

Hartmut von Cronberg's *Statutes of the Heavenly Confraternity*. A Perspective from the Early Reformation

VICTOR D. THIESSEN

In his 1520 *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Martin Luther called upon secular authorities to reform a number of ecclesiastical institutions and implied that some institutions could be abolished outright. *Bruderschaften* (confraternities) were included in this list. In a brief comment Luther observed that confraternities distributed indulgences, masses, and good works, elements of contemporary religious practice for which he had little use. Luther allowed that confraternities that truly served the poor and needy should be maintained, but he believed that such confraternities were no longer to be found. Instead, he believed that by and large confraternities no longer served the common good, and merely sponsored banquets and heavy drinking. Playing with the word *Bruderschaft*, Luther emphasized the aspect of “fellowship,” claiming that all baptized members of the church had fellowship with Christ, the angels and saints in heaven, and all believers on earth; thus, the confraternity of the church was the only necessary fellowship that a true Christian needed. In his 1520 open letter *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation*, Luther wrote:

“I am speaking also of brotherhoods in which indulgences, masses, and good works are apportioned. My dear friend, in your baptism you have entered into a brotherhood with Christ, with all the angels, with the saints, and with all Christians on earth. Hold fast to them and live up to their demands for you have enough brotherhoods. Let the others glitter as they will. Compared with the true brotherhood in Christ those brotherhoods are like a penny compared with a gulden. But if there were a brotherhood which raised money to feed the poor or to help the needy, that would be a good idea. It would find its indulgences and its merits in heaven. But today nothing comes of these groups except gluttony and drunkenness.”¹

1 This English translation is drawn, with slight corrections, from *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* in *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, vol. 44, p. 193). The original reads: “Ich rede auch von den bruderschafftten, darynnen man ablaß, Meß, und gutte werck außteyllet. Lieber du hast in der tauff ein bruderschafft mit Christo, allen engeln, heyiligen und Christen auff erden angefangen, halt die selben unnd thu yhr gnug, ßo hastu gnug bruderschafftten, laß die andern gleyssen wie sie wellen, so sein sie gleich wie zal pfennig gegen die gulden. Wo aber ein solche were, die gelt zusammen gebe, arme leut zuspeyen oder sonst yemand zuhelffen, die were gut, unnd het yhr ablas und verdinst ym hymel. Aber itzt seinn es Collation unnd seufferey drauß wordenn.” (Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe* (henceforth WA), Weimar, 1883–1983, vol. 6, pp. 452–453). Luther had already criticized confraternities in his 1519 *Sermon von dem hochwürdigen Sakrament des heiligen wahren Leichnams*

Hartmut von Cronberg was one of the earliest and most outspoken of the lesser noble converts to evangelical ideas. Shortly after the diet of Worms in 1521 he began publishing pamphlets in support of reform.² Along with Ulrich von Hutten he introduced evangelical ideas to his cousin Franz von Sickingen and convinced him to undertake reforms to his parish churches. Though Cronberg was not actively involved in Sickingen's ill-fated Trier feud of 1522/23, Sickingen's enemies attacked Cronberg's lands and drove him into exile. Cronberg had begun to reform the churches in his lands shortly before he was forced to leave.

Early in 1522, Cronberg started to revise his concept of confraternities according to his understanding of ecclesiastical reform. At the end of May 1522, he sent his ideas and reform plans to Luther and to some noble friends in Saxony. He included a text entitled *Statutes of the Heavenly (Cronbergian) Confraternity* that he may have been preparing for publication. Eduard Kück suggested that the idea for this text probably stemmed from Luther's criticism of confraternities in his *Open Letter* of 1520.³

The text consists of nine (or ten) paragraphs,⁴ and broaches three general themes. The first three paragraphs outline the entry requirements of the *Bruderschaft*. Paragraphs four through seven discuss the aims and administrative aspects of the confraternity; the identification of, and care for the needy; and the structures and offices implemented to administer the collection and distribution of funds. The last two paragraphs return to the theme of the first paragraphs, describing those who would not be allowed to enter into fellowship with people in the Heavenly Confraternity.

Cronberg began by rejecting the notion of membership fees as requirements for those who wished to belong to this confraternity. To join the Heavenly Confraternity was a matter of the heart; only those who had "faith and trust in Christ our Lord and Saviour" were thus eligible for membership. Furthermore, only God through his grace could admit people to this fellowship; the names of these people would be written immediately in the book of the blessed. These new members would have the privilege of fellowship with all other Christians living and with the elect in heaven, including Mary and all the saints. Like Luther, Cronberg identified true confraternity with the association of all Christians, alive and deceased. Going beyond Luther,

Christi und von den Bruderschaften (WA vol. 2, pp. 738–758).

2 For brief biographical sketches of Cronberg, see articles in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* 17, pp. 189f., *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 3, 442ff. For more extensive treatments see: Wilhelm Bogler, *Hartmut von Cronberg: Ein Charakterstudie aus der Reformationszeit*, Bd. VI (Halle, 1897); Helmut Bode, *Hartmut XII, von Cronberg: Reichsritter der Reformationszeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1987); also the introduction to *Die Schriften Hartmuths von Cronberg*, ed. Eduard Kück (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1899).

3 *Ibid.* See also Bode, *Cronberg*, pp. 190–191.

4 I will refer to Kück's edition in *Schriften ... Cronberg*, ed. Kück, pp. 74–76 (see also the introduction, pp. xxvii–xxx). Bode reproduces the text using a more modernized German than does Kück and divides the third paragraph of the text into two paragraphs, hence the variant numbering; see Bode, *Cronberg*, pp. 191–193.

Cronberg mentioned the requirements or “works” expected of those who belonged to the fellowship. These works were found in the Word of God; all members gladly heard the word and fulfilled all its commands, which were summed up in the law of love for one’s neighbour.

This law of love provided Cronberg with the opportunity to discuss more practical matters. It required Christians to care for those in need. But how were these people in need to be identified? Cronberg referred to many Christians who had given to the poor out of their Christian duty, but had been misled by “greedy rich beggars” to give to causes that God despised. As a result, “poor heirs and orphans and pious people were robbed of their inheritance,”⁵ a crime against true Christian love and a grievous sin before God.

For this reason Cronberg established a community chest to be administered by three solid members of the community appointed to these offices for one year.⁶ These men would collect all charitable offerings for the chest and administer them according to the advice of pious men of the community. Cronberg emphasized that people were not obliged to give to the chest except by their own consciences and common sense. The administrators were to ensure that people did not give gifts that would leave their heirs impoverished. Furthermore, the administrators of the chest would not accept contributions of interest, rents, or immovable property. Cronberg also declared that the common chest established in his lands did not wish to attract contributions from people of other communities. In his opinion, every community should establish a common chest within its own jurisdiction and organize the care of its own poor.

In the last two paragraphs, Cronberg turned again to the issue of membership. Only those who were acceptable to God would receive his grace and have their pleas answered by him. All others who were not members of this fellowship would have their hearts hardened, their eyes made blind, and their ears stopped. Cronberg asserted that only God’s grace could save those who diligently sought salvation. No human laws, personal ingenuity, or good works could help a soul gain membership in the Heavenly Confraternity; only those who depended on the rock of Christ could be saved.

In the short text Cronberg used the idea of the confraternity to bring together two different issues. First of all, he used the idea of the confraternity as a metaphor for the church. He transformed the entrance requirements of the fellowship from social and economic to theological terms. The duties and demands of the members also shifted from regular contributions and attendance requirements to general obedience to God’s word and the practice of piety according to the command to love one’s neighbour. Cronberg’s rejection of works, a central criticism of the established church by reform-oriented writers of the 1520s, was as much an attack on the practices and requirements of the church as it was on confraternities. The theologically oriented

5 *Schriften ... Cronberg*, ed. Kück, p. 75.

6 The role of the community chest as a replacement for the confraternity in certain Reformation contexts, as well as the broader use of the term *Bruderschaft* in the 1520s by various reforming movements, is summarized in the *Theologische Realenzyklopaedie (TRE)*, vol. 7, pp. 200–202.

passages of the text expanded upon Luther's statements in his open letter, albeit from Cronberg's perspective. They also brought attention to Cronberg's general understanding of Christian religion. At no point in these paragraphs was Cronberg interested in establishing a functioning confraternity.

Secondly, Cronberg worked toward practical ends. He planned to establish a common chest for the care of the poor within his community. One of the stated aims of many late medieval confraternities was to assist the poor and needy; clearly, Luther, Cronberg, and other sympathizers of reform movements in the early 1520s suspected that confraternities were not fulfilling this purpose. Cronberg's common chest constituted a communally-based alternative for poor relief. Similar efforts to organize poor relief were being developed in other German-speaking towns and cities as well. Not only Karlstadt's ill-fated Wittenberg reforms of early 1522, but similar projects in Altenburg, Nuremberg, Kitzingen, Strasbourg, Breslau, and Regensburg were begun between 1522 and 1523. Luther's own enthusiasm for such projects can be seen in his introduction to Leisnig's *Ordinance of the Common Chest* published in the summer of 1523.⁷

It appears that Hartmut von Cronberg had adopted Luther's critical position with respect to confraternities and expanded on the reformer's ideas. By using the image of the confraternity as a metaphor for the church, he undermined the confraternity as a special institution within Christendom. On the practical level, the creation of the common chest for poor relief subverted an important function of confraternities in early modern society. Though he claimed to be establishing a confraternity within his community, Cronberg appeared to be more interested in abolishing the need for confraternities on both spiritual and practical grounds.

Victor D. Thiessen
Queen's University
Kingston, Canada

7 WA 12, 1–30. The Leisnig Ordinance goes well beyond Cronberg's *Statutes* in its detailed description of the chest's purposes. See especially p. 19, concerning the incomes of the confraternities.