

Augsburg Confession, Article VII - Of the Church

By Glenn R. Schneider

[A paper read at the Southern Conference of the Nebraska District meeting at St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, North Platte, Nebraska February 4-5, 1975]

Introduction

An essay on Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is very much in place at this time. Terms such as: unionism, ecumenism, church-fellowship, and gospel-reductionism are much used words in religious print today. Along with these words come the issues which those words represent. Of necessity, there are at least two sides to every issue. The purpose of this essay is to show how the writers of the Augsburg Confession and related confessional writings dealt with these issues. In doing so, we shall see how our confessional writings agree with what God's Word has to say, and therefore, can be applied to the issues we face today.

Confessional Lutherans are often criticized for wasting time on theological or doctrinal discussions. Those who criticize feel they are justified in their criticism because they believe the church has more burning issues to contend with. They ask: why waste time on doctrinal discussions when there are millions of people starving, millions of people out of work, millions of people suffering from injustice, and millions of children whose lives are threatened or lost even before they are born? As serious as these worldly issues are, let me assure you that a clear understanding of the doctrine of the Church is a greater issue, and no waste of time.

I.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession states:

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of, etc. Eph. 4:5,6.¹

Melancthon stated in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

And this article has been presented for a necessary reason. We see the infinite dangers which threaten the destruction of the Church. In the Church itself, infinite is the multitude of the wicked who oppress it (despise, bitterly hate, and most violently persecute the Word, as e.g. the Turks, Mohammedans, other tyrants, heretics, etc. For this reason the true teaching and the Church are often so utterly suppressed and disappear, as if there were no Church, which has happened under the papacy; it often seems that the Church has completely perished).²

The Holy Christian Church, of which Christ is the Head, has been under attack by its enemies (devil, world, man's own sinful flesh) ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin. In the Old Testament we read about the prophet Elijah who thought he was the only one left on earth who believed in the Lord God of hosts. Elijah thought that all the rest of God's people had fallen into Baal worship or died. But the Lord said: "I have left Me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed

¹ *Concordia Triglotta*, A.C., Art. Vii, p. 47.

² *op. cit.* Apology, Art. VII & VIII, p. 229.

him. (1 Kings 19:18) In early New Testament times Christians were blamed for crimes they did not commit and hated by the human race. Christians were sewn in the skins of beasts and torn to pieces by dogs. Many died on crosses or hurried to death at the stake. In spite of these destructive enemies, the Church continued to exist. During the period of the Reformation, the appearance of the Church had been lost. The doctrines and commandments of men had taken the place of the doctrines and commandments of God. The Church, known to men, had become a political power with a religious name. The Roman Catholic Church claimed that there was no salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church. But the true way to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone was not being taught according to Roman Catholic doctrine. In spite of this, the true Christian Church on earth continued to exist.

Throughout the history of the Church heresy, worldly causes, and earthly gain have invaded the Church. As the last times continue to draw closer upon us we need to be aware of Jesus' prophesy concerning these last times. "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and Wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect." (Matt. 24:24) As the faith of Jesus' disciples was threatened before the destruction of Jerusalem, likewise in the last times the Christian faith of God's elect could be lost if God permitted it. But we know from Jesus' promise to Peter and the rest of His disciples that this will not happen. After Peter had confessed his faith in Jesus, saying, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," then Jesus promised, "upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matt. 16:16b-18b) Christians are united with Christ through faith. Christ enters into them and promises that not one of them shall be lost. (John 10:27-28) The reason why the Church is to continue forever and will not perish is because Christ is present with them! To His disciples Jesus commanded and promised: "Teach these to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:20) Jesus added those words of promise because He knew that His disciples (members of Christ's Church) would not be welcome in the world. Their message of preaching Christ crucified would be a stumbling block to the Jew, and to the Greek foolishness. If men of the world today would praise the Church and her work, it would be a bad sign, namely, because she is not showing her true colors. The Church is to properly confess that there is no salvation in none other than Christ Jesus who died for all, and that everyone who believes in salvation by their own efforts or by their own good character, are damned. Scripture refers to this message as "turning the world upside down." (Acts 17:6)

All the corruption and dangers which have and still threaten the Church are the results of sin. Sin is the one corrupting factor which the Church must recognize and know how to deal with. If the Church does not recognize sin and its consequences, it will be like the Pharisees to whom Jesus said, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." (Matt. 12:25)

How can we be so confident that the Church will continue forever and will not perish? We are confident because of the Lord's promises. If anyone doubts His promises, how could he do His Lord's work vigorously? Who will have his heart in his work, if he thinks that he is wasting his efforts in a hopeless cause? No one could do his Lord's Work cheerfully, if he believed the Church is doomed to fail. The Church will not perish because Christ is the Head of the Church, and rules the whole world in the interest of His Church. (Eph. 5:23, Ps. 110:1) The Church (Una Sancta) is cleansed from its sin by Christ through His Word. God's sure promises in His inspired Word guarantee that the Church will continue forever. "As Christ, also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25b-27)

II.

Some very natural questions could be asked at this point, such as: who are the members of this Church; where is this Church found; and how can I recognize this Church. These questions are clearly answered in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. It states: "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the

Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.”³ In our Apostles’ Creed, we confess: “I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” These two expressions describe each other. The holy Christian Church is the communion of saints. In the Creed they are separated by a comma which means they are appositional. This definition of the Holy Christian Church came out of the period of the Apostles, who continued in the instruction which Christ had given them. We are to teach the same definitions. “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (Acts 2:47b)

In 1530, there were two false definitions of the Church. The Anabaptists taught that the Church was a Platonic state. In their minds they reasoned that to be a member of the Church was to enter into a Utopia, an imaginary Church, which is to be found nowhere. The Church of Rome taught that the Church is an external organization. This definition seemed quite natural because, from earliest times, there were external practices (various ceremonies, customs, rules, offices) and objects which everyone could see. When the word “church” was mentioned, people thought first of the building in which these services were held and where they believed Christians exercised their faith. All the ritual and ceremony of the priests drew the peoples’ attention. The priests led the people to believe that the Church was composed of all that obeyed the rule of the highest priest—the pope at Rome. The Roman Catholic Church taught that the Church (Holy Christian Church) was the Church of Rome and all who desired salvation had to belong to the organization headed by the pope.

Martin Luther shattered these two false teachings. From God’s Word he learned that the Church is not an external organization. The Church has no human head. A person’s salvation does not depend on his membership in the papal church. Remember this is the church which Luther had grown up in and studied under for many years. Now try to grasp the strength of the words in Article XII of the Smalcald Articles:

We do not concede to them that they are the Church, and (in truth) they are not (the Church); nor will we listen to those things which, under the name of Church, they enjoin or forbid. For thank God, (to-day) a child seven years old knows what the Church is namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd. For the children pray thus: I believe in one holy Christian Church. This holiness does not consist in albs (white vestments), tonsures (shaven head of monks), long gowns, and other of their ceremonies devised by them beyond Holy Scripture, but in the Word of God and true faith.⁴

Luther’s chief point was that there is no outward body here on earth which can claim that they are the one Holy Church. He aimed his point at the Church of Rome and said: “You are not the Church.” The Church (Holy Christian Church) is not an external organization, nor an imaginary church which does not exist.

According to God’s Word, Martin Luther confessed:

I believe that there is upon earth a little group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms.⁵

The apostle John was inspired to write: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.” (I John 5:1, NASB) The Church consists of true believers united by faith with Christ and with one another. Faith in Christ is the chief part.

Who are the true believers? Our confession calls them saints. From God’s Word we know that no man since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin is born a saint. Due to original sin all men have been born spiritually blind, spiritually dead, and enemies of God. Yet there are saints, real saints. Not saints that boast of their own righteousness, but receive perfect righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus, as told in Phil. 3:9, “And he found in Him (Christ), not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of

³ op. cit. A. C. Art. VII, p. 47.

⁴ op. cit. Smalcald Articles, p. 499.

⁵ John P. Meyer, *Notes on Augsburg Confession*, p. 39.

Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” Through God’s gift of faith worked by the Holy Ghost, saints have the perfect righteousness of Christ credited to them. Saints are true believers in Christ, who rely entirely upon Christ’s redemption for their salvation. They are not saints because of their conduct. They are not perfect saints or nothing but saints. True saints are also afflicted with the Old Adam in them. This Old Adam opposes the righteousness which true believers possess through faith in Christ. Therefore, saints have weakness and imperfections, but remain saints because Christ’s righteousness is charged to them through faith. All this refers to something spiritual. Although we can recognize fruits of sin and fruits of faith, yet we can not judge from these appearances who is a true saint, and who is not.

Professor John P. Meyer writes in his notes on this Article:

“The righteousness by which we become saints is a spiritual thing. It is the one which God declared when Jesus had suffered and died for us. It is something which is offered to us in the promises and proclamations of the Gospel, and sealed to us in the sacraments. It is something on which you cannot lay your hands, but which you receive through faith, a spiritual thing. We acquire this righteousness through faith, another spiritual thing. Faith is a matter of the heart. We may profess to believe, but no man is in a position to examine our faith whether it is genuine or not. God alone can try the hearts and reins of men.”⁶

Through faith in Christ Jesus saints are united with their Savior. Jesus is the Head, and the Church (Holy Christian Church) is His body, joined to Him by faith. Jesus is the heavenly King Who sits at the right hand of the Father and rules the world for the welfare of His Church. But we cannot see Christ ruling. Christ, the Head of the Church, is spiritual and invisible to us. The Church, then, must correspond to its Head. Otherwise it would be a monster, if it had a visible body and an invisible head. There is only one Church. The Church is the communion of saints. Individual true believers are bound together in one body of the Church. The tie which binds them together is their same-faith in Jesus Christ. By this same-faith they are closely joined with one another. Christian love flows out of their faith to their brothers and sisters in faith. This Christian love is likewise spiritual. Christian faith and Christian love are the spiritual bonds of the Church. No matter how you look at the Church, whether at its Head, or at its members, or at its bonds of union, or at its blessings—the Church is a spiritual congregation, invisible to the human eye, because no one can see into another person’s heart.

Luther did not like to use the word congregation because he noticed that people would immediately think about a visible church. Luther preferred the expression, “*Versammlung Aller Glaubigen.*” The church is “the men scattered throughout the whole world who agree concerning the Gospel, and leave the same Christ, the Holy Ghost, and the same sacraments.”⁷ And again the Apology adds: “But we are speaking of the true, that is, spiritual unity, without which faith in the heart, or righteousness of heart before God, cannot exist.”⁸ The Church includes all who believe in the one Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture gives several beautiful names to this gathering of true believers. Such names as: the body of Christ, Eph.1:22; the house (Household, family) of God, Eph.2:19; His fold, John 10:16; people of God, II Cor. 6:16; and a royal priesthood, etc. I Pet. 2:9-10.

Where are these true believers in Christ? Where is this Church? How do I become a member of this Church? In answer to these questions our confession states: “The Church is the communion of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.”⁹ Here is where we can speak of the invisible and visible Church. In the narrower sense, the Church is invisible because membership into this Church rests upon true Christian faith which only God can see. How then, can an invisible Church exist in this world? The Church is distinguished in this world by its visible marks (*notae ecclesiae*). These marks are the external means of grace in Word and Sacraments. Christ’s New Testament Church was founded upon these marks as we hear on that first Pentecost: “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized; ...and they

⁶ op. cit. p. 40.

⁷ *Concordia Triglotta*, Apology, Art VII & VIII, p. 227.

⁸ op. cit. p. 237.

⁹ op. cit. A. C. Art. VII p. 47.

continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:41a-42) The Holy Spirit works saving faith in human beings through these means of grace. It follows that the Word of God must be preached and the Sacraments must be administered in order for the Holy Spirit to work faith as far as we know. For the Holy Spirit does not work faith without the Word and Sacraments.

Of even greater significance is **how** the Gospel is preached and **how** the sacraments are administered. In the final draft of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon inserted the words: "*Das Evangelium rein gepredigt und die heiligen Sakremente lauts des Evangelii gereicht werden.*"¹⁰ These words were added because their opponents had also taught that the Church comes into being where the Gospel is preached and where the Sacraments are administered.

When is the Gospel purely preached and when are the sacraments rightly administered? The previous articles of the Augsburg Confession and some that follow explain what the pure Gospel is. Art. III deals with the Son of God, Art. IV deals with justification. Art. V deals with the Ministry, namely, the usage of the means of grace. The Gospel is purely taught if the pastor preaches its full meaning as expressed in God's Word, which is correctly expounded in the Augsburg Confession. The Sacraments are rightly administered if they are administered in agreement with the pure Gospel as presented in God's Word and the Augsburg Confession. Where, then, will you find the Church? "Where Word and Sacrament are (rightly) administered, there sins are forgiven, sinners are converted, there is the congregation of saints, there is the church. The Word of God never returns void."¹¹ Martin Luther summed it up in the words: "God's Word cannot be without God's people; and, again, God's people cannot be without God's Word."¹²

Without the Word of God there would be no Church. Without the forgiveness of sins there would be no Christians. Forgiveness of sins is what we need the most. It was to His Church on earth that Jesus gave the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Forgiven sin opens the door of heaven, but unforgiven sin locks it. The Church has, as its chief purpose, the command of Christ to go into all the world preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, baptizing all nations in the name of the Triune God, teaching them everything which is recorded for us in God's Word. (Matt. 28:19-20, Mark 16:15) The one holy Church is present and grows wherever this is being done. Wherever you see people coming together to sing and pray, to hear God's Word in a sermon, to provide for the Christian training of their children, to plan ways and means of bringing the Gospel of Christ to the unchurched or the heathen, to contribute for the support of Christian high schools, colleges, and seminaries for educating future pastors and teachers; when you see groups of people gathering together to partake of the Lord's Supper, or to receive new saints into their membership by administering Holy Baptism, then you can be sure you are dealing with a visible church where there are true believers, a congregation of saints.

The visible church is a necessary result of the establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth. It becomes the local representative of that kingdom when two or three are gathered together in His name to worship Christ and to make use of the means of grace. Within this visible church is a congregation of saints as it appears on earth, with a mixture of human beings who may not be saints, because they are not true believers in Christ. Although they have been received as members of the local congregation by their instructions and profession of faith, this does not make them true Christians. Hypocrisy can exist in the hearts of these people. Just as it is not the conduct of believers that makes them saints, likewise it is not the visible members of a church that constitute the Church. Those who possess true saving faith in Christ Jesus constitute the Church. Whenever and wherever these believers gather for worship and make use of the means of grace, they are the church in that area. The fact that some who are not believers have made their way into such a congregation does not deprive these Christians of the power and blessings which Christ gives to them. Neither does the fact that the saints who because of their sinful flesh still sin in thoughts, words, and deeds, deprive them of Christ's power and blessings upon them. Even if the majority of a congregation were hypocrites, that would not deprive them of being called people of God. Keep in mind that the Church is not an external organization. It is the true marks of the Church which make it visible.

¹⁰ op. cit. A. C. Art. VII, p. 46.

¹¹ John P. Meyer, *Notes on Augsburg Confession*, p. 43.

¹² *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XXVI, No. 5, May 1955, p. 332.

Since this is true, we must admit that even in heterodox (not orthodox) churches there have been, are, and will be saints. They are saints, not as a result of the false doctrine, or sin which is tolerated, but because of the presence of the pure Gospel in Word and Sacraments. We can be sure that even in false and erring church bodies the Holy Spirit will use the Truth of the Gospel which remains to create and strengthen faith. The Holy Spirit has promised this, saying, “So shall My word be that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” (Is. 55:11)

God’s Word shows the sinner his lost and condemned condition. God’s Word tells the sinner that his sins are great and heavy upon him. God’s Word also assures him that God’s Grace in Christ Jesus is greater. God’s Word gives him the power to believe in what Christ has done for him to redeem him from his sins. A Christian owes everything he is and desires to be spiritually to God’s Word. Naturally he will be very careful about whether the Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered. He would not want anything to happen that might jeopardize his spiritual life or the spiritual lives of others. Any indifference towards the means of grace, any changes in doctrine and practice, any unfaithfulness to God’s Word would be a deadly secret poison. Any Christian or Christian church who continues to tolerate error is guilty of taking God’s Name in vain, and if it is not repented of, may well rob itself of God’s eternal promises connected with God’s Word.

III.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession goes on to state:

And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4:5-6.¹³

Some historical information about this article and the Augsburg Confession should be helpful at this point. In 1521, Martin Luther took his stand against the Roman Catholic Church. Thereupon, he was formally excommunicated from the Church of Rome by the pope, who declared Luther a heretic. Emperor Charles V was in power, and was under severe pressure from the Roman Church. The Emperor also declared Luther an outlaw. But for nine years after 1521, the Reformation went on. Neither the pope, nor the emperor were able to suppress the spread of Lutheranism. During this time, the Turks were threatening to take over western Europe. For political reasons, the Emperor tried to bring about peace between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants (as they were first called). His hope was that the Protestants would again unite with the old Roman Church. For this reason, the Emperor called the Diet of Augsburg to meet together on June 25, 1530.

The Lutherans intended to submit at this Diet a list of the abuses in the Church of Rome which they wanted changed, such as: the Mass, monastic vows of monks and nuns, compulsory celibacy of priests, etc. After they had done, this, they realized that it would be just as important for them to present a positive presentation of their own doctrine to prove that they were a true Christian church. This is the natural setting of the Augsburg Confession. On one side stood the Roman Catholics with their claim to be the Church (Holy Christian Church), while, on the other side, stood the Lutherans with their list of charges of false doctrine and practice and their claim that they were a true Christian church. In the middle stood the Emperor who intended to unite both bodies under one church body.

Article VII speaks about: what is the true unity of the Church, how this unity is realized, and how it is to be practiced. The chief point is that no outward body can claim that they are the one Holy Church on earth.

¹³ *Concordia Triglotta*, A. C. Art. VII, p. 47.

Their proof was that the unity of the Church is a unity of faith, **not** of organization. This faith we can only know by the confession of the individual or church.

From God's Word, Luther and his faithful companions learned and believed that the pure Gospel of Christ Jesus makes the Church one, not many, so this unity (oneness) appears in the unity of faith. In order to make their point clear, they contrasted what God has done for us through Christ (Gospel), and what man has tried to institute through his own thinking and practices (traditions).

Regarding the question: "Can non-fundamental doctrines be excepted," the Lutherans brought their list of abuses against the Church of Rome for adding doctrines and sacraments which were not found in Holy Scripture. They rejected them because these practices and teachings in no wise constituted the Church. Those who obeyed and received these church rites did not establish the existence of the unity of the church, because the unity of the Church is a unity of faith, not a fellowship of outward signs. The Catholics insisted that these doctrines and practices were essential to the Church and that no true salvation could be acquired without them. As a result they recognized that they could not unite into one church because both sides did not agree.

Luther contended that the true unity of the Church is an agreement of heart and mind, of faith and confession. This unity is produced by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, and is recognized by a clear confession in harmony with the Gospel. Therefore, Luther confessed: "It is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments." These words are possibly the most controversial words in all the Confessions. They are being disputed over yet today.

The real question is: what is the force of the "*satis est*" (Latin, it is enough)? Some believe that our Lutheran fathers were liberal in their view and meant to say that very little is required for true unity. Others say that these words mean that there must be true and sincere agreement on all points of doctrine and practice before unity exists and fellowship can be practiced.

The historical setting of the confession is again important. The Catholics had placed their emphasis on their human traditions, such as: monastic vows, celibacy, celebration of the Mass, etc. Against these were the Lutherans who said: "No, it is enough to **agree in doctrine**, and doctrine alone. This is the deciding factor. Human traditions as determined by the church do not establish the true unity of the Church. It is not necessary to agree on these rites and ceremonies. The force of "it is enough" is that it demands agreement concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments.

What is the doctrine of the Gospel? How broad is the concept "*doctrina evangelii*" (Latin, doctrine of the Gospel)? Here is where many do not apply correctly the expression "it is enough", and want us to believe that the doctrine of the Gospel means no more than the principal truths of the Gospel. They say that God's Word contains some very fundamental truths which concern the very heart of the Gospel. Regarding these fundamental truths or articles of faith there must be agreement, while it is not necessary to agree on other points of doctrine which do not affect the Gospel. We need to ask: Is this what Luther said?

In Holy Scripture we see that the word, "Gospel" is used in two ways. In one way it can refer to everything concerning the entire doctrine of Christ which includes both law and gospel. In another way, it is used in a narrow sense to express God's undeserved love which comes to sinful man through faith in Jesus Christ. The word "faith" has the same usage in these two ways. The Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord shows that our Lutheran fathers recognized this also. It states:

the term Gospel is not always employed and understood in one and the same sense, but in two ways, in the Holy Scriptures...For sometimes it is employed so that there is understood by it the entire doctrine of Christ, our Lord, which He proclaimed in His ministry upon earth, and commanded to be proclaimed in the New Testament, and hence comprised in it the explanation of the Law and the proclamation of the favor and grace of God. (Mark 1:1, 16:15, Acts 20:21)...Furthermore the term Gospel is employed in another, namely, in its proper sense, by

which it comprises not the preaching of repentance, but only the preaching of the grace of God.” (Mark 1:15)¹⁴

It is clear from the confessions that the writers did not use the term “Gospel” in the narrow sense, but in the broader sense of referring to the whole doctrine of Christ. To them the term “Gospel” was synonymous with the Word of God. Luther stated in his writings:

And that alone is the Church, which has the pure Word and the pure Sacraments...the true Church is there where the little company of those is who know Christ, that is, who are united in the doctrine, faith, and confession of Christ.¹⁵

Again Luther stated in his evaluation of Emperor Charles V’s Recess:

great care must be exercised...that on our part nothing is assented to or conceded which would be contrary to faith, the Gospel, and divine honor...moreover we must confess, that the doctrine taught and presented at Augsburg is the pure and genuine Word of God, and that all who believe it and hold to it are children of God and will be saved.¹⁶

The true unity of the visible Church is established only when there is complete unity on the Word of God. Where this agreement does not exist, there can be no true unity. The Augsburg Confession, again, proves this by first devoting three articles to the doctrines of God, original sin, and the person of Jesus Christ. First the sinner must be told that he is under the judgment of God, and know who this true God is, and know the true nature of his sin, then he needs to be told who Jesus Christ is and what Christ has done to forgive his sin.

This doctrine did not come from men, nor was it drawn up by men. God revealed it to man in his inspired Word. Professor J. P. Meyer remarks on this point:

Remember also for what purpose God revealed the doctrine of the Gospel to us, every part of it. He gave it to us not to exercise our ingenuity, to see if we can properly pick out the important from the less important. He gave it to us for our salvation. Every part is filled with His power to nourish and strengthen our faith. Flaw, then, can we think of consenting to drop any part of it?

Before this he states:

How then dare we ignore any of them (God’s Words) or set them aside, in order to unite with people who question, or even deny, any point that God has revealed? How dare we appear before God in joint prayer, or conduct joint services, or partake of the same Communion with people who reject or alter His Word in any part?¹⁷

Luther saw that he could not unite with the Church of Rome because they did not agree on God’s Word. The central truth of Scripture is the justification of guilty sinners through faith in Christ Jesus, alone. Everything else in Scripture is connected with this doctrine of faith. “We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness.” The Apostle Paul was inspired to write, and added, “for I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” (I Cor. 1:23, 2:2) Referring to these passages Dr. F. Pieper says:

¹⁴ op. cit. Formula of Concord (Thorough Declaration), p. 953.

¹⁵ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 65 # 3, July 1968, p.174.

¹⁶ op. cit. p. 176.

¹⁷ John P. Meyer, *Notes on Augsburg Confession*, p. 45.

Christ crucified is our righteousness and our salvation, and this is the heart and core, the sum of Christian doctrine. All other doctrines either lead to this doctrine, or they issue forth from it....The other doctrines have value only inasmuch as the doctrine of justification is adhered to.¹⁸

When Dr. Eck, a Roman Catholic, tried to debate this issue with the Lutherans, he tried to pass off the clear doctrines of God's Word as adiaphora (something neither commanded nor forbidden by God). Dr. Martin Luther insisted that what God's Word teaches is no adiaphoron but a command of God.

The unity of the Church is a unity of faith, a spiritual unity. This unity is expressed by the confession of the individual or the church. This confession of faith in word and practice is, and must continue to serve as the basis for all church fellowship. Individuals confess this faith of their hearts through their church membership by agreeing with the doctrine and practice of that church body. When a person attempts to recognize that a true Christian unity exists as through joint prayer, joint church work, joint worship and communion services, while there is no agreement in confession is to presume to look into another person's heart. Jesus said, "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment." (John 7:24) God alone can do this. It is false to accuse an individual or church body for judging another man's heart when they refuse to practice fellowship with someone outside of their church fellowship. The outward confession of a person or church body is to be judged by spiritual sight and guided by God's Word. To the Christian brethren of Rome, Paul was inspired to write: "mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." (Romans 16:17; also II Cor. 6:14, Matt. 7:15, I Cor. 10 :1 4, I John 4 :1)

Our basis for church fellowship must be founded upon God's Word and determined by faithfulness to God's Word in doctrine and practice. Our confessional booklet *This We Believe* states: "We believe that we cannot practice religious fellowship with those whose confession reveals that error is taught or tolerated, supported or defended. The Lord bids us to avoid persistent errorists." (Rom. 16:17-18)¹⁹

Therefore we reject the ecumenical movement for attempting to unite churches under one head for joint church work. We likewise, reject church unionism in which prayers, worship services with Communion, and evangelism efforts take place. We, also, reject Gospel-reductionism which attempts to reduce the doctrine of the Gospel to nothing more than a faith in Jesus Christ as my personal Savior, and uses this to establish the true unity of the visible Church. Also, we do not practice church fellowship with those church bodies or organizations in which false doctrine and errors are taught, tolerated, or defended.

This must be our position and practice because errors and truth do not mix. God says: "A little leaven (yeast) leaveneth the whole lump." Error concerning God's Word cannot leave our faith unaffected, but, like a poison, will destroy it. Neither should we compromise this position with those who call this "hair-splitting" or "un-evangelical."

Article VII further mentions that the true unity of the Church is not a matter of organization. It states: "Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike." The unity of the Church is not affected by purely external things. Neither does the matter of liturgies affect the unity of the Church.

The Church in its present existence needs definite forms. These forms are not to conform to the practice of this world. Jesus said: "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." (John 17:15-16; also cf. I Cor. 7:31)

The forms of worship and organization which we use are man-made. God has given us freedom concerning them. We are not bound by Scripture as to what order of service to use on a given Sunday, or whether the congregation should have three elders and two trustees, or meet once a month. Scripture does not speak concerning these matters of organization. The color of the pastor's gown, the color of the hymnal, and the

¹⁸ *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 65 # 3, July 1968, p. 177.

¹⁹ *This We Believe*, 1967, p. 19.

order of services for baptisms, weddings, and funerals do not affect the unity of the Church. For example the Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds are accepted and used by Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran Churches. Yet this does not make them one with us in faith. In many Lutheran churches you will find the same hymnal as we use. Again, this does not make them one in faith with us. The unity of the Church is not a matter of rites and ceremonies, nor of words.

Our services are held for the purpose of dispensing the means of grace in Word and Sacrament for the forgiveness of sins. Our services are to give all Glory to God. Anything that might concede some honor or praise to man is out of place. Uniformity as to how this is done is not required by God's Word. Uniformity has its place and can be helpful, but it does not affect the unity of faith.

God, Himself, established the unity of faith in the one Holy Church, when He inspired the Apostle Paul to write: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all." (Eph. 4:4-6) May the Holy Spirit keep us in this bond of peace through the pure Gospel in Word and Sacrament.