

The *Satis Est* in Article VII of The Augsburg Confession

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“For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.” Unity, true unity, is something God creates, and it exists in the *una sancta ecclesia*, which is spoken of in the first paragraph of CA VII. The congregation of saints, which is the *una sancta ecclesia*, is united by “one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all,” to use the words of our confession quoted from St. Paul. There is true unity in the congregation of saints; it is indeed *una*.

But even as the *una sancta ecclesia* is invisible, since only God sees the faith that is in the heart and he alone knows those who are his, so also the true unity that exists in the *una sancta* is invisible, for it too has to do with the faith that is in the heart, known only to God. And even as there are marks by which the presence of the *una sancta* can be recognized, the gospel in Word and Sacrament (“in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered”), so also the presence of the “true unity of the church” can be recognized by marks, marks that involve agreement (*consentire, eintraechtlich*), for unity is recognized by agreement.

But how does agreement become outwardly evident? The German text directs us to the preaching that is done and how the sacraments are administered, to the *publica doctrina* of the church. That is its confession. This may be expressed in a confessional document, as was done at Augsburg. The Augsburg Confession was prepared to show “what manner of doctrine from the Holy Scriptures and the pure Word of God has been up to this time set forth in our lands, dukedoms, dominions, and cities, and taught in our lands” (Preface, 8, Trig. p 39). Thus the very first article begins: “Our Churches, with common consent, do teach” (CA I, 1, Trig. p 43). “With common consent,” *magno consensu, eintraechtlich*—the Augsburg Confession was to give expression to the *publica doctrina* on which the confessing churches were united. It was a mark of the true unity of the church among the Lutherans.

This raises the question: On what must there be agreement for “true unity” to be recognized? What must be preached and taught *eintraechtlich*? How extensive must the agreement be? CA VII answers: “...it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.”

Satis est. The *satis* has implications in two directions. On the one hand it says, “It is enough. If more is required by way of agreement, that is beyond what is necessary.” Thus *satis* has a limiting role. On the other hand it says, “If you have this much agreement, it is enough. Anything less will not be enough.”

What is enough? The Latin text answers: *consentire de doctrina evangelii et administratione sacramentorum*. The German is somewhat longer: *dasz da eintraechtlich nach reinem Verstand das Evangelium gepredigt und die Sakramente dem goettlichen Wort gemaesz gereicht werden*. The answer to “what is enough?” depends on the usage, the scope, of the term *evangelium, doctrina evangelii*.

If words always had only one meaning, one usage, the answer at this point would be simple and brief. The term “gospel,” however, does not have a single usage in our confessions nor, for that matter, in Scripture. In the article “Of the Law and the Gospel” the Formula of Concord points out that the dissent to which the article responds “has been caused chiefly by this, that the term *Gospel* is not always employed and understood in one and the same sense, but in two ways, in the Holy Scriptures, as also by ancient and modern church-teachers” (SD V, 3; Trig., p 953). Among the “modern church-teachers” Melancthon, writing in the Augsburg Confession, has to be included. The two uses of “gospel” are described. “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” (SD V, 4; Trig., p 953). “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” (SD V, 6; Trig., p 953). If one follows the latter, the narrow or “proper,” meaning of “Gospel,” CA VII says that there is “enough” agreement when there is agreement on the doctrine of the vicarious atonement, or justification, on what is summarized in John 3:16. If one follows the former, or broad, meaning, there is “enough” agreement when there is agreement on “the entire doctrine of Christ,” on all that is taught in Holy Scripture. Less than that would not be “enough.”

When a word has several possible meanings, the immediate and wider context must determine which usage applies. That is a sound principle of hermeneutics.

CA VII not only states the positive, what is “enough” for true unity in the church, but contrasts *doctrina evangelii* with a negative, stating what is not necessary: “Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men should be everywhere alike.” The traditions, rites and ceremonies that are not necessary are described as “human”; they were “instituted by men.” Thus the contrast is between the doctrine of the gospel, which has God as its source, and traditions and ceremonies which have their origin with man. The article does not refer to the doctrine of the gospel as fundamental and necessary over against other doctrines that also have God as their source but may be considered non-fundamental and thus not necessary for the true unity of the church. Instituted by God versus instituted by men is the contrast. And so we are led to understand “gospel” in its broad sense in this context, that is, “the entire doctrine of Christ,” which he “commanded to be proclaimed in the New Testament.” All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. All Scripture doctrine has God as its origin (plenary inspiration). We are bound to all of it, but not to anything “instituted by men.”

That the reformers thought of “gospel” in its broad sense is evident also in the Apology. Where in Articles VII and VIII Melanchthon in the Latin uses the term *evangelii doctrinam* (Ap VII, VIII, 5; Trig., 226), Justus Jonas in the German translation can use the broad term *Gottes Wort*.

The fact, of course, is that all doctrine, although it is not gospel in the narrow sense, does serve the proclamation of it. Law is not the good message of the gospel, but the gospel cannot be taught without also teaching the law. And so it is with all Scripture teaching. All that God reveals and teaches in Holy Scripture is ultimately in the interest of proclaiming his saving grace in Christ. Thus the broad concept of “gospel” as comprising all that Christ taught not merely mathematically adds together parts or doctrines, but it recognizes that all doctrine of Scripture inherently belongs together and failure in any part threatens the gospel in the proper or narrow sense.

Rome failed in regard to the *satis est* in both directions. It demanded more on the one hand and in fact required less on the other. The Roman Confutation insisted that “universal traditions are to be observed because they are handed down by the apostles” (Trig., 241). To this Melanchthon responded: “What religious men they are! They wish that the rites derived from the apostles be retained; they do not wish the doctrine of the apostles to be retained” (p 241). By not retaining the doctrine of the apostles Rome was not coming up to the *satis est*. By requiring rites which Scripture does not require they were going beyond it. The contrast again is between what is commanded by God and what is not commanded by him.

The Formula of Concord makes the same distinction when it speaks “Of Church Rites.” The article concludes: “Thus the churches will not condemn one another because of dissimilarity of ceremonies when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them, provided they are otherwise agreed with one another in the doctrine and all its articles, also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, . . .” (Trig., p 1063). Clearly the article views the doctrine of the gospel in its broad sense, including “all its articles.”

Both the immediate context in Article VII as well as the wider context in the Book of Concord lead to the same conclusion. For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree on the doctrine of the gospel in its broad usage, that is, on all that Christ taught and commanded as revealed in the inspired Scriptures. Anything beyond that is of human origin and is not necessary.

The question may be asked: How did the authors of the CA and those who made it their confession put Article VII into practice? What can the history of the time teach us? In 1529, only nine months before the Diet of Augsburg, Luther and Zwingli met at Marburg in the hope that they might recognize one another as brothers in the faith and that the Lutherans and the Zwinglians might do battle together in defending the faith. The Marburg Articles were signed by all participants. In them they expressed agreement on the basic articles of the

Christian faith, such as the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, Original Sin, the Eternal Word, Baptism, Confession, etc. Even regarding the Lord's Supper the final article stated:

We all believe and hold concerning the Supper of our dear Lord Jesus Christ, that both forms should be used according to the institution; also that the mass is not a work, whereby one obtains grace for another, dead and living; also that the sacrament of the altar is a sacrament of the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and that the spiritual partaking of this Body and Blood is specially necessary to every true Christian. In like manner, as to the use of the sacrament, that like the Word of God Almighty, it has been given and ordained, in order that weak consciences might be excited by the Holy Ghost to faith and love.

A brief paragraph in which they recognized their single point of disagreement was added:

And although we are not at this time agreed, as to whether the true Body and Blood of Christ are bodily present in the bread and wine, nevertheless the one party should show to the other Christian love, so far as conscience can permit, and both should fervently pray God Almighty, that, by His Spirit, He would confirm us in the true understanding.

In the first sermon Luther preached at Wittenberg upon his return he commented favorably on the colloquy but made it clear that brotherly unity had not as yet been attained. He said: "Things look rather hopeful. I do not say that we have attained brotherly unity, but a kindly and friendly concord" (WA 26, p 669, as quoted by Sasse, *This Is My Body*, p 274). The Swiss on the other hand were ready for Christian fellowship with the Lutherans. For them agreement on the doctrine of the gospel in the narrow sense was enough (*satis*) for unity. They accused the Lutherans of being impudent and stubborn in demanding agreement also on this one remaining point. Luther commented on this in his Exposition of Galatians 5:9: "A little yeast leavens the whole lump."

This is a caution which Paul emphasizes. We, too, should emphasize it in our time. For the sectarians who deny the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper accuse us today of being quarrelsome, harsh, and intractable, because, as they say, we shatter love and harmony among the churches on account of the single doctrine about the Sacrament. They say that we should not make so much of this little doctrine, which is not a sure thing anyway and was not specified in sufficient detail by the apostles, that solely on its account we refuse to pay attention to the sum total of Christian doctrine and to general harmony among all the churches. This is especially so because they agree with us on other articles of Christian doctrine. With this very plausible argument they not only make us unpopular among their own followers; but they even subvert many good men, who suppose that we disagree with them because of sheer stubbornness or some other personal feeling. But these are tricks of the devil, by which he is trying to overthrow not only this article of faith but all Christian doctrine (LW 27, pp 36f; St. L. IX, 644).

Luther's description of the "sectarian" fits not only the "sectarian" of our time, that is, the Reformed or evangelicals or fundamentalists, but also many Lutherans, e.g., those who work and worship together in the Lutheran World Federation or elsewhere without doctrinal agreement. At Marburg the Lutherans required unity that involved agreement *de doctrina evangelii* in its broad sense.

This history of the Lutheran confessions during the Reformation period, from the CA to the Formula of Concord, shows the concern for all of Scripture doctrine on the part of the Lutherans. The question may, however, be asked: Doesn't Melancthon, the chief author of the CA, say in its conclusion that he has concerned himself only with "the chief articles which seem to be in controversy" (CA, Conclusion, 1; Trig., p 95)? He writes: "For although we might have spoken of more abuses, yet, to avoid undue length, we have set

forth the chief points.” Melanchthon did not say everything that could have been said. He wrote that “the rest may be readily judged” from what was presented. Luther would have included more, as his critical statements regarding the CA seem to imply.

As the need arose, however, the Lutheran confessions become more inclusive and specific. The Roman Confutation resulted in Melanchthon’s longer and more explicit treatment in the Apology.

Later in the Smalcald Articles Luther said some things he missed in the earlier CA. He avoided the kind of “gentle treading” he could not have done at Augsburg, had he been present and writing the confession. In fact, if the calmer, milder language was appropriate in addressing the emperor and the Diet, Luther’s forceful manner of speaking was the kind needed at a church council called by the pope. In the Preface Luther explains the assignment given him in view of the fact that Pope Paul III had summoned a council. He writes: “I was directed to compile and collect the articles of our doctrine in case of deliberation as to what and how far we would be willing and able to yield to the Papists, and in what points we intended to persevere and abide to the end.” As Luther proceeds, there is no question about this: the Christian church must hold to whatever Scripture teaches; the church cannot bargain away any Scripture doctrine. On the other hand, the church must not allow itself to be bound by human traditions or by papal errors and demands. He wrote: “The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel” (SA II, II, 15; Trig., p 467). In the Smalcald Articles Luther applied what he had written in his Galatians commentary: “Doctrine belongs to God, not to us; and we are called only as its ministers. Therefore we cannot give up or change even one dot of it” (LW 27, 37).

When dissension arose among theologians of the Augsburg Confession on account of the Interim, the true Lutherans did not point to Article VII of the CA. Rather, their concern was “to state and declare plainly, purely, and clearly our faith and confession concerning each and every one of these in thesis and antithesis, i.e., the true doctrine and its opposite, in order that the foundations of divine truth might be manifest in all articles” (FC, Of Articles in Controversy, 19; Trig., p 857). No aberrations from God’s truth could be permitted, not even in what to some have appeared as fine points of doctrine that would better have been ignored or disregarded. The Formula of Concord has been said to confound “orthodoxy with an exclusive confessionalism” (Schaff) and to establish a “dead scholasticism.” It is supposed to have caused the “ossification of Lutheran theology,” and transformed the “Gospel into a ‘doctrine.’” More correctly it shows that the Lutherans were concerned about the *doctrina evangelii* in its broad sense, recognizing that error in any doctrine is dangerous to the Christian faith and disruptive of unity.

The conclusion we have arrived at regarding the meaning of the *satis est* is important because we are convinced that it agrees with Holy Scripture. Our risen Lord commands his church to make disciples by baptizing in the name of the Triune God and by teaching those it baptizes to observe all that he commanded (τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐντειλάμην). The church has no right make πάντα say less than it does, to limit it to some or even most doctrines, but not to include all. Peter writes: “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pe 4:11). The church is bound to all of Scripture. This does not mean that everyone has and must have a perfect knowledge and understanding of all that Scripture teaches. No Christian ever attains to perfect faith and knowledge, and so the admonition “to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pe 3:18) always applies to us. At the same time Scripture clearly states that Christians must avoid (ἐκκλίνετε) those “who cause divisions and put obstacles in the way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned” (Ro 16:17, 18; cf. also Galatians 1:8, 9; Matthew 7:15-19; 2 Timothy 2:17-19; 2 John 9-11). On the basis of what Scripture says the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod holds that “we can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine and practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it” (*Doctrinal Statements*, pp 42-46). Any error thus persistently held to is disruptive of confessional unity and makes the practice of fellowship (religious, Christian, church) impossible.

This we believe Scripture, the *norma normans*, teaches. We are pleased to find that CA VII, the *norma normata*, agrees so that we can give an unqualified *quia* subscription to this as to all articles of our Lutheran

confessions. Understood as expounded above we can subscribe to CA VII because it is a true exposition of the doctrine of Scripture on this matter. We are ever bound by all of Holy Scripture, the inerrant Word of our God.