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Concerning the Clarity of Scripture and the Unity in Spirit

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Concerning the Clarity of Scripture and the Unity in Spirit

John 17:1-26

Since Cain's crime against his brother Abel, the earth has been a pit of murderers on both a small and a large scale. It still is today, and it will remain so till the Last Day. For Christians, who are familiar with Scripture and the history of the world, that requires no discussion in detail. Today the fulfillment of Matthew 24:6-8 stands very plainly before our eyes. And although the world considers war to be the most terrifying of all evils, it nonetheless knows no means to avoid it. The war to end all wars also necessarily had to prove itself to be a farce. Everyone knows that every war breeds new war. One would have to first make every person as individuals and every people as masses thoroughly pious, in order to make every quarrel and argument, every rape and all bloodshed impossible. That will never happen on earth. If the world does not want to believe it from the Bible, then it could, if it were true only from a human standpoint, learn it from the experience of its own heart and that of others, that in all natural people the ineradicable *wish to be like God*—lust for power, jealousy, supreme control—leads and gives birth to all the discord which so badly embitters the life of the individual in the family, in the people and the life of the coexisting peoples.

But is it no different in the circle that we people call "church". Even that form of the church which wants to be the one, true and "visible" (!) church on earth, the papacy, has become the woman who is drunk on the blood of the saints and on the blood of the witnesses of Jesus (Rev 17:6). About it we confess with Luther in the Smalcald Articles, "For lies and murder – to ruin body and soul eternally, that is actually a papal rule," – though we know that also under the papacy a true church, i.e., a communion of saints, is present.

But also the so-called "Protestant" church (the word "church" taken in the external sense), which rightly separated itself from Rome, suffered from the start and suffers today still from the injury of Joseph; and by external division it has become only more so in the course of time. Why could the Reformed reformers not agree with Luther? Here it was – so it seemed – the common source and authority: Holy Scripture! And – why roam into the distance? – why is there also discord, quarrelling, controversy and division in that which calls itself the Lutheran church? Why also among us is there fighting and division – we who like to call ourselves the orthodox Lutheran church and submit ourselves *a priori* to every sentence of the Bible as God's Word absolutely, and claim to accept the word of no man as an authority.

The undersigned heard several years ago of a Pauline (a man from the order whose members the pope often uses to propagandize for the papacy) arguing publicly in this way: Hold the Bible in honor! Every country has recorded its basic rights; the United States has its constitution, which conclusively decides all

questions of law. But no country's constitution, as wisely formulated as it may be, can in its wording be completely decisive for the future, because its formulators, as children of their primitive time circumstances, cannot possibly foresee or thoroughly consider the development of future centuries in detail, without writing an endless casuistry. On this basis, every civilized country has not only made additions to its constitution again and again (and thereby he refers to several historical changes of our constitution) but has placed a *supreme court* next to the constitution. This court, in each case that comes up, settles with absolute authority the meaning, significance and applicability of the constitution to the circumstances which were formerly unknown, but now lie concretely before their eyes. That is exactly the relationship between the Bible and the papacy. The Bible is the basic law, the original constitution of the church, and the pope with his college is the high court established by Christ, which, by virtue of the fullness of the Spirit promised and given to him, interprets every saying of the Bible authoritatively for the whole church, both in matters of doctrine and in matters of life [Wandels], and settles all controversies. This wonderful institution of Christ guarantees the unity of the church and its duration among all storms of time, and it keeps the church an effective, world-sustaining power. But each falling away from the papacy abandons the Bible and everything Christian for the judgments of privately taught Bible interpreters—judgments which are totally unreliable, divergent in a thousand directions and full of contradictions. And thereby each apostasy splits the church into countless sects and disrupts all

ecclesiastical, moral, social and governmental relationships of life on earth. The spiritual, moral and social recovery of the world and peace among the nations lie in the return to the authority of the seat of Peter, which is established by Christ.

We naturally don't want to go into the refutation of this argumentation here. The writer of these lines is amazed at the calculated intelligence with which the speaker has chosen his argument specifically for an audience so constituted. What other argument could have worked more convincingly with Americans! Where else are the conflicts of the non-Roman church as outstanding before everyone's eyes as with us! What other social system in humanity supersedes for the American the "*non plus ultra* of wisdom" of his own basic system of Constitution and Supreme Court! And there is no deception of equal effectiveness as one that supports itself with a kernel of truth. Who can deny the deep and constantly progressing conflict of the so-called Protestant church? And from where else—so one concludes—should it [the conflict] come from than from the Protestant claim that every Christian has the right and duty to study, understand and appropriate the Bible directly?

That the last sentence is, in its vagueness, a misrepresentation of the genuine Protestant, i.e., Lutheran, principle of Biblical interpretation, we wish to note here only in passing. It is worth the effort, however, to place that once again before our eyes in its innermost essence and in its definite limits.

For us it cannot depend upon a unity like the papacy wants and demands. That is a purely external unity, founded on the powerful errors of 2

Thessalonians 2 and kept intact by outward force and unspeakable bloodshed, such as has not been attempted by any tyrant of world history, not even by the present-day rulers of the Russians. In spite of all that there is in no church party greater disunity in faith and in morals, more envy and hate, quarrelling and controversy, more back-and-forth intrigue to the point of poison and dagger than in the papal party. And everything takes place under the shield of the one great untruth, which is all encompassing and covers everything on the surface—the untruth of the divine appointment of the papacy and its (even officially proclaimed in 1870) infallibility.

Luther tore the mask off the face of the papacy, pulled the rug out from under their feet and set the church again on the solid ground of Scripture.

To understand that correctly, however, one must keep it clear from the start that he wanted to know that under the word “church” was understood not the outward institution that is popularly called “church”, but the communion of believers—and only this. For that, we now refer for the sake of brevity only to the definitions of the church contained in 7.8.28 in Augustana and Smalcald Articles III,12. We know that he quite often compares the mouth-Christians, who are mixed up with the communion of saints, to the filth that separates itself from the human body. More often he describes them as members of the kingdom of the devil, from whom one must separate when they are recognized as evil.

But Luther also opposed the Donatists, Novatians and the Enthusiasts of his time, who imagined that they could establish a church on earth, in which

outward group there were no evil ones. In this group of the church "at the same time grows good seed and weeds with each other, that is, good ones and evil ones are among each other. Whoever wants to make a church in which there is no sin or trip up will have to exclude as unchristian not only all weak Christians but also the strong."... "Indeed in the church even the true Christians will never be so pure and holy that the old Adam will never let himself be seen" (XIII, 185,186). "Never will you see such a form of the church in which no annoyance, offense, discord and many kinds of weaknesses will be found" (IV, 2107).

The first may not entice us to want to bring charges against people who to us appear to be mere mouth-Christians, unless they are obviously evil ones. The second may not bewitch us with the delusion that the church was safe from all quarrelling and all division, because we see in it only pious, well-meaning Christians. Much less is it the evil life of a church member than the false doctrine of the shepherds that fills the church with controversy and tears it up outwardly. Certainly it can be thrown into the church from the outside, but usually the false teachers arise out of the church itself, Acts 20:29,30. In the local congregations certainly laity cause controversy, factions and divisions as in Corinth, but the actual church dividers to a great degree are the church leaders: we teachers and administrators, professors, pastors and other prominent people. And we are that not out of conscious malice, but in the intent to do God and the church a service. The good intent of even the founders of the large sects, of the faction leaders themselves in the present controversy of the Protestant church of Germany, is

not to be denied from the start. One could certainly say that all sectarianism has its roots in enthusiasm that is pious from a human standpoint. But finally deep underneath—hidden to the originators—lies the tail [Weichselzopf] of vices, which produces also the first great falling away, the papacy, which was raised slowly and finally has made itself an incurable boil on the body of the church: the unnoticed mature, but permanently twisted tissue of uncertainty, conceit, vanity, pride and lust for power, for which the first sin has laid the foundation in all of our hearts. To not recognize that, to not uninterruptedly be on guard with ourselves against it and at every provocation to energetically struggle with prayer and petition—that is the danger of the disunification of the church, against which the Lord wrestled with his Father in his last prayer (John 17), asking for the unity of his disciples.