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- Can the Lutheran Confessions Have Any
Meaning 450 Years Later?..... Robert D. Preus 104
- Augustana VII and the Eclipse of
Ecumenism..... Siegbert W. Becker 108
- Melanchthon versus Luther: The
Contemporary Struggle..... Bengt Hägglund 123
- In Response to Bengt Hägglund:
The Importance of Epistemology for Luther's
and Melanchthon's Theology..... Wilbert H. Rosin 134
- Did Luther and Melanchthon Agree on the
Real Presence?..... David P. Scaer 141
- Luther and Melanchthon in
America..... C. George Fry 148
- Luther's Contribution to the Augsburg
Confession..... Eugene F. Klug 155
- Fanaticism as a Theological Category in the
Lutheran Confessions..... Paul L. Maier 173
- Homiletical Studies 182



Augustana VII and the Eclipse of Ecumenism

Siegbert W. Becker

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, short as it is, has many implications for the whole subject of ecumenicity, whether of the true or false variety. At the very outset the definition of the church given in the first paragraph of that article ought to alert every confessional Lutheran to the dangers of the prevailing false ecumenicity of our time in which men bend their best theological and ecclesiastical energies and efforts toward the building of a super-church which bears only a superficial resemblance to a communion of saints, at least in the biblical and confessional meaning of that term, a church whose unity is in reality a denial of the true unity of the church and whose head may well be the bishop of Rome, of whom our confessions say that he is to be considered "ipsum verum Antichristum."

The anticonfessional nature of that kind of ecumenicity ought to be evident from the fact that to many of its proponents the pope of Rome seems to be the logical head of such a united church. In the guidelines prepared for the dialogs being carried on this month between Lutheran and Catholic local congregations, Lutherans are being asked

if they are able to acknowledge not only the legitimacy of the papal ministry in the service of the Roman Catholic communion but even the possibility and desirability of the papal ministry, renewed under the Gospel and committed to Christian freedom, in a larger communion which would include the Lutheran churches.¹

The question being proposed here is so worded that it is made clear from the very beginning of the discussion that an affirmative answer is expected to the first half of the question and that a negative answer to the second half would almost seem to be an attack on the Gospel. But the crucial question that will have to be answered first of all before either half of the above question can be considered seriously is the question, "What does one mean when one speaks of the Gospel?"

Not only the Augustana's definition of the church but also its identification of the marks of the church as the correct teaching or the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the holy sacraments sounds a clear warning to every confessional Lutheran against the kind of ecumenicity which openly asserts that love unites while doctrine divides, an ecumenicity which for

that reason in times past was inclined to avoid the discussion of doctrine altogether.

Some may object that this stricture no longer applies, at least in Lutheran circles; but before we sing any *Te Deums*, it would be well for us to remember and to realize that the present willingness to discuss doctrine is in many cases no more than lip service to the need for confronting and surmounting doctrinal differences; for such concessions have invariably been coupled with demands for freedom for all participants in the dialogue. This simply means that it is tacitly agreed that any discussion of doctrine will be carried on in a framework in which it is assumed that whatever the outcome of the discussion may be, no doctrinal discipline will ever be exercised, but that each participant will continue to be considered as a brother in the faith with whom fellowship in a greater or lesser measure can be practised, provided only, at least in more conservative circles, that certain boundaries are not overstepped. What those boundaries are is hard to determine and their fixation is usually left to the individual participant in the discussion, a process which may lead to outward unity but actually promotes inward fracture, and in reality does very little to impress the world with the unity of the Christian Church.

But while the definition of the church and the identification of the marks of the church, as we find them in the Augsburg Confession, have very definite ecumenical implications, the sentence of the seventh article which speaks perhaps the loudest word in regard to the modern ecumenical enterprise is the first sentence of the second paragraph: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments."

That sentence is perhaps also the most misunderstood and most abused statement in all of the Lutheran Confessions. The question that has been asked repeatedly is this: "What does the Augustana mean when it speaks of the 'doctrine of the Gospel?'" The answers have ranged all the way from the one given by Bishop Einar Billing of the Church of Sweden, who held that the Gospel is the simple message that "God is near us," to that given in the Formula of Concord, namely, that it is "the doctrine in all its articles." To Billing's credit it must at least be said that he recognized that his definition of the "Gospel" or the "Word of God" was not in harmony with the teaching of the Formula of Concord. Anyone who with an open mind reads the preface to the Book of Concord in the context of Reformation history knows that what Article X of the Formula meant when it spoke of the "doctrine and all its articles" is nothing less than the sum total of

all the teachings of Scripture. It can surely be said that Franz Pieper caught the spirit of Article X when he wrote,

In all Scripture there is not a single text permitting a teacher to deviate from the Word of God or granting a child of God license to fraternize with a teacher who deviates from the Word of God.²

The True Unity of the Church

Franz Pieper and those who hold the view which he espouses in those words have often been accused of not being satisfied with the "satis est" of the confessions and of demanding more for the true unity of the church than the Augsburg Confession requires. It has often been argued that since the one holy Christian church includes also believers in heterodox communions, therefore it is possible to have church fellowship with them and to practise this fellowship publicly in order to give outward testimony to the unity which exists between all members of the *una sancta*. Therefore the true unity of the church of which the seventh article speaks cannot consist in doctrinal unity, and the Augustana must mean something other than full doctrinal agreement when it speaks of the true unity of the church. The confessors were not ignorant of this argument. Aegidius Hunnius takes note of it in a series of theses on church and ministry, in which he says that a consensus in doctrine is not opposed to the unity of the Spirit but rather included in it.³ It may also be that such thoughts might have been in the mind of Melancthon when he added the adjective "true" to the phrase "the unity of the church" in the final draft of the Augustana.

It is true that Article VII does not address itself directly and explicitly to the question of church fellowship or unionism, nor does it speak expressly of the kind of activity that is carried on today in the modern ecumenical movement. A pluralistic society such as we have here in America, and in the whole world for that matter, where all churches, including the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Satan have equal standing before the law with worshippers of the Holy Trinity was a situation which the Reformers could not have envisioned in their wildest dreams. Even less imaginable for them would have been the concept of a pluralistic church organization in which truth and error could exist more or less peacefully side by side. They consciously rejected the idea of a church in which there was not doctrinal discipline and where, in the words of the Formula of Concord, controversies were not settled and removed "betimes, without long and dangerous digressions."

A glance at the preface which Luther wrote for the "Instructions for the Visitors" in 1528 will clearly demonstrate the truth of such an observation. The great reformer there expresses the hope that all the pastors of Electoral Saxony will "without any compulsion" accept the guidance of the visitors. But this "without any compulsion" was not to be interpreted to mean that each one was finally to be allowed to go his own way. He makes it clear that if there are pastors who do not agree with the doctrinal stand to be proposed by the visitors they are not to be tolerated in the church. He says, "We must separate these from ourselves as chaff on the threshing floor and refuse to accommodate ourselves to them." He threatens to call upon the elector to carry out his obligation "to so order things that strife, rioting, and rebellion do not arise among his subjects." What he has in mind with those words becomes very clear when he cites the example of Constantine, who called the bishops to Nicea and "constrained them to preserve unity in teaching and faith." And then, very significantly, he closes his preface with a reference to the same passage which is quoted at the end of Augustana VII. He writes, "What would happen if there were to be disunity and disagreement among us? . . . So let us be on our guard and anxious to keep (as Paul teaches) the spiritual unity in the bond of love and peace."⁴ It is very obvious that for Luther the spiritual unity of which Paul spoke in Ephesians included also unity in doctrine.

Modern Lutherans seem to have a great deal of difficulty with such a concept of unity. They ask, "If it is true that the Gospel in the narrower sense is one of the basic marks of the church and if faith can be kindled by the basic promise of free forgiveness for Christ's sake, then how is it possible for a consistent Lutheran to demand more for unity than the basic, central message of the Gospel?" Those who ask such a question have simply not understood what Article VII is trying to say to them.

It should be evident that while Article VII does not address itself directly to the problems we face in our confrontation with modern ecumenism, yet this article does have clear implications also for the practice of church fellowship and, as such, it ought to give direction to all confessional Lutherans in regard to the whole question of our attitude toward the modern non-confessional ecumenical spirit. And if the voice of the Augustana would be heeded by those who have pledged themselves to it, this would indeed result in the eclipse of ecumenism.

The "true unity" of the church, spoken of in Augustana VII, is not the unity for which the ecumenical movement is striving, nor is it the kind of unity which is reflected in modern ecumenical ac-

tivities. To avoid misunderstanding it probably needs to be said that we recognize very clearly that the unity spoken of here is the unity which exists invisibly in the *una sancta*, the one holy catholic church, made up of believers scattered all over the world, in the church militant, together with all the saints gathered before the throne of the Lamb, in the church triumphant. Melancthon says, in his comments on this article in the Apology, "We are speaking of true, that is, spiritual unity, without which faith in the heart, or righteousness of the heart before God, cannot exist" (Apol. VII — VIII, 31).

Someday someone might well explore the question of why Melancthon says that faith cannot exist without spiritual unity rather than that spiritual unity cannot exist without faith. But whatever the answer to that question may be, it remains true that "faith in the heart" is the bond which joins men together in the invisible unity of the one holy church. It is not correct to say, as Conrad Bergendoff said in 1961 at one of the meetings that led to the formation of the Lutheran Council in the United States of America, that "faith unites the believer with God" but that "love unites fellow-believers within the church."⁵

The same faith that makes believers children of God also makes them brothers and sisters in the same family. While it is certainly true that love is the bond of perfection which will endure long after faith has been replaced by sight, yet there is no true Christian love without faith, and the love that unites us with God and with all our fellow-Christians of all times and places grows only out of faith and is perfected only by faith, by that faith through which we have the forgiveness of sins. It is this forgiveness alone that makes our love for God and our fellow-men what it ought to be by covering all its imperfections with the perfect righteousness of Christ. For this reason also the imperfection of our love does not destroy the unity we have with God and with other members of the one holy Christian Church, the body of Christ. For our lack of love, which is a sin, is forgiven by God freely for Christ's sake, and this forgiveness, pronounced in the Gospel, is accepted only by faith.

But, as Hunnius says, this spiritual unity we have with one another through faith is not opposed to consensus in doctrine, but rather includes it. There are not two different brands of unity, but only different facets of one unity. Since the unity of the church is a unity of faith in the heart, it follows that whatever creates, nourishes, strengthens and sustains faith in the heart is really inseparable from the promotion and preservation of this unity. And whatever undermines, weakens, or destroys faith in the heart

is a threat to that unity. We are not taking seriously the admonition of the apostle to preserve the unity of the Spirit when we tolerate any kind of false doctrine in the church, and, together with Luther, we ought to pronounce a curse on that love and that unity which is preserved at the expense of the Word of God. Faith is nourished by the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. False doctrine cannot create and nourish faith. It is a constant threat to faith and for that reason also to the unity of the church. Therefore the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession says, "Ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et administratione sacramentorum."

The "Doctrine of the Gospel" In Modern Lutheranism

All Lutherans subscribe to this sentence, but to say that this joint subscription is a united confession is pure hypocrisy. Just as the essence of Scripture is to be found in the message conveyed by the inspired words, so a united confession does not consist in saying the same words but in saying the same thing. And modern Lutherans no longer seem to know what the "doctrine of the Gospel" really is.

And so we ask, "What is the doctrine of the Gospel of which the seventh article speaks?" This is the question that has agitated modern Lutheranism as it seeks to come to terms with the pressures of ecumenism. Those who have yearned to be part of what they consider to be the wave of the future have sought to reduce the doctrine of the Gospel to its lowest common denominator, namely, the doctrine of forgiveness. Thus David Truemper, a pastor of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (according to the 1979 *Lutheran Annual*), formerly assistant director of programming for the Lutheran Hour and presently a member of the theological faculty of Valparaiso University, has written,

The traditional LCMS insistence on maximal and prior doctrinal agreement as a condition for church fellowship is in need of revision. It distorts the idea of the church, perverts faith, and elevates doctrinal formulations above and in opposition to Christ and the one gospel and sacraments. In its stead, Lutherans would do well to grow up into their confessional posture and recognize and maintain the unity that already exists among the several Lutheran bodies, and not condemn one another on the basis of external matters like ceremonies and doctrinal formulations. Enough is enough.⁶

One may be inclined to ask how serious a man can be who holds that the true unity of the church consists in agreement with the Gospel in such a narrow sense and yet lives and works and fellowships in a church which he clearly condemns as being "in opposition to Christ and the one gospel and sacraments." On the other hand, one is just as inclined to wonder how men who hold the position which Truemper so clearly condemns as being in opposition to Christ and the gospel can kneel at the same altar with men who share Truemper's convictions. The whole situation is only another concrete illustration of the axiom: "Wenn mal die Kirchengemeinschaft zu Grunde faellt, dann wird selbst die Unterscheidung der Bekenntnisschriften zur lauter Heuchelei."⁵

Truemper's definition of the "doctrine of the Gospel" was already proposed by Conrad Bergendoff in the meetings that led to the formation of LCUSA and apparently proved no obstacle to the kind of fellowship that is practised in LCUSA. At one of the meetings in 1961 he said, "To claim that there must be perfect observance of all that the church teaches before fellowship can exist is to go beyond Scripture."⁷

This same point of view is set forth even more explicitly in the LCUSA report on the "Consultation on the Function of Doctrine and Theology in the Light of the Unity of the Church." In that report it is said that the representatives of the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church,

while affirming their continuing commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Lutheran Confessional writings, have tended to emphasize the historical character of those writings and to maintain the possibility of dissent from confessional positions that do not deal directly with the Gospel itself, such as some aspects of the confessional position of the fall of man into sin and the nature and interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Under such presuppositions the "theological consensus" spoken of in that same context cannot possibly be the unity of which the Augustana and the Formula speak.

But before such a group as this it is hardly necessary to cite this evidence. In large measure we are all aware that even the most conservative mainstream Lutheran bodies have in practice, if not in principle, adopted the view that Melancthon was speaking of a limited Gospel when he wrote Article VII. They shrink from a modern application of Luther's words, "We must separate these from ourselves as chaff on the threshing floor and refuse to accommodate ourselves to them." Thus Bishop Rost of the *Selbstaendige Evangelische Lutherische Kirche* has written that

for SELK there are no other marks of the church than “die schriftgemaesze Evangeliumsverkuendigung und die stiftungsgemaesze Sakramentsverwaltung,” but those beautiful words are then followed by the conclusion that for this reason it is not necessary to agree in regard to the inerrancy of Scripture and an “especially uncompromising position in matters of church fellowship” (ein besondere kompromiszlose Haltung in Fragen der Kirchengemeinschaft).⁸

Over against all such “limited subscription to shrunken confessions” the synod to which I have the privilege and the joy of belonging stands unreservedly for a full commitment to all that the confessions say and, beyond that, to all that the Scriptures say. We recognize that there are many theological and practical questions to which the confessions do not address themselves. To us “the doctrine and all its articles” or “the doctrine of the Gospel” includes also every teaching of the Scriptures which is not delineated in the confessions. We will not be deterred from such a position by the charge that we are going beyond the confessions or that we want to add more confessions to the Book of Concord. The confessors of four hundred years ago did not shrink from the idea of adding to the Book of Concord. We are prevented from doing that because Lutheranism has lost the ability to say, “Our churches with common consent do teach . . . and we condemn those who teach otherwise.” The formulators of 1580 had settled the controversies of the preceding decades by producing the Formula of Concord and in the preface to the Book of Concord they made the promise that if new controversies should arise those disputes would also be settled without long and dangerous digressions.⁹ In the historical context of those words we must certainly see in them a promise to produce whatever confessional documents might become necessary.

In that spirit E. C. Fredrich has written in the foreword of the 1980 volume of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* that during the coming decade

in all probability there will occur some sort of federated or merged union of the LCA and the ALC and the infant AELC. The basis will be a shared subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. This will, however, be a limited subscription to shrunken confessions.

There will be much self-serving concern on the part of those uniting that all who do not join or approve their union are “going beyond” the Confessions. We frankly admit that we “go beyond” the Confessions as the union prospects subscribe to them. But to call for an unequivocal commitment to

all the doctrinal content of the Confessions because it faithfully reproduces the doctrinal content of the Scriptures is to stay within the Confessions as the confessors wrote and underwrote them four hundred and four hundred and fifty years ago.

There will be much celebrating of confessional anniversaries in the months ahead. One cannot, however, expect that any celebrating of the Confessions by those who limit their subscription to them will actually improve the situation. Before that can be accomplished there will have to be a "going beyond" the Confessions to that which is their source, their *norma normans*. Only full allegiance to the Holy Scriptures can motivate a full commitment to the Lutheran Confessions. God grant that we and many others are guided by the Holy Spirit to such allegiance and commitment.¹⁰

The "Doctrine of the Gospel" as the Confessions Understand It

We see, therefore, in modern Lutheranism a wide cleavage in the definition of the "doctrina evangelii." If our vaunted "shared subscription" to the Confessions is to mean anything at all, we must first learn to agree on what the Confessions meant when they spoke of the "doctrine of the Gospel." Until we have answered that question in agreement, it will continue to be reprehensible hypocrisy to speak of a "shared subscription" on the part of all who call themselves Lutheran.

We have already noted that the Formula of Concord speaks of agreement in the doctrine and all its articles as the unity for which the confessors were striving. It is often said that those who want to define "the doctrine of the Gospel" in the wider sense appeal to these words of the tenth article of the Formula as justification for their point of view. Such a statement is, of course, correct, but unfortunately the impression is often left that this is the only evidence to which we can appeal for such a wider definition of the "doctrine of the Gospel."

However, the wider definition of "the doctrine of the Gospel" can definitely be established even without an appeal to the Formula. This wider definition is already implicit even in the brief wording of Article VII itself. It has been pointed out repeatedly that in Article VII "the doctrine of the Gospel" is not contrasted with other doctrines. Rather "the doctrine of the Gospel" is distinguished from "human traditions." When Melancthon spoke

of "the doctrine of the Gospel" he was not in any way selecting one specific doctrine out of the sum total of the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. Such a selection would have been unthinkable even for Melancthon, and for Luther it would have been horrendous.

The whole Augsburg Confession itself is a refutation of the claim that Melancthon was thinking of the Gospel in the narrower sense when he spoke of the true unity of the church. It is clear, for example, that he did not consider the doctrine of original sin to be an expendable doctrine, and yet this doctrine surely is not part of the doctrine of the Gospel in the narrower sense. In this connection a Finnish defender of the wider definition has written,

If it sufficed to think of the Gospel only in the narrower sense, the Augsburg Confession with its twenty-eight articles and the rest of the confessional writings would have been drawn up, accepted, and confessed in vain."

That "the doctrine of the Gospel" included far more than the message of free forgiveness for Christ's sake is also manifest from the many passages of the Apology which do not equate this particular doctrine with the doctrine of the Gospel, but rather speak of it as the "chief doctrine" of the Gospel. So, for example, it is said the doctrine of justification is "the chief topic of Christian doctrine" (Apol. IV, 2). Tappert's translation, "the main doctrine of Christianity" blunts the force of the original, which calls justification the "praecipuus locus doctrinae Christianae," while the German text says that the controversy over justification is "ueber dem hoechsten, vornehmsten Artikel der ganzen christlichen Lehre."

In a similar way the doctrine of repentance, which is defined as contrition worked by the Law and faith worked by the Gospel, is called "the chief topic of the Gospel" (XII, 3). In the same context the "remission of sins" is called the "chief topic of the Gospel." The designation of the doctrine of repentance as the chief topic, or *locus*, of Christian doctrine is repeated in a later article (XXIV, 40). In Article XV of the Apology the righteousness of faith, faith in Christ, and the consolation of consciences together are called "the most wholesome part of the Gospel" (XV, 42). The identification of the doctrine of forgiveness or even the much broader topic of repentance as the chief *locus* or article of the Gospel demonstrates beyond all doubt that the Gospel as the author of the Augsburg Confession understood it included much more than the basic message of forgiveness.

A. Aijal Uppala goes so far as to say, "Not once do these confessions use the word 'Gospel' in the narrower sense, as distin-

guished from other points of doctrine.¹² This judgement will be confirmed by an unbiased study of Melanchthon's use of the word in both the Augustana and the Apology. While he does use the word Gospel in a narrow sense, this is always done in a context in which the Gospel is distinguished from the Law. I would challenge anyone to find one clear passage in either confession in which Melanchthon, in his use of the word "Gospel," distinguishes the gratuitous promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake from any other part of the Gospel in the narrow sense.

Truemper is therefore completely unjustified when he defines the Gospel in the narrower sense as "the central article of forgiveness for Christ's sake."¹³ Such a definition of the Gospel in the narrow sense is absolutely foreign to the confessions. In the confessions the Gospel in the narrow sense includes everything in the Bible that is not Law. Truemper's attempt to make such a view sound ridiculous by speaking of "hedging it [that is, the central article of forgiveness] about with all manner of other assertions of doctrine" is a cheap shot not worthy of serious attention. Truemper's Gospel is not the Gospel in the narrower sense. It is Gospel-reductionism at its worst. There is not a single passage in the confessions where the word "Gospel" is used in the way he wishes to have it understood.

Bergendoff makes a similar mistake. He says that the "doctrina evangelii" is "what the NT proclaims as its fundamental truth." In that connection he says that Luther and his colleagues were forced by the course of the Reformation "to make more precise what is the substance of the New Testament." If only Lutheran scholars would do more reading in Luther and a little less repeating of worn-out cliches which they have adopted from others, who, in turn, have not read Luther much or well. We have all read the evidence for such a presumed change in Luther's thinking about the New Testament and the Word of God a hundred times, because it is always the same evidence. But Luther's remarks about James prove just the opposite of what the Gospel reductionists would like it to prove. His threat to quote Christ against Scripture is a protest against a false use of Scripture. Melanchthon expresses Luther's thought in different words in the Apology (III, 148).¹⁵ And, finally, Luther's frequently quoted remark from the American edition in which he is translated as saying that the Word of God is the Gospel is an inexcusable mistranslation. Luther's views, contrary to Bergendoff's statement, reinforce the usage of the confessions, which never allow us to understand the Gospel in the limited sense that is so often foisted upon it.

In fact, there are many places in the Apology where Melancthon uses the word "Gospel" as a name for the Bible as a whole, or for the sum total of all Christian doctrine, both Law and Gospel. In the Fifteenth Article of the Apology, for example, Melancthon says that the adversaries "rail at the Gospel" and then he gives a long list of sermon topics that are treated in Lutheran preaching, which in that context are obviously intended to show what kind of "Gospel" it is that is proclaimed from Lutheran pulpits. The first six topics listed there would perhaps be part of the Gospel defined in a very narrow sense, but then he goes on to list prayer, its efficacy and effect, the cross, the authority of magistrates and civil ordinances, the distinction between church and state, marriage, etc. (Apol. XV, 43).

Many times Melancthon simply equates the Gospel with the Scriptures. We cannot in the time available to us begin to make anything like a complete list of all the passages in which he alternates between the use of the terms "Gospel" and "Scriptures," and in which he evidently uses them as synonyms,¹⁶ but here again it can be said that the Formula was absolutely right when it said in commenting on a statement of the Apology that "the term Gospel . . . sometimes is employed so that there is understood by it the entire doctrine of Christ" (FC-SD, V,3). Melancthon says, for example, that the "Gospel convicts all men that they are under sin, that they are subject to eternal wrath and death" (Apol. IV, 62). But where is the Lutheran scholar who does not know that the Apology speaks in this way?

It might, however, not be a waste of time to call attention to the passage in the Apology's article on the church which speaks of the "pure doctrine of the Gospel" as one of the "outward marks" of the church. The German translation, in which Melancthon had a very active hand, translates the Latin "puram evangelii doctrinam" with "wo Gottes Wort rein geht." That passage all by itself ought to establish what Melancthon meant with the "doctrine of the Gospel." There can be no doubt that "Gottes Wort" in the language of the confessors meant the whole Bible. This is already evident from the Preface to the Augsburg Confession, where the Lutheran princes say that this confession was offered 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 churches" (8). So also in the Preface to the Apology Melancthon charges the Roman theologians with having "condemned several articles (of the Augsburg Confession) *contrary to the manifest Scriptures of the Holy Ghost*" (9), while in the same context he says, "We hold

the Gospel of Christ correctly and in a pure way" (15f.). In the Augustana article dealing with ecclesiastical power the "Gospel" is clearly equated with "the canonical Scriptures of God" (XXVIII, 21). An unbiased reading of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology will convince the unprejudiced that the doctrine of the Gospel is the totality of the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures.

The Temptation to Narrow the Concept of the "Doctrina Evangelii"

Nevertheless we must admit that the temptation to narrow the concept of "Gospel" is always with us. The narrowing of the concept "Gospel" is especially tempting when the pure teaching of the Gospel is viewed as a mark of the church. Even those who hold unreservedly to the plenary inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures are inclined to fall prey to that temptation. In our innate rationalism we are often prone to think that only the Gospel in the narrowest, the very narrowest sense, namely, the gratuitous promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake, has the power to bring men to faith.

In some ways this is a normal mistake to make. When all the verbiage is stripped away this promise is the object of faith, as the Apology reminds us. Where this promise is not found there can be no faith. Unless the gratuitous forgiveness for Christ's sake is preached purely there is no Gospel. Not even the account of Jesus' death or the doctrine of His deity or of the Holy Trinity are Gospel when those doctrines are divorced from the gratuitous promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake. This is what makes the papal system the mystery of iniquity that it is. Therefore also the Augsburg Confession and the Apology regularly speak of the adversaries as enemies of the Gospel, even though Melancthon is fully aware that these men did not deny the vicarious suffering of the Savior or the deity of Christ, or dozens of other doctrines that are part of even a rather narrow concept of "Gospel."

From the fact that the Apology clearly asserts that, where the promise of free forgiveness for Christ's sake is not proclaimed, there can be no faith, many have concluded that wherever this promise is proclaimed the Gospel is being rightly taught or preached in accord with a pure understanding of it, even if other fundamental doctrines are openly denied.

A concrete illustration of this argument is found in the oft repeated proposition, which is accepted as an axiom even by many conservative Lutherans, that no one has ever been converted by the doctrine of verbal inspiration or of biblical inerrancy.

Incidentally, while many are inclined to think of two distinct doctrines when they hear those terms, we ought to recognize that they are two terms for the same concept. A verbal inspiration which results in anything less than an inerrant Bible is pure, unadulterated nonsense.

It is, however, true that just as the deity of Christ could be proclaimed without preaching the Gospel, so verbal inspiration could be taught without preaching the Gospel in accord with a pure understanding of it. The doctrine of verbal inspiration as confessed, for example, by Jehovah's Witnesses becomes a part of a false prophet's disguise and is parallel to the truths the devil spoke to Eve in the garden of Eden, and an illustration of the words of Shakespeare, who tells us that the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence.

But when the doctrine of verbal inspiration is coupled with the free promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake, it becomes the purest Gospel. And who, in view of the total lack of Scripture evidence, would really dare to say that the Holy Ghost could not use this doctrine to bring us to faith in the promise? The doctrine of verbal inspiration reminds me that it is God Himself who says through the hand of the Apostle John that the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses me from all sin. No man has a right to believe that his sins are forgiven unless he has a promise from God to that effect. And verbal inspiration assures us that we have such a promise from God Himself.

Augustine tells us that he found rest for his restless heart by reading the last verse of the thirteenth chapter of Romans. I wonder how many of us would think of trying to bring a man to faith by quoting that verse. But we need not cite the case of Augustine. We have a biblical illustration even more graphic than the conversion of that saint. One of the first disciples, Nathanael, was brought to the conviction that Jesus was the Son of God and the promised Messiah by the statement of Jesus that he had been under a fig tree when Philip called him and invited him to come to Jesus. We have here a powerful demonstration of the principle enunciated in the confessions when they tell us that man comes to faith "ubi et quando visum deo," where and when it pleases God. "You were under a fig tree" at first glance hardly seems to be part of the Gospel in a wider sense, or should we say in the widest narrower sense. But it was this apparently insignificant remark which triggered that eloquent confession of faith, "Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel."

And just as this seemingly insignificant statement of Jesus led to a most significant confession of faith, so any doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, if it is proclaimed in connection with the gratuitous promise of forgiveness for Christ's sake, may be the power of the Holy Ghost, who is operative in all of God's Word, become the straw that breaks the camel's back and brings the sinner to repentance to make him a member of the one holy catholic church.

Once that is understood we will also realize that every denial of any doctrine of the Bible will be a threat to the unity of the church and dare not be tolerated in the church without doing violence to the true unity which ought to exist there. If we have a love for men's souls and if we want to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we cannot, we dare not, give room to the least error. Only so will the true unity of the church be preserved and the evil influences of modern ecumenism finally be eclipsed.

Footnotes

1. James Johnston, "Chapter and Verse," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, Jan. 12, 1980.
2. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), III, p. 422.
3. Philip Press, "Some 16th Century Theses Based on Articles 5, 7 and 8 of the Augsburg Confession," *Wisconsin Theological Quarterly*, XLIV (1967), pp. 181 f.
4. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press), XL, pp. 272 f.
5. *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation*, NCL and LC-MS, 1961, p. 11.
6. David Truemper, "How Much is Enough?" *Missouri in Perspective*, VI, 23 (Oct. 8, 1979), p. 6.
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 13.
8. *Informationen*, 22 (Oct. 10, 1979), p. 9.
9. Preface to the Christian Book of Concord, *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 25.
10. E. C. Fredrich, "The Foreward to Volume LXXVII: The Quarterly's Confessional Commitment," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXXVII (1980), p. 5.
11. A. Aijal Uppala, "It Is Enough" — "Satis Est," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, LXV (1968), p. 183.
12. *Loc. cit.*, p. 173.
13. *Loc. cit.*, p. 5.
14. *Loc. cit.*, p. 7.
15. *Triglotta*, p. 197.
16. Cp., e.g., AC XXVIII, 21, 34 f.; Ap. II, 4-50; IV, 86-117, 200; VI, 37-75; XXIV, 61-95.