

10. Confessional Ecumenism

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There is little doubt that future church historians will describe the modern Ecumenical Movement as one of the most significant religious phenomena of the twentieth century. So pervasive is the influence of this movement on the theology and life of the contemporary church that no responsible Christian individual or denomination can afford to remain indifferent toward it. But perhaps more important, neither can we afford to be indifferent toward the problem of ecclesiastical division and fragmentation that the ecumenical movement proposes to solve. We can share the sentiment of the Roman Catholic theologian who, after noting the existence of more than 250 religious denominations in the United States alone, observes, "The general impression is that of being confronted by a religious world blown to atoms and whose secret of cohesion has been lost."¹ To deplore this situation is not enough; we must understand its causes, and then take proper and effective action. What principles and attitudes should govern such action? Should we participate in extant ecumenical activities and organizations, and if so, why, and to what extent? Because such questions involve an understanding of the nature and mission of the church, they are doctrinal questions. Furthermore, they call for an understanding of the nature and function of doctrine itself. Lutherans will base their answers to these questions on the Word of God and the exposition of that Word in the Lutheran Confessions. For that reason Lutheran ecumenism is always *confessional* ecumenism. Confessional ecumenism is not some chauvinistic attempt to achieve Christian union by securing formal subscription to the precise words and phrases of our 16th century confessional documents. It is rather the practice of developing our relationships with other Christians by means of attitudes, principles, and activities based upon the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions as true expositions of the Word of God. Our essay attempts to serve such confessional ecumenism in two ways: first, by reviewing the crucially important confessional understanding of the nature of the church and its relationship to the Gospel; and second, by indicating some of the more important implications of this relationship for our attitude toward and involvement in ecumenical activities today.

I. Church and Gospel

In his inimitable fashion, Dr. Martin Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles: "Thank God, a seven-year old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (SA, III, xii, 2). Many today, although presumably wiser than the seven-year olds of Luther's day, have evidently forgotten the two chief features of this definition, namely, that the church consists of believers, and that believers follow the Shepherd's Word, the Gospel. The confessions deal at length with the intimate relationship between the church and the Gospel.²

(1) *The church in the narrow or proper sense is the "assembly of believers"* (AC VII). It is "mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Ap VII, 5) and not merely an "association of outward ties and rites". The great truth that the church is constituted by faith was articulated by Luther and his colleagues in the 16th century not only because of the polemical situation of that time, that is, to enable Luther to say in the Smalcald Articles, "We do not concede to the papists that they are the church, for they are not" (III, xii, 1). Much more, this understanding of the church as constituted by faith in Jesus Christ and not by membership in an external organization, fol-

lows from the great Apostolic and Reformation truth that man is justified by faith. Just as it is only by faith in Jesus Christ (or, the Gospel in the narrow sense) that a man is righteous in the sight of God, so the church is simply the totality of those who have such faith.³ The church is the Body of Christ because it has a living relationship with Him who is its Head. Apart from a living relationship with the Head, there is no living relationship with other members of the Body (Ap VII, 5). Apart from faith, there is no church. Just as faith alone justifies, so also faith alone constitutes the church. What this means dare not be overlooked! It is not our membership in St. Paul's Congregation, or in the American Lutheran Church or the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod or the Lutheran Church in America, or in any other organization that makes us "church." The church, properly speaking, is the community of all those, and only those, in whom the Holy Spirit has created saving faith in Jesus Christ. It is therefore both smaller and larger than any denominational structure. Its reality is *spiritual*, for it is constituted by *faith*. The precise limits of the church in the narrow sense cannot be determined by man, nor can its extent be measured statistically, organizationally, or sociologically.

(2) *The church is called and recognized by the use of the Gospel and Sacraments.* The church is GOD's creation. Because we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel and enlightens us with His gifts. When the Gospel is communicated or the sacraments are used,⁴ God does miraculous things! The Holy Spirit works through these instruments to make saints out of sinners by creating faith in Jesus Christ. When He creates faith, He places the faithful into a community called the church. The church is people, not an intellectual abstraction. For the means by which the church is *called* is also the means by which it is *recognized*. So great is our confidence in God the Holy Spirit's operation through the Gospel and sacraments that we know that the church exists wherever His means are employed. Thus, to find or recognize the church, our confessions urge us to look neither for great programs, many buildings, and large and elaborate organizations, nor even for purity of life or excellency of love — important as all of these may be —, but rather ask us to look for the pure and right use of the Gospel and sacraments. This emphasis honors God as the Author of the church and recognizes the church as His creation, rather than our own.

(3) *The church is united spiritually; its unity is given with faith in the Gospel.* We confess in the Nicene Creed: I believe in *ONE*, holy Christian and apostolic church. Properly speaking, there are not 250 churches in America, but *ONE* church. We are one with every Christian who lives or has ever lived on the face of this earth. Christian unity is nothing other than the spiritual bond that unites all believers to their Lord Jesus Christ and thereby to each other. There is only *one* assembly of such believers in both space and time. *Ubi ecclesia, ibi unitas*, our fathers said; "Where the church is, there is its unity." When our Augsburg Confession states in its Seventh Article, "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments", the confession is not in the first instance making a programmatic statement about our modern ecumenical problem.⁵ To quote from the Apology, it is rather describing "true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God" (Ap, VII, 31). Unity is there correlated with faith and righteousness — *spiritual* realities rather than empirical objects. Such unity is found where the Gospel and sacraments are used purely and rightly, that is, where they are in the first instance, *qualitatively* pure and right, where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are used without pollution and contamination by human additions or subtractions or by legalistic admixtures. For it is only through the pure Gospel that God creates the one and only church of Jesus Christ.

(4) *The church in the narrow sense is found only within the church in the broad sense.* Where do we find this one church of believers only? The

confessions answer: only in a larger assembly of people including hypocrites and unbelievers who for various reasons are gathered around the Word and sacraments together with the true believers. The confessions call this assembly the "association of outward ties and rights" (Ap VII, 5), or the church in the broad sense. The hypocrites and unbelievers in this assembly are not living members of the body of Christ but are only what the Apology calls "members of the church according to the outward associations of the church's marks" (Ap VII, 3), or "as far as outward ceremonies are concerned" (Ap, VII, 12). The church in this broad sense can be measured and described empirically and sociologically. Statistical yearbooks can be compiled on it. But it bears the name "church" only because of the true church within it. It too is identified by the use of Gospel and sacraments carried on in its midst and which continue to retain their divine power and efficacy even when done by unbelievers. This is not a second church, for there is only one church. But the one church of true believers — real people, not some Platonic idea or mere intellectual abstraction — exists within the broad church and is not simply coextensive with it. But it is the church in the broad sense that is involved in the modern ecumenical movement; it is in fact the normal identification of the word "church" today.

(5) *The external unity of the church in the broad sense is to be based on agreement in the Gospel and sacraments, that is, in "doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments"* (FC, Ep, X, 7). While unity is a "given" of the church in the proper sense, it is also a goal for the church in the broad sense, the "association of outward ties and rites". The Augsburg Confession was written not only to establish the fact that the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church was present among Luther's followers, but to help restore an outward unity that had been lost. The Preface of the AC states this purpose very clearly, namely, "to have all of us embrace and adhere to a single, true religion and live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ" (AC Preface, 4).⁶ Such outward unity is dependent on agreement in the Gospel and use of the sacraments according to Christ's institution. We are here talking about agreement in the Gospel in the broad sense.⁷ Why is such agreement necessary? To be sure, it is because Lutherans seek to be faithful to their Lord who commanded the church to "obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19, TEV). But it is also because the pure understanding of the Gospel and the consequent correct preaching of the Gospel in the narrow sense calls for a correct understanding of the Gospel in the broad sense, particularly of the articles of faith treated in the Augsburg Confession, defended in the Apology, and explained in the remaining Lutheran Confessions. All articles of faith are integrally related to the Gospel in the narrow sense; as the fathers often said, they are either antecedent or consequent to justification by grace. The Gospel in the narrow sense is central in the Gospel in the broad sense, and all aspects of the Gospel in the broad sense have a direct or indirect bearing on the Gospel in the narrow sense.⁸ Because of this relationship, the preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding of it becomes an impossibility whenever any article of faith is either falsified or denied. In this sense, the *pure* and *recte* of AC VII have also *quantitative* significance because the Gospel that creates and builds the church ultimately embraces all articles of faith revealed in Holy Scripture. For the confessions, it is self-evident that the norm for determining what is "pure" preaching of the Gospel and "right" administration of the sacraments is the Word of God, Holy Scripture. Whatever is faithful to Holy Scripture serves the Gospel, and whatever opposes Holy Scripture threatens the Gospel. An external fellowship in which the Bible's authority or truthfulness is denied or minimized jeopardizes the Gospel, for the testimony of the Scriptures is the God-spun fabric from which all articles of faith are woven. Recognition of the divine authority of Holy Scripture is a fruit of faith in the Gospel, but the *Biblical* content of the Gospel we preach and administer is in turn our assurance that our Gospel comes from God and therefore expresses His will and possesses His power.⁹ In this con-

nection, it should be observed that the Gospel is not to be confused with "ceremonies" that need not be everywhere alike (AC VII). Uniformity in ceremonies may be useful, but ceremonies not ordained by God have no organic connection with the Gospel and are therefore not criteria for fellowship. But the antithesis in AC VII is between the divine Gospel and human ceremonies, and not between the Gospel and "other" teachings of Holy Scripture.

(6) *Only such external unity within the church in the broad sense as preserves and employs the means of grace in their essential purity serves the true unity, preservation, and extension of the church in the proper sense.* The Holy Spirit builds the church through the Gospel and sacraments. Believing, teaching, and confessing the Gospel according to Holy Scripture becomes the one essential task of the church and the one God-given means for seeking and finding true Christian unity. In other words, the primary mission of the church is the faithful use of the means of grace. External unity in the church is not an end in itself, but serves the primary task of the church. *Concordia* is intended to advance *unitas*, and this is done only when the Gospel is faithfully preserved and consistently employed. Therefore, we cannot automatically assume that organizational mergers, participation in church federations, or even ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship in themselves advance the cause of true Christian unity, for the decisive criterion remains whether such activities advance and are faithful to the Gospel.¹⁰ According to this criterion, not every separation of Christians from other Christians is to be condemned (however much it is deplored), for God Himself commands separation from all alliances that persistently falsify His Gospel, or tolerate such falsification.

To summarize: The church in the narrow sense, which consists of believers in Jesus Christ, is united spiritually by its common faith in the Gospel in the narrow sense, but exists within the church in the broad sense whose external unity is to be based on agreement in the Gospel in the broad sense. The Gospel in the narrow sense is related to all aspects of the Gospel in the broad sense, and is the means by which the Holy Spirit creates and extends the church.¹¹

II. Implications

(1) *Confessional ecumenism is based on the understanding of the church as the assembly of believers, rather than on the current misunderstanding of the church that defines it solely in terms of sociological and empirical terms.* This is one of the most serious errors of contemporary ecumenism. Its concomitant is the notion that equates denominational fellowship with Christian unity. Such thinking has either forgotten or rejected the spiritual unity of the church on the basis of its common faith in Jesus Christ. Confessional ecumenism, on the other hand, knows that while the church is not a mere abstraction, neither is it precisely identical with the institutional church or its trans-denominational ecumenical organizations. Confessional ecumenism recognizes the fact that the church is true believers and that accordingly only such activities as give that face preeminence are really and truly ecumenical. Understanding the true nature of the church is of crucial importance. According to the Apology, knowing that the church consists only of believers who enjoy the gifts promised by Christ is a great comfort against despair when we see "the infinite dangers that threaten the church with ruin" (Ap VII, 9). Moreover, "If we were to define the church as only an outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked, then men would not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit but would think of it as only the outward observance of certain devotions and rituals" (Ap. VII, 13). In other words, misunderstanding the church may involve a misunderstanding of the Gospel itself.

(2) *Confessional ecumenism is predicated on the existence of true Christian unity among all believers.* The spiritual unity of believers is the pre-supposition and basis for seeking the empirical manifestations of that unity.

Let us state that somewhat less academically. It is precisely because we *are* one with all Christians that we are concerned about all Christians. It is because the Roman Catholic believer is my brother in Christ, for example, that I am concerned about his understanding of the role of Mary or the authority of the papacy. It is because the Baptist believer is my brother that I am concerned about his views on the sacraments. Oneness of faith leads and impels us to frank and earnest efforts with other Christians to help them preserve the faith, grow in the knowledge of the Savior, and share His love with others. On the other hand, it is for the sake of their common faith that Christians will often have to remain separate, individually and denominationally, from other Christians; for such separation as is commanded by God Himself serves as a fraternal admonition to the separated brethren to heed the whole counsel of God for the sake of their salvation. It is most unfortunate that so much recent ecumenical literature treats Christian unity only as the goal, and not as the presupposition, for our ecumenical efforts.

(3) *Confessional ecumenism is both evangelical and evangelistic.* It knows that the Gospel of Jesus Christ creates, sustains, and enlarges the church and therefore spares no effort to preach and administer that Gospel. It keeps the Gospel central (evangelical); it shares it with others (evangelistic). To be sure, Christians must be concerned with the great moral and social questions of our time, but not as a substitute for the Gospel or a means to promote true Christian unity, for the church's primary mission to itself and to others is fulfilled only by giving the Gospel pre-eminence in all it does. In fact, confessional ecumenism can be correctly understood as the practice of evangelism *within* visible Christendom.

(4) *Confessional ecumenism is doctrinal ecumenism.* It is committed to seeking full doctrinal agreement (i.e. agreement in the Gospel in the broad sense) as the basis for fellowship between Christian churches. For it knows that doctrine is in all its articles related to the Gospel by which the church lives, moves, and has its being. It therefore opposes both minimalistic and pluralistic doctrinal approaches to ecumenism. The former occurs in the appeal to practice ecclesiastical fellowship simply on the basis of a declaration of the Lordship of Christ, the "simple" Gospel, a Trinitarian statement, the fact of Baptism, or perhaps membership in a nominally Christian church.¹² As Lutherans, we must be particularly careful that AC VII is not misused in this way, as though the requirements for membership and unity in the *una sancta*, the church in the narrow sense, are a sufficient requirement for external unity or fellowship in the church in the broad sense.¹³ Closely related is the pluralistic assertion, so common in ecumenical literature, that many doctrinal positions can exist side by side within the same fellowship without disrupting the fellowship.¹⁴ This agreement to disagree is often bolstered by the fallacious argument that varying traditions of doctrine can enrich and help each other. Both the minimalistic and the pluralistic positions reflect an indifferentism to revealed doctrine that dishonors God's Word, weakens the Gospel that sustains the church and its true unity, offends the brethren, and ultimately promotes the external disunity of the churches. Such positions, often predicated on an inadequate notion of Christian love, serve the cause of neither love nor truth. Love demands that our brother be served by truth rather than by error, because error leads away from Jesus Christ, not toward Him. Doctrinal indifference ultimately destroys true Christian unity and produces schism, division, and polarization within Christendom. It is also to be emphasized that it is agreement in the Gospel — not in anything else, such as social action, liturgy, or structure — that is the basis for true Christian fellowship.¹⁵ Granted that the divided state of Christendom is a serious offense, it must be understood that doctrinal indifference or laxity not only does nothing to remove real barriers to fellowship, but creates an additional offense.

(5) *Confessional ecumenism accepts and employs Holy Scripture, the written Word of God, as "the only judge, rule, and norm according to which, as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged.*

as good or evil, right or wrong" (FC, Ep, Rule and Norm, 7), and vigorously rejects whatever calls into question the authority or truthfulness of the Bible. Confessional ecumenism resists the temptation to pit the Gospel or Christ against the Scriptures, for it knows that Christ is the center of all Scripture and that Holy Scripture is God's way of revealing Christ to us. Confessional ecumenism therefore resists the new "enthusiasm" or mysticism which substitutes subjective ideas (usually on the pretext of being guided individually or corporately by the Holy Spirit) for the clear Word of Holy Scripture. To be sure, our Lord has promised to guide the church into all truth and to give it His Holy Spirit, but He gives His Holy Spirit through the Word of His truth, and not apart from it.¹⁶ Moreover, confessional ecumenism recognizes the *doctrinal unity* of Holy Scriptures, and therefore resist the contemporary ecumenical notion that theological diversity within the Scripture justifies theological diversity within the church. When it is asserted that the authority of the Bible is not the basis of fellowship, it must be recalled that the Bible is the basis, and fabric, as it were of all articles of faith and therefore the norm of the Gospel we preach and teach.

(6) *Confessional ecumenism knows that the basis of church fellowship lies in agreement in doctrine, not in human ceremonies.* "It is not necessary" states AC VII, "that human traditions or rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere". Christian fellowship should not be made more stringent than God has made it by requiring agreement in such ceremonial or human matters. Liturgical agreement and structural conformity may be highly desirable for various reasons, but are not of the essence of the church or its unity. Brethren contemplating the declaration of either separation or fellowship need to be very careful that man-made and external considerations are not determining factors.

(7) *Confessional ecumenism cultivates a fellowship that is vertical in time as well as horizontal in space.* It therefore cherishes its doctrinal heritage and makes its historic confessions its own. Moreover, it echoes the desire of the Lutheran confessors that our posterity will share our faith, and knows that this can be achieved when, by the blessing of God the Holy Spirit, men of all ages seek and find their common agreement in the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of His Holy Word. Confessional ecumenism therefore deplors the current emphasis on theological change and novelty at the expense of continuity, particularly when such advocacy is predicated on the false notion that doctrine itself must change as part of the evolutionary and revolutionary process by which Christ is said to be exercising His Lordship over the world.

(8) *Confessional ecumenism recognizes the importance of practice as the application of doctrine to life.* Proper formulations of the meaning of the Gospel on the basis of the Scriptures, necessary as such formulations are, are no substitute for actually preaching, teaching, and living the Gospel and using the sacraments. Practice is a fair indication of fidelity to the Gospel. For example, it does little good to point to an excellent formulation of the lodge problem in a synodical constitution if in fact that policy is not being followed in the parishes. It means little to point to a fine statement on the inerrancy of Holy Scripture in the *Brief Statement* or the *United Testimony of Faith and Life* if, in fact, that position is no longer consistently followed. We need to remember that the Augsburg Confession (VII) is talking about a Gospel that is actually taught and proclaimed and about sacraments that are actually administered. Why? Because it is through the practice of the Gospel, if you will, that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains His church. To be sure, not all items in the area of practice are clearly defined in the Word of God, and this needs to be recognized. But where they are, or where they clearly relate to the Gospel, there can be no ecumenical retreat to the safety of written formulations at the expense of what is actually happening in the church's parishes as well as its seminaries, colleges, publishing houses, boards and commissions.

(9) *Confessional ecumenism employs both Law and Gospel in a fraternal and evangelical practice of Christian discipline toward those whose life or doctrine contradicts the teaching of Holy Scripture and vitiates or denies the Gos-*

pel of Jesus Christ, thereby impairing fellowship within the church of Jesus Christ. To be sure, the presence of error in a church body is not immediate grounds for suspension of fellowship. Heresy is the *persistent* advocacy of error, and erring brethren — whether individuals or churches — need our earnest efforts to correct them before we take the always regrettable ultimate step of separation. But doctrinal discipline is necessary for the preservation of the Gospel among us, for the promulgation or toleration of error neither builds nor sustains the church. It is therefore mandatory that procedures for doctrinal discipline within and between church bodies be as direct and uncomplicated as possible; that persons responsible for the public supervision of doctrine exercise that responsibility without prodding and without harassment, and that all of us, pastors and laity, keep ourselves informed on what is being taught, preached, and written in the church so that we can exercise a mutual ministry of concern toward each other. Evangelical doctrinal discipline is not legalistic, as some assert. It rather helps brethren remain faithful to the truth which alone makes men free.

(10) *Confessional ecumenism is grassroots ecumenism.* It involves the efforts of *all* Christians, both to become and to remain doctrinally informed, and also to give testimony of their faith to other Christians. Efforts toward achieving doctrinal agreement with other Christians should not be limited to the church's officials or theologians, important as these are. For true fellowship in the church in the broad sense is predicated on the assumption that the *believers*, whether pastors or laymen, are indeed united in the understanding and confession of the Gospel in the broad sense. Much more must be done to extend the ecumenical movement to our individual parishes.

(11) *Confessional ecumenism distinguishes between merger or altar and pulpit fellowship on the one hand, and cooperation in external matters on the other.* Fellowship with other Christians at the altar or in the preaching of the Word of God is clearly the pinnacle of Christian cooperative efforts, while joint efforts in social action or welfare and in other areas not directly affecting Word and Sacrament can sometimes be carried out with less than full doctrinal agreement. Even then, Christians will avoid giving the impression by such joint efforts that full agreement exists. The Formula of Concord reminds us that there are situations when there must be no "yielding or conforming in external things where Christian agreement in doctrine has not previously been achieved" (FC SD, X, 16). That statement means that even adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden by God, can be a legitimate source of contention and separation between Christians when the Gospel is at stake. We should not hesitate to cooperate with other Christians in such matters when this can be done without offense or misunderstanding. Such activity, however, must not be regarded as a substitute for attaining doctrinal agreement, for this would be to confuse a merely secular ecumenism with authentic confessional ecumenism.

(12) *Confessional ecumenism distinguishes between merger or altar and pulpit fellowship on the one hand, and ecclesiastical participation in federations and councils of churches on the other.* Merger, organic union, and altar and pulpit fellowship are based on complete doctrinal agreement (i.e. the Gospel in the broad sense), while federations or councils, on the other hand, usually represent efforts to provide structures for achieving such agreement. Membership in the latter type of organization (e.g. LCUSA, LWF) would be possible (though not mandatory) without complete doctrinal agreement whenever (1) such membership would entail serious doctrinal discussions with a view to the attainment of full doctrinal agreement, (2) when the federation or council as such does not engage in activity which would identify it as a church, (3) when membership in the council or federation would not tend to identify the member churches as being in doctrinal agreement when in fact they were not, and (4) when membership in such an organization would not identify a member church with undesirable or questionable positions or activities of the organization as a whole or with any of its member churches. When such concerns are adequately met, membership becomes primarily a question

of feasibility. When such organizations are not fulfilling their potential usefulness in the attainment of external unity, attempts should be made to change the organization before withdrawing from it or entering it, as the case may be. For such organizations, ideally considered, offer a useful framework for seeking a greater measure of doctrinal agreement and for cooperation in externals.

(13) *Available time and resources, as well as the demands and opportunities in other areas of the church's task, suggest that Christian churches follow clear priorities in seeking closer ties with other Christians.* On the principle that those closest to us in the household of faith deserve our closest attention and most persistent effort we would suggest the following sequence of ecumenical priorities:

- (1) Attaining closer relationships with estranged brethren within our own denominational fellowships, where the doctrinal differences often appear to be as great as between denominations. Lutherans loyal to their synodical constitution should not make withdrawal or separation their goal, but should rather endeavor to correct their synodical problems through the forthright rejection of error and the fraternal discipline of errorists.¹⁷
- (2) Maintaining and enriching our fellowship relationships with daughter and sister churches around the world. In the case of the ALC-LCMS relationship, we need to encourage the Inter-Church Commission to deal effectively with the issues that were commended to it and to promote greater doctrinal discussion at all levels. Where problems exist, we need to recall that patient and fraternal exhortation should precede more drastic action — whether we are dealing with individuals or church bodies.
- (3) Seeking to restore fellowship with churches formerly in fellowship, such as the WELS, the ELS, or our Finnish brethren.
- (4) Attempting to attain sufficient doctrinal agreement for fellowship with Lutheran churches not in fellowship with us, such as the Lutheran Church in Australia and the Lutheran Church in America.¹⁸
- (5) Promoting closer relations with non-Lutheran Christians.¹⁹
- (6) Using available opportunities to discuss the Gospel with representatives of non-Christian religions or ideologies, provided such contacts give ample opportunity for a clear testimony to the Gospel and are not regarded as according the non-Christian religion an equal claim to the truth.²⁰

In all these contacts and efforts, the quality of participation certainly is as important as the quantity. It is unfortunate that many of the top-level ecumenical discussions are held between the more liberal representatives of the churches. This is one reason why conservative Christians often tend to be somewhat negative toward ecumenicity, and why serious doctrinal differences are not effectively dealt with.

(14) *Confessional ecumenism holds that considerations of truth must take precedence over considerations of love, should these be in conflict, for Christian love is always dependent upon the truth of the Gospel.* When a choice must be made between external unity and the truth of the Gospel, unity must yield to truth. For it is better to be divided for the sake of the truth than to be united in error. Such division is the responsibility of those who depart from the truth, rather than those who follow it.

(15) *Confessional ecumenism will continue to make the following statement from the Formula of Concord in the 1570's the Lutheran formula for concord in the 1970's:*

We have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility, and outward harmony. Nor would such peace and harmony last, because it would be contrary to the truth and actually

intended for its suppression. Still less by far are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors. We have a sincere delight in and deep love for true harmony and are cordially inclined and determined on our part to do everything in our power to further the same. We desire such harmony as will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save for him forever through the sole merit of Christ, and so forth. (FC, SD, XI, 95-96)
That, dear brethren, is *confessional* ecumenism. God help us to practice it!

FOOTNOTES

¹Bernard Lambert, *Ecumenicism, Theology and History*, translated from the French by Lancelot C. Sheppard (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 54.

²The following paragraphs reflect the confessional distinction between the narrow and broad sense of both "church" and "Gospel". The church in the narrow sense consists of all believers and only believers (cf. AC VII; Ap VII, 28) but the church in the broad sense includes also hypocrites and unbelievers (cf. AC VIII and Ap VII, *passim*). Gospel in the narrow sense identifies the message or promise of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, while in the broad sense it includes all Christian doctrine (Ap IV, 43, 345; FC, SD, V, 3-6).

³It should be understood that the faith which saves and makes a man a member of the church (*fides qua*, as distinguished from the *fides quae*) is faith in the Gospel in the narrow sense, but not the knowledge and acceptance of the entire body of Christian doctrine.

⁴The sacraments have the same purpose and effect as the preached or spoken Gospel, for they are also ways in which our gracious God "offers counsel and help against sin" (SA, III, iv). They should therefore be thought of as "signed Gospel" or "visible Word" (Ap XIII, 5), not as something distinct from the Gospel.

⁵There has, of course, been widespread misuse of this article by contemporary Lutherans. Its primary purpose was to state what is necessary for the true church to exist, and by implication to affirm that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church was also present among Luther's followers. In this connection, it is useful to observe that the Latin versions of the Formula of Concord tend to use the term *concordia* when speaking of the external fellowship or unity of the church, and to reserve the term *unitas* for the spiritual fellowship existing among true believers in the *una sancta*.

⁶This language is substantially that of Charles V's imperial summons to the Diet of Augsburg.

⁷This broad sense of "Gospel", which is no doubt derived from the four "Gospel" accounts of the New Testament, was common usage in the sixteenth century and occurs in a variety of ways in the confessions. The expressions *iuxta evangelium* or *secundum evangelium* ("according to the Gospel") traditionally had reference to the four New Testament Gospels or a specific passage in them. The following confessional references are samples of such usage: AC, XXVIII, 5; Ap, XI, 4; XII, 122; LC, I, 65, 81, 276, 285. By extension, the term "Gospel" is sometimes applied to other parts of the New Testament, or to the Biblical teaching as a whole. For example, when Melancthon writes that the Mosaic ceremonial laws do not justify "according to the Gospel", his reference is to Colossians 2:16-17 (Ap, XV, 30). When the Apology asserts that we obtain forgiveness of sins freely because of Christ, it is possible to base this assertion on either *scriptura docet* (Ap, XII, 157) or *evangelium docet* (Ap, XV, 30). Likewise such expressions as *mandatum evangelii* or *evangelium iubet* evidently reflect this broad usage of the term (e.g., Ap, XII, 172). Melancthon laments the fact that the monks "neither hear nor preach the Gospel", and then asserts that the Gospel deals not only with forgiveness and justification but also is "about true penitence, about works that have the command of God" (Ap, XXVII, 54). Luther regrets that the clergy have learned very little from the "Gospel" about the conduct of their offices, with the result that they abuse their Christian liberty (LC, Preface, 3-4).

It is understandable that "Gospel in this broad sense was also used for the proclamation or teaching of the contemporary church. Luther claims, for example, that "the entire Gospel is an external, oral proclamation" (LC, IV, 30). The Apology equates *evangelium* with *doctrina* in defining the church as the assembly of saints who share the association of the same Gospel or teaching and of the same Holy Spirit" (Ap, VII, 8). Or again, one of the fruits of the fact that "the Gospel is taught purely and diligently among us" is that no Anabaptists have arisen in the churches of the Augsburg Confession; the teaching of Baptism is based on Matthew 28:19, but the content and effect as taught in the church is "Gospel" (Ap, IX, 2). It is often difficult to draw a precise line between the Biblical Gospel and its contemporary proclamation. When, for example, the confessions talk about the *praecipuus evangelii locus*, it is clear that they have reference to the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ (e.g., AC, XXVIII, 52; Ap, XII, 3, 10). But *evangelium* in this expression refers in the first instance to the entire doctrine of the New Testament and then to the proclamation of that doctrine in the church. This expression, incidentally, indicates that the Gospel-in-the-narrow-sense is the most important point and the chief topic of the Gospel-in-the-broad-sense.

Students of the confessions need to be sensitive to the various emphases in the use of the term "Gospel", for the confessions employ the term without great precision and sometimes use it in different ways in the same context (e.g., AC, VII; XXVIII, 5; Tr, 60).

⁸The Gospel has been likened to a seamless garment, a golden ring, or a wagon wheel whose hub is Jesus Christ and whose spokes are the articles of faith. The interrelationship of the articles of faith and their relationship to the Gospel in the narrow sense is explained in the following: "A Review of the Question, What Is a Doctrine?" III, 7, in *1969 LCMS Convention Proceedings*, pp. 506-507; *Theology of Fellowship*, Part II, B, 2, in *1969 LCMS Convention Proceedings*, p. 535; and "The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions: Essay Adopted by the Commissioners of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod", in *1967 LCMS Convention Proceedings*, pp. 417-419.

This interrelationship can be seen by thinking through the "simple" Gospel on the basis of a passage like John 3:16. Questions like the following lead to a consideration of all the theology from creation to eschatology, and indicate why agreement in the Gospel involves full doctrinal agreement: Who is "God"? Where did the "world" come from? Why did it need God's "love"? Who is God's "Son" and why is he called "only-begotten"? What did he do when the Father "gave" him, and how did this really change man's situation? What is meant by "believing in Him" and how does one get such faith? What does it mean that the world would "perish" without him? What is "eternal life"? On what basis can we be sure that our answers are God's?

⁹There is much confusion on this point, also within Lutheranism. But it must be understood that what is in conformity with the Gospel is determined by Holy Scripture, and not by man's subjective decision. It was axiomatic for the confessional fathers that Holy Scripture was God's authoritative revelation. It is a total misreading of the confessions to argue that they were interested only in the soteriological purpose of Holy Scripture and not in its divine authority and infallibility. For a systematic exposition of the confessional view of Holy Scripture, see my book, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968) especially Part One.

- ¹⁰It is important to recall the earlier emphasis that the "simple" Gospel embraces all the articles of faith and that the proper administration of the sacraments includes the proper *doctrine* of the sacraments.
- ¹¹It is a serious confusion when the requirements for spiritual unity are made the sole basis for altar and pulpit fellowship. This was done, for example, in the Fellowship Supplement of *The Lutheran Witness Reporter*, Vol. 4, No. 22, November 17, 1968, which stated on p. 4: "That which is necessary and sufficient for the church's true spiritual unity is also necessary and sufficient for altar and pulpit fellowship". The statement either requires too much for true spiritual unity or too little for altar and pulpit fellowship (although the following context fortunately clarified the matter somewhat).
- ¹²Novel as it may be to use the word "fundamentalistic" correctly, it should be observed that it is "fundamentalistic" to base church fellowship on agreement in certain basic doctrines to the exclusion of others. This was the position of historic Fundamentalism as well as of the earlier Moravian slogan, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity".
- ¹³Cf. the statement cited in note 11. This position would enable open communion, intercommunion, and unlimited participation in the ecumenical movement.
- ¹⁴The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod recently criticized "A Call to Openness and Trust" for its advocacy of a pluralistic doctrinal position in a number of key areas. A similar advocacy was voiced earlier in "The Task Ahead", an editorial in the September 1969, *Concordia Theological Monthly*.
- ¹⁵Nor is sociological or psychological compatibility to be confused with true Christian unity. Advocates of the "more we get together, the happier we'll be" kind of ecumenism are too much in evidence.
- ¹⁶The appeal to truth or action on the basis of an intuitive reading of the times for a dynamic group process or other forms of experience apart from the Word is nothing other than "enthusiasm" (Schwaermerei). Luther reminds us that enthusiasm "is the source, strength, and power of all heresy" (SA, III, viii, 9). And heresy is the heart of the ecumenical problem.
- ¹⁷Although intra-denominational relations are usually not included in "ecumenism", the confessional distinction between the church in the broad sense and the church in the narrow and proper sense enables us to think of all ecclesiastical structure in terms of its contribution to the true spiritual unity among believers. It is worth noting that the primary objective of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is "The conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; I Cor. 1:10) and a united defense against schism and sectarianism (Rom. 16:17)". In "Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod", *Handbook*, p. 15.
- ¹⁸Membership in such organizations as the Lutheran World Federation and the Lutheran Council in the United States of America should be evaluated in connection with this fourth objective. Some criteria for this evaluation were listed above in thesis 12.
- ¹⁹Within this vast array of denominations, we should cultivate closer ties with evangelical Christians first, and then with more liberal groups. It is important for us to realize that significant changes have taken place in the traditional views of some denominations, including certain Reformed groups and Roman Catholicism. We should also be aware of changes being introduced into ecumenical structures in order to make it possible for more widespread participation (e.g., the National Council of Churches).
- ²⁰As we have defined the term, this activity is technically not "ecumenical", but evangelistic. See the discussion of this problem with particular reference to Judaism in Lambert, pp. 445 ff.