

The Function of Doctrine ¹⁴ and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,
Lutheran Council in the USA,
During 1972-77

**HAMMA LIBRARY
TRINITY LUTHERAN SEMINARY
2199 EAST MAIN STREET
COLUMBUS, OH 43209**

© 1978 Lutheran Council in the USA

Quotations from **The Book of Concord**, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., **The Book of Concord** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

Contents

Part 1: Report on the Study	7
Part 2: Definitions of Gospel, Doctrine, Theology, and Consensus	
As Used in the ALC — By Warren A. Quanbeck	17
As Used in the LCA — By Robert C. Schultz	19
As Used in the LCMS — By Roland A. Hopmann	21
Part 3: Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship	
ALC View: What Does Agreement in the Doctrine of the Gospel Mean? — By Warren A. Quanbeck	27
How the LCA Understands Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship — By Edgar M. Carlson	29
The Position of the LCMS on the Basis for Fellowship — By Ralph A. Bohlmann	32
Our Commitment to the Gospel — By Ralph A. Bohlmann	40
Part 4: The Interrelatedness of the Gospel	
Gospel and Scripture — By Charles S. Anderson	47
Gospel and Church — By Robert C. Schultz	52
Gospel and Doctrine — By H. George Anderson	60
Part 5: Biblical Interpretation	
The Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions and the Historical-Critical Method — By Robert D. Preus	65
The Historical-Critical Method and the Method of the Lutheran Confessions — By Duane A. Priebe.....	76
Part 6: Theological Diversity in a Confessional Church	
LCMS Doctrinal Position — By Albert M. Marcis	83
Limits of Theological Diversity — By Warren A. Quanbeck	87
The Nature of Biblical Unity and Its Implications for the Unity of the Church — By Duane A. Priebe	89

5-29-87

T-19, 909

Part 3

Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship

COLUMBUS, OH 43209
219 EAST MAIN STREET
TRINITY LUTHERAN SEMINARY
HARINA, ILLINOIS

Our Commitment to the Gospel

By Ralph A. Bohlmann

Expressions like "commitment to the Gospel," "agreement in the Gospel," or "acceptance of the Gospel" have been employed frequently in the discussions and documents pertaining to the establishing of fellowship between the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

The 1969 convention of the LCMS agreed with the national and district presidents of the ALC and LCMS in declaring that "fellowship between church bodies is based on a common and mutual acceptance, understanding and practice of the Gospel and the sacraments."¹ Because "agreement in the Gospel" had been recognized, the LCMS declared itself "to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with

The American Lutheran Church."² The same resolution specified that "our commitment to the Gospel" is to be the basis on which we "seek a unified evangelical position and practice" in areas where there are unresolved problems or differences.³

Because agreement in and commitment to the gospel is both the basis and the framework for our fellowship, it is vitally important that we understand the confessional implications of such agreement and commitment. The Confessions employ "gospel" in both a narrow and a broad sense (cf., Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, V, 1-6).

In the narrow or "proper" sense (e.g., Apology, IV, 43, 345) "gospel" identifies the message or promise of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. "Gos-

pel" in this sense stands in antithesis to "law." It is the central message of both the Old and the New Testaments (e.g., Ap, IV, 5) and the means whereby God accomplishes his *opus proprium*, namely, "to quicken and console" consciences terrified by God's wrath (e.g., Ap, XII, 51). "Gospel" in this sense is impossible to conceptualize apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ.⁴

In the broad sense the word "gospel" in the Confessions often refers to some or all of the New Testament writings or to their content or even to the teaching of the evangelical church.⁵ In this sense "gospel" is the "entire teaching of Christ, our Lord, which in his public ministry on earth and in the New Testament he ordered to be observed" (FC, SD, V, 4). Used in

this way "gospel" includes the law and all parts of the Christian doctrine. The chief parts of the **gospel-in-the-broad-sense** are repentance and forgiveness of sins (or law and **gospel-in-the-narrow-sense**) (FC, SD, V, 4-5).

The gospel is in every sense the Word of God. Its central content is the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. It is the revelatory Word of God's grace for man's sin. It is creative and dynamic in its operation on the human heart, as befits both the Creator's power and the creature's sin. The gospel we proclaim and teach (in both the narrow and broad senses) is also the Word of God because, and to the extent that, its content is derived from Holy Scripture, the written Word of God. 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 is in turn our assurance that our gospel comes from **God** and therefore expresses **his** will and **his** power.⁶

Through the gospel God creates and preserves his church; through the church God proclaims and administers his gospel. Like the concept "gospel," the Confessions use the term "church" in both a narrow and a broad sense.

In the narrow or proper sense (*stricte* or *proprie dicta*) the "church" is the "assembly of believers" (Augsburg Confession, VII, VIII). As such, it is "mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts" (Ap, VII, 5) and "not merely an association of outward ties and rites." The faith

that makes one a member of the church is a gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed through the gospel (narrow sense) and sacraments (AC, V), which are not only means of grace but also the distinguishing marks of the church.⁷ Although the church-in-the-narrow-sense consists of believers in community, its precise limits cannot be determined, nor can its extent be measured statistically, organizationally, or sociologically, for its constitutive factor is faith and its reality is spiritual.

The unity of the church-in-the-narrow-sense is given with the existence of the church, for there is only one assembly of believers in both space and time. **Ubi ecclesia, ibi unitas**. When AC VII states, "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments," it is clear that in terms of the church in the narrow and proper sense the Confession is talking about "true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God" (Ap, VII, 31).

For such unity it is sufficient (because it alone is necessary—note the contrast with the opening words of the next sentence) "that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word." The accent in these words, as well as in the **recte** and **pure** of the Latin text, is pri-

marily (though not exclusively) qualitative: in order for the one church to come into being and endure (that is, for faith to be created and preserved), the gospel must be preached purely (that is, as God's gracious message of forgiveness in Jesus Christ without the works of law) and the sacraments must be used rightly (that is, as the gospel instruments God intended them to be). Agreement in the gospel-in-the-narrow-sense is thus basic and primary to the spiritual unity of the church-in-the-narrow-sense.⁸

The church-in-the-proper-sense, the "assembly of believers," exists in this world only in an "association of outward ties and rites," which includes also "evil men and hypocrites," who are not members of the body of Christ but are only "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 (*late* or *large dicta*) can be measured and described empirically or sociologically. But it bears the name "church" only because of the true church in its midst. It too is identified by the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments which are carried on in its midst and which retain their divine efficacy even when done by unbelievers. The continuing efficacy of the means of grace in the church-in-the-broad-sense is a source of comfort and assurance for the church-in-the-narrow-sense, particularly because of the latter's existence

within the former; for the battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil must also be fought within the church-in-the-broad-sense.

While unity is a constant characteristic, 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 also to help restore an outward unity that had been lost: "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).⁹ AC VII is instructive for the attainment of such external unity or fellowship. 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.¹⁰ 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 (including the law) have a direct or indirect bearing on the gospel-in-the-narrow-sense.¹¹

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 quantitative as well as qualitative significance. The norm for determining what is pure preaching of the gospel and right administration of the sacraments is Holy Scripture; whatever is faithful to Scripture serves the gospel, and whatever opposes Holy Scripture threatens the gospel. Thus even an external fellowship among Christians is improper without agreement in the gospel-in-a-broad-sense, or when the authority or truthfulness of the Bible is denied or minimized.¹² For only such agreement within the church-in-the-broad-sense as preserves the means of grace in their essential purity serves the true unity, preservation, and extension of the church-in-the-proper-sense. Where such agreement in the gospel does exist, however, Christians not only may but should practice fellowship.

Nearly 50 years after the drafting of the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord came into being. It proposed to help in the restoration of external fellowship to the German churches of the Augsburg Confession.¹³ The opening sentence of the Solid Declaration specifies the primary requirement for such external unity: "The primary requirement for basic and permanent concord within the church is a summary formula and

pattern, unanimously approved, in which the summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God" (FC, Rule and Norm, 1). The Formula's requirement of a "summary formula and pattern," or common confession, as a basis for ecclesiastical concord does not establish an additional requirement beyond "agreement in the Gospel." For the Formula, like the other Lutheran Confessions, is not only the basis for concord but also the result of "agreement in the Gospel."

Like the earlier Confessions, the Formula also demonstrates the need to reject teachings which jeopardize or overthrow the gospel.¹⁴ In words that echo AC VII, the Formula agrees that churches should not condemn each other because of differences in ceremonies "as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments" (FC, SD, X, 31). But they do insist that agreement in the gospel means agreement in "doctrine and all its articles" and that there must be no "yielding or conforming in external things, where Christian agreement in doctrine has not previously been achieved" (FC, SD, X, 16).¹⁵ Their concern for the truth is also ours: "We believe, teach, and confess that at a time of confession, as when enemies of the Word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the Holy Gospel, the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, and especially the ministers of the

Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess openly, not only by words but also through their deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God" (FC, SD, X, 10).

We are now in a position to state what is implied by "commitment to the Gospel" as the basis for fellowship and the framework within which we will "seek a unified evangelical position and practice" in areas of difference. Such commitment to the gospel means that in our dealings with one another and in our witness to church and world:

1. We accept, confess, and give primacy to the gospel-in-the-narrow sense as the message of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, and we reject all teachings and practices which in any way adulterate this gospel;

2. We believe, teach, and confess the gospel-in-the-broad-sense as the totality of revealed doctrine which in all of its articles is related to the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ, and we reject all falsifications of this doctrine;

3. We accept and employ 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, R&N, 7), and we therefore reject whatever calls into question the authority or truthfulness of the Bible;

4. We continue to confess and use the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran Confessions as true and normative expositions of the Holy Scriptures and explications of the gospel (broad sense);

5. We regard and treat each other as fellow members of the church (narrow sense), that is, as brethren whose faith in Jesus Christ makes us sharers in the "association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts" (Ap, VII, 5);

6. We zealously endeavor to preserve and promote in the church (broad sense) the preaching of the pure gospel and the right administration of the sacraments as the only means by which the church (narrow sense) is nourished, maintained, empowered, and extended;

7. We recognize that proper formulations of the gospel and the sacraments, necessary as they are, are no substitute for actually preaching, teaching, and living the gospel and using the sacraments; and that practice, as the application of doctrine to life, is a fair indication of fidelity to the gospel;

8. We pledge ourselves to a continued use of law and gospel in a fraternal and evangelical practice of Christian discipline toward those in our church bodies whose life or doctrine contradicts the teaching of Holy Scripture and vitiates or denies the gospel of Jesus Christ, thereby impairing our fellowship with one another in the church of Jesus Christ;

9. And we implore God the Holy Spirit, who has begun this good work in us, to continue it until the day of Jesus Christ.

1 Preamble of Resolution 3-15, 1969 **Convention Proceedings**, p. 97. The sentence is cited from the statement accepted in substance by ALC and LCMS national and district presidents in a joint meeting in Minneapolis, February 25-26, 1969.

2 Ninth "Whereas" and second "Resolved" of Resolution 3-15, p. 98.

3 Third "Resolved" of Resolution 3-15, p. 98. The "Conclusion" of the resolution speaks similarly in pledging the Synod "to draw these and all other problems affecting our relationships into the perspective of God's grace as revealed in the divine Word and deal with them within that framework."

4 The terms "gospel" and "Christ" are used almost interchangeably in some contexts, e.g., Ap, IV, 257, 260.

5 This broad sense of "gospel," which is no doubt derived from the four Gospel accounts of the New Testament, was common usage in the 16th 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, X, 4; Ap, 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, VI, 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; AC, XXVIII, 5; Tr, 60).

- 6 The Confessions' conviction that the Scriptures were authored by God the Holy Spirit is closely related to the confessional accent on the Christological content and soteriological purpose of the Scriptures. The confessional fathers confess the Christ of Scripture, even as they ground all their theology on the Scripture testifying to Christ.

For a detailed treatment of the confessional understanding of Holy Scripture, see Ralph Bohmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), especially pp. 23-80.

It hardly needs to be demonstrated that the Confessions consider their doctrine, centering in the gospel of justification through Jesus Christ, to be the clear teaching of Holy Scripture and not some sectarian emphasis received and taught apart from the sacred Scriptures. Cf., Bohmann, pp. 73-79, for documentation.

- 7 Interestingly, the German text of Ap, VII, 5, has "*wo Gottes Wort rein gehet*" where the Latin has "*puram evangelii doctrinam*." Similarly, Article XIV refers to the marks of the church thus: "We know that the church is present among those who rightly teach the Word of God and rightly administer the sacraments. It is not present among those who seek to destroy the Word of God with their edicts. . . ." (Ap, XIV, 4). This interchangeability of "Word of God" and "gospel" suggests that each term has a variety of emphases rather than that one term completely defines the other.

- 8 AC VII is not in the first instance a programmatic statement for the establishment of denominational fellowship, although it has important implications for the latter. 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.

- 9 This language is substantially that of Charles V's imperial summons to the Diet of Worms.

- 10 Cf., "A Review of the Question, 'What Is a Doctrine?'" III, 7, in 1969 *Convention Workbook*, pp. 506-07. In a similar vein the LCMS's "Theology of Fellowship" (Part 2, B, 2, 1969 *Convention Workbook*, p. 535) explains with reference to AC, VII:

"The doctrine of the Gospel is not here to be understood as one doctrine among many, or as a bare recital of John 3:16, but rather as a doctrine composed of a number of articles of faith. For the doctrine of the Gospel cannot be understood or preached without the Article of God, which the Lutheran confessors say they teach *magno consensu* (AC, I), the Article of Original Sin, which shows man's need for the Gospel, the Article of the Son of God, who became incarnate and redeemed man. The true understanding of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is correctly set forth by Herbert J. A. Bouman as follows: 'This does not mean that the specific locus "*de justificatione*" considered by itself is all that the Lutherans consider indispensable. Rather they regard the entire *corpus doctrinae* as bound up inextricably with justification. All doctrines have their place in this doctrine. All doctrines stand or fall with the doctrine of justification.'"

- 11 A careful examination of the close relationship of the articles of faith to the gospel is found in "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 the 1967 *Convention Workbook*, pp. 417-19.

In this connection commitment to the gospel-in-the-broad-sense includes commitment to the law. Confessional Lutherans therefore reject not only *legalism* (theoretical or practical use of the law for its own sake, particularly in the interest of attaining God's favor) but also *antinomianism* (theoretical or practical disuse of the law as the ethical standard of Christians and a necessary instrument for their daily repentance) as an aberration in the gospel.

- 12 See the earlier paragraph beginning, "The gospel in every sense is the Word of God," and footnote 6. Because of the importance for the gospel of maintaining the truthfulness of Holy Scripture, it was reassuring

for the delegates to the 1969 LCMS convention to hear from President Fredrick Schiotz that Professor Robert Preus' explanation of the meaning of inerrancy (in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, June 1967) is "virtually a paraphrase of what The American Lutheran Church states in its *United Testimony. . .*" (in *1969 Convention Proceedings*, p. 74).

- 13 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**. The German text tends to employ "**Einigkeit**" for both concepts.
- 14 The framers of the Formula state: "In order to preserve the pure doctrine and to maintain a thorough, lasting, and God-pleasing concord within the church, it is essential not only to present the true and wholesome doctrine correctly, but also to accuse the adversaries who teach otherwise" (FC, SD, R&N, 14).
- 15 External concord was not to be attained at any price. The Formula states that "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 error" (FC, SD, XI, 95).