

*The Formula of Agreement
in Confessional Lutheran Perspective*



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

*The Formula of Agreement
in Confessional Lutheran Perspective*

An evaluation of the Formula of Agreement
by the Department of Systematic Theology
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

With a summary and study guide prepared by
The Commission on Theology and Church Relations of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Summary of the Seminary Assessment of the Formula of Agreement	7
Study Questions	10
A Theological Assessment of the Formula of Agreement	15
The Text of the Formula of Agreement	35

A Summary and Study of the Seminary Evaluation

1. The 1997 assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) adopted by an 82 percent majority *A Formula of Agreement* (FOA), which was signed by the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. This document says that the signatories “recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God.” Perhaps the most significant point of difference that FOA declares to be settled is the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

2. Regarding this and other historic points of Lutheran-Reformed difference, FOA says: “in light of the radically changed world of the twentieth century, it was deemed inappropriate to defend or correct positions and choices taken in the sixteenth century, making them determinative for Lutheran-Reformed witness today.” In essence, this says that the historic confessions are no longer binding. Such an assertion is perhaps compatible with an open-ended Reformed understanding of confessional subscription or with the ELCA constitution which identifies even the Augsburg Confession as simply a “true witness” to the Gospel. It is not compatible with the binding nature of confessional subscription in historic Lutheran tradition. The present evaluation of FOA is informed by all of the Lutheran Confessions found in the *Book of Concord*.

3. Signatories to FOA “recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered.” By adopting FOA, the ELCA extends this recognition to pastors and congregations who deny or avoid saying that the true body and blood of Christ are present in or under the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. But the Lutheran Confessions teach precisely this, and they reject the contrary Reformed position (*Small Catechism*; Augsburg Confession X; For-

mula of Concord VII). Lutheran and Reformed doctrine and practice concerning the Lord's Supper truly are contradictory, not "complementary" as FOA claims. In FOA's new frame of reference, opposing views are valued as equally acceptable versions of the truth.

4. The adoption of FOA by the ELCA has implications for both pastors and laypeople in that church body. Pastors will act contrary to the Lutheran Confessions, to which they pledged themselves in their ordination vows. Laypeople will participate in communion services led by Reformed ministers in Lutheran or Reformed churches where questions may arise about whether what is distributed is actually the body and blood of Christ. In effect, subscription to the Augsburg Confession by ELCA congregations and pastors has been supplanted by FOA's requirement of a practice that is contrary to the Lutheran Confessions.

5. FOA holds that while neither Lutherans nor Reformed profess to explain *how* Christ is present in the Lord's Supper, both affirm that Christ Himself is present and received in the Supper. This is only partly correct. While it is true that no one knows "how" Christ's body and blood are present, nonetheless the Lutheran Confessions identify "where" the presence is and "what" is present. In the sacramental union (*unio sacramentalis*), bread and wine *are* the body and blood of the Lord. (As Jesus said, "This is My body.") These are received and eaten and drunk specifically by the mouth (*manducatio oralis*), and not merely by faith. Also unbelievers eat and drink the true body and blood of Christ with the mouth (*manducatio indignorum*). Christ is received in the Sacrament precisely because He is present with His body and blood in, with, and under the elements of bread and wine. Simply saying that Christ is the host at the table or that Christ is fully present — without specifically mentioning His body and blood as He did in instituting the Lord's Supper — is not to confess the biblical doctrine of the Sacrament.

6. Identifying what is eaten and drunk in the Lord's Supper

SUMMARY AND STUDY

was the historical point of contention between Lutherans and Reformed. It is simply not true that the two agreed about the *fact* of the “Real Presence,” but differed only as to the *mode* of that presence. The Reformed claimed that Christ could not be present in the Sacrament according to His human nature. They said that a human body can only be in one place at a time, and that Christ’s body is at the right hand of God, understood as a specific place in heaven.

7. FOA raises other issues of concern besides the Lord’s Supper. Since the Reformed do not practice emergency baptism, for example, Lutheran parents with a child in danger of death should not expect a Reformed pastor serving their congregation to be overly concerned. Likewise, since FOA speaks of justification as “including forgiveness of sins and renewal of life,” it is possible for it to say, “there are no substantive matters concerning justification that divide us.” But FOA fails to define justification properly or precisely in Scriptural and confessional terms.

8. In short, FOA simply glides over historic differences that have separated Lutheran and Reformed churches. What was once considered false doctrine by one party or the other is now understood as “mutual misunderstanding and misrepresentation” and “complementary rather than contradictory.” By agreeing to FOA, the ELCA has effectively denied its own confessional basis by approving positions rejected in the Lutheran Confessions.

Study Questions

(Paragraph numbers refer to paragraphs in the summary above.)

Paragraph 1

What is the basic affirmation made by FOA?

Paragraph 2

How does FOA's understanding of the role of confessions differ from that expressed in the Book of Concord itself? See the Preface to the Book of Concord (Tappert ed., pp. 12-14) and the Preface to the Formula of Concord (Tappert ed., pp. 504-506).

Paragraph 3

Are Lutheran and Reformed positions on the Lord's Supper contradictory or complementary? Why?

Paragraph 4

What challenges does the adoption of FOA by the ELCA present for the pastors and laypeople of that church body?

Paragraphs 5-6

What are the three hallmarks of Lutheran teaching about the nature of the Lord's Supper (whether or not you use the Latin catchphrases to refer to them)? Identify the basis for each in 1 Cor. 10:16-17 and 1 Cor. 11:23-29.

Why can we say that the body of Christ born of Mary is present in the Lord's Supper? See 1 Cor. 10:16-17 and 1 Cor. 11:23-26. How is it possible that this body is present in the Lord's Supper? See Matt. 28:18, 20; Eph. 1:20-23; 4:7-10; 1 Cor. 15:27; Heb. 2:8.

Is it true that Lutherans and Reformed are agreed about the *fact* of the real presence, but differ only as to the *mode* or *manner* of this presence? Why or why not?

Historical-critical theologians continue to question whether

SUMMARY AND STUDY

Jesus instituted the Holy Supper before His death and whether He rose from the dead. On these premises, what would it mean to say that “the risen Christ imparts himself in his body and blood,” as FOA does, citing an earlier ecumenical document? (See “A Formula of Agreement: A Theological Assessment” by the Department of Systematic Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, pp. 118-119.)

Paragraph 7

Briefly describe two theological issues that are raised by FOA in addition to the Lord’s Supper.

Paragraph 8

What does it mean to be a Lutheran church? Has the ELCA ceased to be Lutheran in either a confessional sense or an historic sense? Why or why not?

Why does all of this make a difference? Various answers could be given from different angles. This is perhaps the most important: The Lord’s Supper is the meal in which, under the bread and wine, Jesus gives His people His body and blood wherein the Lord forgives iniquity and remembers sin no more (Jer. 31:34; Matt. 26:28). Where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation. The Lord has given us His Supper so that we can trustingly receive His body and blood on the way to life everlasting. This is too great a treasure to give up! Discuss.

A Formula of Agreement: A Theological Assessment

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Prelude

The August 1997 assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) acted on three documents defining its relationship to three confessional families: the Roman Catholic Church, three Reformed churches, and the Episcopal Church. While the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* with the Roman Catholic Church addressed that one central truth, the documents proposed with the Reformed churches and the Episcopal Church were intended to establish full fellowship, allowing the clergy to preach and officiate, and encouraging the laity to participate in the Eucharist in the others' churches. The Lutheran-Episcopal *Concordat*, which required new ordination procedures for the ELCA, failed by a handful of votes to meet the ELCA's two-thirds constitutional requirement (though attempts are now under way to reverse this rejection by revisions in the document). A Formula of Agreement with the three Reformed churches fared better and passed with an 82 percent majority. The Reformed signatories to *A Formula of Agreement* (henceforth called the Agreement) were the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC). In the Lutheran-Reformed "Proposal," attached as a preface to the Agreement, these churches are specifically called "the three Reformed churches," which identifies them as members of the family of churches descended from John Calvin, the Geneva reformer and a younger contemporary of Luther. Reformed (Calvinist) and Lutheran churches have historically differed most notably about the Lord's Supper, though even more fundamental differences exist between these two confes-

sional families. Without in any way diminishing the significance of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, the immediate results of the Agreement are for Lutherans more catastrophic, as even some members of ELCA have seen both before and after their August 1997 assembly.

In the United States of America, the Agreement brings to a climax Reformed attempts, reaching back as far as Zwingli's meeting with Luther at Marburg in October 1529, to let Reformed communicants participate in the Sacrament at Lutheran altars. Since then the Reformed have attempted to make formal intercommunion arrangements with Lutherans. They were eminently successful in the 1817 forced union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Prussia, an arrangement adopted in other parts of Germany as well. By contrast, parallel attempts in America were voluntary.¹ In our century, the formation of the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKiD, 1948) and the adoption of the Leuenberg Concord (1973) have further advanced Reformed inroads into Lutheran churches. Most recently the Porvoo Declaration (1996) allowed northern European Lutherans and Anglicans, historically a Reformed church, the same privileges now accorded each other by the signatories to the Agreement. We can hardly overestimate the seriousness of the Agreement. It signals a reversion to the position of Samuel S. Schmucker and a rejection of the great confessional tradition of Charles Porterfield Krauth. By the ELCA's surrender of what is characteristically Lutheran, all Lutheranism has been diminished. With penitent hearts for our frequent lack of gratitude for the gifts of the Reformation and with the full conviction and confession that the bread and wine of the Sacrament are the very body and blood of Christ, we offer this assessment of the ELCA-Reformed A Formula of Agreement.

It is our prayer "That pure we keep, till life is spent, Thy holy Word and Sacrament."

The Agreement

The Agreement acknowledges that the signatories “recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered according to the word of God.”² In approving the others’ position on the Lord’s Supper, the central issue between the Lutheran and Reformed churches is accepted as settled. Lutherans differ from the Reformed on other doctrines: God, Christ, including the incarnation and atonement, Baptism, justification, sanctification, the purpose and goal of the Scriptures, election and the church.³ Differences on the Lord’s Supper, which surfaced in the break between Luther and Zwingli at Marburg, have made this doctrine the most prominent. While the Agreement addresses the historical differences made explicit in the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions and other official documents of both churches,⁴ it really sets them aside as outmoded: “Furthermore, in the light of the radically changed world of the twentieth century, it was deemed inappropriate to defend or correct positions and choices taken in the sixteenth century, making them determinative for Lutheran-Reformed witness today.” We add that they were found to be inappropriate by the Reformed already in the sixteenth century and by some American Lutherans in the nineteenth century. In other words, doctrinally defining documents are no longer binding as confessions. Here the Reformed understanding of confessions has won out over the Lutheran. Karl Barth described the Reformed view as a “timeless appeal to the open Bible and to the Spirit which from it speaks to our spirit.” He continued:

Our fathers had good reason for leaving us no Augsburg Confession, authentically interpreting the word of God, no Formula of Concord, no “Symbolical Books” which might later, like the Lutheran, come to possess an odor of sanctity. They left us only creeds, more than one of which begin or end with a proviso which leaves them open to being improved upon in the

future. The Reformed churches simply do not know the word dogma, in its rigid, hierarchical sense.⁵

This the traditional Reformed animosity to confessions and dogma, summed up so well by Barth, provides the spirit and content of the Agreement.

The ELCA's "confessional paragraph" seems to give pre-eminence to the Augsburg Confession. In itself, this would be no problem, since the Formula of Concord regards not itself but the Augsburg Confession as the "symbol of our epoch." Nor have strict Lutherans in the past questioned the orthodoxy of those who for historical reasons had no formal subscription to the Formula, but genuinely adhered to the Augsburg Confession. The ELCA, however, while acknowledging "the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord . . . as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church," merely "accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel,"⁶ which latter alone is "confesse[d]." Given the ELCA's deliberate exclusion of biblical infallibility/inerrancy from its constitution, all further commitments rest on a slippery slope of relativism. Not surprisingly, "[t]he dispute now is not over anything so refined as the relationship of Law and Gospel. It is, just for starters, over what the Gospel is, whether there is any Law at all, and just who this necessary Christ might be."⁷

In evaluating the Agreement, our response takes advantage of the entire Book of Concord (1580), without in any way diminishing the primacy of the Augsburg Confession (1530), which is as anti-Reformed as the Formula of Concord (1577): "Of the Supper of the Lord it is taught thus, that the very body and blood of Christ are verily present under the form of bread and wine in the Supper, and are there distributed and received. Therefore also the contrary doctrine is rejected."⁸

Pivotal for the Agreement is the "*satis est consentire*" of Augustana VII: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree

concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” In this article not only Lutherans, but also the Reformed, who do not accept the Augustana, find a basis for their alliance.

Adoption of the Agreement has an immediate effect in altering the confessional status of Augustana X, which was intended to exclude Zwinglian teaching. Even the Lutheran World Federation’s Harding Meyer noted that acceptance of the Leuenberg Concord (1973), expressly approved by the Agreement, meant a major change in “Lutheran confessionality.” It could “only mean that both churches no longer hold to the same position on certain points which had for a long time been considered important.” For one thing, “the previous Lutheran insistence on the Unaltered Augsburg Confession” is given up.⁹ For the Agreement, then, the historic doctrinal differences between Lutherans and Reformed are no longer obstacles to fellowship between the churches at any level. Since the UCC makes no confession binding, historical precedent presents no obstacles.¹⁰

The ELCA’s recognition that the sacraments are rightly administered in the Reformed churches puts the positions on the Lord’s Supper of Zwingli, Calvin, Bullinger, Knox and other classic Reformed and Calvinist teachers, along with their traditional confessions like the Consensus Tigurinus,¹¹ the Second Helvetic Confession, the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession on an equal footing with what is confessed in the Book of Concord. Thus pastors and congregations who explicitly deny or deliberately avoid saying that the bread of the Sacrament is the body of Christ and the cup is the blood of Christ are now recognized by congregations of the ELCA as those among whom “the sacraments are rightly administered.” This clearly disavows the teaching of the Lutheran Reformation (AC VII and X). In effect, the Agreement puts the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper into the category of adiaphora, matters on which there may be disagreement without disrupting the unity of the faith and the church. It

follows logically that the Agreement “withdraw[s] any historic condemnation by one side or the other as inappropriate for the life and faith of our churches today.”¹² To cite a critique of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: “The document seems to hold to a hermeneutic that would have us believe that disagreements can be overcome if we will only agree that the disjunctive statements really” do not matter any more.¹³ Richard John Neuhaus, a former ELCA clergyman, refers to an article by Leonard Klein, a current ELCA clergyman, to offer this assessment: “In the larger world of ecumenical affairs, there has been much talk in recent years about ‘reconciled diversity.’ The idea is that differences once thought to be church-dividing may not be so, that unity does not mean uniformity, and so forth. ‘What we have achieved with the Reformed,’ writes Pr. Klein, ‘true to the mood of the inclusive church, is unreconciled diversity.’”¹⁴

The Lutheran Confessions hold that the true body of Christ is present in or under the bread [*unter der Gestalt des Brots*] and that this excludes the contrary Reformed position.¹⁵ Within the new frame of reference, opposing views are valued as equal approximations of the truth.¹⁶ Accordingly, the condemnations of the Lutheran Confessions against the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper are no longer operable and are therefore withdrawn. With this the Lutheran Confessions are relegated to the position of mere historical documents, which no longer can claim the exclusive right to articulate the faith of Lutherans in the ELCA. Thus ELCA congregations and pastors are incidentally and not necessarily Lutheran. The practical outcome of this new understanding is that pastors of the Reformed tradition, with their denial of the real presence of the Lord’s body and blood in the Supper, are welcome to officiate at Lutheran altars and the Reformed laity are allowed to commune at these altars. In turn, Lutheran pastors and laity may celebrate and receive at Reformed tables.

Eucharistic hospitality is conceded by the Lutherans, not the Reformed. In this ecclesiastical treaty between the two great Reformation churches, the Lutherans and not the Reformed have made the accommodation in formally instituting mutual eucharistic hospitality. Already at Marburg, Zwingli extended a eucharistic invitation to Luther, which the Reformed have continued to offer Lutherans with few exceptions in the intervening four centuries. In the case of the Prussian Union, this invitation was legally enforced by penalties against Lutherans who conscientiously objected to it. The Agreement calls on the Reformed to keep on doing what they have always done and requires the Lutherans to do what they have historically refused to do. Concession is totally on the Lutheran side.

Since the ELCA has long practiced open communion (the former American Lutheran Church had full fellowship with the Reformed [1986]), the Agreement with the Reformed hardly represented a real crisis for them. It received an eighty-two percent approval vote.¹⁷ Subscription by ELCA congregations and pastors to the Augustana—for some this may include one or more of the other Confessions, something that may differ from congregation to congregation—has been replaced by the Agreement requiring a practice that is contrary to the Confessions. This situation is most serious for pastors, who must now act contrary to their ordination vows. Here is a parallel to the Prussian Union.¹⁸ The renunciation of the Confessions becomes most evident in the ELCA's recognition of the UCC, which, in its blending of Congregational, Baptist, Reformed, and Evangelical (Lutheran-Reformed) churches into one denomination, long ago gave up any concept of confessional subscription.¹⁹

The Agreement has meaning for ELCA laity. They are urged to participate in communion services led by Reformed ministers in Lutheran or Reformed churches. In both instances they may hear a liturgical formula in the distribution of the Lord's Supper that is different and even contrary to what they have been accus-

tomed to hearing in a Lutheran service. Such liturgical ritual has doctrinal implications, because it either confesses or does not confess the truth. What is distributed in such situations may in fact be no Sacrament at all. The Reformed have never gone beyond seeing the Sacrament as anything more than a form of the Word to which faith responds to make the sacramental action complete.

Without formally disowning the historic doctrinal documents, the Agreement provides a new operative statement for understanding the Lord's Supper, which for all practical purposes can only be regarded as an interpretative confession: "while neither Lutheran nor Reformed profess to explain how Christ is present and received in the Supper, both churches affirm that 'Christ himself is the host at the table . . . and that Christ himself is fully present and received in the Supper.'"²⁰ This expresses the traditional Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. Granted, we can no more know the "how" (method) of the real presence than we can know the "how" of the incarnation. Yet, identifying "where" Christ is, as well as "what" is present and received in the Supper, is exactly what the Lutheran Confessions do. He is present in the bread and the wine in such a way that, by virtue of sacramental union, bread and wine are actually His body and blood. These are received specifically by the mouth (*manducatio oralis*) and not merely by faith. Unbelievers too receive the true body and blood with the mouth (*manducatio indignorum*), since by definition they have no faith at all. Thus reception of the Sacrament by faith is dependent first on Christ's presence in the elements and then on our receiving Him with our mouths. Lutherans have insisted that the bodily reception of Christ exists apart from and independently of faith. Christ is actually sacramentally present before and apart from faith. Faith does not make or contribute to the Sacrament, but faith is created and confirmed and responds to Christ in the Sacrament (AC XIII).²¹ This is the whole point of the *manducatio indignorum* and the *manducatio oralis*. Formula of Concord

VII confesses this as the teaching of the Augustana, the Wittenberg Concord (1536), and the Great Confession (1528) of Martin Luther, who understood the Augustana better than anyone else (FC, SD VII, 33).

At first glance, it might appear that, even though Lutherans and Reformed have differences on how the sacramental elements are to be understood, they do have a common understanding about Christ being the host at the table, and they can affirm that He is fully present and received in the Supper. This is a totally false assumption. The Reformed see the Spirit and not Christ as the real giver of the Sacrament. They are forced into this position by their doctrine of Christ's human nature, which does not and cannot receive and is not affected by the divine nature (*genus maiestaticum*). Their doctrine of the local session of Jesus at God's right hand is a logical conclusion of their Christology. Though they teach that the divine nature is permanently attached to the human nature, that human nature is confined to heaven and is not present on earth. Thus Lutherans and Reformed have a different understanding of what it means that Christ is the host of the Lord's Supper. For the Reformed Christ does not really give His body and blood in the bread and wine.²²

Any discussion of Christ's presence in His human nature of course brings up the thorny issue of the historical Jesus, whose bodily resurrection is often denied or "reinterpreted" among both liberal Lutherans and liberal Reformed. This redefinition has been going on since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and was reinforced by the nineteenth-century "quest for the historical Jesus." Though the first two "quests" were declared dead, a third "quest" has resurrected the search.²³ Such a "quest" was unknown during the Reformation, when all parties to the dispute believed in the resurrection, even though the Reformed had their own peculiar views about the confinement of Christ's body to a place in heaven. Marc Lienhard, of the LWF's Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg, informs us that the historical-critical

approach to the Bible, which had made possible the Leuenberg Concord, had also made it impossible in the Arnoldshain Theses (a precursor to Leuenberg) “to connect the institution of the Lord’s Supper with the night in which he was betrayed.”²⁴ This renders meaningless the Agreement’s citation from the Leuenberg Concord that “in the Lord’s Supper the risen Christ imparts himself in his body and blood . . .”

Such language as “Christ himself is host at his table” is wrong-headed for at least two reasons.²⁵ Some 20th century New Testament scholars, most recently Willi Marxsen, claim that after Jesus’ death, early Christians believed He was present at the table and later on the table. Again it is not a matter of presence, but where that presence is. Gradually, a simple Protestant table became a Catholic altar. This is a word game with prepositions and could be dismissed, if it were not so serious a matter with dire consequences for the Church’s faith. Similarly, this kind of thinking sees early Christians as moderate Unitarians who later evolved into Trinitarians and prepared the way to Rome. The Germans call this doctrinal evolution the *Katholizisierung* of Christian doctrine. Secondly, the word “is” belongs to the bread and the cup, not to the host.²⁶

In certain places the Agreement seems consciously to follow Melancthon, who attached Christ’s presence to the liturgical action and not to the elements, as did Luther. Consider the inclusion of this citation from the Leuenberg Concord: “We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking.”²⁷ Certainly Christ is present in the ritual (act), but identifying what was eaten and drunk was the historical point of contention between Lutherans and Reformed.²⁸ It is simply not true, therefore, that Lutherans and Reformed agreed about the fact of the “Real Presence,” and differed only about the “mode.”²⁹ Nor is it true, as the former American Lutheran Church was assured in preparation for its acceptance of full communion with the Reformed in 1986, that

Lutheran teaching excludes only Zwingli, but not Calvin's "spiritual presence," since "both Lutherans and Calvinists ardently affirm the reality of Christ's presence in the sacrament."³⁰

Augustana X's condemnation clause had Zwingli in view. Calvin had not yet appeared, and so could not have been in the minds of Luther, Melancthon, and the other reformers and princes. However, Calvin and not Zwingli was the foremost target of the condemnations of Formula of Concord VII, which meant to safeguard the true sense of Augustana X (FC SD VII, 41-42). True, the Agreement does not reflect Zwingli's radical teaching that Christ is not present in the Sacrament. Yet the milder version, which let the Reformed "speak of the presence of Christ in the community gathered by the Holy Spirit,"³¹ is no more allowed by the Augustana than is nineteenth-century Unitarianism by Article I, which condemns fourth-century Eunomians. Confessional subscription for Lutherans means that after the historical condemnations are acknowledged and accepted, they continue to be applicable to the church's current situation. The Apology (1531), the Treatise (1537), and the Formula (1577) do precisely this for the Augustana (1530). By making the condemnations inoperable, the purpose of the Lutheran Confessions qua confessions is abandoned, so at best they represent only what certain churches historically believed. Confessional subscription is rendered meaningless. Not to be cynical, but can we ask whether the condemnations against the Arians and Muhammadans are still operative (AC I)? Or are we faced with selective confessional condemnation?³²

Sundry Items

(1) Each church's acceptance of the other's Baptism is no major breakthrough and plays no major role in the Agreement, but perhaps it should have. The Reformed neither believe nor practice emergency Baptism for infants and presumably also for adults. So Lutheran parents whose children are in danger of

death should not expect a Reformed pastor serving their congregation to be overly concerned.³³ Also, Lutherans may not be aware that Reformed and Presbyterian churches often welcome Baptist ministers to their pulpits. Ministers of either confession can serve as regular pastors of the churches of the other denomination. Reformed and Baptists differ over the method of administering Baptism and at what age it should be administered, but are agreed that Baptism does not work regeneration. So a Lutheran attending a Reformed church might find himself receiving what purports to be the Lord's Supper from a Baptist who denies that children are morally accountable because of original sin or capable of faith and salvation through Baptism. At stake here are Augustana II and IX.

(2) The Agreement notes that "ordinations in both traditions have usually been by presbyters," but acknowledges that one person as a bishop may act in behalf of presbyteries and synods. This may not be a significant issue for the presenters of this critique, but one cannot help note that the likely-to-be-revived ELCA Concordat with the Episcopal Church requires ordination by a bishop and consecration of ELCA bishops by Episcopal bishops.

(3) Ordination of women as pastors (ministers; presbyters) is not a problem for fellowship between churches, except for a few like the Missouri Synod and the Roman Catholic Church, and is simply taken for granted in the Agreement.

(4) Any differences on justification are simply put to the side: "there are no substantive matters concerning justification that divided us." This conclusion is based on defining justification as "forgiveness of sins and renewal of life." The Roman Catholic-ELCA Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification may be more elaborate, but comes to the same definition, a matter to be left to another time.

Conclusion

The signatories to the Agreement were fully aware of the his-

toric differences among themselves and agreed to accept each other's positions without correction. What was once considered false doctrine by one party or the other is now understood as "mutual misunderstanding and misrepresentation" and "complementary rather than contradictory." In this new situation, Lutheran and Reformed doctrines are considered traditions, that is, they are historic beliefs with no necessary binding significance for contemporary churches. Confessions have no more value than other historical documents.

The ELCA-Reformed alliance is not without precedent. Lutheran churches have gone out of existence by putting other documents or arrangements in the place of the Lutheran Confessions. Sasse saw the Prussian Union (1817) as the most notorious, but he also saw the formation of the Evangelical Church in Germany (1948) as an umbrella organization in the same light. This was taken one step further by the Leuenberg Concord, a foundation document for the Agreement, which claimed that the historic Lutheran and Reformed positions on the Lord's Supper simply represented different strands of the New Testament.³⁴ By effectively putting Reformed and Lutheran Confessions on a par in the Agreement, the ELCA has changed and denied its confessional base and has ceased to be Lutheran in both a confessional and a historic sense. This is in keeping with the global unionism embraced and advocated by the Lutheran World Federation's ecumenical program of "Reconciled Diversity" (1977): the various churches enter into full communion with one another while keeping their former confessions—minus the condemnations. Did theologians invent "postmodernism" before it became a secular fashion?

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Endnotes

1. Donald H. Yoder outlines some of these efforts in “Lutheran-Reformed Union Proposals, 1800-1850: An Experiment in Ecumenics,” *Bulletin of the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* 17 (January 1946): 39-77.

Johann Probst’s argument in *Die Wiedervereinigung der Lutheraner und Reformierten* [sic] (Allentown, Pa.: H. Ebner, 1826) is strikingly reminiscent of the Agreement’s perspective. He writes: “To Christian people in general it is all the same over what other dogmas the preachers of former days quarreled in their publications. Such writings can only be of interest to scholars. All the old confessional writings have been brought about through particularly grievous and troublesome circumstances and are likewise with time become obsolete and have only historical value.” Cited in Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology* (New York: The Century Company, 1927), 48.

2. The Agreement assumes that a doctrinal consensus was achieved in *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today* (March 1992). Also cited in the Agreement as authoritative are *An Invitation to Action* (1981-1983), the *Leuenberg Concord*, and *Marburg Revisited* (1962-1966). Marburg was the site where Luther refused the hand of fellowship to Zwingli and is symbolic of the traditional Lutheran resistance to communion with the Reformed. The title *Marburg Revisited* suggests that this resistance has been overcome. The Leuenberg Concord claimed doctrinal unity among the established Lutheran and Reformed churches of Europe.

3. The Agreement acknowledges “the differing ‘accents’ of Calvin and Luther on the relation of the church and word, Law and Gospel, the ‘two kingdoms,’ and the sovereignty of Christ.” For Barth, as for Zwingli, the Law is very much a form of the Gospel.

4. See, for example, *The Four Visitation Articles* of 1592, which has separate sections on “The False and Erroneous Doctrines of

the Calvinists” on the Lord’s Supper, the Person of Christ, Baptism and Predestination and Providence of God. Friedrich Bente, “Historical Introduction,” in *Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 192, 217, 1150-57.

5. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton (New York: Harper, 1957), 229-230.

6. This has long been the position of the General Synod branch of American Lutheranism. Milton Valentine writes under the heading “The Augsburg Confession Only” (“The General Synod,” in *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, 3rd edition (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1903, 41):

“The General Synod does not include in its confessional basis any of the other writings that have been, to greater or less extent, accepted as doctrinal standards in some places, such as The Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Luther’s Larger Catechism, the Smalkald Articles, and especially the Formula Concordiae.”

What is noteworthy in the case of the General Synod, though, is its militant attitude against the other confessions. About the Augsburg Confession itself, Valentine says “That in the differences of understanding and explanation that have always marked the interpretation of some of its statements, undisturbed liberty shall be enjoyed” (47).

This is not surprising, however, when one considers the position of Samuel Schmucker, the nineteenth-century American Lutheran. He argued that only the Augustana was to be subscribed to, and only insofar as it confessed the fundamental articles of the Christian faith in a manner substantially correct. Schmucker also claimed that because many Lutherans had never subscribed to the other symbolical books, they could therefore not be considered confessionally binding.

See “The Doctrinal Basis and Ecclesiastical Position of the American Lutheran Church,” in *The American Lutheran Church*,

Historically, Doctrinally, and Practically Delineated, 155-246 (Springfield, Ohio: D. Harbaugh, 1851).

Of note is the significant step back from the position of Schmucker and Valentine by J. A. Singmaster. See "The General Synod," in *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, 4th edition (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1914), 57-58.

7. "Editor's Response," *Lutheran Forum* 29 (Lent 1995): 18.

8. AC X, German, our translation.

9. Harding Meyer, "The LWF and Its Role in the Ecumenical Movement," *Lutheran World* 20 (1973): 28-30.

10. The *Statement of Faith*, adopted in 1959 by the United Church of Christ, makes no reference to the eternal generation of the Son, which denial is condemned by Augustana I.

11. It held that the body and blood were received spiritually and only bread and wine were received by the mouth. This was a result of the belief that Christ's body was locally contained in heaven and could not be on earth.

12. "Preface," Agreement.

13. Wording borrowed from Louis A. Smith, "Some Second Thoughts on the Joint Declaration," *Lutheran Forum* 31 (Fall 1997): 8. *A Common Calling* cites with approval and as an adequate authority the *Leuenberg Concord*, that the "condemnations expressed in the confessional documents no longer apply to the contemporary doctrinal positions of the assenting churches.

14. "Here I Stand. And Here, and Here: The ELCA in Assembly," *First Things* 78 (December 1997): 72.

15. See Formula of Concord VII, especially paragraph 33: "Sacramentarians and enthusiasts" who "will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final." This is no doubt why Bishop Perry at the closing convention of the Lutheran

Church in America “calmly and explicitly repudiated Article Seven of the Formula” in the interests of the projected fellowship with the Reformed (*Forum Letter* [September 16, 1986]).

Leonard Klein is quite right: “Lutheran and Reformed eucharistic doctrine and practice are not complementary but contradictory” (“Experiential Expressivism—The ELCA’s August Assembly,” *Forum Letter* [October 1997]: 4).

16. Neuhaus, “Here I Stand,” 72. “The proponents of fellowship with the Reformed repeatedly cited Calvin over the more radical Zwingli. Yet Calvin consistently stopped short of saying what Lutherans insisted upon, namely, that the bread and wine in the Eucharist is truly the body and blood of Christ.”

17. At least some confusion over the issue is demonstrated by the absurd statement of ELCA columnist Clark Morphew: “An Episcopal bishop . . . is believed to have the power to make Christ present in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Lutheran bishops have never been given that power” (Fort Wayne News-Sentinel [May 16, 1997])!

18. Hermann Sasse, *Union and Confession*, translated by Matthew C. Harrison, in *Christ and His Church*, edited by Ronald Feuerhahn, Matthew Harrison and Paul T. McCain (Saint Louis, Missouri: Office of the President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1997), 38.

19. This is frankly admitted by Robert W. Jenson (“The August 1997 Assembly of the ELCA,” *Pro Ecclesia* VI [Fall 1997]: 389-90): “The supposedly confessional ELCA was able to enter full fellowship with the United Church of Christ even though it knows that this partner is unable to commit itself creedally or liturgically and was again so informed by the United Church representative at the assembly.” For specific information on the United Church of Christ, see Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 4 volumes (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 2:664-74.

20. This phraseology is taken into the Agreement from James E. Andrews and Joseph A. Burgess, editors, *An Invitation to Action*:

The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III 1981-1983 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), but the emphasis and ellipsis were added by the writers of the Agreement and not the presenters of this critique.

21. “*sacramenta instituta sint, . . . ad excitandam et confirmandam fidem, in his qui utuntur, . . .*” So Christ’s bodily presence in sacramental bread and wine precedes faith and reception of it.

22. We are not alone in our observation that the Formula of Agreement is Calvinistic. Michael J. Root, formerly with the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France, and recently appointed to the ELCA faculty of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, notes that “The Formula clearly excludes a Zwinglian reading of the Supper and states that Christ gives himself to all who receive the elements” (*Forum Letter* 27 [March 1998]: 4).

At issue here, however, is not Zwingli’s, but Calvin’s view, as rightly noted by ELCA clergyman, Russell E. Saltzman, the editor of *Forum Letter*. “As we have read it, the trouble with the Formula is not what it says, but what it does not say. It never says plainly that what is given and received in the Supper is the Lord’s body and blood. This was of course the same problem Calvin had, how to say as much as possible about the Supper without finally ever saying it is the Lord’s body and blood. ‘[W]e must establish such a presence of Christ in the Supper,’ so he wrote in his *Institutes*, ‘as may neither fasten him to the element of bread, nor enclose him in bread, nor circumscribe him in any way. . . . ‘Careful reading shows the Formula accomplishing just that. ‘Imparts himself in his body and blood,’ to quote Leuenberg quoted in the Formula, is not nearly as distinct as ‘gives himself in his body and blood,’ just as an example. The Formula is a very good attempt at grappling with the Real Presence, but unless we and the Reformed are both speaking of the elements as that ‘body born of Mary’ (LBW #215), then ultimately we are speaking of different things. We agree, the Formula is not ‘feel good’ ecumenism, which is why a number of us feel worse for it.” *Lutheran Book of*

Worship #215 is Luther's eucharistic hymn "O Lord, We Praise You," in which the Reformer confesses the identity of the sacramental gift with the body born of the Virgin Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate (TLH 313; LW 238). We concur with Pastor Saltzman that the Formula of Agreement presents Calvin's and not Luther's position.

23. The Jesus Seminar is the best known, but its determining truth by ballot may relieve it of scholarly credence.

24. Marc Lienhard, *Lutherisch-Reformierte Kirchengemeinschaft Heute. Ökumenische Perspektiven* Nr. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Otto Lembeck, Verlag Joseph Knecht, 1972), 54, our translation.

25. Emphasis is in original.

26. It might go too far to suggest that the authors of the Agreement were engaging in deception in using the word *host*, which can refer to the person at the head of the table and to the sacramental bread. The former comes from the Latin *hospis* and means "one who entertains"; the latter from the Latin *hostia* and means "the sacrificial victim."

27. Ernst Sommerlath, "Die kommende Kirche? Anfragen zum Leuenberger Konkordienentwurf aus der DDR," in *Von der Wahren Einheit der Kirche: Lutherische Stimmen zum Leuenberger Konkordienentwurf*, 185, herausgegeben von Ulrich Asendorf und Friedrich Wilhelm Künneht (Berlin und Schleswig-Holstein: Verlag Die Spur GmbH & Co., 1973):

"Klar scheint mir aber zu sein, daß die Frage, ob die Kommunikanten beim Abendmahl Christi Leib und Blut essen und trinken, von der LKE verneint wird." ["It seems clear to me that the question whether the communicants eat and drink the body and blood of Christ at the Lord's Supper is answered negatively by the Leuenberg Concord."]

28. Lutherans in no way want to deny that the Sacrament is the work of the Holy Spirit, who alone gives all good gifts to the church, including and especially the Sacraments. The Reformed assigning the Lord's Supper to the Holy Spirit should not force

us into denying that the Lord's Supper is as much a Trinitarian gift fully involving the Holy Spirit as it is a christological one. After all, it is the Father who invites us to the Supper of His Son and so He is properly addressed in all the eucharistic prefaces: "It is truly meet, right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto Thee, Lord God, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, . . ." Through the Father's invitation and the Son's gift, the Spirit works in the sacramental elements and creates and confirms faith in the heart. This activity of the Spirit is specifically associated with the presence of Christ in the bread and not with some parallel, disconnected working in the heart. In this Sacrament as in the incarnation, He is acknowledged and worshiped as Creator Spiritus.

29. So, for instance Andrews and Burgess, editors, *An Invitation To Action*, 114-115; and Walter Wietzke, "With Our Closest Kin," *The Lutheran Standard* (July 11, 1986): 9-11). While numerous Reformed proponents of this argument could be cited, we will refer only to John W. Nevin's "The Lutheran Confession" (*Mercersburg Review* 1 [September 1849]: 470): "In particular, we are not able at all to accept Luther's idea of Christ's presence in the eucharist. With Calvin, and the *Heidelberg Catechism*, we hold the mystery itself, and abhor the rationalistic frivolity by which it is now so commonly denied; but the mode of it we take to be such as fairly transcends all local images and signs" (emphasis in original).

30. Wietzke, 9. Ernst Sommerlath, the long-time editor of the distinguished *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, made a similar critique against the Arnoldshain Theses, which prepared the way for the Leuenberg Concord. The participants were agreed that Christ was the subject of the sacramental action, "But nowhere is it said, that he gives his body and blood in the elements." "Stellungnahmen unter Gesichtspunkten der Lehre and des Bekenntnisses," *Lehrgespräch Über das Heilige Abendmahl*, edited by Gottfried Niemeier (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961), 79 (our

translation).

31. *Christianity Today* 41 (October 16, 1997): 81.

32. A certain pre-history here inspires little confidence: A 1980 article in *Lutheran World Report*, by John Reumann, of the former LCA, had argued that the whole traditional Christology from Nicaea and Chalcedon to Article III of the Augsburg Confession is untenable in light of historical-critical scholarship. Thereupon, the LCMS resolved in 1981 to request the Division of Theological Studies of the former Lutheran Council in the USA (LCUSA) to take up “as a matter of urgency a thorough discussion of the far-reaching implications of historical criticism, as practiced in U.S. Lutheranism, for: a) the central, Christological-Trinitarian core of the Gospel; b) the very possibility of confessional subscription; c) the preamble of LCUSA’s constitution, according to which the participating Lutheran church bodies . . . see in the Ecumenical Creeds and in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church . . . a pure exposition of the Word of God” (1981 *LCMS Proceedings*, 160).

Five years later, and shortly before it expired, the Division of Theological Studies issued a thin leaflet on historical criticism with a few points of agreement and disagreement, but stating that time had “not permitted” it to deal “with the implications of historical criticism for Christology, justification, and confessional subscription, which are taken up in the Reumann article.” But readers were assured that even where “sharp disagreement” had arisen, this “nevertheless did not destroy our sense of oneness in Christ”!

Lienhard, incidentally, points out that when the Leuenberg Concord speaks of the “collapse of traditional thought-forms,” this refers to “the two-natures doctrine and the doctrine of the communication of attributes” (107).

33. Sasse, *Union and Confession*, 25.

34. For Lienhard whether or not “est” can be understood as “significant” is not capable of being exegetically resolved (54). He

refers to Eduard Schweitzer who finds Palestinian tradition of the New Testament perpetuated in Reformed views and Hellenistic tradition in Lutheran views, (*Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* [1:18]). The uncertainty over the meaning of “is” apparently does not apply to the Agreement’s own reference: “Christ himself is host at his table.” Would they allow, “Christ is signified [as] Host at the Table”? Both Lienhard and Schweitzer work with an evolutionistic understanding of the New Testament in which the simpler Jewish beliefs developed into more complex Greek ones. The Lutheran understanding of the Lord’s Supper is judged to resemble the more advanced Greek (also known as the catholic) form. For a proper understanding of the Leuenberg Concord, Tuomo Mannermaa’s painstaking *Von Preussen Nach Leuenberg: Hintergrund und Entwicklung der theologischen Methode in der Leuenberger Konkordie* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte und Theologie des Luthertums. Neue Folge Band I. Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1981) is simply indispensable. It is the first and perhaps the only “historical-critical” study of Leuenberg, in the sense that it examines the historical roots and the development of the methodology behind that document. Without oversimplifying the complexity of the argument, it may be said that the operative principle of Leuenberg turns out to be a distinction between “justifying faith” and “dogmatical faith,” such that the “theological explication of faith” comes in the end to be classified with the “human rites and ceremonies” of AC VII, agreement in which is not necessary for the true unity of the church (see pages 62-63).

A Formula of Agreement

Between the
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,
the Presbyterian Church (USA),
the Reformed Church in America,
and the United Church of Christ
on Entering into Full Communion
on the Basis of *A Common Calling*

Preface

In 1997, four churches of Reformation heritage will act on an ecumenical proposal of historic importance. The timing reflects a doctrinal consensus which has been developing over the past 32 years coupled with an increasing urgency for the church to proclaim a gospel of unity in contemporary society. In light of identified doctrinal consensus, desiring to bear visible witness to the unity of the Church, and hearing the call to engage together in God's mission, it is recommended:

That the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ declare on the basis of *A Common Calling* and their adoption of this *A Formula of Agreement* that they are in full communion with one another. Thus, each church is entering into or affirming full communion with three other churches.

The term "full communion" is understood here to specifically mean that the four churches:

Recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God;

Withdraw any historic condemnation by one side or the other as inappropriate for the life and faith of our churches today;

Continue to recognize each other's Baptism and authorize and encourage the sharing of the Lord's Supper among their members;

Recognize each others' various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament;

Establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of the churches;

Commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service;

Pledge themselves to living together under the Gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a chance to grow.

This document assumes the doctrinal consensus articulated in *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North American Today*, and is to be viewed in concert with that document. The purpose of *A Formula of Agreement* is to elucidate the complementarity of affirmation and admonition as the basic principle for entering into full communion and the implications of that action as described in *A Common Calling*.

A Common Calling, the report of the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations (1988-1992) continued a process begun in 1962. [1] Within that report was the “unanimous recommendation that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ declare that they are in full communion with one another” (*A Common Calling*, pp. 66-67). There followed a series of seven recommendations under which full communion would be implemented as developed within the study from the theological conversations (*A Common Calling*, p. 67). As a result, the call for full communion has been presented to the four respective church bodies. The vote on a declaration of full communion will take place at the respective church-wide assemblies in 1997.

Mutual Affirmation and Admonition

A concept identified as early as the first Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue became pivotal for the understanding of the theological conversations. Participants in the Dialogue discovered that “efforts to guard against possible distortions of truth have resulted in varying emphases in related doctrines which are not in themselves contradictory and in fact are complementary . . .” (*Marburg Revisited*, Preface). Participants in the theological conversations rediscovered and considered the implications of this insight and saw it as a foundation for the recommendation for full communion among the four churches. This breakthrough concept, a complementarity of mutual affirmation and mutual admonition,

THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

points toward new ways of relating traditions of Reformation churches that heretofore have not been able to reconcile their diverse witnesses to the saving grace of God that is bestowed in Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church.

This concept provides a basis for acknowledging three essential facets of the Lutheran-Reformed relationship: (1) that each of the churches grounds its life in authentic New Testament traditions of Christ; (2) that the core traditions of these churches belong together within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church; and (3) that the historic give-and-take between these churches has resulted in fundamental mutual criticisms that cannot be glossed over, but need to be understood “as diverse witnesses to the one Gospel that we confess in common” (*A Common Calling*, p. 66). A working awareness emerged, which cast in a new light contemporary perspectives on the 16th century debates.

The theological diversity within our common confession provides both the complementarity needed for a full and adequate witness to the gospel (mutual affirmation) and the corrective reminder that every theological approach is a partial and incomplete witness to the Gospel (mutual admonition) (*A Common Calling*, 66).

The working principle of “mutual affirmation and admonition” allows for the affirmation of agreement while at the same time allowing a process of mutual edification and correction in areas where there is not total agreement. Each tradition brings its “corrective witness” to the other while fostering continuing theological reflection and dialogue to further clarify the unity of faith they share and seek. The principle of “mutual affirmation and admonition” views remaining differences as diverse witnesses to the one Gospel confessed in common. Whereas conventional modes of thought have hidden the bases of unity behind statements of differences, the new concept insists that, while remaining differences must be acknowledged, even to the extent of their irreconcilability, it is the inherent unity in Christ that is determinative. Thus, the remaining differences are not church-dividing.

The concept of mutual affirmation and admonition translates into significant outcomes, both of which inform the relationships of these four churches with one another. The principle of complementarity and its accompanying mode of interpretation make it clear that in entering into full church communion these churches:

Do not consider their own traditional confessional and ecclesiology-

ical character to be compromised in the least;

Fully recognize the validity and necessity of the confessional and ecclesiological character of the partner churches;

Intend to allow significant differences to be honestly articulated within the relationship of full communion;

Allow for articulated differences to be opportunities for mutual growth of churchly fullness within each of the partner churches and within the relationship of full communion itself.

A Fundamental Doctrinal Consensus

Members of the theological conversations were charged with determining whether the essential conditions for full communion have been met. They borrowed language of the Lutheran Confessions: “For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree (*satis est consentire*) concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (*Augsburg Confession*, Article 7). The theological consensus that is the basis for the current proposal for full communion includes justification, the sacraments, ministry, and church and world. Continuing areas of diversity, no longer to be seen as “church-dividing,” were dealt with by the theological conversations under the headings: The Condemnations, the Presence of Christ, and God’s Will to Save.

On Justification, participants in the first dialogue agreed “that each tradition has sought to preserve the wholeness of the Gospel as including forgiveness of sins and renewal of life” (*Marburg Revisited*, p. 152). Members of the third dialogue, in their Joint Statement on Justification, said, “Both Lutheran and Reformed churches are . . . rooted in, live by, proclaim, and confess the Gospel of the saving act of God in Jesus Christ” (*An Invitation to Action*, p. 9). They went on to say that “both . . . traditions confess this Gospel in the language of justification by grace through faith alone,” and concluded that “there are no substantive matters concerning justification that divide us” (*An Invitation to Action*, pp. 9-10).

Lutherans and Reformed agree that in Baptism, Jesus Christ receives human beings, fallen prey to sin and death, into his fellowship of salvation so that they may become new creatures. This is experienced as a call into Christ’s community, to a new life of faith, to daily repentance, and to discipleship (cf. *Leuenberg Agreement*, III.2.a.). The central doctrine of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper received attention in each dialogue and in the theological conversations. The sum-

THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

mary statement in *Marburg Revisited*, reflecting agreement, asserts:

During the Reformation both Reformed and Lutheran Churches exhibited an evangelical intention when they understood the Lord's Supper in the light of the saving act of God in Christ. Despite this common intention, different terms and concepts were employed which. . . led to mutual misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Properly interpreted, the differing terms and concepts were often complementary rather than contradictory (*Marburg Revisited*, pp. 103-104).

The third dialogue concluded that, while neither Lutheran nor Reformed profess to explain how Christ is present and received in the Supper, both churches affirm that "Christ himself is the host at his table. . .and that Christ himself is fully present and received in the Supper" [emphasis added] (*An Invitation to Action*, p. 14). This doctrinal consensus became the foundation for work done by the theological conversations.

The theme of ministry was considered only by the third dialogue. Agreeing that there are no substantive matters which should divide Lutherans and Reformed, the dialogue affirmed that:

Ministry in our heritage derives from and points to Christ who alone is sufficient to save. Centered in the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, it is built on the affirmation that the benefits of Christ are known only through faith, grace, and Scripture (*An Invitation to Action*, p. 24).

The dialogue went on to speak of the responsibility of all the baptized to participate in Christ's servant ministry, pointed to God's use of "the ordained ministers as instruments to mediate grace through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments," and asserted the need for proper oversight to "ensure that the Word is truly preached and sacraments rightly administered" (*An Invitation to Action*, pp. 26, 28, 31).

The first dialogue considered the theme of church and world a very important inquiry. The dialogue examined differences, noted the need for correctives, and pointed to the essentially changed world in which the church lives today. Agreeing that "there is a common evangelical basis for Christian ethics in the theology of the Reformers," (*Marburg Revisited*, p. 177), the dialogue went on to rehearse the differing "accents" of Calvin and Luther on the relation of church and world, Law and Gospel, the "two kingdoms," and the sovereignty of Christ. The dialogue found that "differing formulations of the relation between

Law and Gospel were prompted by a common concern to combat the errors of legalism on the one hand and antinomianism on the other.” While differences remain regarding the role of God’s Law in the Christian life, the dialogue did “not regard this as a divisive issue” (*Marburg Revisited*, p. 177). Furthermore, in light of the radically changed world of the 20th century, it was deemed inappropriate to defend or correct positions and choices taken in the 16th century, making them determinative for Lutheran-Reformed witness today. Thus, the theological conversations, in a section on “Declaring God’s Justice and Mercy,” identified Reformed and Lutheran “emphases” as “complementary and stimulating” differences, posing a challenge to the pastoral service and witness of the churches. “The ongoing debate about ‘justification and justice’ is fundamentally an occasion for hearing the Word of God and doing it. Our traditions need each other in order to discern God’s gracious promises and obey God’s commands” (*A Common Calling*, p. 61).

Differing Emphases

The Condemnations:

The condemnations of the Reformation era were an attempt to preserve and protect the Word of God; therefore, they are to be taken seriously. Because of the contemporary ecclesial situation today, however, it is necessary to question whether such condemnations should continue to divide the churches. The concept of mutual affirmation and mutual admonition of *A Common Calling* offers a way of overcoming condemnation language while allowing for different emphases with a common understanding of the primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the gift of the sacraments. *A Common Calling* refers with approval to the *Leuenberg Agreement* where, as a consequence of doctrinal agreement, it is stated that the “condemnations expressed in the confessional documents no longer apply to the contemporary doctrinal position of the assenting churches” (*Leuenberg Agreement*, IV.3.2.b). The theological conversations stated:

We have become convinced that the task today is not to mark the point of separation and exclusion but to find a common language which will allow our partners to be heard in their honest concern for the truth of the Gospel, to be taken seriously, and to be integrated into the identity of our own ecumenical community of faith (*A Common Calling*, p. 40).

THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

A major focus of the condemnations was the issue of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Lutheran and Reformed Christians need to be assured that in their common understanding of the sacraments, the Word of God is not compromised; therefore, they insist on consensus among their churches on certain aspects of doctrine concerning the Lord's Supper. In that regard Lutheran and Reformed Christians, recalling the issues addressed by the conversations, agree that:

In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord's Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgment (*Leuenberg Agreement*, III.1.18).

We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord's Supper (*Leuenberg Agreement*, III.1.19).

The Presence of Christ:

The third dialogue urged the churches toward a deeper appreciation of the sacramental mystery based on consensus already achieved:

Appreciating what we Reformed and Lutheran Christians already hold in common concerning the Lord's Supper, we nevertheless affirm that both of our communions need to keep on growing into an ever-deeper realization of the fullness and richness of the eucharistic mystery (*An Invitation to Action*, p. 14).

The members of the theological conversations acknowledged that it has not been possible to reconcile the confessional formulations from the 16th century with a "common language . . . which could do justice to all the insights, convictions, and concerns of our ancestors in the faith" (*A Common Calling*, p. 49). However, the theological conversations recognized these enduring differences as acceptable diversities with regard to the Lord's Supper. Continuing in the tradition of the third dialogue, they respected the different perspectives and convictions from which their ancestors professed their faith, affirming that those differences are not church-dividing, but are complementary. Both sides can say together that "the Reformation heritage in the matter of the Lord's Supper draws from the same roots and envisages the same goal: to call the people of God to the table at which Christ himself is present

to give himself for us under the word of forgiveness, empowerment, and promise.” Lutheran and Reformed Christians agree that:

In the Lord’s Supper the risen Christ imparts himself in body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thereby grants us forgiveness of sins and sets us free for a new life of faith. He enables us to experience anew that we are members of his body. He strengthens us for service to all people. (The official text reads, “*Er starkt uns zum Dienst an den Menschen,*” which may be translated “to all human beings”) (*Leuenberg Agreement*, II.2.15).

When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we proclaim the death of Christ through which God has reconciled the world with himself. We proclaim the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. Rejoicing that the Lord has come to us, we await his future coming in glory (*Leuenberg Agreement*, II.2.16).

With a complementarity and theological consensus found in the Lord’s Supper, it is recognized that there are implications for sacramental practices as well, which represent the heritage of these Reformation churches.

As churches of the Reformation, we share many important features in our respective practices of Holy Communion. Over the centuries of our separation, however, there have developed characteristic differences in practice, and these still tend to make us uncomfortable at each other’s celebration of the Supper. These differences can be discerned in several areas, for example, in liturgical style and liturgical details, in our verbal interpretations of our practices, in the emotional patterns involved in our experience of the Lord’s Supper, and in the implications we find in the Lord’s Supper for the life and mission of the church and of its individual members. . . . We affirm our conviction, however, that these differences should be recognized as acceptable diversities within one Christian faith. Both of our communions, we maintain, need to grow in appreciation of our diverse eucharistic traditions, finding mutual enrichment in them. At the same time both need to grow toward a further deepening of our common experience and expression of the mystery of our Lord’s Supper (*An Invitation to Action*, pp. 16-17).

God’s Will to Save:

Lutherans and Reformed claim the saving power of God’s grace as the center of their faith and life. They believe that salvation depends on God’s grace alone and not on human cooperation. In spite of this com-

THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

mon belief, the doctrine of predestination has been one of the issues separating the two traditions. Although Lutherans and Reformed have different emphases in the way they live out their belief in the sovereignty of God's love, they agree that "God's unconditional will to save must be preached against all cultural optimism or pessimism" (*A Common Calling*, p. 54). It is noted that "a common language that transcends the polemics of the past and witnesses to the common predestination faith of Lutheran and Reformed Churches has emerged already in theological writings and official or unofficial statements in our churches" (*A Common Calling*, page 55). Rather than insisting on doctrinal uniformity, the two traditions are willing to acknowledge that they have been borne out of controversy, and their present identities, theological and ecclesial, have been shaped by those arguments. To demand more than fundamental doctrinal consensus on those areas that have been church-dividing would be tantamount to denying the faith of those Christians with whom we have shared a common journey toward wholeness in Jesus Christ. An even greater tragedy would occur were we, through our divisiveness, to deprive the world of a common witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ that has been so freely given to us.

The Binding and Effective Commitment to Full Communion

In the formal adoption at the highest levels of this *A Formula of Agreement*, based on *A Common Calling*, the churches acknowledge that they are undertaking an act of strong mutual commitment. They are making pledges and promises to each other. The churches recognize that full commitment to each other involves serious intention, awareness, and dedication. They are binding themselves to far more than merely a formal action; they are entering into a relationship with gifts and changes for all.

The churches know these stated intentions will challenge their self-understandings, their ways of living and acting, their structures, and even their general ecclesial ethos. The churches commit themselves to keep this legitimate concern of their capacity to enter into full communion at the heart of their new relation.

The churches declare, under the guidance of the triune God, that they are fully committed to *A Formula of Agreement*, and are capable of being, and remaining, pledged to the above-described mutual affirmations in faith and doctrine, to joint decision-making, and to exercising and accepting mutual admonition and correction. *A Formula of Agree-*

ment responds to the ecumenical conviction that “there is no turning back, either from the goal of visible unity or from the single ecumenical movement that unites concern for the unity of the Church and concern for engagement in the struggles of the world” (“On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: The Message of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order,” 1993). And, as St. Paul reminds us all, “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this,” (1 Thess. 5:24, NRSV). [2]

Notes:

[1] For a summary of the history of Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue in North America, see *A Common Calling*, pp. 10-11. The results of the first round of dialogue, 1962-1966, were published in *Marburg Revisited* (Augsburg, 1966). The second round of dialogue took place in 1972-1974. Its brief report was published in *An Invitation to Action* (Fortress, 1983), pp. 54-60. The third series began in 1981 and concluded in 1983, and was published in the book, *An Invitation to Action*. Following this third dialogue a fourth round of “Theological Conversations” was held from 1988 to 1992, resulting in the report, *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today* (Augsburg, 1993). In addition, the North American participants in Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue have drawn on the theological work found in the *Leuenberg Agreement*, a Statement of Concord between Reformation churches in Europe in 1973, published in *An Invitation to Action*, pp. 61-73, as well as the Report of the International Joint Commission of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1985-1988, *Toward Church Fellowship* (LWF and WARC, 1989).

[2] The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: To enter into full communion with these three churches [Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ], an affirmative two-thirds vote of the 1997 Churchwide Assembly, the highest legislative authority in the ELCA, will be required. Subsequently, in the appropriate manner, other changes in the constitution and bylaws would be made to conform with this binding decision by an assembly to enter into full communion.

The constitution and bylaws of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) do not speak specifically of this church entering into full communion with non-Lutheran churches. The closest analogy, in view of the seriousness of the matter, would appear to be an amend-

THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

ment of the ELCA's constitution or bylaws. The constitution provides a process of such amendment (Chapter 22). In both cases a two-thirds vote of members present and voting is required.

The Presbyterian Church (USA): Upon an affirmative vote of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the declaration of full communion will be effected throughout the church in accordance with the Presbyterian *Book of Order* and this *Formula of Agreement*. This means a majority vote of the General Assembly, *a majority vote in the presbyteries*, and *a majority vote of the presbyteries*.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves. Different orders have served the Gospel, and none can claim exclusive validity. A presbyterian polity recognizes the responsibility of all members for ministry and maintains the organic relation of all congregations in the church. It seeks to protect the church from every exploitation by ecclesiastical or secular power and ambition. Every church order must be open to such reformation as may be required to make it a more effective instrument of the mission of reconciliation. ("Confession of 1967," *Book of Confessions*, p. 40).

The Presbyterian Church (USA) shall be governed by representative bodies composed of presbyters, both elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament. These governing bodies shall be called session, presbytery, synod, and the General Assembly (*Book of Order*, G-9.0100).

All governing bodies of the Church are united by nature of the Church and share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers as provided in this Constitution. The governing bodies are separate and independent, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole Church performed by it through the appropriate governing body. The jurisdiction of each governing body is limited by the express provisions of the Constitution, with the acts of each subject to review by the next higher governing body (G-9.0103).

The Reformed Church in America: Upon an affirmative vote by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the declaration of full communion will be effected throughout the church, and the Commission on Christian Unity will, in accordance with the responsibilities granted by the *Book of Church Order*, proceed to initiate and supervise the effecting of the intention of full communion as described in the *Formula of Agreement*.

The Commission on Christian Unity has advised the General Synod and the church of the forthcoming vote for full communion in 1997. The Commission will put before the General Synod the *Formula of Agreement* and any and all correlative recommendations toward effecting the Reformed Church in America declaring itself to be in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ.

The Constitution of the RCA gives responsibility for ecumenical relations to the General Synod (BCO, Chapter 1, Part IV, Article 2, Section 5). To be faithful to the ecumenical calling, the General Synod empowers its Commission on Christian Unity to initiate and supervise action relating to correspondence and cooperative relationship with the highest judicatories or assemblies of other Christian denominations and the engaging in interchurch conversations “in all matters pertaining to the extension of the Kingdom of God.”

The Constitution of the RCA gives responsibility to the Commission on Christian Unity for informing “the church of current ecumenical developments and advising the church concerning its ecumenical participation and relationships” (BCO, Chapter 3, Part I, Article 5, Section 3).

Granted its authority by the General Synod, the Commission on Christian Unity has appointed RCA dialogue and conversation partners since 1962 to the present. It has received all reports and, where action was required, has presented recommendation(s) to the General Synod for vote and implementation in the church.

The United Church of Christ: The United Church of Christ (UCC) will act on the recommendation that it enter into full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Reformed Church in America, by vote of the General Synod in 1997. This vote is binding on the General Synod and is received by local churches, associations, and conferences for implementation in accordance with the covenantal polity outlined in paragraphs 14, 15, and 16 of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ.

The UCC is “composed of Local Churches, Associations, Conferences, and the General Synod.” The constitution and byLaws of the United Church of Christ lodge responsibility for ecumenical life with the General Synod and with its chief executive officer, the president of the United Church of Christ. Article VII of the constitution grants to

THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

the General Synod certain powers. Included among these are the power:

To determine the relationship of the UCC with ecumenical organizations, world confessional bodies, and other interdenominational agencies (Article VII, par. 45h).

To encourage conversation with other communions and when appropriate to authorize and guide negotiations with them looking toward formal union, (VII, 45i).

In the polity of the UCC, the powers of the General Synod can never, to use a phrase from the Constitution, “invade the autonomy of Conferences, Associations, or Local Churches.” The autonomy of the local church is “inherent and modifiable only by its own action” (IV, 15). However, it is important to note that this autonomy is understood in the context of “mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church,” (IV, 14). This Christological and covenantal understanding of autonomy is clearly expressed in the Constitutional paragraphs which immediately precede and follow the discussion of local church autonomy:

The Local Churches of the UCC have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the UCC has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility (IV, 14).

Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference, or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church (IV, 16).