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Lutheran-Reformed Altar Fellowship and Augustana X

ALBERT J. COLLVER III



THE SIGNING OF THE *JOINT DECLARATION on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)* on October 31, 1999, between the Lutheran World Federation and Rome has, for the moment, overshadowed prior ecumenical agreements between Lutherans and other church bodies. While it is true that the dispute on justification between the Lutheran church and Rome goes back to the beginning of the Reformation, any agreement or consensus between these two bodies on justification would appear to be very significant, perhaps as significant as the events that caused the disagreement in the first place. Yet only a few years earlier the Lutherans and the Reformed came to doctrinal consensus not only on justification but also on the Lord's Supper. Quantitatively, it would appear that more was accomplished between the Lutherans and the Reformed than between Lutherans and Rome. The recognition that the Lutherans and Rome came to an agreement not only on justification but also on original sin at the Diet of Regensburg in 1541¹ further suggests that *JDDJ* is not quite as significant as its authors would have it thought. Although Eck and Melancthon could agree on justification at Regensburg, they could not come to agreement on the Lord's Supper. They disputed for eight days on the Lord's Supper until they stopped due to lack of agreement.² Regensburg demonstrates that lack of agreement on the Lord's Supper does not permit an agreement on justification to remain intact. What will ultimately become of the most recent agreement between the Lutherans and Rome remains to be seen. Historically, it has been thought that what most separates the Lutherans from Rome is the doctrine of justification. On the other hand, it has been thought what most separates the Lutherans from the Reformed is the Lord's Supper. The difference between these two points is not as great as first appears. What is common to both is the gospel. In the rejection of "by faith alone," Rome denies the gospel. By rejecting the Lord's true body and blood given for you, the Reformed deny the gospel. In order to see how the gospel is ultimately at stake, it may be helpful to examine how the Lutherans and the Reformed came to agree on the Lord's Supper.

In 1997, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and three Reformed bodies ratified the *Formula of Agreement*,³ declaring that they were in full communion. This agreement is the result of more than thirty years of discussion between the

Lutherans and Reformed in America and represents what they call "an ecumenical proposal of historic importance." There is no doubt that an event of "historic importance" took place when these four "Reformation" churches created "a doctrinal consensus"⁴ based on a common understanding of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments that bridged a division formed more than four hundred years ago at Marburg.⁵ What is more remarkable about the agreement is that it was achieved without compromising each church body's "traditional confessional and ecclesiological character."⁶ It would be presumptuous to suggest that there is no real consensus after the involved parties have signed a document declaring⁷ such consensus. But a critique of *Formula of Agreement* may be made on the basis of this statement. The hermeneutics leading up to this agreement have already been examined,⁸ as has the document itself.⁹ This essay will examine whether or not the statements on the Lord's Supper found in a *Formula of Agreement* are congruent with Article X of the *Augsburg Confession*, which is the historic confession of the Lutheran church on the Lord's Supper. Since a different understanding of the gospel manifests itself in the Lord's Supper, ultimately this essay will test the claim, "there are no substantive matters concerning justification that divide us."¹⁰ In working through this, tools may be developed to assist in the diagnosis of other ecumenical agreements.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE FORMULA OF AGREEMENT

Since the *Formula of Agreement* is the result of more than thirty years of dialog between the Lutheran and Reformed church bodies, it may be helpful to provide a brief sketch of the document's historical background. While official discussions between representatives of Reformed and Lutheran churches in America did not begin until 1962, it would be remiss to ignore the developments in Germany preceding this discussion. In order to grasp completely what brought the Lutheran and Reformed together in Germany, one would have to review the events from the time of the Reformation to World War II. Since space does not permit such a treatment, only a few brief comments can be provided.

Elert notes that the Lutherans have constantly complained about the attempts to read Reformed doctrine into the public statements of the evangelical church.¹¹ Luther complained of this very problem when he wrote in 1532 to the citizens of Frankfurt on the Main concerning reports he had heard that the Lord's Supper was taught there in the Zwinglian way, "yet under the

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appearance and with such words as if it were one and the same thing with us and our same teaching."¹² During this time the desire for union with the Lutherans was, no doubt, partially inspired by political motivations, since only the Roman Catholic

The Arnoldshain Theses form the foundation for all subsequent agreements between the Lutherans and Reformed.

Church and the Church of the Augsburg Confession were legally recognized. Nevertheless, to ascribe merely political reasons to the desire for union would be unfair. It appears that Zwingli genuinely desired union with Luther, as did Bucer and later Calvin, but they could not understand why the Lord's Supper was so essential to the Lutherans. What appeared, from their point of view, to be minor differences of opinion kept what became known as the Reformed church bodies separated from the Lutherans. As Zwingli found out at Marburg, ninety-three percent agreement is no agreement at all. It is because the Lord's Supper is the gospel (and not merely a proclamation of the gospel, as the Reformed teach)¹³ that disagreement in the Supper evidences disagreement in the doctrine of justification.

Other events in Germany's history prompted the desire for union, such as the Prussian Union (1817), by which the government imposed unity between the Lutherans and the Reformed without regard for differences in confession. Some in the ecumenical movement regard the Prussian Union as an example that casts "glimmers of ecclesial geniality on an otherwise rather bleak Protestant landscape."¹⁴ In 1934, Karl Barth proposed the Barmen Declaration on the foundation of the Prussian Union to unite the Christian churches, Lutheran, Union, and Reformed, to stand up against the false Christianity of the Nazis.¹⁵ According to Barth, the Barmen declaration "does not have to do with matters of the Supper, but with matters of the first commandment."¹⁶ While Barmen may not have intended to form altar and pulpit fellowship between the Lutherans and Reformed, Sasse notes that it received such acclaim that "it was placed next to, yes even above the confessions of the Reformation. The participants of the confessional synods were allowed to deviate from the Augustana."¹⁷ Crisis, confronting the church in the form of Nazi persecution, "forced Christians of all denominations out of their doctrinal co-existence,"¹⁸ resulting in the wartime confessing church, where Lutherans and Reformed shared the same table. The question that occupied German theologians for ten years, from 1947 to 1957, was this: could "wartime emergency fellowship be authorized as the norm for a new, official church fellowship?"¹⁹ The answer to this post-war question was the Arnoldshain Theses.²⁰

The *Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland* (EKiD) accepted the eight Arnoldshain Theses²¹ on July 25, 1958, thus beginning full altar and pulpit fellowship between the Lutheran, Union, and

Reformed churches in Germany. Whereas the Barmen Declaration had been supposedly based on an emergency situation that required a confessing church, the Arnoldshain Theses were, in part, based on sociological factors, namely, on population movements in Germany that erased the boundaries separating the differing confessions.²² The population movements that presumably contributed to the Arnoldshain Theses initially were the result of World War II and later due to the ease of travel in the twentieth century. As a result of this increased mobility, "the awareness of *belonging to* a confessional tradition (Lutheran or Reformed) has weakened quite a bit among the faithful—and among many pastors."²³ This is not a dominical agreement based on the Lord's word, but an anthropocentric agreement based on sociological factors.

The Arnoldshain Theses form the foundation for all subsequent agreements between the Lutherans and Reformed, whether in Europe or America. Only four years after the theses were ratified in Germany, discussions began between the Lutherans and Reformed in America. From 1962 to 1966, delegates from the North American Area of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Holding the Presbyterian Order and the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation held dis-

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cussions and presented papers. In 1966, the delegates issued a non-binding report entitled *Marburg Revisited*, which reported:

We have recognized in each other's teachings a common understanding of the Gospel and have concluded that the issues which divided the two major branches of the Reformation can no longer be regarded as constituting obstacles to mutual understanding and fellowship.²⁴

Building on the foundation of Arnoldshain, *Marburg Revisited* picked up the phrase "He Himself gives"²⁵ from thesis 4 and concludes, "One thing we must insist on today is that there is only one proper Sacrament and that is Jesus Christ."²⁶ This is to say that Jesus gives himself in the Supper, or that he is personally present. One of the goals of this report was to avoid deadlock by steering clear of traditional Lutheran and Reformed language regarding the Lord's Supper. What this meant was that the Lutherans would avoid speaking of Christ's body and blood (what the report terms "realistic language") and the Reformed would avoid speaking of Christ being local circumscribed at the right hand of God. In this way, the Christological questions that divided the Lutheran and Reformed for five-hundred years could be avoided. Recognizing that the discussion of Christological issues did not bring the Lutherans and Reformed closer together in the past, the authors of the report needed alternative ways to speak about the issues. One such move was to speak of the body of Christ as the church. Thus, St. Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians concerning unworthy eating is redefined: "such unworthy eating takes place today in

the failure to discern the body of Christ whenever we fail to act upon the truth that all who believe in and love the Lord Jesus Christ are essentially one in him by admitting to fellowship at his table fellow-members of the *ecclesia* of God." The Arnoldshain Thesis had taught how modern exegesis could reinterpret not only the *verba Christi* but also the apostolic teaching on the Lord's Supper. This lesson on reinterpreting texts was learned well by the authors of *Marburg Revisited*. In this case, Saint Paul's warning about discerning the Lord's body and blood is reinterpreted to a discerning not of Christ's body born of the Virgin Mary, crucified on the cross, and ascended into heaven, but a discerning of the mystical body of Christ, that is, the church. The focus of this reinterpretation places the emphasis upon man and his love for the fellow Christian rather than on the body and blood of Jesus. In this way, the discussion of *manducatio impiorum* is avoided, thereby escaping deadlock. Not only is the historic deadlock avoided but also this new agreement implicitly heaps Saint Paul's condemnation of not discerning the Body of Christ on anyone who denies full altar and pulpit fellowship between Christians of differing confessions.

Marburg Revisited was the first step built in America on the foundation of Arnoldshain; although there was a second meeting in 1972-1974, no significant developments arose. Consequently, it is usually passed over, since the third major proposal, *An Invitation to Action*, does not even mention the second meeting. Instead, it refers to the Leuenberg Agreement, which took place in Europe at approximately the same time as the second meeting in the States. While the Leuenberg

Inklings



Everybody just seemed to lose all patience with my sermon after we put an espresso cart in the narthex!

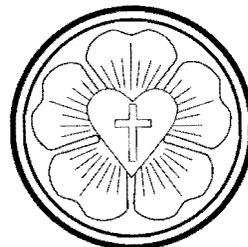
Agreement also rested on the Arnoldshain foundation, it attempted to go further by adopting the approach followed by Bucer at the Wittenberg Agreement of 1536.²⁷ The Leuenberg Agreement's greatest contribution to Lutheran and Reformed dialog was the concentration on Augsburg Confession article VII and *satis est*: "It is enough for true unity to agree on the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments."²⁸ By interpreting AC VII as confessing justification as the least common denominator of agreement, full agreement in all matters and details of doctrine between church bodies was no longer necessary. The emphasis on AC VII and the *satis est* has remained a feature through all subsequent discussions between the Reformed and Lutherans.

This approach is evident in *An Invitation to Action*, which recommended that "the churches recognize one another 'as churches in which the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered according to the ordinance of Christ'."²⁹ As each document comes out, it carries with it the freight of the previous documents and adds more. In the case of *An Invitation To Action*, not only does it rest on the previous documents, but

it also adds the World Council of Churches' document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* for consideration.³⁰ As a result, the scope of this document is broader than the previous documents. Other than the Leuenberg Agreement, all the previous documents focused almost exclusively on the Lord's Supper. *An Invitation To Action* includes joint statements on justification, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and ministry. Presumably, with each document the churches involved are coming closer to full fellowship.

While none of the documents in the series outlined has seen a reason for the Reformed and Lutherans to remain separate, with *An Invitation to Action* the momentum was building for a fellowship agreement between the churches. Before any action could take place, three Lutheran bodies in America merged to create the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Because not all of the Lutheran bodies that merged into ELCA adopted the previous "recommendations of *An Invitation To Action* and endorsed the establishment of full church fellowship among Reformed and Lutheran churches,"³¹ another meeting had to be held between the churches. The result of this meeting

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was the document *A Common Calling*, which is the immediate predecessor to *A Formula of Agreement*.

AUGUSTANA X

Thus far, this article has briefly recounted the documents preceding *A Formula of Agreement*. While this has not been simply a historical review, it may seem far afield from the stated goal of examining this Reformed-Lutheran agreement with AC x. Quite simply, until the appearance of *A Common Calling*, AC x was conspicuously absent from the discussion. This can be partially explained by the desire to avoid sixteenth-century formulations as stated in the document *An Invitation to Action*. According to *An Invitation to Action*,

changes in scientific and philosophical outlooks from one period of history to another also present problems of "translating" traditional doctrines. The truth of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is changeless, but the human language which gives it doctrinal expression undergoes constant modification.³²

In other words, "static" doctrinal formulations were acceptable in the sixteenth century but today "these debates seem esoteric and purely scholastic."³³ Since there is no doctrinal reason for the Reformed and Lutherans not to have fellowship, the formulations of the sixteenth century, rather than being divisive, must be "seen as complementary, mutually enriching our common life and necessary for the church's total witness to the presence of God in the Lord's Supper."³⁴ As a result of this view, AC x of the Augsburg Confession must be marginalized, reinterpreted, and ultimately omitted.

When *A Common Calling* does deal with AC x, it is not in an affirming sense, but rather in an attempt to explain the condemnation against those who teach otherwise. Positive statements are easier to explain or ignore than negative statements, especially when they are condemnations. Since the Reformed did not use condemnations against the Lutherans,³⁵ the condemnation in AC x is especially offensive to those trying to forge an agreement. More important, the condemnation of AC x can no longer apply to the Reformed (if it ever did); otherwise agreement would be impossible as long as the Augsburg Confession is still used. *A Common Calling's* solution is to confirm that the condemnation did apply to a particular person or group of people in the sixteenth century, but no longer applies to the current Reformed church. "The condemnation in CA 10 may have excluded Zwingli but did not address the nuanced position of Calvin and of many early Calvinist confessions, as the Formula of Concord VII, assumed."³⁶

A Common Calling posits a reading of AC x that freezes a moment in time and suggests that using other documents from a later time to interpret AC x is hermeneutically untenable. Since the author of the Augsburg Confession had not yet encountered Calvin, he could not have been condemning a Calvinist view of the Lord's Supper. Once the sixteenth-century formulations are eliminated as acceptable ways of describing reality today, all that remains is to remove the condemnations. The lack of reference to

AC x before *A Common Calling* and the mental gymnastics used to explain it, demonstrate that AC x does not play a significant role in the Lutheran and Reformed dialog. It seems difficult to understand how such an approach to AC x does not compromise the "traditional confessional and ecclesiological character" of the Lutheran church.

CONCLUSION

This article has not addressed at great length *A Formula of Agreement* or AC x. *A Formula of Agreement* does not make a significant contribution beyond what has already been discussed in the preceding documents. It is the culmination of over thirty years of dialog, and consequently it is nothing more than an affirmation of what previously had been said. In *A Formula of Agreement*, the section dealing with the Lord's Supper consists chiefly of quotations from the previous documents. As for AC x, its *absence* says more about the ecumenical agreement between the ELCA and the Reformed than would an examination of the article itself.

This brings us back to the question, Are there any substantive disagreements in the gospel between the Reformed bodies and the ELCA? Considering that there is a ratified agreement between the Reformed bodies and the ELCA, no substantive disagreement concerning the gospel exists. The better question to ask is whether or not the ELCA has remained faithful to the teaching of the historic Lutheran Church regarding justification and the Lord's Supper. Although the ELCA imagines that it has kept the Lutheran confession of justification and the Lord's Supper, its agreements with the Reformed indicate that somewhere during the dialog there was a compromise. As Herman Sasse wrote,

A doctrine such as that of the Lutheran Church regarding the Sacrament of the Altar has to be borne witness to. If it is no longer attested but only presented as an historical antiquity, even though it be presented with great care and correctness, it dies.³⁷

As a result of the ecumenical agreement between the ELCA and the Reformed, the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper has died in the largest "Lutheran" church in America. In the construction of the ecumenical tower of Babel with the Barmen Declaration as the foundation and the *Formula of Agreement* as the spire reaching to the heavens, the ELCA desires to build even higher so as to have a unified church on earth built with the hands of men. The problem with devising clever formulations to avoid the problems and divisions of the sixteenth century is that they almost never resemble the words of the Lord. Jesus did not promise to be present in the Supper or to give himself; he promised to give his body and blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins. This is the Gospel! AC VII confesses that AC IV and AC x go together—because they both go to the forgiveness of sins. It is enough for unity in the church when men do not devise ways to stop the Lord from giving his gifts any way that he sees fit—in the water, the body and blood, and the word. These agree in one. LOGIA

NOTES

1. A recent article recognizing this fact is Paul T. McCain's "Regensburg Redivivus?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (1999): 305-309.
2. E. B. Pusey, *The Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ: the Doctrine of the English Church, with a Vindication of the Reception by the Wicked and of the Adoration of Our Lord Jesus Christ Truly Present* (Oxford: J. Parker, 1869), 64.
3. *A Formula of Agreement* [Web page], ELCA, 1997 [cited August 5, 1999]. Available from <http://www.elca.org/ea/formula.html>.
4. *A Formula of Agreement*, "Preface."
5. These church bodies see the Marburg Colloquy, September 30-October 3, 1529, as the point marking the division between their churches. While Marburg is a very important moment, it did not mark the beginning of the division between Luther and Zwingli. Rather, it was the result of previous disagreement on the Lord's Supper.
6. *A Formula of Agreement*, "Mutual Affirmation and Admonition."
7. It does cause one to wonder if this is an "imputed" consensus—that is a consensus that declares such and creates it or if it is a "sanative" consensus—that is a consensus that is made over time by moving toward the theological lowest common denominator.
8. The systematic department of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, wrote a reaction to *A Common Calling*, which provides the basis for the *Formula of Agreement*. See "Basic Understanding of and Reaction to A Common Calling: the ELCA-Reformed Conversations," *Concordia Journal* 20 (1994): 292-314.
9. The systematic department of Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne, IN, wrote a theological assessment of the *Formula of Agreement*. See "A Formula of Agreement—A Theological Assessment," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (1998): 107-124.
10. *A Formula of Agreement*, "A Fundamental Doctrinal Consensus."
11. Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums* (München: Beck, 1952), 265. "Sie war aber immerhin ehrlicher als die Versuche, die reformierte Abendmahlslehre in die öffentlichen Erklärungen der evangelischen Kirche hineinzuinterpretieren, über die man auf lutherischer Seite von Luthers Brief an die Frankfurter an beständig zu klagen hatte."
12. WA, 30³: 558, 8-10: "doch unter dem Schein und mit solchen Worten, als solt es gar gleich und ein ding sein mit unser und unser gleichen Lere." This letter has been translated by Jon D. Vieker, "An Open Letter to Those in Frankfurt on the Main, 1533, by Martin Luther," *Concordia Journal* 16, no. 4 (1990): 333-351.
13. Hermann Sasse, "A Lutheran Contribution to the Present Discussions on the Lord's Supper," *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1959): 38.
14. Keith F. Nicle, "Real Presence—Really! The Eucharist in the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 29, no. 3 (1995): 179.
15. For the text of Barmen, see John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 517-522.
16. Hermann Sasse, *Union and Confession*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison, ed. Ronald R. Feuerhahn, Matthew C. Harrison, and Paul T. McCain (St. Louis: Office of the President, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1997), 29.
17. *Ibid.*, 32.
18. Eugene M. Skibbe, "Discussion of Intercommunion in German Protestantism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 11 (1959): 91.
20. William G. Rusch and Daniel F. Martensen, eds., *The Leuenberg Agreement and Lutheran-Reformed Relationships* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989). Lienhard, a contributor in the volume just cited, notes how the Barmen Declaration provided the foundation for the Arnoldshain Theses, which provided the foundation for the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973. The authors of *A Common Calling*, which is the foundational document for *A Formula of Agreement*, cite the Leuenberg Agreement as foundational to their work. Thus there is an unbroken chain from Barmen to the current Lutheran-Reformed ecumenical agreement in America.
21. "Das Abendmahlsgespräch der EKD," *Evangelische Theologie* 18 (1958): 425-427; English translation with comment Paul M. Bretscher, "The Arnoldshain Theses on the Lord's Supper," *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1959): 83-91.
22. "Faith and Order—Arnoldshain Theses," *Lutheran World* 7 (1960-1961): 57. "Its aim is to bring closer together the Protestant churches of different confessions, whose boundaries have been erased to a great extent by the population movements in Germany."
23. Rusch, 15. Emphasis is in the original text.
24. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord, eds., *Marburg Revisited* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), Preface.
25. "Das Abendmahlsgespräch der EKD," *Evangelische Theologie* 18 (1958): 426: "er selbst . . . gibt."
26. Empie and McCord, 52.
27. Rusch, 18-19.
28. "Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum."
29. Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, eds. *A Common Calling* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 10. Note that the document *A Common Calling* cites the *Invitation To Action*.
30. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper no. 111* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982). James E. Andrews and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *An Invitation To Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series 3, 1981-1983* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2.
31. Nickle and Lull, 11.
32. Andrews and Burgess, 21.
33. Nickle and Lull, 40-41.
34. *Ibid.*, 45.
35. *Ibid.*, 39. While this statement may be true of the Reformed confessional documents, condemnations against the Lutheran confession of the Lord's Supper were a common feature of Reformed dogmatic writings. Luther notes in the "Disputation Concerning the Humanity and Divinity of Christ" (WA 39²: 92-121) that Schwenkfeld accuses the Lutherans of teaching that Christ is a creature, that is, of Arianism. Pieper only reluctantly reports that the Reformed have called Lutheran Christology "Eutychnianism" (Pieper, 2: 119) and "impious monstrosity" (Pieper, 2: 166) only to name a few. References are from Franz August Otto Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951).
36. Nickle and Lull, 39.
37. Sasse, *Union and Confession*, 16.

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