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Satis est: AC VII as the Hermeneutical Key to the Augsburg Confession

Albert B. Collver

When one thinks of the Augsburg Confession, the Luther proverb¹ reported by Balthasar Meisner, “*justificatio est articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*,”² (“justification is the article by which the church stands and falls”) comes to mind. Justification has been understood as the hermeneutical key to understanding the Augsburg Confession, the church, and in fact all of theology. Of course, if justification is misunderstood or not confessed correctly, everything it touches also will be skewed. However, misunderstandings do not always begin with justification but sometimes begin in another article, just as a flywheel can be thrown off balance not because the central shaft is bent, but because the flywheel itself has become distorted. In a similar way, distortions in other articles can result in the loss of the gospel. In light of the close connection of the church with the government in Europe, some have suggested that a loss of two-kingdoms (two regiments) theology expounded in AC XXVIII has weakened the church’s view of the Scriptures and wreaked havoc with the gospel. “If the church follows the various paths of theological monism, it cannot be content with its particular calling to preach the gospel as well as

¹ “This is the chief article of our faith; and if you either do away with it, as the Jews do, or corrupt it, as the papists do, the church cannot exist.” Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–1545/1544–1554): vol. 4, p. 60, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE.

² Arthur Carl Piepkorn writing to John Tietjen on February 23, 1971 traces the origin of this phrase to Balthasar Meisner in *Anthropologia sacra* (Wittenberg: Johannes Gormannus, 1615), disputation 24. Meisner calls it a “*Lutheri proverbium*.” Piepkorn was not able to identify an exact quote matching the *Lutheri proverbium*, but found something similar in the Genesis commentary in AE 4:60 and *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), vol. 43, p. 178. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Sacred Scriptures and The Lutheran Confession: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, ed. Philip J. Secker, vol. 2 (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 260.

Albert B. Collver III is Director of Church Relations—Assistant to the President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This article was originally presented as a plenary paper during the LCMS Theology Professors Conference which took place in Irvine, California, on May 23–25, 2016.

administer the keys of heaven and the holy sacraments.”³ According to this view, if two-kingdoms theology is lost, the gospel is lost. This is particularly seen in areas of social-ethical and moral issues. The church cannot speak clearly about social-ethical issues when it is under the thumb of a government that is promoting a view contrary to that of the Scriptures. If the bishops and pastors are government agents, then these governmental agents will be hard pressed to go against the will of the government.

Indeed, this contributed to the problems the church faced in Europe. But as a universal paradigm, it does not seem to hold. The churches in the United States today are facing challenges similar to those in Europe in speaking to social-ethical issues in society. No doubt the United States government has implemented policies encouraging positions contrary to the Scripture in recent years. And despite the government’s attempt to intrude further on religious liberty, the churches in the United States are still separate from the government. Many of the mainline churches in the United States capitulated long before the government changed its policies. One might be able to make a better historical case by arguing that the government entered areas when and where the churches abrogated their responsibility. The question seems to be: what, then, caused the church to cease to be church by abrogating its responsibility to proclaim God’s law and gospel?

While not rejecting or diminishing the centrality of AC IV’s confession on justification, I would like to suggest that for the past two centuries (especially during the ecumenical era of the twentieth century), the understanding of AC VII, particularly the phrase, “it is enough to agree on the doctrine of the Gospel,” has served as the hermeneutical key to understanding not only article IV but the entire Augsburg Confession.

I. AC VII: A Brief Historical Background and Development

The basis or source for Augsburg Confession article VII can be found in Martin Luther’s *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), which predates the Schwabach Articles by a year.⁴ In this document, Luther confesses the church.

³ Anssi Simojoki, “Potestas in Ecclesia, Potestas Episcoporum: Confessio Augustana XXVIII and the Life of the Church” *CTQ* 69, no. 2 (2005): 119–131, 123.

⁴ Hermann Sasse, “Article VII Of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism,” trans. Norman E. Nagel, in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 253. “The reason why the Augsburg Confession had to speak on the matter is clear. The article goes back to Article 12 of the Schwabach Articles, and behind that lies Luther’s *Great Confession* of 1528.”

I believe that there is one holy Christian Church on earth, i.e. the community or number or assembly of all Christians in all the world. . . . The Christian Church exists not only in the realm of the Roman Church or pope, but in all the world. . . . This Christian church, wherever it exists, is to be found the forgiveness of sins, i.e. a kingdom of grace and of true pardon. For in it are found the gospel, baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, in which the forgiveness of sins is offered, obtained, and received. Moreover, Christ and his Spirit and God are there. Outside this Christian Church there is no salvation or forgiveness of sins, but everlasting death and damnation.⁵

Luther's confession on the church from 1528 has many of the elements found both in the Schwabach Articles of 1529 on the church⁶ and AC VII of 1530. For example, Luther, the Schwabach Articles, and AC VII confess that there is one holy church. All three state that the church is composed of believers, or the saints in the case of AC VII. All three locate the church where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered.⁷ Wilhelm Maurer states, "These three basic principles again form the foundation of the evangelical concept of the church: universality, essential connection with Christ, and dependence on Word and Sacraments."⁸

In distinction to the Schwabach Article 12 and AC VII, Luther weds the doctrine of the Antichrist to the doctrine of the Church.⁹ In the *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), he writes:

⁵ Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" (1528), *AE* 37:367–368.

⁶ John Michael Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1966), 43. "Article XII. That there is no doubt that there is and remains upon earth until the end of the world a holy Christian church, as Christ declares, Matt. 28:20: 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' This church is nothing else than believers in Christ, who hold, believe and teach the above-mentioned articles and parts, and for this suffer persecution and martyrdom in the world; for where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments used aright, there is the holy Christian church, and it is not bound by laws and outward pomp, to place and time, to persons and ceremonies."

⁷ Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, trans. by H. George Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 378. "A literary comparison of Schwab. 12 shows it to be an abstract of the Confession of 1528. Three theses reappear: (1) There is a 'holy Christian church' on earth. (2) It is nothing else than 'believers in Christ.' (3) It is where 'the gospel is preached and the sacraments used rightly.'"

⁸ Maurer, *Historical Commentary*, 378.

⁹ Sasse, "Article VII Of the Augsburg Confession," 254. "Even if we were to disregard the doctrine of the Antichrist, which was for Luther a part of the doctrine of the church, this quotation shows why the Reformation had to ask and answer the question: 'What is the church?' The highest office in the church had rejected the holy Gospel, and those who proclaimed this Gospel had been put out of the fellowship of the

Thus this Christian Church is physically dispersed among pope, Turks, Persians, Tartars, but spiritually gathered in one gospel and faith, under one head, i.e. Jesus Christ. For the papacy is assuredly the true realm of Antichrist, the real anti-Christian tyrant, who sits in the temple of God and rules with human commandments, as Christ in Matthew 24[:24] and Paul in II Thessalonians 2[:3 f.] declare; although the Turk and all heresies, wherever they may be, are also included in this abomination which according to prophecy will stand in the holy place, but are not to be compared to the papacy.¹⁰

For Luther, the doctrine of the Antichrist was tied to the doctrine of the church because the church is where the gospel is proclaimed and those who proclaimed the gospel (Luther and those who followed in the Reformation) were cast out of the fellowship of the Roman Church. AC VII had to address primary opponents, the Church of Rome and the Anabaptists. The question of the church and where it is located was essential for the Reformation.

AC VII confesses that the church is located or found where the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered (Latin text).¹¹ The question this phrase asks is what is meant by “rightly” (*recte*) and what is meant by “gospel.” The definition of the “gospel” also becomes key for understanding the *satis est*. In Apology VII–VIII 20, when Melancthon discusses the marks of the church as the gospel and the sacraments, he references 1 Corinthians 3:11–13, “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest.” He writes: “For it retains the pure Gospel, and, as Paul says, 1 Cor. 3, 11, the foundation, i.e., the true knowledge of Christ and faith. Although among these there are also many weak persons, who build upon the foundation stubble that will perish, i.e., certain unprofitable opinions, which, nevertheless, because they do not overthrow the foundation, are both forgiven them and also corrected.”¹² With this quote Melancthon seems to suggest that his

church. For this reason Luther and those with him had to say why they could not recognize the papal excommunication as exclusion from the church. Thus the ecclesiological question was put, and an answer had to be given.”

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528), AE 37:367–368.

¹¹ AC VII Latin: “Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium recte docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta.” W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 46.

¹² Dau and Bente, *Triglot Concordia*, 233.

understanding of the gospel in AC VII and Apology VII-VIII is broad rather than narrow. For Melanchthon in AC VII, the word “gospel” is more than simply “justification by grace through faith” but rather the “gospel and all her articles,” that is, both the law and the gospel. This point will become more important in connection with church fellowship and ecumenical discussions in the twentieth century.

Regarding the word “rightly” in AC VII, some have suggested that Melanchthon made a slip of the pen by adding it to the teaching on the church.¹³ It is true that drafts of the Augsburg Confession prior to its presentation on May 25, 1530, did not contain the word “rightly.” Some have tried to dismiss the word with the interpretation that “the Church of Christ does not exist where the teaching of the Gospel is not pure.”¹⁴ Yet this is not the point Melanchthon was making. The foundation and content of the pure gospel is that Jesus the Son of God died and rose again (Romans 4:25). Another theme picked up by Melanchthon that is present in Luther is that “the pure doctrine is the old; every new one is heretical.”¹⁵ According to Maurer, the ancient Christian approach to heresy was normative for Luther, although the standard by which heresy was measured was, for Luther, Holy Scripture, rather than traditional dogma. For Luther, the old, traditional dogma is identical with that of the apostles.¹⁶ For Luther, then, this standard identifies also the antichrist, who adds to the gospel or subtracts from it, making it impure, not rightly taught.

Although AC VII does not use the language “kingdom of God,” it does use language reminiscent of Psalm 149:1, calling the church “the assembly of the saints.” The saints or the godly dwell in the kingdom of God. Apology VII-VIII 16 calls the church “the kingdom of Christ, distinguished from the kingdom of the devil.”¹⁷ In this context, the “kingdom of Christ” is the “kingdom of God” and is the “kingdom of Israel” in Acts 1:6. However, here is perhaps where AC XXVIII comes in helpful. From the perspective of the Confessions, the kingdom of Christ contains both regiments: the one exercised by the church and the one exercised by the

¹³ Juergen Ludwig Neve, *A Guide to The Augsburg Confession: Its History and Its Theology* (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1927), 102–103. “Some have been disposed to discount the serious intention of this word ‘rightly’, and have preferred to treat it as a slip of Melanchthon’s pen. But that cannot be done.”

¹⁴ Neve, *A Guide to The Augsburg Confession*, 102.

¹⁵ Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, 386.

¹⁶ Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, 386.

¹⁷ Dau and Bente, *Triglot Concordia*, 231.

secular authorities. The kingdom of Israel, at least imperfectly in the Old Testament, represented the two regiments of God existing coterminously. In Acts 1:6, when the disciples asked whether Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel, he explained that his kingdom and the church on earth would be about “being witnesses,” that is proclaiming the gospel to the entire world. In this way, the kingdom of Christ is his reign by which he redeems fallen mankind from sin, death, and Satan, while at the same time giving him righteousness and eternal life.¹⁸ Melancthon explains that “the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Apology VII–VIII 13).¹⁹ The righteousness of the heart comes from the forgiveness of sins. The gift of the Holy Spirit receives this gift through the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments. The Holy Spirit, even as portrayed in the Scriptures, does not act apart from means. Christ gives his righteousness and exercises his rule through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, in seeming weakness, though with assured victory over Satan’s kingdom.²⁰

Prior to AC VII, the confession of the church was found in the Nicene Creed, “I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church.” According to Hermann Sasse, this article was Christendom’s first doctrinal statement about the definition of the church and wherein her unity lies.²¹ Elements of AC VII entered into the confessional documents of nearly every Protestant church that began in the sixteenth century. The great schism of the Western church prompted the clear confession of the AC VII, but that confession could not settle all questions about the church. These questions only intensified in subsequent centuries, perhaps culminating in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the rise of forced unionism among the Lutheran churches, the Vatican’s attempt to define the church, and the rise of ecumenism in the twentieth century.

II. AC VII within Contemporary Ecumenical Dialogue

Hermann Sasse noted that in the middle of the nineteenth century that “article VII of the Augsburg Confession came to occupy the center of the discussion.”²² With the expansion of the Prussian Union, the existence of

¹⁸ Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehneke and J.A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 196.

¹⁹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 175.

²⁰ Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, 197.

²¹ Sasse, “Article VII of the Augsburg Confession,” 252–253.

²² Sasse, “Article VII of the Augsburg Confession,” 251.

the Lutheran territorial churches in Germany was at stake. Adolf von Harless wrote, "Only with the profoundest grief can one think such thoughts through to the end, that the Lutheran Church . . . would have her lamp cast aside in Germany."²³ Harless' prediction from 1870 has essentially come true in the early twenty-first century as The United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (German: Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands, abbreviated VELKD), which boasts 9.5 million members and was founded on July 8, 1848, draws closer and closer to The Evangelical Church in Germany (German: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, abbreviated EKD). The VELKD and the EKD share a common administration. This occurred when Horst Gorski was appointed President of the VELKD and a Vice President of EKD in September 2015. In the not too distant future, Lutheranism may no longer exist in Germany, both in name and in substance, as Harless feared. Among Lutherans in Germany, the potential loss of the territorial churches in the nineteenth century to the Union drove an intense study on the church. The rise of the ecumenical movement and the desire to unite various churches into a visible unity also drove the study of the church. Among Lutherans, AC VII has been central to these studies in an effort to discover *satis est*, what is enough for fellowship and unity.

During the nineteenth, twentieth, and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, the key phrase discussed related to AC VII is *doctrina evangelii* ("doctrine" or "teaching of the gospel"). What exactly does this term mean? The answer to that question helps to demonstrate how AC VII has become a hermeneutical key to understanding Article IV on justification, Article V on the ministry, and Article X on the Lord's Supper. How the phrase *doctrina evangelii* is interpreted determines if a Lutheran church body can have fellowship and communion with other churches like the Anglicans or with the United Church of Christ. How "the doctrine of the gospel" is understood determines how various Lutheran church bodies might enter into fellowship with one another. How "the doctrine of the gospel" is understood also explains how the 144 church bodies that compose the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) can be in communion fellowship despite vastly different positions on the Scripture, and ethical issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of practicing homosexuals into the office of the ministry. Ever since Albrecht Ritschl in the nineteenth century, many Lutherans have seen AC VII, and particularly the phrase *doctrina evangelii* ("doctrine of the gospel"), as a plastic text, malleable and able to be shaped and changed, and in this way to serve as the key to interpreting the rest of the Augsburg Confession.

²³ Sasse, "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession," 251.

Lutherans are not united by church polity, nor do they have a uniform liturgy to unite them. "What keeps them together, according to their self-understanding, is unity in doctrine, and what drives them apart is disunity in doctrine."²⁴ The key to defining that "unity in doctrine" is found in AC VII and the phrase *doctrina evangelii* ("doctrine of the gospel"). The German text mentions "preaching" (*Evangelium gepredigt*) which has led some to say all that is needed for unity is preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. Again, depending upon what that "gospel" is, the bar for fellowship can be low or high. Also, how restrictive is "preaching," and does that only occur in the pulpit? The Latin text would suggest not only preaching but also teaching. The German text ought not be understood restrictively. If one thinks that preaching and administering the sacraments in a narrow sense is intended by AC VII, doctrine is no longer divisive of church fellowship. Nearly any Protestant church that preaches the "gospel" and administers the "sacraments" can be in fellowship, according to that view. Note that the "gospel" is rarely defined. Usually, Lutherans read "gospel" through the lens of AC IV, justification. What then is justification? Good news? A glad tiding? For many, the effect of justification is determined by how great one's sin is. If one's sin is intolerance toward transgendered people, then the gospel becomes the acceptance of them. When sin as traditionally defined in the Scriptures has been deconstructed away, then the gospel acquires a new definition or form. There is a temptation to say that such a view is simply another form of gospel reductionism, or to suggest that this problem is caused by the understanding of Article IV on justification rather than Article VII on the church. Yet in many cases, the understanding of Article VII is influencing or changing the understanding of Article IV.

For instance, David Bosch, in his book *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, speaks about Augsburg Confession VII. He writes:

The most famous of the sixteenth-century definitions of the church is the one to be found in the (Lutheran) Augsburg Confession of 1530. Its Article VII describes the church according to two distinguishing marks, namely as "the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." . . . The Protestant preoccupation with right doctrine soon meant that every group which seceded from the main body had to validate its action by maintaining that it alone, and none of the others, adhered strictly to the "right preaching of the gospel." . . . In all these instances the

²⁴ Roland F. Ziegler, "Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship," *CTQ* 78, nos. 3-4 (2014): 59-79, here at 60.

church was defined in terms of what happens inside its four walls, not in terms of its calling in the world. The verbs used in the Augustana are all in the passive voice: the church is a place where the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. It is a place where something is done, not a living organism doing something.²⁵

Bosch affirms something previously noted, that AC VII initiated the desire to define the church in the sixteenth century. He regards locating the church in the Word and Sacraments as static, causing the church to be “passive,” hence not being missional. He also regards an emphasis on doctrinal agreement to be problematic and sees doctrine as the source of church schisms. Bosch says, “The church of pure doctrine was, however, a church without mission, and its theology more scholastic than apostolic.”²⁶ Bosch begins with the state of the church. Is it missional or not? Is the church following *missio dei*? *Missio dei* in Bosch’s system is based upon the non-classical attribute that God is a sending God. Bosch writes, “In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God.”²⁷ In classical dogmatics, “sending” is not listed as an attribute of God. Bosch continues to explain what it means to participate in the *missio dei*, “To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.”²⁸ This leads to a missionary ecclesiology, which casts aside classical categories, and locates the church not where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are administered, but where the church is sending and engaged in mission activity. In fact, the *missio dei* is seen as larger than the church. Bosch writes, “Mission is God’s turning to the world in respect of creation, care, redemption, and consummation. . . . It takes place in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church. ‘God’s own mission is larger than the mission of the church.’”²⁹ “The *missio Dei* is God’s activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate.”³⁰ Bosch’s explanation at best confuses the two regiments described in AC

²⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th Anniversary Edition, American Society of Missiology series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 237–238.

²⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 238.

²⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 382.

²⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 382.

²⁹ Lutheran World Federation, “Together in God’s Mission: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding of Mission,” *LWF Documentation* 26 (1988): 8.

³⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 383.

XXVIII, that God works through the secular realm and in world history primarily through the law, while the Lord works through the churchly realm through the gospel. The move that Bosch presents opens the door toward environmental theology where the sending of God causes us to work to stop climate change and the gospel is the saving of the environment.³¹ In fact, there are some “Christian” pastors who preach such a message. What this example might show is how starting with the definition of the church and redefining it has an effect on the gospel and may in fact change it.

From the state of the church (Article VII) the gospel (Article IV) is shaped. Bosch writes, “There is no such thing as a ‘pure’ gospel, isolated from culture.”³² The trouble with Bosch’s statement is not that Lutherans disagree that the Scriptures need to be presented and applied contextually, that is, dividing law and gospel for a given people group in a given place, but that Bosch presents a dichotomy between ‘pure’ gospel on the one hand, and gospel enculturated on the other. The Lutheran Confessions, particularly AC VII, make no such dichotomy. The pure gospel is first and foremost the message of the forgiveness of sins on behalf of Christ’s death and resurrection. The pure gospel in AC VII is not dependent upon the culture even if it needs to be taught and explained to a people of a given culture. The certainty of the gospel involves its locatedness. That is to say, the forgiveness of sins given at a particular place, to a particular people, at a particular time—this is culture.

While Bosch provided one example of how beginning with the definition of the church might alter the gospel, the desire for unionism and ecumenism continued to shift the definition of the church, and subsequently impacted the gospel, at least as it had been understood in an orthodox sense. Roland Ziegler outlines several different interpretations of the phrase “doctrine of the gospel.”³³ Albrecht Ritschl’s view has been previously mentioned. For Ritschl, “The doctrine of the gospel is the human effort to speak the gospel, that is, the divine, gracious will. As such, it is the mark and foundation of the church.”³⁴ Where the human effort exists to speak the gospel then the church is present. Ritschl argued against the confessional Lutherans of his day in the nineteenth century, such as Theodosius Harnack, who believed doctrinal agreement was necessary for

³¹ Karen L. Bloomquist, ed., *God, Creation and Climate Change: Spiritual and Ethical Perspectives* (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, 2009).

³² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 288.

³³ Ziegler, “Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship,” 60–66.

³⁴ Ziegler, “Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship,” 61.

fellowship. Harnack wrote, "It is the essence of the Lutheran church to be a church of the Confession, and based on the Word of God, to be the church of the scriptural confession."³⁵ The problem of the union prompted much discussion in German lands over the nature of the church. Karl Barth adopted Ritschl's viewpoint, and this would play out to some extent in the missional church movement as mentioned above regarding David Bosch.

Among the various understandings of the "doctrine of the gospel," Ziegler highlights a key distinction: the distinction between the narrow and broad interpretation of the "doctrine of the gospel." Essentially, the narrow interpretation limits or reduces the "doctrine of the gospel" to something like "the human attempt at proclaiming the gospel," or "preaching a message of justification, hope, or good news," or "having consensus on what the gospel is in the narrow sense,"³⁶ which could include the views above or other viewpoints as long as there is consensus of what that definition of the gospel is. This is the approach taken by the Leuenberg Concord of 1973, which allowed for communion fellowship between Lutheran, Reformed, and Union churches.

The broad definition of the "doctrine of the gospel" is essentially the position held by the Missouri Synod and her partner churches. The broad definition holds that "that the consensus necessary for the unity of the church consists in everything that the Scriptures teach."³⁷ Francis Pieper proposed this approach in his essay "On the Unity of Faith," delivered to the convention of the Synodical Conference in 1888. There he connects AC VII and FC SD X. Pieper writes, "By unity in the faith we understand the agreement in all articles of the Christian doctrine revealed in Holy Scripture."³⁸ The "doctrine of the gospel" as understood by the Missouri Synod includes not simply the doctrine of justification but all articles of Christian doctrine. Fellowship requires agreement in all the articles, not only regarding justification.

³⁵ Theodosius Harnack, *Die Kirche, Ihr Amt, Ihr Regiment* (Nürnberg: Bertelsmann, 1862), 88: "Es ist der lutherischen Kirche wesentlich, Kirche des Bekenntnisses zu sein, und sie ist sich dessen aus Gottes Wort gewiß, die Kirche des schriftmäßigen Bekenntnisses zu sein."

³⁶ Ziegler, "Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship," 63.

³⁷ Ziegler, "Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship," 65.

³⁸ Francis Pieper, "On Unity in the Faith, 1888," trans. Matthew C. Harrison, in *At Home in the House of My Fathers: Presidential Sermons, Essays, Letters, and Addresses from the Missouri Synod's Great Era Unity and Growth*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (Fort Wayne, IN: Lutheran Legacy, 2009), 572.

George Lindbeck touches on the issue of the interpretation of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. He notes how “Most Lutheran churches are in communion with each other, and many have moved or are moving toward establishment of some degree of official Eucharistic fellowship with various non-Lutheran bodies.”³⁹ He notes that the only major Lutheran church not in fellowship with the Lutheran World Federation member churches is The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Lindbeck writes about how Lutherans have differentiated themselves on the nature of “agreement in the gospel.” He writes:

The first, exemplified by the Missouri Synod, has, as we have already mentioned, restrictive consequences. Agreement must be comprehensively spelled out in detailed doctrinal formulations, and furthermore, what is actually taught in the churches must conform to these formulations. One cannot be in communion with churches which, even if officially orthodox, nevertheless tolerate error. Such criteria, when rigorously adhered to, lead to a progressive narrowing of the circle of Eucharistic fellowship. All non-Lutheran churches, and most Lutheran ones, fail to qualify.⁴⁰

In contrast to the position of the Missouri Synod, Lindbeck speaks about how the Swedish Lutherans approach the situation, in particular in their discussions with the Anglicans. He writes, “What is important for intercommunion is that ‘the two communities agree . . . as to the content of the message of salvation, founded on the divine revelation, which has been committed to both of them.’”⁴¹ The content of the message of salvation is usually defined as justification by faith. In this case, the “message of salvation” would be similar to how it was formulated in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ).⁴² Lindbeck notes that the Anglicans apparently do not oppose what the Lutherans teach. The Anglican Church does not try to impose its doctrines on the Lutherans, nor do Lutherans do this to Anglicans, for that matter. Lindbeck concludes, “intercommunion with Anglicans is possible, not because of shared doctrinal formulations, but because Anglican and Lutheran teaching and life are not in conflict.”⁴³ In response to Lindbeck’s paper, Avery Dulles provided a Roman Catholic perspective. He agreed with Lindbeck in many

³⁹ George A. Lindbeck, “A Lutheran View of Intercommunion with Roman Catholics,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13, no. 2 (1976): 52–58 [242–248], here at 52 [242].

⁴⁰ Lindbeck, “A Lutheran View of Intercommunion,” 53 [243].

⁴¹ Lindbeck, “A Lutheran View of Intercommunion,” 53 [243].

⁴² The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁴³ Lindbeck, “A Lutheran View of Intercommunion,” 54 [244].

areas and expressed a desire to have “a middle course between the Missouri Synod, which would insist on virtual theological unanimity, and the Church of Sweden which, by his account, would be satisfied with a minimal ‘agreement in the gospel.’”⁴⁴ This middle course between the Missouri Synod’s position and that of the Leuenberg Concord is the road more traveled than the less traveled path of complete agreement in doctrine. In fact, the North American Lutheran Church (NALC)’s search for this middle path so far has been futile. As Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt 7:13–14). There is no middle path between the wide and narrow gates.

III. Conclusion

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession has become a hermeneutical key to interpreting AC IV. The interpretation of Article VII has influenced how justification is understood, how the office of the ministry is understood, and the practice of the Lord’s Supper. With the goal of unity as the operating principle, the definition of the church must restrict or reduce the scope of justification to, at a minimum, being the proclamation of some sort of good news from a sin or malady that the Lord himself may not actually regard as sin. In the ecumenical context, AC VII has become the key to allowing fellowship not only among Lutherans who in the past could not be in altar and pulpit fellowship together but also with non-Lutheran church bodies. For the past century, this way of redefining the church has dominated.

A hope for change comes in part from the Global South, which cannot quite accept the ethical positions accepted by the Western churches. This has caused many to seek the Missouri Synod and her partners worldwide. Whether this tsunami of change will continue or whether the narrow view of the doctrine of the gospel will triumph in world Lutheranism remains an open question. Nevertheless, with AC VII we confess that the Lord will preserve for himself a church forever. A church of the AC VII will continue to exist even if it no longer bears the name Lutheran because the Lord has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail. May the Missouri Synod and her partners remain faithful to their confession, and may the churches of the Global South continue to seek this path.

⁴⁴ Lindbeck, “A Lutheran View of Intercommunion,” 58 [248].

