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"The Log in Your Own Eye"

PAUL G. BRETSCHER

Lutheran Conditions for Communion in  
Holy Things

ROBERT W. JENSON

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*Dann dies ist genug . . .*

## Lutheran Conditions for Communion in Holy Things

ROBERT W. JENSON

### I

Our question is: What conditions would have to be satisfied for Lutheran denominations to officially begin "the communion of holy things" with those with whom Lutherans do not now have such communion, in this instance, the American Episcopalians? Any attempted answer to this question must build on Augustana VII: *Dann dies ist genug zu wahrer Einigkeit der christlichen Kirchen (unitatem ecclesiae, note Latin singular), dass da eintraechtlich nach reinem Verstand das Evangelium gepredigt und die Sakrament dem gottlichen Wort gemaess gereicht werden (consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum). Und ist nicht not zur wahren Einigkeit der christlichen Kirche (note German singular), dass allenthalben gleichformige Ceremonien, von den Menschen eingesetzt, gehalten werden. . . .*

These dogmatic propositions function in three distinguishable contexts; the pluralism of function is signaled by, among other things, the odd uncertainty about singular and plural of "church." I will discuss the three functions in sequence (II to IV below).

### II

In the first place, the propositions try to define the unity of the one catholic church, whose existence is unquestioned and to whose existence unity essentially

belongs. The definition is accomplished by listing certain unities the lack of which marks the division between church and nonchurch, and certain other unities the lack of which is encompassed within the one church. Since the church occurs as that gathering of persons (*Versammlung*) which is distinguished from other gatherings in being constituted as a gathering by the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments (Augustana VII, previous paragraph), any gathering which is not in fact so constituted is outside the church. "Ceremonies," on the other hand, may vary. The term "ceremonies" should be taken as widely as possible. The provision asserts the historicity of the Gospel: that the liturgical, hierarchical, legal, and dogmatic arrangements for the preaching of the Gospel and performing of its sacraments are the responsibility of free human creativity (*von den Menschen eingesetzt*) and that therefore they will legitimately vary from time to time and place to place. Thus, for example, the unity of the church is not broken by liturgical variations short of such as make it doubtful that the sacraments are being performed at all.

We have already reached a decisive point for our discussion: In the Lutheran view, if we could establish mutual recognition and acceptance of "preaching" and mutual official recognition of, and accep-

tance at, the Eucharistic table, we would thereby achieve all that must necessarily be achieved between us or any denominations, including between "Lutheran" denominations. For a Lutheran understanding, initiation of *communio in sacris* would be the success of the main ecumenical endeavor and would not *necessarily* be the beginning of any further unifications. For Lutherans what we are here discussing is the main event.

### III

#### A.

The plural "churches" at one point in the German text does not assume our notion of denominations, or any special reflection on the relation between "churches" and the church. It only assumes the experience of churchly plurality: between territorial churches as they had existed in varying independence through medieval history, between confessing groups of the Reformation period, or between the Eastern and Latin churches. It is further assumed that insofar as churchly plurality interferes with communion in the holy things, this interference should be overcome—unless, of course, it should develop that one party had ceased altogether to be church. The *dies ist gnug (satis est)* states the simultaneously maximum and minimum demands of the Lutheran parties in such endeavors. There are two (discussed in B and C following).

#### B.

##### 1.

The first demand is *dass da eintraechtlich nach reinem Verstand das Evangelium gepredigt . . . werden*. This is not a

demand for dogmatic unity; the German text makes it clear that also the *consentire de doctrina evangelii* of the Latin text is about actual preaching of the Gospel, and not about confessional statements or systematic theologies. Nor does the *dies ist gnug* single out some set of essential doctrines on which there must be agreement, as against other less essential doctrines on which there need not be agreement. Rather the *dies ist gnug* contrasts "Gospel" with "ceremonies" as conditions of unity. What is said is that when the Gospel can indeed be preached *together (eintraechtlich)* by a group of persons, any party within the group must recognize other parties therein as actualizations of the one church, and so as entitled to the communion of holy things, despite whatever "ceremonial" (including dogmatic!) controversies may otherwise divide them.

This does not mean that theology and dogma are irrelevant to the unity of the church. For the judgment must be made whether it is in fact the Gospel that is spoken by a community, or some other word pretending to be the Gospel. It is this latter possibility which the demanded "purity" of preaching raises and condemns. The Gospel will in fact be preached by a community only if it is preached *nach reinam Verstand*, i. e., if the community is committed to the theological enterprise and having some success with it. The theological enterprise is the continuing effort to come to understanding how to preach the Gospel in each new situation; and where this enterprise flags we may expect the Gospel to be perverted. Dogmatic formulation is a recurrent step in the church's theological enterprise, marking especially significant crises, especially

such as threaten the unity of the church; the Augustana itself is just such a theological act.

2.

Since Augustana VII does not envisage the denominational system, and surely not our moribund denominational system, it does not directly furnish answers to the problem before this meeting; nor does the preceding exegesis of Augustana VII do so. What follows involves jumps not covered by the dogmatic text.

Augustana VII does not, I think, permit Lutherans, faced with a question of fellowship, to evade judging whether the Word by which the other group coheres as a group is indeed the Gospel or something else. And Augustana VII also does not allow us to make that judgment by anything so pleasant as a sense of fellowship, or an intuition of eschatological unity. Lutherans have to ask: When the Episcopalians speak as a community and to be a community, what do they *say*? And is it the Gospel? We have already much discussed what sort of question this is, and by what criteria it might be answered; and, I believe, with considerable agreement.

Faced with this task of judgment, Lutherans must immediately say that the resolute nonconfessionalism of the Episcopalian community makes it so hard to answer the first part of the question that, were we on either side permitted to make traditional ecclesiastical assumptions, Lutherans might be tempted to look elsewhere for communion partners. But the assumptions Lutherans have traditionally made about their own theological status can no longer be made. For despite the

Lutheran denominations' greater official fervor for their dogmatic tradition, the Book of Concord has little if any greater communal effect among them than do the Thirty-Nine Articles among Episcopalians; it is just as hard to find authority among Lutherans. Does this delegation, for example, speak representatively for American Lutherans? Not even remotely. The Lutheran denominations live—or do not live—by the same mixture of fundamentalism, helplessness before every wind of doctrine, tag-ends of denominational tradition, and occasional saving theological and proclamatory miracles by which the other American denominations live.

Lutherans must regard the dogmatic irresolution of the Episcopalian communion as a churchly degeneracy, however proud of it Episcopalians themselves may be (this disagreement cannot itself be church-divisive). But we must register a very similar degeneracy in ourselves. My suggestion is that we will make progress with our problem only when we recognize that what we are doing is making interim arrangements between segments of a disintegrating form of the church, by way only of trying to make the birth of a new form of the church a little easier.

Therefore the question we have to ask about each other can be no stronger than: Is there enough of the Gospel alive in these two parties to make it likely that they will prepare the way for a rebirth of the church better *in* communion than *out* of communion? This, I suggest, is still Augustana VII's demand for judgment, but in the form appropriate to our present situation. It cannot be answered by any comparisons of documents, *or* by intelligence operations conducted from afar, but

only by just such mutual explorations, under the judgment of the Bible, as we have made in these meetings. I suggest also that we should take the risk of reporting that in our judgment the answer is "Yes."

My discussion has turned to the future, which is where, from the viewpoint of Augustana VII, it should turn. Augustana VII is concerned with arrangements for *eintraechtlich* proclamation in new churchly unities yet to be established; it is itself such an attempted arrangement. Clearly, the fathers of Augsburg regarded confessional formulation and subscription as the way of looking to an *eintraechtlich* proclamation of the Gospel in any new churchly unities to be created. Equally clear, there is no hope of any such thing between Episcopalians and Lutherans; but this is mostly because neither Episcopalians nor Lutherans can be expected to agree among themselves on any currently decisive churchly or theological issue.

In this situation I suggest that the currently appropriate form of Lutheran demand to arrange for future unanimity in the Gospel might be: a commitment by the highest authorities of both parties that communion in the holy things be accompanied by continuing joint theological study, at high level, of currently emerging potentially divisive topics, and with such authoritative arrangements for dissemination and discussion as to assure influence on the thought and practice of both denominations. The study should be undertaken with the express purpose of preparing both denominations for common confession, when and if the Lord again makes new confession possible and necessary.

If both denominations can make an af-

firmative judgment of existing fellowship in the Gospel, and if the commitments of the previous paragraph can be made, the first demand of Augustana VII will, in my judgment, be satisfied—insofar as we now could think of satisfying it at all.

The second demand is *dass da eintraechtlich . . . die Sakrament dem gottlichen Wort gemaess gereicht werden*. This is not a demand for an agreed-upon doctrine about the sacraments; it is a demand upon the performance of the sacraments. The "Word of God" in question is simultaneously the canonical command in obedience to which we perform these actions, and the Gospel which is the meaning of the actions (as is clear from parallel *laute des Evangelii* of the previous paragraph). Therefore what is demanded is that what the canonical command says to do be in fact done, and that it be so done that its meaning as a communication is the Gospel and not something else.

Each of our denominations may rightly, I think, have some suspicions about the other on these scores—and remember, the issue here is not what is said in sermons, catechetical instruction, or confessional formulae about the sacraments, but what is said and done as the actual celebration. The divisive problems center in the Eucharist. Lutherans may, I think, rightly suspect styles of Eucharistic celebration which, despite all disavowals, make the deed fundamentally a petitionary and doxological work of those present, or liturgical formulations which make the blessing dependent on the attitude of the recipient. Episcopalians may, I think, rightly suspect patterns of Eucharistic celebration which make it dubious that the canonical command is being obeyed at all, as when in-

stead of sharing wine from a cup Lutherans drink each from his little shot-glass, commanded to "give thanks" do no such thing, or perform the Eucharist so infrequently and lugubriously as to transform it into a substitute for penance.

### C.

Our situation is much the same as with the first of Augustana VII's demands. And here again, I propose that we have a judgment to make and a program to initiate.

Can each denomination judge that, despite everything, the sacraments do by and large happen in the other denomination? We here at any rate ought, I think, so to judge, on the basis of our previous discussions. More than that neither denomination can at present judge about itself; therefore neither can demand more than that from the other.

For the future I suggest two steps. Concurrently with the declaration of communion, the continuing theological study should take as its first task the preparation of a mutually agreed list of sacramental abuses in both communions, to be submitted to both communions as recommendation for reform. Thereafter, representatives of the one communion should be consultants in all deliberations of the other communion over such matters as liturgical reform/innovation and sacramental order (e. g., current redoing of confirmation-first Communion in both denominations).

If both denominations can make an affirmative judgment of genuine sacraments in both, and if the commitments of the previous paragraph can be made, the second demand of Augustana VII will, in my

judgment, be satisfied — insofar as we now could think of satisfying it at all.

### IV

*Dies ist gnug* not only specifies the demands which Lutherans must make on others; it also limits the demands which Lutherans can allow to be made on themselves. Most offensively stated: If other parties can affirm that the Gospel is preached *eintraechtlich nach reinem Verstand* among us, and the sacraments celebrated *dem gottlichen Wort gemaess*, they have no right to demand further uniformities as conditions of communion. Indeed, Lutherans have generally regarded any tendency by another party to make further demands for uniformity as *prima facie* evidence that the Gospel is not being preached rightly in that quarter.

Here is the place where negotiations between Anglicans and Lutherans have repeatedly broken down around the world. The sticking point has been, of course, the episcopacy.

But I do not see that the matter should be hopeless. As to the theology of the matter, it seems to me we have made some progress. If the understanding arrived at in our last meeting is indeed satisfactory to both denominations, Lutherans should be happy. For the Lutheran position means that so long as the episcopacy — or any other "ceremony" — is not made an antecedent condition of communion, Lutherans are committed to limitless openness thereafter, both in investigating the inadequacy of their own previous arrangements and in achieving new arrangements for future forms of the church. The explicit recognition of *episcopate* as an intrinsic function in the church has not been characteristic

of Lutheranism, but in no way violates Lutheran principle and merely makes up a rather obvious lacuna in our thought. If some such statements as those achieved in our previous meeting could be adopted by an authoritative entity in each denomination, we would be past the theologically sticky point for Lutherans. Nor need Lutherans demand that this be the *only* statement on episcopacy in force, in either denomination.

In fact, of course, it has not been so much the theology of episcopacy that has been divisive, as practical demands. Here the situation is logically peculiar, and failure to keep it straight may be one cause of previous difficulty. For if Episcopalians were able to recognize Lutheran sacraments, on *whatever* theological or practical basis, this would be in itself all the recognition of their ministries that Lutherans, within *their* theology, need or should demand. There are, therefore, no Lutheran conditions to be met at this point; or rather, if the Episcopalians can at all approve communion, that in itself satisfies the only Lutheran condition in this connection for approving communion.

If after the establishing of communion both denominations wished to move toward further, organizational unifications, the issues that would arise would all be subject to negotiation, as far as Lutherans are concerned. Precisely because communion in the holy things defines churchly unity for Lutherans, once this is achieved Lutherans can lose their sensitivity about conditions. Once communion in the Gospel and its sacraments is given, then juridical, liturgical, hierarchical, and dogmatic conditions are obviously appropriate; and Lutherans would probably discover a few of their

own. This does not mean Lutherans should regard these subsequent issues as unimportant; on the contrary, as the matter of our free historic responsibility for the Gospel, they are precisely as important as we are. It might well be that negotiation would become struggle; it might be that the struggle would fail, and even in such a form as to threaten the established communion. But all that is a matter for the future.

I must say, however, that I hope any further steps beyond communion would *not* take the form of further traditional ecumenical negotiations. If our present discussions bore their best fruit, we would have a situation in which the Episcopal and Lutheran denominations had communion where it counts most for the people. Surely that is all that should be contemplated for denominations as we know them: to get them a bit out of the way of whatever God may have in mind for the future of His church. I believe that what God has in mind will involve upheavals and creations far more drastic than any further institutional ecumenism. I cannot refrain from remarking that plans like COCU resemble nothing so much as genetic blueprints for rebreeding the dinosaur. If we can make our institutions help believers to get together in the Word and the sacraments, rather than hindering them, our old denominational forms will have done yet one good thing. Past that point we should, I think, expect God to work some surprises — which by no means keeps us from anticipating that the new work to which He will call us will include such things as authentic episcopacy and clear confession.

Gettysburg, Pa.