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Commentary on "The Doctrine of The Church in The Lutheran Confessions"

JOHN F. JOHNSON

THE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP between the doctrine of the Church and the formulation of the Lutheran Confessions has sometimes been slighted, if not almost completely overlooked. Great Confessions were distilled from the theological and ecclesiastical ferment so characteristic of the early centuries of the Church's historical existence. The Lutheran Symbols were also occasioned by heretical dogma and anti-Scriptural practice. The Confessions resulted from serious and oftentimes agonizing attempts to cleanse the existing church of error and to proclaim the Gospel of redemptive grace which Christ has committed to his church. They were at the same time documents of reconciliation; as they sought the proper praise of the grace of God they also sought the unity of the church.

The framers of the essay under consideration (*De Ecclesia*) remind us that there was, strictly speaking, no ecclesiastically fixed and prescribed doctrine or dogma of the church until the Lutheran Symbols came into existence. Over against various Roman and medieval views, the Symbols asserted the true nature of the church while pointing out what is necessary and essential for the true unity of the church.

Lutherans are by choice and definition bound to the Scriptures and the Confessions. The Scriptures (*norma normans*) because they are, in the words of the Confessions, the clear fount of Israel, "the word of God which alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything should be subjected." (F.D., Th. D., C.S., 9). The Confessions, (*norma normata*) "not because they were composed by our theologians but because they have been taken from God's Word and founded firmly and well therein." (5.10) The Lutheran Confessions understand themselves to be a clear and adequate exposition of Scripture, the summary of Scripture whose heart they recognize to be the Gospel. "The Confessions are introduced as a witness of the truth." (13.4) Lutherans look not only to the Scriptures, then, but also to the Confessions to provide a definition of the church as well as adequate determination of the pressing questions relating to church fellowship.

I.

The essay on "The Doctrine of the Church" adopted by the commissioners of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, sets forth the following:¹

1. The church is the congregation and assembly of all believers in Jesus Christ. "This church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered through the world." Its marks are the pure teaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments. (*Apology* VII and VIII, 20) Faith in Christ is unquestionably constitutive of the church.

2. In order to create and preserve faith the ministry has been ordained by God. This is a ministry of Word and Sacrament. The church believes the Gospel; and the Gospel is defined, strictly speaking, as precisely "a confronting and joyful message which does not reprove or terrify but comforts consciences, directs them solely to the merit of Christ, and raises them up again by the delightful proclamation of God's grace and favor acquired through the merits of Christ." (F.C., Ep.V., 6-7) The preaching of this Gospel creates, preserves, and sustains Christ's church. (Cf. A.C., V)

3. Within the church are the churches. Those who "preside over the churches" are to preach the Gospel, remit sins, and administer the Sacraments. (*On the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 60). When the bishops refuse ordination "the churches retain the right to ordain for themselves." (*Ibid.*, 66-67). The churches, our Confessions make explicitly clear, are the Christian community in which we obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and the Sacraments.

4. The principle of unity among the churches is lucidly stated. It is "that the Gospel be preached in conformity with pure understanding of it." (A.C. VII). While ceremonies need not be uniform, the Gospel must be proclaimed in the churches. And the Gospel is a divine doctrine, understood in an active and dynamic sense of public preaching and teaching. True unity among the churches is destroyed by anything which vitiates the Gospel.

5. The Gospel is defined within the context of the Augsburg Confession. The Gospel is the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The various articles of the *Augustana* all relate to this Gospel. Article I witnesses to the God of the Gospel, confessed by the Church as Father, Son, and Spirit. Article II reminds the Church that the Gospel apart from the Law would be pointless. The doctrine of sin must be proclaimed if the Gospel is to be preached properly. (*Apology* IV, II, 33-34, 50) Article III establishes the divine work of atonement, while Article IV defines the very heart of the Gospel: justification by grace *propter Christum*. Similarly all other subjects treated in the Augsburg Confession can be shown to set forth from evangelical perspective the teaching of the church. *De Ecclesia* emphasizes that a commitment to the pure understanding and preaching of the Gospel "calls for fidelity in all matters that are either a part of the Gospel or necessary background for the Gospel or a necessary consequence of the Gospel."

6. Lutherans who seek external unity are to be guided by these principles. All articles of faith taught in the church are to be tested

to determine whether they serve the pure preaching of the Gospel. For any teaching which is contrary to the Gospel impairs the true unity of the church.

7. This stated principle, that true unity among the churches requires that the Gospel be preaching in conformity with a pure understanding of it, is far more than a pious phrase or an ecclesiastical formula. The Gospel *must actually be proclaimed* in the pulpits and taught in the churches. This demanded more than a correct statement in an official confession. At the same time it is not to be interpreted as demanding or insisting on an externally pure church. Occasional and incidental aberrations do not destroy the unity of the church; they must, however, be dealt with "in a patient and constructive manner."

8. When such a genuine consensus in understanding and doctrinal conviction has been achieved, Lutheran churches "not only may but should enter into pulpit and altar fellowship." Churches which recognize their unity of faith must always submit themselves to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit who has promised to lead his church into all truth.

9. The churches desiring to establish and preserve unity must earnestly raise these questions, apply themselves in love to a correction of errors when such arise, and concern themselves with the cleansing of practices that endanger the purity of the Gospel message.

This, in sum, is the substance of the position set forth in the essay, *The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions (De Ecclesia)*. A careful reading and study leads one, I believe, to say of it what the confessors said of their own document: nothing contrary to the Scriptures.

II.

Any serious discussion of unity among bodies (churches) who possess the Holy Spirit and commit themselves to Christ's holy Gospel leads a Christian to consider the reality of the church as the Body of Christ and the people of God. In and through Jesus Christ God has reconciled an estranged world to himself, breaking down walls of partition, enmity, and separation. God in Christ has created a glorious fellowship of faith. This *koinonia* is mediated through the Word of reconciliation and its concomitant summons to faith, which is at the same time the call to fellowship. (1 Cor. 1:9) *Koinonia* with God in Christ leads to *koinonia* with one another in the *Una Sancta*, as this is so carefully delineated in Scripture. (Eph. 4:1ff; 1 John 1:3; 1 Cor. 12; Gal. 3:26ff). Christians are to maintain and preserve this unity and fellowship, exercise it in worship, (Acts 2:42; 1:14; 4:24f; 8:14; 9:15-19; 15:36) and extend it by witness and proclamation. (Acts 4:20; 1 Cor. 9:19f; 2 Cor. 5:18ff) God's people are also to guard the *koinonia*. (Titus 1:9-14; 1 Cor. 1:10-11) by recognizing disunity and by judging and correcting it (Gal. 1:6-9; 6:1-2; 2 John 9-11, etc.).

The Holy Spirit creates the *koinonia* as a gift of grace. He establishes, preserves and extends it by the *vocatio divina*. This *koinonia* is one in faith. "*Omnes Christiani de evangelio consentiunt.*" Faith has as its object the *one* Christ, crucified and raised again for our justification, the *one* Gospel of reconciliation through which the *one* effective call of the *one* Spirit unites us in the *one* Body.

This unity is to be reflected in the churches. For as the internal church is one in faith the external church(es) ought to reflect this oneness in confession of faith. The church by its very nature must seek unity in truth; it prays for the Holy Spirit to establish externally what he has already established internally. According to the principles laid down in the Confessions to determine genuine unity, unity does exist among the churches who happen externally to belong to the bodies known as The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The Joint Statement and Declaration of the representatives of both synodical bodies (and the S.E.L.C.) declare that "the Spirit of God has led them in their common loyalty to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions to seek closer affiliation with each other within the unity of faith . . . Recent consultations of the representatives of the several churches have revealed consensus and mutual trust in their understanding of the following:" The three documents, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Scriptura* and *De Ecclesia* are then named. Our churches, state the representatives, "are committed to the Holy Gospel . . . We pray that the Lord Jesus Christ will so lead our churches that they will always be agreed in faith and life." The constitutions of the bodies (synods) publicly commit themselves to the Sacred Scriptures² and the Confessions³ as a summary of the faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. This certainly means that both synodical groups formally confess the Gospel and unity thesis explicated in Article VII of the Augustana. And let us not forget the reminder enunciated by Dr. Walther in the Altenburg Thesis (8): "The orthodox church is to be judged by the common, orthodox, and public confession to which the member acknowledge themselves to have been pledged and which they profess."

Whether all within these churches hold to all points of exegesis, interpretation, and understanding is not decisive in determining true unity *according to the Confessions!* True Lutheranism has always eschewed a legalistic principle. That all speak the same thing is the ideal (1 Cor. 1:10). Christians are indeed admonished to agree, to avoid division, to speak as with one mind and tongue. But this has never been understood within evangelical Lutheranism to demand that everyone accept *my* interpretation of a passage or even an official synodical interpretation. The Word of God *alone* frames doctrine, not conferences, synods, denominations, faculties, etc.

Passages of Scripture have sometimes been used to suggest that fellowship among churches who subscribe to the same confessional principle is not to be permitted. Already the Common Confession II

warned that neither separatism nor unionism is to be countenanced by using passages and admonitions out of context or by disregarding relevant Scriptural injunctions. Guided by the Spirit of God the early church recognized various aspects of *koinonia*. The church was to recognize the severance of *koinonia* when it actually had occurred (e.g., Gal. 1: 6-9; 2 John 9-11; Acts 19:8-10; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; Acts 13:14-15, 45f) but examine 2 Thess. 3:6-15; some were out of rank, acting according to their own will (cf. 1 Thess. 4:11-12; 5:14). They were not walking in accord with the tradition. Paul had earnestly warned them; yet he had remained fraternal with them. When the Gospel is denied there is no question: the *koinonia* has been broken. But recall how Peter acted when he realized that people had received the Holy Ghost? He could not refuse the fellowship (Acts 15:8-11).

The church living under the authority of the apostolic Word must apply that Word to every age in which it manifests its Spirit-given catholicity. The New Testament simply does not deal with some of the complex problems facing us. The contextual setting of certain passages cannot be automatically transferred to our day with resulting imperatives and prohibitions finding absolute validity in our particular application of them.

At the same time we must be genuinely concerned about what is really being taught in the churches, rather than merely being concerned about what is officially stated (*publica doctrina*). The Brief Statement, the Common Confession, and the document under discussion emphasize that the character of a church is established by what is actually taught in its pulpits, seminaries, and publications. The Gospel "must actually be proclaimed in the pulpits and taught in the church" (*De Ecclesia*). Christian people of sincerity, integrity, and conscience openly heed this principle. The people of God who in conviction and freedom have identified themselves with and subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions will particularly uphold and defend this stated position.

The Symbols obviously do not speak of lodgery *per se*. Therefore, according to our own confessional principle, attitudes toward lodgery can at best come under consideration only in the realm of relating lodge practice to the Gospel. "Any teaching that is contrary to the Gospel impairs the true unity of the church" (*De Ecclesia*). The Confessions speak of the Scriptures as "the Word of God, words of the Holy Ghost, the clear fountain of Israel, the only guide for doctrine and life," etc. They do not explicate theories of inspiration and related matters such as inerrancy. While such concerns have a place in theological discussion, the confessional principle we uphold requires no more than what is stated in the constitutions of the churches (synods) involved.

In light of the above it appears that we are, in Lutheranism, dealing with a kind of theological reductionist principle. The stand we take on the Confessions is clear: unity is predicated upon the actual proclamation of the Gospel in conformity with a pure under-

standing of it, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the divine Word. The churches involved in the search for external unity commit themselves to this principle. If they are carrying out this principle *publicly and actually*, they have met the requirements laid down in our Confessions. The real issue, then, for some involved in controversy becomes equally clear: it is not whether unity exists, but whether our canon of sufficiency is still sufficient! If we want to inject other issues into the whole question of unity—issues which are not strictly demanded by our confessional principle—then let us be honest enough to state it.

One final concern: what is to be done when two churches (congregations) find themselves in total consensus according to our confessional principle? The answer, you will say, is that they must practice fellowship. That is absolutely correct. Now what happens when they belong externally to two bodies (synods) which don't practice fellowship? This is a serious question, it seems to me, too serious to forget about if fellowship is not declared at Denver. Whatever the official outcome this summer, we, the churches, cannot simply say with Goethe: "Es waere so schoen gewesen, es hat nicht sollen sein." We have a responsibility to answer the questions and concerns of these final paragraphs. Our task is not over whether we say Yes or No at Denver!

FOOTNOTES

1. The following represents my own summary, emphasis and numbering of points.
2. The Bible is defined "in all their parts as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God." The church "submits to this as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life." (*Confession of Faith*, IV, 1 of the A.L.C.) The Bible is "the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice." (Constitution of the L.C.-Mo. Synod, II, 1)
3. Both Missouri and the A.L.C. further express their commitment to the Lutheran Confessions "because they are the presentation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God."