

The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,
Lutheran Council in the USA,
During 1972-77

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Quotations from **The Book of Concord**, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., **The Book of Concord** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

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Part 3

Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship

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ALC View: What Does Agreement in the Doctrine of the Gospel Mean?

By Warren A. Quanbeck

In Article VII of the Augsburg Confession the reformers implicitly reject the Roman Catholic teaching that the true church is that which is subject to the authority of the Pope, has bishops in the apostolic succession, and a ministry ordained by them. The church is rather to be seen as the creation of the Holy Spirit working through Word and sacraments. For this reason nothing of human origin can be essential to the existence of the church whether it be Pope, bishops, or a priesthood in some canonical succession. Only the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments are essential, for through these the Holy Spirit creates and preserves his church.

This denial that bishops in the apostolic succession and a ministry ordained by them are essential for the church clearly does not rise out of a negative attitude toward bishops or apostolic succession. The reformers made clear that they would have preferred to maintain the traditional structure of the church together with its discipline. Only the refusal of Catholic bishops to ordain pastors for evangelical congregations compelled the reformers to improvise other forms of church administration.

“. . . we have given frequent testimony . . . to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority. We know that the fathers had good and useful reasons for instituting ecclesiastical discipline in the man-

ner described by the ancient canons. . . . Furthermore, we . . . declare our willingness to keep the ecclesiastical and canonical polity, provided that the bishops stop raging against our churches. This willingness will be our defense, both before God and among all nations, present and future, against the charge that we have undermined the authority of the bishops” (Apology XIV).

The excommunication of Luther and his followers for the offense of faithfulness to the Scriptures convinced them that neither Pope nor bishops were sure guarantors of succession in the apostolic gospel. Given the choice between the tra-

ditional ministry together with its condemnation of the gospel or the gospel without the traditional ministry, they unhesitatingly chose the latter. They were convinced that the church could function without Pope or bishops but not without the Word of God. AC VII expresses their conviction that the presence and grace of Christ creates and sustains the church. "We know that the church is present among those who rightly teach the Word of God and rightly administer the sacraments" (Ap XIV). They were confident that wherever the gospel is actually proclaimed and the sacraments properly administered, there Christ is present in the power of the Spirit to grant forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

The work of the Spirit in Word and sacrament is also the source of the church's unity. There is one God, one gospel, one baptism, and one Spirit who leads his people toward unity. For this reason all that is essential to the unity of the church is the working of the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Many other matters may be desirable and useful but only the Spirit's presence and working are essential. Within this unity in the Spirit there may be diversity in all matters of human origin such as forms of worship, structures of administration and discipline, and patterns of witness and service.

Agreement in the proclamation of the gospel and in the administration of the sacraments is for the sake of determining where the

church of Jesus Christ and its unity are to be found. One aspect of the theological task is to make the judgment whether the gospel is in fact being proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered to authenticate the presence and working of the Spirit in the church through the means of grace.

For this task understanding of the Scriptures and of the development of doctrine in the church is required as well as a faculty of discrimination such as Luther describes as competence in the distinction between law and gospel. Here theological skills must operate in the living context of the church's life of worship, witness, and service, with sensitivity to nuances of meaning and intention of theological statement as well as a grasp of patterns of piety and life. Within this process a wide range of judgments is possible. On the one hand there can be detailed agreement in doctrine at a level so abstract and academic that it would furnish no real assurance that the gospel is actually being proclaimed or the sacraments properly administered in congregations. On the other hand there can be real agreement in proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments together with diversity of theological methods, vocabulary, and conceptuality. Contemporary historical studies have shown that within the unity of the biblical witness to Jesus as the Son of God come in the flesh are

many ways of setting forth the gospel: a declaration of justification, a process of making holy, deliverance from guilt, redemption from bondage, union with Christ, a new covenant, and others.

Whether churches are actually in agreement in this latter situation can only be determined in theological conversations in which each group presents its own understanding of the gospel, listens intently to what the other group says, and seeks to enter with sympathy and penetration into the mind and thought of the other. Where there is a common loyalty to the Scriptures and a common appropriation of the testimony of the ecumenical creeds, there may be an initial presumption of considerable agreement which can then be tested in discussion. Where in addition there is a common acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions, the discussion should probably be carried out within the setting of altar and pulpit fellowship. Whatever differences then appear to be beyond legitimate diversity in the gospel can be discussed in an atmosphere of brotherly counsel and admonition.