

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 6

Theological Diversity in a Confessional Church

Limits of Theological Diversity

By Warren A. Quanbeck

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession asserts the Reformers' conviction that the church lives by the presence of the crucified and risen Christ in its midst. As the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments mediate his gracious and forgiving presence, the people of God are called into being and renewed and empowered for discipleship. There is one God, one Christ, one Spirit, one baptism, one people.

For the early church, "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4.3), this unity in Christ was a precious thing and was safeguarded with zeal. Christians strove to maintain relationships with other Christian communities, sharing their spiritual and temporal gifts. They saw their being all together

as the eschatological sign of the unity given in Jesus Christ and constantly offered and striven for in the mission of his people. Their energies went toward strengthening and upholding each other so that the love of God in Christ might be embodied in his people. To separate a member from the body was for them a solemn act, undertaken with reluctance. It was done only in the case of a denial of the Christ, who is the source of the church's life, or in the face of an act against the unity of the people in Christ.

That there be agreement on the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments is enough for the unity of the church. That human traditions or rites and ceremonies be alike everywhere is not necessary. Where Christ is, there is the church. The unity of the church is its unity in Christ. Where this unity

exists, variations are permissible, perhaps even desirable, in modes of church government, forms of worship, and pastoral, homiletical, and theological styles—always, of course, with the understanding that these variations do not obscure the proclamation of the gospel or distort the administration of the sacraments.

Over the centuries theologians have fashioned many different styles of doing theology: Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, Luther's theology of the cross, rationalistic, idealistic, existentialist, process, analytical. Any style of doing theology is good which enables the church to confront the questions raised by the culture in which it

works and to articulate clearly the redemptive work of Christ and his claim to finality. A theological style is less satisfactory when it assists the church in avoiding confrontation with the questions of the day or in giving unqualified approval to the standards and aspirations of contemporary culture.

In a similar way interpreters of Scripture have devised instruments for their work. For centuries they used the literary tools they discovered in Hellenistic civilization. By the Middle Ages they had developed the **Quadrige**, a fourfold interpretation of the Scriptures with its attention to both literal and spiritual dimensions of the text. Reformers rejected the allegorical methods, insisting on a literal-historical interpretation of the author's intentions. In the last century this method has been refined by such techniques as form criticism and tradition and redaction criticism and is still in the process of development through attention to literary, historical, and hermeneutical problems. This method of interpretation offers the church the opportunity to listen to the Scriptures more attentively now than at any time in the past.

Lutheran churches should live in the consciousness that their existence is a gift of God's grace, called into being by the gospel, sustained by Christ's presence in proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments. Any theological or exegetical method is good and useful which enables the church to sustain adequate worship of God, articulate clear witness to Christ as Redeem-

er and Lord, and in Christ to offer its life for the service of the neighbor. The limit to this evangelical diversity is the denial or obscuring of Christ as the source, center, and end of the church's life.