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The Unity of the Church and the
Message of Christ

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The Unity of the Church and the Message of Christ

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This article was presented in the form of a lecture during Dr. Wisløff's recent visit in this country. We are making it available to our readers because it stresses some important aspects of a very live issue.

I SHALL try to throw a little light on this subject by presenting for your consideration seven theses. The first four deal with important basic New Testament ideas. The next two set forth important, but often neglected, central truths of the Lutheran Reformation. The final thesis attempts to draw a conclusion.

Thesis 1. In our day the establishment of the unity of the church appears as a big problem. In the message of the New Testament, the unity of the church is proclaimed as established.

Jesus told Peter that He would build His church on the foundation of Peter's faith and confession. And the Lord added: "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). It is clear that in these words the founding of the church and the continuation and victory of the church over the gates of hell are simultaneously set forth in one and the same premise.

In his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians Paul speaks of the church and shows clearly that God's salvation is actualized in the church. We cannot refer to every relevant passage such as Col. 1:18 ff. and Eph. 1:19. By way of example we quote Eph. 1:10: "That in the dispensation of the fullness of time He might gather together in one all things in Christ,

both which are in heaven and which are on earth, even in Him."

When we think of the unity of the church as a problem, we dare not forget that the apostle declares: There is *one* church in which God's eternal plan for our salvation is realized.

Jesus prayed, "That they all may be one" (John 17:21). When we hear these words, we are confronted by what appears to be a divided church and hope that the situation may get better. But when Jesus' apostles heard these words, they were not confronted by a divided church. Nor were they to think of many churches that were to become one. They were to proclaim one communion of believers, united as the Father and the Son are one. The unity of the church is not a problem that we are to solve; it is a glorious message of a reality, which the apostles were to announce.

Thesis 2. In the New Testament, the church is a fellowship of people. God's church is not primarily an institution, but people. The church is "someone," not "something."

This is evident in John 10, for example. The relationship of Jesus to His friends is the relationship of a shepherd to his sheep. We find the same view expressed in Acts 20:28. The church's guardians are shepherds, the members sheep. In both instances, moreover, there is mention of "the wolf" or "wolves." The church is

people, not an institution that administers property for someone.

Another clear passage is 1 Peter 2:5: "like living stones, be yourselves built into a spiritual house." The church is a temple. But notice how Scripture speaks of the temple. Some people like to imagine the church spoken of here to be a venerable building with thick walls, where the believers—and nonbelievers—sit. Not so. In the New Testament the church is not a building in which believers and nonbelievers dwell. The church is a building that is built up of the believers as living stones. The walls do not enclose the faithful; but rather the faithful are the walls. I will tell you how many stones there are in God's living church on earth: there are precisely as many stones as there are living hearts that believe in Jesus as their Savior. Not a single one more, not a single one less.

Peter further describes the faithful as "a holy priesthood." That is, they are all priests. There are not some who are priests for the others, middlemen between them and God. They are themselves priests, every one of them.

Thesis 3. The people who thus compose the church are "added to" this church through an act of grace by God, who uses for this purpose the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

We said that it is people, believers, who are the church. But this must not be misunderstood. It is not people who create the church. It is God who does that. The living stones are seized by the strong hand of God, who puts them together as He Himself wills.

In Acts 2:47 it is said that "the Lord added to their number day by day those

who were being saved." There is *one* Builder: God Himself.

What does He use as a tool? He uses the Gospel. Ephesians 1:13: "in whom ye also trusted, after ye had heard the Word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation." They heard the Gospel of salvation, and thus they came to faith in Christ. The Greek text has two participles, ἀκούσαντες and πιστεύσαντες. These participles have a causal meaning and speak about what the readers experienced before they received the seal of the Spirit. They heard the word of truth, which is the Gospel. Thereby they came to faith in Christ. Then they, like Paul, were told, "Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord." (Acts 22:16)

To summarize: (1) God's church consists of people who believe, people "who have faith and the Holy Spirit in their hearts," as Melancthon says.¹ (2) This church is *one*, because (3) the Gospel is one.

Thesis 4. Just as the unity is created by the message about Christ, so the unity cannot continue except by one and the same Gospel. The true Gospel creates the one church. False messages divide and destroy the unity of the church.

This follows from what we have already stated. Paul uses strong and severe language against any who proclaim "any other gospel" (Gal. 1:8 ff.). He who forsakes the Gospel falls from grace (Gal. 5:4). The church is not specifically mentioned in this connection. But it is clear that false

¹ Apology VII, 5 (Latin); *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche: Herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsbургischen Konfession*, 3d ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), p. 234.

doctrine creates a schism. As long as there is one message, there is one church. Those who proclaim another gospel "went out from us" (1 John 2:19). Those who preach this false message are "deceivers" (2 John 7). There is no longer unity but division.

The only mark of the one true church is the one Gospel. For the church consists of people who believe this one Gospel.

Some have maintained that the organized form of the church is the mark of the one true church. Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and others have sought, and to their own satisfaction found, in the New Testament their respective ideal form of the church. So each one is satisfied, and we could therefore say, in the words of *Alice in Wonderland*: "Everybody has won, and all shall have prizes." But that leaves us right where we started. No external organization can be found as the one expression of the church's unity.

Others say the ministry is the expression of the unity of the church. In the Church of South India apostolic succession has been preserved as a symbol of the church's unity. The Swedish writer Stig Hanson in his valuable study, *The Unity of the Church in the New Testament*, calls the ministry "an important factor of unity." He refers to important emphases in the New Testament: the apostle was sent by Jesus Himself (1 Cor. 1:17), he had his ἐξουσία from the Lord (2 Cor. 13:10), Christ speaks through him (2 Cor. 13:3), and he is thus Christ's representative to the congregation. The same thing can be said, to a certain extent, about the church's ἐπίσκοποι and πρεσβύτεροι.

All of this is true. But one fact must not be forgotten. What makes the apostle

the mark and expression of unity is not his ministry as such, but what creates and maintains unity is the message he proclaims. A man, consecrated for service of the church, who does not preach the true Gospel, is no longer a witness to the unity of the church but to its division. Peter was the Lord's apostle. But in Antioch he had to submit to correction by Paul. The Peter who had "not walked uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel" (Gal. 2:14) was in this situation not a factor of unity. He was a dangerous contributor to the church's disunity. The antichrists whom the Epistles of John warn against were almost certainly ministers of the church. This is also true of the expression "grievous wolves" in Acts 20:29. They arise "of your own selves" (v. 30). "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 John 2:19). Also ministers of the church can be "false prophets who come in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravening wolves." (Matt. 7:15)

The fact that a church with a tower and spire is found somewhere is no guarantee that Christ's church is there. Nor is the fact that there may be clergy in full vestments, members in attendance, and so on. There is *one* sign: the Gospel, rightly preached, and—included in this—the sacraments rightly administered.

Thesis 5. The task of the Reformation was to assert that the unity of the church lies in the true message and not in anything else. According to Luther, the unity of the church is a spiritual matter, not a matter of canon law.

The Augsburg Confession (Art. VI) says, "Likewise they teach that there will always be one holy church." Our evangelical forebears emphasized strongly that

the church is *one*. And that was not by chance. The pope's men had accused them of "having fallen from the faith and formed a new church," as Luther puts it. Now that doesn't sound so terrible to us, accustomed as we are to the idea that there are many churches. If a person isn't satisfied with his old church, why, he has only to form a new one. But Luther was deeply mortified that anyone could say such a thing about him. There is, of course, only one church! Therefore Luther said, "If they can actually support their accusation with one single valid proof—more than that is not needed—why, then we will acknowledge ourselves convinced and will come and confess: We have sinned. Forgive us!"²

There is but one church. Which church? The Augsburg Confession says: "The church is the communion of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered." In this connection we should note two things.

a) Here we find the same personal aspect as in the New Testament. The church is *someone*, not *something*. It is customary to ask, What is the church? Luther asks rather, *Who* is the church? That is what he asks in the letter to the clergy assembled at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530: "You say that nothing new shall be introduced without the approval of the church. But tell me, Who is the church? Is it you?" (W. A. 30.2, 321)

The same thing in the Smalcald Articles: "We do not admit that *they* are the church [notice the personal form of

expression], and that they are not, either—for a child of seven knows, thank God, what the church is, namely, the holy believers and the sheep who hear the Good Shepherd's voice. . . ." Or another quotation: "I believe that there is one holy church on earth, that is, the communion, or aggregate, or assembly of all Christians in the world, Christ's bride and spiritual body." (Large Catechism)

Luther takes exception to the usual mode of speaking about the church. In the first place, the church is not any cultic assembly. "The church is not a gathering in a building, a gathering with certain ceremonies and vestments." Rather those who believe in Christ are the church. In Luther's *Sermon vom Bann*, for example, he says that there are people who have been interdicted without reason. They are outside the church and not allowed to commune. But if they believe, they belong to the church all the same. Within the church there are people who are allowed to commune and do so, but if they do not believe, they do not belong to the church of Jesus.³

In the second place, he takes exception to the thought that the church is primarily the priesthood. No, the church is everyone who believes. The church is "*ein Häuflein der Heiligen*" (Large Catechism). The church is understood on the basis of the doctrine of justification by faith.

b) Furthermore, we find in Luther the conviction that it is the message which creates the church, the one true church.

In this connection we must think of the words *satis est* in the Augsburg Confession.

² D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883 ff.), 51, 477. Hereafter cited as W. A.

³ Dr. Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke, II, XXVII (Erlangen: Verlag von Carl Heyder, 1833), 54 f.

"And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike." Augsburg Confession VII. *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 47.

Pope Pius XII said that the liturgy was *signum unitatis ecclesiae* (*Mediator Dei*, 1947). But Luther would not say that. There can be the same liturgy and still no unity if there is not a common faith. There can be different liturgies in use, and still unity can prevail if the faith is the same.

A definite form of the ministry is no sign of the church's unity. In some quarters today apostolic succession is proclaimed as the mark of unity, and from South India comes a demand that we seek unity in the church through, among other things, the historic episcopate. But to that we repeat the same answer as given before. A ministry with apostolic succession does not guarantee unity! Why not? Because a person can come to faith without this ministry. And one can be led astray by such a ministry. The church is the sum of all who believe. Therefore nothing else can guarantee unity among them than that one message that can lead to faith.

The sectarians at the time of the Reformation rejected the ancient liturgy, or rather the Roman "liturgism." Luther spoke about this subject in sermons for *Invocavit* Sunday. The Romanists say consecrated vestments are necessary. The sectarians claim it is necessary to reject such vestments. The Romanists forbid lay people to touch the Communion elements. The

sectarians insist on taking the Communion bread in their hands. The Romanists serve God by putting pictures in their churches. The sectarians glorify God by throwing them out. But all this is child's play and foolishness — or work-righteousness. It has nothing to do with faith. Ceremonies cannot guarantee faith. Ceremonies cannot rob me of my faith. (W.A. 10.3, 31)

Some want to find the unity of the church in a definite Christian experience. You must experience this, and this and that. And you must experience it in such and such a way. Certainly, to come to faith implies that I experience meeting God. It is not a problem in mathematics. It concerns the will. It concerns the conscience. But let no one say that the unity of the church consists in the fact that we all experience Him in exactly the same way, psychologically. That is not true. It is the message about Jesus that creates faith. Nothing else. Therefore it is also the message that creates the unity.

Thesis 6. For Luther the opposite of the one church is not the many churches, but the false church, the pseudo church.

The church is the communion of believers, those who believe the same Gospel. But what is this complex thing, with its priests and churches and ceremonies, that does not preach the true Gospel? If the church is composed of those who believe the true Gospel, what is this group which preaches another?

Luther taught that there was only one church. But this other one, what was that? This was not a second church, but a false church, a church of lies: *die gleyssende kirche*, something that looks like a church but isn't. (W.A. 7, 309; 30.2, 347)

Luther wrote to the priests assembled

at Augsburg in 1530: "As long as no proof is given, it is useless for some to sit and say that *they* are the church, while all others are heretics. One party must be right; the other wrong. For there are two churches from the beginning of the world to its end. Augustine calls them Abel and Cain. And our Lord commanded us not to trust the false church. He differentiated between two churches, one right and one wrong. Christ said, 'Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing.' Where there are prophets, there are also churches in which they teach. If the prophets are false, then the churches are also false who believe them and follow them." (W. A. 51, 477)

When we read this, we may perhaps think that the false church is the Roman Catholic Church and the true church the Lutheran Church. For are we not, after all, the church of the pure doctrine of the Augsburg Confession? But it is not quite so simple as that! Remember that in 1530 there were not two organized denominations as later came to be. Luther stands right in the middle of the one organized church and *there* distinguishes between the true and the false church. In his view the pope is not the head of one denomination among several. He sees the pope rather as an evil power that makes itself felt in the church. For also the pope is "in the church." The pope is Antichrist. "But the Antichrist does not dwell in a stable but in the temple of God" (W. A. 51, 505). Those who follow him are *in der Kirche*, but not *von der Kirche, oder Glieder der Kirche. In ecclesia sunt sed non de ecclesia*. On the other hand, the church can be said to exist among the adherents of the papacy, just as surely as it can be

said to be among the Turks and Tartars. Why does he believe that? Because Baptism has existed there, and children have surely had faith for a while—likely until they are seven years old, Luther thought. And then the crucifix has been held aloft before the eyes of the dying, and they have been told, "Put your trust in Him who died for you" (W. A. 38, 221). The church always consists of those who have faith in Christ Jesus.

Thesis 7. The task of the Lutheran Church today must be to preach what the New Testament and the Reformation have taught us: the church finds its unity in the true Gospel and in nothing else.

The ecumenical situation today is characterized by the title of a report from *Faith and Order* to the Evanston assembly, "Our oneness as Christians and our disunity as churches." I will not comment on the whole report. But I will put my finger on one thing.

When one talks about our division as Christians and our oneness as Christians, then one has silently presupposed two things: (1) All who are called Christians on earth are basically one. (2) There are many different churches on earth. Here we meet a widespread train of ecumenical thought that finds our real difficulty today in point two. The problem is the many churches. But the basic unity of the many Christians is a fact upon which we can build.

Meanwhile there is one thing that is evident. If the unity of the church lies in its message, then the organizational difficulties are not the greatest problem. For if there were in spirit and truth only one living message in Christendom, or to put it another way, if all who are called Chris-

tians actually agreed upon the one true Gospel, then the problem of the many organized denominations would be no major issue. Then it would be simply a practical question. I am not saying that it would be a small, insignificant question to solve. But I do say that this is not where the actual problem lies.

The actual problem today and always is this: Is there really any unity among all those who are called Christians? That is the problem. And if we believe that our Lutheran Catechism is correct, then we cannot immediately answer yes to this question. Archbishop Söderblom believed that we can answer yes. For his view, as formulated by Karlström, was this: Behind all formulations of faith lies faith itself (*Kristna Samförståndssträvanden*, p. 146). But that was the reasoning of liberal theology. Religion is in the last analysis a matter of emotions. One person feels and experiences it in one way, another person in a different way; Roman Catholics thus, Lutherans so, and what is the difference? Only in the words and expressions. Basically there is no difference. That is the reasoning of liberal theologians. But the New Testament does not agree. It knows no unity until there is one faith, one Baptism, one Gospel.

The day we can say that this unity is a fact, point 2 (the many denominations) will cease to be a theological problem. Then this becomes merely a purely practical question. I am not saying that it is an unimportant problem. But I repeat: it is then no longer a theological problem.

In our situation many seem to be of the opinion that only two things are required in ecumenical endeavors. They maintain that first of all broad-mindedness is neces-

sary. And following that, the will to act. They reproach us, "Why can't you be more broad-minded? Why can't we immediately set to work creating church unity?" We must answer: "Because this concerns the one message that can save men. For this one message there must be one corresponding confession. There is one message, only one. The church consists of those who believe this message. Therefore the church also is one."

The Lutheran Church is a confessional church of ecumenical character. What does this mean? Does that mean a church that "broad-mindedly" embraces everything? No, it means a church that confesses the one apostolic message in the Holy Scriptures and that does so on behalf of all Christendom. We do not believe we are the only ones who will get to heaven, as some folks insist we believe. No, rather, we believe that in spite of everything, God has resources for getting people everywhere to heed the Word that saves — even though they get a lot of extraneous matter at the same time!

Our ecumenical program must be to take seriously our Augsburg Confession and its *satis est*. It is not a question of making Lutherans of others. There are in our church and in our doctrinal heritage many elements of a historical, cultural, and sociological nature, elements that are dear to us, but we have no right to insist others must adopt them. It is truly enough for the unity of the church that there is unanimity concerning *doctrina evangelii et administratio sacramentorum*.

It is also truly unnecessary to aim for one world church. Also this is included in the *satis est* of the Augsburg Confession. Tendencies in that direction are to be

found here and there. I believe this entails a good deal of human hybridization. But such presumption can be found also among "Lutherans" who can see nothing but their own point of view.

The story is told about a bishop who supposedly said, "I believe in one Christian Church, and I am very sorry that for

the time being it does not exist." We do not need to be so pessimistic. It exists all right! It can be found. God sees it. Christ knows it. It is His body. It is composed of all who are living in faith in Christ. It is living here on earth in sorry garb. But it is living!

Oslo, Norway