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Augsburg Confession VII Revisited

Kurt E. Marquart

Does Article VII of the Augsburg Confession speak of outward church fellowship, or only of an inner, invisible unity? In our ecumenical age this question has or ought to have top priority for *bona fide* Lutherans throughout the world. The brief points which follow are meant to indicate how and why a clear and consistent answer to the question may be formulated.

I.

If the question is framed as above, then it is clear that the issue is *not* whether inner and outer unity must be distinguished. Of course, the oneness of the one church which is an article of faith and not of sight must be distinguished from outward pulpit and altar fellowship — though not separated (cf. Apol. VII — VIII, 5: “The church is not *merely* an association of outward ties and rites . . . but it is *mainly* an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men’s hearts,” emphases added). The *Minneapolis Theses* (1925), for instance, distinguish with model clarity between inner and outer unity:

These synods agree that true Christians are found in every denomination which has so much of divine truth revealed in Holy Scripture that children of God can be born in it; that according to the Word of God and our confessions, church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition, altar and pulpit fellowship, and eventually cooperation in the strictly essential work of the church, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and of the confession of the same in word and deed. Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism, pretense of union which does not exist.¹

II.

Article VII itself plainly speaks not simply of something hidden and unobservable, but of outward, publicly verifiable entities, *viz.*, correct preaching and teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the holy sacraments. This language simply has to be taken at face value. Hermann Sasse put it like this:

The Augsburg Confession was written for a practical purpose which is described in the Preface as a restoration of an outward unity that had been lost: “to have all of us

embrace and adhere to a single, true religion and live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ" (Pref. par. 4). While the corresponding Schwabach Article XII had to deal with the question of what the church is, the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession had to take up that practical question: How can the unity of the church as an *association of outward rites and ties* be restored? Over against the Roman claim that this would require not only the acceptance of the doctrine and the sacraments of the church, but also of constitution, liturgy, and other traditions, Augsburg Confession VII declares: "For the true unity of the church it is enough . . ."²

III.

This has always been the understanding of the Lutheran Church. The contrary view, *viz.*, that Article VII refers only to the "invisible" church and not to outward church fellowship, was characteristic of the Lutheran-Reformed Union Church of Prussia:

According to Augsburg Confession VII only this [Lutheran] confession can have validity in a Lutheran church. This article was held by the official theology of the [Prussian Union Church's] *Oberkirchenrat* to apply to the "invisible" church. But the *teaching purely and rightly administering the sacraments* takes place in the "visible" church.³

How are the Lutheran and the Reformed churches related to the allegedly "evangelical" church? Either the latter exists, and then the Lutheran and Reformed confessions are not churches but merely directions [*Richtungen*, or "confessing movements," in the language of to-day's AELC! K.M.] within one church. Or else the two confessions are churches; then the evangelical church allegedly standing above them is a fiction. The latter has always been the position of Lutheranism, which on the basis of Augsburg Confession VII could not judge otherwise.⁴

IV.

This same traditional Lutheran position was represented by the two great theological "founding fathers" of the Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther and F. Pieper. They took for granted that Article VII of the Augustana governs outward doctrinal and sacramental unity, and does not deal simply with intangibles.⁵

V.

The standard objections to the traditional understanding of Augustana VII are ill-founded in the sources and therefore

invalid. For instance, it is customary to appeal to Apology VII — VIII, 31: “We are talking about true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God.” It is held that this refers not to doctrinal unity but to a kind of minimal spiritual unity which cuts across doctrinal differences. Such pietistic, psychologising notions of faith, however, are foreign to the Apology. The German version of the Apology makes quite clear what is meant in this paragraph:

We say that those are called one harmonious church who believe in one Christ, have one Gospel, one Spirit, one Faith, one and the same Sacrament, and we thus speak of spiritual unity, without which faith and Christian existence cannot be. For that very unity now we say that it is not necessary that human ordinances . . . be everywhere the same.

In other words, “spiritual unity” here includes the entire Christian faith or doctrine as well as “one and the same Sacrament.” The contrast here, as in Augustana VII, is not between minimal doctrine and maximal doctrine, or central doctrine and peripheral doctrine, but between the divinely revealed evangelical doctrine, all of it, and human customs and ceremonies. All this faithfully echoes Luther, for whom “unity” always rested on the objective Gospel in its doctrinal and sacramental fulness:

I believe that there is on earth a holy little group and fellowship consisting entirely of saints, under one Head, Christ, gathered together by the Holy Spirit, in one Faith, sense, and understanding, with various gifts, but harmonious in love, without sects and divisions . . . Therefore there belongs here what is to be preached concerning the Sacraments, and in sum the entire Gospel and all offices of Christianity.⁶

VI.

A related objection runs as follows: The purely taught Gospel and the rightly administered sacraments cannot mean the complete doctrinal content of the Book of Concord — agreement “in the doctrine and in all its articles” (FC-SD X, 31) — since that would limit the Christian church to orthodox Lutherans. Therefore, the Gospel and Sacraments come into consideration here only in some vague sense of what the various “denominations” have in common, without doctrinal specifics.

The entire Book of Concord, however, knows no such sentimentally shapeless Gospel and sacraments. To suggest that the “gospel” in the Augustana is simply Article IV, on justification, that is, “one of 28 Articles,”⁷ is to impose on the Confession a

forced and — dare one say it? — unhistorical interpretation. In that case the Confession meant to assert that “true unity” existed with the Zwinglians, because they also agreed completely with the Article IV, on justification! Why then were the Zwinglians not allowed to sign the Augsburg Confession? Article X, on the Holy Supper of our Lord, “rejects” the Zwinglian doctrine, and Luther’s Great Confession of the Supper of Christ (1528!) contained these words, quoted later in FC-SD VII, 32:

It does not rest on man’s faith or unbelief but on the Word and ordinance of God — unless they first change God’s Word and ordinance and misinterpret them, as the enemies of the sacrament do at the present time. They, indeed, have only bread and wine, for they do not also have the Word and instituted ordinance of God but have perverted and changed it according to their own imagination.

Does anyone really think that the Augsburg Confession meant to say that the Zwinglian “enemies of the sacrament” also preached the Gospel “harmoniously according to its pure understanding” and distributed the sacraments “in conformity with the divine Word”? Or, for that matter, that the “true unity” and the “purely” and “rightly” distributed Gospel and sacraments were meant to cover also the Romanist opponents who “defend wicked opinions against the Gospel” (Apol. IV, 400), who “defend human opinions contrary to the Gospel” (Apol. IV, 400), whose doctrine “does overthrow faith” (Apol. VII — VIII, 21), and who “seek to destroy the Word of God” (Apol. XIV, 4)? Whatever difficulties there may be in the interpretation of Augustana VII, it is evident that the solution cannot lie in this direction.

Two opposing misunderstandings must be avoided. On the one hand, it will not do to limit the purely taught Gospel simply to justification, or to the Second Article of the Creed. This is clear already from a comparison with Schwabach Article XII, on which the first part of Augustana VII is based: “Such church is none other than the believers in Christ, who hold, believe, and teach the above-mentioned articles and parts, and are on that account persecuted and martyred in the world.” And the Torgau Articles, on which the Augustana’s argument about true unity is largely based, make the point that the unity of the church is not violated by ceremonial dissimilarities, although it is violated by those who “abandon God’s Word in an article.”⁸

Luther’s understanding of the Gospel was holistic, not atomistic. In his Large Catechism, published prior to the Augsburg Confession, Luther contrasted the Ten Com-

mandments as Law not with the Second Article only, but with the entire Creed, that is, with all three Articles. The Creed is “the Faith” (*der Glaube*). Justification, forgiveness, grace, are organically embedded in the Trinitarian fulness of the faith and cannot be cut mechanically out of this matrix: “These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. . . . Now you see that the Creed is a very different teaching from the Ten Commandments. The latter teaches us what we ought to do; the Creed tells what God does for us and gives to us.”⁹ The Gospel, then, is not one out of many articles, but it is all the articles of faith, seen in the perspective of the grace of God in Christ, in other words, not as Law. In its first paragraph, therefore, the Seventh Article of the Augustana gives the normal and normative description of the church as being bound up with the entire evangelical and saving truth. Of course, Christians can and do exist under heretical regimes — but these regimes exist in violation of Christ’s saving will for His church and as such are illegitimate. He has bound His whole church to His whole truth.

The opposite misunderstanding holds that Article Seven speaks of the Gospel in its widest sense, including the Law. This is a perfectly understandable reaction to the impossible idea that “the Gospel,” agreement in which is sufficient for the “true unity” of the church, is a short slogan about justification. It is this minimalist notion of “Gospel” which probably has created most of the trouble in the interpretation of Augustana VII. What must be seen is that the Gospel in the “narrow” or strict sense is not the Second Article as distinguished from the First and Third. Rather, it is the entire salvific Trinitarian faith or creed, as distinguished from the Law. That is the point of the distinction in Article V of the Formula of Concord (see SD V, 4-6,20). The Gospel in the “broad” sense, then, differs from the Gospel in the “strict” sense only in that the former includes also the Law, or the preaching of repentance. If that be the distinction, then Article Seven means the Gospel in its “strict” sense, as Sasse has shown in his classic *Here We Stand*.¹⁰ Actually Francis Pieper had said quite the same thing rather clearly half a century earlier:

By unity in faith we understand agreement in all articles of the Christian doctrine revealed in Scripture . . .

In the thesis only the Gospel is meant. When we speak of “articles of the Christian doctrine,” this is to be understood as the revelation and preaching of Christ . . . The Law does not come into consideration here. The foundation on which

the Christian church is built is Christ, the Gospel . . . Although the Law, therefore, does not belong within faith and, therefore, also not within the definition of faith, acceptance of the Law is, nevertheless, a necessary presupposition of unity in faith . . . The expression “articles of faith” designates a quite definite concept: the doctrines of the Gospel in contrast to the Law.¹¹

VII.

Why is all this important? Official discussions among ALC, LCA, and LC-MS theologians under the auspices of LCUSA’s Division of Theological Studies have produced the remarkable “FODT Report,”¹² which includes this formulation:

For Lutherans, Article VII of the Augsburg Confession provides the starting point for investigation of existing unity: “For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” All of our church bodies begin from that premise. But exactly what is this “teaching of the gospel” (DOCTRINA EVANGELII)? Discussions among our three church bodies revealed differences on this point.

The sad paradox is that radically anti-confessional forces are appealing piously to the “true unity” and the “Gospel” of Augustana VII — even as they blithely surrender the Sacrament (e.g., *Marburg Revisited* in America and the *Leuenberg Concord* in Europe) and totally overthrow the Reformation’s *sola scriptura* foundation in the name of historical criticism! All this is routinely papered over with threadbare formalisms and legalisms about confessional “subscription” and paragraphs in church constitutions. The Lutheran World Federation has even discovered in Augustana VII an “unexpended ecumenical capital,”¹³ which was promptly used to finance an ecumenical program of “reconciled diversity” — a “genuine church fellowship” among the various denominations, predicated on “the legitimacy of the confessional differences and therefore the need to preserve them.”¹⁴ If only such “ecumenical capital” — about as authentic as Joseph Smith’s golden plates — had been discovered a century and a half earlier, the Lutheran Church could have spared itself the whole bother about the Prussian Union (which embodied precisely “reconciled diversity”¹⁵), including the costly emigrations to America and Australia. Who would have thought that the Lutheran World Federation could within twenty short years go so far beyond the principles of one of its own former presidents, Franklin Clark Fry, who, though not exactly known for extreme

confessionalism, stated in 1956: "Insistence upon agreement in doctrine as a precondition for church fellowship is the distinguishing mark of Lutherans among all Protestants and should never be relaxed"?¹⁶

Conclusion

World Lutheranism and Christendom are agog with controversy and confusion not simply over the ecumenical dogma of inspiration ("Who spake by the prophets" — Nicene Creed) but over the very Trinitarian and Christological core of the Faith. Nothing is more necessary in these circumstances than clarity about first principles. The priceless evangelical heritage of our Book of Concord — including its rich ecclesiological dimension — needs to be reappropriated in every generation by means of patient, hard, humble, and prayerful theological work. But in the measure in which the true *evangelical* grandeur of the Augsburg Confession is glimpsed anew, in that measure it will again be clear why it is precisely an *ecumenical* and most relevant duty to confess our dear Augustana both positively, in true *concordia*, "as our symbol in this epoch . . . because it is taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein," and negatively as a symbol which "distinguishes our reformed churches from the papacy and from other condemned sects and heresies."¹⁷

FOOTNOTES

1. *Minneapolis Theses*, III, "Church Fellowship." Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), Document 146, p. 341.
2. H. Sasse, "Theses on the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession," *The Springfielder*, XXV, 3 (Autumn, 1961), pp. 14-15.
3. H. Sasse, *Was Heisst Lutherisch?* (Munich, 1936), 2nd ed., p. 15, note 2.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27, note 7.
5. C.F.W. Walther, *The True Visible Church*, Theses VIII, XII, XVIII D, XXIV; *The Proper Form of an Ev. Luth. Congregation*, par. 1, note 1; *Pastoral-Theologie*, par. 6, note 5. F. Pieper, *Vortraege*, 1916, pp. 26-27, 118-126; *Grundbekenntnis*, pp. 98-99; *Christian Dogmatics*, III, p. 417, cf. allusion on p. 422.
6. *Large Catechism*, Creed, Third Article, pars. 51 and 54; cf. Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Muhlenberg, 1959), p. 417. Luther on Gal 5:9 (*Luther's Works*, 27, pp. 36-39):

For the sectarians who deny the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper accuse us today of being quarrelsome, harsh, and intractable, because, as they say, we shatter love and harmony among the churches on account of the single doctrine about the Sacrament . . . This is especially so because they agree with us on other articles of Christian doctrine . . . To this argument of theirs we reply with Paul: 'A little yeast leavens the whole lump.' In philosophy a tiny error in the beginning is very great at the end. Thus in theology a tiny error overthrows the whole teaching . . . For

doctrine is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith Just as the world with all its wisdom and power cannot bend the rays of the sun which are aimed directly from heaven to earth, so nothing can be taken away from or added to the doctrine of faith without overthrowing it all.

For copious Luther-background and analysis see Armin-Ernst Buchrucker, *Wort, Kirche und Abendmahl bei Luther*, Bremen: Verlag Stelten, 1972.

To interpret the Augsburg Confession here contrary, not to this or that casual statement or individual opinion of the Reformer, but to the consistent and unvarying thrust of his whole theology on this issue is historically and theologically fallacious. The Formula of Concord recognizes this and appeals to Luther as a reliable expositor of the Augsburg Confession's genuine sense precisely on the issue of the sacramentarian distortions and misinterpretations (FC-SD VII, 33, 34, 41, 91; Tappert, pp. 575, 576, 585, 586).

7. H. George Anderson, "Gospel and Doctrine," *The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church* (Division of Theological Studies, LCUSA, 1978), p. 62.
8. J. M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources* (Concordia Seminary Press Reprint, n.d.), p. 82.
9. Tappert, p. 419. Cf. also note 6 above. Law and Gospel are not two doctrines among others. They are the "two proclamations" which have "since the beginning of the world" been continually "set forth side by side in the church of God with the proper distinction" (FC-SD V, 23; Tappert, p. 562). These represent God's "alien" and His "proper" works respectively: "These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify and to justify and quicken the terrified. One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture" (Apol. XII, 51-53; Tappert, p. 189). Therefore: "All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises" (Apol. IV, 5; Tappert, p. 108).
10. H. Sasse, *Here We Stand* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), esp. pp. 95 ff., 110-180.
11. F. Pieper, "Von der Einigkeit im Glauben," *Synodical Conference Proceedings*, 1888, pp. 6-13.
12. See note 7 above.
13. "Ecumenical Commitment," Section II Report, LWF *Proceedings* (Evian, 1970), p. 72. Cf. Edgar M. Carlson, "The 1969 Theology Commission Meeting — A Report and Appraisal," *Lutheran World*, XVII, 1 (1970), pp. 62-63.
14. LWF *Proceedings* (Dar-es-Salaam, 1977), pp. 173-175.
15. Prussian Union authorities declared officially: "The Union does not intend or signify the abandonment of confessions of faith which have heretofore been used nor does it abolish the authority which the Symbolical Books of the two evangelical communions have hitherto exercised. Concurrence in the Union is only an expression of the spirit of moderation and charity which no longer allows difference in isolated articles of faith to serve as ground for a denial of external church-fellowship on the part of the one communion toward the other" (quoted in H. Sasse, *Here We Stand*, p. 11).

16. "Franklin Clark Fry's Presentation of United Lutheran Attitude, 1956," Richard C. Wolf, ed., *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America*, Document 225, p. 546.
17. FC-SD, Rule and Norm, 5; Tappert, p. 504.