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The Porvoo Declaration in Confessional Perspective

**A Joint Report by the Departments of Systematic Theology of
the Saint Louis and Fort Wayne Seminaries, in Response to a
Request from the Reverend Doctor Alvin Barry, President of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod**

1. What It Is

In October, 1992, the delegates of the Anglican churches of Great Britain and Ireland and of the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches gathered in the cathedral of Porvoo, Finland, to celebrate a joint Eucharist. The occasion was the adoption that month by these delegates of the text of an agreement to be submitted for ratification by the participating churches. This "Porvoo Declaration," together with the explanatory "Porvoo Common Statement," was the end result of negotiations which had begun in 1989. The effect of its adoption by the churches in question would be the creation of one single ecclesial communion straddling northern Europe from Iceland to the Baltics.

In the event, the Declaration was adopted by the Anglican churches of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, and by all the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches except Denmark and Latvia. Formal signing was to take place at three eucharistic celebrations planned for Trondheim (Norway), Riga, and London. Tallinn (Estonia) had to be substituted for Riga when the Latvian church postponed action on the matter. The first signing ceremony took place in the Trondheim Cathedral on 1 September 1996, the second on 8 September in Tallinn, and the third on 28 November in Westminster Abbey, where Queen Elizabeth II signed the document in person.

The actual "Porvoo Declaration" itself—as distinct from the longer "Common Statement" reporting on the discussions—comprises not quite two printed pages. It embodies six "acknowledgments" and ten "commitments." The former provide, for instance, "that in all our churches the Word of God is authentically preached, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are duly administered," and "that the episcopal office is valued and maintained in all our churches as a visible sign . . ." The ten participating churches further "commit" themselves "to

welcome one another's members to receive sacramental and other pastoral ministrations" and "to regard baptized members of all our churches as members of our own."

The clear effect of Porvoo is to merge the ten Anglican and Lutheran churches into one communion and church. The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, got it exactly right when he announced: "Now we're married."¹

2. Some Theological Issues

On the seven-point fellowship scale devised by the Faith and Order Conference (Lund, 1952), and ranging from 1. Full Communion to 7. Closed Communion, the Porvoo arrangement rates a full 1: the commitment "to share a common life in mission and service . . . and to share resources," goes well beyond point two of the Lund scale ("Intercommunion and Intercelebration").

But what is the basis for this close union and communion of Anglican and Lutheran churches? To answer this question, it is necessary first to appreciate the considerable differences in principle between the Anglican and the Lutheran outlooks on the nature and basis of the true unity of the church. This involves fundamentally different understandings of doctrine or confession, and of its proper place in the Christian scheme of things. Then, secondly, it will be necessary to take special notice of two crucial theological specifics, the sacramental presence of the Lord's body and blood, and the so-called "apostolic succession."

(a) The Anglican and the Lutheran Ecumenical Platforms

The Anglican Lambeth "Quadrilateral" of 1888 comprises Holy Scripture, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, "the two Sacraments" of Baptism and the Holy Supper, and the "Historic Episcopate." If we compare these four points with the two requirements of Augsburg Confession VII ("that the gospel be unanimously preached in its pure understanding, and that the sacraments be administered in accord with the divine Word"), certain relationships become apparent: (1) At first there appears to be a

¹*Lutheran World Information*, number 17 (5 September 1996).

large degree of overlap. (2) Closer examination shows that the Lutheran insistence on the *purely* preached gospel (spelt out as “agreement in the doctrine and in all its articles,” in Formula of Concord, SD X, 31) has no counterpart in the Anglican document, which is satisfied instead with Holy Scripture as “the rule and ultimate standard of faith” and the two creeds “as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.” (3) Unlike the Augsburg Confession, which insists that the sacraments be administered “in accord with the divine Word,” the Quadrilateral is satisfied with the *formalism* of “the unfailing use of Christ’s words of institution and of the elements ordained by Him.” Also, Lutherans do not dogmatize the number of sacraments, certainly allowing sacramental status also to Holy Absolution. (4) While the first three Anglican points at least cover the same general ground as the two Lutheran essentials, gospel and sacraments, the “historic episcopate” is something quite different. It clearly belongs among the “human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men,” in which, according to Augsburg Confession VII, uniformity is “not necessary” for the true unity of the church.

Here lies the crucial difference between the Anglican and the Lutheran churches. It is true that “the Anglican and Lutheran churches in Britain and Ireland and in the Nordic and Baltic countries have much in common, including much common history.”² It is also true that the Anglican and the Lutheran are the only two *liturgical* churches that issued from the Reformation. Yet they are liturgical in very different senses. The Anglican Church puts “order” (specifically the “historic episcopate”) on a par with “faith.” For the Lutheran confession questions of order are in principle “adiaphora” — things neither commanded nor forbidden by God, and therefore not to be treated as necessary to the true unity of the church or church fellowship (In the modern Lutheran context one must add at once that it is various liturgical *details* that are adiaphorous, not the nature of New Testament worship itself, which rather is confessed at some length in Article XXIV of both the Augsburg Confession and its Apology).

Under the title *The Genius of the Church of England*, a lecture by

²Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 8.

Canon Charles Smyth of Westminster tellingly described:

the dual principle of maintaining a decent uniformity in the external worship of God according to the doctrine and discipline of the Church of England, as the basis and condition of a wide liberty of theological speculation. You can afford variety in the pulpit so long as you have uniformity at the altar. . . The Anglican principle is here the direct antithesis of the Roman: The Church of Rome encourages an almost luxuriant variety of devotion, but insists on theological uniformity: the Church of England embraces many shades of theological opinion, but desires liturgical uniformity.³

The "antithesis" to the Lutheran confession runs deeper still, as Herman Sasse shows:

Our church is in its essence a confessional church in a sense in which the [Roman] Catholic and the Reformed churches are not. For all these churches have beside their confession still something else which shapes their distinctive characteristics and holds them together, namely their constitution, their liturgy, their discipline, or whatever. The Lutheran church has none of that. It belongs to her understanding of the divine Word, to the differentiation of Law and Gospel, that she finds in the New Testament no laws about church constitution, church discipline and liturgy. She can live in episcopal, presbyteral, or congregational forms of constitution. Her liturgical possibilities extend from Swedish high-churchism all the way to Wuerttemberg's lack of liturgy. She has only her confession. If gospel and sacrament are the *notae ecclesiae*, by which we recognize the presence of the Church of Christ, then the *nota ecclesiae Lutheranae*, the distinguishing mark by which we recognize whether a church is Lutheran or not, is the Lutheran confession.⁴

³Charles Smyth, "The Church of England in History and Today," in *The Genius of the Church of England* (London: S.P.C.K., 1958), 33-34.

⁴Hermann Sasse, "Über die Einheit der Lutherischen Kirche," in *In Statu Confessionis*, F. W. Hopf, editor (Berlin: Die Spur, 1976), 2:247.

The difference between Anglicanism and Lutheranism therefore lies not in the specific divergences between the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Augsburg Confession, but in the two communions' totally different attitudes towards their confessional documents. The Augsburg Confession meant to insist on concrete doctrine and sacraments, which could be and were spelt out at whatever length necessary, for instance in the Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord. The Anglican Articles seem to have fallen short of the status of strict dogmatic definitions even before the softening of the subscription formula in 1865 and its total abolition (in England) in 1975. A. E. J. Rawlinson, then Bishop of Derby, put it like this: "Even before 1865 . . . [the Thirty-Nine Articles] were found to leave room for variations of emphasis, and to be capable of being taken in more senses than one. Whether intentionally or not, they are, in effect, highly ambiguous; and we may be thankful that this is so."⁵ And the U.S. Anglican Reginald H. Fuller notes that the Thirty-Nine Articles "are on their way to becoming what they are now in many branches of the Anglican Communion—including this one—relegated to the status of historical documents of the past."⁶

The Porvoo Common Statement hints rather gently at the underlying difference:

Anglicans have tended to stress the importance of liturgy as expressing the faith of the Church. Lutherans, whilst not denying this, have tended to lay more emphasis on doctrinal confession. . . . The Augsburg Confession and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion were produced in different circumstances to meet different needs, and they do not play an identical role in the life of the churches.⁷

If the modern Lutheran tragedy is the wholesale surrender of what is officially confessed as pure doctrine in the Book of Concord, the Anglican tragedy is the devastating absence of

⁵ A. E. J. Rawlinson, "Theology in the Church of England," in *The Genius of the Church of England* (London: S.P.C.K., 1958), 12.

⁶ *Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue*, second series 1976-1980 (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publication, 1981), 97.

⁷ Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 29.

compelling doctrinal criteria: "And now abideth Scripture, Tradition, and Reason, these three. In what some would claim is typically Anglican fashion, we stubbornly refuse to say which of them is the greatest! We give much lip service to the first, but when we do theology our efforts at harmony have a way of coming out in three-part form."⁸

(b) The Sacramental Presence of the Lord's Body and Blood

On the basis of the "common understanding of the nature and purpose of the Church, fundamental agreement in faith and our agreement on episcopacy . . . contained in Chapters II-IV of the Porvoo Common Statement," the Porvoo Declaration provides: "(ii) we acknowledge that in all our churches the Word of God is authentically preached, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are duly administered; (iii) we acknowledge that all our churches share in the common confession of the apostolic faith."

Section III of the Porvoo Common Statement is entitled "What We Agree in Faith," and ends thus: "33. This summary witnesses to a high degree of unity in faith and doctrine. Whilst this does not require each tradition to accept every doctrinal formulation characteristic of our distinctive traditions, it does require us to face and overcome the remaining obstacles to still closer communion." Paragraph 32h draws upon various previous ecumenical agreements, including *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, in offering the following agreed language about the Holy Supper:

We believe that the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed and received under the forms of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper (Eucharist). In this way we receive the body and blood of Christ, crucified and risen, and in him the forgiveness of sins and all other benefits of his passion. The eucharistic memorial is no mere calling to mind of a past event or of its significance, but the Church's effectual proclamation of God's mighty acts. Although we are unable to offer to God a worthy sacrifice, Christ unites us with himself in his self-offering to the Father, the one, full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice which he has offered for us

⁸J. O. Hoffman, Jr., *Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue*, 70.

all. In the Eucharist God himself acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member. Celebrating the Eucharist, the Church is reconstituted and nourished, strengthened in faith and hope, in witness and service in daily life. Here we already have a foretaste of the eternal joy of God's Kingdom.⁹

The woolly language about *sacrifice* here is a masterpiece of studied ambiguity. It will allow anyone to say anything. The intent no doubt is to allow plenty of scope for the accommodations reached in various dialogues with Roman Catholicism. The wording ("Christ unites us with himself in his self-offering") could mean simply that Christ pleads for us on the basis of his substitutionary sacrifice (along the lines of Luther's "A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass") – or that he makes us co-offerers of his sacrifice.¹⁰

On the *sacramental presence* the language seems at first sight less ambiguous. The words "truly present, distributed" echo the Augsburg Confession's "*vere adsint et distribuantur*" verbatim. But then the twenty-eighth of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles also speaks of the Bread being "a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ." Yet that Article adds: "The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the means whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper, is Faith." The very next Article (29) is entitled "Of the Wicked, which eat not the Body of Christ in the use of the Lord's Supper." This reference to the Thirty-Nine Articles is not meant to prove that Anglicanism is today committed to Calvinism, since it has been acknowledged above that the Articles do not officially determine an Anglican confessional stance. It is meant rather to illustrate the point that language which seems to affirm the Real Presence of Christ's body may in fact not do so at all. This is not to deny that many

⁹*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper no. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

¹⁰Martin Luther, "A Treatise On the New Testament, That Is, The Holy Mass," in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Helmut T. Lehman, editor (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 35:79-111.

Anglicans agreeing with the Porvoo Statement and other ecumenical documents do teach the Real Presence. But it should be realized that denials of the Lutheran doctrine also exist in the Church of England, among others. See, for example, *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England*, by Christopher Cocksworth, in which the Lutheran teaching is called "spatial speculation" and "scholastic schematizing."¹¹

So then the oral reception of Christ's body and blood and the reception by unworthy communicants (*manducatio oralis*, *manducatio indignorum*) are expressly rejected in the original Anglican standards. Yet these are the very points which the Formula of Concord (Article VII) takes to be the litmus-test distinguishing the confession of Christ's sacramental presence from its denial. If the body and blood of Christ are not received with the mouth and also by the unworthy, then they are simply not in the Sacrament at all in any honest sense. In other words, the argument was never about the "how," or the "mode" of the real presence — as is sometimes pretended today¹² — but solely and alone about the "that," the very fact of that presence. In the Formula of Concord (SD VII:33) the Church of the Augsburg Confession makes Luther's judgment her own:

I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final.¹³

It is true that "Anglicans of Britain and Ireland and Lutherans of the Nordic and Baltic lands have at no time condemned one

¹¹Christopher J. Cocksworth, *Evangelical Eucharistic Thought in the Church of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 202-203.

¹²James E. Andrews and Joseph A. Burgess, editors, *An Invitation To Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue*, third series 1981-1983 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 114-115.

¹³Theodore G. Tappert, translator and editor, *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 575.

another as churches and have never formally separated."¹⁴ But this does not mean that these Anglicans and Lutherans are free now to rush into communion without further ado. In the first place, even the Book of Concord is at pains to make clear—in response precisely to the concerns represented so energetically by the emissaries of Queen Elizabeth I—that its condemnations are not meant to cover “entire churches inside or outside the Holy Empire of the German Nation.”¹⁵ Secondly, however, prominent among the positions which the Formula rejects and condemns, because they “are contrary to the expressed Word of God and cannot coexist with it,” are just those Calvinistic theories about the Sacrament which the Anglican Articles embrace.

Although scholars naturally differ on many details, it can hardly be denied that the Anglican “articles on sacramental matters bore a Swiss/Calvinist tone, although differing on many points in expression,”¹⁶ and that the pivotal figure of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was shaped largely by Zwinglian-Calvinist influences: “The Lutheran phase, if there was one, did not last. Cranmer arrived at an understanding of the Eucharist that excluded the Lutheran *manducatio indignorum* [eating by the unworthy] just as firmly as the Roman church’s transubstantiation. Only faith receives the body and blood of the Lord; the wicked receive the sign, but not the thing signified.”¹⁷

At least until the rise of the Tractarian Movement just before the accession of Queen Victoria (1837) the Anglican Church inclined largely to Reformed theology. Dr. Tom Hardt of Stockholm, in a dialogue in Latvia with Canon Christopher Hill regarding Porvoo, quoted the famous Anglican Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher (1581-1656) as having said: “I do profess that with like affection I should receive the blessed Sacrament at the hands of Dutch ministers if I were in Holland, as I should at the hands of the French ministers if I were in Charentone” (the

¹⁴Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 29.

¹⁵Preface, Tappert, 11.

¹⁶Guy Fitch Lytle III, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Hans J. Hillerbrand, editor, 4 volumes (Oxford University Press, 1996), 1:82.

¹⁷Brian A. Gerrish, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Hans J. Hillerbrand, editor, 4 volumes (Oxford University Press, 1996), 2:78.

leading Calvinist church in Paris).¹⁸ Hardt also reports that Archbishop Wake of Canterbury established "in 1717 a formally recognized church fellowship between the Church of England and the Reformed Church of Zurich."

Given this history, a few general sentences about the Sacrament, without specific rejections of erroneous doctrine, cannot create even a semblance of a responsible basis for Anglican-Lutheran inter-communion, let alone the ambitious consolidation envisaged in Porvoo.¹⁹

The Porvoo arrangements are part and parcel of a larger global strategy expressly invoked in the concluding paragraphs 60-61, "Wider Ecumenical Commitment." The North American developments are instructive. The official report on the Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue, Second Series (1976-1980) explains under "theological methodology":

Both communions affirm the real presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the Lord's Supper, but they express this faith somewhat differently. Lutherans (especially strongly confessional Lutheranism as represented by the Missouri Synod) tend to assert the Real Presence by doctrinal statement, as in the classical affirmations of *manducatio impiorum* and *manducatio oralis*. Although Article XXIX refers to these questions, and takes a somewhat different stand on them from that of classical Lutheranism, Anglicans today have no interest in these particular doctrinal affirmations. Rather, they tend to express their belief in the Real Presence in ceremonial action, by the reverence with which they treat the consecrated elements outside of Communion.²⁰

The actual "Joint Statement on Eucharistic Presence" stated:

¹⁸Thom G. A. Hardt, "Church Fellowship in the Ancient and in the Lutheran Church," unpublished lectures, 20-21 May 1996.

¹⁹*Lutheran World Information* (number 16 [22 August 1996], 3) exulted: "Lutheran and Anglican churches in northern Europe are preparing to declare themselves a regional communion of churches in which they will share a common sacramental life served by a single ministry."

²⁰*Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue*, second series, 16-17.

. . . For [Lutherans], this implied a two-fold eating of the sacrament, spiritually and orally (*Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VII:60-61). Anglicans, on the other hand, followed the Reformed emphasis on the spiritual eating by faith, thus denying that the wicked and unbelievers partake of Christ (*Articles of Religion* 28-29). It was Richard Hooker (1554-1600) who gave Anglicanism its normative approach to eucharistic doctrine by teaching that the elements of bread and wine are the instruments of participation in the body and blood of Christ. In more recent times, biblical studies and liturgical renewal have led Lutherans and Anglicans to recognize a convergence on the essentials of eucharistic faith and practice.²¹

If Hooker's teaching is to be considered Anglicanism's normative approach, then

the Anglican Church, when it speaks of the elements as instruments of participation in the body and blood of Christ, must be understood to mean, with Hooker (and Calvin), that "Christ is personally present, albeit a part of Christ is corporally absent."²²

But there are also many defenders of the Real Presence in Anglicanism.

The grounding of the new "convergence" in "biblical studies" is particularly troublesome in view of two features expressly adduced in the "theological methodology" section: (1) "In most contemporary exegesis the words 'body' and 'blood' are interpreted increasingly not as substances but as saving event (*Heilsereignis*)."²³ (2) ". . . a renewed emphasis on the pluralism of the biblical witness and the time-conditioned character of its language and conceptuality (one may compare Käsemann among Lutherans and Dennis Nineham among Anglicans)."²⁴ On premises like these, consensus about anything is easily attained,

²¹*Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue*, second series, 25-26.

²²Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1899), 1:608, 649.

²³*Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue*, second series, 17.

²⁴*Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue*, second series, 18.

but it is meaningless.

To accept diplomatic treaty-texts like Porvoo as evidence of a doctrinal consensus and as a proper basis for pulpit and altar fellowship is to surrender the Lutheran confession in general and the Sacrament of the Altar in particular. One must not blame the Anglicans here. Porvoo does not in the least compromise their sacramental theology. "The ambiguous wording of the [Book of Common Prayer] has permitted the coexistence of a variety of doctrines in the [Church of England]."²⁵ Many Anglicans in fact have a better grasp of the Sacrament than many Lutherans. But it is the Lutherans who give up their confession in such schemes. The equivalence of altars on the basis of ambiguous formulas means opening the borders between the confession of the Sacrament and its denial. Robbed of the Sacrament of the Altar, the Church of the Augsburg Confession ceases to exist. Its place is taken by a bureaucratic alliance of altars, under whatever name, which can no longer tell where, if anywhere, the Lord's body and blood are really present and given, and where not.

(c) "Apostolic Succession"

On the one hand it is argued that the thirty-sixth of the Thirty-Nine Articles "is in fact a vital defense of the traditional Catholic structure of the threefold ordained ministry (bishop, priest, and deacon) and a claim that the English episcopate remains in apostolic succession."²⁶ On the other hand the American Lutheran-Anglican dialogue concluded: "It was not until the Anglo-Catholicism of the nineteenth-century Tractarian movement that serious argument was heard within the Church of England for the historic episcopate being of the essence (*esse*) of the Church in a way that tended to 'un-Church' non-episcopal churches."²⁷

The Malines Conversations (1921-1925) conducted by a group of Anglican and Roman Catholic theologians had agreed "that

²⁵E. A. Livingstone, editor, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 179.

²⁶Lytile, *Oxford Encyclopedia*, 1:82.

²⁷*Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue*, 35.

Episcopacy is by Divine law."²⁸ But the Church of England's official response to *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* stated: "This estimate of the threefold order was not prescribed by Holy Scripture and yet desirable for unity is a position members of the Church of England will welcome. It is in line with the reflections of the Doctrine Commission of 1938."²⁹

The Anglican "Study Guide" to the Porvoo papers refers to Chapter IV (Episcopacy) as "the most crucial and also the most difficult chapter."³⁰ The Porvoo Common Statement's approach is lenient in holding that an "authentic apostolic succession of witness and service" has been maintained by all participating churches, even by those that did not retain the "sign" of "the historical episcopal succession;" and that this "sign" may now be re-embraced "without denying [such a church's] past apostolic continuity."³¹

Traditionalist Anglicans rightly suspect compromise and concession here. Thus John Hunwicke warns against the implications for relations with British Free Churches, and questions the adequacy of the Danish episcopate's "succession" via "superintendent" Bugenhagen: "If the outpouring of the Spirit in the Episcopal Consecration is done sacramentally through representative members of the world-wide Episcopal Collegium so as to maintain and uphold the local Church in the communion of the *Una Sancta* and so that its new bishop's ministry is inserted into the Catholicity of the Church of God, then Bugenhagen, frankly, has lost his trousers."³²

On the other hand, Bishop Richard Holloway of the Scottish Episcopal Church, said in his sermon in Trondheim Cathedral on the occasion of the signing of the Porvoo Declaration: "If we are going to be honest about the episcopacy today, we have to

²⁸*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 318.

²⁹Max Thurian, editor, *Churches Respond to BEM*, 6 volumes (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1988), 3:53.

³⁰*The Porvoo Declaration: Reference to the Diocesan Synods and Study Guide, Memorandum by the Standing Committee and Study Guide by the Council for Christian Unity* (London, 1994), 14.

³¹Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 52.

³²John Hunwicke, "Porvoo or not Porvoo?" *New Directions* 1 (July 1995): 8.

acknowledge that some of us have treated it as an idol that justified us," adding, "which is why so many churches have rejected episcopacy."³³

What then is one to make of this "sign" in light of the Book of Concord? Two issues must be kept distinct. The three-fold division into bishop, presbyter, and deacon, is one thing. Theories about "unbroken" lines of succession from the apostles in terms of who laid hands on whom are quite another.

In and of itself the threefold ministry is an adiaphoron, a venerable tradition. The Apology expresses "our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority" (XIV,1). The Smalcald Articles state: "If the bishops were true bishops and were concerned about the church and the gospel, they might be permitted (for the sake of love and unity, but not of necessity) to ordain and confirm us and our preachers, provided this could be done without pretense, humbug, and unchristian ostentation" (III/X/1).

The so-called "apostolic succession" is another matter. On this score the Church of Sweden's credentials are if anything even better than those of the Church of England. Yet in responding to the Lambeth Conference's 1920 overture, Archbishop Soederblom and the Church of Sweden minced no words: "God has instituted *ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta* — our Church cannot recognize any essential difference, *de jure divino*, of aim and authority between the two or three Orders into which the ministry of grace may have been divided, *jure humano*, for the benefit and convenience of the Church."³⁴

Comparing the New Testament variety with the bishop-led structure assumed by early Anglicanism and the still later notions of "apostolic succession," D. L. Edwards concluded:

When the 1662 Prayer Book states that the existence of the three orders of bishops, priests and deacons since the

³³Lutheran World Information, number 17 (5 September 1996).

³⁴Vilmos Vajta, editor, *Church in Fellowship: Lutheran Interchurch Agreements and Practices* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 183.

apostles' time is "evident unto all men" who are diligent students of the matter, it is stating an untruth. When the advocates of the apostolic succession theory deduce from this false premise that the apostles' powers were transmitted to bishops who are therefore the essential ministry on which all other ministries are dependent, they are turning bad history into dangerous theology. . . . The inevitable conclusion seems to be that the episcopate emerged out of the presbyterate by a natural development, varying from place to place in speed and detail.³⁵

Hermann Sasse's classic study likewise shows that the notion of an "unbroken" line of episcopal ordinations is in fact an "ecclesiastical myth" and a "soap bubble, on which no church can be built."³⁶ One must distinguish apostolicity of origin, of doctrine, and of succession. "For Lutherans certainly everything depends on the question: 'Where today is the doctrine of the apostles?'"³⁷ "Apostolic succession" is no mere innocent tradition if it is meant to compensate for lack of consensus in the pure gospel and sacraments, or if it is taken to imply that something more than such dogmatic-sacramental consensus is necessary for the true unity of the church.

But even if "apostolic succession" were a mere adiaphoron, the principle would hold that in a case of confession, that is, when the truth of the gospel and Christian liberty are at stake, nothing is an adiaphoron. In such a situation one may not yield even in matters which would otherwise be adiaphora (Formula of Concord X). Does the assertion in paragraph 57 in the Porvoo Statement that "those churches in which the sign has at some time not been used . . . should embrace it" indicate an obligation to do so? If so, the confessional Lutheran must inquire after the basis of the obligation. When paragraph 48 states that the sign "transmits ministerial office and its authority in accordance with God's will and institution," what is said here to be God's will—the transmission of the office, or the sign? And is it correct to say that

³⁵D.L. Edwards, *Not Angels But Anglicans* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 27-28.

³⁶Herman Sasse, "Apostolic Succession," in *We Confess the Church*, translated by Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 105, 102.

³⁷Sasse, "Apostolic Succession," 88.

the adiaphorous sign transmits anything?

The Porvoo Common Statement admits: "The use of the sign of the historic episcopal succession does not by itself guarantee fidelity of a church to every aspect of the apostolic faith, life, and mission."³⁸ That is rather an understatement. With a few honorable exceptions, of what help has the whole Anglican-Nordic-Baltic episcopate been in the crisis over that palpable abandonment of apostolicity, the ordination of women?

The trouble is that the endless quest for the "sign"³⁹ has effectively obscured and swallowed up real concern about the apostolic truth, of which the "sign" is supposed to remind us. When human "order" is put on a par with divine "faith," the latter is lost. The Lima paper *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* is a good illustration. The section on the ministry, with its episcopal "sign," takes up more space than do the sacraments put together – and their treatment waffles on all dogmatic issues.

If it is true, for instance, as Loyola University Philosophy Professor Thomas Sheehan wrote in the 14 June 1984 *New York Review of Books*, that the dominant "liberal consensus" in Roman Catholic seminaries is that "Jesus of Nazareth did not assert any of the messianic claims that the gospels attribute to him and that he died without believing that he was Christ or the Son of God," then what is the point of discussing the niceties of episcopal forms and structures? In this time of unparalleled dogmatic dissolution, can we afford the luxury of wasting time on trivia? Why bother about a "sign" when it is the substance that needs recovering?

3. Global Confessional Implications

The significance of Porvoo lies not in its novelty – its approach is not new – but in the scope and clarity with which it exemplifies the ruling "ecumenical" paradigm.

Most of the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches already had various arrangements for intercommunion and even

³⁸Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 51.

³⁹Porvoo Study Guide: "the most crucial and also the most difficult chapter!"

intercelebration with Anglican and other churches. This piecemeal clutter is now being replaced by a tidy and elegant uniformity.

Purely as a historical development the Porvoo pact makes perfect sense. Its member-churches have similar histories as Reformationally transformed remnants in northern Europe of the Constantinian establishment. As ecclesiastical appendages of modern secularized societies and states, their very existence is anomalous.⁴⁰ The church is undoubtedly hidden also under these bureaucratic structures ("spiritual police-districts" Sasse called them), but the structures as such have for the most part long ceased to be or to behave as confessional churches. Why should they not join together, as the British Study Guide puts it, "at a time when Europe is growing together socially, politically and economically"?⁴¹

What is simply taken for granted is that "visible unity" is paramount. The symptom, "the scandal of division among Christians (1 Corinthians 1:11-13, 1 John 2:18-19)," is taken to be the ultimate evil, while the real trouble—apostasy or heresy—is blithely ignored.⁴² Texts like Romans 16:17 or Galatians 1 are beyond the document's horizon. There is only the steady drumbeat for union: "Christians can never tolerate disunity."⁴³ Very well, but can they tolerate falsehood and doctrinal compromise and pretense?

The question of truth is addressed, or rather evaded, in terms of "unity" and "diversity," in other words, precisely according to the Lutheran World Federation's (1977) ecumenical recipe of "Reconciled Diversity." That means that everyone keeps his confession, only the differences are no longer considered divisive. The Porvoo application is that there will be unity in externals, above all in "The Historic Episcopal Succession as Sign," while differences over doctrinal substance can be accommodated as

⁴⁰One may see John Kent, *End of the Line? The Development of Christian Theology in the Last Two Centuries* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

⁴¹Porvoo Study Guide, 9.

⁴²Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 27.

⁴³Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 27.

legitimate “diversity.” In this way the purity of the gospel and sacraments is made to trade places with adiaphora. The essential has become the peripheral, and vice versa. Total confessional relativism rules if it is true that “all existing denominational traditions are provisional.”⁴⁴

Already looming directly ahead is the next step: a dramatic gesture—now delayed—originally planned to coincide with the 450th anniversary of the Council of Trent’s Decree on Justification (1547). The Lutheran World Federation hoped at its assembly in Hong Kong in 1997 to adopt a joint declaration with the Vatican regarding justification, which would have mutually withdrawn the sixteenth-century condemnations as no longer applicable.⁴⁵ There was, however, the awkward possibility of a one-handed handshake, if the expected official Vatican confirmation were withheld. Again, the clear and unambiguous confession of the gospel would be set aside in favor of compromise formulas for the sake of a semblance of unity. With justification out of the way as a stumbling-block to reunion with Rome, and the sacramental presence renegotiated with Canterbury and then Geneva, the way will be clear for “full communion” everywhere, and whatever anyone may choose to make of the gospel and sacraments, it will all be fully warranted as apostolic by the “sign” of a joint episcopate.

Where what the Book of Concord confesses about the church as an article of faith is heeded, there the glass beads of illusions and counterfeits will not be allowed to pass for the real treasures of the church. That is the ecumenical stand Lutherans are called upon to take humbly, soberly, and globally. The life-giving truth of Christ must take precedence over everything else—and the very gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

On the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord, 1997

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⁴⁴Porvoo Common Statement, paragraph 22.

⁴⁵*Lutheran World Information*, number 17 (5 September 1996).