

Theses On The Seventh Article Of The Augsburg Confession

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I.

THE Augsburg Confession (Art. VII, VIII and Apology) teaches as an article of faith that there is and always will be one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This Church is properly or strictly speaking ("*proprie dicta*," "*stricte dicta*") an "association of faith and the Holy Spirit in men's hearts ("*societas fidei et Spiritus Sancti in cordibus*," *Apol.* par. 5), the congregation of saints, i.e., of true believers who are justified by faith. Since the Lord alone "knoweth them that are his" (II Tim. 2:19), and since their faith and holiness is seen by Him alone, the Church in this sense is hidden to human eyes. But we are bound to believe it to be present wherever the means of grace are administered. This is meant by the first part of the Seventh Article: "*Item docent quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit. Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta.*" (According to the German text, which is the authentic commentary to the shorter Latin: "It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.")

II.

As the means of grace must be and are administered here in this world, by living persons among living persons, the Church is also an "association of outward ties and rites" ("*societas externarum rerum ac rituum*"), like other societies. This is the church in a broader sense ("*large dicta*," "*late dicta*"). It is not Church in the proper sense because it comprises also persons who are not members of the body of Christ, hypocrites and evil men, unbelievers who only for outward reasons belong to the external organization. But even the believers are weak and sinful men. This means that they are constantly in danger of losing their faith, of falling away under

the onslaughts of the devil who always tries to destroy the Church. Hence it is the constant task of the Church as the "association of outward ties and rites" to see to it that the pure Gospel and the Sacraments as instituted by Christ are preserved. The promise of Christ that He will be with His Church until the end of the world, and that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it is, therefore, inseparably bound up with His command to preach the Gospel in its entirety (Matt. 28:29; Acts 20:20), to continue in His Word (John 8:31) and to administer the sacraments. This includes the most sacred duty to reject error and heresy. Promise and commandment, the gift of the Gospel and the command to proclaim and preserve it belong inseparably together.

III.

The Church of Christ is essentially one, *Una sancta*. The doctrine of the Church is, therefore, always also a doctrine of the unity, the oneness of the Church. Also, the unity of the Church is at the same time a gift and a task, an indicative and an imperative. This becomes clear in the Scripture passage that underlies *Confessio Augustana*, VII, Eph. 4: "There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. . . ." This is the indicative. It is bound up with the imperative "that ye walk worthily of the vocation with which ye are called . . . endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In the same way in the Seventh Article we find the indicative "*quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit*" linked up with the imperative contained in the sentence: "*et ad veram unitatem ecclesia satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum, nec necesse est. . .*" For this sentence tells us what we have to do in the "*societas externarum rerum ac rituum*," the church broadly speaking, in order that "*societas fidei et Spiritus Sancti in cordibus*," the church strictly speaking, the *Una Sancta* may remain *with us*.

IV.

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 fellow-

ship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ" (Pref. par. 4). While the corresponding Schwabach Article XII had to deal only with the question what the Church is, the Seventh Article of the *Confessio Augustana* had to take up that practical question: How can the unity of the church as a *societas externarum rerum ac rituum*" 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, *Confessio Augustana* VII declares: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites or ceremonies, should be alike everywhere. It is as Paul says, 'One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all' This implies clearly that the *consensus de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum* is absolutely necessary for the true unity of the church. The "*Satis est*" in contrast with "*Nec necesse est*" means: This is enough because only this is necessary.

V.

The "*consentire de doctrina. . . .*" of the Latin text must be understood in the light of the German text which explains the meaning authoritatively: "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian Church that the Gospel be preached unanimously according to its pure (true) meaning and the sacraments be administered according to the Word of God." Not any consensus will do, but the consensus in the pure Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. As in the New Testament (cf. the petitions of Christ, John 17, "sanctify them in the truth" and "that they all may be one" and the apostolic injunctions concerning heretics) so in the Augsburg Confession the quest for unity is the quest for truth. *Ubi veritas, ibi unitas*. If two church bodies find that they agree concerning the Word and the sacraments and establish a union on this basis, this would not necessarily serve the true unity of the church. In America Unitarians and Universalists have reached agreement. But this union has nothing to do with the unity of the Church of Christ. Even if two Lutheran churches reach an agreement in matters of doctrine, and establish a merger on this basis, this does not necessarily mean true church union. For it could be that they agree to disagree in such doctrines as the

doctrine of Holy Scripture as the Word of God (is it the word? or is the word contained in it?), or the Real Presence. Only such agreement reached in the church as the association of external ties and rites serves the true unity of the church which preserves the means of grace in their purity. For these means of grace create and preserve the church as the association of faith and the Holy Spirit in men's hearts, the true Church that always is one, the *Una Sancta*. *Ubi veritas, ibi unitas*. For only through the means of grace the One Lord builds His Church, the *Una Sancta* which is His body.

VI.

What does it mean that we must agree in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the sacraments? Is it enough that the article of justification, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is correctly preached and taught, or must there be also agreement in other doctrines. The answer must be: The article of justification cannot be rightly taught where the great articles of the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed are not kept. The denial of the Virgin Birth leads to a false doctrine of the incarnation. A false doctrine of the incarnation leads to a false understanding of justification and of the sacraments. Thus the article of the standing and the falling church keeps together all articles of the Christian faith and illuminates them. For Lutherans the consensus required should always be regarded as the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord. For also the doctrinal decisions of the Formula of Concord concerning original sin and the will of man, Law and Gospel, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Person of Christ, Predestination and election are nothing but explanations and safeguards of the Article of Justification. It is the dogma of what has to be accepted, not necessarily the theological terminology. As to the Sacrament of the Altar it must be maintained that the doctrine of the Real Presence belongs to the "administration" because Christ Himself has given an explanation in the words of institution. Since the Christian sacraments are bound up with the Word and could not exist without the Word the consensus of the Gospel cannot be separated from the consensus concerning the sacraments.

VII.

The question is constantly being asked, especially by all union

churches, whether it is not enough that the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered, whereas the common confession does not necessarily belong to the essence of the church. Our answer must be that certainly not the confessional writings belong to the essentials of the church, but that the dogma which they contain must be preached, proclaimed to the world and confessed, not only by the individual Christian and pastor, but by the church body as a whole in church and school, in oral proclamation and in writing. It cannot be left to the individual pastor whether or not he wants to preach this or that doctrine. It is the duty of the church body to see that all congregations hear the true Gospel and receive Christ's sacraments. While the form of such church government belongs to the *adiaphora* and traditions, the function of oversight must be exercised—"non vi, sed verbo," *Confessio Augustana* 28—in order to preserve the Gospel and with it the unity of the Church. Only where the Church as the "association of outward ties and rites" obeys the divine imperative, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit," remaining the Word of Christ and rejecting false doctrine, will the divine promise be fulfilled that the *Una Sancta perpetuo mansura* is with us.