

The Augsburg Confession: Article VII

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Introduction—Why Confessions Of Faith Are Necessary

God's Will

Why do we have confessions of faith? Why are creeds necessary? These questions are a little bit like the loaded questions that youngsters sooner or later ask their parents about the facts of life, such as, “Where did I come from?”, and, “Why am I here?”. If you have faced these questions as a parent, you know that there are two ways of answering them. You could go into a great deal of biological detail, or you might be able to satisfy the child simply by saying, “You are here because God wants you to be here.”

Similarly, the easy answer to the question about why we have confessions and creeds is, “Because God wants Christians to confess their faith, and He causes believers to be witnesses to the world of what He has revealed in the Bible. “Romans chapter ten is one of many places where this is taught: “The Word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that is, the word of faith, which we preach; That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (Romans 10:8-10).

The Need to Combat False Doctrine

As we might expect, there is also a complex answer to the question about why we have confessions of faith. It has to do with the need to combat false doctrine by using the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. For so the Apostle advises Timothy, “But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness;... I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ,... Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine;... And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tim. 3:13-4:4).

The Augsburg Confession is an outstanding example of this necessary and God-pleasing use of Scripture that the Apostle urged. It is not merely the voice of our Lutheran forefathers. It surely is not a collection of antiquated doctrines that no longer agree with our beliefs 450 years later. The doctrines of the Augsburg Confession are as timeless as the Word of God from which they are drawn—the Word which Jesus declares shall never pass away.

Therefore, we still hear reference made to the Augsburg Confession today, for example, when our pastors are ordained. We ask them to declare that they believe that the doctrine of “the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is a true exposition of the Word of God.”¹ Notice the word “Unaltered.”

The Unaltered Augsburg Confession

The fact that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession must be distinguished carefully from another version of the same document raises a flag in our thinking. It reminds us that the flock of God constantly is struggling against those who will not endure sound doctrine, against a woolly sort of wolf which even deceives itself into thinking it is one of the sheep. For so it happened soon after the Augsburg Confession was produced and delivered. Some variations were made in it, especially in the article on the Lord’s Supper, on the grounds that this would help the Reformation by bringing all of the Protestant groups together. The original precise wording of the Augsburg Confession purposely was made more ambiguous, more unclear, so that people who actually disagreed with each other could “unite” by subscribing to a mutually tolerable confession of faith. Others, however, saw that this was a dangerous move and a flaunting of God’s will. They refused to support the union effort and stated that they would sign only the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

Today, however, it does not necessarily mean what it used to mean when Lutherans say they subscribe to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Today the purpose of that document, even in its original wording, is being abused by some. They pledge to teach according to the doctrines of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, but they add, “insofar as that doctrine agrees with Scripture.” Thus they imply that they are at liberty to make alterations in the doctrine of the Confession wherever and whenever they decide that it does not agree with Scripture. Essentially, people who subscribe to the Confession with such reservations are revealing little or nothing about what they actually believe. In that sense they are defeating the purpose of the Confession.

Article VII—Of the Church

We could benefit by examining all the doctrines of our Christian faith which are included in the 28 Articles of the Augsburg Confession, but that is not the purpose of this essay. Here our attention is directed to Article VII, which is titled “Of the Church,” and which has to do with the doctrine we frequently confess when we say the words of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.”

Before we read the words of Article VII let us return to what we said earlier about why confessions of faith are necessary. First of all we said that God wants us to confess our faith, and then we stated that confessions of faith are necessary to avoid false doctrine.

False doctrine concerning the Church may not seem of critical importance until we remember that we are not talking about a building or a man-made organization, but about people purchased by Christ's blood. We are referring to a holy household that we confidently hope and pray includes our dear children and grandchildren, our beloved spouses and parents. The Church is all people throughout the world whom the Holy Spirit has called by the Gospel and keeps with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. We are speaking about more than a statement of faith, more than a series of words on paper. The doctrine of the Church describes a matter of life and death importance. Scripture bears witness to the fact that misconceptions and false teaching concerning this doctrine not only mislead, but can have eternally disastrous consequences for those who are misled.ⁱⁱ On the other hand, the true doctrine of the Church provides important, comforting information and encouragement for all who are led by the risen Savior to want to make disciples of all nations and to feed the flock of God which He has purchased with his own blood. To that end we dedicate this essay. The following quote is Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.

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. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, etc. Eph. 4:5. 6.ⁱⁱⁱ

Part I—The Historical Background

The Papacy

When Martin Luther wrote his Catechisms in 1529, the year before the Diet at Augsburg, he noted that there was widespread ignorance of Scripture among the clergy and laity. The chief parts of Christian doctrine were not generally known. Therefore, we draw the conclusion that even though the Scriptural doctrine of the Church had been believed by Christians in earlier centuries, this doctrine was practically unknown to people in the Middle Ages prior to the Reformation.

History shows that the few who did know what the true Church is were vigorously persecuted during the 500 year period known as the Middle Ages. When a Catholic named Peter Waldo dared to defend the Church against the false doctrines of purgatory and salvation by good works in the late 1100s, he and his followers became targets of bitter, blind hatred. Some of them were tortured to admit guilt, and many who were convicted of heresy were burned at the stake.

Two centuries later the air still was being filled with ugly fumes. John Huss was executed in a similar way as a heretic because he, out of love for the Church, had attacked the authority of the Roman papacy.

Other examples could be cited, but the point is that for several hundred years before Martin Luther and the Augsburg Confession very few people were aware of the Scriptural doctrine of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church was considered to be the one and only church even though it was miserably corrupt and unfaithful to the Gospel. Anyone outside of the visible Roman church was thought to be damned. Only by submitting to the authority of the Pope could one hope to be saved, or even safe. Those who for any reason refused to submit to that authority were treated as the enemies of God.

The Courageous Reformers

In the city of Augsburg, Germany, in the year 1530, the Lutherans tried to open the eyes of people to what the Church really is according to Scripture. It must have taken a great deal of courage for the Reformers to face the centuries-old Roman giant with the Word of God! The field had been stained with the blood of many others who had tried. Rome, like Goliath of Gath, did not hesitate to scoff at the rod and staff of God's Word which the Reformers carried. "What is Scripture but the product of the church," she boasted, "the church is more ancient than the Scriptures, therefore, it has greater authority!"^{iv}

Martin Luther's Scriptural refutation of this claim was based on the fact that without God's Word—either written or oral—there would be no Church. God's Word produces and nourishes the Church: "God's Word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's Word."^v To Martin Luther, God's Word was the supreme authority for the Church on earth, whether Rome would acknowledge it or not. If Rome would not acknowledge the authority of God's Word, Rome was only proving thereby that she was not the Church.

The Emperor

Another reason the Lutherans had for including the doctrine of the Church in the Augsburg Confession was in order to reassure the Emperor, Charles V, that they were sincerely interested in church unity and in doing away with the spiritual tensions that were threatening to destroy the solidarity of the German portion of the Empire.

Dr. Willard Allbeck, a modern scholar of the Lutheran Confessions, calls attention to the first sentence of Article VII, which declares that no one, least of all the Lutherans, could or ever would destroy the Church: "(the Lutherans) teach that one holy Church is to continue forever." Allbeck writes: "If Emperor Charles had been led to believe that the Lutherans wanted to destroy the church, and that this desire was at the bottom of their opposition to indulgences, monasteries, and papal rule, this opening sentence should have reassured him on this matter."^{vi} Likewise the second paragraph of Article VII emphasizes the Lutherans' interest in settling things. As we read it we note, however, that they were not about to accept any shallow kind of unity consisting merely of having the same rites and ceremonies everywhere. The Lutherans hoped that the meeting at Augsburg would help to achieve the true Scriptural unity urged and described by the Apostle Paul: "*one* faith, *one* Baptism, *one* God and Father of us all, etc. Eph. 4:5, 6."

The Tensions ...

We have mentioned several characters who influenced the thinking, feelings, and life of that time. They are: the Reformers, the Papacy, and Emperor Charles V. It was a tense period of world history. In order to grasp the purpose and meaning of the Augsburg Confession it is necessary to get a feel for the tensions that existed then .

... With Rome

Dr. Theodore Graebner, in 1929, wrote a small book which was intended to give laymen a picture of the historical background of the 1500s and the production of the Confession. In it he writes: “No one in our age and country is able to understand all that was at stake and comprehend the issues involved, unless he is able to transpose himself into the midst of continental Europe as it was four hundred years ago.”^{vii} As we know, there were tensions between the Lutherans and the Papacy. Graebner says that in 1521 the Roman church tried to maneuver Martin Luther into a compromise after the Diet at Worms where he had taken his unwavering stand on Scripture. Private consultations were held with Luther in which reportedly there was an attempt to bribe him. The Archbishop of Trier is said to have offered Martin Luther a rich priory in his diocese and protection from indignant followers if he would recant. Luther indignantly refused it.

... With the Emperor

Emperor Charles V was the cause of several other tensions. Dr. Graebner notes that the Emperor, still a young man of 30, was no slouch. He was the ruler of Mexico, Peru, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and most of Italy. In 1521 he was at war with France. He needed several thousand more troops, but the religious problems in Germany and Luther’s refusal to compromise forced the Emperor to issue the Edict of Worms against Luther, outlawing him and all who followed him. However, Luther’s territorial Prince decided to protect him and therefore the Edict could not be enforced. To the Emperor, Luther appeared to be a subversive. He was a problem the Emperor didn’t need.

After four years of fighting, at the end of 1525, France went down in temporary defeat. Tensions mounted for the Lutherans, because it looked as though the Emperor would use the time of peace to crush the Reformation. But, of all people, the Pope interfered. Pope Clement VII had become disturbed by the Emperor’s growing power and decided to form an alliance with France against Charles. The Emperor was drawn back into war, this time with France and the Pope; and the Lutherans gained additional years of time. Already in the years of the first war with France—1521 to 1525—the Lutherans had made significant numerical gains. Of course there were some losses also, due to disagreement with the Humanists and due to Luther’s refusal to support the Peasant Revolt. But when the war resumed in 1527 the Reformation was allowed a few more years of growth.

In 1529, the year before Augsburg, tensions mounted once more. Both the Pope and France were defeated by the Emperor. Pope Clement VII and Charles managed to come to an uneasy truce, “each using the other for the advancement of his private ambitions.”^{viii} That same year another ominous event occurred in the city of Spire. The Catholic majority demanded that Roman worship and rights be restored in the Lutheran lands. Realizing that such a move would virtually abolish their churches, the Lutherans issued a formal public protest which earned them the name “Protestants.” The situation looked dark. The Emperor appeared ready at last to take action. Graebner notes that only God could help the Lutherans now.

Apparently God did decide to help. Dr. Graebner asks: “Why did the Emperor not make good his threats against the Protestants? Answer: The Turk! Charles could not afford to start civil war while Suleiman was on the Danube.”^{ix} Evidently, the huge army of Turkish Sultan, Suleiman II, threatened to march across western Europe at that moment, and so the Emperor’s immediate goals were changed. Instead of moving against the Lutherans, he was obliged to try to unify the Empire for a massive push to defeat the Turks.

The Invitation to Meet at Augsburg

In order to attempt a resolution of the differences between the Lutherans and the Catholics, the Emperor called for a national convention of all the German rulers to meet at Augsburg in April of 1530. His invitation was surprisingly friendly, as Graebner shows: “His call was couched in the most engaging language. ‘Let us put an end to all discord,’ he said; ‘let us renounce our antipathies; let us offer to our Savior the sacrifice of all our errors; let us make it our business to comprehend and weigh with meekness the opinions of others. Let us annihilate all that has been said or done on both sides contrary to right, and let us seek after Christian truth. Let us all fight under one and the same leader, Jesus Christ, and let us strive thus to meet in one communion, one Church, and one unity.’ ”

The Tensions Persist

The momentous attempt which was made to settle the differences between the Emperor, the Lutherans, and the Catholics did not put everyone at ease, however.

The Emperor did not grant Martin Luther a guarantee of safe conduct to and from Augsburg. Luther, who had spoken so boldly before the Emperor during the Diet at Worms, remained an outlaw subject to arrest and punishment. Therefore, he traveled only as far as Coburg in southern Saxony where he could remain under the protection of his prince and yet be close enough to Augsburg so his friends could reach him for advice when necessary.

In this somewhat strained situation the Lutherans planned to present the Emperor with a simple defense of Martin Luther’s stand regarding faith in Christ and good works. “This plan, however, was modified when the Lutherans, after reaching Augsburg, heard of and read the 404 Propositions published by Dr. John Eck, in which Luther ... was charged with every conceivable heresy.”^x Dr. Eck was one of Luther’s most formidable Roman Catholic adversaries. “These calumniations (false charges) caused the Lutherans to remodel and expand the defense originally planned into a document which should not merely justify the changes made by them with regard

to customs and ceremonies, but also present as fully as possible the doctrinal articles which they held over against ancient and modern heresies, falsely imputed to them... that everyone might see how unjustly our churches were slandered in the lying papal writings.”^{xi}

Confess the Truth!

A thorough doctrinal statement was drawn up. “The overthrow of Romanism was not its primary object; in a certain sense it was not its object at all. Its object was to establish truth, no matter what might rise or fall in the effort.”^{xii} The Lutheran document was firmly worded, but it retained the conciliatory tone set by the Emperor in his invitation. The following is an excerpt from the Preface of the Augsburg Confession, which the Lutherans addressed specifically to the Emperor: “we ... are prepared to confer amicably concerning all possible ways and means, in order that we may come together as far as this may be honorably be done, and the matter between us on both sides being peacefully discussed without offensive strife, the dissension, by God’s help, may be done away and brought back to one true accordant religion; for as we all are under one Christ ... , we ought to confess the one Christ, ... and everything ought to be conducted according to the truth of God.”^{xiii}

Rome’s Confutation and the Lutheran Apology (Defense)

After the Confession was presented, one of the Catholic officials present, Duke William of Bavaria, commented, “ ‘Never before has this matter and doctrine been presented to me in this manner.’ And when Eck assured him that he would undertake to refute the Lutheran doctrine with the Fathers, but not with the Scriptures, the Duke responded, ‘Then the Lutherans, I understand, sit in the Scriptures and we of the Pope’s Church beside the Scriptures!’ ”^{xiv} The Catholics hurriedly prepared an answer or Confutation of the Lutheran Confession. This Confutation was presented in August, but never published. Thereupon, at the Emperor’s direction, committees were appointed to work toward reconciliation. These failed. In the meantime, the Lutherans drew up a reply to the Roman Confutation, which they called the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. They intended to present it at the Diet before the Emperor left Augsburg. The opportunity came toward the end of September 1530, when the Emperor made an announcement at the Diet stating that as far as he was concerned the Lutheran Confession had been refuted “ ‘with sound arguments from the holy gospels and the Scriptures’ ”^{xv} “Self-evidently, the Lutherans could not let this Roman boast pass by in silence. Accordingly ... (they) presented the Apology.”^{xvi} But the Emperor refused to give the Lutherans any further hearing. Thus the Diet ended.

The Risks Were Worth It

We have examined some of the historical background of the Augsburg Confession in order to get a glimpse of the tense social, political and religious situation the Lutherans were facing. The laymen who signed the Confession as it was delivered. at Augsburg were running considerable risk. A Twentieth Century Lutheran commentator on the Confession, George Forell, makes the observation that “This document was not produced in the quiet study of some philosopher or theologian. It was forged in the heat of a great spiritual battle. Signing it was a risk. The men who placed their names under this document jeopardized their position, their property, and even

their lives. In the 16th century, as today, if you wanted to be safe you didn't sign anything, you didn't get involved, you said; 'Go away, we don't want any.' The signers of the Augsburg Confession put their money where their mouth was. Some of them lived to regret it; signing this document wasn't just an exercise in calligraphy."^{xvii}

Dr. C. H. Little in a 1943 book published by the Missouri Synod underscores the vital theological importance of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: "This Article ranks second only to Article IV (of Good Works) in importance.... It was in their conception of the Church and of the way of salvation that the Lutherans stood out in most striking contrast to the Roman Catholic Church. The Romanists conceived of the Church as being an external, visible organization, consisting of rulers and subjects. In their view the duty of the rulers was to govern; the duty of the subjects was to obey (pay, pray, obey).... At the head of this Church, which 'is as palpable (tangible) as any earthly kingdom,' stands the Pope. To his authority all must submit or forfeit their eternal salvation.... Naturally this Article VII was wholly rejected by the Roman Catholic confutators."^{xviii}

Part II—The Scriptural Truths In Article VII

What the Lutherans Had in Mind

The second part of this essay will discuss the Scriptural truths affirmed by Article VII. However, the purpose of this section will not be to provide a complete, definitive study of everything the Bible teaches about the Church. Article VII itself does not do that. Our intent is simply to hear from the confessors themselves what Scripture truths they had in mind when they wrote the Article.

Let the Apology Speak

In order to accomplish this goal, since Article VII is quite brief, we are going to make use of the explanation and defense of the Augsburg Confession which the Reformers so carefully provided, and to which both they^{xix} and we have subscribed—the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.

Remember that at Augsburg, after the Lutherans had presented their Confession to the Emperor, the Catholics put together a 50 page Confutation of it. Article VII happens to be one of the sections that Rome totally rejected. Therefore, Article VII is one of the sections that the Lutherans vigorously defended and carefully documented with ample Scripture references in the Apology. We now turn to that document in order to see the particular truths which the Lutherans wanted to affirm. At the same time we will hear the Reformers indicate the false doctrines they were rejecting.

The Church is Holy

In the first place, the Lutherans affirmed the fact that "the Church is the congregation of *saints*." Rome had scoffed at the idea of a holy Church, unless that term were used to refer to the saints in heaven.^{xx} The Catholics insisted that the church on earth always consists of both good and bad.

As proof they cited Matthew 13:47, where Jesus compared His church to a net in which there are both good and bad fish.

This mingling of good and bad in the visible church on earth was not news to the Lutherans. They had treated the same subject in Article VIII of the Confession, where they had shown from Scripture that the outward fellowship of the Church can and does include unbelievers and hypocrites. But, they replied, in no way can the sad fact of this intermingling change the true nature of the Church, properly speaking, which is “a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in hearts.”^{xxi}

We can understand why the Lutherans insisted on this Scriptural doctrine of the holy Christian Church when we hear them say in the Apology that there were times when they would almost despair as they looked at the corruption in the papacy, “... it often seems that the Church has completely perished.”^{xxii} But thanks to this Biblical doctrine, “we may know that, however great the multitude of the wicked is, yet the Church (which is Christ’s bride) exists, and ... Christ affords those gifts which He has promised to the Church, to forgive sins, to hear prayer, to give the Holy Ghost....”^{xxiii}

Therefore it was not only to reject Rome’s false outward concept of the church, but also for their own reassurance that the Lutherans wrote: “And this Church alone is called the ‘body of Christ’, which Christ renews (Christ is its Head, and) sanctifies and governs by His Spirit, as Paul testifies, Eph. 1:22 sq., when he says: ‘And gave Him to be the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.’ Wherefore, those in whom Christ does not act (through His Spirit) are not the members of Christ.”^{xxiv}

Still defending their statement in Article VII that there is “one holy Church,” they said, “Paul has defined the Church precisely in the same way, Eph. 5:25f., that it should be cleansed in order to be ‘holy’ For he says thus: ‘Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.’ In the Confession we have presented this sentence almost in the very words.”^{xxv}

The Papacy is the Antichrist

A second Scriptural truth which the Lutherans apparently had in mind as they wrote Article VII is the fact that the papacy is the Antichrist. Article VII does not say this explicitly, but the Apology does.

Rome taught that the one true Church is an outward organization with the Pope at its head. The Lutherans, however, insisted that this doctrine disagreed both with the Apostles’ Creed, where the Church is called the Communion of Saints, and with Scripture’s description of the Church of Christ. Furthermore, they boldly asserted in the Apology that Rome’s doctrine of a papal kingdom with the Pope as a “God on earth” and “lord of the whole world” fulfilled Daniel 11:36ff., where “Daniel, the prophet, represents Antichrist in this way.”^{xxvi} Daniel 11:36-37 says, “And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself

above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against. the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished; for that that is determined shall be done. Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god; for he shall magnify himself above all.”

The Visible Marks of the Church

The third Scriptural truth the Lutherans affirmed in Article VII is that while the true Church is not identifiable with any outward organization, there are certain signs which indicate that the Church is present on earth. The Catholics had asserted that the Lutheran concept of a holy Christian Church was purely Platonic, purely imaginary and to be found nowhere on earth. Rome also taught that the sign of the Church’s presence was obedience to the Pope, or the outward observance of certain rites. The obvious and dangerous result was that they were attempting to build the Church of Christ in a totally unscriptural, misleading way. They removed the foundation of the Church, which is faith in Christ: “in the place of Christ they set up their works, orders, masses....”^{xxvii}

The Lutheran and Scriptural answer to this was that the one tool with which the Church is built and the one mark of the Church’s presence is “the pure doctrine of the Gospel ... and the Sacraments.... as Paul says, I Cor. 3,11 (:‘Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ’)...”^{xxviii} In other words, as we would say today; where the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments administered according to their institution by Christ there the Church, believers, are present. We believe this because, as a general rule, only believers are interested in the Gospel; and God assures us that the Gospel produces believers. Therefore, where the Gospel is, there one can expect the Church to be; and where the Gospel is discarded there can be no Church.

The Unity of the Church

The fourth Scriptural truth affirmed by Article VII and very important for our consideration today ties in with the point just mentioned above concerning the visible marks of the Church. This fourth truth has to do with the unity or oneness of the Church; a unity which is caused by God as He works in the hearts of believers through the Gospel. The Lutherans stated that there is *one* holy Church which abides forever, and that the true unity of the Church is not merely an agreement to use the same outward ceremonies, but rather a spiritual agreement concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.

Rome, with her superficial, outward concept of the church, said that the papacy was one with the original, Apostolic Church because it observed certain traditions that supposedly were handed down by the Apostles. Rome condemned the Lutheran statement that “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.” Actually, the papacy was, at the same time, condemning the Lutheran and Scriptural doctrine of Justification by Faith—that a person is saved not by human works but by faith in Christ.

The Lutherans were not about to compromise on such an important issue. They said in the Apology that many “great errors ... concerning traditions had crept into the Church. Some thought that human traditions were necessary ... for meriting justification ... , also that no one can be a Christian unless he observe such traditions, although they are nothing but an outward regulation ... Likewise some Churches have excommunicated others because of such traditions, as the observance of (the date of) Easter, (the use of) pictures, and the like.”^{xxxix}

The Lutherans explained that while certain customs may be observed for the sake of good order, such as worshipping on Sunday; nevertheless, dissimilar customs would not, by themselves, destroy the true unity of the Church any more than similar customs would create true spiritual unity. They said that anyone who taught that man-made customs were mandatory for salvation was contradicting Scripture: “Paul clearly teaches this to the Colossians, 2, 16. 17: ‘Let no man, therefore, judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ.’ ”^{xxx}

In contrast to Rome, the Lutherans unwaveringly held that the holy Christian Church is spiritual, that is, membership is a matter of the heart. Therefore, they continued, the true unity of the Church also is a spiritual matter. It is brought about when God moves hearts to trust and agree that Christ is their Savior. God does not do this by means of man-made ceremonies, but by means of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. With this in mind, the Lutherans quoted Romans 14:17, “ ‘The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost’ ... The adversaries say that universal traditions are to be observed because they are supposed to have been handed down by the apostles. What religious men they are! They wish that the rites derived from the apostles be retained; they do not wish the doctrine of the apostles to be retained.... For the apostles did not wish us to believe that through such rites we are justified, that such rites are necessary for righteousness before God. The apostles did not wish to impose such a burden upon consciences; they did not wish to place righteousness and sin in the observance of days, food, and the like. Yes, Paul calls such opinions doctrines of devils, I Tim. 4, 1.”^{xxxi}

What then does unite Christians of all times and places ? “As Paul says: ‘One faith, one Baptism, one God and father of us all, etc.’ Eph. 4, 5 . 6.” The following practical warning from the highly respected writings of the former Professor John Meyer is in place here: “Christians may easily be misled. When attending service in some other than their home church, they may find that the order of service is the same as the one to which they are accustomed. And, they may be ready to assume, without further question, that therefore there must be unity. Such is not necessarily the case.”^{xxxii} The statement of our Lutheran forefathers still holds true that unity is a matter of God working a common faith in human hearts, and not a matter of outward rites, ceremonies or traditions.

Four Scriptural Truths

To summarize what has been said, four Scriptural truths stand out in Article VII and the Apology’s treatment of this Article. They are, 1) the Church is holy; 2) the papacy is the Antichrist; 3) the mark of the Church is the Gospel in Word and Sacrament; and 4) the true unity of the Church is faith in Christ produced by God through the Gospel.

There are other Scriptural truths about the Church which the Reformers could have confessed, but these are the important ones which they chose to emphasize in their attempt to bring about the Emperor's desire for unity at Augsburg, without violating the will of God.

What Article VII did not say ... about the Church under the Papacy

We might wonder whether the Lutherans considered the holy Christian Church to be non-existent under the papacy. We can find some rather strong statements in Luther's writings in which he unhesitatingly condemned the way the papacy externalized Christianity and reduced it to a religion of works; but Luther nevertheless retained his confidence in the power of the Gospel to work saving faith. The following was written by Luther in 1523.

We have the sure promise of this from God in Isaiah 55 (:10, 11), "My word" (says God) "that goes forth from my mouth shall not return empty to me; rather, as the rain falls from heaven to earth, making it fruitful, so shall my word also accomplish everything for which I sent it." Thus we are certain that there must be Christians wherever the gospel is, no matter how few and how sinful and weak they may be. Likewise, where the gospel is absent and human teachings rule, there no Christians live but only pagans, no matter how numerous they are and how holy and upright their life may be.

Thus it undeniably follows that bishops, religious foundations, monasteries, and all who are associated with them have long since ceased to be Christians or Christian congregations, even though they have claimed they are more entitled to the name than anyone else. For whoever recognizes the gospel sees, hears, and understands that even today they insist on their human teachings have driven the gospel far away from themselves, and are still driving it away. That is why one should consider pagan and worldly what these people do and pretend.^{xxxiii}

Although those are strong words, Martin Luther was not thereby saying that the Church went out of existence during the Middle Ages. He knew and believed the promises of Jesus that the gates of hell cannot prevail against the Church (Matthew 16:18), and that Jesus will be with his Church to the end of the world (Matthew 28:20). This faith is reflected in Article III of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession where the Lutherans clearly affirmed that in spite of the false doctrine taught by Rome, the Church of true believers was preserved by God: "... even though Popes, or some theologians, and monks in the Church have taught us to seek remission of sins, grace, and righteousness through our own works, and to invent new forms of worship, which have obscured the office of Christ, and have made out of Christ ... only a Legislator, nevertheless the knowledge of Christ has always remained with some godly persons."^{xxxiv}

Commenting on this last thought, Dr. F. Pieper wrote in his *Christian Dogmatics*: "There would be no members of the Christian Church under the rule of the Papacy but for the baptized children who believe in Christ, plus a few souls who, in the terrors of conscience and particularly in the agony of death, in spite of the 'Church's' interdict and curse, cast aside their own works, together with the merit of the saints, and trust solely in the merit of Christ."^{xxxv} Dr. C. F. W.

Walther taught similarly about the Catholic church, and added, “Whoever denies this fact is forced to deny also that there are Christians in some Lutheran communities in which errors have cropped out. But there are always some children of God in these communities because they have the Word of God, which is always bearing fruit in converting some souls to God.”^{xxxvi}

What Article VII did not say ... about the Lutherans

We also might wonder whether the Lutherans were claiming to be the only saving Church. The answer is no. In the Apology the Lutherans denied any attempt to identify the Church with an outward organization, including their own. In their comments the Lutherans referred to the Latin version of the Apostles’ Creed, “which teaches us to believe that there is ‘a holy Catholic (universal) Church,’ ” and the Lutherans pointed out that “it says ‘Church Catholic’ in order that we may not understand the Church to be an outward government of certain nations ... but rather men scattered throughout the whole world, ... who agree concerning the Gospel, and have the same Christ, the same Holy Ghost, and the same Sacraments, whether they have the same or different human traditions.”^{xxxvii}

But at the same time the Lutherans did claim to have the pure Means of Grace through which God works to create and preserve His Church. More than once Martin Luther urged the tender consciences of his followers to believe that they did not have to be connected with the papacy in order to be in the Church, but that the Gospel in Word and Sacrament was truly effective for them even though it was being administered by men whom Rome had excommunicated and condemned. Writing to his followers about Holy Communion, Martin Luther said this in 1539: “ ... God’s people, or Christian holy people, are recognized by the holy sacrament of the altar, wherever it is rightly administered, believed, and received, according to Christ’s institution.... And here too you need not be disturbed if the pope does not say mass for you, does not consecrate, anoint, or vest you with a chasuble (an outer priestly garment).... Moreover, don’t be led astray by the question of whether the man who administers the sacrament is holy, or whether or not he has two wives. The sacrament belongs to him who receives it, not to him who administers it, ... as was said above of the word, wherever God’s word is, there the church must be; likewise, wherever baptism and the sacrament are, God’s people must be, and vice versa.”^{xxxviii}

We join Luther in believing the effectiveness of the Word of God which is preached today. We join him also in desiring to remain faithful to God’s Word so that we may effectively transmit the true saving faith. Like our Lutheran forefathers we make a Scriptural distinction between the holy Christian Church and visible church bodies; and between true and false church bodies. For example, in our explanation of *Luther’s Small Catechism* we present the following questions and answers regarding the statement in the Apostles’ Creed, “(I believe in) the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints”:

244. Where, then, is the Church (HCC) to be found on earth? The Church is found everywhere on earth where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered, and only there.

246. When can we say of ... a (visible) church that it has the *one true faith*? We say that a church has the one true faith when it proclaims the Gospel and administers the Sacraments in their truth and purity.

251. How can we know when a church has the true faith? A church has the true faith when its published confessions and its practice agree with the Word of God.

252. By what name is the Church of the true faith known today? The Church of the true faith today is known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church.^{xxxix}

With those statements we are not claiming that the holy Christian Church is to be found only in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. To do so would be to join Rome in denying that “... a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28). Nor are we claiming that everyone in the Evangelical Lutheran Church is a believer, because people can resist the Holy Ghost. But we are saying that since the Evangelical Lutheran Church preaches God’s Word in its truth and purity, the holy Christian Church, or true believers, are present there; even as they are present wherever the Means of Grace are in use. In addition we are emphasizing our Scriptural desire to avoid all forms of false doctrine and to remain as faithful as possible to the Word of God; as the Apostle says, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering” (Hebrews 10:23). Because of that faithfulness to Scripture, and as long as that faithfulness continues, we believe Dr. Walther’s statement that “The Lutheran Church is indeed the true visible church; however, only in this sense, that it has the pure unadulterated truth. As soon as you add the qualification ‘alone-saving’ to the Lutheran Church, you detract from the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and confound Law and Gospel.”^{xl}

Part III—The Importance Of Article VII Today

Need for Unity

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession speaks to a question which seems to be asked continually in New Testament times—“What can be done about the splintering of Christianity?” The advice of Article VII is not meant to supplement or supplant Scripture, but merely to bear witness to what Scripture says. The Reformers felt compelled to do this not only because of the Emperor’s request, but also in response to the gentle urging of the Apostle: “. . . be ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you . . .” (1 Peter 3:15). The Lutherans believed that the Church enjoyed a wonderful, spiritual unity, and they wanted to help their detractors to understand and to share in that unity if possible.

The Lutheran Church has grown considerably since 1530. Sad to say, however, it has also grown apart. As we look at the other Protestant church bodies we see that a similar fragmentation has occurred, and the same is true to a certain degree in the Roman church. Instead of diminishing, the need for unity has increased in the last 450 years. More and more voices are being heard today which say, “Let’s get back together!” More and more clerical *cowboys* have discarded the Sword of the Spirit in favor of an Ecumenical rope seemingly not realizing that it could become a highly dangerous noose if not properly placed. Hanging together is no better than the undesirable alternative of drifting apart.

With the growing need for unity come increasing tensions, not unlike the tensions that existed at the time of the Reformation. May they not frighten us into an entanglement we will regret. Let there be a striving for unity, but let it be the kind of unity which is described in Scripture and reflected in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII.

Unscriptural Attempts at Union

We are going to look at some of the more recent efforts toward church union. Unscriptural, Devil-may-care planning is a distinctive feature of these attempts which we will notice again and again. Instead of helping the body of Christ, the Church, to show its true unity, these attempts have caused the true Christian Church a great deal of pain.

Between 1817 and 1830, King Frederick William III decided to observe the 300th anniversary of the Reformation by bringing about a religious reunion in Prussia. Mainly for his own political benefit he sought to solve the differences between the Lutheran and Reformed citizens of his country. His solution was a common Liturgy book, plus a certain amount of force. He was successful to the degree that Rationalism had infected the faith of his people and had made them indifferent to doctrine. But his “Prussian Union” was met with persistent resistance from the “Old Lutherans” who conservatively clung to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Many of those Lutherans eventually migrated to America and formed the Buffalo Lutheran synod here.

However, coming to America did not solve the problem of disunity among the church-going immigrants. As a matter of fact the freedom of religion permitted in this country seems to have made it easier than ever to say, “You go your way and I’ll go mine.” Professor George O. Lillegard of Bethany Lutheran Seminary, Mankato, observed that the American religious climate also contributed to the interest in ecumenical efforts here: “In America, where the churches were free to organize as they wished, they have split up into several hundred denominations, often for anything but scriptural or doctrinal reasons. It is, no doubt, as a reaction against this extreme sectarianism that so many attempts are being made today to unite all churches in some kind of external organization.”^{xli}

But there were other causes also. A strong ecumenical current had surfaced in 1910 at the urging of various Protestant world missionaries. According to F. Dean Lueking, these missionaries felt that the outward division among Christians was “intolerable,” especially in mission fields where “church meets world” and presents it with a “hodgepodge of competing denominations.”^{xlii} Lueking says that the wave of ecumenical thinking encouraged by the concerns of these missionaries led to the eventual formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948.

Two World Wars had a decided effect on the ecumenical movement. When, for example, Lutheran men and women were shipped to distant and dangerous parts of the globe where it was difficult to serve them with the Means of Grace, the impetus was provided for interest in joint special ministries work on the part of the synods. The aim of the National Lutheran Council, which came into being at about the time of World War I, was cooperation in serving these war zones on the basis of a common need rather than on the basis of any doctrinal agreement.^{xliii}

Our Desire for Unity

As Confessional Lutherans, we do not favor religious isolationism. We know that God encourages His people to be joined together. For example, the Apostle Paul writes: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). We notice, however, that God does not simply want union, but unity. He wants believers to speak and think the same things concerning His Word and thus to be joined together by a common faith.

Where is this God-pleasing kind of unity to be found among the ecumenists who do not seem to be interested in doctrinal agreement in the church? Equally important, how do such ecumenists justify having an “open door” policy regarding conflicting beliefs? Do they have a godly desire to let the publicans and sinners of today’s world hear the truth? Or are they *convinced* that the truth is a will-o’-the-wisp, an elusive thing that all beliefs approach from different directions? The latter kind of thinking seems to be typical of many ecumenists, according to the following information which was gathered by Professor Lillegard:

The distinctive feature of modern union movements is that they no longer seek to bring about unity in doctrine but allow each church to teach as it pleases and seek only to bring about cooperation in the work of the church. Unity in doctrine, they say, is not only unattainable but undesirable. For, as Williams Adams Brown, of Union Theological Seminary, says in his book, *Toward a United Church*, (1946) with regard to the so-called Ecumenical Movement:

Those who have united in the Movement have recognized that when finite and imperfect men are dealing with matters as high and deep as those which concern the Christian faith, one cannot expect complete agreement as to their meaning and implications. In any unity worthy of the name, there must be room for honest differences of conviction, not merely in unimportant matters of habit and preference, but even in matters of vital belief.... (p. 4) - What is new in the present movement is the type of unity to which the churches have committed themselves. This is a unity which has broken once and for all with the ideal of conformity (p.16).

That is, they do not even want to agree in doctrine but want truth and error, sound doctrine and heresies to have equal rights in the church on the contention that nobody knows what the real truth is anyway!... We could multiply quotations from leading theologians in all churches, including the Lutherans, to show how they no longer distinguish between truth and error but demand equal rights for the most contradictory theories and beliefs, not excluding Catholic idolatry. Their watch-word is, “not compromise, but comprehension.” That is, the churches are to get together, not on the basis of a compromise formulation of doctrine, but on the assumption that the distinctive teachings of all churches are needed in order to

arrive at the whole truth. Thus Dr. A. Nygren, President of the Lutheran World Federation, said in his report to the convention at Lund in 1947:

The Gospel is so exceedingly rich that no section of Christendom can claim a full and exhaustive grasp of its richness. One Church has grasped more of it, another less. One has penetrated to the central things, while another has remained to a greater degree at peripheral points. One has grasped one side, the other another side. In this respect the churches can learn from each other and help each other to arrive at a simpler, richer, and deeper understanding of the Gospel (N. L. C. News Bureau Release, June 30, 1947).^{xliv}

It is obvious that the ecumenists whom Lillgard quoted have quite a way with words and can make even forbidden fruit seem desirable. What they are saying, however, stands in direct contradiction to the directives God has given, namely, “be perfectly joined . . . in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Messengers who teach manifestly contradictory doctrines and who push their pulpits together to do so more efficiently and not doing God a service. The nations who gather at their feet are being fed a Scripture so riddled with philosophical “isms” added by men (Rationalism, Humanism, Agnosticism, etc.) that they will be fortunate indeed if they manage to hear the Gospel for their salvation. Because the eternal welfare of blood-bought souls is at stake, unity dare not be sacrificed for the sake of union.

Real church union is not a matter of uniform liturgies, monolithic organizational structure, common programs or similarly worded Constitutions. But as Article VII of the Augsburg Confession said so long ago, “The *one* holy Church . . . is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is *rightly* taught and the Sacraments are *rightly* administered. 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.” Our forefathers believed that the only way to unity is God’s way. He unites people through His Word and Sacraments.

Today as we listen to the voice of the Augsburg Confession and of God’s Word, and as we desire and strive to maintain the true unity of the Church, may we be alert to the dangers which can destroy that unity. May we be encouraged by the example of the Reformers so that we neither stop trying, nor try stopping short of God-pleasing unity with other professing Christians.

What is “Enough” for true Unity?

Article VII itself is one of the documents which some ecumenists like to use to support their doctrinal inconsistency or indifference. Ecumenical Lutherans who are interested in progress toward union rather than in progress toward unity will point to the phrase in Article VII which says, “. . . it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel.” Then they will say that we are not being faithful to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church if we insist on complete doctrinal agreement as a prerequisite for fellowship. They would prefer it if Adult Information Classes, for example, would consist of a mini-doctrine course—the Gospel, and no more. In other words, their interpretation of Article VII is that it requires agreement on the doctrine of

redemption through faith in Jesus, and further doctrinal agreement is both un-Lutheran and unnecessary.

Dr. Willard Allbeck, in his study of the Lutheran Confessions, makes the following comment and cautionary remark: “The unity of the church and the diversity of churches and sects is a problem engaging many minds. Lutherans, if they are true to their heritage, cannot help but be interested in unity and harmony.... the direction to be taken ... is certainly not one of doctrinal indifference, as many advocates of union urge.” Then he adds the provocative statement: “On the other hand we must frankly face the question how much of the field of doctrinal theology is included in the phrase ‘agreement in the doctrine of the Gospel’ (in Article VII). The will to unity in the church must not be ambushed by sectarian pettiness or betrayed by religious isolationism.”^{xlv}

Exactly what he means by that last remark is not clear, but we do agree with him that the way to unity is not one of doctrinal indifference. We believe that the 28 Articles of the Augsburg Confession indicate the Reformers felt the same way. They were not inclined to compromise with error in order to find an easy solution to the divisions that separated Wittenberg and Rome. Therefore, we also believe that in Article VII they were not intending to say there is a need only for agreement on the doctrine of the Gospel but no such need on other doctrines—as though when one was brought to faith in the Gospel they would not care what else he believed. The only contrast in Article VII is between the true spiritual unity of the Church which God causes through His Word, and the mere outward unity which the papacy claimed was important.

Doctrine of the Gospel—“Wide Sense”

What then is meant by the expression the Lutherans used: “to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel”? A number of our scholarly conservative Lutheran commentators have documented the fact that in Article VII the phrase “doctrine of the Gospel” refers to the Gospel in a “wide sense” rather than in a “narrow sense.”^{xlvi} According to their study the Reformers were using the term “doctrine of the Gospel” as a synonym for the whole Bible. We still do the same. We not only use the word Gospel to refer to the work of redemption, but at times we also apply it to an entire book, such as the Gospel of Matthew. Or we may speak of the “whole body of Christian doctrine”^{xlvii} as the Gospel, because the Gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—is the chief message of the Bible and all doctrine has a relationship to the Gospel, which is central. Jesus says concerning the Scriptures, “they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).

Professor John Meyer, a former President of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, wrote a commentary on the Augsburg Confession in which he said concerning the phrase “doctrine of the Gospel”: “God considered it important to embody in His Gospel also all the points which to us may seem less essential. They are His doctrine as well as all those points which we may call most important. How then dare we ignore any of them or set them aside, in order to unite with people who question, or even deny, any point that God has revealed? How dare we appear before God in joint prayer, or conduct joint services, or partake of the same Communion with people who reject or alter His word in any part?”^{xlviii}

In this connection we might take note of the fact that some liberals express a deep concern over those who are doctrinally conservative. They say they stand in horror of the possibility that conservatives might have a purely “intellectual” faith, a faith in the facts of Scripture without faith in the Gospel. These are they same liberals who rationalize Scripture away with the Historical-Critical^{xlix} method of interpretation and then inconsistently suggest that conservatives are anti-intellectual” for refusing to accept that method. Professor Meyer was a conservative Lutheran theologian who carefully guarded his students and readers against the danger of a “dead orthodoxy” by always bearing witness to his faith in the Gospel. This is apparent in his comments on the importance of all Bible doctrine: “Remember also for what purpose God revealed the ‘doctrine of the Gospel’ to us, every part of it. He gave it to us not to exercise our ingenuity, to see if we can properly pick out the important from the less important. He gave it to us for our salvation. Every part is filled with His power to nourish and strengthen our faith. How, then, can we think of consenting to drop any part of it?”¹

Doctrine of the Gospel—“Narrow Sense”

It is difficult to conceive of a Scriptural way in which the phrase “to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel” could be understood in a “narrow sense” in Article VII. However, we do not want to give the impression that a believer must know and believe every doctrine of Scripture in order to be in the holy Christian Church and be saved. We do cherish the Scriptural hope that faith in the Gospel is enough to make our baptized but uninstructed infants one with Christ and with us in the Kingdom of God. Similarly we know that in our churches there are some true believers who are weak in the faith. They do not know every doctrine of the Bible, however, they are willing to learn. They do not stand in opposition to the doctrine of Scripture. We believe that their simple faith in the Gospel makes them members of the one holy Christian Church also, uniting them with the entire body of Christ and with Jesus, the Head of the body. The Apostle calls such persons, who need further instruction, “babes in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1). They are “in Christ” by faith, but they are still only “babes” as far as their understanding of Scripture is concerned. We note also that such “babes” are urged to “desire the sincere milk of the Word, that (they) may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2). Many of Luther’s followers, too, were “babes in Christ” who still had much to learn from Scripture. They were weak brethren, but they were brethren. The Gospel which they believed was enough to establish unity between them and their Savior, no matter what Rome said to the contrary.

What Article VII does not Support

Even if the phrase “doctrine of the Gospel” could be understood in a “narrow sense” in Article VII, the Reformers still would not be saying that those who are part of the one holy Church by faith in the Gospel are free to *disagree* on the rest of what Scripture says, or to *disregard* other Bible doctrines. In no case does Article VII support doctrinal indifference. Anyone who claims that it does is going beyond what it actually states and is giving the false impression that our Lutheran forefathers supported unbiblical ecumenism.

Martin Luther’s Fellowship Practice

The Reformers, especially Luther, would not and did not engage in any kind of unionism. That Luther would not unite and practice fellowship with persistent errorists is apparent from his dealings with the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli. Luther and Zwingli were both in agreement on the doctrine of the Gospel in the “narrow sense.” But in this case it was not enough for fellowship, because Zwingli refused to accept the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli, influenced by the philosophy of Rationalism, insisted that Christ’s body and blood could be present in the Sacrament only in a symbolical way. He flatly rejected the literal meaning of the word “is” which Christ used when he instituted the Lord’s Supper. Therefore he and Luther parted without agreement. That was in 1529, a year when it would have seemed politically wise to unite at any cost in order to face the Emperor and the Pope with a solid front at Augsburg.

Similarly, in 1539, almost a decade after Augsburg, Luther wrote the following about the need to exercise church discipline with those who willingly resist God’s Word: “... the church, or God’s people, does not tolerate known sinners in its midst, but reproveth them and also makes them holy. Or, if they refuse, it casts them out from the sanctuary by means of the ban (Excommunication) and regards them as heathen, Matthew 18 (:17).”^{li}

God Forbids Unionism

Scripture clearly forbids uniting or practicing fellowship with people who “resist the truth” or are “reprobate (disqualified) concerning the faith” (2 Tim. 3:8). God says, “Beware of false prophets” (Matt. 7:15); “brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrines which ye have learned; and avoid them; (Rom. 16:17). After the Apostle had listed a wide variety of Bible doctrines, he warned, “If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness; from such with draw thyself” (1 Tim. 6:3-5).

The Real Cause of Disunity

Disunity is not caused by those who withdraw from Scripturally defined errorists. As Dr. Pieper says, “This separation is commanded in Scripture ... and is the only means of restoring and maintaining the true unity in the Christian Church.”^{lii} In every case, the cause of disunity is unfaithfulness to God’s Word.

The Example of Missouri

Professor Kurt Marquardt of Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, brings out into the open the real cause of disunity as he evaluates the problems which the Missouri synod has been experiencing. He indicates that nothing destroys the true unity of the Church faster than the modern zeal for trying to build the church through disregard for Scriptural doctrine. He says the philosophy of the ecumenical movement thinks of the church the way Rome did at the time of Luther, that is, as “essentially visible ... an ideal to be realized by patient negotiation, ecclesiastical diplomacy,

and compromise.”^{liii} When doctrine is forfeited by those who seek union, the unity of the faith is lost, as Marquardt shows in the following satirical comment: “If the Apostles’ Creed were to be reworded to reflect honestly the prevailing critical opinion, it would ‘confess’ Christ something like this:

... Who was probably not conceived by the Holy Spirit or born of the Virgin Mary, was almost certainly crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead, and buried; on the third day or so He seems in some sense to have risen again from the dead, and was thought to have ascended into heaven; from thence, if the preceding is valid, he may or may not return....^{liv}

Close Communion

Professor Marquardt also specifically warns against indifference to the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. We include his comments on the problems he has seen in this regard because Article VII clearly calls for agreement on the “administration of the Sacrament.”

Referring to the way the Sacrament of the Altar has been under attack, Marquardt writes: “This modern abandonment of the Confessions, ... involves not ‘secondary’ points of doctrine but something which is quite central and crucial in the Confessions: the Sacrament of the Altar.... The Presbyterian-Lutheran discussions in America concluded in 1965 that ‘no insuperable obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship’ existed. This statement took on special significance because the Missouri Synod had participated in this and subsequent dialogues. In 1970 a number of Missouri Synod ‘moderates,’ including St. Louis seminary professors, published ‘A Call to Openness and Trust.’ This document includes a brief list of ‘items’ which ‘should not divide the Christian fellowship’ nor exclude anyone from membership in the Missouri Synod. Among the examples given is not only ‘the question of factual error in the Bible’ but even ‘the definition of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper!’”^{lv} Marquardt also points out that the LCA (Lutheran Church in America) “has already adopted in a ‘working document’ the anti-Confessional policy that ‘whenever the Sacrament is celebrated it should be open to all communing Christians present.’”^{lvi} One final note on the Lord’s Supper—Professor Marquardt sounds a warning to Confessional Lutherans about the infrequent use of the Sacrament: “In the New Testament as in the Lutheran Confessions the Sacrament is a vital and central part of Christian worship. Our actual practice often suggests the Reformed-pietistic notion of the Sacrament as an occasional ‘extra.’”^{lvii}

Prayer Fellowship

What has been said above in order to discourage Altar Fellowship with heterodox Christians also applies to Prayer Fellowship with them. Not everyone seems to understand this. Professor George O. Lillegard marveled at the strange reasoning of those who appear eager to join in prayer with people who believe and teach things that are contrary to Scripture: “Through some strange mental processes that it is hard to analyze they find it wrong to practise ‘pulpit and altar fellowship’ with errorists but see nothing wrong in practising ‘prayer-fellowship’ with them. Scripture has nothing on which to base this distinction. It condemns all ‘spiritual fellowship’ with errorists, while allowing Christians, indeed, to associate with them on the civic, business,

and social plane. (1 Cor. 5) We can be friendly toward Jews, Turks and heathens, but can no more *pray* with them than we can *worship* with them or *work together* with them in religious matters.^{lviii}

Conclusion

Unfaithfulness to the doctrine of Scripture causes all of the disunity which we see disrupting churches around the world. The solution for this, according to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, is the diligent use of the Word of God—see to it that the Gospel is “rightly taught” and the Sacraments are “rightly administered.” Make disciples of all nations by “baptizing them” and by “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19, 20). Do this *together with fellow Christians!*^{lix}

It is useless and vain for us to stand sheepishly on the sidelines of the real work to be done in God’s Kingdom and debate the usefulness of the doctrines of Scripture with rationalists. We know that God has spoken to us through his Word. Jesus has told us that the Scripture cannot be broken. Those who contend and squirm on questions of how much of Scripture is God’s Word and what part of Scripture is vital to saving faith fail to listen to His voice who says “all scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16) and “all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Flocking together with those who dare to deny the fundamentals of the Christian faith is not the pastime of Christ’s sheep. Let us be faithful to what Scripture says and let alone the deviousness and disputings of those who love to hang sheepskins on their walls like trophies. They love sheep’s clothing, but they will not be sheep.^{lx}

May we be eager to promote the true unity which the Church, which exists forever, always has. To that end may we never forget that it is up to God to do the calling to faith and the gathering together of the nations. It is up to us only to let God be heard. That is why He warns us not to make any additions to or subtractions from His Word. May we continue in His Word and trust God to produce the results that He wants in His elect. He will unite them as members of His body, the Church. “Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear; Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ” (1 Peter 3:15-16).

Endnotes

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- ⁱ “The Order for the Ordination of a Minister,” *The Lutheran Agenda*, (St. Louis: Concordia) p. 106
- ⁱⁱ (Examples of misconceptions regarding the Church): The Samaritan Woman, Jh.4: 20,22; The Pharisee in the Temple, Lk. 18:11-14; The slayers of Stephen, Acts 7:51-53. (Examples of eternally disastrous consequences): Judas, Mt. 26:20-25; The man without a “Wedding garment,” Mt. 22:11-14
- ⁱⁱⁱ “The Augsburg Confession,” *Concordia Triglotta*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921) p. 46.
- ^{iv} H. Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961) p. 59
- ^v *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) p. 150
- See also Robert Preus, who writes: “The Lutheran doctrine of the necessity of Scripture was directed against two antitheses: the view of the Quakers, fanatics, and mystics, who held that God speaks to men and saves them apart from His written or spoken Word; and the rather common Roman Catholic opinion that the church of Christ could progress and pure doctrine could be maintained by means of tradition without the aid of Scripture” (“The Necessity for Scripture,” *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, St. Louis/London: Concordia, 1970) p. 273
- ^{vi} Willard Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1952) p.79
- ^{vii} Theodore Graebner, *The Story of the Augsburg Confession*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1929) p. 4 of Introduction
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, p.2
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p.31
- ^x F. Bente, “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 16
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xii} Charles P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963) pp. 202, 203
- ^{xiii} *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 41
- ^{xiv} Bente, p. 19
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 41
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvii} George W. Forell, *The Augsburg Confession: A Contemporary Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968) p. 7 of Introduction
- ^{xviii} C.H. Little, *Lutheran Confessional Theology*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1943) p. 45
- ^{xix} Bente, pp. 46,47
- ^{xx} Allbeck, p. 29
- ^{xxi} *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 227
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 229
- ^{xxiii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, p. 227
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 229
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, p. 235
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, p. 233
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, p. 239
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, p. 241
- ^{xxxii} John Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*, (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Co., 1965) p. 44
- ^{xxxiii} *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 39, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) pp. 305, 306
- ^{xxxiv} *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 225
- ^{xxxv} F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953) p. 404 See also Theses 34-40 written by a 16th Century theologian, Aegidius Hunnius, who says: “ ... in the midst of this papal darkness God always preserved the remaining saints.... some who openly spoke against the Roman throne: ... also infants.... ” (“Some 16th Century Theses Based on Articles 5,7, and 8 of the Augsburg Confession,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 64, July 1967, pp. 169-192, Translated by Philip K. Press)
- ^{xxxvi} C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928) p. 338
- ^{xxxvii} *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 229
- ^{xxxviii} *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41, p. 152
- ^{xxxix} “The Church,” *Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956) pp. 147-152
- ^{xl} Walther, p. 343

^{xli} George O. Lillegard, "Modern Ecumenism and Cooperation in Externals," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 56, October 1959, p. 235

^{xliii} F. Dean Lueking, *Grace Under Pressure*, (St. Louis/London: Concordia, 1966) p. 92

^{xliiii} Lillegard, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 57, Jan. 1960, pp. 25-28

^{xliiv} Lillegard, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 56, Oct. 1959, pp. 235-237

More recently John Warwick Montgomery wrote about a method of Bible interpretation which has led to many of the un-confessional church unions we see today. It looks upon the Bible as a collection of "traditions" or of "what other people *believed* to be true," rather than of facts. He says this makes it possible for a liberal preacher to use the kind of "traditional" terms that formerly made liberals shudder, such as Incarnation, Miracles, Redemption, etc., without publicly admitting whether or not he thinks these things are factual. In this way both liberal laymen, who are in the know, and conservatives, who are happy to hear the old words again, can be served by the same preacher! ("Luther's Hermeneutic vs. the New Hermeneutic," *In Defense of Martin Luther*, Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1970) p. 57

^{xliv} Allbeck, p. 82

^{xlvi} Professor Armin Schuetze writes: "The context in the articles and the historical evidence speak for the wider sense of the term 'Gospel.' ... however, most important for us is that the wider sense is also Scriptural... Scripture everywhere calls for faithfulness to the whole of God's Word" ("What is the Meaning of 'Gospel' in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession?," *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 53, June 12, 1966) p. 185. Rudolph Norden adds: "If agreement on the Gospel in a narrow sense were all that is necessary for church union, one would have to ask: Why then did the framers of the Confession go to the effort of setting forth 28 articles on Gospel-related doctrines, some at great length?" (*The Gospel: Love it & Live it*, St. Louis/London: Concordia, 1973) pp. 24, 25. Pastor Torald N. Teigen quotes from one of Luther's lectures of 1531 on Galatians 5:9,10: "Some foolish spirits advocate this position: Even though somebody should hold an error in a minor matter, as long as there is unity in other things, one might yield a little and be tolerant and practice brotherly and Christian fellowship and communion. No, my dear man, do not talk to me about peace and fellowship which makes us lose God's Word... Here our rule must be not to yield or concede in order to do either you or other people a favor" ("Let the Gospel be the Gospel," *The Way to Lutheran Unity*, Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1972) pp. 56, 57. A. Uppala notes that Luther and Melancthon used the terms "Gospel" and "Word of God" interchangeably (p. 171) and that the Apology did the same in its German version of Article VII (5): "The Christian church 'has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel'" (German: '*Wo Gottes Wort rein gehet*') (p. 172) ("It Is Enough" - "Satis Est," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 65, July 1968, pp. 169-186).

^{xlvii} Pieper, p. 223

^{xlviii} Meyer, p. 45

^{xlix} Kurt Marquardt defines the Historical-Critical method of Bible interpretation as a product of the rationalistic Enlightenment. He says it "differs from traditional biblical scholarship in that it insists on treating the Bible not as an unquestioned authority, but as one ancient book among others. All biblical statements are therefore open to challenge before the court of sovereign human reason. Historical criticism understands itself simply as the general scientific method applied to past events, namely history. This means that the critic and his reason are judge and jury, while the Bible, like all other ancient documents, is on trial, whether as defendant or as witness; for even as a witness its credibility depends entirely on the findings of the critical 'court.' This situation, of course, represents a complete reversal of the classic roles of reason and Scripture in Lutheran theology. Under the new critical regime, reason is master and Scripture is servant, whereas formerly it was the other way round" (*Anatomy of an Explosion. Missouri in Lutheran Perspective*, Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977) pp. 113, 114.

¹ Meyer, *Ibid.*

See also the essay titled, "What is Doctrine according to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions?" in which Pastor Harold Wicke made a similar point: "We are not interested in doctrine for doctrine's sake, for we are not and dare never be religious scientists.... As preachers we would be failures if we became the kind of preachers described in the Apology in these words: 'In their sermons they do not teach the Gospel....' " Wicke also makes the point that even though "some parts of Scripture are more important than others for our eternal salvation, ..." nevertheless no part of Scripture is unprofitable or non-doctrinal: "As far as I am concerned ... 'doctrine' and 'Scripture' are synonymous" (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 57, Jan. and Apr. 1960, pp. 34-49 and 81-97).

^{li} *Luther's Works*, Vol. 41, pp. 152, 153

^{lii} Pieper, p. 427

^{liii} Marquardt, p. 52

^{liv} *Ibid.*, p. 127

^{lv} Ibid., p. 62

^{lvi} Ibid., p. 63

^{lvii} Ibid., p. 65 (The opposite, “high-church” extreme places the Sacrament above the Word and is a return to Romanism.)

^{lviii} Lillegard, pp. 249, 250

^{lix} John Meyer in an essay titled, “Remarks on Eph. 4:1-16,” says: “The oneness of the spirit is threatened whenever the Word of God is adulterated with errors, may they seem ever so insignificant, and when external things are allowed to interfere with the mutual contact of brethren ... (such as) a Christian who would isolate himself from a local church; or ... a congregation that would isolate itself from larger church bodies” (*Quartalschrift*, Vol. 41, October 1944) p. 219

^{lx} “How does the Lutheran Church fare (under the judgment of God)? ... Our Confessions are scriptural. They do teach the Gospel rightly, and they speak of the sacraments as real Gospel. But to what extent do our churches of today succeed in appropriating the many Gospel notes in their Confessions and in the writings of their great reformer? We cannot be expected to preach the Confessions, of course. Every age has its own special problems and demands its own language. But we know only too well that there are those in our pulpits in all lands today who have become victims of the temptation to level or lower their message so that it will conform to all the modern tendencies which, in principle, eliminate the old Gospel of grace and sin to replace it by a false Gospel of auto-redemption. The ways of adulterating the Gospel are so many” (J.L. Neve, *Story and Significance of the Augsburg Confession*, Burlington, Iowa: The Lutheran Literary Board, 1930) p. 147

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