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Notes on the "Satis Est" in Article VII of the Augustana

By JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

"And to the true unity of the Church *it is enough* [italics our own] to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" (*Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelica et administratione sacramentorum*). So reads one of the most important statements in the Augsburg Confession. It is inserted between a definition of the "one holy Church" and the rejection of the Romanist teaching that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should everywhere be alike. This antecedent and subsequent context must be kept in mind by all who wish to understand what the writers of the Augustana meant to emphasize when they here wrote their significant *satis est*.

There is no need for describing at this place the Romanist doctrine of the Church in detail, but its main features might be represented, nevertheless, since it was against this papistic doctrine that Articles VII and VIII of the Augustana were chiefly directed.

Already John Eck, in his *Enchiridion locorum communium*, had presented the doctrine of the Church as the first and foremost head.¹ The subtle doctor was fully aware

¹ Cf. G. Plitt, *Einleitung in die Augustana*. Erlangen, Verlag Andreas Deichert, 1868 (2). Pp. 206 ff. P. Tschackert, *Die Entstehung der lutherischen und der reformierten Kirchenlehre*. Goettingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1910. Pp. 281 ff.

of what he did when in his *Catechism* he made the dogma concerning the Church the first and foremost for discussion. For Romanist theology that doctrine is fundamental. As the papistic historian Laemmer points out, all other doctrines are ultimately based upon the doctrine of the Church.²

Now, already Prierias, in dealing with Luther's new, startling tenets concerning the Church, had defined the Church as follows: "The Church universal is essentially the convocation for divine worship of all who believe in Christ. The Church universal in truth is virtually the Roman Church, the head of all churches, and the Pope."³ Thus at the very beginning of his controversy with Rome, Luther was forced to take issue with his opponents on this important point, and it is his theology on the Church that finds expression in Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession.

In the two brief articles there are found ten different statements regarding the Church: 1. The Church will continue forever. 2. The Church is the congregation of saints and true believers (a definition of the Church, which, against Eck, Luther had defended as the *ecclesia occulta*, or *ecclesia invisibilis*).⁴ 3. The congregation of saints exists wherever the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered (for this is the sense of the somewhat ambiguous phrasing as we learn from the Apology and also from the fact that Luther never identified the *una sancta* with any visible orthodox church). 4. To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. 5. Traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, need not be everywhere alike. 6. In this life (in the visible Church) hypocrites and evil persons are mingled with believers. 7. It is lawful to use the Sacraments administered by wicked men. 8. The Sacraments and the Word are effectual because of Christ's institution and command. 9. For this reason the Sacraments and the Word are effectual even if they are administered by wicked persons. 10. The Lutherans reject the corresponding subjectivistic antithesis of the Donatists.—It is well for us to remember these ten points when considering the *satis est*, because they add to the clarification of its mean-

² Plitt, p. 206.³ Plitt, p. 207.⁴ Plitt, p. 210.

ing by affording a general overview of the matter in controversy.

The question now confronting us is this: "Does the Augustana mean to limit the requirement for church unity to certain doctrines pertaining to the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, or does it merely desire to place the evangelical doctrine, which must be maintained, in opposition to man-made traditions that must be rejected, if they are insisted upon as necessary for justification?" We believe that it is the latter which the writers of the Augustana had in mind. While emphasizing the evangelical doctrine as necessary, they regarded human traditions as not necessary for salvation. In other words, they did not hold that only certain Gospel fundamentals are necessary for the true unity of the Church, while there need not be any agreement in nonfundamentals, but the antithesis is between doctrine and ceremonies.

To this, we believe, the very statements in the two Articles themselves point. Against Romanism the Augsburg Confession stresses as necessary for church unity the Word of God. The expression "doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" here manifestly stands for the entire evangelical teaching of Holy Scripture over against all man-made tradition which according to papistic belief must be observed. In Article VII Lutheranism bows to the divine Word, but turns its back upon all human institutions, especially if these are taken out of the realm of adiaphora and are inculcated as necessary for salvation. Here is Luther's bold challenge on behalf of the *Sola Scriptura* over against all decretals and institutions of the Papacy.

This meaning, it seems to us, is suggested also by the very rejection of the Donatistic antithesis. It is true, the subjectivism of Donatism, at least indirectly, denies the objectivity of the means of grace, and therefore Donatism had to be censured. There was also a historical reason why the repudiation of Donatism should be stressed at this point, for the Lutherans wished to show themselves adherents of the Apostolic Church and thus disprove the papistic charge that they were no more than a mere sect. Nevertheless, the rejection of Donatism at this point is significant also because it demonstrates that the Lutherans regarded as essential for true

unity not merely a number of Gospel fundamentals, while closing their eyes to such lesser vagaries as those of Donatism. On the contrary, while Donatism constituted an aberration in the area of nonfundamentals, the Lutherans condemned it as an error that must not be tolerated. The condemnation of Donatism lies on the same level as that of the Novatian non-fundamental in Article XII and that of the millennial non-fundamental in Article XVII. The Augustana thus brooks no perversion of the Christian doctrine at all, no deviation from God's Word in the least, just as it does not condone any enforcement of man-made rites as necessary for salvation.

The most cogent proof for the fact that the antithesis in Article VII is between doctrine and ceremonies is supplied by the Apology of the Augustana. As it is well known, the Romanists, in their Confutation, had rejected the entire Seventh Article as Hussite. They contended that evil people and sinners belong to the Church, because John compares the Church to a threshing floor on which wheat and chaff are heaped together. At the same time they insisted that the universal rites or ceremonies⁵ were binding on all men. This compelled the Lutherans to take issue with their adversaries on the disputed point.

As one studies the Apology on Articles VII and VIII,⁶ he finds that the arguments against the Confutation are clearly and sharply stated. The Apology shows that the wicked and hypocrites indeed belong to the Church "according to the outward fellowship of the signs of the Church," which means that they belong *outwardly* to the *visible Church*. But it rightly contends that the Church is "originally a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in hearts." This "inward communion of eternal blessings in the heart" has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. According to this inward fellowship, the wicked are not members of the Church, for the Church is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22 sq.), and those in whom Christ does not act cannot be members of His body (1-5). "The wicked are in the Church only in name, not

⁵ Cf. Dr. E. Koellner, *Symbolik der lutherischen Kirche*. Hamburg, Friedrich Perthes, 1837. Pp. 408 ff.

⁶ Triglot, Concordia, pp. 227 ff.

in fact" (7), and this even the adversaries acknowledge, for they regard the wicked as dead members of the Church (6). Proof for the Lutheran teaching is then supplied both from Scripture and the Church Fathers.

The Apology next rejects the Romanist definition of the Church, namely, that it is the supreme outward monarchy of the whole world, in which the Roman pontiff necessarily has unquestioned power, which no one is permitted to dispute or censure, to frame articles of faith; to abolish, according to his pleasure, the Scriptures; to appoint rites or worship and sacrifices; likewise, to frame such laws as he may wish, and to dispense and exempt from whatever laws he may wish, divine, canonical, or civil, and so forth (23). Since the true Church of Christ is not at all such an outward affair or organization, the Apology repudiates the papistic definition of the Church as unscriptural. "Neither must we transfer to the Popes what belongs to the true Church, namely, that they are pillars of the truth, that they do not err" (27). Nevertheless, when the Sacraments are administered by wicked men or hypocrites, they remain efficacious, "because, on account of the call of the Church, they represent the person of Christ, and do not represent their own persons" (28).

The matter of the *essence* of the Church and of the objective *efficacy of the means of grace* when administered by hypocrites and wicked men, having thus been disposed of, the Apology next defends the declaration of Article VII that "to the unity of the Church it is sufficient to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments; nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by men should be alike everywhere" (31). In this exposition there are two noteworthy statements. In the first place, the Apology stresses the fact that it is speaking of a *spiritual unity* (31). "Those are one harmonious Church who believe in one Christ; who have one Gospel, one Spirit, one faith, the same Sacraments" (*ibid.*). In emphasizing this point no attempt is made at distinguishing between essential and nonessential teachings, between fundamentals and nonfundamentals. The stress is entirely on the Christian doctrine and its acceptance over against man-made traditions. This is the first emphasis.

The second is this, that since spiritual unity is secured by

faith in the one Christ, human rites are not at all necessary, no matter whether they be universal or particular. But why this emphatic repudiation of ceremonies? The Apology answers this question by pointing out the fact that human traditions have been inculcated as "necessary services for meriting justification" (32), so that "no one can be a Christian unless he observe such traditions" (*ibid.*). "The question at issue is whether the observances of human traditions are acts of worship necessary for righteousness before God" (34). For the sake of tranquillity [unity and good order] indeed universal rites should be observed (33), but what the Apology rebukes is that they are drawn into the article of justification and salvation (37). In other words, traditions are rejected as a part of the Romanist system of work-righteousness.

In discussing this point at greater length, the Apology, at least indirectly, shows that our contention is the correct one. It says: "They [the Romanists] wish that the *rites* derived from the Apostles be retained; they do not wish the *doctrine* (*italics our own*) of the Apostles to be retained" (38). Here, then, Melancthon shows that the antithesis in Article VII is not between certain Gospel fundamentals and other, non-fundamental doctrines, but between the doctrine of the Apostles, which must be retained, and the papistic rites, which must be rejected. The Apology argues that since the Apostles have not burdened the consciences with traditions, the Romanists likewise should not do so, which indeed is a fair argument.

It has been said that the Schwabach Articles, from which the major articles of the Augustana have been developed, prove that the *satis est* of Article VII of the Augustana must be understood in the sense that the antithesis here is between Gospel fundamentals and nonfundamentals, so that to the true unity of the Church only the former are necessary and not the latter. But no such proof is offered by the Schwabach Articles. This weighty confession sets forth the doctrine of the Church in its *Twelfth Article*, after it has first treated the doctrines of God, Christ's person and work, justification, faith and good works, how justifying faith is obtained, the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, their essence and effects, and Confession and Absolution. In Article XII the Schwabach Articles, speaking of the Church, then say: "This Church is nothing else than the believers in Christ who hold,

believe, and teach the above-mentioned articles and parts and for this suffer persecution and martyrdom in the world; for where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are used aright, there is the Holy Christian Church, and it is not bound by laws and outward pomp to place and time, to persons and ceremonies."

How are we to understand these words? Do they mean to say that it is sufficient for Christians at all times merely to cling to the fundamental Gospel doctrines stated in paragraphs I—XII of the Schwabach Articles, so that there need not be doctrinal unity also on other points? To assert this certainly means to ignore the historical setting at the time when the Schwabach Articles were composed. These articles were written to set forth the points on which the Lutherans differed not only from the Romanists, but (at least in part) also from the Reformed. They were doctrines in controversy on which agreement had to be reached by all means; for only where these doctrines are believed and confessed, there, according to these Articles, the Holy Christian Church is found. Hence if unity of doctrine concerning these articles of faith was stressed, it was because on these points there was a radical difference of opinion between the Lutherans and their adversaries. This point must not be forgotten.

But certainly the Schwabach Articles did not mean to say that by the acceptance of these doctrines, all of which are fundamental, all demands for a true church union or for complete unity of faith are satisfied. On the contrary, what the Schwabach Articles mean to assert is that where these articles of faith are held, in other words, where thus "the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are used aright," there is that Holy Christian Church that is not bound by laws and outward pomp to place and time, to persons and ceremonies," in other words, there is the *una sancta*, the *ecclesia invisibilis*, the communion of saints, and not yet a visible orthodox church organization, though, of course, where these requirements are fulfilled, there believers are on the way also to outward union. Thus the argument from the Schwabach Articles loses its force. Luther certainly did not regard unity in fundamentals as the only requirement for church union; nor was this the opinion of his co-workers.

That the founding fathers of the Lutheran Church, who

wrote our Confessions, did not wish to limit the doctrines on which there must be agreement to the Gospel fundamentals, is clear from their insistence upon nonfundamental doctrines in other places of their Confessions. A close study of the Lutheran Confessions as a whole reveals a number of very important doctrinal attitudes of their writers.

In the first place, they were eager to know the divine truth as this is set forth in Holy Scripture. They were in the fullest meaning of the term *Schrifttheologen*, loyal students of the Bible, searching with greatest diligence the canonical books of the Old and the New Testament in order to be sure of possessing and confessing the whole pure truth which God has made known to man in His Word. Again, as we study the Lutheran Confessions, we note in their authors a most consecrated zeal to profess the truth over against all manner of adversaries that departed from the Word, no matter whether these were Romanists, Calvinists, or gross enthusiasts. They were not at all indifferent to the divine Word, nor were they inclined to sacrifice the divine truth to gain the friendship or favor of influential, but erring men. They were so completely dedicated to the divine Word that only the Word mattered to them. Hence they could not stoop to hypocrisy and double talk. They were sincere both in their expression and their confession of faith, speaking in the plainest terms so as to be truly understood by friend and foe, concealing nothing, but showing all men honestly and squarely where they stood with regard to all moot questions and disputed points of doctrine. Love of truth, willingness to confess the truth, and cordial sincerity in stating the truth marked all those who published our glorious Lutheran Confessions, and all these virtues were rooted in their sincere Christianity.

That the writers of the Formula of Concord so understood the *satis est* is evident from the fact that they embodied in this masterful Confession also an article on the descent of Christ into hell. That article, while touching on fundamentals, is itself a nonfundamental doctrine. After all, it might be argued, it does not matter anything for the salvation of believers, whether they interpret Christ's descent into hell as a part of His suffering and humiliation or whether they think of it as having taken place only according to Christ's soul, and the like. But not so did the writers of the

Formula of Concord feel. They deprecated confusion and offense as also all uncertainty and indefiniteness of teaching in the Church. So they presented for subscription and adoption by all Lutherans also an article on Christ's descent into hell, thus closing the controversy which had been waged on this teaching for some time.

Again, the doctrine concerning predestination is non-fundamental, for a believer may be saved even if he has never heard a word about the eternal election of believers unto everlasting life. Yet there is in the **Formula of Concord Article XI**, "Of God's Eternal Election," in which are rejected all Calvinistic and synergistic errors and in which this comforting and important doctrine is set forth in its whole Scriptural truth and purity in an unparalleled way, and today we thank God for their splendid presentation of this wonderful truth.

Lastly, in **Article XII**, among the doctrines which "the other factions and sects" taught, there are quite a number which are either directly nonfundamental or which at least border on the area of the nonfundamental, so that from the viewpoint of doctrinal indifferentists there really was no need of grouping them in a special roster of "erroneous articles." Yet **Article XII** condemns such nonfundamentals as, for example, "That a congregation [church] in which sinners are still found is no true Christian assembly" (*Triglot*, p. 1099); or "That no sermon should be heard or attended in those churches in which the papal masses have previously been said" (*ibid.*); or "That a Christian cannot with a good conscience be an inkeeper, merchant, or cutler" (*ibid.*), and the like. All these errors in nonfundamentals are condemned in an unqualified manner as unworthy of a place in a Christian creed, and all Lutherans are called upon to disavow them. Certainly, the Lutheran Confessions do not condone the maintenance of error in nonfundamentals. We, of course, do not consider at this time the problems of terminology and definition which will arise in the course of the theological formulation of Scriptural teaching, or the so-called "problems" of theology, or the question regarding the manner in which weak brethren should be dealt with who hold errors in nonfundamentals, but what interests us here is the principle of tolerating errors in nonfundamentals, while insisting upon

unity in essentials. The Lutheran Confessions assuredly do not uphold the view: "In essentials unity; in nonessentials charity," in case errors in nonessentials demand equal rights in the Church with the divine truth.

But to conclude. Our Confessions recognize the existence of the *una sancta* wherever the Gospel is preached; for through the Gospel the Holy Ghost works faith in the hearts of men, and wherever there are believers, there is the communion of saints, the Church invisible. That is one very emphatic part of their teaching. But there is another which is no less emphatic, namely, that the visible churches, or groups of Christians organized into congregations, exist to preach the Gospel and confess the divine truth, as Christ commands this in Matt. 10:32-33 and other Scripture passages. If the objection is raised that this was only an idiosyncrasy of the authors of the Formula of Concord and not the position of Luther, as also of Melancthon in his best days, let the objector be reminded of the ideal of true unity in faith which the signatories of the Augustana depict in the "Preface to the Emperor Charles V," where they say: ". . . 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 and do battle under Him, we ought to confess the one Christ . . . and everything ought to be conducted according to the truth of God; and this is what, with most fervent prayers, we entreat of God" (*Triglot*, p. 41).

This means that these honest, rugged confessors of the divine truth aimed at complete unity in faith, or true doctrinal agreement, to the total exclusion of all uncertainty, indifferentism, and confusion. Just that, too, is the meaning of the touching prayer at the close of Article XI, "Of God's Eternal Election" (Formula of Concord, Epitome, *Triglot*, p. 837): "May Almighty God and the Father of our Lord Jesus grant the grace of His Holy Ghost that we all may be one in Him, and constantly abide in this Christian unity, which is well pleasing to Him! Amen."

