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Factors in Lutheran Unity

By E. GEORGE PEARCE

EDITORIAL NOTE: The various Lutheran groups from Poland, Germany, and the Baltic provinces who have found an asylum in England, are anxious to build one united Lutheran Church in their new homeland. The essay sets forth the basic premises on which such a union is to be established.

CYRIL, Bishop of Jerusalem in the fourth century, advised his people that when they attended a divine service in a strange city, they ought not merely to enquire for the church or for the Lord's house, because Marcionists and Manicheans and all manner of sects professed to be the Church and called their meeting places the House of the Lord; but they ought to ask: Where is the Catholic Church? The name "Catholic," used in all the early creeds and in the writings of the Fathers, came into use first to distinguish the universal Christian Church from the national Jewish synagogue, and later, as sects arose and separated themselves from the universal Church, the term came to mean orthodox.

In current ecumenical discussions a great deal of thought is given to the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant." In the opinion of some Anglicans the term "Catholic" may not be applied to the Lutheran Church.

In the narrowed, denominational sense in which these words are used today, the Lutheran Church has no particular preference for one or the other. Both are historic titles which once stood for a clear distinction between the true and the false doctrine. "Catholic" meant the universal and orthodox faith; "Protestant," now frequently negative and usually syncretistic, once adequately described the Church's protest against corruption in doctrine and practice. This antithesis is no longer present in these terms.

Our Lutheran fathers, to avoid confusion in the minds of simple Christians, translated *catholicam* in the Apostles' and Nicene

Creeds simply by the word "Christian," but this does not mean that they thereby conceded this ancient title of honor in its initial and proper sense to Rome. "Our Confession is true, godly, and catholic," the Apology says (XIII, 26). Luther's Reformation did not establish a new and different Church. The very term "Reformation" rules out the idea of a new Church and implies that the Church of the Reformation is the same visible Church to which Augustine and Athanasius belonged. If we Lutherans are asked today: "Where was your Church before the Reformation?" there is still no better reply than the homely counterquestion: "Where was your face before you washed it?"

In Luther's mind there was no question that the Church of the Reformation was the historical and legitimate continuation of the Catholic Church of the early ages. He refuted the charge of having disrupted the Church by stating that the unity was broken by the introduction of errors. It was the Church of the Council of Trent and not that of the Augsburg Confession which stepped outside the pale of the catholic faith. Luther maintained that the apostolicity of the Church did not depend upon "the orderly succession of the bishops as Popery pretends" (WA 21.333.32), but upon right doctrine and right Sacraments. For the continuity of the Church founded by Christ and His Apostles this mark was most essential. No Church could be Apostolic or could claim to be catholic which did not preserve and proclaim the Word and Sacraments of the pure Gospel.

In his exegesis of Genesis 25, which describes the struggle of the two sons of Rebecca, Esau and Jacob, of which Paul makes much in Romans 9, Luther says: "The popish Church is not the true Church" (WA 43.386.21). "If you ask the Pope, Why are you the people of God? he replies: Because I sit in the seat of the Apostles Peter and John. I am their successor. Furthermore I base my case on Scripture. 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build My Church!' But a dog or a pig can sit in the seat of Peter" (WA 43.387.14 ff.). The comparison is characteristically blunt, even rude, but the point is made. Luther goes on: in spite of all historic associations and her assertions that outside her there is no church and no salvation, Rome had by her terrible apostasy become a heterodox body, "Israel after the flesh" in the Gospel dis-

pensation. But this did not mean that the Catholic Church, "Israel after the Spirit," had disappeared from the face of the earth. What the Apostles "received from His [Christ's] mouth . . . the same goes on from them, from the Apostles to us, through right bishops, ministers, and preachers, as they have received from the Apostles" (WA 43.404.40). Here is Luther's idea of Apostolic Succession: the *successio* of the pure Gospel continuously preached and handed down from age to age by faithful preachers. "So today," Luther continues, "the Pope has the name of Church. We have not. But we know that we are the true Church, for we have the Word, Sacrament, Keys which Christ left behind Him, not that they might serve our powers or our desires in this life, but that they might prepare us for the Advent of the Son of God" (WA 404.35 f. 6).

I have spoken about "catholicity" not only because Luther (and with him the Church called after his name) is so often charged today with the archheresy of apostasy and with the consequent sin of dividing the Western Church, but also because the relation of Word and Sacrament to the unity of the Church is the only approach to church unity that Lutheran theology can recognize. In the Lutheran view there is no Church without Word and Sacraments. Without agreement in the doctrine of the Gospel and in the administration of the Sacraments, there is no unity in the Church. This conviction is set forth for all the world to see in the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession:

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 and ceremonies instituted by men, should be everywhere alike.

Lutherans believe that church unity discussions must concern themselves with achieving a united understanding and a common use of God's Word and Sacraments. All else is irrelevant. Article VII of the Augustana is the central factor in effecting Lutheran unity in Great Britain as well as anywhere else.

I

If we are to focus our attention on those factors which do affect our striving for Lutheran unity in Great Britain, it may be well,

at the outset, to eliminate those things which do *not* belong to the true unity of the Church.

The basic Article before us states: "Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites and ceremonies instituted by men, should be everywhere alike." Regardless of the weight placed upon "human traditions" by Anglicans and Romanists in ecumenical discussions, our Confessions declare them to be completely irrelevant. "Just as the dissimilar length of day and night does not injure the unity of the Church," the Apology says, "so we believe that the true unity of the Church is not injured by dissimilar rites instituted by men" (Ap. VII, 33). As Edmund Schlink cautions in his *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (p. 279), "traditions," "rites," "ceremonies" refer not only to the holy days and festivals of the church calendar but to the whole area of liturgy and church government. The unity of the Church is the unity of faith, agreement in the Word and Sacraments. To arrogate liturgy or constitution as if these were factors effecting our possible unity is to commit what is among Lutherans the cardinal error of mixing Law and Gospel. Barthianism notwithstanding, Christ is no new Lawgiver. The Gospel does not set forth "a spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word," as the Calvinist Belgic Confession teaches. These are *adiaphora*, or *Mitteldinge*, in which the New Testament allows, and the Church must insist upon and claim, perfect freedom. No man or group of men may dare to command anything concerning which Scripture is silent and thus violate that liberty for which Christ paid His precious blood.

We dare not, of course, forget the Reformation rule: *in statu confessionis nihil est adiaphoron*. Under certain circumstances, *adiaphora* become matters of principle. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Frederick I of Prussia, dismissing doctrinal differences as secondary, sought to unite Lutherans and Calvinists by forbidding polemic sermons and removing from Lutheran churches vestments and crosses which he considered to be "Roman remnants." It was this same misguided ruler, by the way, who sought a Protestant union on a larger scale on the basis of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. A German translation of the Prayer Book was, in fact, used for many years in the Lutheran Court Chapel of St. James in London and in the Chapel Royal in Berlin. But

that was as far as this particular "papering over the cracks" got. "Rites," "ceremonies," and "traditions" need not be alike for the unity of the Church. Therefore the fact that some of us wear black gown and *Besfchen* and others cassock, surplice, and stole has no theological importance whatever for our future Lutheran unity. As Dr. Kramm points out in his *Theology of Martin Luther* (p. 73), Luther deliberately wore different vestments in his two churches and hesitated to print his Wittenberg liturgy lest the "unalterable" Roman Mass be replaced by the "unalterable" liturgy of Wittenberg. The many kinds of church orders or constitutions represented among us have nothing to do with the problem of establishing "true unity" among us. The fact that we have no central administration nor even uniform systems of government in the various national groups is no real factor to be dealt with in our unity discussions, neither *now* nor—if God gives us a united Church—*after*. Once there is agreement in Word and Sacrament, there is "true unity," however many different outward organizations we may be. Organic unity may follow upon this inner unity if thought desirable. And then, any form of church government is permissible which, in the words of Augustana V, provides for "a ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments." Nor do our diverse languages and backgrounds constitute any real problem for unity. We cannot build church unity on the basis of a common language. This is so obvious that I need do no more than state it. Language or nationality does not divide the Church. Nor does it unite it, no more than does the one tongue of the Roman Mass in any way affect the conflicting and contradictory teachings that find shelter in the Roman Church.

Certainly, it does not follow that since agreement in these externals is not a condition for church unity, that they are therefore unimportant or that uniformity in them is of no value. The same Apology that underlines the statement that human traditions need not be everywhere alike goes on to say: "It is pleasing to us that, for the sake of tranquillity, unity, and good order, universal rites be observed" (Ap. VII, 33). The whole of the Tenth Article of the Formula of Concord is devoted to "Church Rites." As Lutherans we ought to retain the same sense of balance as do our Confessions on these outward matters, especially with regard to

liturgy. That the ritual and vestments of our churches have been affected in various ways by the waves of pietism, rationalism, and Calvinism through which they passed is undoubted. That they can benefit by liturgical research it would be foolish to deny. On the other hand, to turn back the hands of the liturgical clock 400 years or 1,000 years and to insist that what took place in the great monastic churches of the Middle Ages is the only proper form of service for our small people's churches of today is an utterly un-Lutheran emphasis. Liturgy, language, and government are important, and we shall continue to study and to discuss them at our meetings, but basically they are *adiaphora* and hence do not come into primary consideration when we discuss the possibility of uniting our churches in Britain.

II

What, then, are the factors which must be considered in unity discussions? Since Augustana VII defines the Church as "the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered" and Augustana V defines the office of the ministry as "the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments," it is certainly pertinent to examine the relation of the Church to the means of grace.

It has been said: "Protestantism is the Church of the *Word*, and Catholicism is the Church of the *Sacraments*." Whatever truth there is in this generalization, the Lutheran Church is emphatically the Church of both Word and Sacraments. These, according to Lutheran conviction, are the dynamic and living means of grace, through which the living Christ creates the Church and keeps it alive until He comes again. The Church lives because her Head and Savior is active in her by the power of His Spirit through Word and Sacraments. Apart from the means of grace, there is no Church. The Apology says that "the Kingdom of Christ exists only with the Word and Sacrament" (Ap. IX, 52). "God's Word cannot be without God's people, and God's people cannot be without God's Word" is an axiom with us as it was with Luther. "The Church of God is present wherever the Word of God is spoken," Luther says, "whether it be in the middle of the Turk's land or in the Pope's land or in hell itself" (WA 43.596.38). "For," he continues, "it is the Word of God which builds the Church. . . ."

Where that is heard, where Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and the forgiveness of sins are administered, there hold fast and conclude most certainly that there is the house of God and that there is the gate of heaven" (WA 43.596.38).

Luther's remark leads to certain important and necessary observations regarding the terms "visible" and "invisible" Church. The Church is, according to Augustana VII, *die Versammlung aller Gläubigen*, the gathering of all believers. But no man can look into another's heart to see whether he is a believer. Hence we agree with the Reformer that "the Church is invisible and is recognizable by faith alone" (WA 4.189.17). The Church is the body of Christ, which, of course, no human eye can see. Therefore the Church is an article of faith as is God Himself. We confess our faith in both in exactly the same words in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds: "I believe in God. . . . I believe in the holy Christian Church." But this does not mean that Lutheran theology spiritualizes the Church away into an abstraction or into a mere idea. "You have insultingly taken me to mean that I would build a Church as Plato builds a state that never was," Martin Luther cried (WA 7.683.9). No, the Church is a reality. It is alive and present, here and now. Not only does it exist, but it can be recognized and found upon earth in the spoken, audible Word and in the visible Sacraments. The Church has, as the Apology says, "outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ" (Ap. VII, 5). Or again to quote the Apology: "We are speaking not of an imaginary Church, which is to be found nowhere, but we say and know certainly that this Church, wherein saints live, is and abides upon earth. . . . And we add the marks: the pure doctrine and the Sacraments" (Ap. IV, 20). So the Church is invisible, but the marks which unflinchingly declare her local existence are visible.

But this does not mean that there are, so to speak, two churches: (1) the visible Church, larger in number and leading into the other; (2) the invisible, the real and inner *una sancta*; or, in the language of Pietism, two concentric circles: the larger circle, the visible Church, and within, the smaller circle of true believers, the *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. Placing the "visible" and the "invisible"

Church into such an antithesis is again a mixing of Law and Gospel and is foreign to Lutheran theology. Luther himself used the term "invisible" in reference to the Church frequently, but, as far as modern research can establish, "visible" only once in all his writings. Seventeenth-century theologians brought in this terminology from the outside to repudiate the extravagant Roman claims of Bellarmine, who stated that the true Church was the Church of Rome, as visible and tangible a gathering of men as the people of Rome or the kingdom of Gaul or the republic of Venice. The way in which these terms are used today in Reformed discussions—and sometimes even among Lutherans—runs the danger of spiritualizing the *una sancta* into an utterly otherworldly abstraction and of externalizing the "visible" Church into a completely mundane religious society.

But unless we use this antithesis "visible" and "invisible," how can we describe the paradox that in those places where the one holy, catholic, and Apostolic Church is being created and sustained by the preaching of the Gospel, there may be hypocrites as well as true saints, unbelievers as well as believers? For Christ clearly says that there are tares among the wheat and speaks of good and bad fishes caught in the net (Matt. 13:25; Matt. 13:47). Nor do the Lutheran Confessions labor under an illusion in this matter. The Article following the one before us confesses that although "the Church properly (*ecclesia proprie dicta*) is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless . . . in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith" (CA VIII). This distinction between "Church in the proper sense" (*ecclesia proprie dicta*) and "Church in the improper sense" (*ecclesia large dicta*) is a valuable and a safe one. "Although," as the Apology says, "they are members of the Church," such unrepentant sinners are not the Church, but are "members of the kingdom of the Devil" (Ap. VII). "The Church, properly so called," the Apology continues, "is the congregation of saints, who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and have the Holy Ghost." "The Church in its wide sense embraces good and evil . . . the wicked are in the Church only in name, not in fact" (Ap. VII). It is in this wider sense that the New Testament refers the term *ekklēsia* (Rev. 2:12) to include certain heretics who were members of the congregation at Pergamos but certainly

not of the *una sancta*. Church, in its improper sense, includes all those who use the Word of God and receive the Holy Sacraments, whether they believe or benefit by them or not. And since such an organization of professing Christians is external and visible, then in this sense we may say such a church is "visible." But even in such a gathering the true believers are known only to God and hence remain invisible to men, though we may be sure that the invisible Church is there because the means of grace are used. In the proper sense, however, there is but one Church, and that is and must remain invisible.

To sum up. The Church is the congregation of believers. It is created through, and cannot exist without, Word and Sacraments. The Church is invisible, yet no Platonic dream of the other world, but exists in this world and is recognizable through the visible and audible means of grace. The ecclesiastical organizations upon earth, since they include unbelievers and hypocrites, may be termed "visible" churches, using the word "church" in an improper sense.

III

From this fact proceed a number of consequences vital to ecumenical discussions.

First of all, it is obvious that such discussions are not concerned with the unity of the *una sancta*. The invisible Church is one Church. It is the unity of all those who believe in Christ, "the whole household of God" (Eph. 2:19), the "whole family in heaven and earth" (Eph. 3:15), the multitude gathered from out of "every kindred and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:19). It is the community of all saints, living, as the Apology says, "here and there in all the world, in various kingdoms, islands, lands, and cities, from the rising of the sun to its setting, who have truly learned to know Christ and His Gospel" (Ap. VII, 20). All these Christians together, though they may not know one another, already have "one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father over all"; and though they may not feel nor see this unity, nevertheless stand before God as one communion of believers. This unity has been created by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. The unity of the invisible Church is and always has been an established fact. It is not something which must yet be achieved by men. "Is Christ

divided?" Paul asks (1 Cor. 1:13). Can His body be divided? The unity of the invisible Church is not a factor in our unity conversations.

As a consequence it becomes immediately apparent that the question of personal faith is not at issue here. Faith is invisible to men. We cannot look into each other's hearts to see whether faith is there. That is presuming upon God's domain. We cannot make personal faith the basis for establishing church fellowship. According to the law of love, we assume that every professing Christian, inside and outside the Lutheran Church, has faith, but can we base church unity on this assumption of faith? If so, how can we restrict such fellowship to those who bear the name "Lutheran"? What of the good Christians that are in other denominations where Word and Sacrament are in use? If the confessional principle has any meaning at all, it must be obvious that the question of personal faith does not come into consideration at all. But we can hear, and, like Luther, we claim the Biblical right to judge a man's doctrine, the profession of his lips. We cannot read hearts, but we can read theological books, hear essays, and listen to a man's words. And if we reject as error what we hear with the clear-cut *damnamus* of the Lutheran Confessions, we are condemning *doctrines*, not presuming to stand in the place of God and condemning *persons*. Augustana VII does not list faith in the heart as a church unity condition; it does not require what is in any case quite impossible, that we determine the state of a man's heart. It refers us to conditions that can be seen and heard: that the Gospel is "rightly taught" and the Sacraments "rightly administered." The inner unity of faith is God's domain, and we can rest assured by His promise that it already exists. Our task must be to manifest its correlative by our common confession and understanding of what God's Word is and teaches and of what He gives us in His Holy Sacraments.

The Lutheran Church does not "excommunicate" or unchurch all other churches. It does not say: "You are not Christians because you are not Lutheran." It never confuses the *una sancta* with the Lutheran Church or with other earthly organizations. It has never claimed to be God's only channel of blessing in a world of sinners. It recognizes and acknowledges that wherever the Gospel and Sacraments are in use, and even though mixed with error, there are

members of the body of Christ. Martin Luther said some very hard things about the Church of Rome. "Though the Papacy is the very Antichrist, though Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, yet there remain in it Baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel . . . therefore the Roman Church is holy, because it has the holy name of God, the Gospel, Baptism, etc." (WA 40.1). Nor did Luther deny the name "Church" to the *Schwaermer*, but conceded that the Church exists "even where fanatical spirits do reign, if only they deny not the Word and Sacraments" (WA 40.1).

Yet Luther repudiated Melancthon's appeasement attempt with Rome and thrust aside the hand of fellowship that Zwingli offered at Marburg. So today the Lutheran Church, though it rejects the errors of other churches and refuses the hand of fellowship, nevertheless goes farther than any other church in really holding that the Church of Christ is present in other denominations. Where Word and Sacrament are, even though men may have a partial or imperfect understanding of them, there is Christ, there are men who believe in Him, there is the Church. But the faith which unites such believers to Christ and to all other believers is something which cannot be seen or perceived by men. Believers within the Lutheran Church are by their faith joined together spiritually with believers in the Church of England or the Plymouth Brethren just as closely as with other Lutherans. But that does not provide a basis for fellowship with such bodies. Indeed, if we were to make membership in the invisible Church, or personal faith in the Redeemer, the grounds for outward fellowship, where would we start and where would we stop? It is impossible to know for certain that there is personal faith even in the hearts of those who are very close to us. The unity of the invisible Church is not under discussion, and whatever we may say or do will not affect that inner relation which ties all believers in all Christ-preaching denominations to Christ and to one another.

So we are faced with the unhappy paradox that there is on the one hand but one Church, the *una sancta ecclesia*, the *congregatio sanctorum* united in one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all; and yet, on the other hand, there are many "churches" which are not one in the doctrine of the Gospel and in the administration of the Sacraments. How is this contradiction of one Church yet

many Churches to be solved? One oft-suggested solution says that the various Churches are different but equally legitimate expressions of the one Truth and the one Christ. The Anglican reunion movement called this the "branch theory." Just as a prism breaks up a single ray into many different colors, so the one light of Christianity manifests itself in the variegated hues of modern interdenominationalism. All are needed to express complete Christianity. Another solution suggests that the hope for a united Church must be founded on life, not doctrine. The fellowship of Christian love and faith overarches all the little differences that theological hairsplitters have set up to divide Christianity. Life, not creed, is vital and supreme. Doctrinal disagreements are like the poor — we shall always have them with us. But if not to be actually ignored, they dare not hinder the Churches from coming together. Both these views are held in Reformed circles today, and they are not without admirers even within what is called "Lutheranism." That we cannot accept these cheap solutions is clear from the fact that both of them treat God's Word as of little account, as something we can bargain with and compromise. A confessional Lutheran can never yield to overtures in church unity, each group willing to surrender something of its conviction in order to reach a common result. We cannot negotiate and bargain with what is not ours, but God's truth. Any ecumenicity which by-passes or depreciates doctrine is not only dishonest and a betrayal, but it defeats its own purposes. The painful experience of church history is that whenever attempts have been made to unite Churches without first establishing what is truth and what is error, unity has not been achieved, but, what is worse, error has been magnified and multiplied.

What, then, is the solution? The great article of the Augsburg Confession which is before us is perhaps the first attempt in Christian history where a Church has defined confessionally what the Church is and what is needed for its unity. The Article says plainly: "For the unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments." And this consensus consists in the Gospel being "rightly taught" or "*rein gepredigt*" and in the Sacraments being "*laut des Evangelii*" or "rightly administered." No more than such agreement is needed but also nothing less than this. This fact brings

the conditions needed for church unity into an area where men can see and perceive. We cannot read hearts, but we can hear and perceive the profession of lips. If there is agreement in the confession of doctrine and in the practice determined by that doctrine, if we agree in our understanding and handling of the Gospel and Sacraments, then we are one Church, and we may have intercommunion and joint worship and work. Indeed, if we establish that we are thus agreed, we *must* enter into complete fellowship with one another. It would be sinful separatism to keep aloof for another minute. But it is just as plain a teaching of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions that where this consensus is not established, we believe it is sinful unionism to worship together as if such agreement had been achieved. True unity of the Church is unity in the confession of the truth. Fellowship is created by unity of faith and not unity of faith by fellowship.

By way of digression, it ought to be said distinctly and clearly what is surely self-evident — that uniformity in theological terminology is not required. Coming from different cultural and theological backgrounds as we do, we may have different approaches and different modes of expressing ourselves in doctrinal matters. We who come from the theological seminaries of the New World are sometimes baffled and perhaps a little suspicious of some of the philosophical-theological language that German divinity faculties produce. We would prefer the simple language of the Bible or the familiar forms of traditional Lutheranism. But none has the right to suspect false doctrine simply because terminology is used which is foreign to his own background. We must approach one another with a will to understand what is meant by what we say or write, whether it be in the language of the past or of the present. The theological thought forms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rightfully hold a place of honor in Lutheran theology and ought not be lightly cast aside.

A different matter is that of practice. Sometimes doctrine and practice are so separated that it is said that although there must be agreement in doctrine because it is divine, it is not necessary in practice, since it is purely human. This is an oversimplification which cannot be accepted. True, there are many matters of practice which lie completely in the realm of *adiaphora*, in which, as

we have already noticed, uniformity is not required. Church rites and ceremonies, the form of church government, are left to the discretion of men because God's Word neither prohibits nor commands concerning these. But there is also a large area of Christian practice in which uniformity is obligatory for the simple reason that such practice is clearly based on Scriptural truth. Here hearing and doing go hand in hand. Refusal to apply a Christian principle to real-life situations is in fact a denial of that principle. "He that saith I know Him," St. John says "and keepeth not His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). Thus, whether or not we use the same hymnal and order of service is not a theological factor to be considered for the uniting of our Churches. But our practice with regard to open or close Communion, Christian burial, our relations to other Churches, *are* issues that we need to face as a necessary preparation for fellowship. And this is clearly implied in the Article before us. The Gospel "rightly taught" and the Sacraments "rightly administered" certainly include not only the doctrine but also the practice. Before we can become one Church, we must arrive at agreement not only in how we understand the Gospel and Sacraments but also in how we handle and dispense them.

What of the Confessions? Are they factors that affect the realization of one Lutheran Church in this country? Lutheran theology has always permitted the Confessions only secondary authority as *norma normata*, while the Holy Scriptures as *norma normans* have always been regarded as the final and supreme authority. Nevertheless, the Confessions are still *norma normata* for every pastor ordained into the Lutheran ministry. We have been glad to place ourselves under confessional subscription because we are convinced that the symbols are a true and clear exposition of the holy Word of God. Augustana VII does not of course mention the confessional writings as a mark of the Church as it does Word and Sacraments, yet what are the Confessions but the Gospel *recte doctum* and the Sacraments *recte administrata*? Since the Confessions are nothing but the *consensus de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum* of Augustana VII, they are certainly factors to be considered in our unity endeavor.

We often speak of the Lutheran Church as the Church of the

Augsburg Confession. May we always look back with pride and respect to the Confessions, which gave us our character and strength! Ever since Philip Melanchthon there have been two kinds of Lutherans and two attitudes towards the Confessions. You find these two streams of Lutheranism reappearing under different names in every stage of history since Luther's death. There is, on the one hand, the "peace at any price" policy of Melanchthon, the minimizing of doctrine by Pietism, the rationalism of the *Aufklärung*, which finally led right outside Christ and His Bible into virtual paganism. There is, on the other hand, the other stream of Lutheranism, the school of Flacius, Chemnitz, and Gerhard with "rigid orthodoxy," "ultraconservatism," but it did retain its positive Lutheran and Christian character. Whatever its sins might have been, it remained the Church of the Augsburg Confession, standing watch like a sentinel over the great truths of the Reformation. Our Church preserves its strength and character so long as it stands firmly on the solid ground of the Bible and the Confessions. Today Lutheran churches are discovering their symbols anew. In the last decades the Confessions have become alive again in the Lutheran Church in a manner unknown to other churches. While the Anglicans are trying their best to forget and bury their Thirty-Nine Articles, Lutherans are suddenly taking a great interest in their historic creeds. Hardly a conference goes by without some eloquent and solemn tribute to the enduring value of the Book of Concord. What testimonials have not been heard on the floor of our conferences here in England! But are the Lutheran Churches of the world still truly confessional Churches? Have our Churches in Britain a right to the name the Church of the Augsburg Confession? What is being preached from Lutheran pulpits? What is being taught in confirmation classes? What kind of doctrine is heard on the floor of our conferences? Is the pure doctrine of the Bible as set forth in the six Lutheran Confessions the living message we are proclaiming today? Are we willing and ready to accept the clear-cut statements censuring false doctrine and false practices? Are we ready to draw the consequences, to "judge doctrine, to reject doctrines contrary to the Gospel," as the Augustana says? A *de iure*, official subscription to the Confessions at our ordination is good, but it must be supplemented and supported by a *de facto* actual preach-

ing and teaching in all our pulpits. We shall never come to be a united Church unless we take our Confessions seriously. The way to church unity is never around them, but in them and through them. The symbolical books of the Lutheran Reformation are therefore a vital factor in our unity discussions.

One question remains. How large a unity is necessary before church fellowship can be established? To what extent must there be agreement in doctrine and practice? None of us would be willing to grant that what is called "simple acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior," so common a formula for interdenominational alliances, is a sufficient basis. Is it enough if we agree in the main article of the Christian religion? Augustana VII says simply: "It is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments." It does not qualify the amount of agreement in any way. Can we? Can we, so far as loyalty to God's Word is concerned, draw the line anywhere, even at what are called "fundamental" doctrines? If all Scriptures are God-inspired, have we the right to minimize *any* clearly revealed teaching of the Bible? Surely to confess that the Scriptures teach a certain truth carries with it the obligation to believe and teach that truth and to defend it against gainsayers. If God has spoken, no man has the right to reject or to refuse to believe and teach what He has said, even if it be termed a minor or unimportant point. No man has the right to ask toleration for the smallest error, and no man has the right to grant it. The whole of Scriptural doctrine must be kept free from falsification and error. Even for the noble end we have in view, there is not a single clearly revealed Bible truth that we may surrender or compromise with impunity. In his commentary on the words in Galatians "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump," Luther says: "Doctrine is not ours but God's, whose ministers only we are called; therefore we may not change or diminish one tittle thereof. . . . The doctrine ought therefore to be, as it were, a golden circle, round and whole, wherein there is no breach; for where there is the very least breach, the circle is no longer complete. . . . This place therefore maketh very much for us against these cavilers which say that we break charity to the great hurt and damage of the churches. But we protest that we desire nothing more than to be at unity with all men, so that they cleave

unto the doctrine of faith entire and uncorrupt. If we cannot obtain this, in vain do they require charity of us. Accursed be that charity which is preserved through the loss of the doctrine of faith. . . . Therefore, when they make this matter of so little account, they do sufficiently witness what store they set by the Word of God. Which if they did believe it to be the Word of God, they would not so trifle with it, but would hold it in high honor, and without any disputing or doubting they would put their faith in it, knowing that one word of God is all, and all are one. Likewise they would know that one article of doctrine is all, and all are one, so that if one is set aside, then little by little all are lost" (WA 40.2.47). One of Luther's deepest convictions was that one point in doctrine is more important than heaven and earth.

Whether one day we shall have one Lutheran Church in Great Britain, God only knows. But we know that we shall not arrive at a God-pleasing unity by glossing over differences or by agreeing not to criticize one another's views when they contradict each other. We know that there is but one way to our desired end: that as Christian brothers we go back to the Holy Scriptures there to find harmony in Word and Sacrament. We know that through these means of grace the Lord Jesus is present among us and by His Holy Spirit is building up among us the communion of saints, the company of sinners justified by the faith of the Son of God. We know that with all our discussions we can never ourselves create the unity for which we have striven and prayed these past years, but that it must be God who will grant this blessing as a gift of His grace. May His Holy Spirit lead us through our discussions in these days and in all our future meetings to a deeper understanding of His holy Word and His blessed Sacraments that we may find ourselves one Church with one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all. So be it. God grant it.

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