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The Unity of the Church

(Article VII of the Augsburg Confession)

By PAUL M. BRETSCHER

THIS is an anniversary year for the Lutheran Church. The Augsburg Confession, the foremost of our Lutheran symbols,¹ came into existence 425 years ago. Prepared by Melancthon and approved by Luther,² it was read in German at the Diet of Augsburg on June 25, 1530. Copies of the German and Latin text were presented to Emperor Charles V. This 1530 version, known as the "unaltered" Augsburg Confession, has since that memorable day been the touchstone of what constitutes Lutheranism. It reflects in matchless form the deepest theological concerns of Luther, Melancthon, and their colaborers. It served a threefold purpose: (1) it articulated clearly and concisely what "Lutherans" believed and taught; (2) it demonstrated that "Lutherans" stood in the great tradition of the church of all the Christian centuries and were therefore no schismatics, much less errorists and heretics; (3) it aimed to effect, if possible, a reconciliation between "Lutherans" and the established church.³

The reformers were not gods, not even prophets. They did not succeed, in spite of Melancthon's patient efforts, to draft a statement of faith so univocal and comprehensive that it answered every question, allayed every fear, removed every suspicion, met every exigency, and that it became also in matters of church organization and administration a never-failing source of information and guidance. Only a few months after the Confession had been read Melancthon was instructed to refute the charges raised against it by the opponents. He did this in what is known as the Apology (1531), which is, however, also an extensive development of the thoughts expressed in the Confession. Luther's Smalcald

Articles (1537) are, in reality, a further explication of some of the principal articles in the Augsburg Confession. Melancthon's *Tractatus de Potestate et Primatu Papae* (1537) is regarded as an appendix to the Augsburg Confession.⁴ A further interpretation of Lutheran teaching, necessitated by theological controversies following Luther's death in 1546, culminated in the Formula of Concord (1577). But this confession frankly acknowledges its indebtedness to the Augsburg Confession. The Book of Concord (1580), which contains all the confessions referred to, includes also Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, "because they have been unanimously approved and received by all churches adhering to the Augsburg Confession" (FC, Sol. Decl., 8, *Trig.*, p. 853).

Nevertheless, though the Augsburg Confession is a human and therefore imperfect declaration of faith; though, furthermore, it originated in a most crucial period of church history and was intended to serve, as has been pointed out, very immediate purposes, it has, for these reasons, not become antiquated and irrelevant. Even granting some of the concerns regarding the Augsburg Confession which Hans Asmussen raises in his *Warum noch Lutherische Kirche?* (1949)⁵ a bit of sober reflection on the developments in the church of Jesus Christ since 1530 and on conditions in the church in our day drive one to the conclusion that the Augsburg Confession is still meaningful, that it still spells out clearly and concisely what Lutheranism is, and that it is still an eloquent summary of the evangelical faith.⁶ Time and circumstances have not been able to dim the luster of its classic formulations of Christian truth. The warning sounded many years ago by Theodosius Harnack against a supercritical attitude toward the Lutheran Confessions is still applicable:

The chief source of our difficulty is that the crown of the church, the unity and purity of its confessions, is no longer regarded sufficient. . . . We have become blinded by the deceiving crowns of theological science as well as ecclesiastical institutions.⁷

If one were to ask which Biblical doctrine lies at the center of all serious theological discussion carried on in our day, the answer would no doubt be: the doctrine of the church. A study of this doctrine has, in fact, compelled Christian churches to rethink and re-evaluate their confessional basis. We refer especially to the

comprehensive symposium on the church published in 1943 by Swedish Lutheran theologians under the leadership of Bishop Anders Nygren and titled *En Bok om Kyrkan*.⁸ In recent years such themes as the following are topics of wide interest: The Church of the New Testament, Church and State, Church and Churches, The Young Churches, Church and Culture, Churches and Cults, The Church and the Ministry, etc.⁹ The question is therefore in order: Are Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession, which speak explicitly of the church, still meaningful and relevant?

This study submits some observations on Article VII with regard, however, also to Article VIII and the interpretation of these articles in the Apology. We present our findings under the heading The Unity of the Church. We propose to inquire: (1) What is the nature of this unity? (2) How is this unity realized? (3) What is the relation of a consensus *de doctrina evangelii* to the true unity of the church?

1. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THIS UNITY?

Article VII introduces the subject of the church with what must have appeared to the opponents as an ingenuous statement, for the first sentence of the article reads, "*Item docent quod una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit.*" Surely, they must have thought, there is nothing heretical in this statement, for also the Nicene Creed speaks of an *una sancta . . . ecclesia*, and is not this *ecclesia* the Holy Catholic Church? But they were soon to be disillusioned. For the second statement of Article VII declares, "*Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta,*" and Article VIII equates the congregation of saints with the *vere credentes*. Obviously the reformers had a different church in mind.

Article VII confesses that there is only *one (una)* church. In this aspect of their faith the reformers did not differ from their opponents. The difference between them and their opponents lay in the interpretation of the term *church*. In passing, it should be noted that the Augsburg Confession occasionally speaks of a plurality of churches. It employs phrases like *in unseren Kirchen* (AC, Conclusion 1, p. 83 c); *in nostris ecclesiis* (Apol. XIV, 4).

In a most characteristic passage the AC declares, "*Ecclesiae apud nos de nullo articulo fidei dissentiunt ab ecclesia catholica*" (p. 84). But in Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession *ecclesia* does not denote a parish or a group of parishes served by "Lutheran" pastors. Nor do these articles refer to the established church known in the Middle Ages as the *ecclesia catholica*, which traced its external organization to the days of Constantine. The *ecclesia* in Articles VII and VIII is not the church which Luther publicly renounced when he on that cold December 10, 1520, in the company of a group of students walked out to the Elster gate and, "visibly moved, placed on the burning fagots the papal bull, the decretals, and other writings of the papists, speaking only these few words in Latin: 'Since thou hast grieved the Holy One of God, may the eternal fire consume thee.'"¹⁰

What, then, is the *ecclesia* referred to in Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession? It is the church of the believers. It is the church which is united by a common faith in the Lord of the church, the Savior Jesus Christ, who is in the midst of His church to the end of time. This church is indeed *one (una)*, statistically speaking. But this *oneness* is at the same time an *unitas*, a unity of faith. Therefore the Latin text of Article VIII equates the church with the *vere credentes*, and the German text of Articles VII and VIII refer to the church as the *Versammlung der Gläubigen*. It should also be noted that the final statement in the Latin text of Article VII does not reproduce the Scriptural word order of Eph. 4:5, 6, as does the corresponding German text, but it quotes freely and places at the beginning of the quotation the term *una fides*. The church is therefore a unity of faith. This does not mean that love is a negligible factor in this unity. In Article IV of the Apology Melancthon develops the place and importance of Christian love.¹¹ But even as love does not justify the sinner before God, so it is not the bond which in God's sight unites the church in the *congregatio sanctorum et vere credentium*.

The Apology repeatedly speaks of the unity of faith. We cite a few passages. "Therefore we believe according to the Scriptures that the '*ecclesiam proprie dictam esse congregationem sanctorum, qui VERE CREDUNT evangelio Christi*'" (Apol. VII, 28). Again, "We say that this church, that is, the '*vere credentes ac iustos*,'

exists scattered throughout the world" (Apol. VII, 20). And again, "But we are speaking of the true, that is, spiritual, unity (*de vera, hoc est, spirituali unitate*) without which faith in the heart, or righteousness of heart before God, cannot exist" (Apol. VII, 31, Trig., p. 237). The German text of this weighty statement reads: "Wir sagen, dass diejenigen ein einträchtige Kirche heissen, die AN EINEN CHRISTUM GLAUBEN, ein Evangelium, einen Geist, einen Glauben, einerlei Sakrament haben, und reden also von geistlicher Einigkeit, ohne welche der Glaube und ein christlich Wesen nicht sein kann" (Trig., p. 236).

Accordingly the church embraces all who believe in the one Lord Jesus Christ, the just who live by faith. But this faith is not of their own making. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. Melancthon evidently means this when he declares in the passage cited above: "We are speaking of the true, that is, spiritual unity (*de vera, hoc est, spirituali unitate*) without which faith in the heart . . . cannot exist" (Apol. VII, 31, Trig., p. 237). The unity of the church is of a spiritual nature in the sense that the Spirit of God produces it. "Therefore Paul distinguishes the church from the people of the Law thus, that *the church is a spiritual people*, that is, that it has been distinguished from the heathen not by civil rites, but that it is the true people of God, *regenerated by the Holy Ghost*" (Apol. VII, 14, Trig., p. 231). The *vere credentes* are the *true people of God* (Apol. VII, 14). They are the *regnum Christi* (Apol. VII, 16). "The adversaries do not understand that the *kingdom of Christ* is righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Apol. VII, 13). Yes, the church is not only the *true people of God* (Apol. VII, 14); not only the *regnum Christi* which has the gift of the Holy Spirit; but the church is the *vivum corpus Christi* (Apol. VII, 12).

This *ecclesia* is catholic in the sense that it embraces *all* believers. It is the "*Versammlung ALLER Gläubigen*" (AC VII, 1; VIII, 1). The church is "the men scattered throughout the whole world who agree concerning the Gospel, and have the same Christ, the same Holy Ghost, and the same sacraments" (Apol. VII, 11, Trig., p. 229). When Melancthon wrote these words, there may well have floated through his mind Luther's beautiful confession: "I believe that there is a holy Christian Church on earth, which is the

gathering or number or congregation of all Christians in all the world, the one bride of Christ and His spiritual body. . . . And this Christian Church exists not only in the Roman Church or under the Pope but also in all the world . . . so that it is scattered bodily under the Pope, Turks, Persians, Tartars, and all over, but gathered together spiritually in one Gospel" (WA 26, 506, 30).

Since the church is an *unitas spiritualis*, an *ecclesia catholica*, the body of Christ, the *regnum Christi* whose subjects are united in faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ, the church is not a society in a secular and sociological sense. It is not "an outward government of certain nations" (Apol. VII, 10). It indeed consists of people, human beings. It is, as Luther says, "scattered bodily." But it is not a corporate body of individuals who have of their own accord agreed to become the church of Jesus Christ. Nor is the church an association or fellowship united by obligations mutually agreed upon. It is, furthermore, not an ethical society whose foremost purpose is to promote respectable living, though indeed the church of Jesus Christ is sensitive to its privilege to function as the light of the world and the salt of the earth. The church is not a holy caste of untouchables, for though it is the communion of saints, it remains throughout its temporal existence a congregation of sinners who plead, "Lord, have mercy upon us." It is indeed a brotherhood. But it is not a fraternal benefit society in the sense that it believes to have met all divine obligations when it has lived by the level and the square and has practiced such virtues of bourgeois morality as friendship, truth, prudence, patriotism, sympathy, sobriety, obedience, tolerance, honor, benevolence, loyalty, kindness, chivalry, wisdom, innocence, strength, chastity, patience, silence, freedom, and happiness. The inscription on the church's masthead is not "democracy and education" or "liberty and justice for all," though the church is grateful to the Lord for whatever political and social privileges it enjoys and though it is truly concerned to do good unto all men and not only to the household of faith. And the church is not the right arm of the state charged to make morally responsible citizens, though it prays for good government and for all who are in authority and is desirous to promote the common welfare. Finally, the church is not a society

for the advancement of culture and civilization, nor does it exist for the purpose of transfiguring democracy into religion.

Is the *ecclesia* visible or invisible?¹² Neither the Augsburg Confession nor the Apology employ these terms. The Apology speaks of *ecclesia proprie dicta* and *ecclesia large dicta*, that is, the church in the narrower and wider sense. Since the church consists of the *vere credentes*, and since faith is a matter of the heart and will, it is impossible to establish empirically and statistically who the *vere credentes* and the *non vere credentes* are. But the *vere credentes* possess through the power of the Spirit the capacity to believe, which is a human capacity. The believers are not incorporeal beings. The church is not a *civitas Platonica* (Apol. VII, 20). "The Holy Ghost . . . works faith in them that hear the Gospel" (AC V, 1; *Trig.*, p.45). But obviously they "that hear the Gospel" are human beings. Believers are there where God's Word is preached; where infants are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; where penitent hearts find comfort in Holy Communion; where sinners receive the forgiveness of sins; where God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is worshiped and glorified; where people for the sake of Christ suffer, are persecuted, and even put to death. The *ecclesia* of which the Augsburg Confession and the Apology speak consists of believing men, women, and children.

2. HOW IS THIS UNITY REALIZED?

The Holy Spirit creates faith in human beings through means. We call them means of grace. What these means are, Article V fully states in the words: "That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith . . . in them that hear the Gospel." (*Trig.*, p.45.) The means of grace are therefore the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.

To these means the second statement in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession calls attention in the words, "*Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta*" (that Melancthon had in

mind specifically Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, and Holy Absolution we infer from the consideration that the articles on these three subjects, that is, Articles IX, X, and XI, immediately follow the two articles on the church, that is, Articles VII and VIII). In passing, it should be noted that according to Article V there is a singularly close interrelation between the means of grace and the work of the Holy Spirit: (1) the means of grace give the Holy Spirit; (2) through these means the Holy Spirit creates faith. The church thus comes into existence when the Holy Spirit through the means of grace creates faith. Those who are united by faith in the communion of saints also possess the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The confessions, following Luther, stress the supreme importance of the *viva vox evangelii*, of proclaiming the Word, that is, the Gospel. What makes the Sacraments means of grace is the fact that they are the *visible* Word. Therefore it is not surprising that in practically every reference to the means of grace in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology the Gospel or Word of God is named first. Two quotations from Luther seem pertinent. He writes: "We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich in His grace. First, through the spoken Word, by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; *which is the peculiar office of the Gospel*. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the Holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, Matt. 18:20." (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. IV, *Trig.*, p. 491.) In his defense against Ambrosius Catharinus, Luther writes: "*Evangelium enim prae pane et baptismo unicum, certissimum et nobilissimum ecclesiae symbolum est, cum per solum evangelium concipiatur, formetur, alatur, generetur, educetur, pascatur, vestiatur, ornetur, roboretur, armetur, servetur, breviter tota vita et substantia ecclesiae est in verbo Dei, sicut Christus dicit: 'In omni verbo, quod procedit de ore Dei, vivit homo'*" (WA 7, 721, 9, quoted by Elert).¹³

In Article V the Word is termed *evangelium* and *verbum externum* (German text has *leiblich Wort*). Article VII employs the term *evangelium* in both texts. In the Schwabach and Marburg

Articles, which were the principal sources used by Melanchthon, and in variant readings of Articles V and VII we read that the Holy Spirit gives no one this faith "*ohn vorgehend Predigt oder mündlich Wort oder Euangelion Christi*," but "*durch und mit solchem mündlichen Wort*." Other terms which appear in these source materials are *verbum Dei* and *das Wort*.

According to the Augsburg Confession, the Holy Spirit creates faith through the Word. It follows that the Word must be preached. The Latin text of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology most commonly employ the term *docere* when referring to the preaching of the Gospel. *Docere* appears in the Augsburg Confession about sixty times, *praedicare* only twice. *Predigtamt* is *ministerium docendi* (AC V, 1); *Evangelium predigen* is *evangelii docendi* (AC XXVIII, 12); *was die Unsern predigen und lehren* is *doctrina nostrorum* (AC XXVII, 17); *gelehrt und gepredigt* is *docuisse* (AC XXVII, 38); *öffentlich lehren und predigen* is *publice docere* (AC XIV, 1); "vor Zeiten hat man gelehrt, gepredigt und geschrieben" is "*publica persuasio fuit non tantum vulgi sed etiam docentium in ecclesiis*" (AC XXVI, 1); *predigen* is *docere* (AC XXVIII, 70). A particularly enlightening passage appears in the Apology (XV, 42): "*Praecipuus cultus Dei est DOCERE EVANGELIUM*," the German text of which reads: "Denn der allergrösste, heiligste, nötigste Gottesdienst, welchen Gott im ersten und andern Gebot als das Grösste hat gefordert, ist *Gottes Wort predigen*; denn das *Predigtamt* ist das höchste Amt in der Kirchen. Wo nun der Gottesdienst ausgelassen wird, wie kann da Erkenntnis Gottes, die Lehre Christi oder das Evangelium sein?" Without a doubt Schlink's interpretation of *docere* is correct. He writes: "The Gospel is essentially oral proclamation of the forgiveness. In the German and Latin text the terms employed for preaching and teaching have the same meaning. Not the possession of a teaching, but the event of teaching is meant here; but, again, not a teaching which disregards encouragement and comfort, but one which preaches."¹⁴ Nevertheless, when one bears in mind Melanchthon's preference for the term *docere* and his comparatively infrequent use of *praedicare* in the preface of the Augsburg Confession, in his earlier sketches of the preface, in the Augsburg Confession, and in the Apology, one cannot but note in

his use of *docere* a decided emphasis on the didactic rather than on the persuasive element in preaching, and one appreciates Professor Caemmerer's observation: "The supernatural ingredient in the Christian religion was [for Melanchthon] information of divine content and origin, but (that) the mind apprehending it was not substantially changed by it, and hence the life actuated by that mind was substantially the same as that of natural man."¹⁵ It is not without some significance that Melanchthon approves of the definition of Nicholas of Lyra: "*Ecclesia consistit in illis personis, in quibus est NOTITIA VERA et confessio fidei et veritatis*" (Apol. VII, 22).

It is necessary that the Gospel be preached and that it be heard. But it is of even greater significance *how* the Gospel is preached and *how* the Sacraments are administered. "*Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium PURE docetur et RECTE administrantur sacramenta*" (German text: "*Das Evangelium REIN gepredigt und die heiligen Sakrament LAUTS DES EVANGELII gereicht werden*"). An earlier draft of the Augsburg Confession did not include the terms *pure* and *recte*. Melanchthon inserted them, however, in the official version because the opponents had maintained that they, too, taught that the church comes into being where the Gospel is preached and where the Sacraments are administered.¹⁶

The terms *pure* and *recte* appear also in the Apology. "*Evangelium pure . . . apud nos docetur*" (Apol. IX, 52). Melanchthon complains that the adversaries neglect their churches and that "*non curant RECTE doceri ecclesias et sacramenta RITE tractari*" (Apol. XXVIII, 3). Again he writes: "We know that the Church is among those who teach the Word of God *aright*, and administer the Sacraments *aright*, and not with those who not only by their edicts endeavor to efface God's Word, but also put to death those *who teach what is right and true*" (Apol. XIV, 27, Trig., p. 315).

But the question is in place, "When is the Gospel *purely* taught and when are the Sacraments *rightly* administered?" There appears to be but one answer to this question. The Gospel is purely taught if the preacher discloses its full meaning. What this meaning is, the Augsburg Confession aims to state. The Sacraments are rightly administered if they are administered in accordance with the Gospel

as the Augsburg Confession understands it. That this is the meaning of *pure* and *recte* is evident from the close of Melanchthon's earlier sketches of the preface intended for, though not included in, the Augsburg Confession. There he declares: "Now we want to speak of doctrine and first of all enumerate all the foremost articles of our faith. From this your Imperial Majesty can gather that the elector of Saxony does not permit anything to be preached in his land which is unchristian, but that he is most concerned to be loyal to the common, pure, Christian faith."¹⁷ And in the conclusion which follows Article XXI Melanchthon declares that the "summary of our doctrine contains nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church Catholic, or from the Church of Rome as known from its writers. This being the case, they judge harshly who insist that our teachers be regarded as heretics" (*Trig.*, p. 59). Accordingly, the Gospel is then preached *pure* and the Sacraments administered *recte* if these acts are performed in accordance with the teachings confessed in the articles of the Augsburg Confession.

For Melanchthon Word and Sacraments are *notae* (*seemeia*, *Merkmale*, *Kennzeichen*). "*Ecclesia . . . est societas fidei et Spiritus Sancti . . . quae . . . habet EXTERNAS NOTAS, ut agnosci possit, videlicet puram evangelii doctrinam et administrationem sacramentorum consentaneam evangelio Christi*" (Apol. VII, 5). "*Ad-dimus NOTAS: puram doctrinam evangelii et sacramenta*" (Apol. VII, 20). But Word and Sacraments are more than *notae*. They are, above all, the means and constitutive elements (*tekmeeria*, *Wahrzeichen*, *Konstitutiva*) through which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains the faith of the *vere credentes*. "*Neque vero pertinet promissio salutis ad illos, qui sunt extra ecclesiam Christi, ubi nec verbum nec sacramenta sunt, quia Christus regenerat per verbum et sacramenta*" (Apology XI, 52). Referring to the enthusiasts of his day, among whom he reckoned also the Pope, because he claims to have "*alle Rechte im Schrein seines Herzens*," Luther wrote in 1537: "In those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may be protected against the enthusiasts" (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. VIII, *Trig.*, p. 495). And Luther

summed it all up in that pithy statement: "God's Word cannot be without God's people; and, again, God's people cannot be without God's Word." (WA 50, 629, 28 ff.)

3. WHAT IS THE RELATION OF A CONSENSUS "DE DOCTRINA EVANGELII" TO THE TRUE UNITY OF THE CHURCH?

The third and fourth weighty propositions in the Latin text of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession read: "Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum. Nec necesse est ubique similes esse traditiones humanas seu ritus aut ceremonias ab hominibus institutas. . . ." The *et* in the third proposition obviously introduces a new thought. The *vera unitas ecclesiae* refers, as we have tried to show, to the unity of faith. The *satis est* ("it suffices") suggests a minimum rather than a maximum condition for the establishment of the *vera unitas*.¹⁸ Since, however, the *satis est* stands in contrast to the *nec necesse est* in the fourth proposition, it may not be interpreted to mean that a consensus *de doctrina evangelii* is an insignificant and relative matter. It rather suggests that whereas the observance everywhere of the same traditions, rites, and ceremonies is not necessary, a consensus *de doctrina evangelii* is a requirement, even though a minimum requirement, for the establishment of the *vera unitas*.

Let us now look at the phrase "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*." This is probably the most controversial phrase in the entire Augsburg Confession. The controversy rages about the question: Does this phrase express the thought suggested by the corresponding German phrase, or does it express something else, and if something else, what? The German text reads: "*Dies ist gnug zu wahrer Einigkeit der christlichen Kirchen, dass da EINTRAECHTIGLICH NACH REINEM VERSTAND DAS EVANGELIUM GEPREDIGT [werde]*" (AC VII, 3). The German text declares that it suffices for the true unity of the church if there is a consensus regarding the pure understanding of the Gospel and if the Gospel is preached according to that consensus. Does the Latin phrase "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" say the same thing?

Before answering that question, one must ask another. If the Latin phrase does not say what the German text says, if it states a condition for the establishment of the *vera unitas* different from that expressed in the German text, would this not create a most serious problem? Would it not mean that the *satis est* is a deceptive understatement?

We reply to the above considerations that a person who is acquainted with the text of the Augsburg Confession will recall occasional variations between its Latin and German readings. By way of example, we refer to the Latin and German phraseology employed in the article on the Lord's Supper (AC X). Nor may one argue that one of the two texts of the Augsburg Confession is necessarily a translation of the other. Brunstäd asserts that the German is the original text.¹⁹ Wehrung holds the opposite view.²⁰ The fact of the matter is that neither text is a translation. Though Melancthon is the author of both, he rewrote, polished, and revised each independently of the other. The German text is not translation German, and the Latin text is not translation Latin. The German in the Augsburg Confession is throughout idiomatic and robust sixteenth-century German, and the Latin is smooth and flowing Latin. "By the middle of June, 1530, the text was complete in its essentials, each version independent of the other. Sometimes the one, sometimes the other, made faster progress."²¹ In view of these considerations one must at least reckon with the possibility that the Latin reading "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" can mean something different from that suggested by the corresponding German wording.

But if "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" does express a thought basically different from that suggested by the corresponding German wording, will not such a discrepancy detract from the glory of the Augsburg Confession? Our answer is a frank no. Both the Latin and German text of 1530 are regarded as official in the Lutheran Church. Such a discrepancy would, however, mean that the *satis est* implies more than the German text suggests.

Among interpreters of the Augsburg Confession who regard the phrase "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" to be the equivalent of the corresponding German phrase, we note Albrecht Ritschl, Wehrung, Schlink, and Brunstäd. Ritschl stressed the term *evan-*

gelii and maintained that in 1530 Melanchthon had not yet confused the religious proclamation ("*die rein religiöse Verkündigung*") of the Gospel with an intellectualized *notitia* of the Gospel. Melanchthon's apostasy from the true meaning of the Gospel as defined in the Augsburg Confession began, according to Ritschl, after 1537.²² Wehrung claims that the Latin text expresses what the German text suggests. But he concludes: "The Latin text is in itself ambiguous and can serve the confessional church as a refuge. This happened."²³ Schlink insists that *doctrina evangelii* means preaching, proclamation of the Gospel.²⁴ Brunstäd takes essentially the same position. He writes: "*Doctrina evangelii* is for the reformers the proclamation which teaches and sets aright" ("*belehrt und zurechtbringt*").²⁵

Among interpreters who believe that "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" implies more than preaching the Gospel, that it rather refers to the essence and full implications of the Gospel, we note Elert and Theodosius Harnack. Elert's position may be summarized in his brief statement: "*Die beiden Grundsätze, die der VII. Artikel der Augustana für kirchliche Einigkeit enthält, sind Einheit in der Lehre, aber Freiheit in Aeusserlichkeiten.*"²⁶ In his thorough defense of the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, Theodosius Harnack took it for granted that "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" implied agreement in all the doctrines confessed in the Augsburg Confession.²⁷

The Formula of Concord does not contain, so it appears, an explicit interpretation of the phrase "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*." But a number of statements in the Formula suggest that for its authors the essence of the Augsburg Confession is *doctrina* in the sense of "doctrine." One passage reads: "We have resolved to tolerate in our realms, churches, and schools no other doctrine than that which, in the year 1530, was approved at Augsburg in a solemn confession" (*Trig.*, p. 15). Another passage echoes some of the phraseology of Article VII. It reads: "For thorough, permanent unity in the church it is, above all things, necessary that we have a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form where is brought together from God's Word the *common doctrine* reduced to a brief compass, which the churches that are of the true Christian religion confess" (*Trig.*, p. 849). In still

another passage those electors, princes, and estates are commended who in 1530 "*sinceram evangelii doctrinam amplexi fuerant*" (Trig., p. 846).

In the light of the above considerations it is at least understandable why those interpreters of the Augsburg Confession who believe that "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" refers exclusively to the proclamation of the Gospel find fault with the Formula of Concord. In their opinion the *satis est* in Article VII was falsely interpreted to include also a consensus in doctrinal formulations which, so it is said, in course of time, degenerated into a slavish concern for *pura doctrina* and throttled the free course of the Gospel. But it is also understandable why those interpreters who believe that "*consentire de doctrina evangelii*" implies a consensus in doctrinal affirmations with respect to the full import of the Gospel are in accord with the efforts of the authors of the Formula of Concord to compose "a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form . . . a common doctrine." So Theodosius Harnack, who finds agreement in doctrine essential to the *vera unitas* of the church and who supports his position by reference to such New Testament passages as Acts 2:42; Rom. 6:17; 1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13; Titus 2:1. For him such agreement makes possible also a common confession of faith.²⁸

We now turn to an examination of the terms *doctrina* and *evangelii* and thereupon inquire into the meaning of *doctrina evangelii*. The term *doctrina* appears in the Confession 30 times and 116 times in the Apology, sometimes with, sometimes without, a modifier; sometimes referring to the whole body of Christian truth, sometimes to a part of it. We thus find expressions like *haec doctrina contemnitur* (AC XX, 15); *tota haec doctrina* (AC XX, 17); *summa doctrinae apud nos* (conclusion following AC XXI); *doctrina nostrorum* (AC XXVI, 17); *doctrina fidei* (AC XV, 3); *doctrina operum* (AC XX, 19). In these and other instances *doctrina* cannot by any stretch of imagination mean preaching.

Melanchthon's stress on *Lehre* is evident also in his first sketches for a preface for the Augsburg Confession.²⁹ In them he insists that if unity in the church is to be achieved, there must be agreement in doctrine. False doctrines must be done away with,

the true doctrine must be reinstated. He speaks of the "right, pure, and Christian doctrine"; "false doctrines"; "Christian doctrine"; "many destructive and unnecessary doctrines"; "constant and right and true doctrine"; "unfounded and blasphemous doctrine." He writes: "We desire nothing more than to instruct Christians in pure doctrine . . . for only out of doctrine is the Christian Church born and preserved."

The term *evangelium*³⁰ is used in the Augsburg Confession in more than one sense. It may mean the promise of the forgiveness of sins in opposition to the demands of the Law. This is, of course, its most characteristic and frequent meaning. But sometimes the accent appears to be not so much on the content of the *evangelium* but rather on the manner in which the *promissio* is communicated, that is, preaching. In a passage in the Apology, Melancthon seems to equate *evangelium* with *doctrina*. Referring to the church, he writes that it is the "*societatem eiusdem evangelii seu doctrinae*" (Apol. VII, 8). What seems most remarkable is the apparent equation of *evangelium* with Scripture in AC XXVIII, 34—39 (compare German and Latin text). In any case, it would be rash to restrict the meaning of *evangelium* in the Confession entirely to the promise of forgiveness. To be sure, the peculiar New Testament meaning of *evangelium* seems to be present in the word wherever the Confession uses it. But there are those instances in the Confession where *evangelium* is used in a less restricted sense and where it may even suggest the doctrine of Scripture.

Now where are we? What does the combination *doctrina evangelii* mean? This combination appears twice in the Confession and six times in the Apology. Could it be that this term is interchangeable with *doctrina Christiana* which occurs eight times in the Confession and the Apology? Could it be that *doctrina evangelii* has the same meaning as *doctrina evangelica* employed for hundreds of years to designate the faith of those who were regarded members of the medieval *una sancta catholica ecclesia*?³¹

We believe that Melancthon's usage of *doctrina* in the Confession, in the Apology, and in the early sketches of the preface point in the direction that he intended *doctrina* in the combination *doctrina evangelii* to denote doctrine. *Evangelium* is indeed with him a fluid and elastic term. Yet when one bears in mind Melancthon's

thon's insistence on pure doctrine in the sketches referred to, his insertion of *pure* and *recte* in what is now the official Latin text of the Confession, his clearly stated position in the last proposition of Article VII that he regards traditions, rites, and ceremonies to be inconsequential for the *vera unitas ecclesiae*, and his minimum requirement for the establishment of the *vera unitas*, one cannot but conclude that he used the term *evangelium* in the combination *doctrina evangelii* in the sense of God's total revelation in Scripture. It hardly seems accidental that the Augsburg Confession, before it deals with *evangelium* in its strictest sense, the good news of God's justifying grace in Christ (AC IV), devotes three articles to the doctrines of God, original sin, and the person of Jesus Christ. For how can the Gospel conceived in its narrow sense be made meaningful to a sinner unless he is first told that he is under the judgment of God, unless he knows who this God is, unless he knows the true nature of sin, and unless he knows who Jesus Christ is. One could go on from here and demonstrate that all other doctrines in the Augsburg Confession are brought into close relationship with the Gospel viewed in its restricted sense, the promise of the forgiveness of sins.

But if this is the meaning of the term *doctrina evangelii*, what is the relation of a consensus *de doctrina evangelii* to the *vera unitas ecclesiae*? Will not insistence on a consensus in doctrine contradict and even vitiate the teaching of Articles VII and V which declare that the true unity of the church is effected only by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments? ³² They who propose this difficulty overlook the *Pure docetur* and the *Recte administrantur*. What these terms imply we attempted to show above.

The *vera unitas ecclesiae* is indeed entirely the creation of the Holy Spirit. He achieves this *unitas* through the means of grace, which Jesus Christ entrusted to the church and which the church employs. In performing this task, the church always fights on two fronts. 1. It must place the Gospel of forgiveness into the center of all its preaching, teaching, and other activities, and it must studiously seek to avoid falling a victim to a *doctrina* of rites and ceremonies, Law and good works, reason and philosophy. The church lives only by the forgiveness of God in Christ. 2. The

church must be concerned to preserve the Gospel with all that this Gospel presupposes (sin, guilt, Law, God's wrath, death); all that it implies (the *sola gratia*, the *propter Christum solum*); and all that it achieves in the hearts of sinners (faith, the fruits of faith, the hope of eternal glory).

It is possible to sentimentalize the Gospel and so to deprive it of its God-intended purpose. It is possible also to adulterate the Gospel by mixing Law into it. It is possible to transform the Gospel into Law. But it is also possible so to stress the consensus *de doctrina evangelii* that the Gospel is strangled. It is possible to fall under the judgment of *Lebrgerechtigkeit* and not only under the judgment of *Werkgerechtigkeit*. To keep the heart of the Gospel in the center of all Christian preaching and other activities of the church, but at the same time to preach the whole Gospel with due recognition of all its Scriptural implications must be the constant aim of the *vere credentes*. The *vera unitas ecclesiae* gets its life from the proclamation of the *remissio peccatorum*. But this *unitas* is at the same time one of loving obedience to all the directives of Him who purchased the church with His own blood and who keeps His promise that His church "perpetuo mansura sit."

St. Louis, Mo

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Editions of our Lutheran symbols consulted in the preparation of this study are *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis, 1921) and *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, second edition (Göttingen, 1952). Unless specifically identified, references are to the German edition. Abbreviations: AC—Augsburg Confession; Apol.—Apology; Trig.—*Triglot Concordia*; BELK—*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*; FC—Formula of Concord.
2. For a succinct discussion of Luther's participation in the Augsburg Confession see Joh. Meyer's "Luthers Anteil an der Augsburger Konfession" in *Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*, issues of May 9, 16, and 23, 1930. According to Meyer, Melancthon is responsible for the form of the Confession. But he was largely indebted to Luther for formulations as he found them in Luther's *Bekenntnis* (1528) and in the two catechisms and to Luther's overpowering theological mind. The statement often attributed to Luther, "Der Katechismus, die Auslegung der Zehn Gebote und die Augsburger Konfession sind mein" does not appear in the Weimar edition. Meyer believes it to be apocryphal. Both Luther and Melancthon had a hand in the Schwabach and Marburg articles, the primary sources of the Confession.
3. "(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 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" ("*ad unam veram concordem religionem reducat*"). Preface, AC, Trig., p. 41.

4. BELK, p. XXVI.
5. The subtitle of Asmussen's book is *Ein Gespräch mit dem Augsburgischen Bekenntnis*. The book contains some penetrating insights. But it also plays up many details which seem very unimportant.
6. See Werner Elert's article "Die Botschaft des VII. Artikels der Augsburgischen Konfession" in *Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*, issues October 28, November 4, 11, 18, 1927. Here, too, Elert is at his best.
7. Theodosius Harnack, *Die Kirche, ihr Amt, ihr Regiment* (Nürnberg, 1862), p. IX.
8. An English translation of *En Bok om Kyrkan* by Carl C. Rasmussen appeared under the title *This Is the Church* (Philadelphia, 1943). The German translation has the title *Ein Buch von der Kirche* (Göttingen, 1951).
9. I call attention to a significant article on the church by Professor Theodore Graebner. It is one of his last major contributions. The title is "Kirche und die Kirchen." It appeared in *World Lutheranism of Today: A Tribute to Anders Nygren 15 November 1950* (Stockholm, 1950). I note that the spring number of *Religion in Life* features a symposium on the topic "The One Church and Our Many Churches."
10. W. H. T. Dau, *The Great Renunciation* (St. Louis, 1920), p. 293.
11. Trig., pp. 156 ff.
12. On this question see Theodore Graebner's article referred to in note 9, and an article by Herbert Olsson titled "The Church's Visibility and Invisibility According to Luther" in *This Is the Church* (note 8).
13. Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums* (München, 1931), I, 228.
14. Edmund Schlögl, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, second edition (München, 1946), p. 270.
15. Richard R. Caemmerer, "The Melancthonian Blight" in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XVIII (1947), 323.
16. Elert, *Morphologie* . . . I, 238.
17. BELK, p. 43.
18. See John Theodore Mueller, "Satis est" in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XVIII (1947), 402 ff.
19. Friedrich Brunstäd, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gütersloh, 1951), p. 2.
20. Georg Wehrung, *Kirche nach evangelischem Verständnis* (Gütersloh, 1945), p. 317.
21. BELK, p. XVII.
22. Albrecht Ritschl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Freiburg, 1893), I, 51—110; II, 366—385. See also Elert's rebuttal of Ritschl's thesis in *Morphologie* . . . I, 235 ff.
23. Wehrung, p. 317.
24. Schlögl, p. 271, footnote.
25. Brunstäd, p. 11.
26. Elert, *Morphologie* . . . I, 237.
27. Theodosius Harnack, pp. 88, 89.
28. Theodosius Harnack, p. 58.

29. BELK, pp. 35—43.
30. For some detailed information on the use of terms like *evangelium*, *doctrina*, and others in the Apology I am under obligation to Jaroslav Pelikan's article "Some Word Studies in the Apology" in *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXIV (1953), 580 ff.
31. See Elert, "Die Botschaft des VII. Artikels . . ." (note 6), col. 1060.
32. The question of the relation of *pura doctrina* to the proclamation of the Gospel is dealt with by Georg Wehrung in his *Kirche nach evangelischem Verständnis* (see note 20). His book contains a mass of valuable material. But it leaves one with the impression that the subject is so complex and involved that one volume can hardly do more than articulate the problem. For Luther's attitude to *pura doctrina* see the excellent article by Hans-Werner Gensichen titled "Zur Frage der 'Reinen Lehre' bei Luther" in *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*, September 30, 1950.