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LWF Study Document

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CHRIST FREES AND UNITES

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The present Study Document, which will be submitted to the delegates attending the Assembly of the LWF at Minneapolis next August, is in form and content a decided improvement over the document which appeared a year ago. A careful comparison of both compels the conclusion that the Commission on Theology was truly concerned to prepare a statement which would be solidly Scriptural and soundly confessional. For these efforts the Commission deserves the unqualified thanks of all who love the Lutheran Zion. The following observations are therefore intended only to point up some issues in the present document which, in our opinion, deserve further clarification "in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."

This study document consists of an introduction and five parts: the freedom we have in Christ; the unity of the church in Christ; the freedom to reform the church; free for service in the world; free and united in hope. The five parts are, however, not so many loose and independent units of thought, but rather constitute a single closely reasoned argument, which culminates in Section II.

This is not to say, however, that Part I is a mere introduction and that Parts III—V are of no particular consequence. The fact of the matter is that Part I, which prepares the way for Part II, is from our point of view both new and novel and therefore deserving of thoughtful analysis. Parts III—V, though of great importance, do not raise serious questions. This review therefore limits itself to Parts I and II.

Before recording some concerns, we shall indicate what appear to be the significant steps in the argument. They are: Christ set men free through His redemptive act. He set men free not "for autonomous individuality" (II, A, 24) but for unity. This unity in Christ is a gift. Nevertheless, Christians should manifest this unity. This unity becomes manifest in church fellowship. But church fellowship requires agreement regarding the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. When such agreement has been reached, altar and pulpit fellowship necessarily follow. Church fellowship must

assert itself also in participation in ecumenical endeavors. The church is free for service in the world. The church is free and united in hope.

In developing its argument the document is intent on supporting its statements with evidence from Scripture and the Confessions. According to our count, about 40 passages from Scripture are cited in full, some 190 are referred to in footnotes, and over 30 are suggested for "further study." The text itself contains citations from Scripture together with references. The Lutheran Symbols are frequently referred to as well as some of Luther's writings other than those received into the *Book of Concord.*

We shall state our concerns in terms of three questions. In a final paragraph we shall call attention to what we believe are inadequate or unfortunate formulations. Our questions are these:

1. Are the definitions of "Gospel" truly expressive of the Lutheran accent?
2. Does the correlation of "freedom" with "unity" truly conform to New Testament theology?
3. Is the analysis of "unity" clear and in full harmony with the New Testament concept of "unity"?

I

The study document defines the Gospel as follows: "The message of the Gospel can be summarized under the caption: The Freedom of the Christian" (Introduction, p. 6). "The Church's task is to proclaim to the world the glad news that God's act in Christ truly sets men free" (I, A, 13). "The Gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ has come to set man free" (I, C, 17). "It is the Gospel which brings to us the proclamation that the liberating act of Christ is our own freedom, to be appropriated by us in faith" (I, D, 19).

We ask: Are these definitions of "Gospel" truly expressive of the Lutheran accent? The document indeed says that Christ suffered for our sins and bore in our place the wrath of God, that God in Christ reconciled us to Himself, that by virtue of Christ's righteousness we are made righteous before God, and that as a result of reconciliation we receive by grace the forgiveness of sins (I, C, 17, 18). But do not these statements merely serve the purpose of providing the basis for the document's accent on freedom? The *cantus firmus* to be heard throughout the document, practically on every page, if not in almost every paragraph, is that Christ has made us free and frees us.

But is this freedom achieved by Christ the keynote of the Gospel? Does not Article IV of the Augsburg Confession place the vicarious

atonement into the center of Christ's redemptive act? Does it not read: "They teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins"? Therefore, is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, above every other consideration, Gospel because it tells us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, made atonement for our sins through His obedience, suffering and death, that He appeased the Father's wrath, that He reconciled the world to His Father, and that, as a result, man no longer needs to fear God's wrath and eternal punishment? Most certainly, the Gospel includes the good news that by His atoning work Christ freed and redeemed man from the bondage of sin, the fear of death, the power of the devil, and enables him to serve God in righteousness and true holiness. But does not Scripture stress, above all, that Christ reconciled us to God by suffering and dying for our sins?

We cite only a few passages: "Christ Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree. . . . By His wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24). "Christ died for the ungodly. . . . God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. . . . We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:6 ff.). "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:18, 19). "He [the Son of God] loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20); "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "He [God] did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). "Whom God put forward as an expiation by His blood" (Rom. 3:25).

Is not, so we inquire, the chief accent of the Gospel, as Lutherans have always interpreted it, the blessed truth that Christ gave Himself into death to atone for our sins, to suffer divine wrath, and to make us beloved children of God? Surely, we lay in the bonds of sin and death and the devil, from which Christ freed us. But is not this freedom the inevitable consequence of the fact that He first reconciled us to God?

We ask furthermore: Is it not strange that the document, when it speaks of Christ's redemptive work (p. 7), does not even refer to the important passage in Rom. 5:6-11? And does it not disturb one to note that in the body of the text (pp. 7—9), which discusses the "freedom we have in Christ," the argument of Romans 1—5 is not even

referred to? And does it not seem strange that those precious terms "justification," "righteousness," and "reconciliation" are all too quickly disposed of on page 9? Have Lutherans not always declared that the Gospel is, above all, that wonderful message which tells us that God, because Christ reconciled the world to Him, justifies the sinner, forgives him all his sins, and assures him of eternal salvation? Indeed, God's ultimate purpose was to set men free from every form of bondage. Yet the manner in which He carried out His purpose was to have His own Son die for the sins of the world. It is this aspect of the Gospel message that constitutes its heart and center.

II

Does the correlation of "freedom" with "unity" really conform to New Testament theology? Let us look at the arguments in the study document. Part I analyzes the "freedom we have in Christ," and Part II discusses "the unity of the church in Christ." The connecting link is the preposition "for" ("Free for Unity," II, A). The term *freedom* is pressed into the service of the term *unity*. Now, it is true that Christ, by His redemptive act, freed man from the curse and slavery of sin, from the fear of death, and from the power of the devil. But what is the purpose of this freedom according to the New Testament? Is it not that we might be free from the Law (Gal. 4:21-31); that we might become "slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6:18); "slaves of God" (Rom. 6:22); "obedient . . . to the standard of teaching to which you were committed" (Rom. 6:17)? This freedom imposes the obligation on Christians "to walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25); "to be servants of one another" (Gal. 6:15); "to live as servants of God" (1 Peter 2:16); to avoid strife, dissension, envy, pride, and many other sins which threaten to enslave the Christian life. In brief, the freedom which Christ achieved for the Christian means that the Christian should regard himself a slave of God, of Christ, of his brethren, of his fellow men in general.

But now the question: What is the relation of this freedom to the "unity of the church in Christ"? The document declares: "Christ frees us by binding us to Himself, incorporating us into His body and bringing us under His salutary lordship and into His kingdom. By Christ's act of liberation we are reconciled and united to God" (II, A, 24). Is it New Testament teaching that *Christ frees us by binding us to Himself?* Should we not say that Christ frees us, in fact *has* freed us, from the bondage of the Law, sin, death, and the devil and that when we accept this freedom in faith, He incorporates

us into His body? Furthermore, does it not seem strange to say: "By Christ's act of liberation we are reconciled and united to God"? Is it not more in keeping with New Testament thought to say that because of Christ's act of reconciliation we are, in fact *were*, liberated from the powers of evil and that in the act of faith we are united into Christ's body, the church, where we serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness?

The footnote on page 13 suggests that the authors themselves had difficulty in establishing the relation of freedom to unity. The footnote reads: "The Assembly theme *Christ Frees and Unites* does not mean that unity is added to freedom in the work of Christ. Unity is rather a result of our freedom in Christ. The liberating act of God unites us to Christ and to one another." In view of this footnote, it would have been well if the Assembly theme had read "Christ frees and therefore unites," or "Because Christ frees, He also unites." But granting for a moment that the "and" in the Assembly theme is not to be stressed unduly, the question still remains: Is it theologically sound to establish a close connection between the freedom which Christ achieved and the unity of the church? To us it appears that freedom and unity can be correlated theologically only with difficulty.

Indeed, exegetes and dogmaticians have the privilege and the duty to extract from the sacred text, on the basis of defensible hermeneutical principles, inferences regarding the meaning of words and their bearing on the Christian faith. They also have the privilege to build such inferences into a construct of thought. This has always happened and will continue to happen. But should one engage in erecting a construct of theological thought, such as correlating freedom with unity, on the basis of such slender New Testament evidence as the study document supplies? Where is there in the entire New Testament a passage which co-ordinates the concepts of freedom and unity? We seem to have a great deal of trouble trying to make clear the full implications of the New Testament concept of unity. Why, we ask, inject another term into the discussion and increase the difficulty?

III

Is the analysis of unity clear and in full accord with the New Testament concept of unity? The concept unity is dealt with in Part II ("The Unity of the Church in Christ"). To us it seemed that, in spite of the authors' evident determination to be clear and direct, the term *unity* is ambiguous. The authors use the terms "unity," "unity at any price," "genuine unity," "true unity," and "church unity." The trend of the argument is, as was noted above, to show that "church unity,"

that is, external fellowship between churches, must be sought after on the basis of a consensus with respect to the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. But when this consensus has been achieved, then altar and pulpit fellowship necessarily follows, and participation in ecumenical endeavors is inescapable. Churches that are agreed with other churches in the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, but nevertheless do not practice altar and pulpit fellowship with them, are responsible for the fact that "the plurality of churches becomes a serious problem" (p. 16, footnote 3).

One fails to discover in Part II a clear statement regarding the nature of the unity in Christ and how this unity was achieved by Him. Of this "oneness" (we prefer this term to "unity") the Savior speaks in the Gospel of John: "other sheep," "one flock" (John 10:16); "Jesus should die . . . not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52); "I do not pray for these only, but also for those *who are to believe in Me through their Word,* that they may all be one" (John 17: 20, 21 — italics my own). This oneness obviously refers to the oneness of Jews and Gentiles which Jesus meant to bring about by reconciling the world unto God. This oneness He effected on the cross (Eph. 2:13-22). Because He achieved, through His blood, forgiveness for all men, Jews and Gentiles, the oneness of the church since Pentecost consists in this, that it is made up of Jews and Gentiles who recognize the same Lord, the same Baptism, and the same God and Father of all. They are united in one body and in one Spirit. This is the oneness of the church. This oneness was achieved by Christ; it is made available by the Spirit through the Gospel; it is accepted by faith; and it is consummated at the Lord's Table.

The church is the congregation of all true believers. They are found wherever the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. As members of the one body of Christ, they are brethren (1 Cor. 10:17). As members of the one body and as brethren in the same faith, they are to love one another, avoid strife and dissension, overcome pride and arrogance, carry one another's burdens. As members of the body of Christ in a given locality, they are to worship together and to promote the preaching of the Gospel. As members of Christ's body, they are to avoid false teachings and to observe all that Christ has commanded them. Already the New Testament makes it evident that Christian congregations cultivated Christian fellowship with one another (Antioch and Jerusalem, Acts 15). The New Testament also reports that the congre-

gations in Macedonia showed concern for the physical needs of their brethren in the church of Jerusalem. But it may be difficult to establish from the New Testament that "unity does require a visible expression of fellowship among churches" (II, E, 34). It would rather seem that churches which are agreed "concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" (II, E, 36) will seek visible expression of their fellowship with one another as a result of the operations of the Spirit of God.

The document before us eloquently stresses the need of a consensus as defined by the Augsburg Confession in Article VII. But is it not of importance at this point to note that the authors of the Lutheran Symbols took an attitude toward Holy Scripture which in some quarters of Lutheranism no longer exists? The real problem in present-day Lutheranism is not, first of all, disagreement among Lutherans regarding the consensus requirement of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, but divergent attitudes toward Holy Scripture. Indeed, Jesus Christ is "Savior, Reconciler, Redeemer and Liberator" (p. 5). But the New Testament also describes Him as the Prophet and Teacher come from God. And this Prophet and Teacher has some things to say about the Old Testament which are largely disregarded or made light of today. He also gave His apostles, who became the authors of the New Testament, the gift of His Spirit, who would guide them into all truth and make their writings the inerrant Word of God.

In conclusion we call attention to some statements in the study document which we believe to be inadequate or unfortunate formulations. We note the following. "Baptism was instituted by Christ for the redemption of the world . . ." (II, F, 37). Have Lutherans not always held that Baptism was instituted by Christ as a means through which the Triune God brings those who are baptized in His name into His fellowship? Again: "It [the Lutheran Church] recognizes other church bodies with their special gifts . . ." (II, G, 39). We suggest: The Lutheran Church recognizes that there are believers, children of God, in other church bodies where the Gospel is still preached. The statement regarding the purpose of the Lord's Supper seems to us inadequate (II, F, 37): "The Lord's Supper is Christ's gift to the congregation for the strengthening of the fellowship with its Head and Lord and the constant realization of the fact that it is His body." Does not Lutheranism teach that the Lord's Supper is, above all, a means of grace in which the Lord Jesus gives His own body and blood for the strengthening of the faith of those who commune? And is it really true that "division within the Church is

always [italics ours] the result of arbitrary attempts to add something human to Word and Sacrament as the necessary marks of the Church"? (P. 6.) Have not divisions arisen in the church, even in New Testament times, for other reasons?

We pray that the Lord of the Church will richly bless all the efforts of the Minneapolis Assembly to arrive at a truly Scriptural and God-pleasing consensus regarding the study document. What Minneapolis will do with the study document may spell either a greater degree of unity and of unification within Lutheranism, or greater and sharper divisions. Since it is the Holy Spirit who alone creates and preserves the unity in Christ, may He guide and direct all thought and activity in the Assembly.

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