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Some Thoughts on the Church in the Lutheran Symbols

HERBERT J. A. BOUMAN

Near the end of 1536 Martin Luther wrote that "a seven-year-old child knows what the church is" (SA III XII). In our time great ecumenical gatherings expend incalculable amounts of time and effort in wrestling with the doctrine of the church, and first-rate theologians in all churches provide the printing presses with an unabating flow of materials in discussion of the problems and implications of ecclesiology.

Surely these facts give rise to a number of nagging questions. Was Luther incurably naive and did he hopelessly oversimplify the question? Or are the ecclesiastical assemblies and theological experts of our day inextricably overcomplicating something that is basically very simple? Again, has the history of the church since the Reformation overlaid the doctrine of the church to so massive an extent that before the church can ever begin her constructive task in this area she must devote her enormous energies almost exclusively to the grinding task of destruction and demolition, to rid the doctrine concerning the church of an inestimable accumulation of debris? Or has the galloping proliferation of denominationalism since the Reformation contributed to a multiplication of sectarian ecclesiologies, full of fragmentations and distortions, largely determined by sec-

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tarian preconceptions imposed on the biblical record concerning the church? Has the intrusion of nontheological factors and church-political concerns compounded the complexity of the issue? Has the problem been made increasingly more difficult by a failure to distinguish clearly between the relatively simple question concerning the *essence* of the church and the many clamorous questions about the church raised by the tangled and sophisticated, and at the same time rootless and forlorn, space-age society in which we live?

By the sheer quantity of concern with the doctrine of the church the label attached to our century as the "century of the church" may be accurate enough. This may be a simple statement of fact, an exclamation of joy, a cry of anguish, or a sigh of weary resignation.

Yet it is an overstatement to call this the century of the church. There must be more substance than a mere preoccupation with details of ecclesiology. It is only when the community of the faithful is true to the nature and mission of the church that any age can properly be called an "age of the church." In a sense every century since Pentecost has been an age of the church. However, the most luminous eras have been those in which the church took herself seriously as she was intended to be in the design of her divine Founder—in whole devotion to her Lord and to His eternal Gospel. Such an age was the 1st century, when the apostolic Gospel marched from Jerusalem to Rome and

beyond. Another great age of the church was the period of the great christological controversies when the church would brook no adulteration of her witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. And surely the 16th century was preeminently a century of the church, when the restoration of a biblical synthesis of Christology and soteriology recalled the church to her being, her mission, and her resources.

The heritage of the 16th-century Lutheran Reformation lies before us in the Lutheran symbols. To the degree that our generation can recapture the christological fidelity and prophetic boldness and evangelical fervor of the 1st, 4th, 5th, and 16th centuries, it can yet become a great century of the church and speak an authoritative and dynamic Word of the Lord to a rebellious, skeptical, confused world and to a tragically fragmented and uncertain Christendom.

This essay desires to be nothing more than an attempt to call attention to some of the riches and the radiance of the doctrine of the church in our Book of Concord and thus to make a small contribution to the renewal of the church in our time. In what follows I propose to call attention to (I) the presuppositions and contexts for the doctrine of the church; (II) the nature and resources of the church; (III) authority in the church; (IV) the work of the church; and (V) the unity of the church.

I. PRESUPPOSITIONS AND CONTEXTS

Although the Lutheran doctrine, including the doctrine of the church, claims to be drawn from the Scriptures, the formulations bear the marks of their time with an awareness of other current views on the church and a conscious antithesis to them.

We cannot ignore the historical setting, nor can we re-create it. We can but attempt to reproduce the abidingly valid thrust of the ecclesiology of our fathers. On the one side they faced the church of Rome, of which they themselves were for a time still members. The church of Rome was a complex structure, the product of many centuries of development, a multifaceted institution. The church of Rome was inescapable, impinging on every area of life in the Western World. It was monolithic and authoritarian, every cleric, down to the lowest rank of the hierarchy, representing the local extension and actualization of the papal claims. Through the centuries the bishop of Rome had arrogated more power to himself until Boniface VIII (*Unam Sanctam*, 1302) made submission to the pope an indispensable requirement for salvation. Papalist claims ultimately overcame the conciliarist challenges and struck down every pre-Reformation rebellion against papal supremacy. The Roman church had become an external organization, a worldly realm complete with all the trappings of a secular state. The determining factor was not as much the Gospel of Christ as it was the law of the church. The church was burdening consciences with human traditions at every turn. Although the sacraments loomed large in the practice of the church, they seemed at times to be treated as individual contrivances in an integrated, sacerdotally controlled system and were legalistically dispensed or withheld.

The reformers at Zurich and Geneva presented another understanding of the church which differed from the Lutherans. Though they differed from each other on a number of points, both groups shared strong political, sociological, and icono-

clastic emphases. A third front developed from the radical left-wing orientation of the Anabaptists with a "spiritual," enthusiastic and perfectionist, chiliastic and individualistic accents.

In contrast to these concepts, some of which seemed like caricatures of the church, the Lutheran reformers strove to align themselves constructively with the church of the early centuries without losing sight of the historical continuum. The Lutherans had a profound appreciation for the traditions of the past, not indeed uncritically but with an earnest endeavor to "prove all things and hold fast to that which is good." Their concern was one of conservation and reform, not an indiscriminate repudiation of the past. They were foes of innovation and of all that was sectarian and schismatic. As in all of their theology, so also in their theology of the church the Lutherans were committed to true catholicity and genuine ecumenicity. But to be truly catholic meant for them to be apostolic. For them apostolicity was much more than a dimension in space or time and did not necessarily include the dynastic aspect of an unbroken succession of episcopally ordained persons from the days of the apostles. Apostolicity meant a commitment to the apostolic word of the Scriptures, the whole, unfragmented, undiluted, uncompromised apostolic Gospel, no less.

In an exhaustive treatment of Lutheran ecclesiology a presentation of the biblical teaching concerning the church would be indispensable, because the Lutheran symbols insist that the Scriptures are the sole norm, rule, and judge of their theology. An analysis of the biblical material will lead to a recognition of the inseparable connection between the church and the

triune God, the church and Jesus Christ, the church and the Holy Spirit. It will make clear the New Testament emphasis on the church as a community: a fellowship of people, the people of God in relation to God, in relation to the Word, in relation to each other, and in relation to the world; a fellowship of faith and of love; a fellowship in obedience to Christ and in the Gospel of Christ; a fellowship of suffering and dying, of living and reigning with Christ, of peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, of hope and of glory; a group chosen, redeemed, called, converted, justified, and sanctified by God alone; a group of human individuals of disparate backgrounds and dispositions welded together by the Lord into a blessed fraternity, forged into the oneness of the Spirit in the bond of peace; a horizontal association of sharing earthly and heavenly treasures; a fellowship of forgiveness and mutual burden bearing, of mutual admonition and encouragement, of worship and prayer and Holy Communion; a fellowship of mutual discipline, reproof and correction; a fellowship of people redeemed by Christ from all lawlessness and cleansed by Him to be a people for a possession, zealous of good works; an other-worldly community, squarely in this world but not of this world, with a different orientation, different standards, sense of values, goals and destiny; the offscouring of this world — misfits, strangers, pilgrims, hunted and harassed — yet the supreme benefactors of this world.

A careful study of the New Testament will demonstrate that there is little or no interest in details of external organization and structure, of polity and cultus; that there is, in fact, a repudiation of hierarchical pretensions. In the freedom of the

Gospel the New Testament church is empowered to establish, abolish, or adapt her forms in the best interests of her function, controlled and directed only by the Head and Lord, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit through the apostolic Word.

The perspective of the holy Gospel informs and shapes Lutheran theology, and thus also the theology of the church. But the Gospel is a many-splendored treasure, inexhaustibly rich and radiating its luster in an infinite variety of contexts. The church too appears in the symbols in a variety of settings. The church's teaching appears in the context of the confession of the triune God according to the Ecumenical Creeds. Not only do these affirmations stand at the beginning of the Book of Concord, but the particular Lutheran symbols themselves say all that they have to say from a trinitarian perspective. The Augsburg Confession, the Apology, and the Smalcald Articles all begin with explicit reference to the "sublime articles of the divine majesty" (SA-I; cf. AC I, Ap I). Luther's treatment of the Creed in his Catechisms is devoted to the great works of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, including the work whereby the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth." This means that Lutheran ecclesiology is unequivocally in the mainstream of the Christian tradition, a fact that is also made plain by its affirmation of the church's apostolicity and catholicity.

This also means that in the Lutheran view no doctrine of the church that is not trinitarian is Christian. Such a nontrinitarian stance is *a priori* both irrelevant and false. "We steadfastly maintain that those who believe otherwise do not belong to

the church of Christ but are idolators and blasphemers" (Ap I 2; cf. also the Athanasian Creed, 1, 2).^{*} Entrance into the church is effected by the sacrament of Holy Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Through it "we are first received into the Christian community" (LC IV 2). "God's name was given to us when we became Christians at Baptism, and so we are called children of God . . ." (LC III 37). The permanence of the holy Christian church in history is guaranteed and manifested by the application of the trinitarian Baptism through the years (cf. LC IV 49—50).

Within the framework of the holy Trinity the Lutheran doctrine of the church is unmistakably christological. Following its acknowledgment of the triune God, the Augsburg Confession proceeds to speak of mankind, God's creatures, as lost in sin and in need of redemption (II) and continues with the person and work of the Son of God, the Redeemer (III). By the holy merits of Jesus Christ the sinner is reconciled, forgiven and justified, as the fruit of God's grace in Christ is imputed to the sinner through faith (IV). All the people in whom this faith in Christ has been created (V) constitute the church (the assembly of *all believers*, VII 1). The church is the body of Christ (*corpus Christi*, Ap VII 12); the kingdom of Christ (*regnum Christi*, Ap VII 13, 16, 17, 19, 22); the church of Christ (*ecclesia Christi*,

* All English citations from the Lutheran symbols are from *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, and Arthur C. Piepkorn (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959). German and Latin citations are from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der ev. lutherischen Kirche*, 5th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963—64).

Ap VII 11); the people "who truly believe the Gospel of Christ" (Ap VII 28); the people who "have the same Christ" (Ap VII 10); the "holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (SA-III XII). By being laid on the bosom of the church we are led to Christ (LC II 37). The church is nothing but "a little flock or holy community of pure saints under one head, Christ" (LC II 51). In short, Christology and ecclesiology are altogether inseparable. *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*. Conversely, where Christ is not preached, there is no church. (Cf. LC II 45.)

But since Christ cannot be fragmented, the doctrine of the church involves *all of Christology*—the total Christ, in His divine nature and in His human nature, in His humiliation and in His exaltation, in His cross and in His glory, in His lowliness and in His majesty; the Christ who is our Brother and the Christ who is our Lord; the Christ "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven," who "truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, that He may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures, that through the Holy Spirit He may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in Him, that He may bestow on them life and every grace and blessing, and that He may protect and defend them against the devil and against sin." (AC III 4, 5; "All who believe in Him" are the same as the "believers" of AC VII, and the "eternally rule" corresponds to the "continue forever" of AC VII.)

The extent of Christ's involvement with the church is well stated in the following passage from the Formula of Concord:

We do not understand these testimonies

[i. e., Matt. 18:20; 28:20] to mean that only the deity of Christ is present with us in the Christian church and community and that this presence of Christ in no way involves His humanity. . . . We believe that the cited passages illustrate the majesty of the man Christ, which Christ received according to His humanity at the right hand of the majesty and power of God, so that, also according to and with this same assumed human nature of His, Christ can be and is present wherever He wills, and in particular that He is present with His church and community on earth as mediator, head, king, and high priest. [SD VIII 77—78]

Nowhere, however, is the church equated with Christ, as a sort of continuous extension of the incarnation. Christ is with the church, the Lord of the church, indeed the Head of the church, but not the church herself. The church is not the entire Christ but only the *body* of Christ, and the individual Christians are *membra Christi*. In any case there can be no doctrine of the church apart from or independent of the doctrine of Christ. And of course no doctrine of Christ is complete without fully including the work of Christ.

The doctrine of the church is trinitarian, christological, soteriological, and also pneumatological. One cannot trace the christological contexts in which the Lutheran symbols present the doctrine of the church without colliding head on with the doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Christ and the Holy Spirit are simply inseparable. One must say, *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*. One must also say, *ubi Spiritus Sanctus, ibi ecclesia*. Yes, one must say it in a constant relationship, *ubi Christus, ibi Spiritus Sanctus*. Already AC III says of the exalted Christ in His dominion over all

creatures "that through the Holy Spirit He may sanctify . . . all who believe in Him," while the church consists of all the *vere credentes*, all the believers in Christ, and these believers are entirely the product of the Holy Spirit's work, who creates faith where and when He pleases (AC V). To be in the church means, indeed, to "believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him," but this is possible only because "the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel . . . even as He calls . . . the whole Christian church on earth." This relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit and the church is perhaps nowhere expressed more fully and clearly than in Luther's Large Catechism. (II, 37—53; cf. esp. 37, 38, 43—45, 51, 52.)

In many different places the activity of the Holy Spirit in and for the church is linked to the means of grace, the Gospel and the Sacraments, which are the only elements explicitly drawn into the definition of the church. It is through the Gospel and the Sacraments "as through instruments" that the Holy Spirit is given, who creates faith (AC V). "We must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. . . . Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and Sacrament" (SA-III VIII 3, 10). The kingdom of God, or of Christ, one of the descriptive titles given to the church, comes to us "when the heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit so that by His grace we may believe His holy Word" (SC III 8). This repeated emphasis is, of course, in conscious antithesis to the accents of the enthusiasts.

When the Lutheran symbols place the

doctrine of the church into the context of the Gospel and when they express the concern that the Gospel be *purely* preached, they point to the importance and necessity of understanding what the Gospel really is, and the ability to distinguish it from God's other Word, the Law. There can be no *doctrina evangelii*, nor any *consensus de doctrina evangelii*, elements indispensable to the church, if there is not at once and constantly a proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel. Such a distinction means for the church the recognition that the Gospel is God's *opus proprium*, or more precisely, the Word through which God performs His *opus proprium*. Hence too, all nomistic and synergistic elements are excluded from the Lutheran theology concerning the church. The Gospel alone, not Law and Gospel, is drawn into the definition of the church, and the Gospel always involves *sola gratia, solus Christus, sola fides*. Self-evidently this fact does not make the church antinomian in her task and proclamation (cf. FC SD II 50, V 23, *et passim*). Yet Luther's burning of the Canon Law at the Elster Gate has far-reaching significance for Lutheran ecclesiology. The church is not primarily an institution controlled by laws but a fellowship committed to the Gospel.

But because the Gospel, with its content of justification, or the remission of sins, determines the church's nature, the doctrine of the church is thereby also moved into the context of man and of sin. This fact suggests a biblically realistic view of the people who constitute the church. Even as "true believers" they are still sinners. As such they are estranged, rebellious creatures of God, selfish, self-centered, autonomous, autocratic, and anticomunal.

Through the saving acts of God in His incarnate Son they have been called by the Gospel so that the broken relationships may be restored and the sinners may be brought out of their isolation into the community, the people of God. By the forgiveness of their sins they have been brought into the church and they must live in the church every day by the forgiveness of sins (cf. Ap. II 50). It was Luther who in his exposition of the Third Article made the juxtaposition of the *credo ecclesiam* and the *credo remissionem peccatorum* theologically meaningful. Any Donatist, perfectionist concept of the church is ruled out.

In their determination to present a faithful witness to the biblical doctrine of the church the Lutheran symbols are explicit in delimiting their theology against all ancient and contemporary schismatic and sectarian disruptions of the fellowship of the church, as well as against all externalized or idealistic distortions of the church, as is borne out by the Lutheran rejection of all trinitarian, christological, anthropological, soteriological, and ecclesiological heresies, e. g., in AC I, II, VIII, IX, XVII.

The "continue forever" of AC VII points to the historical perspective, which is also implied in the "*catholica*." These are not only flat, horizontal (contemporary) concepts but also vertical, including the church through the centuries past since Pentecost, involving the *consensus patrum* and the *consensus fratrum*. The conservative approach of the Lutheran symbols to the traditions of the past — liturgical, church-political, catechetical, and so on — is further evidence of this historically anchored stance.

This is, however, not only a backward look into and a sense of continuity with

the past history of the church. It is also a forward look into the future (cf. "our posterity" [Preface, *The Book of Concord*, pp. 5, 12]) and to the consummation of the church's history at the Lord's return (AC XVII) and a consciousness of having to "appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Pref., p. 9)

Therefore, in the presence of God and of all Christendom among both our contemporaries and our posterity, we wish to have testified that the present explanation . . . is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God's grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account. [FC SD XII 40; cf. VI 24, 25.]

And thus the entire ecclesiology of the Lutheran symbols stands under the control of the Lord of history and of the church. The eschatological orientation and urgency of the symbols is, of course, profoundly significant also for the doctrine of the church and has, in fact, made the Reformation the great age of the church that it was.

To summarize what has been said about the contexts and presuppositions of Lutheran ecclesiology: What is taught and confessed about the church in the symbols is placed in the framework of the doctrine of the triune God, of Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit. It speaks in spiritual, eternal, monergistic, dynamic, evangelical accents. Like all other articles of the Creed, the church too is an article of faith. It is spiritual indeed, yet not as being unreal or intangible or unidentifiable but spiritual as being controlled and directed by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the contexts of the doctrine of the church are markedly unconcerned with externals, with

matters that seem so important if not essential to many others, such as the precise organizational structure of the church, the careful definition and specific number of the sacraments, a detailed description of rites and ceremonies, a clearly established church polity, a studied delineation of church-state relationships, and so on. In all this one can feel again and unmistakably a manifestation of the spirit of the New Testament (and "spirit" could be written either upper case or lower case). Any approach that ignores these considerations necessarily fails to do justice to the Lutheran confessional concerns regarding the church. It represents a distortion and is, in truth, irrelevant.

II. THE NATURE AND RESOURCES OF THE CHURCH

Although references to the church are scattered throughout the symbols, the principal sources, in addition to the compressed formulations in the Creeds, are AC VII and VIII, Ap VII and VIII, SA-III XII, Melancthon's *Tractatus*, and Luther's explanations of the Third Article (especially in the Large Catechism). From these articles may be derived all the basic elements of the doctrine, always remembering that the statements about the church get their color from their more immediate or more general confessional contexts. As the Lutherans commit themselves unreservedly to the Ecumenical Creeds and, in fact, assign them a position of priority over the 16th-century Lutheran documents (cf. FC SD Summary Formulation, "*illa catholica et generalia summae auctoritatis symbola*"), so they also accept the creedal formulations regarding the church as normative. Either explicitly or implicitly they adopt the de-

scriptive adjectives of the Creeds—one, holy, catholic (Christian), apostolic—and they understand the statement about the *communio sanctorum* ecclesiology. It is true that in the Lutheran perspective the epithets and qualifications are understood differently in detail from the Roman Catholic understanding, and the accents in Lutheran ecclesiology diverge from traditional Roman Catholic statements with reference to starting point, essence, and marks, as well as the requirements for unity in the church.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession brings the first official Lutheran statement regarding the church. The definition or description begins with a conscious link to the Ecumenical Creeds (*eine heilige christliche Kirche; una sancta ecclesia*), and this already indicates the unbroken historical continuity of the church and the Lutherans' place in it. This becomes explicit in the "*alle Zeit*," "*perpetuo mansura sit*," which later is expressly referred to the dominical promise of Matt. 16:18 (FC SD XI 50; cf. 8). Through the proclamation of the Law and the Gospel, says the Formula, God "gathers an eternal church for Himself out of the human race" (SD II 50). The duration of the church, understood in a wider sense, is viewed as co-extensive with the history of mankind between the Fall and the Day of Judgment, exactly the span covered by the proclamation of the two words of God, the Law and the Gospel. "Since the beginning of the world these two proclamations have continually been set forth side by side in the church of God with the proper distinction" (SD V 23; also 24). In the resurrection, man "will no longer require either the preaching of the Law or its threats and

punishments, just as he will no longer require the Gospel. They belong to this imperfect life." (SD VI 24)

As for the catholicity of the church, the phrase "assembly of all believers" points to an accent that is detailed in the Apology. Here Melanchthon speaks of the "holy catholic church" (Ap VII 7), or "the communion of saints" which "seems to have been added to explain what 'church' means, namely the assembly of saints who share the association of the same Gospel or teaching and the same Holy Spirit who renews, consecrates, and governs their hearts" (8). Specifically: "It says 'the church catholic' lest we take it to mean an outward government of certain nations. It is, rather, made up of men scattered throughout the world who agree on the Gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments" (10; cf. 20). It is instructive to note the differences in these accents as compared with the traditional hierarchical and institutional emphases of the Roman view as formulated, for example, by Robert Bellarmine (1542—1621) in *De ecclesia militante*, 2: "The church is a union of men who are united by the profession of the same Christian faith, and by participation in the same sacraments under the direction of their lawful pastors, especially of the one representative of Christ on earth, the Pope of Rome" (cited in Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, tr. Patrick Lynch [Saint Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1958], p. 271). In the Catechisms Luther also emphasizes the true catholicity of the church when he speaks of "the whole Christian church on earth," or of the "unique community in the world," "the mother that begets and bears every Christian." (LC II 42)

The same contexts also give expression to the holiness of the church. The church is holy since it is a *communio sanctorum*, a fellowship of holy people. Both Luther (LC II 47—48) and Melanchthon (Ap VII 8) interpret the phrase as referring to holy people rather than holy things (for example, the sacraments) and regard it as equivalent to "church." Furthermore, the word "saints" is used interchangeably with "believers," as the German and Latin texts demonstrate. But since faith is the faith that justifies, that is, the faith that receives the forgiveness of sins, the holiness of the church is, in principle, forensic in the same sense as justification itself. The holiness of the church is "the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Ap VII 13), that is to say, "the righteousness by which we are righteous before God" (15). "The church in the proper sense is the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel and who have the Holy Spirit" (28). Luther makes much of the church's attribute of holiness, both in his Catechisms and in the Smalcald Articles. In the Small Catechism the church is said to be holy because in the church the Holy Spirit "richly and daily forgives all sins to me and all believers." In the Large Catechism we have the constantly recurring refrain: "His holy community" (LC II 37), "a holy Christian people" (48), "a community composed only of saints, or still more clearly, 'a holy community'" (49), "a little holy flock or community of pure saints" (51). "Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are in the Christian church, where there is full forgiveness of sins. . . . But outside the Christian church (that is, where the Gospel is not) there is no for-

givenness, and hence no holiness" (55—56). Here too the tension of *simul justus et peccator* is clearly expressed.

Similarly, the apostolicity of the church is related not to an external apostolic succession of bishops but to the apostolic Gospel. The church's apostolicity is reflected in the reference of AC VII to the purely preached Gospel and the sacraments administered in accordance with the Gospel. The opponents are rebuked because "apostolic rites they want to keep, apostolic doctrine they do not want to keep" (Ap VII 38). "Christ gave the apostles only spiritual power, that is, the command to preach the Gospel, proclaim the forgiveness of sins, administer the sacraments." (Tr 31; cf. 11; Ap XII 73)

What characterizes the Lutheran definition of the church is its emphasis on *people*, not people in general nor any kind of people but a very specific kind, namely, all such as have justifying faith, by which they have been made saints (cf. LC IV. 2; AC IV and VII), and have received baptism. Since this faith is entirely the work of God (AC V) and since this faith rests entirely in God, in His works and promises, the church is described as the people of God. The church consists of "men scattered throughout the world" (Ap VII 10), "a spiritual people . . . God's true people, reborn by the Holy Spirit" (14). Luther speaks of "all His Christian people." (LC II 62)

Essential to the understanding of the church, however, is not only the fact that there are a number of people in the world who have faith. In such a static concept of the church it would be possible to think of the members by themselves in isolation from each other. And indeed, there have

been presentations that stressed the "invisibility" of the church in so one-sided a way as to create the impression that one's obligation to the doctrine of the church was fully met by the mere affirmation that there were other people like ourselves in the world but for whom we need feel no further concern beyond possibly including them in our prayers. To counteract this static and escapist approach, our symbols add a description of what the members of the church *do*, not simply in addition to but because of what they *are*. The church consists of believers, or saints, who *gather* and thus constitute a community in mutual relationship and activity, a *Versammlung*, a *congregatio*. Here the biblical concept of the *Qahal Yabweh*, the solemn assembly of God's people in the Old Testament, and *ekklesia*, the LXX rendering of *Qahal* taken over in the New Testament, is reflected. This dynamic feature is reiterated in various ways. The church is "the assembly of saints" (Ap VII 1), "an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts" (5), "the assembly of saints who share the association of the same Gospel," etc. (8; cf. 16, 28). Luther has the same accents. By the term "church," "simple folk understand not a group of people but a consecrated house or building. But the house should not be called a church except for the single reason that the group of people assembles there. . . . Thus the word 'church' (*Kirche*) really means nothing else than a common assembly." (LC II 48; cf. 51, 52)

Again, the dynamic character of the church does not simply lie in that the members do *something* or in that they gather casually or aimlessly for any purpose. Rather the emphasis rests on what

they do when they have come together, or what happens in the midst of their assembly. The church is an assembly in which (*in qua, bei welchen*) the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered. It is not the mere possession of the Gospel and Sacraments, however pure, but their use, that is affirmed. But this means nothing less than that the members of the church are gathered around Christ Himself, for Christ is where the Gospel is, because the Gospel is the instrument by means of which the Holy Spirit brings Christ and His benefits to the church. Instead of saying *in qua evangelium* we could say just as well *in qua Christus* or *in qua Spiritus Sanctus*. For so the church, the assembly of believers around the means of grace, is characterized. It is "an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Ap VII 5), "the body of Christ, which Christ renews, consecrates, and governs by His Spirit" (*ibid.*). The church is people who "have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit" (Ap VII 10). Therefore Luther's description in the Smalcald Articles says precisely the same as AC VII: The church is "holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (III XII 2). By bringing us into this holy community the Holy Spirit "brings us to Christ." (LC II 37; cf. 43—44, 51)

When the definition of AC VII adds certain adverbs to qualify the activity in the midst of the believing assembly that constitutes the church, that is, when it says that the Gospel is to be preached "purely" (*rein, pure*) and the Sacraments are to be administered according to the Gospel (*lauts des Evangelii, recte*), it emphasizes the critical importance of the church's stance over against the Gospel and her pledge to

proclaim it in conformity with its true character. There is only one Gospel, and it has only one content, Jesus Christ, or the gracious saving, monergistic activity of God through His eternal Son for us men and for our salvation. The Gospel itself is always pure, if it is Gospel at all. The stress is placed on what the church does with the Gospel, and the church's confession declares how the church understands the one Gospel and proposes to make use of it. For this reason the Apology can include also the church's confession among the marks by which the church is recognized (e. g., VII 3). This does not make the confession, which is a human formulation, of the same value as the Gospel and the Sacraments, which are God's gifts, but the confession is only the church's determination to use the Gospel and the Sacraments purely, correctly, true to their content and purpose. This is what it means to "hear" the voice of the Good Shepherd. And this does not exclude the possibility that in spite of and in the midst of faulty understanding or weakness, and inadequacy of formulation and application, the Gospel still sounds through purely, and therefore through it the Holy Spirit creates believers and builds the church even in heterodox communions, a fact that Lutherans have always gratefully acknowledged. It is in every case the Lord Christ through the Holy Spirit who builds and nourishes and extends and preserves His church; it is never the ever-present human frailty and faulty understanding that does these things. Therefore, the church is never dispensed from her obligation to guard the purity of her proclamation and thus to have the proper attitude of total acknowledgment of the lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the ideal and must remain the goal of the church's concern. This goal has never in the church's postapostolic history been reached, not even in the Reformation, not in any church body in existence today. Perfection, which is marked by fullness of understanding, by not saying too much or too little, by making the proper applications to daily life situations, by observing undeviatingly and unerringly the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, so that the Gospel be *purely* preached in every case—this will not be present as long as the task is entrusted by the Lord to frail and sinful men and not to the holy angels. Our symbols are realistically aware of this situation: "Of course, there are also many weak people in it [the church] who build on this foundation [i. e., "the true knowledge of Christ"] perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected. The writings of the holy Fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundation but that this did not overthrow their faith" (Ap VII 20—21; cf. esp. IV 231—235). Condemned as heresy is the teaching attributed to the Anabaptists "that there is no truly Christian assembly or congregation in the midst of which sinners are still found" (FC SD XII 14) and the claim placed on the lips of the followers of Schwenkfeld "that a congregation in which public expulsion or orderly process of excommunication does not take place is not a true Christian congregation" (34). Therefore, "we shall at all times make a sharp distinction between needless and unprofitable contentions (which, since they destroy rather than edify, should never be allowed to disturb

the church) and necessary controversy," and the important qualification is made that necessary controversy has to do with "dissension concerning articles of the Creed or the chief parts of our Christian doctrine, when the contrary error must be refuted in order to preserve the truth." (FC SD Summary Formulation 15)

Attention should be called to certain other qualifications in the Lutheran descriptions of the nature of the church. Already AC VIII states what the church strictly speaking (*eigentlich, proprie*) is. The contrast is between the true believers and the "many hypocrites and evil persons . . . mingled with the believers" (*falsche Christen und Heuchler, auch öffentliche Sünder*). The Apology refers to this tension again and again. It speaks of "the outward fellowship of the church" (VII 3) and concedes that "in this life hypocrites and evil men are mingled with the church and are members of the church according to the outward associations of the church's marks" (*ibid.*). There are indeed "dead members of the church," although they are never "members of Christ" (5). "There is an infinite number of ungodly within the church who oppress it" (9). One can speak of members of the church both "in fact (*re*) as well as in name (*nomine*)" (12). It is necessary, therefore, to speak of the church both in a strict and in a broad sense. "The church is *not merely* an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments, however, but it is *mainly* an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts" (5, emphasis added; cf. 16). The kingdom of Christ is "hidden under the cross" (18), "hidden under a crowd of wicked men" (19). "The church, properly [strictly]

speaking, is that which has the Holy Spirit." (22; cf. 28—29)

The church is the creation of the Holy Spirit. The church is concerned with spiritual and eternal things, with righteousness and faith and the true knowledge of Christ. Therefore the church is called a "spiritual people," "the true and spiritual people." But this does not mean that the church is "spiritualized" into some intangible never-never land. The church is always made up of flesh-and-blood people, so that Luther can say, "Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses" (LC II 52). The church can be located and identified through its marks, it can be found where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered. "We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic . . . but we teach that this church actually exists. . . . And we add its marks . . ." (Ap VII 20; cf. 3). Nowhere do our Lutheran symbols use the visible-invisible dichotomy, as do the Roman Catholics, the Westminster Confession, the Thirty-Nine Articles, and others. It is also true that the symbols never speak of two churches, the one visible, the other invisible, just as the New Testament never does. Always the reference is to the one church, and always where Gospel and Sacraments are used.

No discussion of what constitutes the church would be complete without some reference to the resources of the church. While it is true that the resources are not a part of the church's essence in the strict sense, since the church consists of people, it is nevertheless also true that without her resources the church herself would not have come into being and would not continue

to exist. The church not only uses her resources but is created and nourished and continually renewed by them.

Remembering the context in the Augsburg Confession into which the church is placed, we may say that the primary and principal resource of the church is the triune God Himself (AC I). In particular, it is the exalted Christ at the right hand of God who exercises His beneficent and protective rule over the church (AC III 4). He is "our mediator, redeemer, king, high priest, head, shepherd" (FC SD VIII 47), He is "present with His church and community on earth as mediator, head, king, and high priest" (78), He is the church's head (SA-II IV 9; AC Pref. 4, 10; LC II 51), He "intercedes for us as our high priest" (Ap IV 332). Above all, the Holy Spirit, as the Paraclete sent by Christ and as the agent of the exalted Christ, is the creative operator in the church as the Lordly, lifegiving One (Nicene Creed). It is "by His Spirit" that Christ "renews, consecrates, and governs" His body (Ap VII 5; cf. 8, 14). It is the Holy Spirit who "calls, gathers . . . the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (SC II 6). The church "is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding." (LC II 51)

The resources of the church referred to in the Augsburg Confession (VII) are the Gospel and the Sacraments. They are indeed called the *marks* of the church. But they are infinitely more than marks of identification. They are the efficacious means entrusted to the church as the mighty instruments of the Holy Spirit. They are the church's equipment for her life, her growth, and her perpetuation. And they are the

only means. Without them there would be no church. Without their continued use the church would die (cf. LC II 43). These means of grace are also the empirical guarantee of the church's concrete reality and the infallible criteria of her presence.

Inseparable from the Gospel and the Sacraments as a resource for the church is the ministry, which has significance and validity exclusively in relation to and in the service of the Gospel and the Sacraments. "To obtain such faith [cf. AC IV] God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments" (AC V 1). "According to the Gospel the power of keys or the power of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments" (XXVIII 5). Priests "are called to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments to the people" (Ap XIII 9; cf. SA-III X). Finally, it must not be forgotten that the members of the church are themselves a great and important resource of the church. (Cf. SA-III IV.)

III. AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

What was said about the church's resources must also be said about the church's authority. The ultimate authority rests, of course, in the hands of the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ Himself. He is the "Lord of life and righteousness and every good and blessing" (LC II 30). "The church cannot be better governed and maintained than by having all of us live under one head, Christ" (SA-II IV 9). And He remains the sole authority even when He exercises His authority through instruments. The Lord has given the church His Word, the Word of the proph-

ets and apostles, as the sole norm, rule, and judge of all teachings and teachers in the church (FC SD Summary Formula 1). This Word is the treasure that belongs to all believers. "'You are a royal priesthood' (1 Pet. 2:9). These words apply to the true church which, since it alone possesses the priesthood, certainly has the right of electing and ordaining ministers" (Tr 69). The authority of the church rests therefore with the church herself, as she applies the Word under the authority of Christ Himself.

There is no superior rank or order or independent authority given to a certain class of men in the church. "Neither to the pope nor to the church do we grant the authority to issue decrees contrary to this consensus of the prophets" (Ap XII 66). "Neither Peter nor the other ministers should assume lordship or authority over the church, nor burden the church with traditions, nor let anybody's authority count for more than the Word" (Tr 11). "St. Peter forbids the bishops to exercise lordship as if they had power to coerce the churches according to their will" (AC XXVIII 76). Such power as the bishops or, for that matter, any other governmental structures in the church do possess is derived from the power and authority of the Word itself, and that means of Christ Himself. "The keys . . . belong . . . to the whole church" (Tr 24; cf. AC XXVIII 5). "Christ gave the apostles only spiritual power" (Tr 31). Any authority that men exercise in the church beyond what is explicitly prescribed in the Word is of human origin, something that the church in her freedom established in the interests of good order and to promote the welfare of the church. It is therefore revocable and

subject to periodic review and revision. "Originally," says Melanchthon, "the authority of the Roman bishop grew out of a decision of a council and is of human right" (Tr 12).

Yet, although the Lutherans recognized the human origin of traditional forms of polity, they had no wish to upset an existing church government so long as it could serve a useful purpose in the service of the Gospel. It was rather their "deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority" (Ap XIV 1). Within the framework of the freedom under the Gospel, the Lutherans unhesitatingly supported a "strong" church polity, as their respect for traditional forms and their concern for good order in the administration of the church's affairs makes clear (cf. AC XXVIII 69, 71, 77; Ap XIV 5; Ap XXVIII 12—15). But to *demand* any specific form of church government and to make it a part of the church's essence, as is done in Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, some Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist circles, is going beyond the Scriptures.

IV. THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

The work of the church can be understood only in the light of the church's purpose and of the church's resources. The tools with which the church is equipped are Word and Sacraments, and these have a purpose only in relation to their content, which is soteriological. Through the Word and Sacraments human beings are to be called out of their estrangement and alienation from God and brought to faith in the forgiveness of sins. Having been regenerated through Word and Sacraments, they

are to manifest this new relationship to God by the fruits of faith in a new, sanctified life (cf. AC VI). The work of the church is no more and no less than the unremitting proclamation of the Law and the Gospel, so that God may perform His work in men, both His alien work of terrifying and killing, and His proper work of consoling and making alive (cf. Ap XII 51 ff). The church has no other task. Everything that in the broadest sense is related to and helps to promote this task of the church has a valid place in the church's activity. The church is no political organization or coercive power, or economic association or social club. The church is a redemptive, Spirit-directed, Gospel-orientated, eschatological community. This certainly does not exclude but rather includes the church's sensitivity to and proper concern for the welfare and sanctified behavior and activity of all her members in whatever "secular" calling they may fulfill their calling by the Spirit. Thus the church can and does call upon her members to "reflect on your condition in the light of the Ten Commandments: whether you are a father or mother, a son or daughter, a master or servant" (SC V 20). The church can and does set before her members a Table of Duties "for various estates and conditions of men, by which they may be admonished to do their respective duties" (SC IX 1). Luther can and does address himself to all kinds of domestic relationships and problems, to "management and labor," to questions of civil government and responsibilities of citizens, as well as to the church's duty to train qualified and capable civil servants (cf. LC I Fourth Commandment, *passim*). Melanchthon can even tell the Emperor Charles that it is his "special responsibility

before God to maintain and propagate sound doctrine and to defend those who teach it" (Ap XXI 44). "Especially does it behoove the chief members of the church, the kings and the princes, to have regard for the interests of the church. . . . For the first care of kings should be to advance the glory of God" (Tr 54). "The real adornment of the churches is godly, practical, and clear teaching, the godly use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like" (Ap XXIV 51). How comprehensive the work of the church that is committed to the Gospel is may be seen from such passages as the following:

In our churches . . . all sermons deal with topics like these: penitence, the fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, comfort for the conscience through faith, the exercise of faith, prayer and our assurance that it is efficacious and is heard, the cross, *respect for rulers and for all civil ordinances, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ (or the spiritual kingdom) and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, chastity, and all the works of love.* [Ap XV 43, emphasis added]

We have testified often enough that penitence ought to produce good fruits. What these fruits are, we learn from the commandments — prayer, thanksgiving, the confession of the Gospel, the teaching of the Gospel, *obedience to parents and magistrates, faithfulness to one's calling, peaceable conduct instead of murder and hatred, the greatest possible generosity to the needy, restraint and chastisement of the flesh instead of adultery and fornication, truthfulness.* [Ap XII 174, emphasis added; cf. also AC XX 2, 27, 35, 37; AC XVI; Ap XVI.]

Ultimately, however, the church is committed to the work of proclaiming the

Gospel, "the propagation of that Word of His that alone brings salvation." (Preface, *The Book of Concord*, p. 13)

V. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession addressed itself to the contemporary situation in the Western church and was conscious of the attempts at conciliation for which both sides of the cleavage in the church had been summoned to Augsburg. The article approaches the question of unity from the perspective of what characterizes the church, brings her into being, nourishes her and defines her activity, namely the use of the Gospel and the Sacraments.

It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. [AC VII 2]

On the other hand, "it is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places" (3). The immediately obvious antithesis for the reformers was between Word and Sacrament on one side and human ceremonies on the other, that is, between what God does and what man does. It is made clear at the outset that uniformity in traditional forms is no valid prerequisite for unity and concord in the church. This point need be labored no further. Hence, any discussion of church unity that loses and exhausts itself in arguments and demands about externals such as organization, polity, liturgy, customs, or degrees of sanctification is false and irrelevant (see particularly Ap VII 30—50; the entire section is devoted

to a discussion of church unity). Any legalistic approach to the question of conformity in this area as necessary for true unity is unapostolic and therefore sectarian and schismatic, since the "apostles wisely admonished the reader neither to destroy evangelical liberty nor to impose a necessity upon consciences." (Ap VII 44)

Nor do the symbols suggest that the church that takes herself and her relationship to the Lord seriously will *a priori* approve of deviation from the Scriptures or of an attitude of indifference to them. The question is not primarily a quantitative one, in terms of 100 percent vs. 99 percent or 87 percent. It is rather a qualitative approach in which the big question is: Where do you stand with respect to the Gospel in all of its forms? This means, in fact, Where do you stand in relation to Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the church? Here must be the starting point and framework and continuing concern in all serious discussion concerning church unity. If commitment to the Gospel is unreserved and whole, if it is really taken seriously, there can never be any nonchalance about Christian doctrine; for to take the Gospel seriously means to be completely in earnest about the doctrine of the triune God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; the doctrine of man and of sin; of salvation *sola gratia, sola fide*; of faith and works; of eternal life and eternal death. Thus the Gospel becomes the judge and guardian and disciplinarian of the church's theology and life and unity. In Part II of the Smalcald Articles, Luther gives an excellent example of how this principle is applied (I 5; II 1, 7, 12, 17, 21, 24, 25; III 2; IV 3).

Where such an orientation to the Gospel

exists both in theory and in practice, unity in the church is secured. Nor is the unity of the church disrupted even by the presence of imperfections, shortcomings, and errors. Melanchthon says in the Apology: "There are also many weak people in it [the church] who build on this foundation perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected. The writings of the holy Fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundations but that this did not overthrow their faith" (Ap VII 20—21). Note that this refers not only to the so-called "weak people" who perhaps do not know any better, but also to "the holy Fathers," who were not "weak" but great and esteemed teachers of the church, such as Augustine, Cyprian, Ambrose, etc. And we may extend the list to include "the holy Fathers" of the Lutheran Church.

This analysis of the *satis est* of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession has imposed itself as the result of years of intensive exposure to our Lutheran symbols. It gives place neither to an attitude of indifference or compromise in the Gospel nor to a stance of inflexible separatistic rigor. It is saying to us latter-day readers of the Book of Concord: The perspective of the Gospel gives direction to all theology and practice in the Lutheran Church. This includes the doctrine of the church itself in all its aspects, also the matter of unity and union in the church. It places upon us all anew the burden of distinguishing what Lutherans call Law and Gospel *in concreto*, of recognizing the difference between what must be and what should be and what need not be, of know-

ing when and where to stand intolerant and when and where to bear and forbear. In the process we ourselves will err again and again either *in defectu* or *in excessu* and must ourselves live daily by the forgiveness of sins. And since Christians can do nothing or say nothing or think nothing good without the Holy Spirit, our constant fervent and confident sigh must be: *Veni, Creator Spiritus!*

It was precisely these considerations that guided the official representatives of The American Lutheran Church, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in their joint deliberations on the question of establishing pulpit and altar fellowship with each other. On the basis of jointly prepared essays*, which were thoroughly discussed, the participants discovered a genuine consensus in the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Unreservedly the representatives of the participating church bodies gave their assent to the closing statement of the essay dealing with the doctrine of the church:

Where Lutheran bodies have discovered or have been granted a genuine consensus in the preaching of the Gospel "in conformity with a pure understanding of it" and in the administration of the sacraments "in accordance with the divine Word," they not only may but should enter into pulpit

* The following topics were considered: 1. What Commitment to the "Sola Gratia" of the Lutheran Confessions Involves; 2. The Lutheran Confessions and "Sola Scriptura"; 3. Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions. These essays have been reprinted in *Convention Workbook (Reports and Overtures)*, 47th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, New York, July 7—14, 1967. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967, pp. 405 ff.

and altar fellowship. [*Convention Workbook*, p. 419]

Acting upon this conviction, the representatives of the three participating churches addressed a "Joint Statement and Declaration" to their respective bodies. After reviewing their consensus in the Lutheran understanding of grace, of Scripture, and of the church, the framers of the documents affirmed

that in conformity with the Confessions all teaching in the church must be tested to determine whether it conforms to the pure teaching of the Gospel. [*Convention Workbook*, p. 421]

Where people disagree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel, they cannot make common cause in their witness to the Gospel. Conversely, where Christians share a wholehearted consensus in their understanding and proclamation of the Gospel, it is sinful separation for them to erect or maintain barriers to fellowship. [*Ibid.*, p. 422]

On the basis of their common commitment to the Gospel, churches in fellowship will help one another to develop consistently evangelical practice regarding unchristian and antichristian associations. [*Ibid.*]

At its New York convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod expressed itself as being in agreement with the principles here set forth because they faithfully reflect the concerns of the Lutheran symbols regarding the requirements for unity in the church. By an all-but-unanimous vote the convention adopted a resolution that declared in part:

Resolved, That the Synod recognize that the Scriptural and confessional basis for altar and pulpit fellowship between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and

The American Lutheran Church *exists* [emphasis added], that the Synod proceed to take the necessary steps toward full realization of altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church. . . . [Convention Proceedings (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 103]

What has here been detailed in the concrete action of the church bodies involved applies in principle to the question of Lutheran unity everywhere. Once this qualitative assessment concerning an unequivocal consensus in the Gospel in its comprehensive confessional significance has been made, the way is open to mutual fellowship, a fellowship committed to fraternal burden bearing and reciprocal en-

couragement and strengthening so that the consensus, professed ideally, may be concretely realized and experienced more and more in all phases of the church's faith and life. Such an approach conforms to the letter and the spirit of the Lutheran symbols, particularly also in their teaching on the church and unity in the church. Such an approach calls for a realistic optimism—realistic in that it has no interest in evading the problems and difficulties that have been a long while accumulating, and optimistic in the courage of faith that the Lord of the church by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel will provide appropriate solutions.

St. Louis, Mo.