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Theses on Ecumenical Truth and Heresy

JOHN GEORGE HUBER

*Posted at the Door of The Lutheran Church
—Missouri Synod on the Eve of the
Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*

Out of love and zeal for both truth and unity, the following theses are presented to my beloved colleagues in the Southern California District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as a constructive contribution to the current debate on altar and pulpit fellowship. They do not represent an official policy, but are only a personal, unofficial opinion offered for exploratory discussion. They reflect the "heretical stance" of one who lives in the tension of obedience to Jesus Christ while simultaneously remaining a responsible member of a changing synod and a changing world.

In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

1. Our present synodical divisions as Lutherans are a mockery of God, a caricature of Lutheranism, and a scandal of Christianity before a skeptical world.
2. We live in an era of a new beginning when men can literally stand back from our planet and see that the good earth created by the Creator of us all is indeed one world.
3. During the annual Unity Octave, observed by Protestants, Lutherans, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholics the world over, we are reminded that Jesus Christ, our Lord, has founded

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and called us into His one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

4. As Lutherans we have always accepted this fact, knowing that Martin Luther never intended a separate denomination to bear his name.
5. The writers of the Augsburg Confession demonstrated this ecumenical understanding in the concluding words of this basic document which is accepted by all Lutherans: "We have introduced nothing, either in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian faith."
6. Our Lutheran forefathers affirmed the catholicity and unity of God's one church by quoting the Old and New Testaments of Holy Scripture and also teachers of the church of both the Western and Eastern traditions.
7. The compilers of the Book of Concord of 1580 also realized their unity with all Christians and expressed this oneness by incorporating the three Ecumenical Creeds into the list of Lutheran Symbols.
8. Our ecumenical priorities as Lutherans have been summarized well: "We are Catholic Christians first, western Catholics second, and Lutherans third." (*Concordia Theological Monthly*, 29 [1958], 5).
9. Despite the high ecumenical ideals which marked the origin of the Lutheran movement, we must reaffirm the fallibility of the church, to which Lu-

- ther referred in the words: "Popes and councils may err."
10. We must also include Lutheran synods, conventions, districts, leaders, pastors, and laymen as capable of error in theology, piety, and practice.
 11. A heresy of the 16th century within a segment of Christendom was to point to the quantity of one's good works as the basis of earning favor and fellowship with God.
 12. A heresy of the 20th century among some schismatic Lutherans and sectarian fundamentalists is to point to the quantity of correct doctrines as a prerequisite for establishing favor and fellowship with other Christians.
 13. Both heresies have something in common: they lead to self-righteousness and pride, emphasizing what an individual, a synod, or a denomination has achieved more than what God has done for us, and in spite of us, through His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.
 14. Martin Luther correctly denounced the heretical trend of quantifying Christianity by bringing the debate from the level of quantity to the level of quality.
 15. He did not advocate tallying one's orthodoxy against another's heresy as a basis of salvation, but relied on God-given trust in Jesus Christ alone.
 16. He knew that, apart from faith, it is possible to have right dogma and a wrong relationship with God at the same time.
 17. We are not justified through faith in impersonal doctrines; we are justified through faith in the person of Jesus Christ, who demands our personal involvement with the fallible, forgiven, and forgiving people of His one church.
 18. Faith is not a good work that can be reduced to a high statistical score of synodical orthodoxy; faith is not quantitative; it is a qualitative relationship with God that those enjoy whom the Spirit enables to put their trust in Jesus Christ, who lived, suffered, died and rose again for us and for all men.
 19. The Lutheran reformers applied this basic insight of quality over quantity in setting forth the key ecumenical principle of the Augsburg Confession, which makes the Gospel and the sacraments the one sufficient criterion for unity.
 20. It is significant that they did not make the Augustana document itself the basis for unity, but only the verbal and visible Gospel, which alone has the power to bring us into a unified relationship with Christ and with Christians.
 21. With this understanding of the ecumenical and evangelical nature of Lutheranism, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has articulated a commitment to the cause of Christian unity.
 22. The Missouri Synod constitution identifies its first objective as "the conservation and promotion of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10) and a united defense against schism and sectarianism (Rom. 16:17)."
 23. Synod's Theology of Fellowship document sanctions cooperation with "the churches of various denominations" on the "local, national or international level . . . to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow."

24. The Mission Affirmations adopted at the Detroit convention of 1965 state: "Resolved, That we affirm as Lutheran Christians that the Evangelical Lutheran Church is chiefly a confessing movement within the total body of Christ rather than a denomination emphasizing institutional barriers of separation."
25. A long-accepted application of synodical ecumenism is the Eucharist fellowship with individuals of other synods and other denominations permitted by the *Manual for Lutheran Chaplains in the Armed Forces*.
26. Another so-called "emergency situation" has enabled our Synod's mission church in Japan to declare altar and pulpit fellowship with the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church on April 28, 1966, "on the basis of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Symbols."
27. Our Synod's mission in India, together with other Lutheran groups, is developing a joint catechism with the many-splendored Church of South India.
28. A practical illustration of the ecumenical stance of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod is found in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, which uses not only a liturgy common to world Lutheranism and to Western Christendom but also the hymnody, music, and theological insight of Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Unitarian, Jewish, and other religious traditions. (See *The Lutheran Witness*, Dec. 29, 1959, pp. 16, 21)
29. In their Joint Statement and Declaration of January 23, 1967, regarding altar and pulpit fellowship, the representatives of the ALC, LCMS, and SELC were in effect saying that they have rediscovered the ecumenical and evangelical heart of the Church of the Augsburg Confession:
30. "The members of the committee are unanimous in asserting that where Lutheran bodies have been granted and have discovered a 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' (A. C., VII), they not only may but should enter into pulpit and altar fellowship."
31. This same ecumenical and evangelical principle of the original Lutheran movement enabled an entire convention of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod (New York, 1967) to "recognize that the Scriptural and confessional basis for altar and pulpit fellowship between The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church exists."
32. Those well-meaning critics who oppose fellowship with the American Lutheran Church on the grounds that the Gospel and sacraments are an inadequate basis for unity are in effect altering the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, which says, "It is enough."
33. To demand less than what the Gospel demands for fellowship is liberalism, but to demand more than what the Gospel demands is legalism.
34. To impose the piety and practice of The Lutheran Church — Missouri

- Synod regarding lodge membership, announcement for Holy Communion or affiliation with councils of churches upon other Lutherans as a prerequisite for fellowship is to confuse Law and Gospel; it is to be legalistic rather than evangelical.
- 35 To deny the Sacrament to other Lutherans on the basis of their synodical affiliation is to place them into a category of unworthiness and excommunication which violates the Lutheran criterion: "He is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.'"
 36. If we continue our synodical sin of separation at the Lord's Table, it would be appropriate to stamp our Communion wafers with a Missouri Synod seal rather than a crucifix, thus assuring each communicant that it is our supper and not the Lord's.
 37. To make a doctrine of Biblical inspiration or inerrancy a requirement for fellowship is also to go beyond the ecumenical standards set by Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.
 38. Our obsession with the infallibility of what Luther called the "cradle" does not necessarily guarantee our possession of the Christ contained in the cradle.
 39. The Jehovah's witnesses, who vigorously uphold the inerrancy and divine inspiration of the Bible, are living proof that such "orthodoxy" by itself does not guarantee doctrinal purity to a sect that remains isolated from the historic catholic church, of which Lutheranism is but a small part.
 40. A German-Australian Lutheran theologian, Dr. Hermann Sasse, has pointed out that the Missouri Synod's preoccupation with inerrancy can be traced to the influence of Fundamentalism, which involves a violation of the evangelical principle of the Lutheran Church.
 41. "The main teaching of the Fundamentalists centered around the idea that once a man is convinced of the inerrancy of the Bible, he is also convinced of the divinity of Christ with all its consequences; the Lutheran Christian, however, believes in the Bible because he first believes in Christ." (*Accents in Luther's Theology* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967], pp. 82 ff.)
 42. Our faith and our theological security do not rest on the proofs and props of Biblical inerrancy.
 43. The church's one Foundation is not verbal inspiration, despite rhyme and reason.
 44. Saving faith is not based on logic; it is a leap based on God's love.
 45. There is no sign given to this generation but the sign of Jonah: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, an unprovable event accepted by faith alone.
 46. The road to Christian unity is not the road to St. Louis or Wittenberg or Rome or Constantinople or Geneva or Canterbury, but the road to Jerusalem, where Christ died for us and rose again that we might all be one and that the world might believe.
 47. To continue to concentrate on our differences as Lutherans and as Christians

- is to play the Pharisaic game of straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel of sinful division.
48. To continue to thank God that we are not as other synods are, rather than confessing our own besetting sin of separation, is to take the risk of having the others go down to their house justified without us.
 49. To make membership in The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod our "security blanket" is idolatry.
 50. If we are true to the ecumenical and evangelical principles of our Lutheran forefathers, we must declare ourselves to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with the worldwide Church of the Augsburg Confession which preaches the one Gospel and celebrates a common Eucharist.
 51. It is incorrect to escape from our ecumenical responsibility by appealing to some invisible, Platonic abstraction called the *Una Sancta* as God's goal for unity.
 52. The kingdom of God comes without observation and is invisible, but the church is the empirical expression of that kingdom, comprised of visible people who are identified with an audible Gospel and tangible sacraments.
 53. Despite a lack of altar and pulpit fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians, there is an unofficial "lectern and font fellowship" based on a common acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as an authoritative source of doctrine and Baptism as a mutually recognized sacrament of incorporation into the one body of Christ.
 54. We are also in "pew fellowship" with all Christians who share our Trinitarian faith as it is expressed in the Ecumenical Creeds or in a more contemporary equivalent.
 55. While insisting upon still greater theological depth, clarity, and accuracy, we nevertheless must gratefully acknowledge every Christocentric and Biblically sound position taken by such ecumenical groups as the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., the Consultation on Church Union, and Vatican II.
 56. In dialog with other Lutherans, as well as with Reformed, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Christians, we have realized afresh the God-given strengths of our own heritage, but also the incompleteness and weaknesses which benefit from the correction and the mutual enrichment of theological insights in other Christian traditions.
 57. As a synod we have always lived in the healthy tension of our own internal diversity of style, personality, liturgical taste, epistemological theories, pastoral casuistry, and theological opinion, which has also pointed the way toward a possible ecumenical breakthrough at Denver: the kind of selective fellowship already practiced as we continue to fill our summer pulpits with discretion. (Also see Acts 15:36-41)
 58. At the Denver convention, we face a crucial choice: division or diversity; an unrealistic uniformity on all doctrine and practice or a liberating unity

in the Gospel; reliance on the quantity of our correct doctrines or on the quality of God's grace alone; perpetuating a legalistic immigrant sect or rediscovering a church that is essentially ecumenical, evangelical, and in perpetual need of renewal.

59. The time has come to act boldly, knowing that we who do what is right, though unpopular and imperfect, find

our ultimate security at the cross and the open tomb.

60 through 94. If there were 95 theses here, we should want to repeat 35 times: ". . . the Gospel . . . and the sacraments . . . it is enough . . ."

95. Here we stand. God has helped us. Amen.

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