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# Some Thoughts on Authentic Lutheranism

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THE LUTHERAN SYMBOLICAL WRITINGS PROVIDE THE BASIS FOR THE AUTHOR'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL-CENTERED NATURE OF AUTHENTIC LUTHERANISM.

In the period following Luther's death the Reformation movement identified with his name experienced a generation of fragmentation and polarization. Separate and opposing camps claimed epithets for themselves and applied labels to others, as, for example, "Gnesio-Lutherans" and "Philippists." When the polarization was finally overcome in the Formula of Concord (1577), instrumental in this achievement were neither the "Gnesios" nor the "Philippists," but "a number of pious, irenic, and learned theologians," as the Preface to *The Book of Concord* characterizes them.<sup>1</sup> Patiently and evangelically, careful to avoid all name-calling, these men strove to lead their co-religionists to a Lutheranism that was genuinely Scriptural, wholly committed to the Gospel—to believe it, teach it, confess it, and propagate it. This was authentic Lutheranism.

As we approach the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord, American Lutheranism is evidently experiencing a season of polarization, on the one hand, and of concern for authentic Lutheranism, on the other. Surely all who bear the Lutheran name should be interested in authentic Lutheranism. They should be

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 6. Passages from the Symbols are quoted according to this edition.

driven by a desire to understand what it means, to be committed to it, to promote its exercise, to guard it where it is imperiled, yes, to recover it where it has been lost or adulterated. To be sure, not every attempt to define authentic Lutheranism is successful, and not every claim to have it and to propagate it authentically is valid. There are significant differences among Lutherans in America, transcending all synodical lines, not so much in their objective commitment but in their listing of priorities and in emphases.<sup>2</sup> There are differences in details of understanding and application. There have been formulations of Lutheran theology that were ill-conceived, wrongly accented, less than adequate. Motivations, as well as expressions and actions, have been misunderstood and misconstrued. As a result, differing view-

<sup>2</sup> One might call attention to Eugene Klug, "Scripture and the Fellowship Quest," *Sola Scriptura, an International Voice of Authentic Lutheranism*, I/1 (1970), 4 ff. The article lays primary stress on the "ontological" character of the Scriptures as the Word of God "in their very being." The article is critical of an emphasis on the dynamic (*Deus loquens*) side of Scripture rather than the objective (*Deus locutus*) givenness of Scripture as the Word of God. It appears to have some misgivings about the Law/Gospel principle in exegetical enterprise and to assign only a secondary role to the functional purpose of Scripture. According to the author unanimity on the article of Scripture is the *sine qua non* for church fellowship.



points have congealed into separate and even opposing camps, even though all concerned sincerely want to stand on the identical theological platform. It may not be amiss to ponder a few of the things the Lutheran Symbols have to say about the Scriptures and about fellowship. After all, the Lutheran Symbols are the voice of authentic Lutheranism.

When the Symbols speak about the Scriptures, certain accents recur consistently. Here are just a few samples:

Ap. IV, 5 — *All Scripture* [my emphasis] should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises.

Ap. IV, 186 — . . . in some places the Scripture presents the law, while in others it presents the Gospel.

Ap. IV, 255 — [The Bible passages under consideration] contain two elements. One is the proclamation of the law or of penitence, which condemns wrongdoers and commands that they do right. The other is a promise that is added.

Ap. XII, 53 — These are the two chief works of God in man, to terrify and to justify and quicken the terrified. *One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture* [my emphasis]. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The other part is the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace granted in Christ.

Small Cat., Preface, 18 — Always adduce many examples from the Scriptures to show how God punished and blessed.

F. C., S. D. V, 1 — The distinction between law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be *explained and understood correctly* [my emphasis]. We must therefore observe this distinction with particu-

lar diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the Gospel into law. This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort which they would otherwise have in the holy Gospel. [Note the interweaving of hermeneutical, soteriological, and pastoral concerns in this passage.]

F. C., S. D. XI, 12 — *All Scripture* [my emphasis], inspired by God, should minister not to security and impenitence but to "reproof, correction, and improvement" (II Tim. 3:16). Furthermore, *everything* [my emphasis] in the Word of God is written down for us, not for the purpose of thereby driving us to despair but in order that "by steadfastness, by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

F. C., S. D. XI, 92 — It is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent.

These passages clearly indicate that the Lutheran Symbols are concerned about the content, the function, the correct understanding, and the proper use of the Scriptures, and all of these areas, not in isolation of one from the others, but in one inseparable whole. To put it technically, what is distinctively and authentically Lutheran is a steadfast refusal to separate the formal principle of Scripture from its material principle, to divorce the hermeneutical and exegetical from the kerygmatic and pastoral.

What is authentically Lutheran in connection with the question of establishing and manifesting fellowship relations with other church groups? Here, too, there is considerable divergence of opinion among Lutherans in America, largely because



there is lack of clarity in what Lutherans must accept as indispensable prerequisites for fellowship and where a consensus must primarily be located.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, there is an extremely close connection between the Word of God and the church. The very being of the church is inseparable from Word and sacrament. Luther puts it this way:

A seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd. So children pray, "I believe in one holy Christian church." Its holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, albs, or other ceremonies of theirs which they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures, but it consists of the Word of God and true faith. [Smalcald Articles III, xii, 2 f.]

Luther insists that "the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel" (S. A. II, ii, 15). "We believe, teach, and confess," say the Lutherans, "that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged . . ." (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm, 1). The scope and significance of these affirmations in the area of the unity of the church and of fellowship in the church must be

<sup>3</sup> The essay cited above begins with the statement that on "Scripture there is no choice in the fellowship quest. Purity and consistency in the body of Christian teaching depend on it. A consensus without unanimity on the article of Scripture militates against a faithful confessional stand." The closing paragraph reads: "Without question Scripture is key to the present quest for church fellowship and ecumenical outreach. With what glasses a man looks at Scripture will pretty well determine where he stands on Lutheran union and where he is likely to come out in ecumenical endeavor."

determined on the basis of the contexts that deal specifically with that matter.

We think of Augsburg Confession VII with its well-known statement that "it is sufficient for the true unity of the 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." The scope of this consensus in the use of the Gospel and the sacraments receives further elucidation in Apology VII and VIII (20 f.) with the reference to the many weak people in the church, and even the holy fathers who build perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions, on the foundation, which is the true knowledge of Christ and faith. Yet, because the foundation remains intact, there is no rupture of fellowship. What does overthrow faith (and therefore dissolves the fellowship of faith) is a rejection of the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins by faith, on the one hand, and maintaining that our own merits avail in the presence of God, on the other. This indeed means to "remove Christ as the foundation." The Lutheran Symbols are a foe of perfectionism. They are realistically aware of human frailty and sin and therefore see the Christian community as a mutual fellowship of the forgiven and the forgiving. Fellowship in the church means "linking the many members of the church with one another" by the "bond and unbroken chain" of love (Ap. IV, 232). The Lutherans insist that "it is not possible to preserve tranquility unless men cover and forgive certain mistakes in their midst. In the same way Paul commands that there be love in the church to preserve harmony, to bear, if need be, with the crude behavior of the brethren, to cover



up minor mistakes, lest the church disintegrate into various schisms and the hatreds, factions, and heresies that arise from such schisms" (ibid.). The love that is manifested in Christian fellowship "covers up some of the mistakes of its friends; . . . it puts the best construction even on the more offensive actions of others. . . . This virtue is necessary for the preservation of domestic tranquility, which cannot endure unless pastors and churches overlook and forgive many things." (Ap. IV, 242 f.)

It is from this same perspective that the Lutheran Symbols approach the question of differences. In his polemic in the Smalcald Articles Luther rejects a whole series of teachings and practices for only one reason. After briefly stating the article pertaining to "the office and work of Jesus Christ, or to our redemption," he establishes the polemic principle: "On this article *rests all that we teach and practice* [my emphasis] against the pope, the devil, and the world" (S.A. II, i, 5). Then he itemizes: mass, purgatory, pilgrimages, fraternities, relics, indulgences, invocation of saints, chapters and monasteries, and the papacy itself. In every case the argument is not, at least not on the surface, "I reject this because it is unscriptural," but, "the article of Christ and redemption will not allow it" (S.A. II, ii—iv, *passim*). But this in its true sense was for Luther the decisive principle, the hermeneutic, if you will, according to which he determined whether a thing was Scriptural or not, and whether he needed to unlimber his polemical guns or not.

It is in the light of this consistent approach of the Symbols to questions of consensus and differences as they affect fellowship that we must understand the

statement in the Formula of Concord, Epitome X, 7, a statement that has been used to support the claim that there must be total agreement, if not uniformity or unanimity, regarding the whole range of the content of Scripture as an indispensable prerequisite for fellowship. The statement reads:

We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is *mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles* [my emphasis] as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments. . . .

It will be noted at once that this passage echoes precisely the statement in A. C. VII about consensus in the Gospel and the sacraments over against uniformity in ceremonies. The parallel statement in the Solid Declaration speaks of "Christian agreement in doctrine" (X, 16). A few lines earlier it is said that "here we are dealing primarily with the chief article of our Christian faith" (X, 14). What the Lutheran Symbols understand the scope and dimensions of this "agreement in doctrine and in all its articles" to be is clear from Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, which speaks of "articles of the Creed or the chief parts of Christian doctrine" (15). It is therefore, in my considered judgment, contrary to both the letter and the spirit of the Lutheran Symbols to make "doctrine and all its articles" the equivalent of the total content of the Bible and to insist that complete unanimity in the understanding of the Bible in a quantitative sense is necessary for fellowship.

Of course, this does *not* mean that the Lutheran Symbols, or those who understand them as just indicated, are indifferent



to any aberration from the Holy Scriptures or that they adopt a pose of benevolent neutrality or even that they somehow approve of any falsification of the Bible. Nor does it constitute a departure from, or "softening up" of, a whole-souled commitment to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Symbols. But it does mean that when the Symbols talk about the church, the mission of the church, as well as the unity of the church and concord or fellowship in the church, they nowhere approach these issues on the basis of a commitment to quantitative, more-or-less, percentage-of-uniformity-in understanding and formulating the Biblical content. Rather, they consistently deal with them in the framework of the Gospel in Word and sacrament. The Symbols do not deny the inerrancy of the canonical Scriptures, nor, for that matter, do they affirm it in an across-the-board, mechanical sense. They do not really deal with this issue at all, certainly not in the sense of some modern formulations of this question. It is therefore Lutherably irrelevant and ultimately pre-theological. It is the wrong *Fragestellung*, an inappropriate way to pose the question.

The Lutheran Symbols do accept the Scriptures as the Scriptures of the Holy Spirit, as divinely inspired. They do regard the Scriptures as the unique fountain, rule, and norm for Christian theology. They do believe the Word of God to be the potent and efficacious vehicle or instrument of the Holy Spirit's activity here and now to lead sinners to repentance and to faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. They do affirm that God and His Word will not lie to us or lead us astray. But this does not in itself settle, or even address itself to, questions regarding exegetical tools and

methods. In all this it is not loyalty to a Book that is decisive for authentic Lutheranism, but faith in and submission to a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, by means of the Scriptures, and this, together with "the holy church throughout all the world," in the confession of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This is authentic Lutheranism, according to *The Book of Concord*. It is given its foundational expression in the Augsburg Confession, which is "Christian and thoroughly scriptural," "a genuinely Christian symbol which all true Christians ought to accept next to the Word of God, just as in ancient times Christian symbols and confessions were formulated in the church of God . . ." (Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 4). The Augsburg Confession is called "the contemporary symbol" of the Lutheran faith (Preface, *The Book of Concord*). As such it takes its place alongside the ancient ecumenical symbols of the church. The basic Lutheran confession is essentially an updated summary of the catholic Christian faith, as comprehended in the ancient Trinitarian Creeds, which developed in the sacramental and worship life of the church. The Lutherans are committed to the creedal affirmations as well as to a rejection of "all heresies and errors which the primitive, ancient, orthodox church rejected and condemned on the certain and solid basis of the holy and divine Scriptures." (S. D., Rule and Norm, 17)

Thus the doctrinal content of the ecumenical creeds, carried forward to meet contemporary needs, delineates the nature of authentic Lutheranism and is determinative for establishing the areas of legitimate controversy. The Confessions declare that they



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 (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). [S.D., Rule and Norm, 15; all emphases mine].

Authentic Lutheranism, as given expression in the Augsburg Confession, which, next to the Scriptures, becomes the norm for all other Lutheran Symbols (cf. S.D., Rule and Norm, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12), is entirely oriented to the Gospel, both as to content and as to perspective. It was the purpose of the Lutheran formulation, says Melancthon, "to testify to all nations that we hold to the Gospel of Christ correctly and faithfully" (Apology, Preface, 15). Authentic Lutheranism is dedicated to the confession, proclamation, and application of the Gospel. Authentic Lutheranism is *for* everything that promotes the cause of the Gospel and is *against* everything that hinders, thwarts, abridges, detracts, or distracts from the cause of the Gospel. Thus the evangelical perspective determines the theological stance of authentic Lutheranism in both thesis and antithesis.

Authentic Lutheranism views the Scriptures as the Word of God, who addresses the sinner for the purpose of judging him in order to be gracious to him in Christ. Authentic Lutheranism is not interested in, and refuses to be distracted by, any question about Scripture in isolation from the Gospel message. Similarly, authentic Lutheranism views all matters relating to the church, including fellowship, from the perspective of the Gospel.

Authentic Lutheranism is Gospel centered, which means Christ centered, which means living by the forgiveness of sins and having the mind of Christ. This means, concretely, that authentic Lutherans are evangelical, fraternal, constructive, patient, considerate in all their dealings. This means also that all that is legalistic, perfectionistic, unbrotherly, destructive, inconsiderate, or impatient is un-Lutheran and must be categorically repudiated by all who would be authentic Lutherans.

This, I humbly submit, is what authentic Lutheranism is all about. This is the true *locus* for the "mutual conversation and consolation of brethren," as Luther puts it (S.A. III, iv). It is not what large numbers of our people and pastors (including myself) at one time have sincerely taken authentic Lutheranism to be, and what is still so regarded by many of our cherished brethren. To chide these brethren for continuing to maintain a position I myself once essentially and perhaps militantly shared is the source of no little embarrassment and anguish. I did not really know what authentic Lutheranism is until by the grace of God I was exposed intensively for many years to the Lutheran Symbols. It goes without saying that this position, too, is subject to the scrutiny and correction of my brethren.

The searing pathos of our beloved church in our time is that both sides of a profound polarization are passionately concerned about authentic Lutheranism, its essence, formulation, and dynamic exercise. Thus the "Statement of Purpose" of the Lutheran Congress—Loyalty to the Scriptures and Confessions, which met in the late summer of 1970, declares a dedication to the "effective proclamation of the sav-



ing Gospel." It affirms "commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ in our historic Lutheran faith." It desires to "motivate and involve all Lutherans in keeping truly faithful to their Gospel heritage and relate it to the entire task of missions, its message and methods." Do not all of us want the same things? Does not this make it possible, yes, does this not compel us, to cease fire, to come out of our trenches, to traverse the sterile no-man's-land, and to clasp hands in mutual forgiveness and united resolve, and when we see the whites of each other's eyes, not to shoot but to

assure each other of the *Pax Domini*, the peace of the Lord that passes all human understanding? And should we not do this, as the Symbols suggest, around Word and sacrament, that is, in a setting of worship at its profoundest and most exalted level, where God judges us so that we may not be condemned with the world but may hear His absolving and inspiriting Word as the very voice from heaven? And shall we not then respond in exuberant doxology, that God in all things may be glorified and His holy church edified?

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