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CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian Church that the Gospel be preached unanimously according to the pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the Divine Word.

Augsburg Confession VII.2

THE NATURE OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The nature and basis of church fellowship cannot of course be separated—each decisively shapes and determines the other. Nonetheless it will be helpful to distinguish the two aspects, mainly in order to clarify at the outset *what sort of thing* fellowship really is. This is necessary because of the unchurchly and unbiblical perspectives of modern individualism and pietism which routinely dominate and distort the subject.

To begin with, there is no such thing as a “doctrine of fellowship.” There is only a doctrine of *church* fellowship, which is part and parcel of the doctrine of the church. This fact has far-reaching implications. It means, for instance, that it is beside the point to invoke a naive philologism, as though everything could be settled by studying the biblical usage of “κοινωνία” and related words, important as these are. The main linguistic contribution to the right understanding of church fellowship is the fact that the “κοινωνέω/κοινωνία/κοινωνός” word group comes from “κοινός” (common) and denotes a sharing or common participation in something (Mt. 23:30; Lk. 5:10; Rom. 15:27; I Cor. 10:16–20; II Cor. 1:7; I Tim. 5:22; I Pet. 4:13; 5:1).

Church fellowship is the fellowship of the church. It is first of all a “vertical” but then also a “horizontal” relationship among holy persons, mediated by “holy things.” All the constitutive elements come together in I John 1:1–3: Our fellowship (κοινωνία) is with the Father and with the Son—also of course with the Holy Spirit, II Cor. 13:13, cf. I Jn. 5:6–8—as well as with one another, and this fellowship is brought about by the proclamation of the Word of that Life which the apostles themselves heard, saw with their eyes, and touched with their hands. And blessed are those who not having seen in that way, have yet believed (Jn. 20:29)!

Unlike all the relationships and sociabilities we know from human nature and culture, the fellowship of the church is uniquely shaped by the unity of the Divine Persons within the

Holy Trinity (cc. Jn. 17:21–24). It is through the Word-made-flesh, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14), and in Whom dwells all the fullness of Godhood bodily (Col. 2:9), that we actually become “partakers of the divine nature [θεϊᾶς κοινωνοὶ φύσεως]” (II Pet. 1:4). Since God is love (I Jn. 4:8.16), the fellowship of the church arises out of the divine love and grows towards ever fuller participation in it and ever greater mutual exercise in that responding love which the divine love kindles in us (I Jn. 1:5–9; 4:7–21; Jn. 15:9.10; I Cor. 13; Eph. 3:14–4:16; II Pet. 1:3–7).

All these sublime realities of the church’s life are ours by faith (*sola fide*, cf. Gal. 5:6). Yet although these mysteries “spill over” into the practicalities of daily life, and become embodied there, we have no direct, experiential access to their inner nature and splendor. Here too the principle applies that our “life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). We must concentrate therefore on those blessed, God-given means by which the fellowship is brought about and sustained.

Fellowship is founded in Baptism and finds its concrete expression in the Sacrament of the breaking of bread. That corresponds exactly to the usage of Paul: God has called the believers “into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” “By *one* Spirit we were all baptised into *one* body. . . and all were made to drink of *one* Spirit” (I Cor. 1:9; 12:13). The connection with the Lord’s Supper becomes quite clear (I Cor. 10:16f.). The κοινωνία of the body and blood of Christ coincides with the κοινωνία of the church.¹

When we speak of “church fellowship,” therefore, in the sense of something to be granted or refused, practiced or not practiced, we mean not the whole inexpressible “width and length and depth and height” (Eph. 3:18) culminating in the Divine Society² of the Blessed Trinity, but only that “tip of the iceberg,” as it were, that presents itself to our observation and judgment.³

Church fellowship then is common participation in the salvific goods or treasures of the church. St. Lawrence’s well-known little joke on the Roman prefect, which brought him the martyr’s crown

1. H. Sasse, *We Confess the Sacraments*, 141. This essay is also found, in a different translation, as an appendix in H. Sasse, *This Is My Body*.

2. The Latin Bible translates “κοινωνία” in the personal sense of I Jn. 1 not with “*communio*” but with “*societas*.”

3. Luther: “The Latin word *communio* means ‘fellowship,’ and this is what scholars call the holy sacrament. . . Fellowship is of two kinds. . . . The first kind of fellowship is inward, spiritual, and invisible, for it is in the heart. It means that through faith, hope, and love a man is incorporated into the fellowship of Christ and all the saints—as signified and given in the sacrament. . . The second fellowship is outward, physical, and visible. It means that a man is allowed to participate in the holy sacrament, to receive it and to partake of it together with others” (*A Sermon on the Ban* [1520], LW 39:7–8; WA 6:63–64).

in the year 258, established the profound saying that the poor were the treasures of the church. Yet Luther saw even more deeply when in his 95 Theses he allowed only relative validity to this definition:

59. St. Lawrence said that the poor of the church were the treasures of the church, but he spoke according to the usage of the word in his own time.

62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.⁴

Behind this understanding lies the fundamental distinction between Law and Gospel, love and faith, sanctification and justification. The divine, faith-creating treasures from which the church comes into being and lives must not be confused with anything less, not even with their own precious fruit of mutual love and help. The Large Catechism's debunking of the popular notion of the "relic" ("*Heiligtum*") as concentrated sacrosanctity, applies in principle to all rivals of the Gospel:

The Word of God is the true holy thing [*Heiligtum*] above all holy things. Indeed, it is the only one we Christians acknowledge and have. Though we had all the bones of all the saints or all the holy and consecrated vestments gathered together in one heap, they could not help us in the slightest degree, for they are all dead things that can sanctify no one. But God's Word is the treasure that sanctifies all things. By it all the saints themselves have been sanctified (Third Commandment, 91).

God's Gospel-Word, which lavishes upon His church the treasures of salvation, includes of course also the holy sacraments. Because the Sacrament of the Altar is the communion (*κοινωνία*, I Cor. 10:16) of Christ's body and blood, the very Holy of Holies of the New Testament, it expresses *the* communion or fellowship of the church *par excellence* (v. 17. Compare the whole context of vv. 14-21 and II Cor. 6:14-18; also Heb. 13:10). The Sacrament is not a silent mummery, however, like some Masonic "landmark," which requires only outward observance, without any precise understanding and confession of what it means. It is, on the contrary, embedded in the matrix of the "apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42) and is itself the very essence of Gospel proclamation and confession (I Cor. 11:26). "For the ceremony of the Mass or of the Supper . . . was instituted for the sake of preaching" (Ap. XXIV.35, German). Altar fellowship then *is* church fellowship, and of course presupposes and includes baptismal and pulpit fellowship:

4. *The Ninety-Five Theses* (1517), LW 31:30-31; WA 1:236.16-17, 22-23.

The fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship. It can show itself in many other ways, some of which, like prayer and worship and love of the brethren, the church cannot do without; others of which, like the holy kiss or the handshake or the reception into one's house, vary from place to place and from time to time. In whatever way the fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself, all visible manifestations of fellowship must be truthful and in accordance with the supreme demands of the marks of the church. The "sacred things" (*sacra*) are the means of grace, and only by way of them is anything else a "sacred thing" (*sacrum*).⁵

This language echoes the necessary distinction between *communio/communicatio in sacris* (fellowship in sacred things) and *cooperatio in externis* (cooperation in externals). These "externals" can indeed be very spiritual, namely when they express mutual love and care in Christ (I Jn. 3:15-18). Such sharing of "externals" too is "fellowship" (*κοινωνία*, Acts. 2:42; Rom. 12:13; 15:26; Gal.6:6; Phil. 1:15; 4:15.16; Heb. 13:16) in the double sense of the *sharing* in whatever things are involved, and also of the deeper *sharing* of which the outward activity is an expression. But love's duty of rendering bodily help extends also beyond the circle of faith (Gal. 6:10). And there are circumstances when even "externals" can signal wrongful participation or fellowship in evil (II Jn. 10.11, cf. I Tim. 5:22).

To repeat, church fellowship is not about just anything for which the word "*κοινωνία*" (fellowship) could possibly be used, but is completely bound up with the public functioning of the means of grace in a relationship for which also other words, beside the *κοινωνία*-group, are used in the New Testament (I Cor.10:16-21; II Cor. 6:14-16). Church-fellowship is concerned most directly not with what *follows and flows from* love, but with what *precedes and brings about* faith—and to that "everything must yield—love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.!"

"O blest communion, fellowship divine," we sing in R. Vaughan Williams' stirring "For All the Saints," echoing the Collect for All Saints' Day: "O almighty God, Who hast knit together Thine elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of Thy Son. . ." Fellowship is communion. But what of the *communio sanctorum*, the "communion of saints" in the Apostles' Creed? On

5. Thesis 12 of *Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church*. These 13 theses comprised the "Statement of the Overseas Committee" presented to the Synodical Conference in 1961 in an effort to resolve the deadlock among the member synods on church fellowship. *Proceedings of the Recessed Forty-sixth Convention, Lutheran Synodical Conference, 1961, 9-13*. We shall be citing this important document as *Overseas Committee Statement, 1961*.

the familiar interpretation customary in the Western church, the reference is masculine, *sancti*, holy people. This is also how Luther takes it in the Large Catechism. It is also possible, however, that the neuter, *sancta*, is meant, in which case the reference would be to the Lord's body and blood in the sacrament. As Elert, Sasse and others contend, this was the original meaning of that expression in the Creed.⁶ Dogmatically there is no contradiction here but only complementarity. Nor does the doctrine of church fellowship depend on this one way or the other. The question is purely the historical one: what *originally* did *communio sanctorum* mean? If "holy things" are confessed in the Creed, it would mean that in addition to the New Testament Temple consisting of the "holy persons" in Christ (Eph. 2:21), we would have also a specific reference to its "holy of holies" (τὰ ἅγια, Heb. 9:12). We could then view the mystical body of Christ stereoscopically, as it were, together with its ontological foundation in the body once and for all sacrificed on the Cross and now distributed till the end of time in the Sacrament of the Altar (cf. Heb. 13:10). The κοινωμία of the mystical body of Christ finds its supreme objective expression in the κοινωμία of His sacramental body (I Cor. 10:16.17).

The objective understanding of church fellowship as pulpit and altar fellowship stands in sharp contrast to the subjectivism that followed in the wake of Schleiermacher.⁷ For the latter fellowship arises from below, by the banding together of like-minded religious individuals. This fellowship as religious sociability or camaraderie creates the church. Everything is topsy-turvy here. The individual comes first, the church second. Fellowship as human inter-personal relations defines the nature of the church rather than being derived from the prior nature of the church and understood therefore as common participation in the church's goods. The results of such thinking, incubated for over a century in sentimentality and secularization, are today everywhere in evidence as a full-blown pathology: the church and her fellowship are expected to abdicate their own supernatural priorities, and to make themselves useful instead as emotional "support-groups" compet-

6. In *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, Elert shows that even in the West the meaning of "holy things" in the Third Article is well attested, e.g. an early twelfth century French version, which has "*la communion des saintes choses*" (p. 10). Also: "Abelard correctly refers the *sancta* to the Eucharist, and the ancient Irish text scarcely permits any other interpretation. . ." (p.11). For the traditional Augustinian interpretation see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 388-397.

7. We rely here on Elert's trenchant characterization of the contrast between Schleiermacher and Luther. *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 1-8.

itively servicing the "felt needs" of autonomous individuals/consumers, who in turn pursue their own inalienable right to self-determined "self-fulfillment". In such circumstances, and under the lash of pragmatism, it becomes in principle impossible to distinguish any longer between services and circuses, edification and exploitation, faithfulness and fraudulence, love and lunacy.

The terminal stages of this church-dissolving individualism do not of course appear overnight and without warning. Herein may well lie, for North American Lutherans, the true significance of the ignominious dissolution of the Synodical Conference. That body had been founded in 1872, precisely as a vehicle for orthodox church fellowship, and having for its high aim "the consolidation of all Lutheran synods of America into a single, faithful, devout American Lutheran Church."⁸ Not quite a century later the Synodical Conference broke up—over the same issue on which it had been founded, that of church fellowship. *Post mortem* findings must focus on the clear-sighted diagnosis supplied by the Overseas Committee on Fellowship, which comprised some of the leading spirits in communion with the Synodical Conference abroad: "Since the premature turning off into the byway of fellowship has led to a dead end, it would seem best, first of all, to return to the [traditional highway of the doctrine of the church] and there move forward together guided only by the marks of the church."⁹

By the premature "byway of fellowship" was meant the tendency to think of fellowship in terms of isolated individuals or "Christians," rather than in those of the church and of churches. But church fellowship is by definition something to do with churches. It cannot "compute" footloose individuals except by derivation from and connection to churches. The normative marks, after all, attach to and identify not individuals but the church. Focusing simply on individuals derails the whole discussion into the trackless wastelands of subjectivism. That, oddly enough, was the trouble with both the "Missouri" and the "Wisconsin" documents on fellowship at that time, even though on the face of it the two approaches seemed diametrically opposed.¹⁰ Both synods were being recalled by their confessional brothers overseas not to some new-fangled academic construct, but back to

8. R. C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America*, 196.

9. *Overseas Committee Statement*, 1961.

10. The Wisconsin Synod defined its "unit concept" thus: "Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another." The weak-

their own great common roots and heritage, as embodied in men like Walther, Hoenecke, and Pieper, who were held, if anything, in even higher esteem overseas than in America.

The presentation of the Missouri Synod's Theological Commission, "Theology of Fellowship," was criticized severely. See *European Supporting Documents*, pp. 17-29. The Europeans also endorsed the stringent criticisms of both the Wisconsin and the Missouri documents transmitted officially by representatives of the Australian sister church (ELCA). The essential flaw of the Missouri document was put thus by the Australians: "The tendency throughout—and it is intentional—is not to speak of churches, but to speak of individuals. For with them, in accordance with the subjective $\pi\rho\acute{\omega}\tau\omicron\nu\ \psi\epsilon\tilde{\upsilon}\delta\omicron\varsigma$ at the basis of the whole presentation, we can. . . distinguish those who are plainly not of Christ. . . and those who are true Christians. . ." The application of the biblical texts forbidding false fellowship is rendered problematical in this way, if not virtually impossible—except in the cases of manifest heresiarchs, most of them safely dead. Regarding joint prayer in this context one can hardly improve on the judiciously framed final thesis of the Overseas Committee of 1961:

Prayer is not one of the marks of the church and should not be co-ordinated with Word and sacraments, as though it were essentially of the same nature as they. As a response to the divine Word, it is an expression of faith and a fruit of faith, and when spoken before others, a profession of faith. As a profession of faith it must be in harmony with and under the control of the marks of the church.

Unlike preaching and the sacraments, prayer is not necessarily an official act of the church as such, but is something which individuals may do in private. Such private acts and situations are governed fundamentally by familial and other social relations and obligations, and do not necessarily commit and compromise the church. On the other hand, such considerations are overridden

ness here, despite the best intentions, was twofold: (1) The starting point was the faith of individuals and their *de facto* agreement, rather than the church's objective marks. This introduced a certain subjectivism into the premises. (2) The definition, "every joint expression, etc.," was too sweeping. It overlooked, among other things, the distinction between the two kingdoms. Taken literally, therefore, it would forbid joint political action against abortion, for instance, by Roman Catholic, Baptist, and Lutheran citizens, since, if they were all motivated by the love of Christ, their action would be a "joint expression" of faith, and so would constitute church fellowship. For detailed analysis and critique see *European Supporting Documents*, Part III, pp. 3-13, in the files of Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Mo., and the public letter of 15 July 1961 from Doctors W. M. Oesch and M. Roentsch to President O. J. Naumann of the Wisconsin Synod (31 pp.).

when and to the extent that churches act officially, normally through and with their public ministers.¹¹

Between the lines drawn by these "pure types" lies a not inconsiderable "mixed" or grey area, in which judgments will differ, and in which—other things being equal—such differences of judgment must be borne in mutual charity. The existence of such a zone of ambiguity—under the church's overarching missionary imperative, with its summons to faithful confession in resourceful mobility—is suggested by apostolic precedent and example (Acts 2:46–3:1; 21:24–26; 24:11.12).¹² Joint prayers, also by church leaders, for divine blessing and guidance, in the immediate context of genuine efforts to overcome doctrinal divisions under the Word of God, clearly fall within the evangelical constraints so well defined by the Lutheran Church of Australia in its *Theses of Agreement*:

When joint prayer shows the marks or characteristics of unionism, it must be condemned and avoided. Such marks and characteristics of unionism are:

- a) failure to confess the whole truth of the divine Word (*in statu confessionis*);
- b) failure to reject and denounce every opposing error;
- c) assigning to error equal right with truth;
- d) creating the impression of unity in faith or of church fellowship where it does not exist (II,2).

Given the current climate of rampant subjectivism and sentimentalism, it has been necessary in this discussion to stress above all the objective nature of church fellowship as joint, public participation in those supernatural riches which create and shape the church. Our main foil was and is the popular misconception—for which the name of Schleiermacher may serve as a convenient identification code—that church fellowship is religious togetherness or chumminess or friendly "sharing" among individuals. Once this shapeless and secularizing caricature has been put aside, however, it is also necessary to guard against a false objectivism—as though we were in the means of grace or the marks of the

11. *European Supporting Documents*: "Wisconsin and the Norwegians are right in urging that we cannot pray together with those who represent divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned (Rom. 16:17 and all parallels). . . . The Lutheran Symbols, all Lutheran doctrine and practice in orthodox times including the Synodical Conference synods in past decades, as well as the ancient church have insisted that unity and continuity of pure doctrine demands that we do not pray together with gainsayers" (p. 13). See also *infra*, Ch. 8, n.21.

12. "Paul feels free, according to Acts 21:24 ff., to let himself be purified, together with certain Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, in the temple, which surely did not happen without the prayers of such priests as did not personally confess Christ" (Oesch/Roentsch letter, p. 27).

church dealing with impersonal, vaguely occult entities. That would be magic, and is the opposite of everything the church confesses. No, the living God Himself confronts and deals with us in His holy Word and sacraments. He does not send "sheriffs and bailiffs" (Luther), but comes to us Himself, together, to be sure, with "angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven." No Buddhist absorption or transcendence of personality here! By the holy mysteries of His saving Gospel the Trinity of Persons in the unity of substance draws us into a personal communion so intimate and sublime as to surpass all human understanding. The church is "the brotherhood" (I Pet. 2:17); and by virtue of the Incarnation she is the Brotherhood of God and man (Mt. 12:46-50; Jn. 20:17; Heb. 2:11-17).

THE BASIS AND CRITERIA FOR CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Once the *nature* of church fellowship has been clarified, it is relatively easy to set out the *basis* or *criteria* for God-pleasing pulpit and altar fellowship. This matter was unavoidably broached already in our treatment of joint prayer in relation to church fellowship. In brief, the criteria for fellowship are precisely those that define "the true unity of the church."¹ According to the Augsburg Confession, this means unanimity in the pure proclamation of the Gospel and in the right administration of the sacraments. And as we have seen in our consideration of the church's unity, apostolicity is the decisive criterion here. The Gospel is "purely" taught and the sacraments are "rightly" administered if and only if they conform to the apostolic norm. Whatever is not apostolic is apostatic. Proclamations contrary to the apostolic norm are for that reason and to that extent pseudo-gospels (Gal. 1:1-12), to be shunned and excluded (Rom. 16:17; Tit. 3:10). In short, they are church-divisive.

Simple and axiomatic though the above may be and indeed is, a number of rather basic issues arise here which require some discussion. They may perhaps be treated most economically in connection with questions to do with the real import of AC VII.

Gospel, Doctrine, Articles.

It is sometimes suggested that "doctrine of the Gospel" in the Augsburg Confession is not the same thing as "the doctrine and all its articles" in the Formula of Concord (Ep.X.7;SD X.31). Instead, the AC supposedly sees "the gospel as one article among

1. "The outward unity of the Church as 'the fellowship of outward ties and rites' must rest upon the same basis on which the spiritual unity of true believers rests and depends, viz., upon the marks of the One Church: the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. Where there is truth, there is unity" (Lutheran Church of Australia, *Theses of Agreement*, V,21).

those making up 'the doctrine and all its articles.'² This is quite impossible. No sixteenth century Lutheran could have thought of the Gospel as one among many other articles! Such a trivialization rests entirely on modern misconceptions. One begins by assuming that the Gospel is simply the article of justification, and ends up rather quickly and painlessly with a few harmless slogans thought to document "agreement in the Gospel" and so to provide a "sufficient" alibi for any desired church-fellowship.

The Reformation knows no such "mini-gospel." AC VII is based largely on the 12th of the *Schwabach Articles* (1529), which has this language: "This church is nothing else than believers in Christ, who hold, believe and teach the above-mentioned articles and parts, and for this suffer persecution and martyrdom in the world; for where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments used aright, is the holy Christian church. . ."³ The Augsburg Confession says nothing different. To preach the Gospel purely is to preach it correctly in all its constituent articles, in harmony, in other words, with *all* the doctrinal articles of the Confession—otherwise what would have been the point of confessing them all? Justification is *the* "chief article" (Ap.IV.2), but not the only article, not even the only "chief article"⁴ of the Gospel. This means that the article of justification integrates all the articles of faith into one organic whole, so that to deny any one of them is to distort justification itself:

The article of justification cannot be rightly taught where the great articles of the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed are not kept. The denial of the Virgin Birth leads to a false doctrine of the incarnation. A false doctrine of the incarnation leads to a false understanding of justification and of the sacraments. Thus the article of the standing and falling of the church keeps together all articles of the Christian faith and illuminates them. For Lutherans the consensus required should always be regarded as the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord.⁵

The contrast in AC VII, it must be remembered, is not between the Gospel and other articles of doctrine, but between the Gospel, all of it, and "human traditions or rites and ceremonies instituted by men."

2. H. George Anderson, "Gospel and Doctrine," in *The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church* [hereinafter: FODT], 62. Anderson adds: "This usage would also suit the terminology of the Confession, where justification—the fullest definition of 'gospel'—is one of 28 articles."

3. M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources*, 43.

4. For "Hauptartikeln" (chief articles) or "fürnehmsten Artikeln" ("de praecipuis articulis") in the plural, see AC, Conclusion of 1st Part, and FC SD, Intro. 3, BKS, 83d and 830.

5. H. Sasse, "Theses on the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession," 16. See also H. Sasse, *Here We Stand*, 110–152.

A little attention to the terms will go a long way here. It is a well-known fact that the NT words διδασκαλία and διδαχή—both of which can, like the Latin *doctrina*, denote both the activity and the content of teaching—appear in the plural only when referring to the false doctrines of men or of demons (Mt.15:9; Mk. 7:7; Col. 2:22; I Tim. 4:1; Heb. 13:9). Falsehoods are many—the truth is but one. It is best therefore to speak of the various aspects of the one evangelic truth or doctrine not as “doctrines” but as “articles” or “parts.” The Latin “*articulus*” means a joint or small member, such as the joint of a finger.⁶ An article is by definition something which, incomplete in itself, is part and parcel of a larger organic whole. “Articles of faith and doctrine” (heading of AC I–XXI) therefore does justice both to the multiplicity of aspects and to the oneness of the whole.

Most instructive is the usage of the Large Catechism. The Gospel as distinct from the Law there is not the Second Article of the Creed, against all the rest, but the whole Creed [German: *Glaube*=faith], which “is a very different teaching from the Ten Commandments” (II.67). This (Apostles’) Creed used to be divided into twelve articles, but resolves itself much more naturally into the three articles corresponding to the Creed’s Trinitarian structure. Yet these three could “be treated more fully and divided into as many parts as there are words” (II.12). So the Second Article, for instance, consists in turn of several “parts” or sub-articles, i.e., “such articles as the birth, passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ,” which are preached about in detail at their own special times in the church year (II.31–32). This Second Article is “very rich and far-reaching” (II.26); indeed, “the entire Gospel that we preach depends on the proper understanding of this article. Upon it all our salvation and blessedness are based, and it is so rich and broad that we can never learn it fully” (II.33).

The Gospel, then, is neither a bloodless abstraction (see Mt. 26:13!) nor a content-free “kerygmatic” gushing. The whole idea of an undogmatic Gospel or of a rift between “κῆρυγμα” and “δόγμα” is a modern myth. In keeping with its incarnational/paschal core, the Gospel is a substantive and sacramental communication of revealed divine truth or doctrine. This truth is in principle the same whether confessed in the embryonic form of the simplest NT Creed, “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9; I Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11), or in the ancient and Reformation symbols which spell out

6. Therefore Melanchthon can, following Plato, compare botched distinctions to the failure of clumsy cooks to sever bones properly, at the joints. Ap. XXIV.16.

the Trinitarian and soteriological import of the Lordship of Jesus. The whole Book of Concord is nothing but the unfolding, in response to changing circumstances, of the dogmatic content already "nested" in the formula, "Jesus is Lord." For the Reformation, as in the Scriptures, the Gospel is not a safe, placid commonplace commanding the assent of all reasonable people. It is rather the saving wisdom of God in its human servant form (I Cor. 1:18-2:16), and for that very reason presents itself to us as a many-faceted, sharp-edged, irreducible dogmatic content, against which men and devils rage, and which therefore is and remains embattled and controversial (Lk. 2:34!) in the present age.

"Gospel" in Wide and Narrow Senses

The strict and wide senses of "Gospel"—this explicit distinction occurs not in the AC but in FC V—differ only in the exclusion or inclusion of the Law respectively. Since the church and her unity are created and preserved entirely by the Gospel, and not by the Law, the Gospel in AC VII is the Gospel in its proper or narrow sense. The Law, after all, is not unique to or distinctive of the church, since it is found, in some form, also in the synagogue, in the mosque, and even in natural man (Rom. 2:14.15). It is the Gospel that is the church's distinctive mark and "secret," and from her even the "principalities and powers" must learn it (Eph. 3:10). "These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth" (LC II.66).

"These articles of the Creed" include, as we have seen, all their constitutive parts or sub-articles. This language further highlights the precise identity of the AC's unanimity in the purely taught Gospel with the Formula's agreement "in the doctrine and in all its articles" (SD X.31)⁷—all the more so as both expressions in their respective settings are paired with the right administration of the sacraments. Nor is this stress on the many-articled Gospel as distinct from the Law a theological novelty. It was clearly articulated,

7. D. G. Truemper argues that when the AC "speaks of 'articles' it is not . . . speaking of doctrinal formulations, but of the parts of the confession" (*Cresset*, Feb. 1980, 29). On the face of it we have here a distinction without a difference, for what could the various "parts of the confession" possibly be other than "doctrinal formulations"? The context shows, however, that "doctrinal formulations" here is code for "doctrinal content." The claim then is that by "articles" the AC means not the various aspects of the evangelic truth, but the literary units or sub-divisions of the AC itself! The demonstrable fact is that any such self-reference in the AC is strictly secondary and derivative. What is primary and decisive is the standard pre-Reformation notion of "*articuli fidei*" (articles of faith) as the component parts of the one Christian faith or creed. When the Schwabach Articles, one of the AC's main sources, define the church as "the believers in Christ, who hold, believe, and teach the above-mentioned

for instance, by F. Pieper, in 1888: "The expression 'articles of faith' designates a quite definite concept: the doctrines of the Gospel in contrast to the Law."⁸

Yet a moment's consideration will show that though utterly *distinct*, Law and Gospel can never be *separate* in practice: "Although the Law therefore does not belong within faith and therefore also not within the definition of faith, acceptance of the Law is nevertheless a necessary presupposition of unity in faith."⁹ God's "alien work" of smashing all smugness and self-righteousness by His Law is done not for its own sake, but for the sake of God's "proper," life-giving work through the Gospel (Ap. XII.51-58). The

articles and parts," surely no one imagines that the "articles and parts" are the Schwabach document's own paragraphs, rather than the controverted components of the Christian faith. Or consider the very first of Luther's *Propositions Against the Whole Synagogue of Satan* . . . , which arrived in Augsburg a week after the Confession had been presented: "The church of God has no power to make up a single article of faith, just as she has never made up any, nor will ever make up any" (WA 30:II:420.6-7). In the AC itself, dissenting "about [de] no article of faith from the catholic church" (Intro. to XXII-XXVIII) cannot refer to a portion of the AC's own text. Elsewhere Truemper undertakes to explain FC SD X.31, agreement "in the doctrine and in all its articles," as not meaning "full agreement in all the larger and smaller parts of Christian doctrine" ("The Catholicity of the Augsburg Confession: CA VII and FC X on the Grounds for the Unity of the Church," 12). He rightly observes that "the term 'doctrine' in article X of the Formula of Concord is primarily and essentially an equivalent term for the 'gospel,'" but wrongly opposes the singularities "gospel" and "doctrine" to agreement "in a whole range of doctrinal formulations" (p. 14). Having failed to account for the FC's plural, "all its articles," Truemper simply drops the subject, but not the false claim. There is a clear-sighted purpose behind all these apparent muddles: if the straightforward reading of the FC prevails, "then Missouri's insistence upon full, or at least very substantial, doctrinal agreement as a precondition for church fellowship would be shown to have the support of the Book of Concord" (*Cresset*, p. 29). Or: "If the Formula of Concord is understood as a kind of commentary on the Augsburg Confession (which in some sense it must be), and if 'the doctrine and all its articles' i[s] the authoritative interpretation of the 'it is sufficient' of AC VII (which is at issue here), then the inevitable consequence is current LCMS fellowship policy" (D. Truemper, "How Much Is Enough?"). One can only concur in this candid judgment.

8. "Thus the Lutheran Church has understood the divinely willed unity in the faith. She defines the 'true unity of the Christian church' so in the 7th article of the Augsburg Confession: 'that the Gospel be preached unanimously according to its pure understanding and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel' . . . Here [FC Ep. X.7] our church declares that by true unity she understands agreement 'in the doctrine and in all its articles,' not merely in some of them. . . Also in the [above] thesis only the Gospel is meant. When we speak of 'articles of the Christian doctrine,' this is to be understood as the revelation and preaching of Christ. . . The Law does not come into consideration here. The foundation on which the Christian church is built is Christ, the Gospel. . . The Law does not create the church, neither does the Law unify the church. Only the Gospel does that. Therefore the Law does not belong into a definition of Christian unity or unity in the faith. . . . When it is said: we believe the Law, the word 'believe' is taken in a totally different sense than when one speaks of the Christian faith. The expression 'articles of faith' designates a quite definite concept: the doctrines of the Gospel in contrast to the Law" ("Of Unity in the Faith," 6-13. Our translation).

9. *Ibid.*, 13.

Law prepares the way for the Gospel, and the Gospel presupposes that the Law has done, and is doing, its work. In *practice*, therefore, it comes to the same thing whether the Gospel in AC VII is taken in its narrow or wide sense. Taken in the narrow sense, the rightly preached Gospel presupposes the rightly preached Law. If the latter is distorted, so, correspondingly, is the former. And taken in the wide sense the Gospel cannot be purely preached except in the "especially brilliant light" (FC SD V.1) of the Law/Gospel distinction, by which the whole Scripture (*universa scriptura*) "is to be divided into these two chief topics: into the law and the promises" (Ap. IV.5).

Is *Doctrina* the Activity of Teaching or the Content?

Even that archetypal scholastic, Thomas Aquinas, could use "*doctrina*" (teaching) as equivalent to "*praedicatio*" (preaching), and generally meant by it "both the act of teaching and the knowledge communicated in teaching."¹⁰ Since the German of AC VII.2 speaks of the activity of preaching, and since the "teaching [*doctrina*] of the Gospel" is syntactically coordinated with the "administration of the sacraments," it is clear that the "*doctrina*" in AC VII is the activity of teaching. The complete phrase, however, is "*doctrina evangelii*," with the evangelium or Gospel supplying the dogmatic content. Hence the argument about the word "*doctrina*" by itself is really a red herring. The Latin ("to agree [*consentire*] about the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments") means nothing other than the parallel German text ("the Gospel be preached unanimously according to its pure understanding and the sacraments be administered in accord with the divine Word"). There is no escaping the thoroughly dogmatic nature of the "*doctrina evangelii*," since "the Gospel is never *mere* proclamation devoid of doctrinal content but is always doctrine."¹¹ Furthermore, R. C. Schultz has, following W. Elert,¹² drawn attention to the "*doctrina evangelica*" of the Edict of Theodosius I, which had been basic Imperial law since the fourth century, and which

10. Per Erik Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, 43–44.

11. R. Preus, citing the standard commentators, Fagerberg and Schlink, in "The Basis for Concord," 21.

12. W. Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 274.

Melanchthon probably meant to echo in AC VII.¹³ Schultz's conclusion is that "the meaning of the doctrine of the gospel (*evangelic doctrine*) becomes more obviously defined in terms of the entire doctrinal section of the Augsburg Confession itself." Still, attempts to turn AC VII into an attractive ecumenical slogan by jettisoning unwelcome dogmatic ballast, continue unabated. A case in point is the subtly argued but extremely radical scheme of Gerhard Ebeling, which, with adaptations by Wenzel Lohff, decisively shaped the Leuenberg Concord.¹⁴ Ebeling's "Word-theology" re-interprets "Word" (or "Word-event"), "Gospel," and "faith" along existentialist, "hermeneutical" lines, so that whatever else they may now mean, dogma or doctrine in the old sense they are not. Unlike American retailers of such ideas,¹⁵ however, Ebeling does not purport to be reproducing the historic position of the Reformation. He freely admits that for Luther and the Reformation the "Word" meant doctrine, even "pure doctrine," recognizable as such.¹⁶ This, however, according to Ebeling, "rests on a presupposition which we cannot possibly make our own any more." Rather, we must distinguish much more radically than did the Reformers between the Word, the Bible, and doctrine! Ebeling concludes this essay on the significance of doctrinal differences with a revealing pronouncement from Bonhoeffer: "The antitheses between Lutheran and Reformed. . . are no longer genuine."

The "True Unity of the Church" is Not a Domain of Pure Inwardness

AC VII, about the church and her true unity, was held by the official theology of the Prussian Union Church to apply to the "invisible" church.¹⁷ Ebeling, in his own way, follows suit.¹⁸ "But," as Sasse points out, "the *teaching purely and rightly administering the*

13. *FODT*, 55. An expanded version appeared as "An Analysis of the Augsburg Confession Article VII,2 in its Historical Context, May & June, 1530." *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XI, 3 (1980), 25-35. The essay is illuminating despite the "even deeper conclusions than [Eiert] or Maurer would have been likely to draw" (p. 28), which serve the cause of reunion with Rome.

14. See T. Mannermaa, *Von Preussen Nach Leuenberg*, esp. 41-102.

15. Note, for instance, D. Truemper's astonishing assertion that both AC VII and FC X demand for true unity only "the actual preaching of the gospel and the actual administration and reception of the sacraments—and not a doctrine or doctrines about the gospel and about the sacraments" ("The Catholicity of the Augsburg Confession," 12.) If only Zwingli had thought of this at Marburg, how many centuries of heartache might not the church have spared herself!

16. G. Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, 174-177.

17. H. Sasse, *Was Heisst Lutherisch?*, 15, n. 2.

18. Ebeling, *op. cit.*, 166, 181-186.

sacraments takes place in the 'visible' church."¹⁹ The invisible bonds of faith which unite the church to Christ, and so also within herself, cannot of course be traced by us. The pressing problem at Augsburg, however, was that true unity of the church which could be outwardly grasped and registered, and concerning which the adherents of the papal party were making false claims and impossible demands. That is the focus of AC VII, and therefore orthodox Lutheran theologians have always correctly understood and applied this article as directly setting out the criteria for external church fellowship.²⁰

It is a spiritualizing misunderstanding to cite against the above Ap. VII/VIII.31: "We speak of the true, that is, spiritual unity, without which it is not possible for faith to exist in the heart or the righteousness of the heart before God." The German expressly defines this "spiritual unity" as "believing in one Christ, having one Gospel, one Spirit, one faith, the same sacraments." Unlike saving faith itself, its objective basis in the one Gospel, faith (=creed), and sacraments comprises publicly manifest entities. And if these entities are truly the glorious power of God for salvation and the ministration of Spirit and life (Rom. 1:16; II Cor. 2:12-3:18), then one cannot belittle common participation in such means of salvation as merely "outward" and therefore not really "spiritual." The internal and external aspects of the church's unity or fellowship may be split into two unities no more than the church invisible and visible may be torn asunder into two churches. Calov, therefore, in his great commentary on the Augsburg Confession, taking for granted that true unity includes outward communion, rightly observes that "for the spiritual unity of the church interior gifts are required no less than external fellowship."²¹

Orthodoxy: the Paramountcy of Truth

Outward unity is created and normed by the truth, not truth by unity. Any "paramountcy of unity" which makes truth secondary,

19. Sasse, op. cit. See also H. Sasse, "Theses on the Seventh Article of the Augsburg Confession," 14 ff., and K. Marquart, "Augsburg Confession VII Revisited," 17-25.

20. This includes of course the great Missouri Synod standard-bearers, C.F.W. Walther (*True Visible Church*, Theses 8, 12, 18 D, 24, and other works) and F. Pieper (*Das Grundbekenntnis der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 98-99). By contrast, see A. C. Piepkorn, "What the Symbols have to say about the Church," 750, 751, 759, for a confused and unwarranted dichotomy of "*unitas*" (AC VII) and "*concordia*" (FC X), when the German has "*Einigkeit*" for both.

21. A. Calov, *Exegema Augustanae Confessionis*.

is pseudo-ecclesial. For the true unity of the church the pure Gospel and sacraments are "sufficient"—but also necessary—whereas uniformity in man-made ceremonies is neither necessary nor sufficient. This absolute primacy of the evangelical truth has been put nowhere more starkly than in Luther's extended commentary on Galatians:

We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield—love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.! . . . We can be saved without love and concord with the Sacramentarians, but not without pure doctrine and faith. . . . Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. . . . Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. "One dot" of doctrine is worth more than "heaven and earth" (Matt.5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture.²²

This is not of course an ontological argument about the relative importance of divine truth and love—such speculation could be nothing but presumptuous absurdity. The point rather is a very practical one: given our situation and the divine arrangements for our salvation, truth lies closer to the surface, as it were, and is therefore more easily identified than love. Divine love has chosen to make itself known to us through the divine truth of the Gospel. We have therefore a reliable instrument by which to gauge truth-claims. We have no comparable controls by which to test love-claims as such. If we are to distinguish nonetheless between true love on the one hand and demonic pretences or silly sentimentalities on the other, as indeed we must, then the only way to do this safely is by way of the revealed truth (I Cor. 13:6).

What has been said about love applies in principle also to unity. According to M. Dummet, Wykeham Professor of Logic in the University of Oxford, the "paramountcy of unity" is a principle "held in common by [Roman] Catholic and [Eastern] Orthodox, and rejected by Protestants." This principle means "that it is enjoined on us, whatever the provocation, never to take any step to disrupt the unity of the church." Prof. Dummet is concerned chiefly with the self-contradictions in which those involve themselves who publicly profess the Christian faith but then deny the

²² *Galatians Commentary* (1535), LW 27:38–42; WA 40:II:47–52.

most basic elements of that faith. Prof. Dummet's incisive observations on this score should be welcomed by honest churchmen everywhere. It is irrefutably true, for instance, that if Jesus:

did not believe himself divine, then we have no ground to do so, and hence commit idolatry in praying to him. If he knew nothing of the Trinity, then we know nothing of the Trinity, and have no warrant whatever for supposing that there is a Trinity. If he intended to found no community, then the church has no standing and is an impostor institution.²³

If it is indeed true, however, as Prof. Dummet argues, that the growing "liberal consensus" along the above lines is gaining dominance also in Roman Catholic seminaries, and so is "helping to transform [that] church into something distinctly fraudulent," then what becomes of the "paramountcy of unity"? The scandalous dogmatic self-contradictions, says Dummet, ought "to be tolerated no longer: not if there is to be a rationale for belonging to that church." What then if they are tolerated, what if the crisis continues to deepen? Must not the time come to apply the principle so admirably formulated by Dummet himself: "If the church is a fraud there can be no justification for belonging to it: no justification for complicity with fraud"?²⁴ At this point one must either bid farewell to the "paramountcy of unity" and embrace the paramountcy of truth, or else surrender one's conscience and integrity unconditionally to an institution which is thereby granted absolute power to corrupt absolutely. "Doctrine is heaven; life is earth." And fraud is hell!

Orthodoxy as a Whole vs. the Dividedness of Heterodoxy

There is only one church, as there is only one faith and one Gospel (Eph. 4:4.5). Orthodoxy—that is doctrinal and sacramental conformity to this one faith—is the divinely willed condition of the church (Jn. 8:31.32; 17:17; Eph. 2:20). Heterodoxy, on the other hand, opposes other teachings to the one doctrinal, sacramental truth, and so disfigures the one faith according to alien and illicit patterns (Rom. 6:17; 16:17; I Tim. 6:3–5; II Tim. 1:13; 4:3). Such false teachings and teachers are to be clearly renounced and abandoned (Mt. 7:15; 15:9–14; 16:5–12; Jn. 10:5; Rom. 16:17; Gal. 1:6–9; Tit. 3:10). If instead they are harbored and acknowledged as legitimate, there arises that tragic self-contradiction, the "heterodox

23. M. Dummet, "A Remarkable Consensus," 424ff.

24. Idem.

church," with which the orthodox church cannot practice church fellowship without thereby surrendering the truth and becoming heterodox itself (Gal. 5:9; I Tim. 5:22; II Jn. 10.11; Rev. 18:4).

Since church fellowship (pulpit and altar fellowship) requires and presupposes unanimity in the pure Gospel and sacraments of Christ, the exercise of such church fellowship is a solemn, public, and reciprocal profession and acknowledgement of one another's orthodoxy (Gal. 2:9).²⁵ The Reformation's understanding that "church fellowship is equivalent to doctrinal fellowship and confessional fellowship,"²⁶ expresses nothing other than what was self-evident in Christian antiquity:

By his partaking of the Sacrament in a church a Christian declares that the confession of that church is his confession. Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all.²⁷

It follows that church fellowship is not an optional²⁸ matter—like diplomatic recognition—which might be granted or refused at

25. ". . . Church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition as brethren, altar and pulpit fellowship and resultant co-operation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments. . . We declare that wherever continued co-operation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments and worship exists, there we have a witness to the world of unity in the faith and a profession of church fellowship" (Lutheran Church of Australia *Theses of Agreement*, V:26-28).

26. Buchrucker, *Wort, Kirche, und Abendmahl bei Luther*, 175 (our translation). Also: "to acquiesce in the other's doctrine, that is church fellowship. For church fellowship is doctrinal fellowship, which exists for Luther only where sameness [*aequitas*] of doctrine obtains" (Ibid., n.70).

27. W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 182.

28. It is seriously inadequate, theologically, to counter false and unacceptable "models" of external unity in the church (i.e. conciliarity, "reconciled diversity," and selective fellowship) not with the true evangelical, biblical "model," but with an improvised construct which is admittedly "neither divinely ordained nor Scripturally mandated" (*The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981, 42). The fault here lies in the definition of the preferred "model" as "ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship based on agreement in doctrine and practice." Now, of course, "ecclesiastical declarations," in the sense of formalities of parliamentary procedure, are things indifferent, mere *adiaphora*. But such official "declarations" are neither essential to nor distinctive of the correct practice. (After all, even the unacceptable "models" have to be implemented by some sort of "ecclesiastical declarations"). What is essential and distinctive is "altar and pulpit fellowship based on agreement in doctrine and practice"—and that IS "divinely ordained" and "Scripturally mandated," to use the language of the document. The reliance on mere *adiaphora* in so vital a matter as church fellowship avenges itself in the conclusion of the *Nature and Implications* document, which compensates for the shortfall of divine authority by appealing to strictly human authority, viz., Synodical regulations and procedures "mutually agreed-upon" (p. 46). F. Pieper: "All government of the Church which does not bind the consciences of Christians to Christ's Word, but to the word of men, is pseudo-government" (II:394).

will, depending on all sorts of prudential considerations. Rather, church fellowship exists and must be recognized wherever orthodoxy prevails.²⁹ On the other hand, where heterodoxy reigns, or is given equal rights with orthodoxy, church fellowship must be refused.

What is also clear is that church fellowship is by its very nature indivisible—it is either granted whole or refused whole. It does not come in bits and pieces. Two churches are either in communion or they are not in communion. There is no third possibility. And if two churches enter into fellowship or communion, they thereby become one communion or church, regardless of administrative differences. To imagine otherwise, to think for instance that pulpit and altar fellowship is only a harmless courtesy, while organizational amalgamation is the much weightier “real thing,” is to confuse substance and shadow, and to substitute church politics for the rightful reign of the Gospel.

If the proper nature and basis of church fellowship are taken seriously, the resultant either/or is profoundly distasteful to the whole modern temperament. It seems rather like regarding divorcees as either totally innocent or totally guilty—and we are all too sophisticated for that. It is perfectly true, moreover, that there are believers, dear children of God, in heterodox churches, if only the Gospel is still somehow “getting through” to create and sustain faith. It is also true that there are hypocrites in the orthodox church. Given these realities, is it not counter-intuitive, indeed Pharisaical, to draw church fellowship boundaries so strictly, as though one ecclesial communion—and a small one at that!—had a monopoly on all true Christians? And since there will be Christians from all sorts of churches in heaven, had we not better get used to them here on earth? That is how the matter strikes many people today, and that is why the issue is at once pressing and delicate.

One way out of this dilemma is to attempt to break up the stark either/or into a graded series of both/and’s. Even Roman Catholicism at the Second Vatican Council entered cautiously upon this “ecumenical” path with an imaginative “ecclesiology of ele-

29. “If there is a church in Australia—and, thank God, a church which agrees with us in the true faith exists there—then we must maintain fellowship of confession and of love also with that church. Were we to deny a church-body which agrees with us in the faith, that is, confesses Christ’s name in all articles, then we should be denying Christ Himself in such a church-body,” (F. Pieper, *Vorträge*, 191. Our translation).

ments."³⁰ Instead of the notion of membership, Vatican II employs the idea of being linked to the church in various degrees or at different levels, including that of unbaptized unbelievers. Given Rome's confusions of natural religion and the Gospel, and of divine and human authority in the church, the new scheme is probably as resourceful and effective an adaptation to modern conditions as can be expected on those premises. It certainly liberates modern Roman Catholics from the embarrassing old absolutism,³¹ which for all practical purposes identified the visible institution headed by the papacy with the Mystical Body of Christ. While granting some *communicatio in sacris* to Eastern Orthodoxy, and to individuals of other churches in emergencies, Vatican II did not expressly adopt the "sliding scale" of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission (Lund, 1952), which ranges from "closed communion" and "limited open communion" through "intercommunion" with or without "intercelebration" all the way to "full communion."³² Such a terracing of church fellowship, however, is based on arbitrary criteria apart from and beyond the pure Gospel and sacraments, and is therefore biblically indefensible. If "intercommunion" is warranted biblically, then so are "intercelebration" and "full communion," and if not one then also not the others. With the Gospel one cannot distinguish among them. If such artificial gradations and a piecemeal communion are nevertheless assigned fundamental validity and significance, then this is the work of man-made regulations and bureaucratic legalisms. Church fellowship by degrees³³ in effect quantifies the Gospel. Yet the Gospel and therefore orthodoxy is at bottom holistic, and calls for qualitative, not quantitative judgments:

For the sectarians who deny the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper accuse us today of being quarrelsome, harsh, and

30. J. Feiner, "Commentary on the Decree" [on Ecumenism], in Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, II, 80; Also A. Grillmeier, *Commentary*, I:168ff.

31. J. Feiner rightly observes: "The Decree on Ecumenism recognizes in non-Catholic communities more than Calvin does in the papal Church, more than mere scanty 'vestiges' or miserable 'relics'; it sees in them essential structural elements of the Church" (*Commentary on Vatican II*, II, 74). Luther, incidentally, was even more generous in seeing under the papacy "the very choicest Christendom and many pious and great saints" (WA 21:147f. The translation in LW 40:232 is weak).

32. *Commentary on Vatican II*, II:106.

33. "There are even those who suppose that they can establish degrees of unity. The degrees match the level of agreement reached so far in the discussions. The consensus one tries to read out of Article VII is in all such cases a purely human arrangement. . . . Not agreement in doctrine. . . but only the consensus in the *pure* doctrine and in the *right* administration of the sacraments is the consensus demanded in the Augsburg Confession" (H. Sasse, *We Confess the Church*, 67).

intractable, because, as they say, we shatter love and harmony among the churches on account of the single doctrine about the Sacrament. They say that we should not make so much of this little doctrine. . . This is especially so because they agree with us on other articles of Christian doctrine. . . To this argument of theirs we reply with Paul: "A little yeast leavens the whole lump" [Gal. 5:9]. In philosophy a tiny error in the beginning is very great at the end. Thus in theology a tiny error overthrows the whole teaching. . . For doctrine is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition. On the other hand, life is like a physical point. Therefore it can always be divided and can always yield something. . . Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect. . . If they believed that it is the Word of God, they would not play around with it this way. . . and they would know that one Word of God is all and that all are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond. . . Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith.³⁴

Only from this perspective is it possible to make sense of the harsh condemnations of false doctrine in the New Testament, which modern readers find so perplexing. It has been argued, for instance, that Rom. 16:17, "Mark those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learnt, and avoid them," forbids church fellowship only with outright unbelievers, not with erring Christians, since v. 18 adds: "they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly."³⁵ As if we could determine who really believes and who does not! Since believers exist in all churches which are still somehow Christian, the Romans text could then be applied to no heterodox church whatever. Clearly Paul was talking about objective criteria, not subjective imponderables, when he referred to "the doctrine which you have learnt." One should note also the "kiss of peace" in v. 16, which suggests a Eucharistic context.

It is difficult to imagine a subjectively more benign and well-meant error than Peter's misguided solicitude for his Lord's safety and welfare in Mt. 16:22. Yet the objective effect of his sentimental intervention coincided precisely with the devil's intent to deflect

34. *Galatians Commentary* (1535), LW 27:36-39; WA 40:II:45-48.

35. Within the Missouri Synod the best-known example is Thesis Five of *A Statement of 1945 (Speaking the Truth in Love)*. The classic response to this argumentation is R. Hoerber, *A Grammatical Study of Rom. 16:17*.

the Savior from His path to the Cross (Mt. 4:1 ff.). Therefore, having a few verses before called him "blessed," the Lord turns on Peter with a quite unexpected severity and says: "Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (16:23, NIV). Other New Testament condemnations of error, including Rom. 16:17 ff. are mild by comparison. But, it may be objected, the Lord did not deny Peter the equivalent of church fellowship. True, but then Peter did not persist in his error either. It is just the nature of heterodox communions, on the other hand, that they do persevere in their heterodoxy. That is the very reason for their continued separate existence. Nor must it be imagined that the heretics of Paul's day simply rejected the New Testament, root and branches. On the contrary, the Judaizers no doubt accepted the Lordship of Jesus, Baptism, etc., but only insisted on a few "little" extras in addition, like mandatory circumcision—on which see Gal. 5:2–12. H. P. Hamann therefore wrote:

Surely one must see that the true counterpart in our day to the false teachers of the New Testament age are the heterodox church-bodies themselves. . . For in them heterodoxy, false teaching, heresy, is given a habitation and a name; it is given respectability; it is given perpetuity—and all this under the protection of the blessed name "Church"! The false teachings given a refuge in heterodox bodies are every whit as bad as the false teachings known in the New Testament. . . And the New Testament condemnation of false teachers should be applied to them directly and without any softening of the rebuke.³⁶

Unvarnished falsehood is easy to detect and not nearly so dangerous therefore as a seductive melange of truth and error. It is just such a mixture of incompatibles that actually characterizes heterodoxy and heterodox churches. This radical doubleness of heterodoxy—may we call it "schizopneumia," on the analogy of "schizophrenia"?—flies the flags both of Christ and of Belial, of light and of darkness, of faith and of unfaith, of God's temple and of idols (II Cor. 6:14.15). This calls for two complementary postures towards heterodox churches. Two modern analogies can help to illustrate this. Consider a cancer patient. The whole ingenuity of medical technology is deployed to attack the cancer in such a way as to maximize the damage inflicted on the cancer cells, while minimizing injury to the rest of the body. It is just this concern

36. H. P. Hamann, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia's official critique of the LCMS' CTCR's "Theology of Fellowship," 1961.

which Luther expresses in his 1528 letter "Concerning Rebaptism."³⁷ The fanatics attack the papacy in a blind fury, without regard for the Christians who are held captive there. Luther, on the contrary, recognizes under the papacy the continued existence of the body of Christ, with the "true Spirit, Gospel, faith, baptism, sacrament, keys, the office of the ministry, prayer, holy Scripture, and everything that pertains to Christendom."³⁸ Correspondingly, he holds of the Protestant enemies of the sacraments that "we must admit that the enthusiasts have the Scriptures and the Word of God in other doctrines. Whoever hears it from them and believes will be saved, even though they are unholy heretics and blasphemers of Christ."³⁹

When the fanatics therefore rage indiscriminately on the principle, "whatever is in the papacy we must have and do differently,"⁴⁰ they re-enact a tragedy that had taken place in the Thuringian forest: A man, trying to help his brother who was being mauled by a bear, missed the bear and accidentally stabbed the brother. So the fanatics "attack the temple of God and miss the Antichrist who sits therein, just as the blind, who grope after water, take hold of fire."⁴¹ The moral is worth quoting in full:

They take a severe stand against the pope, but they miss their mark and murder the more terribly the Christendom under the pope. For if they would permit baptism and the sacrament of the altar to stand as they are, Christians under the pope might yet escape with their souls and be saved, as has been the case hitherto. But now when the sacraments are taken from them, they will most likely be lost, since even Christ himself is thereby taken away. Dear friend, this is not the way to blast the papacy while Christian saints are in his keeping. One needs a more cautious, discreet spirit, which attacks the accretion which threatens the temple without destroying the temple of God itself.⁴²

Regard for captive Zion, however, must not weaken one's resolve in resisting the oppressor, Babylon. This suggests another modern analogy, that of one nation, part of which is free, under a benign and civilized government, while another part has been conquered by brutal terrorists with designs on the rest of the country. In these circumstances the "good" government would, as long as it existed, clearly represent the true interests of the entire nation,

37. *Concerning Rebaptism* (1528), LW 40:229-262; WA 26:144-174.

38. *Ibid.*, LW 40:232; WA 26:147.37-39.

39. *Ibid.*, LW 40:251; WA 26:164.5-7.

40. *Ibid.*, LW 40:233; WA 26:148.23-24.

41. *Ibid.*, LW 40:233; WA 26:148.31-32.

42. *Ibid.*, LW 40:233-234; WA 26:148.38-149.

no matter how much of its actual territory had been annexed by the neighboring concentration camp. Patriots of that nation would then do all in their power to deprive the robber regime of any tokens of legitimacy, and this not from hatred or contempt of their compatriots in captivity but precisely from loyalty to them. Nor would public shows of friendship and hobnobbing with the oppressors be taken as indications of esteem for the oppressed. The latter themselves would not wish to see their oppressors legitimized, and would regard any moves in that direction as adding insult to injury. Now, of course political and spiritual government differ so fundamentally, that all analogies between them are bound to be misleading. Our sole point here is the crucial distinction between the heterodox "regime" or system as such, and its victims. Opposition to the former must never mean hostility to the latter. On the contrary, it is just genuine love for the whole church, and especially for those parts of it languishing under the Babylonian Captivity of heterodoxy, that demands unremitting, uncompromising, and exclusive fidelity to the genuine evangelical and ecumenical banner, that is, to the pure marks of the one church. "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (II Cor. 13:8). All false banners, regimes, doctrines, systems and the like, under whatever name, must be roundly repudiated as illegitimate, that is, as misrepresentations of the one Lord and His one church. That is what it means to refuse church fellowship to heterodox churches as such. Refusal of church fellowship does *not* mean excommunication:

By their exclusion from the celebration of the Holy Supper in communion with the Lutheran Church, members of erring communions are not being excommunicated, much less declared to be heretics and condemned, but they are merely being suspended until they shall have reconciled themselves with the orthodox church by renouncing the false communion (or fellowship) in which they stand (C.F.W. Walther).⁴³

The lines of church fellowship, it will be remembered, run not directly between individuals, but by way of the uniting center, that is, the church's pure marks. Individuals are in fellowship with one another by way of their pulpits and altars. They do not first come to know each other as brothers in the faith, and then form a common relationship to the church. Rather, the mutual acknowledgment hinges on the prior mutual participation in the common faith of the church. One's spiritual identity is shaped not so much by

⁴³ Walther, *Theses Concerning Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently*, 11.

personal verbal professions of the moment, as by the public doctrine of the altar and pulpit at which one regularly confesses (Acts 2:42; I Cor. 10:17; 11:26). The old Lutheran theologians always cited II Sam. 15:11, about the two hundred men who followed Absalom "quite innocently, knowing nothing about the matter," to illustrate the situation of sincerely misguided believers, trapped in heterodoxy. Their personal sincerity warrants church fellowship with them as little as the naivete of Absalom's two hundred once meant that making common cause with them was no longer treasonable.

Neither sentimental simplifications nor urbane universalisms like those of the World Council of Churches and of Vatican II really take into account the whole trans-human, demonic dimension involved in heterodoxy. Forbidding marriage and certain foods, for instance, may strike us as a simple case of overdone asceticism. Paul, however, brands such prohibitions "doctrines of demons" (I Tim. 4:1). Satan, the arch-liar and arch-murderer, is also "the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44). He and his minions take grim pleasure in donning churchly trappings and angelic disguises (II Cor. 11:14) in order to entice and seduce as many as possible away from the saving truth of God (II Thess. 2:9-12). It is not enough, therefore, to understand heterodoxy only or mainly psychologically, in terms of human ignorance, ambition, illusion, or even malice. These are trifles compared to the super-human malignities that lurk behind and exploit them in constant counter-thrusts against the saving work of God (I Pet. 5:8,9). Not flesh and blood are the real enemy, but "principalities and powers," against which no human ingenuity avails, but only the armory of God (Eph. 6:10-18). Physical persecutions, inquisitions, and crusades against heresy are inversions and mockeries of the ways of God (Mt. 5:3-12; I Pet. 2:13-4:19). The church's battles are fought not with worldly weapons but with spiritual ones alone (II Cor. 10:3-6). Responsible theological identification and exclusion of heterodoxy by means of the church's marks calls not for personal meanness and enmity, but for a modest sobriety and charity of mind (Rom. 12:17-21; Gal. 6:1-10; Phil. 4:5). It is just because "the love of Christ constrains us" (II Cor. 5:14) that we dare not yield "for a moment" (Gal. 2:5) to any corruption of the Gospel. "To dissent from the consensus of so many nations and to be called schismatics is a serious matter"—but divine authority demands it (Tr. 42).

We can now appreciate the profound simplicity of Augsburg Confession VII. To common sense it may well seem that one must choose between the whole church and the whole truth. The more

people are to be included, the more the truth will have to be diluted to what they hold in common. On the other hand, the more truth is to be salvaged, the more people will have to be defined out of the church. But this inverse proportion is deceiving. AC VII defies the illusion by keeping the whole church firmly anchored in the whole truth. That of course is biblical. Since there is only one Gospel, one truth, and one faith, and since faith is in every case the work and gift of the Holy Spirit, it follows that the Spirit works the same faith in all believers. To the extent that we are Christians at all, we are true Christians. Whatever is in us above, beyond, or against the one faith, comes not from the Spirit of truth (Jn. 16:13), and is therefore not faith but a mere conceit of the flesh (Mt. 16:23; Rom.7:14-25; 16:18). By faith the newly baptised baby and the aged saint have the same Christ—all of Him. Just as in the Sacrament "one receives and a thousand receive—and the many as much as the one,"⁴⁴ so in Christ all participate in the fullness of one and the same divine truth. Faith is always a theological reality, not a psychological phenomenon. It is not accessible therefore to direct human inspection. This means that disturbances, confusions, and disfigurements at the surface level of empirical human appearances in principle negate the underlying oneness of faith no more than does the infant's or the comatose believer's inability to verbalize any of it.

Mention must be made in this connection of the distinction between "*fides qua*" (faith by which) and "*fides quae*" (faith which). The former is the personal, subjective faith by means of which the individual receives and appropriates the treasures of salvation in the Gospel. The latter is the objective content of the faith which is believed. Only mischief and confusion result when this distinction is pressed into "ecumenical" service, with the suggestion, for instance, that all Christians have the same "*fides qua*," or saving faith, but differ about the "*fides quae*," that is, the doctrine in all its articles. This suggests that the "*fides qua*" is a sort of core-excerpt from a larger "*fides quae*," so that agreement in this mini-faith is enough for salvation, while full agreement in the maxi-faith of Christian doctrine is not so essential. The simple truth of the matter is that "*fides qua*" is not a sort of shrunken version of "*fides quae*," a rival, but smaller content. It is, rather, the act of believing, while the "*fides quae*" is the content. These two therefore are and can be in competition no more than food and eating. And since the

44. "*Sumit unus, sumunt mille: Quantum isti, tantum ille,*" from Thomas Aquinas' famous Eucharistic hymn, *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*, often quoted by the old Lutheran theologians.

smallest faith takes hold of the whole Christ, since the Holy Spirit bears witness to the whole truth, and since the one baptism is into the one Lord and the one faith, therefore all "*fides qua*" takes hold of one and the same "*fides quae*." The contrary appearance of some disarray at the cognitive level does not alter the reality. This consideration does not in the least excuse or mitigate the evil of false proclamation in the church, for all attacks on the "*fides quae*" in principle imperil the "*fides qua*." It is simply a matter of taking due account of the Holy Spirit's work at the "receptor's," or we might say, the "victim's," end of the garbled communication—in accord with the ancient adage that "the ears of the people are holier than the mouths of the priests."

It is the humble grandeur of the orthodox church that she represents and confesses the faith of all Christians, also of those who cannot speak for themselves. She embodies the true interests of all believers, for she teaches that pure Gospel and administers those holy sacraments through which alone Christ builds His church—even under contrary appearances. Her cause therefore is not a narrow, sectarian one, "but the cause of Christ and the church" (Ap. XII.90). Under changing historical forms and names, her fate registers and reflects the titanic struggles till the end of days between Abel and Cain, Isaac and Ishmael (Gal. 4:29), Jacob and Esau (Rom. 9:13), the narrow way and the broad way (Mt. 7:13.14), the woman and the dragon (Rev. 12): ". . . the true doctrine and church is often so oppressed and forlorn, as happened under the papacy, as though there were no church, and it often appears as though she had quite perished" (Ap. VII/VIII.9, German).

It is perfectly correct to call the orthodox church "the true visible church," as opposed to false or erring visible churches. That is the traditional terminology. Its denotations are unexceptionable, but its connotations may in today's context needlessly prejudice some. In this chapter we have restricted ourselves to the simpler terms "orthodox church" and "heterodox church," in order to avoid as much as possible any unnecessary disputes about words. Heterodox churches are churches and sects at the same time. They are churches insofar as they still retain such essentials of the Gospel and sacraments as will allow people to be converted and become children of God. But heterodox churches are sects insofar as they deviate from the evangelical truth and so divide the church and by their errors threaten the faith of Christians.⁴⁵ Or, as Car-

45. Our language here follows closely that of F. Pieper in *Christian Dogmatics*, III.423.

pzov put it: "Insofar as the church is impure, she is no church, though the true and pure church is within her, as regards certain members known to God, who lie hidden there."⁴⁶

In conclusion, the Gospel and sacraments of Christ, insofar as they are the marks of the church, distinguish the church from all that is not church; and insofar as these marks are pure, they distinguish the orthodox church from heterodox churches. In and of themselves, of course, the marks are always pure—for to the extent that impurities or disfigurements are added, these are not the church's marks at all but alien features. "Another gospel" is as such precisely "no gospel" (Gal. 1:6.7). Those who do not believe that revealed divine truth is concretely accessible in the church, will of course find this discussion in particular—and traditional theology in general—hopelessly arrogant and fanciful. Their objections cannot be considered here in detail. That is a task for Prolegomena. In the doctrine of the church the truth of the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) is a given, no, *the* given. To suppose otherwise, to imagine that truth and error cannot be reliably distinguished, is to embrace ecclesiological deism. The church of Christ, on the contrary, is "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (I Tim. 3:15). Luther:

But whatever wavers or doubts cannot be truth; and what would be the use or need of a church of God in the world if [she] wanted to waver or be uncertain in [her] words, or wanted to say something new every day, now asserting this, now rejecting that?⁴⁷

Orthodoxy Does *Not* Mean Theological Perfection

In chess one may learn the basic rules in five minutes, but this does not make one a grand master. Similarly, orthodoxy is a bare minimum, a starting point, a floor, not a ceiling. It means keeping all the articles of faith straight, and not allowing anything to contradict them. At the same time an orthodox teacher may be quite wrong in his understanding of this or that biblical text—indeed, where is the theologian whose mind is entirely free of eccentric notions? Not every mistake is at once heretical or church-divisive. ✓ On the basis of I Cor. 3:11–15 the Apology teaches a very necessary leniency in this regard (VII/VIII.20–21, compare IV.231–243).

Gerhard and the other old Lutherans chided the Jesuits for maintaining that every biblical statement was an article of faith, therefore also the item that the apocryphal "dog of Tobit wagged

46. Cited in a slightly different translation in C.F.W. Walther, *The True Visible Church*, 24.

47. *Against Hanswurst* (1541), LW 41:213; WA 51:511.24–27.

its tail."⁴⁸ The Lutherans, on the contrary, distinguished between articles of faith, which were necessary for salvation, and other, supporting biblical details and ramifications about which one might be ignorant or even wrong without direct detriment to faith. Of course, once one recognized that something was presented as a fact in Scripture, one was not free to deny it, for then one would be opposing the inspiration and authority of God's holy Word—a major article of faith indeed. That is the point of Hunnius' remark: "He indeed is a heretic who denies an article of faith; but not only he, but also he who denies a historical narrative of the Holy Ghost."⁴⁹

The founders of the Missouri Synod shared this position, and are therefore unjustly lampooned today as perfectionists, who could tolerate no disagreement about anything. Walther, for instance, was convinced that the prohibition of interest-taking was a biblical teaching. When pressed, however, he insisted that it was not an article of faith, so that if someone were sincerely wrong only on this sort of thing, no grounds would exist for refusing church fellowship. Everything depended, Walther said, on whether those who rejected the point at issue did so from sincere misunderstanding or from stubborn resistance to what they recognized to be biblical teaching. If the latter, it would of course be a case of attacking the foundations, and hence would be church-divisive.⁵⁰

Those who caricature orthodoxy as a demand for theological perfection do so in order to discredit the demand by appealing to Luther's "*simul justus et peccator*" (at the same time righteous and sinner). ~~The idea is that to require orthodoxy is to require a certain degree of sanctification, and that in turn is to confuse Law and Gospel.~~ This whole approach, however, rests on a category-mistake, and reflects puritanic/pietistic moralism rather than the evangelical, confessional marks-of-the-church orientation. The church and her fellowship rest not on faith but on its objective source: the pure Gospel and sacraments. ~~Orthodoxy in this sense therefore has nothing to do with sanctification~~ (an orthodox office-bearer may turn out to be personally a hypocrite [AC VIII]). The point is not anyone's personal quality or worthiness, but the

48. Cited in C.F.W. Walther, *True Visible Church*, 105.

49. *Ibid.*, 106.

50. See lengthy citation in R. Bohlmann, "The position of the LCMS on the Basis for Fellowship," *FODT*, 37. In support Bohlmann cites 1969 LCMS *Convention Workbook*, p. 505, n. 25. The original source is *Der Lutheraner*, 27 (May 1871), 131. See also Brobst's *Theologische Monatshefte*, 4 (September 1871), 272–273.

~~alone-saving truth of the Gospel~~, which is prior to all faith, love, and sanctification. Unlike love and sanctification, which are always piecemeal, incomplete, subject to the Law's calibrations (Rom. 13:10), the Gospel of justification does not work by halves, sevenths, or tithes, but by wholes (Rom. 8:31ff.; II Cor. 1:19.20). Church-fellowship turns on this holistic, utterly prior Gospel, not on sanctification or on anything else which is "in us," and so subject to fluctuation by degrees.

Orthodox Confessions as Pure Gospel (Pure Marks) in *Practice*

If Holy Scripture is the inexhaustible gold mine of divine truth, the creeds and confessions of the church are the minted coin of evangelical currency. For the Book of Concord truth is not an abstraction, but a concrete given. It is the divine, evangelical truth as revealed in Holy Scripture and faithfully confessed in the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, as well as in the Augsburg Confession and its associated documents (FC SD, Rule and Norm). Orthodox creeds and confessions are truth-preserving, and therefore divide as well as unite. By identifying decisive elements of the biblical teaching, such creeds call and gather the faithful to the standards of authentic proclamation. On the other hand, by pin-pointing the differences, the creeds distinguish true biblical teaching from counterfeits and misunderstandings, thereby warding off rival, heterodox teachings, and excluding their persistent adherents. Creeds and confessions therefore embody the church's marks in concrete, concentrated form.

This confessional spirit of the Church of the Augsburg Confession is fundamentally at odds with the anti-confessional outlook which animates the Reformed (Zwingli-Calvinist) churches. The latter, as Karl Barth has rightly seen, ultimately know no such thing as "Reformed doctrine." Instead of the Lutheran insistence on the *properly understood* Scripture, the Reformed churches maintain a basically abstract *sola Scriptura* principle, that is, a "timeless appeal to the open Bible and to the Spirit which from it speaks to our spirit." Barth continues:

Our fathers had good reason for leaving us *no* Augsburg Confession, authentically interpreting the word of God, *no* Formula of Concord, *no* "Symbolical Books" which might later, like the Lutheran, come to possess an odor of sanctity. They left us only *creeds*, more than one of which begin or end with a proviso which leaves them

open to being improved upon in the future. The Reformed churches simply do *not* know the word dogma, in its rigid hierarchical sense.⁵¹

The decisive impulse here, evident already in Calvin but stronger in Barth, is a deeply Platonic, anti-incarnational spiritualism, which decrees an eternal *apartheid* between finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, human and divine. Absolutes in this anti-sacramental scheme must hover permanently beyond the reach of concrete, historical embodiment, which latter is exiled to a shadowy underworld of the relative and the provisional. Trendy Lutherans have drunk deeply from these post-Barthian, anti-confessional wells.⁵² However, Lutheran writers often feel obliged to appeal to the Confessions in the very process of attacking them. One technique is to isolate FC Ep. RN.8, so as to suggest that orthodox creeds and confessions can be *no more than* "merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, etc."⁵³ What the Epitome says here of extra-biblical writings applies to them only in comparison to the sacred, inspired text itself. In other words, only Scripture is ultimate norm, *norma normans*. It is complete fabrication, however, to suggest that therefore orthodox creeds are not normative in the sense of *norma normata*, but are "merely witnesses." On the contrary, the Formula lists all the documents of the Book of Concord as forming, together with the Sacred Scriptures of God, "the Summary Formulation, Basis, Rule, and Norm, Indicating how all Doctrines should be Judged in Conformity with the Word of God and Errors are to be Explained and Decided in a Christian Way."⁵⁴

The Solid Declaration expressly states that the *sola scriptura* principle does not involve rejection of the normativeness of the Symbolical Books:

Our intention was only to have a single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe and from which and according to which, because

51. K. Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 229-230.

52. It is difficult to think of a better example than V. L. Eckstrom, "Pluralism and Lutheran Confessionalism," 109-149.

53. A variant of this approach is to exempt the Augsburg Confession itself, but to claim that the FC "allocates to all other writings the status of witnesses to the way in which 'at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries'" (D. Truemper, "The Catholicity of the Augsburg Confession," 13).

54. Tappert, 503.

it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated.⁵⁵

Not an abstract "timeless appeal to the open Bible" is decisive, but the concrete confession of the properly, evangelically, understood Bible.

As the church's pure marks in concrete, concentrated form, the orthodox confessions define the basis and limits of church fellowship. Where these confessions are contravened in doctrine and practice, there the Gospel is not being purely preached, and the Sacraments are not being rightly administered. In this sense the Augsburg Confession and its associated documents in the Book of Concord "distinguish our reformed churches from the papacy and from other condemned sects and heresies" (FC SD RN.5). These boundary-markers against major falsifications of Christian truth stand also against kindred errors among nominal Lutherans, who pay lip-service to the Augsburg Confession but whose "teachings are contrary to the expressed Word of God and cannot coexist with it" (Preface to the Book of Concord). Indeed the pseudo-Lutheran errors "are of such a nature that the opinions of the erring party cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended" (FC SD Intro.9).

As bearers of the public marks of the church, the Confessions demand actual practice and implementation, not formal pedantries of any sort. If the Gospel is being purely preached and the sacraments are being rightly administered, then orthodoxy and church fellowship in fact obtain, even if not all orthodox creeds and confessions are formally named in church constitutions or ordination vows.⁵⁶ On the other hand, solemn professions of loyalty to the entire Book of Concord count for nothing if they are confined to the "patient paper" of formal documents, while in practice pulpits, seminaries, and publications disseminate also teachings contrary to the Book of Concord. If confessions do not actually confess, they are play-confessions, toy tokens in a sacrilegious game of "church."

"The unity of the Church does not consist in subscription to the

55. FC RN 10, Tappert, 506.

56. F. Pieper: "If the Lutheran Confession were not mentioned at all in a congregation's constitution, but if the teaching in that congregation were in all points in accord with the Word of God, then that would be an orthodox Lutheran congregation. And if a congregation were to say ten times in its constitution that in this congregation the preaching was to be Lutheran, yet if in reality the preaching were not Lutheran but Methodist, Baptist, synergistic, etc., then that would not be a Lutheran congregation, despite its declaration in its constitution" (*Vorträge*, 185).

same Confessions, but in the acceptance and teaching of the same doctrines."⁵⁷ And of course "a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combatted and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline."⁵⁸ It is of the very nature of the Gospel, and therefore of the evangelical Reformation, that content takes precedence over form, and reality over appearance.

It is in church fellowship above all that confession or denial takes place. When church fellowship is limited to churches with which there is genuine consensus in the Gospel and sacraments, as defined in the Book of Concord, then these Confessions are being implemented in accordance with their whole thrust and intent.⁵⁹ When on the other hand nominally Lutheran churches officially practice or tolerate pulpit and altar fellowship with churches and ministers whose doctrine is in conflict with that of the Book of Concord, then the Confessions are thereby abrogated, despite continued lip-service to them from church-political motives. By coalescing with non-Lutheran churches at their altars and pulpits, Lutheran churches cease to be Lutheran and become syncretistic sects.

It is certainly conceivable that occasionally some Lutheran theologians or even a larger group of them and their followers could find that they have lost their former convictions, and no longer believe, teach, and confess as does the Book of Concord. If this were then publicly admitted, and the proper consequences drawn, no one could object to the integrity of the proceedings. What is intolerable, and destructive of all churchly integrity, is the continued pretence of confessional loyalty when the reality is demonstrably otherwise. So for example one cannot without perjury ac-

57. H. E. Jacobs, "The General Council," 94.

58. LCMS, *Brief Statement*, 29. This so-called "doctrinal discipline" must not be confused with "church discipline" in general, which is an additional mark of the church for the Reformed, but not for Lutherans (FC SD XII, 34). If anti-evangelical teaching is granted equal rights with the truth in pulpits, seminaries, and publications, this is no mere lapse in discipline. It is rather a church-divisive and church-destructive attack on the Dominical and apostolic foundations of the church, Eph. 2:20. A necessary corollary of the above is Walther's thesis: "True Evangelical Lutheran particular and local churches or congregations are only those in which the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as set out in her Symbols, is not only legally recognized, but also holds sway in public preaching" (*True Visible Church*, 133. The translation given there is slightly inaccurate). On the basis of Jer. 8:8 Walther adds that the lip-service of "nominal Lutherans" to the orthodox Confessions—when in fact false doctrine prevails among them—"must be rejected as vain boasting."

59. "For Lutherans the consensus required should always be regarded as the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord, which does not necessarily mean agreement in theological terminology" (Lutheran Church of Australia, *Theses of Agreement*, V,22).

cept pulpit and altar fellowship with Episcopal and Presbyterian churches,⁶⁰ and also claim that one still abides by one's ordination vow and subscription to the Book of Concord, which confesses with Luther:

I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final (FC SD VII.33).

The historic confessional position was put like this by C.F.W. Walther: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church rejects every fraternal or ecclesiastical fellowship with such as reject its Confession, either in whole or in part."⁶¹ Nor was this a "Missourian" peculiarity. The "centrist" *Minneapolis Theses* (1925) stated:

Church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition, altar and pulpit fellowship, and eventually co-operation in the strictly essential work of the Church, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the confession of the same in word and deed. Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism, the pretense of union which does not exist. [The Galesburg Rule] is not only in full accord with, but necessarily implied in, the teachings of the divine Word and the Confessions of the evangelical Lutheran Church. This rule, implying the rejection of all unionism and syncretism, must be observed as setting forth a principle elementary to sound and conservative Lutheranism (III,1.2).

60. The reference here is to the "interim Eucharistic sharing" between several U.S. Lutheran bodies and the Episcopal Church since 1982, and the terms of Lutheran-Reformed altar-fellowship agreements documented in J. E. Andrews and J. A. Burgess, eds., *An Invitation To Action. The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue Series III 1981-1983*. In direct contradiction to FC SD VII *An Invitation* claims that "those churches that have subscribed to the Reformed Confessions have always taught and still teach the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist," and that the difference is simply about the "mode" of Christ's presence, which should not be divisive (114-115). Only rarely is this anti-confessional revolution admitted, and then much too guardedly to enlighten the general membership. For example, *Lutheran and Presbyterian-Reformed Agreement 1986: A Study Guide*, released by The Office of the Presiding Bishop of The American Lutheran Church, stated: "In the same way Lutherans who adopt the Leuenberg Agreement have modified their confessional stance by agreeing that condemnations in the Reformation Confessions are inapplicable to those churches with which they now find consensus (cf. *Invitation To Action*, 69-70). Three Batak churches in 1984 took another historic step by joining forty-eight Christian churches in adopting documents establishing what Lutherans call 'pulpit and altar fellowship.' Among these churches are Pentecostals, Methodists, Mennonites, and the Reformed. Thus Lutherans cannot deny that in effect they are producing new Confessions by the way old Confessions are being used in new situations and by new situations to which they commit themselves" (11).

61. *True Visible Church*, 128.

Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics

Volume IX

Robert Preus, Editor

THE CHURCH
AND
**HER FELLOWSHIP, MINISTRY,
AND GOVERNANCE**

Kurt E. Marquart