

## The Meaning Of *Satis Est*

by Gerhard O. Forde

Much of the beauty of the Augsburg Confession (hereafter: CA) consists in that it means just what it says. In the question before the house in this session it says:

*Our churches also teach that one holy church is to continue forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. For the true unity of the church it is enough (satis est) to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere. It is as Paul says, "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all," etc. (Eph. 4:5,6) (Art. 7, translated from the Latin version, Book of Concord, Tappert, 32).*

That is the catholic claim of the CA. The meaning is quite plain, and has been so from the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation until now. The *satis est*, especially when taken together with the next sentence stating that it is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere, is clearly a setting of limits. It states what constitutes the true unity of the church, and limits what can be required of any church in order to be included in that unity. The confession asserts boldly that enough is enough, and that nothing more can be required for the true unity of the Church.

We do not need to guess what Art. 7 means. The texts are in good shape. We have all the sources any historian could desire. We have the writings of Luther, Melancthon and others relevant to the subject. We have the documents used as sources for the CA and plenty of letters. We know the historical context. The churches of the Reformation were accused of schism, breaking the unity of the church, because they had proceeded without

Roman or Imperial institutional approval in undertaking certain reforms, especially in the Saxon Visitations. The CA is their "apology," as they often referred to it, in which they turn back the charge of schism. Even though they have undertaken several necessary steps to reform the church, thus indeed interposing certain discontinuities in existing institutional forms (traditions, rites, ceremonies, instituted by men), they have not broken the true and spiritual unity of the church, the Reformers

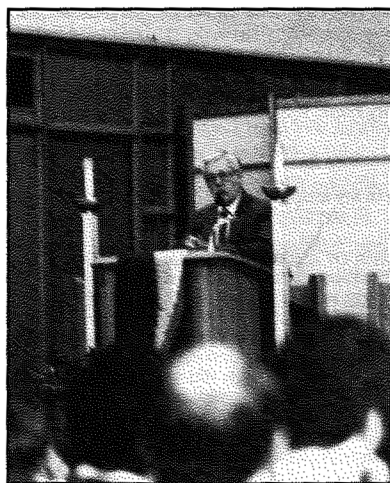
claimed, because they seek only to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments which call that true church into being and give it its unity.

But one should have no illusions about what a drastic step this was for any understanding of the church and social life. It meant a renovation in practically every facet of existence. Just a list of what the "traditions, rites, and ceremonies" devised by men included is enough to indicate that:

*mandatory fasting; auricular confession; the veneration of saints, relics, and images; the buying and selling of indulgences; pilgrimages and shrines; wakes and processions for the dead and dying; endowed masses in memory of the dead; the doctrine of purgatory; Latin Mass and liturgy; traditional ceremonies, festivals, and holidays; monasteries, nunneries, and mendicant orders; the sacramental status of marriage, extreme unction, confirmation, holy orders, and penance; clerical celibacy; clerical immunity from civil taxation and criminal jurisdiction; nonresident benefices; papal excommunication and interdict; canonlaw; papal and episcopal territorial government; and the traditional scholastic education of clergy (Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980], 435).*

But if the meaning is quite clear, what is the problem? When questions arise about the meaning of something so clear, our suspicions ought to be aroused. All too often that indicates that a move is afoot to make it mean something other than it has been taken to mean all along. That appears to me to be the case in the current argument over the *satis est*. As is usual in such instances, the question of context is appealed to as the warrant for making the history say something other than what it clearly intends to say. If we wish to get at the question of the meaning of the *satis est* today, I expect we shall have to attend to such argumentation. To use an older distinction which I don't generally espouse, but which may be helpful in this instance, the argument about the meaning of the *satis est* is not so much, perhaps, about what it *meant*, but what it *means*. It is not so much, that is, about what it meant back there, though that is inevitably involved, but perhaps more about what it supposedly means for us today — or even what we would *like* it to mean! It is helpful to distinguish these two things particularly in arguments where one appeals to context. With that in mind, we proceed to the question: What is the meaning of *satis est*?

The standard argument these days is the argument from context. The situation now, so the argument goes, is so different that the *satis est* is supposed to function differently from the way it did back then. This sort of argument has lately been raised to the status of what one supposes is virtual infallibility since it has been accepted as part of the supporting rationale for the ELCA statement on ecumenism at the churchwide assembly.<sup>1</sup> Since this is the voice of authority, we shall treat it as a classic statement of the argument about what the *satis est* means. The



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historical situation, the voice of the ELCA informs us, is now different from what it was in Reformation days. Then, we are told, the *satis est* was proposed to preserve an existing unity. Now, however, it should function, if at all, apparently, to enable us to move from visible disunity to greater visible unity and "full communion."

subject by saying, "Yet Article VII of the Augsburg Confession continues to be ecumenically freeing, because of its insistence that agreement in the Gospel suffices for Christian unity." This is taken as warrant for the ecumenical method of by-passing insistence on doctrinal or ecclesiastical uniformity and looking instead to consensus on the Gospel. Laudable enough. But what

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*The Kingdom of God comes by God's power  
alone in God's good time. There will be no church then,  
thanks be to God! The church lasts until the end  
of the age, and is its end.*

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Just how the *satis est* is supposed to do that is never very clearly spelled out. Instead we are served a series of statements about the *satis est* which hardly follow from one another and seem virtually contradictory if taken according to their implied meaning. "Today," we are informed, "the *satis est* provides an ecumenical resource to move to levels of fellowship among divided churches." True. But only if the *satis est* is taken as a concept limiting what can be imposed upon churches as institutional requirements for unity. But that clearly is not what the argument is supposed to mean. For the next sentences indicate that the ecumenism statement has something quite other in mind. It moves immediately to try to remove the limits. "Article VII," it announces, "for all its cohesiveness and precision does not present a complete doctrine of the church. It is not in the first instance an expression of a falsely understood ecumenical openness and freedom from church order, customs, and usages in the church." What are such sentences supposed to mean? Clearly the drift seems to be that since CA 7 does not present a complete doctrine of the church and cannot be taken as pointing to a "falsely understood ecumenical openness," i.e., freedom from church order, customs, usages, then we are called upon now to complete the doctrine of the church and take on, for the sake of visible unity, the orders, customs, and usages, which the confessors declared could not be required. Instead, that is, of being a limiting concept, the *satis est* is taken to be something of a minimal requirement for unity, to which a number of other things could freely be added. This, of course, opens up the possibility of accepting the orders, customs, and usages which others may find to be necessary.

But it is hard to see what the next sentences are to mean in this new context. The "primary meaning" of the *satis est*, we are informed next, "is that only those things that convey salvation, justification by grace through faith, are allowed to be signs and constitutive elements of the church." The sentence seems a kind of grudging admission in the midst of the attempts to open things up, that the *satis est* does impose limits which cannot be denied. It seems a contradiction to the argument to this point. Then there is a kind of gratuitous reference to the fact that, unlike the 16th century, we must recognize the missionary situation of the church today. Another context is heard from. What that is to mean for the *satis est*, we are not told. Does it mean that in the light of the missionary situation we should be prepared to "loosen" up on the claims of CA 7? If not, why are such statements here? But then the statement returns to the

provokes interest is that "yet" with which the paragraph begins. "Yet" CA 7 continues to be ecumenically freeing. Why so, "yet?" Is that a reference back to the fact that the argument for openness, which took the *satis est* to be a minimum to which other things could readily be added, ran into a snag in the fact that "only those things that convey salvation" are allowed to be signs and constitutive elements of the church? So is the *satis est* to be rescued, finally, by a condescending "yet?"

The attempt to answer the question of the meaning of the *satis est* by an appeal to context thus seems to end in confusion. If it is now to function to help restore a lost unity, one can never be quite certain whether it is an enemy or a friend, an open door or a roadblock. If this is the more or less official position of the ELCA, we are in trouble. We are left not knowing whether our confessional position is a bane or a blessing. One even hears of snide references these days from highly placed ecumenical leaders, about "*satis est* Lutherans." Like Luther's drunk on horseback, the interpretation of the *satis est* falls off on one side, only to climb back on and fall off on the other. It vacillates back and forth between what it meant and what it supposedly means with no apparent consistency, with the general result that one is quite puzzled as to what it does mean for us today. The argument from context is used, apparently, to demonstrate that it should function differently today, but one is honestly at a loss to divine what that different function is. Perhaps the truth is that the argument actually tries to render the *satis est* irrelevant so it can no longer be an obstacle to our designs.

In what follows, I shall try my hand at expounding the meaning of the *satis est*. To do so, however, one must be considerably more careful about the question of context and therefore with the distinction between what it meant and what it means. It is, of course, a truism to say that matters were different then from what they are now. But then one must try to specify very precisely what those differences are. To begin with, it is doubtful that CA 7 assumes and therefore is designed to preserve an existing visible unity. After all, the confessors were being charged with schism — with having broken the unity of the church. But furthermore, just a little reading around in the writings of Luther indicates that he, and Melancthon as well, was quite aware of the many ruptures in the visible or physical unity of christendom. The words of Luther's great confession which stand behind much of the CA bear eloquent testimony to that:

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This [one, holy, Christian Church on earth] exists not only in the realm of the Roman Church or pope, but in all the world, as the prophets foretold ... Thus this Christian Church is physically dispersed among pope, Turks, Persians, Tartars, but spiritually gathered in one gospel and faith, under one head, i.e., Jesus Christ ... In this Christian Church, wherever it exists, is to be found the forgiveness of sins, i.e., a kingdom of grace and of true pardon. (LW 37:367-8).

One can find many other statements of the same sort in Luther and other reformers.<sup>2</sup> True, the "physical" disunity which they see may be somewhat different from that which obtains today. It was not so much a matter of denominations as the church dispersed among different peoples or nations.<sup>3</sup> But differences there were, in traditions, rites, and ceremonies, as they put it, "instituted by men." Therefore, the task they saw was not that of attempting to preserve an existing physical unity, since that, quite obviously, no longer existed — if it ever had. The task, rather, was that of coming to a deeper understanding of the unity of the church in the face of such physical difference and dispersion. Thus they sought to grasp the true unity of the church which persists through all of its physical manifestations. And this true unity of the church could be grasped only in the light of the gospel of justification by faith alone. That is to say, the church and its unity could itself be nothing other than an object of faith, not of sight. The "invisibility" or better "hiddenness" of such unity was not, therefore, simply a counsel of last resort, a taking refuge in "spiritualization" when all else failed. It was rather a matter of principle. It would make no difference at all to CA 7 whether there were one physical church or several. The true unity would still be an object of faith and not sight. If the church and its unity is to be an object of that same faith that justifies, then it cannot be an object of sight. That was not a counsel of despair. It was part and parcel of the good news itself.

There is a fundamental divide here between the church viewed from the perspective of justification by faith and the perspective of justification by grace-wrought works. Where justification is by works the church must realize and manifest itself by its works in the world. It has, basically, two options. Either it must seek to make the world over and thereby dominate it, via necessary ruling institutions, or it must retreat from the world to its own holy enclave. The genius of Rome, one might say, was that it did some of both — in the papacy and its claims on the one hand and monasticism on the other. To equate the true unity of the church with such visible manifestation was simply to invite and perpetuate tyranny, or, in theological terms, put the Antichrist on the throne.

Where justification is by faith alone, however, the true church is revealed only in acts which set us free from the tyranny of law, sin, and death. So its only visible marks in this world are acts of ultimate liberation, primarily the pure preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments, but also, as Luther would sometimes say, in other manifestations of liberation, ministry, bearing the cross, suffering, prayer, and so forth. The true unity of the church is therefore brought about by such acts of liberation from sin, death, and the power of the devil because they call into being a *communio* of those who believe in and hope for the ultimate triumph of this as yet unseen and unseeable "church."

In this light, the *satis est* was not part of an attempt to preserve an already existing unity. It was rather part of an attempt to

redefine the true unity of the church in consonance with the gospel of justification by faith. Thus the confessors maintained in the face all the apparent physical and visible disunity, that nevertheless the true unity of the church persists by faith alone. Their apology therefore was that they had not destroyed the true unity of the church, and indeed that they could not. Consequently they insisted that for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree on the proper preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. That was a statement of the limit imposed by the nature of justification by faith itself. A line was drawn by the gospel. Whatever traditions, rites and ceremonies one might propose in addition must take their place this side of the line as strictly of human provenance. The forms devised by men to safeguard and deliver the gospel may, and perhaps should, vary. It is enough to agree on the proper doing of it. Enough is enough. That, I believe, is what it meant. And one should not serve up contextual hash to obscure that. But that cannot be the end of the story. Just what it means for us is, of course, the last, and most difficult question. So we must turn to that question to conclude this exercise.

What does the *satis est* mean today? It goes practically without saying that the context today is different from that of the original text. Critical interpreters are right at least in that. However, as pointed out, the real difference is not to be found on the level of the unity or disunity of ecclesiastical institutions. The major differences we have to attend to are more in the realm of the theology and metaphysics. This is hardly the place to go into an exhaustive discussion of such matters, but if one is to draw out the meaning of the *satis est* for today, some judgments of at least a preliminary and suggestive sort will have to be ventured.

Theologically the most important contextual reality for the understanding of the *satis est* as well as ecclesiology in general today is the challenging and breaking up of 19th century liberal and romantic continuities by the recovery of biblical eschatology. To this, Lutherans must also add the recovery of Luther's theology, especially the theology of the cross.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that originally the *satis est* marked an attempt to draw a line in order to protect the very nature of the gospel. To carry this through, the reformers used various distinctions in their thinking about the church: visible versus invisible; physical versus spiritual; sometimes (but all too rarely) hidden versus revealed; and above all, divine versus human institution. These distinctions have not fared well in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. In one way or another, the transcendent (invisible, spiritual, revealed, divine) was collapsed into the immanent (visible, physical, human, moral). A similar fate befell the understanding of the church in both Roman and Protestant camps. The result was what Ernst Wolf characterized as the romanticizing of the church.<sup>5</sup> The church was taken to be a visible reality (a *gemeinschaft*, i.e., a commonality made — *geschaffen* — by human activity) which once — prior to the reformation — united Europe, but now, because of its physical disunity, fractures it. Such romanticizing spawns a kind of ideology of unity: If we could put the church back together again, and perhaps restore its magisterial integrity, people would return to it. This ideology of unity fires much of the ecumenical pathos in the church today.

But even though the collapsing of the transcendent into the immanent has come under heavy fire in virtually every other theological locus,<sup>6</sup> the doctrine of the church seems to have

escaped. Romantic notions of the church have persisted and now take the form of the drive for visible unity, *koinonia*, "full communion" and such grand things. The upshot is that the old distinctions used at the time of the reformation to protect the gospel come under heavy fire and are often relativized if not rejected outright. Should one not ask whether this relativizing or rejecting is not of a piece with the general slide of the churches into the sociological swamp so vehemently descried elsewhere?

The question before the house, therefore, is whether the *satis est* is to be taken still today in some fashion as a part of our call to faithfulness or if it is just a piece of historical junk. We will be able to answer that question confidently in the affirmative only if we recognize that it was groping — as were all these reformation distinctions — for what we today would call an eschatological understanding of the church. The *satis est* pointed towards an understanding of the church which takes account of the eschatological distinction between the ages, this present old age and the future breaking-in in the new. The *satis est* sets an eschatological limit to what can be claimed by the institutional forms of the church in this age. When it asserts that for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree on the right preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accordance therewith, it insists that the highest and final exercise of authority in the church is the gospel which sets people free from sin, death, and the power of the devil, thereby inaugurating the new age for faith and hope and granting true unity as a gift. And since the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and

risen, is the highest exercise of authority in the church, the reformers always insisted, particularly against Papal and episcopal claims, that Christ was the head of the church. He is the end of the church and the promise of the new beginning, the new age, the Kingdom of God. Whatever the leadership of the church in this age, and however necessary and useful it might be, it was strictly of human arrangement and its forms could not be considered obligatory. The church, that is to say, should be understood strictly as a this-age entity. What comes after the church in this world, that for which the faithful hope, is the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom of God comes by God's power alone in God's good time. There will be no church then, thanks be to God! The church lasts until the end of the age, and is its end.<sup>7</sup>

If the *satis est* is taken eschatologically, it means that the eschaton can be carried now only by the preached word and delivered sacrament. The eschatological word can only be, finally, its own warrant. If we grasp what Luther's theology is about we will see that at stake is a different understanding of how a truly "objective" reality is mediated. The eschatological word draws its objectivity from the fact that it is an "alien" word entirely from without, from God's future which is the end of us. It can live, therefore, only from its own inherent power. It does, indeed, need to be mediated, spoken and administered by humans exercising the office of such speaking and doing. One can even say that such an office is divinely instituted since God,

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by “providing the gospel and the sacrament,” called it into being. But since it is an office announcing the end, it is self-limiting. It can only seek to get out of the way for the eschatological Kingdom. This is what the *satis est* means. It is a self-limiting concept. Therefore one can claim no more than human warrant for the institutional forms coined in this age.

And one should not look upon this self-limiting, pointed to by the *satis est*, as though it were something negative. As always, the eschatological limit *saves* the institutions of this age precisely by putting them to their proper tasks, making them truly historical. “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means, we uphold the law” (Rom. 3:31). Whenever the church claims something more than that, we have trouble. The trouble is just that law overcomes gospel. Indeed, if one of the churches claims to be the one church we will have nothing but trouble. History bears repeated witness to the fact that the drive towards visible unity in one visible church on earth is a dream most detrimental of all to ecumenism. The eschatological limit is transgressed and the figure of the Grand Inquisitor hovers in the wings. When the eschatological line is transgressed, the church begins to claim itself to be the unifying end of history, the fulfillment of history’s meaning and “seeks to prove the truth of its message by the continuity of its traditions, the ‘validity’ of its order and the solidity and prestige of its historic form.”<sup>8</sup> The church, that is, begins to look upon itself as the visible incarnation of the invisible ideal church. It is simply not correct or appropriate to call opposition to such a position *anti-catholic*. It is not anti-catholic to believe that the one church is wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments delivered. It is surely much more anti-catholic to claim that one institution is the one church now and forever. That is a transgression of the eschatological limit set down by the *satis est* which spells, in the end, tyranny.

What is the faithfulness to which the *satis est* calls us? If one looks at the matter in the light of the recovery of Luther’s theology, perhaps we can avoid some of the endless debates of the past and needless debates of the present. What the *satis est* calls for is agreement not on a whole list of things or doctrines, but on the specific activity of teaching (preaching) the gospel and administering the sacraments according to that gospel. The debates of the past have generally gotten bogged down in arguments about doctrinal agreement — “how much” is necessary. More lately the drive towards “visible unity” seems to incline its advocates to add some things by way of communal life and discipline. It is no accident that it was the Reformed theologian/ecumenist Lukas Vischer who coined the slogan, *satis est non satis est*. As a good Calvinist he wanted to add something about discipline and such. And even our bonny Lutheran theologians at Strasbourg seem to want to add things beyond the limits drawn by the *satis est*. They talk of the necessity of “lived unity” and such niceties — even statements to the effect that “to attempt to realize [sic!] the unity described in *satis est* without the relations of ‘full communion’ is to live in self-contradiction.”<sup>10</sup> Whenever something gets added, the teeth of the law begin to show!

Is this not simply the same old game? Whenever the eschatological line is drawn in Lutheranism by the gospel and the sacraments, someone always wants to add something more. The gospel and the sacraments are never enough. Always, always, someone gets nervous and demands something more.

The statements about adding things to the *satis est* list sounds remarkably like the dreary business of the third use of the law, now applied to our ecclesiology. Those who refuse to add more “things” to the list are even accused of “*satis est* reductionism!”<sup>11</sup> And, given the nervousness, such changes are consequent. Whenever the line is transgressed, the old being escapes. And where old beings escape the appointed end, the church has to take steps to bring them under control. The church becomes a surrogate for eschatology, a kind of eschatological vestibule! And that always turns out to be a prison.

The *satis est* calls us, surely, to believe and confess that the gospel and the sacraments are indeed enough. No doubt the irony of it all is that that seems precisely the hardest thing for churches and theologians to agree on. But what can be done about that? If we have listened to Luther, and learned anything at all from the recovery of his theology, I expect we will just have to say, nothing! It is simply not a matter of attempting to repair the supposed inadequacy of the *satis est* by adding or subtracting this or that. It is not a matter of a list of “things,” doctrinally or otherwise, it is rather a matter of the specific activity of preaching the gospel — learning how to do that and sticking to it. If we don’t know how to do that, or don’t do it even when we know how, nothing can help us. No tinkering with a list of things and no bolstering of offices is going to help because the office is to preach the gospel. If one does know what the gospel is all about, one is certainly not concerned to play the game of expansionism or reductionism. If we are in trouble on this score, we are *really* in trouble. Nothing can be done about it except to do what the *satis est* is all about: to return to the preaching of the gospel and the doing of the sacraments with faithfulness until those who hear and receive have finally had “enough” and can consequently confess: *satis est*, I have had enough! What more could one ask? **LF**

— Endnotes —

1. References are to William G. Rusch, Ed., *A Commentary on “Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 28-29. Hereafter: *Ecumenism: ELCA*.
2. See, for instance, M. Luther, “On the Papacy at Rome.” LW 39: 55-104, and “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests.” LW 38:138-214. It is significant that Luther’s most ecumenical statements about the unity of all christendom come in the writings against the Papacy!
3. Nevertheless, denominationalism has its roots very early on in the Protestant movement. See the interesting essay by Winthrop Hudson, “Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity: A Seventeenth Century Conception.” *Church History* 24, 1955, 32-50. Hudson points out that 17th century divines found warrant for denominationalism in Calvin. But perhaps they could have found even more direct warrant in Luther’s writings against the claims of Rome. See note 2, above. Furthermore, as Hudson points out, denominationalism was not what split the church, but rather an ecumenical strategy to bring it together once again.
4. It is well to remember that the phenomenon known as “Luther’s Theology” is really pretty much a 20th century discovery. The theology of the cross was virtually unknown until W. Von Loewenich’s book on it in 1929, which was not translated into English until 1976!
5. Ernst Wolf, “*Sanctorum Communio. Erwaegung zum Problem der Romantisierung des Kirchenbegriffs*” *Peregrinatio* (Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954), 279-301.
6. One might hold, of course, that it is not only in the understanding of the church that the theology of the 19th century is alive and well. That, of course is true. But it is also precisely our problem today.
7. CA 7 says, of course, that the true church will last forever. However, the Schwabach Articles say it will last only until the end of the age. Here, as elsewhere, the Schwabach articles are better!
8. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Scribners, 1949), 239.
9. *Ecumenism: ELCA*, 111.
10. *Ecumenism: ELCA*, 111.
11. Michael Root. “*Satis Est: What Do We Do When Other Churches Don’t Agree?*” Unpublished paper read at The Convocation of Teaching Theologians of the ELCA, Techny, Ill, 1991, 27.