

Lutheran Ecumenism: With Whom and How Much?

by GERHARD O. FORDE

ACCORDING TO SEVERAL observers, we seem to have entered an ecumenical winter. Winter, especially in Minnesota, is when it is cold and slippery. Cars will not start, and even if they do, they run under protest and consume much more energy. Winter: that is when one is tempted to stay home and forget useless forays into the hostile atmosphere outside.

But why the ecumenical winter? Everything seems to be coming undone. The Anglican Communion is furious over Rome's official response to the final report of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission I. At the same time, the Eastern Orthodox community is furious with Rome because of disputes over the fate of uniate churches in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and because of Rome's unilateral appointment of Roman bishops on what the Orthodox consider their turf. Then there is the seemingly ubiquitous problem of proselytizing, Rome's ambition to evangelize territories left virtually secularized by Soviet anti-religious policies. Even in Europe, things are not well. An ecumenist of no less a standing than Lucas Vischer is promoting a Protestant Conference under the auspices of the Conference of European Churches in the wake of John Paul II's recent assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Europe, apparently to counter the pope's call to re-evangelize (re-Catholicize?) Europe. So things are not well on the ecumenical front. All the classical sore points — papal primacy and presumption, episcopal jurisdiction, proselytism, and turf-claiming — are re-entering the ecumenical arena with a vengeance. It's cold out there! How does it happen that the supposed symbol of unity causes so much disunity whenever it attempts to instantiate what it symbolizes? Is that endemic to the claims of the office or do we have to do just with the idiosyncrasies of the current pope?

Yes, it is bitter cold out there in the ecumenical world today. But I am from Minnesota. And in Minnesota we do not pay much attention to winter. We just put on our heavy parkas, boots, and gloves

and arm ourselves with shovels so we can clear away what the storms leave and go about our business as usual. After all, if ecumenism is not just a passing fancy, not just a fair-weather pastime, we ought to learn to get on with it even in winter. In the words of the poet I remind myself when it gets really bad: "O wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind?" So I would like to begin by venturing into the ecumenical cold and doing a little shoveling.

The Non-Issue of Mutual Recognition

First, I would like to begin by stating my personal opinions on ecumenism just to clear the air a bit. I speak from the limited perspective of a dialogue participant, not an "ecumenist." I believe in a policy of ecumenical openness with a concomitant theological tough-mindedness. Our biggest problem, here and in the church in general, is theological integrity. Basically, I have come to reject the principle of making exhaustive agreement in doctrine and polity a condition for intercommunion. From reading Luther and the Reformers, that is a quite un-Lutheran idea. Indeed, in most instances of churches confessing the triune God, there exists enough common ground for us simply to declare ourselves to be in the fellowship that already exists. This is especially true in those instances where we have had considerable dialogue and have arrived at mutual understandings. Certainly this is the case in light of the Lutheran/Reformed dialogue and the Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue. (The fact that Roman Catholics do not want to recognize such fellowship, since they reject the validity of Lutheran orders, is their problem. We need not give in to their views and play their game.) The high-water mark was when the fourth-round participants in the American Lutheran/Catholic dialogue studied the possibility of recognition, but met a stone wall. Since then it has been downhill. Now it is Lutherans who are expected to recognize Roman views on orders as valid.

Actually, Lutherans should think that the very idea that we are not in communion with other Christian churches is rather strange. To my knowledge, Lutheranism has never really "unchurched" anyone or declared anyone's ministry to be invalid. Lutheranism does not

even have the ecclesiastical machinery for so doing. To assume that we are now going to put ourselves in fellowship with others, or that something is accomplished by “recognizing” their ministries, is to be tricked into playing the game according to Roman rules. In my estimation, this happens too much in ecumenical circles. It is assumed, for instance, that because those churches that insist on the “historic episcopate” and their concomitant sacramental ordination do not recognize, say, Lutheran ministry, then Lutherans in turn do not recognize episcopal ministry. Since I do not recognize you, you obviously have the same problem: you do not recognize me! That, of course, is not true. Lutherans may well have problems with it but, in order to make it seem as if there is reciprocity in the issue, Lutherans are supposed to go through the motions of “recognizing” their ministry. Or, in recent efforts to remove “mutual condemnations,” the assumption seems to be that Lutherans have the same sort of problem in the issuance of condemnations as Roman Catholics do. So we go through the charade of lifting supposed mutual condemnations when, as a matter of fact, we do not really have any — or if we do, they are quite a different matter, administered by quite different ecclesiastical machinery, and serve a different purpose. Removing them is pointless — something like removing or ignoring imprecatory psalms from the Bible.

So, Lutherans should quit playing the game according to everyone else’s rules and simply be about the business of stating what is the case according to our own lights. This is simply that Christ is the head of the church, that he makes Christians by grace alone through preaching and the sacraments. Since Christ creates the community, all human arrangements devised by denominations must be in the service of the head of the church and his gospel. The churches are of human provenance this side of the eschatological line.

However, the move to declaring fellowship cannot mean that our theological discussions are over. We still have a lot of snow to shovel. But that means that we would have to devise better means whereby it could begin in earnest. This entails that theological discussion would be best carried on within mutual recognition rather than as a condition for it. Further, it means that some form of conciliar ecumenism in which the denominations that recognize each other

would agree to come together for serious conversation on theological, doctrinal, polity, and practice is desirable. For the time being, that kind of conversation would be the most advantageous.

Honoring Theological Difference

The question of serious theological conversation, however, brings us to the second point: theological tough-mindedness. After participating in a bilateral dialogue with Roman Catholics for some fifteen years now, I have come increasingly to think that the current method in ecumenical dialogue that seeks unity via theological convergence/consensus (the difference between the two seems never to have been cleared up) as a step toward some high-sounding goal like “full communion” is more or less theologically bankrupt. It leads ultimately to what could be called “repressive tolerance.” When pressed incessantly as a method, it ceases after a while to kindle, promote, or foster useful theological discussion, but rather stifles it and soon seeks to repress it. Ecumenical officers move to shut it down. We get together to be professionally nice. What begins in the spirit of openness and tolerance soon closes down — in the fashion characterized by Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*. This or that view will be designated as being “extreme,” or perhaps “not representative,” or “pre-Vatican II,” or “too Lutheran” or some other grave theological sin. The message soon becomes: “you had better be tolerant, or else,” or “if you don’t back off you are just not serious about ecumenism.” In the name of ecumenical tolerance and progress serious discussion is repressed. One who seeks to pursue difficult questions is something of a pariah. Documents that state issues sharply and cleanly have to be edited and toned down so as not to be too offensive. As Henry Chadwick once put it, the genius of ecumenical statements lies in their ambiguity — the art of stating things in such a fashion that no one could possibly disagree. Imagine: theology, which has been exhorted all these long years to strive for precision, is now, apparently, to cultivate deliberately the art of ambiguity! The drive today towards what is called “visible unity” becomes, under current conditions, an ideological crusade which

seems — wittingly or not — only too ready to cut corners on the truth or even sacrifice it to reach its goal.

This attempt towards unity is driven by a specific ideology. It is the result of an alliance between Romanticism, politics, and theology coming out of the nineteenth century. Romantic yearnings for the good old days of the *corpus christianum* (by, for instance, Prussian unionists like Fredrik Wilhelm III, his jurist von Gerlach, as well as Stahl or Loehe, together with the church-historical judgment of Protestant converts like Friedrich Heiler who maintained that the Reformation shattered the church's unity and unleashed the wars of religion, destroying modern Europe's faith) have all colluded together to foist upon us an ideology of unity. Like all ideologies, this one functions virtually without question today. It is politically correct. It does not have to be argued for. We have uncritically adopted this Romantic view of history, ecclesiology, and the Reformation. We seem to have accepted the idea that once upon a time there was a pristine, pure *corpus christianum* whose unity was a kind of warrant for the faith. We have bought the idea that the shattering of this supposed unity is the reason for modern unbelief — that if we would put Humpty Dumpty back together again, people would flock home to the church. The Reformation used to be celebrated even in the secular world, particularly by the heirs of the Enlightenment, as the great triumph of the freedom of conscience over the imperialism and heteronomy of Rome and its power plays. No longer. Today, under the drive of the ideology of visible unity, the Reformation is more to be regretted than celebrated. All this is combined together to make up the general ideology of unity that seems to dominate the field without question. Denominationalism, which was actually the ecumenical idea that brought religious warring to an end, is now blamed for being the source of our troubles. Actually, of course, it is always the claim by one church to be the one visible church on earth that causes all the trouble to begin with. It could well be argued that the idea of "visible unity" is the most unecumenical idea the world has ever seen!

Given the weight of this ideological drive, legitimate theological questions and concerns tend just to get steamrollered. That means that we have to find some other way to proceed in a theologically responsible way. After all, does not the drive toward unity actually

entice us to a kind of theological irresponsibility? The problem with repressive tolerance is that generally it spawns a gaggle of compromise statements that no one really cares much about, a kind of “middle kingdom” where all theological cats are gray. One spends a good deal of time cranking out such statements and then goes home and more or less forgets about them. At worst, the truth is obscured for church-political reasons. It is really a kind of subversion of the theological task when we, under the pressure of the ideological drive for unity, not only surrender the search for unambiguous speech, but indeed actually avoid it. A neat passage from the Robertson Davies novel *Fifth Business* indicates that sharper lay minds are onto this kind of business. Speaking of the church union in Canada, he says:

In a movement that reached its climax in 1924, the Presbyterians and Methodists had consummated a *mysterium coniunctionis* that resulted in the United Church of Canada, with a doctrine (smoother than the creamy curd) in which the harshness of Presbyterianism and the hick piety of Methodism had little part. A few brass-bowelled Presbyterians and some truly zealous Methodists held out, but a majority regarded this union as a great victory for Christ's Kingdom on earth. Unfortunately it also involved some haggling between the rich Presbyterians and the poor Methodists, which roused the mocking spirit of the rest of the country; the Catholics in particular had some Irish jokes about the biggest land-and-property grab in Canadian history. During this uproar a few sensitive souls fled to the embrace of Anglicanism; the envious and disaffected said they did it because the Anglican Church was in some way more high-toned than the evangelical faiths, and thus they were improving their social standing. (p.128)

Perhaps such passages are an indication that the supposed scandal of our disunity is no greater than the scandal of our contrived unions!

Under the pressure of the ideology of unity we develop a kind of “middle-kingdom” language in which we finally end by saying things that we really ought not to say to one another or that are quite hard to take seriously or believe. For example, with regard to the recent Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue on Mary and the saints, the precariousness of the earlier round on justification with its dubious “convergence” between a Catholic idea of transformation by grace alone and a Lutheran view of the simultaneity of being just and sinful by faith alone was made apparent. The saints, for Roman Catholics, are those who are supposed to be pre-eminent examples of the way grace

works. In effect, Roman Catholics want to claim that grace works so successfully in the lives of some that they immediately enjoy the beatific union and can be invoked to pray for us. Lutherans, skeptical about such religious success stories and subsequent claims to their eternal consequence, find the practice dubious, if not finally deleterious, to a sound conscience and the understanding of the way grace works. So then, what do we do? We move to a kind of middle ground in which Catholics say that Lutherans do not have to accept their teachings on the saints and Mary as long as they do not outright reject them. And Lutherans, for their part, are to promise not to accuse Catholics of idolatry in their faith and practice. And in that we are driven to saying to one another things we really ought not to say. It would seem to me that if Catholics really believe that the transforming power of grace can be so effective as to elevate at least some to immediate beatific vision, they ought not to be constrained to say that it is permissible for one not to accept it provided they do not reject it. Given the actual track record of the *magisteria* in such matters, and a good deal of actual practice on like matters, confidence in such assurances is not exactly unshakeable! Likewise, given the Lutheran stance, Catholics ought really not ask Lutherans to grant a kind of absolution in advance in which we agree not to raise the question of idolatry. Lutheran preachers should be concerned to sniff out and attack idolatry wherever it is to be found. No one should automatically exempt any Lutheran formulations, policies, or practices from such attack, and be asked *a priori* to do so for the sake of Roman Catholic practices. In sum, we end under the weight of a repressive tolerance that waters down what we want to say, dissolving it in the rhetoric of ecumenical ambiguity.

We have about reached the end of this line. The seeking of doctrinal convergence/consensus before unity leads more and more to theological irresponsibility, to deliberate obfuscation of language, and to the distortion of history so that it will not impair the impetuous drive toward the goal of “visible” unity — whatever in the world that might be!

What is needed is a different ecumenical method, a different way to exercise theological responsibility in a diverse, pluralistic theological situation at the same time that we pursue unity. We need to fos-

ter a collegiality as Christian believers that does not prejudice or prematurely shut down honest conversation about theological differences. That is why we can affirm that now there is enough agreement simply to declare ourselves in fellowship, but that that is not the end of the theological conversation, but rather perhaps the beginning of it in earnest.

Ecumenism as Confessional Integrity

Now let's consider the current situation in the ELCA. There is a kind of internal tension about the motivation and thus perhaps also the strategy for ecumenism in the ELCA. One might get at this by speaking of three factors: (1) ecumenism as an item in the agenda of political correctness, (2) ecumenism as ecclesial correctness (a cure for the threatened takeover by politically correct ideology), and (3) ecumenism as theological or confessional correctness. It may be a bit strained to see them all in terms of "correctness," but the characterization will do for now.

1. *Ecumenism as Political Correctness.* The majority of folks in the ELCA who support ecumenism do so because it is simply a part of the politically correct agenda engendered by the spirit of the age which — as Kierkegaard once put it — seems to hang over us like a marsh gas, and is reflected in *The Lutheran* and other church publications. The Commission on a New Lutheran Church (of which I, alas, was a member) was dominated, it is fair to say in retrospect, by politically correct ideology and rhetoric. Ecumenism was simply another item on the list. Like quotas, inclusivism, social justice, peace, tolerance, openness, affirming anything and everything, etc., the case did not need, really, to be argued, but just accepted as a given. One paid lip service to theology or theological integrity, but it was not particularly important. And remains so for the majority of ELCA members today. Hence, when the statement on ecumenism came before the churchwide assembly, it was overwhelmingly approved. Why? Because it is politically correct — just like hosts of other statements set up for vote. It is somewhat

amusing, therefore, when our ecumenical leaders take that vote to be an overwhelming affirmation of their policies. The majority, I expect, do not really care about the policies at all, and would be rather shocked if they realized what they had voted for.

2. *Ecumenism as Ecclesial Correctness.* On the other hand, there are those in the church who have turned to ecumenical rapprochement with “catholic” Christendom, particularly Rome, precisely as a cure for the erosion of substance brought on by PC-ness and attendant follies that appeal to mainline Protestantism. Such folks look to the restoration of the historic episcopate, the authority of the magisterium, and sometimes even papalism, precisely to stop the ravages of such things as PC-ness. *But this means that the first view of ecumenism is really diametrically opposed — at least in motive — to the second view.* One wonders how, in the time to come, this is going to shake down, and what it will mean both for the church and for ecumenism. Those who espouse the second view are often very vocal in castigating the first, even accusing them of apostasy, heresy, and such matters. And the frictions between the leaders of the church and those in category 2 are becoming more and more evident.

3. *Ecumenism as Confessional or Theological Correctness.* Meanwhile, there is a third approach or faction which is driven by a somewhat different motivation. This can be generally characterized as a concern for theological and/or confessional integrity. Unimpressed, if not untouched by ecumenism as PC-ness on the one hand, and unconvinced if not antithetic to Roman institutionalism on the other, as the way to go for either pragmatic or theological reasons, this faction has been most concerned about preserving confessional integrity in the ecumenical venture. Needless to say, I would place myself somewhere in this third category. But, it seems, that is a kind of precarious place to be. You are likely to get caught in the crossfire between the other two factions. Those who understand ecumenism as PC-ness will accuse you of being particularly parochial, perhaps a victim of an “upper Midwest virus” — as one of our erstwhile bishops put it, or just not being “with it,” and other political and social crimes. On the other hand, those favoring the Roman touch in matters ecclesiastical are

likely to be scandalized by too much openness to denominations other than those blessed (afflicted?) with the historic episcopate. So one will be accused of being “mainline Protestant,” or denominationalist, or sectarian (virtually the same thing!), or some other lesser breed. One might even be accused of having no ecclesiology! (I can boast that I have a pin that says in red letters: “Beware! This man has no ecclesiology.”)

My chief concern in all this is for theological and confessional integrity. What the Lutheran communion has to contribute to the ecumenical church is its understanding of what the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the sacraments as gospel is all about. If we lose that, or decide that we need to compromise it in order to pursue a will-o'-the-wisp called “visible unity,” we have no reason for being. Admittedly, we need to stress more strongly than before the teaching office of the church and assert its gospel and its significance in no uncertain terms. But frankly it is strange that when I try, in my calling as a theology professor, to do just that, I get accused of overdoing it! Why is it that all those who are always complaining about the teaching office object when somebody actually tries to do it? What is going on here? I can hear someone saying, “Move over, Forde, and let a bishop do it! You have no credentials!” I am reminded that Carl Braaten in one of his recent essays speaks of the fact that people will no longer accept or tolerate confessional theology. They won't buy it. So, what should we do? His answer: We need a *magisterium* to shore up things, and should perhaps back off a bit on justification to gain ecumenical approval. To my mind, backing off from our confessional position in order to gain the historic episcopate is tantamount to selling out to mainline PC-ness. Why should we bother to be inclusive if we have nothing worth saying to all the people we include? In both cases the gospel is lost. I do not see any reason to keep the Lutheran Church going if we are going to give up on the gospel that brought it into being. I do not believe in sacrificing theological integrity just to preserve the institution. That is why I believe that the only way ahead for the time being appears to be some sort of conciliar ecumenism in which confessional integrity can be preserved while the theological conversation continues.

Satis Est: The Eschatological Factor

The major problem in much of this is the relation of ecclesiology to eschatology. That ecumenism as PC-ness tends to collapse the kingdom of God into the church hardly needs to be argued. It is just another version of the liberal Protestant identification of the Kingdom with the church. That ecumenism as ecclesial correctness tends in the same direction is perhaps a more subtle, but certainly no less serious, claim. But the attempt to claim more than human authority (*de jure humano*) for its institutional forms is a violation of the eschatological limit. The *Augsburg Confession*, article 7, specifies that limit when it says that for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree on the preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. The preaching of the gospel is always the ultimate and the highest exercise of authority in the church: the authority that sets people free from sin, death, and the power of the devil. That is why the Reformers and Confessors insisted that Christ was the head of the church, and that there could be no other. The church, that is to say, must be understood institutionally to be strictly a this-worldly entity. What comes after the church in this world, that for which the faithful hope, is the kingdom of God. There will be no church there—thank God! The church lasts until the end of the age, and that’s it! The *Augsburg Confession* 8 speaks of the church as lasting forever. But Schwabach says only till the end of the age! As in other things, the *CA* must be interpreted by Schwabach. Whenever the church begins to claim something more than temporal human warrant for its institutions we have trouble. The eschatological line is transgressed and the figure of the Grand Inquisitor, even Antichrist, heaves into view. The church begins to claim itself to be the 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 orders, and the solidity and prestige of its historic form. The church, that is, begins to look upon itself as the visible incarnation of the invisible ideal church that now, supposedly, hankers after visible unity. But that just spells tyranny.

Now, much more could be said here on matters of ecclesiology. My point is simply that claims to authority beyond the merely human

— and even claims for what is supposedly “historic” — are a transgression of the eschatological limit and as such a threat to the gospel itself. They should not be tolerated. For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree on the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to that gospel. That is a very broad ecumenical program. It is time we should get on with it.

What does the *satis est* mean? It seems to be rather obvious when one reads *CA 7* against the background of its predecessor documents, the Schwabach and Torgau Articles. Since the Lutherans had been accused of schism in going ahead with their reform programs, they wanted to make a basic statement about church unity, about what is schismatic behavior and what is not. To do this they invoke a fundamental distinction between what is divinely instituted, so to speak, and what is humanly instituted. The one holy church, they say, will be and remain forever. But that church is not defined by hierarchical arrangements, bishops, territories, buildings, or anything of that sort, i.e., not by any of the ordinances or ceremonies of men, and prescinding from such ordinances and ceremonies, or changing them, does not and cannot destroy the unity of the church. Rather, the church is to be defined and located in terms of a quite specific activity. It is the assembly where the gospel is preached (in purity) and the sacraments administered (as gospel). Where that occurs, there is the church, and that is sufficient (*satis est*) for its unity. Now it seems that the unity they are here talking about is not what ecumenists today like to talk about as “visible unity” (whatever that is!). It is what is often called the “spiritual” unity of the one holy Christian church throughout all time of which they speak, the unity of that church which is the object and result of faith and not of sight. What can be seen is not the object of faith — not “seeing is believing” but “believing is not seeing.” What can be seen is not to be believed! It does not have to be believed, because it can be seen, namely, law! Hence, the adjectives “hidden” and “revealed” are to be preferred to “visible” or “invisible,” since they are much more appropriately eschatological and indicative of what the Lutheran view is about. Nevertheless, it is, of course, true, as our ELCA statement avers, that *CA 7* is not a complete doctrine of the church. But then one must first look back to the Torgau articles particularly in this case, and behind

them to Luther's Confession Concerning Christ's Supper (1528), because they stand behind the words of CA 7 and are the eventual source even of the very wording. It is just historically irresponsible to ignore such facts and becloud the issues by hinting that we should first go elsewhere to learn what they mean, or that we can impose any meaning on them we wish.

The ELCA ecumenical statement invokes the *satis est* in two instances: one in the brief historical background section and the other just before the conclusion to the policy statement where it is cited as warrant for the statement's view of "full communion." In the historical statement it is averred that the situation today is quite different from that in 1530. At that time, it is said, *satis est* was invoked to preserve unity. Now it must be invoked to re-establish a lost unity. But is that really the case? It is hardly the case that in 1530 the visible unity of the church was still quite intact. Did not the emperor call the Diet precisely to patch up an empire shattered by disunity, ecclesiastical and otherwise, so as to be able to meet the challenge of the Turks? At that time, the Lutherans were accused of schismatic behavior because they did not knuckle under to what they considered human ceremonies and ordinances. They defended themselves by insisting that only divine ordinances (gospel and sacrament) are necessary for unity. They would not submit to anything more. That was the limit. Is it really all that much different now? Is it not the case that Lutherans and other Protestants are considered schismatic because they will not accept what they consider to be purely human ordinances: papacy, historic episcopate, and the like? Does not the *satis est* raise exactly the same question now as then? Is preaching the gospel and giving the sacraments enough? One may, indeed, decide they are not. But then one has to come flat out and say that CA 7 is wrong and not doctor the history to obfuscate what is being said. And if one wants to say it is wrong, then one will have to look to oneself as to how one is going to prove that and convince the church of it! If there is to be a policy that somehow wants to call the *satis est* into question, then there has to be a serious discussion of the matter, not just an attempt to throw historical sand in our faces.

It is at least dubious on the basis of CA 7 and its actual historical background, therefore, without further ado to claim that "full communion" as the ecumenical goal of the ELCA is consistent with the

satis est. That is the second instance in which the *satis est* is invoked by the ELCA statement. If the *satis est* maintains that human ordinances (beyond preaching the gospel and giving the sacraments) cannot be conditions for the unity of the church, then it would seem quite contrary to set additional (human) requirements as conditions for such “full communion.” (Full communion is a very slippery term, of course, so it is hard exactly to know what to do with it.)

But now, just what is it materially that the *satis est* finds to be “enough”? What is it talking about? What is it (following the Latin version) that we are to “agree” (*consentire*) about? Once again, there is no great mystery here. What we are to agree about is the activity of preaching the gospel in its purity and administering the sacraments accordingly as gospel. Here it seems that we have made matters a good deal more complicated than we should have. We get all tangled up in questions of doctrine — arguments about the correctness and completeness of our doctrines *about* the gospel. But the question here is not one of doctrines about the gospel, not whether we must insist on “the gospel and all its parts,” the whole corpus of Christian doctrine and the doctrine of scripture to boot, all down pat before we have got “enough.” Instead, the question is one of the pure *preaching of* the gospel and right *administration of* the sacraments. It is an activity that is enough for the true unity of the church: preaching and administering the gospel as gospel. Now, if that is the case, what is intended by the adverbs and qualifying phrases — “purely,” “rightly,” “in conformity with a pure understanding of it,” and “in accordance with the divine word ” — that govern the preaching and the administration? In light of the Reformation tradition, this also is not terribly complicated. Pure preaching of the gospel means simply a preaching in which gospel is not confused with law. In our terms, pure preaching is simply gospel preached as *unconditional promise*. Right administration of the sacraments, in accordance with the divine word means, then, sacraments also given as gospel, as unconditional promise, according to the scriptures and not bought and sold as sacrifices, votive masses, and all the traffic of medieval piety. In a real sense, it would seem, the distinction between human ordinances and ceremonies carries through also in the designation of what constitutes pure preaching and right administration. The gospel and the sacrament, that is to say, are God’s gifts, and to offer them properly is not to take them captive to human

arrangements, ordinances, and ceremonies, which would only enslave people, terrify consciences, and not liberate. The gospel and the sacraments are, we might say today, God's eschatological gifts and are not to be obscured by human perfidy. To ask for anything more than the pure giving of such gifts as a foundation for the true unity of the church is in itself already a perversion, already a confusion of law and gospel, an attempt to elevate human ordinances over and above the sheer gift, an attempt to construct a human device that transcends the eschatological limit. It cannot be done. *Satis est*. Enough is enough.

Now if it is such pure preaching and right sacramental administration that is enough for the true unity of the church, it is also important to not that for the Reformers this was by no means an exclusive claim. That is to say, you will look in vain in the Reformers for the claim that they were the only ones who were doing this — that they were the only ones who preached the gospel purely or administered the sacraments “rightly” in the sense meant by *CA* 7. Even in his most vitriolic attacks on the papacy (as antichrist!) Luther never denied that the gospel and sacraments or the forgiveness of sins were absent. In *On the Papacy at Rome* (1520) Luther sets the question:

Whether the papacy in Rome, possessing the actual power over all of Christendom, as they say, is derived from divine or from human order; and, if so, whether it would be a Christian statement to say that all other Christians in the whole world are heretics and schismatics — even though they adhere to the same baptism, sacrament, gospel, and all articles of faith in harmony with us they do not have their priests and bishops confirmed by Rome or, as is the case now, buy them with money and let themselves be aped and mocked like the Germans. The Muscovites, the white Russians, the Greeks, the Bohemians and many other great nations in the world are some examples — all of them believe like us, baptize like us, preach like us, live like us. . . . I have held and still hold, that they are neither heretics nor schismatics; perhaps they are better Christians than we are — although not all of them are, just as not all of us are good Christians.¹

Or in the *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528) which is the immediate background in Luther for *CA* 7:

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. For in it are found the gospel, baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, in which the forgiveness of sins is offered, obtained and received. Moreover, Christ and his Spirit and God are there. Outside this Christian Church there is no salvation.²

The Confessors did not claim that they were the only ones doing the kind of preaching and administration necessary to call the church into being and constitute its unity. What they did object to, however, most strenuously was that someone should demand of them something more than such preaching and, moreover, deny to them the right to preach the gospel on the basis of the fact that they did not knuckle under to these demands. The significance of pointing to all sorts of other Christians in the world is simply to say that if Rome cannot deny to these others the claim to being Christian, how then can they deny it to us? In other words, how can one possibly claim that variation in human ordinances and ceremonies ruptures the unity of the church? *Satis est* therefore simply marks a limit beyond which one can make no demands and beyond which one cannot accuse anyone of destroying the true spiritual unity of the church.

Now if one puts this together, it is apparent that the *satis est* is a very broad and open ecumenical principle. If the Reformers are saying that Rome cannot charge them with schism or with destroying the true unity of the church, then it would seem to be only consistent that they too cannot charge others with schism or destroying the true unity. It is on this basis that it is consistent to make the claim presented at the outset that unless we are willing to declare these others schismatics and heretics (no gospel preaching, no sacraments) then we cannot but declare ourselves to be in fellowship. But this does not mean doctrinal agreement. It means the doctrinal and theological discussion must now begin. And the discussion, no doubt, will have to be about the extent to which human ordinances and ceremonies obscure the pure preaching and right administration.

Gospel-speaking and sacrament-giving mark, therefore, an eschatological limit to ecclesiology. They are the highest exercise of "authority" in the church, the marks of the church in this age. The

church, though hidden as an object of faith, is nevertheless revealed in acts of eschatological liberation. The divine ordinances are those that convey and have as their ultimate aim the redemption and liberation of sinners. The constant temptation of the church is always to transgress, to overstep, the eschatological limit, to set itself up as a kind of "eschatological vestibule," a sacramental *Zwischenbereich*, perhaps even as a sacrament itself, a diachronic extension of the incarnation in time. When that occurs, there is a blurring of the eschatological limit, a tendency to vest its purely human offices with sacramental, indeed divine, sanction. The divine right of popes and bishops mirrors other political attempts to transcend eschatological limits, such as the divine right of kings. Backed up by the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius (of course in the Middle Ages they did not know he was "pseudo" so his writings had great authority), the earthly hierarchies reflected and exercised the authority of the heavenly. The human ordinances and ceremonies pick up divine weight and transcend the eschatological limit. When that is the case the preaching of the gospel as liberating word is in effect transcended. The eschaton, so to speak, is postponed (as an old graffito had it) due to the lack of trained trumpeters!

This blurring of the eschatological boundary is responsible for much of the confusion in ecumenical policy today and is, unfortunately, reflected in the ELCA statement. In the *Zwischenbereich* all sorts of ecumenical double-talk develops which simply confuses matters. Again, take the matter of "visible unity." Early on in the ecumenical movement there was a fundamental shift from the attempt to create unity to the goal of discovering and manifesting the unity we already enjoy in Christ. Suddenly now, that is not enough. Now we are supposedly obligated to achieve or create "visible unity." But, what is that? What is it that we are supposed to see? How does our unity in Christ become see-able — when we get a bunch of be-mitered bishops hugging each other? That may be better than bishops going to war against each other (as they used to in the days of the CA!), but still it does not make the unity visible. The unity of the church is an article of faith, a gift of the gospel, an eschatological reality, and as such cannot be visible in this age. In this age a visible unity becomes nothing but law. It is set before us as either a de-

mand to be realized or something that is, in the very pious terms of indicative/imperative language, both gift and task. Spare us such platitude! I believe in the true unity of the church, but I surely cannot see it. I cannot see it even within my own communion (what crazy theology and practice we have to put up with!), let alone between communions. And the success of the ecumenical movement, however desirable and necessary, is not going to make the unity of the church one whit more visible. In a policy statement we need to speak with some precision and clarity about these things. Like the old LCA statement, we ought to distinguish clearly between union and unity or between our fellowship with one another (which admittedly needs improving) and the unity that is given in Christ.

The same thing is true with such muddled concepts as “full communion,” supposedly now the goal of our ecumenical striving. But what is it? Is it the *communio sanctorum* of the creed, an object of faith, an eschatological reality coming upon us from God’s future in Christ, or is it a goal to be reached by our pious strivings? Once again, current ecumenese seems deliberately to blur the lines and cultivate ambiguity in order to further its own ideology of unity.

When one steps back and takes a look at the whole, one sees that the drive towards consensus has created a kind of mythological middle kingdom in which deliberate ambiguity is practiced, blurring the lines and turning all theological cats gray. One puts together this-worldly adjective and eschatological substantives like “visible unity” or “full communion” and so quite thoroughly confuses rather than sheds light on the issues and problems before us. A policy statement ought not to do that. It ought to define and clarify issues so we know who we are and where we intend to go.

Postliberal Lutheranism: Gospel, Church, and Ecumenism

But now, the most serious shortcoming of the so-called policy statement is that it has no vision either of the contribution of the Lutheran Church to the ecumenical church today or of the eventual mission of the church. Fascination with the ideology of unity and the subsequent consensus *Schwärmerei* leads to a kind of theo-

logical myopia and timidity that insulates against a forthright statement of what Lutherans have to contribute today. Rather, the ELCA statement on ecumenism seems more geared towards what we ought to be prepared to give up — more interested in selling the farm than in contributing from its bounty. What, after all, do Lutherans have to contribute to this postliberal, postmodern age? Well, what is it that keeps a postliberal Lutheran catholic? What keeps me, for instance, in the catholic faith, ties me to the trinitarian confession of the church catholic? It is not the magisterium or its authority, not bishops or their alleged “historic episcopate” or “apostolic succession” or the dream of some sort of “full communion” or “visible unity” under the auspices of all of that decadent ecclesiastical furniture. What keeps this postliberal Lutheran catholic is precisely the most radical facts of the early Lutheran Reformation, such matters as the “theology of the cross,” the anthropology emerging from the arguments about the “bondage of the will,” the hermeneutics of “letter and spirit,” and “law and gospel.” These are some of the things we have to contribute. These are the kinds of things that will fortify the church against the acids of decadent modernity of which many are so concerned today. Yet these are the very things that never get discussed in ecumenical circles. Dialogues seem to shy away from them like a horse who has seen a rattler. Our ecumenists seem to be dedicated to the ideology of unity spawned by the Romanticism of late nineteenth-century ecclesiastical politics and the drive towards consensus rather than showing interest in what Lutherans might have to contribute theologically. This is a dubious and questionable road to take, to say the least. Lutherans actually have something of value to say, and it is not a proper or faithful move to leave it all behind to enter the middle kingdom where all cats are gray.

We Lutherans have a contribution that is a vital understanding of what it means to preach the gospel and to give the sacramental gifts. The claim that this is enough for the true unity of the church is itself already based on an understanding of the gospel and the sacraments as the last, the eschatological word, beyond which nothing else can be demanded. To ask for something more as necessary is already to call the gospel into question. At the very least, we need to come

to some clear understanding of this. If the church must have a policy statement, then it had better be a clear one that affords us and the *oikumene* some real guidance in the days ahead.

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NOTES

1. *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. Eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 39:58. (Hereafter cited as LW.)
2. LW 37:367–68.



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