

The Function of Doctrine ¹⁴ and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,
Lutheran Council in the USA,
During 1972-77

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Quotations from **The Book of Concord**, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., **The Book of Concord** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

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Part 3

Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship

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How the LCA Understands Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship

By Edgar M. Carlson

This paper carries no credentials or authorizations beyond those of its author. It seeks to be pertinent rather than comprehensive.

The Lutheran Church in America came into being in 1962, and the only doctrinal statements which have relevance to it are those contained in or recognized by its official documents. Any positions taken at various points in the historical development of its constituent groups have been superseded by those documents.

According to the preamble of the LCA constitution, the bodies which came together to form the LCA were "persuaded that the time has come when his unifying power should be manifested through a united profession of faith by these churches and through forms of

fellowship which will make for a more effective stewardship of his gifts to us" and hence adopted "this constitution to govern our common life in him and our united witness to him, praying that he who is the lord of the church may thereby lead us toward a more inclusive union of all Lutherans on this continent." The language used assumes that a unity had been established which is now manifested in the merger of these bodies. The unity was not created by the merger. The merger was considered to be an act of obedience to the lord of the church and a response to his unifying power.

The constitutions of the LCA, its member synods and congregations contain an identical "Confession of Faith" in seven sections.¹ These are binding on all units. The LCA "confesses Jesus Christ as Lord of the Church," "the Holy Spirit creates and sustains the Church through the Gospel and thereby unites believers with their Lord and with one another in the fellowship of faith" (Section 1). It "holds that the Gospel is the revelation of God's sovereign will and saving grace in Jesus Christ," which is made more explicit by the statement that "in Him, the Word Incarnate, God imparts Himself to His people" (Section 2). The LCA "acknowledges the Holy Scriptures as the norm for the faith and life of the Church" (Section 3). It re-

Some years ago in making a study of the confessional writings, I found what seemed to be substantial evidence that the term "rightly" would be most adequately rendered by a word such as "effectively." What was intended, I thought, was that the gospel is to be preached in such a way that it achieves its purpose. It is not a question of judging theological correctness; rather, it is assuring that hearers are persuaded of the forgiveness of their sins and of fellowship with God through their acceptance by Christ. If this interpretation has any justification, it would make current communication more important than compliance with historical criteria.

The validity of theological conversations in search of some degree of theological consensus seems based on the following considerations:

—The dynamic, living, active Word calls for continuous translation, interpretation, and application to both the situation in the world and the situation in the church.

—Theological faithfulness must be judged as much by the capacity of our theological language to speak to our generation as by its capacity to speak from the historic revelation.

—The attempt of Lutheran churches to understand one another at this point in their lives is a valid and important endeavor without reference to whether such understanding leads to agreed-upon ways of speaking about the matters discussed. This is true even if the matters discussed are agreed to be highly important.

—If the gospel is to be liberating in our generation, we must be able to see how it can be effectively stated in terms of the acknowledged burdens and bondage of our generation. Quite possibly the conception of "justification by faith" cannot convey the gospel with as much effect in our day as in the 16th century. Faithfulness to the gospel may require us to find other patterns of thought and expression in the Scriptures which will at least supplement the Reformation concentration on justification.

Theology is a specific discipline devoted to the clarification of the Christian faith by the use of all available resources. In particular, it draws upon the data of the historical revelation as contained in the Scriptures and in the historical existence of the believing community. It seeks to find the coherent meaning and significance of the revelation and to relate its various parts to one another and to the whole, as well as to contemporary concepts and modes of thought. It does not intend to be preaching or confession. Its aim is to understand and clarify, not to persuade

or confess. Its concern must be to represent accurately and clearly the realities with which it deals.

Since theology is the theologian's attempt to state specifically the meaning and significance of the Christian faith, many theologies will be inevitable. We speak out of our own histories, utilizing the equipment we bring out of our experience and capabilities, focusing on aspects and emphases which seem most relevant to each of us. While there may be varying degrees of consensus in the way we express ourselves, because so much of what we have apprehended of the gospel is alike and so much of our training and experience are parallel, we must not require consensus in theology as though it were a corollary of "consensus in the gospel." If theological consensus is required, the theological effort is rendered meaningless. Only what is learned by rote can be always the same. The significance of theology is that it is our attempt to state, describe, and interpret the faith we know in the ways that will make as clear as possible, to us and others, what we believe.

1 LCA Constitution, Article II.

fers to the Holy Scriptures as “the divinely inspired record of God’s redemptive act in Christ, for which the Old Testament prepared the way,” which the “New Testament proclaims,” and which is continued in the current proclamation of the church: “God still speaks through the Holy Scriptures and realizes His redemptive purpose generation after generation” (Section 3).

The LCA “accepts the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian creeds as true declarations of the faith of the Church” (Section 4). It “accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism as true witnesses to the Gospel, and acknowledges as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of these symbols” (Section 5). The other symbolical books of the evangelical Lutheran church, which are listed, are accepted “as further valid interpretations of the confession of the Church” (Section 6). In what may be regarded as a summary statement, “This church affirms that the Gospel transmitted by the Holy Scriptures, to which the creeds and confessions bear witness, is the true treasure of the Church, the substance of its proclamation, and the basis of its unity and continuity. The Holy Spirit uses the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship. As this occurs, the Church fulfills its divine mission and purpose” (Section 7).

In these statements there is no direct parallel to the phrase, “consensus in the gospel.” The closest would be in Section 5, where the LCA “acknowledges as one with it in faith and doctrine” all churches that “likewise accept the teachings of these symbols.” Being “one with it in faith and doctrine” seems to be more comprehensive than “consensus,” which may convey a more limited agreement in matters of theological description and affirmation. On the other hand, “the teachings of these symbols” seems more theoretical and intellectualistic than does the simple term, “the gospel.” The consistent emphasis throughout the sections is on the gospel, and my judgment is that the reference to “the teachings of these symbols” is intended to be identical in its implication with other references to “the gospel.”

The requirements for unity in light of the teachings of the confessional writings are expressed in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII: “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 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.”

With respect to this passage, everything described as necessary to the unity of the church goes on in the local congregation. The focus is really on local congregations, where preaching is done and the sacraments are administered. The focus is not on church bodies. Only when certain credentials must be set up for those who preach and administer is a church body decision called for. For instance, we may say they must have the apostolic succession, or they must have a certain liturgy, or they must use specific “authorized” ways of preaching or speaking about the gospel.

Whether AC VII assumed some level of theological consensus beyond that which is implied by “gospel” and “sacraments” is certainly debatable. If something of that sort were implied, it could be argued that this would have been a logical place to include a reference to the ecumenical creeds. The fact that there is no reference to any post-biblical formulations suggests that the biblical material itself is regarded as adequate. If the ecumenical creeds are not necessary formulations of that biblical presence and proclamation which alone creates the church, why is it assumed that the formulations which are expressed in the Lutheran symbols are necessary? On the other hand, the possibility of misrepresenting the gospel and misusing the sacraments must be acknowledged.