

7-1-1979

# The Augsburg Confession and Lutheran Unity

Roger W. Nostbakken

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Nostbakken, Roger W. (1979) "The Augsburg Confession and Lutheran Unity," *Consensus*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss3/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION AND LUTHERAN UNITY

*Roger W. Nostbakken*

Lutheran churches, institutions, study groups and theologians all over the world are now engaging in the most concentrated series of studies on the Augsburg Confession since it was first formally read in Germany at Augsburg, on June 25, 1530. These studies are being undertaken in connection with the anticipated celebrations scheduled for the 450th anniversary celebrations in 1980. The many approaches being taken reflect particular local concerns as well as broader and more ecumenical interests. It is also a truly international endeavor inasmuch as Lutheran churches from every part of the world are engaging in these studies. The following are examples of some of the approaches being taken:

1. The influence the Augsburg Confession has had on the national churches through its use in doctrine and proclamation.
2. Differences between today's approach to theological problems and that of the time the Augsburg Confession was written.
3. The relevance of the Augsburg Confession to current issues in the churches.
4. The validity of the Augsburg Confession in the present life and doctrine of the church.
5. Questions of the nature of the church and fellowship in the context of secularization and the use of non-Christian ideologies.
6. The response of the co-called Third World churches to the Augsburg Confession. Is it a valid confession in an Asian or African cultural and spiritual context?<sup>1</sup>

In response to this great variety of study projects, the Ecumenical Institute in Strasbourg is holding a consultation in October of 1979 to reflect on and co-ordinate some of the findings of these studies. Additionally, a consultation was recently held in

---

1. Report, Institute for Ecumenical Research, No. 17, Strasbourg, France, 1978, p. 10-12.

which the ecumenical character of the Augsburg Confession has been debated by a group of Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist scholars.<sup>2</sup>

It is both appropriate and timely that a discussion of the Augsburg Confession and Lutheran Unity in Canada should be called for. It is high time we had such a discussion because during all the hours of theological debate over many questions in the past years, remarkably little attention has been given to the Augsburg Confession and what it may have to say about the matter of Lutheran unity. The Augsburg Confession is the principal distinctive confession of Lutheranism. As such it ought to have a primary role in theological discussions among Lutherans. We have tended of late to expend our energies in trying to fine tune our statements about Scripture and to develop further arguments on the issue of the ordination of women. Meanwhile, the document which could well have given our discussion a different orientation has received faithful nominal subscription and then largely been set aside.

In particular, we have not taken Article VII of the Augsburg Confession with the kind of seriousness it warrants for an understanding of the nature of the church. Historically we have tended to add to it both polity and practice which are not fundamentally constitutive of the church according to its definition. This has had a negative affect on our pursuit of the goal of Lutheran unity in Canada.

## THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

On January 21, 1530, Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, proclaimed a diet to convene in the city of Augsburg. As stated in his summons, the purpose of the diet was to determine "How in the matter of error and divisions concerning the holy faith and the Christian religion we may and should deal and resolve, and so bring it about, in better and sounder fashion, that divisions may be allayed, antipathies set aside, all past errors left to the judgment of our Saviour, and every care taken to give a charitable hearing to every man's opinion, thoughts, and notions, to understand them, to weigh them, to bring about and reconcile them to a unity in Christian truth, to dispose of everything that has not been rightly explained or treated of on the one side or the other, to see to it that one single, true religion may be accepted and held by us all, and that we all live in one common church and in unity."<sup>3</sup>

This friendly and open summons, was cloaking an essentially political concern for the unity of the Spanish-Hapsburg empire. Yet, on the surface at least, it appeared as a call for an amicable reunion of the now disparate elements in the Church.

In Saxony, the seat of Luther's Reformation, news of the diet brought mixed feelings. Naturally and justifiably concerned about the political motivation behind the diet and the circumstances under which it would be held, the Lutherans were faced with the need to respond to this call to present their opinions before a "charitable hearing" so that "reconciliation" and a "common church" and "unity" might be effected. It was hoped that Charles, who now had established order in Italy and

---

2. Ibid.

3. Michael Reu, *The Augsburg Confession*, (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930), pp. 38-39.

Spain and was for the moment firmly in control, might be willing to make some concessions actually to bring about unity ecclesiastically as well as politically.

The Saxons determined, therefore, to prepare a document outlining their position and detailing their expectations and specific requests for reforms. Elector John of Saxony commissioned Luther, Melanchthon, Jonas and Bugenhagen to write the document. These writers set to work at once and the first results were presented by Melanchthon at Torgau on March 27. The stages in the evolution of the articles to the form in which they were finally presented, need not be rehearsed here. Suffice it to say that Melanchthon, as principal writer, made use of the Torgau articles, the Schwabach articles, the Marburg articles and Luther's *Concerning Christ's Supper* in his recasting and editing of the Lutheran statement.

As Melanchthon worked in Augsburg, he sent drafts to Luther who had for safety's sake to remain in Coburg. In them he left space for marginal comments Luther might wish to make. As late as May 15 Luther returned the material to Melanchthon with the observation, ". . . I do not know what to improve or change in it; neither would it be proper, for I cannot tread so gently and quietly . . ."4

Melanchthon kept polishing the document right up until the time it was to be publicly read on June 25. While Luther did not see these final drafts, he subsequently indicated joyous approval, with only very mild criticism of omission of articles condemning such teachings as purgatory and adoration of saints.<sup>5</sup> The conciliatory language and mediating tone of the Confession were among the most important contributions Melanchthon made. Luther, with characteristic honesty, recognized his own shortcomings at this point. Prior to the actual reading, a substantial number of Lutheran delegations affixed their signatures to indicate this was a consensus of the Lutheran constituencies. Additionally, Chancellor Brueck prepared a preface which was a direct response to the Emperor's invitation, and echoed the concern he had expressed for the unity of the church. The preface sets an important theme for the Confession and states both clearly and well Lutheran hopes for the diet.

A special concern, voiced in the preface several times and echoed at subsequent points in the Confession, is for the unity of the church. Brueck, at the beginning, expressed the Lutherans' desire that "the matter might be settled and brought back to one simple truth and Christian concord."<sup>6</sup> The following articles are presented as "the confession of our preachers and ourselves . . ."<sup>7</sup> Of greatest significance for our concerns here, however, is the frequently stated conviction that it is possible to present a united Lutheran witness on the basis of this Confession. While not presuming to be exhaustive, they in fact deliberately omitted some contentious areas of non-fundamental concern, expressing the hope that on the basis of this document it would be possible to "confer amicably concerning all possible ways and means in order that we may come together . . ."<sup>8</sup> It should also be emphasized that the Lutherans (including Luther) saw in this document a sufficient consensus to bring about unity with the Romans. It is self-evident that this represents an agreement

---

4. *Luther's Works*, American edition, Vol. 54, p. 45

5. *Concordia Triglotta* (Minneapolis: Mott Press, 1955), p. 41.

6. Preface to Augsburg Confession, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 39

7. *Ibid*

8. *Ibid*

among Lutherans which provides them with a common Confession.<sup>9</sup> The Augsburg Confession is presented as “. . . a clear testimony, that we in no wise are holding back from anything that could bring about Christian concord.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus the signatories saw in the Augsburg Confession not only a Lutheran consensus, but a universal Christian confession in itself sufficient to bring about ecumenical agreement. The current consideration by the Vatican to recognizing the Augsburg Confession as a “true Christian Confession” seems finally to complete the circle begun to be drawn in 1530.

Dr. Heinz Schuette, representative of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, spoke in 1977 of the possibility that “Lutheran and Catholic churches would no longer be separate churches, but sister churches . . . They could celebrate the Eucharist together and the leaders of one church could carry out their functions also in the other.”<sup>11</sup>

While this remains an optimistically expressed hope, it emphasizes the historical irony that among Lutherans who all accept the Augsburg Confession as a fundamental confession, *some* continue to refuse eucharistic fellowship on the grounds a sufficient doctrinal consensus has not yet been achieved. Surely the 16th century signatories, who struggled so hard to reach a consensus in order to find a common basis with the Roman Church, would regard such a stance as a virtual repudiation of this carefully drawn confession. The Augsburg Confession is a simple, brief, clear and irenic confession of the faith. It purports to be an expression of the faith of the church held in common with the apostles and the church fathers. Although it contains some corrections of false teaching, it is essentially a clear and positive statement of the evangelical faith of Christendom, having its focus on the doctrine of justification. This fundamentally evangelical note frees it from the character of a polemic against Rome. It is uniquely a unifying confession. This is both implicit and explicit in its words. Its importance for a discussion of Lutheran unity can thus hardly be over-emphasized. The fact that so little attention has been paid to it in discussions up to this point may well be a major factor in the inability of our J.C.I.L.R. to have achieved an “amicable concord”. A true appreciation of the Augsburg Confession as the fundamental *Lutheran* confession will recognize that we *have had* since June 25, 1530, a confessional basis for Lutheranism sufficient for unity, and will summon us to united work and witness.

## THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

The Augsburg Confession occupies a unique place in world Lutheranism. It is the only Lutheran confession accepted by all Lutherans. Among Lutheran churches belonging to the Lutheran World Federation, all accept the constitutional statement on confession (Article II) which states, in part, that the Federation “. . . sees in the three Ecumenical Creeds, and in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, especial-

9. In fact the only Lutherans not satisfied were the Southern German Lutherans who felt it would not be satisfactory to the Calvinist wing of the Reformation.

10. Preface, *ibid.*

11. L.W.F. Information Bulletin, Release No. 26/77, L.W.F. News Service, Geneva, 1977.

ly in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism a pure exposition of the Word of God."<sup>12</sup>

The only L.W.F. church not specifically naming the Augsburg Confession as a confession is the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (Protestant Christian Batak Church) which has drawn up its own confession. The content of their confession, however, while couched in the cultural expressions of East Asia, is drawn from the Bible, Luther's Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore because the Batak church accepts the constitution of the L.W.F., it indirectly subscribes also to the Augsburg Confession.

The Augsburg Confession has always been the fundamental confession of the Lutheran churches. The Apology was written as an interpretation and defense of the Augsburg Confession in response to the *Confutatio Pontifica* of the Roman Church.<sup>14</sup> The Smalcald Articles were Luther's personal response in preparation for the hoped for ecumenical council called by Pope Paul III. The Catechisms, originally intended as instructional instruments, because of their enormous popularity, gradually assumed confessional status. The Formula of Concord, while collaterally related to the Augsburg Confession, is essentially an inter-Lutheran document and has never had universal subscription. As is well known, substantial segments of Lutheranism have never formally subscribed to more than "the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism" as Lutheran symbols. There are obvious historical reasons for this, but the fact remains that the Augsburg Confession continues to occupy a unique place as a Lutheran confessional symbol.<sup>15</sup>

Consistent with the intentions stated in the Preface, and particularly in Articles VII and VIII, the Augsburg Confession continues to exist, both as a fundamental basis for Lutheran unity and as a plea that such unity be expressed visibly within the Christian community. By signing, the signatories to the Confession in the 16th century were letting Charles V and the Roman theologians know that this Confession represented the doctrines which united them on all fundamental matters. For those Lutheran churches which now in the 20th century subscribe to the same Confession of doctrinal consensus this document can still be a witness to the world Christian community that there one has a truly unified witness of Lutheranism.

Previously reference has been made to the fact that the Roman Catholic church is considering the possibility of recognizing the Augsburg Confession as a Christian confession. The L.W.F. at its VI Assembly took action to ensure that initiatives which might make possible such recognition would be undertaken.<sup>16</sup> While it is clear the L.W.F. does not act for any member church except upon instructions, it

12. L.W.F. Constitution, Art. II

13. *Lutheran World* (XXIV, 2 & 3, 1977), pp. 187-188. See also "The Confession of the Batak Church; Andar M. Lumbantobing, *The Church and the Confession*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 119-147.

14. For the text of the *Confutation*, See Reu, pp. 348-383.

15. Cf. the discussion in Hans Weissgerber "Valid Confessional Symbols" and Eugene Fevold, "The Place of the Confession in American Lutheran Churches of Scandinavian Background" in *The Church and the Confession*, Vilmos Vajta, editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963, pp. 1-22, and pp. 84-105.

16. Arne Sovik, editor *In Christ a New Community: The Proceedings of the 6th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation*, Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania, June 13-25, 1977 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977), p. 175.

does serve as an instrument through which serious discussion of inter-church relations can go on. The possibility is, to say the least, intriguing that "ecclesial communion" might be realized between most of the world's Lutherans and the Roman Church before it is a reality among all Lutherans. The plain fact of the matter is that the Augsburg Confession, a universal Lutheran confession, is on its way to gaining recognition as a universal Christian confession.

Two other examples of the unifying nature of confessional statements, which have implications for the kind of unity expressed by those churches which subscribe the same confession, may be cited. In 1934 the So-called Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church, comprised of Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches, met in Barmen. The intention of the meeting was to affirm the unity of those churches, on the basis of their confession, over against attempts by Hitler to manipulate church policy for his own political ends through the so-called "German Christian" church.

In a statement of position the Confessional Synod, also called the German Evangelical Church, quoted its own constitution which had been recognized by the Reich Government on July 14, 1933. "The inviolable foundation of one German Evangelical Church is the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is attested for us in the Holy Scripture and brought to light again in the Confessions of the Reformation."<sup>17</sup> While it by no means represented all Lutherans, the Barmen Declaration affirmed the principle that confessional unity based on the "Confessions of the Reformation" is sufficient and indeed calls for expression of that unity in common action against a common threat.

In 1971 Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Germany were able to agree on a statement which has subsequently become a basis for full ecclesial fellowship among them. This document prepared at Leuenberg near Basel, is called an "Agreement (Konkordie) among Reformation churches in Europe" or, more popularly, "the Leuenberg Concord". It is a basic assumption of that document that "a common understanding of the Gospel" makes church fellowship possible. It is further asserted that it is now possible ". . . to distinguish the fundamental witness of the Reformation Confessions from their historically conditioned thought forms and to take up that witness in a new form with an eye to the challenge of the present. Because and insofar as the Confessions bear witness to the Gospel as the living Word of God in Jesus Christ, they do not close the way to such further duty of witness, but open it up and summon us to follow it . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Lutherans, participating in the Leuenberg conversations, came to agreement with their Reformed brothers and sisters because they felt that A.C. VII provided a basis for it in its emphasis that agreement on the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments is enough for the "true unity of the Church". There is no question that A.C.VII was a principal source of inspiration for the Leuenberg Concord. That fact was recognized by the Bishops' meeting of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in both 1974 and 1976. While the Norwegian Church does not find the Leuenberg Concord immediately relevant to its own situation because there are virtually no Reformed Churches in Norway, it does recognize the legitimacy of the Concord as an

17. The Declaration, Resolutions and Motions adopted by the Synod of Barmen, May 29-31, 1934. Complete text in A.C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), pp. 237-247.

18. The Leuenberg Concord, I.2. For a copy of the text see "Leuenberg Agreement" *Lutheran World* (XX,4, 1973), 349-353.

agreement growing out of A.C. VII. The bishops expressed themselves as follows: "The Bishops' meeting finds it to be praiseworthy and correct that those who worked on the Leuenberg Concord have followed a method which corresponds to the Lutheran principles expressed in Augustana Art. VII, where the true teaching and true understanding of the Sacraments are the foundation for church fellowship. The Bishops' meeting supports therefore both the intention and the result of this positive work in our ecumenical situation."<sup>19</sup>

The Bishops went on to say that the kind of ecclesial fellowship envisioned by that accord corresponds to the practical "working together which already exists between the Norwegian Church and other non-Lutheran churches, for example, the Scottish Church."<sup>20</sup> Such examples as have been cited should be sufficient to make the point that the Augsburg Confession is not only the one universal Lutheran Confession, but it has always stood as a unifying confession for Lutheranism. More than that, it is also concretely the historical basis upon which Lutherans have been able to establish fellowship with other churches.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF A.C. VII FOR LUTHERAN UNITY

"In keeping with the scope of its content, Art. VII of the Augsburg Confession should really have the title 'on the True Unity of the Church'."<sup>21</sup> Given the historical circumstances in which A.C.VII was written, there seems no doubt that this assertion is correct. The principal concern is not to make a theological statement on the nature of the church. There is instead an assumption of its real existence and the intention of making clear what is the basis of the churches' unity. What is fundamental to unity are the "doctrine of the Gospel" and the "administration of the Sacraments". "Human traditions", i.e., rites, ceremonies "instituted by men" are incidental, not fundamental. Unity at the level of Gospel and Sacrament is a profound unity which is expressive of Christ Himself as Head of the Church. Unity at this level cannot be destroyed nor denied by human custom and tradition. It is a unity present even when not acknowledged by ecclesiastical formulations and agreements. The unity is in Christ Himself. Such unity cannot be denied. The pragmatic expression of that unity in the day-to-day life of churches can, of course, be frustrated. It is clear, however, that the framers of A.C. VII saw their fundamental unity with the historic church even though they were ecclesiastically barred from expression of it in daily life. The fact that Lutheran states were then allowing priests to marry, modifying the mass, administering the Sacrament in both kinds, and challenging a centuries-old understanding of the nature of the Church's authority, did not, in their minds, affect the basic unity of the Church founded in the Gospel. Fellowship is brought about by Christ Himself, it is in Christ Himself, it is expressed in Word and Sacrament alone. "In this constitutive sense, Word and Sacrament alone are the *notae ecclesiae*".<sup>22</sup>

An important point to be observed here is that the unity of the Church is a personal and dynamic unity in *Christ*. Historically, in our discussion, attention has often

19. Leuenberg Konkordien og Den Norske Kirke, BISPEMOTE, 1976, Oslo.

20. *Ibid.*

21. E. Kinder, "Basic Considerations with Reference to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession", *The Unity of the Church*, E. Schlink, editor (Rock Island, Augustana Press, 1957), p. 59.

22. *Ibid.*, p.69



focused on unity as an abstraction, i.e. agreement on a set of doctrinal statements. The assumption is then made that the ecclesiastical expression of unity must await the kind of formulation to which everyone can agree. This is putting the cart before the horse. A.C. VII clearly states our unity *is* in the Gospel and Sacraments. The true unity (*veram unitatem*) *is in* (*satis est*) Christ Himself as He comes to us in Word and Sacrament. The question then is not 'can we find unity', for we already have it, it is rather 'how shall we express the unity which is already there?' Even the most conservative interpretation recognizes that unity is Christological rather than based in doctrinal formulation. An example is a statement by a prominent Missouri Synod theologian: "But if unity is doctrinal unity, it does not thereby cease being personal — Christological unity . . . and thus the unity of the Church remains a living, functioning organic unity . . ." <sup>23</sup>

The "satis est" of A.C. VII is of greatest importance in appreciating the intention of this article. It emphasizes that the central concern of the Reformation, namely the recovery of the Gospel of justification by God's grace alone, is all that is needed to express the Church's basic reality. It further emphasizes that all other matters are subject to this one central concern. Luther, in the midst of his most grievous disputes with Roman theologians, continued to maintain that the Roman Church was still truly the Church. "This is true: that the papacy has God's Word and the office of the apostles, and that we have received Holy Scripture, Baptism, the Sacrament from them . . . I believe and am sure the Christian Church has remained even in the papacy." <sup>24</sup>

It was never the intention of the Reformation Church to leave the Roman Church. In fact, to the end of his days, Luther hoped for the kind of open ecumenical council which could permit the visible expression of unity which he believed existed. There is explicit in Art. VII and implicit in the historic nature of Lutheranism a confession of the continuity and unity of the Church. Basic to this article is the conviction that that which constitutes the Church's existence is all that is necessary for its unity (*satis est*). The Augsburg Confession attempts consistently to point out what Lutherans and Romans had in common as an expression of the will for unity. There is consequently ". . . a sort of contradiction between what the Lutheran Churches have become in the course of history and what was the basic intention of the Lutheran Reformation." <sup>25</sup>

The fact that Lutheran churches have existed as separate entities in the same nation, in some cases for over 400 years, is clearly a development other than that envisioned by the signatories of the Augsburg Confession.

The force of the "satis est" in A.C. VII requires us to examine seriously our own situation in the light of what constitutes "veram unitatem". The "veram" indicates there can be a false unity. As has already been pointed out, the Confession sees "true" unity as one in Christ, in the Gospel. An obvious implication of this is that not *more* than this can be required for unity to be expressed. That would be a false unity inasmuch as it would imply that more than unity in Gospel and Sacrament is

23. M. Franzmann, "A Lutheran Study of Church Unity" *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (published jointly by the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Mo., and the National Lutheran Council, New York, N.Y., 1961), p. 21.

24. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 24, p. 304.

25. H. Meyer, "Lutheranism in the Ecumenical Movement", *The Lutheran Church Past and Present*, V. Vajta, editor (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), p. 228.

required. Years ago Lutherans in Canada came to common agreement on what the Gospel is.<sup>26</sup> If that were still a question to be debated there might still be justification for our separate existence. Now, however "There is warrant neither in Scripture nor in the confessions for a demand that a whole theological system be held in common before a unity can be established . . . nor can unity be denied except when there is not agreement on the teaching of the Gospel."<sup>27</sup>

There are obvious differences among us with regard to polity, particularly regarding the nature of ministry, the role of the laity and the role of women in the Church. Since "Holy Orders" is not regarded as a sacrament among Lutherans, it seems quite inconsistent with our theology of the Church that either polity differences on the nature of ministry and church, or which sex should be eligible for ministry, or what polity we hold on ministry, should disturb the visible expression of our unity. Our unity ought to be consequent on our confession.

The "satis est" allocates to Gospel and Sacrament definitive importance in determining the basis for fellowship and unity. Kinder is correct in his view that "It must be strictly maintained that only the standards derived from the Gospel can be considered as unconditionally necessary for the actualization and fellowship of the churches. Everything else must remain essentially in freedom."<sup>28</sup>

This is not to say organic union is *necessarily* required. Rather, it is to say that fellowship on the basis of the Gospel is already present and should not be denied on the basis of different forms of constitution, piety, administrative practices or styles of theological interpretation. The "satis est" also clearly sounds the ecumenical note. Based on the fact that the Augsburg Confession represented the "Confession" and "clear testimony" of Lutherans, it is evident the original signers were calling for the widest possible circle of ecclesial fellowship. A question we must now ask is, 'do we take seriously the intention of the Augsburg Confession as long as we remain in a fragmented form ourselves?' Can we in our present situation with full legitimacy affirm A.C. VII's commitment to church unity? "The Reformation Confession of the continuity and unity of the Church and the awareness of having a responsibility for Christendom as a whole makes it binding on the Lutheran Church to seek dialogue and fellowship with other churches. Active ecumenical commitment is therefore an expression of fidelity to their Reformation origins."<sup>29</sup>

The ecumenical responsibility is especially clear now that both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches are opening themselves to serious dialogue with us. It would be unfortunate indeed if the clear intention of A.C.VII were to be continually frustrated by internecine arguments incidental to rather than constitutive of ecclesial unity in fellowship.

## THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION, A RESPONSE TO A CALL FOR UNITY AND HISTORICALLY THE EMBODIMENT OF IT

The Conclusion of the Confession includes the statement, "Only those things have been recounted whereof we thought it was necessary to speak, in order that it

26. *Affirmation and Appeal*, (Winnipeg: J.C.I.L.R., 1970), p. 23.

27. C. Bergendoff, "A Lutheran Study of Church Unity", *Essays*, p. 13.

28. Kinder, p. 71

29. Meyer, p. 230

might be understood that in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture and the Church Catholic."<sup>30</sup> This accords with the intention expressed in the preface that the Lutherans would not ". . . hold back from anything that could bring about Christian concord."<sup>31</sup> By its nature, the Confession is an attempt to bring about concord within Christendom and a confession of such concord among Lutherans.

In spite of this obvious fact, intrinsic to the Augsburg Confession, Lutheranism has historically consistently qualified this expression of unity. The history of Lutheranism in North America is virtually a study in varieties of such qualification.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the clearest recognition of the principle of implicit *unity* embodied in the Augsburg Confession is a statement from the Washington Declaration of 1920. It reads, "In the case of those Church bodies calling themselves Evangelical Lutheran, and subscribing the Confessions which have always been regarded as the standards of Evangelical Lutheran doctrine, the United Lutheran Church in America recognizes no doctrinal reasons against complete co-operation and organic union with such bodies."<sup>33</sup>

While the Augsburg Confession is not specifically named in the Declaration, it is certainly the principal standard of Evangelical Lutheran doctrine and the Washington Declaration accords with its intention. Within Canadian Lutheranism the Augsburg Confession's affirmation of what is necessary for unity has been achieved on more than one occasion. Yet we still have not even realized full ecclesial communion among us, let alone organic unity, or ecumenical fellowship.

In 1970 the then members of the J.C.I.L.R. issued a collection of statements under the general title "Affirmation and Appeal". It was the conclusion of those commissioners that there then existed, ". . . a consensus on the basis of which altar and pulpit fellowship could be declared and practised."<sup>34</sup>

Of particular interest to our discussion here of the Augsburg Confession and Lutheran unity is the fact that the above consensus included agreement on the Gospel<sup>35</sup> and Sacraments,<sup>36</sup> which are the "satis est" of A.C. VII. Given the fact that the Augsburg Confession is an embodiment of and call for Lutheran unity which has already found expression among us, what more is to be said? I would propose only the following statements:

1. The Augsburg Confession has since June 23, 1530, embodied for all Lutherans their essential unity in matters fundamental to faith.
2. The Augsburg Confession itself is a demonstration that agreement in the Gospel and the Sacraments is a sufficient basis for ecclesial fellowship.
3. The current lack of fellowship among all Lutherans in Canada is a reproach of the ecumenical spirit of the Augsburg Confession, and suggests a failure to distinguish fundamental from non-fundamental matters in understanding the nature

30. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 95

31. *Ibid.*, p. 41

32. Cf. R.C. Wolfe, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966). This book could well have been called, "Documentation of Stymied Attempts at Lutheran Unity".

33. See Washington Declaration, *Ibid.*, pp. 346-355.

34. *Affirmation and Appeal*, (Winnipeg: J.C.I.L.R., 1970), Foreword (A.O. Olson)

35. *Ibid.*, p. 23

36. *Ibid.*, p. 24, 25.

of the Church.

4. For Lutherans in Canada, the Augsburg Confession should itself be a sufficient basis for fellowship.

Historically Lutherans in North America have argued from their separate conclaves on a vast array of problems. These have included debates on: slavery, the doctrine of election, the doctrine of conversion, the doctrine of inspiration, fraternal societies, the nature of confessionalism, the nature of the office of the ministry, the social and political responsibility of the church, the ordination of women, and so on. It is time to recognize once again the essential wisdom of the framers of the Augsburg Confession in separating essential from non-essential matters and to use that simple, evangelical and irenic document as a principal basis for achieving both fellowship and unity.

# The Good Samaritan Society

(A LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION)

BOX 8190, STATION "F" T6H 5A2  
TEL. 436-0806

4TH FLOOR, 4225 - 107 STREET  
EDMONTON, ALBERTA

**Community Social Service Projects Owned and Operated by the Society:**

GOOD SAMARITAN AUXILIARY  
HOSPITAL  
9649 - 71st Avenue

GOOD SAMARITAN NURSING HOME  
(Mt. Pleasant)  
10530 - 56th Avenue.

GOOD SAMARITAN PINEVIEW  
RESIDENCE  
8770 - 165th Street

GOOD SAMARITAN NURSING HOME  
(Southgate)  
4225 - 107th Street

GOOD SAMARITAN MANOR  
10355 - 83rd Avenue

GOOD SAMARITAN NURSING HOME  
Stony Plain, Alberta

*"The Good Samaritan Cared — so do we"*