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Theses on Inter-Church Relations

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DOCUMENTATION

Theses on Inter-Church Relations

1. Church fellowship and cooperative work among Christian churches are determined by our understanding of the nature and the mission of the church.

2. In calling the church "the body of Christ" the Scriptures ascribe to it a God-given unity by virtue of its possessing one Lord, one faith, one baptism, etc. It is obligated to be eager to maintain this gift of unity in the bond of peace. In its primary essence the universal church is "an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Ap. VII,5) and "an assembly of believers" (A.C. VII,1) which is both called into being and recognized by the use of the Gospel and the sacraments for the creation of faith. It is faith alone which constitutes this assembly as "church," and "the church, properly speaking, is that which has the Holy Spirit" (Ap. VII,22).

Abbreviations in reference to the Book of Concord are as follows:

- A.C. Augsburg Confession
- Ap. Apology of the Augsburg Confession
- B. of C. the Book of Concord, cited according to Tappert, Ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).
- Ep. Formula of Concord, Epitome
- L.C. Large Catechism
- Tr. Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope
- S.A. Smalcald Articles
- S.C. Small Catechism
- S.D. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration.

3. In its empirical reality or “outward appearance” the Christian church is not one and united, but divided in both its convictions and its life. Here the church struggles to reach the goal of realizing in its life the gift of its essential spiritual unity.

“In accordance with the Scriptures therefore, we maintain that the church in the proper sense is the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless we grant that the many hypocrites and evil men who are mingled with them in this life share an association in the outward marks, are members of the church according to this association in the outward marks, and therefore hold office in the church.” (Ap. VII,28)

4. In its empirical reality the Christian church seeks to fulfil a dual mandate from its Lord: 1) to become so perfectly united in discipleship that the world might be led to believe in Christ and His love (Jn. 17:20-23; 1 Jn. 1:3; Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 4:11-12), and 2) to avoid and renounce all error in teaching and life (2 Jn. 7-11; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Tim. 2:16-18, 3:5, 4:15).

5. Participating in churchly functions with erring churches has been termed “unionism”. Failure to foster the manifestation of unity in Christ has been termed “separatism” or “sectarianism” -- the opposite of “ecumenism”. Because, historically, neither of these non-Biblical terms has been uniformly defined, misunderstanding and fruitless discussion have resulted.

6. Generally, the term “syncretism” has been applied to the merging of Christian and non-Christian beliefs and actions, while the term “unionism” originated in the controversy following the Prussian Union of 1817 and was applied to Lutheran-Reformed mergings. Later, however, the term was also applied to inter-Lutheran situations of joint work and worship where total agreement in doctrine and practice was lacking. The essence of unionism was an agreement to disagree. It fostered church fellowship (altar-, pulpit-, prayer-fellowship) and work (missionary, educational, etc.) with individuals, groups, or church bodies who adhered to false doctrine and refused to be corrected by God’s Word. It displayed an avoidance of creeds and confessions and doctrinal discussion in order to hasten progress in joint work. While unionism ignored genuine differences in teaching and practice and so undermined the church, separatism sinned against love and so divided the church.

The Symbols reflect on one aspect of “unionism” when they disavow the practice of “yielding or conforming in external things, where Christian agreement in

doctrine has not previously been achieved” (S.D. X,16) with those whose doctrine constitutes denial of the Gospel. (Emphasis added)

7. In her Confessions, the Lutheran church is committed against separatism and sectarianism in the church’s life (I Jn. 2:9; I Cor. 11:18-19).

“Christ has also warned us in his parables on the church that when we are offended by the personal conduct of priests or people, we should not incite schisms . . . We regard as utterly seditious those who have incited schisms . . .” (Ap. VII,49-50)

“No church should condemn another . . . as long as there is agreement in doctrine . and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments.” (Ep. X,7)

“This teaching . . . is not contrary or opposite to that of the universal Christian church.” (A.C., Concl.,5)

8. In her Confessions, the Lutheran church does not equate any historic denomination with the church catholic. Christian unity is not to be equated with denominational fellowship.

“(The church catholic is) made up of men scattered throughout the world who agree on the Gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether they have the same human traditions or not.” (Ap. VII,10)

9. In her Confessions, the Lutheran church is committed against unionism and declares that it is better to be separated from erring churches for the sake of truth than to be united with them in error.

“From our exposition friends and foes may clearly understand that we have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility, and outward harmony . . . We desire such harmony as will not violate God’s honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error . . .” (S.D. XI,95-96)

“Hence yielding or conforming in external things, where Christian agreement in doctrine has not previously been achieved, will support the idolators in their idolatry, and on the other hand, it will sadden and scandalize true believers and

weaken them in their faith.” (S.D. X,16) Note: “idolators” refers to those to whom Paul (Gal.2) would not yield “that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved.”

“When a clear-cut confession of faith is demanded of us, we dare not yield to the enemies in such indifferent things . . . In such a case it is no longer a question of indifferent things, but a matter which has to do with the truth of the Gospel, Christian liberty, and the sanctioning of public idolatry, as well as preventing offense to the weak in faith. In all these things we have no concessions to make, but we should witness an unequivocal confession . . .” (Ep. X,6)

“. . . reasons are set forth at necessary length . . . for having no communion (Gemeinschaft) with the papists . . .” (S.D. Summary, 7)

10. In her confessions, the Lutheran church is concerned that practice and *de facto* adherence to the truth versus mere profession be a criterion for fellowship. At the same time she recognizes the claim to doctrinal perfectionism a danger to be guarded against. Therefore, she establishes a fundamental level of agreement sufficient for recognition of unity.

“When we come to define the church, we must define that which is the living body of Christ and is the church in fact as well as in name.” (Ap. VII,12)

“. . . we never understood or accepted the second edition (Variata 15,40) in any other sense than that of the first Augsburg Confession as it was submitted.” (B. of C., Preface, p.9) Note: In many places the Formula of Concord deals mercifully with some erroneous claims of the Melancthonians.

“We believe, teach and confess that at a time of confession . . . the entire community of God, yes every individual Christian and especially the ministers of the Word as the leaders of the community of God are obligated to confess openly not only by words but also by their deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God. (S.D. X,10)

“For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian Church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine word.” (A.C. VII,2)

11. In her Confessions, the Lutheran church declares that she will not indiscriminately label every erring Christian as a heretic, and every erring teacher as a false prophet, much less apply these terms to whole churches which accept erroneous doctrines while holding the truth of the Gospel and the Sacraments. Not every departure from the truth is of the same quality or of identical proportion. Equal dedication to truth can render different judgments. An heterodox church is still church.

"It is not our purpose and intention to mean thereby those persons who err ingenuously and who do not blaspheme the truth of the divine word, and far less do we mean entire churches inside or outside the Holy Empire of the German Nation (A footnote identifies the reference to the churches in England, Spain and France, etc.). On the contrary we mean specifically to condemn only false and seductive doctrines and their stiff-necked proponents and blasphemers . . . We have no doubt at all that one can find many pious, innocent people even in those churches which have up to now admittedly not come to agreement with us . . . It is furthermore to be hoped that when they are rightly instructed in this doctrine, they will, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, turn to the infallible truth of the divine word and unite with us and our churches and schools." (B. of C., Preface, pp. 11-12)

"Of course, there are also many weak people in it (the church) who build on this foundation perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected. The writings of the holy fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundation but that this did not overthrow their faith. Most of what our opponents maintain, on the other hand, does overthrow faith, as when they condemn our doctrine that forgiveness of sins is received by faith." (Ap. VII,20-21)

12. In her Confessions, the Lutheran church publicly declares her desire for loving conciliation (Eph. 4:2; Thess. 5:14), cooperation and fellowship among Christians, and she pledges thereby to avoid hasty and all-embracing judgment of Christians by affirming the principle, "Abuse does not invalidate use". See L.C., Baptism, 59 (Phil. 1:16-18).

"Love is a bond and unbroken chain linking the many members of the church with one another . . . It is not possible to preserve tranquility (in families and communities) unless men cover and forgive certain mistakes in their midst. In the same way Paul commands that there be love in the church to preserve harmony . . . to cover up minor mistakes, lest the church disintegrate into various schisms." (Ap. IV,232)

". . . perfection (that is, the integrity of the church) is preserved when . . . the bishops take into account the weakness of the people." (Ap. IV,234)

". . . in everyday life we should put up with many things for the sake of mutual peace." (Ap. IV,235)

"For themselves they easily find forgiveness but not for others . . ." (Ap. IV,236)

"Even though these offences occur, love covers them up, forgives, yields, and does not go to the limit of the law." (Ap. IV,242)

“... the apostle speaks so often about this duty of love . . . This virtue is necessary for the preservation of domestic tranquility, which cannot endure unless pastors and churches overlook and forgive many things.” (Ap. IV,243)

13. The scope and mode of fellowship practised by Lutherans are guided by the following principles:

a) Occasional joint worship (altar-, pulpit-, prayer-fellowship) for specific purpose and function is not tantamount to declaring doctrinal consensus nor does a deficient consensus preclude it. The *purpose* of an act of fellowship between Christian congregations determines what constitutes the essence of the act. Attendance or participation does not necessarily indicate total or even substantial agreement (cf. II Kings 5:18-19 with Daniel 3:16-18).

b) Refusal to practice fellowship with Christian Confessors holding erroneous views is not necessarily a denial of their membership in the body of Christ. On the other hand, where doctrinal consensus exists, Christian love demands the practice of fellowship.

c) Open communion, i.e., the invitation for altar fellowship without a prior doctrinal consensus, is generally to be avoided. The Lord's Supper expresses and builds upon an existing unity. It is not a device for use by men in promoting unity among Christians of differing persuasion.

“For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come.” (L. C. V,2)

“The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved.” (A. C., XXV,1)

14. The scope and mode of cooperative, federative, or conciliar relationships are determined by the application of the following principles:

a) Condemnation of error is not directed against the entire faith and proclamation of those who err.

b) The church is free to participate in any association in which its organizational autonomy and confessional integrity is safeguarded, i.e., when the association does not legislate for the churches or exercise churchly function on its own authority and when it does not establish altar and pulpit fellowship with member-churches by virtue of such association or thereby presume doctrinal consensus.

c) Cooperation which hinders or prohibits a witness to the truth is properly avoided. That which promotes such witness is to be desired and fostered.

15. In defining and relating to any given case of church practice inconsistent with church confession, the Lutheran church is guided by the following principles:

- a) Practice prevailing within the church body is determinative.
- b) That which we forbid to fellow-Christians must be clearly forbidden by the Word of God.

“We believe, teach and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testament are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrine and teachers alike must be appraised and judged.” (Ep. Summary,1)

- c) Scriptural doctrines need not always be stated with traditional theological formulations. We do not attempt to make the answers to yesterday’s questions fit precisely the questions of today.

“We believe, teach and confess that the community of God in every locality and every age has authority to change such ceremonies (or church usages which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God) according to circumstances, as it may be most profitable and edifying to the community of God.” (Ep. X2)

- d) “It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies instituted by men should be observed uniformly in all places.” (A.C. VII,3).

- e) Christian love and patience recognize the existence of the fortunate inconsistency whereby a given error in doctrine or practice does not necessarily lead to the denial of other or all scriptural truths.

“Therefore only presumptuous and stupid persons draw the conclusion that where there is no true faith there also can be no true baptism.” (L. C. IV,58)

- f) Christian humility acknowledges that our own Christian understanding requires development and correction and that the Holy Spirit effects progress in our comprehension of the truth (1 Cor. 13:9; John 16:13-14).

Adopted by the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships, November 4-6, 1974.

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 15:5-6)

Theses on the Mission of the Church

1. The church is the community of people called together by Jesus Christ to be His body in the world (Eph. 1:22, 23; 5:29, 30; Acts 20:28; John 15:5). It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that this community is established and nourished (Eph. 2:17-22); therefore, the church is to be diligent in the use of the means of grace, word and sacraments, through which the Holy Spirit exercises His saving power (Matt. 28:19, 20; Rom. 6:3, 4; I Tim. 4:1-3; Col. 3:16, 17; Eph. 5:19, 20).
2. The church is sent into the world as Christ was sent into the world, with deep compassion and costly service, eager to minister to every person and every need (John 17:18; Mark 10:45; I John 3:16-18; James 2:14-17).
3. The church is sent into the world to witness to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ (John 3:16, 17). The church is called to proclaim this love by word and deed so that all people might receive Christ as their Saviour and Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18-20; John 20:21-23, 31; Acts 1:8).

The church is sent with the urgency born of the conviction that people are dead in sin and, without faith in Christ, are eternally lost. It therefore proclaims the law of God so that people may recognize their bondage to sin and need for salvation (Matt. 10:7; 24:14; Mark 16:15, 16; Luke 24:46, 47; John 4:35, 36).

The church is entrusted with the gracious gospel of God for the purpose of making known God's saving purpose in the crucified and risen Christ, confident that through speaking clearly the good news of Christ, people are brought to faith and liberated from the bondage of sin for abundant and eternal life (John 10:10; Matt. 7:13, 14; Rom. 6:3, 4).

4. The church is in ministry to the world as its members live in ministry to one another, for love and fellowship in the Lord are a witness in the world to the gospel. The church is called to be the family of God transcending every barrier of race, status, sex, and nationality (Gal. 3:26-28; James 2:2-7; John 17:23; I Cor. 12:7; Rom. 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-17).
5. The church is to bear witness in all of life's settings to the rule of God, alert to the changing needs of people, and willing to risk itself in pursuit of reconciliation, justice and freedom from oppression, ready to challenge the sinful structures of this age (2 Cor. 5:18; Luke 19:1-10; Acts 4:19, 20; 5:27-29; 7:51-60; Mark 13:9-11; John 16:7-11).

Adopted by the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships November 4-6, 1974. Scriptural references have been added.