

SATIS EST?

What do we do when other churches don't agree?

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The question before us in this session concerns our interpretation and use of Article VII (and, I suppose, more immediately related Articles V, VIII, XIV, XXVIII) of the Augsburg Confession (CA) and its Apology. Most particularly we are concerned with these articles as they pertain to questions about ministry. Article VII, it is to be recalled, says that "Our churches. . . teach that one holy church is to continue forever" and that "the church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." Then comes the critical statement in which we are specifically interested: "For the true unity of the church it is enough (satis est, dies ist genug) to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel (consentire de doctrina evangelii; dass da eintraechtlich nach reinem Verstand das Evangelium gepredigt) and the administration of the sacraments (et de administratione sacramentorum; die Sakrament dem gottlichen Wort gemaess gereicht werden). And the article then continues with the the negative limitation: "It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere," and concludes with the quotation from Ephesians 4:5,6, "It is as Paul Says, "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, etc."

Relative to the doctrine of ministry, our question could thus be put more explicitly: What do we do when other churches insist on something more than pure preaching of the gospel and proper administration of the sacraments--when, that is, other churches insist on some particular form of church government, or ministry, or discipline, or even doctrinal uniformity or consensus? More specifically, given the concerns of the study on ministry, what do we do when some churches insist on what has come to be called "the historic episcopate," or perhaps the threefold office of ministry (bishop,

priest, deacon)" as necessary to the true unity of the church? What do we do, that is when other churches find that satis est non satis est? As I recall it was Lucas Fischer who coined that bon (or malin!) mot--and it is interesting and significant that it was coined by a Reformed and not by a Roman or Anglican theologian! Is the satis est simply expendable in an ecumenical age? Should we, for the sake of unity today, be ready to go "beyond"--if there is any such!--the satis est? Is the situation today so changed or perhaps even so dire that it could or should be sacrificed, either for practical or ecumenical reasons--or both? Are we in such straits that we need bishops and/or deacons to set our own house in order, or to open the way for greater ecclesiastical unity--what these days is called "full communion?"

We need to consider carefully what sort of claim is being made in the satis est. Is it a statement about a bare minimum: this is sufficient--all that is needed--for true unity, and as long as that minimum is met, other things can be added to meet the needs of the day? Or is the satis est rather a statement about a limit imposed by the very nature of the case: this is enough; nothing more can be allowed for to do so would be precisely to destroy the unity that is brought into being, i.e., the unity that is created solely and alone by the pure preaching of the gospel and the giving of the sacraments consonant therewith.

To put you our of your misery as far as my thesis for this paper is concerned, I believe it to be the latter. I am persuaded that the satis est is in the first instance a limiting concept. It states clearly and forthrightly that enough is enough, and that nothing more can be required for the true unity of the church. I do not see how in the context of its own time it could be understood any differently. The confessors at Augsburg were being accused of schism, breaking the unity of the church because they had questioned, if not rejected institutional authority and undertaken certain reforms, especially in the Saxon Visitations, without the approval of Rome or the Empire. They defended themselves by stating clearly in what they believed the true unity of the church to consist (satis est), and what beyond that could not be required of them or of anyone else, what was not necessary. When the satis est is taken together with the nec necesse est, quite clearly a line is being drawn.

In that light, a word of caution should be inserted here about the question posed for our discussion groups. The question reads, you will notice, "Is the satis est a limit beyond which we cannot go or a basis upon which to build?" The question is loaded and the alternatives posed are false. By implication, one who views it as a limit won't have a basis on which to build. Who would want to be in such a strait? But those are hardly alternatives. It could well be both limit and basis, of course. It could be the kind of limit which states that we had best employ our building skills elsewhere. And so it is, of course. The satis est is a statement about the eschatological limit to our building activities. It is a statement about who builds true unity in the church. It is intended to clear the field for the gospel and the sacraments so they can do their work: call the church into being and therein give it its true unity. The point is to turn the gospel loose on the world, not to hem it in with human institutions, rites, and ceremonies. The satis est is in that sense not simply a limiting concept, but at the same time a liberating concept. The confessors are not interested in romantic claims about humans having a basis on which to build something in this case. Whatever humans build will not lead to the true unity of the church. Quite the opposite. It is what humans have constructed that is limiting and restrictive and consequently the cause of all the trouble. The gospel liberates from all that. That is why it is not only enough but the one thing really necessary for true unity.

Now I have said something in a preliminary fashion about how I believe one has to understand the satis est on the basis of the history of the matter. Some time ago it was conjectured in high places whether this position might not be an "upper midwest virus." Perhaps the most apt reply to that is that one had best beware because it is "real catchy!" Indeed, that is the burden of the confessional conviction. If it isn't we are in big trouble! But, of course, remarks of that sort by one of those in whom we are supposed to vest more teaching authority are symptomatic of the deeper and more serious problem we have today in confronting not only the satis est but the question of the place and authority of confessional theology generally in the teaching ministry of the church. This deeper and more serious problem is further illustrated

by the statement produced by the Office for Ecumenical affairs of the ELCA and adopted as a working document by the 1989 Churchwide assembly, entitled "Ecumenism: The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America." This statement also offers us some judgments about the satis est which are supposed to guide our ecumenical policy making and practice today. As such, the statement bears directly also on the study of ministry. It claims that the satis est "could" function differently today because the situation is quite different from that of 1530. Back then, we are told, they were attempting to preserve an existing unity. Today we are trying to reestablish a broken unity. Thus, it is averred, the satis est today provides "an ecumenical resource" to "move to levels of fellowship among divided churches" (5). Taking the satis est in this setting is, apparently, supposed to support if not justify the move of the statement towards what ecumenists these days call "full communion." The satis est is taken in the sense of a minimal requirement beyond which we should be willing to make necessary adjustments and compromises for the sake of unity. Many take that to mean, apparently, that as long as there is agreement on the gospel and the sacraments, we should be able to go along with the historic episcopate, the three-fold ministry, or just about anything not ostensibly not contrary to the Word of God.

The discussions about changed historical context indicate that before we go any farther we need to take a more careful look at who we are and where we are today. This first convocation of teaching theologians should really have been about that: our integrity and/or identity as a Lutheran Church in America today. But now the irony is that the arguments about satis est make the questions we should have faced first unavoidable anyway. What do we do when other churches don't agree on these matters? When the question is raised our own integrity and identity are on the line. Do we have anything to say here anymore, anything to hold out for? Is there anything at stake for us? Existentially, the answer depends, I suppose, on whether there is any fire left. My favorite cartoon in college days was of a long freight train that had ground to a halt in the desert. A set of footprints in the sand stretched all the way from the caboose up to the engine. The engineer was leaning out of the cab explaining sheepishly to the conductor, "The fire went out...." What do you do when someone does not

agree that the gospel and the sacraments are enough? It depends, I suppose, on whether you are "satisfied" enough to want to say something about it or fight for it. Asking whether it is enough is something like asking whether one spouse is enough! If the gospel is not enough, I expect the confessors would simply have said that there is nothing really to do then but to preach until they have had enough! For in actuality, the satis est is a confession to the power of the gospel. If one has heard it, what more could one want? Consequently what the reformers demanded above all was just the right so to preach. But such preaching, of course, depends on whether there is any fire left. The satis est makes the question unavoidable: Are we satisfied that the gospel is enough? If not, is this whole discussion not pointless?

But to put it in terms of fire in the belly is to put it perhaps too subjectively or existentially. It is to speak more of the "who" than of the "where" we are. There is, of course, considerable warrant in Lutheran theology for paying careful attention to the "who," given Luther's "as you believe, so you have it" (wie du glaubst, so hast du). In terms of doing theology that means that everyone theologizes as they must, as they are bound to. And that cannot be forgotten, especially in this case! Nevertheless, we must make the attempt to look more objectively at "where" we are now as American Lutherans. This is no doubt why it is more and more the case that disputants in these matters among us find it necessary to furnish us with a hermeneutic for interpreting the confessional documents, particularly the CA, before proceeding to make their arguments. The proposed ELCA statement on ecumenism (mentioned above) does that by some rather feeble and quite unsatisfactory remarks about the change in historical situation. They are now about to bless us with a 160 page commentary at a cost of some \$40,000 plus of the Church's very scarce cash to serve us up a more adequate hermeneutic/apology by which to read these matters. George Lindbeck, to name one among several, has done it more extensively and thoroughly, and I hope more economically, in a number of writings, most recently in a presentation at the Free Conference at St. Olaf this summer ("Ecumenical Directions and Confessional Construals, St. Olaf, June 7, 1990. As yet unpublished, I believe). He draws a contrast between two quite different "confessional construals." The one which

Lindbeck himself favors, understands Lutheranism as a confessional movement within the church catholic, a corrective movement of renewal within the catholic church of the West. The other, supposedly, thinks of Lutheranism as a confessional denomination, a more or less separate and newly reconstituted ecclesia. The CA especially, and ⁱⁿour case the satis est, will therefore be read differently in the light of these construals. The confessional movement Lutheran will tend to see the CA and consequently also the satis est as spelling out the minimal conditions under which unity can be restored (i.e., if the doctrinal articles summarized in Part One of the CA be not repudiated, and there is freedom to disagree on the matters dealt with in Part Two). If these conditions are met, then the proposal supposedly made at Augsburg, particularly in CA 28 about bishops, should be reissued. Lutherans should be willing to accept the historic episcopate for the sake of unity, even if others claim its necessity where Lutherans deny it.

Confessional denomination Lutherans on the other hand, according to Lindbeck, will see the CA and the satis est either as a proposal to the church catholic which was never seriously meant because its refusal was expected, or if seriously meant at the time, is no longer applicable because it was refused. If the satis est has any meaning ecumenically in this era of many denominations, it is simply taken as general openness to anyone who agrees about the freedom of the gospel, without a "tilt" to the Protestant or Catholic side.

The kind of hermeneutic suggested by Lindbeck bids fair, it seems, to dominate in ELCA ecumenical officialdom. This kind of "construal" indicates that before entering into debate about particulars, we need to talk about the hermeneutic itself. The hermeneutic deals the cards--not to say stacks the deck!--for the game. In my estimation, we need a hermeneutic that is not only more attuned to the actual history of the CA but also takes more notice of where we are in the ELCA today. All that cannot be accomplished in an essay of this sort, of course. But it is important for us to begin, at least, and especially to think more seriously about the "where are we?" question. In what follows, I shall attempt the risky business of sketching in broad strokes an estimate of where we are, and how that relates to the question of a hermeneutic for reading the CA, and subsequently our questions about the satis est. It

will of necessity have to work with broad generalizations, but I think they will stand up at least enough to animate our discussions.

Where are we today as an "Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?" What is happening to us? Where are we going? What we are witnessing, I believe, is the agonizing end of our Melanchthonian-based pietism. This "ending" has been accelerated and made more evident and thus more painful for many by the merger (euphemistically: the New Church). By a Melanchthonian-based pietism I mean a pietism resulting from the attempt to hold together a Melanchthonian anthropology with a Pauline/Lutheran understanding of justification.² Unwilling or unable to accept an anthropology which holds that justification sola fide entails bondage of the will and spells the death of the old and the resurrection of the new, such pietism holds out for the continuity and (in some degree) free choice of the I as acting or reacting subject in the regeneration process. It is, as Hans Joachim Iwand maintained, ultimately impossible to hold Luther's view of justification together with Melanchthon's anthropology and the attempt can only condemn the faithful to permanent skepticism.³ The burden shifts inexorably from the divine deed to the "I," from the iustitia aliena to the iustitia propria. When can I ever know? Am I really a Christian? - Have I really and truly let Jesus into my heart? The attempt to construct a synthesis resulted, broadly speaking, in Lutheran Pietism: a turn towards the subject and the question of the conversion of the individual, the psychologizing of the ordo salutis and the stress on visible evidence of sanctification, the third use of the law, and all of that. There was, of course, always an attempt to hold onto justification and the means of grace as the "objective" reality over against the continuously existing "subject" and its piety. But that only meant that the attempted synthesis could coin itself in the slogan, "justification by grace through faith", where "grace" means the objectively given salvific facts and "faith" means the subjective act of appropriation.

For our purposes it is crucial to see that this turn towards the subject, its continuity and visibility as "sanctified" has unavoidable consequence for the understanding of the church and its unity. Perhaps one could say that the pietist ecclesiola with its "visible" oneness and holiness is a harbinger of the future. At any rate, there is a

fundamental shift from the sheer givenness of the true "marks" or "signs" of the church to the evidence of holiness in the subjects. For such religious "subjects" the "marks" of the church are never enough. Baptism is not enough. There is no "magic" in the Lord's Supper. How many times have we not heard that? The entire "left wing" of the Reformation was--and is--arrayed against the satis est as an eschatological limit. But then, so is the Roman right. That, significantly, is what left and right have in common and is the reason why Luther considered both ultimately to be schwaermer: basically subjectivist in their understanding of these matters. The iustitia aliena, the absolute ^{con}ditionality and givenness announced in the gospel and given in the sacraments which simply puts us under itself and makes us one in so doing, is not "enough." Dedicated subjectivity, conversion, being really sincere, or lacking that, institutional guarantee and visibility, the proper ecclesiastical pedigree, is what it takes.

Now we all know and have tasted in one way or another the bitter fruit of this move toward subjectivism. Here we can only pause to note once again that it tends toward individualism. But that can only mean that the church is understood not as the body of Christ in which we believe, but rather a collection of like-minded, or like-converted/ruled individuals. The church is not, as Luther insisted, a Gemeine, a commonality put under the Word by faith alone, but a Gemeinschaft, a club of similar individuals. Since it is such a Gemeinschaft its commonality is defined not by faith in the imputed iustitia aliena but by its own acquired iustitia propria. It must therefore drive towards visibility. Its unity, what it has in common must be evident in its subjects. It is a Gemein-SCHAFT, a Gemeine that has been geschaffen through its subjects.

Once this step is taken, the way is open to what Ernst Wolf aptly characterized as the romanticization of the Church in the 19th and 20th centuries. The idea of the body of Christ is interpreted sociologically and the communio sanctorum understood as a sociological structure. This lead to an anthropocentric misunderstanding of the church. When sanctorum communio is then used in apposition to sanctam ecclesiam catholicam the way is opened for a romanticized treatment of the

church.⁴ The church begins to be understood as a sociological communio. Indeed, as we are told these days, the aim of ecumenism has to be "full communio" with all its visibility. The cure for subjectivism and individualism is not, as per the Pauline/Lutheran view, the death of the subject and its rebirth in the body of Christ by faith alone, but rather romantic notions of communalism. Socialism and communism are its secularized offshoots--and one should not fail to note what is happening to them these days! The individualism of the subject who would not die is to be cured by being taken up in communalism. How many times do we not still hear that today? The cure for individualism is community, koinonia, and all that. The cure for ecclesiastical waywardness is better community organization, stronger institutions, more authority at the top, perhaps the "historic episcopate." The entire drive becomes that to sociological unity and visibility. Was old Max Stirner right and prophetic when he remarked contra Marx that such business is only the Sunday side of the matter? The week-day reality is, "You better be a comrade or else."

Now it is crucial to recognize that this romanticization of the church also overtook the Roman Church in the 19th and 20th centuries, and therefore has come to be something of a common underlying presupposition for contemporary ecclesiology and ecumenism.⁵ Indeed, the Roman Church, in this view, is the ideal and supremely visible and viable Gemeinschaft because of its catholicity, i.e., its visible temporal and spatial universality. An "evangelical catholic" church is thus supposed to be one that successfully combines the evangel with this enterprise. It is not strange, therefore, that romanticized Protestants and Lutherans in the 19th and 20th centuries equate this dream with ecumenism.

Thus the aim of current ecumenism is stated as "full communion." When one is on the romantic and sociological ladder, one graduates almost imperceptibly from communio sanctorum as an invisible ideal to "full communion" as its visible realization. Where such "full communion" is described at all it comes out in a mish-mash of theological and sociologico-institutional terms: It means common confessing of the faith, mutual recognition of Baptism, exchangeability of members, mutual recognition and availability of ordained ministers,

common commitment to evangelism, witness and service, means of common decision making, mutual lifting of remaining condemnations. (p.14) We are assured of course, that such descriptions are not conditions even though, apparently, some of those participating in such full communion would hold them to be so. So ambiguity, the patron saint of ecumenists, reigns. In the new 160 page commentary on/apology for the ELCA statement on ecumenism there is an appendix on the satis est accredited as "An Opinion from the Institute for Ecumenical Research at Strasbourg" dedicated to demonstrating that the satis est is not in conflict with "full communion." It attempts to do this by an incessant drive from the "true unity" announced in CA 7 to what it repeatedly refers to as a "lived out" and therefore concretely realized unity among the churches. "The unity of the church described by satis est is inseparable from a lived out communion among churches." The unity described in satis est is "a lived communion." "'Full communion' spells out in greater detail the relations between churches in which the unity described in satis est is concretely lived out." And then it is interesting to note how, as always in these instances, the heat gets turned up in the end: "...To attempt to realize the unity described in satis est without relations of 'full communion' is to live in self-contradiction." (Quotations taken from Appendix 1 of the as yet unpublished MSS, William G. Rusch, Ed., A Commentary On Ecumenism: The Vision of the ELCA.)

Now, I say, if we want to begin to grapple with where we are and what is happening to us in the ELCA today, we ought to recognize that we are witnessing the agonizing end of the the line for our Melanchthonian based pietism. The fire, you might say, seems to be going out. Now we all know what happens when pietism loses its fire, when it loses its enthusiasm for and is cut loose from its moorings in the "objective" salvific deed. It loses its substance and runs off into culture protestantism. If I read the situation rightly today this is what worries and angers so many about the public face of the ELCA. The church gets its identity more and more from the quality of its own faith and life. It concerns itself not with its relation to God, but with its own internal and external relationships. It worries not about communion with God in Christ's body, but about communion with one another. God has become a theological cipher, easily replaceable by the general

concept of love and thus no longer to be worried about. God or his wrath no longer enters significantly into our field of concern. One is not concerned, first and foremost, as in the old pietism, with "getting right with God" but rather with getting right with oneself (the only God left?), and subsequently not with living a "godly" life, but rather learning to affirm others in their chosen lifestyle. The church's energies are consumed by concern about "lived out unity," inclusivity, togetherness, social issues, quotas, and just about any cause that comes down the mass media pike. The causes, to be sure, are often worthy enough in themselves. But the point is that when faith in the iustitia aliena is lost or deemed irrelevant, the iustitia propria is no longer its spontaneous and natural fruit, but a task and a demand. Erstwhile pietists feeling guilty because the fire has gone out are easily consumed by such demands and programs. Indeed, there seems to be quite a number, even among those teaching theology, afflicted with might be called a theological oedipus complex--harboring a kind of ressentiment for having been burned by their pietist fathers--so that the mere mention of the Lutheran tradition (even though they know very little of it!) awakens a kind of knee-jerk antipathy. They are beguiled just by the thought of something "new."

But now the question is, where does all this leave us today? If our Melanchthonian based free-choice pietism has lost its substance, and if we are appalled or at least worried by the drift of the church towards culture Protestantism, where do we turn? Here is where the hermeneutic will tend powerfully to influence the choice. If the kind of interpretation suggested by Lindbeck is right, there would seem basically to be two possibilities. The first and most obvious is to turn back towards Rome. If we are a confessing movement in the church catholic, and if, in Tillichian terms, we have pushed our protestant principle to the degree of losing our catholic substance, then the only real way to find our substance again is to go back to Rome, that preeminent custodian of such catholic substance. Rome has had long experience with this sort of thing. Rome knows how to grant free choice with one and and take it back with the other!

The other possibility would be the old Protestant move: back to the Bible, to move, perhaps, in the direction of so-called evangelical

or fundamentalist Protestantism, lately dubbed fundagelicalism. If we are denominational Lutherans, basically critical of or anti-Rome, and yet fear the loss of substance, we would likely be attracted by the so-called evangelical or maybe even neo-pentacostal movements in contemporary Protestantism. They too, you might say, have a certain ability to grant freedom of choice with one hand and take it back with the other. You are free to choose Jesus, but once you do you better toe the mark! And one cannot overlook the fact that around the globe these days such movements manifest considerable vitality!

Disenchanted Lutherans today are attracted by both possibilities. Witness the talk of "evangelical catholicism" on the one hand--sometimes to the point of schism--and the actual Fundagelical splinter group, the AALC, on the other. When free-choice pietism has lost its moorings in the external Word, the only way to get it back in line is by turning to authority structures with the clout to do it. One can find that either in Roman-type hierarchicalism or in Biblicism. In either case, satis est non satis est. The gospel and the sacraments are not enough. They never are when they don't bring the eschatological end and new beginning. An authority structure above and beyond the gospel must be added--a kind of substitute eschatology to assuage our impatience!

Do these hermeneutical alternatives define the parameters of our fate today? Are these the only possibilities available to us? I believe not. But I do think that if there is any fire left now, it will have to come more from Luther than our Melanchthonian tinged pietism. Of course, many Lutherans seem to get glassy-eyed or nervous at the mention of such a prospect. But that is due, I think, to our theological oedipus complex. We think it simply a re-pristination, perhaps, of what we already know and have reacted against. But, of course, most of Luther was largely unknown to the Lutheran church, especially in America, until quite recently, and the most important dimensions of his theology are actually 20th century discoveries. The phenomenon known as "Luther's Theology" is actually a quite new thing, particularly for American Lutherans. What it means to be a theologian of the cross, for instance, was virtually unknown until 1929 when Walter von Loewenich published his book on the subject. It did not appear in English until 1976. The Bondage of the Will did not really emerge as an

alternative to received Lutheran anthropology until mid-century. The significance of Luther's struggle with the basic letter/spirit metaphysic of medieval--and for that matter modern--catholic christendom for hermeneutics and theological method also developed largely after the second world war and is still unfolding. The recovery of the doctrine of vocation is due largely to 20th century Swedish Luther research. And so on. When all of this is put together with current biblical studies, especially the recovery of New Testament eschatology, a theology with a radically different--in today's terms, eschatological--shape begins to emerge.

One of the most fundamental questions for Lutherans today is what they are going to do about this theology. The reason for taking it seriously, of course, is not just that it happens to wear the name of Luther. The question is first of all the question of the gospel and its proclamation. Does it drive to a more truthful and vital proclamation of the biblical gospel? And secondly, the question is whether the gospel so proclaimed does not have a better chance of engaging the problems of the so-called post-modern world. Is it not, actually, a real alternative to all the used-up options of the 19th and 20th centuries? We do not, of course, have the time to entertain such questions here--although that is what we really need to talk about. But we cannot avoid addressing them at least obliquely in terms of the hermeneutic used to read the CA and the satis est.

.. If it is true that Lutheranism can be understood as a confessing movement within the church catholic, then at the very least, it must be said that the recovery of Luther's theology provides a much broader base for understanding the nature of that confessing movement. It means that the confessional documents, if they are to be read within their own tradition, demand a hermeneutic informed by this broadening and deepening. A serious defect in the kind of hermeneutic espoused by many of our ecumenists is that it tends to ignore the fact that the CA is a Lutheran Confession (or as the confessors could put it, an apology). The usual approach is to begin with the platitude that the CA is an ecumenical document, and then proceed to read it as though it were basically a medieval catholic document with a few ultimately dispensable Lutheran notations. One even finds it declared "unconfessional" to

interpret the CA in terms of Luther's theology or other confessional writings bound with it in the same Book of Concord!⁶ The very hermeneutic proposed to us entangles itself in contradictions. On the one hand it seeks to defend itself vis a vis Luther by demonstrating that he and Melanchthon are in fundamental agreement on the issues at stake, but at the same time it will turn about and refuse to grant that Luther has anything to contribute to what that agreement is! Apparently it is alright for Luther to agree with Melanchthon, but not for Melanchthon to agree with Luther! This all, surely, is a highly arbitrary procedure. The exclusion of Luther from the discussion means, of course, that Melanchthon alone is used to interpret the confession. As even the Roman Catholic Peter Manns complained, one practices ecumenism at Luther's expense. But if Melanchthon is stripped even of his Lutheran convictions, all we have is medieval left-overs.

The fruits of the procedure become rather evident, it seems to me in the case of the satis est. Agreement in the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments can then simply be interpreted to mean "consensus in historic catholic doctrine" (Lindbeck, St. Olaf Lecture, p. 6).⁷ Anyone used to reading Luther or even Melanchthon (at least of 1530 and earlier) or the predecessor documents to the CA itself could hardly read the satis est in that fashion. It would not escape notice that what is being spoken of here is not a body of historic doctrine but the activity of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments properly. Agreement concerning the proper doing of these things is enough for the true unity of the church, regardless of differences in human conventions, languages, institutions, and ceremonies, etc. To read it as consensus in historic catholic doctrine simply places the unity question back on something we do. It leads inexorably to debate about what is included in consensus on "historic catholic doctrine." In other words, it leads right back to the sort of interminable internal debates that have exhausted American Lutherans about whether doctrina evangelii in CA 7 means, as Missouri Synod hard-liners insisted, "the gospel and all its parts" or contrariwise, just a kind of liberal gospel reductionism. Faced with that choice, one is better advised, no doubt, to get oneself back to Rome, in the (vain?) hope that a bishop will be kinder than a biblicist!

If one reads the CA as a Lutheran confession or apology one is not, it would seem to me, restricted to these unsavory alternatives. CA 7, like all the articles of the CA, spells out the consequences of justification by faith alone. It is a confession to the faith-creating power of the gospel. The satis est question is therefore a question about whether we believe the gospel actually succeeds in making us one, whether it is actually enough, or whether something more, some appeal to "higher" authority or structure, is needed. As such it becomes something of an existential question for the church. Do we find it to be enough? What do we do if we don't? What do we do if other's don't? What could that mean other than that the fire has gone out? From a Lutheran perspective there could ultimately be only one answer to such questions. If it is not enough it must not have been preached or heard. The only thing to do then is to attend to the theology that fosters the proper preaching of it and to preach it until we, and they, have had "enough!"

Now this does not propose some sort of gospel reductionism or anything of that sort. It proposes the most radical sort of gospel proclamation there is: a proclamation in which God acts to put sinners to death to raise them to new life. What one has to attend to theologically, therefore, is how to do that. Theological concern and effort is invested finally, therefore, not in making maximal or minimal doctrinal claims, but in the art of distinguishing law from gospel and in the usus of this craft. Was Christum treibet is always decisive for such theology.

One is not therefore being offered a choice between the sum total of "historic catholic doctrine" and a minimalistic gospel. Historic Lutheranism has never been interested in that game. Why should one who has heard and been liberated by the gospel be interested either in maximal or minimal doctrinal statements? That would be akin to making maximal or minimal requirements for good works! One has to do with God on the move in Word and Sacrament. One has to do with a divine ordinance. Nothing can set itself above that, in heaven or on earth. This gospel is the highest, the ultimate, the final Word of God. This gospel cannot therefore appeal to anything beyond itself. Preaching the gospel is the highest exercise of authority there is in the church. If

others don't agree, there is no higher authority or reason I can call upon to convince them that they should, or that they had better. There is no institution that can grant the authority to do that. The gospel, by its very nature, fixes an absolute limit, an eschatological limit. There is nothing beyond or above or after it save the God who through his Son ordained it to be spoken. The reformers made a great point of saying that the last word about this affair is simply the word of Jesus: "My sheep hear my voice." If people don't hear it, the only thing we can do is say it again, and pray for the Spirit. But then we had best invest our effort in making sure we say it properly!

This gospel, precisely because it is the last word creates what CA 7 refers to as the true unity of the church. It does so simply because it takes and commands "the high ground" and puts us in our place under itself. Precisely because it is the gospel of the forgiveness of sins it levels us and puts us all in the same place. But also because it is the gospel of the forgiveness of sins it grants a unity that is not our possession, but always a gift. It comes to us from the one who alone can give it. Therefore, it is a unity which can only be believed. It breaks the surface of visibility only in the doing of the forgiving, the right preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. And "right" means simply that it is given, no strings attached. It cannot betray itself. Were it to come or demand authority in any other way it would not be gospel, but rather law and human ordinance.

Those who wish to make additions beyond the satis est often like to prepare the way by the platitude that CA 7 and 8 do not spell out a complete doctrine of the church. Perhaps that is true. But that cannot be used as pretext for ignoring that what CA 7 and 8 do say is absolutely fundamental. Furthermore, if one reads them with a Lutheran hermeneutic one will see that there is much more than immediately meets the eye. What the CA proposes is an utterly unromantic understanding of the church. The church of Jesus Christ is created by that most unromantic theologoumenon of all, the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, not by any iustitia propria, human achievement, commonality, institutionalism, holiness, priesthood, or what have you. Those things just breed disunity. It rests solely on the iustitia aliena, or, as Melancthon would say, the merits of Christ.

When CA 7 says that it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree or consent to the pure teaching of the gospel, this is what it means. This is not a theological platitude, not a kind of self-evident preliminary, to which one can nod in passing before moving on to "real" or "concrete" unity. To be captivated and put under the gospel, to consent to being so placed, to being a sinner, is to become one who knows that the true unity of the church can only be believed, and just for that reason not seen, i.e., not confused with any human achievement or institution, and just so to turn one's entire effort to the proclamation. The true unity of the church is therefore part of the gospel. The fact that this unity is not visible in anything other than the proclamation of the gospel is itself a consequence of the gospel. If the visibility of the church is sought in anything other than the proclamation of the gospel, it is not good news and it does not belong in the creed. Complaint that emphasis on the true unity of CA 7 somehow undercuts "real" unity is of a piece with the complaint that the gospel of justification undercuts good works. It is simply a failure to take account of how the gospel works. And the only cure for that is more gospel!

The fact that the church and its true unity are a creation of the gospel and thus an object of faith alone is no doubt the reason why the confessional documents show little interest in what we might call the "visible" or the "empirical" church as such. They were not romantics. Much to our chagrin they seem interested neither in sharp distinctions between the visible and the invisible, the revealed and the hidden, nor in protracted descriptions of what the visible or empirical church ought to be. That is because they had an entirely different understanding of how the true unity of the church relates to who we are and what we do. They rejected the charge that they were guilty of shattering the unity of the church because the unity of the church can neither be created nor broken by human effort or perfidy. They simply believed the promise that one holy church would be and remain forever and that the gates of hell could not prevail against it. They knew, of course, that in this world human institutions are necessary to carry on the proclamation. But that is the case in the other estates (politics, economics) as well. The divine ordinance coins itself in particular human institutions. But

it is not necessary for the true unity of the church that there be agreement about such institutions. The true unity granted by the gospel does not mean uniformity or sameness. To demand that would simply be to deny the gospel itself.

The distinction vital to the confessors was not visible versus invisible and such like, but rather Divine ordination versus human construction. This distinction runs virtually throughout the whole Book of Concord. The Divine ordination, the preaching of the gospel, creates the true unity, and that is the only unity that really matters. The human institutions may, and indeed even should vary according to place and time. Under the gospel they should blossom and flower. The reason they did not speak much about unity of a visible or empirical sort was simply, I think, that they neither expected it in this age, nor did they know what it could mean. How could unity in the gospel become visible? What would there be to see? The only thing visible beyond the preaching and the sacraments would be a human contrivance. About such there will likely never be agreement, and if there is, it will spell not unity but tyranny.

Those who press for visible unity, as is the wont today, like repeatedly to serve up the words from the Apology, "We are not dreaming about some Platonic Republic, as has been slanderously alleged...." The passage pops up almost as often as Luther's saying that his followers ought not be called Lutherans. Judging from their overuse, those two passages must pretty nearly be the most authoritative thing they ever said! But rarely is much careful attention given to what is actually being said. The reason why this church is not like a Platonic Republic is not because it is somehow to be translated into institutional visibility but simply because, unlike a Platonic Republic, it does actually exist, and will exist until the end of the age. It exists, however, not by human guarantee, might, or togetherness, but by the power of the divine promise. It is made up of true believers and righteous folk scattered throughout the world and comes to our attention because of its marks, the gospel and the sacraments. You can tell it is there precisely because there is a mysterious folk who want only to preach Jesus Christ and not themselves!

Ironically, those who like to make the point that the church is

not a Platonic Republic often turn about and act as though it were in fact exactly such. Ecumenism then gets defined virtually as the task of realizing the invisible Platonic ideal, "living it out," making it visible perhaps by getting us some "real" bishops! The reformers did not so think. They knew what "visible unity" meant: Rome! And they had had enough of that. True unity was a gift of the gospel. They believed that the church actually exists throughout the world of space and time because they heard the gospel and trusted that God is at work through it.

Once the true unity of the actually existing church is established in the gospel, differences in human institutions are radically relativized. Peace and tranquility but not uniformity will come precisely when it is realized that it is not necessary to agree in such things. Thus the way is open to a very inclusive ecumenical stance. The Reformers did not claim that they were the only ones who were doing the proper preaching of the gospel or administering of the sacraments. Never, even in his most vitriolic attacks against the papacy as antichrist did Luther deny that the gospel was absent from the Roman Church. Nor was there, as far as I can see, a list of some sort spelling out what proper preaching or administering meant. Preaching the gospel meant simply that the forgiveness of sins was done, that the church was a kingdom of grace and pardon. Proper administration of the sacraments meant simply that they were to be given as gospel, conferring forgiveness without restrictions, such as limiting baptism to adults or believers, compulsory private confession, withholding the cup from the laity or strings of a Donatist sort. Luther's own words on that score occur repeatedly and are well known. Those from his personal confession in "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper" which stand behind CA 7 are typical:⁸

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....(LW 37:367-8.)

It is obvious from all this that what really exercised the Reformers was the imposition of human ordinances, ceremonies, and conditions on the gospel and the sacraments as in some sense necessary for or contributing to righteousness before God and concomitantly essential for the true unity of the church. The satis est represents a clear drawing of the line in this matter. It is enough for the true unity of the church agree on what is divinely ordained, preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments properly. Agreement in human ordinances, however advantageous, cannot be required for such unity. To demand such agreement is to mistake and therefore to mis-preach the gospel itself.

Now what does this say for our structuring of ministry? It seems obvious that what really exercised the reformers was the question of "something more." To demand something additional to the proper preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments, some human institution, ceremony, appeal to authority, etc., is to endanger the gospel itself. It is to allow something other than the forgiveness of sins to be the foundation of the church and its unity. Human institutions differ the world over and have differed throughout time. If they cannot be considered necessary for righteousness before God they cannot be demanded as necessary either for the true unity of the church or for shaping its ministry.

This certainly means, first of all, that whatever we want to say about the episcopate or a threefold office, the distinction between what is divine ordinance and human contrivance has to be maintained. To admit a human ordinance as necessary to righteousness before God or for true unity, is to betray the gospel. The necessity for ministry itself, of course, comes with the gospel (CA 5). It is, as such, divinely instituted. But the structuring of that ministry in this age is human arrangement. The particular shape of such structuring must be clearly understood to be of variable human institution. When the Reformers expressed the desire even to retain bishops and traditional structures,

they did so always under the proviso that these would be understood as human institutions (de iure humano). That for them was an absolute. Considerable unclarity and ambiguity reigns in ecumenical discussion here as elsewhere in these matters today. Indeed, there seems to be a kind of practiced ambiguity in ecumenical language. Does "historic episcopate" mean actual historical succession? Is it necessary to believe in episcopal ordination as long as you just do it? Just what is being asked of us? And so on. The satis est should not also be thrown to the dogs of ambiguity. It simply demands that we not concede to those who want to make particular order, either high or low, constitutive of or necessary for salvation or therefore unity. This is a theological and not just a practical necessity. It follows from the nature of the gospel. The gospel is the last Word, the eschatological limit, it knows no appeal to anything higher, beyond, or after, itself. To be grasped by that is to understand that agreement in human forms in this age is not necessary. The peace and tranquility the Reformers desired will come when the gospel itself brings us to that understanding.

NOTES

1. Ernst Wolf, "Sanctorum Communio. Erwaegung zum Problem der Romantisierung des Kirchenbegriffs." Peregrinatio. Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag. 1954. 279-301. Hereafter: Wolf, Romantisierung.
2. Hans Joachim Iwand. "Die grundlegende Bedeutung der Lehre vom unfreien Willen fuer den Glauben." Um den rechten Glauben. Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag. 1959. 17.
3. Ibid., 17.
4. Wolf, Romantisierung. 289.
5. Ibid. 289.
6. George Lindbeck. "Ecumenical Directions and Confessional Construals." Unpublished lecture delivered at St. Olaf, June 7, 1990. 6.
7. Ibid. 7.
8. See Ernst Wolf. "Die Einheit der Kirche im Zeugnis der Reformation." Peregrinatio. Muenchen: Chr. Kaiser Verlag. 1954. 146-182, for a collection of passages of this sort.