

THE TERM “GOSPEL” IN AUGSBURG CONFESSION ARTICLE VII

The *Augsburg Confession* VII, on the church, is basic for the proper Lutheran approach to church unity. In Scripture virtually every passage that refers to the Church also refers to the Holy Spirit and the Gospel and Sacraments using various expressions. That is a separate study. The question whether “Gospel” should be understood in a narrow sense or a broader sense in this article has come up in the material put forward in the LCA for the convention in October. The chief thrust is for full membership in the LWF.

Augsburg Confession VII reads: “It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the Gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere. As Paul says in Ephesians 4[:4-5]: ‘There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism’” (Translation of the German text by Kolb and Wengert, emphasis added).

The LCA documentation argues that at the time of the Reformation “the pure gospel meant the gospel properly distinguished from the law.” If to restore unity among Christians all that was needed were agreement that Jesus Christ died for the sin of the world, or agreement only in the most fundamental teachings of the faith, external unity would have been easy to achieve in 1530 and would be now. It would ignore many serious differences. Because the member churches of the LWF understand the requirement for unity as Gospel in the narrow sense, it is easy to understand why the LWF officially promotes a policy of “reconciled diversity” in relation to other churches and church-unity.

The term “Gospel” is sometimes used very broadly. Reformed churches often say “the Gospel” when they mean “the Word of God.” “The Gospel according to Matthew” contains a good deal about the right interpretation of the Law, as in the Sermon on the Mount. Of course the Lutherans at Augsburg wanted to distinguish the Gospel from the Law, and to prevent the Sacraments from being turned into human works. However, the headings alone of the articles of the *Augsburg Confession* I-XXI show that the crucial concerns were not restricted to a narrow view of “Gospel.” The articles are: God, Original Sin, the Son of God, Justification, The Office of the Ministry, The New Obedience, The Church, What the Church is, Baptism, the Holy Supper, Confession, Repentance, The Use of the Sacraments, Order in the Church, Church Usages, Civil Government, The Return of Christ, The Freedom of the Will, The Cause of Sin, Faith and Good Works, and the Cult of the Saints. At the end of XXI, it is said, “This is just about a summary of the doctrines that are preached and taught in our churches for proper Christian instruction, the consolation of consciences, and the amendment of believers.” None of these articles were dispensable. The following articles show that concern for the Gospel included rejection of abuses. Their titles are: Both Kinds in the Sacrament, The Marriage of Priests, The Mass, Confession, The Distinction of Foods, Monastic Vows, and The Power of Bishops. For the Gospel to be rightly distinguished from Law, The *Augsburg Confession* found it necessary to include all these.

Furthermore, with what does the text of the article VII contrast the Gospel? “It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere.” That contrast shows that the Gospel was not understood in a narrow sense. That is also made clear by *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Articles VII and VIII, The Church, where ceremonies are discussed at length. It accuses the Roman Confutation of wanting to retain rites derived from the apostles and refusing to retain the doctrine of the apostles (38).

On the words, “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”, The LCA material for the October convention says: “The LCA has tended to understand the ‘pure’ teaching of the gospel to imply the full doctrinal content of the Book of Concord, it has usually made full agreement on the Book of Concord a condition of church fellowship” (emphasis added). It claims that the narrow interpretation of Gospel is more faithful to the original meaning of the text.

The words “tended to” and “usually” are deceptive. Honesty should have required the writers to refer to their own *Theses of Agreement*, which has spoken about this issue. Thesis V has a whole section titled, “The Church and Its Unity According to Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession*.” It is one of the clearest and best sections of the *Theses*, in which Dr Sasse had a hand, and which, unusually for the *Theses*, tackles the question by adding negative statements to the positive ones. They say, on this point, “22. For Lutherans the consensus

required should always be regarded as the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord.” The negative statements expressly rule out the approach that the advocates of membership in the LWF want to take. “24. With these theses we reject the following errors: ... (5) to understand *Augustana* VII ... (a) as limiting the area of the Gospel to less than, or expanding it beyond, what has been stated in paragraph 22; (b) in a way which overlooks the fact that the true contrast to agreement in the Gospel and Sacraments is agreement in matters of human traditions, i.e., rites and ceremonies instituted by men.”

Therefore the writers of the LCA document go against their own *Theses* when they write, “The other interpretation, which we adopt here and which is also adopted by the LWF, is more faithful to the original meaning of the text.” It tries to explain away the contrast with ceremonies instituted by human beings by saying, “The Reformers were here answering charges that they were breaking away from Rome and setting up their own new (sectarian) church.” Of course Melancthon and his comrades wanted to show that the *Augsburg Confession* did not differ in any way from biblical teaching or from the universal church. They were not so foolish to imagine that all their troubles were ceremonies.

The *Augsburg Confession* makes its meaning clear in other ways that it does not restrict the basis for agreement to fundamentals. The text in German does not say merely “the Gospel” but “the doctrine of the Gospel.” The text adds the adverbs, “the Gospel is rightly (German text: purely) taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.”

The Lutheran approach, which ought to be followed, is stated in the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*: “For this reason the churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching and in all the articles of the faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments. As it is said, ‘dissimilarity in fasting shall not destroy the unity of faith.’” IX, 31).

The deplorable insincerity is evident in the lack of concern about the betrayal by many of the member churches of the LWF of the real presence in the Lord’s Supper. The Sacraments are not rightly administered when those who deny the real presence are admitted to Lutheran altars. So what is the basic reason for this whole falsely ecumenical direction? It is unwillingness to take seriously the Scriptural insistence on sound teaching of all that Christ has commanded, (Mt 28:20, Jn 8:31; Acts 2:42; 2 Tm 1:13), and unwillingness to apply the passages that warn against and condemn error (Mt 7:15-16; Rm 16:17; Gal 1:6-9; 5:9; Phil 3:2; 2 Th 2:3; 1 Tm 1:20; 4:1-6; 5:22; 2 Tm 2:17-19; Tt 3:10; 1 Jn 4:1-6; 2 Jn 9-10; Rv 22:18-19.) These passages consistently refer to the means of grace, which we call “the marks of the church” as the proper criteria.