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CHURCH AND MINISTRY IN THE LUTHERAN SYMBOLS:
SERVING THE GOSPEL TO THE PRIESTLY PEOPLE

In a particularly eloquent passage in his *Forum Letter* of 30 May 1979 Richard John Neuhaus had the following to say in a story on the foibles of contemporary American Lutheranism: "We are not dealing with an ideal church. We are dealing with a church so muddled and compromised that only a faithful Lord would dare to own up to it." That is such an apt statement, such an exquisitely Lutheran statement, that I promptly typed it on a file card and stuck it on a crowded little cork-board on my office wall above my typewriter. It stands, therefore, as a kind of benediction on my work as I compose this essay --and, more importantly, as a contemporary summary of a couple of the most essential motifs in the view of the church and, by implication, the ministry in the Lutheran symbolical books. The church confessed at Augsburg is a flawed church, a sinners' church. It is not the shadow of a flawless hierarchy, nor the collection of morally-pure persons envisioned by the so-called "enthusiasts" of the sixteenth century, nor surely the invisible and ideal spiritual community of the Hussites. It was rather the church of the sort disclosed to the visitors in Electoral Saxony just a couple of years earlier --about which Luther could write, "The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism . . . Good God, what wretchedness I beheld!" These words are from the preface to the Small Catechism; they continue:

The common people, especially those who live in the country, have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the

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holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts, and now that the Gospel has been restored they have mastered the fine art of abusing liberty (Small Catechism, Preface, 2-3).

Some American Lutherans, it seems, still cherish the notion that there might be some other church, some pure and perfect church, where all the pastors are competent, where all the faithful live up to their name, where the sacrament is received at least weekly by all, and where the latest fund drive is heavily oversubscribed! Maybe it is *reine Lehre*, or maybe it is proper procedure, or maybe it is well-choreographed chancel prancing --but many of us American Lutherans still imagine that we can find or produce an ideal church, a pure and proper and flawless church, perhaps around the corner of the next church convention.

The confessors at Augsburg in the summer of 1530 knew better. They knew that the church had been corrupt; they had been at work for a dozen years or so to renew and reform it, as the slogan of the time had it, "in head and members". They knew also that the church was still far from ideal; Luther could write those poignant words in the preface to the Small Catechism, and Melanchthon could pen the words of the Augsburg Confession, Article VIII, "Many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly." And with that, I have indicated one of the crucial elements in this presentation: the Lutheran symbolical writings talk about the church and the ministry in utterly realistic, this-worldly, concrete terms. So also Melanchthon in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world (Apology 7/8,20).

Some Preliminary Considerations

The intense study of the Augsburg Confession which has been occasioned by the celebration of the 450th anniversary of its presentation has caused a good bit of mind-changing on the part of a number of scholars.

And that mind-changing may just have filtered through to the common Christian folk as well. In my case, it has caused a major shift in emphasis, and I have to confess that fact to you before getting on to the substance of my remarks this afternoon. I used to think, with all the filial piety of a fresh-baked seminarian, and even with some of the sophistication of a graduate student in the area of the confessional writings of Lutheranism, that the question of the center of gravity of the Augsburg Confession was settled, hands-down, with a nod in the direction of Article IV on justification. Justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith was, after all, the heart of the reformatory discovery of Luther and his associates. And that notion constitutes, in the provocative view of Gritsch and Jenson, the unique and characteristic Lutheran proposal of dogma to the universal church.

Nevertheless, I speak to you today out of a somewhat different persuasion. Justification through faith may well have been the basis of the insight of the Lutheran reformers, but the focus of attention at Augsburg was really on the church and its ministry, or on the means of appropriating and realizing the forgiveness of sins which is indeed *sola gratia, propter Christum, and sola fide*. The whole confession is written as a way of drawing out the implications of faith-justification for the life and ministry of the church, and for the reform of certain late medieval abuses which had obscured such an understanding of the gospel --and for doing all of that while preserving the unity of the western church.

It is striking to notice that, though the Confutation raised only a marginal and basically irrelevant objection to Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon's Apology suddenly spends a great deal of time and ink on the question of the church, to a degree matched only by topics related to justification, such as original sin and penance. And it is striking to notice that, though the negotiations in Augsburg in 1530 seemed hardly to touch on the topic of ecclesiology, that very topic rose to the top of the heap and in fact became the decisive point for the breakdown of the colloquy at Ratisbon in 1541, the last significant conversation between Lutherans and Roman Catholics until the resumption of negotiations fifteen

years ago. And it is further noteworthy that topics related to ecclesiology have been a kind of preoccupation in both the American and the international dialog sessions between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the last fifteen years. Are they trying to tell us something?

In what follows, I intend to restrict my discussion to the Augsburg Confession, making occasional reference to the other confessional writings only as that is necessary in order to draw out the implications of the basic confessional document. That restriction is imposed not only by the limits of time for this presentation but also by the fact that the Augsburg Confession is clearly basic to all the others and that it (coming as it did at a key and decisive moment for the reformatory movement) is fundamental for subsequent Lutheranism.

I should also point out that the Augsburg Confession must be read in its setting, against the background of the discussion and the polemic of the time. That means, of course, all the obvious historical and critical things. But it means, especially, that the Augsburg Confession must be read as a document intended for Lutheran/Roman Catholic *rapprochement*, as a contribution to the maintenance of the unity of the church at a time of high tension. Accordingly, the Augsburg Confession needs to be read, as it were, within earshot of representatives of the church of Rome, and with the expectation that such reading will produce dialogue, negotiation, and the further refinement of its pronouncements. That is why the rash of recent joint studies of the Augsburg Confession by Lutherans and Roman Catholics is so very significant, and why the results of those studies are ignored only at our peril. Put simply, I shall in what follows endeavor to provide the results of a reading of the Augsburg Confession in the context of those joint discussions, nuanced by the echoes from the conversation partners across the table.

Finally, I should admit that I frankly understand myself to be saying nothing that is particularly new. If you are on top of the literature, especially the wave of joint studies coming out of the German churches, you have heard it all before. Yet, in spite of the numerous publications on the subject, these things have surely not been heard and observed by decisive majorities in American churches --where Lutherans

still think that the universal priesthood of the baptized is the basic confessional statement on ministry; where Roman Catholics think that that *is* what Lutherans think; where confusion reigns supreme about the notion of a teaching authority in the church (witness a synodical president in a church convention in 1973 pleading for the passage of a series of doctrinal resolutions with the words, "Somebody's got to have some authority in this church!"); and, above all, where clergy and faithful alike suffer from endemic confusion about their respective role and function.

Let me now conclude this introductory section with what I take to be a number of rather striking features of the view of the Augsburg Confession on the church and its ministry.

- 1) The Augsburg Confession mentions the divinely-instituted office of the ministry *before* it takes up the question of the church, thus linking the office of the ministry in closest possible proximity with the notion of the gospel as the means for the attainment of saving faith, which saving faith is then productive of good work (Article VI) and of the one church (Article VII).
- 2) There is no mention in the Augsburg Confession whatsoever of the universal priesthood of believers, for that notion had by 1530 outlived its usefulness in reformatory polemics. It is in fact mentioned only once in the entire Book of Concord, and that is in connection with the matter of ordaining persons to the sacred ministry!
- 3) There is no mention in the Augsburg Confession of an invisible church, or even of a spiritually-understood church in isolation from the concretely-existing church in which an ordered ministry provides the gospel and the sacraments.
- 4) The Augsburg Confession knows nothing of an abstract function of ministry apart from its concrete occurrence in incumbents of the office of the ministry. This parallels the notion that the gospel may not be abstracted from its concrete saying and doing in preaching and sacraments.

5) The Augsburg Confession does not advocate separation from the existing church, despite manifest and serious abuses. It aims at renewal, while heeding its own promise (in the preface) not to omit doing anything which may serve the cause of Christian unity.

That is a brief summary of what, notably, the Augsburg Confession does *not* say about the church and the ministry. There remains only to offer another clue to the understanding of the Augsburg Confession --and then we can get on to the constructive task of looking at the document.

An important key to understanding the Augsburg Confession is to remember to read it backwards. Recall, please, that Part Two (on abuses) was written before Part One (on matters of doctrine). And keep in mind that Article XXVIII, on the authority of bishops, was likely the first of all the articles to be written; that article is in any event the longest and in many respects a very crucial article (witness the fact that it contains fifteen of the thirty-two instances of the use of the word "gospel" in the German version of the Augsburg Confession). Accordingly, though justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith is the key reformatory insight, the Augsburg Confession is massively about the *church*. And therefore it is massively about the *ministry* as that which keeps the gospel alive in the church --or should I say, keeps the church alive in the gospel.

With that in mind, recall the sequence of articles about matters of faith and doctrine in Part One of the Augsburg Confession, and notice some of the consequences of that sequence for the view of church and ministry reflected there. Articles I to III rehearse the catholic and apostolic consensus and constitute a *prima facie* case for the catholicity of the Augsburg Confession. Article IV identifies the reformatory impetus in the gospel of forgiveness by grace of Christ's sake through faith. Then come Article V on the office of the ministry, Article VI on the holy life, Articles VII and VIII on the church, Articles IX through XIV on the sacraments, Article XV on church rites, and Article XVI on matters civil/political. There the article on the

office of the ministry stands at the head of the large central section of Part One of the Augsburg Confession, a section on the appropriation and implications of the gospel for the life and mission of the church in the world. That, it seems to me, constitutes sufficient grounds for a focus on church and ministry, one which can be made in the confidence that one is touching on matters of central importance for the document in question.

Ten Theses on Church and Ministry

1) The church is the creature of the Spirit of God via the office of the ministry as the incumbents of that office proclaim the gospel and provide the sacraments.

On this the testimony of the Augsburg Confession is univocal. The church is comprised of believers (Article VIII), and faith is the work of the Holy Spirit of God in those who hear the gospel (Article V), and for the obtaining of such faith God has instituted the office of the ministry (Article V). To be sure, Article VII does not mention the office of the ministry when it speaks of the gathering of believers in which the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered; yet that role of the ministry is clearly there in Article V. We may therefore conclude that Article VII implies that not only the gospel and the sacraments are constitutive of the church, but also the office of the ministry is constitutive of the church --an office of ministry whose function it is to preach and to preside at the sacramental celebrations of the gathering of believers. And Article XXVIII is straightforward in its description of the power or authority of bishops:

to forgive sins, to reject doctrine which is contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude from the fellowship of the church ungodly persons whose wickedness is known, doing all this without human power, simply by the Word (Article XXVIII, 21 Latin).

If God grants forgiveness only through the gospel, then people's salvation depends upon that gospel being proclaimed and sacramentally enacted. In that fact is grounded the necessity of the ministry of the gospel --a ministry which in the view of the Augsburg Confession is never mere or abstracted function, but always as ordered, public, official ministry.

2) The church is that gathering of believers in which recognizably authentic (i.e., apostolic) gospel is proclaimed and done in sermon and sacraments.

The key passage here is Article VII:

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. 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. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.

Strictly speaking, the reference to the purity of the gospel and the rightness of the administered sacraments is a tautology. Gospel that is not pure is not gospel; sacraments that are not rightly done are not grace-conveyingactings-out of the gospel promise. On the other hand, however, the words *pure et recte* serve to strike the note of the apostolicity of the gospel. The apostolic gospel, after all, is the criterion for what is to be preached and done in the church; even the Formula of Concord can point to that when it appeals to the prophetic and apostolic writings as judge, rule and norm of teaching and doing in the church. The apostolicity of the church, then, is noted when in that church the same gospel is proclaimed as the one which Jesus transmitted to the apostles.

There is another comment called for at this point. The apostolic gospel-and-sacraments is recognized precisely when and as it is in fact said and done in a concrete assembly of believers. And it is recognized precisely in the act of trusting it! The criterion is not a doctrine about the gospel, or a set of rubrics for the celebration of the sacraments, but the gospel as it is in fact preached and the sacraments as they are in fact done in the churches. When in the Apology Melancthon calls the gospel and the sacraments marks of the church (and he is obviously following a developing notion in Luther's thought at this point, a notion which comes to full flower in Luther's *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539), he evidently is referring to that which is notable, obvious, audible and visible.

The "pure doctrine of the gospel", confessional phrase that it is, does not refer to a pure doctrine about what the gospel is or about what its effects are; it refers rather to the purely-preached and purely-taught gospel as that actually occurs in a congregation.

3) The church lives in the world, producing the fruits of faith in the good works of holy lives, yet it lives out of the very un-worldly source of the gospel said and done in its midst.

Here we recall that Article VI on good works stands, perhaps strangely and awkwardly, between the articles on the ministry and on the church --as if, I suggest, to say that the first and necessary consequence of gospel heard with faith will be holy lives in the world, producing all the good works which God has commanded. Article XX makes specific appeal to the decalog, as well as to "instructions concerning true Christian estates and works." (Article XX,2). Moreover, both Article VI and its expansion, Article XX, make it clear that the source for such holy living is the gospel, as that is heard and received with faith, which is "not merely a knowledge of historical events but is a confidence in God and in the fulfillment of his promises" (Article XX,25).

If the church, then, really is promise-trusters at God's work in the world, then we have in the Augsburg Confession a view of the church which successfully avoids several unwelcome excesses: it is first of all not hierarchical, as if the church consisted in the priests and faithful who are in obedience to a particular bishop; nor is this view of the church "enthusiastic (Schwaermerisch)", as if the church consisted of those reborn people who live manifestly as pure and holy people who refuse civil and military service and the like; nor is this view, to anticipate later developments, sociological, as if it consisted of like-minded devotees of Jesus who form an association based on a shared and common view of the world --or at least of Jesus. Instead, the decisive element is the notion of gospel-trusters, and they are found in the shop, in the kitchen, in the barn, and in the chanceries.

4) The office of the ministry is not optional, nor merely beneficial to the church's being, but absolutely necessary, in the only sense in which anything is necessary in the church, *viz.*, necessary for salvation.

The notion of the pastoral office has its place in the Augsburg Confession's conception of the church at the very place where the gospel and the sacraments stand. Ministry is seen as one with gospel and sacraments. The gospel is at the same time ministry of the gospel, and the sacraments are at the same time ministry of administering the sacraments (Articles V and VII). Church without office of ministry would be a church without the gospel, without forgiveness of sins, without salvation. There can be no church without the gospel, and thus no church without the office of the ministry of the gospel. Without that office, the church is not the church. "[Eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life] cannot come about except through the ministry of Word and sacraments" (Article XXVIII,8-9).

Furthermore, the Augsburg Confession repeatedly underscores that the office of the ministry is a divine institution. "God instituted the office of the ministry" (Article V,1). And Article XXVIII, in a passage cited earlier, reminds the churches of their obligation to be obedient to the bishops because their work ("to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest") is carried out "according to divine right" and "not by human power but by God's Word alone" (Article XXVIII, 21). That is what lies behind the statement in Article XIV that those who publicly teach and preach and administer the sacraments must have a regular call, i.e., must have a call from a Christian congregation and must be ordained with invocation of the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands by the bishops (or, when necessary, by neighboring presbyters).

All of this simply reflects a recurring element in Luther's own view of the ministry, which sees the ministry embedded in the whole process of salvation. The ministry, he says, "is the sort of office in

which our life and our blessedness reside" (Weimar edition of Luther's Works 28,466). Through the function of the means of grace in the office of the ministry "the passion and resurrection of Christ come into use" (Weimar edition of Luther's Works 34/I,318). For all Luther's readiness (in contrast to Melanchthon and the Augsburg Confession) to ground the office of the ministry also in the notion of the universal priesthood of the baptized, Luther steadily grounded the pastoral office in the institution of God. That is demonstrated with typical Teutonic thoroughness by Hellmut Lieberg in his magisterial and exhaustive study, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melanchthon* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962).

5) The church, the community of believers gathered around and by the gospel said and sacramentally enacted in its midst, has both horizontal and vertical dimensions; i.e., it is a gathering of believers, and it is also the creature of God's Spirit -- *communio sanctorum* in both the personal and the objective senses.

With its phrase, "assembly of believers" (in Latin, *congregatio sanctorum*), Article VII is simply reproducing the *communio sanctorum* of the apostolic creed, and it is doing so in a way common in the church since Thomas Aquinas. Now, though Luther tended to stress the personal aspect and meaning of that phrase, in which it is taken to mean a communion of holy people, and though that is surely the sense which dominates here in Article VII as well as elsewhere in the Book of Concord, it is nevertheless also true that the next clause of Article VII speaks of a reality which keeps alive also the objective sense of the phrase, *communio sanctorum*, i.e., a sharing in the holy things, as it speaks of the gospel said and done in the midst of the liturgical assembly.

Accordingly, what we might call the horizontal dimension of the church is the fact that it is an assembling of believers, and what we might call the vertical dimension (though these labels are about as accurate as conceiving of our Lord's ascension as a kind of primitive space launch) its nature as creation of God's Spirit. This duality of nature is repeatedly noted by Melanchthon in the Apology (7/8,5.8.13.

20) --and it surely lies behind Luther's famous and often misunderstood dictum in the Smalcald Articles: "Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers, and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (Smalcald Articles III,xii,2). And we might as well note at this point that the same duality is at the heart of the constitution on the church of Vatican II when it speaks of the church as people of God and also as *mysterium*.

The fruit of this tension or duality has been alluded to earlier. As concrete event, as assembly of people, the church is not dissolved into a Platonic idea nor into an invisible or spiritualized phenomenon as in Hus or Wycliffe. That was, in fact, the apparent fear of the *confutatores* --and with good reason, since Luther had defended such views against John Eck at Leipzig. And the church's nature as creature of God's Spirit through the ministry of gospel and sacraments preserves it from both hierarchical and sociological misconceptions which would make it the gathering of those who share at least obedience to a particular bishop as their common bond.

No, this church is truly extant on earth (where else?), and it has external marks. Yet, as the righteousness of Christ in people's hearts, and as the creature of God or the body of Christ, it is a hidden body, a mixed body, a reality apparent precisely to faith. For faith alone can trust the promise that any given liturgical assembly is indeed the body of Christ. In the case of some assemblies, a heroic faith is called for!

6) The preference, indeed the goal, of the Augsburg Confession is preservation of the traditional canonical episcopal polity, and it envisions no withdrawal from the then-existing church, but only its renewal according to the gospel.

Article XXVIII attacks the power of the bishops, to be sure, but it does so *only* on account of their then current claim to temporal power as something held by divine right. In fact, that article is positively fulsome in its ascription to bishops of authority in the gospel.

According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God's Word alone (Article XXVIII,21).

The reformers were sensitive on this point, because Eck and others had concluded that the several reforms which had been introduced in the territories that had gone over to the reformation had been done only as infractions of episcopal authority. Thus, studies of the negotiations at Augsburg in the summer of 1530 show Melanchthon to be as diligent as possible in his efforts to preserve canonical church order and the episcopal constitution of the church. Those efforts are reflected not only in Melanchthon's famous qualification to his subscription of Luther's Smalcald Articles ("however, concerning the pope I hold that, if he would allow the Gospel, we, too, may concede to him that superiority over the bishops which he possesses by human right, making this concession for the sake of peace and general unity among the Christians who are now under him and who may be in the future"), but also, more formally and for our purposes even more pointedly, in the Apology:

On this matter [i.e., canonical ordination] we have given frequent testimony in the assembly to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority. . . . Furthermore, we want at this point to declare our willingness to keep the ecclesiastical and canonical polity, provided that the bishops stop raging against our churches (Apology 14:1,5).

It is simply an incontrovertible fact that Melanchthon wanted with all his might to preserve the *canonica politia*, and that means both the episcopal constitution of the church, including the bishop of Rome in a kind of primacy by human right, and the various grades or ranks of the public ministry.

At this point we need to consider, however briefly, what the notion of "divine right" means in the Augustana. Article XXVIII speaks in such a way as to make it a parallel phrase with "according to the Gospel" as that is used in Article VII (cf. Article XVIII, 21-23; Article VII,1). This important clue suggests that, given the silence of the New Testament about the "will of God" in matters of church

polity, the only way to determine whether a given "X" is by divine right or not is to determine whether that "X" is necessary for the authenticity of the gospel as trustable good news. There is simply no other criterion regularly and systematically employed in the Augustana by which to settle the question whether a given aspect of church leadership or administration is a matter of divine right or human choice.

Especially significant in this connection is that the Augsburg Confession envisions the exercise of a kind of three-layered magisterium or authority in the church: episcopal, confessional, and conciliar/synodal. The authority of the bishops is evident from passages already cited. The authority of the confession is reflected in the several passages which indicate the readiness of the confessors to continue in the *magno consensu* --a consensus they were not merely reporting but were also binding themselves to continue, in fact at the possible cost of their property, their domains, and their lives. The conciliar/synodal layer of authority is reflected in the several passages of the Augsburg Confession which hold open the hope for a future council in which the matters which still needed clarification could be resolved in --it was hoped-- a final and settled way.

But most significant of all is the insistence that such authority is itself *ordered* authority, limited authority. The limit and bound for the exercise of all such authority is, simply, the gospel. The recurring refrain in Article XXVIII is "according to the gospel." Here we must observe again the concurrence of the second Vatican council with the Augsburg Confession: the dogmatic constitution on divine revelation (10:2) reminds the faithful that the magisterium is not above the word of God.

I would simply observe at this point that these considerations are significant grounds for insisting that the Augsburg Confession is not a charter for a separate church but rather for a confessing movement within the one church, a church which, it was fervently hoped, would be renewed according to the gospel.

7) The term "gospel" as used in the Augsburg Confession means the message of forgiveness and justification *sola gratia, propter Christum, sola fide*; the stress is not on theological statements about the gospel, but on the actually-preached and actually-done gospel and sacraments by the public ministry within the concrete assembly of believers.

If we examine the use of the word "gospel" in the Augsburg Confession, we find that the word is used (in the German text) thirty-two times. Striking is the fact that fifteen of those instances are in Article XXVIII, on the power of bishops; another fifteen instances occur in articles directly dealing with church and ministry. On just a few occasions the word is used as a reference to the word of God; once it seems to refer to the scriptures, or at least to the four gospels. But the vast majority of the instances of the word "gospel" in the Augsburg Confession are clearly references to the message of forgiveness or justification; in fact, the term most often functions as shorthand for that particular understanding of the Christian message which is the reformatory insight reflected in Article IV.

From even the most casual study of the usage of the word gospel in the Augsburg Confession it is evident that the term stands at the center of the confessors' concern for the church and the ministry. The gospel is the Spirit's means for creating faith, and thus church. The gospel is the news that we have a gracious God, for Christ's sake. And according to the gospel, bishops have authority to preach, celebrate the sacraments, exercise the power of the keys, and judge doctrine. The point, I trust, is clear. Gospel provides the real touchstone and the final limits of churchly authority, just as it provides the source of the church's life.

Such authority as the gospel authorizes is as unique as the gospel itself, as unique as the church it calls into being. Gospel authority is not so much the authority of a fence or a boundary; rather, it is the sort of authority which *authorizes*, i.e., authority which enables and makes possible. I suppose my country parish calls have suggested to me that the gospel is the sort of authority which keeps the ecclesiastical cow where she belongs, not so much like the fence as rather

like the feedbox, the source of nourishment far from which no proper cow would want to stray. The gospel is the limit by being the enabler for the church's teaching and practice, the criterion by which its very existence is not merely judged but given.

Since the gospel has such status in and for the church, it is also evident that "pure" gospel and "right" sacramental administration do not refer to teachings or theological opinions *about* the gospel and the sacraments, but, in fact, to the gospel promise as it is in fact said and done in the midst of an assembly of believers.

8) The unity of the church is served and preserved by the very same force which created the church, *viz.*, the said gospel and the done sacraments --said and done, to be sure, by the incumbents of the office of the ministry; for that is what brings salvation.

Article VII is again the crucial passage. It does not say that the true unity of the church depends upon a right teaching about the doctrine of justification, or upon a correct sacramentology. Rather, it says that the very gospel in word and deed which makes the church the church in the first place is the same gospel which is sufficient to keep the church the one church. That seems to me now to be so inescapably obvious that I wonder how some of us Lutherans have ever managed to muddy that pellucid truth. One has to perform the most amazingly intricate theological gyrations in order to confuse this point. Yet some of my fellow Lutherans are in fact adept at that!

Of course, Article VII is hardly a full description of the nature and essence of the church. Yet it points to the crucial center and to the genuinely reformatory element in the Augsburg Confession's view of the church. That is a radical concentration of the ecclesiological (and ecumenical) problem on the question about the proper proclamation of the gospel and its proper sacramental enactment. One can, and often must, say a great deal more about the church. Melancthon hastens in Article VIII to add at least an anti-Donatist sentence or two, and we have already alluded to the expansion of this ecclesiological motif in the Apology. But this much is enough; stay

connected to this source, the Augsburg Confession confesses, and your ecclesiology (to say nothing of your ecumenical relations) will not go astray!

The pair of sentences in Article VII make an intriguing couple: *satis est*, and *non necesse est*; it is enough, and it is not necessary. The one interprets the other, and in both directions. To be sure, the logicians can point out that sufficient conditions and necessary conditions are not quite the same. Nevertheless, the function of the two statements together is clear; and, by the way, Melanchthon the Renaissance humanist hardly needed to be coached in logic! Other things are not needed; said and done gospel is enough for the church. That is so, because said and done gospel is all that is needed for salvation. (That, you may recall, is where we started, back in Article VI). The *satis est* statement, then, is no iconoclastic blast, nor is it a license for a sort *laissez-faire* ecumenism of the least common denominator. And it is surely not, as S. Becker has charged, the "Eclipse of Ecumenism" via what he calls the "worst kind of gospel reductionism." After all, only those things may count as signs and as constitutive elements or marks of the church which in fact meditate salvation, or justification *sola gratia, sola fide*. Article XXVIII, again, works this notion out in great detail; one paragraph may be taken as typical:

Inasmuch as such regulations as have been instituted as necessary to propitiate God and merit grace are contrary to the Gospel, it is not at all proper for the bishops to require such services of God. It is necessary to preserve the teaching of Christian liberty in Christendom, namely, that bondage to the law is not necessary for justification, as St. Paul writes in Gal. 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." For the chief article of the gospel must be maintained, namely, that we obtain the grace of God through faith in Christ without our merits; we do not merit it by services of God instituted by men (Article XXVIII,50-52).

What is it that is not necessary? Bondage to the law, the denial of Christian freedom. Article XV helps us see what Melanchthon and the others had in mind, when it mentions foods, calendars, festivals, fasting, holy days and the like. There is in fact a whole range of

such elements, developed in the history of the church, which are good and maybe even proper, and which surely may be observed to salutary effect. But the gospel criterion exposes the crucial matter: these do not mediate salvation, and so they do not affect or effect the unity or the existence of the church. Therefore they are not necessary. (Though, to be sure, the Augsburg Confession hastens to point out that most such usages are kept by the Lutherans because they contribute to peace and good order in the church.)

Now the hard question. Is the office of the ministry among these developments conditioned by time and place which are not necessary? To be sure, ministerial office is not mentioned in Article VII. Recall, however, that Article V says that the ministry, as office, was instituted by God, and thus sees that office to be necessary in the only way anything is necessary, namely, necessary for salvation. Article XXVIII, 9 adds that such gifts as eternal grace, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life "cannot come about except through the ministry of word and sacraments." Recall, too, that this is said not about a universal priesthood, but about the *rite vocati*, the ordained incumbents of the office of the ministry, those who represent, as Apology 7/8 puts it, not themselves, but the person of Christ (Apology 7/8:28).

To conclude this point: Ministry is not mentioned in Article VII because it has already been inextricably linked with the gospel and the sacraments in Article V. As the Schwabach articles put it here, "There is no other means or manner, no other path or stairway, for obtaining faith" than the office of the ministry.

9) The necessary function of the office of the ministry is, simply, to provide the one thing absolutely necessary for the church's life, *viz.*, the gospel and the sacraments.

Let me say simply that it is the task of the office of the ministry to do that which keeps the church Christian. The shoemaker will make shoes, but he will be a Christian as he has a share in the gospel said and done. The farmer may farm his land, but he will be a Christian as he has a share in the gospel said and done. The physician may

treat her patients, but she will be a Christian as she has a share in the Gospel said and done --said and done in the liturgical assembly of the believers in whose midst. . . . (Well, by now you have those lines committed to memory!)

Of course each Christian is a part of the universal priesthood by virtue of baptismal incorporation into the body of Christ. Luther could say, "If I call you Christian, I have already called you priest." And he also could say, "All Christians are priests, but not all are pastors." The priestly people do their work in the world, and they do it with faith in God and with love for their neighbor --when and as both are enabled by the ministry of word and sacrament in their midst!

10) The distinction between all the faithful and the special office of the ministry is not one of rank or privilege, though there is a certain authority ascribed to the incumbents of the office of the ministry.

Let it be said as clearly as possible: the Augsburg Confession is no relapse into medieval clericalism. It is no last stronghold for clerical chauvinists to play at magical or shamanistic power over the poor dumb uninitiated laity. The stakes are too high for that --gospel and faith and church and salvation!

The Augsburg Confession knows nothing of the notion of a *character indelebilis*, yet it expresses a view of ministry and order which knows rather a kind of immutable blessing, one that, like baptism, is irrevocable and needs no repetition.

The Augsburg Confession knows nothing at all about a theory of transference, in which the rights and prerogatives of the faithful are given over to the minister for the sake of decency and order.

The Augsburg Confession implicitly, and the Apology explicitly, approves the notion of a distinction between the *potestas ordinis* and the *potestas jurisdictionis* --precisely as the divine authorization

to say and do the gospel that is necessary for the church's life, and so to judge doctrine and to exercise discipline in the community.

The Augsburg Confession grows out of a view of ordination in which the ordination rite is (1) a public confirmation of the community's call, (2) the effective commissioning of the candidate into the office of the ministry, and (3) the blessing for the exercise of that office --all of that seen in such a way that God, who instituted the office, is the real actor in each case.

After all, the office of the ministry is not a "ceremony instituted by [human beings]," but is God's own creation --whatever specific form and ordering it may have taken on in the history of the church's life. But then, so is indeed the Lord's dear church, where all his dear children hear the good news of their forgiveness and of their incorporation into Abba's family, and where in the blessed sacraments they enact the life and work and feasting of Abba's family --reaching out to be served with the food of life, and reaching out to serve the brothers and sisters --all the while served by the ministry with the gospel said and done in their midst, so that they may be in their scattering what they are in their gathering, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation --yea, God's own people.