

The Augsburg Confession

Article 7

The Church

In the previous articles the Lutherans have stated their belief on God, Sin, Jesus Christ, Justification, the Means of Grace, and Sanctification. They have presented the Christian's relationship with God and now, in the next two articles, they speak about the Christian's relationship to other human beings.

The title given to this article is "The Church" and the following article is "What the Church Is." By these titles alone it would be difficult to distinguish between the subject matter of these two articles. A better title for this article might be "Of Fellowship" to help separate it from the doctrine of the church in the following article. As we will see, "Of Fellowship" would adequately describe the subject matter presented here.

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Regarding the church the Lutheran confessors stated: *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 [with one accord] 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. It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4-5 "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism."*

In this article the reformers speak about the Scriptural basis for fellowship between churches or individuals within the Christian church. How important it is to heed the words of this article!

The True Unity of the Christian Church

In connection to the doctrine of Church fellowship we find two common pitfalls: The first is that churches join together in fellowship with others who are not agreed on the teachings of Scripture. The Lutherans stated: *“it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached [with one accord] in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.”* What is necessary for unity in the Christian church? *“That the Gospel be preached [with one accord] in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.”*

Note: Sadly, Tappert’s translation of the German omits the word *eintrachtlich* which means “with one accord”. That phrase is a beautiful description of the relationship between believers and is used repeatedly in the book of Acts to describe the early church.

“And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas the son of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers” (Acts 1:13-14).

The translation of that word is included in brackets in the translation above.

Some argue that this unity can only be found within the invisible church, and not the visible church. But this article is not speaking of the visible as well as the invisible church. It is the visible church in which the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered. It is the Means of Grace - the Gospel in Word and Sacrament - through which the church is unified. This is not only a theoretical unity, but an actual unity based on a pure understanding of the Word of God.

Paul writes: *“If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words” (1 Timothy 6:3-4).*

It is Sufficient

Others would like to change the meaning of the word “Gospel”. They would say that here the word “Gospel” must be understood in its narrow sense, referring only to agreement in Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, not in all the doctrines of Scripture. But this is not the case as we can see from other passages of Scripture where the Holy Spirit warns of the dangers of false teachings outside of the “Gospel” in the narrow sense (cf. 2 Timothy 2:18; 2 Peter 2:1-3, 13-20; 1 Timothy 4:3; and Titus 3:9).

When the confessors stated that agreement in the Gospel was “sufficient” they were not making a comparison between the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins in contrast to the rest of the doctrines of the Bible, but were making a comparison between agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture and agreement in outward ceremonies or traditions of the church which is not necessary.

Where Agreement is not Necessary

While unity in the doctrines of Scripture is a necessity within the church, we are also reminded that there are others things which do not require agreement in practice. They continue: *“It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.”*

If God has stated something should or should not be done in His Word - there can be no discussion. John says: *“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 John 1:10-11).*

But if they are traditions and decisions we have made, then they cannot be set down as morally binding for all people. To do so would be to be like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day of whom He said: *“in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9).*

Conclusion

- Believers are the Church. We have Christ's promise that the Church, built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and His work for us will endure forever. Jesus said, ***“on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).***
- Where the Word of God is taught, there believers will be found; and where believers are, there the Word of God will be found. Believers are encouraged: ***“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:23-25).***
- The true unity of the Church comes from the Word of God and is in the entire Word of God. Paul warns Timothy: ***“Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer” (2 Timothy 2:14-18).***
- There is no need for complete uniformity in customs, ceremonies or traditions which have been set up by human beings and are not commanded by God. But in all our dealings we should let love for one another be our guide. Paul tells the Galatians: ***“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13).***