

Visible Unity: The Public Mission of the Church

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Gerhard Ebeling, a Lutheran theologian, wrote about the struggle of the Church. For Ebeling, “church is not primarily a religious and ritualized institution but rather a living communication-event in which God’s word strives to create faith in the midst of unbelief. By its very nature, then *Kirche* is *Kampf*.”¹ If the Church is struggle, this would explain a lot. It would explain, for example, why there continue to be so many challenges among the accomplishments of the Church particularly on its ecumenical journey. Fortunately, unity is not simply the will of God, it is also God’s gift. Indeed, since “the grace that comes through Christ overcomes human finitude and sin, it entails both enablement and restoration.”²

In this essay, I will address persistent issues facing Lutherans today on our ecumenical journey. I will do so by exploring the accomplishments, challenges, and persistent issues on the ecumenical journey by examining four issues in particular — Lutheran ecclesiology, the *satis est* phrase in Lutheran ecumenical theology, the common aspect of unity, and the public aspect of unity. On this journey to visible unity, it is important to promote the good that is being done ecumenically, yet it is equally important to remember that “we all suffer from the wounds of division. These wounds extend into our theologies, our institutional structures, and our very sense of what makes the church life-giving.”³

Context

In May 2006, the annual Lutheran Anglican Roman Catholic Conference was held in West Virginia. The title of this conference was “The Church: The Journey to Unity.” As aptly noted by the organizers of the conference, “The Church is always on a journey, faithful to its traditions, but always moving forward. ... The Church has its roots in Jesus Christ, but it is a Church shaped by history.” This is

¹ Mark D. Menacher, “Gerhard Ebeling’s Lifelong *Kirchenkampf* as Theological Method,” *Lutheran Quarterly* Volume XVIII/Number 1 (Spring 2004): 1-27, 2.

² J. Augustine DiNoia, “The Church in the Gospel: Catholics and Evangelicals in Conversation,” *Pro Ecclesia* Volume XIII/Number 1 (Winter 2004): 58-69, 66.

³ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 57.

an interesting statement, bringing forth concepts such as pilgrimage, faith, and the centrality of God's action in and for the world. I believe that an important part of the faithfulness of the Church is the continued intentional journey to a unity rooted in God that is visible, dynamic, manifest, known, actual, concrete, true, and public.

I am not alone in this belief. One of the favorite texts to go to in defense of ecumenical efforts is John 17 [17, 20-21] where Jesus prays and asks the Father, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."⁴ In this passage, unity, mission, proclamation, knowledge, and belief are inextricably linked. The Church exists for reasons beyond itself. Ecumenical efforts to manifest the God-given unity of the Church further the mission of the Church and the belief of the world. Indeed, "unity is given to the church, not for the sake of the church, but that the church might give itself in mission to the world for the sake of the Gospel. The church realizes its unity in its actions, not simply via theological discussion."⁵

What are the actions of unity? What are the common life and structures that we are discovering that unity concretely demands of us? What does a high valuation of community look like?

Ecumenism is part of the very fabric of church faith and life. Ecumenism permeates, informs, and vitalizes. The history of the worldwide ecumenical movement in general and of Lutheran participation specifically shows the clarification of the goal of ecumenism, thus of the forms of ecumenism. The forms and goal of visible union has most recently been clarified by the term *communio* or *koinonia*.⁶ This communion ecumenism emphasizes common faith and life. It may or may not demand the breaking down of denominational barriers. In fact, in current practice denominations are left intact in their full communion agreements. Furthermore, many seem satisfied with something that is less than full communion, contentment abounds when people can be mobile between denominations with out disorientation or

⁴ New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁵ *The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.*

⁶ *The Ecumenical Future*, 9-10.

discomfort. In other words, division is fine as long as the boundaries are porous.⁷ Even full communion, as it is enacted currently, could be spoken of in the same way, namely as mobility between congregations without discomfort. Yet “friendly division is still division.”⁸ Furthermore, division should not become normal for the Church.

For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the goal of ecumenism is full communion. Full communion is visible and sacramental. It is a goal in need of continuing definition. It is a goal consistent with the “satis est” principle given by the Augsburg Confession. It is a goal that is flexible, in part because (as currently defined) it neither demands nor rules out organic union. It is a goal that seems so far away at times, so difficult to achieve. “However, the call to serve the unity of the church is not premised on the likelihood of success; that is in God’s hands. Our present unity, however broken by our habits and traditions of division, already exists as a gift of God ... Any true steps toward unity will be a manifestation of new life in Christ.”⁹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, argues that unity is given and if we seek anything at all, we seek its embodiment. Embodiment is a theme in Bonhoeffer’s writing. Just as Christ was a real, concrete, incarnate presence in the world, so is the Church which is the body of Christ. Bonhoeffer writes in *Discipleship*, “The body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth.”¹⁰ For Bonhoeffer, the Church is not just visible, but public. The words and acts of the Church are public. Indeed, for Bonhoeffer Christianity is never lived in the abstract, so there is a living, corporate ecclesial reality and form. There is a visible and public churchly witness. Matthew Musteric summarizes:

Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology has important implications for the mission of the church. The view of the church as a public, embodied reality gives an entirely different shape to mission than does an invisible, disembodied view of the church. As the gather assembly of God *for the sake of the nations*, the church brings its reality, its public space, to bear in particular ways on the world and the specific communities in which it finds itself. The church’s very existence and taking up of public space becomes its witness to the world. Its liturgy enacts God’s desire for creation; its practices shape and mold its members into Jesus’ body on earth; its sheer presence declares God’s reign. ... the church *enacts* (and

⁷ Michael Root, “The Unity of the Church and the Reality of Denominations,” *Modern Theology* 9 (1993): 385-401, 387.

⁸ *In One Body*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 225.

thus declares bodily) God's public reign over creation.¹¹

Note how the concepts of visible, concrete, mission, unity, and public are linked. This is the case not only in Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, but also in the continuing efforts of the ecumenical movement to develop, clarify, and embody unambiguous visible unity. Indeed, "the unity of the Church must not only be visible to those who wish to see it, but also evident, even obvious. That there is but one Church must be manifest." This means something for the Church, it means that unity manifests in a common mission, a common confession, and a common sacramental life.¹² For unity to be obvious and public it needs to be manifest as a common life. Unity is truly embodied, for the "unity of the church is both a unity in Christ and a unity among persons in concrete community."¹³ All of this means journey, a grace-filled journey. Ecumenism is a journey of struggle and of hope. In our division we are addressed by the Word of God which calls us to repentance, prayer, and unity.

For nearly a century, the ecumenical movement has explored the link between the visible unity and mission. Mission involves public, not merely visible, proclamation (in word and deed) of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The truth of God in Christ is a public truth to all of creation. The ministry of Jesus took place publicly as he walked, talked, and acted among the people, for example the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, the death of Jesus took place publicly and not just among a few select believers. The resurrection of Jesus the Christ was announced publicly according to the witness of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Even if it was foolishness to the Greeks, St. Paul himself witnessed to the Gospel publicly, for we are told in Acts 17 that Paul spoke and debated in synagogues and marketplaces. In the same way the mission, and therefore unity, of the church must be visible, public.

Lutheran Ecclesiology

The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution is a recent book written by six Lutheran theologians. In the opening pages of the book the statement is made:

¹¹ Matthew Musteric, "Against the Voices of Blood and Nature": *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology and the Lutheran Tradition* (STM Thesis at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary), 56-57.

¹² Michael Root, "Once More on the Unity We Seek: Testing Ecumenical Models," In *The Unity We Have and the Unity We Seek: Ecumenical Prospects for the Third Millennium*, edited by Jeremy Morris & Nicholas Sagovsky, pp. 167-177 (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 174.

¹³ Root, "The Unity of," 395.

Today we are encountering an important fork in the road in the unfolding story of our Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Different ecclesiologies are vying to be the heart of Christian mission in our present ministry context. Lutherans are standing at the crossroads trying to decide which way to go.¹⁴

Indeed, this is one of the major challenges for Lutheran ecumenism. The different vying ecclesiologies create divisive in-fighting, create confusion among those attempting to understand ELCA Lutherans, and make it difficult for both Lutherans and any dialogue participant(s) to engage in dialogue with ELCA Lutherans.

In my attempt to discuss Lutheran ecclesiology in an coherent way, I would like to start by looking at a simple and direct text of Martin Luther's. In his Small Catechism, written for instruction in the family home, Luther comments on the third article of the Apostles' Creed ["I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins ..."] by answering the question, "What does this mean?" Luther writes:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers.¹⁵

In other words, the Church is created and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The Church is in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In the Church the Holy Spirit creates and sustains belief in Jesus Christ and forgives sins.

In 1994, the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau issued a pamphlet entitled "Lutherans and Other Christians." In this pamphlet, a moment is taken to talk about faith and about how God comes to us, in part through the Church, with saving grace. Faith for Lutherans, in this document, is compared to the American protestant tradition of revivalism in which high value is placed on the individual's decision for Christ, and their personal conversion experience. In contradistinction to this revivalist tradition, Lutheran theological understanding is placed on God's forgiving and saving grace which comes to us through Word and

¹⁴ Richard H. Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 5.

¹⁵ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 355-356.

Sacrament. In line with the Lutheran ecclesiology established by the Small and Large Catechisms, the pamphlet states:

While Lutheranism has never denied the significance of a deeply personal sense of God's saving grace, the weight of its witness has been on the side of God's own efforts to reach us from outside ourselves through the preached Word and the church's sacraments.

Lutheranism understands that Christ's Church, not simply the individual, is the setting for God's saving work.¹⁶

The pamphlet continues by explaining an important effect of the Lutheran focus on the Church as the Body of Christ, "An emphasis on the Body of Christ, the Church, helps Lutherans to see beyond the limitations and even the successes of their denominational organizations."¹⁷

In the Body of Christ the Holy Spirit brings people to the one true faith in Jesus Christ. This is part of the reason (in addition to being a means of grace) that the Lutheran tradition incessantly refers to Word and Sacrament. In other words, "The center of this tradition involves the way that Jesus comes to people in their lives—by grace through faith through the means of Word, Sacrament, and Christian community."¹⁸ For Lutherans, a sacrament is instituted by Christ and has the divine promise of grace, of God's presence. Thus Lutherans have at least two sacraments, namely baptism and Eucharist. Indeed, "The sense or non-sense of sacraments hinges on the total vision of God and his ways with the world of nature and history, with the total incarnational structure of grace and salvation in personal and communal life."¹⁹

The incarnational quality of the Word of God has long been emphasized by Lutherans. That the Word is embodied, manifest, and visible in our midst is central to Lutheran ecclesiology, ecumenism, evangelism, and missiology. In other words, "As a form of self-communication from person to person, it is never disembodied ... The Word that was incarnated in Jesus the Christ, the divine Logos, is always taking on flesh."²⁰ This incarnation of the Word is manifest in the sacraments of the Body of Christ. Echoing Luther's view that the Word bearing Christ's presence comes through concrete oral proclamation and

¹⁶ "Lutherans and Other Christians," Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 1994.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The Evangelizing Church*, 6-7.

¹⁹ Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 88.

²⁰ Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,

sacramental signs Frank Senn, in his book *Christian Liturgy*, writes:

What is disclosed in the sacrament is the same reality disclosed in the incarnation: a God who meets us deep in the flesh in order to know us as we are, forgive us, share his own life with us, and save us. Only in the preaching of the gospel and in the performance of the sign-acts of the sacraments do we have any assurance by words of promise that God in Christ continues to come to us in a saving way.²¹

Thus, for the Reformers, “The church is called and gathered by the preaching of the word, and constituted and built up by the administration of the sacraments.”²²

The ecumenical ecclesiology of the Lutheran church was crystallized with Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, a document aimed at confirming and maintaining the unity of the one Church.

Article VII highlights Gospel, Word, and Sacrament as constitutive of the Church and its unity:

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 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.”²³

There is one Church that is holy and Christian. This one holy, catholic Church is the assembly of believers, the Body of Christ. In the Church, among the assembly of believers the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. Gospel preaching and sacrament administration are concrete means of God’s salvation, and thus they are constitutive of the Christian community of the Church. This Article VII speaks of what is sufficient for the unity of the church as it gives us that small, but church dividing phrase of *satis est*, which encapsulates (but does not exhaust) Lutheran ecclesiology and ecumenism.

In his chapter, “The Ecumenical Principle,” Carl Braaten reminds us that the aim of Luther, Melancthon, and the other reformers was not a new church, but the reform of the known Church. The Lutheran Reformers saw themselves in line with the previous centuries of the Church’s one true faith. To them the abuses of the Church that needed reform were medieval innovations that were not in accordance

1997), 306-307.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

²² *Ibid.*, 317.

²³ *Book of Concord*, 42.

with the Word of God. Braaten writes, “At the center of the Reformation movement was the proposition that the church and all its attributes of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity derived radically from the gospel of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as the foundation of the church and its reason for being.”²⁴ Indeed “the church is truly present where the power of the Holy Spirit is at work through the Word and Sacraments. These are the means by which Christ becomes present and therefore the signs by which we can tell whether a particular gathering of people is really the church.”²⁵

As Daniel Erlander points out in *Baptized, We Live*, Lutherans are “a people sure of our name but not our identity.”²⁶ Identity for Lutherans tends to be confused and/or ill-formed. Self-identity and unity are linked. In other words, how a denomination defines itself determines what keeps that denomination one. Likewise, how the Church defines itself determines what is fundamental for the unity of the Church. When identity is formed around pragmatic, institutional, and bureaucratic factors, then ecumenism can remain on the level of “tolerance and cooperation in externals.”

On the other hand, when identity is formed on theology, doctrine and thus when ecumenism is more than “tolerance and cooperation in externals,” ecumenism is “a matter of ecclesial self-definition.” In the words of Root, “What makes a church to be a church? Where does a common witness to the gospel require agreement and where can it live with continuing differences? The more far reaching an ecumenical proposal, the more it requires a church to reflect on such basic questions of self-definition.”²⁷

Distinctiveness has become the basis of Lutheran self-identity. The obvious problem with this is that it leads to a confused, ill-formed, and fractured identity that has less and less to do with Christian faith. Distinctiveness as identity divides us from ourselves and from one another. “In every separated community the temptation has been to base the community’s life on its ‘distinctives,’ that is, on the features of its faith and life that differentiate it from other Christian communities. The apostolic faith confessed in the

²⁴ Braaten, *Principles*, 43.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Daniel Erlander, *Baptized We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Chelan, WA: Holden Village, 1981), 2.

²⁷ Root, “The Unity of,” 394.

ecumenical creeds ... is pushed to the margin of communal self-description.”²⁸ As astutely noted by the writers of *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*:

The differences between divided churches were originally understood as fundamental disagreements about the content and significance of the apostolic legacy. Dispute therefore took the form of argumentative exegesis of Holy Scripture, in which the great Christian teachers and witnesses of the past were called to give testimony. But as the dynamic of division unfolded, actual dispute between separated Christians became less common, and when it did occur often served as a kind of ritual revalidation of division. Theological teaching in separated churches more and more took the form of a monological presentation of the distinctive doctrines and practices of a particular community. ... In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it became common for confessional theology to appeal to the phenomenology of a community’s form of life and teaching, to the ethos discerned in the community’s distinctive history. There was a profound shift in the way that the norms of life and teaching were perceived: the question “Is it true?”, that is, faithful to the divine revelation, was implicitly equated with “Is it authentically Catholic?”, “Is it Evangelical?”, “Does it express the mind of Orthodoxy?”, “Is it congruent with the dynamics of the Reformation?”²⁹

For Luther, Melancthon, and the other reformers, the central questions on which their call to reform were based included the questions of is it true to the Gospel, is it faithful to divine revelation, does it affirm the one true faith.³⁰ These fundamental questions and how they were answered by the Lutheran reformers lead to Gospel and Sacrament becoming two of the marks of the one true Church.³¹

One related point I would like to speak on briefly is that of the soul-searching, even repentant,

²⁸ *In One Body*, 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

³⁰ The concern was authentic Church vs. not-Church, rather than Lutheran vs. Roman Catholic for example which is a modern innovation. The Reformers argued that they were authentic Church and not separate at all. The early Church formalized the creed, the common articulation of right Christian believe to clarify Christian vs. not-Christian. The New Testament bears great witness to the in-fighting and attempts at division being squashed by Paul, Titus, etc. through appeal to the common factor of one Lord and one faith.

³¹ “Although early Lutheranism understood itself as a confessional movement, subscribing to confessions that were authoritative expositions of the truth of Scripture, it never abandoned the principle of the priority of Scripture over confession. Thus the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, states: ‘We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated. ... The Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and (that) no human being’s writings dare be put on a par with it, but (that) everything must be subjected to it.’” (Braaten, *Principles*, 4)

question that I believe Lutherans are theologically obligated to ask: “Why does the Lutheran Church exist?” Division into a separate Church body was never the intent. In this essay, I refer quite a bit to Lutheran confessional texts. In doing so I am not seeking “to appeal to the phenomenology of a community’s form of life and teaching.” Nor am I seeking to say that Lutheran distinctives and division are normal to the Church. No good can come of this, only division which is not normal to the Church. Likewise, my intent in referring to Reformation texts is not to solidify my own nor my denominations standing as Lutheran. I seek to get back to the original intent of these texts, rich in form and content, with foundations of Gospel truth and common life and faith. Remember:

Lutheranism is not essentially a church but a movement. It is not essentially an independent church in competition with other denominational churches. It is a confessional movement that exists for the sake of reforming the whole church of Christ by the canon of the gospel. The ecclesiastical, organizational structures of Lutheranism are interim measures, ready to go out of business as soon as their provisional aims are realized.³²

Unfortunately, denominations (including the ELCA) have learned to be concerned for their own self-preservation. Truly, “A commonplace of complaints about the slow pace of ecumenical progress is that ecumenical proposals are blocked by institutional inertia and the instinct for self-preservation.”³³

The Lutheran churches exist in part on account of the move from movement to church which occurred despite our own deepest wishes.³⁴ Since this occurrence Lutherans have become so comfortable with division that division is seen as the norm, thus Lutherans have become “smug and self-sufficient and convert their interim status into a permanent establishment.”³⁵ Self-sufficiency is the opposite of common life, of unity. Smugness is pride, and along with self-sufficiency, is at the very heart of sin. And sin does indeed divide us from ourselves.

As explained, “Lutheran ecclesiology was not systematically worked out in the abstract and then applied to concrete cases. Rather, it was developed piecemeal within specific historical contexts.”³⁶

³² Braaten, *Principles*, 46.

³³ Root, “The Unity of,” 394.

³⁴ Michael Root, “The Lutheran Churches,” In *The Christian Church: An Introduction to the Major Traditions*, edited by Paul Avis (London: SPCK, 2002): 186-213, 188-189.

³⁵ Braaten, *Principles*, 46.

³⁶ Root, “The Lutheran Churches,” 186.

Central to Lutheran ecclesiology is the understanding that the one Church is the graced creation of the Word, of the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. The Word is manifest in the public teaching of the one true faith, in the preaching of the Gospel, and in the sacraments. The Church is concrete, dynamic, visible, living, and one.

Satis est (it is sufficient)

Michael Root writes, "The ecumenical contribution of a Lutheran ecclesiology should be a perspective on the church that stands unshakably on the ground of God's free grace. The church is called to proclaim and mediate that grace and to shape its life in accord with that grace."³⁷ This statement keeps in mind the life-giving, salvific, community forming power of the Word. The proclamation and mediation of Gospel proclaimed grace through taught Word, preached Word, and through the sacraments shapes the life of the Christian community which is the Church. This view is not reductionist, rather it is founded on the reality of the Church as concrete, visible, living, dynamic, and manifest. The reductionist view focuses on what occurs liturgically in the sense of the "mere" acts of preaching and of administering the sacrament. The reductionist view loses sight of "the wider family of relations which binds the church together."³⁸

Root opens his article, "'Satis est': What Do We Do When Other Churches Don't Agree?" with this question:

Is the *satis est* clause of the Augsburg Confession a lens that focuses the living unity of the church on the evangelical essential of agreement in Word and sacrament, or a set of blinkers or blinders that directs to eye to what is important but also block out all else, isolating the essential from the context necessary for its right interpretation?³⁹

What context is being blocked out? The Lutheran theology of the Reformation, while striving to be in line with the Christian theology that has come before, was still worked out in and on account of concrete situations and specific historical contexts. Thus Lutheran theology is apologetic, polemical, and ecumenical. In other words the theological context of *satis est* is not separable from the historical context.

The apologetic intention of the *Augsburg Confession* in general and of Article VII specifically was

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁸ Michael Root, "'Satis est': What Do We Do When Other Churches Don't Agree?" *Dialog* 30 (1991): 314-326, 319.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 314.

to show that Lutherans have not left the true unity of the Church. Thus the *satis est* sentence states what suffices for unity. The logic of the Reformers was that if that which suffices for unity is present in the Reformation churches, then they have remained within the one Church.⁴⁰

The polemical intention is linked and states that if agreement in Word and sacrament suffices for the true unity of the Church, then other elements are not required for unity. In other words, the Reformation churches were still in the one Church even though they did not observe uniformly the human instituted ceremonies of Rome.

The ecumenical intention, because of the unity proven by the Reformers with Article VII, was not concerned with how to bring divided churches back into union. Rather, it was concerned with what makes the Church one and where is the one Church found.⁴¹

The overarching theological context to Article VII of the *Augsburg Confession* is that of the doctrine of justification which flows from the Lutheran focus on the grace of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Justification and unity are inseparable. Indeed, the “point of the *satis est* clause in both its affirmation and its jointed negation is that as a body created by justifying grace and existing in faith, nothing but the divine means of grace and faith can be essential to the church’s unity.”⁴²

The Church, formed by the Holy Spirit, is an active and dynamic community. The unity of the Church is embodied in concrete and visible ways. The *satis est* phrase is good because it reminds us of these things by pointing to the divine means of grace and faith concrete in Gospel and Sacrament. It is good also in that it opens up Lutherans to be bold and unafraid of diversity, for it opens Lutherans up to dialogue with the range of Christian denominations. Indeed:

Lutherans, unlike Anglicans, Reformed, Catholics, or Orthodox, have never claimed that any particular polity — congregational, Presbyterian, Episcopal, patriarchal, papal — was divinely instituted or of the church’s essence. The church is defined without reference to such historical arrangements. The typical claim is that this ahistorical definition of the church frees the church to enter into history more fully. The church is free to adapt itself to the opportunities and requirements of every age because it is not tied to the historical contingencies of any age. It is tied only to the gospel of Christ, mediated in word and sacraments, which transcends every age.⁴³

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴³ Root, “The Lutheran Churches,” 192.

Yet despite this bold openness to ecumenical dialogue, internal and external problems arise for Lutherans. Most recently and dramatically, problems have arisen over the issue of bishops. The disagreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics has not been that dramatic of late, but it has been long standing and Church dividing. In particular it has centered around the Bishop of Rome. Disagreement concerning the Bishop of Rome shows forth disagreement over the structure and polity of the Church.

On the other hand, recent ecumenical dialogue between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church USA has been nearly derailed in large part because of dramatic and loud arguments within the ELCA centered around episcopal succession. After decades of study which resulted in the determination that there were no church dividing issues between Lutherans and Episcopalians, a full communion agreement was drafted entitled “Concordat of Agreement.” In 1997, at Churchwide Assembly, the ELCA failed to adopt the “Concordat of Agreement” by a margin of a half dozen votes. This was heartbreaking to all the Lutherans and Episcopalians who had been working so hard towards this form of visible unity. By the grace of God, the Episcopal Church continued to speak to and work with the ELCA, thus the “Concordat” was reworked into “Called to Common Mission” which has since been adopted and enacted by both the ELCA and the Episcopal Church USA. To this very day, the ELCA remains in chaos and near division on account of disagreements concerning the episcopacy. Furthermore, denominations have become the focus rather than the unity of the Church.

The self-preservation of a denomination based on identity formed by distinctives definitely contributes to this debate. I see another factor as well. I believe that one root of the nearly church dividing disagreements internal to the ELCA is reductionism. In other words:

The Lutheran tendency is to consign everything that is not strictly essential to the category of things indifferent, about which we are entirely free to do what we wish, guided only by considerations of efficiency. But to say that something is not essential to the unity of the church in righteousness before God does not deny that it may be highly significant, desirable, and even in some situations and for some purposes necessary for the lived unity of the church.

When such a more differentiated sense of adiaphora is lacking, serious problems result.⁴⁴

Serious problems have resulted indeed. Not only has the theology of the one text Lutherans on all sides love to quote, namely *Augsburg Confession* Article VII with its *satis est* clause, become reduced to the

⁴⁴ Root, “*Satis est*,” 323.

point of losing all richness, context, and relevance, but other wonderful theologically rich texts are being ignored. This Lutheran trend of reductionism, of the move away from theological differentiation, which I like to call theological wussiness, is a strange development for a denomination which traditionally prides itself on its theological acumen.

Truly, “The *satis est* clause does not constitute an ecumenical program. It is a crucial assertion of Lutheran ecclesiology and must be at the center of Lutheran ecumenical work, but it is only one statement about the church, not a full ecclesiology.”⁴⁵ Since the *satis est* (it is sufficient, not it is the fullness of) clause is only one aspect of full Lutheran ecclesiology, thus ecumenism, what does a more full picture of unity look like for Lutherans? Unity is founded on and accomplished by grace. Our grace formed journey to visible unity should be full of self-critique, repentance, prayer, *kenosis*, and a willingness to be transformed by God. Although what the full embodiment of unity will look like is still unknown, unity is and will be common and public.⁴⁶ In other words, a “‘visible’ ecclesiology calls into question the disunity of the church—and the proper unity of the church calls for a visible ecclesiology.”⁴⁷

Common

For us all there is a common God, the one Holy Trinity, a common Lord and Savior, a common Gospel, a common faith, a common aversion to self-sufficiency, and a common draw to community. There are common central elements of community. There is a communal context of shared life.

At its heart, the *satis est* clause is about a living, grace formed community whose common life is manifestly shaped by Gospel and Sacrament, which have always been the central elements of the Christian community. What is our common life?

A common life, in which those who were divided are reconciled in the body of Christ, is an essential goal of the mission that God has appointed for his people. Unity is not merely a means to mission, but rather a constituent goal: God gathers his people precisely in order to bring unity to a divided humanity. ... Sin divides us against ourselves (Romans 7:15-22) and from one other. ... The gospel is a public proclamation

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ “Members of the Princeton Project come from various churches and have varying convictions about the shape that full, visible unity should take. We have differing judgments about the role of ordained ministry, the place of the sacraments, the role of bishops and of the bishop of Rome. We agree, however, that the unity we seek must be unambiguously visible.” (*In One Body*, 43)

⁴⁷ Musteric, “*Against the Voices of Blood and Nature*,” 8 (footnote 8).

through which the Holy Spirit summons men and women from their locations within the human world to gather around a common center, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. This movement takes concrete social form in the gathering of the Christian assembly. In turn, the church becomes the corporate agent of the gospel's continuing proclamation of unity.⁴⁸

Indeed this common life includes the embodiment of the called for visible unity of the Church through the actions of the public mission of the Church. Unity is active. Unity is not a passive state. "When CA 7 says that it is enough for unity to *agree* in gospel and sacraments, the paradigm of agreement is agreement that is consciously realized in the life of the church. ... Agreement cannot be assumed; it must be consciously realized."⁴⁹

The way that agreement and unity are consciously realized is through the intentional embodiment of dynamic unity, that is through communal events and common life. The Church, the Body of Christ, consists of a wide set of relations. These relations bind the community together. At the center of this community is the crucified and risen Christ who is proclaimed in the preaching of the Word and in the celebration of the sacraments, which are life giving, salvific, and formative of a common life together.⁵⁰ Other concrete communal events of this dynamic common life include prayer, fellowship, acts of love.⁵¹ In other words, all of the things we are already doing and so much more:

The achievements of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement have ... been great. It is vital that they be sustained and enhanced, until such time as God may grant their completion. The gospel has indeed been taken to every corner of the world. Separated churches have made genuine progress toward doctrinal agreement. From being divided in their prayers, Christian communities have discovered great mutuality in worship of God, and have come to draw widely on the liturgical and devotional resources of each other's traditions. Churches have begun to consult together in matters that affect their common life; their ministers have begun to give pastoral care across institutional boundaries. In these and other ways, the "unity which is both God's will and his gift to

⁴⁸ *In One Body*, 26-27.

⁴⁹ Root, "*Satis est*," 318.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁵¹ "But the New Delhi statement propounds three fundamental elements of unity that are particularly relevant to our time: (a) unity of faith and doctrine ('holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel'), (b) a coordinated life of witness and service ('having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all'), and (c) reciprocity of membership and ministry in continuity with the church throughout the centuries ('united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages, in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all'). These three aspects of unity defined by the New Delhi statement guide us toward concrete action." (*In One Body*, 44)

his Church” is indeed “being made visible.”⁵²

Cooperation takes place across division. Indeed, “Cooperation of various sorts is possible despite this division, but it stops short of the common life called for by visible unity.”⁵³ The ecumenical movement must not be content with mere cooperation, but must actively seek visible unity. Another point regarding unity as common must be made. Common does not mean strict conformity. There is much room for and need of diversity. Rather, the point of common life and faith and unity is missional for:

The instability which Christian division introduces into normative teaching and the ordering practice in our churches can be overcome only if we commit ourselves to the cause of visible unity. To be sure, Christian churches have always displayed some variety in their formulation of teaching and organization of their life, and doubtless will continue to do so. Nevertheless, the authority of normative teaching and practice will continue to be undermined in all the churches until they present to the world a far more visible consensus in essential teaching and practice, based upon common reception of the apostolic legacy and its gospel truth.⁵⁴

In other words the central elements of community and the communal context of shared life are inseparable from unity and mission.

Public

Lesslie Newbigin, evangelist, pastor, bishop, theologian, and ecumenist, writes, “I find myself driven back to the simple fact that Jesus prayed for the unity of his Church, that he still prays for it, and that that prayer can never be denied.”⁵⁵ In John 17, Jesus prays and asks the Father that the Church be one, so that the world may believe. The division of the Church hinders this mission, in part because division is common, visible, and public knowledge. Likewise then unity should be common, visible, and public; it “must be unambiguously visible.”⁵⁶ The unambiguous visible unity of the Church is indeed the public mission of the Church. Fortunately for us all, unity is grounded in and accomplished through grace. Dr. Gösta Hallonsten reminds us of this as he writes, “the striving for Christian unity is based on the prayer of Jesus. Only his Father can answer that prayer.”⁵⁷

⁵² *In One Body*, 25.

⁵³ Root, “The Unity of,” 388.

⁵⁴ *In One Body*, 42.

⁵⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (London: SPCK, 1985), 250.

⁵⁶ *In One Body*, 43.

⁵⁷ Gösta Hallonsten, “Vision of God, Vision of Unity: The Legacy of Carl J. Peter,” *Pro Ecclesia*

The point of unity as public is that unity “must be recognizable as unity without an extensive theological gloss. One must be able to see that the church, in its ordinary life and practice, is one community reconciled in Christ.”⁵⁸ In other words, while the Church is still divided, what can it be a sign of?⁵⁹

In the rich text of John 17, we read the prayer of Jesus for unity. Many things can and have been said about this text, but at least three points shine particularly bright:

First, the unity of which Jesus speaks must be in some way visible, because it is meant to be *seen* by the world. Invisibility has no evangelistic power. Second, salvation, unity, and witness are intertwined. What binds together those who believe in Jesus is his gift to them of the glory he has himself received from the Father. To receive this gift is to be brought together with others into the unity of the church, and thus to become a sign to the world of the truth of Jesus’ claim. Third, Jesus’ prayer for the unity of the disciples must be read in the context of his commandment that they love one another (John 15:12ff.), which is explicitly grounded in the relationship of the Father and the Son (15:9). Jesus’ prayer discloses both the mystery of grace by which alone the commandment can be kept and the communal context of shared life to which Jesus’ prayer concretely refers.⁶⁰

Time and time again the ecumenical movement reminds the Church of the link between unity and mission and the fact that witness is harmed by division.⁶¹ As stated well by the Second Vatican Council “division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel.”⁶²

Division hinders the mission of the Church precisely because division is public, persistent, self-sufficient, self-preserving, and seen as normal. Remember, sin divides us from ourselves. Division hinders mission by creating confusion. Confusion occurs both internally and externally to the Church. There is much public confusion regarding the witness of the Church for:

Divisions among Christians distort and impair these central elements of community. ... There is abundant testimony from non-Christians to the confusion created by the witness of divided churches, all claiming to speak for the same Christ yet at odds with one

Volume XIII/Number 3 (Summer 2004), 288.

⁵⁸ *In One Body*, 43.

⁵⁹ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, 253.

⁶⁰ *In One Body*, 32.

⁶¹ See also Dr. Phil Baker’s article in *Taproot*, Spring 1998.

⁶² Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), Paragraph 1.

another in their understanding of the truth and their practice of corporate life.⁶³

Mission is accomplished internally through the Holy Spirit gathering people to hear the Gospel, to receive the sacraments, and to be formed as Church. The mission to the world is accomplished through the Holy Spirit forming and sending out the one Church.

The ecumenical movement has used the language of “visible” to speak of unity. I am using the language of “public” to push us all further in our thinking about and embodiment of visible unity, unambiguous visible unity. I believe that this shift in language from visible to public reminds us of the missional dimension of the unity of the Church. The shift to public also reminds not to hide away in our insular communities, but to be sent out and visible. Additionally, the language of public pulls us out of the 16th century polemic of visible vs. invisible/hidden Church, while at the same time affirming the visible, physical, public gathering of the Church as *ekklêsia*, Body of Christ, and assembly of believers.

Conclusion

Father Neuhaus reminds us, “Our purpose is not to create a unity among Christians that does not already exist. Indeed, we cannot create Christian unity at all. Unity is God’s gift, not our creation. ... The problem, indeed the scandal, is that we are united but live as though we were not.”⁶⁴ Fundamentally, the *satis est* clause and the vocabulary of common and public tell forth the truth of our mission of visible unity and remind us to live the truth of our unity.

Therefore, what I have been trying to explicate in this essay is the truth of our unity. The truth of our unity is the triune God, manifested in Jesus Christ. Thus, the most important thing the Church can be is a pointer to God, to the one blessed Holy Trinity. The Church, as the Body of Christ, points to our one Lord and Savior and is graced to participate in the unity of God through the proclamation of the Gospel, through the teaching and preaching of the Word, and through the sacraments.

⁶⁴J. Augustine DiNoia, “The Church in the Gospel,” 64.

⁶³ *In One Body*, 38.

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