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An Analysis of the Augsburg Confession Article VII, 2 in it's Historical Context, May & June, 1530

Robert C. Schultz
Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary¹

Wilhelm Maurer has ended his prolific scholarly career with a two-volume *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*.² In the opening paragraphs he expresses his awareness that such a historical commentary represents a new approach to the study of the Augsburg Confession (CA). Previous interpretations have been determined by the need to respond to contemporary controversies among Lutherans themselves and between Lutherans and representatives of other denominations. Such dogmatic interpretations are obviously appropriate and necessary. They have, however, frequently detracted our attention from the meaning of the CA in its own historical context, Augsburg in 1530.³

Maurer's particular contribution to the analysis of the CA in its historical context is two-fold. He has given careful attention to the textual history of the confession and to its sources. He has also detailed many interrelationships between the text of the CA and the theological writings of the Lutheran reformers from this period. Both are fruitful fields for future work. (Fortunately, I understand that we may soon expect a translation of Maurer's work.) Both areas of work offer the possibility that previous dogmatic interpretations of the CA will be paralleled by interpretations of the CA in its primary historical context.

In this paper I propose to look closely at Article VII of the CA and particularly at one sentence: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel (*doctrina evangelii, dasz da eintraechtiglich nach reinem verstand das Evangelium gepredigt*) and the administration of the sacraments." My question is: What did this sentence (which has played such a significant role in Lutheran ecclesiastical relationships) mean in the context of May and June 1530?

¹Sections of this material have appeared in "Gospel and Church," in *Studies: The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church*. (Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., 1978), pp. 52-62. Used here by permission.

²Gütersloh: Mohn, 1976-1978.

³Valuable studies of this context from the Roman perspective have been provided by Vinzenz Pfnür, *Einig in der Rechtfertigungslehre? Die Rechtfertigungslehre der Confessio Augustana (1530) und die Stellungnahme der Katholischen Kontroverstheologie zwischen 1530 und 1535*. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1970); and by Hermann Immenkoetter, *Um die Einheit im Glauben: Die Unionsverhandlungen des Augsburger Reichstages im August und September 1530* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1973).

Sigmundt zu demselben gantz. Das wir uns lang her
 über alle dreyen kindt hingeret das wir alle
 in demselben kindt der heiligen geistes
 güte, Reine, sterke, troste, in demselben
 lebendigen kindt der heiligen gaben, und güte
 die wir alle vnd werden, heilige, und
 die wir alle heilige, heilige, und heilige
 in demselben kindt der heiligen, demselben
 in demselben kindt der heiligen, demselben
 die wir alle heilige, und die wir alle
 Symboli: apostolorum

W

Wirtet nicht gelert, das wir vorgebung der sünden
 und gerechtigkeit vor gott nicht erlangen /
 muggen durch vnser verdienst, werck / und
 genughung, sonnder wir bekommen /
 vorgebung der sünden vnd werden gerecht /
 für gott aus gnaden vmb Christus willen /
 durch denn glaubenn, so wir glauben, das /
 Christus für vnns gelleitenn hatt vnd das vnns
 (vmb seinetwillenn die sünde vorgebenn,
 gerechtigkeit vnd ewigs leben geschengkt
 wirth, dann diesen glaubenn will gott für
 gerechtigkeit für ime haltenn vnnnd zurechnen,
 Romer 3 vnd 4...)

Artikel des Glaubens und der Lehre in der Augsburgischen Konfession. Vor 25. Juni 1530.

(... Item das derselbig Christus abgestiegen zur helle, warhaftig am dritten taged von den todten vferstanden, aufgefahren gen hymmell,) sitzendt zur rechtenn gottes, das er ewig hersche / vber alle creatur vnnnd regiere, das er alle, / so an in glauben, durch den heiligen geist / heilige, reine, sterke, troste, inen auch / lebenn vnnnd allerley gaben vnd guther / aussteylle vnd wieder den theuffel vnd / wider die sünde schutze vnd beschierme. / Item das derselbig herr Christus entlich / wirth offentlich kommen, zu richtenn / die lebenndigen vnd die todeten et cetera lauts des symboli apostolorum.
 Weiter wirt gelert, das wir vorgebung der sünden / vnnnd gerechtigkeit vor gott nicht erlangen / muggen durch vnser verdienst, werck / und genughung, sonnder wir bekommen / vorgebung der sünden vnd werden gerecht / für gott aus gnaden vmb Christus willen / durch denn glaubenn, so wir glauben, das / Christus für vnns gelleitenn hatt vnd das vnns (vmb seinetwillenn die sünde vorgebenn, gerechtigkeit vnd ewigs leben geschengkt wirth, dann diesen glaubenn will gott für gerechtigkeit für ime haltenn vnnnd zurechnen, Romer 3 vnd 4...)

Such an analysis is no mere scholastic exercise. For as far as I know, all Lutherans who subscribe to the CA do so as a historical document which must be understood in the context of the situation. It is therefore possible that an historical analysis of this passage will reveal that later interpretations of this sentence have reflected its varied contemporary uses by Lutherans rather than its historical meaning in 1530. Such is indeed my hypothesis. If I am correct, Lutherans need to reexamine their interpretation of Article VII and consider whether they in fact wish to subscribe to CA VII in its original meaning or in one of a variety of meanings given it by later interpreters—beginning with Melanchthon's Apology of 1531. This may in turn open new possibilities for Lutheran participation in ecumenical reunion in full fidelity to the CA of 1530.

My hypothesis itself is based on data that is currently available. In my opinion, this data has not been previously combined in the way that I propose because of the predominance of polemical and dogmatic interpretation. My perspectives are in part derived from over twenty years of intense participation in dialogue with Roman Catholics. The current ecumenical climate enables us to ask new questions and to look at old data in new ways.

The polemical situation of the past 450 years makes it understandable that Lutherans have been reluctant to look at the meaning of the CA in the ecumenical context of June of 1530, but rather have emphasized a polemical interpretation. It is nonetheless regrettable. This reluctance is typified by the lack of study of the CA in terms of its sources. Texts of these sources are available in English in works by Johann Michael Reu,⁴ and by Henry Eyster Jacobs,⁵ but the limited awareness and use of these source materials indicates that the CA is thought of primarily as a treatise of dogmatic truth rather than a historical document.

I propose that we, as far as possible, lay aside such dogmatic presuppositions and look at this sentence in terms of its contemporary historical context. In this perspective it is not a theological statement but a political and legal statement. As such it has its own history and sources which go beyond the commonly available theological material. My examination of these direct sources of the CA indicate no parallel to the sentence under consideration.⁶ There are parallels here and there in the non-confessional writings of the Lutheran reformers to the first sentence of

⁴*The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources with an Historical Introduction* (Chicago: Wartburg, 1930).

⁵*The Book of Concord; or, The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Henry Eyster Jacobs, ed., 2 vols. (Philadelphia: A. W. Frederick, 1882-1883). Few Lutherans are even aware of the significant sources made available in English by Jacobs. Thus a current comprehensive description of the role of the CA in American Lutheranism refers to this volume merely as "having historical introductions." See "Bibliography," in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, (1980) VII, 121. This bibliography was prepared as part of a report to world Lutheranism on the impacts of the CA. The availability of source material in translation was apparently not considered important.

⁶See the summaries below.

CA VII, but it appears that there are no direct parallels to this statement on unity in any of the documents which may be considered sources of CA VII. The sentence first appears in the draft (Na) which the representatives of Nuremberg sent to Nuremberg on or about May 30. On this basis I conclude that this sentence was inserted in response to an event in Augsburg in May of 1530: Charles V rejected the Schwabach Articles as a basis of resolving the dispute.⁷

In the following, I shall sketch the historical context of this event: The theme of unity was of course a dominant theme of the Diet of Augsburg from its inception in the imperial court of Charles V. His invitation to discuss religious questions at the Diet expresses this concern very clearly. The emperor orders the princes to appear in Augsburg, hoping "to bring and reconcile men to a unity in Christian truth, to dispose of everything that has not been rightly explained or treated of on the one side or the other, to see to it that one single, true religion may be accepted and held by us all, and that we all live in one common church and in unity, just as we all live and battle under the one Christ."⁸

The Lutheran response is equally clear in its commitment to the unity of the church. In the "Preface" the Augsburg Confession defines itself as an explicit response to this summons and uses the language of the summons to express its concern for unity. The princes present this confession of their "preachers' teaching and of our own faith" in order to show "in what manner, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, these things are preached, taught, communicated, and embraced in our lands, principalities, dominions, cities, and territories" (Preface, 8). Other princes are asked to submit similar confessions to provide the basis for discussing "such practical and equitable ways as may restore unity . . . and we may be united in one, true religion, even as we are all under one Christ and should confess and contend for Christ" (Preface, 10). If such discussions fail, the Evangelical princes commit themselves not to "omit doing anything, in so far as God and conscience allow, that may serve the cause of Christian unity" (Preface, 13). The emperor is reminded that Evangelical princes have followed "legal form and procedure" in past appeals and that they will continue to do so until and unless these matters are settled in Christian concord" (*Einigkeit*). Similarly, the conclusion of the first part of the Augsburg Confession asserts that the Evangelicals are summarizing their teaching in order to demonstrate that they do not "depart from the Scriptures or the catholic church or the church of Rome, in so far as the ancient church is known to us from its writers. Since this is so, those who insist that our teachers are to be regarded as heretics judge too harshly" (CA, XXI, 1). Those who so judge act "contrary to all Christian unity and love" (CA, XXI, 1). And the "conclusion" of the CA asserts that there is "nothing in either doctrine or ceremony contrary to Scripture or the

⁷Maurer, 1,44, has detailed the importance of this event for a larger revision of the doctrinal articles as presently incorporated in the CA.

⁸Reu, pp. 71*-72*. (The asterisks indicate the page numbers of Reu's "Collection of sources," Distinguishing them from the page numbers of Reu's historical essays).

Catholic church" (5). Melancthon's is a much more theologically specific first draft of a conclusion. Statements such as these seem, if viewed in a polemical perspective, to be less than honest. Such statements are, however, made with implicit reference to the laws of the empire on heresy, rather than to specific theological systems and are therefore true.

Werner Elert has clearly identified the empire's laws on heresy as the historical context of the CA's approach to unity.⁹ I believe that Elert's evidence when viewed in an ecumenical perspective, leads to even deeper conclusions than he or Maurer would have been likely to draw. I shall not attempt to summarize Elert's massive evidence but only draw attention to points particularly relevant for our understanding of CA VII, 2.

Since the thirteenth century the civil laws of the Code of Justinian on heresy had been incorporated into canon law. They were the legal context of every accusation of and trial for heresy, including Luther's condemnation at Worms in 1521. These laws are explicitly cited in the condemnation of the Anabaptists at the Diet of Speyer in 1529.¹⁰ And the point at issue from 1521 until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 is not whether Lutherans and Romanists agree, but whether Lutherans meet the requirement for citizenship in the empire. If not, they are outlaws. This is also the issue at the Diet of Augsburg, 1530--a thoroughly political event which also considered revisions of the civil penal code and referred to Justinian's example in dealing with monopolies.¹¹ It was in the expectation that official acknowledgement of his orthodoxy would be possible that John of Saxony--eager to prove his orthodoxy and simultaneously pave the way for his installation as elector--had sent a copy of the Schwabach Articles to Charles V while the latter was travelling from Innsbruck to Augsburg. This was done in the certainty that the emperor would accept them. To the Lutherans' surprise and consternation Charles V rejected the Schwabach Articles. The news reached Augsburg between May 13 and 15. The Lutherans were now in a dilemma. They could not basically change their theological position, but they did need to present it in a new and more winning way. The Lutheran theologians and their political counselors accordingly began careful and extensive revision of the Schwabach Articles. One revision was the insertion of the sentence in which the Lutherans describe the basis on which they are claiming to stand in the unbroken continuity of catholic teaching and practice: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments."

In this context the CA's definition of the unity of the church appeals to the emperor not to judge according to his own private preference as he had in rejecting the Schwabach Articles, but according to the imperial law

⁹*The Structure of Lutheranism, Volume One: The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Walter A. Hansen, trans., (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), pp. 274-291. See also Maurer, 1, 64, and 11, 19.

¹⁰Maurer, 1, 64.

¹¹Valentin von Tietleben, *Protokoll des Augsburger Reichstages 1530*, Herbert Grundmann, ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 89, 90, 99, 122.

which he explicitly swore to uphold when he was elected emperor.¹² In making his plea, Melanchthon instinctively uses the legal phraseology: *doctrina evangelica*. The fact that he writes *evangelii* does not change the sense but does permit him to avoid the possible mis-identification of *doctrina evangelica* as “teaching of the Evangelicals,” which was exactly what he did not want to say. And the choice of material discussed in the CA is closely related to the emphasis of the *corpus iuris civilis*. The Romanists understood the issue well and therefore insisted that the confutation of the Augsburg Confession be issued by the emperor. Philip Melanchthon draws attention to this legal context of the Augsburg Confession in his unused drafts of prefaces. He appeals to the emperor to follow the example of his predecessors Theodosius, Charlemagne, and Henry IV. Theodosius established catholic Christianity as the state religion with his decree:

It is Our will that all the peoples who are ruled by the administration of Our Clemency shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans, as the religion which he introduced makes clear even unto this day. It is evident that this is the religion that is followed by the Pontiff Damasus and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, a man of apostolic sanctity; that is, according to the apostolic discipline and the *evangelic doctrine* (*doctrinam evangelicam*), we shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity.

We command that those persons who follow this rule (*lex*) shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom We adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative, which We shall assume in accordance with divine judgement.¹³

At the time of Theodosius, this decree represented a final decision on Arianism and Donatism. Both are condemned and placed under the condemnation of imperial law. It is then not surprising that Melanchthon includes the reference to the doctrine of the gospel in the section of the

¹²Hans Von Schubert, *Der Reichstag von Augsburg in Zusammenhang der Reformationsgeschichte*, (Leipzig: M. Heinsius, 1530).

¹³Code of Theodosius, XVI, 1,2. *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, vol. II: *Codex Iustinianus*, Paul Krueger, ed. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1880), p. 5 (l, l, 1, ff.). The first twelve sections of Book One of the Code deal with religious matters.

confession dealing with the Donatist controversy, immediately after the statements related to the doctrine of God.

The Emperor Marcian issued a similar decree in support of the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. When Justinian formulated the sixth century code of laws which was still regarded as the basic law of the empire in the sixteenth century, he repeats the above-quoted decree of Theodosius and this decree of Marcian as the first and third items in the code. Melancthon's reference to Theodosius therefore was an explicit reference to the conditions set down for the unity of the church in the imperial law. Charlemagne and Henry IV are referred to as emperors who also took initiative in the affairs of the church. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession thus has a specific historical context. The CA asks to be judged on the basis of the imperial constitution of civil law rather than by papal definition of heresy.¹⁴

The church is one by definition in the thinking of the Evangelicals. However, its unity is being unjustly denied by the Papists. They are seeking to exclude the Evangelicals from the church; the Evangelicals are not seeking to exclude the Papists. The emperor has called the diet to settle the matter and restore the unity of the church. The Augsburg Confession asserts that this unity is not broken by the Evangelicals because they teach the doctrine of the gospel. Their confession emphasizes the congruity between their teaching and the teaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments through which the church has been created and is still being preserved. They are "catholic."

The doctrine of the gospel that is sufficient for the unity of the church in the Augsburg Confession is therefore nothing else than the "evangelic doctrine" of the imperial law. This becomes more obvious if we read the Augsburg Confession without the later inserted titles of the various articles. Then the entire doctrinal section is a continuation of the opening confessional formula of the early church: *cum magno consensu*. All the doctrines are specific items of this one confessional statement. If Article VII is read in this continuous context, the meaning of the doctrine of the gospel (*evangelic doctrine*) becomes more obviously defined in terms of the entire doctrinal section of the Augsburg Confession itself. Indeed, as we trace the development of Article VII through the sources of the Augsburg Confession to its final formulation, we see an ever-increasing economy of form and content. However, the statement on the unity of the church is a basically new element.

The Torgau Articles, the most immediate predecessor of the Augsburg Confession, emphasize that John of Saxony "is making provision that . . . the Holy Gospel be preached with all diligence, and that ceremonies be performed in accordance with it."¹⁵ This is followed by the assertion that even their opponents admit the rightness of their doctrine. The Torgau

¹⁴This was the principle already adopted by Frederick the Wise in his defense of Luther; see Wilhelm Borth, *Die Luthersache (Cause Lutheri), 1517-1524* (Lübeck: Mathiesen, 1970).

¹⁵Reu, p. 80.

Articles then discuss the doctrines and ordinances of men. The Evangelicals observe those "ordinances, which are not contrary to the Holy Gospel."¹⁶ Galatians 1:8-9 is cited as the basis for the rejection of schismatics:

On that account, the unity of the Christian church consists not in external human ordinances . . . dissimilarity in external human ordinances is not contrary to the unity of the Christian church . . . which we confess in the Creed . . . For since we are here commanded to believe that there is a catholic church, that is, the church in the entire world and not bound to one place, but that wherever God's word and ordinances are, there is a church, and yet the external human ordinances are not alike, it follows that this dissimilarity is not contrary to the unity of the church.¹⁷

There is a marked difference in emphasis between the discussion of unity in the Torgau Articles and the Augsburg Confession. The whole trend of the Augsburg Confession is sharply refocused as a result of the emperor's rejection of the Schwabach Articles. Before this rejection the Evangelicals had reason to hope that doctrine would not be the major issue at the Diet of Augsburg. They were certain that they met the requirement of the Code of Justinian. Accordingly, the Schwabach Articles have nothing corresponding to the sentence on unity in Article VII and the material now found in Article VIII of the Augsburg Confession. The Confession's emphasis on the rejection of the Donatist heresy may be read an implicit identification with the Code of Justinian which rejects the Donatist heresy. The Evangelicals thereby also defend themselves against the conclusion that their criticisms of the Papists deny the validity of the Papists' sacraments.

The Schwabach Articles, in comparison to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, are much less pointed in their discussion of the unity of the church: Article XII.

That there is no doubt that there is and remains upon earth until the end of the world a holy Christian church, as Christ declares, Matt. 28:20: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." This church is nothing else than believers in Christ, who hold, believe and teach the above mentioned articles and parts, and for this suffer persecution and martyrdom in the world; for where the Gospel is preached (*wo das Euangelion gepredigt wird*) and the Sacraments used aright, is the holy Christian church, and it is not bound by laws and outward pomp, to place and time, to persons and ceremonies.¹⁸

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 43.

The Schwabach Articles were prepared in the summer of 1529 as a joint confession of the Saxons and Franconians. They combine the Franconian Confession of the 1520s and Luther's confessional statement at the end of his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*. Luther's statement on the church in this confession has no explicit discussion of the unity of the church. The most pertinent section is:

In this Christian church, wherever it exists, is to be found the forgiveness of sins, i.e., a kingdom of grace and of true pardon. For in it are found the gospel, baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, in which forgiveness of sins is offered, obtained, and received. Moreover, Christ and his Spirit and God are there. Outside this Christian church there is no salvation or forgiveness of sins, but everlasting death and damnation; even though there may be a magnificent appearance of holiness and many good works, it is all in vain.¹⁹

The *Ansbacher Ratschlag* (1524) is the most typical of the Franconian confessions which played a role in the negotiations leading to the development of the Schwabach Articles. Its section on the church covers several pages in the 1930 edition of these confessions. Its significant statement on the unity of the church reads:

The Christian church is the group or gathering of all who believe in Christ and thus live in the unity of the Spirit, faith, hope, and love and will continue to live in this unity. Because of this unity they are called a community of saints.²⁰

This basis of unity is markedly different from the Augsburg Confession's. The emphasis on preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments is present in other contexts in the *Ansbacher Ratschlag*. And its theme of unity is submerged in the Schwabach Articles--possibly as a way of correcting an inaccurate formulation by omitting it. The question of Zwinglian influence in Ansbach at this point is intriguing but cannot be pursued here.

The Marburg Articles have no section on the church. The Large Catechism asserts that the church is one but gives no precise definition of the unity of the church. The other significant source of the Augsburg Confession is the "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors" of 1528. It

¹⁹D. Martin Luthers Werke (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-), 26, 506; *Luther's Works* 37, Robert H. Fischer, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 368.

²⁰Wilhelm Ferdinand Schmidt and K. Schornbaum, *Die Fraenkischen Bekenntnisse: Eine Vorstufe der Augsbургischen Confession* (Munich: Kaiser, 1930), pp. 187 ff. The doctrine of the church is on pp. 187-196.

does not have a section on the church but does have one on doctrine. In this section Luther and Melancthon admonish the pastors to preach “the whole gospel”—and the context makes clear that they are concerned about the pastors’ failure to preach repentance and the law.²¹ Given the bitter experience of the first Antinomian controversy, which resulted from Agricola’s objection to this point, Melancthon would hardly have written Article VII without thinking that the Evangelicals could give good evidence of their seriousness in defining the teaching of the gospel.

The Augsburg Confession’s explicit and specific concern with the unity of the church has its closest parallel in the Torgau Articles. Both the Augsburg Confession and the Torgau Articles were written after receipt of the imperial summons to come to Augsburg with a confession in order to discuss unity. The Torgau Articles emphasize that differences in ceremonies are not divisive. The Augsburg Confession adds the emphasis on the positive base of unity in agreement on the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. That emphasis with its implicit appeal to the Code of Theodosius as incorporated in imperial law reflects the emperor’s rejection of the Schwabach Articles as an adequate doctrinal statement.

The Augsburg Confession is careful not to suggest that the Romanists should be excluded from membership in the one holy church because of bad theology. That had been suggested in earlier writings of the reformers and would be suggested again—but only about selected Romanists.

The legal context of the Diet of Augsburg in May and June 1530 therefore became the historical context of the Lutheran confessional commitment to ecumenicity. It is common for commentaries on the CA to emphasize its ecumenical intention. On this point there is no question. It is then also frequently suggested that the CA itself might serve as an ecumenical confession and that unity might be achieved by other denominations adopting it as a basic theological statement. That was, in 1530, clearly the CA’s attitude toward the Protestants of southwestern Germany. They can be considered part of the church only if they are willing sincerely to subscribe to the substance of the CA, particularly to the doctrine of the Sacrament of the Altar with full acceptance of its Christological basis. There is, however, no expectation that the emperor and the Roman party would do anything more than to acknowledge the CA as a valid statement of catholic teaching and practice. Lutherans affirmed their unity not with a Roman church to be reformed by a council such as Trent or Vatican II, but with the Roman church of 1530.

Since then, the CA has been washed over and over again in the waters of polemical theology. The repeatedly aborted negotiations of the summer of 1530 demonstrated that adequate compromise formulas could be found at every point, but private political considerations on both sides dictated the prolongation of the controversy. Thus, the opportunity for reconciliation disappeared. However, in the past twenty years this possibility has begun to reappear. It needs to be carefully protected and nourished on both

²¹*Luthers Werke*, 26, 198; *Luther’s Works* 40, Conrad Bergendoff, ed., 275.

sides. The Diet of Augsburg, 1530 was convened to preserve the unity of the church. In terms of this basic purpose, all concerned failed to achieve the commonly accepted task. We who are also concerned with the unity of the church can learn from their failures. One possibility is that—even though we are not bound to the Code of Justinian—we may define an equally minimal basis for the unity of the church.

The first act of preservation of the ecumenical possibility is the careful washing away of the overlay of polemical interpretations of the past 450 years. This process will properly take our sentence from CA VII as the guideline of its interpretation of all the doctrinal articles. They are designed to assert Lutheran catholicity without calling the catholicity of the Roman church into question. This by-passes the present process of dialogue which seeks to add to the necessary basis of the unity of the church in the present by seeking to reconcile theological positions which are the fruit of 450 years of polemical theology and ecclesiastical life. These energies would be far better expended in describing the present basic agreement in the wide variety of theological positions held across the church. The lines of agreement and disagreement would by no means correspond to the present denominational lines. There is far more need to discuss the various ways in which Lutheran catholic, and Roman catholic Christians respond to the actual tasks of the church, to preaching and to pastoral work—and how these differences are related to the teaching of the gospel. For example, since Lutherans cannot agree on “justification” among themselves, why is it necessary to resolve ancient and present disagreements with Roman Catholics?

Some will say this is a practical impossibility. It may not happen, but not because of intrinsic impossibility. All that is needed is for representatives of all groups involved to commit themselves to working together at the central task of the church without regard to the presentation of their own group and its history. From that perspective a variety of theological formulations may be found to have varying degrees of usefulness for varying tasks.

Such is what could have occurred if the negotiations of the Diet of Augsburg had recognized existing catholicity and the two parties had begun to learn to live together with as much dedication as they learned to fight. A general council convened in 1530 would have had opportunities no longer present in 1531. Lutherans were as much a party to that failure as the Romanists. But Article VII, 2 seemed for a moment to stand on the brink of a firm commitment to the unity of the church. Immenkoetter²² quotes Luther—who was not entirely pleased with the Augsburg Confession—“Ich habe sorg, da wir nimer mehr so nahent zu samem khomen werden als zu Augsburg.” (“I fear that we will never again come as close together as we did at Augsburg.”)

Luther’s words have been true for 450 years but need not be for 500 years. The initiative can be taken from either side, by individuals or by groups. To use a psycho-historical illustration: The church is like a family

²²Immenkoetter, p. 10 (WA Tr., 4,495,7-9.)

which has experienced divorce. For it to be reunited, it need not resolve the old quarrels, need not come to terms with all that has happened during the years of separation. Rather such a family in the process of reconciliation needs to focus on present and future tasks and on the resources available to members of the family in meeting those tasks. Not all members will focus on the same tasks or use the same methods in resolving them. They may find more or less creative ways of working together. Whether they do or not will depend on the choices which they make as individuals about using present strengths and past experiences as resources for dealing with the future.

This is the practical significance for Lutherans of looking at the meaning of CA VII, 2 in the historical context of Augsburg in May and June 1530. Later Lutherans would confess this same sentence with quite different meaning. For them it would be a polemical basis of maintaining the schism.

Lutherans today may not confess this sentence ("For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments") without clearly specifying which of these meanings they affirm.

Lutherans' confession of this sentence confronts Roman Catholics with a similar question. On what basis are they willing to confess and work toward the unity of the church? The question is not whether Rome posthumously acknowledges the Augsburg Confession--any more than the question is whether the Lutherans will posthumously recognize the canons and decrees of Trent. The question rather is whether we will all find the strength to act on the unrealized but again available potential of Augsburg in the spring and summer of 1530 and commit ourselves to the unity of the church on the basis of evangelical doctrine and apostolic discipline--leaving the latitude of understanding of these principles which the church lived with both before and after the western schism.

Suppose, for example, that the Roman Church would be willing to test this possibility by admitting a Lutheran or even a larger variety of Protestant groups as religious communities in its midst, with their own traditions, own history, and own organizational structures. And suppose that a few such Protestant communities were willing to take the risk. I predict that in a few decades the lines of division will be no more painful than those presently existing between the various religious orders and dioceses of the Roman Catholic Church. If so, the principle of catholicity would be vindicated. And the experience of this experiment would provide a useful resource for further reunification. That might have happened at Augsburg in 1530. It was, in any case, what the signers of the CA were requesting. We cannot know how contemporary ecclesiastical politicians might now respond to such an initiative. However, it remains an open possibility today. Clearly, however, there is no confessional reason for Lutherans to wait for Rome to recognize the CA, but Lutherans are rather confessionally obligated to imitate the CA in declaring effective catholic unity with Roman Catholics.