

## Augsburg Confession VII: An Unnecessary Controversy

“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 the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine word” (32:2).<sup>i</sup> The interpretation of this passage of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, has been a source of contention among Lutherans in the present as well as in the past. The controversy has centered around the question as to what extent Augustana VII applies to church fellowship. Some maintain that the term “Gospel” in Article VII must be taken in the wide sense to include “doctrine and . . . all its articles,” as the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article X puts it. The Gospel in this sense is more than forgiveness of sins. Others insist that “Gospel” must be taken in the narrow sense of forgiveness through faith in Christ.<sup>ii</sup> Taken to the extreme this view completely repudiates the Confession’s concern for truth and purity of doctrine. In 1971 the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Germany agreed on a statement which has become a basis for full church fellowship. This statement is popularly known as the Leuenberg Concord. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession was a principle source of inspiration for this agreement concerning church fellowship.<sup>iii</sup> Who is right? Which view is the correct interpretation of Article VII? Does Article VII establish a high standard for fellowship or one that is minimal? I think neither, for the wrong question is being asked. Article VII sets no standard, high or low, for church fellowship because it was never intended to serve as a basis for such an enterprise but instead to describe what the church is and how the church is created and preserved.

A careful examination of Article VII demonstrates that church fellowship is not under consideration but the church as the *Una Sancta*. The opening sentence determines the subject matter for the entire article: “It is also taught among us the one holy Christian church will be and remain forever” (32:1). The next sentence makes it clear that the *Una Sancta* is being discussed by explaining what the church 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” (32:2). If “the Gospel . . . in its purity” is taken in the broad sense of doctrine and all its articles as in Formula X, then only a handful of Lutherans were the one holy Christian church. This is the very conclusion which Article VII was designed to refute because of Rome’s view of the church as an outward association with the Pope being its head. Article VII quotes Ephesians 4:4, 5 in order to prove that there is only one holy Christian church, i.e., *all* believers (32:1). The Gospel “in its purity” and the holy sacraments “administered according to the Gospel” are mentioned as the means which create and preserve the *Una Sancta*. In other words, human rites do not justify and they are not means of grace. Article XV, “Church Usages,” and Article XXVI “Distinction of Foods,” reiterate Article VII’s claim that human rites cannot create or preserve the *Una Sancta*. It is in this context that it is said, “It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church [the *Una Sancta*] that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places” (32:3).

If one is not fully convinced by the above discussion of Article VII that church fellowship is not its concern, the Apology demonstrates this beyond any doubt. The Apology was written to defend the views of the Augsburg Confession, and it explains the intended meaning of Article VII. As with the Augsburg Confession, Article VII of the Apology is clearly concerned with the *Una Sancta* and not church fellowship. In the first sentence the Apology describes the church as “the assembly of saints” (168:1). The Apology also states that the Gospel and the sacraments not only are the means which create the preserve the church but that they also are marks of the church, i.e., where they are present one can be certain that the church is present (169:5). The church properly speaking excludes the wicked, and it is not merely an external association (169:5, 8; 170:13). Instead, the church properly speaking includes only those “men scattered throughout the world who agree on the Gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit and the same sacraments, whether they have the same human traditions or not” (170:10). Again, the church consists of all who are “reborn of the Holy Spirit” (170:14) and have the righteousness which comes through faith in the Gospel (170:15, 16). Clearly, the *Una Sancta* is being spoken about, i.e., all believers “the Church in the proper sense is the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit” (173:28). Only a few of the references concerning the church have been quoted. It is in this context that the reference to true unity must be understood.

Fortunately, the Apology specifically explains what is meant by “true unity” in Augustana VII: “We are talking about true spiritual unity, *without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God*. For *this* unity, we say, a similarity of human rites, whether universal or particular, is not necessary” (174:31) (emphasis added). At this point it is extremely important to note in what connection rites and ceremonies are being discussed. In the Apology they are not mentioned in connection with church fellowship but in connection with the *Una Sancta*.

Rites and ceremonies are not discussed as adiaphora but as things which do not merit justification or serve as means of grace: “Some have thought human traditions are devotions necessary for meriting justification” (174:32). Such a view is condemned because “the uninitiated have concluded that there can be no righteousness of the heart before God without these observances” (174:33). If the discussion of church rites and ceremonies in Augustana VII and the Apology was concerned only about adiaphora there would have been no problem for the reformers: “we believe that the true unity of the church is not harmed by differences in rites instituted by men, although we like it when universal rites are observed for the sake of tranquility” (174:33). However, this is not the issue. The issue is whether such rites effect or affect the *Una Sancta*: “Now, we are not discussing whether it is profitable to observe them for the sake of tranquility or bodily profit. Another issue is involved. The question is whether the observance of human traditions is an act of worship *necessary for righteousness before God*” (175:34) (emphasis added). The Apology answers: “It is evident that human traditions do not quicken the heart, are not works of the Holy Spirit (like love of neighbor, chastity, etc.) and *are not means by which God moves the heart to believe (like the divinely instituted word and sacraments)*” (175:36) (emphasis added). *The Apology, then, declares that the intention of Augustana VII is to describe what the church is, i.e., the Una sancta, how it comes into existence, and how it is preserved, i.e., by the Gospel and the sacraments. This is the true spiritual unity that exists among all believers in Christ. Human rites and ceremonies do not contribute towards this spiritual unity and, therefore, it is not necessary that they be observed uniformly in all places.*

Since the Apology so clearly explains the meaning and intent of Augustana VII it is wrong to use Formula X to prove that Augustana VII is concerned with external fellowship between churches. The passage that is frequently used as a parallel of Augustana VII is the following: “In line with the above, churches will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies . . . as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments, according to the well-known axiom, „Disagreement in fasting should not destroy agreement in faith” (616:31). The concern of Formula X is not the *Una Sancta* but church fellowship, whether to use rites and ceremonies of another denomination when there has been no previous agreement in doctrine and all its articles. The issue of Article X is what to do when adiaphora become a matter of confessing the truth (493:6; 613:14); “Hence yielding or conforming in external things, *where Christian agreement in doctrine has not previously been achieved*, will support the idolaters in their idolatry, and on the other hand, it will sadden and scandalize true believers and weaken them in their faith” (613:16; cf. 611:2, 3, 5; 612:10; 613:16) (emphasis added). Although rites and ceremonies are discussed in Augustana VII and Formula X, they are discussed in different historical settings and different contexts. In the Augsburg Confession and the Apology the burning question is “Are certain church rites necessary to justification and are they means of grace?” In Formula X the question is this: “In times of persecution, when a confession is called for, and when the enemies of the Gospel have not come to an agreement with us in doctrine, may we with an inviolate conscience yield to their pressures and demands, reintroduce some ceremonies that have fallen into disuse and that in themselves are indifferent things and are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, and thus come to an understanding with them in such ceremonies and indifferent things? One party said Yes to this, the other party said No” (492:2).

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession should not be used at all in matters pertaining to external church fellowship or visible unity. The spiritual unity of the *Una Sancta* is the concern of Augustana VII. Formula X should not usurp the function of the Apology to explain Augustana VII. Formula X is dealing with a different issue than Augustana VII. Fifty years separate the two documents, and the historical and doctrinal elements are not the same. The Augsburg Confession was directed toward the Romanists while the Formula, although still concerned with the abuses of the papists, is, in the main, a document which settled doctrinal differences among Lutherans. Thus, Lutherans who use Augustana VII to support a minimal standard for church fellowship are wrong to do so. Article VII cannot be used to justify watering down confessional positions on doctrine or to condone loose fellowship practices. The Lutheran Confessions, especially the Augsburg Confession, require doctrinal unanimity for the exercise of fellowship, but Article VII does not belong in this discussion.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the Book of Concord are cited according to page and section number in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Roger W. Nostboken, “The Augsburg Confession and Lutheran Unity”, *Consensus*, vol. V, No. III (July, 1979), 3-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: This was also the position of our late colleague, Dr. Harry Huth.

