

LUTHERAN THEOLOGY 101
ARTICLE SEVEN OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

AN EXCERPT FROM THE PACIFICA SYNOD BISHOP'S GATHERINGS 2009
BISHOP MURRAY D. FINCK

A COMPANION PIECE FOR THE POWER POINT PRESENTATION

Following the days of the Reformation nearly 500 years ago, we Lutheran Christians have held as a guiding principle that the Holy Scriptures are the source and norm of our faith and life, and that the Lutheran Confessions are faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures. We subscribe to the Old and New Testament, the three ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions as that which leads us in our faith and theology. Our governing documents state:

2.03. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

2.04. This church accepts the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church.

2.05. This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

2.06. This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.

2.07. This church confesses the Gospel, recorded in the Holy Scriptures and confessed in the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessional writings, as the power of God to create and sustain the Church for God's mission in the world.¹

Rostered leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are asked at the time they make their vows...

“The Church in which you are to be ordained confesses that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and are the norm of its faith and life. We accept, teach, and confess the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds. We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witness and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures. Will you therefore preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions?”²

The rostered leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are theologically trained servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.³ As they become part of the rostered ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, they make the above vow before God and the Body of Christ. As a people and a church centered in Christ, we subscribe to Holy Scriptures, the three creeds and the Lutheran Confessions as our treasury of resources that gives our faith and the church of which we are a part a very sure foundation.

Within this vast treasury, Article Seven of the Augsburg Confession states a central truth that is one part of the whole to which we Lutherans subscribe...

Entitled “*Concerning the Church*,” **Article Seven of the Augsburg Confession** states: “*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 Christianity 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.’*”

We Lutheran Christians therefore claim our unity in the Gospel of Jesus Christ purely preached and the Holy Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist rightly administered; and, according to our Lutheran Confessions we claim nothing more for the unity of the church. That confessional identity was intended by our reformers to keep us together as a church, to assure that we would be in mission side-by-side, that together we would support our ministries and each other, and that we would be partnered by our proclamation of the Good News and gathered with each other at the pulpit, altar and font.

A bit of history... In 1530, a group of reformers stood before the Holy Roman emperor, Charles V, in Augsburg, Germany. They came at the request of the emperor to explain their teachings that sought reform for the church. Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon and others prepared a series of documents to present to the emperor in Augsburg. When they arrived in Augsburg, it became clear to Melanchthon (Luther was unable to attend) that they also needed a concise document that demonstrated their orthodoxy and catholicity. Utilizing the language from other writings of the reformers, Melanchthon constructed a confession of twenty-one doctrinal articles and seven articles on reform, writing them in both German and Latin, and on June 25, 1530, a small group of princes and government leaders presented to Emperor Charles V, along with some Roman Catholic bishops and princes, what we now know as the 28 articles of the Augsburg Confession. It became the “mission statement” for the Evangelical churches.

The teaching and theology of the reformers began with a basic premise, namely that Christ Jesus is always central in our lives, our faith, our theology, our teaching, and our church. As people of faith, everything radiates from him. All that we are as children of God and as the church is connected first and foremost to Jesus. If we use the imagery of the wheel, then Jesus Christ is the hub, our lives are the outer rim, and the spokes are all the parts of our lives that daily connect Jesus with us and us with him. Among the many spokes, we could certainly include “Baptism, Prayer, the Holy Bible, Faith, Holy Communion, Worship, Witness, Relationships, Vocation, Mission, Ministry” and so many more.

When those who crafted the Confessional Writings, to which we subscribe, wrote about the church in Article Seven of the Augsburg Confession, the teaching started with the same basic understanding... that Jesus is always central. As they talked about a church that they were wanting and hoping would stay united as one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, they put Jesus in the center. The language in Article Seven about the centrality of Jesus is seen in the references to the preaching of the gospel in its purity (i.e., the teaching of the life, ministry, sacrifice, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus) and the proper administration of the sacraments (which Jesus instituted and commanded).

From there, with Christ Jesus in the center, the church and its theologians and members have added layer upon layer of other understandings, doctrines, dogmas, and teachings. Around the core understanding of our faith—that Jesus, the Living Word of God, is in the center—we speak about the Written Word of God, the Holy Bible, which Luther called “the cradle which held the Christ child.” That Written Word easily forms a “second layer” around the “Living Word.” Along with our use of the Holy Scripture, we developed teachings and understandings about its authority and interpretation, and those became other layers in our theological framework. Each time we added a layer, we had more teachings and theology that would enhance our understanding, and at the same time, there was more about which we could discuss, debate, define, and disagree. For instance, in the eighteenth century, a teaching arose out of more fundamental Christianity that spoke about Holy Scripture as being “infallible” or “inerrant.” There were many definitions and interpretations of what that actually meant for the Bible. While these ideas did not come out of Lutheran teaching or theology, they found their way into some Lutheran circles, teachings, polity, and even governing language. It also was found that the more people of faith discussed the Bible in these ways (as “inerrant” and “infallible”), the more they debated and argued about what that meant for Lutheran Christians and the church’s understanding of its life and faith. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was formed in 1988, the governing documents and statements of faith about our expression of the Lutheran identity did not use those descriptive ideas or words, which were not rooted in our Lutheran theology as it developed over the years. Instead, the ELCA chose the language that says “the Old and New Testaments are the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.”⁴

Other layers continue to be added. Around our understanding of biblical interpretation, we add the teachings we glean from Holy Scripture around Christian ethics, biblical morality, adherence to the law, other rules, and conclusions that are imbedded in the words and teachings of the Bible. Threaded throughout the Holy Scriptures, there are many laws, guidelines, rules and commandments. Over the years, much as been discussed, written, taught, and debated about the part of the Bible we call “the Law.” These are very important teachings about our faith and life as they show us the necessity of Jesus Christ. However, the reformers did not believe they were central teachings for the unity of the church nor would all believers have to be in full agreement to be one. While important, in Lutheran theology, they are not necessary for the unity of Christ’s Church.

Any time we begin to bring parts of our understanding and teachings from the “outer layers” and make them a “litmus test” for our unity in Christ, the church will be greatly challenged. Historically, when that has happened in the past, most often it has caused division rather than unity in the Body of Christ. The reformers believed it was enough to remain united as the Christian Church if we would purely preach the gospel of Jesus and rightly administer the sacraments he gave us. With that as our primary witness to the world and to each other, the church is able to move forward in its ministry and in its mission to all as its primary focus, calling and witness. The witness of the church would be on the cross and the empty tomb and would always center itself in Christ Jesus. Any other witness would immerse the church in controversy. At the same time, the church would remain always engaged in its biblical understandings, its teaching, its doctrines and dogmas, and its theological discourses, always with the understanding that upon these matters our unity in Christ does not depend.

What will be our witness to the world? To remain together in the face of difficult times, challenging discussions, and the diversity of our debates offers the world the witness that unity and reconciliation are critical for the Christian community and that witness invites others who are not part of the community to enter in. Such unity of spirit, mind, and heart makes the prayer of Jesus that “all may be one,” as recorded in John 17, a reality. Oneness in Christ validates what St. Paul taught, that we are

one body with different members, and that we are united under one calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.⁵ It sends a message to a broken and sinful world that we Christians are able to live and work and worship together in the midst of the brokenness and diversity we share because we do so under the grace and mercy of God, under the cross and empty tomb of Christ, and under the faith and promise of the Holy Spirit. To be one gives witness that we have not brought our differences and divisions into the center of our being and our existence as the Church that bears the name of Christ. To live together in unity proclaims that the life and death of Christ are larger than our human understandings and misunderstandings; and to be the church together shares the Good News that the resurrection of Jesus is healing in the midst of our diversity and his new life promises us yet another new day.

Footnote 1 Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Footnote 2 Occasional Service Book

Footnote 3 I Corinthians 4:1

Footnote 4 Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Footnote 5 Ephesians 4:5