

WHAT OPTIONS DO THE CONFESSIONS GIVE US?

**An Exploratory Essay Concerning the LCMS Crisis
as It Relates to Those Who Hold to the
1580 Book of Concord**

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The Standard of Heterodoxy

That The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is heterodox can no longer be denied. Just over a hundred years ago Dr. Francis Pieper set the conditions which prove this thesis when he wrote:

It is unfair and unjust to charge a church body with false doctrine if that fellowship practices doctrinal discipline and attempts, according to the Word of God, to put an end to the false doctrine which has arisen among its individual members. However, it is completely fair, proper, and required by God's Word to charge that church body with false doctrine if the fellowship has told its individual members and indeed its leaders, "You may say whatever you want to."

We Missourians only then hold a church body as such to be orthodox when the true doctrine sounds forth from all of its pulpits and professor's chairs and in all writings which are published within the church body, and every false doctrine, on the contrary, as soon as it makes its appearance, is eliminated in the way which God directs. According to this standard we judge others; according to this standard we also submit to be judged ourselves. We Missourians must and will be content to be judged according to the doctrine which is taught by our individual pastors whether in San Francisco or New York, St. Paul or New Orleans, or which is taught by our publications whether they be published officially or unofficially.

If anyone should prove against us that even one pastor preached false doctrine, or even one periodical stood in the service of false doctrine, and we did not eliminate this false doctrine, we would thereby have ceased to be an orthodox synod and would have become a unionistic fellowship. In short, the mark of an orthodox church body is that throughout that church the true doctrine alone prevails, not only officially and formally but also in actual reality.¹

Three things should be noted about this statement by Dr. Pieper. In the first place, it is not the *presence* of false doctrine that makes a synod become a "unionistic fellowship," but the *toleration* of false doctrine. Some time must be allowed for due process, no doubt; but Pieper stresses that such issues must be dealt with swiftly. Second, not only the Synod as a body, but each of its members must teach purely no matter where they are located or what position they have. Pastors and professors from one coast to the other are all alike included. Official statements and formal pronouncements alone are not sufficient. What is actually taught in classrooms, approved for publication, and preached from pulpits must be pure. Finally, Dr. Pieper explicitly insists that this standard applies not only to other communions, but also to the communion fellowship which is The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

¹ Pieper, Franz, "Die Missouri-Synode und das General Council," *Lehre und Wehre*, vol. 36, no. 8. (August, 1890)

Based on his standard, how does The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod fare today? A careful and candid assessment and analysis of the facts will demonstrate that the LCMS fails miserably because it persistently, deliberately and intentionally tolerates false doctrine, as well as departing from the true doctrine and practice articulated in its own confessional standard. We have become a unionistic or heterodox communion fellowship, and those who love Truth must ask themselves not only how we got there but also what we must do in light of the Scriptures in conjunction with the confessions and creeds of the church.

In this paper I propose to offer not just specific examples of how Missouri has fallen. More importantly, I will outline the two pillars that under gird this “unionistic fellowship” and give it immovable stability to this day. Furthermore, it is my contention that these two pillars of heterodoxy require us to see our current crisis as much more than a disciplinary or catechetical aberration that can be fixed by elections, resolutions, or the hopes of the next generation. The first of these pillars of heterodoxy is the inversion of the catholic principle explicitly and implicitly articulated in the 1580 Book of Concord. This gives birth to the second pillar of heterodoxy—the conundrum called “Lutheranism” by which we define ourselves, not as the true visible church, but as a movement or body which holds out to all Christendom a disembodied ideal. Finally, I will examine the options being commonly considered these days by confessional Lutheran pastors. I will demonstrate that all but one of these options are highly problematic since they do not knock down either of the pillars of heterodoxy.

I am sure that not everyone will agree with either my judgment on the Synod or my elimination of the options being considered. However, those who defend the present state of the Synod or one of the proposed options are duty bound to show how and where my analysis of the situation falls short. In any event, the times call for sober and serious assessment and, more than anything, for repentance and fervent prayer that the Spirit of Truth would guide the people of Christ in their search for an orthodox communion fellowship.

The Marks of Heterodoxy in the LCMS

As evidence that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is heterodox, one can point to any number of departures from the faith of the holy catholic church as it is rightly confessed in the 1580 Book of Concord. Many of these departures are not actions the Synod has taken against its own confessional standard, or outright denials of catholic faith and practice. Instead, they are omissions or persistent refusals to teach what is clearly and forthrightly confessed in the Book of Concord. However, there are also several clear marks of heterodoxy within the LCMS. The most obvious is the unchecked use of laymen to preach and administer the Sacrament.

The 2004 Synodical Convention passed a resolution allowing women to participate in any congregational office, provided that such an office did not involve the exercise of functions “distinctive to the pastoral office.” When the CTCR was asked to delineate those functions, it listed the following examples: preaching, administering the Sacraments, and public absolution.² But since the 1989 convention, the Synod had allowed certain designated

² “Convention Says Women May Hold All Offices That Do Not Involve Pastoral Functions,” *REPORTER* (July 15, 2004), <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=5557>.

laymen, while remaining laymen, to do just those things! Claiming that we are in an emergency situation is no excuse. Saying that the needs of certain ethnic communities require it is insulting and perpetrates the Synod's institutional racism. And hiding behind the false mantra that ordination is an adiaphoron not only makes it worse, but also violates the very principles which under gird the Book of Concord.

The official approval, the active promotion and the shameless and persistent use of unordained laymen to presume to preside over the celebration of Holy Mass (i.e., consecration of the Lord's Supper) is clearly an innovation in the church catholic and a violation of Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession. This article unambiguously confesses that "no one in the Church should publicly teach or preach or administer the Sacrament without an orderly call."³ Luther himself, in his lectures on Galatians (1531), cites the Lord's words through Jeremiah, "Woe to those who run where I did not send them," and stresses in the strongest possible terms the need for a proper call *before* carrying out the pastoral office. The right understanding of that proper call is underlined by the Apology to the Augsburg Confession which says that ordained pastors "represent not their own persons but the person of Christ *through the call of the Church*."⁴ Early on, protests were lodged and attempts were made to return to the catholic and confessional practice, but those attempts have died with the 2001 convention,⁵ and it is now apparent that this heretical practice not only continues unabated, but is persistently, deliberately, consciously and willfully promoted by many of the District Presidents and by the LCMS Board for Mission Services. Who, now, can say that the LCMS is a Lutheran church when it ignores patently clear statements from the Lutheran Confessions? And who can now number the LCMS among orthodox church bodies when it has manifestly departed from the consistent doctrine and practice of the holy catholic faith?

Other obvious indications of the LCMS's heterodoxy are the tolerance of grape juice in place of or alongside wine in the Lord's Supper; the tolerance, and even promotion, of worship forms that are clearly unLutheran (and, in some cases, heretical) both in doctrine and in ceremony; the tolerance of unionistic and syncretistic worship; the tolerance of heretical invocations of God and baptismal formulae; and the tolerance of blatant teaching and preaching against the Confessions. If Luther is right when he says that suffering is a mark of the true church, then another mark of heterodoxy must also be the widespread persecution of faithful pastors who have striven to uphold their ordination vows by re-introducing traditional catechesis, evangelical discipline, Private Absolution, and liturgical forms and ceremonies which forthrightly proclaim the true doctrine of God and His church.

³ Augsburg Confession XIV. In *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, Vande (Göttingen: nhoock & Ruprecht, 1986), 69. (Hereafter, BKS). Original translation of the German text. In its historical context as well as church tradition, *Ordentlichen Beruf* or *rite vocatus* refers not merely to an election or appointment by a single congregation, but the "call of the Church" (cf. *vocationem ecclesiae; des Berufs der Kirchen* in Apology VII.28; BKS, 240) which is confirmed or ratified in ordination (cf. Treatise, 70; BKS, 491-492).

⁴ Apology to the Augsburg Confession VII.28. (BKS, 240). It is significant that the phrase *propter vocationem ecclesiae* rather than *propter vocationem congregatio* is used. For the former clearly asserts (a) that the call is through the holy catholic church according to its trans-parochial nature and (b) thereby that ordination, which is inseparable from the appointment or election, is equally in view.

⁵ For a comprehensive description of this sad history, see James Heiser, "Here We Have No Continuing City," (www.salemlutheranchurch.net), 10-13.

Taken separately or even together, the errant practices and the false doctrine that under girds them may be seen as aberrations brought on by lapses in episcopal supervision and discipline, and by weak catechesis. If they are aberrations, then they may point to but do not have to add up to the charge of heterodoxy. Instead, they may be seen as indications of the cross within the holy church. For with the wheat are the tares; both good and bad fish are among the baptized; and the grove of holy Christendom contains both bad trees which produce evil fruit as well as good trees which produce good fruit. However, these are more than instances of aberrant or errant public teaching and practice, or of weak-kneed, ignorant or malicious bishops. These marks of heterodoxy in the LCMS all share one thing in common: a blatant, willful and persistent disregard for its own confessional standard.

Inversion of the Catholic Principle

Central to our confessional standard are the Holy Scriptures which are “the pure, clear fountain of Israel which alone is the one true guiding principle according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated.”⁶ However, as we all know from a multitude of experiences, maintaining that the Scriptures are the “one true guiding principle” is quite unhelpful if those same Scriptures are heard within disparate contexts or read through widely varying lenses. The same is true whenever anyone claims that all decisions, doctrines, practices, or statements of faith will be based only on clear passages in Scriptures. Quite apart from the philosophical conundrum (“what is clear to me may not be clear to you”), it is apparent that no one can, and no one does, read the Scriptures according to the bare words alone. Rather, we read them within the context of faith—whether that is the orthodox faith of the church, some heterodox or heretical faith, or an anti-Christian faith. That is why the Book of Concord exists, and why it insists on listing what is to be believed, taught and confessed. For our confessional standard is not Holy Scriptures alone. Neither is it interpreting the Confessions according to the Scripture. Rather, as C. F. W. Walther reminds us, our confessional standard is reading, interpreting, and expounding Holy Scripture according to the Confessions.⁷ In other words, the catholic faith rightly articulated in the Book of Concord gives us the right way to hear the Scriptures, and the right lens for reading the Scriptures. This is so because (as the Catalogue of Testimonies demonstrate), the Book of Concord affirms that it is the true summary of ancient truth handed down from the Apostles through the ages within the visible, historical church. In this way, we are safeguarded from our own strange or wandering thoughts, and the peculiar imaginations or fanciful interpretations of pastors and theologians. In fact, the faith of the church, as it is confessed in various orthodox documents, fulfills the biblical mandate “that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation.”⁸ For this reason, the orthodox

⁶ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, “Concerning the Binding Summary...”, ¶3. In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 527. (Hereafter, KW).

⁷ “If the Church conceded that its ministers should not be required to interpret the Scriptures according to the symbols but interpret the symbols according to the Scriptures, subscription would not give the church any guarantee that the pledged minister would understand and expound the Scriptures as it [the Church] does but rather as he himself thinks right. Thus the church would actually set up the changing personal convictions of its ministers as the symbol to which it would obligate itself.” (C. F. W. Walther, “Confessional Subscription,” *Essays for the Church: Volume I 1857-1879* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992], 25).

⁸ 2 Peter 1.20.

confessors of all ages—including the Reformation Era—understood and lived by the principle that Holy Scriptures are read aloud and heard through the lens of the church’s Tradition—i.e., what the holy catholic church has always believed, taught and confessed.

This is the central, foundational principle—in fact, the governing assumption—that is the self-understanding of the 1580 Book of Concord. For how often do we hear them they say, explicitly or implicitly, “that we intend to create or accept no special or new confession of our faith”;⁹ “that no new interpretation is introduced here”;¹⁰ and that “we have said nothing new.”¹¹ In fact, the charge often leveled against the papists is that they have established new doctrines, new ceremonies, new vows, new laws, new interpretations, new works, new devotions, and even new logic. The overriding claim of the confessors, then, is that they are not formulating new doctrines, but keeping to what has always been taught. This, I suggest, is the catholic principle which not only resounds throughout the Book of Concord, but also—and most importantly—is the foundational assumption when reading any part of it.¹²

Nowhere is this catholic principle more clearly and succinctly asserted than in the chief confessional document. In the paragraphs between the two parts of the Augsburg Confession, we confess that “there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman Church, insofar as we can tell from its writers.”¹³ We also confess that “the churches among us do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith but only set aside a few abuses that are new and were accepted because of corruption over time contrary to the intention of the canons...”¹⁴ What these words say is that we receive and hold to the teachings that have been handed down. And when we confess that we “do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith,” we are saying that we hold to what has been handed down to us not *if it conforms to the Scriptures* but *unless it is contrary to the Scriptures*.

This point cannot be stressed strongly enough and bears repeating, for it is what separates the Lutheran Confessions from all other Protestant confessions and even from the Decrees of the Council of Trent. The confessors consistently state *not* that we hold to those doctrines and practices that have been handed down to us if, or when, they correspond to Scriptures. Rather, our confessional principle is that we hold to those doctrines and practices that have been handed down to us *unless* they clearly contradict Scriptures.

This is a different underlying assumption than the one that has governed Lutheran exegesis of the confessions since at least the time of Johann Gerhard (d. 1637). According to Robert Preus, Gerhard asserted that “we believe the Church in so far as it adheres to Scripture, that is, the Word of God. We do not believe Scripture because of the Church, that

⁹ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, “Concerning the Binding Summary...” ¶2. (KW, 526).

¹⁰ Augsburg Confession XX.12. (KW, 54).

¹¹ Apology to the Augsburg Confession II.15. In KW, 114. Also Apology VII.7 (KW, 174).

¹² For more evidence of the “catholic principle” in the Book of Concord, see Addendum II.

¹³ Augsburg Confession, “Conclusion of Part One” ¶1. (KW, 59).

¹⁴ Augsburg Confession, “Articles in Which an Account is Given of the Abuses That Have Been Corrected” ¶1. (KW, 61). In some respects the translation of the German text is stronger: “Nothing contrary to Holy Scripture or to the universal, Christian church is taught in our churches concerning articles of faith” (KW, 60).

is, the witness of men, but because of itself, because it is the voice of God.”¹⁵ This represents a clear inversion of the Book of Concord’s catholic principle.

Whereas the *Formula of Concord* had called Scripture the *pure* source and *sole* norm, Gerhard speaks of the canonical books as *the* source of our faith. The *Formula’s* way of speaking left some room for the idea of the catholic principle, with creeds, councils and fathers serving as sources (albeit impure) which could then be normed by Scripture. But by speaking of the canonical books as *the* source, Gerhard in effect nullifies any appeal to other sources for establishing dogma.¹⁶

With all due respect and in all charity, Johann Gerhard was well-intentioned when he argued polemically and apologetically against the Romanists that Scripture was the source of all dogma. He wanted to show rightly that Lutheranism, together with early orthodox theology, opposed a two-source governing principle; namely, traditions on the one hand and Scriptures on the other. However, in doing so he set the stage for abandoning the true confessional understanding of Tradition as deriving from both explicit and implicit Scriptural testimonies;¹⁷ or, to say it another way, from what the Lord Jesus taught when we could bear it, and what the Spirit now adduces, testifies and brings to our remembrance through creeds, confessions and received interpretations.¹⁸ Gerhard’s chief flaw was that, like so many, he tried to defeat his enemies by using their weapons and fighting on their turf. He relied upon the methods of scholasticism which were as uncatholic and debilitating in his day as Luther proved them to be a century earlier.

Gerhard’s unwitting inversion clearly contradicts the Confessions and the judgment of the two great Martins. Martin Luther used the catholic principle to justify, among other things, infant Baptism when he wrote: “I did not invent [infant Baptism.] It came to me by tradition and I *was persuaded by no word of Scripture that it was wrong.*”¹⁹ In other words, Luther accepted infant Baptism not because Scripture proved it, but because Scripture did not *disprove* it. In the same way, Luther supported the transmutation (*gewechselt*) of the bread into the Body of Christ in the Eucharist when he writes:

[The] testimony of the entire holy Christian Church (assuming that we had no more than it), should of itself be sufficient to keep us in the profession of this article and to prompt us neither to hear nor to tolerate any factious spirit on this matter. *For it is a perilous and dreadful thing to hear or believe anything against the unanimous testimony, belief and doctrine of the entire holy Christian Church.*²⁰

The other great Martin, Dr. Martin Chemnitz, maintains the same principle against both the false understanding of tradition by the papists and the refusal of tradition by the Anabaptists when he writes:

¹⁵ Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 104-105.

¹⁶ Charles Robb Hogg, “Something About Mary,” *Lutheran Forum*, TBA.

¹⁷ See Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: Part One* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 249.

¹⁸ Note John 16.12-13; 15.26; 14.26. The first is especially used by St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nazianzen in arguing for (among other things) the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism,” *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, Volume 40 “Church and Ministry II” (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 254. Emphasis added.

²⁰ *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar Ausgabe 30.III:552, ll. 9-15. Emphasis added.

We confess also that we disagree with those who invent opinions which have no testimony from any period in the church, as Servetus, Campanus, the Anabaptists, and others have done in our time. *We also hold that no dogma that is new in the churches and in conflict with all of antiquity should be accepted.*²¹

Regrettably, Gerhard's uncatholic principle not only holds sway currently in the LCMS, but has been the governing hermeneutical principle for confessional exegesis in all of present-day global Lutheranism. And while he would shudder in his grave at its consequences, the notion that we hold only those traditions which can be proved from the Scriptures has undermined all theological support for the some of the following doctrines and practices upheld by the Book of Concord: Private Absolution,²² the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary;²³ Ordination;²⁴ fasting as laudable preparation for Holy Communion and Easter;²⁵ the jurisdiction by divine right of bishops as bishops to forgive sins, to reject teaching that opposes the gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the church the ungodly whose ungodliness is known;²⁶ and that "churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops."²⁷ Additionally, opposing the confession's catholic principle by requiring that all doctrines and practices rely exclusively on "clear passages of Scripture" makes it extremely difficult to defend (among other things) infant Baptism, the true understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the christological nature of the office of the holy ministry. For it is well known that heterodox communions which subscribe to the *sola scriptura* principle reject these catholic traditions.

The persistent, willful and deliberate rejection of traditional dogmas which do not contradict Scripture has led to the anti-confessional notion of the Scriptures as the sole source of doctrine and practice. This is one of the two major pillars for both the false doctrine and its illegitimate false practice which not only plagues the LCMS, but has infected all Lutheran churches today.

The "Lutheranism" Conundrum

The inversion or rejection of the catholic principle, in turn, has given birth to the other major pillar of heterodoxy. This second pillar, which equally shows that the false doctrine and practice in the LCMS is not merely an aberration or passing error, is the invention and suffusion of Lutheranism. Please understand what I mean by the term "Lutheranism." It refers to those who have accepted the notion that the Lutheran Church is a confessing movement (or subset or parallel association) within the holy catholic and apostolic catholic; or that it represents the truest form of the church; or that the Lutheran

²¹ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, I.258. Emphasis added.

²² Augsburg Confession XXV (KW 72-75).

²³ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VIII.24. (KW, 620).

²⁴ Augsburg Confession XIV (KW, 47). Treatise 70 (KW, 341).

²⁵ Small Catechism V.9-10 (KW, 363). Augsburg Confession XXVI 30-33 (KW, 79).

²⁶ Augsburg Confession XXVIII.21 (KW, 94). Note: This does not mean that the distinction between bishop and pastor exists by divine right, but it does not address the divine distinction between bishop and presbyter.

²⁷ Ibid. Also, note this: "Therefore the Church cannot be better ruled and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops - equal according to the office (though they may be unequal in their gifts) - keep diligently together in unity of teaching, faith, sacraments, prayers, and works of love, etc." (Smalcald Articles II.4.9 [KW 308].)

Confessions are the clearest expression of the Christian faith. All of these notions are built on the idea that the Book of Concord is the definite articulation of what the Evangelical-Lutheran Church believes, teaches and confesses. As such, it is *the* Lutheran Confession and thereby not only defines Lutheran doctrine and practice, but also establishes an entity called “The Evangelical-Lutheran Church.”²⁸

The problem is that the documents that comprise the 1580 Book of Concord make no such claim. Their consistent argument is that they are *not* establishing a new church with a new or different confession. Rather, the confessors understand themselves to be the true and authentic continuation of the catholic church in the West, holding what has always been believed and taught. We have seen that this understanding is especially apparent in the Augsburg Confession when they insist that we hold to the received tradition in doctrine and practice unless these conflict with the Scriptures. Yet this is simply the most obvious indication. Throughout the confessional documents, the continual reference to the interpretations and teachings of the church fathers, the insistence that liturgical ceremonies have not been changed, the use of traditional doctrinal formulae, the charges of abuse and innovation, the positive acceptance of various extra-biblical customs such as Private Absolution, the operative assumption that the office of bishop is an integral part of the church, the fact that they consistently refer to their chief opponents as the papists or the Roman party and that they never once refer to themselves as “Lutheran,” and the constant use of the term “our churches” to refer to themselves—these facts are evidence that the confessors had no desire, no intention, and no hope to establish a new church, synod or denomination. They understood themselves—and even the papists—to be the true visible church and simply wished to reform it of various heretical or heterodox accretions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the most sharply worded confessional document, the Smalcald Articles. Although he doesn’t hold out much hope, Luther nevertheless writes this confession with the assumption that there will be a council, that there are basic fundamental articles of faith upon which the two parties agree, that there is room for reformation, and that the solution is not the formation of a new church but the reformation of *the* church in the West.

In brief, the self-understanding of the Book of Concord is *not* that it defines the faith of a church called Lutheran, but that it is the definite articulation of what the holy catholic church believes, teaches and confesses. It defines what has always been the doctrine and practice of the church. As such, it never understands itself as the last word or even the most definitive word. Rather, the confessions understand themselves to be simply one more series of creeds and confessions within a long line of creeds and confessions throughout the history of the church. This is most evident with not only the inclusion but also the prominence

²⁸ For the LCMS, this definition and understanding is enshrined in the ordination rite where the candidate is asked, “Do you believe that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is a true exposition of the Word of God and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church...?” Notice carefully the language. The Augsburg Confession defines Lutheran doctrine, thereby admitting that there is such a thing. This notion is further sealed with what immediately follow: “...that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Authority and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord—as these are contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one scriptural [Evangelical Lutheran] faith?” See *Lutheran Worship Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 211-212.

given to the three “ecumenical creeds”²⁹ when the Book of Concord was compiled in 1580. This self-understanding was not a political ploy, but borne from an ecclesiology which assumed the demonstrative identification of the true visible church which was apparent to faith through the *notae ecclesiae* (“marks of the church”). In other words, not only did the confessors refuse the accusation that they were starting a new church; they also opposed the notion that their subsequent excommunication required a Nestorian-like distinction between the visible and invisible church. Rather, it is apparent through their confessions and supporting writings that the confessors—and particularly Luther and Chemnitz—saw the churches who adhered to the confessional documents of the Book of Concord as adherents not to their own new faith, but to the true faith of the ancient church and, hence, as members of the true visible church on earth which is nothing less than the Body of Christ.

Over the centuries, fueled no doubt by polemics, persecutions and historical events, what has occurred is a sectarian, if not heretical, shift as remarkable as it is regrettable. This shift, I believe, is traced to and thereby born from the inversion of the catholic principle. The result is that we now have been taught to read, hold to, and defend the confessions as the definition not of *the* holy catholic faith, but the Lutheran faith. And we have been overwhelmed with the notion that the confessions are not *a* but *the* true and correct exhibition of the faith which, in turn, allows us to ignore most especially the ecumenical councils whose creeds and canons are the very historical and theological foundation of our confessions. Subsequently, we are helpless to think, speak, identify, and describe ourselves not as the catholic church of the west, but as nothing other than one church among many or, worse yet, as remnants of the church which will never be incarnationally seen with our eyes, handled with our hands, or in any other way concretely manifest. In short, the Lutherans stopped being Lutheran the day they believed themselves to be Lutheran rather than the authentic continuation of the western catholic church. (Or, more simply, our spiritual fathers eased themselves away from the holy catholic church when they described themselves as “Lutheran.”) For that we could blame the Jesuits who shrewdly made stick the moniker that named our increasingly sectarian forefathers after (so they said) the prime heretic. But, in point of fact, we only have ourselves to thank for reducing our confessional heritage to one book, and for letting that book alone be the definition of the visibility of our church.³⁰ In doing so, we have given rise to the desire to form and break communion fellowships at will; we have nurtured the false notion that Christ in His ecclesial presence is completely unlike Christ in His sacramental and incarnation presence;³¹ we have rendered the word “church” devoid of any concrete meaning outside of the local congregation; and we have reduced the trans-parochial understanding of the church to a voluntary association of like-confessing congregations.

²⁹ In line with nearly all theologians in the western church of their day, the confessors assumed that the Apostolic Creed and the *Quicunque Vult* were known and accepted by the eastern churches. They also did not question the validity or historicity of the western version of the *Niceno-constantinopolitan* creed.

³⁰ This is essentially Walther’s argument in his book “The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The True Visible Church of God on Earth.” (See Walther, *Essays for the Church Volume I*, 88-201). His contention is that the 1580 Book of Concord not only defines, but also is the most concrete form of the true visible church.

³¹ For a simple description and comparison of Christ’s three ways of presence, see Addendum III.

The Options

Communion fellowship (whether described as trans-parochial or the inter-communion of bishops) must be the only criterion to evaluate and determine any options for the faithful pastor and congregation. This is in line with biblically informed Tradition of the church articulated by the Confessions and reasserted by Pieper's statement which opened this essay. So communion fellowship is the only foundation for any "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." As such, it has also been the basis for any legitimate form of unity within the church throughout the ages. Communion fellowship is not what establishes the church; neither is it necessarily a mark of the church. But communion fellowship is the concrete manifestation of the Body of Christ (i.e., the true visible church on earth). Therefore, the ultimate question—"What options do the Lutheran Confessions give us"—must be answered not principally but exclusively within the framework of communion fellowship. Toward this end, in every age and in every place, there are—and always have been—only four possible options: remaining in the communion fellowship where one is; becoming independent (i.e., independently or individually determining which churches and pastors to be in communion with); forming a new communion fellowship (either formally or through some "synod within the Synod"); or joining an existing communion fellowship.

The inversion of the catholic principle of the confessions together with the rise of "Lutheranism" are the two pillars which have laid the foundation for, and continue stubbornly to support, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as an heterodox communion fellowship. The inversion has permitted us to deviate from articles of faith and wholesome practices which we received from the earlier generations. The rise of "Lutheranism" has given us the theological and intellectual scaffolding to justify remaining in communion with heretics, schismatics, unionists, syncretists, and those who blatantly, willfully and persistently violate our own agreed upon confessional standard. According to this diagnosis, the problem is not simply bad discipline or poor catechesis. Rather, it is a systemic and endemic problem which can be corrected only by an absolute and unhesitating repentance and reversal of who we (as a communion fellowship) currently are and have been since our founding. Furthermore, as Pieper reminds us, according to our own doctrinal standard we are required to "note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them" (Rom 16.17); to "reject a heretic after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned" (Tit 3.10-11); and to "withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from [the apostles]" (2 Thes 3.6).

Some might object to the requirement to "mark and avoid," "reject" or even "withdraw" because they understand The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to be not a church, but a voluntary association of pastors and congregations organized as a non-profit legal entity for the creation, training, development and distribution of religious goods and services. For this reason, some may entertain various options of creating a "synod within the Synod" (e.g., declaring *in statu confessionis* or forming a ministerium of confessional Lutheran pastors). These persons, however, have neglected to remember that, above all else, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is a communion fellowship. In other words, membership in the Synod declares clearly and publicly who will unquestionably be admitted to receive communion at our altars, and from whom we are permitted to receive Holy Communion. The recent fad of pastors banning fellow pastors apart from ecclesiastical

discipline is not only the very essence of schism, but a new form of papism since it subjugates communion fellowship to the arbitrary and often subjective whims of any local pastor. This schismatic fad writ large, combined with a strident unecclisial view of Synod, is the foundation of any scheme to stay within the Synod while demarcating new boundaries of communion fellowship which exclude other members of Synod.

Equally sectarian is the proposal to form a new Synod, either formally or through a series of protocols or statements between or among independent churches. The heart and core of the argument throughout the Book of Concord, most especially the Augsburg Confession, is that the evangelical party is not a new church but the authentic continuation of the catholic church in the West. This argument was the basis both for importing the Augustana to the Scandinavian and Slavic countries, as well as for entering into official correspondence with the Patriarch of Constantinople in the late sixteenth century. To begin a new communion fellowship not only betrays this confessional ethos, but also calls into question the historicity of the continuity in doctrine and practice upon which the Confessions insist and build. Furthermore (and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough) any new Synod is doomed from its birth. For it will inevitably carry within itself the seeds of the two pillars of heterodoxy since the theological rationale for a new communion fellowship rests upon both the inversion of the catholic principle and some notion of Lutheranism.

It is readily apparent that these two pillars already exist to a greater or lesser degree in every existing American Lutheran church body (and perhaps in all Lutheran churches throughout the world). Each understands itself, in some sense, to be Lutheran in contradistinction to other communions or denominations. Each regards itself not as the continuation of the true visible church, but as a partial representative of an ideal Evangelical-Lutheran church. And each, therefore, has succumbed in some fashion to the inversion of the catholic principle. Furthermore, it can easily be demonstrated that not one American Lutheran church body has escaped one or more marks of heterodoxy, and so by definition cannot measure up to Pieper's right-headed (if overly exacting) standard. Finally, as the LCMS does, every American Lutheran church body, in some way, maintains a *quataenus* subscription to the 1580 Book of Concord, thereby betraying their self-described confessional standard.

Here, then, is the conclusion of the matter. Remaining in the communion fellowship called The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is prohibited by Scripture. Forming a new Synod, either formally or through a “synod within the Synod” or through some association of independent congregations, is contrary to the underlying ecclesiology and ethos of the Confessions. In fact, it relies upon an ecclesiology which requires us to assert firmly that the true church is an ideal, invisible reality which can never be fully, demonstratively, concretely manifest as a communion fellowship in this life. Such an understanding—that the true church is a platonic republic—is expressly forbidden in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession.³² Finally, without going to too much trouble, it can be easily demonstrated that every American Lutheran communion fellowship is infected with the same two pillars of heterodoxy—or worse.

³² Apology VII.20 (KW, 177).

The only remaining option, then, is to seek a communion fellowship which manifests the marks of the church and retains the historic catholic faith without the inversion of the catholic principle or the conundrum of sectarianism. Where that communion fellowship might be found I must, for several reasons, leave with you. For my intent has been simply to raise the question. Moreover, it is obvious that the answer thus far has eluded me since I remain in the heterodox communion fellowship which is The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Friday in Michaelmass III

22 October 2004

Fr. John W. Fenton, S.T.M.

Pastor, Zion Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Detroit

In conjunction with

Rev. Dr. Charles Robb Hogg, Ph.D.

ADDENDUM I

A Survey of LCMS Errors

Compilation and Comments by Rev. Dr. Charles Robb Hogg

So also the "Missourian" perspective is this; it is unfair and unjust to charge a church body with false doctrine if that fellowship practices doctrinal discipline and attempts, according to the Word of God, to put an end to the false doctrine which has arisen among its individual members.

However, it is completely fair, proper, and required by God's Word to charge that church body with false doctrine if the fellowship has told its individual members and indeed its leaders, "You may say whatever you want to."

We Missourians only then hold a church body as such to be orthodox when the true doctrine sounds forth from all of its pulpits and professor's chairs and in all writings which are published within the church body, and every false doctrine, on the contrary, as soon as it makes its appearance, is eliminated in the way which God directs.

According to this standard we judge others; *according to this standard we also submit to be judged ourselves*. We Missourians must and will be content to be judged according to the doctrine which is taught by our individual pastors whether in San Francisco or New York, St. Paul or New Orleans, or which is taught by our publications whether they be published officially or unofficially.

If anyone should prove against us that even one pastor preached false doctrine, or even one periodical stood in the service of false doctrine, and we did not eliminate this false doctrine, we would thereby have ceased to be an orthodox synod and would have become a unionistic fellowship. In short, the mark of an orthodox church body is that throughout that church the true doctrine alone prevails, not only officially and formally but also in actual reality.

*Pieper, Franz (3), "Die Missouri-Synode und das General Council,"
Lehre und Wehre, Jahrgang 36, No. 8. (August, 1890), p.262.*

Here, in a brief and simple way, are examples of the LC-MS's departures from the chief Lutheran confessional document, the *Augsburg Confession (Augustana)*. This list is not exhaustive, but illustrates the most obvious problems.

The left column contains excerpts from the *Augustana*, together with a few brief remarks plainly pointing out certain points from those excerpts. The most significant portions are put in italics. The right column summarizes and illustrates how the Synod has departed from the *Augustana*.

Article 1: On God

The Augsburg Confession

1] Our Churches, with common consent, do teach that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the Three Persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting; 2] that is to say, there is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible; and 3] yet there are three Persons, of the same essence and power, who also are coeternal, the Father the Son, and the Holy Ghost. *And the term "person" 4] they use as the Fathers have used it, to signify, not a part or quality in another, but that which subsists of itself.*

In article 1 of the *Augustana*, the Confessors proclaim Lutheran adherence to the doctrine of the Council of Nicaea concerning the Holy Trinity. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three Persons, are one consubstantial God. The term "Person" is explicitly said to mean, "not a part nor a quality in another but that which exists by itself."

The LC-MS

This article is taught falsely in a children's book published by Concordia Publishing House, called 3 in 1.^[i] There the Persons of the Holy Trinity are compared to the skin, pulp and core of an apple. Now skin, pulp, and core are the parts of an apple. But *Augustana* 1 explicitly says that the divine Persons are not parts.

This article is also taught falsely in any number of special worship services, both found in so-called "Creative Worship" resources and in LWML worship resources. There, versions of the invocation which begin "In the name of the Father . . . and in the name of the Son . . . and in the name of the Holy Spirit" are found.^[ii] Such invocations distort Matthew 28 by using the word "name" three times instead of once. Because they do not secure the unity of the Trinity, they promote tritheism (the idea that Father, Son, and Spirit are three Gods).

For it is not adequate, in preparing the prayers of God's people, to rely on their knowledge of doctrine from other sources in order to make up for shortcomings in such prayers. Each element in the divine service must stand on its own, and all together must confess the truth in a simple and coherent way.

^[i] 2002-2004 CPH catalog, p. 61.

^[ii] As seen, for example, in the 2002 or 2003 LWML Sunday materials.

Article 10: On the Lord's Supper

The Augsburg Confession

1] It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our *Lord under the form of bread and wine* and are there distributed and received. 2] The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected.

“The word is joined to the element, and it becomes a sacrament,” St. Augustine says in words often cited by the Confessors. It is necessary for a sacrament, then, to take the elements the Lord used and speak the words he spoke. Anything done without either elements or words is not a sacrament at all.

The LC-MS

Notwithstanding opinions of the CTCR, it is a wide standing practice within Missouri to offer grape juice instead of or in addition to wine, allegedly out of pastoral concern for those who have trouble with alcohol. Nor is it apparent that any pastor or parish has been disciplined for such a practice. This, of course, points out another significant problem with the LC-MS, the lack of doctrinal discipline.

Article 11: On Confession

The Augsburg Confession

1] Of Confession they teach that *Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches*, although in confession 2] an enumeration of all sins is not necessary. For it is impossible according to the Psalm: Who can understand his errors? Ps. 19, 12.

The confessors urge in the strongest terms that private absolution be retained, especially because of the comfort it gives to troubled consciences. This is especially noteworthy because elsewhere the confessors are not reluctant to criticize Roman abuses concerning this rite.

The LC-MS

The last remnants of this practice are remembered by older LC-MS members who would "announce" to the pastor their intention to commune. But private absolution has virtually passed out of existence in our circles. It is now practiced only sporadically, and those who urge its restoration are often viewed as Romanizers or somehow odd.

Article 14: On ecclesiastical order

The Augsburg Confession

Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that *no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.*

In Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession, the Office of the Public Ministry's key function is set forth:

(Article 5)

1] *That we may obtain this faith*, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, **2]** the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear **3]** the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake.

The Gospel itself is at stake in the Office of the Public Ministry. Because God wants his people to obtain saving faith, the assurance that their sins are forgiven, he has instituted the Office. Hence the Office of the Keys (Small Catechism) says: "I believe that when *the called ministers of Christ deal with us* by his divine command, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself." *Faith is founded on Christ's Word and institution; where that Word and institution is not present, only uncertainty can result.*

The LC-MS

The 2004 Synodical Convention passed a resolution allowing women to participate in any congregational office, provided that such an office did not involve the exercise of functions "distinctive to the pastoral office." When the CTCR was asked to delineate those functions, it listed preaching, administering the Sacraments, and public absolution as examples. *But since the 1989 convention, the Synod has allowed certain designated laymen, while remaining laymen, to do just those things!* Luther himself, in his lectures on Galatians (1531), cites the Lord's words through Jeremiah, "Woe to those who run where I did not send them," and stresses in the strongest possible terms the need for a proper call before exercising the functions of the pastoral office. Saying that we are in an emergency situation, or that the needs of certain ethnic communities require it, is no excuse. As with many innovations, what began as a stop-gap for "emergency" situations is now becoming normal practice, even in parishes which have no emergency situation, and in which pastors are present. **This practice is a complete innovation, and its continued tolerance, even by itself, renders the Synod a "unionistic fellowship."**

Article 15: On ecclesiastical usages

The Augsburg Confession

1] Of Usages in the Church they teach that those *ought to be observed* which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquillity and good order in the Church, as particular holy days, festivals, and the like. 2] Nevertheless, concerning such things men are admonished that consciences are not to be burdened, as though such observance was necessary to salvation. 3] They are admonished also that human traditions instituted to propitiate God, to merit grace, and to make satisfaction for sins, are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith. Wherefore vows and traditions concerning meats and 4] days, etc., instituted to merit grace and to make satisfaction for sins, are useless and contrary to the Gospel.

Article 15 says that those church regulations which can be kept without sin, and serve to maintain peace and good order in the church, *should* be kept. Such words are not merely descriptive, but prescriptive. And the word translated "church regulations" had in its purview not merely various festivals, but also the order of Divine Service to be used in a certain territory.

The LC-MS

The present existence of the LCMS is marked by chaos and disorder in worship forms. Variety exists not only within various territories or regions, but even within individual parishes there is liturgical worship, "blended" worship, "praise" worship, "polka" worship, "clown" worship, and even country and western liturgies. Even if all such *disOrders* were doctrinally pure—which, as has been demonstrated under Article 1 above, they are not—still, how does such practice promote peace and good order in the church?

Article 24: The Mass

The Augsburg Confession

(Note: Due to the length of the article, I have excerpted it.)

1] Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for *the Mass is retained among 2] us, and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added 3] to teach the people. For ceremonies are needed to this end alone that the unlearned 4] be taught [what they need to know of Christ].* And not only has Paul commanded to use in the church a language understood by the people 1 Cor. 14, 2. 9, but it has also been so ordained by man's law. 5] The people are accustomed to partake of the Sacrament together, if any be fit for it, and this also increases the reverence and devotion of public 6] worship. *For none are admitted 7] except they be first examined.* The people are also advised concerning the dignity and use of the Sacrament, how great consolation it brings anxious consciences, that they may learn to believe God, and to expect and ask of Him all that is good. 8] [In this connection they are also instructed regarding other and false teachings on the Sacrament.] This worship pleases God; such use of the Sacrament nourishes true devotion 9] toward God. It does not, therefore, appear that the Mass is more devoutly celebrated among our adversaries than among us. . . 34] Now, forasmuch as the Mass is such a giving of the Sacrament, *we hold one communion every holy-day, and, if any desire the Sacrament, also on other days, when it is given to such as ask for it. 35] And this custom is not new in the Church; for the Fathers before Gregory make no mention of any private Mass, but of the common Mass [the Communion] they speak very much.*

Article 26: Distinction of foods

The Augsburg Confession

(excerpt) 40] Nevertheless, very many traditions are kept on our part, which conduce to good order in the Church, as the Order of Lessons 41] in the Mass and the chief holy-days. But, at the same time, men are warned that such observances do not justify before God, and that in such things it should not be made sin if they be omitted without offense.

The LC-MS

Can any parish be found in the Synod where only those who have been examined (a reference to private absolution) are admitted to the Lord's Supper—not to say before every celebration, but ever? What efforts, what teaching on the part of the Synod is addressing this issue?

Can any candid observer of creative worship use the phrase "the greatest reverence" in connection with such events?

God be praised that weekly communion is being restored in many LCMS parishes. But it is by no means the universal rule, as the *Augustana* assumes and teaches.

Noteworthy, too, is the purpose of ceremonies: "that the unlearned be *taught* what they need to know of Christ." Ceremonies do *not* exist for the purpose of entertaining people, nor for the sake of evangelism. The confessions assume that worship is a gathering of the baptized, with occasional unbelievers. They assume that evangelism takes place outside the confines of the Divine Service.

Finally, we note the confessors' abhorrence of novelty in the church. "This custom is not new."

The LC-MS

Article 26 says that the traditions of "the order of readings in the Mass, holy days, etc." are kept among us and promote good order in the church. It is also recognized that such acts of worship do not justify before God and that no punishable sin is committed if they are omitted *without offense*. But who could deny that in abandoning these things in favor of alternative liturgies and formats, many of God's people have been offended?

Article 28: Ecclesiastical power

The Augsburg Confession

(Excerpted) 21] "...according to the gospel, or, as they say, by divine right, this jurisdiction belongs to the bishops as bishops (that is, to those to whom the ministry of Word and sacraments has been committed): to forgive sins, to reject teaching that opposes the gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the church the ungodly whose ungodliness is known—doing all this not with human power 22] but by the Word. In this regard, churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops, according to the saying, 'Whoever listens to you listens to me.'"^[iii]

Note that the powers listed belong to bishops, or pastors, by divine right—not by human arrangement. Note also the relationship set forth between pastors and their congregations: "churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops."

The LC-MS

In the LCMS' explanation of Luther's Small Catechism, the roles of pastor and congregation are completely reversed! Questions 279-284 speak of the *congregation* as the active party in excommunication, and state that the "duty" of the called minister of Christ is to "... carry out the resolution of the congregation."

What candid observer cannot see the gap between the LCMS teaching and that of the *Augustana*?

^[iii] AC 28.21-22.

Summary

Thus the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, as church, fails the test set forth by Francis Pieper. She lies dead, as did Caesar, not from one wound but many, and those inflicted by her own friends. The adoption of Resolution 8-01 has made her resurrection, as a practical matter, impossible. For the process of pressing charges against those who violate her confessional standards has been made infinitely harder, and doctrinal integrity has given way to psychologically and sociologically-based reconciliation. Such efforts are useful and beneficial when the issues are psychological or sociological in nature. But when, as in the present case, the problems are doctrinal and liturgical, they are completely ineffective.

Now some will say that the Augsburg Confession is *descriptive*, and not *prescriptive*. That is, it tells what the churches which subscribe to it actually practice, and does not demand that any practice contained in it be continued. In some cases, this is patently false. But even if (for the sake of argument) it is granted, we face the same devastating conclusion: the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is not the Church the Augsburg Confession describes.

The whole thing can be summed up in a syllogism:

1. "If anyone should prove against us that even one pastor preached false doctrine, or even one periodical stood in the service of false doctrine, and we did not eliminate this false doctrine, we would thereby have ceased to be an orthodox synod and would have become a unionistic fellowship." (Pieper)
2. But the Missouri Synod tolerates false doctrine in its midst (evidence cited above).
3. Hence the Missouri Synod has ceased being a church body and has become a "unionistic fellowship."

ADDENDUM II

Various Quotations from the Confessions Supporting the Catholic Principle

Compiled by Fr. William Weedon

“Since, therefore, the Mass as we conduct it has on its side the example of the church, from Scripture and the Fathers, we are confident that it cannot be disapproved, especially since the customary public ceremonies are for the most part retained.” AC Latin XXIV:40

“So we teach nothing about original sin that is alien either to Scripture or to the church catholic. We have simply cleansed and brought into the light the most important statements in the Scriptures and the Fathers that had been obscured by the sophistic quarreling of recent theologians.” Ap II:32

“Nothing in the customary rites may be changed without good reason. Instead, in order to foster harmony, those ancient customs should be observed that can be observed without sin or without proving too great a burden.” Ap XV:51

“Neither can our opponents produce a single syllable of Scripture in defense of these fables, which they teach with such great authority in the church; nor do they have the support of the ancient church and the Fathers.” Ap XXIV:65

“We know that the ancients spoke of prayer for the dead. We do not prohibit this.” Ap XXIV:94

“Epiphanius taught that Aerius believed that prayers for the dead were useless. This he rejects. We do not support Aerius either.” Ap XXIV:96

“These papistic abuses have been refuted in detail in the common Confession of our churches, and in the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and other writings of ours, *on the basis of God's Word and the witnesses of the ancient church.*” SD VII:110

“For the Holy Scripture and the ancient Fathers (on the basis of Scripture) testify powerfully to the following.” SD VIII:51

“On this basis the Council of Ephesus also concluded that the flesh of Christ has the power to give life.” SD VIII:59

“And we hold and teach with the ancient, orthodox church, as it explained the teaching based on Scripture....” SD VIII:64

“...for example, that his flesh is true, life-giving food and his blood is true life-giving drink, as the two hundred patres at the Council of Ephesus testified.” SD VIII:76

“Rather we have a deep yearning and desire for true unity and on our part have set our hearts and desires on promoting this kind of unity to our utmost ability. This unity keeps God's honor intact, does not abandon the divine truth of the holy gospel, and concedes nothing to the slightest error. Instead, it leads poor sinners to true, proper repentance, raises them up through faith, strengthens them in new obedience, and thus justifies and saves them eternally, solely through the merit of Christ.” SD XI:96

“In the Apology it is not only even more clearly explained, but it is also confirmed using passages of Paul from 1 Corinthians 10 and from Cyril.” FC SD VII:11

ADDENDUM III

A Simple Explanation of the Implications of the Ecclesial Presence of Christ

By Fr. John W. Fenton

As miraculous, incredible and wonderful as it sounds, Our Lord Jesus Christ is not content to present Himself to us in only one way (mode). Rather, by the Holy Spirit, we know that He is present to us in at least three ways.

The first way is His *physical presence*. This occurred when the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Virgin Mary so that she conceived in her womb the Son of God. Her conception is when Our Lord Jesus took into Himself (assumed) human flesh from the Virgin Mary. In this way, Our Lord is both God and Man—God because He is begotten of the Father from all eternity, and Man because He is born of a human mother. And in this way, Our Lord Jesus walked the earth, was tempted, ate and slept as we do, suffered torments of mind and body, died, and rose again.

But because the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Virgin and because He opens our eyes of faith, we can and must point to Jesus and say, “This Man is God.” Likewise, we can and must point to His mother and say, “The Virgin Mary is the Mother of God.” That is precisely what the church did in its earliest days when a heretic refused to say that the man named Jesus is at the same time truly God. The church’s confession is that you can’t split Jesus into two—man and God—but must believe that His divinity interpenetrates His humanity.

The physical presence of Jesus is most significant because it is the foundation of all knowledge we have of Jesus, and it helps us understand the other two ways He presents Himself to us.

Our Lord’s second way is His *sacramental presence*. By the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ unites Himself (both His divine and human natures) with bread and wine. He does this so that He can dwell in us whenever we eat His body and drink His blood.

Like His physical presence, Our Lord’s sacramental presence is the combination or intercommunion of two distinct things—His flesh (physical presence) and the food (the bread and wine) we place on the altar. And just as we cannot split or undo His divine and human natures in His physical presence, in the same way after He has given His word and blessing we cannot split or undo His sacramental presence. In other words, the blessed bread and wine are and remain His body and blood.

In the time of Martin Luther, several refused to say that the consecrated bread is Christ’s Body. Some crassly maintained that it reminded us of Christ’s Body. And others more subtly said that Christ only spiritually hides Himself in the bread; or that He is invisibly (but not really and truly) present alongside the bread.

Like the earlier heretic, these men refused to say “This bread is Christ’s Body.” But the Lutheran confessors were clear: the bread and wine *truly are and remain* Christ’s Body and Blood. So you can point to the blessed bread and say, “This is Christ’s Body—the same body that suffered, died and rose for my salvation.” This we do because the Holy Spirit shows us that *this* bread is the Body of Christ. The two are one, with the Body of Christ interpenetrating the bread so that it is no longer ordinary bread.

The third way Our Lord presents Himself to us is His *ecclesiastical* or *churchly presence*. This presence also occurs by the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit calls and gathers us by faith into the Church, He unites us in Christ’s mystical Body. So two distinct things are combined: Our Lord Jesus and all believers. He is the Head and we are His body.

So Our Lord’s church has two natures—an historical, institutional nature which everyone can see and point to; and a mystical nature which we can see and confess only by the grace of the Holy Spirit. For we are members of His Body—and not of some spiritualized body which no one can see. For the point is that Our Lord presents Himself in outward, manifest ways which men—imbued by the Holy Spirit—can point to and say, “This is the Body of Christ.”

The Lord's three presences, then, are interdependent. His physical presence makes possible His sacramental presence. And His sacramental presence makes possible his churchly presence. For we see Our Lord's churchly presence most clearly and distinctly at the altar—when the Body of Christ (churchly presence) gathers to feast of the Body of Christ (sacramental presence) which suffered, died and rose for our justification (physical presence).

Yet our particular altar does not exhaust or complete the definition of Our Lord's churchly presence. If it did, then Jesus would be confined to one place. Or, if He did appear in other churches, then He would be split into many bits all over the world; or He would be duplicated and reproduced. But because of Our Lord's ascension, the entire Lord Jesus is present sacramentally at every altar. Based on this sacramental miracle, and for the same reason, Our Lord is present not only in one church but across many churches.

Therefore, we ought not simply point at one congregation and say, "This is the Body of Christ." We also ought to point at a group of congregations—churches in communion fellowship with each other because of Christ's sacramental presence—and say, "This group of churches, this communion fellowship, this institution is the Body of Christ."

So Our Lord's churchly presence is not unlike His physical or sacramental presence. Because Our Lord took flesh, we can and must point to Jesus and say, "This man is God." Because of Our Lord's Word and Spirit, we can and must point to the consecrated bread and say, "This bread is Christ's Body." In the same way, we can and must point to a communion fellowship that holds to the true faith and say, "This is the Body of Christ—God's church on earth."

8 October 2004

NOTE: The major premise of this essay relies on "Christ Present in the Church According to Both Natures" by Martin Chemnitz in *The Two Natures in Christ*.

ADDENDUM IV

The Church as Christ's Glorified Body

By Fr. John W. Fenton

St. Augustine (d. 430), a bishop and one of the most prolific thinkers and confessors in the history of the Christian Church, once preached that when Our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, He "commended to us His Body where it would continue to lie."

That statement no doubt will lead you to think of the Holy Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood. For when Our Lord Jesus ascended, He did leave us His Body as a perpetual testament and remembrance which bestows His mercy and life to all who believe. And that Body of Christ continues to lie on Christian altars so that the faithful may partake of the Lord's divine nature.

However, St. Augustine was not primarily talking about the Eucharist when he said that Jesus "commended to us His Body." Instead, this venerable saint was referring to the holy catholic Church. For, as St. Paul says, the Church is the Body of Christ and Christ Himself is its head (see Romans 12 & 1 Corinthians 12).

St. Augustine's statement builds upon St. Paul's. Both lead us to consider the Church not as an organization or institution, but as Christ Himself. And both lead us to profess that our faith in Christ Jesus requires us to "believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church" (Nicene Creed; original version).

But how are we to understand this Body of Christ, which is the Church. Is it simply a metaphor—and picturesque way of speaking of our unity in the Spirit? Does it refer only to our "invisible" unity—a unity that is never to be confused with institutional lines?

Clearly for St. Paul and St. Augustine, "Body of Christ" is not metaphorical; and it is not a fancy way of talking about "church." Rather, this phrase describes yet one more aspect of Our Blessed Lord Jesus. To say it simply, the same Body which was born of the ever-Virgin Mary; the same Body which suffered death on the cross and was raised from the dead; the same Body which we consume at the altar during Holy Communion—that same Body is the Church. Into that Body we were incorporated through Holy Baptism, and apart from that Body we cannot live the Christian life. For Jesus says, "Apart from Me" (that is, apart from My Body) "you can do nothing" (John 15.5; see also Psalm 16.2).

Since the Church is the Body of Christ, it would be heretical to say that this Body is only invisible and has no visible form. For Our Lord Jesus, who became flesh for our sakes, is not invisible now. His ascension did not mean the removal of His human nature—His flesh and bones. Neither did it mean that He simply became invisible. For, unlike the angels, one of the chief characteristics of our bodies is that they can, and will always, be seen. In fact, that is a chief aspect to us being made "in the image of God." For Christ is the image of God; which means that He is the only visible, tangible Person of the Trinity that becomes creature; and we are made in His image, which means our visibility conforms to Him, and not Him to us.

So when Our Lord ascended, His body did not vanish or get taken off. Rather, it was gloriously transformed. And this was done for two reasons: first, so that we could be united in Him (baptism) and Him in us (Eucharist) by the Sacraments. And secondly, so that He—the virgin born—could be visibly present throughout the world in His Church.

This is profound, and not easy to understand. However, it is important to our understanding of "church." For we might think that the church is defined strictly in human terms—an assembly of believers. But St. Paul and St. Augustine urge us never to forget that the primary definition and understanding of "church" is rooted in Christ. It is His Body, not our association. And it is His Body, not merely a group of people who believe and practice the same thing.

Because this is hard for us to understand and remember, the danger is that we flay Jesus' skin from His Body, and think and talk only in terms of an "invisible church" or "a unity that cannot be seen." But if Our Lord Jesus is still in His flesh, and if the Church is His Body, then His Church must be visibly present—visible even to the eyes of the unbelievers. (For remember, even the unbelievers saw Jesus with their eyes, although they did not see or confess Him as the Christ.)

The question, now, is "where is Christ's Body the Church visibly present"? Or, to use St. Augustine's words, where does the Body He commended to us continue to lie?

We Lutherans are in the habit of saying that Our Lord's Body continues to lie where the Word is purely preached and the Sacraments are rightly given. But, historically, a more "meaty" and "fleshly" answer is this: the church is the communion fellowship between those pastors (bishops and priests) who hold steadfastly to the Jesus who is both God and Man, sacrificed on the cross and now given from the altar.

If that communion fellowship between the pastors is broken by false doctrine or false worship, is that any longer the holy and glorified Body of Christ?

And is one member or portion of that Body in danger if it remains in a communion fellowship with pastors who deny the Faith once delivered?

Those are serious questions.

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