

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

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I. DOCTRINAL ISSUES

Public doctrine and pious opinion

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This topic, which relates to the question of authority in the church and congregation, becomes an important one when pious opinion is given the same status as the public doctrine of the church.

1. **Public doctrine** is that which has been established by *the Scriptures themselves* (compare 'Theses of Agreement', I). For the Lutheran Church of Australia, public doctrine is laid down in its Confessions, that is, in the statements of faith gathered together in 'The Book of Concord', 1580. It is because these Confessions express what is taught in the Scriptures that they provide the criteria for measuring public teaching in the church. They say what should be taught in and by the church.
2. The Confessions of the Lutheran church don't say everything that could be said on the doctrines they discuss, nor do they speak fully on many doctrinal matters that have arisen since the sixteenth century. So sometimes it is necessary for the church to elaborate (positively and negatively) on certain teachings and to produce doctrinal statements that are agreed to by the whole church.
3. Examples of such elaboration are the 'Theses of Agreement' and the doctrinal statements which may be amendments of these theses, 'as well as any other statements of a doctrinal nature' which have been examined, discussed and adopted by the church.

Note: the attitude of the Lutheran Church of Australia to the authority of the 'Theses of Agreement' has been clearly expressed in a statement entitled 'The Permanent Status of the Theses of Agreement' (DSTO I A31).

4. **Pious Opinion**, in this context, refers to the interpretations which have been given to the doctrinal statements of the church. Various accents and opinions, well-meaning and pious, are applied to these statements on the basis of traditional thinking. In themselves these pious opinions are harmless and may be helpful, but they must be

resisted if they are turned into doctrines of the church and are given an authority equal to that of the Scriptures and the Confessions of the church.

5. Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession says clearly that for the true unity of the church 'it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments' It goes on to say: 'Nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike'. That latter sentence emphasises that, while it is possible to have pious human traditions in the church, agreement in these is not necessary for the unity of the church. Similarly, different interpretations of the Scriptures which give rise to divergent views don't have to divide the church and destroy its fellowship [note, however, the provisos in 'Theses of Agreement I', 3e (i – v)[DSTO I A3]
6. The early Christian church debated at great length many matters of concern about what is essential for the church, and what is good and beneficial but not of the essence. The Acts of the Apostles reports that there were differences of opinion which had to be discussed at an assembly (Acts 15) before a unanimous decision could be reached.
7. The example of the early Christians reminds us that where there are differences of opinion and divergent views which affect the life and work of the church, they should not be held to in a way which hinders friendly discussion, and makes submission to the Scriptures difficult or even impossible.
8. At the same time, we should recognise that pious opinions can enrich the church. They have often stimulated thinking and discussion on central matters of faith, matters which otherwise may have been taken for granted in the church.