



## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 1

#### A. THESES OF AGREEMENT

## V: The Church

*Resulting from discussions on the basis of Theses and Negativa on the doctrine of the Church submitted by Dr Hamann, and on a preliminary and final draft of Theses submitted by the UELCA Intersynodical Committee, and on some Theses submitted by Dr Sasse, the following Theses on the Doctrine of the Church were adopted at a joint meeting held on February 2 1950.*

*Reviewed July 2001, unedited.*

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### THE CHURCH

1. The Church, essentially or properly so called, the One Holy Christian Church, the *Una Sancta*, the Church Universal, is the people of God (1 Pet 2:9), the communion or congregation of saints, which Christ has called, enlightened and gathered through the Holy Spirit by the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, and which He has thus created to be His Spiritual Body. Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 1:2; 12:12f; Eph 1:22f; 1 Tim 3:15; Cat.Minor, Art.III; Cat.Maior, II, 47-51; Augsburg Confession VII-VIII; Apology VII-VIII, 11-15; Smalc. Art. III, 12.
2. The Church is the communion of believers and therefore also a communion in love and hope, that is, a fellowship of those who at all times and in all places have been led to faith in Jesus Christ as their only Lord and Saviour, and who have been translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ (Col 1:13; John 3:5; Matt 28:19). The Church therefore comprises only believers and all believers at all times and places. No unbelieving, unregenerate person, no hypocrite, belongs to the Church (*ecclesia proprie dicta*). Gal 3:26; John 15:6; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:16,17; 1 John 2:19. Apology VII-VIII, 6-8, 11.
3. The Church is therefore a communion of those who have become 'one' in their Redeemer (John 17:21), and who, as members of His Spiritual Body, are in mystic union with Christ and have communion (*koinonia*) with Christ and one another (1 John 1:3; Rom 12:5). The Church is 'a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in the hearts' (Apology VII-VIII, 3).

4. Just as the Church has been called into being and is preserved through the means of grace, Word and Sacrament, so it is also the divinely appointed organ or instrument by which Christ, through the Holy Spirit, by the same means, calls, enlightens, sanctifies and thus adds men to the congregation of saints. Acts 2:41; 1 Pet 2:5; Eph 4:11ff. Apology VII-VIII, 10,11; IX, 51,52; Cat.Maior, II Pars, III, 37, 40-42, 45, 52, 53.
5. Since the kingdom of God comes not with observation (Rom 14:17; Luke 17:20f), and since no man can unfailingly identify those who have become and still are true believers and therefore truly members of the Church, the communion of saints, and since the Church cannot be identified with any visible, eternal church body, the Church is an article of faith. In this sense the Church has rightly been called invisible by Luther and Lutheran theologians. To the Lord, however, the Church is always visible. 2 Tim 2:19.
6. Nevertheless, the Church is not a Platonic or an imaginary state, not a geographic division or political organization, not an external polity bound to any land, kingdom, or nation (Apology VII-VIII.10) or to any particular form of church government, but it is the kingdom of Christ, the mystic Spiritual Body of Christ, an essentially spiritual communion or fellowship of saints, which yet has real, concrete existence, and is both hidden and manifest, not of the world and yet in the world. Apology VII-VIII, 15, 18, 20.
7. This congregation of saints or believers exists on earth within the wider circle of those who through Word and Sacrament have been called, but of whom not all have in faith accepted salvation.
8. 'The pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ' (Apology VII-VIII.5, 20; XIV, 27), through which the Church is created and preserved, are also the outward marks (*notae*) by which the existence of the Church at any time or place can be recognized. With Luther (E.A. 25, 358ff) we may speak also of ordination, prayer, confession of Jesus Christ, and suffering for His Name's sake, charity and good works, as marks of the presence of the Church on earth. But the means of grace are the only and essential *notae* infallibly indicating the existence of the Church on earth, for these are the essential, the only, and the un failing means by which Christ through the Holy Spirit creates and preserves faith in the hearts of men, and by which the true Church, though 'hidden among the great mass of the godless' becomes manifest on earth. 1 Pet 1:23, 25; Eph 5:26; Rom 10:17; Mark 16:15f; Luke 22:19f. Faith knows and trusts that wherever the essential marks of the Church are present, there the true Church is, inasmuch as God has promised that His Word shall not return unto Him void. Isa 55:10,11.
9. The Church on earth is one with the Church in heaven, even though this unity does not now appear to the eye of man. Only on the Day of Judgment will all who have been brought to faith by the Spirit (*ecclesia militans*) and all who have been translated into glory (*ecclesia triumphans*) become visible as one, and as the glorified Church. Heb 12:22f; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:5; Eph 1:22f.

## THE CONGREGATION

10. Holy Scripture applies the term 'church' (*ecclesia*) also to the true believers at any given locality who are gathered about the Word and the Sacraments. Acts 2:42-47; 4:4,32; 1 Cor 1:1f; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2. The local assembly of believers is essentially 'church' because Christ Himself (Matt 16:18; 18:17) and His apostles used the word 'church' both for the Church Universal and for the local congregation.

11. The congregation is therefore truly *ecclesia* and is endowed by the Lord of the Church with the Power of the Keys, that is the same power which is given to the whole Church and to the individual Christians, whom God has made priests and kings through Christ. Matt 18:17f; 1 Pet 2:9; Tractatus 24,66f. According to the New Testament the smallest congregation is as truly the Spiritual Body of Christ as the Church Universal is. Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 12:27.
12. No exact definition of the 'local' church can be found in the New Testament. The word *ekklesia* in the sense of a single church in contrast to the whole Church, as used in the New Testament, can be
  - (a) a congregation assembling regularly in one building (Rom 16:4; 1 Cor 16:19); or
  - (b) the Christians living in one city, even if assembling in several buildings (Acts 5:11; 8:1; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19); or
  - (c) the Christians living in one city and its smaller or larger environment (Acts 9:31; 2 Cor 1:1).

The local character of such a 'church' does not depend on the larger or smaller space it covers (house, city or part of a city, province surrounding the city, as e.g. Achaia). Its character is given by the fact that it can and does assemble at one place in order to hear the Word of God, to celebrate the Lord's Supper, to elect its office-bearers and to carry on the church's business. A congregation in which Christians thus assemble around the preaching of the Gospel and the use of the Sacraments is *ecclesia* like the local churches of the New Testament, although it may have in its outward communion hypocrites and unbelievers (Matt 13:47ff; 25:1ff). The hypocrites and unbelievers externally united with the true believers (*ecclesia stricta dicta*) in a local congregation (*ecclesia late dicta*) do not form an integral part of the local church.

13. It is clearly the will of God that Christians unite and assemble in congregations (Acts 2:42-44; Phil 1:27-2:4; 1:1; Heb 10:25; Gal 1:2)
  - (a) for the hearing and learning of God's Word (Acts 2:42; Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:27);
  - (b) for the celebration of the Sacraments and the practice of Christian love and fellowship (1 Cor 10:17; 11:30,33; 1:10; Acts 2:42; Col 3:15f)
  - (c) for the exercise of both private and public admonition and church discipline (Matt 18:15ff; 1 Cor 5:4ff, 13).

## CHURCH BODIES

14. The term 'Church' is by common usage applied also to visible ecclesiastical organizations or church bodies, usually consisting of a smaller or greater number of congregations having not only their distinctive creeds and confessions, but also modes of worship, rules of life and conduct, polities, ideals, legal incorporation and representation, etc. All such church bodies are only *ecclesia late dicta* and *ecclesiae mixtae*. They are 'true Churches' only in the sense and to the extent that the Word of God is taught by them in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution.
15. According to the revealed will and command of God, all believers are directed to that visible Church, which teaches the Word of God in its truth and purity and administers the Sacraments according to the institution of their Founder. Conversely, they are directed to avoid all erring and heterodox churches (cf. Theses on Joint Prayer and Worship No. 4).

## CHURCH AND STATE

16. The Church must act according to the instruction of her Lord and Head: 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's' (Matt 22:2) and according to the example of the apostles who said: 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29). By saying: 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36), the Lord has removed the Church from the sphere of earthly dominion, political activity, and the like, and assigned to it the spiritual sphere, with the Word as its only weapon. The Church therefore ought not to interfere and meddle in the affairs of the State, but it must bear witness to the truth in all circumstances and in all directions and may therefore, for the instruction of its members and in all directions have to condemn or approve acts of the State. If the consequences of such instruction and testimony is oppression and persecution, on the part of the State, the Church must keep on bearing witness and bear the cross.

## THE CHURCH AND ITS UNITY ACCORDING TO ARTICLE VII OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

*The following statement on the meaning of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession and the Unity of the Church was adopted at a meeting of the Joint Intersynodical Committees on June 13, 1963, on the basis of papers presented by Dr Hamann sen. And Dr H. Sasse, and by Theses drawn from those papers. The statement is added to the Theses on the Church by resolution of the joint meeting of January 11, 1965.*

### **Affirmativa**

17. It is an article of faith that there is and always will be One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This Church is properly or strictly speaking a 'fellowship of faith and the Holy Spirit in men's hearts', the congregation of saints, of true believers who are justified by faith. This Church exists wherever the means of grace are administered.
18. As the means of grace must be and are administered here in this world, by living persons among living persons, the Church is also a fellowship of outward ties and rites' like other societies.
19. It is the constant task of the Church as the 'fellowship of outward ties and rites' to see to it that the pure Gospel and the Sacraments as instituted by Christ are preserved, in order that the 'fellowship of faith and the Holy Spirit in men's hearts', the Church strictly speaking, the *Una Sancta*, may remain with us. This includes the most sacred duty to reject error and heresy.
20. The Church of Christ is essentially one, *Una Sancta*. The doctrine of the Church is, therefore, at the same time a doctrine of the unity, of the oneness of the Church. The unity of the Church is a gift and a task (cf Thesis 3 and Eph 4:3,4; John 17; Acts 2:42ff).
21. The outward unity of the Church as 'the fellowship of outward ties and rites' must rest upon the same basis on which the spiritual unity of true believers rests and depends, viz. upon the marks of the One Church: the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. Where there is truth, there is unity.
22. For Lutherans the consensus required should always be regarded as the doctrinal content of the Book of Concord, which does not necessarily mean agreement in theological terminology. (cf. Thesis of Agreement, IX, 6, page 22.)

23. Only where the Church as the 'fellowship of outward ties and rites' obeys the divine imperative of 'endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit', remaining in the Word of Christ and rejecting false doctrines, will the divine promise be fulfilled that the *Una Sancta perpetuo mansura* is with us.

### Negativa

24. With these theses we reject the following errors:

- i. to identify the visible church organization, the 'fellowship of outward ties and rites', with the *Una Sancta*, the 'fellowship of faith and the Holy Spirit in men's hearts';
- ii. to regard the deplorable disunity among Christians as a division of the body of Christ, and so to deny the 'comforting and highly necessary article of faith' that the Holy Catholic Church exists today, even if it appears to have been lost;
- iii. to speak of union or reunion, even when legitimate and necessary, as a restoration of the unity of the body of Christ;
- iv. to base church union on human thoughts and formulas of compromise and not on the unity in the true doctrine of the Gospel;
- v. to understand Augustana VII ('For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments')
  - a. as limiting the area of the Gospel to less than, or expanding it beyond, what has been stated in paragraph 22;
  - b. in a way which overlooks the fact that the true contrast to agreement in the Gospel and Sacraments is agreement in matters of human traditions, i.e. rites and ceremonies instituted by men.

## CHURCH FELLOWSHIP AND COOPERATION

*The Document of Union, adopted by the ELCA on March 15 1965, and by the UELCA on October 22 1965, in its section entitled Church Fellowship and Cooperation, superseded the original Theses on Cooperation between Churches Not in Church Fellowship (Appendix 1) adopted by the Joint Intersynodical Committees on June 14 1956. The consensus regarding Church fellowships and cooperation, reached after years of discussion and expressed in the Document of Union, was adopted by the Joint Intersynodical Committees on November 3 1965, in the following form.*

25. We uphold the distinction between the one, holy, Christian Church and the visible organized Churches.

We believe that the One, Holy, Christian Church is present in those visible Churches where the marks of the Church are to be found, that is, where the Gospel of Christ is purely taught and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution (Theses of Agreement, V).

26. We believe that true Christians are found in every denomination in which to a greater or lesser degree the marks of the one, holy, Christian Church are present, in spite of existing errors, and we rejoice in the unity of the Spirit that binds all true believers to their one Lord. Nevertheless, according to the Word of God and our Lutheran Confessions, church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition as brethren, altar and pulpit fellowship and resultant cooperation in the preaching of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments.

27. We reject all religious syncretism or unionism (see Theses of Agreement, II, 2 and V, 14,15). Accordingly, we cannot acknowledge ourselves to be in fellowship with Churches with which we are not one in doctrine and practice.
28. We declare that wherever continued cooperation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments and worship exists, there we have a witness to the world of unity in the faith and a profession of Church fellowship.
29. There are, however, forms of cooperation between Churches not in Church fellowship that are not necessarily a witness to unity in faith, God's Word does not explicitly or categorically justify or condemn such cooperation in special circumstances. Therefore all such extraordinary cooperation must be determined from case to case. Differences in judgment can be expected here and should be tolerated according to the law of love.