



Lutherans in Dialogue: Basic Differences?*

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For over twenty years Lutherans in the U.S. and internationally have been involved in bilateral dialogues with other Christian communions. These discussions have reached considerable agreement on the meaning of the Christian faith and have made encouraging proposals for greater Christian unity. Yet despite such convergence, Lutherans and others remain far from having put into practice many of the recommendations of the dialogues. Now the question has arisen whether there are some *fundamental* unresolved differences between the major confessional groups.

Presumably, if there are fundamental differences, each group will identify them somewhat differently, depending on what each sees to be fundamental. An obvious example would be the insistence on the necessity of the historic episcopate by Roman Catholics and their judgment that those groups which lack this do not have a completely valid ministry. Yet the Catholics' acknowledgment that even in such groups the functions and goals of ministry may be happening would seem to leave room for their finding ways to greater unity. This is to say that the differences may be serious but not so basic as to keep Catholics from recognizing these other groups as being churches.

From a Lutheran theological perspective, what shall we say? We have said it is enough for unity if we agree on the gospel (as justification by faith) and the sacraments (administered according to the gospel of justification). Nothing else is judged to be necessary for the unity of the church, and differences of forms (polity, liturgy, obedience) are not to be considered divisive as long as they do not hinder the gospel of justification. While this may seem to be a rather minimal requirement for Christian unity, and thus should make unity between Lutherans and others a ready possibility, it is obvious that things are not so simple. Some Lutherans have taken agreement on the gospel to mean agreement on

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the whole of Christian doctrine; some have insisted that agreement on the sacraments means not only that they are administered in accordance with the gospel but that there is, e.g., agreement on the understanding of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. Historically, at least, Lutherans have been less open than many other Protestants to unity with other Christian groups despite the modest-sounding confessional definition of unity.

The changes expressed in the dialogues have come about among those Lutherans who have held that the confessional basis for unity involves agreement on the proclamation of the

gospel in the strict sense of its being the saving message of forgiveness on account of Jesus Christ (rather than agreement on all matters of doctrine) and on the sacraments as means of this saving grace. On this basis, many Lutherans have acknowledged the proclamation and sacraments of other Christian groups and have concluded in some cases that greater unity is a possibility. Some Lutherans have even concluded that since other differences are matters of human tradition, rites, and structures, we should be open to taking on new forms if they will serve the gospel (or not hinder it) and if they will help us achieve greater unity.

The question immediately arises whether we can simply accept forms which we do not consider necessary if other groups that have such forms consider them to be necessary. The heritage of the Reformation reminds us that what serves the gospel in one time or place may not serve it later or in another place. If we now accept certain forms largely on a pragmatic basis (i.e., that they serve the gospel and unity), it might be difficult to make changes later or elsewhere as the gospel seemed to call for them if other groups see these forms as necessary. Does the other group truly understand the gospel of grace alone and faith alone in its insistence on other forms? On the other hand, perhaps our continued proclamation of the gospel with our new partners would help them better to see what is central and what is peripheral. Vatican II might be seen as such an instance of interaction between Protestants and Catholics, especially in terms of biblical and theological scholarship, and the bilateral dialogues themselves have certainly led to changes on both sides. The lengthy process which led to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)* should also give us hope of finding ways of moving beyond our historical divisions and favorite categories.

Yet is there still some basic theological difference that must keep Lutherans apart? Is there some matter that seems to appear in most or all of the dialogues that simply does not get resolved to our satisfaction? And, if such a basic difference could be identified, should it be or is it actually church-dividing? Harding Meyer has outlined a sketch of the problem with his article, "Fundamental Difference—Fundamental Consensus,"¹ which describes many

¹Harding Meyer, "Fundamental Difference-Fundamental Consensus: Sketch of a Problem to be Investigated," *Mid-Stream: An Ecumenical Journal* 25 (1986) 247-259. Two related articles on this topic are by J. M. R. Tillard, O.P., "We Are Different" and by S. Mark Heim, "Modes and Levels of Confession." Tillard identifies irreconcilable differences in ecclesiology that demand changes from one or both sides before resolution can be found. Heim, speaking from a free-church position, thinks that the differences vary with the "level" of church being considered (world-wide, national, regional, local) and that the dialogues only deal with differences that are crucial on the higher levels. Tillard's and Heim's articles are in the same issue of *Mid-Stream*, pp. 276-286 and 287-298, respectively.

theological attempts during the twentieth century to identify basic differences (especially between Catholicism and continental Protestantism). He also suggests that there may be a fundamental theological consensus which is emerging (symbolized, perhaps, by *BEM*), which may be more important than any differences. Meyer's article is primarily a proposal for pursuing these questions rather than an answer to them. The many positions he mentions should warn us against any simple assumption that there is one basic difference; and his own continuing work for unity in reconciled diversity indicates that he foresees none of the differences to be church-dividing.

I. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL

In light of these introductory considerations, I suggest that the main problem Lutherans have with both the practice and doctrine of some other Christian communions, as well as with the results of some of the dialogues, is that there seems to be what we would call a confusion between law and gospel. Since the distinction between law and gospel is the most important theological means for making clear what we mean by justification by faith,² it should be central to our assessment of what is going on both because justification by faith is the doctrine which we consider decisive and because this doctrine is emerging again as the point at issue between ourselves and the Catholics.³

The distinction between law and gospel is arguably the methodological center of Martin Luther's theology. This distinction runs through virtually all of Luther's work and it is nowhere more prominent than in his large *Commentary on Galatians*,⁴ which was written at about the same time that Melancthon was working on the Apology to the Augsburg Confession. Here Luther says that what makes a person a theologian is knowing how to distinguish law from gospel (p. 115): the law is death, the gospel is life; the law demands, the gospel gives; the law accuses, condemns, crushes, and kills, the gospel illumines, forgives, discloses grace, and gives life; the law makes guilty, terrifies, and reveals sin, the gospel pardons, comforts, and reveals Christ (pp. 6, 151, 333, 339, and throughout).

The point of making this distinction is not simply to sort out God's Word into two parts but rather to rescue the gospel from the grasp of the law. Luther asserts repeatedly that the problem, for example, with Peter in dealing with the

²See Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), chapter 7, esp. p. 113; and Gerhard Forde, "Forensic Justification and the Law in Lutheran Theology," *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 287-305, esp. p. 293. See also the "Common Statement," paragraphs 39 and 60, and comments by Eric Gritsch, pp. 165-166, and Avery Dulles, pp. 275-276. The confessional precedent for linking law-gospel to justification is primarily the Apology IV, *Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 107-168.

³Cf. the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, quoted by H. Meyer, "Fundamental Difference," 257: "Luther really did know what he meant when he described the doctrine of justification as the real point of separation." See also the editorial by Robert Jenson in *dialog* 23 (1984) 84-85.

⁴*Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76), vols. 26-27. All references in the text are to volume 26. Luther's lectures were given in 1531 and published in 1535.

Galatians—as with the Papists of the middle ages—was that they made the gospel into a new law and Christ into a legislator and by confusing law and gospel lost the gospel (e.g., pp. 54, 116-117). The key in making the distinction is not merely to say what the law *is* and what the gospel *is* but to ask what the law *does* and what the gospel *does*. The law-gospel formula is *functional* (see pp. 315, 333, 335). What Luther asks about the proclaimed Word of God is not "What is it?" but "What does it do?" It is either law or gospel, depending on how it strikes a person. The law is not a code but a "voice" that accuses; the gospel is not information as such but news that gives faith and new life and ends the law's accusation. A word that does not demand or accuse is not law in terms of this distinction. A word that does not pardon and comfort the sinner is not gospel, and the only word that can do that in the face of the law's condemnation is the word of the

crucified and risen Christ, who is the end of the law (pp. 38, 148, 309-310, 339, 345, 367-368).

All people know the law, according to Luther. It is built into the structure of creation, and the experience of life itself accuses us. The law's conditional form ("If you do this, then this will follow") is familiar to all. Our tendency is to make this familiar experience the basis for understanding our relationship to God: "If we keep the commandments, if we are holy, if we do good works, then God will find us acceptable." When we encounter the story of Jesus, the risk is that he too will be captured by the categories of law. Jesus will be called the new lawgiver or he will be seen as the one who keeps the law for us or he will be the one in whom faith is demanded (and faith thus becomes a good work). Or, again, Jesus will be said to be the one who created the church and requires our attendance at its rites and our obedience to certain leaders.

Against this, Luther says that the gospel of Christ is a message of unconditional pardon, a promise of eternal salvation, a free gift. Yet if this gets apprehended by us in terms of law, the pardon becomes conditional, the promise is lost, and the gift has strings attached. Luther can say that if you cannot distinguish law from gospel, you cannot be saved (p. 6), and he insists that Paul builds the idea of justification by faith on the law-gospel distinction (p. 366).⁵ The point of making the distinction is to keep from losing the gospel, to keep the good news good. It is aimed at preaching, above all, so that our proclamation of Christ becomes the eschatological event by which Christ himself comes now to those who hear, putting to death the sinful self and raising us to newness of life. According to Luther, most theology and most preaching are law because they do not see that Christ comes to end the rule of law in the hearer but instead they seek to find ways to allow the old self to go on living under the law. A common form of such preaching is moral exhortation purporting to be the way of salvation (p. 167). The gospel as the promise of eschatological forgiveness proclaimed ahead of time means that the law-gospel distinction entails the *simul justus et peccator* (the simultaneity of the new self and the old self) and demands a forensic notion of justification as imputed righteousness because the old self remains sinful.⁶

⁵Luther's Works, 26:313: "Unless the gospel is clearly distinguished from the law, Christian doctrine cannot be kept sound. But when this distinction is recognized, the true meaning of justification is recognized."

⁶See Luther's Works, 26:167 and the article by G. Forde, "Forensic Justification," 278-305.

II. LUTHERANS AND CATHOLICS

In what follows I will point to a few places where the confusion of law and gospel seems most apparent and then ask what we should make of this in light of our hope for unity. In the dialogue on *Justification by Faith*,⁷ Lutherans and Catholics reached important agreement in a statement that is by now well known (paragraph 4, p. 16)

Our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known; we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ.

They go on to note that this agreement excludes ultimate reliance on human works of any sort and they also acknowledge that the above statement of "Christological affirmation does not necessarily involve full agreement between Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith,"

although it does raise the question whether the remaining differences need to be church-dividing.

Lutherans need have no difficulties with the statement of basic agreement; indeed, we should rejoice at it. It is other things that are claimed also to be necessary that may give us pause. One of the background essays, “Justification by Faith and the Need of Another Critical Principle” by Carl J. Peter (pp. 304-15), is symptomatic of reservations expressed in the Common statement (see, e.g., paragraphs 154 and 156, pp. 70-71). In it he says that justification by faith is much too narrow a principle to be adequate as the only basic principle by which the church stands or falls. The apparent reason for his judgment is that he thinks of justification as *only* a critical principle to be used negatively in criticizing idolatrous practices. He likens justification to Tillich’s “Protestant principle.” However, in the Augsburg Confession, immediately following the enunciation of justification by faith in article 4 come article 5 with the ministry, the Word, and the sacraments, through which the Holy Spirit is given and produces faith, and article 6 on the good works which faith produces. This indicates that justification can hardly be considered to be only a negative principle or that it does not entail much of what Tillich called the “Catholic substance.”

However, Peter does not see this. He says that Catholics cannot accept without reservation “a reforming principle that would judge all things ecclesial with the purpose of determining whether and to what degree they are conducive to bringing people to put their ultimate trust in the God of Jesus Christ alone.” To this Catholics should say, “Yes, *but* there must be another principle”—a principle which would embrace what Tillich calls the “Catholic substance,” which includes the church’s creeds, traditions, teachings, sacraments, and ministry (p. 314, and see p. 308). I would claim that justification by faith includes this.

Carl Peter suggests that while the gospel of justification by faith is unconditional, the contents of the Catholic substance are conditional in the sense that they are conditions through which God saves us. These could be acceptable from a law-gospel perspective *if* Peter were speaking of *means* by which God saves, but when he goes on to talk about “traces of the divine image” and of

⁷*Justification by Faith*. The page references in the text are to this volume.

“free choice” in us and of our taking part in the “journey” from sin to righteousness as some of the conditions that ought to be proclaimed, the danger of turning gospel into law seems apparent (see pp. 311-312). He is worried about moral laxity and a lack of categories for speaking of the Christian life from a position based on justification by faith alone, and these are surely issues we need to address.⁸ We could reply that Lutherans are committed to proclaiming the law as well as the gospel, since both are aspects of the same Word of God. Our objection comes when the law intrudes on the *saving* work of God: not that the law is preached, but that the law is preached as *gospel*, as the way of salvation. Peter may well be correct when he says that we must be more careful when we explain the unconditionality of justification, but the solution surely cannot amount to adding law (conditions) to the proclamation as a means of salvation.⁹

In the Common Statement on justification there is considerable progress in agreeing on what each communion considers important and in clearing up perennial misunderstandings. I think most Lutherans would agree that Lutheran positions and concerns are effectively and accurately expressed (see especially paragraphs 24-28, 39-41, 88-92 on pp. 23-25, 29-30, 47-48).

But finally, despite the agreement on a christological affirmation as basic for the recognition that Lutherans and Catholics share “ a commitment to the same gospel of redemptive love received in faith,” there was an agreement to disagree on the meaning and role of justification: “some of the consequences of the different outlooks seem irreconcilable” (paragraph 121, p. 57).

Disagreements listed include: the Lutheran insistence on forensic justification, which is questioned because Catholics think it may downplay human activity as well as other images of God’s saving work (paragraphs 98-100, pp. 50-51); the extent of continuing sinfulness in those who are justified and the understanding of faith in relation to love (paragraphs 102-108, pp. 51-54); and the place of terms such as merit and satisfaction (paragraphs 108-116, pp. 54-56). The most significant difference is over the *role* of justification as the criterion of authenticity—Lutherans insisting on its continuing validity in general and on the need for specific reforms regarding the papacy, magisterial infallibility, and unconditionality of salvation (paragraphs 117-120, pp. 56-57). To put it another way, Catholic questions about each of these areas might be seen as a case of law being confused with gospel and intruding into salvation.¹⁰

⁸See G. Forde, “Forensic Justification,” 278-305, and also his chapter, “Christian Life,” *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 2. 391-469.

⁹To say this is not to blame Professor Peter specifically. As he makes clear elsewhere (“Justification by Faith,” 218), he is seeking to defend the position of Trent, to which he is committed.

¹⁰For a particularly interesting discussion of Luther’s position and the Catholic Church, see George Tavad, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983), esp. pp. 107-114. See, e.g., his claim on p. 110; “Luther’s formulation of justification may well remain the most central and the most universal principle by which to test all other possible criteria of theology and theological method; it may be the principle of principles, the method of methods. This at least is the perspective in which the question of justification by faith should be envisaged if the divisions of the Reformation are to be ecumenically overcome.”

The other major problem that arises in several Lutheran-Catholic dialogues from a law-gospel perspective concerns the historic episcopate and the papacy. While the Lutheran confessions indicate a desire to continue to have the traditional polity, they obviously did not think of either the pope or the bishops as being necessary for salvation or for an authentic church.¹¹ These were considered to be humanly-constructed institutions which derived their validity from their service to the gospel. While at present there is considerable interest and debate about the historic episcopate, I think the perennial opposition by Lutherans to its *necessity* comes from a sense that conditions are being added to Word and sacraments, and the gospel is being confused with law. Even in those Lutheran churches that have retained historical continuity, this fact (of historical continuity) is not considered to be something necessary or something that makes the Word and sacraments valid.¹²

Despite the cordial declaration by Catholic participants in the dialogue on *Eucharist and Ministry*, asking that the Catholic church recognize the validity of the Lutheran ministry and Lutheran eucharistic celebrations, and the many steps taken together since that dialogue concluded in 1970, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Doctrine concluded as recently as December 1984 that the call for recognition must be rejected because “the Ministry of the Lutheran churches does not stand in the line of apostolic succession by sacrament and office” (p. 6).¹³ They go on to say that “In Catholic doctrine apostolic succession in office (through the sacrament of episcopal ordination) is not simply important for the

transmission of the deposit of faith, but necessary” (p. 7). They add that this is an “essential component” of the church (p. 7) and that apostolic succession in doctrine alone is not acceptable (p. 8). They also have reservations about understanding the papacy in terms of its “Petrine function,” which the dialogues have proposed, because such a term lacks the hierarchical aspects of leadership (p. 10)! The fact that this document of the Committee on Doctrine largely reasserts traditional positions and presumably is an embarrassment to progressive Catholics does not make it unimportant. Equally negative statements by Lutherans might be discoverable, although I am not aware of any such official statements.

¹¹*Eucharist and Ministry: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV* (New York: U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, 1970) 54-55. See also Gustaf Wingren, “Authority,” *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodensieck (3 vols.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965) 1.160-161.

¹²Gustaf Aulen’s words are typical, in *Reformation and Catholicity* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 187-88: “The office of the ministry is a divine institution, and as such it is indispensable in the life of the church. But it is not the order that guarantees the effectiveness of the means of grace. On the contrary, it is the means of grace, effective in themselves, or rather the means of grace made effective through the continuing work of Christ, which necessitate and define the order....On this account the guarantee that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic cannot be sought in the office of the ministry as such.”

¹³Committee on Doctrine, “Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogues: Critique.” Typewritten copy. The Committee on Doctrine was chaired by San Francisco Archbishop John R. Quinn. Page numbers in the text are from the typed copy.

III. LUTHERANS AND REFORMED-EPISCOPAL-METHODIST

A paper such as the present one can make no claims to completeness. Its purpose is to suggest and to speculate, to provoke discussion and reaction. Looking at the various dialogues through the glasses of the law-gospel distinction may at least offer some hunches as to what continues to keep us apart (where that is the case) and some insights as to where we are in basic agreement and can move ahead toward greater unity. In our relations to the *Reformed*, while we have often raised questions about the order of law and gospel and about the primary use of the law, the basic distinction between law and gospel has not been a problem. We agree that we are saved by the unconditional gospel. I think it can be argued also that our disputes about the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper have not been disagreements primarily over the meaning of the gospel but over implications of the gospel and over ways of making sense of the Supper in light of the gospel. Of course, such implications and understandings are not unimportant and continually need to be re-thought in light of the gospel, but they are human constructs and need not be church-dividing. While each group has been suspicious of the other’s practice, and while Lutherans have been particularly worried about Zwinglian aspects present among the Reformed, the strong affirmations concerning Christ’s presence in the bread and wine in *An Invitation to Action* indicate that there are no theological disagreements on the Lord’s Supper to warrant staying apart.¹⁴ (See esp. pp. 14, 15, 42, and 88.) It should be noted that the conclusions of *An Invitation to Action* are based explicitly on the earlier work, *Marburg Revisited* and the *Leuenberg Agreement*, both of which are part of *An Invitation*, and are endorsed by its authors. Christ’s presence in the supper is clearly affirmed: “In the Lord’s Supper the risen Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with the bread and wine” (p. 68). “He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine” (p. 69).

George Lindbeck would seem to represent a widespread consensus in his conclusion that there are no theological barriers between Lutherans and Reformed to keep us from being in full communion (by which he means pulpit and altar fellowship as well as other forms of cooperation). Lindbeck thinks that the differences that have kept us from working harder at unity have not been the result of disagreement over the gospel; rather, they have stemmed from different historical and liturgical developments and different attitudes toward polity and the church's mission.¹⁵ While these other matters are serious (e.g., infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper in many Reformed congregations) and in many cases very interesting, it does not seem as if a confusion of law and gospel is involved.

¹⁴*An Invitation to Action: Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue III* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 14-17, 42-43, 68-69. The last two references are from *Marburg Revisited* and the *Leuenberg Agreement*, respectively. As with interim eucharistic sharing with the Episcopalians, altar and pulpit fellowship with the Reformed would presume ongoing theological discussion. The page references in the text are from this volume.

¹⁵See Lindbeck's lectures of October 1985 at Union Seminary, Richmond, VA, "The Reformation Heritage and Christian Unity," typed copy.

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The main issues that a law-gospel perspective raises in Lutheran-Episcopal relations concern the role that episcopal succession plays for the Episcopalians and whether their commitment to justification by faith is adequately exemplified in their proclamation. The published statements on ministry and apostolicity are most promising.¹⁶ Apostolic succession is described broadly to include not only a succession of episcopally ordained ministers but above all as a succession in the gospel, involving new forms of ministry, preservation of the apostolic doctrine in Scripture and creeds and through preaching and teaching, continuity of liturgical forms, and pastoral care and mission (pp. 21, 158, 168). The Lutheran participants (in the U.S. dialogue) judged that we can affirm the presence of the gospel and apostolicity in the Episcopal Church and that this should lead to greater fellowship in Word and sacrament, even though continuing theological discussion and interaction are called for (pp. 31-32). While Lutherans have often suspected that insistence on the historic episcopate is a requirement being added to the gospel, the Lutherans in the dialogue say that the Episcopalians have recognized "the *historical* freedom and responsibility in which all church structures exist" (p. 35) so that this is not a matter of legalism. The Episcopal statement is a bit more reserved, although the author (Reginald Fuller) makes a good case for recognizing the apostolicity of Lutheran ministry (pp. 41-42). In spite of this he insists that one of the goals of closer relationships between Lutherans and Anglicans is to "prepare the way for the restoration among [Lutherans] of the episcopate in historic succession" (p. 43). However, this may sound more sinister than it is, if we are to judge by Fuller's conclusion later in the volume (pp. 89-90):

The historic episcopate is the historic way of signaling the present church's continuity with the church of the apostles. But it is not more than a sign. The *substance* of apostolicity lies in the scriptures, the creed and the sacraments, with their liturgical celebration, as these are through the preaching unpackaged and rekindled into *viva vox evangelii*.

In another paper for this first dialogue Robert Jenson shows how our confessional *satis est* limits both what we must ask of others concerning the gospel and the sacraments and what demands we can allow others to make on us. What shall we do with the episcopacy? Jenson says that if it is not made a condition ahead of time for communion, then Lutherans are committed to “limitless openness” thereafter about future forms. Once we have achieved communion in holy things, then other matters lose their status as conditions and become matters for later negotiation (p. 137). To this might be added the question by the chairman of the international Lutheran dialogue team, Swedish Archbishop Gunnar Hultgren: “Is the absence of the historic episcopate in some Lutheran churches only motivated by faithfulness to the gospel, or have other motives been at work?” (p. 173). Greater awareness of the historical conditionedness of the episcopate by the Anglicans and their clear-cut recognition of the apostolicity of Lutheran ministry for substantive reasons lessens the fear that the gospel is here

¹⁶*Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue: A Progress Report* (New York: Maxi Books, 1974). The page references in the text are from this volume.

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being overcome by the law. Their practice of *episcopé*, which has not been particularly authoritarian or anti-scriptural as a rule, may underscore the importance of this seemingly somewhat relativized view of episcopacy.

Questions are sometimes raised by Lutherans about preaching in the Episcopal Church: Is there preaching? Is it gospel preaching? (See, e.g., p. 173.) Some Lutherans have thought Episcopalian sermons were more often teaching than proclamation and that this represented a different understanding of the gospel and of the situation of the hearer. The dialogues note that the sermon has become a more normal part of the eucharistic service and they stress agreement on the importance of the proclamation of the Word. As with the Reformed, the differences appear to be amenable to further discussion. It is a stated hope that “interim eucharistic sharing” will prepare for new ways of unity: renewal of the church is more likely to come in communion with one another than out of communion.

The situation seems somewhat different in Lutheran-*Methodist* relations. The law-gospel perspective pinpoints some problems immediately, particularly in the Methodists’ use of process language in speaking about salvation and in their preference for speaking of love rather than faith. The dialogues in this case provide few resources, although they do indicate some areas of difficulty, which may be corroborated by other writings. In the U. S. conversations,¹⁷ the language of John Wesley is used by the Methodists to explain their views: “Justification implies only a relative, the new birth a real, change. God in justifying does something *for* us; in begetting us again, He does the work *in* us” (p. 8). The focus is always on grace rather than on human merit, but it is grace in terms of our “God-given powers to respond to God in faith, to grow in grace, and to attain to whatever *telos* God has in store for his children” (p. 9, quoting Albert Outler, paraphrasing Wesley). As this is worked out in Methodist practice, it is said that confirmation (or “joining the church”) has a tendency to be more important than baptism. Often baptism has not been connected with church membership, for the focus has been on the adult or teen-age decision to “join the church” even though a person has been baptized as an infant and raised in the church (pp. 24-26). In a Lutheran response, Wesley’s theology is characterized as “conjunctive theology” in contrast to the “disjunctive theology” of the continental reformers:

Wesley sought to join justification and sanctification, faith and works, personal and social holiness (pp. 16-17).¹⁸

These observations are supported by George Tavard's structuralist observations of the similarities between Catholicism and Methodism in his *Justifica-*

¹⁷These are collected in the *Perkins Journal* 34 (Winter 1981). The page references in the text are from this volume.

¹⁸Cf. the revealing statement in his introduction to *John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler (New York: Oxford, 1964) vii: "Wesley had glimpsed the underlying unity of Christian truth in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions....He managed to transcend the stark doctrinal disjunctions which had spilled so much ink and blood since Augsburg and Trent. In their stead, he proceeded to develop a theological fusion of faith and good works, Scripture and tradition, revelation and reason, God's sovereignty and human freedom, universal redemption and conditional election, Christian liberty and an ordered polity, the assurance of pardon and the risks of 'falling from grace,' original sin and Christian perfection. In each of these conjunctions, as he insisted almost tediously, the initiative is with God, the response with man."

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tion: An Ecumenical Study.¹⁹ Justification is again seen as conditional by Wesley, now upon the fact of a person's being "in the faith": "Wesley restored a *facere quod in se est* [doing what is in one] as a condition for faith and thereby for justification....The requirement for repentance and fruits for faith, which is itself required for justification, nullifies Luther's *simul justus et peccator*" (p. 89). Tavard the Catholic speaks of Wesley's position in terms of law and gospel in describing how Wesley relates God's grace and our response (p. 91):

The dilemma is resolved practically, not intellectually. It disappears when the Gospel is formulated in terms of Law; there is a law of Christ to be obeyed and practiced at every moment. Through obedience to the new Law, every moment reenacts the original instantaneous experience of new birth. If the instantaneous moment may be called Gospel, the constant obedience of every moment is to Law. But these are one. Methodist preachers are advised to preach "Law and Gospel mixed together."

Tavard suggests that Methodism represents a recovery of older Catholic truths, which means that it also falls under his judgment (p. 107) that:

In his central doctrine of justification by faith, Luther was right, and the conditions of his times made him a strenuous defender of the truth....To be right on a peripheral question would of course not justify making anyone a doctor of the Church. But the irony of Luther's situation is that he was right on the chief point of the Christian understanding of human life in its relationship to God, at a time when the Church's hierarchy...was blind to the point he was making.

The distinction between law and gospel reveals serious disagreements still in need of resolution between Lutherans and Methodists. In the international dialogue many of these differences are simply juxtaposed in sentences concerning salvation and the means of grace with little attempt at agreement.²⁰ This fact makes that group's recommendation for moving toward full communion

less than convincing to me as well as to at least one of the Lutheran participants. Yet Methodism's ecumenical fervor and ecclesiological flexibility should encourage us to work toward greater agreement.

IV. SOME CONSEQUENCES

In arguing in favor of intercommunion inclusive of all baptized Christians as the next step toward full Christian unity, the Methodist Geoffrey Wainwright proposes a series of alternatives that raise the issues very sharply, not only for Lutherans and Methodists but for all Christian groups.²¹ In each case he thinks we must choose the *former* alternative.

1. *Lord's Supper or Church's Supper?* If we do not see it as the *Lord's* Supper and instead give precedence to the church over Christ, then we make the sinful state of Christian disunity normative over the Lord's invitation to all penitents,

¹⁹For publication information, see note 10 above. The page references in the text are from this volume.

²⁰"The Church: Community of Grace," Lutheran-Methodist Joint Commission (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1984).

²¹Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford, 1981) 141-146.

according to Wainwright. In terms of the law-gospel distinction, I think we should agree. Our insistence would need to be that it be the gospel of justification that is made visible in the Supper; that would lead us to be in fellowship with groups where that is happening and to refrain where the Supper is portrayed in legal terms (as our work) or as bestowing no gift at all.

2. *Does the eucharist create unity or express unity?* From Wainwright's perspective, based on New Testament eschatology, the eucharist is more important for what it makes of us than for what it expresses as already being true of us.. He thinks intercommunion will express the unity that is ours in Christ in spite of our disunity. I think that despite its difference from our historic practice, our seeing the sacrament as gospel (as gift and promise) should lead us also to think that it is more important for what it does to us (forgives sin, unites to Christ, builds up the body) than for what it says about us. It seems to me that our traditional exclusiveness may be vulnerable to the charge of turning the gospel into law.

3. *Where they conflict, should love or truth prevail?* Though there can be no final opposition between love and truth, since God is both, now they often seem to be in opposition. Wainwright says that because of sin, our knowledge of the truth will always be imperfect; therefore, we should draw lines excluding others from the Supper as reluctantly as possible. That is, if we live together in love (and practice intercommunion with everyone), there will be a better chance to see the truth. Here I disagree. If our unity is to be based on the gospel, then our first concern must be with truth. Simple toleration of others with whom we disagree is not love, in any case, and it seems to me that truth suffers here also. However, our point of disagreement here should be *only* in terms of the sacrament as a gift of Christ's merciful presence (the gospel); our disagreement on other areas of doctrine or on the mode of Christ's presence should not preclude intercommunion. Our continued witness to the centrality of the gospel as gift, continued dialogue, continued biblical study, continued self-criticism—even if these mean temporary separateness—in the long run will better serve both love and truth.²²

4. *Is mission or order more basic for the church?* If the church is to be one for the sake of

mission, then its order must take second place, Wainwright says. If God uses the ministries of other groups, we should not let ministry (order, polity) keep us apart. (My response follows point 5.)

5. *Is the present event of the church or the past institution of the church more important?* If the church is a creation of present acts of the risen Christ in Word and sacrament, then we should not let the past rule the present. Christ is alive in the present. Circumstances have changed since the first century (and the sixteenth) and our forms and practices should conform to what the gospel requires in the

²²See the remarks by J. Robert Nelson, “Eucharist, Ecumenism, Methodism,” *Wesleyan Theology Today*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985) 313-322, esp. p. 313. Nelson questions using Wesley to the effect that “the cardiac congeniality of two persons is sufficient to overcome—or else to conceal—any differences of faith, doctrines, or theology. Two hearts, strangely warmed, equal one warm handshake, and—voilà!—the problem of church division is resolved.”

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present, particularly if it is our past-based institutions that divide us, according to Wainwright. In terms of both this and the previous point, the “evangelical pragmatism” (i.e., seeking forms in each time and place that will best serve the gospel)²³ which characterized both Luther and Wesley, will lead us (from a law-gospel perspective) to agree with Wainwright in stressing mission as a basis for church order (and for re-forming church order) and in insisting that the present event of the proclamation of the gospel must have primacy over any past forms of the church. This is the case even if these forms were once appropriate responses to the gospel (e.g., the historic episcopate, male clergy, clerical celibacy, forms of worship). This is not to deny the importance of inherited forms but to insist that they must always be subservient to the gospel and to admit that forms can and do change. Ongoing cooperation may in fact help to guide the changing of older forms and the creation of new forms.

V. CONCLUSION

From all of this I conclude that Lutherans need to be much more aggressive in the cause of Christian unity on the basis of the gospel understood in terms of the law-gospel distinction.²⁴ This is not merely to say that we have the truth and others should come around to our way. Rather, if we believe that justification is indeed the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, then we must take care to see that the church stands—and that means the whole church. We should be making clear in every conceivable way how important this matter is. We need to exemplify the sort of freedom to which this doctrine leads—a freedom both from the law’s condemnation and for ever new forms of Christian mission, structure, piety, and loving actions for our neighbors. We should make public what goes on in our churches,²⁵ and if what goes on in our congregations and synods is not in accord with justification by faith, then we should reform ourselves lest we

²³On Luther’s and Wesley’s ecclesiologies and the idea of “evangelical pragmatism,” see the work of the Reformed historian Robert S. Paul, *The Church in Search of Its Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 15-162.

²⁴That neither justification by faith nor the law-gospel distinction is too narrow or only negative has been claimed above (e.g., section II); see also *Justification by Faith*, 167 and 275-276. A quite different judgment is made by Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 92, when he says that the law-gospel

distinction, the doctrine of the two kingdoms, Luther's polemics against the Mass and the papacy, and Luther's understanding of Scripture must all be rejected today by Lutherans who are serious about Christian unity because they are merely products of the age in which they arose. Pannenberg locates the problems with justification by faith and the law-gospel distinction in the area of anthropology (which he thinks is much too individualistic for the Reformers), but he fails to see the hermeneutic importance of these categories. See a related criticism of Pannenberg by Robert Jenson, "On Recognizing the Augsburg Confession," *The Role of the Augsburg Confession*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 151-166.

²⁵Here I am thinking of our evangelism materials, newspaper advertising, and training our members for outreach. We should make it clear that we are reformed and catholic, that we are apostolic in faith and ministry, that we are sacramental and credal, that we hold to the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, that we proclaim the gospel of God's unconditional forgiveness so that our church is a place for sinners. We should also stress that our polity is neither autocratic or legalistic. Both our preaching and our sacramental practice would need to be such that our practice backed up our claims.

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publicize something less than good news. If we believe that we also have the apostolic faith and an apostolic ministry, we should not give in to those who seek to place a certain form of ministry on par with or even above the gospel. We should not embrace hierarchical medieval forms based on historically implausible claims for romantic or utilitarian reasons or for the sake of some sort of "unity" that confuses law and gospel.²⁶ Perhaps developing a truly reformed episcopate rather than accepting someone else's unreformed one could be one of our contributions toward future unity.

The unity of the church is not an adiaphoron (neither are apostolicity, universality, and holiness). It is not enough for us merely to define minimal requirements for unity; we need to persuade, confront, engage in dialogue, experiment, and nurture—as unity in the gospel requires—in our relationships with other Christians (and among ourselves). It is only church-dividing when the gospel is not permitted, when it is mixed with law, or when conditions are added to it. It is church-dividing when the critique and the attempt to reform that which justification by faith demands is not allowed. But then it is not enough simply to go our separate way; we need to contend for the gospel with those who do not see it. This could sound arrogant but it will not be if our own life is shaped by the unconditional gospel of the crucified one, on whose account we are justified apart from our works. If we judge that a situation is churchdividing in the above senses, then I believe the burden should be on us *not* to legitimize our separateness but to become a passionate reform movement *within* the church catholic. Something seems to be happening of gigantic proportions in the world-wide Christian church (cf., e.g., *BEM*, or the growth of Christian faith in the third world). In spite of all our differences, new forms of the church are emerging, new convergences of doctrine and practice are occurring. We must find a way to make our contribution for the sake of the truth of the gospel apart of this emerging reality. This will surely change us also; we may have to leave some of our categories and traditions behind.²⁷ But if we remain separate (apart, aloof) and do not bring the truth as we see it, we will be failing in the only adequate reason for our confessional existence as Lutherans—to be a reforming movement in the service of the gospel alone.

²⁶Cf. George Lindbeck's statement in *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 201-202: "Lutherans, one might say, are conscience bound not to 'submit' to the papacy until it has been so thoroughly renewed that the language of submission is totally

inappropriate.” He goes on to say that we have an obligation to contribute to that renewal both by working with Catholics and by renewing our own structures.

²⁷See the paper by J. M. R. Tillard, O.P., “The Ecclesiological Implications of Bilateral Dialogues,” typed copy, 1986; to be published in a book edited by Daniel F. Martensen. Tillard says that each partner must be willing to change and be changed. There is no possibility for unity without change. We need to encompass others’ insights, thus preserving the richness of diversity without separation. He thinks that many of our old differences cannot be resolved on their terms so we must move ahead to new formulations. In any case, we must not give up and think that confessional differences are inevitable. Michael Kinnamon, *Unity in each place, in all places* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983) 18, makes the point that every Christian communion’s identity changes in time; we need to direct the changes toward unity. My understanding of our commitment to the law-gospel distinction is that it should make us willing and eager to discover new ways toward greater unity as long as the gospel remains good news.