

# Enough, Already – but Perhaps Not Yet:

## Liturgy, Church Unity, and Eschatology

*Address at the Institute of Liturgical Studies, 11 April 2002*

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### *Initial Orienting Reflections*

Enough, as we have been saying, ought to be enough. We've heard the crucial sentence from Article VII of the Augsburg Confession over and over these days, about what's enough for the true unity of the church, namely the one and only gospel proclaimed and enacted in the assembly of believers. We have to suppose that the confessors that summer day in 1530 meant precisely what they said about preserving and maintaining the genuine unity of the church. Enough, to have some *prima facie* acknowledgment that it is indeed the Christian gospel been said and done in this and that assembly of the faithful. Not that gospel *plus* some theological proposition or some canonical requirement, we'd want to say. For we've learned the lesson well: gospel plus anything is always less than gospel.

On the other hand, there have been all kinds of voices raised in the intervening 470 years, suggesting that such simple and obvious meanings are not properly drawn. One of my retired colleagues does not hesitate to quote one of the post-WW II German Lutheran bishops as saying, "Satis est non satis est" – by which he apparently meant to say that the "it is enough" statement is in fact and after all NOT enough, not even for the "true unity" of the church. Now, if we are to suppose that the good bishop, and my esteemed colleague with him, are not simply denying their subscription to the Augsburg Confession, we'd have to divine some sort of circumstance in which what is confessed to be enough is both truly enough and at the same time not enough. And if the historical circumstances have changed from those of *maintaining* the church's unity to those of *recovering* the church's unity, well, then indeed *satis est* may not be enough. Not enough, when this or that church body has come to the gospel-centered conviction that this formulation or that canonical provision is indeed gospel-connected and not an add-on or subtraction from the gospel.

It is my purpose in these remarks near the close of this year's Institute of Liturgical Studies to suggest, and I hope to demonstrate, that the missing ingredient in a lot of talk about the "true unity" of the church as distinct from the painful and patent dividedness of the empirical church, is neither a distinction between a visible and an invisible church (as the baroque and so-called orthodox Lutheran theologians wrote, borrowing as they did from outside the Lutheran fold) nor a separation between a medieval and post-constantinian state church and the modern and post-enlightenment secular state and spiritual church (as if a church filled with politicking and rancor and pederasty and moral uncertainty sort could lay any valid claim to the attribute "spiritual!"); no, I wish to argue that the *satis est* confession is both "already" enough for the true unity of the church and at the same time "not yet" adequate to recover and demonstrate that

“true unity” – while at the same time arguing that the article gives us all we need, even as it summons and challenges us to new ventures as yet untried and new paths as yet untrodden. You will have sensed, I trust, that I mean to interject an eschatological dimension into our discussion. All the more, because I want to suggest – no, I want to make plausible for you the notion – that our appropriation of Augustana VII for today makes the most sense and provides the most energy for the church’s life when it is understood in accordance with the eschatological way of thinking demonstrated in the New Testament.

I admit that I did not come to this point by myself. Some of you who were here last year may recall that, in the final office of prayer and dismissal, it fell to me to read a great chunk of the vision of the New Jerusalem from Revelation 21. And some of you who were sitting near the front of the chapel may remember that I seemed unusually agitated, emotionally engaged in and by the reading of that pericope. I can admit to you now, publically and in this place of confession and reconciliation, that my reading of that text a year ago coincided with the moment of discovery and inspiration that drives and informs what I have to say to you this morning: the vision of the New Jerusalem is an eschatological, apocalyptically-colored portrait of the assembly of believers saying and doing the gospel; or put the other way, the assembly of believers saying and doing the gospel *is* the proleptic enactment of that Holy City come down out of heaven from God, all bedight with jasper and pearl and carnelian, all nourished by the river that flows from the throne of the lamb, all illuminated by the light that comes directly from the throne of God and of the lamb. That’s not a new thing, not a future thing, but this thing, this assembly around the gospel said and done, seen from the point of view of God’s consummation of the world’s salvation. As if we could have been about anything less in our Eucharists, as if we shall be about anything less in a little while when we make Eucharist again before we go our separate ways.

In order to accomplish my task, my outline is really rather simple. I ask, first, what it meant to say in Augsburg in 1530 what the confessors said in Article VII, using the best evidence and the best historical/reconstructive imagination that is available to us nearly half a millennium later; but this can be brief. Max Johnson brought all those things to our remembrance, and he and I are fundamentally on the same page here. Second, I will offer brief summary sketches of understandings of this article that I believe we need to repudiate and abandon – however dearly held and fervently argued they may be in our midst. Third and finally, I will suggest how using an eschatological framework for understanding the statements in CA VII not only make good sense, but might provide fresh energy for the “assembly of believers” around the gospel preached and sacramentally enacted.

### ***Standing Once More at Augsburg in 1530***

This is really merely a descriptive task. By our best lights, we mean now to describe what it must have meant for Chancellor Beyer to read the text that he read that steamy summer afternoon in 1530:

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among who the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure

understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

I risk having too much to say here; I’ve spent too much of my theological life as a student of this very question, so let me try to summarize the situation in bullet-fashion:

- Under the prevailing law of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, for any “estate” to depart from the catholic faith meant to put title, property, and life itself in jeopardy. John Eck had charged, in his “404 Articles,” that Luther and those around him had departed from the catholic faith in 404 indictments. Thus, after the publication of Eck’s charges, it became simply vital for the estates that had permitted reformation in their lands to demonstrate to the Imperial Assembly that the Justinian Code could not properly be invoked against them: their faith was that of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and their reforms did not give the lie to that faith. The structure and content of the first twenty-one articles of the Augsburg Confession are that affirmation.
- Here, under the theme of the church, point one is simply the premise of the Justinian Code: one holy catholic church exists and will exist perpetually. We haven’t split that church; it is not susceptible to splitting, and of a surety not by our simple reforms of the ancient rites! These proceedings, in the Imperial Diet, cannot rule that the church has been split, because those of us on both sides of the theological squabble that has brought us here know that “one holy catholic church will be and remain forever.” And we claim a part in that along with y’all. (I guess I can say “y’all,” because Augsburg is in Bavaria, which is Germany’s Texas.) Now, this confessional claim is our first eschatological “boing!” Even if the thorough-going divisions of the sixteenth century had not yet been realized, the theologians and educated laity gathered in the Archbishop’s palace knew very well that that sentence claimed a whole heaven of a lot more than met the eye! No one could see/observe the truth of that claim, not on either side of the great imperial divide. So its truth could be only “invisible/beyond perception,” or spiritual/true in some non-sensible realm, or, I will argue later, eschatologically, already-but-not-yet.
- This church, the one holy catholic church that will be and remain forever, is next confessed to be palpable, perceptible, something that actually occurs: viz., the assembly of believers around the gospel proclaimed and sacramentally enacted. So we must think about everything in this article as referring not to some *invisible or spiritual* notion, but to that liturgical event when the faithful gather around the gospel, when the gospel calls the faithful together and by its promise/invitation constitutes them as “church” – which, it should be clear to us all, is a whole lot more than “club” or “lodge” or “affinity group”! The one holy catholic church that will be and remain forever is the assembly of believers at Immanuel or Trinity Lutheran Church, at St Andrew’s Episcopal Church, at St Paul’s Roman Catholic Church, at Valparaiso Mennonite Church, at First Presbyterian Church, or even at the Chapel of the Resurrection! The confession is that this particular, concrete, datable, locatable, grubby, and sinner-filled assembly of believers is in fact and truth

- nothing less than that “one holy catholic church” that is and will be – forever, even.
- The identifiers for that remarkable claim are simple. The believers assemble around the gospel proclaimed and sacramentally enacted, the gospel said and done, I’d like to say. Now, in many a German village in the sixteenth century, essentially the same people would have gathered at the *Rathaus*/city hall for town meetings and deliberative/legislative assemblies. They might even have gathered in the village square to protest the raising of their taxes or the deprivation of this or that right or privilege. So it was not their *gathering* that made them “church”; it was rather their *gathering around said-and-done-gospel*, their gathering intentionally as believers in that gospel, that constituted them as “church.” And that church is confessed to “be and remain forever.”
  - Now, we need to deal with the qualifiers, because they’re there, and because some folks have made a big “to-do” about them. It’s a gospel proclaimed “in its purity” and sacraments administered “according to the gospel.” What’s the function of these qualifiers? Mainly, they’re tautologies. Mainly, they mean, “real, genuine, recognizable.” For gospel that is not hearable as gospel is not gospel. Sacraments that are not patently the enacting of God’s unconditional promise to sinners for Christ’s sake are not the sacraments of the “one holy catholic church.” Gospel that is not “pure” is not gospel. Sub-evangelical sacraments are not the business of the one church. You cannot quantify purity; gospel is not “more” pure if it measures up to this or that church body’s list of purity tests. Gospel either IS gospel or IS NOT gospel; it is gospel if it is, as CA IV puts it, conveyor of God’s promise to forgive sins “by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith,” and it is not gospel if it adds conditions or qualifiers (especially those based on human performance/work) to the mix. So the qualifying phrases mean nothing more than “recognizably authentic” and do not in fact invite the Inquisition into the determination!
  - “It is not necessary” for this “true unity” that there be agreement in other things, particularly in matters of human invention or choice. “Let’s agree,” some ecclesial potentate decrees, “that the gospel’s purity requires that the baptized refrain from the use of alcohol, or choose not to abort fetuses in whatever trimester, or agree not to ordain women to the pastoral office (or perhaps not even let them vest and distribute the sacrament), or refuse to welcome same-sex ... gossips(!) at the altar of communion.” Our confessional document is pretty clear about this: if we humans create such a condition or set of conditions and levy that against the gospel, then *we* are the ones who have created something that is “not necessary” for the true unity of the church. Simple rule: if we made it, God isn’t bound to divide the church by it!
  - The appeal to Ephesians 4 is an even stronger eschatological note sounded in this article. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Again, imagine with me, please: June 1530; Augsburg, Germany; reform, threatened division; how many churches? “There is [and that ain’t imaginary, Virginia!] one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” As I will try to articulate more thoroughly in a few minutes, that assertion makes sense only in accordance with the eschatologic of the New Testament. So far I have tried to describe “what it meant” to say these things in Augsburg in 1530.

Now I move on to make a rather briefer survey of what's gone "pfuttsch" in our understanding and appropriation of this confession in the intervening centuries.

### ***They Say It Isn't So!***

You and I both know that what I have just sketched is *not* the commonly-accepted reading of these words, not in the midst of any of the churches in our land that claim an allegiance to the Augsburg Confession. Instead, our churches have produced and promulgated and propagated any of a number of readings of this article – the net result of which is to deny it, to spiritualize it, to render it true of some invisible or nonexistent or non-palpable "church" (falsely so called). Bogus, to be sure. But we want to be obedient daughters and sons of the church, so we'll make ourselves vulnerable, open, to the witness of those readings.

- When I was a seminarian, the dominant point of view among my teachers was that the "true unity" referred to in CA VII was to be understood as referring to the so-called "invisible church." We knew about the invisible church very well. It was the really true church to which all the good statements in the New Testament applied unequivocally – all those warm and fuzzy lines in John 17 and Ephesians 1-4 and Colossians 3 and Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12. And the "visible church," of course, never could be held to measure up to those extravagant NT claims and promises. The visible church had sinners in it, though the invisible church did not. The visible church was divided, but the invisible church was not. We could see the visible church; we could only believe the invisible church. (Never mind that I always thought the invisible church was pretty visible on the Sunday after Easter and the Sunday after Christmas!) That baroque distinction was supposed to solve all the problems about what could be predicated of the church. But then I discovered that the notion of a church visible or invisible was simply not on the table as the Augsburg Confessors prepared for their moment of confession. For their titles and properties and lives would not be preserved by their validating of a claim to belong to an invisible church; the Justinian/Imperial code knew only of a perceptible church – such that departure from it could be seen, indicted, judged, and judgment executed. And that notion, after all, is what allowed catholic and Lutheran princes in the following decades to execute anabaptists by the thousands!
- Others have tried to read CA VII by a kind of spiritual hermeneutic. The palpable church might have all kinds of problems, but the spiritual and genuine church (according to this logic) is indeed one and holy and sinless and perfect. That, to be sure, would have been the church confessed in the Nicene Creed: "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." And maybe that kind of understanding could work under an Aristotelian or Neo-Aristotelian philosophical superstructure, with its distinctions between substance and accident, between essence and attribute. This logic, also, could solve the tensions caused by trying to apply the extravagant language of the New Testament to the church that actually exists and is perceptible in the world. And so, by a kind of abstraction of a spiritual essence from a perceptible accident, one could live with the extravagant images of the New Testament and with the compromised, grubby, divided, and sinner-filled church that one could see, perceive, around the corner or across the street. And, as for CA VII, one could thus tidily affirm all the points: one holy church will be and remain forever; it is the

spiritual assembly around the really pure gospel and sacraments; and it doesn't need anything of human invention to help it along. If you truly believe and are truly a Christian, then you belong to that church; if you've compromised your baptism by sin or whatever, well, we're sorry. That's what the story of the sheep and the goats is about! And so it has gone. Fine subterfuges to turn clear statements into sub-evangelical obfuscations!

***The Eschatological Dimension: Already, But Not Yet!***

Truth be told, I have gone almost my whole adult lifetime without catching on to this. I've worked my academic life on notions of "church" and "unity" – and just now (starting a year ago, as I have admitted), it finally dawns on me. The dimension that scholars have generally felt to have been missing from the theology of the sixteenth-century reformers presents itself as the opening to what I think is some fresh thinking and some new possibility in understanding CA VII as a resource for today's church. What I am proposing is, of course, an *eschatological* reading of CA VII – not out of historical/theological thinking, but out of constructive/systematic theological thinking. My point is this: "It *is* enough" for the true unity of the church, the only church that we can take into our sensorium, that recognizably authentic gospel be preached and sacramentally done from one assembly to another; while that is "enough, already" for the true unity of the only church we dare to speak about (viz., the one we can perceive and the one of which we can conjure up images on our brain-pan), it is "not yet" enough to render that church-ness and that church-unity patent and recognizable to all on every hand. To be sure, it is "already" the absolute and before-God truth, a truth and reality on which the Christian community may jolly-well *act*; still, it "does not yet appear" what we shall be. And the edge to my remarks is this: in the eschato-logic of the New Testament, there is full authorization to *act* on the ultimate and end-time patent reality, already here, already now.

This has been a long introduction to a tripartite thesis. So let's do an Easter number on our thinking and apply that first and greatest and church-determining eschatological event to our thinking about our relationship with one another in and as the "one holy catholic church [that] will be and remain forever."

"Christ is Risen, Alleluia!" "He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!"

It's all there. How did we miss it? He *is* risen. The end-time reality and truth *has* broken into our scuzzy and sin-filled present. We have not been celebrating spring buds and easter bunnies and baby chicks, have we? We have been celebrating the bedrock truth of our existence as the church and as the one church that will be and remain forever. One of the test-phrases for us Christians has been, is Christ "really" risen from the dead? For we have known, have sensed in the deep heart of our believing, that, if we cannot use some kind of "really" language in our talk of Jesus' resurrection into life *beyond* (not back on this side, to be sure) the grave, why then we've not accounted fairly for the New Testament witness. By the same logic, "one holy catholic church" will be and remain forever, the very one in which the gospel is proclaimed as recognizably Christian gospel and the sacraments are celebrated as recognizably Christian sacraments. Already true, already real, already now – not as observable or palpable realities, but as stories from the "end-zone" of God's end-time wrap-up of the whole history of salvation, and therefore true, real, and in-the-bank realities for us who gather around that gospel said and done.

We need to do enough testing to make sure that we understand one another. Already, if

not yet, is the logic we're testing.

- We've been doing two millennia of gymnastics over Jesus' reported words at the last supper: This is my body; this is a new covenant in my blood. Inject some eschatology: no, we cannot perceive that his is your body, a new covenant, but we have given centuries of commitment to the conviction that those are true words. Already, but not yet! Maybe St Luke has it best of all: anew, in the kingdom!
- Forgiveness is like that, too. "I forgive you," we may be graced to say; what might that mean? I will at its best mean that, as we pass the eternal bar, I have given you the pledge, and you have banked on the ultimate truthfulness of that pledge, that the offense just forgiven has been forgiven ultimately and forever. Or as the Small Catechism puts it, that word of forgiveness "is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if God dealt with us" directly.
- When in Luke's passion narrative Jesus says to the dying penitent on the neighboring cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," this is surely another case of eschatological *prolepsis*. What will be true at the last day when God populates Paradise with all the blessed ones, is already true today. Bank on it, Dismas. Ring it up.
- "Beloved, it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when he comes, we shall be like him." So love for one another, genuine love like that which will prevail "when he comes," becomes a possibility for the Johannine community already here, already now.
- "You are the church!" That's not an evident thing to say to an empirical, perceptible community of believers – certainly not evident in the case, say, of the Corinthian community to which St Paul wrote such stinging indictments and such difficult and troubling letters. Yet it's not just a *captatio benevolentiae*, not just polite rhetoric for the gaining of good will, when he addresses them as "the saints of God" in Corinth. And even his criticism depends on the same eschatologic we've been speaking of: their failure to discern the Lord's body, their failure to act in the truth of the sacramental promise that makes them (and us) the Body of Christ, their failure (in other words) is that they failed to act on the eschatological reality of the sacrament by taking and treating one another as the church of Jesus Christ – already here, already now.
- Jesus' prayer in John 17 works out the same kind of eschatology. Though set in the narrative of the upper room in John, it's a pretty strong conclusion that John's gospel is really addressing the church at the turn of the century and the continuing dividedness of the Christian community at that time, with the resulting risk to the credibility of the missionary enterprise. The concern is for "those who would come to believe on me through their word," i.e., through the word of the contention-laden second generation of witnesses to the apostolic gospel. John's Jesus speaks to that generation via his prayer for those turn-of-the-century witnesses, that they may be one with one another, one with those to whom they witness, one with Jesus, one with the Father. Now, Jesus' prayer-language thus amounts to promise-language to the community, declaration-language of the will of God for the community. The result of that promise, that divine declaration, may not have been apparent for the community of the beloved disciple, but it is no less real. What is true and real in the heart of God may be treated as true and real by the

beloved community, already here, already now (i.e., at the turn of the first century to the second, even as here and now at the turn of the second millennium to the third!).

- Back to last year's closing prayer, with the pericope from the end of the Revelation to St John: the seer's picture of the New Jerusalem, a bejeweled vision of the perfect city. When the seer writes of the perfect city, the city of God, the new Jerusalem, he is writing about the liturgy, about the doing and saying of the gospel in the assembly. And vice versa. When we do and say the gospel in the assembly, we are there. We are there for the whole history of salvation. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?" Were you there when God sent down the holy city? Were you there when God and the Lamb are seated at the throne of the cosmos? Oh, yes! With apologies, I don't normally resonate to Herb Brokering's poetry; it's welter of images all on top of one another and topsy turvy jumbled, ideas galore all usually too much for me. But last Sunday we sang his "Alleluia! Jesus Is Risen" from *With One Voice*. He gets it, you see. Stanzas 4 & 5:

Weeping, be gone; sorrow, be silent: death put asunder, and Easter is bright.  
Cherubim sing: "O grave, be open!" Clothe us in wonder, adorn us in light.

City of God, Easter forever, golden Jerusalem, river of life, saints and archangels,  
sing with creation to God the I Am.

- Easter, the great feast of the eschaton, is full of eschatologic. We can hardly turn around without bumping in to it. Thomas, getting an eyeful and a fingertip full, catches it: "My Lord and my God!" Mr and Mrs Cleopas, grief-stricken residents of Emmaus, catch it – of all things, via word and sacrament: "We have seen the Lord!" Mary of Magdala catches it, not so much in her "Rabbouni!" cry of acknowledgment as in her dash to the disciples and her "I have seen the Lord!" And Georg Friedrich Händel got it from St Paul, who got it: "Death is swallowed up in victory!" Not just "will be" swallowed up, but "is" swallowed up, already here, already now. And Luther caught it, in his great Easter hymn, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands": though an Easter hymn, mind you, it is really a meditation on what Easter discloses about Good Friday: Jesus Christ in his dying has "done away with sin," has "taken away from death all its right and power," so that "there remains nothing but death's form/image," and "death has lost its stinger." Now, perhaps it's easy for you to sing that during the great fifty days. But try singing that great hymn over the grave of a beloved parent or spouse or child; tell me death is an empty form and that it can't sting any longer. Pious balderdash! And yet, we sing, as we can and through our tears as we must "one death has devoured the other, and has made a joke of death." Already here, already now.
- One more: the gospel of our baptism says to each of us God's final verdict on us: "You are forgiven; you are mine; I love you for Christ's sake and I will never let you go!" Now, consider what that means for our dealing with one another. If God's ultimate verdict on you is that you are forgiven, righteous, God's own child, then it's already too late for me to treat you as if that were not God's own "last word" on you. If I hold a grudge against

you, or if I refuse to forgive you, why, look whose “last word” I’m opposing, whose “final verdict” I thereby disallow! God’s end-time word to you, on you, is forgiveness; how can I oppose that and claim God’s love myself? No, by this eschatologic of forgiveness, it’s too late to treat you as unforgiven, too late to nurse a grudge, to late to pretend I could rule you out of the kingdom! The eschatologic of baptismal forgiveness is true, already here, already now.

***At Last: Enough Already, and Not Yet?***

Now, at last, let me try to unpack CA VII with such eschatologic – though by now, I trust, you are as able to finish this off as I am.

- One church, holy, catholic, abiding forever. Not invisible, not spiritual, but this one, the onliest one we can refer to, already here, already now. The Augsburg Confessors were not banking on some future or spiritual or invisible reality to preserve their titles and territories and lives, but on the perceptible unity of the only church anybody had any reason to think about that June afternoon: the church of Rome and of Wittenberg, of Constantinople and of Augsburg.
- For this church is indeed perceptible, identifiable, locatable: it is the assembling of the believers around the gospel said and done in their midst, around recognizably authentic preached gospel, around sacraments that in fact enact that gospel. Already here, already now.
- What makes the church *church* is what makes the church *one church*. If it is the gospel that makes the church *church*, then it is that same gospel that makes the church *one church*. For if one holy catholic church will endure, then the church’s oneness is given with the church’s being. John’s vision of the New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven *is* the liturgical assembly, all the baptized, all 144,000 of them, from the tribe of Rome and the tribe of Canterbury, from the tribe of Wittenberg and the tribe of Geneva, from the tribe of Zurich and the tribe of Constantinople, from the tribe of Chicago and the tribe of St Louis, from the tribe of Harare and the tribe of Yogyakarta, from the tribe of Lima and the tribe of Buenos Aires. God has said of them, you are my people; I love you, for Christ’s sake, and I will never let you go. So it’s too late for us to treat them as different, separate, outside the pale. We get to treat one another, already here, already now, as folks on whom that one end-time verdict of God and the Lamb shall fall and has already fallen: “Come, beloved, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”
- *That’s* why “it is not necessary” for human creations, formulae, contracts, declarations, to be made universal. *It’s too late for that*. Christ’s church is Christ’s church, already here. Christ’s one church is Christ’s one church, already now. It’s too late to act otherwise, and most dangerous to put one’s own standing in jeopardy by opposing God’s end-time verdict.

Enough, already, is enough!

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