

Ecumenism according to the Evangelical Lutheran understanding

Introduction

On a number of occasions in recent years, not least in the debate about the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”, it has become evident that there are different, if not opposite, views of the goal and method of ecumenical endeavours, both among Lutheran theologians and within the Lutheran church. Extremely unfortunate for the Lutheran churches themselves and for their relations with other churches, this situation requires clarification or, more precisely, clarification within the Lutheran family. For this reason, the authorities of the VELKD (United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany) requested the Ecumenical Studies Committee and the Theological Committee of the VELKD to form a joint committee and undertake such an internal Lutheran clarification. Established in 1999 and meeting until 2003, this committee has submitted the results of its work in the document “Ökumene nach evangelisch-lutherischem Verständnis” (Ecumenism according to the Evangelical- Lutheran understanding). The document begins with the fundamental aspects of the understanding of Scripture and Confession as well as of how faith and the church come into being, in order to derive their consequences for the understanding of ecumenism. The fundamental statements of the text were unanimously accepted by the members of the joint committee, although this agreement does not exclude differences of emphasis in evaluating concrete issues in the ecumenical dialogue. The church authorities have adopted this document and hereby submit it to the public. It should be taken into account in future ecumenical conversations of the VELKD.

Church authorities of the VELKD

Under the heading of “ecumenism”, the *worldwide* existence of Christianity becomes the subject of theological reflection and church action. This is a question both of the existence of churches as well as Christians of one’s own confession in other regions, countries and continents and of the existence of churches and Christians of other confessions. Reflection on the fundamentals of ecumenism must clarify what significance this worldwide existence of Christianity has for the doctrine and life of the church. If the Evangelical Lutheran understanding is to be applied to this process, it cannot be done from a standpoint *beyond* the various confessional perspectives or *above* them but only *from* the Lutheran point of view. Therefore the only way to determine the Lutheran understanding of ecumenism is to interpret the Lutheran confessions which the Lutheran churches have established as the official, binding exposition of what constitutes Lutheran doctrine.

Accordingly, this clarification of fundamentals has a threefold task:

- (1) to set out the understanding and hermeneutical principles of Scripture and Confession,
- (2) to spell out the understanding of the Lutheran doctrine of the Church brought to light by the interpretation of Scripture and Confession on the basis of this understanding and these principles,
- (3) to identify the consequences following from this understanding of the church for ecumenical theory and practice.

These three tasks are inseparable. Therefore they can only be undertaken appropriately in combination.

1. The understanding and hermeneutical principles of Scripture and Confession

- a) The Christian faith is articulated in the Christian witness of faith. This articulation is based on God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world. Through this self-revelation, encountered in experience, God awakens faith.
- b) Articulation of faith depends on the linguistic means of expression available in particular, historically changing systems of language and signs which take shape in different cultural and individual ways. Such linguistic forms of expression open up realms of perception in which new experiences can be gained and communicated to others.
- c) The authoritative form of articulation of the Christian faith is the *canonical witness of faith* in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is such because it has imposed itself on the Church as the normative witness and was both recognized as such by the Church and formally established as the norm in the course of church tradition.
- d) The Bible is a text which – like all texts and signs – only becomes accessible for understanding when it is interpreted. This interpretation, in order to do justice to its task, must be guided by the respective rules of the art of interpretation, they themselves always needing to be refined. But even such responsible interpretation of the Scriptures is bound by a perspective from which it cannot escape and shares in the ability to err found in all human undertakings. For this reason, in the history of the Christian church differences and conflicts

have repeatedly arisen over the interpretation of Scriptures, and some of them have even resulted in exclusions from churches, church divisions, and the formation of new church bodies.

e) The Confessions of the different churches are the normative forms of their particular articulation of the interpretation of Scripture which has imposed itself upon them as the faithful interpretation of Scripture and which they have therefore formulated and adopted “magno consensu” (CA 1)¹. As such normative interpretation of the Scriptures the Confessions are intended at the same time to be appropriate guides to understanding the Scriptures.

f) Scripture and Confession can be understood only when they are interpreted in accordance with their own meaning (literal meaning). This presupposes that there are persons who are in a position to grasp and convey the meaning contained in the texts and thus the matter to which the texts witness. Here it is generally assumed that, on the one hand, an essential distinction must be made between the meaning of the text and its interpretation and that, on the other, the interpretation must be checked against the meaning of the text and if necessary corrected on that basis.

g) This hermeneutical approach recognizes that each interpretative process is shaped by a particular perspective, without thereby questioning the possibility of an appropriate understanding of the text. Only if one supposes that the texts have their own meaning and that this can be grasped by using appropriate methods of interpretation does it make sense to be guided by texts and to seek to discuss or to agree on their interpretation. This does not deny the fact that every attempt at understanding and interpretation is subject to the risk of misunderstanding and false interpretation. But this danger does not question the meaningfulness of an interpretation of the Scriptures or of the Confession in harmony with the text nor the result of such an endeavour.

h) The Lutheran confession itself expresses the theological insight that, when interpreting Scripture and Confession, one can never achieve “security” (securitas) in the sense of an objectivity independent of the persons involved, because all human understanding – like knowledge of the truth in general – can only come about through the medium of hermeneutical certainty. Such certainty comes about when persons grasp the truth of a text by being grasped by its truth. This process is the prerequisite for all knowledge of truth. The event of knowing the truth through assurance of the truth is beyond our control and must itself be understood as the working of God or, more precisely, of the Holy Spirit on and in the hearts of those who hear the Gospel.

2. The fundamental characteristics of the Lutheran doctrine of the Church

It is characteristic of the Lutheran doctrine of the Church that it is inseparably connected with the doctrine of faith or, more precisely, with the doctrine of how faith comes into being, and thus both with the doctrine of the means of salvation and with the doctrine of the working of the Holy Spirit. Fundamental for Lutheran ecclesiology and thus also for the way the Lutheran church understands itself, these doctrinal statements are found in a concise form in

¹ This also applies in a similar way to the churches which have not formulated the interpretation of the Scriptures they consider binding, in a doctrinal confession.

Luther's interpretation of the third article of the creed in his catechisms and in CA 5-14, with the same confessional texts also claiming to be appropriate interpretations of the creeds of the Early Church.

2.1. The connection between how faith comes into being and how the Church comes into being

a) The inseparable connection between the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of faith is immediately obvious from the description of the nature of the Church as the "assembly of all believers" (CA 7 and 8). But this connection needs to be elucidated along two lines:

aa) It implies, on the one hand, that the Church comes into being by God's action which awakens faith. For the Church as the communion of all believers – that is, a hidden reality, in which we believe and whose extent is unknown to us – comes into existence when faith comes into existence, because when people come to believe in God as God revealed himself in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world, they thus become members of the Church.

ab) On the other hand, the connection between the Church and faith implies that faith can only come about because the Church as the communion of the baptised – that is, a visible reality, which is institutionally established and whose membership is clearly known – witnesses to the gospel of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and thus passes it on.

b) Between these two connections there is an essential asymmetry. For God's action which awakens faith is both necessary and sufficient for the hidden Church to come into being, whereas the witness of the visible, institutionally established church is necessary but insufficient for faith to come about. This becomes obvious when one looks more closely at the Lutheran understanding of how faith comes into being.

2.2. The Lutheran understanding of how faith comes into being

The Lutheran understanding of how faith comes into being is described most precisely – and in complete agreement with each other – in Luther's interpretation of the third article of the creed in the Small Catechism and in CA 5. It has four fundamental points.

a) Faith cannot come into existence "through one's own understanding or strength" (Small Catechism, Explication of the Third Article of the Creed), i.e. it does not arise from an area under human control and thus it cannot be brought about by a decision of the human will. This insight is not a result of a lack of confidence in human abilities. Rather, it is the consequence of the essence of faith itself, understood as the trust which determines one's whole existence. Since faith is such trust which determines human existence as a whole, it could only come about through human understanding or strength if faith were already present in them. Such a total determination of human existence can, therefore, only be understood as coming *from without*, namely, in such a way that through an encounter with another which inspires trust that faith is awakened by which human beings let their existence be determined.

b) That which stimulates trust is the gospel of Jesus Christ which comes to human beings as an external word proclaimed through preaching and through the administration of the sacraments. Since human beings must make this witness to the gospel and are answerable for doing so, they continuously have to examine the purity and clarity of their witness, i.e., its faithfulness to its apostolic origins as well as its intelligibility, so that the Church's proclamation does not become "a gospel contrary to" the true apostolic gospel (Gal. 1,8 f.) which could lead people astray. The hearing or receiving of the gospel is necessary, although it is not sufficient in itself, for faith to come into being and thus the Church as well.

c) The only condition sufficient for faith and the Church to come into being is the working of the Holy Spirit. As the outward word of the gospel is proclaimed, presented, heard and received, the Holy Spirit enables it to become so clear and convincing in people's hearts that they become certain of its truth and saving power and thus know that they are challenged and invited by the gospel to place their trust, both living and dying, in the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ .

d) The fact that faith is the work of God's Spirit beyond human control also means that there is no procedure for and no right to expect that the witness to the gospel as an outward word must as such bring faith into being. God does promise that His word will not return to him void but fulfil the purpose for which he sends it (Isa. 55,11), but this does not abolish God's freedom to bring about faith "where and when he wills" (CA 5). The humbling and liberating recognition of this divine freedom most consistently expresses the knowledge that faith is beyond human control. Hence, according to the Lutheran understanding, the Christian Church is aware of being a creature and work of the Holy Spirit who freely awakens faith in people who hear the gospel, thus creating the Church.

2.3. The task and form of the Church

According to the Lutheran understanding the task and form of the Church are the inevitable results of the manner by which faith and the Church come into being. Three points must be emphasized.

a) Since faith and the Church as the communion of believers are the work of the Holy Spirit beyond human control, it is also beyond the power of human judgement to ascertain whether faith is present. Consequently, the Church as the communion of all believers is an entity whose extent of membership we cannot know and which is in this sense hidden. Because of God's promise we are permitted and commanded to believe in the existence of the hidden church throughout the ages. Hence, we can be certain of it, although we can neither prove its existence nor determine its extent. What we can know is whether a person has been baptised and whether he or she maintains membership in the church, i.e., whether he or she belongs to the *visible* church. In order to belong to the visible church, it is necessary and sufficient for a person to have received Christian baptism and not to have renounced membership. That fact alone is, therefore, sufficient so that other people have no right to call into question such a person's membership in the *hidden* Church. Conversely, this same fact implies from our human perspective – which cannot anticipate God's judgement - that a person who leaves the visible church denies his or her membership in the hidden Church.

b) Since faith and the Church come into being by persons becoming certain of the truth of the gospel through the Holy Spirit at work in human hearts, the believers and the Church have the task of continuing to witness to the gospel in order that all people throughout all ages can

come into contact with the message of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ so that through this encounter faith can be awakened in them. This task is entrusted to each individual Christian and to the Church as a whole as an inherent part of their existence (CA 5). Hence, the form and order of church life must be determined in accordance with this task, and it must be the criterion for everything which the church does.

c) This task, given to all Christians and to the church as a whole, requires that its execution be so ordered as to ensure its fulfilment. Such ordering can only be done according to human insight and human capabilities. For the gospel does not specify what this order should be. What is inherent in the gospel is the task of witnessing to the message once it has been recognised as true, and thus the gospel also entails the task of ensuring that this witness takes place in a comprehensive, comprehensible and reliable way. The order of the church is consistent with this task only when it does justice to and regulates both the ordained ministry and the shared responsibility of all believers for the preaching of the gospel with respect to their specific but mutually related importance. Regarding the first factor, it is necessary to regulate the calling to the church's ministry of proclamation by ordination (CA 14), because the divinely instituted ministry of preaching the gospel (CA 5)² is not only entrusted to all Christians but also to the church as a whole. In other words, the establishment and ordering of the ordained ministry by human beings is a necessary element of exercising the ministry of preaching the gospel instituted by God, in so far as the means of grace, i.e., Word and Sacrament, according to the will of Christ are to be passed on not only individually, but also *publicly*. Hence the church is required to fashion a ministerial order whose focus is the ordained ministry which embodies Christ's commandment of proclaiming the gospel in its public dimension.

3. The Lutheran understanding of ecumenical theory and practice

3.1. The relationship between unity of the church and communion of churches

a) The hidden communion of the believers of all times and in every place is the unity of the church which we cannot see, but in which we believe, based on *one* Lord, *one* faith and *one* baptism (Eph. 4,5). The visible, institutionally established churches, however, do not exist as one entity, but as different local, regional, national or denominational congregations and churches.

b) Whereas the local, regional and national differences are the product of the spread of Christianity as such and do not call into question confessional *oneness*, denominational

² The headings for the individual articles added later to the CA, in this case "De ministerio ecclesiastico" or "Concerning ministry in the Church", may give the misleading impression that the subject of this article is the ordained ministry (which is the subject of CA 14). But article 5 in fact demonstrates from the very first words ("Ut hanc fidem consequamur ..." or "So that we may obtain this faith ...") right through to the anathema at the end, that its subject matter is how faith comes into being. The ministry which this article discusses is the ministry – given to every Christian and to the Christian Church as a whole – of proclaiming the word and administering the sacraments which is necessary for faith and the Church to come into being. If this were said about the ordained ministry, the article would make the false assertion that faith could come into being only as the result of the preaching and administration of the sacraments by ordained ministers.

differences result from two factors – either from different emphases or interpretations of the gospel which constitute confessional *differences* or from opposing, irreconcilable interpretations of the gospel which have or may acquire the nature of confessional *conflicts*. Clearly, these differences are of a very different nature and significance.

c) But all these differences lead to the question of the right understanding of the *unity* of Christianity which is simultaneously a question of its essence or identity. According to the Lutheran understanding, this question can be answered only in the same way as the question concerning how faith and the church come into being. For the essence or identity of the Church, in other words, what makes the Church the Church, is that which makes Christians Christians and thus members of the hidden Church.

d) For this reason, according to CA 7, for the “true unity” of the Church it is sufficient – but also necessary – to agree on the right understanding of the gospel, namely, on the proclamation which is faithful to the Scriptures and on the administration of the sacraments in line with their institution, along with the implications of these conditions. Any additional conditions would be a fundamental renunciation of the Lutheran understanding of how faith and the Church come into being.

3.2. The goal of ecumenism

a) According to the Lutheran understanding, the goal of ecumenism is neither the establishment of the true unity of the Church, which can only be God’s work, nor the establishment of organisational unity between churches, which is a question of how strongly churches can and want to cooperate. Rather, the goal of ecumenism is *the declaration and practice of communion of churches, based upon and only possible through the “true unity” of the Church – brought about by God – which is given in the common understanding of the gospel in harmony with the Scriptures.*

b) When this common understanding of the gospel exists between churches, the reality of the Church’s unity in their case must be acknowledged. The common understanding of the gospel has to be recognised as present when different churches according to their own confession and order deal with the gospel and sacraments in the manner which is the necessary condition for faith to come into being (cf. no. 2.2. above). When this is the case, the churches must do justice to it by declaring and practising *communion of churches*, i.e., *communion in word and sacrament* among each other.

c) A declaration of communion of churches has its place in each church’s constitution. In this way it is given legal status and it is supported by the consent of all who in an official capacity share in the church’s teaching ministry and are responsible for it. This means that recognising the common understanding of the gospel between churches and, on that basis, declaring communion of churches cannot be done without the ordained ministry (“*ministerium verbi*”), but also not by the latter alone.

d) In the relationship between churches of the same confession it is to be assumed in principle that communion of churches exists unless the common understanding of the gospel has been abandoned despite their officially holding the same confession. Between churches of different confessions, communion of churches has to be declared when each of the parties involved can see and recognise, without abandoning its commitment to its own confession, that the other party, without abandoning its commitment to its own confession, treats the gospel and

sacraments in the manner which is necessary for faith to come into being. Hence, differences in doctrinal confession do not necessarily exclude the reality of the common understanding of the gospel.

e) When churches of the same confession as well as churches of different confessions have declared and practise communion of churches with one another, they also have possibilities for cooperation, common structures and carrying out the church's task together. These should be pursued wherever there are no serious reasons for not doing so. At the same time, reliance on the church unity which is present in the common understanding of the gospel permits and demands the recognition, facilitation and encouragement of those forms of diversity which are consistent with this unity.

f) However, the declaration and practice of communion of churches is excluded where it is not possible to recognise the common understanding of the gospel, since another church, according to its official teaching or its law, fails to treat the gospel and sacraments in the manner necessary for faith to come into being. This does not exclude, though, the possibility of inviting *members* of such churches to share in the Word and Sacraments in one's own church. Nor does the impossibility of declaring communion of churches exclude *cooperation* between churches on as many levels as possible, and it certainly does not exclude participation in *ecumenical conversations*. On the contrary, it makes them all the more urgent.

3.3. The purpose of ecumenical conversations

a) According to the Lutheran understanding, ecumenical conversations serve the goal of ecumenism described above (cf. no. 3.2.). This implies that ecumenical conversations are intended to clarify whether the churches involved share the common understanding of the gospel in accordance with the Scriptures which both makes it possible and requires them to declare and practise communion of churches.

b) Thus, the purpose of ecumenical conversations is to engage in mutual questioning and answering, listening and speaking, in order to reach a deeper comprehension of the other's and one's own understanding of the gospel. Through this process the parties involved also are to give one another account of their own understanding of faith, the Church and ecumenism. In doing so, each party will expound its views of the goal of ecumenism and the steps towards it.

c) Hence, ecumenical conversations serve to distinguish genuine disagreements and consensus which exist between the churches involved from supposed or apparent disagreements and agreements concerning the understanding of the gospel and the doctrinal conclusions derived from it. Consequently, ecumenical conversations are not negotiations on doctrinal differences which aim at convergence or consensus through one-sided or mutual compromise thereby neglecting the question of truth. On the contrary, they serve to find the truth by means of mutual witness to the truth the churches have perceived and by examining the understanding of the truth implied therein.

d) Ecumenical conversations in the Lutheran view, therefore, make sense only if they both begin by assuming that the churches involved are linked in the struggle for the truth and are open to the possibility that the truth of the gospel may become evident to all participating in a manner that will deepen and broaden the insights of their faith.

e) Thus, ecumenical conversations according to the Lutheran understanding are a specific case of what CA 5 describes concerning how faith comes into being. They serve to witness to the faith of which a church has become certain. While the participants recognise that their witness can bring about new certainty only through the working of the Holy Spirit, they also know that it is God`s will to use such witness as his word. Understood in this way, ecumenical conversations are not unlike a *worship* service. They are nothing else but the mutual witness of the partners involved to their understanding of the gospel, offered in the context of Christianity`s worldwide existence.

*Church authorities of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD)
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