

# Restoring unity in TRUTH

by STEPHEN HULTGREN

As part of the lead-up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, an ecumenical working party of Lutherans and Catholics has been planning a program of projects and events to jointly commemorate the occasion. One is a series of articles, written by Lutheran and Catholic authors from around Australia, to be published in both Lutheran and Catholic publications. The fifth piece in our series of six is by Dr Stephen Hultgren, lecturer in New Testament at Australian Lutheran College and director of the Australian Lutheran Institute for Theology and Ethics (ALITE).



Despite the division of the church in the 16th century, we need to remember that the Lutheran confessors intended unity. The Augsburg Confession (1530) proposes a doctrinal basis for it.

A Lutheran reflection on restoration of unity in truth and in the gospel does well to begin with article 7 of the Confession. The confessors state 'it is enough for the true unity of the church to

agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments'. This statement is both essential and dangerous.

It is essential, because it indicates what is non-negotiable in Lutheran confession: the right teaching of the gospel. The statement is dangerous because Lutherans have too often viewed this in an overly simplistic way. If agreement on the 'teaching of the gospel' means agreement on

the doctrine of justification, then Lutherans might conclude justification is the **only** doctrine that matters for unity.

Article 7 does not intend this approach; rather it rejects the notion that unity requires agreement on traditions, rites or ceremonies instituted by **humans**. The confessors had in mind various non-biblical ceremonies and ordinances that were of human institution rather than of divine mandate.

But the Lutherans would have been first to argue that unity requires agreement on all doctrines deriving from the Bible. After all, article 7 is embedded within a presentation of 21 articles

the confessors say are in accord 'with the pure Word of God and Christian truth ... teaching [that] is clearly grounded in Holy Scripture and is, moreover, neither against nor contrary to the universal Christian church'.

The restoration of unity in the truth presents an ongoing challenge. Will Lutherans, while rightly insisting on the doctrine of justification as central, resist the temptation to read article 7 in an overly simplistic way? That runs the danger of denying the shared heritage of Lutherans and Catholics across 2000 years. Will the Roman Catholic Church, while rightly insisting on the unity of all truths of faith, be careful never to obscure this most precious truth of justification? The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, agreed to in 1999 by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, is a sign of hope.

In paragraph 18 Lutherans and Catholics agree:

'[T]he doctrine of justification ... stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ. When Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion, they do not deny the interrelation and significance of all truths of faith. When Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria, they do not deny the special function of the message of justification.'

May God restore our unity in truth!



Stephen Hultgren

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