

The True Unity of the Church: Confessing Article VII in a Changing World

Dr. Bengt Birgersson

General Secretary, The Mission Province, Sweden

29 August, 2008

I have been asked to deliver a paper on ‘The true unity of the church: confessing Article VII in a changing world.’ I feel honored to be asked yet concerned about giving something which could be useful to you in our present situation. I apologize for my imperfect English.

I will start with a well known quotation from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 3 to 6: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

You all know the article VII in *Confessio Augustana*, but I want to remind you of it.

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy Christian church, which is the assembly of all believers, among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are given in accordance with the gospel.

For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church, that the Gospel be preached there unanimously according to its pure understanding, and the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. And it is not necessary for true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by men, be observed everywhere, as Paul says to the Ephesians, chapter fourth: One body, one Spirit, as you are called to one and the same hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism.¹

¹CA VII (German text).

Concerning our present situation, I want to read two other quotations from our Bible. First from the book of Revelation, chapter 12, verse 6: “The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1260 days.”

Then I will read from the book of prophet Isaiah, chapter 58, verse 11: “The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy all your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.”

This paper will be divided into three parts. I first want to give some essential perspectives on unity, then some perspectives on the changing world and our calling. Then I wish to conclude with one perspective of confessing Article VII—the way of the Mission Province.

1 Some essential perspectives on unity

Visible and invisible

What is the church? Melancthon gives us a proper answer: The one holy Christian church through all times is the assembly of all believers, among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered in accordance with the gospel. There is only *one* Christian church from the beginning and for ever. There is only one church on earth, in all countries and on all continents.

This church is the assembly of all those believers who have faith in Christ Jesus as their Saviour. But those who have no personal relation to Him do not belong to this church even if they are members in a church body among us.

Article VII contains a very important statement about this assembly of believers: in this assembly the Gospel is preached in a proper way and the sacraments are rightly administered. How these faithful Christians live expresses also what constitutes this church: the pure Gospel and the Sacraments. Where we find the Gospel preached in its purity and the sacraments administered according to our Lord’s command there we will find the church, even if not all of them we can see are true Christians. Therefore we can talk about the visible church and the invisible church. Perhaps we should rather talk about the hidden church instead of the invisible church. When we talk about the invisible church we do not mean the heavenly triumphant church, but the hidden church on earth. Only the Lord himself knows properly who the real Christian believers are. They are those who have their lives “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

All this we know. But let us not forget that the true church is an article of faith we confess in the Creed. We may take part in a wonderful service—it can be in a large beautiful house built for this purpose or in a small room on the ground floor

in a block of flats—but it is wonderful because there is a clearly preached Gospel, a sound teaching about baptism, and the Holy Communion rightly administered as the Lord’s true body and blood. We can see the people listening, singing—and receiving the gifts. And we know—here is the church! Visible!

In another way this same church is invisible, or rather, hidden. Due to the cross the church has, it is still hidden. The inner life of the Christians is hidden. The persecutions of the Christians will also hide the church and its true glory. Sin, false teaching and false teachers coming into church will also hide the true church. Therefore the true church is at the same time visible and invisible.

The wonderful unity

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity,” we read in Psalm 133:1. An old Lutheran layman once said: “The Christian brotherhood is almost like a sacrament!” What did he mean? Exactly what the quoted psalm says. He knew what Christians through history have known. There is among Christians, who love Christ, a precious fellowship, nearly indescribable for non-Christians, which is a fruit of the salvation through the blood of Christ.

Christ has united all believers with him—but through him they are all united with each other. All who have life in him have a real fellowship with those who have the same life-giving faith. This fellowship, this unity, is a work and a gift from the Lord. This unity is present even when believers do not ‘feel’ that oneness in Christ due for various cultural differences, ways of worshipping, personal behaviours and misunderstandings. Still they are united in him because of their common cleansing in the blood of Christ.

The bride

In the New Testament there are several pictures concerning the church. All these pictures—the body, the Shepherd and the one flock, the true vine and the branches and so on—have all something to say about the true unity. The church is also the bride of Christ, and I want to focus briefly on that. Speaking about Jesus and those who gathered around him, John the Baptist confessed, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom” (John 3:29). In the last chapter of the Book of Revelation, in response to the Bridegroom saying, “Soon I will come!” we hear, “The Spirit and the bride say: ‘Come!’” There is the bride, the true church, waiting for the ‘parousia’.

John saw this bride, when he in chapter 7 in the Revelation witnessed the uncountable host coming out of all nations on earth. They were all attired in white robes, because they were all cleansed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9–14). It is important for us to have this vision in mind—otherwise we will get lost talking

about church, unity and structures. When we are struggling with the false church and its false teaching, there is a risk that we can fall into a dangerous ditch: to be the accuser of our brethren. Hidden in the false church there can be true believers in the Lamb even though their pastors may be false teachers.

Two churches

There are on earth two churches. Not one, not many, just two. There is but one: the true church, the bride; the other one is the false church, the harlot. These two churches have struggled throughout history and are still struggling with each other—yet they are here together. They can sometimes look quite similar—but they are totally different. In the one all its members are living with God in Christ and he is its Bridegroom. The other one, using beautiful church buildings and calling their leaders elders, pastors, bishops, just like the other church, has no life in Christ and is riding on the beast. This is the harlot.

It is impossible for the true church to be in union with the false church; though seeking for the true unity in the real church remains an essential goal. Still there can be no union with the harlot. The false church is founded on false teaching that leads either to one or another form of self-righteousness or, to an immoral life. Next to preaching the true gospel it is the most important thing to say “no” to the false church. How to do this remains a crucial decision for the true church. It must warn the faithful: “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues” (Rev. 18:4). And this is about the clear confession, to reveal the false teaching and reject it. Every ecumenical endeavour towards unity with the false church is out of the question—in obedience to our Lord. But how this confessional “no” should be said is not always so easy to say. It must be clear—but it may be done sometimes in a way that there can engage different opinions. We shall come to this later.

The birth of the church

There was—according to Acts chapter 2—a very special day in church history, when Peter in Jerusalem, together with the other apostles, preached the true message, which included both law and gospel, in the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit opened so many hearts. The sermon bore an incredible fruit and the true church emerged and appeared with all its marks. The newly baptized kept to the teaching of the apostles; they celebrated the Holy Communion in their homes. They met every day for the prayers and showed in practice the love to each other (Acts 2). Christ himself had sent them the apostles as their pastors. But very soon there were more servants of the church. If we also think of Luther’s seven marks and the last mark, namely the cross, we also find this already in the fourth chapter. Peter and John

were brought to the high priest and his court, where they had to confess, and were forbidden to speak in the Lord's name (Acts 4:1–22). Later they had to endure more suffering. The promised cross was there—and has not left the church (Mt. 16:24).

The church which appeared in Jerusalem is the true church and all true believers are in unity with that church. All over the world through all times, when the gospel is faithfully and properly preached—with law and gospel—and baptism and the Lord's Supper are rightly administered, there is the same church. But a church which does not proclaim the same gospel as both Peter and Paul did, is not in unity with the old true church—and is therefore the false church, the harlot.

The true unity in doctrine

When John saw the church as an uncountable host dressed in white, they all had the same situation: they were cleansed by the blood of Christ. Nobody comes to that position without faith in the suffering Saviour. Nobody comes to that faith without the pure gospel about him. During some eras of the church's history the gospel has been hidden under or behind lumber—still it has been there.

There is an article on which the church stands or falls (*articulis stantis seu cadentis ecclesia*)—and that is what we have in Article IV in the Augsburg Confession about righteousness through faith in Christ. Everything in the Scriptures leads to this point and every doctrine has its relation to this article. And without this there is no salvation—and no church. Without a clear preaching, teaching and confessing of this righteousness through Christ there is nothing left which can give hope. If we do not use the keys, law and gospel, publicly and privately, nobody will come to faith or remain in faith. If we do not preach the forgiveness of sins through Christ to all sinners we have lost the principal doctrine—to which all our teaching is linked.

To preach law and gospel is, in short, to proclaim that there is no sin so small that it does not have to be forgiven through his blood and that there is no sin so shameful that his blood cannot cleanse it. This message must be proclaimed, and therefore there must be men sent for this purpose, namely pastors (Article V) with the necessary means of grace to implant the faith through the two sacraments (or three if we count the private confession as a sacrament).

The best book I have ever read on this *articulis stantis seu cadentis ecclesia* is the wonderful novel by the late bishop of Gothenburg Bishop, Bo Giertz: *The Hammer of God*.² It is about this subject—righteousness through faith—pictured in the life of a rural parish at three different times, around 1810, 1880 and 1940. In these three parts Bishop Giertz pictures how a person is to come to the true

²Bo Giertz, *Stengrunden* 1941, English transl. *The Hammer of God*

faith, what it is, and its very foundation in Christ's sufferings and the power of the gospel. There is in all parts a dying man. In each part there is also a young pastor who finds the way both to faith and how to preach it. This book summarizes in a unique way the gospel in a changing world.

In the Book of Concord there is a wonderful "bouquet of doctrinal flowers". There are all these positive statements as to what we believe and all the negative statements about what we do not believe. I believe that this is the best confession in the world—and is in accordance to the Bible. But in the middle, in the centre, is this *articulis stantibus seu cadentibus ecclesia*. Some Lutherans in the world, for instance the old churches in Denmark and Norway, do not keep the whole book of Concord as their confessional statement—they have only the three ecumenical creeds, the two catechisms and the Augsburg Confession. But that is enough for true unity.

Division/disunion

Here there must be division between the false and the true church. It becomes essential! There must be a clear rejection of the false teaching and a proper confessing of the right doctrine, which will cause rupture. This is what the apostle Paul says: "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval" (1 Cor. 11:9).

Also, there is another division or disunion either due to party spirit or ignorance (lack of knowledge). Always there will exist in the church those carnal spirits, where the desire exists for power or for another to invent his own tradition to be as important as the Word of God, having predominance over the Holy Spirit. Very often there are influential people and leaders in the churches who in lack of knowledge lead the congregations in a narrow, separatist way and so lose the unity with the main body of the true church. Once again I want to stress what I have already pointed to, struggling for the true doctrine—which is very important—there is a risk to lose the unity we have, even if we can have disagreement on some points of doctrine and practice.

Another threat against the true unity arises when some people apply *adiaphora* to confessional questions. In the struggle against liberal theology and false teaching, some *adiaphora* can be looked upon as so related to the false teaching that they cannot separate the confessional question from the *adiaphoron*. It might be a group of Christians who plead for a very old form of liturgical readings and make this old-fashioned style to be an issue of confession. Here is a need of wisdom, love and distinct perception in the pastor to handle this.

Unity is given as a holy gift from the Holy Spirit and belongs to the church—but we can destroy it, even when we are called to preserve it. Besides, our Lord has united us in order that the world may believe in him. "... that all of them

may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one . . . May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:21–23). All faithful Christians are united as an answer to the Son’s request. This unity has to be preserved.

2 Some essential perspectives on the changing world and our calling

The world is changing

If our great grand-parents’ parents could have come here to our time and were allowed to see the change from their time to ours, it would be in all senses for them absolutely incredible. All the different ways of communicating and travelling, our modern facilities in our homes and offices, the modern computers and computerized manufacturing. They would also realize the big gap between rich and poor, personally and on a national level. They would also notice the great loneliness in the big cities.

If they had the opportunity to stay for more than a few hours they would come to a knowledge of what is in many respects a totally different world on another level, let us say a spiritual level. I will point to some essential facts. We have, as members of the true church, a heavenly call to face this, both that we may stand firm until our Lord will come in glory and that we may serve in a right way, inviting the lost to come into his Kingdom. Some would say that this is a great challenge. I am not sure that God challenges us—but he calls us. The world is in the power of the evil one, even if he never can do more than the sovereign God allows him to do according to the heavenly decree. The devil’s goal is to destroy the church. But the Lord himself is a fence of fire around his church (Zech. 2:5), and he has commanded us to go out and proclaim the gospel to all nations.

The Muslims

A very strong spiritual power in the world is the great and growing Islamic movement. Many countries are led by committed Muslims with a strong conviction to make Islam into a world power. A strong Islamic mission work will continue to strengthen this power. In country after country there will be the Sharia laws with the dangerous pressure on both Jews and Christians. These countries lock their borders for Christian missionaries and expel the Christians, or persecute them even until death.

It was perhaps due to the fruit of very weak congregations with wrong, false teachings, in the times of the prophet Mohammed, that he founded a totally anti-Christian religion. I agree with the Romanian-Danish author Monica Papazu, when she declares that the prophet Mohammed took the God of Israel and made him an idol.³ There are many features from the true God in Islam but he is made into another god.

I want to stress two essential callings. The Islamic movement is both a threat, politically and spiritually, and a possibility. The first is—when this power grows more and more—it demands that we as the faithful and true church stand firmly, even when we will be threatened by torture, prison or death. Many of our Christian brothers in the world are daily facing this. The more the Islamic movement grows the more will these be a great call to patiently endure. There is need for the highest degree of unity among faithful Christians.

The next is: There is a great transposition in the world through immigration. In many Western countries the Islamic population is growing. But this is another call. The doors to fundamentalist Muslim countries are locked, but Muslims come in their thousands to the old Christian countries. Here we have a very important mission task. How do we reach the Muslims coming to our own regions with the gospel?

Postmodernism

I am not the man to talk about postmodernism, but we all have to consider this way of thinking, especially in our Western society. We all have to relate to it and to know at least a little how the postmodern man thinks. For many of our contemporaries there is no real truth. “What is true for you is not necessarily true for me. What is a lie for you may not be a lie for me.” The postmodern man or woman is experience oriented and focused on feelings. “What feels good for me?” is an important question.

This leads us to two things: This way of thinking leads the way for anti-Christian persecutions. Maybe it is not here yet, but soon it will be here. The postmodern man does not care for what is right—because there is nobody who can tell us from the “outside”. There is no God who really is the Lord and King of heaven and earth. When the anti-Christian spirit comes, there is nothing within postmodern man that can resist it. We have to be prepared.

We also have to be aware of this way of thinking and being, because in this context we have our task as true church. There is a modern word—contextualization—which for some theologians means another theology than a faithful confessional and scriptural theology. Hence there is demanded a strong call to us is to express

³Monica Papazu, *Islam*, Tidehverv No 7/2006

the true gospel—preaching law and gospel—in a relevant way to the post-modern man, finding him where he is. The call is not to give him (or her) what he at first wants, which is the way of the Church Growth Movement. Paul, when meeting with his contemporaries, immediately gave them the truth about a just God, judgement, Christ’s death on the cross and the need of conversion. This is still our call. Members of the true church must seek to talk with the post-modern man in a way he understands—without compromising the message.

The secularization of society

The change within the old Western countries, which once were Christian countries, is so deep, especially in the Scandinavian countries, that if our great grandparents would come here they could not believe what they would see, hear and experience particularly the “liberation” from Christian dimensions. We can notice how the European Union omitted the Christian perspectives and history from the proposed new constitution. From my own country, perhaps the greatest change is in the state schools for children—where more than 90% of all children attend—from being a Christian school to an atheistic or agnostic school. Too apparent are the many demoniacal features in modern art. We are all aware of the feminist agenda, the gay movement with these pride festivals in big cities round the world. We all know about “free” sex—and its consequence: the abortions. I have heard an estimate of about 55 millions “legal” abortions every year in the world. We could continue. These are examples that point to the smoke from hell—and that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer.

Realizing this, we are called to confess Article Seven in a faithful way—to be church in which we preach the gospel relevantly to comfort the flock, to give joy in him through the body and blood in the Holy Supper, to prepare for THE DAY. Doing this, we have to be eager in connecting with the other Christians in different parts of the world—and in the next village or the next district of the big city.

The time of judgement

I will for a moment concentrate on the situation in the Scandinavian countries. Noticing the atmosphere in media and the way the governmental leaders of the nations and the leaders of different political parties are arguing for anti-Christian opinions, and noticing how the people are following all the signals, we have to be prepared for a judgement perhaps before the Judgement Day. The first thing is the common hardness of heart, where the gay movement is a sign of this. Our countries have had the Word of God for many centuries—but they will no longer listen to it as nations. It is nearly two hundred years since the Russians were in Sweden, which lost Finland to Russia in 1809, but what will come?

The post-Constantinian era

In many of the north European countries, Great Britain included, there have been great folk churches, most often state churches. The state has supported the church in many ways. To be a citizen has often meant being a member in the church. But now a clear process is under way—a post-Constantinian process—in which the true church, believing in Christ through His Word, is being thrust out. There is a church left in a close relation to the state with a theology that is supporting the modern (or post-modern) opinions and the spirit of the times. This process of thrusting out varies in the different countries. I will come back to this when I will portray our path in the Mission Province.

There is a risk that we look upon ourselves as victims when we experience this process and the marginalizing of Confessional pastors. But from another perspective this is liberation with new possibilities of being the confessing church of Article VII. In the “desert” there is a place for the Bride. There she will both find new wells—and she will be a well for the thirsty post-modern man.

The cunning of the serpent

“Did God really say ...?” (Gen. 3:1). This old question has been repeated in a thousand ways throughout the ages. My personal conviction is that the biblical criticism at the theological universities and seminaries beginning in the 18th century has been the most devastating tool in the hand of the enemy of the Light. This has led to a disastrous development in the education of the pastors. A student in theology at a university in Denmark was undergoing an examination in private. When he answered one question with, “Jesus said after his resurrection ...” the professor said, “A dead man cannot talk!” And the student was immediately failed. This is just one small example, but it shows the inner spirit of the formation of many pastors in the old churches. We all know that without the resurrection of our Lord, there is no salvation (1 Cor 15:13f.). Recently there appeared in the Church of Sweden a report on democracy in the church called, translated into English, “Democracy is a continued (successive) revelation”.⁴ Here we find a “theological” foundation for democracy which argues that the spirit of the time will—more or less—be identified with the will of God.

Since the 1950s the issue of female pastors has been the tool that the devil has used to force the faithful Christians away from the old state churches, while facilitating the acceptance of homosexual partnerships. Here we stand, in the Western culture, at a crossroads. The old churches are blessing not only a real sin, but also a lifestyle which in itself is a heavenly judgement. “For although they knew God, they neither glorified as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking

⁴‘Demokratien är en successiv uppenbarelse’, *Svenska kyrkans utredningar 2005:2*

became futile and their hearts were darkened. . . . Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another” (Rom. 1:21, 24).

Here we have to stand united and to continue to be the church in all senses and not neglect that aspect of the preaching of the Word of God which we can call the prophetic vocation—even when the society will threaten the church. But perhaps nothing is as important as the establishing and supporting of good confessional seminaries for the education of pastors and other leaders.

Worrying struggles for unity

I do not want to omit that the so called Charismatic movement in many of our Lutheran Churches touches on a shortage or a weakness in our congregations. For all that, there is a dangerous risk. There is a movement for unity with the charismatic experience as the “common denominator”. At big conferences people from very different denominations, from Roman Catholics to Evangelicals and Pentecostals, together with many Lutherans, claim to experience a unity “in the Spirit” due the common charismatic experience—instead of truth creating doctrinal discourses. Looking into their programs you will find very little about the cross and the true life in Christ as our Saviour. Here is a false unity—and the temptation to follow is very strong for many, and the spiritual seduction is obvious.

Here is the great vocation to be open for constructive doctrinal discourses with Christians in other traditions and denominations. When we have to reject to take part in various ecumenical meetings or gatherings, we have to be faithful in seeking unity with all those who have the same confession. In our congregations it is necessary to have sound teaching about the true faith combined with a rich liturgy and a good Christian fellowship.

Before I finish this “overview” of “a changing world”, I want to point to two important things, without many words, although they need more than one paper each.

Worldwide

In my struggle through the recent years, I have gotten a friend in Australia, an aged Lutheran pastor, whom I have never met. But we have written several letters to each other. What his prayers and encouragements have meant for me is more than I can say. We have many fellow-Christians in many different countries that are in prison for the sake of their faith. The true unity of the church demands that we take part in their sufferings (Mt. 25:36; 2 Tim. 1:8).

There is a fruitful mission work going on in the world. It is like a final call, especially in the “third world”. Even though there are various mission works

undertaken by people with more faith than knowledge, we must acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is doing more than we could expect. But none of us is free to stand outside this final calling in the world. Together with a carefully prepared evangelization work in our neighborhood we have to take part in the mission to reach those people that have not heard the gospel. This is a part of the true unity of the church.

3 One perspective on confessing Article VII—the way of the Mission Province

In a patient waiting for the Lord's return, there are two perspectives on being church I want to point to: 1) to continue to “worship the Father in Spirit and in truth”, i.e. to proclaim the Gospel properly and to administer the Sacraments in a right way, and 2) to be a voice for “the final call”. I have tried to portray the context in which this has to be done. We have no reason to be discouraged, but we have to be realistic in the broken-down culture and in the post-Constantinian process—and there be faithful both to our confession and our vocation. We may not lose sight of two other perspectives: 1) we have to recognize our brothers and sisters where they are, even if they celebrate the Sacraments in other traditions than we are used to. We have to stand together with them, to support them and to let us be supported by them. 2) We have to move out from the false church and the false brothers. This is mainly a question of confession. It is absolutely necessary to confess the truth and to reject the false doctrine and all injustice in the church. This is the way we leave the harlot. To leave her is primarily not an issue on the organizing level but a question of confession.

Our background

The people who belong to or are connected to the Mission Province have their background in the Scandinavian old state churches. Many large Lutheran state churches have been tools for God's grace to a very high degree. But as a consequence of the post-Constantinian process, they have lost nearly all their spiritual power. However, there is a remnant and we are a part of that. We are—from one perspective—victims of the ongoing process. But from another perspective, through God's grace, we are what we are and we are liberated for a new vocation—a calling to be faithful.

Decisive for the unity of the church is the unity in the Gospel and the Sacraments. But for that purpose it is necessary to have men who preach the word of God and administer the Sacraments, committed men who do this from a personal

belief, good knowledge and with inviolate consciences. To install faithful shepherds is one of the most urgent and central tasks of the church. But this was made impossible through the decisions made by the Church of Sweden in the years 1993 and 2000. If a male pastor candidate did not declare in various ways that he is ready to co-operate even with female pastors, the bishop is not allowed to ordain him, according to the Church Ordinance in Sweden.

The Mission Province—a free non-territorial diocese

Therefore—after several years of discussion and discourses—a group of pastors and lay people formed the Mission Province. This is a free non-territorial diocese within the frames and traditions of the old Swedish church, but outside the structure of the Church of Sweden, which is like an occupying power that controls the old church.

We did not start as a protest movement. No, we just wanted to make it possible to do the necessary thing: to call and ordain pastors and to give them and the new congregations good pastoral oversight. Nearly all of us were still members in the Church of Sweden—and we still are. But we left the harlot, the spirit of the false church, by preaching and confessing also in many media the true faith, standing *in statu confessionis*, and not following the false bishops. We did what was in accordance with our confession, CA VII, about the true church: the gospel must properly be preached and the sacraments must be administered, and for that purpose we needed pastors. The Church of Sweden said “no”. But, as Peter declared, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Therefore, we elected three bishops and called on some faithful confessional bishops to consecrate them.

If you ask why we have stayed within the Church of Sweden, I want to explain that very briefly by an extract from a letter by the famous theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote in London a letter to a Swiss friend about the Confessing Church: “There is not the claim or even the wish to be a free church beside the Reichskirche, but there is the claim to be the only theologically and legally legitimate evangelical church in Germany, and accordingly you cannot expect this church to set up a new constitution, since it is based on the very constitution, which the Reichskirche has neglected.”⁵

The Mission Province cannot any longer be called “the Mission Province in Sweden”, because especially Finland and its Luther Foundation is a part of it. Three of the ten thus far ordained pastors are Finnish and pastors in the congregations belonging to the Finnish Luther Foundation.

⁵D Bonhoeffer, letter to Henry Louis Henriod, July 12, 1934. *DBW 13*, 166

Why bishops?

Some Lutheran people wonder why we have chosen a course in which we have bishops. I will give three short answers. 1) This is not contrary to the book of Concord, even though it gives no such command. But Martin Luther advised the people in Mähren that the pastors they themselves could ordain also should elect and consecrate a bishop for them. 2) It is also a question about legitimacy of the new ordained pastors in our old culture and tradition. In Sweden, a pastor has always been ordained by a bishop. 3) It has to do with the unity both with the old church in our Scandinavian region and with the oldest church before the bishop of Rome wrongly claimed his primacy. We want to keep that unity. But we do not—on a confessional level—hold on to a mechanical apostolic succession (even if we think that we have that).

A vision

The vision of the Mission Province is of course the Kingdom of Christ kept and re-established as an Evangelical Lutheran church in Scandinavia, worshipping in Spirit and Truth. We want to be a prophetic voice in our countries. “What is mercy?” The old church father Basil, gave this answer: “He who corrects another is not unmerciful, but rather he who keeps silent. In the same way, he who sees someone bitten by a snake and lets the poison remain in him instead of drawing it out is unmerciful. For such a person is acting contrary to love.”⁶ We have chosen the name *Mission* Province, stressing mission. It is our vision both to be a tool in the hand of the Lord for re-evangelization of some or all the ‘white’ areas in our countries, where the Gospel is lost. We want to do this in a Nordic fellowship. There is a growing network. For the sake of unity, we also want to stand in close relation to Confessional Lutheran churches worldwide. Of course we are in a special relation to the Kenyan Lutheran Church (ELCK) due the very strong fellowship and support that this church and its bishop, the Most Reverend Bishop Walter Obare Omwanza, have showed us.

I want to point to the strong witness that Bishop Obare gave in Jerusalem in September 2005.⁷ There, in deep unity with his fellow-Christians in Scandinavia, at the council of the LWF he defended his actions in Gothenburg earlier that year, when he consecrated the first bishop of the Mission Province. He knew that he then would be rejected as a counsellor and a member of the LWF Council—but the unity with confessional Lutheran brothers far away was more important for him.

⁶Quoted from ‘Det hvileløse hjerte’, Monica Papazu, p. 189 (my translation from Danish)

⁷‘Choose life!’ Bishop Obare’s speech in Jerusalem September 2005

Around us we have various groups, and will before I finish say a few words about this. There are those who have established some small free Lutheran confessional churches. Our vision is that we, if possible, could bring these together at least for some co-operation. Some people among us are tempted to convert to the Roman-Catholic Church. But we want to show them the apostolic continuity in the Lutheran church with the oldest church before the bishop of Rome claimed his primacy before all other bishops. There are those who still are working in the official congregations in the Church of Sweden and the Church of Finland but refuse to compromise with the liberal church. We want to support and encourage them—and to be ready when the post-Constantinian expulsion process has reached also them. We also talk with those who are tempted to compromise and encourage them to hold on to the Scriptural and Confessional truth.

Conclusion

We may never forget what St John saw on the island of Patmos, when he saw the great multitude that could not be counted. We confess in the Creed every Sunday that we believe in one holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, all those who are cleansed in the blood of the Lamb. The church is an article of faith and therefore we have to see the church in faith. Likewise we recognize the true church where we find the Gospel preached and the Sacraments administered.

Therefore we hold on in doing “the right thing”, confessing the truth, in words *and* deeds, obeying God more than man, knowing that his often persecuted church is the Lord’s Jerusalem. He himself will be “a wall of fire around it” and he will be “its glory within” (Zech. 2:5).

In the book of Revelation there are the seven letters which the Lord Jesus sent to the seven churches. In every letter the Lord says: “He (him) who overcomes” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 11, 21) followed by a wonderful promise. There is an enemy struggling against the true church. Division is a victory for the enemy. Therefore we “fight the good fight of faith” and pray that we will, as Paul writes, “fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19). The Lord says, “I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again I will leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God” (Rev. 3:11–12).

S O L I D E O G L O R I A !