

Concerning the Clarity of Scripture
and the Unity in Spirit
(part 2)

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We will never again unite the church, so many times divided, in spirit and in truth. False doctrine is not introduced into the church by idiots, but “has from the beginning been formed in the world and spread by refined, learned, wise people and dressed up in the most beautiful way” (XII 698,49). These let nothing be said to them, because all those who do not follow them they consider stupid or evil—indeed, hardened; cp. Luther on the first verses of the 120th Psalm (IV, 1755ff.) where he only still refers to the prayer for the erring as our sole duty, and cites Titus 3:10. Just as little does false union make the church truly united with those who carry on false doctrine and firmly adhere to it. This is rather a fundamental and practical denial of the word of God as the decisive authority for faith and life. It opens the door for every error and gives the delusion that outward size increases the power of the church. It [makes] God’s kingdom into a Babylon and a dwelling of all unclean spirits, which in the best case—namely, when true Christians are still present in it—gives birth to useless controversy and new factions—as it currently stands plainly before our eyes in the Protestant church of Germany. Among all means for unification, the most corrupting is the *potest tolerari* of open sin and of clearly erroneous doctrine. That everything leads to that, we would not disagree.

However, it must be possible and is possible, in spite of all sins inhering in us and every trick of the devil, to establish true unity of spirit among devout Christians, even though definite flaws and weaknesses will cling to them. That we all arrive at the *unity of faith* and the recognition of the Son of God and at the perfect adulthood, which is in keeping with the maturity of the fullness dwelling in Christ, and that we, *being truthful in love*, grow in all parts closer and closer to Christ, the head, that it will find its full realization just as little as our complete release from the "body of this death", Ro 7:14ff.; but that is the goal set before us, that each member of the body of Christ must keep it firmly in mind, if we don't wish to be implicated in the discord and the division of the church.

We all know that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and the Son alone it is who brings the church to true faith, preserves her in unity and can restore the unity destroyed by our guilt. Besides true faith, he has given to each Christian one or another special gift, and beside that, also the special gifts of public teaching – all for the purpose that we make use of them "for the common good", for the most complete edification of the body of Christ possible. We know that that can happen only in the truthfulness of love, in which each member with his gift helps the other. We know that we all are lacking in that; we know also that especially we called teachers are lacking in that: we professors, pastors and specially selected ones misuse our gifts for our own glorification through ignorance and vanity, through ambition and social lust for power, and we endanger the unity of the church. It is then in place and our holy duty that we

make each other aware of our faults and weaknesses and admonish one another to humility, love and gentleness.

But especially this admonition is a difficult art, if it is to be successful.

Whoever has to do that in public assembly according to 1 Tim 5:20 must possess much wisdom and tact, so that he gives up nothing of the truth and does not offend the erring one needlessly, but above all that he not wrongly take sides. Love will punish personally and privately, and it will not seek to justify itself with the publication of the sin that has happened for the right of public punishment, as long as the omission of this does not endanger right or truth.

The church, however, has had since the time of Luther an infallible means in hand, among those who are of the truth, to settle every controversy which arises in it and to prevent divisions; that is the *correct use of Holy Scripture*. Let it be noted that we say, "among those who are of the truth." "I was born and came into the world for this, that I testify to the truth. Whoever is of the truth hears my voice" (Jn 18:36 [NIV 18:37]). And: "Whoever is from God hears God's word. Therefore you do not hear, for you are not from God" (8:47). And "hear" means here to simultaneously receive inwardly, obey and follow. While one who is of the truth can also have his difficulty with the appropriation of this or that word of God, finally it will get through to him nonetheless.

When the Pauline mentioned at the beginning tried to make plausible for us citizens of this country the necessity of the papacy next to Scripture by means of the comparison of the church to the indispensability of our Supreme Court next

to our Constitution – he thus supports himself on the old, Roman deception of literary obscurity. This would make it impossible for every uninspired person to understand it correctly. And that, therefore, the claim of Protestant scholars on the right of Scripture interpretation on the grounds of their common scientific education and their knowledge of the biblical languages – this would necessarily have to produce chaos in the interpretation of Scripture – chaos which rules in the ecclesiastical sects and always brings to light new sects.

That he uncovered this great light and destroyed its leading deception, that is, along with his doctrine of justification by grace, the greatest achievement of Luther as reformer. Luther stood from the start and stood steadfastly to the end on the *clarity* of Holy Scripture for the certainty of salvation and the certainty of doctrine. In all his struggles with his papistic, Zwinglian, Enthusiast, and dishonest enemies in his own camp, the clarity – specifically the literary clarity – of Scripture is the lowest basis and the effective power. “With the *text* and from the foundation of Holy Scripture I’ve trapped and hunted all my adversaries... Whoever is well prepared with the text is a true pastor... Whoever is well grounded and well practiced in the text is a good and excellent theologian, since one verse and text from the Bible counts for more than many scribal notes and glosses” (XXII, 6,7). For Psalm 37 he writes: “If someone of them touches you and says, ‘One has to have the fathers’ interpretation; Scripture is unclear,’ then you should answer, that *it is not true. There is no more clearly written book than Holy Scripture*; it is, in comparison to all other books as the sun is in comparison to all

other lights... It is a horrible, great disgrace and vice (invective and blasphemy) against Holy Scripture and all Christianity, when one says that Holy Scripture is dark and not so clear that everyone may understand them to teach and prove his faith... That is surely true, that some passages of Scripture are unclear; But in them is nothing else than what is in other places in clear, frank passages... Only be certain and without doubt, that nothing is brighter than the sun, that is, Scripture. But if a cloud steps in front of it, there still is nothing else behind it than the same bright sun. Therefore, if there is an unclear passage in Scripture, don't doubt; there is certainly the same truth behind it that is clear in another place, and whoever can't understand the dark one, let him stay by the light one" (V, 334-338). For Genesis 15:7 Luther remarks: "We should, however, tackle this, that we may have a definite and true understanding of Scripture, which *can be no other than of the letter, text or history*" (I, 952). In his preface to the sermons on Genesis Luther writes against Augustine and Hilary: "For I've often said that whoever wants to study in Holy Scripture should see to it that he stay on the simpler words whenever he can, and indeed not go away from it, unless it is necessary for some article of faith that one must understand something else *than what the words read*. For we must be sure *that nothing simpler has been spoken on earth than what God has spoken*" (I 20,9).

We stress this stand of Luther on the external clarity of Scripture so strongly because all certainty of faith and doctrine, and with that also all unity of the church, depends on the natural understanding of the words of Scripture. We

certainly know that Luther also speaks of two kinds of understanding Scripture: of the external-literal and of the inner-spiritual, and we heartily agree with him that no one who does not have the Holy spirit can understand one single word in Scripture. But that isn't our business here at the moment, where we write about the uniting of the church. For if another speaks by the Spirit or on his own, the one who really has the Spirit—it may feel to him clearer or more obscure, but he can know and prove definitely neither it nor anything else except through its agreement with the clear wording of Holy Scripture. The Holy Spirit and the spiritual understanding of the gospel do not come except through the wording. One could write a great book, if one were to collect everything from Luther on this topic. But we have it all clearly and concisely summarized in chapter eight of the third part of the Smalcald Articles, where he says: "And in these parts, which concern the verbal, external Word, it is to be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except by means of the preceding external Word." And in conclusion: "God does not want to deal with us except through the external word and sacrament. Everything that is extolled as being from the Spirit without such word and sacrament is the devil." In the wording of Scripture, all doctrine in speech or writing is recognized as true or false with unfailing certainty.