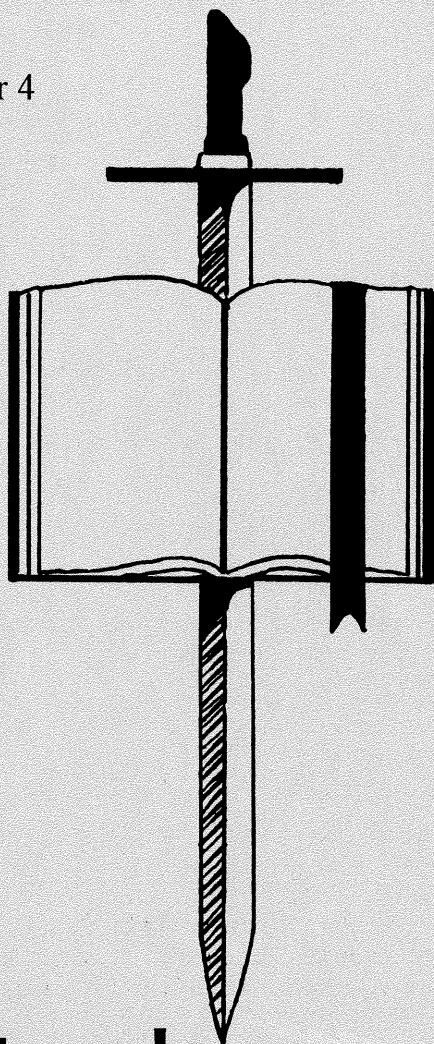


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Foreword

We are pleased to share with our readers the twenty-fifth annual Reformation Lectures, delivered on October 28-29, 1992, in the theater of the Ylvisaker Fine Arts Center, located on the campus of Bethany Lutheran College. These lectures are jointly sponsored by Bethany College and Bethany Seminary.

The lecturer this year was Dr. Robert David Preus, president of Concordia Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Indiana. His lectures centered on *Word, Doctrine and Confession* as found in the writings of Dr. Martin Luther.

The reactors were Professor Richard Stroebel, professor of German at Northwestern College, Watertown, Wisconsin, and Adolph Harstad, professor of Old Testament and Church History at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, Minnesota.

Our readers will note a new format in this issue of the Quarterly. Bethany Seminary recently purchased an advanced desktop publishing system. This issue was produced in part on this new system. Comments and suggestions on the new format are welcome.

We also take this opportunity to wish our readers a blessed Epiphany and a truly happy and healthy New Year in the precious Name of the Christ-Child in Whom alone we have true peace and joy.

W.W.P.

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The Twenty-fifth Annual Reformation Lectures

Bethany Lutheran College
and
Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary
Mankato, Minnesota
October 28, 29, 1992
Dr. Robert Preus

LUTHER: WORD, DOCTRINE, AND CONFESSION

Introduction

This paper covers an immense area of interests. What Luther says on the subjects of God's Word, Christian doctrine, and confessing that doctrine permeates all his writings and is far too vast to treat in a short paper like this. My purpose shall be to examine some of the writings of Luther *de novo*, using almost no secondary sources, and then to come to some conclusions about his position on the three topics and the relationship of the topics to each other.

Lecture I WORD

Scripture as the Word of God

In common with his day, Luther simply and ingenuously identifies Scripture with the Word of God. "You are so to deal with the Scriptures that

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you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this.”¹ We fear and tremble before the very words of Scriptures because they are God’s words, all of them, for “whoever despises a single word of God does not regard any as important.”² Speaking against the Enthusiasts Luther insists that one cannot have the Spirit of God who does not have the visible, external Word; “For it will surely not be a good spirit but the wretched devil from hell. The Holy Spirit has embodied His wisdom and counsel and all mysteries of the Word and revealed them in Scripture and so no one needs to excuse himself or look and search for anything else.”³ Speaking again in the same vein against the Enthusiasts Luther says, “God speaks to us through Scripture and through the man who teaches Scripture. He who hears is not deceived but we are to flee from special revelations concerning the faith which are satanic delusions.”⁴

In all his many writings against the Enthusiasts, as he insists that the Holy Spirit always works His blessings and salvation through the Word, Luther is thinking ordinarily of the preached Word, as based upon the Scriptures. This fact is made clear in the *Smalcald Articles* (III, VIII, 3f.) where he extols the external spoken Word, averring that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through it. The external Word comes before the Spirit is given. Luther

¹W23, 21.

²WA 26, 449.

³W28, 1110.

⁴W2679f.

rejects the *Schwärmer* and Münzer who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and thus interpret and distort the Scriptures and the spoken Word according to their pleasure. The papists too, at bottom, are Enthusiasts in this sense, for the pope boasts that "all laws are in the shrine of his heart," even when his commands are "above and contrary to the Scriptures and the spoken Word." It is safe to say, therefore, that there is no preached Word of God which is not based upon the Scriptures, and that because the Scriptures are the Word of God.

Luther is most insistent that God actually speaks in the Scriptures. The Scriptures are *Deus loquens*. "It is cursed unbelief and odious flesh which will not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in Scripture and that it is God's Word, but tells us that it is the word merely of Isaiah, Paul, or some other man who has not created heaven and earth."⁵

The above citations prove, along with innumerable others, that Luther believed in what has more recently been called verbal inspiration, as Michael Reu has amply documented.⁶ For instance Luther says, "The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, written (I might say), lettered and formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God veiled in human nature."⁷ To Luther, calling Scripture God's Word, meant that it was word for word divine.

⁵W²⁹, 1800; cf. W²⁴, 1492; W²³, 785.

⁶*Luther and the Scriptures*, Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1944, pp. 65-102, passim.

⁷W²⁹, 1770.

The Divine Authority of Scripture

Scripture is divinely authoritative because Scripture is divine. The Scriptures derive their authority not from their content, which is essentially Law and Gospel, but from their origin and nature.⁸ Luther makes the most superlative claims concerning the divine authority of Scripture. "Therefore let us learn to praise and magnify the majesty and authority of the Word. For it is no trifle, as the fanatics of our day suppose; but one dot (Matthew 5:18) is greater than heaven and earth." Luther is speaking against the fanatics on the basis of Galatians 5:9 ("A little yeast leavens the whole lump."). He concludes by saying, "If they refuse [to leave the Word sound and unimpaired], let them perish and be banished to hell, and not only they themselves but the whole world with its godly and ungodly inhabitants, just as long as God remains; for if He remains, life and salvation remain, and so do the truly godly."⁹ Luther does not hesitate to pronounce curses on those who distort or blaspheme the divinely authoritative written Word.

In accordance with his view that the Spirit of God is the Author of Scripture Luther looks for the guidance of the Spirit in the Church in the Scriptures themselves. Neither the Papists nor the Enthusiasts really base their doctrine and practice on the Scriptures, but both claim that the Holy Spirit teaches the Church without the necessity of

⁸W²⁸, 38; 9, 839; 3, 325; 13, 1559; 5, 933; 22, 1661.

⁹LW 27, 46.

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a scriptural norm.¹⁰ Luther counters by asking how do they know that they are the true church? The children of God can only decide by the presence of God's Word, for the Holy Spirit comes and reveals God and His will in the Word. If it is not in accordance with My Word, it is not the Christian Church. For what could induce the Christian Church to change and undermine the Word of its Lord? The true Church would say: I cling to the Word of my dear Lord Christ. I insist on this. According to this Word I will make my decisions. I will not hold with those who do otherwise. This the Christian Church has always done in previous times. It condemned heresy and all false doctrine not according to its own opinion, as the pope and his people do, but according to the Scripture and Christ's Word."

All this pertains to everything that the Word teaches. Every article of faith must be based upon God's Word alone.¹¹ The *sola Scriptura* principle is simply assumed by Luther in all his commentaries and throughout them again and again. One of his notable statements, commenting on Galatians 1:9,¹² bears this point out.

Here Paul subordinates himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters of all to sacred Scripture. This queen must rule, and everyone

¹⁰W28, 464.

¹¹[*Allein auf Gottes Wort*] W²16, 1677.

¹²LW 26, 57-58.

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must obey, and be subject to her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God. Otherwise, let the teachers and hearers be accursed along with their doctrine.

It is interesting in this passage that Luther refers to all three themes of our article: Scripture, doctrine, and confession. Luther had alluded to the same passage from Galatians in his *Smalcald Articles* (II, II, 15) when in writing on the Mass he insisted that “the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel.”¹³ The citations above refer to the authority of the biblical text as such, what later Lutheran theologians called the canonical, or normative, authority of Scripture. This is the authority of the text as written, what Luther and our Lutheran Confessions and our later dogmaticians assert as the *sola Scriptura* principle. Scripture is cognitive discourse about God, and the source and norm for all cognitive discourse about God.

Such authority is predicated on the total truthfulness and reliability of Scripture. Later Lutheran dogmaticians distinguished often between the truthfulness and the canonical

¹³cf. *LW* 34, 33, 39, 40.

authority of Scripture. Luther did not do so. In emphasizing one he emphasizes the other, for they entail each other. "The integrity of Scripture must be guarded, and a man ought not to presume that he speaks more safely and clearly with his mouth than God spoke with His mouth."¹⁴ By the truthfulness of Scripture Luther is operating with a plain Second Commandment, Eighth Commandment, garden variety of truthfulness. He is simply talking about true assertions in contrast to false assertions and lies. "The lie has always had the greater following, the truth is smaller. Indeed, I know if only a few insignificant men were attacking me, then what I have taught and written would not be the truth from God. St. Paul caused a great uproar with his teaching, as we read in Acts [17:5, 18; 18:12; 19:23-41], but that did not prove his teaching false. Truth has always caused disturbance and false teachers have always said 'peace' as Isaiah and Jeremiah tell us."¹⁵

The truthfulness of Scripture to Luther is predicated on its essential clarity, a concept which we will discuss in more detail later. His position is simply that what is clear and simple is therefore reliable, if the one speaking is reliable, and such is the case with God's Word, Scripture. "Holy Scripture must necessarily be clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings. Especially since all teachers verify their own statements through the Scriptures as clear and

¹⁴LW 32, 244.

¹⁵LW 32, 12.

more reliable writings, and desire their own writings to be confirmed and explained by them. But nobody can ever substantiate an obscure saying by one that is more obscure; therefore, necessity forces us to run to the Bible with the writings of all teachers, and to obtain there a verdict and judgment upon them. Scripture alone is the true Lord and Master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for?"¹⁶ Earlier Luther had insisted that the Scriptures do not err, but the fathers, even Jerome and Augustine, have erred. All teachers in the church must prove what they say is the truth by what the Holy Scriptures say. And so we find Luther repeatedly affirming the absolute infallibility and truthfulness of Scripture. "Natural reason produces heresy and error. Faith teaches and adheres to the pure truth. He who adheres to the Scriptures will find that they do not lie or deceive."¹⁷ "Scripture cannot err."¹⁸ Luther is well aware of the fact that often the Scriptures seem to err and especially to contradict themselves (as we shall discuss later), but that is due to our faulty reasoning and our flesh, and should never be construed as an aberration or error in the Scriptures themselves. "The Holy Spirit has been blamed for not speaking correctly. He speaks like a drunkard or a fool. He so mixes things up and uses wild, queer words and statements. But it is our fault, who have not

¹⁶LW 32, 11.

¹⁷W²11, 162.

¹⁸W²14, 1073.

understood the language nor known the manner of the prophets. For it cannot be otherwise; the Holy Ghost is wise and makes the prophets also wise. A wise man may be able to speak correctly; that holds true without fail.”

To Luther the authority of Scripture involves not only its truthfulness but its utter unity and consistency. Scripture does not contradict itself. This is a basic hermeneutic for the pastor who reads and preaches the Scriptures. One text does not contradict another text. One doctrine does not contradict another doctrine, even though they may seem utterly contradictory, as we shall see in the case of Law and Gospel. Arguing against Oecolampadius who would not take the intended literal sense of the words of institution as they stand, Luther simply says that the texts of Scripture do not contradict themselves no matter how ridiculous they may seem.¹⁹ Oecolampadius finds contradictions where in fact there are no contradictions in the Scriptures. What confused Oecolampadius was the fact that scriptural texts which are contradictory *must be reconciled* and one passage must be receive an interpretation which will accord with another; for it is certain that the Scriptures cannot be at variance with themselves. If only Oecolampadius had understood the principle that “the Scriptures do not contradict themselves” he would have come out right in his Christology and his doctrine of the Sacrament. But rather than do so, he seizes the Scriptures with guile and malice in order to use

¹⁹LW 37, 49f.

them as a cloak. And under such a guise he spreads poison among the people. Oecolampadius makes the fatal mistake, Luther says, of asking the wrong questions of Scripture. The usual wrong question is, "Why?" And so he finds hopeless contradictions where none exist and in trying to solve them obscures everything.

The Preacher and the Scriptures

Because the Scriptures are God's Word to us and because they authoritatively teach us what we are to believe and do as God's children, the pastor should be a minister of the Word. That means first of all that he studies the Scriptures and derives his entire message from them. In short, the theologian, or pastor, must be a *bonus textualis*, one who reads the Scriptures and rereads them,²⁰ and one who believes and yields to the clear words of Holy Writ.²¹ Luther says,

The first concern of a theologian should be to be well acquainted with the text of Scripture, a *bonus textualis*, as they call it. He should adhere to this primary principle: in sacred matters there is no arguing or philosophizing; for if one were to operate with the rational and probable arguments in this area, it would be possible for me to twist all the articles of faith as easily as Arius, the Sacramentarians, and the

²⁰W²18, 732; 18, 332; 696.

²¹W²13, 1898.

Anabaptists did. But in theology we must only hear and believe and be convinced in our heart that God is truthful, however absurd that which God says in His Word may appear to be to reason.²²

Reading the Scriptures according to Luther requires what he calls meditation. One does not simply read them like any other human book. Study, reflection, rereading are called for again and again if one is to preach or apply their message.

You should meditate, that is, not in the heart alone, but also externally. You should work on it and ply the oral speech and the lettered words in the book, read them and reread them again and again, noting carefully and reflecting upon what the Holy Spirit means by these words. And take care that you do not tire of it or think it enough if you have read, heard, said it once or twice, and now profoundly understand it all; for in that manner a person will never become much of a theologian.²³

The Clarity of Scripture

Luther is speaking of what we might call an active use of the Scriptures, so essential to their right interpretation and application.²⁴ Ordinarily by the clarity of Scripture Luther simply means the plain and simple sense of the text. This is

²²W25, 456.

²³W214, 435.

²⁴LW 37, 13-17; 23, 371.

predicated on the hermeneutical assumption that the text of Scripture has one literal sense: *sensus literalis unus est*. "In controversy we must follow the literal sense of Scripture alone, and this is one and the same throughout Scripture."²⁵

In his *Bondage of the Will* Luther speaks at great length on the clarity of Scripture and the necessity of the clarity of Scripture if there are to be assertions in the church, that is, if there is to be pure doctrine taught in the church. After making his well-known polemic against skepticism—"the Holy Spirit is no skeptic"²⁶—and insisting that the church cannot stand without "assertions," he addresses himself to the clarity of Scripture. He is not primarily concerned with the grammatical and historical clarity of the text as such, which he already assumed, but with the subject matter of the text, the things (*res*) of God. In God, of course, there are many things that are hidden and will remain so to the end of time.²⁷ This fact, however, does not mean that the Scriptures themselves are unclear as they present the articles of faith and the great mysteries of the Gospel. Briefly put, Luther's position goes as follows:

To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are two kind of obscurity: one is external and resides in the ministry of the Word [*verbi ministerium*]; the other is located in the understanding

²⁵W²18, 1447; cf. W²20, 780.

²⁶LW 33, 24.

²⁷see LW 33, 25ff.

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of the heart. If you speak of the internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scripture unless he has the Spirit of God. All men have a darkened heart, so that if they can recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and really understand nothing of these things [*horum sentiant aut vere cognoscant*], neither do they believe in God, nor that they themselves are creatures of God nor anything else as Psalm 13 [14:1] says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it. If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but all things which are in the Scriptures are made perfectly clear and brought into the light through the Word and declared to the whole world.

Luther's view concerning the external clarity of Scripture involves also the practical and saving purpose of Scripture. "I said above that things which are either contained in or proved by Holy Writ are not only plain, but also salutary, and can therefore safely be published, learned, and known as indeed they ought to be."²⁸ In other

²⁸LW 33, 45.

words, the Scriptures are true and clear not merely like a telephone book, but offer a message (*res*), cognitive in content, which can be preached and “which saves people eternally.” This claim he makes against Erasmus who believed a) that the Scriptures were not clear externally, and b) that their message was not of such momentous content that a person’s salvation was dependent upon knowing that message. To Luther,

Souls will be inevitably lost if they are not changed by the Word of God; and if that Word were taken away, then eternal good, God, Christ, the Spirit would go with it. But surely it is preferable to lose the world rather than God the Creator of the world, who is able to create innumerable worlds again, and was better than infinite worlds!²⁹

To Luther Erasmus simply does not value the Word of life and salvation which Scripture brings poor sinners. Erasmus simply does not know and understand the tremendous importance for every lost sinner to know that the Scriptures are clear.

But that impudent and blasphemous saying that the Scriptures are obscure had to be overwhelmed in this way so that even you, my dear Erasmus, might realize what you are saying when you deny that Scripture is crystal clear. . . . For who is there to make us sure of their light if you

²⁹LW 33, 53.

make the Scriptures obscure? So those who deny that the Scriptures are quite clear and plain leave us nothing but darkness.³⁰

For Luther therefore the Scriptures as such are as clear as glass, their saving message crystal clear. This is fundamental to the divine authority of Scripture and its saving purpose and to the attaining of the pure and saving doctrine of the Gospel.

But what about the internal obscurity and confusion and unbelief which cannot comprehend the saving grace of God and the mysteries of the Gospel? These mysteries are utterly terrifying and “utterly contradictory amid temptation.”³¹ But the Holy Spirit working through the Scriptures and the Scriptures by their own salvific and creative power create the very understanding which we cannot of ourselves muster. For “God reveals the mystery of salvation through the external Word. This Word He has ordained to serve as a means and as a hollow reed through which He conveys saving truth in His heart.”³² And so the Word, pure in itself, obscure to us, becomes the most valuable of all gifts of God to us sinners. If you take it away, it is like taking the sun away from the earth.

For if the Word were removed, what would the world be but a hell, a mere realm of Satan, though wealthy

³⁰LW 33, 94.

³¹LW 26, 338; 37, 46-49, 167.

³²W²⁷, 830.

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people, lawyers, doctors, and others dwell in it? For what can people do without the Word? For only the Word keeps a joyful conscience, a gracious God, and our entire religion, for from the Word flows as from a spring all religion; yes, it upholds the entire world.³³

So the Word to Luther is the greatest blessing in all the world, because God gives us there His merciful promises of forgiveness and life everlasting. The Word by the gift of the Holy Spirit creates the very understanding which we are unable to accord it. So Luther says,

Now when I say that you should fix the Word of God in your heart, I do not mean merely that you should know it and meditate on it. That is nothing. I mean rather that you should regard and esteem it as it ought to be regarded and esteemed. That is, you should hold it to be a living, eternal, all-powerful Word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you so eternally; that brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ, with His flesh and blood and everything He is and has. For it is the kind of Word that can and does do all these things, and therefore it should be so regarded.

³³W24, 1806.

That is its own proper honor. It is not satisfied with any other kind of honor. In short, the proper honor for the Word is nothing else than a genuine faith from the bottom of one's heart, a faith that holds the Word to be true, that trusts it, and stakes its life upon it for eternity.³⁴

So a man simply holds to the clear and simple Word of God, the Gospel Word, and he believes it and follows it. If only a man can do this, there would indeed be more peace on earth. Sects and heretics would arise, but the churches would remain agreed in sound doctrine.

If the Word does not say it, the fact is nothing to us, whether we are talking of Christ or God or anything.³⁵ For Luther it is all or nothing. It is the Word of God and God's truth or nothing. If the Word of Scripture and preaching is sinful and wrong, then there is nothing left to direct our lives. It would be like a blind man leading another blind man (Matthew 15:14). One crookedness would create another crookedness, endlessly and immeasurably. Our lives, of course, are sinful and wrong all the time, but our doctrine must be straight and certain. "Therefore nothing except the certain, pure, and only Word of God must be preached in the church. Where that is lacking, an institution is no longer the church but the school of the devil."³⁶

³⁴LW 36, 278.

³⁵LW 37, 88; 36, 29, 302; 37, 134-135.

³⁶W²17, 1343. Christ is "present in the Word and in the outward things of which His Word speaks" (LW 37, 136-

Is Luther speaking only of the Scriptures when he talks about the Spirit of God working through the Word, the clarity and creative power of the Word to work faith and salvation? Not at all. If one were to read through the writings of Luther, one would find that the term "Word of God" refers more often to the Gospel than to the Scriptures. The term "Word of God" may also mean simply the whole Christian doctrine, or could mean the Law, or some article of faith.³⁷ It

137).

³⁷Often Luther speaks about the Sacrament of the Altar or the Sacrament of Baptism as the Word at work. For instance, speaking of the Lord's Supper he says, "Everything depends upon these words.

. . . Language cannot express how great and mighty these words are, for they are the sum substance of the whole Gospel. This is why these words are far more important than the Sacrament itself, and a Christian should make it a practice to give far more attention to these words than to the sacrament" (*LW* 36, 277). According to Luther, to ignore the words is to lose the Sacrament and to turn it into a "purely external work devoid of faith." Luther is arguing that the veneration of the Sacrament is nothing unless the Word is honored which makes the Sacrament what it is. The best way to honor the sacrament is to honor the Word and "the proper way to honor the Word is to fix it in your heart" (*LW* 36, 278). What does it mean to fix one's heart on the Word of God? Luther replies, "You should hold it to be a living, eternal, or powerful Word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you eternally; that brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ with His flesh and blood and everything that He is and has. For it is the kind of Word that can and does do all things and therefore it can be so regarded. In short, the proper honor for the Word is nothing else than a genuine faith from the bottom of one's heart, the faith that holds the Word to be true, that trusts it and stakes its life upon it for eternity." In whatever form the Word takes, preaching, Scripture, mutual

really does not matter much to Luther. For our doctrine is based upon Scripture, and the preachers preach from the Scriptures; and what they preach is the Word of God. Commenting on Galatians 4:19, Luther says, "So the Word proceeds from the mouth of the apostle and reaches the heart of the hearer."³⁸ Is he speaking of the words of Paul in the Book of Galatians, or the preaching of Paul, or the preaching of the Church on the basis of the Apostolic Word? As usual, he is speaking of all of these, for he proceeds,

There the Holy Spirit is present and impresses that Word on the heart, so that it is heard. In this way every preacher is a parent, who produces and forms the true shape of the Christian mind through the ministry of the Word.³⁹

Luther is talking indiscriminately about the Word of Scripture, the Apostolic Word, and the preached Word when he says,

Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart, that is, the right knowledge of the heart about God. But reason cannot think correctly about God; only faith can do so. A man thinks correctly about God when he believes God's Word. But when he wants to measure and to believe

conversation of brethren, the sacraments, it bears the same power of God to grant forgiveness and salvation.

³⁸LW 26, 430.

³⁹cf. LW 33, 136.

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God apart from the Word, with his own reason, he does not have the truth about God in his heart and therefore cannot think and judge correctly about Him.

Later in this context he says,

Truth is faith itself, which judges correctly about God. And that correct judgment is that God does not look upon our sins but believes that we are cleansed through Christ and justified through faith in Him.

Luther in this context is speaking about the Word as the Gospel itself. He says that the true idea about God is really nothing other than faith based upon the Gospel Word. By reason we cannot apprehend or affirm [*statuere*] that we are accepted into grace for the sake of Christ. But this is announced [*annuntiari*] through the Gospel and we take hold of this by faith.⁴⁰ Luther thus never separates the Gospel from the Scripture Word, which is always centered in Christ. Nor does he separate faith from the Gospel and Scripture Word; and faith, wrought through the Word, is always directed toward Christ.

In another section in his 1535 commentary on Paul's epistle to the Galatians Luther in the same way blends the concepts of Word and faith, but explicitly brings in the Holy Spirit. He is commenting on Galatians 4:6 and says that the Holy Spirit is sent "through the Word" into the hearts of believers. This does not happen in a

⁴⁰LW 26, 238-239.

Preus 21

visible way, and the change in us and our new understanding are not the work of human reason or power, but the Holy Spirit comes through “the preached Word,” He purifies our hearts and produces spiritual motives in us. Therefore we are able to judge with certainty on the basis of the Word about God’s will toward us, about all laws and teachings, about our own lives and those of others. For “without the Word it is impossible to form any sure judgments about anything.”⁴¹ For Luther, therefore, there is no real difference between the preached Word and the prophetic and apostolic Word of Scripture. Although canonical authority resides in the written Word, the same truth and power adhere to the Word preached as it is based upon the Scripture Word. And the same Holy Spirit is working through the Gospel Word. Again, Luther does not distinguish for us whether he is referring to the Gospel in the narrow or the broad sense. It really doesn’t seem to matter to him, for the Gospel in the broadest possible sense surrounds the center of the circle, the doctrine of justification; and the Gospel in the narrow sense entails the entire Christian doctrine.

Notes:

⁴¹LW 21, 375.

Lecture II DOCTRINE

Terms

The terms “Gospel,” “doctrine,” and “Word” are used interchangeably by Luther throughout his writings.⁴² At times Luther uses the word “theology” as a reference to the Gospel, or to Law, or Scripture, or doctrine.⁴³

Since the Word and doctrine are identified by Luther, he invariably speaks about the doctrine as “genuine”⁴⁴ or true simply because God’s Word, whether written or preached, is true. Often in hundreds of contexts he is thinking of God’s Word as consisting of Law and Gospel, or sometimes just as the Gospel in the broad sense. The point is that Luther values purity of doctrine just as he values the Word of God. For the doctrine has its origin in God just as the Word does, and the doctrine is derived totally from the Word.⁴⁵ In a sermon for Judica Sunday dealing with the Jews’ rejection of Christ and His Word and insistence that they were the children of God, Luther says,

What does Christ do here? He lets His life be put to shame, He is silent and suffers Himself to be called a Samaritan. But the doctrine He defends. For the doctrine is not ours,

⁴²LW 26: 52, 221, 223, 296.

⁴³LW 26, 331.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵LW 37, 26.

but God's who shall suffer nothing. Here there is no patience but I shall suffer and do everything I can to keep God's honor and Word from suffering. It does not matter much if I perish. But if I let God's Word perish and am silent, I do harm to God and to all the world.

Luther is particularly insistent that his office as pastor is to preach and defend and confess the pure doctrine, for not only his doctrine but his office "are from God alone."⁴⁶

Of course, a pastor, like the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3 and 4, will prove everything with passages of Scripture, examples, and analogies from the Word. It is out of his concern for the message of the Gospel and for the salvation of lost sinners that Luther constantly strives for the pure doctrine and rails against all "shameful doctrines" which trod under foot the teaching of Christ and salvation.⁴⁷ It is particularly against the Papists

⁴⁶LW 35, 384; 17, 39. Luther here insists that the evangelical doctrine by standing on Scripture stands on its own merits. There is no need, he says, to settle anything about the doctrine, for it determines all other things, standing as it does on the Scriptures. The Papists are aware of this and are afraid. They cannot bear the true doctrine and therefore try in countless ways to set up idols. "Our doctrine, however, does not rely on the endorsement and support of others. We do not have to propel it, for it runs by itself and will stand forever. This is our glory. Meanwhile nothing seems less clear than that we are lowly people. There are the powerful Papists. The haughty Enthusiasts and Anabaptists offer their opposition, and no trace of strength appears in us. But we must put up with it."

⁴⁷LW 34, 21.

and Enthusiasts that Luther directs his polemics. Whether the Papists speak of idle ceremonies and calls and such liturgical rites which are adiaphora, or the *Schwärmer*, including Karlstadt, Schwenckfeld, or Zwingli with their special revelations and twisting of the texts of Scripture speak of the Lord's Supper or Baptism or the doctrine of Christ, the "doctrine" is being attacked. To Luther the pure doctrine is defended and taught as much when the purpose of the Law is rightly taught, or the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, or Baptism, or worship, as when the central article of justification is taught. For everything hangs together, as we shall see.

Christ, the Center of all Doctrine

This leads us to the most important principle of Luther's theology, the dominating theme of all his prodigious theological work as preacher and teacher of the church and confessor in the church: the *solus Christus*.

What does this mean? Let me answer this question by citing Luther and making comments concerning the citations.⁴⁸ It is primarily, but by no means solely, from Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* that we get his views on the *solus Christus* principle and his rationale for it. Therein Luther treats justification in the broad sense as the *praecipuus articulus* of Christian doctrine, and he discusses Paul's defense of that

⁴⁸For a full discussion of the issue see Robert Preus, "Luther and the Doctrine of Justification" in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 1984, pp. 1ff. I will try to expand on what I wrote in that article.

doctrine and principle. "For the issue here," Luther says,

is nothing trivial to Paul. It is the principal doctrine [*articulus*] of Christianity. When this is recognized and held before one's eyes, everything else seems vile and worthless. For what is Peter? What is Paul? What is an angel from heaven? What is all creation in comparison with the doctrine of justification [*articulus justificationis*]? Therefore if you see this threatened or endangered, do not be afraid to stand up against Peter or an angel from heaven. For this cannot be praised highly enough.

Luther points out that Paul is opposing not the apostlelicity of Peter (Gal. 2:11), but his practice, which seemed to yield something to the Judaizers and thus endangers "the majesty of the doctrine of justification."⁴⁹ Luther goes on,

When it comes to the defense of the truth of the Gospel, therefore, we are not embarrassed to have the

⁴⁹LW 26, 106ff.; cf. LW 26, 106: "For the issue here is nothing trivial for Paul. It is the **principal doctrine of Christianity**. When this is recognized and held before one's eyes, everything else seems vile and worthless. For what is Peter? What is Paul? What is an angel from heaven? What is all creation in comparison with the doctrine of justification? Therefore if you see this threatened or endangered, do not be afraid to stand up against Peter or an angel from heaven. For this cannot be praised highly enough."

Preus 26

hypocrites accuse us of being proud and stubborn, the ones who think that they alone have the truth, those who refuse to listen or to yield to anyone. Here we have to be stubborn and unbending. The cause for whose sake we sin against men, that is, trample under foot the majesty of someone's social position or of the world, is so great that the sins that are the worst in the eyes of the world are the highest virtues in the eyes of God. It is good for us to love our parents, to honor the magistrates, to show respect for Peter and for other ministers of the Word. But what is involved here is not the cause of Peter or our parents or the emperor or the world or any other creature; it is the cause of God Himself.

For God, says Luther, is the incomparable Creator. All creatures compare with Him like a drop of water with the ocean.

From the above citation of Luther's we learn that the justification of a sinner before God for Christ's sake is not only the principal doctrine of Christianity, but the very essence of it. Furthermore, it is really the essence of the Gospel itself and of all Christian faith, the *Leitmotiv* of the Christian life and the reason for all that exists. It is the only doctrine or message which can offer a poor sinner hope, salvation, and life and fellowship with God.

For Luther, to lose the doctrine of

justification is to lose the very grace and peace offered and brought by Christ in the Gospel. It furthermore makes one a prey to the devil and all kinds of heresies.

For if we lose the doctrine of justification, we simply lose everything. Hence the most necessary and important thing is that we teach and repeat this doctrine daily as Moses says about his law (Deut. 6:7). For it cannot be grasped or be held enough or too much. In fact, though we may urge and articulate it vigorously, no one grasps it perfectly or believes it with all his heart. So frail is our flesh and so disobedient to the Spirit.⁵⁰

“Grace” and “peace” contain a “summary of all of Christianity,” and grace and peace are impossible unless we have first learned to know the forgiveness we have through Christ.⁵¹ For to take away this article is to take away Christ the “Propitiator.”⁵² For only Christ can make atonement to God, not works, fasts, cowl and tonsure, and meditation. Without Him we inevitably fall and enter into horrible despair and “lose God and everything.” True theology begins by taking hold of salvation in Christ, to

⁵⁰LW 26, 26.

⁵¹LW 26, 26-27.

⁵²LW 26, 28. “Propitiator” is a very common descriptive word used by Luther for Christ, especially in his *Lectures on Galatians* and other commentaries and sermons. It is a kind of umbrella term for all Christ has done to save us.

begin where Christ began—in the virgin’s womb, in the manger, and at His mother’s breast. For this purpose He came down, was born, lived among men, suffered, was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way He might present Himself to our sight. He wanted us to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Him and thus to prevent us from clamoring into heaven and speculating about the Divine Majesty.⁵³

Therefore,

Whenever you consider the doctrine [*locus*] of justification and wonder how or where or in what condition to find a God who justifies and accepts sinners, then you must know that there is no other God than this man, Jesus Christ. Take hold of Him. Cling to Him with all your heart, and spurn all speculation about the Divine Majesty; for whoever investigates the majesty of God will be consumed by His glory.

Luther says he knows what he is talking about because he has experienced this himself, and he concludes this section by saying, “Take note, therefore, in the doctrine (*causa*) of justification that when we all must struggle with the Law, sin, death, and the devil, we must look at no other

⁵³LW 26, 28-29.

God than this incarnate and human God.” Luther is most insistent that Jesus Christ be linked with God the Father. And it is the Spirit of God who brings us to Christ (John 14:6). Any other way to God causes one only to stray from the truth into hypocrisy and lies and eternal death. Therefore Christ, the center of the article of justification, should be such a treasure to me that in comparison with Him everything else is filthy. He should be such a light to me that when I have taken hold of Him by faith, I do not know whether there is such a thing as Law, sin, or unrighteousness in the world. For what is everything in heaven and on earth in comparison with the Son of God?⁵⁴

Statements like the foregoing could be multiplied many times in Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians* and throughout his works.⁵⁵

One more statement from Luther must be cited before we respond to the question of the nature, the meaning, and scope of Luther’s *solus Christus* principle, the centrality of the doctrine of justification. I quote at length from Part II of the *Smalcald Articles*:

The second part treats the articles which pertain to the office and work of Jesus Christ, or our redemption.

⁵⁴LW 27, 182.

⁵⁵LW 26: 54, 116, 126, 136, 198, 222, 223, 282-283, 285, 395; cf. Erl. Lat. 10, 137; 21, 12, 20. WA 18, 606; 46, 414; 56, 247; WA *Tischreden* 5, 5585.

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, was “put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). He alone is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all” (Is. 53:6). Moreover, “All have sinned” and “are justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus by His blood” (Rom. 3:23-25).

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law” (Rom. 3:28), and again, “That He [God] Himself is righteous and He justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “And with His stripes we are healed” (Is. 53:5).

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.

What, then, can we glean from the many, many citations from Luther concerning what we have called the *solus Christus* principle?

1. It is obvious that justification before God and the work of Christ as Propitiator and Redeemer belong inextricably together and, so far as Luther is concerned, really constitute the same article (*articulus, doctrina, locus*). We must add that at times Luther will call the doctrine of the Lord's Supper a *praecipuus locus*, a chief theme of the faith, at other times absolution, and other articles of faith. And, of course, he calls each of these articles in various contexts and other articles in various contexts *doctrina*.

2. Luther's *solus Christus* principle springs from his exegetical studies which conclude that the entire Scriptures were Christocentric in their content. How often does he make statements like the following, "Christ is the sum and truth of Scripture";⁵⁶ "The Scriptures from beginning to end do not reveal anyone besides the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come and through His sacrifice carry and take away the sins of the world";⁵⁷ "Outside the book of the Holy Spirit,

⁵⁶WA 3, 620.

⁵⁷W²17, 1070.

namely the Holy Scriptures, one does not find Christ.”⁵⁸ Such statements make the Christocentricity of Scripture a hermeneutical principle for Luther. “One must not understand Scripture contrary to Christ, but in favor of Him; therefore Scripture must be brought into relationship to Christ or must not be regarded as Scripture.”⁵⁹ To Luther Scripture cannot teach anything against the vicarious atonement of Christ and the doctrine of justification.⁶⁰

3. Since Scripture is Christocentric and therefore all Christian doctrine must center in Christ, the Savior, the purpose of Scripture and the purpose of all doctrine in the church is soteriological. It is for our comfort, our forgiveness, our union with God. Luther never tires of making this point. Scripture makes us happy, trustful, confident Christians and puts us at peace with God.⁶¹ It is our defense against temptation and the devil, the world, and our flesh.⁶² It instructs us in true worship and service of God⁶³ and in how to be a good theologian.⁶⁴ All these and other blessings Christian doctrine affords us because of the great

⁵⁸W²⁹, 1775; for a detailed discussion of Luther's *solus Christus* principle in Scripture and Christian theology, see E. Thestrup Pedersen, *Luther som Skriftfortolker*, Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959, pp. 251-270.

⁵⁹W²¹⁹, 144.

⁶⁰cf. WA 24, 549; 42, 368; 42, 277.

⁶¹W²⁴, 2098.

⁶²W²⁶, 439.

⁶³W²⁴, 1424; 13, 573; 13, 2215-2216.

⁶⁴W²¹⁴, 435.

power of Scripture which underlies all teaching in the church. And Scripture and Christian doctrine and preaching are powerful because they point us to Christ and His grace.

4. Christian doctrine and preaching not only *point us* to Jesus only but *confer* upon us sonship, faith in Christ, fellowship with Him, and all blessings which we have through Christ. "All the works which Christ performed are recorded in the Word, and in the Word and through the Word will He give us everything, and without the Word He will give us nothing."⁶⁵ By "Word" in this connection Luther means not simply the Scriptures but all teaching and preaching based upon that Word.

5. But Christian doctrine, the *solus Christus*, not merely *points* the way to Christ, but *confers* upon us sonship and faith in our Savior and the only possible true relationship we can have with God, because Christ is the only way to God. Christ is *in me* and I am *in Him* through faith.

It is at just this point concerning the hermeneutical function of the *solus Christus* that Luther's radical statements about Christ being the "Lord over Scripture" should be interpreted and understood.⁶⁶ Luther at times "opposes" Christ to Scripture and to all doctrine in the church. What does this mean? In so doing he is not saying Scripture is unclear or self-contradictory. What is he saying? Let me cite his most celebrated passage in this regard. In his comments on

⁶⁵W²13, 1556.

⁶⁶W²19, 1441.

Galatians 3:14 Luther is criticizing his opponents who produce Scripture passages regarding works to oppose Christ's final work of atonement and redemption. He states.

Therefore one should simply reply to them as follows: Here is Christ, and over there are the statements of Scripture about works. But Christ is Lord over Scripture and over all works. He is the Lord of heaven, earth, the sabbath, the temple, righteousness, life, sin, death, and *absolutely everything*. Paul, His apostle, proclaims that He became sin and a curse for me. Therefore I hear that I could not be liberated from my sin, death, and curse through any other means than through His death and His blood. Therefore I conclude with all certainty and assurance that not my works but Christ had to conquer my sin, death, and curse. Even on natural grounds reason is obliged to agree and to say that Christ is not my work, that His blood and His death are not a cowl or a tonsure or a fast or a vow, and that in granting me His victory He is not a Carthusian. Therefore if He Himself is the price of my redemption, if He Himself became sin and a curse in order to justify and bless me, I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to

produce 600 in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and if you were to scream the Scripture contradicts itself. I have the *Author and the Lord of Scripture*, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you. Nevertheless it is impossible for Scripture to contradict itself except at the hands of senseless and stubborn hypocrites; at the hands of those who are godly and understanding it gives testimony to its Lord. Therefore see to it how you can reconcile Scripture, which, as you say, contradicts itself. I for my part shall stay with the Author of Scripture.⁶⁷

The meaning of Luther's outburst at this point is perfectly clear. He is not contradicting the unity of Scripture or the unity of Christian doctrine but expressing his absolute commitment to the *solus Christus* principle. Scripture must be interpreted according to Christ and His vicarious atonement. Nothing in Scripture can oppose that great fact. Nothing in our doctrine can be taught which opposes that great fact. Nothing in our worship or lives can oppose it.

⁶⁷LW 26, 295.

Law and Gospel

Scripture does not contradict itself (*scripturam pugnare*), but it seems so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites. This seeming contradiction which one finds throughout Scripture leads us to Luther's understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel.⁶⁸ In fact, the Law and Gospel do not contradict each other, and Christian doctrine does not contradict itself at this point. But it *seems* so. Scripture very often presents the paradox (*contraria*) that a Christian man is "righteous and a sinner at the same time," that he is "holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God."⁶⁹ People who do not understand this paradox are confused because they do not "understand the true meaning of justification (*rationem justificandi*)." Thus the natural man and even the Christian is inclined to take Law statements in Scripture as Gospel and thus become confused and despair. To Luther the paradox *simul justus et peccator* is not an ontological description of man as righteous and a sinner, nor a statement about the old and new man, but a simple affirmation of two biblical assertions concerning man: the assertion of the Law that man is a sinner and under God's wrath and the assertion of the Gospel that man is righteous and God is at peace. Both assertions are true in fact, ontologically. However, the second verdict, or assertion, takes total preeminence over

⁶⁸LW 26, 208.

⁶⁹LW 26, 232; 26, 208; *duo extreme contraria concurrant*.

the first by virtue of the *solus Christus* principle. Christ is Lord! He is Lord of the Scriptures, of all doctrine, theology, and "everything."⁷⁰

Luther stresses the "paradox" (*contraria*) by stating that the verdict of Law and Gospel are absolutely contradictory (*contradictoria*). He says, "These two things are diametrically opposed (*ipsa ex diametro pugnant*): that a Christian is righteous and beloved by God, and yet he is a sinner at the same time. For God cannot deny His own nature. That is, He cannot avoid hating sin and sinners; and He does so by *necessity*, for otherwise He would be unjust and would love sin. Then how can these two *contradictory things* both be true at the same time, that I am a sinner and deserve divine wrath and hatred and that the Father loves me? Here nothing can intervene except Christ the Mediator." This last simple sentence explains the paradox. It explains the whole Christian religion. It explains the Scriptures. It is the secret to all exegesis of Scripture and all theologizing. It is the only comfort that a poor sinner has in life and in death. It is "Christ alone." So we have in the *solus Christus* principle not only a hermeneutical rule, not only the basis for all comfort, not only the basis for our union with God and for

⁷⁰Ibid. This position seems contrary to what Luther says so often about the authority of Scripture. See *LW* 27, 156 where Luther speaks of Christians in necessity fleeing for refuge to "the most solid Rock of divine Scripture and not to believe rashly any, whoever they may be, who speak, decide, or act contrary to its authority." In the one case he is speaking about the authority of Scripture, in the other the Lordship of Christ.

reconciliation and salvation, but the principle of all human knowledge and understanding.

The Unity of all Christian Doctrine

It is obvious from the *solus Christus* principle that all Christian doctrine is a unity. It is, as Luther says, like a large circle with Christ at the center. Again and again Luther in his sermons and elsewhere affirms the unity of Christian doctrine and the importance of this fact.⁷¹ He urges that we should abide by the Scriptures in purity and “unanimity.” The greatest and most harmful offense to the church is to stir up discord and division in doctrine. This causes harm and ruin in the church.

Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect. What does it profit the Jews to believe that there is one God and that He is the Creator of all, to believe all the other articles [*alios articulos*] and to accept the whole Scripture, when they deny Christ?⁷²

Luther urges Christians to be of one accord in doctrine, not to despise one another. When pure doctrine is divided, Christendom is divided. Disunity of doctrine causes separation in the church and Satan builds his chapel or tabernacle

⁷¹W²12, 896.

⁷²LW 27, 38.

next door.⁷³

The unity of doctrine is not just a *desideratum*, as Karl Barth and our modern relativistic theologians would aver. "It is rather a fact. The doctrine which belongs to God, not to us, is like a mathematical point (*mathematicus punctus*). Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition."⁷⁴

Finally Luther argues,

One word of God is all the words of God; one article is all the articles and all are one, and when one article is lost, then by the loss of that one all are lost eventually. For all the articles belong together in one common chain.⁷⁵

If all doctrine is one, if all the articles of doctrine are one and one is all, if doctrine is like a perfect golden ring, then Christ as the center is the whole essence of Christian doctrine just as He is the center and heart of the Scriptures. The *solus Christus* is not an abstraction but a reality embracing everything that Christ has done to save

⁷³W27, 582-583.

⁷⁴LW 27, 38; 27, 41. "With utmost rigor we demand that all the articles of Christian doctrine, both large and small, be kept pure and certain. This is supremely necessary. For this doctrine is our only light, which illumines and directs us and shows us the way to heaven; if it is overthrown in this one point, it must be overthrown completely." And so Luther says we shall be happy to observe love and concord toward those who faithfully agree with us on **all the articles of Christian doctrine.**

⁷⁵Ibid., cf. WA 40, II, 46.

fallen mankind. The *solus Christus* embraces the entire work of God from creation to Christ's return. It is the total *opus ad extra* of the Trinity. The *solus Christus* embraces not merely the work of Christ and the Father who sends Him, but also the work of the Spirit who sanctifies us. In fact, it is Christ who is our sanctification as well as our righteousness. The unity of doctrine is both Christological and doctrinal, for the doctrine is Christ's and Christ is the center of all the doctrine, *perfecta doctrina*.⁷⁶ To Luther then the *solus Christus* dominates every article of faith, whether it is creation, redemption, the Sacrament of the Altar, Baptism, worship, or whatever. It also dominates the Third Article. Christ is not only our righteousness, He is our holiness.⁷⁷ Luther says, "The church is indeed holy, but it is a sinner at the same time." Notice this *simul justus et peccator*, now being the *simul sanctus et peccator*. Luther goes on,

Therefore it believes in the forgiveness of sins and prays 'forgive us our debts' (Matt. 6:12) and 'for this every saint will I pray to Thee' (Ps. 32:6). Therefore we are not said to be holy formally as a wall is said

⁷⁶LW 27, 59; 27, 16 "concord"; 27, 62 "concordia"; 27, 91. See LW 26, 104: Christians are "companions in doctrine and have fellowship in it; that is, we have the same doctrine, for we preach one Gospel, one Baptism, one Christ, and one faith. Therefore we cannot teach or command anything so far as you are concerned for we are completely agreed in doctrine."

⁷⁷LW 26: 115, 177, 280, 285.

to be white because of its inherent whiteness. Our inherent holiness is not enough. But Christ is [the church's] perfect and total holiness [*perfecta et tota sanctitas ipsius*]. When our inherent holiness is not enough, Christ is enough [*satis est Christus*].

Luther commonly uses the term holiness and the term righteousness interchangeably, just as he uses doctrine, Gospel, and Word interchangeably. Like the Apostle Paul, he doesn't speak as "precisely" as some of our fundamentalist or scholarly theologians do today with their endless word studies, which often prove nothing. In a provocative article entitled "Sanctification in the Lutheran Confessions,"⁷⁸ Dr. David Scaer makes the profound statement, "Any attempt to make Christology preliminary to theology or even only its most important part, but not its only part is a denial of Luther's doctrine and effectively destroys the Gospel as a message of completed atonement." Scaer's statement summarizes Luther's *solus Christus* principle. To Luther the *solus Christus* includes not merely justification but also sanctification. With him Christ, "because of His sheer mercy and love, gave and offered Himself to God as a sacrifice for us miserable sinners, to sanctify us forever (*ut nos sanctificaret in aeternum*)." ⁷⁹ Those who might

⁷⁸*Concordia Theological Quarterly*, July 1989, Volume 53, p. 197.

⁷⁹LW 26, 177.

criticize Scaer as a “christo-monist” or “Gospel reductionist” or with some other pejorative label do indeed misunderstand Luther’s entire theology of the Gospel. Luther, as seen above, sees doctrine as an organic whole, not a linear progression of ideas. It is at just this point that Lutherans in name deviate from each other according to Scaer: Lutherans following the linear, Methodist, pietistic, and fundamentalistic model, separate the articles of faith, trying vainly to classify them according to some order of importance or logic; the true and confessional Lutherans, following their mentor, see all the articles as one article. Christ is the center and focal point of every article of faith, and this in the paradoxical context of Law and Gospel, *simul justus et peccator*. I predict that the next serious controversy and split in American Lutheranism will center around this radically different interpretation of the *praecipuus locus* in Christian theology. The controversy is already raging.

What is to be done about this? First of all we must understand and see clearly where the controversy lies, that it does affect in fact the heart of the very Gospel, the *solus Christus*. Luther has stern and wise words to say on this matter:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the Word and devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing

Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefields besides, is more flight and disgrace if it flinches at that point.⁸⁰

These words of Luther show us the way we must battle for the truth of the Gospel and all its articles. But this exactly is what we are often not doing and what the prophets of old often did not do; and Luther in his *Lectures on Isaiah* alludes to this tragic development which so often obtains in the church.⁸¹ The prophets of old and even the apostles and the ministers and teachers of the church of all times have failed to see, for one reason or other, often venality or cowardice or greed, the issue at hand which impinges upon the church and its correct teaching of the Gospel. In the Old Testament Isaiah calls the prophets and ministers "watchmen." He likens the watchmen to a dog. "The dog is a picture of the preacher in whom there is watchfulness and faithfulness. He is on guard by day and night, watching and barking. A dog is a faithful animal." But what happens if the dog is dumb and cannot bark? What happens if the prophet and preacher teach and preach but have no reference to the "matter at hand"? They wind up not lifting up consciences and terrifying the wicked, but dealing harshly when men should be comforted. "They are

⁸⁰Quoted from Francis A. Schaeffer, D.D., "Truth Versus the New Humanism and the New Theology" in Erich Kiehl and Waldo Werning, *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*, 1970, p. 21.

⁸¹See *LW* 17, 265ff.

learned and verbose in leading the people astray.”

They do not lay bare their sins so as to draw them to repentance and to a thirst for grace. No, they even defend their sins and mistakes and blaspheme the truth. Therefore they are blind and neither know anything nor can they teach others. If Isaiah got away without losing his head, he was lucky indeed.

How many of these dumb dogs, who cannot bark, who dream and lie down and love to slumber there are in our day in the Lutheran Church just as in the church in Luther's day or in the day of Isaiah! Luther calls them "pillow dogs," animals concerned only about their belly. They are preachers who preach much but accomplish nothing because they do not preach to the issues and dangers at hand. They are not watchmen. They are lazy and dumb and protect no one with their teaching.

This is precisely the description of our bishops, they are lazy dogs who loll all day and night on the pillow and gorge themselves and they have not experienced the contrition of Amos.⁸²

Also there are men like Cochlaeus and Erasmus, who are dumb too, since they speak what is agreeable and look out for their own welfare. The text says they are fat, supine, sleepy, fat watchdogs and "so it is with our bishops." They

⁸²Compare Amos 6:6.

pile up nothing but wealth and prestige for themselves and they look out for nothing but their own interests and the strength of their own body and welfare and meanwhile they neglect the church.

I quoted Luther at length to show us what are the great dangers as we contend for the Gospel and *all* its articles. To touch the Gospel at any point is to touch it at its heart. To recognize what is going on in our day in the church and in the world is the great responsibility of a watchman, a pastor. And to face up to the issues of the day with courage and stubbornness and tenacity is the calling of every evangelical preacher and his confession to his church and to the world.

A good look at Luther's *solus Christus* theology might do much to stave off a potential controversy which could engulf all of American Lutheranism. Atomistic, wooden, Arminian fundamentalism is no friend of Lutheran doctrine, nor of the *sola Scriptura* or the *sola fide* or the *sola gratia* or what embraces these three principles and all Christian doctrine, practice, and worship as well, the *solus Christus*.

Doctrine and Practice, Doctrine and Life

So far as I have been able to learn, Luther does not distinguish between doctrine and practice in the sense in which the term practice is used in our day. In speaking about the unity of the church in his *Smalcald Articles* Luther urges Christians to be "diligently joined together in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer,

works of love, etc.” (SA II, IV, 9). Obviously he is thinking about different things here but he is making no distinction between doctrine and practice. The words in the Lutheran Confessions and in Luther which are often translated by “practice” (*üben, Treiben, leben, tun*) sometimes refer to doctrine as it is taught and carried out, sometimes simply to good works and the Christian life in the very general sense. Everything the Christian does is connected to doctrine, but not everything that is done in the church or in the world is practice in the sense in which we use the word today. I suppose that Luther did not think of making any strict distinction as we have done in our day. There was certainly a doctrine of Baptism taught by Christ and the Scriptures. The minute a child is baptized, there is the practice of Baptism. The same could be said for the Lord’s Supper. There is a doctrine of prayer taught by Jesus in many pericopes, but the practice of prayer takes place when we actually pray. However, prayer is a good work and, therefore, must be distinguished from doctrine (as we shall see). I rather think that, if we wish to be faithful to Luther’s theology, we should distinguish practice from life by identifying practice as the carrying out of the means of grace, i.e. preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, applying the binding and loosing key; whereas good works are simply anything that a Christian does as a child of God and in obedience to God’s will and according to his own individual calling. Let us then work with this understanding of doctrine, practice, and good works.

According to this definition of terms, doctrine and practice cannot really be separated. Doctrine must result in practice. This, as we shall see, is really the function of Confession and preaching. Good works, on the other hand, result from faith or may be called, more strictly speaking, the fruits of the Spirit. Thus one can speak of *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*, terminology which is common to Western Christendom; but one rarely talks about orthodox life in terms of obedience to the Ten Commandments, etc. Perhaps the best description of practice found in our Lutheran Confessions is from Luther's article on "The Gospel":⁸³

We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in His grace; first, through the spoken Word, by which the forgiveness of sins (the peculiar office [*Amt*] of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren. Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered," etc.

So doctrine and practice are totally intertwined according to the theology of Luther. Practice is the doing and application of the Gospel, or the doctrine. The moment that doctrine is taught or articulated in any way, practice is taking place. Obvious from Luther's

⁸³SA III, IV.

statement cited above is that practice, if it is in fact the "publishing and proclaiming of the Word and work of Christ" excludes all works and human endeavors. The Christian life in the theology of Luther, as we shall see, is nothing else than good works done by the believer.

Now let us explore how Luther regards the relationship between doctrine (including practice) and life. He leaves us in no doubt as to what doctrine is and what life is and how they relate to each other.

Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. In life there is sin, error, uncleanness, and misery, mixed, as the saying goes, "with vinegar." Here love should condone, tolerate, be deceived, trust, hope, and endure all things (I Cor. 13:7); here the forgiveness of sins should have complete sway, provided that sin and error are not defended. But just as there is no error in doctrine, so there is no need for any forgiveness of sins. Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. "One dot" of doctrine is worth more than "heaven and earth" (Matt. 15:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by

the grace of God our doctrine is pure, we have all the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture. . . .⁸⁴

Luther explains the relationship between doctrine and life, which basically is expressed by love, and how the former must be pure, and established solidly in the Sacred Scriptures.

Elsewhere Luther insists that the purity of doctrine (*Reinigkeit der Lehre*) must be held, if “true religious worship (*Gottesdienste*) must be taught.” Worship is the practice of doctrine. Luther maintains that idolatrous forms of worship, which embrace false doctrine, are examples of the most pernicious sinful life.⁸⁵ Luther makes it very clear that true doctrine is a greater concern to the church than life, and false doctrine does more harm to the church than evil life, for false teaching, the “most pernicious thing on earth,” leads souls to hell. “Whether you are good or bad does not concern me. But I will attack your poisonous lying teaching which goes against the Word of God. And with God’s help I will oppose it with vigor.”⁸⁶ To Luther the vast difference between doctrine and life is this: doctrine is based upon God’s Word alone and is God’s truth alone, whereas life is partly our own doing. Thus, doctrine must remain entirely pure. God will have patience with men’s sins and imperfections and forgive them. But He, “cannot,

⁸⁴LW 27, 51ff.

⁸⁵W²6, 1078.

⁸⁶W²18, 1265.

will not, and shall not tolerate a man's altering and abolishing doctrine itself." For doctrine involves the exalted divine majesty of God. In the sphere of doctrine, therefore, forgiveness and patience are simply not to be allowed.⁸⁷ To Luther, if the doctrine is not right (*wo die Lehre nicht recht ist*), then it is impossible for the life to be right and good (*recht und gut*), for life must be prepared (*anrichten*) by doctrine.⁸⁸ The following proportion illustrates Luther's position, I believe.

Doctrine/practice is to life as

faith is to works, or fruits of faith.

Or, we might say: as doctrine produces life, so faith produces good works.

Or, we might say, as a corollary: doctrine (Gospel, practice) brings about faith, love, and good works.

Luther says, if the doctrine (*die Lehre*) is impure and false, then faith cannot be pure either. If the faith is not right, then there can be no good works or fruits of faith.

He says,

Everything has to do with doctrine. When the doctrine is right, then all things are right: faith, works, life, suffering, good and bad days, eating, drinking, hunger, thirst, sleep, being awake, walking, standing, etc. Where the doctrine is not right, everything is in vain, everything is

⁸⁷W²16, 1675-1676.

⁸⁸W²7, 492.

lost and entirely condemned, works, life, suffering, fasting, prayers, alms, cowls, tonsures, whatever more papistic holiness there is in the church.⁸⁹

To Luther

doctrine and life should be distinguished as sharply as possible. Doctrine belongs to God, not to us; and we are called only as its ministers. Therefore we cannot give up or change even one dot of it (Matt. 5:18). Life belongs to us.⁹⁰

Doctrine to Luther is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided. It cannot tolerate either subtraction or addition. Life is like a physical point; it can be divided and always yield something. And so we will live at peace with all men if they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound. If the adversaries will not do this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. "A curse on any love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield."⁹¹

Luther says,

Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but Word and faith cannot. It belongs to love to bear everything and to yield to everyone.... It belongs to faith to

⁸⁹W217, 1415.

⁹⁰LW 27, 37.

⁹¹LW 27, 38.

bear nothing at all and to yield to no one. Love yields freely, love gives in freely, believes, condones and tolerates everything. Therefore it is often deceived. Yet when it is deceived, it does not suffer any hardship that can really be called hardship; that is, it does not lose Christ, and therefore it is not offended but keeps its constancy in doing good even toward those who are unthankful and unworthy.⁹²

If faith (doctrine) is lost, all is lost.

Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith.⁹³

We see in this citation of Luther's how his *solus Christus* principle and his conviction concerning the unity of all doctrine pervades his thinking and his distinction between faith (doctrine) and love (life). Luther is a far more systematic and synthetic thinker than most people imagine. The entire *Smalcald Articles*, which were written to be a confession for a church council, are structured

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³LW 27, 39: *Quare si Deum in uno articulo negas, in omnibus negasti, quia Deus non dividitur in multos articulos, sed, est omnia in singulis, et unus in omnibus articulis.*

around the *solus Christus* and all his *Lectures on Galatians* and other writings tend to illustrate this total orientation of Luther's.

Doctrine and the Church

In his *Exhortation to all Clergy* Luther tells us of the themes (*loci*) which must be dealt with in the Christian church by bishops and teachers. The following is the list:

- What the Law is
- What Gospel is
- What sin is
- What grace is
- What the gift of the Spirit is
- What true repentance is
- How true confession is made
- What faith is
- What forgiveness of sins is
- What Christian liberty is
- What free will is
- What love is
- What the cross is
- What hope is
- What Baptism is
- What Mass is
- What the church is
- What the Keys are
- What a bishop is
- What a deacon is
- What the preaching office is
- The true Catechism, namely, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed
- True prayer
- The Litany

The reading and interpretation of the Scriptures

What true works are

Instruction of married people, children, manservants, and maids

Respecting authority

Children's schools

Visitation of the sick

Providing for the poor and hospitals

Ministering to the dying⁹⁴

These are obviously topics which the pastor should teach his people. In essence Luther is simply saying that the church lives on the doctrine of the Gospel and all its articles.⁹⁵ It is Luther's firm conviction that Christians must be shepherded by pastors who can protect them from false doctrine and radical interpretations of Scripture.⁹⁶ Even church councils can err, and even the greatest pastors have erred, therefore the church must stand and rely totally on the teachings of God Himself in Holy Writ.⁹⁷ Every

⁹⁴LW 34, 52-53; cf. LW 34, 33, 39. Luther in his various doctrinal writings has many lists such as the above mentioned and they never correspond to each other. For instance, Luther touches certain articles in the *Small Catechism*. He discusses other articles in the *Smalcald Articles*. See also W²19, 288 where Luther says that the chief parts, or pieces, of doctrine "which also are necessary for salvation" are the following: on faith, on love, on hope, on works, on suffering, on heaven, on hell, on repentance, on the Lord's Supper, on sin, on Law, on death, on Christ, on God, on free will, on grace, on Baptism.

⁹⁵LW 26, 430.

⁹⁶W²9, 820.

⁹⁷W²11, 439.

Christian in the church has the right to judge doctrine (and to judge the pastors).⁹⁸ This is not merely a right but a duty, which Christ Himself has established (Matt. 7:15). The sheep cannot avoid wolves unless they know the voice of the Good Shepherd. The prophets in the Old Testament did not tell the children of Israel to believe the false prophets. Neither should pastors do so today. But pastors must not only teach, but warn their people against false doctrine, and the people are responsible to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and their pastors.⁹⁹ And so the church has the right to call pastors and the duty to judge the teaching of the pastors.¹⁰⁰

In his many works against the papacy Luther extols the priesthood of all believers.¹⁰¹ Perhaps his strongest statement on the matter is his essay entitled *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge all Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture* of 1553.¹⁰² The sure sign of a Christian congregation Luther says is that the pure Gospel is preached there. This means that bishops, religious foundations, and monasteries are not Christian or Christian congregations. Christ “takes both the right and the power to judge teaching from the bishops, scholars, and councils

⁹⁸W210, 1586.

⁹⁹W219, 341-342.

¹⁰⁰LW 40, 379ff.

¹⁰¹See his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. LW 36.

¹⁰²LW 39, 305ff.

and gives them to everyone and to all Christians equally.” The right to judge doctrine, according to Luther, is not given to prophets and teachers, but to pupils and sheep. “For how could one beware of false prophets if one did not consider and judge their teaching?” Thus there cannot be a false prophet among the listeners, only among the teachers. That is why all teachers and their teaching should and must be subject to the judgment of listeners. It is the right and also the duty therefore of all Christians to judge doctrine on the basis of Holy Scripture. Of course, the congregation is obligated to call qualified men to be pastors. And it is a terrible plague if a congregation cannot have a pastor. But if false doctrine is taught, there is no need of any special divine command for any Christian to speak up.¹⁰³ In this entire essay Luther is stressing two truths which are dialectically necessary: first, the divine institution of a minister of the Word and the mandate to the congregation to call one from its midst to be its pastor; second, the total responsibility of the congregation and of the Christians to judge the doctrine of their pastor. Luther is especially concerned that bishops stay out of these matters where they have caused more than enough harm by their tyranny and conniving.

Christian Doctrine and Human Reason

Again and again Luther shows the absurdity of Christian doctrine when measured by human reason, even the reason of the regenerate man.

¹⁰³LW 40, 310 passim.

The greatest philosophers of the world know nothing of the great mercy and truth of God, according to Luther. They know nothing about sin and nothing about the promises and grace of God.¹⁰⁴

Luther's position concerning the relationship between doctrine (theology) and reason (philosophy) has been discussed definitively by Luther scholars.¹⁰⁵ Essentially Luther's view is that doctrine is not only above reason but against the unregenerate reason of man so that natural man simply does not understand spiritual things.¹⁰⁶ This means that the doctrine of the Trinity or the Incarnation and other articles of the faith, which we might call "pure articles," are simply foolishness to natural reason.¹⁰⁷ Luther's entire treatise on *The Bondage of the Will* against Erasmus is a testimony to the fact that the articles of faith are contrary to reason. To Luther the articles of faith are simply "grasped" in such a way that one believes without understanding or against one's own natural insight

¹⁰⁴W21, 1554.

¹⁰⁵See Bengt Hägglund, *Theologie und Philosophie bei Luther und in der Occamistischen Tradition* (Lund: CWK Gleerups förlag, 1955), pp. 15ff.; also Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 28ff.; also Bernhard Lohse, *Ratio und fides; Eine Untersuchung über die Ratio in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 55ff.

¹⁰⁶WA 39, II, 6.

¹⁰⁷Er. Lat. VI, 318-319; WA 1, 352ff. WA 5, 537; 10 I, I, 48; 12, 292; 15, 526; 20 II, 394ff.; 27, 76; 32, 259; 37, 202, 295, 366; 39 I, 175; 39 II, 375; 40 I, II, 221f.; 49, 360; 51, 11;

and knowledge.¹⁰⁸ Luther's entire anthropology dominates his thinking. To him Scripture "represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan, his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well, and alive."¹⁰⁹ In other words, it is not merely the categorical difference between doctrine and reason which makes man incapable of understanding the doctrine of the Gospel and its articles, but man's own inherent spiritual blindness and death. Worse than that, God actually hardens the unregenerate man so that he gets everything jumbled up, just as He did Pharaoh (Ex. 4:21).¹¹⁰

So to Luther the believer in Christ believes in all kinds of things which are totally contrary to nature, reason, and which seem impossible and untrue. We cite the well-known statement of Luther's in his *Commentary on Galatians*:¹¹¹

For faith speaks as follows: I believe
Thee, God, when Thou dost speak.
But what does God say? He says
things that are impossible, untrue,
foolish, weak, absurd, abominable,
heretical, and diabolical—if you
consult reason.

Luther says these words in the very midst of his

¹⁰⁸LW 33, 23.

¹⁰⁹LW 33, 130.

¹¹⁰LW 33, 164ff.

¹¹¹LW 26, 227. See also p. 231.

discussion on the doctrine of justification, the chief article, his expression of the *solus Christus*. Again he says,

Thus when God proposes the articles of faith, He always proposes things which are simply impossible and absurd, if you want to follow the judgment of reason. It does indeed seem ridiculous and absurd to reason that in the Lord's Supper the body and blood of Christ are presented, that Baptism is 'the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5), that Christ the Son of God was conceived and carried in the womb of a virgin, that He was born, that He suffered the most ignominious death on the cross, that He was raised again, that He is now sitting on the right hand of the Father, that He now has 'authority in heaven and on earth' (Matt. 28:18).

Luther goes on to assert that the Gospel of Christ Paul therefore calls "the foolishness of preaching" (I Cor. 1:21).

Reason judges this way about all the articles of faith; for it does not understand that the highest worship (*summus cultus*) is to hear the voice of God and believe what He says. When God speaks, reason, therefore, regards His Word as heresy and as the word of the devil; for it seems so absurd.

And so, for Luther, faith must kill and slaughter reason. This slaying reason, which is like Abraham slaying his son, affirms the wisdom, justice, power, truthfulness, mercy, majesty, and divinity of God, and ascribes glory to Him alone.

Therefore no greater, better, or more pleasing religion or worship (*melior aut gratior religio cultusque*) can be found in the world than faith, faith in Christ alone and His Word.¹¹²

But Luther discusses the opposition between doctrine and reason in the same context that he discusses justification by faith, and the *simul justus et peccator* is therefore no accident. Luther's theology is integrated very nicely at this point.

In all of Luther's writings he rails against false doctrine. The only way that false doctrine can be driven out is by true doctrine. And the true doctrine which alone can protect the Christian against heresy and damnable and satanic lies, is the truth about himself and about Christ, the truth that no one can placate God; only Christ can do that and He can do it only by the immense and infinite price He paid, His death and His blood, "one drop of which is more precious than all creation."¹¹³

Therefore I say that there is no force that can resist the sects, and no remedy against them except this one doctrine of Christian righteousness

¹¹²LW 26, 229.

¹¹³LW 26, 176.

Preus 61

(*istum unicum articulum justitiae christianae*). If this doctrine is lost, it is impossible for us to be able to resist any errors or sects. . . .¹¹⁴

Notes:

¹¹⁴Ibid.

Lecture III Confession

The Meaning and Nature of Confession

Whether Luther was writing the *Smalcald Articles* or some other Confession, or preaching one of his thousands of sermons, or teaching confirmands, or writing one his many treatises, or lecturing, or celebrating the Sacrament, or doing the liturgy, or witnessing to some poor sinner, he is engaged in the act of confessing Christ and the doctrine of the Gospel. In fact, the entire public ministry of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments is nothing but a confession of faith according to Luther. When a child is confirmed and promises to remain faithful to what he has learned in the catechism, he is making confession of his faith and throughout his life he is living in the confession and continuing in it. When a pastor is called and ordained into the Christian ministry and he pledges to uphold the Scriptures and the Confessions, he is confessing his faith and the faith of the church publicly and continues to do so as long as he remains a faithful and orthodox pastor. All of Luther's works are, in a sense, nothing but his confession of faith. Speaking mainly as a pastor and public confessor of the faith Luther sums the matter up quite well in his *The Bondage of the Will*¹¹⁵ when he simply says that a Christian, and particularly a pastor, makes

¹¹⁵LW 33, 21 passim.

assertions divinely transmitted to us in the Sacred Writings," and when one takes away assertions, then one takes away Christianity. When one makes assertions, having been given the Holy Spirit from heaven, he glorifies Christ by his assertions and confesses Him even into death.

In the same work, Luther makes it very clear that our confession is possible only by the work of the Holy Spirit in us through the Word,¹¹⁶ and therefore without bold confession nothing but tumults, disturbances beset the church and sects and discord and wars result. For when the Word is lost and confession is not made, "God, Christ, the Spirit would go with it."¹¹⁷

It is clear from Luther's high view of the purity of doctrine and the necessity for confessing it that the essential work of a pastor called to the public ministry of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments, is simply confession, confession of Christ and His doctrine.¹¹⁸ Luther's comments on Galatians 6:6

¹¹⁶Ibid. 35 passim.

¹¹⁷LW 23, 53.

¹¹⁸SA II, II, 24; LW 23, 330. Confession is always the Christian's or the church's response to God who has already spoken to her in His Word (Scripture). See Edmund Schlink, *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, translated by Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961, pp. xv ff. See also Hermann Sasse, "The Church's Confession," translated by Matthew Harrison, *Logia*, Volume 1, No. 1, Reformation 1992, p. 6. "Confession is the response to revelation. To this first characteristic we must add a second. It is always

are significant at just this point. The minister is a teacher according to Luther. He teaches the Word. The Word is the Gospel of Christ. By instructing in the Word the minister shares all good things which God has to give. When Peter was enjoined three times to feed the sheep of Christ, Jesus meant that he should do the greatest work in the church which is preaching, confessing Christ.¹¹⁹ It is clear from all the writings of Luther that he believes that as a Christian and a minister and doctor of the church he is called upon to confess Christ and His doctrine in the sense in which the New Testament uses the word *martyroo* and *homologeo*. There is nothing complicated or sophisticated about his understanding. The Creed confessed by the entire church is no more a confession than the simple witnessing of a child about his Savior.

the response of a fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) of men, the expression of a consensus." Sasse goes on to polemicize against making church Confession merely one's individual confession of "Here I stand." The congregation does not depend upon the individual, but the individual confesses the church's faith in any kind of formal Confession. Modern liberalism and fundamentalism, according to Sasse, have everything backwards in this respect. He points out how the *Nicaenum* of the Eastern Church as been kept with this form [the first person plural] until today, and it is noteworthy that Luther's composition of the *Credo* in song likewise makes the use of the first person plural: "We all believe in one true God . . ." He points out how the *Augsburg Confession* begins with the words: "*Ecclesiae magno consensu opud nos docent*" (AC I, 1). Obviously, there can be no consensus if there is only one person confessing.

¹¹⁹LW 27, 396-397.

What then about Creeds and Symbols? Creeds and Symbols (Confessions) are formal statements of doctrine which the entire church subscribes and are a pattern of doctrine for all ministers in the church. They are, of course, written and permanent. Subscription is forced upon no one but is voluntary. This is the case with the three ecumenical creeds which Luther subscribed as a minister in the Roman Western Church.

When controversies arise in the church, there is a need often for a new Confession, large or small, to settle matters. This was the case with the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530 which Luther supported and of which he claimed to be an author. Therefore everything that Melancthon says in the *Augsburg Confession* or the *Apology* is completely endorsed by Luther.¹²⁰ The *Augsburg Confession* was meant to be ecumenical, that is, an orthodox Confession which would represent the whole church. When Luther wrote commentaries on the creeds, he assumed their authority and ecumenicity, i.e. orthodoxy. This was the same position he took toward the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology*.

In 1536 Luther was requested by many of the Lutherans, both princes and theologians, to write a Confession for a council which, it was hoped, the pope might call at an early date in Germany. This Confession he wrote; and his views on the nature of a Confession, the nature of

¹²⁰See Theodore E. Schmauck, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church*, Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911.

confessional subscription, the purpose of a Confession, and other aspects relating to formal Confessions can be rather easily adumbrated from comments he makes within the *Smalcald Articles*.

First he makes it clear that a Confession, written to serve at a council, the largest Christian gathering possible and representative of Christendom, "is to be accepted unanimously."¹²¹ That means that those who subscribe it do so sincerely and without qualification. The *Smalcald Articles*, like the creeds themselves, were made up of *articles*, that is, specific topics or points or parts of doctrine. Doctrine, as we have said above, was thought of as an organic whole, a unit, without break. And so Luther presents "publicly as the Confession of our faith" the *Smalcald Articles* as a true creed, or Confession. And he does so in good faith and without deception or treachery.¹²² He explains that the three articles of the ecumenical creeds are presented briefly because both parties confess them, i.e. the Romanists and the Lutherans. Part two of the *Smalcald Articles* specifically states the heart of the Lutheran Confession, namely, "the articles which pertain to the office and work of Jesus Christ, or to our redemption." Then Luther explains the *solus Christus* principle and how it

¹²¹See AC I, 1: *cum mango consensu*. See Sasse, *ibid.*, p. 8: "This setting of the limit of truth and error belongs to the essence of confession. If the *improbant* and the *damnant* (by which is designated the impossibility of church fellowship), which sounds so harsh to modern ears, are silenced, the *Augustana* ceases to be a Confession."

¹²²SA, Preface, 2.

operates as a hermeneutical rule in judging doctrine and practice in the church.¹²³ Every article in a Confession such as the *Smalcald Articles* is a matter of confession.¹²⁴ Finally at the very end of the *Smalcald Articles*,¹²⁵ as Luther speaks on “Human Traditions” and condemns the papists’ view that such traditions effect forgiveness of sins or merit salvation as unchristian, he makes the following statement,

These are the articles on which I must stand and on which I will stand, God willing, until my death. I do not know how I can change or concede anything in them. If anybody wishes to make some concessions, let him do so at the peril of his own conscience.

These words clearly indicate the seriousness of Confession for Luther. The entire *Smalcald Articles* are built around the doctrine of redemption, the *solus Christus*. Every abuse that Luther had attacked was condemned because it conflicted with that *Hauptartikel*. This is where Luther takes his stand. We observe the same eschatological and pious truculence in Luther’s great *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*.¹²⁶ Let me quote him at length and then make a few pertinent comments.

I see that schisms and errors are increasing proportionately with the

¹²³SA, II, II, 1ff.

¹²⁴SA III, I, 1.

¹²⁵SA XV.

¹²⁶LW 37, 360-361.

passage of time, and that there is no end to the rage and fury of Satan. Hence lest any persons during my lifetime or after my death appeal to me or misuse my writings to confirm their error, as the Sacramentarians and Anabaptists fanatics are already beginning to do, I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world point by point. I am determined to abide it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence if anyone shall say after my death, "If Luther were living now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not consider it sufficiently," etc., let me say once and for all that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the Sacrament of the Altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the last judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in

dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert the Word of God and the Scriptures, what will he not be able to do with my or someone else's words?¹²⁷

Luther expresses several important motifs in this defiant confession of faith. First, he realizes the reality of Satan and that the fight for the doctrine of the Gospel is waged against satanic principalities and powers. Second, he is oriented eschatologically as is the Apostle Paul throughout Galatians and many of his other epistles.¹²⁸ It is interesting that this *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* is structured very closely to the *Large Catechism*, sticking with the basic outline of the Apostles' Creed; but much more polemical than the *Large Catechism*. It also bears great similarity to the *Smalcald Articles* in that it centers on the *solus Christus* motif, and polemicizes against everything that would contradict or undermine it.

Confessional Certainty

Finally, Luther exhibits what we would today call doctrinal certainty, a quality which seems, like the rest of what we have just described, quite anachronistic in our day. Thus Luther becomes one who can be admired, in the spirit of Thomas Carlisle, but cannot very easily

¹²⁷This statement is quoted verbatim in *FC*, SD, VII, 29-31. See also *FC*, SD, XII, 40.

¹²⁸Cf. II Timothy 4:1, passim.

be followed today as an example. Although being a confessional Lutheran in Luther's day could mean banishment or death, and in our day it means in most cases something far less, social estrangement, embarrassment, or financial loss, we can easily perceive how difficult it is for one who holds to Luther's doctrine and wishes to confess it to emulate him, especially his confident spirit. Certainty is the word. Just as the doctrine itself is certain, as we have seen, one who confesses the doctrine must be certain.¹²⁹ Such certainty is exhibited by Luther not only in his confessional writings but throughout his sermons and all his writings.

I do not listen to anything at all that is contrary to my doctrine; for I am certain and persuaded through the Spirit of Christ that my doctrine of Christian righteousness is the true and certain one.¹³⁰

Commenting against the Enthusiasts, who pervert the Word of God with their false doctrine of the Work of the Spirit, Luther affirms that the Holy Spirit through the Word is sent into the heart of believers so they can know that they are the children of God and can believe the Gospel of Christ, but also differentiate the enemies and perverters of the Word. Thus the Papists and Enthusiasts are unable to judge with *certainty* about anything. "The latter distort and pervert the Word, the former persecute and blaspheme

¹²⁹LW 37; 21, 35.

¹³⁰LW 26, 198; cf. 26, 285.

it.”¹³¹ But, Luther affirms,

We know as a *certainty* that it is a divine gift when we not only believe in Jesus Christ but proclaim and confess Him openly before the world [*praedicamus et confitemur coram mundo*]. As we believe in our heart, so we speak with out lips. According to the statement of the Psalm (116:10): ‘I believed, and so I spoke; but I am greatly afflicted.’

Luther states that we Christians fall into sin but not deliberately, and we sin through ignorance and we regret it. And we can fall from grace; we trust the Holy Spirit to support us. Meanwhile if one loves the Word and enjoys hearing, speaking, thinking, lecturing, and writing about Christ, he should know that this is not a work of human will or reason but a gift of the Holy Spirit. The author of all our confession and all the misery and suffering and glory which might ensue from it is the Spirit of God. Christian ministers merely “proclaim” Christ as the instrument of the Holy Spirit. And with the help of theology, we become certain that our ministerial office is pleasing to God.¹³² So certainty that we are in a state of grace and are saved is coupled with certainty of our doctrine and confession.¹³³ For one who does not confess Christ cannot be saved.¹³⁴

¹³¹LW 26, 375.

¹³²LW 26, 378.

¹³³Ibid.

¹³⁴LW 33, 35 passim. Compare also LW 33, 53ff. See also LW 33, 288.

Confession and False Doctrine

To confess Christ and His Word involves warning, denouncing, and condemning all false doctrine. This is an essential element of confession. The point is made in almost all of Luther's writings and particularly in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* and the *Smalcald Articles*. Luther, made a very strong issue with Melanchthon, insisting upon antitheses in the *Augsburg Confession*. Thereby he shows his concern that there be not only *Lehre* in the church but also *Wehre*. The condemnation of false doctrine and the presence of clear and unequivocal antitheses in confessional writings is not a matter of indifference to Luther nor is it simply a matter of condemning and blasting heretical opinions and false teachers. The purpose of condemnatory statements and antitheses is to enhance the pure doctrine by revealing the false doctrine. The antitheses in confessions serve to clarify and to enhance the theses.¹³⁵

Confession and the Cross

To preach the Gospel publicly and to confess the Christ and the faith inevitably brings crosses, affliction, persecution upon the Christian and the church, especially the public ministers of the Word. This happens without fail. It must happen. Why is this so?

¹³⁵For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Hans-Werner Gensichen, *We Condemn*, translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), pp. 109-122, 153-213. See Footnote 120.

Luther responds,

The Gospel was not given that we might seek our own praise and glory through it or that the common people might acclaim us, its ministers, on account of it. But it was given that through it the blessing and glory of Christ might be illumined, that the Father might be glorified, which He has shown us in Christ, His Son, whom He gave up for us and with whom He has given us all things.¹³⁶

No one who preaches the Gospel seeks his own glory; that is the last thing he looks for. He who preaches salvation by grace and not by works, who preaches the unconditional love of God in Christ—how can such a one claim any glory for doing such a good work? Anyone who seeks his own glory as he preaches the Gospel and confesses Christ is thereby a liar.

And so Paul issues the warning to every minister of the Word that he must suffer opposition as he preaches the Gospel. God has “attached suffering to the teaching of the Gospel,” and this is for our own benefit. For otherwise God would never be able to repress and crush in us “this beast called *Kenodoxia*.” Luther spends a great deal of time explaining the sin of *Kenodoxia*, that is, the yen for the admiration and praise of men and for the life of ease in the ministry of the Gospel. This propensity and attitude in a witness “for the truth” is a certain

¹³⁶LW 27, 100ff.

sign that he is a false witness. For “the fact that you teach faithful doctrine and live a holy life is not your gift; it is God’s. Therefore you do not receive the praise; God receives it in you. Nor will you be elated by praise—nor will you be moved by insult, slander, or persecution or pressure to “desert your calling.”¹³⁷

Therefore it is the very grace of God that He covers those of us who confess His Word with “slander, bitter hatred, persecution, and blasphemy from the whole world, as well as with contempt and ingratitude from our own followers.” In fact, the devastation we receive from followers and false brethren is worse than that which we openly suffer from outright enemies of the Gospel.

There are, of course, some among our followers who honor us on account of the ministry of the Word; but where there is one who honors us, there are a hundred who hate, despise, and persecute us. Therefore the slanders and persecutions of our opponents, as well as the great contempt, ingratitude, and secret bitter hatred of those in whose midst we live—are joyful sights and delight to us so much that we easily forget vain glory.

Thus we are graciously preserved from *Kenodoxia*. Luther adds sarcastically that the *Kenodoxoi* who receive the applause of the crown

¹³⁷Ibid. 102.

are ever so proud and courageous, brave and daring.¹³⁸

From Luther's writings an extensive phenomenology could be written of false teachers and false doctrine. They pretend to be martyrs.¹³⁹ They profess to have only the unity, peace, and harmony in the church at heart.¹⁴⁰ They spend their time engaging in senseless and meddlesome controversies only to enhance their own reputation and wealth.¹⁴¹ They start controversies in the name of orthodoxy and piety.¹⁴² Knowing that they have no Scriptures, they complain about their "ministry."¹⁴³ The most insidious and destructive, however, among all the devil's and false teachers' arsenal is, according to Luther, ironically the Word itself. In his treatises against the fanatics, *This Is My Body*, Luther points out that the devil finally permitted the Scriptures to become the sole authority, thus worming his way in and getting things under his control and then creating a real brawl over Scripture and producing many sects, heresies, and factions among Christians. For everyone claimed to have Scripture on his side. And so the devil wrests from the Christians their weapons, armor, and fortress, i.e. Scripture. Scripture became like a broken net in the church. And like the Papists people either claimed an

¹³⁸Compare *LW* 37, 22.

¹³⁹*LW* 37, 36, 21-22.

¹⁴⁰*LW* 37, 24-25.

¹⁴¹*LW* 35, 388.

¹⁴²*LW* 37, 24.

¹⁴³*LW* 37, 71-72.

authority alongside of or above the Scriptures, or like the fanatics concocted the most idiotic theories as to what the Scriptures were teaching. And thus the “unity” of doctrine is lost in the church. All the articles of Scripture are attacked because the chief article, the *solus Christus*, is ignored. The *verba* of Scripture are meticulously studied and distorted, while the *res* of Scripture, Christ and the Gospel, is abandoned, and this, by both Papists and fanatics.¹⁴⁴

The result is that God lets this blasphemy against His Word and against His Holy Spirit be so hardened,¹⁴⁵ that they cannot be converted. As Christ converted no high priest, Luther can convert no arch fanatic. But he will most certainly make his confession. Meanwhile he condemns them. And if he is called loveless for so doing, he replies,

Cursed be such love and unity in the abyss of hell, for such unity not only divides the Christian church wretchedly, but in true devilish fashion even mocks it and pokes fun at it for its wretchedness.

Qualifying the above statement, he says,

“I do not mean to judge so harshly as to hold that they do this out of malice. But I think they are blinded by Satan, and perhaps they have developed a conscience that bites them, saying ‘Truly we have caused a

¹⁴⁴WA 57, 144; WA 15, 527.

¹⁴⁵LW 37, 20, passim. Isaiah 6:9ff.

great offence and kindled a great fire, now we must paste and putty up the affair with words, and claim indulgence because it is not an important matter.' And even if we lose the argument, let us declare in advance that we have not lost anything important, but have committed only a minor offence, as we say of singers when they make a mistake, 'They only farrowed a piglet.'

And Luther simply concludes, "No, gentlemen, 'None of this peace and love for me!'"¹⁴⁶

Luther insists that "in spiritual matters" as long as we have breath we must condemn, shun, and censure false teachers and corrupters of God's Word who are nothing but blasphemers and liars, knowing that they disguise themselves under false humility, peace, and forgiveness, and claim that they are not speaking to any particular article of faith at all. He who confesses Christ might think that he finds favor, especially among the brethren, for preaching the Gospel of peace, life, and eternal salvation. But often he incurs the most bitter hatred.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶LW 33, 25. "If I were to strangle someone's father and mother, wife and child, and try to choke him too, and then say 'Keep the peace, dear friend, we wish to love one another, the matter is not so important that we should be divided over it,' what would he say to me? This is what the fanatics do to Christ, the Lord, and God, the Father, and to mother church and the brethren with their rejection of God's Word while at the same time claiming it for themselves."

¹⁴⁷LW 26, 388; 26, 305, 425, 427.

Righteous Zeal, Courage, Anger, the Mark of One Who Loves Christ and Confesses Him

Stubbornness is called for, pious Christian stubbornness for everyone, church, pastor, and people, who confesses Christ and His doctrine. We must be proud, Luther says, "proud in God." We must refuse to yield the least little bit in doctrinal matters. Not even to angels from heaven or Peter or Paul or a hundred emperors or a thousand popes or the whole world.¹⁴⁸

On no account should we humble ourselves here; for they want to deprive us of our glory, namely, the God who has created us and given us everything, and the Christ who has redeemed us with His blood. In short, we can stand the loss of our possessions, our name, our life, and everything else; but we will not let ourselves be deprived of the Gospel, our faith, and Jesus Christ. And that is that! Accursed be any humility that yields or submits at this point! Rather let everyone be proud and unremitting here, unless he wants to deny Christ. With the help of God therefore I will be more hard-headed than anyone else. I want to be stubborn and to be known as someone who is stubborn. Here I bear the inscription "I yield to no one." I am

¹⁴⁸LW 26, 99; cf. LW 26, 305.

overjoyed if I am called rebellious and unyielding. Here I admit openly that I am and will be unmovable and I will not yield a hairbreadth to anyone. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (I Cor. 13:7); therefore it yields. But not faith; it will not stand for anything. As the common saying has it, "A man's reputation, faith, and eye cannot stand being played with." So far as his faith is concerned, therefore, a Christian is as proud and firm as he can be; and he will not relax or yield the least bit. For at this point faith makes a man God (II Peter 1:4). But God does not stand for anything or yield to anyone, for He is unchanging. Thus faith is unchanging. Therefore we should not stand for anything or yield to anything. But so far as love is concerned, a Christian should yield and stand for everything; for here he is only a human being.

So anger is a virtue, zeal is a virtue, persistence is a virtue, stubbornness is a virtue, and intransigence, when the Gospel is at stake. Yes, even pride and obstinence are virtues,¹⁴⁹ for we are only listening to God and His voice. This is how one stands in the "strength of sound

¹⁴⁹W²⁷, 890-891; cf. *LW* 26, 99, 103, 107, 119, 187.

doctrine.”¹⁵⁰ This is how we remain faithful to the Word and the doctrine. This is how we confess our faith, boldly and without compromise.¹⁵¹

So we arrive at the end of this paper. Seldom, I suspect, has a paper on Luther's theology consisted of so much Luther and so little personal or subjective comment. I have allowed Luther to speak for himself on all points. In discussing Luther's view of Word, Doctrine, and Confession I have but scratched the surface of what he has to say on such fundamental issues. But it is my hope that these short lectures may contribute something to the cause of confessional Lutheranism and make us all more aware of our evangelical Lutheran heritage.

*Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word;
Curb those who feign by craft and sword
Would wrest the Kingdom from Thy Son
And set at naught all He hath done.
Soli Deo Gloria!*

¹⁵⁰LW 26, 47.

¹⁵¹W²12, 973; cf. 26, 429; 453. "Therefore they are attacking, not our lives but our teaching. And this is not ours; it is Christ's. Therefore it is Christ's fault that they attack us; and the sin for which our opponents persecute us was committed, not by us but by Christ. But let them see to it whether they will evict Christ from heaven for this sin, if God please, of being our only Justifier and Savior, and whether they will condemn Him as a heretic and revolutionary! We shall commend this cause of His to Him and He shall watch and see, happy and secure, who will win, Christ or they."

Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession

Dr. Robert D. Preus, Lecturer
Prof. Richard W. Strobel, Reactor

First of all, let me say, "Thank you, Dr. Preus, for a very fine piece of work that has given us so much of Luther on the Word, on Doctrine, and on Confession. I know that I speak for all who have heard these lectures."

My procedure will be to highlight some items that especially need emphasis in our day as in Luther's. I might also add that for this reaction I will dispense with footnotes and simply say that I am a part of all that I have met. Who isn't?

I really appreciated your allowing Luther to speak. So often in a work like this one is served up a dish of secondary sources. The primary sources only serve to garnish the dish when they ought to be the entree. I am reminded of what Prof. A. Pieper of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary wrote back in 1917: "His (Luther's) four writings, The Freedom of a Christian Man, The Commentary on Galatians, The Bondage of the Will, The Papacy at Rome, outweigh an entire library of books about Luther's teaching." At any rate, for me your *ad fontes*, "to the sources," approach was a real treat.

As is well known, modern theological liberals have long attempted to claim Luther for their camp by

ascribing to him a rather “free attitude” toward Scripture. They base this on a number of things. We mention only two, perhaps the two most prominent.

- ♦ Luther’s distinction between the homolegomena (“those books of the Bible received as canonical by nearly all sectors of the church”) and the antilegomena (“those books of the Bible lacking universal approval of the church as canonical”—such books are Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation). This terminology goes back to the ancient church and is only a description of the history of the books of the New Testament in the life of the church; it is not necessarily a judgment on their value. We shall let a non-Lutheran speak to this point: “Whatever Luther’s questions may have been about the canonicity of certain books, he had no question whatever about the authority and inerrancy of the books viewed as canonical.”
- ♦ Luther’s emphasis on what in Scripture “urges Christ” or “deals with Christ.” From this, modernists argue that Luther assumed “a canon within a canon” and thereby denied the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Bible. Not so! In speaking thus Luther was only emphasizing the gospel of God’s grace in Christ as the essential message of the Scriptures, a message that for centuries had

been obscured, if not entirely eliminated, by the antichristian papacy.

When modernists ascribe to Luther a "free attitude" toward Scripture it is obvious that they pervert historical facts, misquote him, misrepresent his statements (which is easily done), and refuse to read and examine his writings honestly and conscientiously. *Ad fontes*, "to the sources," is something they neglect, and

still they want to be *bona fide* scholars! So it was indeed refreshing to be given copious quotations from Luther in the first part of your essay entitled

Luther's works replace a whole library but a whole library cannot replace Luther's works.

"Word," on the basis of which you conclude, and all other honest students of Luther would conclude with you: "To Luther, calling Scripture God's Word, meant that it was word for word divine." But not only is the written Word God's Word; every sermon, every lesson taught based on that Word is also God's Word. As you correctly say, "For Luther...there is no real difference between the preached Word and the prophetic and apostolic Word of Scripture. Although canonical authority resides in the written Word, the same truth and power adhere to the Word preached as it is based on the Scripture Word."

In the section "The Preacher and the Scriptures" you quote Luther as follows: "The first

concern of a theologian should be to be well acquainted with the text of Scripture, a *bonus textualis*" ("a good exegetical scholar"). To that we would say, "Amen! and Amen!" and deplore the thinking prevalent among so many of our Lutheran clergy and educators that Greek and Hebrew are not that important in making the pastor a good *bonus textualis*. Luther thought otherwise. He said: "St. Augustine, too, is compelled to confess, when he writes in *De doctrina Christiana*, that a Christian teacher who is to expound Scripture has need also of the Greek and Hebrew languages in addition to the Latin; otherwise it is impossible

We shall have a hard time preserving the Gospel without the languages.

for him not to run into obstacles everywhere. In fact, otherwise it is impossible for him not to run into obstacles everywhere. In fact, difficult and labor are incurred even when a person does know the languages well." Luther again: "Let us, then, foster the languages as zealously as we love the Gospel. For it is not meaningless that God caused His Scriptures to be written in these two languages only: the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in Greek. The languages, therefore, which God did not despise but chose above all others for His Word we, too, ought to honor above all others.... Let us ever bear this

in mind: We shall have a hard time preserving the Gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained. They are the case in which we carry this jewel. They are the vessel in which we hold this wine. They are the larder in which this food is stored.” “We shall have a hard time preserving the Gospel without the languages”—Lutheran church history in

Yet to Luther Scripture was most clear with respect to all doctrines necessary for salvation.

American history certainly confirms this contention of Luther's. I know that you, Dr. Preus, agree with all of the above from Luther's pen. Such agreement is surely implied in your section on "The Preacher and the Scripture."

Another point you treat at length, and rightly so, is the clarity of the Scripture. To Luther the Scriptures were clear above all in the interest of the salvation of lost sinners. Luther admitted that Scripture is not clear everywhere, especially not in all its historical and prophetic parts. Accordingly, less clear matters must be interpreted in the light of the more clear; and, above all, Scripture must at all times be its own interpreter (*Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur. Scriptura sua luce radiat.*—Scripture is interpreted by Scripture. Scripture shines by its own light.). Yet to Luther Scripture was most clear

with respect to all doctrines necessary for salvation. As you indicate, this clarity according to Luther is of two kinds, external and internal. Because the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is so important, I know it will not be taken amiss if at this point I quote somewhat at length one of the teachers I had as a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Prof. C. Lawrenz.

Regarding the external clarity of Scripture Prof. Lawrenz wrote in 1972: "The clarity which Scripture ascribes to itself is, first of all, an outward clarity. It consists in this that in the words and sentences of intelligible, comprehensible human language Scripture clearly expresses all the truths which God has been pleased to reveal to us and which we need to know for our Christian faith and life now and for our eternal salvation hereafter. Because of the human language of Scripture many have doubted and continue to doubt its divine nature. Our reaction should rather be that of thanking God for the miracle of His grace that for our benefit He chose to reveal all of His gracious truths to us through the medium of lucid human language which we can understand."

"Any rational human being who reads and studies the statements of Holy Scripture, who carefully marks and note the meaning of the words which Scripture employs, the grammatical construction with which these words are joined together in sentences, the figures of speech, simile

metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, if any, in which the statements are found, will have to say: This and this alone is what Scripture is stating here. He will have to say this even though he may not accept what Scripture is saying.”

In Genesis 1-3 Scripture speaks historically and it must be understood as speaking of literal historical facts. In Revelation 20 Scripture speaks symbolically. In John 15 Jesus speaks metaphorically of Himself as the true vine and of His believers as His branches. In Acts 15 Paul speaks metonymically about Moses being read and preached in the synagogues every Sabbath Day. In Mark 1:5 the Evangelist states hyperbolically that all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem went out to John and were all baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. In each case Scripture must be interpreted on its own terms to get at its proper sense, revealing its intended divine message. When Scripture uses a round number rather than a precise one, it is not less clear and factual. The message that human language commonly conveys through a round number is then also the message that Scripture wants to convey with its own use of a round number. When Scripture uses phenomenal language, the clear message to be apprehended will be the truth which is commonly conveyed through such phenomenal language. This is what is meant when we say that every statement of Scripture must be understood in its native sense according to

vocabulary, grammar, context, and the linguistic usage of a specific era or of all times.

“Scripture clearly presents the truths that we need for our Christian faith and life, the truths of creation, also of man’s creation in God’s image, the truths of the fall and of original sin, of our total depravity by nature, of our separation from God, of our inability to make restitution or to contribute anything to it, the truths of God’s free and unmerited saving love, of His justification of the whole world through the atoning sacrifice of His incarnate Son, of the personal justification of the sinner through faith, of faith as the gift of God, of the new life of the Christian and its holy fruits as the creation of the Holy Spirit.”

“We will constantly remember that none of these truths or any other point of Christian faith and life can be certain and remain certain to us, unless we hold firmly to the outward clarity of the Scriptures, to this that the message of Scripture lies in the message contained in the very words of Scriptures in their full linguistic usage and in their closer and wider contextual setting.”

About the internal clarity of Scripture Prof. Lawrenz wrote: “The clarity which the Holy Scriptures asserts for itself goes deeper than this outward clarity, vital and basic as the outward clarity always will remain. The clarity of Scripture is above all a spiritual one and consists in this that Scripture possesses the power to win acceptance

for the truths of faith and life, of law and gospel, which it clearly teaches. It has the divine power to effect a change in us, to effect in us a spiritual understanding and comprehension for these truths, a blessed comprehension of faith.”

“The truths of Scripture have the power to produce and sustain spiritual life, because they are the Word of God. Jesus said: “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life.” That is the spiritual clarity of Holy Scripture.. The Scriptures are not merely a record of a past revelation of God; they are also and above all His ever-present

and powerful revelation. The Gospel of Christ is ever replete with the power of the Holy Spirit. It is well that we

We will confidently content ourselves with clearly and joyfully presenting the precious truths of Scripture and let God’s Word at its own time manifest itself in blessed power.

never lose sight of this spiritual clarity of the Holy Scriptures.... Mindful of the spiritual clarity of the Holy Scriptures...we need not anxiously endeavor to prove the truths of Scripture, or attempt to demonstrate their reasonableness or vindicate their relevancy for modern man. We will confidently content ourselves with clearly and joyfully presenting the precious truths of Scripture and let

God's Word at its own time manifest itself in blessed power."

In view of this that the clear message of the Scriptures can be comprehended internally, that is, accepted by faith, so that the Scriptures really become what they were intended to be, the lamp to our feet and the light to our path, it behooves each one of us to pray whenever we approach the Scriptures—

*Holy Ghost, with light divine
Shine upon this heart of mine;
Chase the shades of night away,
Turn the darkness into day.*

This brings us to what I feel is the heart and core of your essay, as it was the heart and core of Luther's theology, and as it is the heart and core of Biblical theology, namely *solus Christus*, "Christ alone," with all that this implies. For when Luther emphasized *solus Christus*, this meant, as you point out so well, that

...*solus Christus* is not an abstraction but a reality embracing everything that Christ has done to save fallen mankind...

- ♦ justification and the work of Christ as Propitiator and Redeemer belong inextricably together,

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- ♦ the entire Scriptures are Christocentric in their content,
- ♦ therefore all Christian doctrine must center in Christ (the purpose of Scripture and of all doctrine in the church is soteriological),
- ♦ Christian doctrine and preaching not only point us to Jesus only but confer upon us

Any attempt to make Christology preliminary to theology or even only its most important part, but not its only part, is a denial of Luther's doctrine and effectively destroys the Gospel message of completed atonement.

sonship,
faith in
Christ,
fellowship
with Him,
and all
blessings
which we
have
through
Christ,

- ♦ Christ is the only way to

God, and

- ♦ all Christian doctrine is a unity (like a large circle with Christ at the center).
- ♦ *solus Christus* is not an abstraction but a reality embracing everything that Christ has done to save fallen mankind,
- ♦ *solus Christus* embraces the entire work of God from creation to Christ's return,

- ♦ *solus Christus* embraces not merely the work of Christ and the Father who sends Him, but also the work of the Spirit who sanctifies us (Christ is our sanctification as well as our righteousness; consequently *solus Christus* includes not merely justification but also sanctification), and
- ♦ for Luther the *solus Christus* dominates every article of faith.

All of the above is indeed beautifully and profoundly summed up by Dr. David Scaer in the words quoted by you: “Any attempt to make Christology preliminary to theology or even only its most important part, but not its only part, is a denial of Luther’s doctrine and effectively destroys the Gospel message of completed atonement.”

I teach a course at Northwestern College called German 231 in which we read in German some of Luther’s *Hauptschriften* (chief writings), and I always tell my students that Luther saw Christ everywhere in the Old Testament and that while he may have seen Christ in some places where we might not see Him, it is certainly better to see Christ in the Old Testament everywhere than to see Him almost nowhere, as is the case with most theologians today. Luther was right, for didn’t Jesus say: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). And what did the risen Savior talk

about with the
Emmaus disciples?
Luke tells us:
“Beginning with
Moses and all the
Prophets, he
explained to them
what was said in
all the Scriptures

...true doctrine is a
greater concern to the
church than life,...for
false teaching, the ‘most
pernicious thing on
earth,’ leads souls to hell.

concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Yes, the
Scriptures are the “Jesus book,” but we will not
see this with saving faith unless the Holy Spirit
enlightens us to this fact. Accordingly, before we
begin reading and study of the Scriptures we ought
to pray a prayer like this one addressed to the Holy
Spirit—

*Let me see my Savior's face,
Let me all His beauties trace;
Show those glorious truths to me
Which are only known to Thee.*

Oh, my fellow Lutherans, back to Luther!
Only then will we be able to say with Luther and
really mean it, “In my heart there reigns alone, and
should reign alone, this one article, namely faith in
my dear Lord Jesus Christ. He is the beginning,
middle and end of all my spiritual and divine
thoughts that I may ever have by day and by night.”

With these words of Luther I would like to
close. I realize that I have so far reacted to only

about one half of your essay. But this has gotten long enough, so I will react, again very positively, to the remainder of your essay by listing from it some thought-provoking quotations that speak for themselves, quotations from Luther and from you, Dr. Preus. After all, if we, the beneficiaries of your effort, are led to think further on these all-important truths, then your effort will have been worthwhile and a blessing to the church.

The entire public ministry of preaching and administering the sacraments is nothing but a confession of faith according to Luther.

from Luther and from you, Dr. Preus. After all, if we, the beneficiaries of your effort, are led to think further on these all-important truths, then your effort will have been worthwhile and a blessing to the church.

♦ **Luther**—If I

profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ.

- ♦ **Luther**—One dot of doctrine is worth more than heaven and earth (Matt. 15:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of

faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture.

To confess Christ and His Word involves warning, denouncing, and condemning all false doctrine.

- ♦ **Preus**—Luther makes it very clear that true doctrine is a greater concern to the church than life, and false doctrine does more harm to the church than evil life, for false teaching, the ‘most pernicious thing on earth,’ leads souls to hell.
- ♦ **Preus**—To Luther, if the doctrine is not right (*wo die Lehre nicht recht ist*), then it is impossible for life to be right and good (*recht und gut*), for life must be prepared (*anrichten*) by doctrine.
- ♦ **Luther**—A curse on any love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield.
- ♦ **Luther**—Scripture represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan, his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfettered, able, well and alive.
- ♦ **Preus**—The entire public ministry of preaching and administering the sacraments is nothing but a confession of faith according

to Luther.... All of Luther's works are, in a sense, nothing but his confession of faith.

- ♦ **Preus**—The entire Smalcald Article are built around the doctrine of redemption, the *solus Christus*. Every abuse that Luther had attacked was condemned because it conflicted with that *Hauptartikel*. This is where Luther takes his stand.
- ♦ **Preus**—Luther exhibits what we today call doctrinal certainty, a quality which seems, like the rest of what we have just described, quite anachronistic in our day.
- ♦ **Preus**—To confess Christ and His Word involves warning, denouncing, and condemning all false doctrine.... The purpose of condemnatory statements and antitheses is to enhance the pure doctrine by revealing the false doctrine. The antitheses in confessions serve to clarify and enhance the theses.
- ♦ **Preus**—A statement of Dr. Preus', based on Luther, that puts the past two days in their proper perspective: If one loves the Word and enjoys hearing, speaking, thinking, lecturing, and writing about Christ, he should know that this is not a work of human will or reason but a gift of the Holy Spirit.

So once again, thank you, Dr. Preus, for your lectures that should spur us to read Luther more deeply and more widely, mindful also of Dr. C. F.

W. Walther's assessment that Luther's works replace a whole library but a whole library cannot replace Luther's works. Finally, your lectures should make us doubly thankful that

Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr'

Vergehet nun und nimmermehr.

*(God's Word, which Martin Luther taught,
Shall nevermore be brought to naught.)*

Luther: Word, Doctrine and Confession

Dr. Robert Preus, Lecturer
Prof. Adolph Harstad, Reactor

Thank you, Dr. Preus, for your inspiring lectures on three areas of the theology of Dr. Luther, namely, Scripture, Doctrine, and Confession.

I have a practical reason for heartily thanking you. I

have just agreed to be the "emergency" preacher at a Reformation rally in Portland, Oregon, this Sunday because of the illness of the scheduled preacher.

It is obvious that the subjects of your lectures touch not just your intellect but your heart, yours passions.

Your lectures have provided an excellent start on sermon preparation.

I have heard the name "Dr. Robert Preus" over the years and have read some of your writings, but I had never seen you "in action" in person. And I must say that you do indeed swing into action. It is obvious that the subjects of your lectures touch not just your intellect but your heart, yours passions.

I have something in common with the man who will follow me as a reactor to your lectures. Professor Strobel and I both grew up in the very

much "German town" of Watertown, Wisconsin. And I have something in common with you, Dr. Preus. Both of us can boast that 100% Norwegian blood flows through our veins. It is something we should boast about, isn't it? When my grandfather, Bjug Harstad, an immigrant from Norway, was attending Concordia Seminary way back in the 1870's, he marveled at the teaching skills of his famous German professor, C. F. W. Walther. Then he added a self-deprecating touch. He said that Dr. Walther had the ability to make things clear "even to the dull Norwegian mind." Perhaps we two Norwegians should assume that Grandpa was speaking only for himself in that last expression. I also have something else in common with you, and that is Bethany Lutheran Seminary—you as its first graduate and I as one who has recently joined its faculty.

Many excellent questions from the audience have already touched on points from your lectures that I had intended to address. I will avoid redundancy and not touch on those points again.

The bulk of your lectures is therefore Luther himself lecturing.

More Luther than Preus

The bulk of your lectures is therefore Luther himself lecturing. As you have noted at the end of Lecture Three, Luther has been allowed to speak for himself in your presentation. When you are not quoting Luther, you are often paraphrasing him. That means that if I now

take issue with Dr. Preus, I will have to answer to Dr. Luther. And if I take issue with Dr. Luther, I will have to answer to the Scriptures on which he stands. And if I take issue with the Scriptures, I'll have to answer to God himself. It doesn't seem that taking issue with your presentation is an avenue on which I should proceed. Instead my reaction will move down some other avenues.

Structure

It is interesting to note that the three parts of your lecture follow a pattern known well to confessional Lutherans. "We believe, teach and confess" is virtually parallel to your three-part structure of "Scripture, Doctrine and Confession." You simply chose nouns, while the traditional formula employs verbs. "Scripture" is what "we believe." "Doctrine" is the same as what "we teach." Our "Confession" is obviously what "we confess." The structure of your lectures is therefore as old as the terminology of the Lutheran Confessions themselves. The three words that mark each of your parts also have a ring of dynamic progression to them. Scripture's doctrine is to be faithfully taught and boldly confessed.

With Scripture, Doctrine, and Confession as your three headings, there were bound to be overlaps in the three parts. After all, true doctrine is Scripture, and teaching doctrine is a form of confession. It was thus inevitable that the three topics could not always be cleanly separated in your presentation.

High Points

After reading and then listening to the lectures, I asked myself what I considered to be their high points. Two sections stood out for me like especially lofty peaks.

The first was on the middle of page 37. The subject is the paradox of Law and Gospel and how the *solus Christus* principle brings these two contradictory doctrines together. I quote briefly from that section:

Luther: “Then how can these two contradictory things be true at the same time, that I am a sinner and deserve divine wrath and hatred and that the Father loves me? Here nothing can intervene except Christ the Mediator.” **Preus:** This last simple sentence explains the paradox. It explains the whole Christian religion. It explains the Scriptures. It is the secret to all exegesis of Scripture and all theologizing. It is the only comfort that a poor sinner has in life and in death. It is “Christ alone.” So we have in the *solus Christus* principle not only a hermeneutical rule, not only the basis for all comfort, not only the basis for our union with God and for reconciliation and salvation, but the principle of all human knowledge and understanding.

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The second mountain peak I considered to be in Lecture Three on page 67 where we see Luther's "pious truculence" as he writes about the confession that he will leave to the world at his death. We can feel Luther's passions rising and boiling in these words which you quote on page 68:

Hence if anyone shall say after my death, "If Luther were living now he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not consider it sufficiently," etc., let me say once and for all that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the Sacrament of the Altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the last judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert the Word of God and the Scriptures, what will he not be able to do with my or someone else's words?

Now a few reactions on points from each of the three lectures.

The Clarity of Scripture

That Scripture is indeed clear is an emphasis we need to give boldly together with Luther. The emphasis of negative Biblical criticism with its “historical-critical method” is quite the opposite. It tends to see parts of Scripture as a patchwork of hopelessly contradictory documents. Some commentators tell their readers shamelessly: Don’t even try to understand this, because the text is objectively unclear and hopelessly unintelligible. How different the reality, as Luther emphasizes, and as you have brought out in a summary sentence: “For Luther therefore the Scriptures as such are as clear as glass, their saving message crystal clear.”

By the way, thank you for not once using the word “perspicuity” in dealing with the topic of the clarity of Scripture. I once heard a Reformation sermon in which the preacher continually spoke of “the perspicuity of Scripture” and thereby obfuscated the very perspicuity he was elucidating.

Doctrine is Everything

In an ecumenical age where “doctrine” is almost a dirty word, thank you for reminding us of Luther’s emphasis that doctrine, specifically the doctrine of justification, is simply everything. (“For if we lose the doctrine of justification, we simply lose everything.”)

“When you get to your foreign mission field, the first thing you’ll learn is that doctrine isn’t important there.” That was the mission philosophy I heard from an employee of a mission supply company

...can you imagine the verbal volcano that would have soon erupted from Luther?

as we were stocking up for our move to Zambia, Africa. can you imagine the verbal volcano

that would have soon erupted from him who insisted that “everything has to do with doctrine”?

A New Orthodox Confession?

I will close with a question to you, Dr. Preus. Do you think that a new orthodox confession is needed today in light of the controversies that have arisen since the writing of the Book Of Concord, and if so, what would need to be addressed in such a confession?

The People's Bible: Joshua

Pastor John A. Molstad, Jr., Reviewer

The People's Bible: Joshua, by Adolph L. Harstad.
Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House,
1991. 258 pp., pb., \$7.50 (available through our
Bethany College Bookstore).

Many parishioners may only be familiar with the book of Joshua because of the recorded spectacular event of Jericho's fall, or because of the words from chapter one heard quite often at installations of pastors. The entire book, however, even the lengthy division of the land section, attests to God's guidance for His people in the new land of Canaan. Prof. Harstad gives valuable insight that helps the reader understand that under Moses' successor, Joshua, the people of Israel remained faithful to the covenant that God had made with them.

An early date (1400 BC) is proposed for the conquest of Canaan under Joshua. This is primarily based on "a literal reading of

I Kings 6:1." That verse mentions that Solomon started erecting the temple in the fourth year of his reign, which was 480 years after the Israelites had left Egypt. Taking 966 BC as the fourth year of Solomon's

1400 BC is
proposed for the
conquest of Canaan
under Joshua.

reign, and figuring in the forty years of wandering, the author arrives at 1406 BC as the beginning of Joshua's campaign. Following the scholar Edward Young, Prof. Harstad seems to answer the question of Joshua's authorship as being "possibly as elder, who had been an eyewitness to most of the events recorded in the book."

Several features of this commentary make it an excellent book for not only the laymen's usage but also for the personal libraries of our pastors. As is the case with the *People's Bible* series, there is an easy-to-read style which avoids lengthy discussions on technicalities and yet gives the reader enough essential background information. The author takes occasion to refute the higher critics who dispute the factuality of particular events, but he does not drone on as he provides pertinent answers to difficult questions arising from the text (i.e., the apparent discrepancy between the 30,000 forces in 8:3 and the 5,000 in 8:12). Having been on archæological digs in Israel, Prof. Harstad makes appropriate use of recent excavation information. For example, in discussing the destruction of Hazor (11:13) he mentions: "Excavations at the site reveal destruction and burning at about 1400, 1300, and about 1230 BC. The 1400 BC evidence is in line with the early 'date' of Joshua's conquest."

It is refreshing to have the author continually apply what might appear as "incidentals" to the entire Law/Gospel message of Scripture. Noteworthy in this regard is his discussion on Gilgal (5:9), a name

stemming from the Hebrew verb which means “to roll.” He states:

It is striking that the words “Gilgal” and “Golgatha” are related. If the Lord “rolled away” reproach at Gilgal, think of the slander that Jesus “rolled away” by his sacrifice at Golgatha! Ever since the crucifixion, no one can sneer that God does not love us, that we are not his dear redeemed

people and that we will not live in the eternal promised land. Not even the devil, the “slanderer,” can make reproach stick to God’s people.

Good material for sermon applications can be found throughout the commentary.

Good material for sermon applications can be found throughout the commentary. The fact that Joshua did not wait to make an altar to the Lord when coming off victories at Jericho and Ai (8:30), brought on this poignant remark: “The idea that we should wait to put our spiritual life in order until we are established in our new community, school or employment finds no support in the Bible. ‘Seek first his kingdom’ (6:33) is illustrated in these verses.” The author also has a flair in portraying the Biblical events.

For example, there is this characterization of the deception of Achan (7:1): "His radical disobedience was like kicking a leg out from under a table heaped with delectable food and destroying the whole dinner for everyone."

A hard-to-tackle question concerning Rahab's disobedience to the king's order to bring out the spies she has hidden is addressed carefully and thoroughly. Prof. Harstad rightly remarks that the author of Joshua was not intending to comment on the rightness or wrongness of Rahab's deliberate deception but simply was concerned with reporting the facts. Nevertheless, in defense of Rahab (who is commended as a believer in Hebrews 11), he mentions that "civil disobedience is the right course when obeying orders means disobeying God's commandments (Acts 5:29)."

This reviewer advises the pastors can do their people a great service if they would recommend this volume to the Bible students under their care. An appropriate conclusion to this overview of this commentary on Joshua is the author's soteriological remark: "The Old Testament Joshua could give rest to Israel by defeating their physical enemies. But the New Testament Joshua ("Jesus" is the Greek form of "Joshua") has earned endless spiritual rest for the whole guilt-ridden world by conquering sin for us (Matthew 11:28, 29; Isaiah 53: 4-6)."

John A. Molstad, Jr.