# Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations

A Review of the Question, "What Is a Doctrine?"

#### **SUMMARY**

# I. History of the Question

The question "What Is a Doctrine?" arose in connection with efforts to establish pulpit and altar fellowship between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and The American Lutheran Church during the 1930s and thereafter. An answer to the question was given by the 1944 synodical convention, but in 1953 the Synod asked for a further treatment of the question. This was provided in a 1956 statement by the seminary faculties. Acting on a resolution of the 1962 synodical convention, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations issued an additional report on the matter in 1964. This present review treats additional aspects of the question as requested by the 1965 synodical convention.

# II. Use and Meaning of the Term "Doctrine" and Related Terms

In English usage the term "doctrine" generally means "what is taught," but in various senses. The New Testament uses "doctrine" in the singular to designate the whole Christian teaching but employs the plural "doctrines" with reference to false teachings. The Lutheran Confessions employ the word "doctrine" to denote the activity of teaching as well as to refer to the whole body of Christian truth. The pluralistic usage of "doctrines" to designate various parts of the one Christian doctrine became current in 17th-century dogmatic theology. Dr. C. F. W. Walther, like the dogmaticians, spoke of "doctrines" but distinguished between "Scripture doctrines" and "articles of faith." The term "dogma" emphasizes the role of the church in formulating her doctrine. "Article of faith," sometimes used interchangeably with "doctrine," emphasizes the relationship of parts to the whole, as well as the relationship of all parts of the Christian doctrine to the Gospel. "Teaching" is often used as a synonym for "doctrine" but usually in a less technical sense.

# III. Conclusions and Applications

The 1956 answer to the question is still valid and useful. The "doctrine" God gave us is an organic whole. When "a doctrine" is distinguished from the whole doctrine for purposes of teaching or discussion, it is important that it be studied as belonging to the whole. Only a valid formulation of the teaching of Holy Scripture can be recognized as true Christian doctrine. Mistakes in exegesis or faulty isagogical judgments are not in themselves false doctrines but dare not conflict with the Christian doctrine or undermine the authority of Scripture. Denominational fellowship calls for unity in understanding the Gospel, or mutual agreement in the doctrine and all its articles. All articles of faith are integrally related to the Gospel and articulate the Gospel from different perspectives. The concept "article of faith," which emphasizes the relationship of the Gospel to all Christian doctrine and has had a less ambiguous usage than the term "doctrines," is recommended for the church's use in dealing with the question of fellowship.

# I. HISTORY OF THE QUESTION

The question "What is a doctrine?" began to agitate the minds of some members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in connection with efforts to establish pulpit and altar fellowship between The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church during the 1930s and thereafter.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod stated its doctrinal position in 1932 in *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*. In 1938 the American Lutheran Church, while on the whole accepting this document, elaborated on some sections of it in the *Declaration of the Representatives of the American Lutheran Church*. In their *Declaration* the commissioners of the American Lutheran Church pointed out that theologians in their church body were accustomed to speak of "a visible side of the church," meaning by this expression nothing else than the means of grace, and that there were those in the American Lutheran Church who might understand the passages of Scripture which speak of Antichrist, of the future of Israel, and of the resurrection of the martyrs differently from the way in which these passages were generally explained by Missouri Synod theologians. With respect to these matters the commissioners of the American Lutheran Church said: "We expect no more than this, that the Hon. Synod of Missouri will declare that the points mentioned . . . are not disruptive of church-fellowship."

Some concerned men in the Missouri Synod felt that the points in question involved important issues. They felt furthermore that the Synod should clearly state what, in its understanding, constitutes a doctrine. A memorial to the Synod in 1944 requested that the Synod adopt the following as a definition of a Scriptural doctrine: "A Scriptural doctrine is every truth contained in, or drawn from, or implied by, Scripture." Instead the convention adopted the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Quoted from *Proceedings of the Thirty-Seventh Regular Convention of The Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri*, etc., 1938, pp. 221 to 226.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Proceedings, 1944, pp. 231-234.

following definition proposed by the floor committee: "A Scriptural doctrine is a truth contained in, expressed by, or properly drawn from Scripture."

This definition proved to be unsatisfactory because "a truth" could include a variety of statements in Scripture which had never been considered *doctrines* in the Lutheran Church. Under the proposed definition the number of doctrines could grow endlessly.

The question "What is a doctrine?" again came before the Synod at the Houston convention in 1953. The proceedings of the convention contain the following report:

#### What Is a Doctrine?

This question was raised in Unprinted Memorial 69 a. Committee 3 recommended, and Synod resolved, with three negative votes:

#### **Resolution 22**

WHEREAS, The Committee on Doctrinal Unity must by the very nature of its work deal with the question "What Is a Doctrine?" and

WHEREAS, This is a theological question which concerns also the faculties of our two theological seminaries; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That this question be referred to the Committee on Doctrinal Unity and the faculties of our two theological seminaries for joint study; and be it

*Resolved*, That the results of this study he made available to all pastors, teachers, and congregations of our Synod.<sup>4</sup>

Responding to the above resolution, the faculties of the two seminaries devoted considerable time to a further study of the question "What is a doctrine?" and by the spring of 1956 had formulated the following statement and comments:

A doctrine is an article of faith which the church in obedience to her Lord, and in response to her specific needs, derives according to sound principles of interpretation from Scripture as the sole source of doctrine and sets forth in a form adapted to teaching.

#### **Comment on the Definition**

I. *A doctrine*. In the Lutheran Church the term "a doctrine" is used to designate the church's formulation of a part of the Scriptural revelation of the will of God.

II. *Is an article of faith.* Every doctrine must be organically related to the intention of the holy and gracious God for the faith and life of man as revealed in His Word.

III. Which the church, in obedience to her Lord. Every claim of God upon men is to be received by the church in the full obedience of faith.

IV. And in response to her specific needs. The formulation of such doctrines is conditioned by the historical situation in which the church finds itself.

V. Derives according to sound principles of interpretation from Scripture as the sole source of doctrine. Such formulations are based either on express statements of Scripture, or on direct implications of Scripture statements, or on a synthesis of a number of related statements of Scripture. The procedure in each case must be in accordance with the basic law of interpretation that Scripture is its own interpreter and as divine revelation claims total submission from man.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Proceedings, 1953, p. 539.

VI. And sets forth in a form adapted to teaching. The purpose of these formulations is that of communication, whether it be for preaching, teaching, refuting error, or defending the truth. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

While this definition has considerable merit, it does not distinguish clearly between the various usages of the term "doctrine" in the New Testament, the Lutheran Confessions, and post-Reformation dogmatic theology. Nor did it fully satisfy those who were urging the question, and the matter again came before the Synod at Cleveland, Ohio, June 20-29, 1962. The *Proceedings* of this convention contain the following resolution:

WHEREAS, Memorial 331 points up the importance of the question: What is a doctrine? and particularly the relationship of doctrine and practice, or application of doctrine; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That this memorial and the supporting brief be referred to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations for serious study, consideration, and report; and be it further

*Resolved,* That the results of this study be sent to all pastors and teachers at least one year before the next convention  $\dots$  .

In 1964, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations issued in pamphlet form a *Report on "What Is a Doctrine?"* This report quotes the statement adopted at Saginaw and the definition proposed by the two seminary faculties and says:

The commission . . . found the definitions of doctrine adopted or authorized by the Synod adequate, in harmony with the Scriptures and the Confessions. Pursuant to the above resolution the commission is submitting this report to the pastors and teachers. It includes the statements adopted or authorized by the Synod and pertinent statements from the Confessions. These statements of the Confessions are simple, they view doctrine as a whole, and they preclude false distinctions between doctrine and application of doctrine.

The report adds a number of quotations from the Lutheran Confessions which illustrate the confessional usage of the term "doctrine" and emphasize that doctrine in the Christian church is to be derived from Scripture. This in turn is followed by an appendix with suggestions for study.<sup>7</sup>

At the 46th regular convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1965, the floor committee on doctrinal matters studied the report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations on "What Is a Doctrine?" and recommended the following:

WHEREAS, The Commission on Theology and Church Relations in its report on "What Is a Doctrine?" responded to a resolution of the Cleveland Convention (*Proceedings*, 1962, p. 108); and

WHEREAS, The commission could not give the time and did not have the opportunity prior to issuing its report more than a year ago to attempt a full-scale study and reformulation of a definition of "doctrine"; and

WHEREAS, The study on fellowship, especially in the historical section of *Theology of Fellowship*, has given insights that bear on a definition of doctrine; and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The Lutheran Witness, LXXV (May 8, 1956), 178.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Proceedings, 1962, p. 108.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Report, p. 8; also Convention Workbook, 1965, p. 40.

WHEREAS, It may be expected that the ongoing studies on various Biblical topics, as well as the proposed study on Biblical hermeneutics, may well shed further light on the nature of a doctrine as well as the proper manner of formulating doctrine; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That this convention gratefully approve this report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations as an adequate response to the memorial originally addressed to the Synod at Cleveland; and be it further

Resolved, That the Commission on Theology and Church Relations be encouraged to continue its study of the question "What is a doctrine?" and formulate a further definition that takes into account the results of all its Biblical and theological studies, indicating if possible the distinctions between —

- a) "the doctrine" and "a doctrine" or "doctrines"; as well as
- b) related terms such as "dogma," "article of faith" "teaching," as these terms are used in Scripture as well as the Lutheran Confessions; and be it finally

*Resolved*, That the Commission on Theology and Church Relations submit the results of this study to the members of the Synod for careful study and to a future convention of the Synod for adoption.

This recommendation of the floor committee was adopted by the convention.<sup>8</sup>

The following is an attempt to carry out the instructions of the Synod as laid down in the above resolutions.

# II. USE AND MEANING OF THE TERM "DOCTRINE" AND RELATED TERMS

The very persistence with which the question "What Is a Doctrine?" has been and still is being asked suggests that there is something intrinsically difficult about the question. Part of the problem no doubt lies in formulating a definition precise enough for unambiguous application. But a major portion of the difficulty also arises from the fact that the meaning of the word "doctrine" as used in this question reflects only one of several meanings current in English usage and differs from the usual meaning of the term in the New Testament and the Lutheran Confessions. As used in the question, a "doctrine" rather reflects the usage and meaning of the term which gained wide currency in the writings of the 17th-century dogmaticians.

The following paragraphs briefly describe the usage and meaning of the term "doctrine" in the English language generally, in the New Testament, the Lutheran Confessions, the Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th century, and in the writings of C. F. W. Walther. This section concludes with a brief analysis of the meaning of the related terms "dogma," "article of faith," and "teaching."

# A. "Doctrine" in the English Language Generally

In the most general sense doctrine is "what comes from a teacher," "what is taught," whether it be religious or secular, important or unimportant, right or wrong.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "doctrine" in part as follows:

5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Proceedings, 1965, pp. 98-99.

- 1. The action of teaching or instructing; instruction, a piece of instruction, a lesson, precept.
  - **b.** Public instruction; preaching.
- 2. That which is taught. a. In the most general sense: Instruction, teaching; a body of instruction or teaching.
- **b.** *esp.* That which is taught or laid down as true concerning a particular subject or department of knowledge, as religion, politics, science, etc.; a belief, theoretical opinion; a dogma, tenet.
- **3.** A body or system of principles or tenets; a doctrinal or theoretical system; a theory; a science, or department of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

The *New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* defines "doctrine" as: "That which is taught or set forth for acceptance or belief." As synonymns of "doctrine" it lists "article of belief, article of faith, belief, dogma, precept," but adds: "*Doctrine* primarily signifies that which is taught."<sup>10</sup>

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines "doctrine" as follows:

**1.** a particular principle, position, or policy taught or advocated, as of a religion, government, etc.: *Catholic doctrines; the Monroe Doctrine*. **2.** that which is taught; teachings collectively: *religious doctrine*. **3.** a body or system of teachings relating to a particular subject: *the doctrine of the Catholic Church*. <sup>11</sup>

## B. "Doctrine" in the New Testament

The New Testament words usually translated with "doctrine" are *didaskalia* and *didache*, both derived from the verb *didaskein*, to teach. They are used synonymously, generally in the singular. Lexicographers find that both are used in particularly two meanings:

- 1. As "act of teaching, instruction." 1 Tim. 4:13, 16; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 14:6; 2 Tim. 4:2; Mark 4:2.
- 2. As "that which is taught." <sup>12</sup>

In this latter usage the word is generally used in the singular, for the whole content of what is taught. Titus 2: 10: "the doctrine of God our Savior"; 1 Tim. 1:10: something "contrary to sound doctrine"; 2 John 9, 10: "the doctrine of Christ"; Rom. 16:17: "the doctrine which ye have learned."

From these passages it is evident that the Christian doctrine is *one*; divisions of this doctrine into doctrines are man-made.

Under the second meaning given above, several instances are cited where "doctrine" is used in the plural. But in every instance the context shows that these "doctrines" do not agree with the doctrine which ought to be taught in the Christian church. Matt. 15:9: "teaching for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford, 1933.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Funk & Wagnalls, *The New Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, New York and London, 1945.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The Random House Dictionary of the English Language: The Unabridged Edition, New York, 1966.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See, for example, Arndt-Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Chicago, 1957.

doctrines the commandments of men"; Col. 2:22: "after the commandments and doctrines of men"; 1 Tim. 4:1: "doctrines of devils"; Heb. 13:9: "divers and strange doctrines."

The expression in Heb. 6:2: "doctrine of baptisms," may be translated: "instruction about cleansing rites," as it is in *The New English Bible*. <sup>13</sup> 1 Cor. 14:26 (in the King James Version: "every one of you hath . . . a doctrine") is properly translated by *The New English Bible*: "each of you contributes . . . some instruction."

In all these Biblical usages of the term "doctrine" there is nothing which exactly parallels the use of the term in the question "What is a doctrine?" The New Testament generally speaks of "the doctrine," meaning the Christian doctrine as a whole. When it speaks of "a doctrine," it generally refers to a false teaching.

## C. "Doctrine" in the Lutheran Confessions

An examination of the use of the term *doctrine* in the Lutheran Confessions reveals usages which closely parallel the uses of the term in the New Testament.

Doctrine, whether Lutheran or Roman Catholic, means either "what is taught" or the "activity of teaching." Very often the stress is on that which is taught publicly in the churches. We are reminded how often the Formula of Concord, as also our Confessions otherwise, use the formula: "We believe, teach, and confess." <sup>14</sup>

It is of the public teaching of the Gospel in the church that the following passage in the Augsburg Confession is to be understood: "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel [doctrina evangelii] and the administration of the sacraments." That this is the correct understanding is indicated by the preceding sentence: "The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely [pure docetur] and the sacraments are administered rightly." That doctrina evangelii refers to the public teaching of the Gospel is also shown by the German text, accurately translated as follows:

For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.

The Lutheran Confessions also know a usage of the term "doctrine" as a summing up of the total doctrine confessed by the Lutheran Church. The following statement of the Formula of Concord illustrates this usage:

The primary requirement for basic and permanent concord within the church is a summary formula and pattern, unanimously approved, in which the summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God. For this same purpose the ancient church always had its dependable symbols. It based these not on mere private writings, but on such books as had been written, approved, and accepted in the name of those churches which confessed the same doctrine and religion. In the same way we have from our hearts and with our mouths declared in mutual agreement that we shall neither prepare nor accept a

7

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The New English Bible: New Testament, Cambridge and Oxford, 1961.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See, for example, the Formula of Concord, Epitome, III, 3 to 11 (*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert, Philadelphia, 1959, pp. 473-474).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Augsburg Confession, VII, 2; Tappert, p. 32 (from the Latin).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ibid.

different or a new confession of our faith. Rather, we pledge ourselves again to those public and well-known symbols or common confessions which have at all times and in all places been accepted in all the churches of the Augsburg Confession. . . . <sup>17</sup>

The Lutheran Confessions do not use the term "doctrine" in precisely the same way it is used in the question "What Is a Doctrine?" They often use "doctrine" in its general meaning as "that which comes from the teacher," or "instruction," whether it be true or false, pure or adulterated. Frequently they employ the term to sum up the total Christian doctrine viewed as one grand whole.

When the Lutheran Confessions wish to divide the Christian doctrine into logical or convenient parts, they use the term "articles of faith," or simply "articles." Sometimes they use the term "locus" instead of "article." It may be noted that the Tappert edition of the confessions sometimes translates the singular forms *doctrina* and *Lehre* with the plural "doctrines." This may be illustrated by the following passage:

Tappert Latin German

This is just about a summary of the doctrines that are preached and taught in our churches, etc. Haec fere summa est doctrinae apud nos, etc.

Dies ist fast die Summa der Lehre, welche in unseren Kirchen... gepredigt und gelehrt ist; etc. 18

The reader of the Lutheran Confessions cannot help noting that the Confessions, which present a summary of what Lutherans believe and teach, are themselves divided into articles, not so much to divide the doctrine into its logical parts as to relate the religious issues of the day to the one Christian doctrine.

The usage of the term "doctrine" as it is found in the question "What Is a Doctrine?" does not come from the New Testament or the Lutheran Confessions but from the dogmaticians of the 17th century.

# D. "Doctrine" in the Lutheran Dogmaticians

The Lutheran confessors stated as briefly as the situation permitted what was believed, taught, and confessed in their churches. From the close of the confessional period in 1580 to the beginning of the 18th century, Lutheran theologians like Chemnitz, Gerhard, Quenstedt, Hollaz, and Baier carried out the task of explaining and systematizing the Christian doctrine held and confessed in the Lutheran Church. Their dogmatic works were precisely written and sometimes numbered thousands of pages.

With the growth of dogmatic materials, the dogmaticians began to divide and classify them more and more. Although they continued to employ "articles" and "articles of faith" as the major divisions of the Christian doctrine, they also began to speak of "doctrines." Quenstedt, for example, distinguishes between "moral doctrines" and "doctrines of faith." He writes:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, The Summary Formulation, etc., 1-2; Tappert, p. 503.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Augsburg Confession, conclusion to Articles I-XXI, Tappert, p. 47. See also Apology IV, 5, where the Tappert edition (p. 108) uses "doctrines" to translate *locos*; the German text has *Stück*. In Apology IV, 2, the Tappert edition (p. 107) uses "the main doctrine of Christianity" to translate the Latin *praecipuus locus doctrinae christianae*; the German text has *dem höchsten fürnehmsten Artikel der ganzen christlichen Lehre*.

The subjects with which the articles of faith are occupied are *ta pista*, the credenda, the *things to be believed as such*. For a distinction must here be made between the historical and the dogmatical, and between the moral doctrines, which teach what is to be done or avoided, and the doctrines of faith, which treat of what is to be believed or not believed.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes the terms "doctrine" and "article of faith" were used interchangeably, although they never became precise synonyms. In the understanding of the dogmaticians, all articles of faith are doctrines, but not all doctrines are articles of faith. Gerhard explains that not all matters contained in Scripture are articles of faith, since the latter comprise "only those doctrines the knowledge of which is necessary to salvation."<sup>20</sup>

The use of "doctrines" to denote parts of the Christian doctrine continued to be employed in Lutheran dogmatic theology. Heinrich Schmid, the early 19th-century student of 17th-century Lutheranism, reflects this usage. In his treatment of the Biblical material concerning God, for example, he writes:

The chief design of the creation of man, and that of revelation also, is, that God may be known. Theology, therefore, must begin with the doctrine concerning God.

The doctrine concerning God may be divided into (1) The doctrine of the existence, the nature, and the attributes of God. (2) The doctrine of the particular manner in which God subsists, *i. e.*, the doctrine of God as triune. (3) The doctrine of the works of God, *i. e.*, of Creation. (4) The doctrine of the manner in which God preserves His works and cares for them, *i. e.*, the doctrine of Providence. (5) The doctrine of the angels, as the ministering beings among the works of God.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that by the 19th century the terms "doctrine" and "doctrines" had come to be applied to parts of and divisions within the one Christian doctrine.<sup>22</sup>

# E. "Doctrine" in C. F. W. Walther

This terminology, understandably, was employed in the writings of the fathers of the Missouri Synod. They also distinguish between Biblical doctrines which are articles of faith and Biblical doctrines which are not. This is illustrated by the discussions on *Wucher* (usury) in the 1869 synodical convention at Fort Wayne.

During the year 1864 the German Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in St. Louis, Mo., under the leadership of Dr. C. F. W. Walther had discussed the question of "usury." The minutes of these meetings, enriched by testimonies of heathen, Jews, and Turks against usury, were published in 1869.<sup>23</sup> In these discussions Dr. Walther had taken an uncompromising stand not only against abuses of usury but against all taking of interest. Not all pastors and congregations in the Synod agreed with Walther's position

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico Polemica* I, 241, as quoted in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Philadelphia, 1899), p. 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> A parallel development took place within Reformed dogmatics as may be seen from Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (London, 1950), pp. 47ff.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Die Wucherfrage: Protokoll der Verhandlungen der deutschen evang.-luth. Gemeinde U. A. C. zu St. Louis, Mo., etc. (St. Louis, 1869).

on usury. The convention discussed the question on the basis of theses prepared by Pastor Th. Brohm.

The following citations from the *Proceedings* of this Synod indicate that Dr. Walther and those who agreed with him believed that Scripture teaches a "doctrine of usury" but that this was considered a moral doctrine, not an article of faith.

The apostolic word, "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," urges us all to do everything in our power that we, who confess that we are agreed in the fundamental articles of the faith [Fundamental-Artikeln des Glaubens], may become agreed also in this doctrine [Lehre] which touches the Christian life so closely.<sup>24</sup>

Someone might think that the question, whether the lending of money on interest is a sin, is not of very great importance because it does not concern an article of faith [Glaubensartikel]. . . . It is true, this question does not concern an article of faith, but it is not for this reason unimportant, because on the one hand it is very closely related to the Christian life, and on the other hand it is a doctrine [eine Lehre] which is contained clearly and plainly in the Holy Scripture. . . . The commandment, "Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," makes it our duty to strive to be agreed not only in the articles of faith, but also in all other doctrines [in allen andern Lehren] which are set forth clearly and plainly in Holy Scripture, and if we are not agreed, to find agreement through the grace of God. 25

Although the Lutheran dogmaticians and early theologians of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod sometimes used the term "doctrine" to denote a moral teaching of the Bible, this usage is relatively uncommon today.

# F. "Dogma," "Article of Faith," and "Teaching" Dogma

In New Testament usage the term "dogma" means a decree. The New Testament does not use it to denote the Christian faith but to refer to commandments, whether of men or of God. See Luke 2:1; Acts 16:4; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Vierzehnter Synodalbericht der Allgemeinen Deutschen Evang.-Luth. Synode, etc., 1869, St. Louis, p. 53.

<sup>[</sup>Schriftlehre]" and "article of faith [Glaubensartikel]" to the question of church fellowship. He wrote: "We indeed know how to distinguish between articles of faith and doctrines of Scriptures which are not articles of faith. On the one hand, we permit no one to turn a clear doctrine of Scripture, whether it may seem great or small, into an 'open question' for us. We consider it necessary to contend to the utmost for every article of faith (on every one of which our faith and hope depend), to condemn the contrary error, and to deny the hand of fellowship to those who contradict stubbornly. On the other hand, we by no means consider it necessary under all circumstances to fight to the utmost for such Scripture doctrines which are not articles of faith, much less to pronounce the anathema on the opposing error (although we reject it) and to deny the hand of fellowship to those who err in this matter. If, in a doctrinal controversy, the dispute is about doctrines which do not belong to the articles of faith, everything depends for us on whether those who contradict show that they do so because they do not want to submit to the Word of God, and therefore on whether, while appearing to let the basic doctrines of the Word of God stand, they nevertheless overthrow the vary foundation upon which all these doctrines rest: the Word of God." Der Lutheraner, XXVII (May 1, 1871), 131.

In the Lutheran Confessions the Latin text at times uses the term "dogmas" for false doctrines. For example, the Formula of Concord states: *Haec dogmata omnia falsa sunt*, and refers to the teachings it condemns as *omnia falsa, ambigua, suspecta et damnata dogmata*. <sup>26</sup>

As a theological term, "dogma" emphasizes the role of the church in formulating her doctrine. In Roman Catholicism a "dogma" is "revealed truth defined by the church."<sup>27</sup> and usually set forth as such by a pope or general council. In other Christian churches "dogma" is often used for those articles of faith which the church has drawn from the Bible and formulated in her creeds and confessions in response to her specific needs. Not all "doctrines" are "dogmas" in this sense, but all true "dogmas" are also "doctrines."

## **Article of Faith**

The Lutheran dogmatician Hollaz writes:

The term, *article*, is derived from *artus*, and this from *arcto*. It properly signifies members of the body closely joined together, as the joints of the fingers closely cohere. Metaphorically, the word article is applied to the parts of the doctrine of faith, which are most intimately joined together. <sup>28</sup>

In this usage "article of faith" emphasizes not only the relationship of parts to the whole but also the intimate relationship of all such parts to saving faith and the Gospel. This understanding underlies the following statement in the Formula of Concord:

We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in [the] doctrine and in all its articles....<sup>29</sup>

Sometimes the term carries the added emphasis that such Biblical teachings are not the product of rational proof and demonstration but are held by virtue of a faith wrought by the Holy Spirit. This is its primary emphasis in the following contemporary statement:

With the whole true Church of God we confess the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God. This inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures cannot be seen with human eyes, nor can it be proved to human reason; it is an article of faith, a belief in something that is hidden and not obvious...<sup>30</sup>

Later 17th-century dogmaticians, following the example of Nicholas Hunnius, made various distinctions within the articles of faith. For them, fundamental articles are those doctrines of Scripture which pertain to the *fundamentum*, or foundation, of saving faith: the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Primary fundamental articles (for example, the person and work of Christ) are in their view constitutive for saving faith and can be neither unknown nor denied without the loss of salvation. Secondary fundamental articles (for example, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper) they regarded as related to the foundation of saving faith but in such a way that persons may be ignorant of them and still possess saving faith.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Formula of Concord, Epitome, XI, 21; Solid Declaration, The Summary Formulation, etc., 19. For a neutral use of "dogma" see the full heading of this latter section of the Formula: "The Summary Formulation, Basis, Rule, and Norm, Indicating How All Doctrines [Latin: *Dogmata*; German: *Lehr*] Should be Judged . . . ."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> The Catholic Encyclopedia, New York, 1913, s. v. "dogma."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Quoted from Schmid, p. 93.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 7; Tappert, p. 493.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> "Theses on Scripture and Inspiration" of The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, as quoted in Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *A Study Document on Revelation, Inspiration, Inerrancy*, p. 15.

For them, nonfundamental articles are Scriptural teachings which do not directly touch the foundation of faith and on that account may be unknown or even denied without destroying saving faith, provided such a denial does not result from a conscious opposition to Holy Scripture. The dogmaticians generally included in this category such doctrines as the sin against the Holy Ghost and the doctrine of angels.

For the dogmaticians, both fundamental and nonfundamental articles are Scriptural doctrines. Questions not answered conclusively by the Scriptures were termed "open questions" or "theological problems." This somewhat complex classification of the articles of faith was primarily intended to emphasize the greater importance of certain Biblical doctrines for the faith of the Christian.

## **Teaching**

The term "teaching" is essentially an Anglo-Saxon synonym of the Latin derivative "doctrine." Its usage is somewhat less technical than that of the term "doctrine." *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* defines "teaching" as follows:

1. the act or profession of one who teaches. 2. that which is taught. 3. Often, **teachings**, doctrines or precepts.

Other standard dictionaries of the English language define the term similarly.

# III. Conclusions and Applications

- 1. The statement and comments adopted by the two seminary faculties in 1956 (see above) remain a sound and useful answer to the question "What Is a Doctrine?"
- 2. In the New Testament and the Lutheran Confessions "the doctrine" generally denotes the entire Christian doctrine viewed as a whole. As used in the question "What Is a Doctrine?" the terms "a doctrine" or "doctrines" reflect the atomistic usage current since the 17th century. Used in this way, "a doctrine" denotes a part of the whole Biblical teaching on Christian faith and life which is distinguished from the whole for purposes of teaching or discussion.
- 3. No matter how skillfully or logically we divide the whole Christian doctrine into convenient parts, or "doctrines," it is important for us to remember that the *one* doctrine God gave us is an organic whole. Therefore only that which is part of this one doctrine can claim the status of "a doctrine" in the Christian church. Moreover, Christians will seek to study the various parts in the light of the whole and as belonging to the whole. Such a practice will help "minister to sound doctrine." (2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1)
- 4. Because the Lutheran Church is pledged to "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel,"<sup>31</sup> she recognizes as a valid articulation of the Christian doctrine only that which is a formulation of the pure and clear teaching of Holy Scripture, the inspired Word of God. Teachings contrary to or improperly drawn from Holy Scripture must be rejected.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, The Summary Formulation, etc., 3; Tappert, p. 503.

- 5. A mistaken exegesis of a passage or section of Scripture does not constitute a false doctrine, provided it does not conflict with any part of the Christian doctrine. However, incorrect exegesis may indeed lead to false doctrine.
- 6. Isagogical judgments, that is, statements dealing with the authorship and background of Biblical books, are not in themselves "doctrine" or "doctrines" but aids to the better understanding of Scripture. While incorrect isagogical judgments are not in themselves false doctrines, it must be remembered that such judgments dare not set aside or call into question the authority of Scripture. For then they endanger not only individual Christian doctrines but the whole Christian doctrine.
- 7. In seeking to determine what is included in the doctrinal agreement necessary for the establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship, the church should be guided by the following statement from the Augsburg Confession:

It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.<sup>32</sup>

The Augsburg Confession makes the preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding of it and the administration of the sacraments in accordance with the divine Word the only absolute doctrinal demands for church unity. Since this article is speaking of "true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God," it is not in the first instance a programmatic statement for the establishment of denominational fellowship. Nevertheless, it has important implications for the latter. A pure understanding of the Gospel, and therefore correct preaching of the Gospel, calls for a correct understanding of the articles of faith treated in the Augsburg Confession, defended in its Apology, and explained in the remaining Lutheran Confessions, particularly the Formula of Concord. All articles of faith are integrally related to the Gospel and articulate the Gospel from different perspectives. Consequently the preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding of it is not possible where any article of faith is either falsified or denied.

8. As demonstrated in the *Theology of Fellowship*,<sup>34</sup> the establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship between denominations depends on unity in the faith, or what the Confessions call "mutual agreement in [the] doctrine and all its articles." Because of the ambiguities and various usages of the term "doctrine," the church in dealing with the question of fellowship would do well to utilize the concept "article of faith." Used by the church long before the Reformation, this term was honored by the Reformers, the framers of the Lutheran Confessions, the Lutheran dogmaticians, and the fathers of the Missouri Synod.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Augsburg Confession, VII, 2; Tappert, p. 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Apology, VII, 31; Tappert, p. 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> *Proceedings*, 1965, pp. 264-291.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 7; Tappert, p. 493.