

The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,
Lutheran Council in the USA,
During 1972-77

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Quotations from **The Book of Concord**, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., **The Book of Concord** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

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Part 6

Theological Diversity in a Confessional Church

LCMS Doctrinal Position

By Albert M. Marcis

The question, "What is included in the official doctrinal position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod?" is important not only as it pertains to the LCMS but also to the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church in America. Although my response to the question is my own and not a "formal statement," I nevertheless hope that it will contribute to this discussion in some positive way.

In answering the question I reached the conclusion that I could state the official doctrinal position of the LCMS by quoting Article II of the Synod constitution and stop at that point. That article says:

"The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:

"1. The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice;

"2. All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit: the three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord."

Such a statement can be met by a similar quote from the ALC and LCA and lead, instead of to consensus, to such varied reactions as, "But you demand more than is stated in your confessional base," and, "You don't demand enough."

To grasp the position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, one might need to quote much history. To avoid that route and yet to present an adequate picture, I have picked out some pertinent statements from the Synod's document, "Theology of Fellowship." This document was prepared over a period of years and was received by the Synod in 1967 to guide it in its understanding and practice

of fellowship. Of particular interest here are statements found in the section, "Church Fellowship in the Lutheran Church in America":

"The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod came into being as a strictly confessional Lutheran body. Its pastors subscribed to the whole Book of Concord, not insofar as (*quatenus*), but because (*quia*) it is a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God.

"The Missouri Synod was not, however, separatistic, but its leaders sought to draw all Lutherans in America together on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions. They tried to achieve this in accord with the pattern of the colloquies held in Germany and other European countries during the decades following the Reformation."

The emphasis continues:

"Missouri, which had come into being as a body strictly loyal to the Lutheran Confessions, had for decades stressed:

"a. That the Confessions must be subscribed to **quia**, not **quatenus**, i.e., because, not merely insofar as, they are correct expositions of the Scripture;

"b. That all doctrines taught in the Confessions are binding;

"c. That subscription to the Confessions must be implemented by corresponding public teaching (**publica doctrina**) in pulpit, in-

struction room, seminary, and in the church's publications, and that all who depart from this norm were to be disciplined."

This is what the LCMS intends to convey by its constitution in stating that the Synod and every member of the Synod accept without reservation "all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church."

The Synod has reserved for itself the right to restate its position on this and other doctrinal matters throughout its history. In the Cleveland convention held in 1962 the Synod said in Resolution 3-17:

"At various times the Synod has adopted doctrinal statements which have grown out of her witness to important issues of the day. Applying the truths of Holy Scriptures and standing under the Confessions, these doctrinal statements have served as the Synod's response to the problems and controversies which confronted the church.

"By way of illustration we note that the Synod in 1881 in her discussions with other members of the Lutheran Synodical Conference adopted the 'Thirteen Theses on Election and Conversion' as a simple and clear statement of her beliefs.

"In 1932 the Synod adopted 'A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod,' which dealt with questions and controversies among Lutherans and with theological issues disturbing the church.

"In 1950 the Synod adopted the 'Common Confession Part I' as a joint statement to serve as a basis for fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the former American Lutheran Church; in 1956 Part II was added to form one document composed of Parts I and II and recognized as a statement in harmony with the Sacred Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

"The convention of 1959 adopted the 'Statement on Scripture,' which was also adopted by the Synodical Conference.

"Such doctrinal declarations stand in the history of our Synod as specific responses to contemporary issues. There is every expectation that such witness will continue as issues arise on which the Synod feels compelled to speak. The Synod has not placed one statement above the others. The Synod regards all the statements as standing under the Holy Scriptures and under the Confessions."

One other significant statement of this resolution uses terminology that is repeated by later conventions of the Synod: "That the Synod beseech all its members by the mercies of God to honor and uphold the doctrinal content of these synodically adopted statements." These statements describe the attitude with which members of the Synod are asked to view synodically adopted statements.

Besides Resolution 3-01 of New Orleans in which the Synod in convention adopted "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles," it also adopted Resolution 2-12 which in the final resolve says:

"That the Synod reaffirm its position (Milwaukee Proceedings, Res. 2-21 and 5-24) that such statements, insofar as they are in accord with the Scriptures and the pattern of doctrine set forth in the Lutheran Symbols, are pursuant to Article II of the Synod's constitution, binding upon all its members."

The word "binding" has caused some within as well as outside the Synod to conclude that Missouri has changed its doctrinal base. The conclusion drawn is that the word "binding" changes Article II of the constitution.

That kind of reasoning does not hold up in light of other resolutions of the Synod which predate the New Orleans convention. In the Cleveland convention in 1962 the Synod said in Resolution 3-16:

". . . we reaffirm our belief in the plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture, the inerrancy of Scripture, and that Scripture is in all its words and parts the very Word of God, as taught in the Scripture itself (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-21) and in the Lutheran Confessions; and be it further

"Resolved, That we reaffirm the Scripturally implicit hermeneuti-

cal principles that the Bible does not contradict itself and that the clear passages of Scripture must interpret the less clear; and be it finally

"Resolved, That we confess unequivocally that all true theological statements and propositions must be in accord with the above stated Biblical principles."

The first two resolves say a lot that can be debated, but aside from that the wording of the last resolve is just as binding as Resolution 2-12 of New Orleans, even though the word "binding" does not appear.

The word "binding" is a threatening word to many, and therefore it should be viewed in light of the Synod's understanding. We can get this from the Cleveland convention, because the circumstances at that time caused the Synod to begin clarifying the position of synodically adopted statements. In that convention we find the words, "That the Synod beseech all its members by the mercies of God to honor and uphold the doctrinal content of these Synodically adopted statements." In 1965 in Detroit the Synod again said: "That we once again remind ourselves by the mercies of God to honor and uphold the doctrinal content of synodically adopted statements under the norms of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions." In New York in 1967 the Synod resolved: "That 'A Declaration on the Status and Use of Synodically Adopted Doctrinal Statements' (Appendix E, Convention Workbook, p. 51) be adopted as correctly expressing the Synod's under-

standing on the status and use of synodically adopted doctrinal statements."

The Appendix E report says: "It is the opinion of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations that the counsel of Synod bearing on this question as recorded in Resolution 3-17 of the Cleveland convention and Resolution 2-08 of the Detroit convention is an adequate and well-formulated answer to this question, thoroughly in keeping with the Holy Scriptures and with the Lutheran Confessions under the Scriptures."

The next paragraph begins: "The confessional principle regarding doctrinal formulations is expressed in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, paragraphs 9 and 10 (**Book of Concord**, ed. Theodore G. Tappert, pp. 505-506)" and then includes that statement from the Confessions.

The next paragraph is a quote from F. Pieper about church government and is followed by this comment: "This quotation is introduced to underscore the fact that the church in formulating doctrinal statements from time to time to meet specific needs does not intend to establish doctrine but to express assent to the teaching of Scriptures."

The concluding paragraph says: "The cited synodical convention resolution, the statement from the Formula of Concord, and the quo-

tation from 'Christian Dogmatics' [by Pieper] should adequately guide the Synod in determining the status and use of synodically adopted doctrinal statements in the ongoing life of the church."

The Denver convention picks up this matter again:

"That the Synod continue to urge its members to honor and uphold the synodically adopted statements as valid interpretations of Christian doctrine and not to give them more or less status than they deserve; and be it finally

"Resolved, That the Synod, in convention assembled, dedicate itself anew to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Synod may also speak successfully to the theological problems which beset it today, resolve the controversies which vex it, and apply Christian discipline" (Resolution 2-27).

At Milwaukee the convention adopted a statement of the Council of Presidents which in part says: ". . . we commit ourselves to the Denver resolutions which request 'that by the grace and mercy of God the Synod abide by its doctrinal position as stated in its constitution (Art. II)' and 'uphold and honor the doctrinal content of the synodically adopted statements under the norms of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions' (2-06); and that 'the Synod in humble

gratitude thank God that He has blessed the Synod with such doctrinal statements' and that the Synod continue 'to urge its members to honor and uphold the synodically adopted statements as valid interpretations of Christian doctrine and not to give them more or less status than they deserve' (2-27)."

Finally, the New Orleans (1973) and Anaheim (1975) conventions of the Synod reaffirmed that insofar as such resolutions are in accord with the Scriptures they are binding on those who accept Article II of the Synod's constitution.

The Anaheim convention also resolved "that a special committee appointed by the synodical President . . . present to the 1977 convention a proposed addition to the Handbook in order to set forth clearly: a. The status of doctrinal statements as distinguished from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions; b. The procedures for the adoption of such statements; c. The procedures for proper expression of dissent and possible revision."

I have deliberately taken the long way around to say that the official position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is stated in Article II of its constitution. Doctrinal statements of the Synod are responses to contemporary issues, and although by action of the Synod some doctrinal statements are designated as more formal, in the final analysis they are doctrinal statements and not to be considered on a level with the Scriptures and the Confessions. By the mer-

cies of God members of the Synod are called upon to honor and uphold them. Since they are the Synod's way of speaking to contemporary issues and setting forth the Synod's understanding of the Scriptures and the Confessions, such statements should serve a good purpose in determining areas of disagreement as well as consensus among Lutherans.