

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 2

Definitions of Gospel, Theology, Doctrine, and Consensus

As Used in the ALC

By Warren A. Quanbeck

GOSPEL

In the theological language of the American Lutheran Church the word "gospel" is used in three senses:

—A form of biblical literature; e.g., the Gospel of Matthew.

—The distinctive Christian message, the good news. This is most commonly formulated among us as the declaration of the forgiveness of sins or the justification of

the sinner by grace through faith. Other formulations of this message are found both in the Scriptures and in the Lutheran tradition. We would regard such formulations as acceptable alternatives if they agree in asserting that the unmerited love of God is freely bestowed in Jesus Christ to repentant sinners who respond in faith to God's gracious Word.

—Within this justifying and liberating Word of God, that which is distinguished from law. In this sense law is the expression of God's creatures; gospel is the announcement of what God has done

for us in Jesus Christ. The word "gospel" must be kept in relation to law, yet carefully distinguished from it. Separation of law and gospel or confusion of the two are serious errors. Separation of the two can change the law into an invitation to works righteousness and the gospel into sentimentality. Confusion of the two can change law into gospel and gospel into law, thus replacing the clear Word of God with a theological muddle.

DOCTRINE

The word "doctrine" is also used in three senses:

—**Doctrina evangelii**, the preaching or teaching of the good news. This usage is mostly confined to theological specialists.

—In a general sense, the teaching of the Christian Church concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ, including the whole range of topics that have been found necessary or appropriate in the formulation of this message.

—In a narrower sense, that which the church has officially defined as a result of doctrinal disputes; e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity.

THEOLOGY

"Theology" is used in at least four senses:

—In the broadest sense, theology is the church's reflection upon its distinctive message, including the study of the Scriptures, the development of doctrine in the life of the church, the formulation of the message in the face of questions raised in the present age, and the working out of the implications of the message in the life of congregations as in preaching, teaching, counseling, worship, and service.

—In a narrower sense it refers to the discipline of systematic theology, including dogmatics, ethics, and apologetics.

—More narrowly it may refer to the discipline of dogmatics as distinct from ethics.

—In yet a narrower sense it occasionally refers to the doctrine of God as a theological topic within dogmatic theology.

CONSENSUS

Consensus in doctrine means agreement in the proclamation and teaching of the gospel. A relatively small group in the ALC would understand this to mean agreement in every article of the Christian faith, from the pre-existence of the Logos to the second coming, from the doctrine of the Trinity to matters of pastoral practice. The majority of ALC theologians would understand this to mean agreement in the actual proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, that is, that Jesus Christ is effectively present in Word and sacrament and actually confronts persons with the offer of forgiveness and life in the gospel.

The majority regard the position of the minority as untenable for at least two reasons. It misunderstands the meaning of **doctrina evangelii** in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. It is an intellectualistic distortion of theology which tends to treat faith in too exclusively intellectual terms and thereby is in danger of losing sight of the integrity of faith as the response of the total person to God's Word in the gospel.