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At the Edge of Subscription: The *Abusus* Doctrine in the Formula of Concord—*Doctrina* or *Ratio*?

William C. Weinrich

I. The Person and Work of Christ in Luther

In his *Large Catechism*, Luther claims that the entire gospel depends on the birth, passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. "If anyone asks, What do you believe in the second article about Jesus Christ?' answer as briefly as possible, 'I believe that Jesus Christ, true Son of God, has become my Lord.'" "Lord", Luther affirms, simply means Redeemer, for Christ has "brought us back from the devil to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and keeps us there."² With these simple words, we are introduced into the center of Luther's thinking. The God who is "for me and for my salvation" is and can be none other than the Jesus of the gospels. And in his work of redemption this Jesus is revealed to be none other than the God who created heaven and earth and brings eternal life to the sinful dead. To summarize: to be God is to redeem from sin, death, and the devil.

In this emphasis, Luther is at one with Irenaeus for whom the power of God lay in his will to create and bring the life of man to its consummation in union with himself. In the writings of Luther, this equation of power and the giving of life is nowhere more clearly put than in his Sermon on the Magnificat:

Just as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues unchanged. Even now and to the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed and living. On the other hand, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed and living, He makes to be nothing,

¹ LC II:27.

² LC II:31.

worthless, despised, wretched, and dying. In this manner no creature can work; no creature can produce anything out of nothing.³

This passage is interesting because it sketches the work of Christ as a "manner of working" in which God forgives the sinner and gives life to the dead. In doing so, Christ reveals that he is the Creator and the Almighty. This theme is extensively worked out by Luther in his Galatians commentary of 1535. The will to redeem from the curse of the law gives form to the person of Christ. He is the one upon whom God placed all the sins of the world, so that Christ became the sinner. Indeed, Christ became the greatest and only sinner (*solus et maxim's peccator*). However, to conquer sin, death, and the wrath of God is the work not of a creature but of the divine power. The work of Christ in his justifying, reconciling work is the work of God. To abolish sin, destroy death, give righteousness, and bring life to light — that is, to annihilate those and to create these — this is solely and alone the work of divine power. "Since Scripture attributes all these to Christ, therefore He Himself is Life, Righteousness, and Blessing, that is, God by nature and essence."⁴ Such passages as these represent Luther's fundamental definition of God and present the center of Luther's understanding of the revelation of God. God reveals himself to be God most clearly in the passion of Christ for the sinner. The humiliation of Christ is nothing other than the revelation of the majesty of God. The sufferings and death of Christ are works of God and are, therefore, victorious and life-creating. One might even say that the humanity of Christ expresses the human form of the divine majesty. Moreover, the unity of Christ's person is wholly necessary for the effectiveness of the redemptive work. Unless the humility of the man Jesus is at the same time the condescension of the divine Son of God, there can be no life out of death, no righteousness out of sin.

II. The Person and Work of Christ in the *Formula of Concord*

When, therefore, in the article on the person of Christ the *Formula of Concord* defines the divine nature in wholly different terms, the question arises whether the problem of Christology has not, in fact, shifted. "To be almighty, eternal, infinite, everywhere at the same time according to nature, that is, of itself to be present according to the property of the nature and its natural essence, and to know everything, are *essential* attributes of

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 21:299 [henceforth LW],

⁴ LW 26:282.

the divine nature."⁵ Did it happen that the intense confrontation with the Reformed concerning the Christological foundations of the real presence had brought to the fore another set of attributes that assumed importance as essential to our understanding of God? In any case, the attributes mentioned above are qualities of the *Deus nudus* or *Deus absconditus*, for such attributes do not constitute the redemptive work of Christ. Indeed, these attributes are set over against the natural characteristics of the human nature. These are: "being flesh and blood, being finite and circumscribed, suffering, dying, ascending, descending, moving from place to another, hunger, thirst, cold, heat, and the like" (Ep VIII.8). How do these two opposite and contrasting natures relate? To articulate an answer to this question was the purpose of what Werner Elert called "the most splendid memorial to the architectonics of the generation that brought the Formula of Concord into being,"⁶ namely, the doctrines of the communication of attributes and the three-fold *genera*. These served to ground the unity of Christ's person through the mutual relations that constituted Christ's person. Certainly, as one can easily see from the *Formula of Concord*, the personal union (*unio hypostatica*) of Christ is the central concern and determinative factor of Lutheran Christology. However, such an emphasis does raise the question to what extent God the Son is active and, therefore, revealed in the work of the incarnation. The same question may be asked in this way: to what extent is the humanity of Christ the instrument for the demonstration of the divine majesty of Christ and in what is this demonstration evinced?

The passage of Scripture that usually provided the outline of an answer to this question was Phil 2:5-11. This famous passage speaks of the Son, who, although in the form of God, "emptied himself" in that he assumed the "form of a servant, becoming in the likeness of men and having been found in form as a man," and "humbled himself becoming obedient unto death." Therefore, God highly exalted him and gave him a Name above every name. The economic schema of this passage is this: divine glory, incarnation, kenosis, exaltation. Martin Chemnitz and those around him distinguished between incarnation, self-emptying, and the exaltation in this way. Common to all Lutheran thinkers, they understood the incarnation to be that act by which the divine Son assumed into his person the man conceived and born of Mary. From the very moment of

⁵ SD VIII:9; Ep VIII.7; (emphasis added).

⁶ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism, vol. 1: The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis/London: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 229.

conception, therefore, the man Jesus was in full possession of the divine majesty and of all divine attributes. As the *Formula of Concord* puts it: "In him [Jesus] 'all the fullness of the deity dwells bodily.'" ⁷ However, the Gospel narratives contain accounts in which Jesus appears to exercise divine power, such as in the water into wine miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11), and they also contain accounts in which Jesus appears to be without such divine power, such as when he says that only the Father knows the time of the end (Mark 13:32). The explanation of this apparent contradiction was to claim that the *kenosis* of the Son in his incarnation was a self-renunciation. That is, the humiliation (TocTrEwcooLc) of the Christ involved an *abusus* of (at least) certain of his divine attributes, that is, the non-use or non-employment of his divine attributes. From time to time, however, and as he willed, Christ could use and manifest his divine power and majesty, as when he raised up Lazarus from the dead. But such demonstrations of divine power were more or less infrequent and extraordinary. In sum, the humiliation/kenosis of Christ lay in the non-use of the divine attributes of majesty that he nevertheless possessed in full. According to this view, *possession but not use* is the short definition of the humiliation of Christ. It is this understanding of the non-use of divine attributes in the state of humiliation that will be examined below.

With this understanding of the kenosis of Christ, his exaltation is correspondingly interpreted to mean the resumption of the use, employment and manifestation of the divine majesty that Christ possessed from the beginning of the incarnation. Here is how Chemnitz expressed it: "By the ascension infirmities being laid aside and self-renunciation removed, he left the mode of life according to the conditions of this world, and departed from the world. Moreover, by sitting at the Right Hand of God, he entered upon the full and public employment and display of the power, virtue, and glory of the Godhead, which, from the beginning of the union, dwelt personally in all its fullness in the assumed [human] nature; so that he no longer, as in self-renunciation, withholds, withdraws, and, as it were, hides himself, but clearly, manifestly, and gloriously exercises it in, with and through the assumed human nature."⁸ *Possession and full and public use* is the short definition of the exaltation of Christ in relationship to his divine attributes.

⁷ Col 2:9; FC VIII:30.

⁸ Quoted in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed. revised and trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1899, 1961), 387-388. Schmid refers the quote to *de duab. nat.* 218.

III. The Relationship between the Person and Work of Christ after the *Formula of Concord*

In his *Doctrinal Theology*, Heinrich Schmid makes the claim that the doctrine of the renunciation and exaltation, as articulated by Chemnitz, was "not so clearly set forth" and "was still undecided" because the dogmatists of that day "were not agreed upon it."⁹ Although Pieper is insistent to the contrary,¹⁰ it does seem true that Johannes Brenz and the theologians who followed him insisted on a different reading of the states of humiliation and exaltation. Brenz takes with full seriousness the implications of the claim that the incarnation consisted in the assumption of the man Jesus into the divine majesty. For Brenz this meant that even in his state of humiliation Christ was not only in full possession of the divine glory and majesty, but that he also exercised this divine majesty fully and at every moment, only not in an open manner but in secret. In no way did the humiliation of Christ lay in the fact of his flesh. Rather, the humiliation of Christ lay in the fact of Christ's servanthood in which the divine glory was hidden, kept hidden and concealed. The lowliness of the Christ was the exercise of divine power in the manner of a servant, and in this sense the majesty that the human nature possessed from the incarnation was concealed and hidden. To give but one example of Brenz: "He lay dead in the sepulchre, in humiliation; living, he governed heaven and earth, in majesty; and this, indeed, during the time of his humiliation, before his resurrection."¹¹

This brings us to a brief consideration of the so-called "Crypto-Kenotic Controversy" of 1619.¹² The controversy was between the theology faculty of Tübingen and the theology faculty of Giessen,¹³ and the question was whether even in his humiliation Christ ruled the universe and all creatures fully and directly also according to his human nature. The question as it

⁹ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 388-389. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-57), 2:300 n. 24 holds that Chemnitz and Brenz "taught the same doctrine"; therefore the "compromise" of the FC is only "alleged" and such opposing views "never existed" (also 2:296 n. 17).

¹⁰ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:300 n. 24.

Quoted in Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 389, emphasis mine, (quoted from Brenz, *De divine majestate Domini nostri ject, Christi*, 1562).

¹² For a thorough review of Lutheran Christological discussion leading to this controversy, see Jorg Bauer, "Auf dem Wege zur klassischen Tübinger Christologie. Einführende Überlegungen zum sogenannten Kenosis-Krypsis-Streit," in *Theologen and Theologie an der Universität Tübingen*, ed. Martin Brecht, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Evangelisch-Theologischen Fakultät (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1977), 195-269.

¹³ Tübingen: Lukas Osiander, Melchior Nikolai, Theodor Thurnnius; Giessen: Balthasar Mentzer, Justus Feuerborn.

was raised in this controversy concerned most specifically whether in his humiliation Christ possessed and exercised the attribute of omnipresence. It is helpful to remember that this controversy arose between Lutherans. The Lutheran assumption that the fullness of deity was possessed by the human nature of Christ even in the state of his humiliation was certain to raise difficulties in the reading of the various evangelical stories of the gospels. The faculties of both Tübingen and Giessen agreed that in the state of humiliation the divine nature of Christ in no sense suffered a diminution of the exercise of its power, nor did the humiliation consist of an actual surrender or diminution of the possession of the divine majesty given to the human nature of Christ at his incarnation.¹⁴ The Tübingen theologians, following the Christological outlines of Brenz, were, however, of the opinion that the attribute of omnipresence was a direct and necessary consequence of the personal union, and therefore the flesh of Christ was to be regarded as omnipresent from the moment of his conception. Where the person of the Word incarnated was, there must be also the human nature. Since the Godhead possesses an utterly absolute simplicity and is completely there wherever it is, there could be for the Tübingen theologians no question of a partial or temporary renunciation of Christ's omnipresence.

The distinction between the state of Christ's humiliation and of his exaltation, therefore, existed only in the manner in which Christ exercised his dominion. In the state of humiliation, on one hand, Christ exercised fully his divine majesty in the form of a servant, that is, in a hidden form. In the state of his exaltation, on the other hand, Christ exercised his dominion openly and in a manner corresponding to his divine majesty. From his conception on, according to the Tübingen theologians, Christ was at the right hand of the Father, for the incarnation means nothing other than this, that the man is assumed into the majesty of God. There was, therefore, no renunciation of the exercise of the majesty of the divine nature through the human nature but a concealment of it in the state of his humiliation. "Christ, according to his human nature, already from the first moment of his conception sat at the Right Hand of the Father, not indeed in a glorious majestic manner, but without that and in the form of a

¹⁴ No one of either faculty, Giessen or Tübingen, represented the view characteristic of 19th century kenoticism, namely, that the humiliation of the Word consisted in the actual divestment of his divine attributes. Among Lutheran theologians perhaps the most famous of such kenoticists was Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875). In his treatment on *Christi Person und Werk*, 2 vols, one may find a thorough discussion of the Crypto-Kenotic Controversy of 1619.

servant."¹⁵ *Possession and concealed use* of the divine majesty in the state of humiliation with *possession and open and glorious use* of the divine majesty in the state of exaltation is the short definition of the Tübingen position.

The Giessen theologians opposed this view. They rejected the idea that in his state of humiliation Christ according to his human nature possessed absolute omnipresence, that is, that Christ was present to all things in heaven and on earth even in his human nature. Rather, they held, the Son of God exercises his divine rule only as the divine Word, not in and through the human nature. Omnipresence was defined as a divine work, and, therefore, the use of such an attribute by Christ was not based on the personal union but on the divine will of the Word. They virtually excluded the human nature of Christ entirely from his work of governing and preserving the world (*regnavit mundum non mediante carne*). The state of humiliation, therefore, involved a strict renunciation of the use of the attributes of divine majesty, but did so by referring the use of such attributes to the Word considered "outside" the human nature. Not surprisingly, the Tübingen theologians perceived in the Giessen position an unacceptable accommodation to the *extra calvinisticum* (that the deity of Christ exists also outside his human nature). In agreement with Chemnitz, however, the Giessen theologians held that the exaltation of Christ involved the human nature receiving the full exercise of the divine majesty. This reception of the full use, however, did not occur until the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Eventually the controversy was mediated by Saxon theologians led by Hoe von Hoenegg. In the so-called *Decisio Saxonica* (1624), the Giessen theologians were in the main judged to be correct. For the most part, later Lutheran orthodoxy rendered the same judgment, although John Gerhard refused to concur with the *Decisio Saxonica*. The Tübingen position was judged deficient because it did not adequately distinguish between the state of humiliation and the state of exaltation and because its claim that in the state of humiliation Christ ruled the world by a direct presence also according to his human nature threatened to make the historical Jesus a mere docetic fantasy. Heinrich Schmidt summarizes the outcome of this controversy:

After the decision (1624) pronounced by the Saxon theologians, . . . those of Tübingen modified their views in this one respect, they also admitted a humiliation in a literal sense, with reference to the functions of the sacerdotal office, so that Christ renounced the use of the divine glory during his passion and death, and in connection with everything that he

¹⁵ Quoted in Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 391.

did in behalf of the work of redemption. But *this* difference still continued between the two parties, that the Tübingen theologians so far as the prophetic and royal functions are concerned, regarded the humiliation as a mere concealment and regarded it as exceptional when Christ during his earthly life renounced the dominion belonging to his human nature. The Giessen theologians considered it, on the other hand, exceptional when Christ during his earthly life made use of his divine majesty through the human nature.¹⁶

In his own judgment of the matter, Karl Barth claims that "the basic view common to all Lutherans, that the man Jesus as such shares the totality of the divine attributes, undoubtedly points in the direction taken in Württemberg with the mere '<pining xpiloco3c [concealed use].'"¹² In this judgment I concur, although for Barth this merely demonstrates the wisdom all along of the Calvinistic *extra canton*. It is a common wisdom of many modern historians of dogma to claim that the *abusus* doctrine, reinforced by the *Decisio Saxonica*, was but a preliminary step toward the kenoticism of the 19th century that affirmed that the incarnation of Christ was itself the humiliation of the divine Son whereby he renounced even the possession of his divine attributes. We need not render a judgment on this historical question, although it is certain that for early Lutheranism any thought of the divine Son divesting himself of his deity in the incarnation would have been wholly unthinkable. The gospel itself, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19), demanded that the man Jesus was none other than the divine Son enfleshed.

At the same time, a consideration of such a controversy may well suggest that under the press of polemic necessities Lutheran thinkers allowed themselves to develop a Christological construct in which the main thing is no longer the main thing. Francis Pieper, a Missouri Synod theologian, avers that the "Crypto-Kenotic Controversy should never have taken place," because it occurred only due to the fact that both parties "temporarily forgot" that one must not go beyond the "clear, certain testimonies in the Scriptures."¹⁸ However, Pieper is a partisan who interprets the controversy under the assumption that the *abusus* doctrine, which he believes is clearly and sufficiently articulated in the Formula of Concord, is in accord with the certain testimonies of the Scriptures. This assumption, however, deserves another look.

¹⁶ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 393. I have simplified the English somewhat.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV, 1.182.

¹⁸ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:300.

IV. Is the *Abusus* Doctrine in the Scriptures?

Werner Elert is of the opinion that the controversy between the Giessen and Tübingen theologians was waged on the basis of false conclusions drawn from the doctrine of the two natures. According to these conclusions, the essence of the divine and human natures consists in "an aggregate of attributes" that can be combined and differ from one another only quantitatively: the human nature knows something, the divine nature knows everything; the human nature is limited to a place, the divine nature is everywhere, and so forth. There had been, Elert concludes, "an involuntary adjustment to the Calvinistic contrasting of the finite with the infinite."¹⁹ "In what an altogether different manner," he wonders, "one could have met the attack on the 'finite capable of containing the infinite' if in accordance with the impact of the Gospel God's inexhaustible will to confer grace had been made, not the *cause* but the *decisive content* of the 'assumption of the human nature.'"²⁰ What Elert has in mind can be clearly seen if we remind ourselves of the adjustment the Tübingen theologians made consequent to the *Decisio Saxonica*. They conceded that in Christ's sacerdotal office, that is, in his passion and death Christ renounced the use of his divine attributes, while in his royal and prophetic offices he both possessed and used the attributes of his divine majesty.

Here then the question might well be raised: does this not make problematic Paul's claim that Christ the Crucified is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:22) or that "God was in Christ reconciling the world" (2 Cor 5:18)? Does not such a renunciation in the sacerdotal office call into question the claim that precisely in his passion and death God was not only willing the sufferings of his Son but indeed effecting his rule in and through the death of his Son? Is not the death of Christ *the* great work of God? Is it not central to Biblical, and to Lutheran, concern that in the passion and death of Christ God is, as it were, most intensely at work and that therefore in this work God is to be confessed as most perfectly and completely revealed? Or, we might consider the apologetic claims of Francis Pieper that "the Lutheran Church simply presents the facts recorded in Scripture, namely, that Christ through the non-use of the divine majesty possessed it as though he did not possess it and thus became wholly like other men in life and death."²¹ This seems to me a wholly incautious comment. Is it true that the Lutheran Church wishes the

¹⁹ Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 243-245.

²⁰ Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 232; (emphasis mine).

²¹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:295.

death of Christ to be "wholly like other men"? Of course, what Pieper most certainly means is true enough: the death of Christ was a true human death. However, does this theological commonplace demand the idea that the death of Christ is only consequent to the renunciation of divine attributes? Is the death of Christ not, in fact, the "revealed omnipotence" of the divine mercy and love?²²

The Reformation was precipitated over the definition of God. Who is God, and how is he known to be the God he is? That question led directly to the intense concern about the person of Christ and, as we have noted above, the fundamental importance of the hypostatic union. But that Christological consideration was itself in no way apart from the Gospel of justification and reconciliation. The true God is revealed as the justifying God: the Righteous God is revealed in the gospel. The *for us and for our salvation* was the guiding interest of Christological development.

And this is true not just for the Lutheran Church. It is also true of the Scriptures. We will take note only of a few passages, all from the Gospel of John. Despite John's talk of the descent and ascent of the Son of Man, this language cannot simply be translated into the categories of the hymn of Philippians 2. For in John's Gospel the ideas of descent and ascent are wholly transformed. As is well-known, in this Gospel the crucifixion of Jesus is his exaltation and in *this* exaltation Jesus is revealed to be the "I am" of God himself (John 8:28; cf. 3:14; 12:34; ἰϋϋϋ ϋϋϋ, fna.) . It is the crucifixion which reveals Jesus to be the God of Israel and the Creator of the world and its Savior. Moreover, in John's Gospel this exaltation by crucifixion is said to be the glorification of the Son. According to Biblical diction, glorification is the making known of God by a visible manifestation. In the Gospel of John this manifestation is the passion and death of Christ. Indeed, in the Gospel of John the cross is depicted as the throne of God. In the perfect obedience of the man Jesus (perfect obedience is the mark of the Son), man assumes again the rule given to him at the beginning, and God assumes again his rule in man.

In sum: in the Gospel of John the crucifixion is the very form of the majesty of God. Here one may well speak of a concealment, but only in the sense of the Christ's own principle, that his power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Pieper follows an exegetical tradition when he writes that the words of John 17:5: "Now, O Father, glorify thou me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world was," "speak of a

²² The phrase comes from Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 230.

glorification which began only with the exaltation." ²³ He is thinking of the resurrection and ascension of Christ. However, in the Gospel of John, which reports these words of Christ, these words refer precisely to the crucifixion of Christ in which the glory of God is to be revealed. Elsewhere in the Johannine literature this glory will be named: it is love. We should remember that the right use of the Scriptures is not a mere balancing of their complex and apparently contrasting statements. The right use of the Scriptures is a reading of them according to their own genius (*analogia fidei*), that is, that we might know the one true God, that is, Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

V. Conclusion

Already in the second century Irenaeus affirmed that we do not know God according to his greatness, but we know him according to his love. ²⁴ The gnostic opponents of Irenaeus understood God's transcendence to be beyond, outside, and above all things, so that no created thing, and no singular name, could in themselves denote the reality of God. God was, as it were, the summation of all names and at best could only be hinted at in the symbolic significance given to every thing and event. In no thing could God be known in his fullness as who he is. This spiritualizing tendency made the knowledge of God possible only by the transcending of the creation and the Creator. They seek a god above the Creator, and therefore they find no god at all. That is the accusation of Irenaeus. Rather, Irenaeus argues, the transcendence of God lies precisely in this, that God wills to be present in each creature, so that for each creature he is Creator, the Giver of life.

This is a doctrine of creation quite similar to that of Luther and is not unlike the notion, developed by Lutheran dogmatics, of immensity according to which God is transcendent above all categories of space. ²⁵ God is not a conglomerate of attributes but is a person who is present where and when he wills. Here the notions of finitude and infinitude lose their meaning. As spatial terms God is neither finite nor infinite. Luther's famous words make the point: "Nothing is so small that God is not still smaller. Nothing is so large that God is not still larger. Nothing is so short that God is not still shorter. Nothing is so long that God is not still longer.

²³ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:298.

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 4. 20.1 (ANF 1:487).

²⁵ For a brief description, see Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol. 2: *God and His Creation* (St. Louis/London: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 79-85. It is interesting to note the importance that Preus gives to the *Decisio Saxonica* in early elaboration of God's immensity.

Nothing is so wide that God is not still wider. Nothing is so narrow that God is not still narrower."²⁶

In his own discussion of the topic, Werner Elert makes use of this aspect of Luther's thinking. "The Word became flesh." Such a statement, rather than suggesting a limitation of God, rather indicates the *locus* in which God chooses to be present and through which he chooses to work. The incarnation reveals "the inexhaustible will of God to confer grace."²⁷ If the incarnation was the assumption of the human nature into the majesty of God, therefore, it was also the assumption of the human nature into "God's will to exercise His rule through the man Christ."²⁸ "In Christ God's omnipotence, His omnipresence, and His omniscience are combined in the will to bring about a reconciliation; they enter the service of that will."²⁹ In this rule the man Christ is central and integral. "Just as it is impossible to separate Christ's humanity from the Logos, so one cannot separate the will to bring about a reconciliation and God's work of reconciliation from His omnipotence."³⁰ The death of Christ, therefore, is not given room by a certain non-use of God's majesty, it is rather that place where the participation of the man Jesus was most perfectly the instrument of the divine rule. One must think of God as he is in his Son. This means that one must think of God as he reveals himself in his will to save. The Son is nothing other than the incarnation of God's will to save. "The Logos born of God takes the form of a servant and renders the obedience of a servant unto death for the very purpose of carrying out the new rule of God that begins in the revelation of salvation."³¹

In the title of this paper, I wondered out loud whether the *abusus* doctrine is *vera doctrina* or *ratio*, an attempt at explanation of true doctrine. The task of dogmatic theology is to articulate and explain the truth of divine revelation. In this task, dogmatic theology gives human thought to divine truth. It is faith in search of understanding. The church must engage in this task, for it is through such thinking that the church answers the question, "What does this mean?" And in this task the church speaks of the truth itself, even as it attempts to give the best and most precise clarifications, explanations, and articulations. But to adopt once more an

²⁶ Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Bohlau, 1883-1993), 26:339.

²⁷ Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 230.

²⁸ Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 245.

²⁹ Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 245.

³⁰ Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 246.

³¹ Elert, *Structure of Lutheranism*, 246.

old distinction that I have also used in another context, there is *lex* and there is *ratio*. The *lex* stands firm and must be held for it belongs to the truth itself. It is this *lex* that is the perennial subject matter of dogmatic reflection. On the other hand, *ratio* is the human attempt to explain the *lex* and may be now good, now better, now less helpful. Within every *ratio* is the implicit question, how do we best think about the *lex*, the *vera doctrina*? Method, starting point, and fundamental working assumptions, therefore, are crucial aspects of every *ratio*.

In this paper I have tried to suggest that perhaps the *abusus* doctrine is in fact a *ratio* that attempts to give a sufficient explanation and defense of the *doctrina*. If so, then the *abusus* doctrine is not required of those who would wish to subscribe to the *Formula of Concord*. The essential doctrine of the *Formula*, and that to which all Lutherans are obligated, is the truth of the hypostatic union, the truth that the man born of Mary is none other than God the Son as man. In person, the Word of God and the son of Mary are identical. In thinking about that doctrine and its necessity for the revelation of God as the God who justifies the sinner, however, perhaps the hypostatic union leads more in the direction of Johannes Brenz than it does in the direction of Martin Chemnitz.