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# The Historical Context of the Smalcald Articles

Kenneth Hagen

The Smalcald Articles of four hundred and fifty years ago were to serve two purposes. First, they were to provide a Lutheran confessional identity in the face of impending political and religious warfare. In the face of the Augsburg Confession and Melanchthon's Apology and the current crisis, the concern of the Elector John Frederick was to have Luther, and not Melanchthon, express the truth concerning Lutheran identity. The second purpose of Luther's authorship was that the Articles were to be his "testament." Luther, who at the time thought that his end was near, says in the preface:

I have determined to publish these articles in plain print, so that, should I die before there will be a council (as I fully expect and hope...), those who live and remain after my demise may be able to produce my testimony and confession.

There is some concern in the scholarly literature, indeed, importantly expressed by Hans Volz and Ernst Bizer, that the Smalcald Articles be seen as Luther's testament and not as a confessional writing. While there was initial confusion about the acceptance and confessional standing of the Articles, they appear in the Book of Concord as Luther's vigorous "testimony."

## *I. The Political Context*

The literature that I have seen on the historical context of the Smalcald Articles has concentrated on the ecclesiastical-political maneuvering of the emperor, pope, and elector, as well as the theologians assigned to describe and defend the Lutheran position. The discussions about where a papal council was to be held were politically explosive. Much was at stake in the deliberations over Placentia, Bologna, and Mantua. The general background for the ecclesiastical-political maneuvering of the 1530s was the papal decision one more time to call a council in the face of the imperial and ecclesiastical demands for reform. To read the history of the events

that led finally to the Council of Trent, beginning in 1545, makes one dizzy—dizzy not so much from the massive detail, but from the roller-coaster character of Vatican politics. The demands for reform would rise only to drop down in defeat. A major Roman Catholic thesis has been that, if a Council of Trent had materialized at the end of the Middle Ages, there would have been no Lutheran movement. The decision of Pope Paul III to convoke a general council to meet at Mantua on May 8, 1537, set in motion the events that led to the Smalcald Articles. The political context for the Articles will now be reviewed as it is generally presented in the literature.

Much of the maneuvering on the part of the elector and the theologians was occasioned by the fact that the papal bull expressly declared that the purpose of the council would be “the utter extirpation of the poisonous, pestilential Lutheran heresy.” The elector was opposed to even hearing the papal invitation. The Lutheran concern throughout the mid-1530s was whether the council would be free and under the authority of Scripture or whether it would be under papal authority. Except for Luther, the Lutheran strategy was to avoid a papal council, where the Lutherans feared adverse judgment and defeat might ensue. Luther’s attitude was consistently rather flamboyant. He was prepared to go anywhere, even to papal Bologna, with neck, head, and fist.

The Lutheran theologians were concerned to avoid the reproach of having prevented a council by turning down the legate. So they made distinctions between a citation and an invitation and between two kinds of citation, one whereby they could defend themselves openly in contrast to one whereby they would be declared as public heretics. The elector did not like these distinctions of the theologians. The elector was concerned that the theological authority for the council be Scripture while the theologians engaged in politics.

Luther was not concerned about the place or the politics but about his “testimony.” Luther had been instructed to prepare articles that were necessary for Lutheran confessional identity, articles that could not be yielded without becoming guilty of treason against God. He was also instructed to prepare articles, expected to be few in number, that were not necessary and that could be yielded in good conscience. Toward the end of 1536 Luther was ready with the articles for the approval of his colleagues, and early in the new year with their subscription he sent them to the elector, who again supported Luther all the way. Luther did not provide any points that might be yielded.

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In fact, Luther was adamant about the necessity of all his articles in their entirety. Luther's articles were adopted by the theologians at the Smalcald meeting early in 1537 and endorsed privately by the Lutheran princes and estates.

These events, then, provided the political-historical context for the Smalcald Articles. The Smalcald Articles, however, are, as stated above, a theological testimony of Luther. The historical context necessarily involves the theology of Luther in the middle and late 1530s. The concern here is that this material and its author be approached in a manner appropriate to its intent, that is, that it be approached as theology in its historical, catholic, and medieval context. In the scholarly literature there is an abundant amount of material on Luther's soteriology, sacramentology, Christology, attitude toward the Jews, contribution to feminism and education, and the like. There is little if any attention paid to Luther's theology—his doctrine of God. At heart and head Luther was a theologian, and at the center of his theology is his doctrine of God. The following pages will look at the theological context of the Smalcald Articles by first looking at Luther's writings at the time and then defining and describing his foundational theological orientation as the grammar of faith based on the Trinity. With such a theological context the final focus will be on the Trinitarian and credal form of the *prima pars* of the Smalcald Articles.

## II. *The Theological Context*

In the middle and late 1530s, as throughout his life, Luther was concerned about Scripture, theology, and creed. In 1534 his translation of the entire Bible was published. At the end of the decade, in a preface to the Wittenberg Edition of his German writings (1539), Luther gave three rules for the correct way of studying theology, that is, the Holy Scriptures: *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*. The rules are derived from David the Psalmist. Thus, Scripture provides its own interpretation. These rules apply only to theology; thus theology is a unique discipline. One does not need prayer or the Holy Spirit to read *Aesop's Fables*. Using David's rules in the study of theology, says Luther in his preface, will lead to singing to the honor and glory of God.

Between 1535 and 1545 Luther was lecturing on Genesis. At the time of the Smalcald Articles he was treating chapter three. This

undertaking was the exegetical context for the first article in the third part of the Smalcald Articles, the article dealing with sin. In his commentary on Genesis three Luther dwells on the immensity of original sin, how "hideous and awful" it is.

In 1536 there appears the *Disputation concerning Justification*. Here Luther reflects on the "mystery of God, who exalts His saints." Justification is "not only impossible to comprehend for the godless, but marvelous and hard to believe even for the pious themselves." To consider justification brings one to the mystery of who God is and what God does. It is "incomprehensible as far as our human nature is concerned." Justification is as *ex nihilo* as was creation. So also theology is *ex nihilo* as far as human possibilities are concerned. A true theologian is created by working frequently on this article.

Something else with which Luther was busy four hundred and fifty years ago was writing a short work published a year later, on the three oldest Christian confessions of faith. He wanted to elaborate on the first part of the Smalcald Articles, "on the lofty articles of the divine majesty." The three symbols or creeds of the Christian faith were the Apostles' Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and Luther's favorite "hymn in honor of the Holy Trinity," namely, the "hymn of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine" (*Te Deum Laudamus*). Luther reviews the heresies that threaten the three articles. All three must be truly believed. If any one is lacking, then all three are lacking. The Christian faith must be whole and complete. In this work he centers on the Trinitarian mystery and the person and work of Christ. The creed sung in the mass every Sunday is to be confessed and not interpreted. Luther is critical of modern, human interpretation. The teaching of Scripture concerning God is to remain uninterpreted and is simply to be confessed as the faith of the church in the form of a hymn.

In the year that Luther published the Smalcald Articles (1538), he also began to write *On the Councils and Churches*, in which he reviews the councils of the early church. In his treatment of the early centuries, Luther does not employ nineteenth-century notions of the development of doctrine. The Christian faith does not develop by the interpretation of theologians or Christians in general. The Christian faith does not become more complete or better understood with the passage of time. The church is a confessing church—confessing, not interpreting, the creed. The creed is a mark of the

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church, along with the Word of God, baptism, the eucharist, the keys, the ministry, and the cross.

Thus, Luther's writings concurrent with the Smalcald Articles concerned Scripture, theology, and creed. The next matter which must be considered is Luther's foundational theological orientation. Throughout his life Luther identified with the understanding of theology as the discipline of the sacred page with a unique grammar, what here will be called the grammar of faith.

For generation after generation, from early times on up through the Reformation, theology was practiced as the discipline of the sacred page (*sacra pagina*). The monastery with its daily liturgy, connected to the sacred page, was the place and context of theology. The final goal of theology was to get home, home to God, home to the Trinity (in Augustine's words).

With the rise of universities in the twelfth century, theology shifted to sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*) as the place shifted to the schools. The schoolmen wrote Bible commentaries; they also wrote theology. Theology was based on the method of *quaestio* and dialectic. The final goal of theology was still the beatific vision. The shift from sacred page to sacred doctrine is the shift from locating the stuff of theology in Scripture to locating the stuff of theology in doctrine ("faith seeking understanding").

With the arrival of the printing press and the scholarship of the Christian humanists, however, theology was seen not as the monk's work of prayer and praise nor as the professor's academic questions and propositions but as the educative task of reviving the classics, both pagan and Christian. The study of the sacred letter of Scripture was to lead not so much to God as to a better society, church, education, and government. Theology as the study of the philosophy of Christ was to lead to piety, morality, and justice.

These approaches of sacred page, doctrine, and letter were mixed and matched during the early and late Reformation. Luther continued the discipline of the sacred page minus monastic discipline. The Council of Trent continued the discipline of sacred doctrine. The rise of the historical-critical methods of biblical introduction, biblical theology, and biblical hermeneutics during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries continued humanistic methods. The goal of the historical-critical method is to understand the letter of the text. The goal of sacred doctrine is to understand the faith of the Roman Catholic Church. The goal of the sacred page is to prepare for the kingdom of God.

For some (few) today theology is still allied with the sacred page. For many (most) theology has become allied in the modern era with philosophy, psychology, sociology, politics; in other words, theology becomes interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Theology is a science with such a plethora of allies; theology has many friends. But does theology today have any enemies? For Luther, if theology is true to its discipline of the sacred page, it will have a whole host of enemies; the demonic forces will be stirred up. Theology is engaged in a cosmic battle in Augustine's and Luther's world (not so for Erasmus). For Luther, theology does not engage in friendly interdisciplinary conversations. It speaks for God in the public arena. In his various commentaries on Galatians throughout his life Luther was conscious of the public character of his work and that the public included the demonic forces. Theology's enemies are God's enemies, the pseudo-apostles who come to the centers of faith. Theology is to speak for God against the false teachers in the public arena.

Luther's understanding of communication of theology was different from his contemporary and our contemporary humanist methods. For the humanist, sacred literature is in print for public edification. Luther was not so interested in printing the Gospel as in publishing the good news which is the Word of God. The church is not a pen house but a mouth house, said Luther. Luther was a leader in advocating schools for boys and girls so that they could learn to read. Education must be publicly supported; otherwise Germany might lose it as did Greece and Rome. But education is not communicating theology.

To communicate or speak for God entails a continual public battle. The cosmic battle between God and Satan does not take place in print. The form that the defense of God takes is the theology of Scripture. The form that the defense of Satan takes is blasphemy. Both are public in nature. To allow blasphemy to take place is to commit complicity. Blasphemy is a continual problem. To be silent in complicity is to support the opposition. There is no neutral zone. Either God is winning or the devil is. One way to understand Luther's opposition to the Jews, rather fierce at the time of the Smalcald Articles, is to understand his view of complicity. He believed that the Jews were perpetrating blasphemy publicly. Luther did not attack particular Jewish individuals. No, it was their Judaism and blasphemy. The Gospel must be publicly defended and the opposition attacked. Then one is true to the discipline of the sacred page.

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Why did Luther publish another commentary on Galatians in the same year in which the Smalcald Articles were published? Had he not just published such a work three years earlier in 1535? Had not several editions of Galatians appeared earlier than that? Did Luther change his mind or come up with new interpretations during these years? Absolutely not; it was necessary to publish a commentary on Paul because of Luther's understanding of a *commentarius*.

One cannot assume that a commentary in one century is the same as a commentary in another. When Luther's *Commentary on Galatians* is edited and translated in modern editions, one cannot call it a commentary in the sense of modern exegesis. In fact, Luther himself says that, if one wants a commentary, he should see Erasmus. Luther says that his work is "less a commentary than a testimony to my faith in Christ." Both his so-called commentary and the so-called Smalcald Articles are singular testimonies to his singular faith in Christ. Luther's own word for his public defense of Galatians is *enarratio*. *Enarratio* connotes a public dimension. He is making public the one doctrine, truth, grace, and Christ. Luther is not primarily concerned about the text of Galatians. That would be *narratio*, narrating the text. *Enarratio* is to take out of the text the theology and to apply it in public. It is to publish the doctrine, the soteriology, and the Christology of Paul.

The modern introductions to Luther's various works on Galatians, which are perceived as commentaries in the modern sense, describe them as containing revisions, being shorter or longer, as making progress, or being abbreviated. Such descriptions are ridiculous. When one realizes what Luther's work is, namely, theology, such an idea would be equivalent to saying that Luther revised the doctrine of the Trinity, shortened or lengthened his soteriology, made progress in his Christology, or abbreviated his faith. The treatment of Scripture in the genre of *enarratio* is very old. It goes back to Augustine, the Psalter, and Isaiah. It is to praise the glory of God. A Scriptural *enarratio* is a *catena* (chain) of praises to the glory, the grace, and the justice of God. In the dedication to his commentary on Galatians Luther says that his purpose is to interest others in Pauline theology. Thus, his *enarratio* on Galatians seeks to promote the Gospel that Paul promotes. It is not a matter of interpreting Paul. It is a matter of publishing Paul's theology.

In his various publications of Galatians Luther is always conscious of Paul's linguistic style. Paul's peculiar language must be taken very

precisely. Today we would say that Paul says what he means and means what he says. One of Luther's strongest statements on the interpretation of Scripture is his assertion that Christ Himself gave Paul these special phrases. Luther indeed attempts to describe the various individual aspects of Paul's peculiar language: Paul's mode of argument, Paul's logic, Paul's use of metaphor, Paul's rhetoric, and Paul's grammar. "If you want to be studious in Christian theology, you must diligently observe this kind of Pauline language," says Luther in 1535. If you want to understand this kind of theology, you have to pay special attention to Paul's vocabulary and syntax, the logic and the idioms, the rhetoric and the grammar.

Paul uses a unique grammar as does all of Scripture. The grammar of the Psalter is different from the grammar of Aristotle. Each of these grammars has its place, but one must deal with each in terms of what it is. Paul's grammar is not that of nineteenth-century German idealism. The Bible was not written in Germany. The grammar of the Psalter is not that of nineteenth-century European notions of development, progress, and evolution. There is no progress in the Psalter. There is no development in God. Paul's theology does not evolve.

The challenge to modern historical-critical methods is that of consistency in method. To deal with Scripture on the basis of nineteenth-century philosophical hermeneutics is not consistent. To use modern grammars to interpret Scripture's unique grammar is to cast Scripture into a world that is not its own. One must deal with Scripture in terms of what it is.

What is Scripture? Scripture was written from faith, to faith, about faith, for faith in God. Scripture has its own grammar, meaning, and vocabulary. The basic form of Scripture proceeds from faith to faith. It is the faith of the Christian creed. Scripture comes from God; the mechanics bring us outside the realm of faith. God has a word to say. The promise is unconditional. The promise is given to faith. The promise is validated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The inheritance is guaranteed by the Spirit who moved over the waters at creation and who moves over the waters of our baptism. It is the Trinity, then, that provides the unity of the vocabulary, the morphology, the syntax, the grammar of faith.

What insights can be gained from the discipline of *sacra pagina* to deal with the grammar of faith? The distinct feature of *sacra pagina* is that it sees sacred matters as a page, not as doctrine and not as literature. Sacred doctrine and literature have their place, but their status is derivative. They come from Scripture but they are not *pagina*. The sacred page is directly of God. It is *divina* and not *humana*. The grammar of assent has to do with doctrine and linguistics. The grammar of faith has to do with *divina* directly. The grammar of Athens has to do with the dialect of the city. The grammar of faith is a unique dialect. Luther often claimed in the face of the medieval four-fold sense of Scripture that Scripture has one single, simple grammatical sense. The grammatical sense most often refers to Christ. The grammar of faith is from God, about God, for God, and finally to God, Three in One.

Luther's foundational theological orientation should now be clear from the preceding aspects of it—the discipline of *sacra pagina*, the public character of theology, his commentary as the publication of Pauline theology, and the uniqueness of Paul's grammar. Luther's theology, then, is derived from the grammar of faith, which in turn comes from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Having considered Luther's other writings at the time of the Smalcald Articles and his theology as derived from the grammar of faith based on the Trinity, the *prima pars* of the Smalcald Articles takes on a new significance. It treats *divina* in Trinitarian and creedal form:

- I. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. . .are one God, who created heaven and earth.
- II. The Father is begotten of no one; the Son is begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and Son.
- III. The Son became man.
- IV. The Son became man in this manner. . .as the Creed of the Apostles, as well as that of St. Athanasius, and the Catechism in common use for children teach.

The Smalcald Articles were to serve two purposes: to provide a distinctly Lutheran confessional identity and to serve as Luther's testament. Luther's testimony based on the grammar of faith is Trinitarian and creedal. Thus, Luther's preface concludes: "Do thou, then, help us, who are poor and needy, who sigh to Thee, and beseech Thee earnestly, according to the grace which has been given us, through Thy Holy Spirit, who lives and reigns with Thee and the Father, blessed forever. Amen."

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