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The Smalcald Articles as a Systematic Theology: A Comparison with the Augsburg Confession

H.P. Hamann

For Lutherans *quod non est biblicum non est theologicum*. According to the clear and sharply phrased sentence of the Formula of Concord: "We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachings alike must be appraised and judged." Theology, then, is an account of the teaching or doctrine or sum of the Scripture presented in intelligible terms for contemporary man, where the word "contemporary" means man of any time or place existing at the same time as the one giving an account of what the Bible says. So the theology of the Smalcald Articles and of the Augsburg Confession is the account by men of the first half of the sixteenth century to men living at that time. The nature of these two writings as confessions *in conspectu diei ultimae* does not concern us in this essay—at least, not until the appendix.

The idea "systematic theology," in my judgment, can be taken appropriately in one of two ways. It can mean, first of all, a theology conceived from one dominating point of view, in which all the main sections, and even subordinate ones as well, can be seen as parts of one central theme. This I call a synthetic way of proceeding, because of its close parallel to sermons constructed in this way. Pieper, by the way, uses the terms "synthetic" and "analytic" as applied to the method of presenting the Christian faith or Christian theology quite differently. As examples of this kind of system we might mention Schleiermacher, whose presentation is a development of the theme of "Self-Consciousness," F.A. Philippi and his central theme of fellowship, and Emil Brunner and Helmut Thielicke, who operate with the basic theme of revelation. The Reformed Cocceius worked with the idea of covenant. Other systems develop the whole of theology from the Three Articles of the Creed, or from Christology, or from the theme of the Kingdom of God.

As I see it, the most popular way is to proceed analytically, even today, and to work with the time-honoured *loci*, in the manner of

Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Horst Georg Poehlmann also uses the local method in his very handy *Abriss der Dogmatik*. It might seem that the local method of proceeding is non-systematic by the very method adopted. However, that is not the case, if there is a consistent theology clearly discernible running throughout the various *loci* taken up for treatment. This consistency would be demonstrated especially in the way a central concern—in fact, *the* central concern of the writer, the thing which means more to him than anything else—shows up, no matter what topic (*locus*) one is dealing with at any particular moment.

In what category of systematic theology do the two Lutheran confessional writings that concern us at the moment fit? Obviously, neither fits the first category. Luther's words at the beginning of each of the three parts of the Smalcald Articles show that he is following a purely formal scheme in the division of material. Here are his guidelines:

1. "The first part of the Articles treats the sublime articles of the divine majesty." At the conclusion of the four articles in this first part he writes: "These articles are not matters of dispute or contention, for both parties confess them. Therefore, it is not necessary to treat them at greater length."
2. "The second part treats of the articles which pertain to the office and work of Jesus Christ, or to our redemption." At the close of the first article in this part, Luther writes: "On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world."
3. "The following articles treat matters which we may discuss with learned and sensible men, or even among ourselves."

It is strange, after reading the last statement, to find almost at the end of the treatment of the fifteen matters of the third part also this statement: "These are the articles on which I must stand and on which I will stand until my death. I do not know how I can change or concede anything in them. If anybody wishes to make some concession, let him do so at the peril of his own conscience." So, finally, the whole of the Smalcald Articles is something on which no concession can be made. To sum up, it is quite clear that we do not have a systematic theology of the first category in the Smalcald Articles. We have a series of articles bound together by the thought of what is agreed on by both parties, the evangelicals and the Roman

Catholics, by what cannot be yielded in negotiations, and by what may be amicably discussed. This is the ostensible division, but really, as we have seen, nothing can be conceded by Luther, and others are warned against conceding anything. so we have the formal list of agreements and disagreements, but finally the total list is non-negotiable. All this is purely formal, and there is no systematic development of a theme.

The same situation holds in respect of the Augsburg Confession. There we have twenty-one articles of faith, where it is claimed that agreement exists between those confessing and the Roman Church, followed by seven articles in which various matters regarded as abuses are discussed, abuses which have crept into the church over the years, abuses which are contrary to God's will. This is plainly the *loci* method of arrangement, and only rarely are there explicit indications of the relation between the various articles. So what remains is to examine the two confessions to find out whether some consistently applied principle underlies the various articles in the Smalcald Articles and in the Augsburg Confession, and to determine whether we have the same basic principle or differing principles in these confessions.

I. *The Smalcald Articles*

It is hard to miss the underlying principle or matter of concern in these articles. It appears repeatedly, running like a recurring refrain throughout. We start with Article I of the Second Part ("Christ and Faith"). This is described as "the first and chief article," and it puts together the following elements: the atoning death of Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:25; John 1:29; Isa. 53:6; Rom. 3:23-25); the uselessness of works, law, or merit for the appropriation of this act of God in Christ; and faith in Jesus Christ as the sole means of such appropriation, so that "a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law." Of this doctrine, that man is justified alone on account of the atoning, vicarious death of Christ (*propter Christum*), through faith as the means of reception of the gift of salvation (*per fidem*) completely apart from works, law, merits of any kind, Luther goes on to declare: "Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed (Acts 4:12; Isa. 53:5)." Article after article is determined by this central concern. In Part Two, the Roman Mass is rejected as "running into direct and violent conflict with this fundamental article. . . for it is held that this sacrifice or work of the mass delivers men from their sins, both here in this life and yonder in purgatory,

although in reality this can and must be done by the Lamb of God alone, as has been indicated above” (Part Two, II, 1; a judgment repeated in respect of the mass also in Part Two, II, 5). The same judgment is made in respect of a number of teachings and practices seen as brought about by the mass, like purgatory (II, II, 12), pilgrimages (II, II, 19—at least implicitly here), relics (II, II, 23—also implicitly), indulgences (II, II, 24) and the invocation of saints (II, II, 25). It must be regarded as something of a slip on Luther’s part that in his summary of Article II of the Second Part, dealing with the mass, he does not assert what has been repeated again and again, and that he introduces another thought, important in itself but not the one that should have been mentioned in this context: “In short, we. . . must condemn the mass. . . in order that we may retain the holy sacrament in its purity and certainty according to the institution of Christ and may use and receive it in faith.”

The refrain recurs further in the other articles of Part Two—in his comments on chapters and monasteries (II, III, 2) and the papacy (II, IV, 4) by implication: “This is nothing less than to say, ‘Although you believe in Christ, and in Him have everything that is needful for salvation, this is nothing and all in vain unless you consider me your god and are obedient and subject to me.’ ” The same application is to be found in the declaration that the pope is the Antichrist and where a somewhat lengthy description is given of his activities (II, IV, 9-14), especially the statement: “However, the pope will not permit such faith but asserts that one must be obedient to him in order to be saved. This we are unwilling to do even if we have to die for it in God’s name.” The summary of the articles of the Second Part repeats the refrain by implication also (II, IV, 15).

We would not expect the refrain to appear so often in the Third Part, but it appears here as well. One of the longest articles in the Smalcald Articles is that entitled “Repentance.” The constitutive factors of the chief article of the faith are obviously central to what Luther will say on this head, and the negative of this must also show up in the section entitled “The False Repentance of the Papists,” as in the sentence: “There was no mention here of Christ or of faith. Rather, men hoped by their own works to overcome and blot out their sins before God” (III, III, 14). We may compare with this the following passage: “This is the repentance which John preaches, which Christ subsequently preaches in the Gospel, and which we also preach. With this repentance we overthrow the pope and everything that is built on our good works” (III, III, 39). There are

other passages like this, but quoting them is hardly of any consequence, since the article as a whole, with the positive presentation of the repentance of the evangelicals and the negative presentation of that of the papists, is one long, continued exposition of the chief article. In addition to the section just mentioned, the refrain appears also in the section dealing with monastic vows: "Since monastic vows are in direct conflict with the first chief article, they must be absolutely set aside" (III, XIV, 1).

It is to be noted that Part I of the Smalcald Articles takes an independent position in relation to the rest—a fact to some extent that is in opposition to the contention that there is a systematic theology observable in the Smalcald Articles. In Part I the Trinity is briefly and strongly stated, the divine-human person of the Son who became flesh likewise, but there is really no attempt to bring together in a systematic view Part I with the subsequent material of the Smalcald Articles. Part II, of course, begins with the office and work of Christ, whose person and incarnation were taken up in Part I, but the formal division Luther had in mind (articles in agreement and disagreement between himself and Rome) controlled completely his thinking at the beginning of the writing, and the unifying power of "the first and chief article" did not make itself felt till after that article had been expounded.

The situation is different in the Augsburg Confession. This confession, while starting in much the same way with articles on God and the Son of God—the second article, on original sin, indicates a clear difference from the Smalcald Articles—links the work and office of Christ and His continuing work through the Holy Spirit more closely to the sublime articles concerning God than do the Smalcald Articles. Thus, in the article on the Son of God we have attached to the "crucifixus, mortuus et sepultus" these words: ". . .in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath" (German) or ". . .that He might reconcile the Father to us and be a sacrifice not only for original guilt but also for all actual sins of men" (Latin). Christ's work through the Spirit is described in the one case (German) as ". . .He sits on the right hand of God. . .that through the Holy Spirit He may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in Him" and in the other case (Latin) as ". . .to sit on the right hand of the Father. . .and sanctify those who believe in Him by sending the Holy Spirit into their hearts to rule, comfort, and quicken them and defend them. . ." ("misso in corda eorum spiritu sancto"). This

difference between the beginnings of the Augsburg Confession and the Smalcald Articles may fittingly lead us to see whether there is also an underlying principle in the Augsburg Confession.

II. *The Augsburg Confession*

To demonstrate such a unity is a trifle more difficult in the case of the Augsburg Confession than in the Smalcald Articles. There is no such prominent paragraph as that standing at the beginning of Part Two of the Smalcald Articles. However, a clue does exist, and that is to be found in the word that connects Article V with Article IV and also Article VI with Article IV. Article IV, on justification, runs in the translation of the Latin text: “our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favour and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by His death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight (Rom. 3, 4).” Now, Article V begins: “Ut hanc fidem consequamur. . .”; and Article VI begins: “Item docent quod illa fides debeat bonos fructus parere. . .” No other articles of the Augsburg Confession are tied together in this way. The hint is given, then, to look for recurrences of the close connection between justification, the ministry of the Gospel, and the new obedience or statements about good works. If there is a repeated reference to this nexus of ideas, we have a right to say that such a nexus forms the underlying unity in the separate twenty-one (twenty-eight) articles—that in the doctrine of justification we have the systematic principle of the theology of the Augsburg Confession.

Other hints of connections between the articles of the Augsburg Confession are suggested. It is asserted, for instance, that, as Article V develops Article IV, so Article V is more precisely defined by Articles VII-XIV. The term *ministerium* is picked up in Articles VII, VIII, and XIV (in VII and XIV the word is picked up only in the verbal form *administrare*), while Articles IV-XIII further develop the phrase “Gospel and sacraments.” So the ecclesiological reference of Article IV is to be seen. This may well be true, but I am not so sure that we do not have here the modern systematizing of Gerhard Müller and Vinzens Pfnür at work rather than that of Melancthon.

A search of the Augsburg Confession for an underlying principle, now, does produce two clear facts: (1) that there is repeated insistence on the teaching of justification for Christ’s sake, through faith alone, and (2) that no other such repetition of ideas can be found. As for

the first assertion, we have already shown how the fourth article determines both Article V and Article VI. The faith through which God's grace and forgiveness come to the sinner makes necessary God's institution of the ministry—that is, the provision of the means of grace, the Gospel and the sacraments. That same faith naturally leads to good works; it must produce good fruits. The sixth article goes on to state again the teaching of Article IV, lest the insistence on good works just stated be misunderstood as reinstating good works as a cause of salvation or of God's grace: "We must do so because it is God's will and not because we rely on such works to merit justification before God, for forgiveness of sins and justification are apprehended by faith. . ." (Latin).

The next article in which the underlying principle comes through clearly is Article XII ("Repentance"): "Properly speaking, repentance consists of these two parts: one is contrition. . .and the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, believes that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terror. Then good works, which are the fruits of faith, are bound to follow. The sacraments (Article XIII) are said "especially to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, intended to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them" (Latin). In Article XV ("Ecclesiastical Rites") the warning is erected: "Men are admonished not to burden consciences with such things, as if observances of this kind were necessary for salvation. . .human traditions which are instituted to propitiate God, merit grace, and make satisfaction for sins are opposed to the Gospel and the teaching about faith. Wherefore vows and traditions about foods and days, etc., instituted to merit grace and make satisfaction for sins, are useless and contrary to the Gospel." We have a hint of the big truth in Article XVIII ("Free Will") in this phrase: "However, it [man's will] does not have the power, without the Holy Spirit, to attain the righteousness of God. . .but this righteousness is wrought in the heart when the Holy Spirit is received through the Word." Obviously, Article XX ("Faith and Good Works") is an important one in this context. It is the most fully treated article in the Augsburg Confession and deals at length with the teaching mentioned briefly in Articles IV, V, and VI. To quote the various pertinent statements would be both wearisome and unnecessary. However, one sentence is absolutely necessary, for it is a deliberate statement about the heart of the Christian faith, one on all fours with the big statement of Luther in the Smalcald Articles: "Inasmuch, then, as the teaching

about faith, which ought to be the chief teaching in the church [Latin; German: "which is the chief article in the Christian life"], has been so long neglected. . . , our teachers have instructed our churches concerning faith as follows." Then follows a setting forth of the doctrine of justification at some length and of its relation to good works. In connection with the final article of the basic twenty-one of the confession ("The Cult of Saints"), the point is made that, while it is good to imitate the faith and good works of the saints, it is wrong to pray to them or to seek their help, "for the only mediator, propitiation, high priest, and intercessor whom the Scriptures set before us is Christ."

In the articles relating to abuses, the central concern appears regularly except in those entitled "Both Kinds" and "The Marriage of Priests," where one would hardly expect to find such a reference in any case. So in Article XXIV ("The Mass") it is claimed that the confessing churches admonish the people "concerning the value and use of the sacrament and the great consolation it offers to anxious consciences, that they may learn to believe in God and ask for and expect whatever is good from God." In opposition to the developments of the mass common at the time, the Augsburg Confession says: "Concerning these opinions our teachers have warned that they depart from the Holy Scriptures and diminish the glory of Christ's passion, for the passion of Christ was an oblation and satisfaction not only for original sin but also for other sins. . . The Scriptures also teach that we are justified before God through faith in Christ. Now, if the mass takes away the sins of the living and the dead by a performance of the outward act (*ex opere operato*), justification comes from the work of the mass and not from faith." In Article XXV ("Confession") we have: "Our people are taught to esteem absolution highly because it is the voice of God. . . and people are reminded of the great consolation it brings to terrified consciences, are told that God requires faith to believe such absolution as God's own voice from heaven, and are assured that such faith truly obtains and receives the forgiveness of sins." In Article XXVI ("The Distinction of Foods") reference is made to the common teaching that the distinction of foods and similar human traditions "are works which are profitable to merit grace and make satisfaction for sins," of which teaching it is held that "from this opinion concerning traditions much harm has resulted in the church." Then follows a particularly strong assertion of the central truth of the faith: ". . . it [the opinion concerning traditions] has obscured the doctrine concerning grace and the righteousness of faith, which is the chief

part of the Gospel and ought above all else be in the church, and be prominent in it, so that the merit of Christ may be well known and that faith which believes that sins are forgiven for Christ's sake may be exalted far above works and above all other acts of worship." The Augsburg Confession continues on in the same strain at this place for a number of sentences (XXVI:4-7). The article on monastic vows (XXVII) contains in a lengthy section determined by the central concern (XXVII: 36:43) also this sentence: "Every service of God that is instituted and chosen by men to merit justification and grace without the command of God is wicked. . . Paul also teaches everywhere that righteousness is not to be sought for in observances and services devised by men but that it comes through faith in those who believe that they are received by God into favour for Christ's sake." Finally, in the article relating to ecclesiastical power (XXVIII), there is repeated reference to the same central concern (XVIII:5, 36, 50-52, 62). I refer only to sections 50-52: "Inasmuch as ordinances which have been instituted as necessary or instituted with the intention of meriting justification are in conflict with the Gospel, it follows that it is not lawful for bishops to institute such services. . . It is necessary to preserve the doctrine of Christian liberty. . . It is necessary to preserve the chief article of the Gospel, namely, that we obtain grace through faith in Christ and not through certain observances or acts of worship instituted by men."

This review of the Augsburg Confession has shown that Article IV is the chief, the central, the unifying article of the Augsburg Confession and the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. It is this article, too, which provides the norm for determining what are abuses in the church. The fact needs emphasis that it is really only the teaching concerning justification which is repeatedly referred to as a touchstone and criterion of what is valid and what ought to be taught in the church. There is appeal to no other criterion. It is this teaching which alone is systematically made use of throughout the Augsburg Confession. Naturally, there are references to the Scriptures and to the authority of the biblical writers, especially St. Paul, but these references are never appeals to a mere formal authority. The Scriptures are appealed to because of the Gospel they proclaim as the Word of God, because of Christ and His salvation which they teach. Thus, in the doctrine of justification we have the unifying systematic of the Augsburg Confession.

The result of our study may be summarized quite briefly. Both the Smalcald Articles and the Augsburg Confession are systematic

theologies in the same sense—they are determined in all their assertions by one fundamental view of the Christian faith, consistently applied. What is asserted of the Christian faith is what can be shown to be consistent with the central concern. No other principle can be shown to be made use of in this way. And in both confessions it is the same fundamental view of the Christian faith which is so treated, the doctrine of justification by faith.

III. *Appendix*

I am concerned in this addition with the present situation in the church generally, and in the conservative Lutheran church particularly. As for the church in general, we have in what has been distilled from the Augsburg Confession and the Smalcald Articles the Lutheran non-negotiables. There is absolutely no difference between the two writings in this regard. The only difference in them is a difference in tone. If one wants to put forward an irenic document in the interests of church unity, one would hardly choose the Smalcald Articles. But the use of the Augsburg Confession as such a document would not change a thing in the long run. The perceptive Roman Catholic will see behind the form of Luther's remarks, behind the sharp, bitter, angry, and sometimes insulting language, what Luther is really concerned about, as he will also not be misled by the irenic language of Melanchthon. There is one unmistakable toughness of basic outlook. There can be no surrendering anything of this central teaching, for it is the very heart of the revelation of our God through His Son, as it is the only doctrine which can give comfort to the conscience and freedom to face life with all its rigors and freedom to love our fellowman with all his sins and ugliness.

And there is an important lesson (directive) for the conservative Lutheran church to be drawn from these two confessions and their systematic—any rejection of false teaching or of false directions taken by the church must be such as directly relates to this central doctrine of the Gospel. Luther and Melanchthon fought against the mass, the cult of the saints, false repentance, various ecclesiastical rites and practices, and monastic vows from this central concern. So we must today take up any front we need to take up from the same central concern, not from any other principle. There is an undoubted temptation to face wrong developments in the conservative Lutheran church by direct argumentation from Scripture as a formal authority. Such and such is wrong because it is contrary to such and such a

passage or such and such passages. In a way it is easy to proceed in this way, but it is also a legalistic way, for it deals with Scripture as though it were a codex of laws. But the formal principle of the Reformation—not to be attacked in any way—apart from its material principle is really nothing at all. Let the sects enjoy such a Bible. I should willingly turn from the Sacred Scriptures, eviscerated of Augsburg IV, to the classical writers of Greece—to Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides—or to the great literatures of Rome, England, and Germany, and so on. A false doctrine is not something that is contrary to some biblical passage, but something that is contrary to what Scripture itself points to as its center. “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to Me” (John 5:39). So we conservative Lutherans reject the struggle for a more just society as the programme of the church not because it is something wrong in itself, but because that is not the task given to the church; because if the church turns to that as its task, it is only doing what any man of goodwill can and will do, and then there is nobody left to sound the trumpet call of Augsburg Confession IV in the world. And our opposition to charismatics and those infected with Pentecostalism arises because human works traceable to the Spirit of God are set up as a basis of human faith and confidence in the place of our Lord Jesus Christ. But to bear witness to Christ is the sole work of the Spirit—“for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak. . . He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13,14). And we shall not try to oppose the charismatics on the basis of formal argumentation from a biblical passage or a series of biblical passages.

Another example concerns the understanding of the first chapters of Genesis. Clearly, the Gospel is directly and inseparably linked with much that these chapters have to say. The Gospel is directly tied up with the teaching that God is the Creator of all that exists, that without Him was not anything made that was made, so that any other explanation to the origin of the universe (e.g., evolution) has to be rejected. It is directly tied up with the teaching that God as the good God did not create man as a sinful creature, so that there was a *status integritatis* and original sin is a corruption of human nature, not essentially part of human nature itself. The Gospel is directly tied up with the teaching that there was a real fall from the original sinless state of created mankind. So also the Gospel is tied up with the teaching that God was from the beginning concerned

about the redemption of fallen man. But there is no connection between the Gospel and the mode or length of time of creation. One hundred and forty-four hours of sixty minutes each are as irrelevant as lengthy periods of time, and just as irrelevant are the world-view of the first book of the Bible and that which is generally accepted now. It is an attack on the Gospel to make differences of exegesis on these matters disruptive of church fellowship.

It may be good to note here that the principle with which we have been concerned, that of justification by faith, has also a role to play in the positive teaching of the Christian faith—namely, only what is in keeping with that central truth can be sent forth as Christian doctrine or dogma. It should be clearly noted that I am not saying that the Christian doctrine can be derived from this center, only that there can be no Christian doctrine which is incompatible with this center. The sacraments, to take the most important example, are not derived—cannot, in fact, be derived—from the central principle. They rest solely on the dominical mandate, and that we have in Sacred Scripture. But they can also be shown not only to be compatible with the central teaching of justification by faith, but to be that central teaching itself in another form.

Thus, the doctrine of justification by faith is the criterion of all that is taught or that has the right to be taught as the very truth of God. What is derived from the Sacred Scriptures and is not in opposition to itself it permits; what is contrary to itself it rejects. This is the big lesson for the confessional Lutheran church that is plainly derived from its own confessional writings. And where we have that principle in operation—clearly, plainly, unmistakably so—there we have a systematic theology, no matter what method of procedure the theologian adopts.