

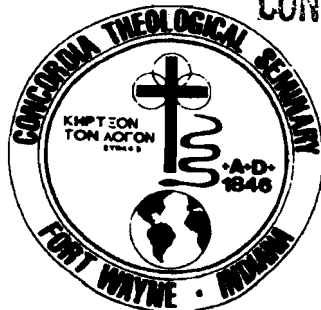
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Reflections on the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today

Eugene F. Klug

Needless to say, this topic is a complex one because of the great volume of material issuing from the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues conducted over the course of twenty years. The record of the dialogues has been published in a series of books, which incorporate most of the papers that were presented, plus summary statements, if there were such. Each round, usually of six meetings, focused on a given topic. It will not be possible here to treat each of these at length or in depth. We must perforce limit what we have to say to very abbreviated sketching for the most part.

In addition there is an underlying problem involved. The Roman church is a massive, complex, often ambiguous entity. Who speaks for the church? I remember that Hermann Sasse, visiting our campus in Springfield, Illinois, in 1965, having just returned from a visit in Rome where he had met with Cardinal Bea, raised the same question. It was a time of turmoil for the Roman church and Pope Paul VI. It seemed as though Vatican II (1962-1965) had opened all kinds of windows and that fresh air and a new openness to change were coming into the Roman church. People within that communion and on the outside came to believe, or at least to hope, that the old authoritarianism of Rome was past and that a new age of collegial openness, even freedom, had dawned. It took some doing but eventually the mild-mannered, frail-appearing Paul VI pressed home again supreme papal authority in all matters concerning faith and life for the faithful, and his successor once removed, John Paul II, even more so. This is not to say that the people, including also the bishops and the clergy, particularly here in the United States, have given up their agitation for relaxing the rules on things like celibacy, women priests, use of contraceptives, divorce, homosexuality, and so forth.

The commotion is widespread, but it is important to note that the resistance does not involve the *corpus doctrinae* of Rome directly, but rather questions or teachings related to canon law and so-called moral theology. Everybody seems to agree that the former cannot and will not be changed, but that in matters of canon law and moral theology the church's teaching and pronouncements have in the past been changed and can in the present and future be modified—hence the agitation. But when the voices, especially of

the elite, the bright and vocal theologians, like Hans Kueng, Eduard Schillebeeckx, Charles Curran, and others, become too public and brazen, demonstrating insubordination to the papal *monitum*, or warning, then the axe falls.

Pope John Paul II has made it painfully plain to all concerned that such attempts at speaking the mind of the church for the church will not be tolerated, that the papal authority must be respected, and that the pope's voice as the teaching authority in the church, the *magisterium*, is final and must be obeyed. Not to do so, to engage in dissent, must be seen according to John Paul II as "totally incompatible with being a 'good Catholic' "; nor should the bishops and the clergy proceed in thinking "that disobedience 'poses no obstacle' to receiving Communion and other church sacraments." Self-evidently the question of who speaks for the church is not open for discussion, certainly not debate. The American bishops were reminded pointedly as infallible teachers and shepherds of the church of their need to comply, not to curry dissent or tolerate it, but to work for and attract assent to the *magisterium*, the church's teaching, in all matters where the church speaks, and at no time in their dialogue with the theologians accept "dissent and confrontation as a policy and method in the area of Church teaching."

With such demonstrations of authoritarian rule this question naturally arises: what possible benefit or fruit can one expect from dialogues in which Roman and Lutheran theologians engage on matters that concern not merely canon law and moral practices but the nitty-gritty of both communions, the disputed articles of the faith itself reaching all the way back to the Reformation? It is a fair and reasonable question, one which implies another question of whether such dialoguing should at all continue in the future in view of Rome's impervious nature even on lesser matters as they are perceived. We shall endeavor to address that question again, particularly towards the end of the essay.

In assessing the dialogues and their claimed accomplishments, consensus to some, I propose to follow an uncomplicated approach, evaluating the documents issuing forth from each round, except that I have chosen to begin with the results of the fifth round. This dialogue between the Lutherans and Catholics focused on "Papal Primacy and the Universal Church" and resulted in the publication of a book with that title in 1974. This matter was pivotal because

it confronted and dealt with the authority issue. It at least broached the subject in a beginning sort of way, though it had to be followed up by the topic, "Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church," in Dialogue VI. Paul Empie, who spearheaded the dialogues from the beginning on the Lutheran side (he also played a leading role in the formation of LCUSA, now disbanded with the forming of the new Lutheran church, ELCA), wrote in retrospect of that round that "it was a tough nut to crack, and one cannot be blamed for asking whether or not it was worth all that time and effort."²

Even before beginning the discussion of these two documents, I am reminded of something that Hermann Sasse stated in a *Christianity Today* article entitled "Protestant-Catholic Dialogue: A Lutheran View" (Sasse's article was set in parallel consideration with a Reformed view written by G.C. Berkouwer of Holland); Dr. Sasse stated that one principle will forever remain key in Romanist thinking: "The Catholic will understand the *Una Sancta* as the great visible church under the pope."³ This is a fixed principle and it needs to be remembered as presuppositional in any and all discussion having to do with authority in the church as understood by Rome. Early in 1975 I had occasion to review the document produced by Dialogue V and I should like to repeat some of what I said then:

"The question is," said Alice (in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*), "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." "Quite the contrary," retorts Humpty Dumpty, "the question is which is to be Master—that's all."

Ah, there's the rub also on papal primacy—who's to be master?—that is all! Though filled with many scholarly words and thoughts, this volume of essays by participants in the Lutheran and Catholic Dialogue V does little to change the situation on rapprochement between Lutherans and Catholics on papal primacy. The Lutheran and Catholic participants have sparred skillfully and knowingly for a long time now, but observers may rightly wonder whether there has been any real advance on the basic issues which have divided the churches, not least among which is the ticklish question of who is master. Papal primacy does not move over easily to make room for anything else. Moreover, the even stickier problem of papal infallibility still lies there untouched by the conversations.

Proceeding forward with a certain amount of euphoria,

“because agreements substantially outweighed differences” (p. vii), according to the book’s editors, on the previously discussed areas (the Nicene Creed as dogma; baptism; the eucharist as sacrifice; the character and function of the ministry), the fifth round of dialogues converged on the knotty questions connected with papal primacy:

Is it of divine or human origin?

What basis does it have in New Testament teaching?

What ground or link is there for Peter’s primacy?

Can the churches agree on a “Peter function” (“whatever that may be”—it never becomes really clear, as Roman Catholic Geo. H. Tvard admits, p. 208)?

How valid is the patristic evidence for the papal claim of primacy?

Can the papal structure be renewed to meet evangelical standards?

Is it true that there is no better unifying factor than the papacy in an ecumenical age like ours?

Side by side with these questions comes another set, prompted by the concern of a thoughtful reader:

Do all participants accept the historical-critical handling of the New Testament—specifically the by-now-famous companion piece, *Peter in the New Testament*, published as a result of Dialogue V?

Do the Lutheran theologians involved really agree, as far as papal primacy or the office is concerned, that they “recognize many of its positive contributions to the life of the church” (p. 19), that it is God’s “gracious gift to his people” (p. 21), that there exists “even the possibility and desirability of the papal Ministry” (p. 23)?

What precisely is the norm of the “Word,” by which the dialogues proceed (p. 19)?

On what ground does it follow that “initiatives should

be encouraged in order to promote a wholesome *diversity* in theology. . .” (p. 20)?

What is “the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit,” for which at least one essayist opted (p. 193)?

Is it not just a little short of incredible for a Lutheran to say that “we have a situation in which the Reformation denial and the contemporary Catholic affirmation of the *ius divinum* (i.e., on papal primacy!) are not irreconcilable” (p. 195) and to expect Lutherans to believe that “they should be delighted to recognize papal primacy to the degree that this becomes truly a servant of the gospel and of the evangelical unity of the church” (p. 208)? (Only a reversal of Trent could bring that about, and that would mean that Rome would give up its very soul.)

The lengthy introductory chapter (of Dialogue V), adopted as a composite, common statement, notes, among other things, that “many Lutherans as well as Roman Catholics will be startled by the convergence on papal primacy” achieved by the participants. That is hardly a mild understatement. But it does not explain really the ground of the astonishment, which has to do with the claimed convergence; for the essays do not demonstrate such alleged convergence.

In view of the fact that to this point in the long discussions none of the really central issues that divided the churches at the time of the Reformation had been faced, particularly on the three *solas* (*Scriptura, gratia, fide*), it is difficult to see (1) how the Lutheran side of the table could conclude with the suggestion that “we ask our churches to affirm a new attitude toward the papacy” (p. 32); and (2) how the Roman Catholic side could actually expect Lutherans to believe that “the papacy has been a signal help in protecting the gospel” (p. 37) and a viable “instrument of unity” in the church (p. 38).

There are many fine essays in this collection, from both sides of the table. . . This is especially true of the historical essays on papal primacy in the patristic period—if in fact one can speak of it as existing at all in that era. Even the Roman Catholic essayist (James F. McCue) admits that it exists “neither

as a theoretical construction nor as a *de facto* practice'' up to Nicaea; and the Lutheran co-essayist (Arthur Piepkorn) demonstrates essentially the same thing, but perhaps not as convincingly as it might have been. The other essays are likewise instructive, though understandably a certain degree of overlap and repetition obtains in a symposium of this kind.

Ultimately, the question about the future of the dialogues has to be asked. By proceeding along lines where disagreement is less likely to be found—though the claimed agreement in the previous discussions might well be questioned at a number of points!—the participants have managed to maintain a rather irenic atmosphere. Soon the main issues—the central articles which Martin Chemnitz laid out so plainly in his still unanswered (by Rome) and brilliant *Examen Concilii Tridentini*—must be confronted, if a degree of credibility is to be kept for our day. Integrity finally demands that the *unresolved* issues be squarely faced. Like it or not, the long shadows of the Leipzig Debate, the Diet of Worms, the Augsburg Diet, and the Council of Trent still fall across the path of twentieth-century Lutherans and Catholics in dialogue, and this volume does very little to move those shadows away.⁴

Such was my review of Dialogue V.

In an ecumenical age like ours it ought not be too much to hope and expect that Roman Catholic scholars would take seriously the critique of Trent offered by Chemnitz. It is incredible and inconceivable, therefore, to see contemporary Romanist scholars simply ignoring and bypassing Chemnitz's incisive dissecting of Trent's theology, especially since all four volumes are now available from Concordia Publishing House in translation. Chemnitz's *Examen* does not even rate mention in David N. Power's *The Sacrifice We Offer*,⁵ which purports to be a reinterpretation of Tridentine dogma. Rome has not to this day answered Chemnitz's challenge. But why should Romanists bother, as long as the heirs of the Reformation on the Lutheran side have not taken Chemnitz seriously either, not to mention Protestantism in general? Christian theology, including much that passes for Lutheran, is in a deep, desperate state of malaise.

The sequence of dialogues began, as the reader may remember, with a discussion of "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma

of the Church,” on July 6-7, 1965, in Baltimore. There was no debate as regards the creed’s articles since both sides continue to confess the faith as therein expressed, especially against Arian thinking, and the participants could say in summary that “we confess in common the Nicene Faith.” Luther in the Smalcald Articles, Part I, cut to the heart of the matter even more quickly, stating: “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.” If Luther had been involved, the dialogue would have been over before the participants from the Midwest, and certainly from the far West, even arrived. But there was a question of how dogma comes to be in the churches, or “two communities” as they were called in the dialogue, and it became clear almost immediately that “the nature and structure of the teaching authority” for the two church bodies differed, especially on “the role of Scripture in relation to the teaching office of the church.”⁶

The second round of dialogues focused on baptism, a topic chosen because of the Nicene Creed’s statement in behalf of “one baptism for the remission of sins.” No consensus statement issued forth from this round though the participants who by this time were undoubtedly growing to know each other better, perhaps even enjoying the company and discussions, apparently all agreed that “the conversations are carried out with the utmost good will and sincerity on each side.”⁷

The two chairmen, Bishop T. Austin Murphy and Dr. Paul C. Empie, were prepared, however, to assure their readers “that the teachings of our respective traditions regarding baptism are in substantial agreement, and this opinion has been confirmed at this meeting.”⁸ The fact that there was no real confrontation and resolution of the ongoing difference as regards baptism’s power and significance, not only for original sin, but especially also for the sins after baptism, did not prevent the upbeat declaration from being made.

Lutherans know that Catholics baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, thus practising a valid Christian baptism. But Lutherans also know how the so-called Sacrament of Penance, the second plank, supersedes baptism in the life of the church, especially in the penitential practice required of the faithful, thus shunting baptism’s ongoing power and significance to the side.

It was clear that with "The Eucharist as Sacrifice" the third round in the dialogues was finally willing to risk going into "a topic which produced great heat at the time of the Reformation."⁹ The size of the resulting published document also bears out this point. But when it was all over the conferees had come to agreement to speak of the Lord's Supper not only as sacrifice (Melanchthon points out in the Apology in what way Lutherans would be willing to speak thus), but even as "unique propitiatory sacrifice,"¹⁰ although the Lutherans bridled at this being "offered for the living and the dead." Agreement was expressed on "the full reality of Christ's presence," also that transubstantiation is a misleading concept and therefore to be avoided,¹¹ but the participants recognized that there was still a way to go and that "our agreement is not yet complete."¹²

So the dialogues went on into the fourth round, continuing the focus on the Sacrament, this time with the topic "Eucharist and Ministry." The result is a large book also, over three hundred pages, and contains commendable essays. For example, John Reumann of the Philadelphia Lutheran Seminary sketches very nicely the office of pastoral ministry as understood by the various Lutheran bodies. Harry McSorley tries to show for the Catholics that there is a way of interpreting Trent which does not make illicit the Lutheran clergy or their sacramental practice. Likewise, from both sides there was a clear assertion of the understanding each had concerning the phrase "apostolic succession," the one side holding to the unbroken transmission of the ministerial office from the apostles, the other to succession in terms of the apostolic doctrine.

Enough sincere expression in behalf of the evangelical mission of the church was present that the Lutheran participants felt prepared to say that they had "again seen clearly a fidelity to the proclamation of the gospel" and to assert that their counterparts were "engaged in a valid ministry of the gospel."¹³ And for their part the Catholic conferees reached a similar conclusion in behalf of their Lutheran friends. No doubt it was true, as stated in the concluding assessment, that "for the first time the Roman church has recognized that Protestant denominations are more than sociological groupings, but are true churches in a true theological sense."¹⁴ This may be a somewhat exuberant overstatement, but clearly there was a new atmosphere prevailing on the basis of rather careful attention to biblical, patristic, confessional sources. One may rightly wonder,

however, about the “ministry of the gospel.” Luther never doubted that the Gospel was still present, being heard, and being believed in the Romanist church of his day, but he undoubtedly would have raised questions as regards the nature of the “gospel” in this case. Was there agreement on the article on which the church stands or falls, *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the justification of the sinner by the grace of God for Christ’s sake by faith alone?

This question led the conferees to decide finally that they must investigate that central Christian teaching on which the two churches have historically stood apart. First, however, the need was still there to address further the question of authority; this discussion was then continued in the sixth dialogue, “Teaching Authority and Infallibility.” It seemed that Lutherans bent over backwards in speaking of their sins and failures to overcome the many divisions in the Lutheran church (over a hundred bodies!), even though all purport to affirm the *sola scriptura* principle. And the Catholics for their part were really unable to move any further from the traditional answer which locates authority in the church with the *magisterium*, the teaching voice of the pope, a fact so well illustrated by Pope John Paul II in his recent dealings with his flock in the United States. Committed as they were to the higher critical view of the biblical text, the dialoguers paid little serious attention to the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures, with the exception of the LCMS participants; the concern was more on how to deal with the question of papal infallibility by both sides, Catholics and Lutherans alike. The overall issue remained largely unresolved, but both sides agreed that there was need for less polemical language.

As Paul Empie assessed the situation he concluded that “we Lutherans are stuck with the problem of authority,” while the Catholics meanwhile are perceived as being stuck with the pope. To Empie the problem was as severe for the Lutherans as for the Catholics, grounding it on this sort of reasoning: “Although we Lutherans talk about *sola scriptura*, the simple fact is that our tradition consists of our confessions, and our confessions are our way of looking at scripture.” Obviously confessional Lutheran theology was an embarrassment to him, as it has become to many others in contemporary Lutheran theology.¹⁵ George Lindbeck, too, spoke in behalf of a softer, more understanding view of papal infallibility: “On the Lutheran side, the new understanding should allay ‘fears that papal infallibility is a usurpation of the sovereign

authority of Christ and make clear that this dogma. . .does not displace Christ from his redemptive and mediatorial role.’ ”¹⁶

If the dialogues on that subject failed to allay fears as regards the question of who or what governs in the church, there was hope that as the discussions moved to the central issue of the Reformation—how a sinner comes to be righteous before God, the doctrine of justification—there might possibly be a breakthrough that could bridge the existing gulf dividing the churches. The best that the conferees could achieve, however, after intense concentration on the position which each communion held on justification (they had agreed to affirm that salvation rests on Christ Jesus) was the somewhat ambiguous statement that “agreement on this Christological affirmation does not necessarily involve full agreement between Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith,” and, in the compromising spirit of our day which adopts reconciled diversity as its theme, they wondered out loud “whether the remaining differences on this doctrine need be church-dividing.”¹⁷ That approach required that the common statement had to adopt a posture agreeing not to “exclude the traditional Catholic position that the grace-wrought transformation of sinners is a necessary preparation for final salvation” and to affirm that this doctrine “can be expressed in the imagery of God as judge who pronounces sinners innocent and righteous, and also in a transformist view which emphasizes the change wrought in sinners by infused grace.”¹⁸ On the basis of that kind of theological manhandling of Scripture’s clear teaching on justification—an article of which Luther states in the Smalcald Articles that it is “first and chief” and that “nothing in this article can be given up or compromised,” since on it “rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world” (SA II, i)—the conferees agreed to say that they had reached a consensus and “were able to confess together what our Catholic and Lutheran ancestors tried to affirm as they responded in different ways to the biblical message of justification.”¹⁹

Is the healing of the division as simple as recognizing different images in Scripture? Did Luther err in his judgment against Rome’s *gratia infusa*, or infusion of sanctifying grace for the sinner’s salvation, when he said that it was a confusion of sanctification with justification, of the fruits of faith with saving faith itself, which clings to God’s pardoning grace in Christ? In a recent thesis devoted

to an evaluation of the dialogue on justification, a student of mine observed that what has happened is a blurring of the second article of the Creed into the third, and this right in front of the eyes of the Lutheran participants, the result being “that the doctrine of forensic justification with the imputed alien righteousness of Christ to the sinner has fallen victim to pictorial interpretation.”²⁰ “Neither side has been faithful to its respective confession, but the Lutherans have lost much more in their failure,” states the same thesis.²¹

This judgment is correct, I believe, in spite of the fact that there are some really very good essays in the documentary collection. Karlfried Froelich, for example, demonstrates persuasively on the basis of linguistic analysis that it was “no mere coincidence that Martin Luther claimed his discovery of the true meaning of justification as the fruit of his exegetical endeavors. . .[in] the ‘original’ Paul—in Greek.”²² Also on the Lutheran side Gerhard Forde, though confessing that he has a problem with the Formula of Concord’s upholding of the third use of the law, finally affirms support for the proposition that justification in Scripture must be understood as “the righteousness imputed by God for Jesus’ sake.”²³ John F. Johnson of the LCMS presented a faithful account of the Augsburg Confession’s and the Formula of Concord’s teaching anent justification.

On the Romanist side Avery Dulles politely yet firmly upheld Trent’s position, giving “strong emphasis to human responsibility and to the created gifts of grace,” though today, according to Dulles, there is a more theocentric outlook which “is strongly oriented toward mystery and symbol.”²⁴ Perhaps the clearest indication that Romanists were not about to move away from their Tridentine position came from Carl J. Peter, who stated as regards the possibility of the Catholic accepting the Reformation’s principle, justification by faith alone, “Yes, but—but on the condition that another critical principle. . .be designated,” namely, “to recognize grace and its renewing effects.”²⁵ He left this question for the Lutherans to settle in their minds: “Does the element of human cooperation in justification and its growth still imply for Lutherans a *partim-partim* view of human salvation?”

The signals coming out of the Romanist camp are really still the same, in harmony with Trent, albeit with much greater friendliness toward the Lutheran side, much softer tones on the place of Luther

in the world of theology, a man who was “improperly condemned,”²⁶ whose condemnation was “a terrible mistake,” according to Hubert Jedin. Be this as it may, an evaluation of the dialogues on justification demonstrate that it would be the height of naivete, if not in fact a terrible mistake, for Lutherans to conclude that a breakthrough has occurred on the meaning of justification as seen by Rome and the Lutheran churches.

It was my privilege early in 1987, from January 30 to February 6, to be among the sixty or so participants invited to an ecumenical conference sponsored by the Department of Theological Studies of LCUSA and the Strasbourg Ecumenical Institute, meeting in Puerto Rico. There were guests from virtually all mainline Christian denominations and from various parts of the world, chiefly Europe and America. The overall theme for the conference was “Fundamental Consensus and Church Fellowship,” undoubtedly prompted by the ecumenical hope that, after the various dialogues around the world by the various communions, with some claimed convergence and consensus, the question now might arise of where we go from here. At the insistence of the LCMS president, Dr. Ralph Bohlmann, lest there be misunderstanding on any side, the topic was modified with a subtitle which was to govern the wide-open discussions at the conference, “Fundamental Consensus and Fundamental Difference.”

Many of those presenting essays had been participants in one or the other of the dialogues going on in the United States or in Europe. The underlying theme and motif which each essayist was to address from his point of view was the significance and relevance of the Reformation’s key article on justification. Thus the conference could be seen as stemming from the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues on that subject. A friendly atmosphere prevailed once again, as is generally the case in all the dialogues. But the fundamental question, of course, is whether there has been any movement towards the chief article of the Lutheran Reformation, *sola gratia-sola fide*. It became evident very soon that there has not been, whether reference is had to Carl Peter responding to Gerhard Forde’s paper, or Father Pierre Duprey speaking for the Vatican (he is secretary of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, previously the Inquisition, of which Cardinal Ratzinger is the present chief), or Archbishop Methodios for the Eastern Orthodox, or Henry Chadwick and Robert Wright

for the Anglicans, or Geoffrey Wainright for the Methodists, or James Dunn for the Baptists, or Paul Fries for the Reformed. The papers were of general excellence, though varying significance, and will eventually be published. Discussion was free and open. Dr. Bohlmann had opportunity to present a strong case for Scriptural authority and sound hermeneutics in determining consensus on the Gospel and a proper basis for fellowship among the churches.

In another paper Dr. Samuel Nafzger reiterated Bohlmann's position that the LCMS takes the stance that there must be agreement in doctrine if fellowship is to be established, arguing also that certain levels of fellowship need to be recognized if we are going to view things practically and existentially—for example, that there are other Christians who love their Lord Jesus, that dialogues and exploratory meetings with other Christians may take place to examine the things dividing them, but finally that “we in the Missouri Synod understand the Scriptures to teach the necessity of agreement in the confession of the apostolic faith as the prerequisite for church fellowship.” If one asks for fruits or results from the Puerto Rico conference, it would be hard to turn up any, at least any meaningful and significant advances towards convergence of the church bodies involved, any actual agreement in the confession of the Reformation articles of the faith. It could be argued, no doubt, that there was benefit in the various representatives being able to state where they and their churches stood as regards the article on justification, which is such a key to the understanding of the Gospel.

When Luther reflected on his meeting with Cardinal Cajetan in October of 1518 and the prelate's efforts to get him to recant, he stated that “it would have been easy to say, ‘I recant,’ but I will not become a heretic by recanting the belief that has made me a Christian.”²⁷ Later in the Smalcald Articles—which in some ways are superior to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology,²⁸ especially in cutting through the teachings and practices within Romanist theology that were out of cinque with Holy Writ and, therefore, subversive of the Gospel—Luther zeroes in on the nature of true repentance in the longest article in Part III. It is not to be found, he says, in a contrived, works-righteous sort of contrition but in godly sorrow for sins against God's holy will and trust in “the consolatory promise of grace through the Gospel, which must be believed, as Christ declares (Mark 1:15): ‘Repent and believe the Gospel’ ” (SA

III, iii, 4.) For Luther this still always was the question: "Wie bekomme ich einen gnaedigen Gott?" How could he be contrite enough so that God would be favorable to him? The nagging doubt always remained—was he contrite enough? Contrition and repentance in Romanist teaching was "our work" and God's forgiveness was made contingent upon our attainment of repentance. "Making conditions for repentance," writes George Yule perceptively of Luther's struggle out of the theological woods, "especially when coupled with a legalistic view of sin and an impersonal view of grace, makes Pelagianism almost inevitable."²⁹ As Luther had so clearly declared in his famous lectures on Galatians (1531-1535), between the righteousness which is in Christ and God's imputation of this righteousness to sinners, both so wondrously objective, nothing stands besides faith, which itself is drawn or elicited from the heart by the Gospel concerning the imputed righteousness of Christ for sinners.

Smalcald was in many ways a miserable affair in Luther's life. Becoming deathly ill so that people feared for his life, he was unable to present the articles on which he had worked so hard. They were not even publicly read through the maneuvering of Melanchthon and others, though they were heartily subscribed privately by the Lutheran theologians present (except for Melanchthon, who acceded grudgingly, with the princes looking over his shoulders). Luther eventually had to be carried out of Smalcald on a bumpy wagon that jostled the suffering man terribly and perhaps by its jostling helped dislodge the kidney stones which apparently almost killed him. Of Luther's firm and clear defense of the Reformation's chief article Friedrich Mildenberger has stated very well that, "if we really agree with the basic decision of the early church that God alone works our salvation, we cannot reject the Reformation's interpretation of the Scripture" that "the gospel is a unity," and that, "therefore, when someone disagrees about the understanding of this gospel, we are compelled to ask whether they really agree with us in accepting the traditional teachings of the early church."³⁰

Luther is often criticized for his vehement, cutting, blunt polemic. Harry McSorley, himself a Catholic, shunts such criticism to the side, stating in Luther's behalf that such a "critique of Luther's harshness ignores the hard fact that Luther did not think he or any Christian preacher was bound by those standards when confronted with enemies of the Gospel."³¹ Luther never thought of himself

as a “man of destiny,” writes Gordon Rupp. Using an analogy from soccer, Rupp looks at the closing chapters of Luther’s life, seeing in the great Reformer a man “who had begun as a striker [but now] was ending as a goal-keeper.”³² The Smalcald Articles represent Luther at his maturest, as striker and goaltender both, still contending with unflagging spirit for the Gospel with genuine ecumenical, catholic emphasis, using his breath, even though it be his last, in behalf of the precious Gospel, the justification of the sinner before God for Christ’s sake through faith. Can there be, dare there be, any other stance for the church, Lutheran or Catholic or whatever, in our day?

Charles V called an imperial diet to meet in Regensburg in 1541. It convened on April 5 with the avowed purpose to achieve religious unity in his realm, if he could, and also military and financial backing for his campaign against the Turks. To get the latter he believed he needed the former. He appointed dialogue teams for both sides: John Eck, Julius Pflug, and John Gropper for the Catholics, Philip Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and John Pistorius for the Protestants. John Calvin was present as a Strasbourg delegate at Melanchthon’s special request. Bucer as always was optimistic about a possible compromise, chiefly because of the presence of moderate princes from both sides; but Calvin was less so. On the theological agenda were discussions of original sin, free will, and also justification. A compromise position was worked out between the parties, surprisingly, on the doctrine of justification by faith, but only because the Protestant side, including Melanchthon, was willing to drop the *sola*. It was a fateful moment in the distressing history of this doctrine. As things turned out the compromise was rejected by both Wittenberg and Rome.

Regensburg or Smalcald—which will it be today? The mood of Melanchthon still pervades the Lutheran churches, compromise for the sake of unity. But that was not the stance of Luther, the striker and goaltender of the Reformation. Of the central article, as well as of all the articles treated in the Smalcald Articles, Luther affirmed, “I can change or concede nothing!” Can there be any other stance for us four hundred and fifty years later?

ENDNOTES

1. *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, September 17, 1987 (a report from the *Los Angeles Times*).
2. Paul C. Empie, *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue I to III*. Personal Notes for Study (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 127 (published after his death in 1979).
3. *Christianity Today*, October 23, 1964, p. 5.
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5. David N. Power, *The Sacrifice We Offer* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).
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8. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
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14. *Ibid.*, p. 324.
15. *Interchange*, Newsletter of the LCUSA, October 1979.
16. "Roman Catholics and Lutherans on Teaching Authority and Infallibility," *Ecumenical Trends*, October 1979, p. 142.
17. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII. Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), p. 16.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
20. Rolf Preus, "An Evaluation of Lutheran-Roman Catholic Conversations on Justification" (S.T.M. thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, January 1987), p. 62.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
22. Anderson, *Dialogue VII*, p. 161.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 303.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

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26. Daniel Olivier, *Luther's Faith. The Cause of the Gospel in the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), p. 21.
 27. *LW* 31, pp. 259-292.
 28. "In a way far superior to that of the Augsburg Confession and Apology, the Smalcald Articles provide a systematic definition of the Reformation's basic decision." Cf. Friedrich Mildenerger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 135.
 29. George Yule, *Luther, Theologian for Catholics and Protestants* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark), p. 6.
 30. Mildenerger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, p. 136.
 31. Yule, *Luther*, p. 27.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

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