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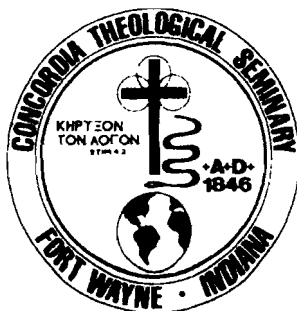
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Chemnitz and the Book of Concord

J.A.O. Preus

The year 1980 is most significant in the life of the Lutheran churches of the world. It is the year in which we celebrate the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of our basic confessional document, the Augsburg Confession, and the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the document which really saved Lutheranism as a theological movement and established Lutheranism as an officially recognized and united church. In many ways, the publication of the Book of Concord at the end of the great period of controversy guaranteed the very existence of the Lutheran movement established by the Ninety-Five Theses and confirmed by the Augsburg Confession. The Augsburg Confession was followed by fifty years of conflict — political, theological and ecclesiastical — to determine whether Lutheranism as a movement and as a church could survive. The adoption of the Book of Concord marks the establishment of a Lutheranism which was able to withstand the terrors of the Thirty Years War culminating, finally in 1648, in the Peace of Westphalia. This Peace, in turn, remained in effect for virtually three hundred years, until the close of World War II. During these three hundred years almost countless generations of people were brought up under the symbols of Lutheranism, and Lutheranism as a theological entity was established to the point where even the vagaries and the uncertainties of post-World War II theology, together with the enormous political upheavals of this last generation, have not been able to obliterate it from the face of the earth.

It is interesting that in this year 1980 churches whose Lutheranism has been seriously questioned are celebrating these events and are identifying with the great central truths of the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith. It is also significant that in this last generation we have witnessed an erosion of the biblical Christian faith and consequently of confessional Lutheranism that is certainly equal to, if not even greater than, that which was endured during the period of rationalism. Thus it behooves us once again to study our roots and our theological foundations.

Present-day Lutheranism can be extremely grateful to various theologians and churches which have, beginning in 1977 and continuing up to the present, endeavored to state in modern language and in forms which can be studied by clergy and laity alike the basic fundamentals of our faith. I make particular reference to

the translation and publication by Concordia Publishing House of the remarkable work translated by Dr. Fred Kramer, the *Examination of the Council of Trent*, written by Martin Chemnitz in the years between 1565 and 1573. Dr. Eugene Klug's outstanding work, *From Luther to Chemnitz*, is an extremely valuable contribution, as are Robert Preus's two volumes dealing with post-Reformation Lutheranism. Certainly to be included in this collection of works are *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, edited by Robert Preus and Wilbert Rosin, with the description of the remarkable historical background of the Formula prepared by Robert A. Kolb, and the series of materials coming under the general heading of "A Formula for Concord," prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. I also am exceedingly grateful to have been asked by Concordia Publishing House to make my own humble contributions to this effort in the translation of Chemnitz's work on *The Two Natures of Christ* and on *The Lord's Supper*. Other works of significance could also be mentioned.

This essay attempts to give in very cursory fashion a brief summary of the particular and peculiar contribution of Martin Chemnitz to the Formula of Concord. This document should be looked upon, as it was by its authors, as an attempt to state in very succinct and careful language what the correct biblical faith of Lutheranism actually was. It was a preserving document. It makes no pretense of being innovative, but rather is simply an attempt to state Lutheranism's understanding of the biblical faith as it had been enunciated during the preceding fifty years — based on the ancient creeds, patristic evidence, and the writings of Luther and Melancthon, and growing out of controversies which had arisen in the period between the death of Luther and the adoption of the Formula over the correct understanding of the Gospel.

Likewise, the document cannot be understood unless it is very clearly stated that the document looks into the future with the idea that out of the adoption of this document a united church would arise in lands which had subscribed to the Augsburg Confession and which had every intention, under God, of retaining that faith. It is really only at the time of the adoption of the Book of Concord that we begin to see emerging a specified body of documents, a *Corpus Doctrinae*, for all of Lutheranism. This was an action which pointed not only to the past and to the present state of affairs but most particularly to the future.

Considering the heat of the controversies, the involvement of the great and beloved Melancthon and his deviations from the common understanding of Lutheranism, the tremendous political pressures which were applied not only by the constant attacks of Rome but also by the conflict with the emerging Reformed party, travel conditions, the use even at this late date of handwritten documents, and the political division within Germany, one stands in almost stunned unbelief that a document of this size, with this degree of theological unity, and with such historically binding results was ever able to emerge. It is certain that in our own age, despite vastly improved communication and transportation methods, printing, and all kinds of related technology, we could never possibly come to as high a degree of agreement on as broad a range of subjects within the family of Lutheranism, to say nothing of the ecumenical endeavors which have been undertaken. One can almost say that we have here in this great Book of Concord a miracle.

And while the particular person singled out in this essay for emphasis is Martin Chemnitz (who indeed did play a major role, and whose theological stance and personality made the endeavor possible), the fact is that the work is really the work of individuals, of committees, of entire faculties, of leading lay theologians, and of churches whose entire ministerium ultimately signed the document. One need know very little about the Book of Concord to recognize the names of Andreae, Chytraeus, Selnecker, and Chemnitz, but one also has to give special mention to the Elector August of Saxony, to the faculties of Wittenberg, Leipzig, and Tuebingen, and to countless unnamed and long forgotten theologians, pastors, and lay-people. The Book of Concord is truly a product of the entire church.

Chemnitz, nevertheless, plays an extremely constant role in this entire development, in that he was chosen from as early as the time when he was a librarian at the University of Königsberg to serve in capacities of mediation among warring factions within Lutheranism. He was selected at a very early date to attempt to bring about the conciliation of Flacius and some of his opponents. In this endeavor he failed in the beginning and succeeded at the end. In 1561 he was asked by his mentor, Mörlin, to assist him with a certain pastor Hartenberg, who was charged with crypto-Calvinism. In 1564 he was involved in the development of the *Corpus Doctrinae* for Brunswick, a document which included the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the two Catechisms of Luther. This document, quite

obviously, was a predecessor of the Book of Concord.

In 1568 he met Jacob Andreae for the first time and both of these men, who had been previously engaged in unification efforts, now began the activities which resulted ultimately in the development of the Book of Concord. Thus, Bente is correct in his statement, "Andreae and Chemnitz are the theologians to whom, more than any other two men, our church owes the Formula of Concord." In these two men we also have a conjunction between the north and south of Germany, with Chemnitz coming from Brunswick and Andreae from Tübingen. Their first joint effort, at the request of their respective princes, was to conduct a joint church visitation in Brunswick, in which they dealt with such articles as justification, good works, free will, adiaphora, and the Lord's Supper. This resulted in a revision of the *Corpus Doctrinae* of Brunswick, thereafter called the *Corpus Doctrinae Julium*, in honor of Duke Julius of Brunswick. It is interesting that, when they first met, Chemnitz was not entirely certain of the orthodoxy of Andreae, and there may have been some reason for this, because Andreae was charged with having sometimes compromised doctrine in order to bring about unity.

During this same period, Chemnitz also made the acquaintance of Selnecker, who had previously been a very ardent supporter of Melancthon. It appears that Selnecker's conversion to a very orthodox position, which ultimately brought him into the role of author of some portions of the Formula of Concord, was brought about by the ministrations and witness of Chemnitz.

The effort toward unity really got underway, however, with the publication in 1573, of Andreae's "Six Christian Sermons," in which he dealt with the controverted doctrines then dividing Lutheranism. These sermons might well be called the embryo of the Formula of Concord. In 1573 the sermons of Andreae were recast in thetical form to produce what was known as the Swabian Concord. The Swabian Concord was revised in 1575 by Chemnitz, on the basis of comments from theological faculties, conferences, and individual theologians, into a document that came to be the Swabian-Saxon Concord. Osiander and Bidebacht in 1576 drew up the Maulbronn Formula, and at the initiative of Elector August a conference of theologians was held at Torgau, where the Swabian-Saxon Concord and the Maulbronn Formula were combined into what was known as the Torgau Book. Andreae produced a summary of the Torgau Book, which today is known as the Epitome of the Formula of Concord. After

various groups had studied and commented on the Torgau Book, it was reworked at Bergen Abbey by Andreae, Chemnitz, and Selnecker into what today is called the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord. For a brief period after 1577 it was called the Bergen or Bergic Book.

These documents were an attempt by their various authors and commentators to bring about a settlement of three decades of conflict between the followers of the honored and revered Melancthon, who had veered off course, and the true or authentic Lutherans, known as the Gnesio-Lutherans, who themselves had divided into parties during the years of conflict. There was the adiaphoristic controversy (1548-1555), which grew out of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims. There was the Majoristic controversy (1551-1562); the synergistic controversy (1555-1560); the Flacian controversy, (1560-1575); the Osiandrian controversy, (1549-1566); the antinomian controversy, (1527-1556); and the Crypto-Calvinistic controversy, (1560-1574). Many of these controversies have their roots in Melancthon's wavering; some were prompted by the interims, some by the rise of Calvinism; and all of them had served to divide Lutheranism. The purpose of the Formula of Concord was to reestablish doctrinal unity and doctrinal purity among the followers of the Augsburg Confession and to bring about peace and harmony among them. In the settlement of these controversies Chemnitz played a significant role.

To dwell a little more fully on the theology and personality of Chemnitz himself, it should be pointed out that somewhere during these years of conflict the decision was made that the documents that were finally drawn up should not contain attacks against people by name. While abundant use is made of the church fathers down to Luther, and while Luther is always quoted favorably, it is notable that the name of Melancthon, despite his involvement in so many of the conflicts, is never mentioned in an unfavorable light, and very seldom in a favorable light. Some of the theologians of the period were dissatisfied with this omission of names; but it is my personal opinion, from having studied Chemnitz's writings, that he probably had a great deal to do with this procedure, because in his voluminous *Two Natures of Christ* and also in *The Lord's Supper* he is extremely careful of the way in which he talks about the contemporary errorists. He seldom, if ever, mentions Melancthon. Calvin is mentioned only once or twice, and even Zwingli is seldom called in. Only in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* does he allow himself the pleasure of certain sarcastic and polemical statements relative to his Roman antagonists.

Another quality that shows up both in the writings of Chemnitz and in the Formula is the reluctance to try to solve the insoluble. Chemnitz, in a rather whimsical way on several occasions, refers to the fact that the answer to certain questions must be left until "we enter the heavenly academy," where then all things will be known to us. It is interesting to see how he avoided the difficulties of the ubiquity of the human nature of Christ in such things as a pile of cow manure and other unsavory ideas by simply stressing that we believe that Christ is present fully and according to both natures in the places where the Scripture says He is fully present, and for our purposes that means He is present in the Sacrament with His body and blood.

Another quality which is very evident in Chemnitz's own writing, and which carries over into the Formula of Concord, is the absence of scholastic argumentation. Chemnitz is at all times a theologian of the Scripture, a very strong supporter of the ancient councils and creeds, extremely well acquainted with and supportive of the church fathers and of Luther, but singularly unimpressed with scholasticism and the use of philosophic terminology.

While it is interesting that, aside from the opening portion of the *Examen*, in none of Chemnitz's writings does he have a *locus de scriptura*, yet his view of Scripture, or his formal doctrine of Scripture, as Klug has so cogently shown, appears on every page of his writings. If the Scripture settles the matter, that is it. It is beyond argumentation. He follows a very simple grammatical method of interpreting Scripture, avoids all reference to allegorizing or esoteric methods of interpretation, talks constantly about the proper and natural meanings of the words (*propria et nativa sententia verborum*), has a good understanding of some of the textual problems which were beginning to arise during his day, and shows at times a remarkable understanding of the isagogical background of the various books of the Bible. Yet the main thrust of Chemnitz's use of the Bible is to show that he regards it as the Word of the living God, before whom we bow, taking our reason captive, and saying, "Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth." There is a reverence about him and a piety which we could well emulate in our own day.

The Formula of Concord, therefore, exhibits the theological influence of Martin Chemnitz in demonstrating with Luther that doctrine is not the product of the church but the revelation of God. Likewise, all doctrine is to be drawn directly from the Scripture and is to be established on sound exegetical principles, using

the proper and natural meaning of the words. Chemnitz does not refer to the so-called literal sense (*sensus literalis*), but rather he prefers the expression *propria et nativa sententia verborum*. For example, he says in his *Lord's Supper*, "Just as all the dogmas of the church and the individual Articles of Faith have their own foundation and certain passages of Scripture where they are clearly treated and explained, so also the true and genuine meaning of the doctrines themselves should rightly be sought and developed accurately on the basis of these passages. Likewise, it is beyond controversy that the correct belief concerning the Lord's Supper has its own particular foundation and its own basis in the words of institution.

"But who does not know this, you say, or what sane man would deny it? My reply is that all do admit it and concede it in their words, but when we come to the matter itself, there is clear diversity. For all the sacramentarians, no matter who they are, derive some of what they want to believe and understand regarding the Lord's Supper not from the words of institution in the proper and simple sense clearly conveyed to our understanding, but they come with preconceptions on the basis of other passages of Scripture, most of which say nothing about the Lord's Supper. Each refers to certain passages which he interprets for himself according to his own analogy. When they have gone through this process they decide on the basis of other passages whatever they want to be believe regarding the Lord's Supper. Finally they approach the words of institution, and at this point it becomes necessary for them to force upon the words of institution their preconceived meaning brought in from elsewhere on the basis of some distorted and twisted interpretation."¹

Consequently, Chemnitz opposed all compromise where the least part of doctrine would be sacrificed for the sake of peace, although, on the other hand, he did not deliberately set about to stir up conflict. He opposed all ambiguities or indistinct formulas by which contradictory statements were to be harmonized.

Chemnitz, moreover, using the device which was common in Luther and picked up by others (such as Flacius in his *Magdeburg Centuries*), has great respect for the church fathers. He does not swallow them hook, line, and sinker. He recognizes their weaknesses; yet, using the old dictum of Luther, "if the Devil writes a good hymn, I'll sing it," he draws heavily on the fathers when they support the unbroken tradition of the church on various doctrines. For example, in *The Two Natures*, he makes reference to John of Damascus, whom he describes as a late arrival and in

general a very poor theologian, but a man who wrote an excellent book on Christology and whom, therefore, we still utilize. Chemnitz makes great use of this father for that reason.

If one were to analyze the history of Lutheranism between the death of Luther and the writing of the Formula, one would have to say that Lutheranism was suffering terribly for the lack of a good leader who could stand his ground, unite his followers, and lead a well-reasoned and comprehensive attack against the enemies of the church. Melancthon was simply incapable of filling this void, and the theologians of the Augsburg Confession scattered throughout Germany were likewise unable to supply the kind of leadership that was necessary.

It probably is correct to say that in Andreae and Chemnitz two such leaders emerged. It is historically beyond debate that these men saved Lutheranism and that they established it on a basis which has guaranteed its continuance until the present day. When one considers the earlier lapses of Andreae and the salutary effect that Chemnitz had both on him and on Selnecker and the fact that, with all of Chemnitz's exertions, he does not seem ever to have made any serious doctrinal error or fallen over into any kind of extremism, one can probably be historically very correct in saying that this man, above all others, supplied the kind of leadership that was able to unite and preserve Lutheranism. When one looks at the ultimate result of this effort it was nothing short of phenomenal. At the end of it all, the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord were adopted by three electors of the Holy Roman Empire, twenty dukes and princes, twenty-four counts, four barons, thirty-five imperial cities, and eight thousand clergy, comprising two-thirds of German Lutheranism. It is interesting that, to this very day, as new Lutheran churches come into being, they all subscribe to the entire Book of Concord. Somebody was supplying leadership.

As the really undisputed leader of Lutheranism, in his attempt to bring about peace and harmony without compromise of the truth, Chemnitz has an interesting personality. In the thousands of pages of his writings, which are extant, one learns almost nothing about his person, his autobiography, or his personal likes and dislikes. As far as his personality is concerned, he keeps a very low profile. Likewise, he indulges in very little sarcasm or personal attack. He deals with issues and he deals with the issues on the basis of Scripture. He is extremely thorough and to some readers might appear prolix, but in all instances he is slowly and laboriously and patiently and systematically making his points.

When he is finished, there is nothing left to say, and no way in which he can be opposed. He is overpowering in his argumentation. He is, by modern standards, completely non-political. Yet in this very stance he succeeded in one of the greatest political endeavors ever accomplished within the church, namely, to bring about peace between warring factions within a strife-torn and leaderless church. Luther shows his personality, his likes and dislikes, his emotions, in strong and often extravagant language. Chemnitz does none of those things but systematically proceeds to demolish the arguments of his opponents by straight biblical teaching and laying out the facts as they are clearly set forth in the Scripture.

The influence of Chemnitz is beyond all debate. Krauth, in his great work, *The Conservative Reformation*, has said, "The learning of Chemnitz was something colossal, but it had no tinge of pedantry. His judgment was of the highest order. His modesty and simplicity, his clearness of thought, and his luminous style, his firmness in principle, and his gentleness in tone, the richness of his learning and the vigor of his thinking, have revealed themselves in rich measure in his works . . . which mark their author as the greatest theologian of his time — one of the greatest theologians of all time."²

Fred Kramer, in the preface to his magnificent translation of the *Examen*, says "Martin Chemnitz was in many ways an ideal theologian — pious, humble, learned, thorough, moderate, peace-loving. Theology was for him not merely an intellectual pursuit. For him theology existed to serve the church. He believed that there was a consensus in doctrine within the ancient church, though he was not unaware of the aberrations which had occurred in every period of the church. He believed that Luther and the adherents to the Augsburg Confession had returned to this consensus in their theology, and he labored ceaselessly both as churchman and as theologian to keep the church within this consensus."³

This observation is echoed by Eugene Klug, who says, "Doctrine for doctrine's sake is never the answer for Chemnitz. Theology always had to be useful and functional, that is, it must of necessity be soteriological, vibrating with that which is necessary for man's knowledge and salvation and also doxological, bringing glory where it ought to be — to God, for Christ's redemptive work, and not to man."⁴

In conclusion, I should like to illustrate these eulogies by the quotation of a passage from *The Lord's Supper*. Remember that

this work was directed against the sacramentarians, both inside and outside of the Lutheran church. There was every opportunity for unbridled polemics. The sacramentarians were not only affecting theology, but they were affecting the very unity and peace of the church. Yet, when it comes to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper itself, Chemnitz is not a polemicist, nor a logician, nor a man who is playing theological one-up-manship. He is a child of God, a man of the Scripture, a man of the church. He says:

Our faith ought to lay hold on Christ as God and man in that nature by which He has been made our neighbor, kinsman, and brother. For the life which belongs to the deity resides in and has in a sense been placed in the assumed humanity. The adversaries teach that faith ought to turn itself away from the present celebration of the Supper and in its thoughts ascend above all heavens and there seek and embrace Christ in His majesty, although they themselves admit that they do not know in what place in heaven He is dwelling according to the mode of His true body. But the proper, simple, and natural meaning of the words of institution teaches that Christ himself is present with us in the celebration of the Supper with both His deity and His flesh, and that He comes to us in order to lay hold on us (Phil. 3:12) and join us to Himself as intimately as possible. This brings sweetest comfort. For Christ, both God and man, must lay hold on us in order that there may be a union between Him and us. But we, weighed down by the burden of sin and pressed under the weight of our infirmity, are not yet able to enter the secret places of heaven (Col. 2:18) and penetrate to Him in glory. He himself therefore comes to us in order to lay hold upon us with that nature by which He is our brother. And because our weakness in this life cannot bear the glory of His majesty (Matt. 17:2ff.; Acts 9:3ff.), therefore His body and blood are present, distributed, and received under the bread and wine. Nor does He will that we wander around the gates of heaven uncertain in which area of heaven we ought to look for Christ in His human nature or whether we can find Him; but in the Supper He himself is present in the external celebration and shows by visible signs where He wills to be present with His body and blood, and there we may safely seek Him and surely find Him, for there He himself through the ministry distributes His body and blood to the communicants. These most sweet and necessary comforts will be completely snatched away from us

if the substantial presence, distribution, and reception of Christ's body and blood are removed from the Supper

There is a salutary change of which the fathers often reminded us with a special joy of the Spirit. Our nature, at the beginning created in God's image, had been adorned with all heavenly and divine gifts, blessings which had been bestowed upon Adam as the founder of our race. But through his fall not only were these blessings lost, but our nature became corrupted by sin and doomed to death. The Son of God, therefore, in order that He might become the second Adam, assumed our nature, but without sin, and in that nature condemned sin, destroyed death, and restored that nature to life. Thus first of all in His own person He sanctified, restored, and blessed human nature. And now in order that we might be made certain that these blessings apply also to us and our wretched nature, and have truly been communicated to us, Christ in His Supper again offers us that very nature which He has assumed from us and in Himself first restored, so that when we receive it with our poor flesh we are no longer in doubt concerning the salvation also of our nature through Christ. For in this way He, as it were, grafts our miserable and corrupt nature into the holy and life-giving mass of His human nature, as Cyril says, so that our depravity and misery are cured and renewed through the remedy of this most intimate union

The price of our redemption is the body of Christ which is given for us and His blood which is shed for us. Among Christians no one doubts that by this giving of Christ's body and shedding of His blood the wrath of the Father has been satisfied and eternal redemption gained. But the question is, to whom does this promise pertain and who are the receivers of this benefit of Christ? To be sure, the teaching of the Gospel in general pronounces that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). But anxious and fearful minds, when they consider their sins, their unworthiness, their weaknesses, and their many temptations, become so terrified and disturbed that dangerous doubts arise concerning the individual application, that is, whether I myself have with sufficient certainty grasped the benefits of Christ and so faithfully cling to them that my conscience can stand before the judgment of God. For this reason Christ in His Supper willed to confirm and seal to His disciples the demonstration and application of the promise

of the Gospel with a certain and firm guarantee, so that in the face of all temptations faith can stand strongly and firmly in the assurance that it is a participant in Christ and all His benefits unto salvation

But how? For this purpose He uses bread and wine, to be sure, but because these elements are diminished by use, as Augustine says, or are partly expelled from our system, as Origen puts it, it is manifest what kind of confirmation and sealing this is if in addition to these external elements nothing else is present and distributed in the Lord's Supper. Therefore Christ in the Lord's Supper distributes to us His very body which has been given for us and His very blood which has been shed for us, and He offers them to us to take and eat

The New Testament is that covenant of grace which is described in Jer. 31:33, 34: 'I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and their sins will remember no more I will be for them a God, and they shall be for Me a people.' This covenant toward God the Father is established and confirmed by the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross. But it is necessary for the salvation of individuals that they be brought into this covenant and remain in it. To be sure, we are received into this covenant by the Spirit through Baptism and preserved in it through the Word. But fearful minds are concerned as to whether they actually are firmly and surely in this covenant. They desire, they long for this, that they may be certain they are going to remain forever and persevere in this covenant of grace. Therefore the Son of God willed that in His Supper our faith should be strengthened by a definite pledge and guarantee, so that we might be assured that we are under this covenant and included in it; and to this end He bears witness that He strongly wills to preserve us in this covenant. For He says: 'Drink, this is My blood which is the blood of the new covenant.' Therefore by this very blood, by the shedding of which this covenant with God the Father has been established, He also ratifies, confirms, and seals the covenant with us, so that He offers this very blood for us to receive.⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, tr. J.A.O. Preus, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 31.
2. Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1899), p. 310.
3. Fred Kramer, "Preface," in Martin Chemnitz, *The Examination of the Council of Trent*, tr. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), I, pp. 23 f.
4. Eugene F.A. Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz on Scripture and the Word* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1971), p. 146.
5. Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, pp. 187-192.