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Dedicated to the Memory of
Robert David Preus (1924-1995)

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**Dedicated to the Memory of
Robert David Preus (1924-1995):
President, Colleague, Teacher, and Friend**

Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession

Robert D. Preus

This essay covers an immense area of interests. What Luther says on the subjects of the Word of God, Christian doctrine, and confessing that doctrine permeates all his writings and is far too vast to treat in a so few pages as these. The purpose here, then, will be specifically to examine some of the writings of Luther *de novo*, using almost no secondary sources and then to come to some conclusions about his position on the three topics named above and the relationship of these three topics to each other.

I. The Word

1. *Scripture as the Word of God*

In common with his day, Luther simply and ingenuously identifies Scripture with the Word of God. "You are so to deal with the Scriptures that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this."¹ We fear and tremble before the very words of Scripture because they are words of God, all of them, for "whoever despises a single word of God does not regard any as important."² Speaking against the Enthusiasts, Luther insists that one cannot have the Spirit of God who does not have the visible, external Word: "For it will surely not be a good spirit but the wretched devil from hell. The Holy Spirit has embodied His wisdom and counsel and all mysteries of the Word and revealed them in Scripture and so no one needs to excuse himself or look and search for anything else."³ Speaking again in the same vein against the Enthusiasts, Luther says, "God speaks to us through Scripture and through the man who teaches Scripture. He who hears is not deceived, but we are to flee from special revelations concerning the faith which are satanic delusions."⁴

In all his many writings against the Enthusiasts, as he insists that the Holy Spirit always works His blessings and salvation through the Word, Luther is thinking ordinarily of the preached Word, as based upon the Scriptures. This fact is made clear in the Smalcald Articles (III, VIII, 3-4), where he extols the external spoken Word, averring that God gives no one His Spirit or grace except through it. The external Word comes before the Spirit is given. Luther rejects the *Schwaermer* and Münzer who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and thus interpret and distort the Scriptures and the spoken Word according to their pleasure. The

papists too, at bottom, are Enthusiasts in this sense, for the pope boasts that "all laws are in the shrine of his heart," even when his commands are "above and contrary to the Scriptures and the spoken Word." It is safe to say, therefore, that there is no preached Word of God which is not based upon the Scriptures, and the reason why is that the Scriptures are the Word of God in the foundational sense.

Luther is most insistent that God actually speaks in the Scriptures. The Scriptures are *Deus loquens*. "It is cursed unbelief and odious flesh which will not permit us to see and know that God speaks to us in Scripture and that it is God's Word, but tells us that it is the word merely of Isaiah, Paul, or some other man who has not created heaven and earth."⁵ The above citations prove, along with innumerable others, that Luther believed in what has more recently been called verbal inspiration, as Michael Reu has amply documented.⁶ Luther says, for instance, "The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God written—I might say, lettered—and formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God veiled in human nature."⁷ To Luther, calling Scripture the Word of God, meant that it was word for word divine.

2. *The Divine Authority of Scripture*

Scripture is divinely authoritative because Scripture is divine. The Scriptures derive their authority not from their content, which is essentially law and gospel, but from their origin and nature.⁸ Luther makes the most superlative claims concerning the divine authority of Scripture. "Therefore let us learn to praise and magnify the majesty and authority of the Word. For it is no trifle, as the fanatics of our day suppose; but one dot (Matthew 5:18) is greater than heaven and earth." Luther is speaking against the fanatics on the basis of Galatians 5:9, "A little yeast leavens the whole lump." He concludes by saying, "If they refuse [to leave the Word sound and unimpaired], let them perish and be banished to hell, and not only they themselves but the whole world with its godly and ungodly inhabitants, just as long as God remains; for if He remains, life and salvation remain, and so do the truly godly."⁹ Luther does not hesitate to pronounce curses on those who distort or blaspheme the divinely authoritative written Word.

In accordance with his view that the Spirit of God is the author of Scripture Luther looks for the guidance of the Spirit in the church in the Scriptures themselves. Neither the Papists nor the Enthusiasts really base their doctrine and practice on the Scriptures, but both claim that the Holy Spirit teaches the church without the necessity of a scriptural norm. Luther counters by asking how they know that they are the true church. The children of God can only decide by the presence of God's Word, for the Holy Spirit comes and reveals God and His will in the Word:

If it is not in accordance with My Word, it is not the Christian Church. For what could induce the Christian Church to change and undermine the Word of its Lord? The true church would say: I cling to the Word of my dear Lord Christ. I insist on this. According to this Word I will make my decisions. I will not hold with those who do otherwise. This the Christian Church has always done in previous times. It condemned heresy and all false doctrine not according to its own opinion, as the pope and his people do, but according to the Scripture and the Word of Christ.¹⁰

This authority pertains to everything that the Word teaches. Every article of faith must be based upon the Word of God alone.¹¹ The *sola scriptura* principle is simply assumed by Luther in all his commentaries and throughout them again and again. One of his notable statements, commenting on Galatians 1:9, bears this point out well: "Here Paul subordinates himself, an angel from heaven, teachers on earth, and any other masters of all to Sacred Scripture. This queen must rule, and everyone must obey, and be subject to her. The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges, or arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God. Otherwise, let the teachers and hearers be accursed along with their doctrine."¹² It is interesting in this passage that Luther refers to all three themes of our article, Scripture, doctrine, and confession. Luther had alluded to the same passage from Galatians in his Smalcald Articles (II, II, 15) when, in writing on the mass, he insisted that "the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no

one else, not even an angel."¹³ The citations above refer to the authority of the biblical text as such, what later Lutheran theologians called the canonical, or normative, authority of Scripture. This is the authority of the text as written, what Luther and the Lutheran Confessions and the later dogmaticians of the Lutheran Church assert as the *sola scriptura* principle. Scripture is cognitive discourse about God and is, in fact, the source and norm for all cognitive discourse about God.

Such authority is predicated on the total truthfulness and reliability of Scripture. Later Lutheran dogmaticians distinguished often between the truthfulness and the canonical authority of Scripture. Luther did not do so. In emphasizing one he emphasizes the other, for they entail each other. "The integrity of Scripture must be guarded, and a man ought not to presume that he speaks more safely and clearly with his mouth than God spoke with His mouth."¹⁴ By the truthfulness of Scripture Luther is operating with the plain garden-variety of truthfulness assumed in the second and eighth commandments. He is simply talking about true assertions in contrast to false assertions and lies. "The lie has always had the greater following; the truth is smaller. Indeed, . . . if only a few insignificant men were attacking me, then what I have taught and written would not be the truth from God. St. Paul caused a great uproar with his teaching, as we read in Acts [17:5, 18; 18:12; 19:23-41], but that did not prove his teaching false. Truth has always caused disturbance and false teachers have always said 'peace' as Isaiah and Jeremiah tell us."¹⁵

The truthfulness of Scripture to Luther is predicated on its essential clarity, a concept which we will discuss in more detail later. His position is simply that what is clear and simple is therefore reliable if the one who is speaking is reliable, and such is the case with the Word of God, Scripture. "Holy Scripture must necessarily be clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings. Especially since all teachers verify their own statements through the Scriptures, as clear and more reliable writings, and desire their own writings to be confirmed and explained by them. But nobody can ever substantiate an obscure saying by one that is more obscure; therefore, necessity forces us to run to the Bible with

the writings of all teachers, and to obtain there a verdict and judgment upon them. Scripture alone is the true Lord and Master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for?"¹⁶ Earlier Luther had insisted that the Scriptures do not err, but the fathers, even Jerome and Augustine, have erred. All teachers in the church must prove what they say is the truth by what the Holy Scriptures say. And so we find Luther repeatedly affirming the absolute infallibility and truthfulness of Scripture. "Natural reason produces heresy and error. Faith teaches and adheres to the pure truth. He who adheres to the Scriptures will find that they do not lie or deceive."¹⁷ "Scripture cannot err."¹⁸ Luther is well aware of the fact that often the Scriptures seem to err and especially to contradict themselves (as we shall discuss later), but that appearance is due to our faulty reasoning and our flesh and should never be construed as an aberration or error in the Scriptures themselves. "The Holy Spirit has been blamed for not speaking correctly. He speaks like a drunkard or a fool. He so mixes things up and uses wild, queer words and statements. But it is our fault, who have not understood the language nor known the manner of the prophets. For it cannot be otherwise; the Holy Ghost is wise and makes the prophets also wise. A wise man may be able to speak correctly; that holds true without fail."¹⁹

To Luther the authority of Scripture involves not only its truthfulness but its utter unity and consistency. Scripture does not contradict itself. This is a basic hermeneutic for the pastor who reads and preaches the Scriptures. One text does not contradict another text. One doctrine does not contradict another doctrine, even though they may seem utterly contradictory, as we shall see in the case of law and gospel. Arguing against Oecolampadius who would not take the intended literal sense of the words of institution as they stand, Luther simply says that the texts of Scripture do not contradict themselves, no matter how ridiculous they may seem.²⁰ Oecolampadius finds contradictions where, in fact, there are no contradictions in the Scriptures. What confused Oecolampadius was the fact that scriptural texts which seem contradictory *must be reconciled* and one passage must be receive an interpretation which will accord with another; for it is certain that the Scriptures cannot be at variance with themselves. If only Oecolampadius had understood the

principle that "the Scriptures do not contradict themselves," he would have come out correctly in his christology and his doctrine of the sacrament. But rather than do so, he seizes the Scriptures with guile and malice in order to use them as a cloak. And under such a guise he spreads poison among the people. Oecolampadius makes the fatal mistake, Luther says, of asking the wrong questions of Scripture. The usual wrong question is "why?" And so he finds hopeless contradictions where none exist and, in trying to solve them, obscures everything.

3. *The Preacher and the Scriptures*

Because the Scriptures are God's Word to us and because they authoritatively teach us what we are to believe and do as the children of God, the pastor should be a minister of the Word. This ministry means, first of all, that he studies the Scriptures and derives his entire message from them. In short, the theologian, or pastor, must be a *bonus textualis*, one who reads the Scriptures and rereads them,²¹ and one who believes and yields to the clear words of Holy Writ.²² Luther asserts:

The first concern of a theologian should be to be well acquainted with the text of Scripture, a *bonus textualis*, as they call it. He should adhere to this primary principle: in sacred matters there is no arguing or philosophizing; for if one were to operate with the rational and probable arguments in this area, it would be possible for me to twist all the articles of faith as easily as Arius, the Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists did. But in theology we must only hear and believe and be convinced in our heart that God is truthful, however absurd that which God says in His Word may appear to be to reason.²³

Reading the Scriptures according to Luther requires what he calls meditation. One does not simply read them like any other human book. Study, reflection, rereading are called for again and again if one is to preach or apply their message. Luther states:

You should meditate, that is, not in the heart alone, but also externally. You should work on it and ply the oral speech and the lettered words in the book, read them and reread

them again and again, noting carefully and reflecting upon what the Holy Spirit means by these words. And take care that you do not tire of it or think it enough if you have read, heard, said it once or twice, and now profoundly understand it all; for in that manner a person will never become much of a theologian.²⁴

4. *The Clarity of Scripture*

Luther is speaking of what we might call an active use of the Scriptures, so essential to their right interpretation and application.²⁵ Ordinarily by the clarity of Scripture Luther simply means the plain and simple sense of the text. This is predicated on the hermeneutical assumption that the text of Scripture has one literal sense: *sensus literalis unus est*. "In controversy we must follow the literal sense of Scripture alone, and this is one and the same throughout Scripture."²⁶

In his *Bondage of the Will* Luther speaks at great length on the clarity of Scripture and the necessity of the clarity of Scripture if there are to be assertions in the church, that is, if there is to be the teaching of pure doctrine in the church. After making his well-known polemic against skepticism—"the Holy Spirit is no skeptic"²⁷—and insisting that the church cannot stand without "assertions," he addresses himself to the clarity of Scripture. He is not primarily concerned with the grammatical and historical clarity of the text as such, which he already assumes, but with the subject-matter of the text, the things (*res*) of God. In God, of course, there are many things that are hidden and will remain so to the end of time.²⁸ This fact, however, does not mean that the Scriptures themselves are unclear as they present the articles of faith and the great mysteries of the gospel. Luther's position may be summed up as follows:

To put it briefly, there are two kinds of clarity in Scripture, just as there are two kinds of obscurity: one is external and resides in the ministry of the Word [*verbi ministerium*]; the other is located in the understanding of the heart. If you speak of the internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scripture unless he has the Spirit of God. All

men have a darkened heart, so that, if they can recite everything in Scripture and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and really understand nothing of these things [*horum sentiant aut vere cognoscant*]; neither do they believe in God, nor that they themselves are creatures of God, nor anything else; as Psalm 13 [14:1] says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" For the Spirit is required for the understanding of Scripture, both as a whole and in any part of it. If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but all things which are in the Scriptures are made perfectly clear and brought into the light through the Word and declared to the whole world.²⁹

Luther's view concerning the external clarity of Scripture involves also the practical and saving purpose of Scripture. "I said above that things which are either contained in or proved by Holy Writ are not only plain, but also salutary and can therefore safely be published, learned, and known, as indeed they ought to be."³⁰ In other words, the Scriptures are not merely true and clear as such, but also offer a true and clear message (*res*), cognitive in content, which can be preached and "which saves people eternally." This claim Luther makes against Erasmus who believed (a.) that the Scriptures were not clear externally and (b.) that their message was not of such momentous content that a person's salvation was dependent upon knowing that message. To Luther, "Souls will be inevitably lost if they are not changed by the Word of God; and if that Word were taken away, then eternal good, God, Christ, the Spirit would go with it. But surely it is preferable to lose the world rather than God the Creator of the world, who is able to create innumerable worlds again and is better than infinite worlds!"³¹ To Luther Erasmus simply does not value the Word of life and salvation which Scripture brings poor sinners. Erasmus simply does not know and understand the tremendous importance for every lost sinner to know that the Scriptures are clear. "But that impudent and blasphemous saying that the Scriptures are obscure had to be overwhelmed in this way, so that even you, my dear Erasmus, might realize what you are saying when you deny that Scripture is crystal clear. . . . For who is there to make us sure of their light if you make the Scriptures

obscure? So those who deny that the Scriptures are quite clear and plain leave us nothing but darkness."³² For Luther, therefore, the Scriptures as such are as clear as glass, their saving message crystal clear. This truth is fundamental to the divine authority of Scripture and its saving purpose and to the attaining of the pure and saving doctrine of the gospel.

What, however, of the internal obscurity and confusion and unbelief which cannot comprehend the saving grace of God and the mysteries of the gospel? These mysteries are utterly terrifying and "utterly contradictory amid temptation."³³ But the Holy Spirit, working through the Scriptures, and the Scriptures, by their own salvific and creative power, create the very understanding which we cannot of ourselves muster. For God reveals the mystery of salvation "through the external Word. This Word He has ordained to serve as a means and as a hollow reed through which He conveys saving truth in his heart."³⁴ And so the Word, pure in itself, obscure to us, becomes the most valuable of all the gifts of God to us sinners. If you take it away, it is like taking the sun away from the earth. "For if the Word were removed, what would the world be but a hell, a mere realm of Satan, though wealthy people, lawyers, doctors, and others dwell in it? For what can people do without the Word? For only the Word keeps a joyful conscience, a gracious God, and our entire religion, for from the Word flows as from a spring all religion; yes, it upholds the entire world."³⁵ So the Word to Luther is the greatest blessing in all the world, because God gives us there His merciful promises of forgiveness and life everlasting. The Word, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, creates the very understanding which we are unable to accord it. Luther says, therefore:

Now, when I say that you should fix the Word of God in your heart, I do not mean merely that you should know it and meditate on it. That is nothing. I mean rather that you should regard and esteem it as it ought to be regarded and esteemed. That is, you should hold it to be a living, eternal, all-powerful Word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you so eternally; that brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ, with His flesh and blood and everything He is and has. For it is the kind

of Word that can and does do all these things, and therefore it should be so regarded. That is its own proper honor. It is not satisfied with any other kind of honor. In short, the proper honor for the Word is nothing else than a genuine faith from the bottom of one's heart, a faith that holds the Word to be true, that trusts it, and stakes its life upon it for eternity.³⁶

Thus, a Christian simply holds to the clear and simple Word of God, and he believes it and follows it. If only men would so believe, there would indeed be more peace on earth. Sects and heretics would arise, but the churches would remain agreed in sound doctrine.

If the Word does not say it, the assertion is nothing to us, whether we are talking of Christ or God or anything.³⁷ For Luther it is all or nothing. It is the Word of God and God's truth or nothing. If the word of Scripture and preaching is sinful and wrong, then there is nothing left to direct our lives. The state of the church would be like a blind man leading another blind man (Matthew 15:14). One crookedness would create another crookedness, endlessly and immeasurably. Our lives, of course, are sinful and wrong all the time, but our doctrine must be straight and certain. "Therefore nothing except the certain, pure, and only Word of God must be preached in the church. Where that is lacking, an institution is no longer the church but the school of the devil."³⁸

Is Luther speaking only of the Holy Scripture when he talks about the Spirit of God working through the Word, the clarity and creative power of the Word to work faith and salvation? Not at all—if one were to read through the writings of Luther, one would find that the term "Word of God" refers more often to the gospel than to Scripture. The term "Word of God" may also mean simply the whole Christian doctrine, or the law, or some article of faith.³⁹ It really does not matter much to Luther. For our doctrine is based upon Scripture, and the preachers preach from Scripture; and what they preach is the Word of God. Commenting on Galatians 4:19, Luther says, "So the Word proceeds from the mouth of the apostle and reaches the heart of the hearer."⁴⁰ Is he speaking of the words of Paul in the Book of Galatians, or the preaching of Paul, or the

preaching of the church on the basis of the apostolic Word? As usual, he is speaking of all of these; for he proceeds, "There the Holy Spirit is present and impresses that Word on the heart, so that it is heard. In this way every preacher is a parent, who produces and forms the true shape of the Christian mind through the ministry of the Word."⁴¹ Luther is talking indiscriminately about the Word of Scripture, the apostolic Word, and the preached Word when he says, "Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart, that is, the right knowledge of the heart about God. But reason cannot think correctly about God; only faith can do so. A man thinks correctly about God when he believes God's Word. But when he wants to measure and to believe God apart from the Word, with his own reason, he does not have the truth about God in his heart and therefore cannot think and judge correctly about Him." Later in this context he says, "Truth is faith itself, which judges correctly about God. And that correct judgment is that God does not look upon our sins but believes that we are cleansed through Christ and justified through faith in Him." Luther in this context is speaking about the Word as the gospel itself. He says that the true idea about God is really nothing other than faith based upon the Word of the gospel. By reason we cannot apprehend or affirm [*statuere*] that we are accepted into grace for the sake of Christ. But this truth is announced [*annuntiari*] through the gospel and we take hold of this gospel by faith. Luther thus never separates the gospel from the Word of Scripture, which is always centered in Christ. Nor does he separate faith from the gospel and Scripture; and faith, wrought through the Word, is always directed toward Christ.⁴²

In another section in his commentary of 1535 on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians Luther in the same way blends the concepts of Word and faith, but explicitly brings in the Holy Spirit. He is commenting on Galatians 4:6 and says that the Holy Spirit is sent "through the Word" into the hearts of believers. This action does not happen in a visible way, nor are the change in us and our new understanding the work of human reason or power. Instead the Holy Spirit comes through "the preached Word," and He purifies our hearts and produces spiritual motives in us. Therefore we are able to make judgments with certainty, on the basis of the Word, about God's will toward us, about all laws and teachings, about our own lives and

those of others. For "without the Word it is impossible to form any sure judgments about anything."⁴³ For Luther, therefore, there is no real difference between the preached Word and the prophetic and apostolic Word of Scripture. Although canonical authority resides in the written Word, the same truth and power adhere to the Word preached on the basis of the Word of Scripture. And the same Holy Spirit is working through the Word of the gospel. Again, Luther does not distinguish for us whether he is referring to the gospel in the narrow or the broad sense. It really seems to make no difference to him, for the gospel in the broadest possible sense surrounds the center of the circle, the doctrine of justification; and the gospel in the narrow sense entails the entirety of Christian doctrine.

II. Doctrine

1. Terms

The terms "gospel," "doctrine," and "Word" are used interchangeably by Luther throughout his writings.⁴⁴ At times Luther uses the word "theology" as a reference to the gospel, or to law, or to Scripture, or to doctrine.⁴⁵ Since the Word and doctrine are identified by Luther, he invariably speaks about the doctrine as "genuine"⁴⁶ or true simply because God's Word, whether written or preached, is true. Often in hundreds of contexts he is thinking of God's Word as consisting of law and gospel, or sometimes just as the gospel in the broad sense. The point is that Luther values purity of doctrine just as he values the Word of God. For the doctrine has its origin in God just as the Word does, and the doctrine is derived totally from the Word.⁴⁷ In a sermon for Judica Sunday dealing with the way in which the Jews rejected Christ and His Word and insisted that they were the children of God, Luther says, "What does Christ do here? He lets His life be put to shame; He is silent and suffers Himself to be called a Samaritan. But the doctrine He defends. For the doctrine is not ours, but God's, who shall suffer nothing. Here there is no patience, but I shall suffer and do everything I can to keep God's honor and Word from suffering. It does not matter much if I perish. But if I let God's Word perish and am silent, I do harm to God and to all the world."

Luther is particularly insistent that his office as pastor is to preach

and defend and confess the pure doctrine, for not only his doctrine but his office "are from God alone."⁴⁸ A pastor, of course, like the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3 and 4, will prove everything with passages of Scripture, examples and analogies from the Word. It is out of his concern for the message of the gospel and for the salvation of lost sinners, as well as his concern to glorify God that Luther constantly strives for the pure doctrine and rails against all "shameful doctrines" which tread under foot the teaching of Christ and salvation.⁴⁹ It is particularly against the Papists and Enthusiasts that Luther directs his polemics. Whether it be the Papists, speaking of idle ceremonies and calls and such liturgical rites as are *adiaphora*, or the *Schwaermer*—including Karlstadt, Schwenckfeld, and Zwingli with their special revelations and twisting of the texts of Scripture—speaking of the Lord's Supper or baptism or the doctrine of Christ, the "doctrine" is being attacked. To Luther the pure doctrine is defended and taught as much when the purpose of the law is rightly taught, or the doctrine of the Lord's Supper or baptism or worship, as when the central article of justification is taught. For everything hangs together, as we shall see.

2. Christ, the Center of all Doctrine

This observation leads us to the most important principle of Luther's theology, the dominating theme of all his prodigious theological work as preacher and teacher of the church and confessor in the church: *solus Christus*. What does this principle mean? This question may best be answered by citing Luther and making comments concerning the citations.⁵⁰

It is primarily, but by no means solely, from Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* that we obtain his views on the principle of *solus Christus* and his rationale for it. Therein Luther treats justification in the broad sense as the *praecipuus articulus* of Christian doctrine, and he discusses Paul's defense of that doctrine and principle. "For the issue here," Luther says, "is nothing trivial to Paul. It is the principal doctrine [*articulus*] of Christianity. When this is recognized and held before one's eyes, everything else seems vile and worthless. For what is Peter? What is Paul? What is an angel from heaven? What is all creation in comparison with the doctrine of justification [*articulus justificationis*]? Therefore if you see this

threatened or endangered, do not be afraid to stand up against Peter or an angel from heaven. For this cannot be praised highly enough."⁵¹ Luther points out that Paul is opposing not the apostolicity of Peter (Galatians 2:11), but his practice, which seemed to yield something to the Judaizers and thus endangered "the majesty of the doctrine of justification." Luther goes on in this way:

When it comes to the defense of the truth of the gospel, therefore, we are not embarrassed to have the hypocrites accuse us of being proud and stubborn, the ones who think that they alone have the truth, those who refuse to listen or to yield to anyone. Here we have to be stubborn and unbending. The cause for whose sake we sin against men, that is, trample under foot the majesty of someone's social position or of the world, is so great that the sins that are the worst in the eyes of the world are the highest virtues in the eyes of God. It is good for us to love our parents, to honor the magistrates, to show respect for Peter and for other ministers of the Word. But what is involved here is not the cause of Peter or our parents or the emperor or the world or any other creature; it is the cause of God Himself.⁵²

For God, says Luther, is the incomparable Creator. All creatures compare with Him as a drop of water with the ocean.

According to Luther, then, the justification of a sinner before God for Christ's sake is not only the principal doctrine of Christianity, but also the very essence of it. Furthermore, it is really the essence of the gospel itself and of all Christian faith, the *Leitmotiv* of the Christian life and the reason for all that exists. It is the only doctrine or message which can offer a poor sinner hope, salvation, and life and fellowship with God.

For Luther, to lose the doctrine of justification is to lose the very grace and peace offered and brought by Christ in the gospel. It furthermore makes one a prey to the devil and all kinds of heresies. "For if we lose the doctrine of justification, we simply lose everything. Hence the most necessary and important thing is that we teach and repeat this doctrine daily as Moses says about his law (Deuteronomy 6:7). For it cannot be grasped or be held enough or

too much. In fact, though we may urge and articulate it vigorously, no one grasps it perfectly or believes it with all his heart. So frail is our flesh and so disobedient to the Spirit.”⁵³ “Grace” and “peace” contain a “summary of all of Christianity,” and grace and peace are impossible unless we have first learned to know the forgiveness we have through Christ.⁵⁴ For to take away this article is to take away Christ the “Propitiator.”⁵⁵ For only Christ can make atonement to God, not works, fasts, cowl and tonsure, and meditation. Without Him we inevitably fall and enter into horrible despair and “lose God and everything.” True theology begins by taking hold of salvation in Christ, to “begin where Christ began—in the virgin’s womb, in the manger, and at His mother’s breast. For this purpose He came down, was born, lived among men, suffered, was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way He might present Himself to our sight. He wanted us to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Him and thus to prevent us from clamoring into heaven and speculating about the Divine Majesty.” Therefore, “whenever you consider the doctrine [*locus*] of justification and wonder how or where or in what condition to find a God who justifies and accepts sinners, then you must know that there is no other God than this man Jesus Christ. Take hold of Him. Cling to Him with all your heart, and spurn all speculation about the Divine Majesty; for whoever investigates the majesty of God will be consumed by His glory.” Alluding to his own experience, Luther concludes this section by saying, “Take note, therefore, in the doctrine (*causa*) of justification that, when we all must struggle with the law, sin, death, and the devil, we must look at no other God than this incarnate and human God.”⁵⁶ Luther is most insistent that Jesus Christ be linked with God the Father. And it is the Spirit of God who brings us to Christ (John 14:6). Any other way to God causes one only to stray from the truth into hypocrisy and lies and eternal death. Therefore Christ, the center of the article of justification, “should be such a treasure to me that in comparison with Him everything else is filthy. He should be such a light to me that when I have taken hold of Him by faith, I do not know whether there is such a thing as law, sin, or unrighteousness in the world. For what is everything in heaven and on earth in comparison with the Son of God?”⁵⁷ Statements like the foregoing recur many times in Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians* and throughout

his works.⁵⁸

One more statement of Luther must be cited before we respond to the question of the nature, meaning, and scope of Luther's principle of *solus Christus*, the centrality of the doctrine of justification. The following sentences are found in Part II of the Smalcald Articles:

The second part treats the articles which pertain to the office and work of Jesus Christ, or our redemption.

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, was "put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:25). He alone is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). Moreover, "All have sinned" and "are justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus by His blood" (Romans 3:23-25).

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28), and again, "That He [God] Himself is righteous and He justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). "And with His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.

What, then, can we glean from the many, many assertions of Luther concerning what we have called the principle of *solus Christus*?

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- (1.) It is obvious that justification before God and the work of Christ as Propitiator and Redeemer belong extricably together and, so far as Luther is concerned, really constitute the same article (*articulus, doctrina, locus*). We must add that at times Luther will call the doctrine of the Lord's Supper a *praecipuus locus*, a chief theme of the faith, at other times absolution, and at other times other articles of faith. And, of course, he calls each of these articles in various contexts and other articles in various contexts *doctrina*.
 - (2.) Luther's principle of *solus Christus* springs from his exegetical studies which conclude that the entire Scripture is christocentric in its content. He often makes statements like the following, "Christ is the sum and truth of Scripture";⁵⁹ "The Scriptures from beginning to end reveal no one besides the Messiah, the Son of God, who should come and through His sacrifice carry and take away the sins of the world";⁶⁰ "Outside the book of the Holy Spirit, namely, the Holy Scriptures, one does not find Christ."⁶¹ Such statements make the christocentricity of Scripture a hermeneutical principle for Luther. "One must not understand Scripture contrary to Christ, but in favor of Him; therefore Scripture must be brought into relationship to Christ or must not be regarded as Scripture."⁶² To Luther Scripture cannot teach anything against the vicarious atonement of Christ and the doctrine of justification.⁶³
 - (3.) Since Scripture is christocentric, and therefore all Christian doctrine must center in Christ the Savior, the purpose of Scripture and the purpose of all doctrine in the church is soteriological. It is for our comfort, our forgiveness, our union with God. Luther never tires of making this point. Scripture makes us happy, trustful, confident Christians and puts us at peace with God.⁶⁴ It is our defense against temptation and the devil, the world, and our flesh.⁶⁵ It instructs us in true worship and service of God⁶⁶ and in how to be a good theologian.⁶⁷ All these and other blessings Christian doctrine affords us because of the great power of

Scripture which underlies all teaching in the church. And Scripture and Christian doctrine and preaching are powerful because they point us to Christ and His grace.

- (4.) Christian doctrine and preaching not only point us to Jesus only but also confer upon us sonship, faith in Christ, fellowship with Him, and all blessings which we have through Christ. "All the works which Christ performed are recorded in the Word, and in the Word and through the Word will He give us everything, and without the Word He will give us nothing."⁶⁸ By "Word" in this connection Luther means not simply the Scriptures but all teaching and preaching based upon that Word.
- (5.) Christian doctrine, however, the *solus Christus*, not only points the way to Christ, but also confers upon us sonship and faith in our Savior and the only possible true relationship we can have with God, because Christ is the only way to God. Christ is in me and I am in Him through faith.

It is at just this point concerning the hermeneutical function of the *solus Christus* that Luther's radical statements about Christ being the "Lord over Scripture" should be interpreted and understood.⁶⁹ Luther at times "opposes" Christ to Scripture and to all doctrine in the church. What does this mean? By no means can he be understood as characterizing then Scripture as unclear or self-contradictory. What is he saying? We may cite his most celebrated passage in this regard. In his comments on Galatians 3:14 Luther is criticizing his opponents who produce Scripture passages regarding works in opposition to Christ's final work of atonement and redemption. Luther writes in this way:

Therefore one should simply reply to them as follows: Here is Christ, and over there are the statements of Scripture about works. But Christ is Lord over Scripture and over all works. He is the Lord of heaven, earth, the sabbath, the temple, righteousness, life, sin, death, and *absolutely everything*. Paul, His apostle, proclaims that He became sin and a curse for me. Therefore I hear that I could not be liberated from my sin, death, and curse through any other

means than through His death and His blood. Therefore I conclude with all certainty and assurance that not my works but Christ had to conquer my sin, death, and curse. Even on natural grounds reason is obliged to agree and to say that Christ is not my work, that His blood and His death are not a cowl or a tonsure or a fast or a vow, and that in granting me His victory He is not a Carthusian. Therefore if He Himself is the price of my redemption, if He Himself became sin and a curse in order to justify and bless me, I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if you were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and if you were to scream the Scripture contradicts itself. I have the *Author and the Lord of Scripture*, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you. Nevertheless it is impossible for Scripture to contradict itself except at the hands of senseless and stubborn hypocrites; at the hands of those who are godly and understanding it gives testimony to its Lord. Therefore see to it how you can reconcile Scripture, which, as you say, contradicts itself. I for my part shall stay with the Author of Scripture.⁷⁰

The meaning of Luther's outburst at this point is perfectly clear. He is not contradicting the unity of Scripture or the unity of Christian doctrine but expressing his absolute commitment to the principle of *solus Christus*. Scripture must be interpreted according to Christ and His vicarious atonement. Nothing in Scripture can oppose that great fact. Nothing in our doctrine can be taught which opposes that great fact. Nothing in our worship or lives can oppose it.⁷¹

3. *Law and Gospel*

Scripture does not contradict itself, but it seems to do so to senseless and obstinate hypocrites. The seeming contradiction which one finds throughout Scripture leads us to Luther's understanding of the distinction between law and gospel.⁷² In fact, the law and gospel do not contradict each other, and Christian doctrine does not contradict itself at this point. But it seems so. Scripture often presents the paradox (*contraria*) that a Christian man is "righteous and a sinner at the same time," that he is "holy and profane, an

enemy of God and a child of God.”⁷³ People who do not understand this paradox are confused because they do not “understand the true meaning of justification [*rationem justificandi*].” The natural man and even the Christian is inclined to take statements of the law in Scripture as gospel and thus become confused and despair. To Luther the paradox *simul justus et peccator* is not an ontological description of man as righteous and a sinner, nor a statement about the old and new man, but a simple affirmation of two biblical assertions concerning man, the assertion of the law that man is a sinner and under God’s wrath and the assertion of the gospel that man is righteous and God is at peace. Both assertions are true in fact, ontologically. The second verdict, however, or assertion, takes total preeminence over the first by virtue of the principle of *solus Christus*. Christ is Lord! He is Lord of the Scriptures, of all doctrine, theology, and “everything.”⁷⁴

Luther stresses the “paradox” (*contraria*) by stating that the verdict of law and gospel are absolutely contradictory (*contradictoria*). He says, “These two things are diametrically opposed [*ipsa ex diametro pugnant*]: that a Christian is righteous and beloved by God, and yet he is a sinner at the same time. For God cannot deny His own nature. That is, He cannot avoid hating sin and sinners; and He does so by *necessity*, for otherwise He would be unjust and would love sin. Then how can these two *contradictory things* both be true at the same time, that I am a sinner and deserve divine wrath and hatred and that the Father loves me? Here nothing can intervene except Christ the Mediator.” This last simple sentence explains the paradox. It explains the whole Christian religion. It explains the Scriptures. It is the secret to all exegesis of Scripture and all theologizing. It is the only comfort that a poor sinner has in life and in death. It is “Christ alone.” So we have in the principle of *solus Christus* not only a hermeneutical rule, not only the basis for all comfort, not only the basis for our union with God and for reconciliation and salvation, but the principle of all human knowledge and understanding.

4. The Unity of all Christian Doctrine

It is obvious from the principle of *solus Christus* that all Christian doctrine is a unity. It is, as Luther says, like a large circle with

Christ at the center. Again and again Luther in his sermons and elsewhere affirms the unity of Christian doctrine and the importance of this fact.⁷⁵ He urges that we should abide by the Scriptures in purity and "unanimity." The greatest and most harmful offence to the church is to stir up discord and division in doctrine. This causes harm and ruin in the church. "Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect. What does it profit the Jews to believe that there is one God and that He is the Creator of all, to believe all the other articles [*alios articulos*] and to accept the whole Scripture, when they deny Christ?"⁷⁶ Luther urges Christians to be of one accord in doctrine, not to despise one another. When pure doctrine is divided, Christendom is divided. Disunity of doctrine causes separation in the church and Satan builds his chapel or tabernacle next door.⁷⁷

The unity of doctrine is not just a *desideratum*, as Karl Barth and our modern relativistic theologians would aver. "It is rather a fact. The doctrine which belongs to God, not to us, is like a mathematical point [*mathematicus punctus*]. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition."⁷⁸ Finally Luther argues, "One word of God is all the words of God; one article is all the articles and all are one, and when one article is lost, then by the loss of that one all are lost eventually. For all the articles belong together in one common chain."⁷⁹

If all doctrine is one, if all the articles of doctrine are one and one is all, if doctrine is like a perfect golden ring, then Christ as the center is the whole essence of Christian doctrine just as He is the center and heart of the Scriptures. The *solus Christus* is not an abstraction but a reality embracing everything that Christ has done to save fallen mankind. The *solus Christus* embraces the entire work of God from creation to Christ's return. It is the total *opus ad extra* of the Trinity. The *solus Christus* embraces not merely the work of Christ and the Father who sends Him, but also the work of the Spirit who sanctifies us. In fact, it is Christ who is our sanctification as well as our righteousness. The unity of doctrine is both christological and doctrinal, for the doctrine is Christ's and Christ is the center of all the doctrine, *perfecta doctrina*.⁸⁰ To Luther, then,

the *solus Christus* dominates every article of faith, whether it is creation, redemption, the sacrament of the altar, baptism, worship, or whatever. It also dominates the third article. Christ is not only our righteousness, He is our holiness.⁸¹ Luther says, "The church is indeed holy, but it is a sinner at the same time." Here *simul justus et peccator* becomes *simul sanctus et peccator*. Luther goes on in this way: "Therefore it believes in the forgiveness of sins and prays 'forgive us our debts' (Matthew 6:12) . . . Therefore we are not said to be holy formally as a wall is said to be white because of its inherent whiteness. Our inherent holiness is not enough. But Christ is the perfect and total holiness of the church [*perfecta et tota sanctitas ipsius*]. When our inherent holiness is not enough, Christ is enough [*satis est Christus*]."⁸²

Luther commonly uses the term holiness and the term righteousness interchangeably, just as he uses doctrine, gospel, and Word interchangeably. Like the Apostle Paul, he speaks less "precisely" than some of our fundamentalist or scholarly theologians do today with their endless word studies, which often prove nothing. In "Sanctification in the Lutheran Confessions,"⁸³ David Scaer has stated, "Any attempt to make christology preliminary to theology or even only its most important part, but not its only part is a denial of Luther's doctrine and effectively destroys the gospel as a message of completed atonement." This statement summarizes Luther's principle of *solus Christus*. To Luther the *solus Christus* includes not merely justification but also sanctification. With him Christ, "because of His sheer mercy and love, gave and offered Himself to God as a sacrifice for us miserable sinners, to sanctify us forever [*ut nos sanctificaret in aeternum*]."⁸⁴ Luther, as seen above, sees doctrine as an organic whole, not a linear progression of ideas. It is at just this point that Lutherans in name deviate from each other: Lutherans following the linear, pietistic, and fundamentalistic model, separate the articles of faith, trying vainly to classify them according to some order of importance or logic; the true and confessional Lutherans, following their mentor, see all the articles as essentially one. Christ is the center and focal point of every article of faith, and this fact in the paradoxical context of law and gospel, *simul justus et peccator*. Quite possibly the next serious controversy and split in American Lutheranism will center around two radically different

interpretations of the *praecipius locus* in Christian theology. The controversy is already raging.

What is to be done about this matter? First of all, we must understand and see clearly where the controversy lies, that it does affect, in fact, the heart of the very gospel, the *solus Christus*. Luther has stern and wise words to say on this matter: "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefields besides is more flight and disgrace if it flinches at that point."⁸⁵ These words of Luther show us the way we must battle for the truth of the gospel and all its articles. But such battling is exactly what we fail often to do; and Luther in his *Lectures on Isaiah* alludes to this tragic development which so often obtains in the church.⁸⁶ The ministers and teachers of the church of all times have often failed to recognize for one reason or other (often venality or cowardice or greed) the issues of the day which impinge upon the church and its correct teaching of the gospel. In the Old Testament Isaiah calls the ministers of the church "watchmen." He likens the watchman to a dog. "The dog is a picture of the preacher in whom there is watchfulness and faithfulness. He is on guard by day and night, watching and barking. A dog is a faithful animal." But what happens if the dog is dumb and cannot bark? What happens if the prophet and preacher teach and preach but have no reference to the "matter at hand"? They wind up not lifting up consciences and terrifying the wicked, but dealing harshly when men should be comforted. "They are learned and verbose in leading the people astray." "They do not lay bare their sins so as to draw them to repentance and to a thirst for grace. No, they even defend their sins and mistakes and blaspheme the truth. Therefore they are blind and neither know anything nor can they teach others. If Isaiah got away without losing his head, he was lucky indeed." How many of these dumb dogs, who cannot bark, who dream and lie down and love to slumber, there are in our day in the Lutheran Church just as in the church in Luther's day or in the day of Isaiah! Luther calls them "pillow dogs," animals concerned only about their belly. They are

preachers who preach much but accomplish nothing because they do not preach to the issues and dangers at hand. They are not watchmen. They are lazy and dumb and protect no one with their teaching. "This is precisely the description of our bishops, they are lazy dogs who loll all day and night on the pillow and gorge themselves, and they have not experienced the contrition of Joseph" (with reference to Amos 6:6). Then there are men like Cochlaeus and Erasmus, who are dumb too, since they speak what is agreeable and look out for their own welfare. The Word of God calls them fat, supine, and sleepy watchdogs, and "so it is with our bishops." They pile up nothing but wealth and prestige for themselves and they look out for nothing but their own interests and the strength of their own body and welfare and meanwhile they neglect the church.

Luther has been quoted at length here to show us what are the great dangers as we contend for the gospel and *all* its articles. To touch the gospel at any point is to touch it at its heart. To recognize what is going on in our day in the church and in the world is the great responsibility of a watchman, a pastor. And to face up to the issues of the day with courage and stubbornness and tenacity is the calling of every evangelical preacher and his confession to his church and to the world. A good look at Luther's theology of *solus Christus* might do much to stave off a potential controversy which could engulf all of American Lutheranism. Atomistic, wooden, Arminian fundamentalism is no friend of Lutheran doctrine, nor of the *sola scriptura* or the *sola fide* or the *sola gratia* or what embraces these three principles and all Christian doctrine, practice, and worship as well, the *solus Christus*.

5. *Doctrine and Practice, Doctrine and Life*

So far as the author's awareness extends, Luther does not distinguish between doctrine and practice in the sense in which the term practice is used in our day. In speaking about the unity of the church in his Smalcald Articles Luther urges Christians to be "diligently joined together in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, works of love, etc." (SA II, IV, 9). Obviously he is thinking about different things here but he is making no distinction between doctrine and practice. The words in the Lutheran Confessions and in Luther which are often translated by "practice" (*üben, treiben*,

leben, tun) sometimes refer to doctrine as it is taught and carried out, sometimes simply to good works and the Christian life in a very general sense. Everything the Christian does is connected to doctrine, but not everything that is done in the church or in the world is practice in the sense in which we use the word today. Luther evidently made no strict distinction as we have done in our day. There was certainly a doctrine of baptism taught by Christ and the Scriptures. The minute a child is baptized, there is the practice of baptism. The same could be said of the Lord's Supper. There is a doctrine of prayer taught by Jesus in many pericopes, but the practice of prayer takes place when we actually pray. Prayer, however, is a good work and, therefore, must be distinguished from doctrine (as we shall see). If we wish to be faithful to Luther's theology, we should probably distinguish practice from life by identifying practice as the carrying out of the means of grace, which is to say preaching the Word, administering the sacraments, and applying the keys of binding and loosing; whereas good works are simply anything that a Christian does as a child of God and in obedience to God's will and according to his own individual calling. Here, then, we shall work with this understanding of doctrine, practice, and good works.

According to this definition of terms, doctrine and practice cannot really be separated. Doctrine must result in practice. This, as we shall see, is really the function of confession and preaching. Good works, on the other hand, result from faith or may be called, more strictly speaking, the fruits of the Spirit. Thus, one can speak of *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*, terminology which is common to Western Christendom; but one rarely talks about orthodox life in terms of obedience to the ten commandments and the like. Perhaps the best description of practice in the Lutheran Confessions is found in Luther's article on "The Gospel":

We shall now return to the gospel, which offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in His grace; first, through the spoken Word, by which the forgiveness of sins (the peculiar office [*Amt*] of the gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through baptism; third, through the sacrament of the altar; fourth,

through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren. (Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered," etc.)⁸⁷

So doctrine and practice are totally intertwined according to the theology of Luther. Practice is the doing and application of the gospel, or the doctrine. The moment that doctrine is taught or articulated in any way, practice is taking place. Obvious from Luther's statement cited above is that practice, if it is in fact the "publishing and proclaiming of the Word and work of Christ," excludes all works and human endeavors. The Christian life in the theology of Luther, as we shall see, is nothing else than good works done by the believer.

Now we may explore how Luther regards the relationship between doctrine (including practice) and life. He leaves us in no doubt as to what doctrine is and what life is and how they relate to each other.

Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. In life there is sin, error, uncleanness, and misery, mixed, as the saying goes, "with vinegar." Here love should condone, tolerate, be deceived, trust, hope, and endure all things (1 Corinthians 13:7); here the forgiveness of sins should have complete sway, provided that sin and error are not defended. But just as there is no error in doctrine, so there is no need for any forgiveness of sins. Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life. "One dot" of doctrine is worth more than "heaven and earth" (Matthew 5:18); therefore we do not permit the slightest offense against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture. . . .⁸⁸

Luther explains the relationship between doctrine and life, which basically is expressed by love, and how the former must be pure, and established solidly in the Sacred Scriptures.

Elsewhere Luther insists that purity of doctrine (*Reinigkeit der*

Lehre) must be held and “true religious worship (*Gottesdienste*) must be taught.” Worship is the practice of doctrine. Luther maintains that idolatrous forms of worship, which embrace false doctrine, are examples of the most pernicious sinful life.⁸⁹ Luther makes it very clear that true doctrine is a greater concern to the church than life, and false doctrine does more harm to the church than evil life, for false teaching, the “most pernicious thing on earth,” leads souls to hell. “Whether you are good or bad does not concern me. But I will attack your poisonous lying teaching which goes against the Word of God. And with God’s help I will oppose it with vigor.”⁹⁰ To Luther the vast difference between doctrine and life is this: doctrine is based upon God’s Word alone and is God’s truth alone, whereas life is partly our own doing. Thus, doctrine must remain entirely pure. God will have patience with men’s sins and imperfections and forgive them. But He “cannot, will not, and shall not tolerate a man’s altering and abolishing doctrine itself.” For doctrine involves the exalted divine majesty of God. In the sphere of doctrine, therefore, forgiveness and patience are simply not to be allowed.⁹¹ To Luther, if the doctrine is not right (*wo die Lehre nicht recht ist*), then it is impossible for the life to be right and good (*recht und gut*), for life must be prepared (*anrichten*) by doctrine.⁹² The following proportion illustrates Luther’s position, in the author’s estimation:

As doctrine and practice is to life,
so faith is to works, or the fruits of faith.

Or we might speak in this way:

As doctrine produces life,
so faith produces good works.

We can then make this assertion, as a corollary: Doctrine (the gospel) brings about faith, love, and good works.

According to Luther, if the doctrine (*die Lehre*) is impure and false, then faith cannot be pure either. If the faith is not right, then there can be no good works or fruits of faith. “Everything,” he says, “has to do with doctrine. When the doctrine is right, then all things are right: faith, works, life, suffering, good and bad days, eating, drinking, hunger, thirst, sleep, being awake, walking, standing, etc.

Where the doctrine is not right, everything is in vain, everything is lost and entirely condemned, works, life, suffering, fasting, prayers, alms, cowls, tonsures, whatever more papistic holiness there is in the church."⁹³

To Luther "doctrine and life should be distinguished as sharply as possible. Doctrine belongs to God, not to us; and we are called only as its ministers. Therefore we cannot give up or change even one dot of it (Matthew 5:18). Life belongs to us."⁹⁴ Doctrine to Luther is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided. It cannot tolerate either subtraction or addition. Life is like a physical point; it can be divided and always yield something. And so we will live at peace with all men if they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound. If the adversaries will not do this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. Says Luther, "A curse on any love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield."⁹⁵ He continues, "Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but Word and faith cannot. It belongs to love to bear everything and to yield to everyone. . . . It belongs to faith to bear nothing at all and to yield to no one. Love yields freely, love gives in freely, believes, condones and tolerates everything. Therefore it is often deceived. Yet when it is deceived, it does not suffer any hardship that can really be called hardship; that is, it does not lose Christ, and therefore it is not offended but keeps its constancy in doing good even toward those who are unthankful and unworthy."⁹⁶ If faith (doctrine) is lost, all is lost. "Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith."⁹⁷ We see in this citation how Luther's principle of *solus Christus* and his conviction concerning the unity of all doctrine pervade his thinking and his distinction between faith (doctrine) and love (life). Luther is a far more systematic and synthetic thinker than most people imagine. The entire Smalcald Articles, which were written to be a confession for an ecumenical council, are structured around the *solus Christus*, and all his *Lectures on Galatians* and other writings tend to illustrate this total orientation of Luther's.

6. *Doctrine and the Church*

In his *Exhortation to All Clergy* Luther tells us of the themes (*loci*) which must be dealt with in the Christian church by bishops and teachers. The following is the list:

What the law is
What gospel is
What sin is
What grace is
What the gift of the Spirit is
What true repentance is
How true confession is made
What faith is
What forgiveness of sins is
What Christian liberty is
What free will is
What love is
What the cross is
What hope is
What baptism is
What mass is
What the church is
What the keys are
What a bishop is
What a deacon is
What the preaching office is
The true Catechism, namely, the Ten Commandments, the
 Lord's Prayer, the Creed
True prayer
The litany
The reading and interpretation of the Scriptures
What true works are
Instruction of married people, children, manservants,
 and maids
Respecting authority
Children's schools
Visitation of the sick
Providing for the poor and hospitals

Ministering to the dying⁹⁸

These are obviously topics about which the pastor should teach his people. In essence Luther is simply saying that the church lives on the doctrine of the gospel and all its articles.⁹⁹ It is Luther's firm conviction that Christians must be shepherded by pastors who can protect them from false doctrine and radical interpretations of Scripture.¹⁰⁰ Even councils of the church can err, and even the greatest pastors have erred; therefore the church must stand and rely totally on the teachings of God Himself in Holy Writ.¹⁰¹ Every Christian in the church has the right to judge doctrine (and to judge the pastors).¹⁰² This is not merely a right but a duty, which Christ Himself has established (Matthew 7:15). The sheep cannot avoid wolves unless they know the voice of the Good Shepherd. The prophets in the Old Testament did not tell the children of Israel to believe the false prophets. Neither should pastors do so today. But pastors must not only teach, but warn their people against false doctrine; and the people are responsible to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and their pastors.¹⁰³ And so the church has the right to call pastors and the duty to judge the teaching of the pastors.¹⁰⁴

In his many works against the papacy Luther extols the priesthood of all believers.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps his strongest statement on the matter is his essay of 1553 entitled *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge all Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture*.¹⁰⁶ The sure sign of a Christian congregation Luther says is that the pure gospel is preached there. The lack of the pure gospel means that bishops, religious foundations, and monasteries are not Christian or Christian congregations. Christ "takes both the right and the power to judge teaching from the bishops, scholars, and councils and gives them to everyone and to all Christians equally."¹⁰⁷ The right to judge doctrine, according to Luther, is given not to prophets and teachers, but to pupils and sheep. "For how could one beware of false prophets if one did not consider and judge their teaching? Thus there cannot be a false prophet among the listeners, only among the teachers. That is why all teachers and their teaching should and must be subject to the judgment of listeners."¹⁰⁸ It is the right and also the duty, therefore, of all Christians to judge doctrine

on the basis of Holy Scripture. The congregation, of course, is obligated to call qualified men to be pastors. It is a terrible plague if a congregation has no pastor. But if false doctrine is taught, there is no need of any special divine command for any Christian to speak up.¹⁰⁹ In this entire essay Luther is stressing two truths which are dialectically necessary: firstly, the divine institution of a minister of the Word and the mandate to the congregation to call one from its midst to be its pastor; and, secondly, the total responsibility of the congregation and of individual Christians to judge the doctrine of their pastor. Luther is especially concerned that bishops stay out of these matters in which they have caused more than enough harm by their tyranny and conniving.

7. *Christian Doctrine and Human Reason*

Again and again Luther shows the absurdity of Christian doctrine when measured by human reason, even the reason of the regenerate man. The greatest philosophers of the world know nothing of the great mercy and truth of God, according to Luther. They know nothing about sin and nothing about the promises and grace of God.¹¹⁰

Luther's position concerning the relationship between doctrine (theology) and reason (philosophy) has been discussed definitively by scholars who are experts on his thinking.¹¹¹ Essentially Luther's view is that doctrine is not only above reason but against the unregenerate reason of man so that natural man simply does not understand spiritual things.¹¹² This opposition means that the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation and the other articles of the faith which we might call "pure articles" are simply foolishness to natural reason.¹¹³ Luther's entire treatise on *The Bondage of the Will* against Erasmus is a testimony to the fact that the articles of faith are contrary to reason. To Luther the articles of faith are simply "grasped" in such a way that one believes without understanding or against one's own natural insight and knowledge.¹¹⁴ Luther's anthropology dominates his entire thinking. To him Scripture "represents man as one who is not only bound, wretched, captive, sick, and dead, but in addition to his other miseries is afflicted, through the agency of Satan, his prince, with this misery of blindness, so that he believes himself to be free, happy, unfet-

tered, able, well, and alive."¹¹⁵ In other words, it is not merely the categorical difference between doctrine and reason which makes man incapable of understanding the doctrine of the gospel and its articles, but man's own inherent spiritual blindness and death. Worse, indeed, God actually hardens the unregenerate man so that he gets everything jumbled up, just as He did the Egyptian pharaoh (Exodus 4:21).¹¹⁶

To Luther, then, the believer in Christ believes in all kinds of things which are totally contrary to nature and reason and which seem impossible and untrue. One recalls the well-known statement which Luther makes in his *Commentary on Galatians*:

For faith speaks as follows: "I believe Thee, God, when Thou dost speak." But what does God say? Things that are impossible, untrue, foolish, weak, absurd, abominable, heretical, and diabolical—if you consult reason.¹¹⁷

Luther says these words in the very midst of his discussion on the doctrine of justification, the chief article, his expression of the *solus Christus*. Again he says, "Thus when God proposes the articles of faith, He always proposes things which are simply impossible and absurd—if, that is, you want to follow the judgment of reason. It does indeed seem ridiculous and absurd to reason that in the Lord's Supper the body and blood of Christ are presented, that baptism is 'the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5), that Christ the Son of God was conceived and carried in the womb of a virgin, that He was born, that He suffered the most ignominious death on the cross, that He was raised again, that He is now sitting on the right hand of the Father, that He now has 'authority in heaven and on earth' (Matthew 28:18)."¹¹⁸ Luther goes on to assert that Paul therefore calls the gospel of Christ "the folly of preaching" (1 Corinthians 1:21). "Reason judges this way about all the articles of faith; for it does not understand that the highest worship (*summus cultus*) is to hear the voice of God and to believe. . . . When God speaks, reason, therefore, regards His Word as heresy and as the word of the devil; for it seems so absurd."¹¹⁹ And so, for Luther, faith must kill and slaughter reason. This slaying of reason, which is like Abraham slaying his son, affirms the wisdom, justice, power, truthfulness, mercy, majesty, and divinity of God, and

ascribes glory to Him alone. "Therefore no greater, better, or more pleasing religion or worship (*melior aut gratior religio cultusque*) can be found in the world than faith," faith in Christ alone and His Word.¹²⁰ But Luther discusses the opposition between doctrine and reason in the same context in which he discusses justification by faith, and the *simul justus et peccator* is therefore no accident. Luther's theology is very well integrated at this point.

In all of Luther's writings he rails against false doctrine. The only way that false doctrine can be driven out is by true doctrine. And the true doctrine, which alone can protect the Christian against heresy and damnable and satanic lies, is the truth about himself and about Christ, the truth that no one can placate God; only Christ can do that and He can do it only by the immense and infinite price which He paid, His death and His blood, "one drop of which is more precious than all creation."¹²¹ "Therefore I say that there is no force that can resist the sects, and no remedy against them except this one doctrine of Christian righteousness (*istum unicum articulum justitiae christianae*). If this doctrine is lost, it is impossible for us to be able to resist any errors or sects. . . ."¹²²

III. Confession

1. The Meaning and Nature of Confession

Whether Luther was writing the Smalcald Articles or some other Confession, or preaching one of his thousands of sermons, or teaching confirmands, or writing one his many treatises, or lecturing, or celebrating the sacrament, or doing the liturgy, or witnessing to some poor sinner, he was engaged in the act of confessing Christ and the doctrine of the gospel. In fact, the entire public ministry of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments is nothing but a confession of faith according to Luther. When a child is confirmed and promises to remain faithful to what he has learned in the catechism, he is making confession of his faith and throughout his life he is living in the confession and continuing in it. When a pastor is called and ordained into the Christian ministry and he pledges to uphold the Scriptures and the confessions, he is confessing his faith and the faith of the church publicly and continues to do so as long as he remains a faithful and orthodox pastor. All of

Luther's works are, in a sense, nothing but his confession of faith. Speaking mainly as a pastor and public confessor of the faith, Luther sums the matter up quite well in *The Bondage of the Will* when he simply says that a Christian, and particularly a pastor, makes "assertions divinely transmitted to us in the Sacred Writings," and when one takes away assertions, then one takes away Christianity.¹²³ When one makes assertions, having been given the Holy Spirit from heaven, he glorifies Christ by his assertions and confesses Him even unto death. Confession not only dominates the life and total ministry of the pastor, but is to Luther the highest form of doxology.¹²⁴ In the same work, Luther makes it very clear that our confession is possible only by the work of the Holy Spirit in us through the Word, and therefore without bold confession nothing but tumults and disturbances beset the church, and sects and discord and wars result.¹²⁵ For when the Word is lost and confession is not made, "God, Christ, the Spirit would go with it."¹²⁶

It is clear from Luther's high view of the purity of doctrine and the necessity for confessing it that the essential work of a pastor, called to the public ministry of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments, is simply confession, confession of Christ and His doctrine.¹²⁷ Luther's comments on Galatians 6:6 are significant at just this point. The minister is a teacher according to Luther. He teaches the Word. The Word is the gospel of Christ. By instructing in the Word the minister shares all good things which God has to give. When Peter was enjoined three times to feed the sheep of Christ, Jesus meant that he should do the greatest work in the church, which is preaching, confessing Christ.¹²⁸ It is clear from all the writings of Luther that he believes that as a Christian and a minister and doctor of the church he is called upon to confess Christ and His doctrine in the sense in which the New Testament uses the word *martyreo* and *homologeo*. There is nothing complicated or sophisticated about his understanding. The creed confessed by the entire church is no more a confession than the simple witnessing of a child about his Savior.

What, then, of creeds and symbols? Creeds and symbols (confessions) are formal statements of doctrine which the entire church subscribes and are a pattern of doctrine for all ministers in

the church. They are, of course, written and permanent. Subscription is forced upon no one but is voluntary. This is the case with the three ecumenical creeds which Luther subscribed as a minister in the Roman Western Church.

When controversies arise in the church, there is a need often for a new confession, large or small, to settle matters. This was the case with the Augsburg Confession of 1530 which Luther supported and of which he claimed to be an author. Everything, therefore, that Melancthon says in the Augsburg Confession or the Apology is completely endorsed by Luther.¹²⁹ The Augsburg Confession was meant to be ecumenical, that is, an orthodox confession which would represent the whole church. When Luther wrote commentaries on the creeds, he assumed their authority and ecumenicity, which is to say orthodoxy. This was the same position he took toward the Augsburg Confession and the Apology.

In 1536 Luther was requested by many of the Lutherans, both princes and theologians, to write a confession for a council which, it was hoped, the pope might call at an early date in Germany. This confession he wrote; and his views on the nature of a confession, the nature of confessional subscription, the purpose of a confession, and other aspects relating to formal confessions can be rather easily deduced from comments he makes within the Smalcald Articles.

He makes it clear, first, that a confession, written to serve a council, the largest Christian gathering possible and representative of Christendom, "is to be accepted unanimously."¹³⁰ Clearly those who subscribe it do so sincerely and without qualification. The Smalcald Articles, like the creeds themselves, were made up of articles, that is, specific topics or points or parts of doctrine. Doctrine, as we have said above, was thought of as an organic whole, a unit, without break. And so Luther presents "publicly as the confession of our faith" the Smalcald Articles as a true creed, or confession. And he does so in good faith and without deception or treachery.¹³¹ He explains that the three articles of the ecumenical creeds are presented briefly because both parties involved confess them, the Romanists and the Lutherans alike. Part two of the Smalcald Articles specifically states the heart of the Lutheran confession, namely, "the articles which pertain to the office and

work of Jesus Christ, or to our redemption.” Then Luther explains the principle of *solus Christus* and how it operates as a hermeneutical rule in judging doctrine and practice in the church.¹³² Every article in a confession such as the Smalcald Articles is a matter of confession.¹³³ Finally, at the very end of the Smalcald Articles, as Luther speaks on “Human Traditions” and condemns the papists’ view that such traditions effect forgiveness of sins or merit salvation as un-Christian, he makes the following statement: “These are the articles on which I must stand and on which I will stand, God willing, until my death. I do not know how I can change or concede anything in them. If anybody wishes to make some concessions, let him do so at the peril of his own conscience.”¹³⁴ These words clearly indicate the seriousness of confession for Luther. The Smalcald Articles are built around the doctrine of redemption, the *solus Christus*. Every abuse that Luther had attacked was condemned because it conflicted with that *Hauptartikel*. This is the place where Luther takes his stand. We observe the same eschatological and pious truculence in Luther’s great *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*.¹³⁵ It is appropriate to quote him at length and then make a few pertinent comments:

I see that schisms and errors are increasing proportionately with the passage of time, and that there is no end to the rage and fury of Satan. Hence lest any persons during my lifetime or after my death appeal to me or misuse my writings to confirm their error, as the Sacramentarians and Anabaptists fanatics are already beginning to do, I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world point by point. I am determined to abide it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence if anyone shall say after my death, “If Luther were living now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not consider it sufficiently,” etc., let me say once and for all that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the Sacrament of the Altar.

I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the last judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert the Word of God and the Scriptures, what will he not be able to do with my or someone else's words?¹³⁶

Luther expresses several important motifs in this defiant confession of faith. Firstly, he realizes the reality of Satan and that the fight for the doctrine of the gospel is waged against satanic principalities and powers. Second, he is oriented eschatologically as is the Apostle Paul throughout Galatians and many of his other epistles.¹³⁷ It is interesting that this *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* is structured much as the Large Catechism, sticking with the basic outline of the Apostles' Creed, but is much more polemical than the Large Catechism. It also bears great similarity to the Smalcald Articles in that it centers on the motif of *solus Christus* and polemicalizes against everything that would contradict or undermine it.

2. Confessional Certainty

Finally, Luther exhibits what we would today call doctrinal certainty, a quality which seems, like the rest of what we have just described, quite anachronistic in our day. Thus, Luther becomes one who can be admired, in the spirit of Thomas Carlisle, but cannot very easily be followed today as an example. Although being a confessional Lutheran in Luther's day could mean banishment or death, while in our day it means in most cases something far less—social estrangement, embarrassment, or financial loss—we can easily perceive how difficult it is for one who holds to Luther's doctrine and wishes to confess it to emulate him, especially his confident spirit. Certainty is the word. Just as the doctrine itself is certain, as we have seen, one who confesses the doctrine must be certain.¹³⁸ Such certainty is exhibited by Luther not only in his confessional writings but throughout his sermons and all his writings. "I do not listen to anything at all that is contrary to my doctrine; for I am certain and persuaded through the Spirit of Christ that my doctrine of Christian righteousness is the true and certain one."¹³⁹ Comment-

ing on the Enthusiasts, who pervert the Word of God with their false doctrine of the work of the Spirit, Luther affirms that the Holy Spirit through the Word is sent into the heart of believers so they can know that they are the children of God and can believe the gospel of Christ, but also differentiate the enemies and perverters of the Word. Thus, the Papists and Enthusiasts are unable to judge with certainty about anything. "The latter distort and pervert the Word; the former persecute and blaspheme it." But, Luther affirms, "We know as a certainty that it is a divine gift when we not only believe in Jesus Christ but proclaim and confess Him openly before the world ["praedicamus et confitemur coram mundo"]. As we believe in our heart, so we speak with our lips. According to the statement of the Psalm (116:10): 'I believed, and so I spoke; but I am greatly afflicted.'"¹⁴⁰

Luther states that we Christians fall into sin but not deliberately, and we sin through ignorance and we regret it. And while we can fall from grace, we trust the Holy Spirit to support us. Meanwhile if one loves the Word and enjoys hearing, speaking, thinking, lecturing, and writing about Christ, he should know that this is not a work of human will or reason but a gift of the Holy Spirit. The author of all our confession and all the misery and suffering and glory which might ensue from it is the Spirit of God. Christian ministers merely "proclaim" Christ as the instrument of the Holy Spirit. And with the help of theology, we become certain that our ministerial office is pleasing to God.¹⁴¹ Thus, certainty that we are in a state of grace and are saved is coupled with certainty of our doctrine and confession.¹⁴² For one who does not confess Christ cannot be saved.¹⁴³

3. *Confession and False Doctrine*

To confess Christ and His Word involves condemning all false doctrine and warning of its dangers. These actions are essential elements of confession. This point is made in almost all of Luther's writings and particularly in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* and the Smalcald Articles. Luther, made a very strong issue with Melancthon of insisting upon antitheses in the Augsburg Confession. Thereby he shows his concern that there be not only *Lehre* in the church but also *Wehre*. The condemnation of false

doctrine and the presence of clear and unequivocal antitheses in confessional writings is not a matter of indifference to Luther nor is it simply a matter of condemning and blasting heretical opinions and false teachers. The purpose of condemnatory statements and antitheses is to enhance the pure doctrine by revealing the false doctrine. The antitheses in confessions serve to clarify and to enhance the theses.¹⁴⁴

4. *Confession and the Cross*

To preach the gospel publicly and to confess the Christ and the faith inevitably brings crosses, affliction, and persecution upon the Christian and the church, especially the public ministers of the Word. These things happen without fail. But why must they must happen?

Luther responds: "The gospel was not given that we might seek our own praise and glory through it or that the common people might acclaim us, its ministers, on account of it. But it was given that through it the blessing and glory of Christ might be illumined, that the Father might be glorified, which He has shown us in Christ, His Son, whom He gave up for us and with whom He has given us all things."¹⁴⁵ No one who preaches the gospel seeks his own glory; that is the last thing for which he looks. He who preaches salvation by grace and not by works, who preaches the unconditional love of God in Christ—how can such a one claim any glory for doing such a good work? Anyone who seeks his own glory as he preaches the gospel and confesses Christ is thereby a liar.

And so Paul issues the warning to every minister of the Word that he must suffer opposition as he preaches the gospel. God has "attached suffering to the teaching of the gospel," and He does so for our own benefit. For otherwise God would never be able to repress and crush in us "this beast called *kenodoxia*." Luther spends a great deal of time explaining the sin of *kenodoxia*, that is, the yen for the admiration and praise of men and for the life of ease in the ministry of the gospel. This propensity in one who is supposed to be a witness "for the truth" is a certain sign that he is a false witness. For "the fact that you teach faithful doctrine and live a holy life is not your gift; it is God's. Therefore you do not receive

the praise; God receives it in you." Nor will you be elated by praise—nor will you be moved by insult, slander, or persecution or pressure to "desert your calling."¹⁴⁶

Therefore it is the very grace of God that He covers those of us who confess His Word with "slander, bitter hatred, persecution, and blasphemy from the whole world, as well as with contempt and ingratitude from our own followers." In fact, the devastation which we receive from followers and false brethren is worse than that which we openly suffer from outright enemies of the gospel.

There are, of course, some among our followers who honor us on account of the ministry of the Word; but where there is one who honors us, there are a hundred who hate, despise, and persecute us. Therefore the slanders and persecutions of our opponents—as well as the great contempt, ingratitude, and secret bitter hatred of those in whose midst we live—are joyful sights and delight to us so much that we easily forget vain glory.¹⁴⁷

Thus we are graciously preserved from *kenodoxia*. Luther adds sarcastically that the *kenodoxoi* who receive the applause of the crown are ever so proud and courageous, brave and daring.¹⁴⁸

From Luther's writings an extensive phenomenology could be written of false teachers and false doctrine. They pretend to be martyrs.¹⁴⁹ They profess to have only the unity, peace, and harmony of the church at heart.¹⁵⁰ They spend their time engaging in senseless and meddlesome controversies only to enhance their own reputation and wealth.¹⁵¹ They start controversies in the name of orthodoxy and piety.¹⁵² Knowing that they have no Scriptures, they complain about their "ministry."¹⁵³ The most insidious and destructive weapon, however, in the arsenal of the devil and false teachers is, according to Luther, ironically the Word itself. In his treatises against the fanatics, *This Is My Body*, Luther points out that the devil finally permitted Scripture to become the sole authority, thus worming his way in and bringing things under his control and then creating a real brawl over Scripture and producing many sects, heresies, and factions among Christians. For everyone claimed to have Scripture on his side. And so the devil wrests from the

Christians the weapons, armor, and fortress which they have in Holy Scripture. Scripture becomes a broken net in the church. Either, like the Papists, people claim an authority alongside of or above the Scriptures; or, like the fanatics, people concoct the most idiotic theories as to what the Scriptures are teaching. And thus the "unity" of doctrine is lost in the church. All the articles of Scripture are attacked because the chief article, the *solus Christus*, is ignored. The *verba* of Scripture are meticulously studied and distorted, while the *res* of Scripture, Christ and the gospel, is abandoned, by both Papists and fanatics.¹⁵⁴

The result is that God lets blasphemers against His Word and against His Holy Spirit be so hardened that they cannot be converted.¹⁵⁵ As Christ converted no high priest, Luther can convert no arch-fanatic. But he will most certainly make his confession. Meanwhile he condemns them. And if he is called loveless for so doing, he replies, "Cursed be such love and unity in the abyss of hell, for such unity not only divides the Christian church wretchedly, but in true devilish fashion even mocks it and pokes fun at it for its wretchedness." Qualifying the above statement, Luther says "I do not mean to judge so harshly as to hold that they do this out of malice. But I think they are blinded by Satan, and perhaps they have developed a conscience that bites them, saying 'Truly we have caused a great offence and kindled a great fire; now we must paste and putty up the affair with words and claim indulgence because it is not an important matter.' And even if we lose the argument, let us declare in advance that we have not lost anything important, but have committed only a minor offence, as we say of singers when they make a mistake, 'They only farrowed a piglet.'" And Luther simply concludes, "No, gentlemen, 'None of this peace and love for me!'"¹⁵⁶

Luther insists that "in spiritual matters" as long as we have breath we must condemn, shun, and censure false teachers and corrupters of God's Word who are nothing but blasphemers and liars, knowing that they disguise themselves under false humility, peace, and forgiveness, and claim that they are not speaking to any particular article of faith at all. He who confesses Christ might think that he finds favor, especially among the brethren, for preaching the gospel

of peace, life, and eternal salvation. But often he incurs the most bitter hatred.¹⁵⁷

*5. Righteous Zeal as the Mark of One Who Loves
Christ and Confesses Him*

Stubbornness, pious Christian stubbornness, is required in everyone—church, pastor, and people—who confesses Christ and His doctrine. We must be proud, Luther says, “proud in God.” We must refuse to yield the least little bit in doctrinal matters. Not even to angels from heaven or Peter or Paul or a hundred emperors or a thousand popes or the whole world.

On no account should we humble ourselves here; for they want to deprive us of our glory, namely, the God who has created us and given us everything and the Christ who has redeemed us with His blood. In short, we can stand the loss of our possessions, our name, our life, and everything else; but we will not let ourselves be deprived of the gospel, our faith, and Jesus Christ. And that is that! Accursed be any humility that yields or submits at this point! Rather let everyone be proud and unremitting here, unless he wants to deny Christ. With the help of God, therefore, I will be more hard-headed than anyone else. I want to be stubborn and to be known as someone who is stubborn. Here I bear the inscription “I yield to no one.” I am overjoyed if I am called rebellious and unyielding. Here I admit openly that I am and will be unmovable and I will not yield a hairbreadth to anyone. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7); therefore it yields. But not faith; it will not stand for anything. As the common saying has it, “A man’s reputation, faith, and eye cannot stand being played with.” So far as his faith is concerned, therefore, a Christian is as proud and firm as he can be; and he will not relax or yield the least bit. For at this point faith makes a man God (2 Peter 1:4). But God does not stand for anything or yield to anyone, for He is unchanging. Thus faith is unchanging. Therefore we should not stand for anything or yield to anything. But so far as love is concerned, a Christian

should yield and stand for everything; for here he is only a human being.¹⁵⁸

It follows, then, anger is a virtue, zeal is a virtue, persistence is a virtue, stubbornness is a virtue, and intransigence, when the gospel is at stake. Yes, even pride and obstinence are virtues, for we are only listening to God and His voice.¹⁵⁹ This is the way one stands in the "strength of sound doctrine."¹⁶⁰ This is the way we remain faithful to the Word and the doctrine. This is the way we confess our faith, boldly and without compromise.¹⁶¹

Conclusion

Seldom, presumably, has an essay on Luther's theology consisted of so much Luther and so little personal or subjective comment. Luther has been allowed to speak for himself on all points. In discussing Luther's view of the Word, doctrine, and confession this study has but scratched the surface of what he has to say on such fundamental issues. But it is the author's hope that these lines may contribute something to the cause of confessional Lutheranism and make us all more aware of our evangelical Lutheran heritage. We may conclude with the first stanza of one of Luther's best known hymns:

Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word;
Curb those who feign by craft and sword
Would wrest the kingdom from Thy Son
And set at naught all He hath done.

The Endnotes

1. "Predigten über das erste Buch Mosis," *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis Edition), 3:21. This edition is hereafter cited as *SL*.
2. "Von Abendmahl Christi," *Luthers Werke* (Weimar Ausgabe) 26:450. This edition is hereafter cited as *WA*.
3. "Predigt über 1 Corinthians 15, 3-7," *SL* 8:1110-1111.
4. "Kurze Auslegung über Jesaia, Cap. 8, 20-22," *SL* 6:80.

5. "D. Martin Luthers kleine exegetische Schriften," *SL* 9:1800. One may compare *SL* 4:1492 and *SL* 3:785.
6. *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1944), 65-102, *passim*.
7. *SL* 9:1770.
8. *SL* 8:38; 9:839; 3:325; 13:1559; 5:933; 22:1661.
9. "Lectures on Galatians," *Luther's Works* (American Edition) 27, 46. This edition is hereafter cited as *LW*.
10. *SL* 8:464.
11. *SL* 16:1677 (*allein auf Gottes Wort*).
12. *LW* 26:57-58.
13. One may compare *LW* 34, 33, 39, 40.
14. "Against Latomus," *LW* 32:244.
15. "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," *LW* 32:12.
16. *Ibid.*, 11.
17. "Am dritten Christtage," *SL* 11:162.
18. "Vom Missbrauch der Messe, 1521," *WA* 8:485.
19. "Habbakkuk, 1526," *WA* 19:350.
20. "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics," *LW* 37:49-50.
21. *SL* 18:732, 332, 696.
22. *SL* 13:1898.
23. "Auslegung des 45. Psalms," *SL* 5:456.
24. "Vorreden über Sammlungen der Schriften Luthers," *SL* 14:435.
25. *LW* 37:13-17; "Sermons on John 7 and 8," *LW* 23:371.
26. "Luthers Antwort auf d. Buch des Catharinus," *SL* 18:1447; one may compare *SL* 20:780.
27. "The Bondage of the Will," *LW* 33:24.
28. One may see *ibid.*, 25-28.

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29. WA 18:609.
 30. Ibid., 45.
 31. Ibid., 53.
 32. Ibid., 94.
 33. LW 26:338; one may also see 37:46-49, 167.
 34. "Luthers Predigt über Matth. 11, 25-30," SL 7:830.
 35. "Der hundertundzweiundzwanzigste Psalm," SL 4:1806.
 36. "The Adoration of the Sacrament," LW 36:278-279.
 37. LW 37:88, 134-135; 36:29, 302.
 38. "Wider Hanswurst," SL 17:1344. Christ is "present in the word and in the outward things of which His word speaks" (LW 37:136-137).
 39. Often Luther speaks about the sacrament of the altar or the sacrament of baptism as the word at work. For instance, speaking of the Lord's Supper he says, "Everything depends upon these words. . . . Language cannot express how great and mighty these words are, for they are the sum substance of the whole gospel. This is why these words are far more important than the sacrament itself, and a Christian should make it a practice to give far more attention to these words than to the sacrament" (LW 36:277). According to Luther, to ignore the words is to lose the sacrament and to turn it into a "purely external work devoid of faith." Luther is arguing that the veneration of the sacrament is nothing unless the word is honored which makes the sacrament what it is. The best way to honor the sacrament is to honor the word and "the proper way to honor the word is to fix it in your heart." What does it mean to fix one's heart on the word of God? Luther replies, "You should hold it to be a living, eternal, or powerful word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you eternally—that brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ with His flesh and blood and everything that He is and has. For it is the kind of word that can and does do all things and therefore it can be so regarded. In short, the proper honor for the word is nothing else than a genuine faith from the bottom of one's heart, the faith that holds the word to be true, that trusts it and stakes

its life upon it for eternity." In whatever form the word takes—preaching, Scripture, mutual conversation of brethren, the sacraments—it bears the same power of God to grant forgiveness and salvation ("The Adoration of the Sacrament," *LW* 36:278-279).

40. *LW* 26:430.
41. One may compare *LW* 33:136.
42. *WA* 40, 1:376-377; see also *LW* 26:238-239.
43. *LW* 26:375.
44. *Ibid.*, 52, 221, 223, 296.
45. *Ibid.*, 331.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *LW* 37:26.
48. "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians," *LW* 35:384; 17:39. Luther here insists that the evangelical doctrine by standing on Scripture stands on its own merits. There is no need, he says, to settle anything about the doctrine, for it determines all other things, standing as it does on Scripture. The Papists are aware of this fact and are afraid. They cannot bear the true doctrine and therefore try in countless ways to set up idols. "Our doctrine, however, does not rely on the endorsement and support of others. We do not have to propel it, for it runs by itself and will stand forever. This is our glory. Meanwhile nothing seems less clear than that we are lowly people. There are the powerful Papists. The haughty Enthusiasts and Anabaptists offer their opposition, and no trace of strength appears in us. But we must put up with it."
49. "Exhortation to All Clergy," *LW* 34:21.
50. For a full discussion of the issue one may see Robert Preus, "Luther and the Doctrine of Justification," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 1984, 1-15.
51. *LW* 26:106.
52. *Ibid.*, 107.

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53. Ibid., 26.
 54. Ibid., 26-27.
 55. Ibid., 28. "Propitiator" is a very common descriptive word used by Luther for Christ, especially in his *Lectures on Galatians* and other commentaries and sermons. It is a kind of umbrella term to speak of everything which Christ has done to save us.
 56. Ibid., 29.
 57. LW 27:182.
 58. LW 26:54, 116, 126, 136, 198, 222, 223, 282-283, 285, 395; one may compare Erlangen Latin 10:137; 21:12, 20. WA 18: 606; 46:414; 56:247; WA *Tischreden* 5, 5585.
 59. "Scholae: Psalmus LXXXI. [LXXXII.]," WA 3:620.
 60. "Reichstage zu Speier 1544," SL 17:1070.
 61. SL 9:1775; for a detailed discussion of Luther's principle of *solus Christus* in Scripture and Christian theology, one may see E. Thestrup Pedersen, *Luther som Skrifortolker* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959), 251-270.
 62. "Fünf Disputationen über Rom. 3, 28," SL 19:1441.
 63. One may compare WA 24:549; 42:368, 277.
 64. "Der hundertundzweiunddreissigste Psalm," SL 4:2098.
 65. SL 6:439.
 66. SL 4:1424; 13:573, 2215-2216.
 67. SL 14:435.
 68. "Am Tage Epiphaniä," SL 13:1556.
 69. SL 19:1441.
 70. LW 26:295 (emphasis added).
 71. The inductive findings here concerning Luther's principle of the *solus Christus* are not some novel animadversion or theory but really underlies the entire Lutheran "theology of the cross," a motif increasingly emphasized not only by students of Luther's

theology, but by Lutherans who want to be faithful to his theology. One treatment of this subject is "The Theology of the Cross," written by Hermann Sasse in 1951 (see Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, trans. Norman Nagel [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984], 36-54). What this writer has described as Luther's principle of *solus Christus*, Sasse treats as the *theologia crucis*. Sasse's position is that "Theology is *theology of the cross*, nothing else. A theology that would be something else is a false theology" (48). Again, Sasse says, "Many Christians regard this [the theology of the cross] as gross one-sidedness. The cross is only a part of the Christian message, along with others. The second article is not the whole creed, and even within the second article the cross is only one fact of salvation among others. What a constriction of Christian truth Luther has been guilty of! No where can you ever hear Lutherans saying this sort of thing. How can true Christian theology be limited to a theology of the cross, as if it were not also a theology of the resurrection, as if the theology of the second article were not in need of being amplified by the third, by a theology of the Holy Spirit and His work in the church as a means of grace and in the saints then and now?" Sasse goes on to respond, "Obviously 'the theology of the cross' does not mean that for a theologian the church year shrinks into nothing but Good Friday; rather, it means that Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost cannot be understood without Good Friday. . . . Always it is from the cross that everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of Christ's revelation. Because this is so, Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) wants to be more than just one of many theological theories that have appeared in Christian history. It stands against its opposite, the prevailing theology in Christendom, the *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory), as Luther calls it, and claims to be that right and scriptural theology with which the church of Christ stands and falls. Only of the preaching of this theology, Luther maintains, can it be said that it is the preaching of the gospel" (39). Sasse then goes on to explain what the theology of the cross is, centering as it does in the work of Christ and in the doctrine of justification.

72. LW 26:208.

73. Ibid., 232, 208 (*duo extreme contraria concurrant*).

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74. Ibid. This position seems contrary to what Luther says so often about the authority of Scripture. One may see *LW* 27:156 where Luther advises Christians in necessity to flee for refuge to “the most solid Rock of divine Scripture and not to believe rashly any, whoever they may be, who speak, decide, or act contrary to its authority.” In the one case he is speaking about the authority of Scripture, in the other the lordship of Christ.
75. “Am siebenzehnten Sonntage nach Trinitatis,” *SL* 12:896.
76. *LW* 27:38.
77. *SL* 7:582-583.
78. *LW* 27:38, 41. “With utmost rigor we demand that all the articles of Christian doctrine, both large and small, although we do not regard any of them as small, be kept pure and certain. This is supremely necessary. For this doctrine is our only light, which illumines and directs us and shows us the way to heaven; if it is overthrown in this one point, it must be overthrown completely.” And so Luther says we shall be happy to observe love and concord toward those who faithfully agree with us on all the articles of Christian doctrine.
79. Ibid.; one may compare *WA* 40, II:46.
80. *LW* 27:59, 16, “concord”; 27:62, “concordia”; 27:91. One may see *LW* 26:104: Christians are “companions in doctrine and have fellowship in it; that is, we have the same doctrine, for we preach one gospel, one baptism, one Christ, and one faith. Therefore we cannot teach or command anything so far as you are concerned for we are completely agreed in doctrine.”
81. *LW* 26:115, 177, 280, 285.
82. *WA* 40:197-198.
83. *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 53 (July 1989), 197.
84. *LW* 26:177. Those who might criticize Scaer’s assertion as “christo-monism” or “gospel-reductionism” or something similar misunderstand Luther’s entire theology of the gospel.
85. These sentences are quoted from Francis A. Schaeffer, “Truth Versus the New Humanism and the New Theology,” in Erich Kiehl and Waldo Werning, eds., *Evangelical Directions for the*

Lutheran Church (1970), 21.

86. The quotes in this paragraph may all be found in *LW* 17:265-67.
87. SA III, IV.
88. *LW* 27:41-42.
89. "Auslegung des Hosea," *SL* 6:1078.
90. "Auf des Bocks zu Leipzig Antwort Doctor Martin Luther," *SL* 18:1265.
91. *SL* 16:1675-1676.
92. *SL* 7:492.
93. "Wider Hanswurst," *SL* 17:1415.
94. *LW* 27:37.
95. *Ibid.*, 38.
96. *Ibid.*
97. *Ibid.*, 39: "Quare si Deum in uno articulo negas, in omnibus negasti, quia Deus non dividitur in multos articulos, sed est omnia in singulis et unus in omnibus articulis."
98. *LW* 34:52-53; one may compare *LW* 34, 33, 39. Luther in his various doctrinal writings has many lists such as the one mentioned above and they never correspond to each other. Luther, for instance, touches certain articles in the Small Catechism. He discusses other articles in the Smalcald Articles. One may also see "Wider Heinrich, König von England," (*SL* 19:288), where Luther says that the chief parts, or pieces, of doctrine "which also are necessary for salvation" are the following: on faith, on love, on hope, on works, on suffering, on heaven, on hell, on repentance, on the Lord's Supper, on sin, on law, on death, on Christ, on God, on free will, on grace, on baptism.
99. *LW* 26:430.
100. "Predigt über Eph. 6, 10-17," *SL* 9:820-821.
101. "Am ersten Sonntage nach Epiphaniä," *SL* 11:439-440.
102. "Concerning the Ministry," *LW* 40:32.

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103. "Wider Heinrich, König von England," *SL* 19:341-342.
 104. "That a Christian Assembly Has the Right to Judge," *LW* 39:308-311.
 105. One may see Luther's *Treatise on Christian Liberty* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in *LW* 36.
 106. *LW* 39:305-314.
 107. *Ibid.*, 306.
 108. *Ibid.*, 307.
 109. *Ibid.*, 310.
 110. "Lectures on Genesis," *LW* 4:145.
 111. One may see Bengt Hägglund, *Theologie und Philosophie bei Luther und in der Occamistischen Tradition* (Lund: CWK Gleerups Förlag, 1955); Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Bernhard Lohse, *Ratio und Fides; Eine Untersuchung über die Ratio in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1958).
 112. "Die Disputation über Joh. 1, 14," *WA* 39, II:6.
 113. Erlangen, Latin, VI:318-319; *WA* 1:353-374; 5:537; 10 I:48; 12:292; 15:526; 20 II:394-396; 27:76; 32:259; 37:202, 295, 366; 39, I:175; 39 II:375; 40 I, II:221-222; 49:360; 51:11.
 114. *LW* 33:23.
 115. *Ibid.*, 130.
 116. *Ibid.*, 164-175.
 117. *LW* 26:227, 231.
 118. *Ibid.*, 227-228.
 119. *WA* 40 I:361-362.
 120. *Ibid.*, 229.
 121. *Ibid.*, 176.
 122. *Ibid.*
 123. *LW* 33:21.

124. One may see Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 16.
125. *Ibid.*, 35.
126. "Sermon on John 6:37," *LW* 23:53.
127. SA II, II, 24; *LW* 23:330. Confession is always the Christian's or the church's response to God who has already spoken to her in His word (Scripture). One may see Edmund Schlink, *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), xv-xixx. One may see also Hermann Sasse, "The Church's Confession," trans. Matthew Harrison, *Logia* 1 (Reformation 1992), 6: "Confession is the response to revelation. To this first characteristic we must add a second. It is always the response of a fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) of men, the expression of a consensus." Sasse goes on to polemicize against making churchly confession merely one's individual confession of "Here I stand." The congregation does not depend upon the individual, but the individual confesses the church's faith in any kind of formal confession. Modern liberalism and fundamentalism, according to Sasse, have everything backwards in this respect. He points out that the *Nicaenum* of the Eastern Church has kept the first person plural until today, and it is noteworthy that Luther's composition of the *Credo* in song likewise makes use of the first person plural: "We all believe in one true God . . ." Sasse points out that the Augsburg Confession begins with the words: "Ecclesiae magno consensu opud nos docent" (AC I, 1). Obviously, there can be no consensus if there is only one person confessing.
128. *LW* 27:396-397.
129. One may see Theodore E. Schmauck, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911).
130. One may see AC I, 1 (*cum magno consensu*), and Sasse, "The Church's Confession," 8: "This setting of the limit of truth and error belongs to the essence of confession. If the *improbant* and the *damnant* (by which is designated the impossibility of church fellowship), which sounds so harsh to modern ears, are silenced, the Augustana ceases to be a confession."

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131. SA, Preface, 2.
 132. SA, II, II, 1.
 133. SA, III, I, 1.
 134. SA, III, XV.
 135. *LW* 37:360-361.
 136. This statement is quoted verbatim in FC, SD, VII, 29-31. One may see also FC, SD, XII, 40.
 137. One may compare 2 Timothy 4:1 and passim.
 138. *LW* 37:21, 35.
 139. *LW* 26:198; one may compare 26:285.
 140. *Ibid.*, 375.
 141. *Ibid.*, 378.
 142. *Ibid.*
 143. "The Bondage of the Will," *LW* 33:35. One may compare *ibid.*, 53-55, 288.
 144. For a thorough discussion of this issue, one may see Hans-Werner Gensichen, *We Condemn*, translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 109-122, 153-213. Footnote 120 is of special relevance.
 145. *LW* 27:100.
 146. *Ibid.*, 102.
 147. *Ibid.*, 102-103.
 148. One may compare *LW* 37:22.
 149. *LW* 37:36, 21-22.
 150. *Ibid.*, 24-25.
 151. *LW* 35:388.
 152. *LW* 37:24.
 153. *Ibid.*, 71-72.
 154. *LW* 37:13; "Predigt am Ostermontag Nachmittag, 28 März,

1524," *WA* 15:527.

155. *LW* 37:20. Isaiah 6:9-10.
156. *LW* 33:25. "If I were to strangle someone's father and mother, wife and child, and try to choke him too, and then say, 'Keep the peace, dear friend; we wish to love one another; the matter is not so important that we should be divided over it,' what would he say to me? This is what the fanatics do to Christ the Lord and God the Father and to mother church and the brethren with their rejection of God's word while at the same time claiming it for themselves."
157. *LW* 26:388, 305, 425, 427.
158. *Ibid.*, 99; one may compare *Ibid.*, 305.
159. *SL* 7:890-891; one may compare *LW* 26:99, 103, 107, 119, 187.
160. *LW* 26:47.
161. "Am vierundzwanzigsten Sonntage nach Trinitatis," *SL* 12:973; one may compare 26:429, 453. "Therefore they are attacking, not our lives but our teaching. And this is not ours; it is Christ's. Therefore it is Christ's fault that they attack us; and the sin for which our opponents persecute us was committed, not by us but by Christ. But let them see to it whether they will evict Christ from heaven for this sin, if God please, of being our only Justifier and Savior, and whether they will condemn Him as a heretic and revolutionary! We shall commend this cause of His to Him and He shall watch and see, happy and secure, who will win, Christ or they."