

Luther And Chemnitz On Scripture

EUGENE F. KLUG

Chemnitz On The Authority Of
The Sacred Scripture (An
Examination Of The Council
Of Trent)

FRED KRAMER

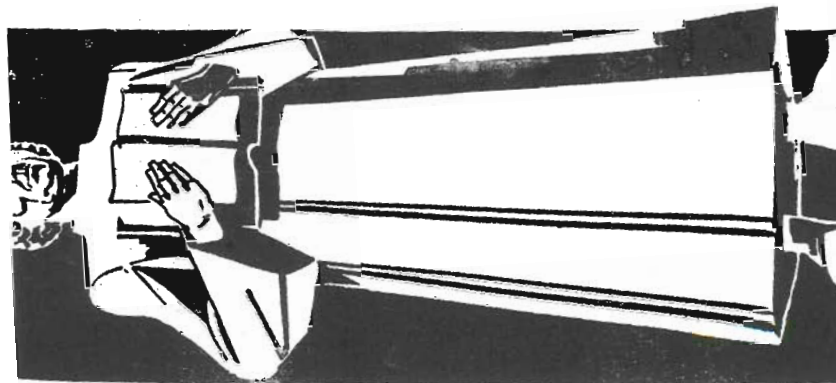
"Shades Of Martin Chemnitz"

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Book Reviews

VOLUME XXXVII NO. 3

DECEMBER 1973



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YES, "SHADES OF MARTIN CHEMNITZ!" Nothing in ancient and modern theological literature is so thoroughly up-to-date in our current doctrinal struggles as a revival of interest in the man of whom it was said: "If the second Martin (Chemnitz) had not come, the first Martin (Luther) would scarcely have endured." All pastors and would-be theologians would do well for the recovery of their theological balance and even for the saving of their own souls to read once again Fred Kramer's translation of Martin Chemnitz's *Examen* of the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent.

To start with, for example, consider what we commonly refer to as *consensus in doctrine* in our strivings for Lutheran unity. Is it attainable in our day of fragmented religious opinion and insight? Is it really possible in an age when the word is out that "we agree to disagree?" Consensus, Chemnitz insisted, was indeed possible on the basis of Scripture and with Scripture alone the source and norm of doctrine. From his wide experience in formulating the articles of the Formula of Concord and in gaining wide Lutheran acceptance of it, he was convinced that doctrinal consensus was attainable as it once existed for the most part in the early Church.

It must be remembered that Chemnitz was not concerned in his *Examen* with dissidents in the Lutheran party of the Augsburg Confession. He was telling the Roman church that harmony in the Church could be restored through unity of doctrine and practice. It was this emphatic message of consensus in doctrine that he was bringing to the Church of his day through his *Examen*. Called together by Pope Paul III, the Council of Trent met at intervals since 1545 to put down what it considered to be the heresies of the Reformers. Through its Canons and Decrees it sought to defend and even justify from the traditions of the church fathers or from a combination of Scripture and tradition glaring abuses in doctrine, practice and ceremonies in the church. Tradition, Chemnitz demonstrated, would have no place in correcting such abuses, as it was a doubtful source of divine revelation.

To be sure, it had to be a man with the theological and philosophical stature of a Chemnitz—a man who with his vast background would be capable effectively to cut through the labyrinth of side-issues and ecclesiastical procedures that attend any theological controversy.

In this case it was the Roman hierarchy and its newly organized and established propaganda agency which threatened to overshadow the real issues. The temptation lay in Chemnitz's path to indulge himself in personal invective against the Jesuits. A certain Andrada, a formidable Portuguese protagonist and defender of the Jesuits,

sought to discredit Chemnitz's written judgment of this newly established order. The Jesuits, Andrada reminded him, were a "sanctified order of holy people, good and honorable men." How often does not this characterization of well-intentioned churchmen becloud controversial issues in seeking to achieve doctrinal consensus in the church! Giving lip service to doctrinal pronouncements without real allegiance to the Holy Scriptures is hardly a criterion for lasting doctrinal consensus among Lutherans or any other group of Christians.

Or, the temptation for Chemnitz in the beginning possibly to question the legitimacy of the Council of Trent itself. Whether for all intents and purposes, for example, the Council was a true and free and representative Christian conclave, in his opinion, would further becloud the real issue in achieving consensus in doctrine. If decisions, he said, reached by any gathering of Christian people are within the bounds of the rule and norm of sacred Scripture, the Church would owe them a respectful hearing. Conversely, if such a gathering would have preconceived attitudes from tradition, its pronouncements would be doomed to failure. Right or wrong any Church Council should be ready to submit to the test spoken of by the Apostle St. John "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God." 1 John 4, 1.

However, more important than any other consideration of procedure is the salvation of men's souls. To resent this would be nothing more than intolerable papal tyranny.

Thus, despite preliminary skirmishes concerning the historical and theological competence of the Jesuits or the legitimacy of the Council itself, Chemnitz's chief concern was to get on to finding a basis for doctrinal consensus. And only Scripture could accomplish this, was his deep conviction.

A very brief review of just the first three sections of the *Examen*, sketches demonstrably a reasonable, and even rational, approach to consensus in doctrine.

In the First Section, Chemnitz showed how the Council asserted that the Holy Scripture is not the canon, the norm, or the measuring instrument or rule, according to which all disputes concerning matters of faith are to be settled. Two reasons are given by Chemnitz for Rome's attitude: 1. Scripture is insufficient, since it does not contain everything that is necessary for faith and godly living; 2. Those things which Scripture does mention are mostly obscure and ambiguous. Therefore tradition must be appealed to where Scripture seemingly is unable to settle the matter.

In the Second Section of his *Examen*, Chemnitz then demonstrates why tradition is a wholly unreliable and false appeal. A study of the *origin* of Scripture in itself reveals that God's written revelation was the great stabilizer from generation to generation for doctrine. The revelation of God from Adam to Moses in the beginning was transmitted by word of mouth. This would tend after a generation or so to be corrupted, so that fixed doctrine or revelation itself

was corrupted. God then always provided a new written revelation to reassert what He previously had revealed. Unwritten tradition almost always brought error and heresy. Its use then by the Tridentine fathers was useless for authority. It was uncertain. Hence, the written Scriptures alone were valid to bring about consensus in doctrine.

In the Third Section Chemnitz shows that in the New Testament, Pharisees and Talmudists filled the Jewish church with heresy and error, because they contended that over and above the Scripture of Moses and the prophets were also unwritten traditions, which were to be received with the same emphasis as written Scripture.

Briefly, then, in the first three sections of his *Examen* it was Chemnitz's intention to demonstrate from the Scripture of the Old Testament what its *origin* was and *why* God so originated it for further use in the New Testament.

To say, then, that the account of Jonah and the whale portrays a truth but not a fact is to question even Jesus' faith in the written revelation of God in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Only when Bible scholars of our day are ready to subscribe to Chemnitz's faith in the validity of the written Word can there be a genuine hope for consensus in doctrine and for Lutheran unity.

Subsequent sections in Chemnitz's *Examen* also remind the church of our generation of the importance of appealing to Scripture in binding up the wounds of a doctrinally torn church and of the only way to achieve unanimity of doctrine and practice in the church. Let the written Scriptures prevail wherever Lutheran unity is sought and whenever Lutheran dialogue confronts sectarian Christianity!