

ap·ro·pos



The Smalcald
Articles as
Martin Luther's
Framework
for Witness to
Fellow Christians

Robert Kolb



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Abbreviations

- AE *Luther's Works: American Edition*. Vols. 1–30: Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76. Vols. 31–55: Edited by Helmut Lehmann. Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86. Vols. 56–82: Edited by Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes. Concordia Publishing House: 2009–.
- Ap Apology of the Augsburg Confession.
- BSELK *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*. Edited by Irene Dingel. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014.
- BSLK *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. 11th ed. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992.
- FC SD Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord.
- K-W Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press, 2000.
- PL *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. in 223. Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1844–64.
- SA Smalcald Articles.
- SC Small Catechism.
- WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. 73 vols. in 85. H. Böhlau, 1883–.
- WA Br *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Briefwechsel*. 18 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–.
- WA TR *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Tischreden*. 6 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–21.

Preface

Almost forty years ago, an invitation from Dr. Martin Luther College (as it was called at the time) to take part in a conference celebrating the 450-year anniversary of the Smalcald Articles turned my attention to this confession of the faith that I had up to that time largely ignored.¹ Since then, Luther's record of what he thought to be the chief items that separated him from the Roman Curia and its entire system of defining and practicing the Christian faith has stimulated my thinking and my teaching. This volume offers my thoughts on what we in the twenty-first century can learn from these Articles.

Although the Smalcald Articles might be labeled “the forgotten item” in the Book of Concord, modern Luther scholars have not totally ignored this document. Students have two editions of the Articles at hand. In 1914, the Weimar Edition of Luther's Works presented its edition of the Articles with an introduction by O. Reichert and Oskar Brenner.² The edition prepared by Klaus Breuer and Hans-Otto Schneider, especially Schneider's introduction, in the revised edition of the *Bekanntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* in 2014 offers effective access to the text.³

1 The lecture was published as “Luther's Smalcald Articles: Agenda for Testimony and Confession,” *Concordia Journal* 14 (1988): 115–37. See also Kolb, “Here We Stand: Confessing the Faith in Luther's Footsteps from Worms to Smalcald,” *Concordia Journal* 32 (2006): 175–88.

2 WA 50:160–78.

3 BSELK 713–85.

Karl Thieme (1862–1932), of the University of Leipzig, published a relatively brief study of the document in 1900.⁴ Hans Volz (1904–78) edited the Smalcald Articles for the 1930 edition of the Lutheran Confessions⁵ and published his brief analysis of the document the next year.⁶ Volz followed this work with a separate edition and an analysis of three critiques of the Articles that appeared in 1538 and 1539 by three Roman Catholics: Johann Cochlaeus, Georg Witzel, and Johann Hoffmeister.⁷ Volz later edited documents related to the Articles.⁸ The four-hundredth anniversary of the Articles occasioned brief studies of the document.⁹ Volz's interpretation elicited criticism from Ernst Bizer (1904–75) of the University of Bonn, initiating an exchange between the two.¹⁰

William R. Russell (1954–) renewed interest with his edition of the text of the Articles and his analysis of their origins and theological structure.¹¹ He provides a competent and perceptive exploration of the document's historical context and content, anchoring its message in Scripture and demonstrating its relevance

4 *Luthers Testament wider Rom in seinen Schmalkaldischen Artikeln* (Deichert, 1900).

5 BSLK 405–68.

6 *Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel und Melanchthons Tractatus de potestate papae: Ihre Geschichte von der Entstehung bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Klotz, 1931).

7 *Drei Schriften Gegen Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel von Cochlaeus, Witzel und Hoffmeister (1538–1539)* (Aschendorff, 1932).

8 *Urkunden und Aktenstücke zur Geschichte von Martin Luthers Schmalkaldischen Artikeln (1536–1574)* (de Gruyter, 1957).

9 Johannes Stier, *Luthers Glaube und Theologie in den Schmalkaldischen Artikeln* (Bertelsmann, 1937); Franz Lau, "Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel als seine Einführung in seine Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 18 (1937): 289–307; Carl Stange, "Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel Luthers," *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 14 (1937): 416–64.

10 Joachim Bauer offers a detailed analysis of their debate and surrounding scholarly analysis in his "Zwischen politischen Anspruch und Bekenntnis—Johann Friedrich der Großmütige, die Verbündeten und die Schmalkaldischen Artikel," *Lutherjahrbuch* 83 (2016): 55–70.

11 *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Fortress, 1995); *The Schmalkald Articles* (Fortress, 1995).

for believers of Luther's time and ours. Werner Führer's (1949–) extensive commentary on the Articles places their theology within the larger context of Luther's writings.¹² A popular exposition of the theology of the Articles appeared in a collection of periodical articles originally published from 1957 to 1960 by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president John P. Meyer (1873–1964).¹³ A series of essays exploring aspects of the Articles appeared in volume 83 of the *Lutherjahrbuch* in 2016. Each of these works can expand the reader's understanding of the Smalcald Articles.

The rather modest exploration of the Smalcald Articles in this volume is intended to introduce the document to readers and to stimulate thinking and discussion on Martin Luther's invitation to all readers to enter confidently into dialogue with other Christians and those outside the faith on critical questions of daily human life. These questions form the heart of human experience, and Luther's voice echoes over the centuries with central biblical insights into God's revelation of his plan for his human creatures. I envision this little book being used for seminars in universities, colleges, and seminaries and in Bible classes, so the footnotes provide additional sources for those who wish to pursue specific aspects of the text.

The insights in this volume stem not only from my own research but from the preparation for and discussions in a Concordia Seminary seminar in the spring of 2025 with students Davin Alberson, Micah Brown, Peter Burch, Sean Deming, Lydia Grabau, Natnael Kebede, Noah Russel, Jessica Thompson, and Justin Wood contributing their engagement with the Smalcald Articles in lively discussions based on careful readings of the text. My deep thanks to each of them.

Robert Kolb
Mainz, October 31, 2025

12 *Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel*n (Mohr/Siebeck, 2009).

13 *Studies in the Smalcald Articles*, 1st ed. (Northwestern, 2017).

Chapter 1

Why Smalcald? Why Articles?

Schmalkalden—Smalcald in English—lies nestled in the trees and hills of the western edge of the Thuringian forest, on the border between the dukedom of Thuringia and the landgraviate of Hesse. In the sixteenth century, the town lent its name to the Smalcald League, the Smalcald War, and the Smalcald Articles. Formed in 1531, the Smalcald League united a growing number of towns and principalities committed to Luther's call for reform in a defensive alliance opposing the hostility of Habsburg Emperor Charles V to their efforts at reform. The League met in various towns, and in 1537 gathered in Smalcald. At that meeting, Martin Luther proposed talking points for discussions at the general church council that had been announced by the pope. Although passed over by the governments assembled, Luther's articles were subscribed by most of the theologians present. They thereby expressed their allegiance to the teachings that had guided them as they carried out reform and to the man who had sparked these actions and who now appeared to be on the verge of death. The League came to an ignominious end with its defeat in April 1547 by the imperial armies of Charles V, yet the Articles remained, a powerful summary of Luther's teaching. Never among his most-read writings in the eyes of his contemporaries, nonetheless, as the Wittenberg circle began to construct a standard for public teaching, this document stood out, alongside Luther's catechisms, as a worthy summary of the teaching for which he stood. It provided a

matching piece to Philip Melanchthon's Augsburg Confession as the students of the two Wittenberg preceptors sought to establish a hermeneutical norm for their public teaching.

In 1538, a year after composing the Articles, Luther edited them, and they appeared in print under the title *Articles That Were to Be Presented at the Council at Mantua*.¹ Several editions appeared in the 1540s and 1550s before the title "Smalcald Articles" became common usage in the 1570s.² Three Roman Catholic theologians recognized the significance of Luther's statement and attacked it immediately.³ In the landgraviate of Hesse, the Articles gained equality with the Augsburg Confession in a 1544 theological memorandum.⁴ In the 1560s and 1570s, as secular governments began to establish standards for public teaching by collecting and publishing documents from the early reformers, the Articles were included in the territorial ecclesiastical regulations in several lands influenced by Gnesio-Lutherans, particularly Martin Chemnitz. They also were published in the dukedom of Pomerania.⁵ The Articles were translated into English in 1543 (from a Latin translation) and 1548 (from the 1543 German edition).⁶

Scholars have debated whether one should regard Luther's Smalcald Articles, drawn up by the reformer (with some help from a committee of friends) in the last days of 1536 and the first of 1537, as his "doctrinal last will and testament" or as his agenda for the Evangelical representatives who were to attend the council

1 *Artikel so da hetten sollen auff's Concilium zu Mantua oder wo es wu[e]rde sein vberantwortet werden* (Wittenberg: Hans Lufft, 1538).

2 BSELK 716; Werner Führer, *Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel* (Mohr/Siebeck, 2009), 1.

3 See above, p. 6.

4 Führer, *Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel*, 417.

5 Hans Volz, *Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel und Melanchthons Tractatus de potestate papae: Ihre Geschichte von der Entstehung bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Klotz, 1931), 40–42; WA 50:160.

6 Hans-Otto Schneider, "Zwei frühe englische Übersetzungen von Luthers Schmalkaldischen Artikeln," *Lutherjahrbuch* 83 (2016): 178–95.

called by Pope Paul III for Mantua later in 1537. Arguments can be made for both contentions.

LUTHER'S EARLIER "TESTAMENTS"

In 1528, Luther had composed a kind of doctrinal last will and testament as the conclusion of his *Confession concerning Christ's Supper* (AE 37:360–72), one of his important statements of his understanding of the Lord's Supper and the presence of Christ's body and blood in bread and wine in it.⁷ This afterword informed readers that the reformer feared that sect and error would continue to express Satan's rage and outrage and that after his death it would be said, "If Luther had lived today, he would have taught this or that article of faith differently." To counter that possibility, he insisted that he was of sound and sober mind and knew well that he would confess before Christ's judgment throne what he was teaching at the time (AE 37:360–61).

This confession followed the outline of the three articles of the Apostles' Creed, treating its individual statements with supplemental comments on related doctrine. Luther's "testament" began with his confession "with my whole heart of the lofty article of divine Majesty, that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons, is [!] the real, true, and only God, by nature Creator of all things" (WA 26:500.27–32; cf. AE 37:361). He then rejected explicitly three ancient heresies regarding the Trinity, along with all other error, and noted that the Roman Church and Christian churches throughout the world held to this teaching.

This confession further confessed the Son, who became truly human, conceived by the Holy Spirit and given birth by the pure, holy virgin Mary, born in natural form. This human being remained truly God and truly man, in an eternally indivisible person,

⁷ Amy Nelson Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments: Print and Authority in the Early Reformation* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 229–40.

a rejection of Nestorian teaching on the relationship of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ. Luther paraphrased the Apostles' Creed: "His innocent blood delivered us from sin, death, and God's eternal wrath. On the third day he arose and ascended into heaven, where he sits at God's right hand, Lord over all lords, King over all kings, over all creatures in heaven, on earth, and under the earth" (WA 26:502.20–24; cf. AE 37:362).

Luther continued: The descendants of Adam inherit guilt and sin at birth and would be bound to die eternally had not Jesus Christ "come to our aid and taken upon himself this guilt and sin as an innocent lamb [and] paid for us by his sufferings." He functions still as our "faithful, merciful Mediator, Savior, and the only Priest and Bishop of our souls" (AE 37:362). Luther rejected praise of the human free will, which undermines our Savior's grace, and the heresy of Pelagianism, which denies original sin. He further condemned dependence on monastic participation and performance, though he acknowledged as a "good thing" the original intent for cloisters, which had been teaching the youth (AE 37:363–64).

The topic of monasticism led Luther to treat the divinely instituted "holy orders and actual situations where worship takes place,"⁸ the walks of life that formed the structure of medieval social theory, "the offices [*Amt* designates both function and position] of priest, marriage, and temporal authority" (WA 26:504.30–31; cf. AE 37:364). The exercise of these responsibilities constituted the service that demonstrates true obedience and holiness in God's sight. These "holy orders" are the general "orders" of Christian love, "serving the welfare of others, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, forgiving enemies, praying for all human beings, suffering every kind of evil on earth, etc. You see, these are

8 Luther used the word *Stift* for places of worship, usually translated "foundation," monastic-like communities dedicated to saying Masses for the dead and observation of the hours of prayer.

called truly good works,” even though they do not contribute to salvation (WA 26:505.11–16; cf. AE 37:365).

Luther’s “confession” further treated the Holy Spirit, who is “one divine essence and nature” with the Father and the Son, from whom he eternally proceeds, a distinct person. Through him all believers receive the living, eternal, divine gift of faith and other spiritual gifts, and he will awaken them from death, liberate them from sin, and make them joyful and free, certain in conscience. The Holy Spirit comforts the people of God. The witness of this Spirit is our bulwark, our assurance that God wishes to be our Father, forgive sins, and grant us eternal life. The Holy Spirit delivers all this through the preaching of the Gospel and Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. These means are valid even when they seem not to have an impact. Luther interpreted this statement as a rejection of Donatism, a heresy that denied the efficacy of sacraments performed by an apostate priest. Luther repeated his confession of the true presence of Christ’s body and blood in the elements of bread and wine, as they are received orally, even by those who do not believe (AE 37:366–67).

Following the wording of the Third Article of the Creed, Luther then confessed that one holy Christian Church exists throughout the world, that it is the community of all Christians, the bride of Christ, his spiritual body, for he alone is the head of the church. Bishops and parish pastors are not the church’s head, lord, or bridegroom, but “servants, friends, and—as the word ‘bishop’ indicates—its overseers, caregivers, and supervisors” (WA 26:506.33–35; cf. AE 37:367). Luther identified the papacy as the Antichrist, with which the Turk and all other heresies cannot be equated. Luther declared that the Christian Church forgives sins and delivers salvation, and outside the church is eternal death and condemnation. This is why he considered private confession to be precious, though it should not be compelled (AE 37:367–68).

Luther concluded this “confession” with comments on a number of medieval pious practices. He rejected indulgences as blasphemous deceit. Upon the death of a loved one, a believer might pray once or twice: “Dear God, if this soul is in a state where it might help, be gracious to it.” But prayers to the saints had no biblical basis, and Christ is indeed the only Mediator that Scripture offers. Extreme unction is not a sacrament; one should pray with the sick and dying and admonish them and, if desired, anoint them. Marriage and the office of priest are holy in and of themselves, but Christ had not made them sacraments. The Mass is an abomination with its alleged repetition of Christ’s sacrifice. The sale of Masses particularly offended Luther, as did monastic abuses. He objected to ascribing special power to images, bells, vestments, altar lights, and similar objects (AE 37:369–71).

Luther’s confession ended with an affirmation of the resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day, the pious for eternal life with Christ, the evil to eternal death with the devil and his angels. “That is my faith, for so believe all true Christians, and the Holy Spirit teaches us this. Whatever I have said too little about, my books from the last four or five years give witness” (WA 26:509.19–21; cf. AE 37:372). This overview of his teaching served as a doctrinal last will and testament. It reflects Luther’s ongoing effort to reform the teaching of the church, drawing it into line with biblical definitions of the key terms of Scripture. It also reflects his ongoing efforts to end abuses of Christian consciences through practices that encourage reliance on the performance of “human commandments” formulated by the church apart from and often contrary to Holy Scripture. This confession declared his independence from the ritual and hierarchical control of his youth.

A year later, in October 1529, Luther joined his Wittenberg colleagues in creating a doctrinal basis for a defensive league linking electoral Saxony, Hesse, and Brandenburg-Ansbach (the effort would bear fruit in the formation of the Smalcald League in 1531).

Their work, known as the Schwabach Articles, appeared in print in late spring 1530, during the diet in Augsburg. It was formally titled *The Confession of Martin Luther for Submission to the Current Imperial Diet in Regensburg in Seventeen Articles*.⁹

The Schwabach Articles briefly survey the basic elements of Wittenberg theology, following roughly the creedal outline and setting in place more precisely the order of articles in the Augsburg Confession, for which it provided extensive wording. The first article confessed the doctrine of the Trinity; the second and third, the two natures of Christ in one person. He suffered for his sinful people. Original sin was defined as truly sin that damns apart from Christ's bearing it and eliminating the sins of the world. Forgiveness of sins is given through faith in Christ, which constitutes true human righteousness before God. Article 6 confessed that this faith is not a human work possible to attain through human power. Faith is God's work and gift, a "powerful, new, living entity producing much fruit, doing good always toward God with praise, thanks, prayer, proclamation, and teaching, and toward the neighbor with love, service, help, providing, giving, and suffering all sorts of evil until death" (WA 30/3:88.19–22; cf. "The Schwabach Articles," 85). These articles rejected scholastic views of justification that assigned human efforts and merit a key role in gaining salvation ("The Schwabach Articles," 83–85).

The document continues by stating that God instituted "the office of preaching or the oral word, namely, the Gospel, through which he has this faith and its power, benefit, and fruit be proclaimed." The Holy Spirit creates faith through this proclamation as through means "when and where he wills" (WA 30/3:88.25–28; cf. "The Schwabach Articles," 85). There is no other way or

9 The manuscript is edited in WA 30/3:86–91; the published version is discussed in WA 30/3:172–77. See "The Schwabach Articles," trans. William R. Russell, in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Fortress, 2001), 83–87.

means to receive faith, no matter how attractive the alternatives. Article 7 reflected Luther's struggles with those who denied that God's Word has power to effect what it describes or sets forth, both the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli with his compatriots and the Anabaptists.¹⁰ Alongside the orally proclaimed Word, God gave Baptism and the Eucharist as means through which God bestows faith and the Holy Spirit. Articles 9 and 10 described the two sacraments in some detail, affirming their power to convey faith and forgiveness. Article 11 affirmed that private confession should bestow comfort upon sorrowful and erring consciences through the spoken Word, without enumeration of all sins ("The Schwabach Articles," 85–86).¹¹

Article 12 confessed one holy Christian Church that endures to the end of the world, spread throughout the world wherever the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are properly used. Article 13 proclaimed Christ's coming on the Last Day to deliver his faithful and give them eternal life, while at the same time condemning the godless and unbelieving with the devil to hell. The final articles affirmed temporal authority as godly, a walk of life that Christians may exercise, and also treated a variety of practices and rituals, insisting on Christian freedom in their exercise and rejecting those contrary to God's Word ("The Schwabach Articles," 86–87).

Luther intended the first of these two "confessions" to be a kind of doctrinal last will and testament; the second functioned as a public confession of faith in God within the context of political negotiations that centered around defense of the faith. The Smalcald Articles arose in the context of preparation to give testimony of the Evangelical faith at the general council to be held

10 Amy Nelson Burnett, "Luther and the Schwärmer," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford University Press, 2014), 511–24.

11 On the place of confession and absolution in the sacramental debates of the 1520s, see Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments*, 250–58, 262–68.

in Mantua. However, Luther and his elector may have also seen them as a summary of the legacy the reformer wished to leave the church.

THE CALL TO COUNCIL AND THE SAXON RESPONSE

In December 1535, Pope Paul III had sent Pietro Paulo Vergerio as his personal envoy to negotiate with the German Evangelical princes and towns.¹² During his visit with Luther in Wittenberg in late 1535 and early 1536, the electoral Saxon leadership, including Luther, laid before Vergerio explicit demands for a truly free, open council of the church.¹³ Despite Elector Johann Friedrich's reluctance, the electoral Saxon government began immediately to develop a strategy for participation in the council, with substantial input from both theologians and jurists on the faculty of the University of Wittenberg. This strategy included plans for the formulation of a statement on the Wittenberg teaching that would guide the discussions with Roman Catholic critics.¹⁴

Earlier, Johann Friedrich had urged that the Evangelical principalities and municipalities reject the pope's invitation and hold their own counter-council. However, his theologians counseled attendance since they had appealed for a general council for nearly twenty years. In early 1539, Luther commented to his students that at Smalcald "we declined to take part in the pope's council." Luther thought that it would have been better to have participated "if only the council [could have] been held under fair

12 Vergerio (1498–1565) was the papal legate (nuncio) to the court of King Ferdinand in Vienna and would shortly after this journey be named bishop of Modrus and Koper. Later, Vergerio became a Lutheran theologian and diplomat in the service of Duke Christoph of Württemberg.

13 WA 50:163–65; Henry Gerhard Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Princeton University Press, 1983), 7–32; Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Pier Paolo Vergerio: The Making of an Italian Reformer* (Dröz, 1977).

14 WA 50:166–75.

terms" (AE 3:335). Precisely what this comment meant in view of the actual policy decisions made at Smalcald is unclear, but it does indicate that Luther thought openness to further exchanges with the papal party might yield some fruit.

Recent scholarship has also refined the argument that Johann Friedrich wanted Luther to write another theological last will and testament by placing the request in the context of the elector's politically related concerns, both external and internal. Within Saxony itself, Johann Friedrich may well have sensed that tensions over two issues could cause conflict and division among Luther's followers. Johann Agricola, a former student of Luther and Melancthon and a friend, was challenging his teachers' understanding of Law and Gospel.¹⁵ Less intense were the differing interpretations of the 1536 Wittenberg Concord, an agreement on the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper reached between the Wittenberg theologians and Martin Bucer, leader of reform in Strassburg, along with several other south German reformers.¹⁶ These potential causes of conflict created the need for a tool to keep his disciples faithful to Luther's teaching. Furthermore, Johann Friedrich desired to fortify his leadership in the Smalcald League, and a firm expression of Luther's teaching might well serve to line up his princely colleagues and the representatives of the Evangelical cities and towns behind him. Therefore, Johann Friedrich sought a document that would do more than merely outline an agenda for the council. He needed a statement that would bear the authority of Luther's name to define the Evangelical confession of the faith at home and abroad.¹⁷

15 Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Baker, 1997), 77–210.

16 Gordon A. Jensen, *The Wittenberg Concord: Creating Space for Dialogue* (Fortress, 2018).

17 Christopher Spehr, "Martin Luther und sein Schmalkaldisches Bekenntnis," *Lutherjahrbuch* 83 (2016): 38–43.