

Theology of the Lutheran Confessions

CONCORDIA CLASSICS

**THEOLOGY
OF THE
LUTHERAN
CONFESSIONS**



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

This book had its origin in the period of the trials and persecutions to which the Christians in Germany were exposed while the National Socialists were in power. In an entirely new and urgent way this situation called for a courageous and steadfast confession of faith over against the totalitarian state and its world view. Here it became apparent what great assistance and strength for today's act of confessing is provided by the Confessions of the ancient church and of the Reformation. Temptations and heresies take on new forms as history moves, but the Christ who saves us and whom we are called upon to confess remains one and the same. For this reason the confessing act of the individual and the Confession of the church belong together, even though each individual in his own time must use new words to confess the same Christ. The Confession of the church, however, is never merely the confession of contemporaries, that is, of the fellowship of the brethren; it is always also the confession of the fathers. For through all the vicissitudes of the ages and amid all the multiplicity of its current witnesses the church ever remains one and the same. It is the purpose of this book to help clarify the relationship—once again so significant—between the traditional Confession and the confessing act of the moment by unfolding the theology of the Lutheran Confessions in its inner coherence.

During those years of common tribulation the walls between the separated churches also became transparent. Many things which formerly kept the churches apart were demolished by the common foe. All were placed in the same way in the position of having to decide whether they would confess Jesus Christ or deny him. In this situation it became evident that, far from widening the historic splits in Christendom, a concern for the right kind of confessing rather recalls the separated churches to the one Lord from whom alone they receive life. At the same time it became clear that the Lutheran Confession, correctly understood, enhances in a special way the ability to recognize brethren also in the other churches. For all

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of its statements are concentrated on the Gospel. With all the differences in worship forms and in polity—yes, even in dogmatic formulations—the Lutheran Confessions permit us to recognize anew the one church, if only the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments administered in accordance with it. Thus, when we were able after the war to leave the catacombs of the Third Reich and to establish ecumenical relations with the churches around the world, the Reformation Confession proved to be of important assistance. It gave us great encouragement to seek beyond the confessional boundaries the fellowship in faith.

It is my hope that the American edition of this book too will not lead to an anxious and aloof repristination but to a concern for genuine confession in our time and that it will encourage a loving approach to the other churches.

—Edmund Schlink

Heidelberg, September, 1960

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The Lutheran Confessions, or Symbols, represent the result of more than a generation of earnest endeavor on the part of Martin Luther and his followers to give clear and positive expression to their religious convictions. The collection of Lutheran creeds known as the Book of Concord, published in 1580, contains a number of documents of diverse background, authorship, historical setting, and purpose. At least four different groups may be discerned: (1) the three Ecumenical Creeds of the ancient church; (2) the two Catechisms of Luther; (3) the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, and the Smalcald Articles, together with the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope; (4) the Formula of Concord in its two parts, Epitome and Solid Declaration. Three of these writings are from Luther's pen, namely, the two Catechisms (1529) and the Smalcald Articles (1537); three were composed by Philip Melancthon, the brilliant scholar and humanist so closely associated with the great Reformer, namely, the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology (1531), and the Treatise (1537). A number of second-generation Lutheran theologians, notably Jacob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz, were responsible for the series of profound doctrinal declarations set forth in the Formula of Concord (1577).

The Catechisms, of course, serve the constructive purpose of teaching the "young and inexperienced," both children and adults, the "chief parts of Christian doctrine." The Augsburg Confession, the primary statement of the Lutheran faith, is couched in generally mild, conservative language designed to help heal the breach with the Church of Rome. The Apology is Melancthon's thorough and learned, often sharply worded, defense of the Lutheran position against the exegesis and logic of the Roman Confutation. Six years later the Lutheran princes and estates met at Smalcald to consider their course of action with respect to a general council which Pope Paul III had convoked. Luther was asked by the Saxon elector to prepare the theological guidelines. With his customary vigor the Reformer set down in succession the articles of faith concerning

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which there was no controversy, those where no concessions could be made, and those that could be discussed with "learned and sensible men." About the same time Melancthon furnished a careful analysis, based on Scripture and church history, of the question concerning the power and primacy of the pope. Following Luther's death in 1546, some thirty years of intra-Lutheran controversy ensued in which various points of doctrine were debated, now with the Roman, now with the Reformed antithesis in view. The resulting discord was, at last, officially resolved in the Formula of Concord. The inclusion of the ancient Ecumenical Creeds in the Lutheran confessional corpus was intended to repudiate the charge of sectarianism against the Lutherans and to demonstrate the genuine catholicity of their teaching.

At first glance there would seem to be little to bind these heterogeneous documents together. In search of a unifying principle we may note that the Lutherans looked upon the Augsburg Confession as basic and central. This was "our Confession," "the Confession of our time," which showed itself to be in perfect agreement with the orthodox Christian faith of all ages. To this Confession all other Lutheran Symbols stood in direct relationship. These declared their function to be one of justifying, defending, expounding, clarifying, and safeguarding the correct understanding of the Augsburg Confession. The Lutherans regarded themselves as "churches of the Augsburg Confession."

But a collection of creeds purporting to set forth the particular orientation of a church body must have more than a formal integration with a specific document. In a number of simultaneously valid creedal statements there must be some single material principle, or central theme, pervading them all.

At this point the question of a theology of the Lutheran Confessions presents itself. Such a systematic study should reveal whether in all their diversity the Lutheran Confessions do indeed bear witness to an underlying unity such as they claim for themselves.

There have been many commentaries, particularly in the homeland of the Reformation, on individual Lutheran confessional writings and even more monographs on individual articles or doctrines. There are extant also various attempts at systematizing the theology of one or the other document. Few, however, are the studies that aim at a comprehensive summary of the genius of Lutheranism. In the year 1940 there appeared the first edition of *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, by Professor Edmund Schlink, now

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of Heidelberg University. The book had grown out of lectures delivered to students of theology at Giessen and Bethel.

The third edition (1948) was the first to come to the translator's attention when, together with Dr. Paul F. Koehneke, long-time instructor at Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and a number of fellow Lutheran pastors, he studied the Lutheran Confessions on the basis of Dr. Schlink's book. All of us developed a high esteem for Schlink's *Theologie* as an aid to increased appreciation of our Lutheran confessional heritage. Dr. Koehneke began to translate the work into English. He died before he could complete the task, but not before he had transmitted the request that the undersigned see the work through to completion. The translator regards it a privilege to be able to do so, especially since in his lectures on the Lutheran Confessions he makes frequent use of Schlink's material. This effort is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Koehneke, genial scholar, theologian, and fatherly friend of young students of theology.

Koehneke's manuscript consisted of the first draft of the book's eight chapters. The present translator made a careful word-for-word revision of this material, added a bibliography and index of subjects, and translated the introduction, the appendix, and a selection of the footnotes. The assistance of the Rev. Kurt Marquardt in checking the translation for accuracy is gratefully acknowledged.

The author's many direct quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are cited according to the magnificent critical edition prepared by eminent German scholars in 1930, the four-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, in the so-called *Jubilaumsausgabe*, which is now in its third edition. The appearance of this *magnum opus*, which prints the original German and Latin texts in parallel columns and furnishes a wealth of critical comments in the historical introductions and footnotes, renders all prior editions obsolete. The quotations in the present volume follow the splendid modern English version prepared by American scholars in 1959, *The Book of Concord, the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*.

A word about the method of citing the Confessions: The quotations are referred to by Confession, Article, and paragraph. Thus Ap. IV, 200 means Apology, Article IV, paragraph 200. In the case of the Smalcald Articles, which are divided into three parts, the quotations are given as follows: Part (III), Article (vi), and paragraph (5). Quotations from the Confessions are introduced either

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by single (‘) or double (“) quotation marks. The former designate quotations from a Latin or German *translation of the original*, whereas the latter indicate quotations from the German or Latin *original itself*. The German originals are Luther’s Catechisms, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord. The Apology and the Treatise were composed originally in Latin; the German version of the Apology is frequently a rather extensive paraphrase of the Latin original. The Augsburg Confession was prepared originally in both languages; for purposes of citation in this book, however, we are regarding the German version actually presented first to the Diet as the original (see B. of C., p. 24).

It should be stated that while we have omitted in this edition a number of footnotes contained in the original, these omissions are all of a relatively minor nature. None involves extensive comment or discussion by the author. Rather they comprise mostly page references to writings cited in the text, or bibliographies relating to specific topics in the individual chapters. To compensate for these omissions in the footnotes, a comprehensive overview of the literature has been included in topical form at the end of the book. The reader bent on scientific research will want to consult the complete references in the original German text in any case.

Documentation both in the footnotes and in the bibliographies at the back of the book is given largely in the form in which Schlink originally had it; no attempt has been made to supply such detailed facts of publication as are customary in English publications. Since parentheses were used extensively by the author in the original edition, and have here been retained, interpolations by the translator have been set in brackets in this English edition.

—Herbert J. A. Bouman

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.C.	Augsburg Confession
Ap.	Apology
Apost.	the Apostles' Creed
Athan.	the Athanasian Creed
<i>Bek.</i>	<i>Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche</i> (2nd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952).
B. of C.	the Book of Concord, herein cited according to Theodore G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).
Con.	Conclusion
Ep.	Epitome
Ep.Comp.Sum.	Comprehensive Summary of the Epitome
F.C.	Formula of Concord
L.C.	Large Catechism
L.C.Pref.	Preface to the Large Catechism
Nic.	the Nicene Creed
<i>Tauf.</i>	Pamphlet on Baptism (Luther's <i>Taufbuechlein</i>)
Tr.	Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope
S.A.	Smalcald Articles
S.C.	Small Catechism
S.D.	Solid Declaration
S.D.Sum.Form.	Summary Formulation of the Solid Declaration
<i>WA</i>	<i>D. Martin Luthers Werke</i> . Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, 1883-).

Introduction

THEOLOGY OF THE CONFESSIONS AS PROLEGOMENA TO DOGMATICS

The Confessions may be approached in various ways: We may concern ourselves especially with the history of their origin and development, such as their occasion, preliminary documents, final formulation and recognition, and the path of their dissemination and criticism on the part of the various theologians in the various territories. For example, we could consider the development that led from the Schwabach Articles to the Augsburg Confession, and then the fate of this Confession in its altered and unaltered form. Or, we could consider the original text of the Small Catechism, or the difficult and interesting discussions and theological declarations that led to the Formula of Concord, as well as the arguments surrounding its recognition. In recent years outstanding work has been done with regard to such historical research in the Confessions. We mention only the names of Th. Brieger, J. Ficker, Th. Kolde, W. Gussmann, H. von Schubert, O Albrecht, M. Reu, W. F. Schmidt, and K. Schornbaum. Without this kind of historical investigation no theological study of the Confessions would be possible. However, a study limited to such questions would not yet take the Confessions seriously as confession. It is perhaps not accidental that the wealth of historical studies on the Confessions could not stem the collapse of confessional loyalty on the part of the churches in Germany.

The Confessions may be studied primarily with respect to their contents. What do they teach? What about their modes of expression and thought, their structure and integrating principle? How are their statements and concepts related to the theology of the ancient and late medieval church? To what extent is their content determined by the encounters with the teachings of Zwingli and Calvin and by the controversies among the churches of the Augsburg Confession themselves? In addition, each Confession, depending upon its authorship, must be understood in the light of the theology of

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Luther or of Melancthon, or as the result of complicated overlappings of diverse theological spheres of influence. This approach too has, from the standpoint of history of dogma and of thought, recently produced a wealth of valuable investigations, as witness the studies of K. Thieme, O. Ritschl, J. Meyer, W. Elert, and H. Sasse, not to forget the notable discussion set in motion by F. Loofs about what the Apology teaches concerning justification. As a matter of fact, no church takes seriously its Confession unless it continues to penetrate the meaning of the individual concepts of that Confession and the interrelationships of its statements, by means of ever-new research in the area of the history of theology. Yet it must be asserted that this kind of theological concern with the Confessions, that concerns itself in principle with determining what the Confessions say, does not yet do justice to them as a confession.

Confessions in their proper sense will never be taken seriously until they are taken seriously as exposition of the Scriptures, to be specific, as the church's exposition of the Scriptures. Confessions are not free-lancing theological opinions; they are statements of doctrine that must be understood even to their last detail in terms of that exposition of Scripture which is the church's responsibility, entrusted to it in and with the responsibility of proclamation. Confessions are primarily expositions of Scripture, more particularly summary presentation of the whole of Scripture, that is, a witness to the heart of Scripture, a witness to the saving Gospel. Resting on Scripture as a whole, the Confessions aim to summarize the multiplicity of statements from Scripture in doctrinal articles directed against the errors of their day and designed for the protection of the correct proclamation then and for all time to come. But exposition of Scripture in which a single member of the church takes his stand against false doctrines cannot yet be called a Confession. As long as Confessions are regarded merely as the writings of Melancthon or of Luther, along with other writings of Melancthon or of Luther, they are not yet taken to be Confessions. In the Confessions it is precisely not an individual, but the church which expounds Scripture. Even if the Confessions came from the pen of Melancthon or of Luther, they no longer belong to these individual members of the church. On the contrary, the teaching church has assumed responsibility for them. They are now a sacrifice of praise offered by the whole congregation of believers, who therewith glorify the grace of God in common repentance and in common faith.

This fact, that here the church (not an individual) witnesses to

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the sum of Scripture (not an incidental exegetical discovery), is the basis for the claim of the Confessions that they are the norm according to which the thinking and speaking of the believers is to be tested and determined. Specifically, they claim to be the obligatory model of all of the church's preaching and teaching. This claim admits of no limits, either of time or of space. At least the Confessions which comprise the Book of Concord make this claim not only with respect to the members of the Lutheran churches, but with respect to the whole Christian church on earth. It is not the "Lutheran" church (this designation is repudiated in the Confessions themselves) but the *una sancta catholica et apostolica ecclesia* which has spoken in the Confessions. They therefore make their claim not only with respect to the time in which they arose, but for all time to come, even until Christ's return. From the beginning the Confessions confronted all people with a comprehensive claim; they confront every man with that same comprehensive claim even today.

Theologically the Confessions have not been taken seriously until one comes to grips with this claim of theirs. In two respects this must be done:

1. We must take cognizance of the claim of the Confessions that they are the church's normative exposition of Scripture.

The unique position of the Confessions over against the writings of individual fathers and brethren must be respected. We must seek and recognize in the multiplicity of their authors and collaborators the consensus of the witnesses, and in the multiplicity of their testimonies the unity of the witness. After all, the one church confesses her one faith through the many tongues of her members. This discovering of the consensus certainly involves knowing how the witnesses differ from one another. And the fact that the Confessions have a unique position over against the other writings of their authors does not absolve us from the duty of interpreting the Confessions in the light of the total theology and thought patterns of their authors. However, this important hermeneutical rule is limited in its application by the unique position of the Confessions as doctrine of the church. This means that, even when they derive from various authors, the Confessions must be explained with reference to one another, because the doctrine of the church has to be interpreted in terms of the doctrine of the church. By elevating the writing of a theologian to the position of a confession, the church places that writing into the

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context of its recognized creeds in order that from henceforth it will be heard in, and interpreted in terms of, this context, as further attestation of the one biblical witness which the church has borne from the beginning. Hence, within the framework of the Book of Concord the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Augsburg Confession must be interpreted no longer merely as an article of *Melanchthon's* theology, but also in terms of its inseparable connection with *Luther's* Catechisms—if the Augsburg Confession is to be taken seriously as a confession.

From this it follows that we may not simply take material from an author's other writings to supplement what seems to be lacking in a Confession, either in statements of doctrine or in the bases given for such statements. There may be a significant reason for these omissions. Perhaps the church intentionally declined to offer these theological opinions as articles of the common faith. Perhaps even the authors themselves did not regard their personal views as *articuli stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. It is dogmatically significant that certain important articles of the Augsburg Confession are very brief. It is especially significant that the Smalcald Articles and the Small Catechism exercise such great restraint with respect to an unfolding of systematic relationships or motivations that easily suggest themselves on the basis of Luther's views expressed elsewhere. This restraint is no accident. To take the Confessions seriously as doctrine of the church means to segregate them from the remaining literary output of their authors. There is room in their other writings for the authors to say a variety of things in matters of exegesis, history of dogma, and personal polemics. Here space may be given to well-founded theses and to conjectures of the moment, to what is universally valid and to what expresses a personal experience. All of these writings may serve as a commentary, one that is indeed indispensable for a correct understanding of the Confessions, but is not normative as the Confessions are.

To take cognizance of the claim of a Confession means, in addition, to recognize its unique position over against the heresies that occasioned its formulation. A Confession can indeed be understood correctly only by acquaintance with the false teaching against which it is directed, and thus also with the concrete historical circumstances of its origin. Yet we fail to understand a Confession as a confession if we seek in it only a historically conditioned answer to a specific problem of its own time. Surely, if a Confession is an exposition of Holy Scripture and a witness to the one eternal truth, then its claim

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remains in force even after the concrete heresy to which it first addressed itself has ceased being an issue. Confessions rise above the vicissitudes of heresy, even though they retain the marks of their particular origin as far as their proportions, illustrations, and terminology are concerned. There is a widespread habit of “relativizing” the Confessions by interpreting them as the reaction to a contemporary error, a reaction that is conditioned by its time and therefore valid only for its time. Contrary to such a procedure, we must discover and recognize the confessional statements for what they are—statements designed by the church to bind once for all the proclamation of all subsequent times. This will be done when we single out the positive principles of doctrine from those polemical portions that are directed against dangers which are today no longer so acute. At the same time, we must show, or at least suggest, the implications that grow out of the Confessions for heresies that have since become an issue, e.g., certain modernistic teachings about creation and the law.

2. We must take a definite stand with respect to the claim of the Confessions that they are the church's normative exposition of Scripture.

This claim is to be affirmed or, if that should not be possible, denied. Neither affirmation nor denial, however, can be left to the arbitrary judgment of the individual. Since the Confessions insist on being recognized as exposition of Scripture, only that response takes them seriously which affirms or rejects them on the basis of Scripture. This presupposes the discovering of the exegetical principles on which the confessional articles rest. In this connection special attention must be given to the Scripture quotations found in the Confessions themselves. Their connection with the articles must be carefully analyzed, both with respect to what the Confessions incorporate of the quoted passages and what they omit. Nor must we overlook the absence of such texts as one might have expected to find.

A legitimate stand with respect to the Confessions is possible only by retracing their exegesis of Scripture. The claim of the Confessions will have to validate itself as their exegesis is measured against Scripture in the very process of expounding the Scripture. This claim must be judged, however, not only on the basis of the Scripture texts cited in the Confessions, but of all statements of

Scripture. After all, the Confessions claim that they are *summa doctrinae*. A legitimate attitude toward that assertion, therefore, must grow out of a step-by-step investigation of the question whether the confessional statements are scriptural in the sense of representing a concentration of all the varied statements of Scripture. Later on we shall consider the method of this investigation and what is to be done with the results, the judgments concerning the rightness or wrongness—or, more precisely, concerning the compelling necessity or mere admissibility—of the Confessions' exposition of Scripture.

An investigation which in this way comes to grips with the claim of the Confessions—measuring them against Scripture and then presenting their teaching in systematic fashion as the teaching of Scripture—could already in essence be called dogmatics. At any rate, it would become dogmatics in increasing measure, the more it would go beyond the relatively meager exegetical references in the Confessions and present their teachings in a very broad exegetical unfolding of the whole of Scripture, and especially in contradistinction to the heresies that have arisen from the days of the Reformation down to the present.

There is much to be said in favor of giving separate consideration to these two things: taking cognizance of the Confessions' claim and taking a stand with respect to it.

This is desirable, in the first place, because of the manner in which the Lutheran Confessions are frequently used in our day. There is no question but that in recent years they are being listened to again with a surprising intensity. This is true both within the Lutheran state churches and also within the union churches, now that extensive agreement has developed in repudiating the spirit that controlled the union movements of the nineteenth century. (The problem today is not the repudiation of those unions, but how to transcend them.) In the stresses of our time many realize anew that the battle for the preservation of the church's proclamation and for the church's unity cannot possibly be fought on the basis of the individualism of neo-Protestant statements of faith. For that reason people resorted to the Confessions in an emergency, almost as to an arsenal of weapons. Though *in praxi* the church itself had largely given up recognition of the Confessions as normative for all teaching, they were still the legal basis for the church's constitution and were acknowledged as such even by the state. However, in the press of the conflict often only those confessional statements were

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sought and found that were needed as weapons for the moment. Many sought only for justification of those measures to which they had to resort in a concrete emergency. As a result, the confessional statements were not infrequently abused in a legalistic way; and the weapons furnished in the church's Confessions for battle against the foe were turned against the one who used them. To expect the Confessions to yield concretely binding directives for all concrete situations—as, for example, in matters of church administration—is to paralyze the Christian in his obedience to God. He will be immobilized in those situations concerning which the Confessions do not explicitly speak if he takes their silence for assent to his capitulation in the given situation. Again, he will be severely hampered if he thinks he must take a concrete judgment made by the authors of the Confessions with respect to the emperor or the bishops of their time, and apply it in the same way today. We miss the point of the Confessions and may easily pervert them against their own intention into law, if our renewed concern with them begins with their directives for church activity. The Gospel and the sacraments provide the only proper approach to an understanding of the Confessions. Only the distinction between law and Gospel furnishes the key to a right understanding of the directives for the church's political action. These directives are basically a solemn charge, in the obedience of faith, to make use of the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. For this reason it is inadvisable to appeal to individual statements of the Confessions without also appealing to their theology as a whole. This, however, means first of all that we must give heed to the claim of the Confessions in its totality.

In this connection we cannot fail to take note of the current situation in the science of biblical and exegetical studies. For decades now in the field of exegesis there has been obvious and significant disagreement concerning every important question of Old or New Testament theology. This is still largely the case, though in a few essential points, at least of New Testament theology, some consensus in exegesis is slowly beginning to emerge. It is too early to tell how much of this consensus will maintain itself and become normative, in terms of method and of content. Important for the matter before us is also the fact that most of the exegetical studies of recent decades have maintained a polemical attitude toward the Confessions of the church. This attitude was justified, on the one hand, by the fact that the Confessions and dogmatics were improperly placed above Scripture, as was customarily done in the period

of Orthodoxy. From this procedure exegetical science had indeed to be set free. On the other hand, however, this polemic proceeded without a proper understanding of the task, scope, and limitations that a Confession has by its very nature—already with regard to its thought patterns over against the multiplicity of scriptural statements. Instead, it proceeded largely in the name of a secular claim of free scientific research. The task of teaching the Confessions as exposition of Scripture by means of repeating the exegetical process is, therefore, one for which the groundwork has not really been laid. Even the most recent confessional theology has often evaded this task in a startling way, in that it has frequently been blithely and culpably unconcerned about the rift between exegetical research and dogmatic teaching within one and the same church. This whole situation makes it more difficult to take a proper stand with respect to the claim of the Confessions. It is advisable to work out step by step what this stance should be by way of thorough and painstaking exegesis, beginning with one basic doctrine of the Confessions. Biblical-theological consideration of one doctrine of the Confessions, however, in turn presupposes familiarity with the whole doctrinal corpus of the Confessions. For every part of doctrine is to be understood only from the perspective of the center of the Confessions, the article of justification. For this reason too it seems appropriate to study the over-all doctrine of the Confessions first of all.

Quite apart from the present status of exegesis and the revival of interest in the Confessions, however, it still remains advisable to give separate consideration to these two things: taking cognizance of the doctrine of the Confessions and taking a stand with respect to them. Surely the Confessions as the *voice of the church* are important enough to be heard out first, in what they have to say, before the *individual* Christian lifts his own voice to speak. Since in the Confessions it is the church, not an individual, which is expounding the Scripture for its members, there is every reason for the individual member first to listen as a pupil to the church's instruction. He should do this without offering his own additions, supplementary interpretations, corrections, or criticisms, however well these may be supported by sound exegetical observations. After all, the church is always there before the individual Christian. The church has acted upon him before he himself could act; it has instructed him before he himself was able to believe. The church, it must be remembered, is "the mother that begets and bears every

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Christian through the Word of God" (L. C. II, 42). Should we not listen first to the church's exposition of Scripture, since through the Word of God it has given us new birth as children of God? Should we not in preference to all other expositions of Scripture listen with the utmost care to the church's explanation of the Creed, which it confessed over us in our baptism, and in which it follows the Lord's commission in testifying to and explaining the meaning of "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"? In the last analysis, all Confessions of the church are nothing more than a fortification built around Baptism, and an explanation of the trinitarian name. Living in the church as those who are borne and nourished by the church, we always have the church's Confession as our point of origin. Should we not, then, to the minutest detail hear how the church in its Confessions explains the Apostles' Creed, which it confessed for us in Baptism? And should we not do this before we offer our own private exposition of Scripture? Yes, should we not from the very outset approach this exposition of Scripture by the Confessions with a confidence in its correctness which exceeds the confidence we give as pupils to this or that member of the church who may be our teacher? More compellingly than any chronological reasons, these considerations impose upon us the obligation first as pupils to take cognizance of the entire claim of the Confessions, before we undertake to become teachers ourselves. And this pertains not only to individual Confessions or their individual articles, but to the Confessions as a doctrinal whole.

This, then, is the task of this theology of the Confessions: In all the humility of hearing and learning to summarize and reproduce the statements of the Confessions in systematic order.

In this connection we designate this systematic presentation of the doctrine of the Book of Concord as "Prolegomena to Dogmatics," and we make it precede the dogmatics which is to follow in this projected series. For the theology of the Confessions is the prolegomenon to dogmatics in a qualified sense, namely, that dogmatics must give consideration to the Confessions before all other commentaries on Scripture. Self-evidently, this "before" is not primarily temporal, but an abiding logical *prius*. This concept of the prolegomena will be more precisely defined at the close of Chapter 1.

If we thus give separate consideration to these two things, taking cognizance of the claim of the Confessions and taking a definite stand with respect to that claim, this in no way implies the liberty

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of isolating the one from the other. It is impossible either to affirm or to deny this claim theologically without knowing exactly what it contains. Conversely, a knowledge of what the Confessions contain without either a positive or negative response to their claim would not yet be theological knowledge. Only then may a theology of the Confessions be called "Prolegomena to Dogmatics," when the dogmatics keeps in view from the outset a concern with the Confessions. In other words, dogmatics must think the Confessions through to their logical conclusion in the act of critically retracing the Reformation's exegesis of Scripture; the theology of the Confessions must not inadvertently and without further ado be set forth in blind repristination as dogmatics. For this reason this theology of the Confessions consciously paves the way for a response to their claim by devoting the last section of Chapter 1 to the implications that arise for the relationship between Scripture, Confession, and dogmatics from the Lutheran view of the relation between Scripture and Confession. Furthermore, at the end of the book we have added a few biblical-exegetical observations and questions on the foregoing chapters as guidelines for dogmatics. For the rest, this whole presentation would press for a dogmatic decision also in this respect—that here in the introduction we definitely set forth in advance the requirement of coming to grips with the total claim of the Confessions. Only he really does this, however, who allows the Confessions to instruct, judge, and comfort him, and at the same time to compel him to test this claim by the Holy Scriptures.

For various reasons it is no easy matter to present systematically the pronouncements of the Confessions as the *one* doctrine of the church, even apart from the problem of taking a stand with respect to their claim. Indeed, the existing difficulties are so great that, with a necessity rooted in the matter itself, no uncovering of the doctrine of the Confessions as a full-orbed unit will be able to escape the charge of subjectivity in presentation. We refer briefly to a few of the most obvious difficulties:

The Lutheran Confessions do not have one and the same author; consequently they do not have one and the same theological thought pattern. They were not written at the same time, but have their place in the midst of a historical process in which a position was being developed with respect to the Roman church and with respect to the new heresies that were arising at the time of the Reformation. In view of this difficulty, a presentation of the Book of Concord

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as a doctrinal unit must first of all pay attention to how the Confessions mutually interpret one another. In spite of their large number, they are nonetheless organically related in a kind of family tree in which the numerous interpretations refer back ultimately to relatively few texts. All Confessions of the Reformation age in the Book of Concord aim to be expositions of the ancient trinitarian Creeds; most clearly the two Catechisms aim to be explanations of the Apostles' Creed. The Apology expounds the Augsburg Confession, the two Catechisms interpret each other, and the Formula of Concord, again, wishes to be understood as elucidation of the Augsburg Confession and, beyond that, of all prior Lutheran Confessions.

Not only are the theological thought patterns different in the Lutheran Confessions, but occasionally there are doctrinal statements that contradict one another. Compare, for example, the statements concerning the number of sacraments, or those concerning the pope. Later Confessions serve not only as interpretation, but at times also as correction of earlier ones. In view of this difficulty it will be necessary in presenting the Book of Concord as a doctrinal unit to fix unwavering attention on that which is the center of all the doctrinal statements of the Confessions, namely, the identity of the Gospel to which they all bear witness. Only from the vantage point of this Gospel can the importance of those apparent doctrinal differences be evaluated, whose existence must not be glossed over and evaded by harmonization. On the contrary, viewed from the center, from the proper distinction of law and Gospel, these differences may prove to contribute a great deal to a correct understanding of the Confessions and of their claim (cf., e.g., pp. 265 ff.).

However, even when the Lutheran Confessions are expounded on the basis of their interdependence and in relation to their central theme, the difficulty remains that not all doctrines are in one and the same context of interpretation. Thus, while the doctrine of the sacraments is based on the same Scripture texts in both the Augsburg Confession and the Catechisms, these writings stand in a certain independence side by side as regards their thought patterns and also the extent of their statements. It is well known, for example, what a variety of interpretation seems to be permitted by the cautious formulation of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Augsburg Confession, especially when in explaining the doctrine it is removed from the context of the Book of Concord and is thus isolated. It is

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evident therefore that, when we set forth the doctrinal statements of the Lutheran Confessions as a unit, we cannot avoid having to make decisions about the point of departure for any given interpretation, decisions which the Confessions do not automatically suggest. In line with this principle, this study will consciously begin its presentation of the doctrine of the sacraments, for example, with Luther's Catechisms, and from this vantage point interpret the statements of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. For the church of the Augsburg Confession has from the beginning understood its doctrine of the sacraments in the context of *Luther's* theology and not of Melancthon's peculiarities.

In addition, it is to be noted that to the present day not even the Lutheran churches themselves are agreed as to the extent of the Lutheran Confessions. From the beginning, the Formula of Concord was disputed as a Confession, and to the present day large Lutheran bodies refuse to acknowledge it as such. Thus the Lutheran rally at Hannover in July, 1935, at which the German Lutheran churches established their common confessional basis, indeed recognized the Augsburg Confession, the two Catechisms, and the Smalcald Articles, but not the Formula of Concord. In spite of its disputed status we shall not dispense with it here. For it cannot be denied that the Formula of Concord in many respects represents a model of theological study, indeed of correct exposition of Reformation thinking over against new errors. Think, for example, only of Articles III to VI. To be sure, the Formula of Concord is to be drawn into the discussion only in so far as it appears to furnish a legitimate exposition of the earlier Lutheran Confessions. For we must not lose sight of the fact that the Formula of Concord can and must be a subject of theological interest from an entirely different point of view, namely, that of the question whether in it the task of expounding the earlier Confessions has been exceeded, whether it perhaps departs from the Reformation Confessions in some points and already exhibits the beginnings of the false developments that characterized the later period of Orthodoxy. Inasmuch as this study will hardly concern itself with these questions at all, it will therefore not offer a theology of the Formula of Concord, which by its very nature would have to treat this matter exhaustively. Rather, the Formula of Concord will be drawn in to the extent of its explanatory consensus with the other Confessions.

These few observations alone indicate that the hermeneutical problems that present themselves in the understanding of any text

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will be considerably increased in connection with so complicated a structure as the Book of Concord. Every attempt at systematizing the Book of Concord as a doctrinal unit is especially vulnerable to the charge of personal prejudice. In view of the procedural difficulties it is, therefore, not at all surprising that for quite some time no such comprehensive task has been undertaken, except perhaps for the rather condensed summaries prepared, e.g., by G. Plitt (*Symbolik* [5th ed.], pp. 75-95) and P. Tschackert (*Die Entstehung der lutherischen und reformierten Kirchenlehre*, pp. 304-372). Nevertheless, in spite of all procedural difficulties the church dare not evade its responsibility of giving ear to the consensus of its Confessions, since it is precisely in their consensus that the Confessions are binding upon the church. Nor may the accusation of subjectivity frighten the church from its duty. Rather, it is well to understand clearly from the start that every individual presentation of the *one* doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions can be no more than *one* voice in the chorus of confessional commentators, and that this need not be objectionable any more than the fact that in the Confessions themselves a whole chorus of witnesses gets to speak directly or indirectly.

To these procedural difficulties with which every theology of the Confessions has to cope, there are added in our case those presented by the limitations of a textbook. As a rule, the scientific theme of a textbook is more comprehensive than the space allotted to the treatment of it. It is inevitable that textbooks often present the results of investigation without being able to repeat in detail the path that has led to these conclusions. So also in this case the presentation and summaries at many places had to be largely thetical, without being able to present thoroughly all the proofs or go into detail with regard to the consideration which has been given to other views. I regret particularly that I could not include a critical introduction to the history of the exposition of the Confessions. The writing of this four-hundred-year history is one of the most intriguing and important tasks of theology, and its undertaking could well lead to a new understanding of the nature and method of the history of theology as distinguished from the humanities. Instead of entering into an explicit discussion with the assimilated recent literature, I had to be content at most points to make passing reference to it. Instead of coming to grips with the older exposition of the Confessions I could only call attention in a bibliography to some of the more significant works.

Other unavoidable limitations of this textbook will be largely compensated for by the fact that it is intended as one of a projected series in which other volumes are expected to deal with such matters as the dogma of the ancient church, the medieval church's understanding of

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that dogma, the theology of Luther, the history of Old Protestant theology beginning with the theology of Melancthon, and the distinctive doctrines of the Formula of Concord over against the Reformed Symbols and the teachings of Calvin. Wherever I could anticipate the handling of certain subjects by these other texts I kept my own treatment brief. The historical introductions in the edition of the Confessions on which this study is based (*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* [Goettingen, 1930], pp. XI-XLIV),¹ plus the bibliography given there and at the end of this book, may well serve the purpose of an initial orientation with respect to the genetic history of the individual confessional writings.

Because of the limitations mentioned above, this text can be nothing more than an introduction. By introduction I mean a leading up to the texts of the Confessions, which each must then study for himself. This text is in no sense a substitute for the study of the Confessions in the original languages. (It should be noted that the German translations of the Apology and the Treatise, as well as the Latin versions of the Smalcald Articles, the Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord, must already be regarded and treated as paraphrases and first expositions of the respective originals. This is true especially of the German translation of the Apology by Justus Jonas.) Since I am not dealing explicitly with comparisons with Roman or Reformed doctrine, nor with modernistic Lutheranism of recent decades, I have here purposely refrained from publishing one of those dogmatic compends that had an answer for every question and so, unfortunately, stifled all dogmatic thinking. The topic sentences too, that precede and serve to summarize the attendant confessional statements, are not intended to be exhaustive statements of content, but aids in getting at the systematic line of thought, particularly at the genuine theological dialectic in which is contained the oft-neglected eschatological expectation of the Confessions.

The purpose of this book, therefore, is a modest one and, please God, one of humble service. It will be inadequate, meager, and barren for a romanticizing and esthetic conception of dogmatics, according to which every dogmatician makes a fresh start, as it were, in mental productivity and originality. It will, however, immeasurably enrich and bless every one who, suspicious of the theological originality of the old Adam, submits as a pupil to the discipline of the teaching church and approaches Scripture together with the fathers in a common act of hearing. A subscription to the Lutheran Confessions can hamper exegesis only so long as it remains a formal subscription without penetrating to an understanding of

¹To facilitate reference to the best available original-language edition of the Confessions, it has been thought best in this English edition to refer to the second edition of the *Bekenntnisschriften* (1952) rather than to the first edition (1930) which the author originally used. See *Bek.* in the Table of Abbreviations on page xiii.—Trans.

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that which is the heart of the Confessions. But this subscription becomes thoroughly liberating and revealing the moment it is recognized as a liberation through the Gospel, that Gospel which is to be distinguished from the law each day anew and to which, in the act of making this distinction, the Lutheran Confessions bear witness. Therefore, the last word of this introduction must be an expression of gratitude. Granted that only dogmatics proper is able to judge clearly the extent to which the claim of the Confessions can, by retracing their biblical exegesis, be admitted, yet I should like to say already at this point that for me the results of the newer exegesis have not only confirmed the statements of the Confessions to a surprising degree, but that in addition the Confessions have disclosed to me the meaning of Scripture texts and contexts which today are commonly overlooked.

This book grew out of lectures I delivered at the University of Giessen and the Theological School at Bethel before my teaching was abruptly halted in the spring of 1939. With this book in 1940 I greeted my young brethren in the dispersion with whom in the previous years I had been privileged to join in common study of the Word of God. I remember them even now in abiding love and gratitude, especially since many of them have been summoned out of the conflicts of this world and the tentativeness of all *theologia viatorum* unto the theological knowledge of those who have reached the goal.

I

SCRIPTURE AND CONFESSION

1. The sole norm of all teaching in the church is the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments.

The preface to the Augsburg Confession asserts that this Confession is preached and taught "on the basis of divine and holy Scripture" (A.C. Pref., 8). In the concluding statement of the first part of this Confession it is said of the preceding "Articles of Faith and Doctrine" that they agree "with the pure Word of God and Christian truth . . . [they are] grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures and . . . not contrary or opposed to [the teaching] of the universal Christian church, or even of the Roman church (in so far as the latter's teaching is reflected in the writings of the Fathers)." Accordingly, the Augsburg Confession concludes with the offer: "If anyone should consider that it [this Confession] is lacking in some respect, we are ready to present further information on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture" (A.C. Con., 7). These statements, which presuppose Holy Scripture as the norm of all teaching, bracket all articles of the Augsburg Confession, but at the same time also those of the Apology and of the other Confessions which regard themselves as interpretation of the Augsburg Confession.

Curiously enough, however, the Augsburg Confession does not have a special article on Holy Scripture, and this is true also of the Apology, the Catechisms, and the Smalcald Articles.¹ Even the

¹This accounts for the fact that, in contrast with most other doctrines, little careful study has been given to the confessional doctrine of Scripture, except in the case of the Formula of Concord. That is a mistake, because the absence of a special article on Scripture must not blind us to the fact that the very silence of the Confessions on this point amounts to a doctrinal declaration. Furthermore, in the actual use of Scripture by the Confessions there is implicit not only a doctrine of Scripture, but also principles of interpretation, and even important hermeneutical rules for the exegesis of the Old Testament. By the way, there was in principle no reason why the Confessions might not have included a doctrine of Scripture, not only at the time of the Formula of Concord, but even during the first years of the Reformation. Part III of the Evangelical Declaration of Ansbach, in 1524, very definitely taught that Scrip-

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purpose of the three quotations given above is obviously not primarily a declaration about Holy Scripture as being normative, but rather, presupposing its normative character, an affirmation that the Confession is bound by that norm. In the context of the quotations, Scripture itself is so self-evidently presupposed as the norm that its exclusive normative character is not even expressly stated. In fact, formulations are not avoided which might call this into question. For example, what is the significance of the declaration that nothing has been introduced "that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church"? (A.C. Con., 5). What does this "or" imply? Is also the church a norm of doctrine? In the immediate connection no clear, unambiguous answer is given. Hence we dare not consider only the relatively rare explicit statements of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology about Holy Scripture, but we must determine the implied doctrine concerning Scripture on the basis of how Scripture is actually used and how other sources of knowledge which might possibly be considered as norms of doctrine are regarded.

We observe, first, the frequency of quotations from Scripture and the importance of their position. Most of the quotations in the Augsburg Confession are from Scripture and they have the character of decisive and conclusive proof. Since they are frequently found at the end of an article they confirm the previously made statements as doctrine. They have been lifted out of the area of merely human questions and opinions, since Scripture has answered the questions and this answer has been received as binding. Since God 'regards a single prophet as an inestimable treasure' (Ap. XII, 66), even a single Bible passage is of decisive significance. But the value of a single quotation rests, in the final analysis, on the fact that it is not an isolated quotation but represents the *oft*-attested teaching of Scripture. This 'strong testimony of *all* the holy prophets may duly be called a decree of the catholic Christian church' (Ap. XX, 2). The confessors know that they are separated from their adversaries not merely by an isolated word of Scripture, but they chide the opponents for 'failing to consider *so many* clear passages which

ture is the sole norm established by the Word of God itself, and that in strict trinitarian hermeneutics reason and human wisdom are rejected and the Holy Spirit as the only means of understanding Scripture is asserted. The absence of such an article in the Augsburg Confession is not to be construed as an evasion of the controversial problem of the relation between Scripture and tradition. Rather, it reflects the genuinely Lutheran urgency of coming to grips at once with the *viva vox evangelii* itself, an approach that goes beyond the Ansbach biblicism.

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clearly state that we are justified by faith and not by works. . . . Do they suppose that the Scripture repeats *this same truth so often* without good reason?" (Ap. IV, 107 f.). Not obscure words of Scripture, but the 'very clear' ones (Ap. II, 50), and again, not single expressions out of context, but the testimonies of which Scripture is "full" (Ap. IV, 102) are the decisive factors. Hence *all* Scripture is the basis of the doctrinal articles.

Next to Scripture the quotations from the church fathers occupy the most prominent position in the Augsburg Confession. Since these voices of the fathers are ordinarily found *after* the Scripture passages, the impression is created that they are consciously accorded an inferior position. Numerous emphatic statements indicate how decisively the church fathers are placed under the norm of Scripture: "There is also great variety among the Fathers. They were men and they could err and be deceived" (Ap. XXIV, 95). "The writings of the holy Fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundation" (i.e., on "the true knowledge of Christ and faith," I Cor. 3:12; Ap. VII, 20 f.). "It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy Fathers' words or works. Otherwise what they ate, how they dressed, and what kind of houses they lived in would have to become articles of faith—as has happened in the case of relics." Even the words of St. Augustine are not to be "accepted when they are without the support of the Scriptures" (S.A. II, ii, 14 f.). With a *single* statement of the apostle Peter we may cheerfully oppose thousands of quotations from the church fathers (Ap. XII, 70).

As the history of the church is disallowed as norm of doctrine, so also the measures adopted by the contemporary church: ". . . one should not obey even regularly elected bishops, if they err, or if they teach or command something contrary to the divine Holy Scriptures" (A.C. XXVIII, 28). 'Neither to the pope, nor to the church do we grant the authority to issue decrees contrary to this consensus of the prophets' (Ap. XII, 66). Like tradition and the church fathers, so also all present and future teachers of the church must be evaluated and judged according to Holy Scripture (cf. also Tr. 11, 56).

Beyond all this, all human thought, emotion, and activity is subjected to Scripture with constantly recurring flank attacks on reason and philosophy, on work-righteousness and enthusiasm. The opinion that man can arrive at a true knowledge of divine matters on the basis of human thought and emotion is again and again traced in

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the most diverse doctrines of the opponents, refuted, and finally made ridiculous. All this is only "*multa fingere*," to 'invent many things in one's own brain,' which leads only to such opinions as are 'totally unfounded in Scripture and touch neither above nor below' (Ap. XII, 178). Reason cannot even come to a knowledge of original sin, but this "must be believed because of the revelation in the Scriptures" (S.A. III, i, 3). And our feelings cannot even give a clear indication of our thirst for grace: "If you cannot feel the need (the thirst for the sacrament), at least believe the Scriptures. They will not lie to you, and they know your flesh better than you yourself do" (L.C. V, 76).

More strongly than statements of principle about Scripture could do, the actual use of Holy Scripture demonstrates that it is recognized by the Augsburg Confession as the sole norm. What Scripture as a whole teaches must be the teaching of the church. What Scripture does not teach must be rejected as doctrinal pronouncement of the church. Both for the Augsburg Confession and its Apology as well as for the two Catechisms the principle already obtains: "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel"; "we can discard all human inventions" (S.A. II, ii, 15, 2).

Accordingly, the Formula of Concord teaches nothing new, although it alone of all Lutheran Confessions, fifty years after Augsburg, speaks by way of introduction "Of the Comprehensive Summary, Rule, and Norm, etc." and there confesses that "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (Ep. Comp. Sum., 1). They are the pure and clear fountain of Israel (S.D. Sum. Form., 3), the only norm, the sole judge, the "only touchstone" (Ep. Comp. Sum., 7). "Other writings and teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures, and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times" (Ep. Comp. Sum., 2).

Nevertheless, it remains significant that before the Formula of Concord the Confessions have no special article on Holy Scripture, and that even in the Formula of Concord no statement is made about the extent of the biblical canon, although at that time this was a subject of debate and, at least as far as the Apocrypha are

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concerned, the canon was given limits differing from those in the Roman church.

We encounter the same, apparently almost disinterested, reticence regarding a detailed doctrine of Scripture when we ask the question, *Why is Holy Scripture the sole norm of all doctrine?*

2. Holy Scripture is the norm because it is the prophetic and apostolic witness to the Gospel.

In search of a basis for the normative importance of Holy Scripture we find the expression in the Apology: "The clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit" (Ap. Pref., 9). Furthermore, we are reminded of the questions put to the adversaries about their false traditions and their work-righteousness: "Why does the divine Scripture so frequently forbid the making and the keeping of human regulations? . . . Is it possible that the Holy Spirit warned against them for nothing?" (A.C. XXVIII, 49). 'Do they think that the Holy Spirit does not utter his Word surely and deliberately, or does not know what he is saying?' (Ap. IV, 108).

One should like to ask immediately what it means that the Holy Spirit 'utters his Word.' One should also like to ascertain more accurately whether in these questions of the Augsburg Confession the Holy Spirit is represented as operating through Scripture or as being its author, and, if the latter, in what manner. But no answer is given there to these and many other questions, and the very casualness of such remarks shows plainly that the Confessions are not interested in fixing the significance of Scripture by means of doctrinal statements about its origin. The inspiration of Scripture is indeed presupposed, but there is no detailed doctrine of inspiration. One might think that this silence of the Confessions could be explained by the fact that the doctrine of inspiration was at that time the common theological heritage of the Reformers and of Roman and other opponents, even of Sebastian Frank,² for example. When one considers, however, what manifold possibilities in terms of doctrines of inspiration were already present at the time of the Reformation, having been prepared by the Middle Ages, and what far-reaching consequences the decisions in the doctrine of inspiration have for other articles of dogmatics, then this reticence cannot be

² Frank was at first a supporter of Luther but then became a promoter of mystical idealism and an enemy of all ecclesiastical system, and was opposed by Luther and Melancthon.—Trans.

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accidental, but must be taken seriously as a theological decision. At any rate, the normative position of Scripture is not deduced from doctrinal statements about the divine inspiration of Scripture.

Instead, the Confessions with great force and powerful urgency again and again point to the content and the center of Holy Scripture. "All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises" (Ap. IV, 5; cf. 102). "These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify and to justify and quicken the terrified. One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The other part is the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace granted in Christ. This promise is repeated continually throughout Scripture; first it was given to Adam, later to the patriarchs, then illumined by the prophets, and finally proclaimed and revealed by Christ among the Jews, and spread by the apostles throughout the world" (Ap. XII, 53). Accordingly, the summary of Scripture is law and Gospel, or, to put it another way, the summary of the entire Holy Scripture is the Gospel. The powerful sentence, 'all who believe that through Christ they have a gracious God are made righteous before God without merit by faith,' is in summary 'the principal matter of all epistles, yea, of the entire Scripture' (Ap. IV, 87), and 'entire Scripture' means the sum total of both testaments, not only of the New, but also of the Old Testament. "As Peter says (Acts 10:43), 'To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name'" (Ap. XX, 2). If the summary of Scripture is law and Gospel, the Gospel, in turn, is the summary of law and Gospel. The Gospel is the center of all of Scripture, not without the law and yet also in distinction from the law, namely, as God's promise and forgiveness which is to be esteemed a thousandfold more than his demands and judgments (see Chap. IV, 10, pp. 136 f.).³

This intense concern with the Gospel suggests that the Gospel is the norm in Scripture and Scripture is the norm for the sake of the Gospel. From this point of view we can understand why none of the Confessions before the Formula of Concord contain a section on Holy Scripture, because not only do individual articles specifically

³This approach of the Confessions gives expression to Luther's reiterated teaching concerning Christ as Lord and Sum of Holy Scripture. Scripture is the norm inasmuch as it is Gospel, that is, in so far as it "presents Christ." The acting Christ and the Gospel are identical. In this discussion Luther's remarks concerning the relationship of Scripture, Word, and Spirit should also be studied.

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treat the Gospel, but in the final analysis all articles in the Confessions are concerned with the Gospel. The assertion that the Gospel is the norm in Scripture and that the Scripture is norm as witness to the Gospel would then have this meaning: Ultimately all articles treat the norm of theological thinking, even though they contain few statements about the normative significance of Scripture.

The occasional hermeneutical directives too—above all, the exegetical practice of the Confessions—favor this understanding of the Gospel as norm in the norm of Holy Scripture. Thus of the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins the Apology says that it ‘is of special service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible, without which doctrine no poor conscience may have true, constant, and firm consolation, or be able to recognize the riches of Christ’s grace’ (Ap. IV, 2 f.). Without the knowledge of the Gospel the Bible remains unintelligible and useless. Only from the Gospel do all individual statements of Scripture receive their proper place and meaning. Erasmus, Zwingli, the peasants, and the Enthusiasts had also waged their battle with Bible quotations, as did also the Roman adversaries. By means of Scripture texts employed “in either a philosophical or a Jewish manner” it is possible to abolish the certainty of faith and to exclude Christ as mediator (Ap. IV, 376). Only in the light of the Gospel can we determine which words of Scripture are commands and promises, which words serve to terrify or to comfort, which words are valid for us as God’s commandments, and which commandments of the Old Testament have been abolished by Christ. Only by faith in the Gospel can Scripture be interpreted correctly, that is, by receiving the benefits secured for us by the crucified Christ. In the Gospel Scripture has not only its unity but also its simplicity.

The Gospel, moreover, is not a book existing of and for itself, but it is the voice of God addressing us; it is no doctrine of and for itself, but it is proclamation. We do not have the Gospel, but we hear it. We do not know it as we know other concepts, but we receive it anew again and again, spoken to us through the voice of man which proclaims the grace of God and through which God’s very voice from heaven resounds among us today. In the most real sense of the term the Gospel is the word of absolution, and *doctrina evangelii* in our Confessions is essentially proclaimed doctrine. Accordingly, in Luther’s explanation of the Third Commandment

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in the Large Catechism the praise of the Word of God does not refer to the book of Holy Scripture, to the Bible as such. "The Word of God is the true holy thing above all holy things. Indeed, it is the only one we Christians acknowledge and have," that is to say, "At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work are sanctified by it" (L.C. I, 91 f.). Not a knowledge about God's Word, but being "guided by God's Word" is required. We meet Scripture as the Word of God only in the act of hearing and learning, of preaching and teaching. "Where the Word is not heard," the devil breaks in. "On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. . . . For these words are not idle or dead, but effective and living" (L.C. I, 100 f.).

God's Word is active as it sanctifies the sinner. But this sanctifying "is nothing else than to bring us to the Lord Christ" (L.C. II, 39). "The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by his sufferings, death, resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation" (L.C. II, 38).

However little and incidentally the Confessions speak about the inspiration of the Bible as a book, they most emphatically and methodically from the Augsburg Confession to the Formula of Concord teach the inspiration of the hearers by the Word of God, that is to say, inspiration through the word of the Gospel. Of course, the two cannot be separated. In both cases it is the Holy Spirit acting through the Word. But the stress of the statements evidently is with the latter. 'Through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given' (A.C. V, 2; cf., e.g., Ap. XXIV, 70). Here "we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before." "Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil." Even Moses and all the prophets did not receive the Spirit "apart from or without" the external preceding Word (S.A. III, viii, 3, 10 f.). The operation of the Word is the operation of the Holy Spirit. In this connection the Confessions again and again testify to the Holy Spirit. What Luther describes as a fruit of the Word—that it "awakens

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new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and . . . cleanses the heart and its meditations" (L.C. I, 101)—is elsewhere praised as the fruit of the Spirit.

Here one could ask: What, then, is the real norm? Scripture, or the Gospel, or the preaching? The following considerations must provide the answer:

The Confessions do not place the norm of the Gospel in opposition to the canon of Scripture; they do not, in contrast to Luther's familiar expression, employ the Gospel as the criterion and norm in opposition to some writings of the New Testament, whereby their canonicity might be rendered doubtful. On the contrary, James, Hebrews, and Revelation are frequently quoted, and there is even a noteworthy effort to give an evangelical interpretation of the controversial passage, James 2:21, 24 (Ap. IV, 224, 252; S.D. III, 43). A criticism of the canon of Scripture or even an intracanonical criticism in the light of the Gospel, though not expressly excluded, is nowhere undertaken.

Furthermore, the Confessions nowhere attempt to give independent status to preaching or its edifying results, or to play it off against Scripture. That would be the enthusiasm of the fanatics "who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word" and "wish to distinguish sharply between the spirit and the letter," but at the same time "do not remain silent but fill the world with their chattering and scribbling, as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the spoken word of the apostles, but must come through their own writings and words" (S.A. III, viii, 3-6). Rather, the preaching through which the Holy Spirit is given is the "preaching of the Scriptures."

Thus Scripture, Gospel, and the preaching of the church are connected in the most intimate manner through the identity of their contents. They have their unity in the Gospel. The sermon must proclaim the Gospel, and the Gospel is the heart of the Scripture. In this way the Gospel as witnessed by *Scripture* remains the sole norm of all Gospel preaching in the church, that is, Gospel as the prophetic and apostolic witness to the Gospel. The preaching of the church is based on the preaching of the apostles and prophets and transmits and bears witness anew to the Gospel which they preached, that is, exposition of the "prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments" (Ep. Comp. Sum., 1; cf. S.D. Sum. Form., 3; Ep. Comp. Sum., 2; S.D. Sum. Form., 16). It is true, the special position of the prophetic and apostolic office

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over against the subsequent preaching of the church is not further elucidated in the Confessions' remarks about Scripture, yet it becomes evident in the doctrine of the ministry. Since, accordingly, preaching is the Word of God only as proclamation of the Gospel, and since the Gospel is the sole and unique message entrusted to the prophets and apostles, Holy Scripture itself is the sole norm.

If we ask again: Why is Scripture the norm? Why are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, why is the prophetic and apostolic Gospel the norm? we receive no further answer to these questions in the Confessions. Even the Formula of Concord does not answer these questions with a doctrine of inspiration (the Holy Spirit is not mentioned at all in the Summary Formulation), but to the claim that Scripture is the norm it merely appends two supporting Scripture quotations: "Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105) and "Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8; cf. Ep. Comp. Sum., 1). However, this proof is obviously not a proof in the ordinary sense, but moves logically in a circle. Why is Scripture the sole norm and guide? Because it says that the Word proclaimed by it is the sole means of salvation! Because God saves through the Word proclaimed by it. The objection may be raised against the Formula of Concord that in contrast to the earlier Confessions it already shifts to a formal Scripture principle by teaching a "comprehensive summary, rule, and norm" without at once indicating the summary of Scripture, namely, the Gospel. But one will have to concede to the Formula of Concord that its doctrine of Scripture is entirely a doctrine of faith. It has recourse neither to the age of Scripture nor to its dissemination and miraculous preservation, neither to the marvelous offensiveness of its content nor to its incomparable moral effects⁴—or whatever contemporary or subsequent orthodox heteronomous pillars of support and confirmation may be mentioned. Only by faith in the proclaimed Word of Scripture through which the triune God in Jesus Christ works in us through the Holy Spirit is Scripture presented as the sole norm. Thereby all questions are directed to the living God himself who in the act of proclaiming

⁴The theologians of the period of Orthodoxy classified arguments of this kind as *kriteria interna* and *externa*. This does not yet imply that the recognition of the *autopistia* of Scripture, nor of the fact that the Holy Spirit alone creates the conviction that Scripture is the norm, has disappeared. Cf., e.g., J. Gerhard's emphasis on the witness of the Spirit to the divine address of Scripture, *Loci*, I, 36. However, this recognition becomes progressively weaker in the direction of a formal supranaturalism.

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Scripture proves to each individual again and again that Scripture is the norm, that is, a pure fountain of life.

3. *The Confession is exposition of Scripture, specifically, a summary of Holy Scripture, namely, a witness to the Gospel.*

In the Lutheran Confessions the term "confession" is used in a threefold sense.

In the first place, *confessio* is the confession of sins, and in the articles on confession we have detailed instruction regarding the significance and extent of this confession.

In the second place, *confessio* is mentioned among the good works which follow faith, like the activity of love and the mortification of the flesh. For Christ, "in order to keep the Gospel among men, . . . visibly pits the witness of the saints against the rule of the devil." The confession of the faithful is a weapon of Jesus Christ, just as the dangers, labors, and sermons of the apostles and other teachers of the church are the "battles by which Christ restrained the devil and drove him away from the believers" (Ap. IV, 189 f.). This confession resulting from faith "is done for the praise of God" and public confession of faith before others. Specifically, confession is here the public praise of the grace of God in the words of everyone who has received this grace.

Finally, *confessio* designates a written confession of faith, or creed.

But to this threefold distinction in the meaning of *confessio* it must immediately be added that the existence of a confessional document (its composition, the endorsing signatures, and its validity) is in no case to be separated from the confession of sins and the public grateful acknowledgment of the grace of God. Every Confession is at the same time confession of sins and public testimony. Hence the Augsburg Confession has Ps. 119:46 on its title page: "I will also speak of thy testimonies before kings, and shall not be put to shame."⁵

⁵ The Confessions thus continue to echo the joyous note of Luther's concept of *confessio*, which not only combines the confession of one's own sin and unworthiness with an overwhelming doxology of the monergism of divine grace, but with the doxology of grace embraces the confession of sin. Cf. E. Vogelsang, "Der confessio-Begriff des jungen Luther (1513-22)," *Lutherjahrbuch*, (Muenchen, 1930). Both in basis and tenor the Augsburg Confession and the Apology are in harmony with Luther's idea of *confessio*. It is, therefore, not correct to say that "there is no bridge between Luther and the Confessions" on this point. H. Kittel, "Das Problem der Confessionalitaet," *Die Erziehung* (1930), p. 3. It is possible to speak of their being diametrically opposed only by divorcing confession as the act of confessing from confession

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One feature is common to every act of confession, namely, that it is the response of man to the revelation of God in his Word. For without this revelation man can know neither his sin nor God's grace. The response of man as a rule is not a verbatim repetition of the words of Scripture, but is made in the words of the man hearing the message, thus even in words which are not found in Scripture. So, for example, such concepts as "person," "substance," "nature," are used in the ancient Creeds, and taken over in the Lutheran Confessions even though Scripture does not use them. However, since these terms used in the doctrine of the Trinity obviously become inadequate and fractured, and this happens in principle with all terms used to designate the revealed God, it becomes evident already at this point that the confessing response of man to the Word of God is always merely praise of God, offering up simultaneously a sacrifice of praise with human lips. Confession, accordingly, is always also a declaration of submission on the part of confessing man. And even as man in his *own* words repeats the address of the Word of Scripture, it becomes evident that man actually submits himself.

The essential nature of a confessional *writing* as a document is determined from the outset by the content of its doctrine. This finds expression already in the Confessions' almost total silence on the nature of a confession. But a theology of the Lutheran Confessions is concerned with the doctrinal content of the Confessions as a whole. At this place only the basic relationships shall be indicated in which, according to the Lutheran Confessions, a confession must stand to Scripture, to the church, to doctrine, and to heresy. This undertaking may also be called the theological structure of a confessional document.

a) Confession as exposition of Scripture—Every structural analysis of the Confessions must start with their constantly emphasized expository dependence on Holy Writ. This follows self-evidently from the presentation in the first two theses of this chapter. The Formula of Concord does not teach anything that goes beyond the earlier Confessions when in its introduction concerning "the comprehensive summary, rule, and norm" it expressly states that "the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments

as the content of confessing. Neither Luther's nor the Confessions' concept of confession permits this. In this connection we must take note of the problems inherent in a Confession as a consensus of the whole Christian church, as against an individual's act of confessing. These problems concern not only matters of definition but also of ecclesiastical administration.

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and all other writings” consists in this: “Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm. . . . Other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned” (Ep. Comp. Sum., 7 f.). But Holy Scripture is the sole norm not only for the Confessions originating in the time of the Reformation. A Confession must *in every case* be exposition of Scripture, that is, the affirmation of man that he has heard God’s Word and acknowledges it. The trinitarian first article of the Augsburg Confession is thus taught and defended “in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea” with an appeal to the fact that “the Holy Scriptures testify to it firmly, surely, and irrefutably” (Ap. I, 2). For the Lutheran Confessions the symbols of the ancient church are in principle on the same level in relation to, and dependence on, Holy Scripture as they themselves. The ancient and the Lutheran creeds are equally authoritative as exposition of Scripture.

Being exposition of Scripture, the Confessions also present what is believed and preached in the church of Jesus Christ. After what we heard about the relationship of Scripture and preaching, it should not be surprising that the articles of the Augsburg Confession do not begin with the words “Scripture teaches . . .” but “Our churches teach with great unanimity. . . .” Doctrine, that is, preaching and instruction, precedes the Confession, just as preaching precedes faith. The Confession does not in the first instance determine what is *to be* taught, but sums up what *is* taught in the church. It does not determine what kind of statements the Bible contains, but which statements are made on the basis of the Bible, what kind of call issues from the Bible. This is preaching, and, coming from preaching and leading to further preaching, the Confessions are exposition of Scripture. The fact that the Confessions bear witness to the doctrine of Scripture by confessing what is preached on the basis of Scripture is demonstrated by the kerygmatic, comforting, and hortatory tenor of large sections not only of the Large Catechism, but also of the Apology.

b) Confession as summary of Holy Scripture—We dare by no means stop with the general definition of confession as exposition of Scripture. Rather, the Gospel is an essential component of the very concept of Confession. In the new preface to the Large Cate-

chism Luther scolds many bad preachers that they are “very negligent” and that they “despise both their office and this teaching” (L.C. Longer Pref., 1). They are not concerned about doctrine and doctrinal books, but are “shameful gluttons and servants of their own bellies” who “would make better swineherds and dog-keepers than spiritual guides and pastors” (L.C. Longer Pref., 2). Later Luther says “Now I know beyond a doubt that such lazy-bellies . . . do not understand a single Psalm, much less the entire Scriptures; yet they pretend to know and despise the Catechism, which is a *brief compend and summary of all the Holy Scriptures*” (L.C. Longer Pref., 18). After giving the text of the first three chief parts Luther judges concerning them, “. . . these three parts in which *everything contained in Scripture* is comprehended in short, plain, and simple terms, for the dear fathers or apostles, whoever they were, have thus summed up the doctrine, life, wisdom, and learning which constitute the Christians’ conversation, conduct, and concern” (L.C. Shorter Pref., 18, 19). Accordingly, the Formula of Concord declares that we “subscribe Dr. Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms as both of them are contained in his printed works. They are ‘the layman’s Bible’ and contain *everything* which Holy Scripture discusses at greater length and *which a Christian must know for his salvation*” (Ep. Comp. Sum., 5). The two Catechisms, then, are to be viewed as a summary of Holy Scripture.

Beyond this, the other Confessions too may be called the summary of Holy Scripture, as they themselves wish to be understood. Self-evidently this term is not to be understood quantitatively. Already the statements given above about the Catechisms would be senseless if understood quantitatively. We recall that in many statements, for instance, of the Apology, law, and Gospel—that is to say the Gospel as such, the justifying word of redemption—are designated as the total content of Scripture. It is evident, therefore, that the *doctrina fidei* is the proper theme of every Confession, and because of this every Confession is a summary of Holy Scripture. The Augsburg Confession has the first explicit statement of the doctrine of justification; yet it is taught by implication in the three ancient Symbols. “I believe” refers in the second article to the work of Christ, and in the third article to the forgiveness of sins. From the Apostles’ Creed on, the Confessions are called confessions of faith, and this not merely as the personal confession of the believers, but because they themselves claim to be “the unanimous, catholic, Christian faith and confessions” or, at the very least, “expositions

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of the faith” (e.g., Ep. Comp. Sum., 3, 8). Accordingly, the heading of the second chief part in the Small Catechism is “The Creed.”

A Confession is not the private expression of a religious nature. Nor does it establish some favorite Bible passage. Nor is it the stressing of Bible passages which are significant only for a specific concrete situation. A Confession is not the expression of the religious experience or guidance of an individual. The truth of a Confession is based expressly on the great number of Bible passages which proclaim this truth; a Confession is the comprehensive exposition of the total Scripture. For a Confession teaches “what a Christian must know for his salvation”; it teaches the Gospel. In this way a Confession as doctrine of Scripture steps out of Scripture and now becomes an approach to Scripture in that the Confession serves as a guide to the discovery of Scripture’s content and as an aid in its correct interpretation. For in the labyrinth of the multiplicity of its dark passages and especially of its Old Testament legal demands the Confession helps us to know how much of all this material still applies to the church of Jesus Christ as a divine command and how much has been abolished by him.

From this point of view we may perhaps also understand why the Bible passages added to the individual articles, e.g., of the Augsburg Confession, often seem to be selected so haphazardly. Often they document or elucidate for us a secondary idea in the article, whereas the principal thoughts are left without biblical proof. Often the exegetical proof is missing where it is urgently expected. Again, Bible quotations of apparently minor import are cited as having full weight. The reason for this practice is to be sought in the self-understanding of the Confessions as *doctrina evangelii*. Because the Confessions want to be the summary of the whole Scripture they do not always attempt to give exegetical proof for individual statements. Since they speak from the very heart and center of Scripture, they sometimes are at a loss to quote specific texts for proof of what all of Scripture teaches.

c) Confession as gift of the Holy Spirit—If the Confession is exposition of Scripture, that is, *doctrina evangelii*, a Confession, like all hearing and proclamation of the Gospel, does not result from human ability, but from the operation of the Holy Spirit who is given through Word and sacrament. The human will is incapable of either believing or confessing, of confessing sins or praising the

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glory of Christ and the grandeur of his merit. The Holy Spirit produces repentance, faith, and confession. Therefore, confession of sins and confession of faith, the fact that we “believe, teach, and confess” (thus the ever-recurring introductory words in the Formula of Concord), are inseparably connected. “No faith is firm that does not show itself in confession” (Ap. IV, 385).

This necessary reference to the Holy Spirit does not place the Confessions on the same plane with Holy Scripture and does not imply a doctrine of a *theopneustia*⁶ similar to the inspiration of Scripture. Such an equation is already ruled out by the very fact that the Holy Spirit, in whose power the church confesses, is given through the proclaimed Word of Scripture, that is, through the prophetic and apostolic office; conversely, the Word of Scripture is not given through the church’s Confession (not even if the fixing of the canon of Scripture may be called a confession of the church), but only through the divine institution of the prophetic and apostolic office. Even when we speak of the church’s Confessions as a gift of the Spirit we must safeguard the pre-eminence of this office over against the ministry of the later church. But if, on the other hand, no mention were made of the fact that faith and confession are possible only through the Holy Spirit, one might think that Confessions could be manufactured according to need and usefulness. Confessions cannot be made; they can only be received as a gift. A Confession is a gift of grace, produced through Word and sacrament.

Both as to content and genesis the Confession as a human act is included in God’s trinitarian activity. God seizes us from the outside through the Word, and through the Word he at the same time opens our hearts from within through the Holy Spirit.

⁶ Even L. Hutter did not claim an equality when he said, “We have established that the primary author, or the *aitios kurios*, of the Book of Concord was not some man, either theologian or statesman, but God the Holy Spirit himself.” *Libri Christianae Concordiae*, Proleg., Chap. I. When he said this he was subordinating this sentence to the *quatenus* of the agreement of the Confessions with Scripture. He was not speaking of an *autopistia* of the Confessions. Carpzov rejected this claim of divine inspiration for the Confessions as being subject to abuse, because, in contrast to the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, *theopneustia* “concerns not only subject matter, but also the very words and the method of Him who communicates, namely, one not bound by means.” *Isagoge* (3rd ed.; 1699), p. 1137. Meanwhile, we shall be able neither to avoid equating Confession with Scripture, nor to make clear the difference between them, if we begin the theological discussion with inspiration rather than with the Gospel whose proclamation God entrusted to the prophets and apostles.

4. *The Confession is exposition of Scripture in consensus with the fathers and brethren. Hence it is the doctrine of the church, delimited over against the current heresy.*

a) A Confession is not the deed of an individual, but an act of consensus—*Tota Scriptura* and *tota ecclesia* belong together in the Confession. Authors and signers of the Confession want to confess as the entire holy Christian church, as all saints of all time have confessed and are still confessing. The Confession is the voice of the whole church.

This consensus takes several forms: Consensus with the church of the present and with the church of the past, agreement *with the brethren and with the fathers*.

(1) The unanimity with the church of the past fifteen centuries finds expression in the copious patristic quotations which are found scattered through most of the articles of the Confessions, not to speak of the *Catalogus Testimoniorum*, which is added to the Book of Concord by way of an appendix as a “Catalog of Testimonies both of Scripture and of orthodox antiquity.”⁷ We have already noted with what determination the fathers are subjected to the norm of Holy Scripture. Why, then, bother to quote the church fathers at all? Why not quote only Scripture? The church fathers are quoted because of their consensus in Scripture exposition.⁸ The introduction of patristic quotations by means of “similarly,” “the same,” “not only . . . but also,” occurs again and again. Thereby the Lutheran Confessions by no means place the church fathers on a level with Holy Scripture, but they place the fathers’ exposition of Scripture next to their own. “For the name spiritual father belongs only to those who govern and guide us by the Word of God” (L.C. I, 158). The patristic quotations are to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Confessions offers nothing new (cf., e.g., A.C. XX, 12: “That no new interpretation is here introduced can be demonstrated from Augustine”). This rejection of the new is not the conservation of ecclesiastical tradition but the rejection of

⁷ The “Catalog of Testimonies” is given in English in the *Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), pp. 297-307.

⁸ Cf. O. Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus*, I, 195 ff., for a discussion of the question of traditionalism and of the differences which developed between Luther and Melancthon concerning the mutual relations of Scripture, doctrine, and church fathers. We may not speak of a formal and basic traditionalism in the Confessions. See also H. J. Holtzmann, *Kanon und Tradition* (Ludwigsburg, 1859), regarding the criticism of these mutual relations in the later history of Protestant theology.

an arbitrary exegesis, and especially is it a distrustful caution regarding the possibility of their own arbitrariness. The church fathers are cited not for their own sake, but for the sake of the church's understanding of Scripture. The church fathers become warning examples through their false exegesis and aids to correct exegesis. Even by means of questionable, yes false, exegesis they serve the purpose of opening the horizon for the manifold exegetical possibilities. If the patristic quotations serve a clarifying purpose for Scripture interpretation by acting through warning and assistance—by means of correct and false exegesis—to uncover the richness of the exegetical possibilities, it is obviously not of decisive importance which father says this or that, but whether he speaks the truth. In spite of certain gradations of esteem enjoyed by individual fathers, they all remain equally subject to Scripture. Occasionally the Confessions also cite the old canons, but only so far as they teach in accordance with Scripture (A.C. XXII, 10).

(2) The unanimity of the church of the present finds expression in the subscriptions to the Confessions. Among the signers were princes, lords, mayors, counselors, and theologians. This means that congregations and larger associations of congregations were also represented. Furthermore, the *consensus fratrum* is expressed by the introductory formula of the Augsburg Confession, "Our churches teach . . ." and in the Formula of Concord, "We believe, teach, and confess . . ." What is the significance of "churches"? Are they individual congregations?⁹ Or do they refer to the Roman church and the churches presenting their Confession at Augsburg?¹⁰ Or are they perhaps referring to the pastors of the congregations?¹¹ The question need not be decided here. We shall see later that the different answers suggested are not at their decisive point mutually exclusive. The only point to be made here is that this uncertainty and the possibility of more than one understanding is not accidental. The important thing is not the legally precise fixing of the organ through which the church passes judgment. Without injury to the specific duty of the ministry, the church in principle allows for a

⁹ Cf. K. Thieme, *Augsburgische Confession*, pp. 1 ff; consistent with the above, L. Fendt, *Der Wille der Reformation im Augsburgischen Bekenntnis* (Leipzig, 1929), p. 15, translates: "The congregations on our side teach with full unanimity."

¹⁰ Cf. F. Kattenbusch, "Die Doppelschichtigkeit in Luthers Kirchenbegriff," *Theol. Studien und Krit.* (1927-1928), p. 285. Does the formula perhaps suggest evasiveness [*Leisetreterei*] on the part of Melanchthon?

¹¹ Cf. the close of the Augsburg Confession: ". . . *confessio nostra . . . eorum, qui apud nos docent*," A. C. Con., 6.

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considerable latitude of confessing organs. The decisive factor is not which organs or official persons confess, but what they confess, and that they confess in the solidarity of the faith. Hence more is expected of a "general, free, and Christian council" (A.C. Pref., 21) than of the decision of individuals. The judgments of councils are the judgments of the church (Tr. 56).

(3) Finally, this matter of the consensus is to be noted also in the agreement of the several Confessions with one another, and "consensus," like "summary," is to be taken not in a quantitative sense, but from the center of the statements, that is, from the Gospel. It is of fundamental significance that most of the Lutheran Confessions claim in large measure to be exposition of the Augsburg Confession in the face of new misunderstandings and heresies. This is most directly true of the Apology and the Formula of Concord, but even at Smalcald the Augsburg Confession and the Apology were resubscribed, along with Melancthon's Treatise. The Catechisms, moreover, in their second chief part are an exposition of the ancient Symbols of the church and they make use of ecclesiastical tradition also in other sections.¹²

This twofold and even threefold consensus is the one consensus of the "one holy Christian church." This consensus makes plain that the Confession is not the doctrine of an individual but of the church. Heeding the voice of the fathers and brethren represented a test and a correction of the understanding of Scripture on the part of the individual authors of the church's Confession. Apart from the church, no individual can confess. Indeed, the Holy Spirit who bestows faith and Confession on individuals is the same Spirit who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (S.C. II, 6). From the point of view of the consensus the Confessions have greater weight than individual fathers, and, again, the Ecumenical Symbols are relatively more authoritative than the Confessions of the Reformation. Thus the three ancient Symbols are called 'those three catholic and general Creeds, possessed of the *highest* authority' (*illa catholica et generalia summæ auctoritatis symbola*). This designation is not applied to the Lutheran Confessions (S.D. Sum. Form., 4). For, in contradistinction to the

¹² Kahnis, *Christentum und Luthertum* (Leipzig, 1871), p. 141, says in so many words: "The other Confessions (beside the Augsburg Confession) are Confessions of the second rank, and their significance is restricted to their being authentic Reformation witnesses according to which the Augsburg Confession is to be explained and applied."

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Lutheran documents, the ancient Symbols are valid for all of Christendom. Their consensus is more inclusive. All Confessions, however, are equally dependent on Holy Scripture.

From this matter of the *consensus patrum et fratrum* it follows that the Confessions as a rule are Symbols of the unity of the church: “. . . We know that our confession is true, godly, and catholic” (Ap. XIV, 3). The catholicity of the church and of the Confession have an essential connection. This is true because the content of the Confession is faith, and because the unity of the church is the fellowship of the same faith under the Word and in the use of the sacraments. However, although the ancient Symbols included in the Book of Concord are also acknowledged by the Roman church, this common acknowledgment of the same Confession does not guarantee the unity of the church. On the other hand, the unity of the church is not to be recognized only there where the same Confessions are accepted.¹³

b) The occasion of the Confession—Only after it has been determined that the Confession is exposition of Scripture, specifically as witness to the Gospel in oneness with the fathers and brethren, only after it has become clear that the Confession is the work of the Holy Spirit, may we approach the question of the occasion for the act of confessing. Outside of the trinitarian circle only one point is important for the construction of a Confession, namely, its occasion. This cannot yet be an event in nature or a political happening as such. No, Confessions are occasioned by heresies which may, of course, also have a political coloring—heresies, that is, that have invaded the church from within or without and have confused and captured members of the church. As a result of the development and history of heresies the Confession comes into being, fixing the church’s doctrine in areas of theological discussion that had hitherto remained dogmatically undecided.

The matter of the occasion is preserved in the Confessions in the very fact that their time of origin is indicated exactly, especially in the “Comprehensive Summary.” It is even taken over into the definition of the Confessions: They are “merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God *by contemporaries* with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned” (Ep. Comp. Sum., 8). The historical hour when the heresy invaded the church, or when the

¹³ Cf. pp. 202, 206 ff., 220 f.

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church became alerted to the heresy, is by no means a source of knowledge for the Confession as is the Word of Scripture; it by no means makes the act of confessing possible as does the operation of the Holy Spirit; it does not even serve as a corrective for the understanding as does the voice of the fathers and brethren. Heresies are nothing more than the occasion, that is, the world's attack in the face of which the church makes plain before all the world that it belongs solely to its Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. This stimulus may cause Scripture doctrines to be unfolded by the Confession in a specific direction or through the use of a specific terminology. However, this occasion as such makes no contribution to the real content of the church's doctrine. In contrast to the one-sided historical treatment of the Confessions on the basis of a one-sided concern with them as conditioned by their historical and theological context and an interest only in their morphological significance, which has become the customary approach since the rise of rationalism, we shall do well, above all, to take note of the doctrine of the Confessions, specifically their doctrine as exposition of Scripture. Thus, for instance, the Confession was not honored, nor even brought into view, but rather brushed aside when, referring to the three-hundredth anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, Schleiermacher proclaimed that "the real object of our last anniversary celebration was more the act of the presentation of the Confession than the function or content of that document itself."¹⁴

We must distinguish, on the one hand, between the historical and psychological *motives* that lead to certain Confessions and, on the other, the exegetical *arguments* that determine the Confessions. The former were esteemed far too highly in the days of historicism and up to the present.¹⁵ The latter, however, give exclusive author-

¹⁴ *Predigten in bezug auf die Feier der Uebergabe der Augsbургischen Confession* (Berlin, 1831), pp. IV f.

¹⁵ An overemphasis of the historical situation out of which the Confessions arose is indicated, e.g., by the following statements of Gogarten: "A Confession belongs to its time. Once this time together with its intellectual presuppositions is past, the Confession—which bears witness to the manner in which at that time the Holy Scriptures were understood as the Word of God—ceases to be a Confession. It is now inadequate to accomplish that for which a Confession is required. Since it belongs to the past, it now requires interpretation, yes, translation, for that very reason." *Das Bekenntnis der Kirche* (Jena, 1934), p. 23.

While it is true, as Gogarten rightly emphasizes, that we may in no wise overlook the character of a Confession as event in its confrontation with a specific heresy, yet the present value of the Confession is to be sought, above all, in the consensus of its Scripture interpretation. With respect to the evaluation of the Confessions in the history of Protestant theology since the En-

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ity to the Confessions and make of them a weapon in the battle. Both must be carefully distinguished. Heresy is given too much credit if it is regarded as the real cause of the origin of a Confession and as the justification of its existence. A Confession is praise of grace. Heresies come and go, but the Gospel remains.

c) Confession as battle against the devil—To see in heresy nothing more than the work of sinful man would betray a lack of understanding of the essence of heresy and of the attack upon it. It is quite consistent with the relation of a Confession to the Holy Spirit to ascribe heresies in origin and content to the devil ‘who stupifies and misleads many a great and wise man in the world by means of dreadful error, heresy, and other kinds of blindness, and plunges men into manifold vices’ (Ap. II, 47 ff.). Thus the heresies of work-righteousness are ‘doctrines of demons, scattered abroad in the world by Satan in order to suppress the true doctrine of the Gospel, so that none or only a few might be instructed in the nature of law or Gospel, repentance or faith, or the blessings of Christ’ (Ap. XII, 141). Luther passes the same judgment on the Enthusiasts: “All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations” (S.A. III, viii, 5). Every false doctrine is thus traced back to the devil. By these expressions the Confessions are not thinking of “hallucinations of the devil,” but they are aware of the real powers of darkness which constantly strive to attack and devour the church. The reality of the devil is directed against the reality of the Holy Spirit, who is God himself. And against the devil the church fights with the weapon of its Confessions. They are the “battles of Christ” against the devil (cf. Ap. IV, 190).

5. Since the Confession is a summary of Holy Scripture, it is the obligatory model for all doctrine in the church.

lightenment, we must say quite generally: The more the significance of a Confession was seen in the event of its frontal-polemic origin, and the less it was seen in the scripturalness of its witness, the more doubtful became not only the unity of the Gospel and the identity of the Holy Spirit, but also the event of the Confession in its peculiarity, namely, the eschatological significance of the act of confession, transcending history and time. The fact that a Confession requires interpretation does not constitute a valid objection to its present value. Gogarten’s fine statement applies also to the correct exposition of the Confessions: As it confesses its faith “the church ever again breaks through the walls of truths, of ordinances, of validities which man in search of security seeks to build. The church does this, not to destroy or abolish these truths, ordinances, and validities, but to keep them open for the ultimate truth which alone can preserve them. . . .” *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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a) Confession as obligation—Faith in the Gospel involves faith in an eschatological judgment, namely, the merciful divine verdict of deliverance in the final judgment. For the Gospel is at once offer and promise of divine grace. Both are joined together in the concept of *promissio gratiae*. The forgiveness that is now in time received through the Gospel is definitive. The Gospel blesses and saves the sinner not only for a moment, but for all time and eternity. To “believe, teach, and confess” the Gospel therefore signifies an obligation that transcends the initial act of confession. Thus in 1580 the framers of the Formula of Concord professed their allegiance to the Augustana: “By the help of God’s grace we, too, intend to persist in this confession until our blessed end and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ with joyful and fearless hearts and consciences” (B. of C. Pref., p. 9; cf. S.D. XII, 40).¹⁶

Believing and confessing the Gospel always implies at once the recognition of the divine commission to preach the Gospel to all the world. But if the Gospel is God’s gracious bestowal for time and eternity, then the charge to preach the Gospel is also always the same. It follows that the Confession as *doctrina evangelii* has an obligatory significance for the speaking and acting of the church in all ages. The power by which a Confession binds is the power of the Gospel. And because the Gospel that has been recognized puts the church under obligation, the Confession too—as *doctrina evangelii*—has binding significance for the church’s proclamation and action.

Placed under obligation by the proffered promise, the church is bound to its Confession and employs it as “a single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe and from and according to which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated” (S.D. Sum. Form., 10).

¹⁶ This eschatological orientation of the Confession is often overlooked, and improperly so. Since Jesus Christ will at the Last Day acknowledge the disciple who confesses him (Matt. 10:32 f.), the true Confession of the church is in itself a veritable eschatological event like the preaching of the Gospel and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Cf. G. Bornkamm, “Das Wort Jesu vom Bekennen,” *Monatsschrift fuer Pastoraltheologie* (1938), pp. 108 ff. For this reason the church cannot arbitrarily alter its Confession. For the same reason the church does not “have” its Confession as a property of which it may now dispose. Recognizing the Confession as an eschatological event, however, does not exclude but rather includes the proviso which Luther himself expressed in his instruction to the Visitors of Electoral Saxony, 1528: “. . . until God the Holy Spirit initiate something better through them or through us.” *WA* 26, p. 200, l. 20.

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The Confessions are binding for church, school, and home; hence, "from and according to" them all preaching and teaching is to be tested and judged, accepted or rejected. On the basis of the Confessions false teachers are to be condemned, and excommunications are to be carried out. The Confessions, however, also give directions for distinguishing "between needless and unprofitable contentions (which, since they destroy rather than edify, should never be allowed to disturb the church) and necessary controversy (dissension concerning articles of the Creed or the chief parts of our Christian doctrine, when the contrary error must be refuted in order to preserve the truth)" (S.D. Sum. Form., 15). Thus the Confession shows how to distinguish between theological movements within the church, on the one hand, and the separateness of church and heresy on the other. In every case the Confessions exclude the liberty to teach anything and everything, and they make the concept "confessional freedom" impossible as a slogan for the church, inasmuch as such a concept signifies not only freedom with respect to *the* Confession, but also with respect to *every* Confession, namely, freedom *from* confession.

In accordance with the essence of the Gospel, the binding significance of the Confession is in no sense limited to the generation of its origin. The Confession is to serve the purpose that the truth may be "*established* the more distinctly and clearly" in the future too. The Confession is to be "a certain and public testimony, not only to our contemporaries, but also to our posterity of that which *is and should remain* the unanimous understanding and judgment of our churches regarding controverted issues" (S.D. Sum. Form., 16). "In order to preserve the pure doctrine, . . . the true and wholesome doctrine" should be "correctly" presented and "the adversaries who teach otherwise" should be reprov'd (S.D. Sum. Form., 14), not only in the moment of writing, but also in the future, in line with the Confession. The Formula of Concord itself follows this rule in that it claims to be nothing more than a "general, pure, correct, and definitive restatement and exposition of a number of articles of the Augsburg Confession" (S.D. title page) over against new objections, misunderstandings, and errors. And this was fifty years after the presentation of the Confession at Augsburg.

In this double sense, then, the Confession is obligatory. The Gospel which men have learned to know never bestows and obligates only for the moment, but for all time and eternity. The confessing church knows, besides, that no one is lord over the knowledge

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of the Gospel, and that therefore no one can presume to regulate the possibility of confessing. The Confession is a gift of the Holy Spirit who produces confession when he pleases.

Not until this is clearly understood may we begin to discuss the meaning of confessional obligation in a legal sense—legal, that is, both in principle and with respect to prevailing church law. Just as we spoke of the Confession first as exposition of Scripture and only then of the significance of the consensus, so in the question of the binding authority of the Confession we must first recognize the binding truth of the *doctrina evangelii*, and only then consider the act of assenting subscription on the part of preachers and governments which—because it was an assent to the Word of divine grace by persons in official capacity—established church law and the obligation in terms of church law.

b) Confession as model under Holy Scripture as norm—In demanding that all doctrine and preaching be “judged and regulated” “from and according to” the Confessions, the Formula of Concord makes use of terms which seem to correspond to the designation of Scripture as “judge” and “*regula*.” This suggests that the Confession too be called a norm (cf. B. of C. Pref., p. 10 f.), as actually soon became common practice in the dogmatics of Lutheran Orthodoxy. This would mean that since the Gospel is the norm, the Confession as *doctrina evangelii* is likewise norm of all doctrine and preaching. Since the Gospel is the key to the understanding of Scripture, the Confession too—as *doctrina evangelii*—is able to render important services as a hermeneutical aid. In the Gospel, Scripture and Confession have their unity. The Gospel is the norm in both.

However, the Confessions themselves in ever-new turns of speech designate the Scripture alone as “norm,” “judge,” “rule,” “foundation,” “guide.” Even though *de facto* doctrine and error are judged “from and according to” the Confessions, and even though the same Gospel is attested in both Scripture and Confession, yet the great, fundamental difference remains: *Holy Scripture* is not the norm because of agreement with the Gospel as witnessed in the Confessions, but the Confessions are authoritative only because of their agreement with the Gospel as witnessed in the Holy Scripture. This relation may not at all be inverted. This difference is so great that the Confessions refrain almost entirely from designating the Confession as a norm. The fundamental distinction remains unblurred: Holy Scripture is the norm as the eternal Word; the Confessions, however, only as witness of “how at various times the

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Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries." Holy Scripture as the Word of God teaches the Gospel, but the Confessions are *doctrina evangelii* only as exposition of Scripture. The Word of God is "eternal truth"; the Confessions are "a witness of the truth" (S.D. Sum. Form., 13).

How, then, shall the binding significance of the Confessions for teaching and preaching be maintained? The Confessions are so thoroughly imbued with their subject, the Gospel itself, that they obviously have no special interest in an explicit doctrine concerning the nature of a Confession. Exclusively decisive for them in this respect is the principle that Holy Scripture is the only norm [*unica norma*]. On the other hand, the Formula of Concord, the only Confession to treat explicitly of the nature of a Confession, designates the Confessions as "form and pattern," "summary," and "model" of the church's doctrine. What does this mean? The word *forma* is probably to be understood in terms of the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition, even though the Formula of Concord does not use it in a philosophically precise sense but rather with a denatured meaning. In that case this term implies two things: As the "form" is an object's substantial nature, lifted out of its manifold modes of appearance and grasped conceptually, so the Confession is the *ousia* of the scriptural witness, lifted out of the multiplicity of that witness and "comprehended" in the *doctrina evangelii*. And as the Aristotelian-scholastic *forma* is the entelechy which, as forming principle, actively operates in things, so the Confession is at once the formative and shaping *energeia* for all present and future preaching in the church, even though the Confession—like the sermon—is exposition of Scripture, a renewed witness to the Gospel to which Scripture had first borne witness.

As "summary" of the church's doctrine the Confessions take their place alongside all church doctrine under the Holy Scripture as the judge. On the other hand, as "pattern of doctrine" (S.D. Sum. Form., 10) the Confessions are a step *ahead* of the ranks of all other teaching and preaching. As "doctrine of the church" the Confessions are the model for all teaching and preaching by individual members of the church.

Inferences for Dogmatics

Beginning this study with a presentation of the relation of Scripture and Confession corresponds neither to the structure of the

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ancient Symbols with which the Book of Concord opens, nor to that of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the two Catechisms. All of these proceed at once to the matter itself, without giving any thought to the basis, possibility, and nature of a Confession, or even to a special article on Holy Scripture. Our purpose in beginning in a different way was solely to make clear at the outset what part the act of listening to the Confessions must play according to their own statements in the framework of dogmatics. This clarification, which in its particulars is part of dogmatics itself, may be anticipated here by drawing the most important inferences for a dogmatics that is bound by the Confessions. In the main we shall once more follow the order of topic sentences 1 through 5.

1. The sole norm for dogmatics is the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments. All dogmatic statements must be derived from God's revelation in his Word. It will, therefore, not do to base dogmatic sentences, wholly or even in part, on the impressions of nature or of history round about us, or on ideas of reason or intimations of the emotions. On the contrary, all of this manifold material must be subjected to the Word of Scripture. Nor can the witness of God in the works of his creation serve as a source of knowledge for dogmatics,¹⁷ but only the revelation of God in his Word. Hence the task of dogmatics consists in ever anew distinguishing between God's revelation and human religion, God's Word and man's own words.

2. Within Holy Scripture, the Gospel—that is, the promise of forgiveness for the sake of Jesus Christ—is the norm for all dogmatic endeavor. Thus the normative center of Scripture is Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh. Only from this center can the Old and New Testaments be correctly expounded, and only by recognizing this center will the dogmatic assertions be properly founded on Scripture. An exegesis which isolates either the Old or the New Testament fails to recognize God speaking in his incarnate Word. And again, an exegesis that does not proceed in the recognition of the incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of Christ is bound to let the statements of the Old and New Testaments deteriorate into a series of legalistic or libertinistic directives. The center of Scripture, however, is not the Gospel *in abstracto*, but law and Gospel, or, more accurately, the Gospel as distinguished from the law and as definitively superior to the law. Again, the center of

¹⁷ Cf. pp. 48 ff.

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Scripture is not Jesus Christ *in abstracto*; it is that Christ who preaches repentance and forgiveness—who judges and saves—but whose proper office is forgiving and saving. Thus the dogmatician is not at liberty to lord it over this normative center of Scripture, to manipulate it as a principle. He must always yield and submit himself again to the center, which is nothing but the living God himself acting in his Word, the God who pardons and judges, demands and bestows. It follows, then, that the decisive task of all dogmatic endeavor is the distinction between law and Gospel in the Word of God. Only he who correctly distinguishes law and Gospel—that is, who remains a pupil in this distinction all his life—will correctly distinguish between God's Word and man's word.

3. As promise, the Gospel is at the same time the bestowal of the forgiveness of sins. The Gospel is not only the message that God forgave sins in the past and will do so again in the future, but it is the Word by which God today forgives the sinner all his sins. This occurs through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. No proper work in dogmatics can therefore be done apart from preaching and the administration of the sacrament. Dogmatics always proceeds from preaching and the sacraments, and must, in turn, always lead back to them. Dogmatics is derived from preaching, because it is in the act of Gospel preaching that Holy Scripture manifests itself as norm. Dogmatics leads to preaching, because it is never an end in itself and has no value in itself, but its task is to serve the church's preaching—and to instruct, warn, encourage, and support the preacher—by means of an expository summing up of the totality of Scripture statements and a differentiating of them from false doctrine. Beyond this service dogmatics has no task.

4. Natural man cannot believe or know the Gospel except through the Holy Spirit. It is through the Gospel that the Holy Spirit operates and is bestowed on man. Hence the Word of God is not only the objective source of knowledge for all statements about God, but it also bestows the subjective possibility of knowing the revealed God, namely, the Holy Spirit who is active in the Word. The fact that man knows God is thus an act of the triune God, a trinitarian event in which God through Word and Spirit takes hold of the blinded and obstinate man and gives him sight. Having recognized God's Word as the sole norm, dogmatics must be equally single-minded in seeing that *only* by the Holy Spirit can and will the Word of God be known. This is possible in no other way, neither through