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The Formal and Material Principles of Lutheran Confessional Theology

By F. E. MAYER

NOTE: This is a chapter in the author's forthcoming *Religious Bodies in America*. — ED.

I

THE FORMAL PRINCIPLE

THE source of doctrine, or the formal principle, of Lutheran theology is *sola Scriptura*, the Scriptures alone. It does seem strange that with its avowed emphasis on the sole authority of the Scriptures the Lutheran Church nowhere has a specific article setting forth its attitude toward the Holy Scriptures. By contrast the early Reformed Confessions have an elaborate statement concerning the place and the scope of Scriptures, including even a list of all the books which are considered canonical.¹ The Lutheran Confessions have no specific article dealing with the Holy Scriptures for three reasons.

1. The Roman Catholic Church has never questioned the divine inspiration and authority of the canonical writings of the Old and the New Testament. In their conflict with Rome the Lutherans could take for granted that they and their opponents accepted the Bible as God's Word. For this reason the Augsburg Confession states repeatedly that the doctrines proclaimed among the Evangelicals are taken solely from the divine Holy Scriptures and asks that all criticisms of the Lutheran preaching be examined in the light of Scriptures.² Throughout the Apology, Melancthon constantly appeals to the Sacred Scriptures, pleads with the Romanists

to compare the Evangelicals' doctrines with the Scriptures, and complains that they simply ignore the many clear passages which show that faith alone justifies man; in short, says Melancthon, the entire Scriptures support the doctrine proclaimed by the Evangelicals.³ Likewise the Smalcald Articles declare most emphatically that God's Word alone, and no one else, not even angels, shall determine the doctrine.⁴ The authors of the Formula of Concord state specifically that the only rule and norm to judge doctrines are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament, the pure fountain of Israel. All other writings of ancient and modern teachers are in no wise equal to Scripture, but subject to it and at best only witnesses to the truth.⁵ And, finally, the preface to the entire Book of Concord is in reality only a further exposition of the opening paragraphs, stating that in the last days of the world's history God has granted a reappearance of the light of His Gospel and Word, "through which alone we receive true salvation." In this preface the authors of the Book of Concord describe the Augsburg Confession as having been prepared from the Word of God and the most holy writings of the Prophets and Apostles and as having been accepted as the norm and guide for teachers. They deplore the several controversies within the Lutheran Church, which would have been avoided if all parties had persevered in the pure doctrine of God's Word and regulated their teaching according to the rule of the divine Word, handed down to posterity in a godly and excellent way through its publicly approved symbols. And of the Book of Concord, the last of the Lutheran symbols, the leaders of Lutheranism stated that they accepted it because it agreed with the Word of God and also with the Augsburg Confession. Like a red thread the sole authority of the Scriptures runs through the Lutheran Confessions.

2. Lutheran theology usually distinguishes carefully between symbolics and dogmatics. Symbolics takes many things for granted which dogmatics must discuss in detail. In particular, symbolics is the study of the theses and antitheses in a given controversy and the examination of the Church's answer to the specific problem, not only as a statement of truth, but also as a confessional act. The word "confession" must be understood also as a verbal noun, probably primarily so. Symbolics has a doxological⁶ and a some-

what existential character. It deals with actual life situations and makes no attempt to present the Christian faith in every point nor in a systematic and comprehensive manner.

3. The Lutheran Confessions have no special article on the divine character of Scripture, because their interest was centered so prominently in a Christocentric approach to the Scriptures. They have no interest in an atomistic, proof-text, concordance approach to the Scriptures. The Confessions state that the entire Scriptures must always be presented according to their two main parts, Law and Gospel, for God's two most significant works are, first, to frighten and slay man and then to justify and vivify the frightened person. Thus, according to the Lutheran Confessions, the main thought of all the gospels and epistles of the entire Scriptures is to believe that in Christ Jesus through faith we have a gracious God.⁷ The Apology points out that "enthusiasts," humanists, and rationalists dissect the Scriptures into individual Bible texts and explain the articles concerning the righteousness of faith in a philosophical and a Jewish manner. But in this atomistic, Biblicist manner they actually abolish the doctrine of Christ as Mediator. Without the knowledge of the Gospel the Bible remains a meaningless and useless book.⁸ But when the Scriptures are seen as Gospel, as *Evangelium*, the Word of God becomes the sanctuary above all sanctuaries which sanctifies the person and everything he does.⁹

Wherever this Word is preached, it becomes the power of God, an active and creative Word, and engenders the faith which accepts the Bible as Christ's inerrant and final word. This appears to be an argument in a circle. The fact is, of course, that this cannot be demonstrated by any rational arguments, but is a divinely wrought faith.¹⁰ The Lutheran Confessions take for granted that a Christian accepts the Scriptures as God's Word, both as God speaking in this Word here and now and as God's Word spoken in times past through the holy writers.¹¹ In Lutheran theology the believer does not accept the absolute authority of the Scripture as an *a priori* truth, but because he has learned to know Christ as his divine Savior; has experienced the power of His Word in the Scriptures upon his heart; and relies implicitly on Christ's own statement concerning the divine character of the Scriptures. It is therefore

proper to say that the formal principle of Lutheran theology is entirely Christological. This holds true with the same force also of the material principle, or the central thought.

II

THE MATERIAL PRINCIPLE

"Justification by Faith" is usually referred to as *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the Church stands and falls. When speaking of the material principle of theology, Lutherans do not have in mind a basic principle according to which a body of doctrines may be developed. The material principle of Lutheran theology is in reality only a synopsis and summary of the Christian truth. When Lutheran theologians speak of justification by faith as the material principle of theology, they merely wish to indicate that all theological thinking must begin at this article, center in it, and culminate in it. As the various facets of the diamond catch, refract, reflect the light, so the phrase "justification by faith alone" gives brilliance to every phase of Christian revelation, and in turn each facet of Christian truth sheds new brilliance on this so-called central doctrine, whether it is viewed as justification by faith, or as the work of Christ, or as the distinction between Law and Gospel, or as faith in Christ, or as the doctrine of the "righteousness before God."¹²

In the Confessions this doctrine is usually presented either as the doctrine of Christ's work or the doctrine of justification. The Formula of Concord states:

This article concerning justification by faith is the chief article in Christian doctrine, without which no poor conscience can have any firm consolation or can truly know the riches of the grace of Christ.¹³

The Apology summarizes all the Scriptures in terms such as "the Gospel message," "absolution," "the forgiveness of sin," "justification," or in such concepts as "God's new relation to man" and "man's new relation to God." Melancthon states:

In this controversy [that men obtain the remission of sin through faith alone and are justified] the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which, understood aright, illumines and am-

plifies the honor of Christ and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences.¹⁴

When in 1537 the Lutherans were confronted by the question whether for the sake of peace they could yield anything, Luther states concerning the "office and work of Jesus Christ, or our redemption":

Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth, and everything should sink to ruin (Acts 4:12; Is. 53:5). Upon this article all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore, we must be sure concerning this doctrine and not doubt, otherwise all is lost, and the pope and the devil in all things gain the victory and suit over us.¹⁵

Only in the frame of references of the doctrine of justification can any Christian doctrine be considered in a salutary way. The doctrine of justification is, as it were, the strand on which all the pearls of Christian revelation are strung.¹⁶

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FOOTNOTES

1. The *Westminster Confession* lists the books which the English divines of the 17th century accepted as canonical. Nowhere in the Lutheran Confessions is there such a list. The Lutheran Confessions are descriptive rather than prescriptive.
2. See the Preface to the Augsburg Confession. In the concluding paragraph of the doctrinal part of the Augsburg Confession the confessors state that the foregoing twenty-one articles contain the sum of their doctrine, in which there is nothing that varies from the Holy Scriptures.
3. Apology, XII, 66; IV, 102; 107 ff.; XX, 2; II, 50.
4. Smalcald Articles, B, II, 15, 10.
5. See Formula of Concord, *Sol. decl.*, Preface, 3.
6. The title page of the Augsburg Confession contains the quotation: "I will speak of Thy testimonies also before kings and will not be ashamed" (Ps. 119:46).
7. Apol., IV, 87, 102; XII, 53; XX, 2.
8. Apol., III, 255.
9. Large Catechism, III Com., 91, 92, 100, 101.
10. H. Echternach, "The Lutheran Doctrine of the 'Autopistia' of Holy Scripture," trans. J. T. Mueller (*Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXIII, 241, 272).
11. In Lutheran theology the Scriptures are both *Deus locutus*, and *Deus loquens* (God having spoken and God now speaking). Dialectical theology also employs this terminology. But it views Scripture as *Deus loquens*, primarily in such a way that Scripture becomes the Word of God only in the existential moment of faith, in man's crisis or his encounter. Cp.

Emil Brunner, *The Divine-human Encounter*, trans. A. W. Loos (Westminster Press, 1943). This view virtually denies the objectivity of the Scriptures.—Another approach to Luther's concept of the Scriptures is discussed by A. T. Kantonen, *Resurgence of the Gospel* (Muhlenberg Press, 1948), pp. 113—124.

12. See Luther, *Preface to Galatians*, also *Preface to Latin Works*, 1545. (St. Louis, XIV: 114, 446 ff.)
13. *Sol. decl.*, III, 6.
14. *Apol.*, IV, 2. Cp. Augsburg Confession, XXVI, 4; XXVII, 48.
15. *Smalc. Art.*, B, II, 1—5.
16. The charge is sometimes made that Lutheranism so overstates the doctrine of justification by faith alone that it loses sight of the significance of other doctrines, such as sanctification. There have been periods in the history of Lutheranism when the theologians' exclusive concern seemed to be to present the doctrine of justification precisely and as a result treated all doctrines in a vacuum. But genuine Lutheran theology, while maintaining a careful distinction between the various doctrines, e. g., justification and sanctification, will never permit a separation of Christian doctrines into isolated compartments.