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Sacra Scriptura and *Verbum Dei* in the Lutheran Confessions

By FRED KRAMER

(This paper was delivered in German at Oberursel, Germany, and at Göteborg, Sweden, in connection with the Bad Boll Conferences in 1954.)

TO understand the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century correctly one must know and bear in mind the fact that it was begun by a man who amid fearful troubles of conscience and after a long and bitter struggle for the certainty of his salvation had rediscovered the Gospel and who in turn desired to share its blessings with others.

The confessional writings of the Lutheran Church should also be read and evaluated with this fact in mind. The Augsburg Confession not only states the doctrine of justification clearly and concisely in its fourth article but also judges all other doctrines from the vantage point of this doctrine.

Concerning ecclesiastical usages and human traditions the Augsburg Confession says: "Men are admonished also that human traditions instituted to propitiate God, to merit grace, and to make satisfaction for sins, are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith. Wherefore vows and traditions concerning meats and days, etc., instituted to merit grace and to make satisfaction for sins, are useless and contrary to the Gospel (*Triglot Concordia*, The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, St. Louis, Mo., 1921, p. 49). Those who rejected earthly possessions, government, marriage, and the like are condemned, "for the Gospel teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart . . . it does not destroy the state or the family. . . ." (*Trigl.*, p. 51.)

The office of a bishop is to serve the Gospel and must be performed and judged with this in mind. ". . . According to the Gospel, or, as they say, by divine right, there belongs to the bishops as bishops, that is, to those to whom has been committed the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments, no jurisdiction except to forgive sins, to judge doctrine, to reject doctrines contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the Church wicked men, whose wickedness is known, and this without human force, simply by the Word. Herein the congregations of necessity and by divine right must obey them, according to Luke 10,16: *He that heareth you heareth Me*. But when they teach or ordain anything against the Gospel, then the congregations have a commandment of God prohibiting obedience, Matt. 7,15: *Beware of false prophets*; Gal. 1,8: *Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel, let him be accursed*; 2 Cor. 13,8: *We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.*" (*Trigl.*, p. 87.)

It was the conviction of the Lutheran reformers and confessors that the doctrine of justification was not only the chief article of the Christian faith, but also the vantage point from which all Scripture must be illumined and understood. The Apology says on this point in Article IV, "Of Justification": ". . . Since in this controversy the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which, understood aright, illumines and amplifies the honor of Christ [which is of especial 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], and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences, we ask His Imperial Majesty to hear us with forbearance in matters of such importance" (*Trigl.*, p. 121).

In this context the Apology teaches the right distinction between Law and Gospel, a distinction of the utmost importance for a correct understanding of Holy Scripture. "All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics, the Law and the promises. For in some places it presents the Law, and in others the promise concerning Christ, namely, either when [in the Old Testament] it promises that Christ will come, and offers, for His sake, the remission of sins, justification, and life eternal, or when,

in the Gospel [in the New Testament], Christ Himself, since He has appeared, promises the remission of sins, justification, and life eternal." (*Trigl.*, p. 121.)

These same confessional writings again and again appeal to the Gospel, but even more frequently to the Scriptures, or the Word of God. The Ecumenical Creeds, to which the Lutheran Confessors held unwaveringly, do not refer to the Scriptures directly except in the Nicene Creed, "the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures," but anyone well acquainted with these creeds and with Scripture itself cannot fail to note that every formulation in these creeds represents a conscious striving toward expressing clearly and correctly a teaching of Scripture.

The specifically Lutheran Confessions, on the other hand, quote the Scriptures over and over and appeal to them. In the Preface to the Emperor the Confessors at Augsburg state: ". . . we offer, in this matter of religion, the Confession of our preachers and of ourselves, showing what manner of doctrine from the Holy Scriptures and the pure Word of God has been up to this time set forth in our lands, dukedoms, dominions, and cities, and taught in our churches" (*Trigl.*, p. 39).

In support of their doctrine, that works do not justify, they appeal to Scripture. "Also they teach that *this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits*, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will, but that we should not rely on those works to merit justification before God. For remission of sins and justification is apprehended by faith, as also the voice of Christ attests: '*When ye shall have done all these things, say: We are unprofitable servants.*' Luke 17,10." (*Trigl.*, p. 45 f.)

Also for their teaching concerning Confession the Confessors appeal to Scripture. "*Of Confession* they teach that Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches, although in confession an enumeration of all sins is not necessary. For it is impossible, according to the Psalm: *Who can understand his errors?* Ps. 19,12." (*Trigl.*, p. 47.)

Contrary doctrines are condemned on the basis of Scripture. "But the Scripture teaches not the invocation of saints, or to ask help of saints, since it sets before us the one Christ as the Mediator, Propitiator, High Priest, and Intercessor. He is to be prayed to, and

has promised that He will hear our prayer; and this worship He approves above all, to wit, that in all afflictions He be called upon, 1 John 2,1: *If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, etc.*" (*Trigl.*, p. 57f.)

The insistence of the Roman Catholic Church on the commandments of men is attacked with Scripture. In Article XXVI of the Augsburg Confession, "Of the Distinction of Meats," we read: "Thus, therefore, they have taught that by the observance of human traditions we cannot merit grace or be justified; and hence we must not think such observances necessary acts of worship. They add hereunto testimonies of Scripture. Christ, Matt. 15,3, defends the Apostles who had not observed the usual tradition, which, however, evidently pertains to a matter not unlawful, but indifferent, and to have a certain affinity with the purifications of the Law, and says, 9: *In vain do they worship Me with the commandments of men.* He, therefore, does not exact an unprofitable service. Shortly after He adds: *Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man.* So also Paul, Rom. 14,17: *The kingdom of God is not meat and drink,* Col. 2,16: *Let no man, therefore, judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy-day, or of the Sabbath-day;* also: *If ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances: Touch not, taste not, handle not?* And Peter says, Acts 15,10: *Why tempt ye God to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.* Here Peter forbids to burden the consciences with many rites, either of Moses or of others. And in 1 Tim. 4,1.3 Paul calls the prohibition of meats *a doctrine of devils;* for it is against the Gospel to institute or to do such works that by them we may merit grace, or as though Christianity could not exist without such service of God." (*Trigl.*, p. 73f.)

With respect to the Sabbath the Augsburg Confession says: "For those who judge that by the authority of the Church the observance of the Lord's Day instead of the Sabbath-day was ordained as a thing necessary, do greatly err. Scripture has abrogated the Sabbath-day; for it teaches that, since the Gospel has been revealed, all the ceremonies of Moses can be omitted." (*Trigl.*, p. 91.)

At the close of the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession the Confessors affirm: "This is about the Sum of our Doctrine, in which, as can be seen, there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church Catholic, or from the Church of Rome as known from its writers" (*Trigl.*, p. 59).

The Lutheran Confessors also offer, at the close of the Augsburg Confession, to furnish additional evidence for their teachings *from Scripture* should their adversaries desire it. "The above articles we desire to present in accordance with the edict of Your Imperial Majesty, in order to exhibit our Confession and let men see a summary of the doctrine of our teachers. If there is anything that any one might desire in this Confession, we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information *according to the Scriptures.*" [*Italics ours*]. (*Trigl.*, p. 95.)

It has often been noted that the Lutheran Confessions have no special article concerning Holy Scripture or the inspiration of Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions did not need such an article at the time of their composition. There was then no dispute concerning the inspiration of the Scripture. Also the most ardent Roman Catholics accepted Scripture as divinely inspired and as of binding force for the doctrines of the church. In addition, however, they appealed to tradition and the fathers. The Lutheran Confessors show, wherever that is possible, the agreement of the best of the Fathers with Scripture. Where their opponents perverted and misused the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessors pointed out the misuse. They did so particularly by placing the Gospel at the very center of all their teaching and judging all doctrine from this vantage point.

This is the case not only in the Augsburg Confession, but also in all the specifically Lutheran Confessions. In the Apology, in the Article "Of Original Sin," Melanchthon says: "In reference to original sin we therefore hold nothing differing either from Scripture or from the Church catholic, but cleanse from corruptions and restore to light most important declarations of Scripture and of the Fathers, that had been covered over by the sophistical controversies of modern theologians" (*Trigl.*, p. 113).

In the same article Melanchthon states further: "It has been said above that Augustine defines original sin as concupiscence. If there be anything disadvantageous in this opinion, let them quarrel

with Augustine. Besides, Paul says, Rom. 7,7. 23: *I had not known lust [concupiscence], except the Law had said, Thou shalt not covet. Likewise: I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.* These testimonies can be overthrown by no sophistry." (*Trigl.*, p. 115.) A little later he says: "But if the adversaries will contend that the *fomes* [or evil inclination] is an adiaphoron, not only many passages of Scripture but simply the entire Church [and many Fathers] will contradict them" (*Trigl.*, p. 115).

In Art. IV of the Apology Melanchthon quotes a large number of passages from the Old and New Testaments which glorify justification by faith. He does not admonish his opponents to believe the Scriptures. He simply quotes the passages to them and expects them to accept them. A little later he complains: "Truly, it is amazing that the adversaries are in no way moved by so many passages of Scripture, which clearly ascribe justification to faith, and, indeed, deny it to works. Do they think that the same is repeated so often for no purpose? Do they think that these words fell inconsiderately from the Holy Ghost?" (*Trigl.*, p. 153.)

Apart from the unmistakable position of Melanchthon with regard to the authority of the Scriptures there appears to lie here also a clear indication of a conception of the inspiration of the Scripture on the part of Melanchthon, namely, in the words: "Do they think that these words fell inconsiderately from the Holy Ghost?"

The Smalcald Articles show that Luther, even as Melanchthon, appealed for proof of his doctrine to Scripture against the Fathers, particularly also against the misuse of the writings of the Fathers, of which his opponents had become guilty. With respect to their use of Augustine in behalf of the doctrine of purgatory he writes: "The Papists quote here Augustine and some of the Fathers who are said to have written concerning purgatory, and they think that we do not understand for what purpose and to what end they spoke as they did. St. Augustine does not write that there is a purgatory, nor has he a testimony of Scripture to constrain him thereto, but he leaves it in doubt whether there is one, and says that his mother asked to be remembered at the altar or Sacrament. Now, all this is indeed nothing but the devotion of men, and that, too, of indi-

viduals, and does not establish an article of faith, *which is the prerogative of God alone* [italics ours].

"Our Papists, however, cite such statements [opinions] of men in order that men should believe in their horrible, blasphemous, and cursed traffic in masses for souls in purgatory [or in sacrifices for the dead and oblations], etc. But they will never prove these things from Augustine. Now, when they have abolished the traffic in masses for purgatory, of which Augustine never dreamt, we will then discuss with them whether the expressions of Augustine without Scripture [being without the warrant of the Word] are to be admitted, and whether the dead should be remembered at the Eucharist. For it will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers; otherwise their kind of fare, of garments, of house, etc., would have to become an article of faith, as was done with relics. [We have, however, another rule, namely] The rule is: *The Word of God shall establish articles of faith* [italics ours], and no one else, not even an angel." (*Trigl.*, p. 465 f.)

This passage from the Smalcald Articles not only shows clearly how Luther used the Scriptures to establish correct doctrine and to overthrow false doctrine, but also states the principle which underlies the use of Scripture in the Lutheran Confessions: "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel." The expression "Word of God" is here synonymous with "Scripture," for the dispute revolved about the question whether the word of St. Augustine without the Scripture could establish the doctrine of purgatory.

When we examine the Lutheran Confessions we find that the expression "the Word of God" in a number of places clearly designates the Scriptural preaching and teaching in the Church. We need but to recall the words of the Small Catechism: "When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity," etc.; also the words of the Smalcald Articles: "Why, therefore, do they desert their own parish, the Word of God, wives, children, etc. . . ?" (*Trigl.*, p. 467.)

On the other hand in a sizable number of cases the Lutheran Confessions use the expression "Word of God" to designate either the whole of Scripture or parts of it. We have a scarcely perceptible transition from the one meaning to the other when the Small

Catechism says in the "How is this done?" of the First Petition: "When the Word of God [first meaning] is taught in its truth and purity . . . But he that teaches and lives otherwise than God's Word teaches [second meaning] . . ." (*Trigl.*, p. 546.) Now it is no more the Word of God that is taught, but the Word itself is the teacher. Here the *publica doctrina* in the church cannot be meant, but only the written Word of Scripture.

God's Word, as recorded in Scripture, is also meant when Luther calls Baptism the "water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's word." He answers the question: "Which is that word of God?" with a passage from Scripture, Matt. 28,12 (*Trigl.*, p. 551).

After this excursus concerning the repeated identification of "Word of God" with "Scripture" in the Lutheran Confessions we return to our theme. We have seen that the Lutheran Confessions time and time again cite as evidence for the correctness of their doctrine Scripture and particular passages of Scripture. Luther's Small Catechism is particularly relevant here. In the Fourth Chief Part Luther asks first of all: "What is Baptism?" He answers: "Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word." Then he asks: "Which is that word of God?" and answers: "Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Matthew: *Go ye into all the world and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*" Next he asks: "What does Baptism give or profit?" and answers: "It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, *as the words and promises of God declare*" [italics ours]. He asks: "Which are such words and promises of God?" and answers again with a word of Scripture: "Christ, our Lord, says in the last chapter of Mark: *He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.*" (*Trigl.*, p. 551.)

The question of reason: "How can water do such great things?" he answers first in his own words: "It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God, which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is simple water and no baptism, but with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of

life, and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost, as St. Paul says Titus chapter three." Then he quotes Scripture for his doctrine concerning the power of Baptism: "*By the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, that, being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying.*" (Trigl., p. 551.)

Luther knows not only the benefit of Baptism but also the symbolical meaning of this Sacrament, namely, the daily drowning of the old Adam in us and the coming forth of the new man. This also he does not derive from reason, but from Scripture. After stating the symbolical meaning of Baptism he asks: "Where is this written?" and answers: "St. Paul says Romans, chapter 6: *We are buried with Christ by Baptism into death, that, like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life*" (Trigl., p. 553).

What has here been set forth in connection with the Fourth Chief Part could easily be done also in the case of the Sixth. In his Small Catechism Luther desired to set forth no other doctrine than that which is clearly taught in Scripture itself. In the Table of Duties he brought together a careful selection of Scripture passages for the instruction of Christians in a godly life.

The remaining symbols of the Lutheran Church, namely, the Large Catechism of Luther and the Formula of Concord likewise base the doctrines which they set forth upon the Word of God as revealed in the Scripture. The Formula of Concord goes beyond the earlier confessions in stating clearly and concisely the principles which the Confessors followed in the use of Scripture as source of and norm for the doctrines of the church.

The Epitome of the Formula is superscribed: "OF THE SUMMARY CONTENT, RULE, AND STANDARD according to which all doctrines should be judged, and the erroneous teachings [controversies] that have occurred should be decided and explained in a Christian way." Then follow the famous words: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119,105: *Thy Word*

is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal. 1,8." (Trigl., p. 777.)

Melanchthon had often quoted the Fathers in the Augustana and the Apology, not in order to establish doctrine outside Scripture or contrary to it, but rather to show that the doctrines taught by the Lutheran Confessors were not innovations but those of the ancient church. In order to make very clear the relation in which human teachers and books stand to the Holy Scriptures, the Formula says: "Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the Apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved" (*Trigl.*, p. 777).

Speaking of the same subject a little later, the Formula says: "In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only touchstone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.

"But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned [by what arguments the dogmas conflicting with the Holy Scripture were rejected and condemned]" (*Trigl.*, p. 779).

In the "Thorough Declaration" the signers of the Formula declare: "First [then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart] *the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged" (*Trigl.*, p. 851).

These words are worthy of careful study. The Lutheran Confessors view the Scripture first of all as "the pure, clear fountain of

Israel," and, secondly, as "the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged." The metaphor of Scripture as the "pure, clear fountain of Israel" can only mean that Scripture is here designated as the *source*, from which all the doctrines of the church must flow. In the Israel of God only that is to be taught which flows from Scripture itself. Neither reason nor tradition may establish doctrine. On the other hand Scripture is also the "only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged." Any teaching which arises and demands a right to be heard and believed in the church must be tested on the touchstone of Scripture and be accepted or rejected accordingly.

It is true that these references to Scripture do not constitute a formal doctrine of inspiration, but it may be justly claimed that the position of the Lutheran Confessors with respect to the authority of Scripture does indeed indicate that they held a doctrine of inspiration, for only inspiration could make the Scripture the Word of God, which the Confessions assert it to be.

As the Lutheran Confessions do not contain an article on the inspiration of the Scripture, so also they do not fix the Canon of Scripture. True, the Formula of Concord seems to have in mind the Canon of Scripture as it has been accepted in Protestantism, when it says: "First [then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart] the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel," etc. (*Trigl.*, p. 851.) Yet it is not possible, on the basis of the quotations from Scripture in the Lutheran Confessions, to define with certainty what the Lutheran Confessors regarded as canonical. On the one hand the Lutheran Confessions quote from most of the books of the Old and New Testament Canon as received by Protestants. There are, however, no quotations from Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Canticles, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, and Haggai. On the other hand passages are quoted and discussed from Tobit and 2 Maccabees, with no doubt expressed as to their canonicity. With regard to the passage from 2 Maccabees, Melancthon says in the Apology that the prayer of the saints in heaven for the church has no testimony in Scripture "except the dream taken from the Second Book of Maccabees, 15,14" (*Trigl.*, p. 345).

It may be worth noting that both these passages from the Apocrypha are found in the Apology, which may indicate that Melancthon, in line with his well-known tendency, may have used them to avoid what he considered an unnecessary argument without implying that in his own mind he considered these two passages canonical.

Of the New Testament books we find the following not quoted in the Lutheran Confessions: Third John and Jude. The much-disputed Epistle of James is frequently quoted by Melancthon, and even Luther quotes it once in the Large Catechism.

It is possible that the Lutheran Confessions quote also books which were rejected by Luther as being not Apostolic and therefore not canonical because some of the Reformers were more inclined to accept these books as canonical than was Luther and sought to lessen the offense which many earnest Roman Catholics had taken at Luther's expressions concerning these books, especially concerning the Epistle of James. It is certain that outstanding teachers of the Lutheran Church spoke more favorably of these books after Luther's death than did Luther himself and that by John Gerhard's time they were considered canonical by some Lutherans, even if only deuterocanonical.¹

We have seen on the basis of many quotations from the symbolical books of the Lutheran Church that the Lutheran Confessors regarded Holy Scripture as the Word of God and that they used it as "the pure, clear fountain of Israel," from which alone they wished to draw their doctrine. On it, as the only true touchstone, they wished to test every doctrine.

A careful study of the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church shows furthermore that they desire to be an exegesis of Scripture, not indeed as a commentary, which interprets verse by verse, but in the sense that they set forth the true understanding of Scripture with respect to the greatest and weightiest questions of doctrine and to word this understanding in precise and easily understood formulations. The church dare never forget that God "at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the Prophets" (Heb. 1;1) and that at times it is very difficult for Christians of later ages to understand Scripture properly

¹ For quotations to this effect from the *Magdeburg Centuries*, Chemnitz, Hunnius, Osiander, Mentzer see John Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, 1885, I, 152.

and to grasp the great Biblical doctrines of our salvation correctly and clearly. It has often been said, and must be repeated for every generation, that heretics also appeal to Scripture for their heresies, not because Scripture supports their false views, but because Scripture is a very large book and contains much, also "some things hard to be understood" (2 Peter 3:16), which people of unstable minds pervert to their own and other people's harm. It is the purpose of our confessional writings to sum up the great doctrines of Scripture clearly, in language which also the common people understand. In that sense the confessional writings are exegesis.

The confessional writings themselves express this fact. In Art. IV of the Apology, "Of Justification," Melancthon not only affirms that the formulation of this doctrine in the Augsburg Confession is correct and in harmony with Scripture, but also asserts that a correct understanding and interpretation of Scripture is impossible without this doctrine. "But since in this controversy the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which, understood aright, illumines and amplifies the honor of Christ [which is of especial 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], and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences, we ask His Imperial Majesty to hear us," etc. (*Trigl.*, p. 121.)

All the symbols of the Lutheran Church offer numerous examples of exegesis. In fact, almost every quotation from Scripture in the confessions could justly be viewed as exegesis. But particularly as a whole are our confessions to be viewed as conscious, intentional exegesis. The classical passage from the Confessions in this respect is found at the beginning of the Epitome of the Formula of Concord and reads as follows: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119,105: *Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.* And St. Paul: *Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed.* Gal. 1,8.

"Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.

"And because directly after the time of the apostles, and even while they were still living, false teachers and heretics arose, and symbols, i. e., brief, succinct [categorical] confessions, were composed against them in the early church, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal Christian faith and confession of the orthodox and true Church, namely, *the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed*, we pledge ourselves to them, and hereby reject all heresies and dogmas which, contrary to them, have been introduced into the Church of God." (*Trigl.*, p. 777.)

From these quotations it is plain that the confessors of the Formula of Concord considered the symbols of the ancient church as a correct summary of the teachings of Holy Scripture, therefore as exegesis. And everyone who knows these ancient symbols with their sharp, clear formulations, especially in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, will agree with them. These confessions, which name the Holy Scripture but once,² are truly exegesis, interpretation of Scripture.

The confessors of the Formula of Concord continue: "As to the schisms in matters of faith, however, which have occurred in our time, we regard as the unanimous consensus and declaration of our Christian faith and confession, especially against the Papacy and its false worship, idolatry, superstition, and against other sects, as the symbol of our time, *the First, Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, delivered to the Emperor Charles V at Augsburg in the year 1530, in the great Diet, together with its *Apology*, and the *Articles* composed at Smalcald in the year 1537, and subscribed at that time by the chief theologians" (*Trigl.*, p. 777).

That the Lutheran Confessors considered the Lutheran Symbols to be interpretation of Scripture is stated in the plainest of plain

² The Nicene Creed: "The third day He rose again according to the Scriptures."

language in the paragraph in the Formula of Concord concerning the two Catechisms of Luther. "And because such matters concern also the laity and the salvation of their souls, we also confess the *Small and Large Catechisms* of Dr. Luther, as they are included in Luther's works, as the *Bible of the laity* [italics ours], wherein everything is comprised which is treated at greater length in Holy Scripture, and is necessary for a Christian man to know for his salvation" (*Trigl.*, p. 777).

There is cause to fear that these words have been grossly misused by many people of the Lutheran name. They have been understood and interpreted as though it were not necessary for lay Christians to use the Scripture itself, as if they could and should be content with the Catechism. The slow, tedious progress in Bible study among the laity in the confessional Lutheran Church may well be connected with misuse of these words of the Formula of Concord.

And yet this passage, rightly understood and applied, is of the greatest importance for a true understanding and use of the Lutheran Confessions. Not only the two Catechisms of Luther, but also all the other Lutheran Confessions, profess to be and are exegesis, interpretation of Scripture, in the best sense of the word. They are a correct summary of the passages of Scripture which concern the particular doctrines which were under discussion and in debate. Above all things, they are a correct presentation of the very heart of Scripture, the Gospel of Christ. They set forth the correct distinction between, and application of, Law and Gospel.

Thus the Confessions not only teach that the Word of God, the Holy Scripture, is the "pure, clear fountain of Israel," from which all Christian doctrine must be drawn, and the "only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged," but also are themselves an exegesis, or interpretation, of Scripture, a summary of the doctrines of the Scriptures. So long as the Lutheran Church considers them such and uses them accordingly, she will remain the church of the pure doctrine, the church of the Gospel.

Springfield, Ill.