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The Soteriological Aspect of the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity According to the Lutheran Confessions

By L. W. SPITZ

THE Lutheran Confessions are basically doxological in their treatment of the Holy Trinity, as they sound forth a hymn of praise to the grace and mercy of the Triune God. The theme of their exultant song is *Soli deo gloria!* But the God to whom alone shall be all glory is the Triune God: the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost—three distinct Persons in one divine Essence. Measuring the space which the Confessions devote to the various doctrines which they profess, one might think otherwise. The Augsburg Confession, for instance, in Article XX devotes more than six times as much space to good works as it does to the Article "Of God," and the Apology devotes forty times as much to a discussion of original sin. Here, however, as so often, appearances are deceiving. A careful study of the Confessions will soon convince the reader that the article on original sin in the Apology is not meant to be a detached essay on a subject in anthropology, unrelated to the doctrine of God, nor is that of the Augsburg Confession on good works. The Augsburg Confession does not fail to emphasize "that our works cannot reconcile God or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification, but we obtain this only by faith, when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ's sake, who alone has been set forth the Mediator and Propitiation, 1 Tim. 2:5, in order that the Father may be reconciled

through Him" (XX, 9). The Apology, on its part, sets forth the grace of God against the dark background of man's total depravity. It says: "But since Christ was given to us to remove both these sins [mentioned before] and these punishments, and to destroy the kingdom of the devil, sin, and death, it will not be possible to recognize the benefits of Christ unless we understand our evils" (II, 50).

The authors of the Lutheran Confessions faced a twofold task. They found it necessary to prove their loyalty to the Christian church; they were no heretics. But they also had to point out and reject the errors which in the course of centuries had crept into and vitiated the *corpus doctrinae* of the church. That explains the fuller and more detailed treatment of the doctrines in which the Evangelicals differed with their theological opponents. It is significant, however, that the doctrine of God is always given first place in the various confessions; likewise that the editors of the Book of Concord placed the Ecumenical Creeds at the head of all the other confessions. These placements are not at all accidental. The position of the Ecumenical Creeds in the Book of Concord reflects more than a justifiable effort to maintain a chronological sequence; it indicates that the Lutheran Confessors regarded the doctrine of God as basic and giving value to all other doctrines.

The doctrine of God was not in controversy at the time of the Reformation nor in the Lutheran church during the controversies which led to the adoption of the Formula of Concord. As a matter of fact, if the battles for the true doctrine regarding the Holy Trinity had not been fought and won in their days by the church, the church itself would have ceased to exist, for the church is built on Peter's Trinitarian confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). There we have the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, who, proceeding from the Father and the Son, anointed the Son to be the Christ. Jesus said: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven" (v. 17). If Peter at that time was not fully aware of the theological and soteriological implications of his confession at Caesarea Philippi, he had manifestly become aware of them by the time of his appearance in the residence of Cornelius at the Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast,

where he declared: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power; who went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with Him" (Acts 10:38).

The clearest statement regarding the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in its soteriological setting came from the lips of the risen Lord, who was about to leave to His disciples the task of confessing Him. He said: "Go ye, therefore, and teach [make disciples of] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28:19). The Lutheran Confessions take note of the battles which were fought in defense of the doctrine here proclaimed by Christ. They name and reject the errorists (Augsburg Confession, Art. I; Formula of Concord, Epitome, VIII). The Lutheran Confessors had merely to demonstrate that they were on the side of the victorious Trinitarians.

From the day of its birth the church had remained fully conscious of its Trinitarian foundation. It matters little whether or not St. Ambrose intoned the *Te Deum* at the time of the baptism of St. Augustine and sang it alternately with him. As a matter of fact, the *Te Deum* has been sung as a hymn in honor of the Holy Trinity for many centuries. In exalted strains it chants the church's worship of the Holy Trinity. The church has never ceased to find new modes of similar worship in hymns. Its author has long been forgotten, but the following Trinitarian hymn, now more than a thousand years old, still lives:

O Pater sancte, mitis atque pie,
O Iesu Christe, Fili venerande,
Paracleteque Spiritus o alme,
Deus aeterne,

Trinitas sancta unitasque firma,
Deitas vera, bonitas immensa,
Lux angelorum, salus orphanorum,
Spesque cunctorum,

Serviunt tibi cuncta, quae creasti;
Te tuae cunctae laudant creaturae;
Nos quoque tibi psallimus devoti;
Tu nos exaudi.

The church of the Reformation joined in singing that hymn, as does the church today, praising the Triune God with exultant voice:

To the all-ruling Triune God be glory!
Highest and Greatest, help Thou our endeavor;
We, too, would praise Thee, giving honor worthy
Now and forever (stanza 4).

(The Lutheran Hymnal, No. 240)

Five hundred years after the writing of this hymn, the church chanted the litany, later revised by Luther:

God the Father be our Stay,
Oh, let us perish never!
Cleanse us from our sins, we pray,
And grant us life forever.
Keep us from the Evil One;
Uphold our faith most holy,
Grant us to trust Thee solely
With humble hearts and lowly.
Let us put God's armor on,
With all true Christians running
Our heavenly race and shunning
The devil's wiles and cunning.
Amen, Amen, this be done;
So sing we Hallelujah! (*Ibid.*, No. 247.)

The second stanza begins with the words: "Jesus Christ, be Thou our Stay"; the third addresses the Holy Ghost. The content of all three stanzas is the same; the repetition of the same content expresses the unity of the Trinity in Essence and in its soteriological activity. Finally, Luther's metrical paraphrase of the Nicene Creed, "We all believe in one true God . . . We all believe in Jesus Christ . . . We all confess the Holy Ghost," sung by Luther's followers to this day, shows that the Church of the Reformation and its defenders likewise lived by faith in the Triune God. In view of that faith it is obvious why the Lutheran Confessions are a sacred doxology in praise of the Triune God.

Accordingly the Book of Concord manifests its Trinitarian emphasis by placing the three Ecumenical Creeds at the head of all other Confessions. The Reformation did not disrupt nor yet

diminish the Christian worship of the Triune God. Likewise, in accord with the unbroken worship of the Holy Trinity, each of the early particular Lutheran symbols gives the article on God priority by putting it in first place, thereby stressing the importance of the doctrine of God in their total doctrinal structure.

The Augsburg Confession confesses the true Trinitarian faith and rejects all heresies in Article I, "Of God," declaring:

"Our churches, with common consent, do teach that the decree of the Council of Nicaea *concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the Three Persons* is true and to be believed without any doubting; that is to say, there is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible; and yet there are three Persons, of the same essence and power, who also are coeternal, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And the term 'person' they use as the Fathers have used it, to signify, not a part or quality in another, but that which subsists of itself." This Confession placed the Evangelicals into the Nicene tradition. To emphasize this fact, they continued by condemning all the heresies to the contrary, past and present, stating: "They condemn all heresies which have sprung up against this article, as the Manichaeans, who assumed two principles, one Good and the other Evil; also the Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, Mohammedans, and all such. They condemn also the Samosatenes, old and new, who, contending that there is but one Person, sophistically and impiously argue that the Word and the Holy Ghost are not distinct Persons, but that 'Word' signifies a spoken word, and 'Spirit' signifies motion created in things." This article left no doubt regarding the position of the Evangelicals with respect to the doctrine of God.

Inasmuch as the adversaries approved the First Article of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon did not find it necessary to defend it in the Apology. Nevertheless, in view of its basic importance, he repeated it in essence, reaffirming the faith of the Evangelicals in this fundamental doctrine and repeating that those who think otherwise are outside of the church of Christ.

The Smalcald Articles likewise place the doctrine of the Holy Trinity at the head of all the others, presenting it in the four

articles of the First Part. Luther justifies his brief treatment of this doctrine with the explanation that "concerning these articles there is no contention or dispute, since we on both sides confess them. Therefore it is not necessary now to treat further of them." It is significant that Luther, in Article IV, refers not only to the Creed of the Apostles and that of St. Athanasius, but also to "the Catechism in common use for children." Both of Luther's Catechisms had indeed been in common use for a number of years, preceding even the Augsburg Confession by a year.

Inasmuch as the Catechisms were intended for instruction, they avoid the technical terminology of the theologians. Luther kept the laity in mind and—the poorly indoctrinated clergy! The doctrines of the Christian faith had to be presented in a clear and simple manner. Nevertheless Luther presented every salient part and purpose of the doctrine of God. In his explanation of the First Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism he speaks of God; he mentions neither Jesus Christ nor the Holy Ghost. In the explanation of the Second Article he mentions Jesus Christ and the Father; he does not mention the Holy Ghost. In his explanation of the Third Article he mentions Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost; he makes no mention of the Father. Thus the explanation of the Second Article binds all three Articles into a single unit. All three are firmly interwoven. No two will form a true and complete pattern without the third. Luther's explanation of the Apostles' Creed is like a tripod, which falls if one foot is removed. Neither tritheites nor Sabellians can find much comfort in Luther's Small Catechism or in any of the other Lutheran confessions.

In a discourse on the Holy Trinity, delivered about the time his Catechisms were first published or shortly thereafter, Luther says: "When the learned men debate with the heretics, they must read the Gospel according to John and the Letters of Paul, which say that there is only one God, but that God nevertheless is such a Being that the Father has a Son who is true God with Him, that is, who is in Him. Here there is no separation as between God and His creatures, but God is truly in Him. We are taught the divine essence has this form: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, and there is no God but this one, the God of three Persons, undivided and of the same essence, yes, undivided, though it must

be said that there are three distinct Persons and that they have one and the same name and activity. John 5 [v.21] Christ says: 'For as the Father raiseth up the dead and quickeneth them, even so the Son quickeneth whom He will.' These words powerfully prove that the Son is God; for to Him belongs the function of raising the dead. The Jews understood this to mean that He made Himself equal with God. Hence they wished to stone Him. To have life in one's self is the characteristic of one who is God. In this way the Spirit, too, raises the dead, as St. Paul says [Rom. 8:11]: 'If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.' Satan is able to kill, but to make alive and to create is not in the power of the devils, the angels, or any other creature." * Referring to the adversaries of the doctrine of the Trinity, Luther says: "These potentates are dead and gone, but the article of faith which was buffeted and wounded has remained and will remain. Hence let this be your foundation: I believe in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the sake of eternal life, the resurrection of the body, and the forgiveness of sin; I expect these things from Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." (Ibid., p.325.) Here we find the same emphasis on the three Persons in one divine Essence as in the Catechisms; but also, be it added, Luther's profound and practical interest in the soteriological aspect of the Trinitarian doctrine.

In his Catechisms Luther placed the Commandments in the First Chief Part and the Creed in the Second. He had good practical and soundly theological reasons for doing so. The teaching of the Law must precede the teaching of the Gospel. In following the historical sequence, Luther, however, did not have to surrender the pre-eminence of the doctrine of God to the Law. He explained the First Commandment, which forbids the worship of false gods, by declaring: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." He was thinking of the true, Triune God, for in the Large Catechism he says: "Therefore it is the intent of this Commandment to require true faith and trust of the heart, which settles

* *Predigten D. Martin Luthers auf Grund von Nachschriften Georg Roerers und Anton Lausbachs, bearbeitet von Georg Buchwald, C. Bertelsmann, 1925, translated by W. Arndt in CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XIX, 323 f.*

upon the only true God and clings to Him alone." He was also thinking of the saving God, in whom we must believe and trust. This God is not only the Creator and Preserver of earthly things, but the God who gives us "all necessities of both temporal and eternal things." Accordingly the God of the First Commandment is the Triune God, including the Person of Jesus Christ the Redeemer and that of the Holy Spirit the Sanctifier. Here, too, Luther could have said, as he explains in his exposition of the Gospel according to St. John: "St. John strengthens and confirms our faith, so that we are certain that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three different Persons, but not three different gods; but there is one God. Hence we Christians worship only a single God, having this advantage above all Jews, Heathen, and Turks, that we alone know God rightly and truly." (St. Louis, VII, 2153 f.)

The First Article of the Apostles' Creed speaks of God the Father Almighty. In his explanation of this Article Luther speaks of God who has made me and all creatures; he does not call Him Father. However, at the close he does say: "And all this purely out of *fatherly*, divine goodness and mercy." Hence Luther is speaking of God the Father, who is doing all those good things mentioned in the explanation of the First Article. He is thinking in terms of the Triune God also in the explanation of this Article. It is important to remember that Luther knows of no divine Father apart from God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time his thinking embraces God the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Let us hear Luther himself in this matter. In his explanation of the Third Article in the Large Catechism he says: "Behold, here you have the entire divine essence, will, and work depicted most exquisitely in quite short and yet rich words, wherein consists all our wisdom, which surpasses and exceeds the wisdom, mind, and reason of all men. . . . Here in all three Articles He has Himself revealed and opened the deepest abyss of His paternal heart and of His unutterable love. For He has created us for this very object, that He might redeem and sanctify us; and in addition to giving and imparting to us everything in heaven and upon earth, He has given to us even His Son and the Holy Ghost, by whom to bring us to Himself. For . . . we could never attain

to the knowledge of the grace and favor of the Father except through the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the paternal heart, outside of whom we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But of Christ we could know nothing either, unless it had been revealed by the Holy Ghost." Luther therefore does not think of God as the Father merely, because He created us, but rather because He created us to redemption and sanctification. Again we see Luther's soteriological interest in the doctrine of the Trinity. He regards the First Article as fully integrated with the Second and the Third. His concept of God is in full accord with the Augsburg Confession: "There is one divine Essence which is called and which is God: eternal, without body, without parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Maker and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible; and yet there are three Persons, of the same essence and power, who also are coeternal, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost"! In the Smalcald Articles (The First Part) he says: "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three distinct Persons in one divine Essence and Nature, are one God, who has created heaven and earth. . . . The Father is begotten of no one; the Son of the Father; the Holy Ghost proceeds from Father and Son."

The Apology and the Formula of Concord are in harmony with Luther's thinking. The Apology (Article IV, 67), referring to Rom. 1:16 and 10:17, insists that "God cannot be apprehended except through the Word." This means, as the Augsburg Confession (Article XX, 24) puts it: "Now he that knows that he has a Father gracious to him through Christ, truly knows God; he knows also that God cares for him, and calls upon God; in a word, he is not without God, as the heathen." The Formula of Concord (Thorough Declaration, VII) speaks of the Son as "this true, almighty Lord, our Creator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ." It is obvious that the Lutheran Confessions fully endorse the Creed of Athanasius when it declares: "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy

Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one." In order to avoid any misunderstanding of the term *persona* by equating it with ὑπόστασις, or *substantia*, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, with πρόσωπον, or mask, the Augsburg Confession (Article I) defines Person in the ancient terms as *quod proprie subsistit*.

Lutheran dogmatics defines soteriology as "the doctrine of Holy Scripture concerning the application and appropriation of the merits of Christ to the individual sinner, whereby the sinner is led to the actual possession and enjoyment of the blessings which Christ has procured for all mankind" (*Theological Quarterly*, IV, 385). This definition presupposes the doctrine of the Trinity; for the doctrine of the Trinity is essential to the appropriation of Christ's merits and the salvation of mankind, inasmuch as eternal salvation is a gift which rests upon the grace of the Father, whose gift is offered, in turn, through the atoning death of the Son, Jesus Christ, and is imparted to men through the regenerating and renewing work of the Holy Spirit. "If there is no Trinity, then there is no eternal Son of God, no incarnation of the Son of God in the fullness of time, no vicarious atonement, no justification by faith, no peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I, 463). Without the doctrine of the Trinity the Lutheran Confessions would therefore be sterile and meaningless.

In this connection Edmund Schlink points up two noteworthy facts. He reminds the reader that the Triune God has not yet been comprehended if "three Persons, of the same essence" are confessed (A. C. IX), but not the works of these three Persons in creation, redemption, and sanctification. Again, that the Triune God is not comprehended, if He is taught without the proper distinction between Law and Gospel (*Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, pp. 103 f.). If, indeed, the Triune God can be comprehended only in the light of the Gospel, He must be either obscured or completely lost whenever Law and Gospel are mixed.

The import of the Trinitarian doctrine in the Lutheran Confessions lends particular significance to Luther's Morning and Evening Prayers, which are a part of these Confessions. In his instruction how the head of the family should teach his household

to bless themselves in the morning and in the evening, Luther says: "In the morning, when you rise, you shall bless yourself with the holy cross and say: In the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen. Then, kneeling or standing, repeat the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. If you choose, you may, in addition, say this little prayer: I thank Thee, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Thy dear Son," etc. Here we have not only a prayer, but a true confession of faith in the Holy Trinity and in the works of the Triune God—all considered in the light of the Gospel, under the sign of the cross. Thus these two little prayers represent the theology of all Lutheran Confessions, which were, one and all, written and now are confessed in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sanctifier. "This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved."

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ED. NOTE: Discussion outlines of this article will be sent gratis upon request. Address:

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