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Scripture, Confession, Justification

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From the very outset of the immigration movement which became part of the Missouri Synod, there was a strong confessional stance. The "Brief Outline of the Emigration Code," in its first paragraph, contained a confession of faith. Those who signed the code said that they had accepted "the tenets of the Lutheran faith, as contained in God's Word of the Old and New Testaments, and set forth and confessed in the Symbolical Writings of the Lutheran Church."¹

They wanted to make certain that there would be no question about the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of their acceptance. The next sentence, therefore, reads: "They therefore accept these writings in their entirety and without any addition."²

Ten years later (1848) in the first presidential address which C. F. W. Walther made to a convention of the young Missouri Synod, he emphasized:

We are not renouncing any right belong-

¹ Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi: The Settlement of the Saxon Lutherans in Missouri, 1839—1841* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 566 (Appendix B).

² *Ibid.*, p. 567. That C. F. W. Walther persuaded Trinity Congregation to add the Saxon Visitation Articles to the list of confessions to which it subscribed is well known. He was not able to persuade the Missouri Synod to make this addition. See Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Walther and the Lutheran Symbols," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXII (October 1961), 615—16; Carl S. Mundinger, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), pp. 138—40.

ing to us if we as servants of the church and as members of an ecclesiastical Synod claim no other power than the power of the Word; for in the church, where Christ alone rules, there dare and can be no other power to which all must submit.³

In all of this these Missourians were acting in the spirit of Luther. In his debate with Erasmus Luther pointed to the fact that Erasmus had said:

I would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Skeptics, wherever this is allowed by the inviolable authority of the Holy Scriptures and by the decrees of the Church to which I willingly submit my personal feelings, whether I grasp what it prescribes or not.⁴

To this Luther replied:

What are you saying, Erasmus? Is it not enough to have submitted your personal feelings to the Scriptures? Do you submit them to the decrees of the Church as well? What can she decree that is not decreed in the Scriptures? . . . What new religion, what new humility is this, that you would deprive us by your own example of the power of judging the decrees—of *men*, and subject us in uncritical submission—

³ "Dr. Walther's First Presidential Address," trans. Paul F. Koehneke, *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, XXXIII, 1 (April 1960), 12. See also August R. Suelflow, "Walther and Church Polity," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXII (October 1961), 637.

⁴ E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, in the *Library of Christian Classics*, XVII (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 37.

to *men*? Where does the Scripture of God impose this on us? ⁵

Luther's point of view is the point of view of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, for instance, in Articles VII and VIII. The church, it is said, does not consist of a monarch who may establish articles of faith.⁶ Melanchthon insists that "the righteousness of faith is not a righteousness tied to certain traditions."⁷ The Apology allows no room for universal traditions, especially when they pertain to rites and ceremonies. True, Melanchthon, especially in the Apology, cites ancient writers and repudiates some of the teachings of the followers of the pope because they are "without authority either in the Scriptures or in the ancient writers of the church."⁸ Nevertheless, in the Preface of the Apology he points out that in the doctrinal controversies to which he was addressing himself he "made it a point to stick as closely as possible to traditional doctrinal formulas in order to foster the attainment of harmony."⁹ However, simply because the church had adopted a position, this did not mean that the position was a correct one. There were many articles of Christian doctrine which lay hidden, he said, "under all sorts of dangerous opinions in the writings of the monks, canonists, and scholastic theologians."¹⁰

⁵ Ibid., p. 108. Italics in the original.

⁶ Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 172 (Ap. VII and VIII, 23).

⁷ Ibid., p. 174 (Ap. VII and VIII, 31).

⁸ Ibid., p. 200 (Ap. XII, 119).

⁹ Ibid., p. 99 (Ap., Preface, 11).

¹⁰ Ibid. (Ap., Preface, 17).

In his discussion of the doctrine of justification¹¹ he brings the testimony of the Scriptures and finds similar statements in the Fathers.¹² The burden of his argument is that he has shown "on the basis of the Scriptures and arguments derived from the Scriptures" that by faith alone there is justification or the forgiveness of sins.¹³ When he argues, "All the Scriptures and the church proclaim that the law cannot be satisfied,"¹⁴ he brings arguments from the Scriptures and quotes the Fathers who agree with this position.¹⁵ This article does not permit its opponents to cite the Fathers, when they do not copy their faith.¹⁶ When, to refute the Lutheran doctrine of justification, the Confutation quotes Colossians 3:14, Melanchthon points out that in this passage St. Paul is speaking about fellowship in the church.

Paul commands that there be love in the church to preserve harmony, to bear, if need be, with the crude behavior of the brethren, to cover up minor mistakes, lest the church disintegrate into various schisms and the hatreds, factions, and heresies that arise from such schisms.¹⁷

To set aside dissensions, to further calmness and forbearance, to provide for the preservation of tranquility, to foster unity and harmony within the church, a clear understanding of the justification of sinners before God is necessary.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 107—68 (Ap. IV).

¹² Ibid., p. 121 (Ap. IV, 102—3).

¹³ Ibid., p. 123 (Ap. IV, 117).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 130 (Ap. IV, 130).

¹⁵ Augustine and Jerome are cited. Ibid., pp. 13—31 (Art. IV, 172—73).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 136 (Art. IV, 211).

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 139—40 (Ap. IV, 232).

This is what the Apology of the Augsburg Confession teaches. C. F. W. Walther had the same approach. At one time there was danger in the Missouri Synod that it might fall into Pietism or Orthodoxy. In a private letter Walther wrote: "The days of the convention of the Missouri Synod of 1859, when we discussed justification, were our Pentecost days in which many were converted from Pietism (yes, also Orthodoxy) to the true Gospel, the evangelical essence."¹⁸

Actually, it was a convention of the Western District of the Missouri Synod in 1859 in which the topic was presented, "That the Evangelical-Lutheran Church alone has been entrusted with the pure doctrine of justification." Walther himself presented the essay. He pointed out that the doctrine of justification is the most important doctrine which has been given by divine revelation and that this is the common confession of the Lutheran Church both in its symbols and in the private writings of its orthodox teachers.¹⁹ It is not an easy matter correctly to present the doctrine of justification.²⁰ Luther learned this doctrine because he was born anew and fitted by God thereto.²¹ Although, even in Luther's day there were few who correctly understood the doctrine of justification, there were many who were tired of it.²² One of Walther's most telling points

¹⁸ C. F. W. Walther to Chr. W. Hochstetter, St. Louis, 11 August 1885, MS, Wadewitz transcription, Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis.

¹⁹ Missouri Synod, Western District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1859, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

was the acknowledgement that in Protestantism generally the doctrine of justification by faith and grace alone was taught; nevertheless, these churches did not properly recognize the means by which a person is made righteous before God.²³ The comfort and consolation of the free forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God must rest on the mercy of God, the merits of Christ, the calling through the Word, the promise of the Gospel, on Baptism, on the use of the Lord's Supper, on Christ, the Mediator and Atoner.²⁴

For a correct understanding of the Gospel Walther pointed the servants of the church especially to a study of the letters of St. Paul and to the confessions of the church. Then he counseled his brethren to read the writings of Luther. The essay is a powerful plea for the correct understanding of the doctrine of justification.²⁵

In that same year, 1859, the topic of the freedom of the Gospel was discussed in the Central District. Prof. A. Craemer who led the discussion pointed to the close connection between Christian freedom and the doctrine of justification.²⁶ Perhaps this discussion, too, offset some untoward tendencies in the Missouri Synod.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod today must restudy the freedom of the Gospel and the doctrine of justification through faith. Let it do this on the basis of the Scriptures and the Confessions. C. F. W. Walther had a deep-seated commitment to the Word of God and insisted

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 11—65.

²⁶ Missouri Synod, Central District, *Synodal-Bericht*, 1859, pp. 13—60.

that Lutheran teachers interpret the Scriptures according to the Symbolical Books and not vice versa.²⁷ His spiritual heirs

would do well to abide by that same commitment. This is the best hope for the Synod's peace and unity.

²⁷ Piepkorn, pp. 606—20, deserves careful study in this connection.