

Church and Unity of Doctrine

[translated from German by J. Valentinus Andreae]

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In order at least to indicate the theological and ecclesiastical attitude which rules me, permit me to make the following introductory statement: As a systematic theologian, I understand the dogmatic method to relate not to reason but to Scripture and to faith and to the congregation in a way that runs parallel to Luther's procedure in the Small Catechism on the one hand and to the confessional symbols of the church, which reject error, on the other. Behind the confident boldness of the church to teach doctrine that is binding on the conscience, there stands transrational and transmundane authorization. Its point of origin is the *deus actiosissimus*. Him no deistic or existentialistic barriers keep from being present throughout all the creaturely universe always, nor from being the one who himself acts and himself speaks. To this presence is added the incarnation. To it is joined the fact that he who makes his holy demands on us in the law also sacrificed himself for us fallen beings and now freely gives his grace and himself to us in the gospel. Conjoined with this there stands the fact that we have his Word of revelation as it reaches us today in holy Scripture and breaks in among us as the *verbum actiosissimum in viva vox* and sacraments. On the background of this understanding Christian obedience can approach our theme, which is critical in more than one respect for our time and which, by the nature of its innermost principle, breaks through the limits of this present eon: **Church and the Unity of Doctrine.**

Part I: μία ἐκκλησία

We turn first to the church. Especially in the last hundred years the words "church" and "congregation," in their inevitable side-by-side position, have been exposed to legal and sociological misinterpretation, by which they have been torn apart if not actually distorted into opposing concepts. In order to escape these misunderstandings, it will be well to agree always to proceed on the basis of the New Testament concept of the ἐκκλησία and for the sake of clearness often make use of this term.

According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* ἐκκλησία can always be rendered "assembly," which, of course, involves gathering and separation. But never can ἐκκλησία be translated "institution" or a form of "rule" or administration, etc. For it is always a host, a band, a people, never some juridical sort of dimension (III, p. 505). It is the New Testament people of God, which has been rescued by Christ out of a perishing and condemned world. They are οἱ ἐν χριστῷ whom he is leading into their eternal home. Their relation to their eternal deliverer is strictly constitutive, making them what they are. They are his body. He is their head (Eph 1:19 ff). During the eon of this world, upon which the kingdom of God does not break visibly (Col 3:3), this deliverance and gathering never takes place directly; it is always brought about through means, by way of external Word and sacraments (Jn 17:20), always by faith in this gospel, a faith in no wise achieved by man himself, but by the work of God (1 Co 12:3; Col 2:12).

A. A Singular which Contains in itself the Plural

"One (εἷς) is God and one (εἷς) is the mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself for all (ὑπὲρ πάντων) as a ransom (ἀντίλυτρον) in order that this be witnessed in its own proper time (καιροῖς ἰδίους)"

(1 Ti 2:5f). To those who have been baptized, insofar as they are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, the universal savior, the apostle writes: “Here there is neither Jew nor Greek, here there is neither slave nor free man, here there is neither man nor woman, but you are all together one (εἷς) in Christ (Ga 3:28). The ἐκκλησία, because it is the *una sancta* is also the *pepetua mansura*, as Christ tells Peter: “On this rock (which stands forth in your confession) I will build ἐκκλησία and the gates of hell shall not overcome it.” Both in its horizontal and in its vertical aspect the truth is that God knows only one dwelling place in the Spirit, Christ only one bride.

Now the plural ἐκκλησίαι is indeed very common in the New Testament. But – how remarkable! – it is never in competition with the singular; the many ἐκκλησίαι are the same, identical one ἐκκλησία of God, but in this manner, that the one ἐκκλησία always makes itself apparent and becomes active before human eyes in the local congregation; that is to say, always in quantitative localization but never in qualitative change. This manner of realizing itself before our eyes brings with it a vexatious trial of faith (*Anfechtung*) for me and for you and for every band of Christian. For by stepping upon the historical scene in this local, temporal manner, the *una sancta* offers itself to human observation as a mixed body of good and evil, even though it is and remains a heavenly dimension, “the Jerusalem above” (Ga 4:25). But to us it appears like the moon through a halo of haze or a star occulted by earthly clouds, which even have their own false luminosity. For unbelievers seem to belong to the one ἐκκλησία or one might think she is torn apart. For alongside of Christ, the sun of righteousness whom she reflects, will-o-the-wisps constantly seem to issue from her. But these hovering swamp lights can be distinguished from her true light; nor do they emanate from her, but have other sources. She remains the one dove of God (SS 2:14), the one justified and sanctified band. In her, rightly understood, only people of God are gathered, who were begotten from above and are engaged in daily sanctification. So this people of God, doing battle for his truth, confessing him, and entreating all and sundry to be reconciled to him (2 Co 5:20), makes its way through the reaches of this earthly time as the genuine קהלה יְהוָה.

B. Church of Faith and the Word

1. Church of Faith

The ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ is not partly an institution of the law, to which people begotten out of the law, that is, evil persons who must be held in check by servile fear, can belong. It does not have, besides its heavenly essence, also an earthly, political nature, as did “the shadow of things to come,” the Old Testament theocracy. On the contrary, it is an entity whose every quality stands in direct and absolute contrast to the institutions of this world. (Ga 4:21-31; Ro 9:1-13; Ap VII/VIII, 14f). What is asserted of the universal ἐκκλησία, for instance in Ephesians as well as in the defining addresses to the local ἐκκλησίαι testifies with one voice to the purely *spiritual* character of the congregation of God on earth. The Ephesian epistle – which speaks of the one body of the one head as the πλήρωμα (chapter 1) and of “one body and one Spirit, even as you were called in one hope of your calling” (chapter 4) – understands the term ἐκκλησία only as those who were once dead in their sins and by nature subject to God’s wrath, but who now are made alive together with Christ (chapter 2) and “acceptable (*angenehm*) in the beloved” (1:6), those who now by grace through faith are transferred into the heavenly eon (1:19f); in sum, they are those who now are no longer darkness but light in the Lord (5:8).

If, under the terms of these definitions we now look upon the local congregations, our spiritual eyes (if we are indeed spiritual according to Ga 6:1) must recognize these local ἐκκλησίαι as being pneumatic colonies of the one eternal people of God, who with Christ their spiritual head have for a time taken lodging at their particular place as in a wayside inn. They are admittedly held responsible for all the conditions in their midst (the seven letters to the churches of Rev 2 and 3), but it is also said: “I place no other burden on you” (Rev 2:24). For our present purpose it may suffice to offer this twofold corroboration from Scripture: The first Christian congregation in Jerusalem is defined as consisting of σωζόμενοι, of πιστεύοντες (Ac 2:47; 5:14), with which designations other references to it agree. Similarly Paul addresses the congregations in Corinth and Colossae as “sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling (1 Co 1:2) and ἀγίοις καὶ πιστοῖς ἀδελφοῖς (Col 1:2). And he furthermore includes the geographically limited ἐκκλησίαι at Corinth and at Rome together with himself under the concept of the body of the Lord, whose members, by their new being in him, of necessity belong to and serve Christ and each other (1 Co 12:12-27; Ro 12:4-11). But notwithstanding their temporary solidarity in love, which cuts no one off but wants to save all, those who join in the profession of faith yet at heart are evil are, in reality, attached to the congregation only externally, like mud on the wagon wheel or dirt and sores on the human body; though on the communicant and voting membership lists, before God they are not members (Luther on Ps 118:20, W² V, 1234f).¹ If their unbelief and impenitence becomes manifest, the divine mandate of church discipline applies: “Remove the wicked man from among you” (1 Co 5:13; Mt 18:15-20).

It is entirely correct to describe the ἐκκλησία as *coetus baptizatorum, verbum audientium, communicantium, media salutis amplectentium*, for she is the *creatura verbi*, specifically of its three means of grace, especially Baptism; but so far as these hearers are not *vere credentes*, they still do not belong to the church of Christ: “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Ro 8:9; compare Ap VII/VIII, 16-19). The European masses today, who still pay church taxes but have turned away from the church, no longer come into consideration at all as persons who can be considered members of the church of Christ. Axiom: *Nulla ecclesia extra media salutis amplectentes*.

It is impossible to deny that this *una sancta* was correctly placed into the Third Article of our faith, for it is invisible to the “staring cow eyes” (Glotz- und Kuhaugen, Luther) of this world. It is certain, on the one hand, that its existence at any given place can and must be recognized with absolute certainty by means of the Word and sacraments there in use, because the gospel is a living seed which cannot be sown somewhere for a period of time without bearing fruit (Is 55:10f; Lk 8:8); therefore I can know with the certainty of faith that God’s assembly is locally present here for me. But it is also impossible, on the other hand, that anyone will actually ever see the church itself by the means available to human observation (Lk 17:20); therefore it is called and actually is a mystery of its Lord (Eph 5:32); its life is hid with Christ in God (Col 3:3). Luther is right in exclaiming: “It is a high, deep, hidden thing, the church, so that no one can know or see it, but must lay hold on and believe it only by the signs of Baptism, Sacrament of the Altar, and Word” (*Against Hans Sausage*, 1541).

With this first essential fact there is inseparably bound up a second; this *una sancta*, Christ’s body of true believers, has by the very act of its [founding] by and on him, an in-built relation to Christ its Redeemer, whose righteousness alone avails for it before God, the head from whom its life comes, and obedience to whom is its true liberty; there is equally built into the essence of its foundation the primary relation to his holy Word and holy sacraments. The *una sancta* is always the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ, the New

¹ W² throughout refers to *Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis, 1880.

Testament **לְקָרָא** of Yahweh, that is, the host called together by God, whom he “called” (*καλέσαντος*, 1 Pe 2:9) according to his eternal counsel and by this call constituted before himself so that it has its life in this way as a free gift. Faith, which takes its refuge from the accusation of the law into the promise of grace and is the inner constitutive element of the *ἐκκλησία* does not only originate exclusively out of these external means of grace (1 Pe 1:23) but also lives solely on this “implanted word” (Jas 1:21) and holds steadfastly to it (Jn 8:31). The believer is laid hold of with the hand of his means of grace, just as Christ is accessible to the *πίστις τοῦ χριστοῦ* only as he is cloaked in this garment of *promissio*. All this is contained in the one word of Jesus before Pilate: “Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.” As even “a child of seven years now knows” it is “the holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd,” who are the church (SA, Part III, Art. XII). We note accordingly that not only when the Scripture sets the church before our eyes locally, as it does in Acts 2:42; but also when it pictures her universally, it lets her shine before us in her glory of “having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20).

But the in-built relation of the *ἐκκλησία* to the Word is not limited to the fact that it is the *creatura verbi*, that the church has Christ in Word and sacrament as its *Mutterboden* (mother soil). To this originating relation belongs also this, that the church is itself vested with the power of the Word, that it is itself *μήτηρ*, mother, according to Galatians 4:26, that it is itself concretely the proclaimer of salvation (Ro 1:5). The Large Catechism is especially clear on this (II:41f, 51f). In view of this double relationship it is no wonder that the book of Acts, where we would say that the *church* grew, repeatedly says: “The *Word* increased (6:7; 12:24; 19:20). As Luther says: “God’s Word cannot be without God’s people, and again God’s people cannot be without God’s Word (*Of Councils and the Church*, W² XVI:2276). Just as God does not gather the sheep of his pasture in an unmediated manner but through his external Word, so also he does not set his revelation, after its completion by the New Testament (Heb 1:2), on its course by supernatural agencies such as angels or (shall we say) the Holy Ghost in human form, but he entrusts it to the housewife into whose hands he put the keys of heaven (Mt 18:17ff), that is, his Christendom on earth. The seal of the new covenant consists in this, that the whole of Christianity is in the fullest sense his preacher and minister (1 Pe 2:9); that this is not limited to a professional group (*Treatise on Power and Primacy*, 69) as in the Old Testament theocracy or as seen in certain churches since then.

Of this double foundation of faith in Christ and his Word concretely entrusted to us Luther speaks often and decisively:

It is not possible to say that these persons here, whom I can count, are the people of Christ. No, where the Word is, there is the people of Christ... Such people of Christ I have never seen or known on earth; the persons I cannot count, but this I can say: Where the gospel is, there Christians are. (*Sermon on Exodus 16:24*, June 1525)

“Where you now hear this Word or see preaching, confessing, and corresponding practice going on, have no doubt that there must certainly be the true *ecclesia sancta catholica*” (*On Councils and the Church*, 1539). And in full detail:

For this is and must be our ground and certain rock: Where the gospel is preached rightly and purely, there a holy Christian church must be. And whoever doubts this may as well doubt the gospel itself, whether it be God’s Word. But where there is a holy Christian church, there must be all the holy Sacraments, Christ himself, and his Holy Spirit. If then we are a holy Christian church and have the greatest and most necessary things, such as

God's Word, Christ, Spirit, faith, prayer, the sacraments, the keys, the ministry etc., should we then not also have this least thing, namely the power and authority to call some men into the ministry, who should administer to us the Word, Baptism, Sacrament of Altar, forgiveness – all of which are already there – and serve us therein? If not, what kind of church would that be to me? Where would the Word of Christ be which says: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them"? And again: "If two of you agree on earth what it is that they will ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven." If two or three have such power, how much more the whole church! (*Von der Winkelmesse und Pfaffenweihe*, 1533)

From the very beginning of the Reformation Luther leaves no doubt that this relation of the one church to the Word is always a relation to the *pure* Word:

Hoc vero urge multo maxime, quod pia conscientia novit nec dubiat Ecclesiam nihil statuere aut ordinare citra aut ultra verbum dei. Quae autem hoc tentat, Ecclesia non est, sed fingit se Ecclesiam esse. Sicut dicit Christus, Johann. X: "Oves meae Vocem meam audiunt. Vocem autem alienorum non audiunt, sed fugiunt ab eis, quia non noverunt vocem alienorum." Non enim verbum dei est, quia ecclesia dicit, sed quia verbum dicitur, ideo ecclesia est. Ipsa non facit verbum, sed fit verbo. Ideo signum quo cognoscitur certissimum, ubi Ecclesia sit, est verbum dei, ut primum observandum sit verbum. Sicut evidenter probat Paulus I. Corinth, XIII.

This compels us and makes us certain (concerning the abuse of the mass) that a devout Christian knows that the church neither ordains nor establishes anything outside of the Word of God; a church that does this is no church except by name only, as Christ says John 10:[4, 5]: "My sheep hear my voice; they hear not the voice of strangers, they flee from them; for they do not know the voice of the strangers." It is not the Word of God because the church speaks it; but because the Word of God is spoken, therefore the church is there. The church does not make the Word but is made by the Word. The unmistakable sign, by which we recognize where the church is, is the Word of God, as St. Paul writes 1 Corinthians 14:24, 25.²

Nothing is more *essential to Luther for a right understanding* than to recognize *that this relation* of the one whole church to the Word *extends also to the congregation locally certified as being the church by the means of grace there in use as its marks; this includes every believing member of it; for where Christ is, there is the spiritual priesthood of all believers.* Since no one can have more than Christ, no ruling "superior" or ruled "inferior" degrees exist among Christians, as the Lord explains (Mt 10:25-28; 23:8); for in the church – in distinction from God's realm of power obtaining in matters of this world, (Mt 20:25-28) – the power to rule resides only in the Word, it is not attached to any person or position as such. So Luther in his late writing: *Against the Papacy at Rome Instituted by the Devil*, 1545:

There we hear that also two or three gathered in Christ's name have the same powers as Peter and all the apostles. For the Lord is himself present, as he says also John 14: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my Word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him." Thereby it has happened that a single man, who was a believer in Christ, has often resisted whole hosts of men, like Paphnutius at the Nicene Council and like the prophets who resisted the kings of Israel, its priests, and the

² *On the Misuse of the Mass*, 1522. (WA 8, 419:28-37). English translation according to WA² XIX, 1081:25.

whole people. In brief, God will not be tied to numbers, greatness, status, power, or any personal quality or condition of men. He will always be with those who love and keep his Word, even if they all were nothing but stable boys. What does he care about exalted, powerful lords? He alone is the greatest, highest and mightiest... This Lord shall pope and all the devils not make into a fool, liar or drunken person to us, but we will tread the pope under foot and declare him to be a desperate liar, blasphemer, and idolatrous devil, who has violently appropriated the keys to himself alone under the name of St. Peter, though Christ has given them to all in common. (WA 54, 251:10-22, 34-37; 252:1, 2)

The same strong stand was taken by Luther also in regard to the local congregation's rights and duties and privileges twenty years earlier in his famous letter of advice to the city council and congregation at Prague: *How Servants of the Church Are to be Elected and Installed*, 1523:

Therefore this lie of men is nothing. For the keys belong to the whole congregation, and that not only as of right but also as to the use of them in practice in every possible way, in order that we may not do violence to the words of Christ, who directly speaks to all in general: "Let him be to you" etc.; also: "you have won your brother" etc.; also "everything that you shall bind" etc. I would also include the saying: "I will give you the keys of heaven," which Christ spoke to Peter only, in this discussion for corroboration, also that of Matthew 18:19: "Where two agree on earth," also v. 20: "Where two are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." In these sayings the most complete right and exercise is appropriated to them and confirmed in the fullest possible manner that they may bind and lose, unless we would want to deny the right to and exercise of the keys to Christ himself when he dwells in the midst of two. (W² X, 1580:52)

Finally, according to Matthew 7:15 and 1 John 4:1 *there follows from the universal priesthood the inalienable right of every Christian congregation and of every individual Christian to judge doctrine according to Holy Scripture*. So Luther against King Henry, 1522:

To distinguish and judge doctrine is the right of every Christian; and anyone who violates this right even a hair's breadth is under God's curse. For Christ himself has established this right in many passages that cannot be contravened, for instance Matthew 7:15: "Beware of false prophets that come to you in sheep's clothing." This he is obviously saying to the people against the teachers and commands them to avoid their false teachings. (W² XIX, 341f)

And again in the well known *Example How to Consecrate a Right Christian Bishop*, 1542:

If the sheep are not to flee from the wolves, until the wolves in their "Christian" council bid them to flee by a public resolution, the sheepfold would soon be empty, and the shepherd would find neither milk nor cheese nor butter nor wool... That would be guarding and guiding the sheep indeed! What then does Christ do, when he bids and commands us to avoid the wolves without waiting for their wolfish church council? For in fact not only the whole herd of sheep but each sheep for himself alone has the right and is empowered to act as best he may and actually does according to John 10:5: "My sheep flee from the strangers." (W² XVII, 102:28ff)

Johann Gerhard, too, still stands opposed to clericalism (*Loci*, “De Ministerio Ecclesiae,” par. 88).³

Let a threefold reference to practical examples take the place of further exposition. When we undertake to free ourselves from the pseudo-powers of the state’s false authority in the church or from the false organizational principles that follow from or lead to clericalism deriving from the past or now everywhere emerging, how do we arrive at the certainty that we are acting in accordance with the *una sancta*’s genuine plenary powers in the organizational structures we build? This must be the basic question in our return to our first love and remembrance of that which we have received (Rev 2:4; 3:3).

- a. **First Reference:** C.F.W. Walther, who surpasses Loehe both in principles and in practice, has most earnestly endeavored to answer this question in his *Pastoraltheologie*, insofar as the public spiritual office is concerned, and also in the second part of his *Kirche und Amt*. We find there many surprising parallels to Vilmar if we abstract from the fact that [August] Vilmar absolutizes the ministry by refusing to recognize the powers of the congregation in the high church manner. So what then, with respect to the *una sancta*’s plenary powers, is the status of the *congregations, whose faithfulness*, according to Scripture and the confessions, *is indeed recognized “Canone Fidei” (by the standard of the faith in accordance with Ap VII/VIII, 5), but which are organized “Canone Charitatis” (according to the principle of Christian love, by which all members against whom no cause for exclusion is known are treated as members of the una sancta, as was the apostolic practice in the New Testament)?* And what is the status of an organized church body vis-a-vis the *una sancta* composed of numbers of such responsible congregations? The proper answer to this is implied in Walther’s book: *The Proper Form of an Evangelical-Lutheran Congregation Independent from the State*. It makes high demands on the spiritual judgment of the congregation and its proper growth in spiritual maturity. This handbook is almost unknown in Germany and all of them are out of print in America also in their translated form.
- b. **Second Reference:** Here in Germany the *Theses of Union (Einigungssätze)* of our SELK also set forth the spiritual principles that give to the church its organized form.
- c. **Third Reference:** Besides these examples there are two welcome approaches to the subject by the VELKD, one a *Gutachten* by a theological committee on ministry and ordination (*Informationsdienst*, August 1955, p. 109f) and the other a more detailed and much publicized set of theses: *Grundlinien für die Ordnung des Amtes* (ELKZ, 1957, p. 76f).

C. Apostle – Church – Preacher of the Word

³ It cannot be the purpose of this short delineation of the doctrine of the church in its relation to the means of grace to enter in detail on the very important question of the point at which the plenary powers of the *una sancta* become concretely realized in the organized forms and practices of the church – and that not by historical development of inner urgings of believers but *jure divino* according to the Word. From what has been said above it is evident that this realization does not take place in the ministerial office only. According to the New Testament there is no office which is an independent institution which, propagating itself as “holy orders”, makes the church visible (Rome, high church). For behind and beside the office there stands the congregation, which, at its given place, holds to the *una sancta*’s Word and sacraments and is ruled *by them*, and which, being related to Christ its center by justification in him, bears the keys of the heavenly kingdom “*principaliter et immediate*” at its particular location. Normally it does this together with its pastor, who is, as the divinely called servant of his congregation, its public voice of Christ. *Therefore the primary concrete realization of the plenary powers of the una sancta*, a catholic ἐκκλησία of world wide extent – according to Luther and the dogmaticians of the age of orthodoxy – *is the contrapuntal relationship between pastor and congregation*. This is the basic, divinely ordered external relationship, which then also governs the organizational structure of the composite *ecclesia late dicta particularis* (i.e. a synod).

A distinction must be made between the apostles and prophets and the preaching office of the church for the proper understanding of the words of AC V: “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the gospel and the sacraments. Through these as through means he gives the Holy Spirit as he pleases to those who hear the gospel” etc. The fact is that the prophets and apostles as such belong to the church’s very foundation (Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14) by virtue of their once for all time service. But yesterday and today and tomorrow the Word of God’s solemn revelation must still be preached continually, so that the cornerstone Jesus Christ may erect and maintain the holy building. But this does not make the post-apostolic office of the Word a duplication of the apostolate, even though “the office of the ministry, proceeds from the general call of the apostles” (*Treatise on Power and Primacy*, 10; German text). Rather they are an additional gift to the ἐκκλησία, the original bearer of the keys (1 Co 3:22; 2 Co 1:24; 5:4); *Treatise*, 24: “*Tribuit...claves ecclesiae principaliter et immediate.*” “The church is above the ministers” (*Treatise*, 11) – that applies to them in still another sense that it does to the apostles. Nevertheless the contrapuntal relation in which this diaconic office that preaches reconciliation stands to the congregation of prophetic, royal priests is a very real one. According to 2 Corinthians 5:18f and 1 Corinthians 4:1 the function of the New Testament office is, in fact, that of the exalted Christ himself acting through his deputy on earth; it does not have its authority from the believing people. Already at the founding of the church on Pentecost God provided that the public administration of the keys of the heavenly kingdom should be in the hands of this office of service – but without disfranchising his royal priestess, the Christendom on earth. We can say that the keys belong particularly also to the New Testament office in a special relation of service, just as they belong by inheritance and absolutely and irrevocably to the whole *ecclesia* which is the πλήρωμα of Christ (Eph 1:23). This is the rich inner meaning of AC V.

Again, that the separate office of preaching is in no wise the creation of the *ecclesia*, but from the beginning was a previously prepared gift of the Lord to his church is shown by the fact that there obtains a notable contemporaneousness both before and after the resurrection consisting in the fact that the *Twelve* – who represent the new Israel which believes in the Messiah who has come – *become both disciples and apostles by one and the same κλησις and are called again in this same double capacity after the resurrection*. Again we see that the *ministerium ecclesiasticum* is not *creatura ecclesiae*. But we also see that even far less is it lifted out of the membership of the *ecclesia* as though it were a second πλήρωμα which propagates itself independently alongside of the church by a false apostolic succession. The post-apostolic public servant of Christ is indeed *co-apostolic* but at the same time also *sub-apostolic*, *creatura* and *testis verbi* but not *fabricator verbi apostolici*. Any teaching office which after and beside that Word claims an apostolic type of authority fabricates nothing but a pseudo-apostolic word like Rome’s mariolatry or that latest, most degenerate and disgraceful product of the historical-critical method of today – process theology. Christ designates all who will to the end of days believe on him as οἱ πιστεύοντες εἰς ἐμὲ διὰ τοῦ λόγου αὐτῶν, i.e. of the apostles (Jn 17:20).

D. Apostolicity or Contradiction in Terms

ὁ λόγος is singular in John 17 and so it is in 2 Corinthians 5:19. This Word of our salvation, within which Christ enters into human hearts is the apostolic-prophetic message which is unitary, beginning in the Old Testament, reaching its high point in Christ’s own words spoken in the days of his flesh, and then setting before us the apostolic kerygma in general, addressing itself accordingly also to the apostolic helpers then as now; it comes to its conclusion with the death of the last apostle (Heb 1:1f, Rev 22:18f). Therefore the church’s confession characterizes the *una sancta ecclesia* as being “*apostolica.*” This *una sancta perpetua mansura* will never deny its apostolicity, for that is the fundamental

originating factor in its essence, as is very clearly seen from 1 Timothy 3:15: "...that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the household of God, which is the congregation of the living God, the pillar and mainstay of the truth (στῦλος καὶ ἐδραίωμα τῆς ἀληθείας)." This one and only church is the unchangeable dwelling place and invincible fortress of the truth whose aim is Christ and which, in the last analysis *is* Christ – his very body.

But if a territorial or denominational organization that one must recognize as a church by Word and sacraments – that means, acknowledge it as representative of the *una sancta* – denies its apostolicity, it enters upon *the most terrible self-contradiction known in all mankind's history*. Insofar as the Word and sacraments in use there are still pure, and real Christians are still born in its midst, it still holds to the one church; but at the same time it renounces it by falsifications and abridgments of the one essential word which is Christ himself. Above the encampment where the banner of salvation – *verbo solo, fide sola, ὑπακοή τοῦ χριστοῦ* – waves – above that very encampment it raises also the sign of the synagogue of Satan: "My own truth, my own righteousness, (*παρακλή*)." It can therefore no longer be acknowledged as representative of the *una sancta* even though this one church is still concealed within it. It cannot be denied that these "Babylonian" characteristics came to be predominant in external Christianity throughout the course of history, marking the church with signs that contradict those of the *una sancta*. The dark picture of the future drawn by Jesus and apostles predict the coming of these confusions and cunning deceptions, as in Matthew 24; 1 Timothy 4:1f, 3:1-9; 2 Thessalonians 2, and the book of Revelation. The present scene in world and church is definitely apocalyptic. Not the existence of many churchdoms, but the chaos in doctrine and practice within the churches is the disastrous ecumenical predicament everywhere increasing, for it denies Christ in the interchurch relationships as well as in internal discipline.

The most significant statement in Luther setting forth this self-destructive self-contradiction is found in his writing: *Against Hans Sausage (Gegen Hanswurst)*, 1524:

We know that you (papists) are not to be looked upon as Turks or Jews, who are outside the church. Rather we say that you do not stay with the church but have become the church going astray, turning apostate and adulterous (as the prophets were wont to call it), and not staying in the one church that has born and reared all of us. You run out of this church and away from the right man and bridegroom (as Hosea says to the people of Israel) to the devil, Baal, Moloch, Astaroth... For we confess not only that you together with us were in the "flood", being washed by Baptism in the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as St. Peter says. But – and this is the church; O yes! that you sit within and rule – (as St. Paul prophesies 2 Th 2) as the accursed antichrist sitting within the temple of God (not in the cow shed). But though *in* the church you are no longer *of* the church or members of it. Rather within this holy church of God you erect the devil's house of your rebellious church and bring in countless adulteries and innovations, by which you mislead uncounted numbers of baptized and redeemed souls to the terrible distress and deep sorrow of all who see and understand these things with eyes of the spirit. But God is he who by his wondrous, omnipotent power among so many abominations and devilish adulteries nevertheless preserves the young children through Baptism and also some older people, though few, who at their end again hold to Christ only, of whom I myself have known many, so that still the ancient church with its Baptism and Word of God remains among you.

E. Augsburg Confession VII and VIII

- a. It appears desirable at this point to enter into a discussion of the decisive definition of the term “church” in the Lutheran Confession and its practical effect on the meaning of church membership. According to the introductory words “...that one holy Christian church must be and remain forever”, AC VII speaks of the *una sancta* and not of the visible church, which is to be distinguished from it. Nevertheless this *una* or unity is thought of here as functioning in space and time and therefore covers all the local *ἐκκλησίαι* insofar as they are really church, that is, insofar as they prove themselves to be the one church by means of the *notae purae* (Ap VII, 5 and 25). These “pure marks” guarantee not only the existence of the *one* church, but also that it is the ruling force in that particular congregation or church body. They furnish the proof that here at this place there is actually being practiced the *unitas ecclesiae* to separate from which is contradiction by the *ecclesia particularis*, heresy, and schism.

The relation between the one church of Jesus Christ and the means of grace is obviously the central fact for AC VII, both when we consider the opening sentence as well as when we direct our attention to the two following sentences. What then, in view of this centrality, is the precise meaning of the relative clause: “*in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta*”, which is attached to the definition of the church as “*congregatio sanctorum*” in the sense of “*vere credentium*” (AC VIII)? Three spotlights may serve to illuminate the theological area here in view:

1. We note first that the “*in qua...*” clause does *not* say that believers (*vere credentes*) who err out of weakness are excluded from the *una sancta*; this holds regardless of whatever the external church connections in which their weakness may have entangled them. To say otherwise would be treason against the *una sancta* and contradict Galatians 3:26-28: “You who are believers and baptized are ‘all’ (πάντες) one (εἷς) in Christ.
2. Furthermore the relative clause “*in qua...*” etc. is not merely an additional modifier to the definition of the church that could be separated from it – as though faith were ever possible without the means of grace that bring it into being and within which it has the Christ who is present (AC V). That would be uninhibited enthusiasm making itself independent from the Word with the unavoidable effect of reliance on our own virtuous feelings for salvation. Then it would be true of the genuine church of Christ what Calvin says of the church in the *Geneva Catechism*: “... *nec signis dignoscitur*,” which would mean that the church we confess in the Third Article, being a church originating by predestination would never be recognizable in any way whatever and that it would be, in effect, completely separate from the external church of the Word and sacraments, since the general call to grace now is not meant seriously by God and therefore not efficacious. According to this presupposition, which tears the Holy Spirit apart from the means of grace, the sinner does not become certain by faith in God’s promises, but by trusting in a fraudulent “inner” way, by which he somehow “establishes the fact” by introspectively observing changes in his own inner thinking and feeling, that he personally possesses the grace of predestination.
3. Finally also the “*pure*” and “*recte*” used in the Confession cannot be separated from the relative “*in qua...*” clause, as though faith could ever cling to a fiction or counter-gospel, or as though the one church, the body which is joined to the head, could ever preach or teach in any other way than “*pure*” or administer the sacraments in any other way than “*recte*” in conformity with the gospel, in accordance with the divine Word. Even there where, according to AC VIII, the *una*

sancta acts through “*hypocritae et mali admixti*” it does this – insofar as it is indeed the *una sancta* which is acting in accordance with the relative “*in qua...*” clause.

- b. **A battle on a double front** – The transrational double character of the one church set forth in the Lutheran Confessions must ever be firmly maintained in defense against the double attack from the right and from the left. It would be folly to claim that the understanding of what the church is, expressed in AC VII and VIII, can be made accessible to the laws of thinking of a merely human reasoning. Only justifying faith, which knows the reality of *Anfechtung*, the sharp attacks of spiritual doubts and tribulations, but dares all on the basis of God’s promises in the means of grace alone, experiences what is being confessed here in accordance with holy Scripture. Only the one true faith stands in this double-fronted warfare. It alone does battle against the self-satisfied human sense of security on the right as well as the left.

It opposes the specious and arrogant “right” of the Roman *theologia gloriae*, which does not know the depths of human depravity and therefore attaches too high a value to the visible procession of history and seeks its security in itself as a historical institution. But this organizational kind of security does not exist in the church, because the church consists only of believers, people whom the Holy Spirit calls and maintains in the faith through the Word. Only this invisible, spiritual community of faith is the dwelling place and workshop of the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity until the end of days. Christ has not entrusted his Word to any organizational apparatus or to any holy office per se, but only to his believers. Nowhere does there exist an institution that is spiritually immune – let that be said against all romantic dreaming or organizationally oriented loyalty. No legally or historically based body claiming divine authority to teach stays with the truth!

On the left front there is the sometimes uncertain arrogance of a *theologia gloriae* which claims to receive the Spirit without the means of grace. This is *Schwärmerei*, a movement consisting of various enthusiastic aberrations which wants to enforce worldwide its understanding of the church as a subjectivistic, democratically oriented congregationalism, as though we sinners were not rescued out of this world into the church, but by our own piety created the church (Schleiermacher)! Emil Brunner is therefore in error, when he speaks of *the* misunderstanding about the church. The Christian two-front warfare must be carried through steadfastly against the *double* misunderstanding, against materialization of the Spirit and against the spiritualization and ultimate democratization of his dwelling place and workshop here on earth.

Both misunderstandings turn the church’s whole life and being into something civil and worldly. At bottom both false constructions split the concept of the church itself in two. Alongside their dominant understanding of the church as an institution devout Catholics end up with a cloudy idea of the church as a body of the elect in a predestinate sense. And alongside the Zwinglian-Calvinist internal church of those called directly without the means of grace – the church of the predestined which “*nec signis dignoscitur*” – there quickly appears the idea of a concretely visible, this-worldly, legally grounded church, which wants to dominate over society and state, and which is the church that really matters. Even the Quakers engage in politics in their official capacity as church. Is it necessary to look far afield to find both these catastrophically false approaches in the various Evangelical and also Lutheran camps of the 19th and 20th Centuries? But note that when one of the two main groups attacks the other, their criticisms often stand up for the truth in a most astonishing manner but, tragically, without breaking through to the grand richness and fullness of apostolicity offered by AC VII. Their conscience over against the *una sancta* is alive, thank God! But not enough for repentant realization of the low, secularized plane on which they operate as church.

c. Luther and AC VII

1. In this ongoing struggle on two fronts no Christian teacher has held fast to the doctrine of the one and only church more superlatively than Martin Luther. His utter faith in Christ and the Word exclusively is the perfect antithesis to all deistic and mystic doubting that this other-worldly church is really and truly God's one church in the world and in heaven. Beginning with the *Short Form* of 1520 and proceeding to the *Great Confession of the Lord's Supper*, 1528, thence through other decisive writings to his last witness *Against the Papacy at Rome*, 1545, there is never any wavering (see Appendix to this part for some of his forceful testimonies). *His teaching on the church is born out of the most fundamental insight of the Reformation, namely the one gospel's central and essential emphasis on justification and the public means of grace* – always these two *foci* around which the Holy Word of God draws the doctrine of the holy church of God. This biblical high road between the objectivistic and subjectivistic abysses on either side is traced with the most acute precision in the Augsburg Confession. That is the secret of its uniquely faultless ecclesiology. Also against the reigning subjectivism everywhere within Protestantism today there stands this “*in qua...*” clause of Article VII; so far is it from being out of date! – note in this connection the turn of phrase “ἤσαν προσκαρτεροῦντες – were holding fast to, persevering in” of Acts 2:42. We should also not overlook the clarity with which the inflexibly strong “*in qua...*” clause is expounded in the Apology (VII, 5ff.), which says that the church is so far from being a visible congregation of saints – the wishful dream of many sectarians – that it is recognizable *only* by the means of grace in their function as *marks* of the church, that is, by those things which in faith it hears and teaches, receives and gives publicly.
2. Similarly against all false objectivism there stands the great definition of the church in Augustana's Article VIII: “*congregatio sanctorum et vere credentium,*” which again decisively defines the church from the standpoint of justification by faith in the *true* Word.
3. Finally (returning to Article VII) the connection of the main sentence (defining the church as the assembly of all believers) with the “*in qua...*” clause (speaking of the purity and rightness of their belief) tells us that the *una sancta* not only lives by the means of grace, but itself also administers them. The consensus in doctrine – “*consentire de doctrina Evangelii*” (VII, 2) – belongs to the very essence of this one and only church; and in this sense unity of doctrine is the public evidence of the one church's presence at any given location and of its presence also in any particular composite church composed of any number of local congregations. Through such unity in doctrine the local ἐκκλησίαι demonstrate that within them the one church is gathered, and that the one church gathers itself through them.

A straight and necessary Biblical path leads from Luther's terrors of conscience under the law and laying hold of the full gospel consolation to his rediscovery of the one church; this he never again surrendered. For this is the *church* which is the incursion of the future, eternal eon into our present world, and which dare never be misunderstood in either the objectivistic or subjectivistic sense.

Appendix to Part I

Here follow quotations from all periods of Luther's reformatory activity, which set forth the purely pneumatic nature of the church, but in such a way that they set it before our eyes not only as an entity to be sought out here on earth, but as an entity also whose presence is ascertainable locally – this however

only by the external element that gives it life and being, namely the world-transcending gospel Word, which is its creative principle.

We begin with the early, but theologically mature writing: *Ad librum...Ambrosii Catharini...responsio M. Lutheri* (1521) as quoted by Werner-Ehlert in his *Morphologie des Luthertums* (I, first ed., p. 227ff):

The church is built alone on the rock that is Christ. With him it will remain forever in the Spirit. It is “*communio sanctorum*” or “*sancta fidelium congregatio*.” In Psalm 9 the church is called “*Almuth*,” hidden; and the article of faith which believes in the holy catholic church confesses that it nowhere and never appears to the eye, and that there is no person or place on earth by which it can be known. Whereby, then, is it to be known? It is necessary that something be given, by which we may gather together to hear God’s Word. The following three, therefore, are its symbols, marks, or characteristic signs... About these signs Christ wants us to agree in concord: The gospel...even before the Bread and Baptism, is the prime, most certain, and most noble symbol or indicator of the church, by which it is recognized, shaped, nourished, generated, educated, pastured, clothed, energized, armed, and served; in brief, the whole life and very substance of the church is in the Word of God, since Christ says: “By every word that proceeds from the mouth of God does man live.

We proceed chronologically under the customary titles:

Short Form, 1522

I believe that there is on earth not more than one worldwide, holy, Christian church common to all, which is nothing other than the congregation or gathering of the saints, the devout, believing people on earth. This worldwide church is gathered, enlightened, and governed by one and the same Holy Spirit, being daily increased by means of the sacraments and the Word of God.

I believe that no one is saved who is not found in this congregation, holding unanimously with her to one faith, Word, sacraments, hope, and love, and that no Jew, heretic, heathen, or sinner is saved with her, unless he is reconciled to her, unites with her, and becomes conformed to her in all things.

I believe that there is in this congregation and nowhere else forgiveness of sin, that outside of it, no matter how many great and good works may be done, they do not help for forgiveness of sins; but that within her, no matter how often or how great sins may be committed, they do not harm for the forgiveness of sins, which remains in force as long as this one congregation remains in existence. For Christ gives to her the keys of heaven, as he says in Matthew 18: “What you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” etc. In the same way he speaks to Peter individually (Mt 16).

Of Christ’s Holy Supper, 1528

I believe that there is one holy Christian church...the Bride of Christ and his spiritual body; that he is her only head, and that the bishops or parish ministers are not her heads or masters or bridegrooms, but servants and friends and, as the word bishop indicates, overseers or caretakers.

And Christendom is not only under the Roman church or pope but in the whole world, as the prophets have proclaimed that Christ’s gospel was to come into all the world, Psalms 2 and 19; that under the pope, Turks, Persians, Tatars and everywhere it is indeed scattered bodily but gathered spiritually in one gospel and faith under one head who is Jesus Christ. For it is certain that the papacy is the real antichristian rule and counter-Christian tyranny, which sits and rules in the temple of God with human

commandments, as Christ says in Matthew 24 and Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2. Besides the Turks and heretics, whoever and wherever they may be also belong to the abominations which, as was prophesied, stand in the holy place, but all their evil is not equal to that of the papacy.

In this Christendom, wherever it exists, there is forgiveness of sins, that is, a kingdom of grace... For there is the gospel, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, in which forgiveness of sins is offered, sought, and received. And Christ and his Spirit and God himself is there. And outside of such Christendom there is no salvation or forgiveness, but eternal death and damnation; though there be a great appearance of holiness and many good works, it is all lost. But such forgiveness of sins within Christendom is not available only at one time in Baptism, as the Novatians teach, but as often and as much as needed until death.

The Small Catechism, 1529

...Not by our own reason or strength...but the Holy Ghost...even as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it in Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian church he daily and richly forgives all sins...

The Large Catechism, 1529

For the word *ecclesia* means a gathering. But we are accustomed to the word church, which the simple people understand to mean not a group gathered together but the consecrated house or building...though the house should not be called a church, except for the reason that in it the group gathers together. For we who gather make and take a certain place and give that house a name taken from the group regularly gathering there. Therefore, according to our mother tongue, it should be called a Christian congregation or, in the best and clearest term, a holy Christendom...

I believe that there is a little, holy group and congregation on earth consisting of nothing but saints, under one Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, unified in love, not divided by party spirit. Of this I also am a part and member, a partaker in fellowship of all the treasure it possesses, brought thereto and embodied into it by the Holy Ghost, through the fact that I have heard the Word of God and still hear it, the Word which brought me there at the beginning. For formerly, before we came to it, we were altogether the devil's, as those who knew nothing of God and his Christ. So the Holy Ghost remains with the holy congregation or Christendom until the Last Day; through which Christendom he brings us to God, using it to wield the Word and employing it for this purpose; for through it he brings about sanctification and increases it, that it may grow daily, and his congregation may become strong in faith and its fruits, which he works within it.

Furthermore, we believe that within this Christendom we have forgiveness of sins, which is wrought through the holy sacraments and absolution, and all manner of Words of comfort from the whole gospel. To this belongs what is to be preached about the sacraments and the whole content of the gospel and all the offices of Christendom; these things it is necessary to carry on continuously... Therefore everything within this Christendom is ordained for the purpose that each one can daily find there total forgiveness of sins by Word and concrete signs, in order to comfort and reassure consciences as long as we live. So the Holy Ghost brings it about that, though we have sin, it cannot harm us, because we are within Christendom, where there is nothing but forgiveness of sin, both that God forgives us and that we forgive, bear with, and help one another. But outside of Christendom, where the gospel is not, there also is no forgiveness, even as there cannot be any holiness. Therefore all those who seek holiness not

through the gospel and forgiveness of sin but through their own works and merit have cast themselves out and separated themselves from the Christian church.⁴

The Schwabach Articles, 1529 (Luther and others)

Let there be no doubt that there is and remains on earth one holy Christian church until the end of the world, as Christ states in the last chapter of Matthew: “Behold I am with you until the end of the world.” This is nothing other than the believers in Christ who hold with the above stated articles and declarations of faith, believe and teach them, and on this account are persecuted and suffer torment in the world. For where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly used, there is the holy Christian church; and she is not bound by laws and external pomp to any place and time or person or ceremony.

Of Councils and the Church, 1539.

The Christians are a personally called people and are not named simply *ecclesia*, church or people, but *sancta catholica Christiana (ecclesia)*, that is, a Christian, holy people that believes on Christ, wherefore it is called a “Christian” people and has the Holy Spirit, who daily sanctifies them, not only (as the Antinomians foolishly teach) through the forgiveness earned for them by Christ, but also by ceasing from sin, sweeping it out, and dying to it, because of which they are called a holy people. So now the holy Christian church is one people and holy or, as we are wont to say, a holy Christendom or the whole Christian church on earth. In the Old Testament it is called God’s people.

And if, in teaching children, such words had been used as: “I believe that there is one Christian holy people” all the misery would have been avoided that has come about under that blind, inaccurate word “church.” For the words “holy Christian people” would have carried with them a clear and strong understanding and good judgment as to what was or was not church. For whoever heard this word “Christian holy people” would have been able at once to conclude that the pope is no people; so also the bishops, priests, and monks, they are no holy Christian people, for they do not believe in Christ nor live a holy life, but are the devil’s own evil, infamous people. For who does not rightly believe in Christ is not a Christian; and who does not have the Spirit to combat sin is not holy. Therefore they cannot be a Christian holy people, that is, *sancta et catholica ecclesia*.

From *Cruciger’s Summer Postil, 1544* (Luther’s sermon on Eph 4:1-6)

Herewith St. Paul shows and teaches what the true, Christian church is and whereby to recognize it. Namely that there is not more than one single church or people of God on earth, which has the same faith and Baptism, the same confession of God the Father and his Christ, and holds fast and remains in this unanimous confession. In this church must everyone let himself be found and be embodied in it, who wants to be saved and come to God. Outside of it no one is saved.

Therefore its unity does not consist in, nor is it known by, having or holding to a particular kind of administration, law, or rule of ecclesiastical usages, as the pope and his large following pretend, and want to have all those excluded from the church who do not obey him in these things. But the church is where this concord of the one faith, Baptism etc. is. Therefore it is called the one holy catholic or Christian church (including all Christians), where there is one pure and clear doctrine of the gospel and its external confession in all places and at all times, no matter what dissimilarity and difference in the external rules, customs, or ceremonies there may be.

Again those who do not hold to this unity of doctrine and faith in Christ, but beside it cause divisions and offenses (as St. Paul says Ro 16) by their doctrines of men and self-chosen good works – for which

⁴ Note Luther’s identification of “Christendom” with “*una sancta*” and its decisive inclusive and exclusive force.

they contend and command all Christians to observe them – they are not Christ’s church or members of it. Rather they are refractory, perverse destroyers of the church, as we have often demonstrated elsewhere. This sure doctrine and comfort we have against the papacy, who accuse and condemn us, because we have dissociated ourselves from them. They revile us as apostates from the church, though they are themselves the real apostates, who persecute the truth and tear the unity in the Spirit to pieces under the name and title of being the church and Christians. Wherefore everyone is duty bound by God’s command to contradict and indeed to avoid and flee from them.⁵

Four Supplementary Definitions Setting Forth the Characteristic Quality of the Church According to Luther’s Unitary Double Definition of the *ἐκκλησία* and the *ἐκκλησίαι*

Luther, being the faithful expositor of Holy Scripture that he is, blocks every attempt at secularization of the church:

1. The clergy cannot make themselves hierarchically independent in Luther’s formulation of the doctrine of the church (to which Walther returned), because they are not themselves the people of God’s possession (1 Pe 2:9), the *una sancta* to whom the keys are “*principaliter et immediate*” entrusted. Much less does the state and its officers, the wielders of legal power, have a right to decide anything in the church. The fact that “the sword,” that is, legally imposed physical penalties, keeps order in the state, categorically consigns it to the left hand realm of God’s world government.
2. But neither can locally assembled “lay” persons as such make themselves democratically or bureaucratically independent in the church; for they are recognized as Christians with the required divine certainty only by the fact that the means of grace are the governing principle among them. But these are not to be administered individually in the name of Christ and congregation by everyone,

⁵ In regard to the relationship between the genuine Lutheran concept of the church and the teaching of the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians on this subject we refer the reader to C.F.W. Walther’s book: *The Voice of Our Church in the Doctrine of Church and Ministry*, which, so far, as been translated only in excerpt, and even that small volume is out of print [Ed. Note: it has since been reprinted]. It contains the most extensive and detailed witness of Lutheran orthodoxy on this subject. Hermann Sasse, in *Lutherische Blätter*, 1957, faulted Heubach’s monograph on ordination, because, in writing it, that author did not take into account Walther’s book. *In view of Walther’s constant closeness to church practice* (which he observes in his whole approach and development of this subject even in the details of the theological and church-historical evidence which he adduces) the student will himself be able to see through Werner Elert’s typical way of by-passing the Scriptural issue in his *Morphologie des Luthertums*.” Elert is in error, when he thinks it necessary to progress beyond Luther’s pneumatic concept of the church in order to do justice to the objective elements in the church’s being (in other words, Elert thinks the *una sancta* must be externalized!). And he finds this “progress” in Melancthon! (in CR 21, 825 and in the Hungarian *Confessio Montana*, Art. 8). This tendency to concretize the concept of the one church is due to remnants of folk and state church thinking in him and others like him – the thinking that had its roots in the idea of the “three estates” in the church, in which even defenders of true Lutheranism in Europe are still partly caught. We refer to the gradual process, which set in after Luther’s death, of making the *una sancta* visible by clericalization and territorialization of the mystery of the church. It is the great problem and task of present day European Lutheranism at last to shake itself free of these tragic malformations, all the more because externalizing as well as spiritualizing tendencies are attacking also conservative Lutheran circles in America. No one in the old Lutheranism had any thought of the kind of demand later made by the Romantic movement, that the church should simply be made into a visible institution of all baptized persons. The pneumatic church of Christ is *never* visible in its essence, nor can its members be counted (contrary to the *Catechismus Romanus* and Bellarmin). It is recognized only by means of the *notae ecclesiae* in use by the visible *coetus vocatorum* (contrary to all religious enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*]). Compare Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, IX, 81: “...*Nequaquam introducimus duas ecclesias...*” because: “*Nam invisibilis electorum coetus continetur sub visibili congregatione vocatorum...* But we may question whether, in Johann Gerhard and others, there is not already a tendency to weaken the connection between the *una sancta* and the *notae ecclesiae* and in this way begin to let it slip into an area where things can no longer be sharply defined, in order to soften the paradox that the church is invisible and yet locally recognized with certainty (loc. cit. 131ff).

nor by mere employees, but by the congregationally transmitted call of Christ into the ministry. Nor is the voice of the people the voice of God; the voice of God is holy Scripture.

3. Church bodies, be they territorial or confessional, cannot make themselves independent; for they derive their ecclesiastical, that is, spiritual or churchly authority only from the power of the constituent congregations to transmit Christ's call into public spiritual office; for juridically established superordination has no place whatever in the church, where Christ alone is Lord; it is an intrusion of the realm of power into the realm of grace and, where claimed *iure divino*, evidence of antichristianity; for it violates, by wordly commands, the *una sancta*, the bride of Christ, who is free and fully empowered to act even in the smallest local *ecclesia*, insofar as the pure Word and rightly administered sacraments are there in evidence.
4. But also the properly constituted *ἐκκλησία* with the public office of the Word in its midst and therefore (on the basis of its full empowerment) called autonomous, cannot possibly make itself independent from the one church, by considering itself in principle separate from the other local *ἐκκλησία*; for its very essence as church, being created and publicly certified and recognized by the *notae purae* common to all, is that of the *one great ἐκκλησία* of the total Christendom on earth. A visible ecumenistic Unionism has no claim upon recognition as representative of the one essential church. The *una sancta* is not formed by the coming together of such juridically determinable groups, but the one *ἐκκλησία* is already there prior to any such efforts, the only determining factor being the unanimity in the pure Word and sacraments. Since, then, only that church has a valid, divine commission (Mt 28:19f), which is itself the irruption of the eon to come into this present, wordly eon, and not the commission of a socially oriented movement for the betterment of the eon which will pass away, there can never be a task assigned or a right conceded to this *one church* which is not spiritual, that is, does not consist in the administration of Word and sacraments together with the office of the keys (AC XXVIII, 8-10). To set political and social aims is unauthorized interference with alien duties and betrayal of the church to the world. For even its truest social effects are due entirely to the church's exclusive pursuit of its spiritual, heavenly goals. Who is Lord? Christ! Who is independent? Christ! What then is the ruling force? The gospel which gives Christ to sinners as a free gift! In applying it to the sin-sick world it is not possible to dissolve its specific relation to the law as Antinomianism does, for then it would no longer be gospel, certainly not the gospel from above; just as it is not possible to dissolve the gospel's Chalcedonian relation to the once only but still actively present prophetic-apostolic Word of God's revelation of himself which is today's Word of holy Scripture. This leads us directly into Part II, Unity of Doctrine.

Part II: Unity of Doctrine

[Translator's note: Since our purpose is to provide guidelines for drawing up the two proposed addenda, we are including selected excerpts from Dr. Oesch's *Solus Christus* essay: "Luther's *Grundstellung zur Heiligen Schrift*" as a most suitable and richly rewarding guideline for the addendum on the holy Word of God, on which the unity of doctrine depends.]

Introduction

The real attitude of Luther toward Holy Scripture is indeed a far-reaching theme, which touches every facet of his theology. A basic rule for arriving at a reliable result is to avoid any procedure by which selected excerpts are put forward in a non-factual manner in an attempt to demonstrate supposed differences between Luther's and the Lutheran orthodox dogmaticians' view of Scripture, or even

somehow to indicate or prove that in Luther's own opinion Scripture was capable of error. (Example: Pelikan's introductory volume to the English translation of *Luther's Works*). Deplorably this procedure has been all too popular for more than 150 years with writers under compulsion to cast off the (to them) heavy yoke of scriptural authority. Under such motivation it all too easily happens that one cannot see the forest for the trees. Because of the extensiveness of his opus, the greatness and significance of the real Luther in his own context is never caught sight of. Here, more than ever the watchword must be: *ad fontes!* Far more important than dissertations on selected statements is it to read Luther himself and then read him again. And as each of his great themes comes into view, one must be mindful of Luther's particular concern at that point and try to see it in his perspective. Only then can one correctly judge of the significance of secondary, accompanying themes and properly fit them into the context. For Luther's detailed expressions, though never arbitrary but always relevant, are so lively and unconcerned about the possibility of being misunderstood that, when torn out of the context of their weighty, purposeful continuity, they are easily mistaken in contravention of their intent.

Since dealing with mere pieces broken out of the total context of Luther's thought cannot lead to true results, we will endeavor to provide sufficient quotations which are not merely links in a chain of our own argument but a mirror of Luther's faith in Scripture, and so indeed to live that faith after him. We will inquire first after the place in which Scripture comes to stand in Luther's whole insight and proclamation, and see this develop before our eyes; then we will inquire after the objective – churchly characteristics of Luther's doctrine *de Scriptura*.⁶

A. The Place where Holy Scripture Stands Theologically and Historically in Luther's Teaching

1. Starting point: *Solus Christus*

For a thousand years the natural, pagan error of hypocritical holiness by works and human endeavor had dominated the church. Now, by the means of holy Scripture which, from the very beginning, was for him divine, Luther was called to the knowledge of the full seriousness of God's holy law, which cast him into deep despair, and then to faith in the redemption by Jesus Christ, which raised him out of the depth by letting him taste the sweetness of free and full grace. The Psalms especially of the Old Testament and above all the epistle to the Romans of the New bring Luther to this insight. By them the Holy Ghost revealed to him, whom the law had tortured and beaten down, the *difference between law and gospel* and therewith the contrast in essence between two entirely different kinds of righteousness, that of being justified before men and that of being justified before God. From this insight there followed for him immediately also the difference between *the two realms* of God's world government of *grace and of power*. So the Holy Spirit gave him the firm assurance of the forgiveness of sins, guaranteed particularly to him personally in the Word of absolution and the sacraments. With this assurance, mediated to him by Scripture, Luther soon attains to clarity in all of holy Scripture's other doctrines through a realization of the rich comfort afforded by the close inner connectedness of all the truths given from above. For Luther all the light comes from the "*chief article*," which is *Jesus Christ, the beginning, middle, and end* of all Luther's spiritual thinking. The dawning of the bright day of truth comes to him from the justification through Christ's merit laid hold of in faith (see Smalcald Articles, Part II, Art. I).

But human reason, just like the human traditions which had pushed themselves alongside of Scripture during the Middle Ages, stood and stands always on the side of work righteousness. However on

⁶ Since Aland's *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium* which gives the references also to the English translation of *Luther's Works*, is available in theological libraries, it is only necessary to give at most two references for quotations from Luther. We give references to the Weimar edition with WA and to the St. Louis revised edition of Walch with W².

Luther's side stands Holy Scripture; he firmly and clearly establishes its sole authority with uniquely powerful emphases. For it has become clear to him that only the prophetic-apostolic Scriptures and in and through them God the Holy Spirit glorify the Lord Christ; they alone stand for the redeeming principle: *Christ only*, writing and sealing it upon human hearts.

As we now proceed to illustrate at the hand of Luther the decisive contrast between the two kinds of righteousness, let us always be aware of the fact that by finding refuge in the spiritual liberty of God's own Word from the dark, confining prison of human thinking, Luther takes a stand of total opposition against the radical reliance on human reason also of our own day, which already announced itself in the Renaissance.

2. Reason's Relation to Things Spiritual According to Luther

In Luther's lectures on Genesis, 1535-1545 we read: "For reason is vain and therefore addicted to lies, that is, to the praise and glory of its own virtues, likes to be told that with its own efforts it can earn salvation" (W², I, 757:93). In his large *Galatian Commentary*, 1535, he writes:

This (workrighteousness) is the highest wisdom, righteousness, and worship of God so far as reason can judge of it. And these virtues are possessed by all mankind as it is by nature... They cannot reach any higher than that Pharisee in the Gospel (Lk 18:11f). They have no knowledge of the Christian righteousness that comes through faith (1 Co 2:14; Ro 3:11). They all have the same reason, the same heart, the same illusion...: "If I do this or that, I have a gracious God; if not, he is angry with me." There is no middle ground between reliance on one's own works and the knowledge of Christ; when this is obscured, it matters not whether you are monk or heathen. Therefore it is extreme folly for papists and Turks to wage war against each other over religion and worship... while the trust of their hearts is more alike than one egg is to another... Therefore every one who falls away from the knowledge of Christ necessarily falls into idolatry... Such a God is nowhere to be found; therefore it is a dream and setting up (*confictio*) of an idol in the heart. (W² IX, 520:136ff)

On Galatians 1:4 we read this comment:

That then is nothing but what human reason would like to be true... Namely that its sin should not be really and truly sinful... Reason would like to present itself before God as a healthy person, one who does not need the physician, and only after it no longer feels its sin wants to believe that Jesus is given for our sins.

We see here what Luther's use of the term "reason" includes. He has in mind the behavior of an external Christendom still bound to the Christian tradition; he is not yet reflecting here on a reason no longer draped in churchly guise but behaving autonomously. Nevertheless he says in closing: "This is the way the whole world is minded, and especially those who want to be more God-fearing and holier before the world than others" (W² IX, 57:74ff).

Luther's refrain over against all this striving and thinking of natural man is, in never ending repetition: "Here stands the text and Scripture" – "It is written."

3. Luther's Concept of Scripture

Luther is perfectly conversant with the history of the canon; he takes into account a time when there was as yet no written Word of God, how new revelations came to be added to the first holy writings until the time of the New Testament, where now the key figures are the Son of God in the flesh, before him the prophets, and following him as his very mouth, the apostles. There never was a time at which the Word of God did not stand facing the church as its creator and guide; but it is only the blessed post-apostolic church which possesses the whole canon as God's authoritative, complete, revelatory Word. So to the proper state of the church today there necessarily belongs the *sola scriptura* for its freedom from human domination and for its perfect bonding to the true revealed God by this scriptural faith.

Luther's concern here is double; to him two factors are included under the ruling *solus Christus*; to him "holy Scripture" means both the *content* and the *speaker*. The content is Christ or the justification by grace through faith; and the revealed God or Christ in the Holy Spirit is he who speaks this content, who himself "speaks the Scriptures." We use the present tense, "speaks," advisedly; because to Luther no syllable of Scripture is a literary word of the past. Though God the Holy Spirit inspired the Word during a certain span of historical time exactly as the words stand, it is nevertheless – by virtue of the Holy Spirit continually operating in and by it – God Almighty speaking these words to you and to me *today*.

Let us then first consider briefly Luther's concept of holy Scripture from the aspect of its *content*, by which it opposes the natural religion of man's self-righteousness and self-glorification, which deceives him and leads him to hell. In the closest possible co-operative connection, yet radically distinct, we meet in this content God's "alien" work in the law, which condemns, and his "proper" work in the gospel full of saving grace. In the law God upholds his claim upon mankind as his creatures whom he made in his own image. Notwithstanding their fall into sin he still demands of them perfect holiness in thought and will, and all details of action. Thereby he totally destroys man's self-righteousness and exposes his self-made piety as willful idolatry and camouflaged continuance of his original rebellion against God. But faced with this divine verdict man's contradiction against the true God by no means becomes less, but inflames itself all the more passionately. This negative side of Scripture's content, which represents the law's appointed office to punish, is set forth by Luther in powerful language in the Smalcald Articles, Part III. Art. I-III (compare WA 40, I, 479ff and WA 36, 9ff; 17, I, 102ff; 36, 352ff and WA 10, I, 2, 399ff; 45:145ff; 29, 546ff). The positive side of Scripture's content is the accreditation of Christ's righteousness to man without the least reciprocal contribution on man's part. The difference between these two words of God is a subject which, in its application by proclamation, demands endless attention at the highest pitch of meticulous spiritual awareness.

Our particular concern here is that in this process the *unity of Scripture be not lost*. Since God's alien work in the law only serves his proper work in the gospel by preparing the way for reception by us condemned sinners of the inexpressible gift of the Redeemer and therewith our justification, the real content of Scripture is only *one: Christ*. Consequently, when seen correctly from the viewpoint of law and gospel, the whole of Scripture's Old and New Testaments have for Luther only this one content which preaches the way to salvation: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you and your house shall be saved" (Ac 16:31). For "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us (in our stead) that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Co 5:21). That is the preaching of his obedience and cross, that he died in our place as the curse, payment, and expiation for our transgressions of the law and is risen and lives for our good. That is what saves us, that Christ brings *himself – as our righteousness*. Out of the gift of the liberty which thereby is ours and which faith takes to itself, there blossoms for us the eternal blessedness, and out of it also there flows all our new being and doing.

To set forth this content is the basic factor in Luther's theological lifework. He announced it programmatically already in his *Exposition of Psalms*, 1513/14 in the words of 1 Corinthians 2:2: "Ego

non intelligo usquam in Scriptura nisi Christum crucifixum.” From the consistent execution of this program of faith and its understanding of Scriptures content, Luther’s theology developed like a great circle generated by its living center, *Christ*. Out of it there stands forth the saying near the end of his dissertation *On the Bondage of the Will*, 1525:

To sum up, since Scripture everywhere holds Christ before our eyes against everything that does not have the Spirit of Christ – I mean to emphasize that Scripture wants to say nothing beyond the fact that all things which are not Christ or in Christ are under the devil, death, error, darkness, blindness, under sin and the wrath of God – therefore *there stand against free will* all the passages that speak of Christ; and they are beyond counting; indeed that is no less than the whole Scripture! – *Tolle Christum e Scripturis, quid amplius in illis invenies?*” (W² XVIII, 1681, quoted in the words of Justus Jonas)

How he meant this Luther had already made clear in his lectures on Romans: “The whole Scripture treats everywhere of Christ only, when we look upon its inner meaning, even though superficially it may sound otherwise” (Ficker, 240, 10ff). “*He is the man to whom everything is in reference (in quem omnia sunt referenda)*” (WA Bible 5, 11, 24).

But while, on the one hand, the content of the canonical Scriptures are to Luther the “spoken Christ,” on the other hand they are to him the *speaking Christ (Christus praedicatus ET praedicans)*. In the Scripture just as it stands God, speaking to us today, confronts us directly with his full authority. Besides him, speaking there, no other source of saving revelation exists, and there will be none until the Last Day breaks in upon us. This Scripture principle, which excludes every other source of revelation, is the very foundation of Luther’s reformatory existence. Failure to understand this is rejection of the Reformation itself.

This speaking Christ who teaches *himself* to us and therewith gives himself to us is like an *eclipse*, in which beside the subjective case, the objective case furnishes the second focus. We note that the Lord Jesus *himself* (subject) teaches, appropriates, and seals *himself* (object) to us as the Son of God and Redeemer of the world by the content of Scripture. He does this, of course, not only through the printed Bible but also in *the means of grace which he entrusts to the church* and whose public administration he committed to the ministerial office by clear scriptural Word. But in view of the widespread enthusiastic theology of the Protestantism all around us, both Reformed and weakened and weakening Lutheranism, which are all downright hostile to exactness in doctrine, we must emphasize again that Christ does not speak, teach, and appropriate to us anything but and everything that he once for all has spoken and ordained already through his prophets and apostles, be it in regard to inward essence or outward form of the Word or of the church. *To the modern church which asks: “What does Christ speak to us today? What is the church commissioned by him to preach today?” The only answer is that not only the source but the norm also is found only in Scripture, that holy Scripture, in the ordinary sense of the words as they stand, is the voice of the Holy Spirit for which we seek and that Scripture alone performs this service; it alone has this authoritative stature. This is the scripture principle and with it the spiritual principle.* As Ragner Bring writes:

The Bible is something alive; it expresses the connection of a now living power with us; and this connection is mediated precisely by the fact that this power speaks. When God speaks, he creates. The Word is precisely the means by which he creates. He says to man: “Your sins are forgiven you,” and therewith forgiveness of sins has become reality. When God says something, then it becomes exactly what he has said (*vis dativa et effectiva*) (*Luther’s Concept of the Bible*, Berlin, 1951, p. 10f).

Bring adds (p. 13): “Since the Word is an actuality spoken by a present, living God there can never be a separating difference between Word and Spirit.”

4. Holy Spirit – Means of Grace – Scripture

- a) Through the Holy Spirit Christ comes to us in order to appropriate himself to us. But Christ and the Holy Spirit come only through the means of grace, that is, through the word of the gospel, which is the decisive element also in the sacraments. Commenting on Ps 23:4 (“Thy rod and Thy Staff”) Luther says:

For God has from the beginning of the world dealt with all his saints through his Word and beside it has given them external signs of his grace, to which our sacraments today correspond. This I say, in order that no one should dare to deal with God without these means or to build for himself a special way to heaven; else he will fall and break his neck. (W² V, 281:65)

For in the Word the sacraments are also “comprehended,” it is their real kernel (W² I, 1251:132). Baptism, Lord’s Supper, absolution “are indeed all external things, but they are comprehended and locked in the Word, wherefore then without them the Holy Ghost does nothing” (loc. cit.). And W² VII, 2130 adds: “When you let go of the Word, then Baptism is nothing but water and the Lord’s Supper is bread; for the real kernel of the sacraments is the Word.”

- b) Acceptance of the Word in faith takes place only through the Holy Spirit. One need think only of Luther’s explanation of the Third Article: “If we want to find the Spirit and life, we too must become spiritual; the words which I hear, if I am to understand them, that takes place through the Holy Spirit; he makes me spiritual too; for he writes it into my heart and in sum it is all Spirit” (W² VII, 2390:450, on Jn 6:63). The course the Holy Spirit steers runs counter to our own works, feelings, and reason: “When the Word of God comes it comes “*contra sensum et votum nostrum*” (Ficker II, 249:3). “Thus God points us toward himself and his Word and gives us to understand that no one finds God except alone through his Word” (WA 16, 53, 28). In a sermon on John 6:37 (“Him who comes to me...”) Luther says:

Reason does not do it, wealth and human wisdom and everything that is not God hinders and is no help in coming to this art, this bread and spiritual banquet, where we eat the food and bread of life. God alone must do it. What people do, however easy it may seem, is all a great hindrance... Christ wants to have pupils who are simple, who humble themselves and cling to the Word of God, embrace it and let themselves be taught. When they hear it, they do not act as judges and masters of its teachings but let themselves be reformed, mastered, and taught by the divine Word and assent to it... This is a comforting speech to those...who can say and conclude: “Now I know that I have been given to the Lord Jesus Christ by the Father.” For he feels that this Word pleases his heart and is willing for its sake to let go of everything that he has... When you hear this Word and it pleases you, then you eat this food, then your faith is a gift and grace from God; it is not a human aptitude or our own work. Therefore St. Paul says (2 Th 3:2) “*Non omnium est fides.*” And to the Ephesians, chapter 2:8f: “*Dei donum est, non ex operibus etc, ne quis glorietur.*” Therefore he says here: “No one can come to me, unless the Father draw him.” No one can hear me unless the Father gives it to him – for the proud, sage, wise heads who speak much and know how to judge and master everything, to them these

words are saying: “Don’t be such woolly heads as to think you can step in here with your reason; you shall not master Christ; your conceitedness and arrogance are here cast away!” (W² VII, 2246:121-123)

- c) The operations of the Holy Spirit by the means of grace are firmly tied to Scripture:

Hold fast to the Word only; take it in your fist and strike down into the midst of sin and death: “Here is God’s Word!” Then they all will turn to the side and make room for you. The devil has filled the world with spirits who preach of wind and of “Spirit” – but without Moses’ staff, for they have abandoned holy Scripture. I warn you, be careful; for I very much fear we shall lose God’s Word again, because of our ingratitude!... But he who has God’s Word feels indeed his sin, the law, and death, but they do him no harm. But he who does not hold this staff but listens to other spirits will drown in his bad conscience. (W² III, 902f)

Do we not find the very essence of this “Word and Spirit” doctrine in *our confessional writings*? In the Smalcald Articles we read: “We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacraments. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil” (Part III, Art. VIII, 10). And preceding this we read:

In these matters which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one the Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts – that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word, and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure. Muenzer did this, and many still do it in our day who wish to distinguish sharply between letter and the spirit without knowing what they say or teach. The papacy, too, is nothing but enthusiasm, for the pope boasts that “all laws are in the shrine of his heart,” and he claims that whatever he decides and commands in his churches is spirit and law, even when it is beyond and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word. (loc. cit. 3f)

These two confessional passages decisively define Luther’s position in every respect. As he does battle for the principle “by grace alone, by faith alone, Christ alone,” he upholds against both adversaries the *word* in opposition to man’s own spirit. The main attack he sees in the fact that the Scriptures or spoken Word of the apostles is held to be without force, man’s own fancies set up alongside of it, and the Scriptural Word reinterpreted according to man’s own opinion. Against this Luther stands for *the authoritative Word which is not to be separated from the book*.

- d) Behind the Word there indeed stands the commission to go into all the world. But this grant also of *plenipotentiary missionary power is specifically tied to the Word of the apostles and prophets* (Jn 17:20; Mt 28:20) *on which the church itself is built* (Eph 2:20). Luther says:

Jesus Christ our Lord, who gave his apostles and all ministries *ecclesiae Dei* the command to preach, puts a word into their mouth. That is another kind of word, namely the Word of God which is eternal. This word has another kind of power, the power to forgive sins which no other word has. (W² V, 245:16)

And unconditionally, unexceptionally it is always the case that: “We are not the ones who teach our own word, but our mouth shall serve God’s Word only” (W² IV, 623).

5. Relation between Authority and Content

As pointed out Luther had to carry out his spiritual warfare against a double front of enthusiastic error, the papists on the right and the sacramentalists on the left. Both seek to turn the gospel of grace into law, and both do it in accordance with their particular kind of human reasoning, the former in favor of an institutional type of reason, the latter in favor of an anti-institutional, individualistic type of reasoning. In opposing them and all seeking of salvation by human effort Luther sees *the only possibility of preventing the destruction of Scripture's content in the strict upholding of Scripture's authority*. This is not to be misunderstood as though a confident faith in Scripture came before the faith in Christ set forth at the beginning, Christ is the starting point; therefore the opposite is the case. Scripture, which at first usually means not the reading of the Word, but the hearing of the preached gospel which derives from it, creates first the faith in Christ: "When I believe (that Christ is the Son of God), *then* I believe that God in his Word is truthful and does not lie" (W² IX, 1510:32).

This faith in Christ, however, is nothing else than faith in the word of promise. There is no faith in an unmediated presence of Christ outside of and beside the Word: "Outside of his Word and without his Word we know nothing of Christ, much less what he wants to tell us" (*Wittenberg Concordia*, W² 2015:18). And just preceding that: "For with this talk of theirs the Words of Christ are taken away from before our eyes and belief made free as the air, without the Word, according to one's own ideas. But I want to have the words and put my faith in them 'as they read'!" So we see that faith itself does not tolerate any discrediting of Scripture's authority or even the least stepping outside or beyond its plain words, for the basis of faith's saving trust rests *in* the authoritative Word. Is it not the "Speaker Christ" himself, the Revealer Christ, the Ambassador coming out of the Father's own bosom, in whom dwells all Scripture's content? In contrast to the law, of which fallen human nature still knows something, the gospel rests entirely upon the revelation coming from above (1 Co 2:6ff). Therefore Luther wrote already in his programmatic *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520: "Away! away! with the thought that there should be even the least point in all of Paul which the whole universal church should not follow or hold to" (W² XIX, 20). This corresponds with Luther's never wavering conviction: In theology one must only hear, believe, and hold fast: "God is truthful (*verax*), however ridiculous what God says in his Word may seem to our reason" (WA 40 II, 593, 34f). Finally, speaking of the Trinity: "When I know that it is God's Word and that God has spoken it, I do not ask further how it could be true but let the Word be sufficient to me, however it may rhyme with reason (W² XII, 651: 12). "Even though so many and still more thousands – and they all holy teachers of the church – had held this or that tenet, they all have no validity over against a single passage of Holy Scripture," 1518 (WA 1, 384, 32).

6. Objectivity vs. Subjectivity in the Reformation's Development

a) Luther's total confidence in Scripture is grounded in its *objectivity*, which, in the course of the Reformation's development, he was forced to defend even more emphatically and continually against the "wagging monkey tails" of Zwingli's and his fellows' subjectivism than against Erasmus' humanism or Karlstadt's aberrations. He warns that once faith somehow comes to believe in itself as the object of belief, then it will in time find itself unable to acknowledge even Christ's own divine-human person and work. What, then, will it have left in its hand but law? And it will be an even more attenuated and weakened law than Rome can bring into the fray. No! The reality of the case is that it is a matter of that Word which is directly audible and visible – and this does not diminish its divinity; rather its human characteristics are the bridge that invites and induces faith to cross over to the speaking God and his salvation: "The Word of God does uncountable good; yes, it

does all things” (W² XX, 875; 283), “but the devil with his enthusiasts is so hostile against the divine Word, that he always wants to separate it from the external thing. But God wants it to be unseparated and comprehends each into the other” (loc. cit. 879:292). *The saving act of faith can latch only on to the data which stand objectively in view outside of itself:*

I would like to know where they (the Swiss leaders) get the fact that there is one God, that the Son of God became man, that one must believe in him, and all the other articles of our faith, which have never entered into any human being’s reason. Did they know them by the Spirit, before they bodily and externally heard or read them? Here they cannot but answer “No,” of that I am certain. For they have it through the bodily external Word and Scripture. How then can such external Word be “of no use,” through which the Holy Spirit is given with all his gifts?” (loc. cit. 836:183)

Is this “uselessness” of the Word not the very thing intended also by the ceaseless attacks of the newest theology against all that is objective in Christianity, against everything that has been “objectivized,” as they say, in Scripture? Luther’s compact dissertation, *That these words “This is My Body etc.” still stand firm etc.* from which we are quoting, repeatedly answers this question in words which clear-sightedly foresee this future development: “You teach what can readily be understood and for which no faith is necessary... St. Paul is not such a refined teacher; he teaches what no one can understand” (loc. cit. 888:314). But this spirit will continue and attack more articles; its eyes are already aglitter to think that Baptism, original sin, and even Christ himself are nothing (loc. cit. 766:9). For what in the last analysis is more unreasonable and unheard of than that God became man? (cp. loc. cit. 815:128) If Oecolampadius’ “rhyming with reason” comes to be taken as a valid hermeneutical principle, who is then not able to demonstrate plausibly that the incarnation is contrary to the “honor” of the Son of God? (loc. cit. 818:134); or that the Scripture, which commands: “Be fruitful and multiply,” contradicts itself when later it teaches the virgin birth – especially since at the same time it also proclaims Christ as God the Creator? (loc. cit. 796:78f) Luther comments: “That is Oecolampadius’ ‘Spirit’ and most famous ‘truth,’ that conceit and unbelief should be valued above the Word of God and made the basis for our faith. No, these Scriptures are not contrary to each other; one can indeed say it but not prove it.”

- b) **Subjectivism of love vs. faith.** All Enthusiasts who deny the concrete objectivity of the Word of God and its identity with Scripture, now as then, justify themselves by placing love above the truth of the scriptural faith. Of them Luther says:

It is no help to them that they boast of how they teach Christ truly and praise him in other points of doctrine. For he who seriously denies, dishonors, or slanders Christ in one article cannot teach and honor him truly at any other point. For Christ does not divide himself into parts; with whole heart and whole soul he wants to be loved and honored. Through these enthusiasts the devil prepares the way for other heretics who will come and say that Christ is nothing, that he did not come into the flesh, that he is not God, as happened at the beginning of Christianity. If this witness does not move men or help them to guard against such teachings and avoid the devil hidden therein, there is no help, they want to be lost. But not by any fault of mine, I have warned them enough; let their blood be on their heads (loc. cit. 873:279). So they make books and admonish that on account of this thing one should not tear apart Christian unity and love and peace. Well now...I say, cursed be such love and unity into the depths of hell, because not only does it woefully tear Christianity to pieces but also mocks and makes it into foolishness... These enthusiasts are convicted by this one little point, that they think God’s Word and cause of

little account and set them below human love, just as though God had to step aside for man and his Word were valid only according to man's agreement or disagreement with it. (loc. cit. 772:22ff)

B. The *Objective Churchly Character* of Luther's Doctrine of the Holy Word of God

7. Consciously Acknowledged Formal Principle of the Holy Word of God

We would be deliberately persisting in the fatal blindness over against everything the Reformation stands for, to which Rationalism and then, at the beginning of this century, the historical-critical scientism was fated, if today we would still refuse to understand that, from the time of the Leipzig debate, Luther arrived at a second fundamental, deliberate, and irrevocable decision, which is just as important as his earlier decisive experience in connection with Romans 1:17, which set the Reformation in motion. In that first decision it became clear to him, *which* righteousness it is that justifies us (W² XIV, 446ff) and how law and gospel are to be distinguished (WA, TR, No. 5518). In this second decision, which follows from the first and stands or falls with it, he decided, by the Holy Spirit's power, against the flesh as a source of faith, against every religion of subjectivistic inwardness or external observances (both of which end in work righteousness) and instead turned in total trust to the infallible Scripture's written Word as the only source and norm of saving faith.

All contrary assertions notwithstanding there is not a hair's breadth of difference between Luther's view of Scripture and that of the Formula of Concord's *Comprehensive Summary Rule and Norm* at the start as well as in its Article III and in what the orthodox dogmatists state as the primary thesis of their Prolegomena and doctrine *de Scriptura*. That Luther was fully aware of the significance of the *sola scriptura* principle as the outward, formal determinant of what is God's Word is clear from the quotation already cited above and should be amply sufficient, were it not for the fact that today we are faced with an entirely different theological attitude since the days of the rationalistic Enlightenment and of Romanticism and then again since the rise to dominance of the deistic historical-critical method and with it the evolutionistic concept of *Religionsgeschichte* and Existentialism. To meet the resulting misrepresentations of Luther, further testimonies from his writings are called for.

In his exposition on the Evangelist John, written at the height of his reformatory activity, 1530-1532, Luther cannot be too emphatic in asserting Scripture's formal principle:

If someone wants to do according to his own will and judgment and preach what pleases him and hear what he wants to hear, he has heaven barred against him and shall never taste even a particle of what is holy Scripture. They may make a big noise and imagine that they can improve on Scripture, but nothing can come of it. So it shall be with pope and enthusiasts when they set themselves up as masters over Scripture; the Holy Spirit and heaven shall be locked against them. It cannot and will not be otherwise, for God says: "Him only shall you hear" (Mt 17:5). You shall not find fault with him or be wiseacres who set bounds or measure to him, how his words are to be understood, but the whole world shall be under him. "Think of and hear him, that is my will. If you will hear him, I will make true disciples, yes, real masters of you, that from my Word you will be able to judge of all doctrine." (W² VIII, 33:76)

Now a Christian soon smells from afar where there is Word of God and where there is doctrine of men where one speaks from himself; he sees from afar that the fractious spirits speak out of themselves and their own heads and thinking... They cannot escape

me, I can soon decide and judge whether their thing is God's Word or human teaching (Humanism). For I do the will of God who has sent Christ, John 7:17... I say: "Dear Lord Christ, I want to be your pupil..." So then he makes me (Dr. Luther) a teacher who is caught up in the Word of God and also can judge... A Christian can distinguish doctrine from doctrine and say: "That has God spoken, that has he not spoken." Also: "This is from God, that is from the devil." Therefore St. Paul says, 1 Co 2:15, that the spiritual man, who has God's Word, judges all doctrine, yes, all spirits, but those teachers and spirits cannot judge him." (loc. cit. 34:77)

The Christian church (*una sancta*) has judged and condemned Arius, Pelagius and all other heretics, yes, hurled a whole sea of heretics into the depths of hell through the Word of God – not as though she were mistress over God's Word, but rather that she listens to Christ alone and does the will of him who sent him, and that she is a pupil of this man, of his Word and teaching. *That* is how she is a mistress over all things. (loc. cit. 35:78; read the whole section, columns 32-36)

Neoprotectionism's argumentative intellectual pride takes the attitude that its theological task is to pick, by its own sagacity, the bits and pieces of divine truth out of the historically evolved text of Scripture. Even in the right wing of Neo-Lutheranism there no longer exists that humble certainty of the Fathers which accepts what Holy Scripture states and proclaims as valid, simply because that is God's way of doing his work among men. Only where faithful remnants saw through the pretensions of the surrounding *Schwärmertum* and persevered in the attitude of the old Lutheran church, was the reigning subjectivism avoided. And these true confessors often had to put up with the charge of being Fundamentalists of the Reformed type by the very people who no longer can distinguish clearly between law and gospel nor set them into proper relation – if the gospel did not escape them altogether!

8. Verbal Inspiration – External Clarity

Luther naturally never thought that the opinion would be attributed to him that the "Word of God" proclaimed in the church could mean anything else than the proclamation of the Word of holy Scripture. This great principle of identification of Word of God with Scripture is not the invention of Matthias Flacius or the dogmaticians of the 17th century but the fundamental concern of Luther himself. Of the papists he says:

They all confess that indeed the Word of God is nothing else than holy Scripture. But! (they claim) out of the Fathers and the church councils one can have it better! Let them go! It is enough that we know how this principal thing, this sanctuary refuge (i.e. holy Scripture) sweeps clean, maintains, nourishes, strengthens, and protects the church. (W² 2247f)

And against both papists and enthusiasts in the Smalcald Articles:

...who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word, and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure... All this is the old devil and the old serpent, who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them away from the external Word of God to spiritualizing (*Geisterei*) to their own conceits, and yet did it through other external words!...just as though the Spirit could not come through the (external) *Scripture and spoken Word of the apostles*. (Part III, Art. VIII, 3, 5f)

This total identification of the Word of God with holy Scripture can mean only one thing: Scripture's *verbal inspiration*. For it expresses the exclusive Spirit origin and Spirit molding throughout of the canonical books. But since this great subject demands an essay of its own we restrict ourselves here to a brief summarizing outline which, however, corresponds to and reflects the unshakable certainty of Scripture's divine truth in every word.

We introduce it by calling attention to the most notable examination published in this century into Luther's attitude toward Scripture by E. Thestrup Pedersen in Danish under the title: *Luther Som Skriftfortolker*, subtitle: *En studie i Luthers skriftsyn, hermeneutik og eksegesi* (Kopenhagen, 1959). Unfortunately it has not been translated at this writing (1965). But it is supplied with an appendix which summarizes the text in German. Pederson says (p. 459f.):

Luther's faith in inspiration is not a scholastic element of which he failed to cleanse himself in his understanding of Scripture; it is rather *deeply rooted* in the very center of his teaching, namely, *the witness to the justification of the godless through faith alone*. Luther's concept of inspiration is genuinely reformatory; for his *faith in verbal inspiration is an inalienable part of the Protestant doctrine concerning holy Scripture*. Christian truth comes to us in a revealed Word; it does not arise out of the depths of our own religious consciousness; it is not tied to ecclesiastical office nor to subjective religious experiences. As Luther says, the internal Word of the Spirit is transmitted only by the external word of the gospel; that is the fundamental fact which determines Luther's belief regarding inspiration.

1. In corroboration of what Pedersen says about the verbal or total inspiration for which Luther stands in opposition to its weakening either by turning it into an inspiration merely of persons or by acknowledging it with respect only to parts of Scripture's content, we refer the reader to the numberless expressions with which any reader of Luther must have met. These are expressions which perform the following functions:
 - a) Expressions by which Luther "gives the whole Scripture to the Holy Ghost" and calls it "the Holy Spirit's book" (W² III 1890; IX 1775);
 - b) Expressions by which he makes the Holy Spirit, who cannot lie and does not make fools of his readers, author of every word as it stands and as it must be understood in its context (W² IV, 1960; II 772);
 - c) Expressions by which he makes the Holy Spirit the holy author who determines also the emotions with which the writers express themselves, the author of their occasional inconsistent sentence structure or anacoluthons, also burdens him with responsibility for descriptions of certain painfully embarrassing sexual sins (as in his Genesis commentary), also of occasional reports of events which seem to be out of their proper order etc. *πάντα θεῖα* – the Holy Spirit did not set down one syllable in vain!
 - d) But the reader of Luther, is no less acquainted with the *πάντα ἀνθρώπινα* included in this *πάντα θεῖα*. *This double πάντα must be unfolded in any presentation of the doctrine of verbal inspiration*. For, as Luther's readers know, he left sufficient elbow room to spare for the individuality of the different messengers of God and for the historical circumstances of their time. But this not in the Nestorian manner, as though the *πάντα θεῖα* were nailed on top of the *πάντα ἀνθρώπινα* like one board on the other with no communication between the two. So does

Karl Barth indeed see it, for he can let the divine intrude upon the human only momentarily and even then only subjectively (see *Church Dogmatics* I, 2, p. 587 and all his teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit).

- e) Luther lets himself be guided by strict Christology also in his doctrine of holy Scripture, the human element being indeed genuine and complete – but nevertheless
- f) accepted and received into the divine, not in an auto-hypostatic but in an enhypostatic manner, that is, not as an autonomous human element but as a human element embodied into the divine Scriptural essence – analogous to the Chalcedonian relationship.

2. Verbal inspiration guarantees not only certainty, but with it necessarily also the *external clarity* of the canonical Scriptures. For God does not play hide and seek with us in his revelation, but imparts to us sure information of events that really happened, showing us their significances for us, so that in all statements, doctrinal or informative, we can simply take him at his Word. Only in connection with the clarity of this sure Word is Luther's radical rejection of Erasmus to be understood, who constantly sought to adjust Scripture's Word to reason by taking mediating positions: "The Holy Spirit is not a skeptic!" "He has written into our hearts not things that are doubtful or mere opinions but firm assertions that are more certain and sure than life itself and all experience" (W² XVIII 1680f). Also this doctrine of the clarity of Scripture belongs to Luther's reformatory break-through. Rome taught exactly the opposite.

Already in the exposition of Ps 37, which appeared in print on August 12, 1521, there is a classic statement on Scripture's clarity:

If someone wants to assault your faith, telling you that one must have the interpretation of the Fathers, because Scripture is dark, then answer: It is not true! for there is on earth no clearer book written than holy Scripture. Compared to all other books it is like the sun against all other lights. They tell us such things only to raise themselves above us as our masters, in order to make us believe their dream sermons. (W² V, 334 below)

Be assured and without doubt that there is nothing brighter than the sun, that is, the Scripture. But if a cloud has moved in front of it, there is nevertheless nothing else behind it than the same bright sun. So if there is a dark passage in the Scripture, do not doubt there is certainly the same truth behind it which at another place is clearly stated. (loc. cit. 337)

The principle of the clarity of Scripture means that there cannot be two opinions about what it says. Against all such fancies Luther sets the *solus Christus*, who destroys all humanizing thought patterns by his *sola scriptura*. It is true what Reinulf Barbers says:

The understanding that the other man also has a right to his opinion, which is the taproot of all tolerance, is altogether alien to Luther. His fundamental conviction is that Scripture is transparent, clear, and has only one meaning (*ist eindeutig*). So there resulted for him with complete decisiveness the right and duty to stand for one single understanding, which is received from Scripture as the truth.

[Translator's note: After this series of excerpts from "Luther's *Grundstellung zur Heiligen Schrift*", supplied with suitable connecting sentences, we return to "Church and Unity of Doctrine," closing our presentation with the last five theses of that essay, which apply the truth of the Word to the church.]

9. The Lord of the church, whose Word calls the church into being and sustains it, is its one prophet and its one king. His sheep hear his voice. When he then entrusts his Word to this one holy church of believers for proclamation internally and to those without, it is with the self-evident understanding that *every change or abridgment of its content by the external, acting church* (which contains also hypocrites) commits the *crimen laesae majestatis* against Christ's divine sovereignty.

Consider the solemnity with which the Lord demands faithful discipleship and obedience: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his cross and comes after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26f). This demand includes specifically the obedience to the Word and doctrine: "If you *abide in my Word*, then you are truly my disciples and shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him and disclose myself to him. If you abide in me and my Words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you. By this is my Father glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...teaching them all that I have commanded you" (Jn 8:31f; 14:21; 15:7f; Mt 28:19f). It is clear therefore that the one catholic church, the communion of saints, as the obedient bride of Christ, guards and must guard the whole pure truth entrusted to her: "I write that you may know how to conduct yourself in the household of God which is the church of the living God, the pillar and mainstay of the truth" (1 Ti 3:15).

This holds true independently of the subjective question to what extent salvation depends on the fully perceived whole truth of revelation, that is, where the borderline is beyond which error has reached its full measure and become deadly. In any case the Formula of Concord's Article X, dealing with *church fellowship* is to be understood strictly from the standpoint of the principle of *full purity of doctrine*. In practice *the distinction between evil intent and weakness of understanding, between false doctrine and incomplete doctrinal insight is often difficult and confusing*. Caution and the forbearance of love are therefore important, since the acting church militant nowhere grows beyond still remaining weaknesses of individuals even in doctrine. Nevertheless the difference between Christ's voice and the voices of strangers is never relative but absolute, always that between Christ and Belial (Jn 14:4f; Ro 16:17, 20; 1 Jn 2:21; 2 Co 11:15; 2 Ti 2:17f). See also in Matthew, in 2 Thessalonians, in John's First Epistle, and in Revelation the passages speaking of false Christs and antichrist).

10. Unity of doctrine is not only a negative but, above all, a positive requirement, whose aim is that *the whole message be sounded out in its living, authentic relationship of law to gospel*, that nothing that is needed for salvation and the entire service of the saints be omitted (compare AC VII within its context of all the other articles of the faith confessed in the Augsburg Confession and the Schwabach Articles, also FC X, 31).

In Deuteronomy 4:2 we are told: "You shall not add to the Word which I command you nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you." And again, at the end of God's revelation we are told (Rev 22:18f): "I testify to everyone who hears the Words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book." Both of these texts cover both covenants and both Testaments of God. If it is said already of the Old Testament: "All Scripture is profitable" (2 Ti 3:14-17), then this applies with even greater force to the apostolic word: "Teach them to keep *all* that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20;

Jn 8:31f). In this connection we must constantly remind ourselves that *between the material principle of Scripture and the formal principle there exists a Chalcedonian relationship: ἀσυγχύτως - ἀχωρίστως, unmixed, yet unseparated.*

We also remind ourselves that the old Lutheran teachers were far from being inept in holding that, reduced to the basic procedure, the totality of doctrine consists of the sedes doctrinae themselves with their larger connection within the whole divine kerygma.

- 11.** The *sharp struggle carried on by Jesus and the apostles against all-human tradition* is far removed from anything like the modern “pointilistic” existentialism in which divine truth exists only moment by moment when and as it is realized in an individual’s mind. The truth *they* proclaim exists objectively, independent of any individual’s attitude, and is grasped only by total assent to the divine Word as transmitted. The passing on of this truth represents a continuous chain of the Holy Spirit’s working through this Word, which extends to the Last Day, and to which now, since the perfect completion of the prophetic-apostolic revelation, we have nothing to add, but are called upon to receive it in faith by the power of the Holy Spirit residing in and working through it, to draw from its riches to their very depths, not by addressing only the intellect but in the faith-engendering way that shapes men’s lives, and finally to pass it on as the faith to be believed (*fides quae creditur*), unchanged. This includes, on the one hand, the ability to express the divine truth in our own words by the Holy Spirit’s power, and on the other, to formulate it in fixed confessional statements, running through the centuries of the church’s history, for defense against the seductive errors continually arising against the faith of the one holy church. *The great, decisive confessional symbols that were and are born out of Holy Scripture from part of this chain of the Holy Spirit’s work and are therefore not subject to revision.*

Jesus expressed his rejection of human tradition most decisively: “You invalidate the Word of God with your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the commandments of men’” (Mt 15:1-9). The apostolic word applies this to the New Testament church: “Having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Christ and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with thankfulness, see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceptions according to the traditions of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not through Christ” (Col 2:7f). Jesus’ attitude to the Old Covenant is very clear: “Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter (yohd) or stroke (serif) shall pass away from the law until all is fulfilled” (Mt 15:18). The whole series of passages beginning with ἵνα πληρωθῇ have the same significance. Jesus stands within the covenant word and for the covenant word and, at the same time, over the covenant word as the *son* there promised, himself its author and external ἔγω.

Jesus’ gospel is the gift to be passed on. But as his human μάρτυς does this, he himself never becomes its teacher in his own right, even were he an apostle; he never advances to the status of the Greek philosopher, the Jewish rabbi, or our leading university professors. Even the laws of empirical research in the sciences and the earnest insistence on a strictly objective search for truth can serve here only as handmaidens. The Lord alone is the decisive authority; *his* Word is to be transmitted in simple faithfulness, without self-important undertones or overtones, to the “saints by calling, according to the foreknowledge of God the Father by the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (1 Co 1:2; 1 Pe 1:2), “just as we also have received it” (1 Co 15:3 in its context of vs. 1-10). The παρέδωκα δὲ καὶ

παρέλαβον (1 Co 11:23) rules all gospel proclamation . Though Paul learned it *διὰ αποκαλύψεως* directly from the Lord (Ga 1:12), his gospel is none other than that proclaimed by the apostles in general (2:5-9). The Galatians and Corinthians are to keep it just as they have received it from him (*παρελάβετε*). The Thessalonians are told: “So then stand firm and hold fast (*κρατείτε τὰς παραδόσεις* – 2 Th 2:15), to which is added expressly: *ἅς ἐδιδάχθητε*, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.” Even the Romans, who had not been visited by any apostle, can be told in Paul’s Epistle: “But thanks be to God that, though you were slaves to sin, you became obedient from the heart *to the form of doctrine to which you were committed*, εἰς ὃν παρεδόθητε τύπον (standard) διδαχῆς.” To Timothy the apostle writes: The things you have heard from me in the presence of (*διὰ*) many witnesses, these commit (*παράθου*) to faithful men who will also be able to teach others (2 Ti 2:2).

The fact that the Word is lodged in the church in the form of *παραθήκη* (deposit, entrustment) does not deprive it of its dynamic. Not only does the *παραθήκη* actively rule in the church as *ὑποτύπωσις ὑγιαίνοντων λόγων* (2 Ti 1:13f), but it generates out of itself as the *norma normans* also the church’s *norma normata* in the form of catechism (for internal instruction) and confessional symbol (for defense against error). Compare the beginning of such public confessional formulations in the New Testament itself, not only at Matthew 16:16; 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 4:3-6, but also in such passages as Hebrews 4:14 etc. This *norma normata* is not only the simple “yes” of the church to the Word, the human echo to the divine voice, but also, notwithstanding its total dependence on the Word, *a genuine confessional symbol, is actual Scripture doctrine in historical action*, divine truth aimed at a specific point and hence itself *doctrina divina*. And since the church itself is not only an existential point here and now, but a continuing entity throughout the course of the world, this *norma normata* of confessional symbol is binding upon the church throughout historical time as divine doctrine (Lk 10:16). This follows also from all the Scripture passages we have adduced, which show us the one doctrine of the one *una sancta* in continuous action.

Faithful Christian theologians join with the Smalcald Articles in declining to tear apart Spirit from letter, content from form (Part III Art. III, 3-13) of the prophetic-apostolic Word of revelation, in which our Creator and Redeemer – who is in no way a deistic God – makes use of human modes of speech and formation of concepts; for he is himself also the creator and sovereign Lord of language. They refuse to join in the efforts to find in this Word, which proceeds from the one mouth of Christ (Mt 4:4; Jn 8:31f.; 10:8, 16f.; 8:36f.; Mt 23:8; 28:20) contradictory statements and doctrinal confusion, this Word of his which binds us so emphatically, clearly and closely to the one and only *διδαχή, παράδοσις, παραθήκη, ὑποτύπωσις ὑγιαίνοντων λόγων!* The testimony of the Holy Spirit shining in and through the unanimous witness of the congregation of saints of all time is more decisive and convincing to them than the plausibilities of modern historical criticism or the assertions about the relativity of all results of historical research. In view of Christ’s promises in John chapters 14 to 16 and 1 Timothy 3:15, they refuse with no less decisiveness to join in the denial to the *una sancta perpetua mansura* of the post-apostolic ages the plenipotentiary authority to go into all the world and all its different religious faiths *διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν* and instead to retire into a “biblicism” which is estranged from the Confessions and hostile to Christian dogma, atomizing the Word’s teaching into an endless fog of doctrinal

differences between the holy writers, with the result of surrender of all certainty and ending in a purely human religion.⁷

- 12. Error**, which counters truth at every step, *bears a double mark of Cain on its brow. On the formal side* it offends against Holy Scriptures as the written Words of God himself; *on the material side* it violates Scripture's content, which distinguishes between law and gospel. These two sides are one, since the center of the Scriptures as a whole as well as of every one of its statements is the one Christ who fulfilled the law and took upon himself its curses for us. *This makes every attack on the formal authority of Scripture already a violation of its content, Christ, denying him who is its Lord.*

The definition of the essence of error follows from the preceding definition of the doctrine. From the virtually unlimited number of passages condemning false teachers and commands to avoid them three texts stand out: Matthew 5:17-19; Galatians 1:8f.; and 2 John 9-11. Jesus says: "Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke (that is, the exact form of words) shall pass away from the law, until all is fulfilled. Whoever then annuls (λύση) one of the least of these commandments and so teaches people shall be called the least (ἐλάχιστος) in the kingdom of heaven," when God's reign shall become public. Paul states that there is no other (ἄλλο) gospel.

Whatever deviates from the one gospel is ἕτερον (different) and under God's curse, even if an angel from heaven should proclaim it. What kind of teacher will undertake to throw doubts upon the unity of truth in the face of this divine curse? John instructs his readers: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching (διδασχῆ), do not receive him into your house and do not bid him welcome, for he who bids him welcome participates in his evil deeds." What, then of those who, in the face of Jesus' warning and the double apostolic interdiction defend indifferentism and unionism, setting themselves against the "ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ' αὐτῶν" (Ro 16:17) and the call to "come out from among their midst and be separate" (2 Co 6:17)? Compare the ominous characterization at 2 Timothy 2:17: "Their talk will spread like γάγγραινα (gangrene)."

Also *wrong church practice is destructive* and constitutes false doctrine, if it is defended in principle. For the external, acting church under the marks – insofar as it is indeed and truly church – never renounces the title of being orthodox and teaching correctly, least of all if it calls itself Lutheran. Therefore, if its practice is wrong, it must either correct it in accordance with its right teaching, or it will sooner or later adapt the teaching to conform to its false practice – as happened

⁷ It is not to be overlooked that this movement, which began about 200 years ago, is not something exceptional, but that the subjective rationalism of the intelligencia of any age usually takes the shape of a pseudo-biblicism. For it is more difficult, in a still largely Christian society, to attack the Bible directly than to question the supposedly too narrow definition of doctrine heretofore in use (as is the case today also with [C.]F.W. Walther's teachings). This trend is aided by the unfortunate circumstance that the correct doctrinal definitions are discredited because of unthinking, mechanical overuse due to the Old Adam's sloth in spiritual matters, which hinders conscientious spiritual thinking and constant reference to the Bible itself as *norma normans*. Orthodoxy itself then comes to be looked at as "traditionalism of the past" and the thirst for new things as "liberation," while actually it is connected with secular impulses arising from society's constant ferment. And now the way is free to attack the orthodox Confessions. On the one hand this is a concealed attack which absolutizes them by claiming that now further confessional decisions against error are no longer permissible. On the other hand the attack is direct: sharp distinctions are made between biblical teaching and confessional statements. Both attacks serve the same purpose, namely to dissolve the connection between the living Scripture and the living confession of the one church and in the final outcome to make both the confessional standard and its scriptural source into a dead letter, until only the enthusiastic claims and nicely balanced compromises or common denominators of unionistic ecumenism remain as the live actuality of the day.

even to the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians of the 17th Century because of their state church membership (see Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical–Lutheran Church*, p. 618f, where this development is traced in historical sequence from Gerhard to Baier under point [7]). For such deformation of doctrine shows up soonest in the doctrine concerning the church and then spreads to others, as we see today. The reverse process also takes place: false teaching on church and ministry brings about false practices, which rob the believer and the congregation whose member he is, of the liberty with which Christ has made them free; *for the autonomy of the divinely ordained congregation under the marks is the key to the realization of this liberty in the organized structure of the church body*. How difficult it is to remain faithful! Is it not the fact that ill-considered advice or action, according to worldly or false churchly viewpoints, can be observed daily, even where the need to maintain correct doctrine is still publicly acknowledged? For the worldly realms at God's left hand and the Christians' own flesh continually seek to intrude themselves into the inner and outer order of the church generated from above through the Word (Mt 26:41). Such *μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος* becomes heresy as it is accepted and defended. For Christ's truth is practical: "Teach them *to observe* all that I have commanded you." Here belong Galatians 2 and FC X. *This article of the Lutheran symbols is one of those which have the most to say to the church today in view of our time's temptations.*

- 13.** *The oneness or unity of doctrine in its essential relation to the church, which is its complement, does not result in security (as e.g. in the Roman system) but in certainty (in contrast to Rome and high church systems). It does not only make the individual believer certain of his state of grace under the terrors of a conscience aroused by the law, but always functions also to allot to him his place among God's people. For it teaches him to be certain of his membership in God's one church at the location where the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly administered, there to serve the ἐνότης τοῦ πνεύματος (Eph 4:3) in love and in doctrine and in resistance to error; for, since the Word from heaven is itself external, it is necessarily administered by an external office at a concrete geographical location by the public ministry and the universal priests, constituting an external gathering in a form shaped by the Word, particularly also by the doctrine of the keys of heaven.*

A certainty of doctrine on the basis of synodical or denominational loyalty but without the constant living distinction between law and gospel and the doctrines consequent upon it would, indeed, serve for a carnal kind of security. Then *we* would be the ones to "have" the truth instead of the truth having us (Ga 4:9). This Scriptural truth, and with it God, has us indeed totally and completely so far as justification is concerned, but sanctification is a daily struggle. For we are *simul justi et peccatores!* Accordingly we who live under the sway of the one sure truth are still disciplined by the law because of our evil flesh and warned against falling away, including *a falling away from loyalty to the una sancta to loyalty to a church body.*

Because of the distinction it makes between justification and sanctification it furthermore follows from the oneness of the doctrine of the one Christ and the one Holy Spirit that *no one within the whole Christendom on earth advances beyond the point where he no longer needs to learn*. Paul indeed assures the pastors assembled at Ephesus "...that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Ac 20:26f). But at the same time he writes to the Corinthians: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, now I know in part" (1 Co 13:12); and Peter admonishes his readers: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Therefore impatience with those who are weak is not something that follows from the certainty of doctrine; for to learn patience and bearing each others' burdens is part of this endless course of study. Only he knows God aright and is known of God who remains in his love (Ro 14; Ga

4:9a; 1 Jn 4:7-13). Therefore there belongs to the gift and task of unity of doctrine also the patience of doctrinal discussion.

So the consequence of the unity and purity of doctrine is not security in what we have attained but certainty in what we have been given, certainty over against the law and in the midst of trials, tribulations and doubts brought on by world, devil, and our own sinful flesh (1 Ti 4:16: *καὶ σεαυτὸν σώσεις καὶ τοὺς ἀκούοντας σου*; Heb 13:9; 1 Jn 5:4; Eph 4:11-16).

It is indeed a great blessing that by its unity and purity of doctrine the one worldwide church can be recognized and embraced at the particular given location. For the disciple of Christ can ascertain the presence of the *ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ* *only* by the fact that the means of grace are in use at a particular place or places as the pure marks of the *una sancta*, since it does not have the visible characteristics of the legalistic institutions of the realm at the left hand of God's government of the world (Ap VII, 5, 8, 10, 20, 27, 48). Only by the means of these public marks he finds the one and only church, becomes certain of it by this public evidence, and publicly fits himself into it by his own public relation to the public Word and sacraments there publicly in use. For the one holy church is there in this concrete reality of existence and action by the divine guarantee of Isaiah 55:10f (Ap VII, 20), even though its glory and the identity of its individual members is hidden under a veil (Col 3:3; 2 Ti 2:19), and even though these true members may be represented there by only a few persons. But because of the public evidence that they are "gathered together in my name (*εἰς τὸ ἕμὸν ὄνομα*)," Christ's presence with his bride – a presence of power, which resides in the pure marks – is a certainty (Mt 18:20), so that even the smallest assembly lacks nothing that belongs to the church with all its powers. This is the conclusion of faith: "I *believe* one holy Christian church" etc., not in the sense of a seeking hope but in the *certainty* that here is the *ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ*. For while it is indeed the Holy Spirit who, by the very act of creating faith, himself posits the integration of the individual into the people of God, the local congregation does not only register this on the basis of Baptism or public confession; but what happens here is also this, that faith, on the basis of the public spiritual action taking place at this location, has the inner certainty that *here* I am integrated into the one and only church of God and his Christ. The admixed evil persons and hypocrites are not grounds for doubting this as long as they cannot establish the synagogue of Satan within this congregation (Mt 13:24-30, 36-38; Ap VII/VIII, 17-20).

Nevertheless the command speaking to us from outside of ourselves as well as the faith within us demands the breaking of relations with any and every community bearing the church name which persistently teaches error, Titus 3:10: "*αἱρετικὸν ἄνθρωπον* – reject after a first and second admonition." Evidently there are conclusions to be drawn from all this for the training of pastors, compare 2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:9 and parallels. Likewise, evidently conclusions are indicated concerning relations with church bodies who adhere to false doctrine. For the making of the proper distinction between what is orthodox and what is heterodox cannot be avoided when dealing with particular congregations or church bodies, who, as we have seen, are all mixed bodies. Now it is true that the one church must be believed to exist where Word and sacraments are still substantially present (Ap VII/VIII, 20); for even when error has established itself alongside the truth, the church does not simply cease to exist (1 Ki 19:18; Ro 11:4). *But such a gathering about Word and sacrament immediately ceases to bear the marks of the one true church, because its internal doctrinal condition is characterized by an intolerable contradiction, in which the marks of the church and the marks of the devil's rule exist on equal terms.* How can an upright Christian swear by

two such radically opposed sets of marks? Is that not a denial of his Lord? Matthew 12:30 and the previously quoted 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 give us our answer.

The ecumenism and downright universalism of our day, which claims Christian truth even for pagan religions, abolishes even the last traces of the distinction between law and gospel which is the essential content of the Christian faith and of Christ's one church. The genuine ecumenical thinking of this living faith and the obedience to Scripture characterizing it judges all human associations claiming the name church not according to appearances or organizational solidarity and loyalty, but exclusively and strictly according to the scriptural *notae ecclesiae* alone. Since there is no historical guarantee against apostasy, the way the divinely ordained *κοινωνία* or unity between congregations or church bodies is practiced by the churches is subject to constant testing by the standard of these *notae purae* and their confessional *notae notarum*. This obligation of testing extends down to the individual pastors and congregation members (FC X, 10). *There is no legitimate historical or traditional loyalty over against any kind of concrete church organization, only to the una sancta itself!*

Therefore today less than ever dare we overlook the truth Meusel sets forth in his *Kirchliches Handlexikon* (VI, p.208):

Not mere unity but unity in the truth is required, as the Lord Christ prayed John 17: "that they all may be one in us." So the church too is ever the one congregation of saints gathered about the pure Word and the sacraments as Christ instituted them (AC VII). Therefore to separate from a falsely teaching church body cannot be called a sin against the church's unity but, on the contrary, is a duty over against the truth.

Meusel closes by cautioning: "Of course such separation dare not be undertaken frivolously or prematurely."

The present trend toward union within the western half-world, which, however, aims at global totality, moves the world's churchdoms closer to each other. That is a fact no one dare overlook. In this process an ecumenical movement is never from God, if it makes doctrine into something innocuous, planes down all doctrinal differences instead of overcoming them by the *pure* doctrine. For when God's world of heavenly truth irrupts into our human world of history interwoven through and through with lies, there is never a divine "Yes" in action without a corresponding "No" to set against error. *That is why the whole Bible is so polemical.* Today's so frequent attempts to by-pass the contradictions against God's truth by letting them go on untouched and only seek consensus among the church bodies, and in that way to arrive at unity, contradicts God's whole revelation of himself and is something that rises out of the nether darkness. If the striving for ecumenity should be carried on according to the far famed but infamous "branch theory" which looks upon the *una sancta* as a tree and the different denominations with their confessions as its branches, without overcoming the hardening of hearts in error and unfaithfulness, which developed historically in the past or is now developing empirically around and among us, then the attempt would be sectarian; it would, in the end necessarily result in a mixed global sectarianism. The effort to bring about such an externally legitimized sectarianism is now in process and has been for a hundred years. However, as it is achieved, Rome and probably Moscow would stand out from it as mutual opponents, the former with the claim that it is still taking the truth of God more seriously than the now emerging new Protestant (including Lutheran) formations. But the one Lord and only Savior demands that we contend for the true unity of Ephesians 4:1-13 and John 17. Only when an ecumenical movement proceeds from this mystery of the body of Christ, the one church of the justified sheep who hear their Shepherd's voice

and not that of strangers, is it a *church* or *una sancta* movement. Only so can it help the empirical churchdoms, alienated from the truth as they are, to move out of their self-contradictions introduced by the synagogue of Satan's intrusions. The *Magna Carta* of true ecumenicity lies before us in classical form in AC VII and VIII. It calls us to action according to principle as divinely laid down in the office of the keys, not according to expediency.

Conclusion

Here below it will never become visible to human eyes that – in spite of all contrary appearances – *the entire one church of believers is in unity of doctrine always, from the time of the apostles to the day of judgment*. But in the world to come down from above we will behold with our own eyes the miracle of the one shepherd with his one flock which existed throughout the whole history of the church on earth and finally has become manifest in the seeing face to face in the new heaven and earth.

When Luther's grand hymnal version of the Apostles' Creed sings of the Holy Ghost who "keeps the church, his own creation, in the unity of Spirit," and the Small Catechism confesses that he "keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith," these are not hyperbolies. Think of John 14-16 and 1 Timothy 3:15: "The household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and mainstay of the truth." Empirically closed to human observation (Luke 17:20) this conclusion of faith is nevertheless the pillar of faith's sure confidence. *The Christian concept of the church therefore is so "narrow" that only the truth of God belongs in it, but at the same time so "broad" that all believers of all times and zones of the earth are included in it*, be they strong or weak, notwithstanding in whatever Babylonian churchdoms their weakness may have entangled them, offensive though this is. This church always *seems* to be perishing:

But in order that we may be certain...that the Christian church on earth lives and is in being, which is the bride of Christ, though the crowd of the godless is more and greater, also that the Lord Christ is at work in the band which is called church, daily forgiving sins, daily hearing prayer, daily refreshing and again and again restoring his own with rich and strong consolation – for this the comforting article is set into the creed. "I believe a catholic, universal, Christian church." (Ap VII, 9ff; our translation from the German text of Triglotta, p. 228)

In the new world from above it will become evident that – in contrast to the total failure of all human religious wit and wisdom to solve the question of mankind's purpose and destiny posed by its original separation from God – the *una sancta* accomplished the perfect reunion with him. In the new heaven and new earth, where righteousness dwells and the devil and those that are lost and any evil shall no more enter in, the great voice from the throne will sound out: "Behold, the tabernacle of God with men, and he will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be among them."

For faith, therefore, which joyfully awaits the eternal day of seeing face to face, our elliptical theme: "Church and Unity of Doctrine" is only one theme, that of the church's thanks to God for his "indescribable gift." As certain as it is that in connection with the doctrine dealing with the church also the law has a service to perform, this doctrine is above all a doctrine of the gospel, itself a glorious glad tidings. It is a veritable ocean of comfort and consolation, as well a pillar of the certainty of salvation and a fountain of love and faithfulness and strength to combat and overcome error.

Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Glory to his Name for ever and ever. Amen!

