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The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
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Quotations from **The Book of Concord**, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., **The Book of Concord** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

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The Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions and the Historical-Critical Method

By Robert D. Preus

The Lutheran Confessions, including the ecumenical creeds, see themselves as expositions or at least summaries of the sacred Scriptures.¹ This bold assumption of the Confessions themselves is certainly a chief reason subsequent Lutherans subscribed the Confessions with utter seriousness, not merely as historic relics of the past but as living and contemporary symbols for every age, and why they have given their willing subscriptions with a *quia* formula: “**because** the Confessions agree with the sacred Scriptures.”

Today, therefore, Lutherans who wish to subscribe the Confessions in the sense and spirit of their original intention will need to pay some attention to the exegesis of

the Lutheran symbols and be satisfied that the symbols' exposition of Scripture is correct. It is, of course, the doctrinal content of the symbols they subscribe, not every exegetical detail of etymology, grammar, or choice of proof passages.² But they must realize that Christian doctrine is, on Lutheran terms, the result of exegesis. And so they must satisfy themselves that our Confessions are scriptural if they are to subscribe them.

Few students of the Confessions have dealt with the way in which they read and apply the Scriptures.³ The purpose of this paper is to summarize the various approaches of the Lutheran Confessions to the Scriptures and trace some of the hermeneutical principles of the Confessions in practice. A couple of assumptions lie behind such a survey.

First, I am assuming that all the Lutheran Confessions, with the exception of the three ecumenical creeds, see themselves as biblical and spring from the same hermeneutical backdrop while dealing with the Scriptures in a great variety of ways. There is no difference between the hermeneutical presuppositions and norms of Luther and Melancthon and the writers of the Formula of Concord who were their students. This means that we can meander freely through the Confessions, according to a sort of *analogia confessionum*, and find consistent hermeneutical assumptions and practices. Our task then is merely to note what seem to be the most obvious and important hermeneutical canons used by the Confessions and comment on them.

Second, biblical interpretation as carried out or assumed in the Lutheran symbols is a cognitive enterprise, consisting of both exegesis and application. The basic rules for such interpretation fall into two classes: those rules which are common to the interpretation of any and all literature (e.g., grammatical and historical analysis, clarity, analogy, etc.), and those principles derived exegetically from Scripture itself but at the same time unique to Scripture as the Word of God (e.g., the necessity of the Spirit's guidance to the exegetical task, the Christocentricity of Scripture, the law-gospel motif, etc.). My conviction is that there is and can be no conflict at all between the first and second classes of principles. There is nothing esoteric or reductionistic about the second class of principles. They are in every case based upon sound exegesis. For instance, if the article of justification is indeed the **praecipuus locus** of theology "which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures . . . and alone opens the door to the entire Bible," as Melancthon says (Apology, IV, 2, German), then it occupies this eminent position because Scripture teaches so.

What I have just said will in this paper be proved in the case of four basic theological principles employed in our symbols. But first I want to comment on the different exegetical approaches in our Lutheran Confessions. There is no single exegetical approach to the Scriptures in our Confessions but a great variety of approaches.

The Augsburg Confession in its first part presents a brief summation of exegetically based doctrinal assertions in a credal form. This it does with a minimum of biblical citation—in certain cases inadequate according to what we in retrospect might wish. In many of the articles no citation is offered from Scripture, although unquestionably deep and penetrating exegesis underlay Melancthon's assertions. Similar is the approach of Article IX of the Formula of Concord, "Christ's Descent Into Hell," as well as much of the Smalcald Articles.

The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VII, on the Lord's Supper, offers brief but very careful arguments from the context, history, and genre of one basic pericope for the Lutheran doctrine, and on the basis of such arguments dogmatic conclusions are drawn.

In FC, SD, II, we are offered the broad induction from the entire sweep of all Scripture, Old and New Testaments alike, on the question of fallen man's spiritual powers prior to conversion. Here is a splendid example of what came to be the **loci theologici** method in "dogmatics" which was in those days really a branch of exegesis, somewhat similar to "biblical theology" today. Another example of such an approach is FC, SD, VI, as it traces the flesh-spirit (Old Adam-New Man) motif in the New Testament.

FC, SD, I, presents a sort of commentary on the history recorded in Genesis 3 in the light of Romans 5 and the analogy of Scripture.

In the Large Catechism, with its specific purpose, a different approach is discernible: a homiletical, practical application of texts and pericopes to specific needs of the day. But again there is no doubt that a profound exegetical understanding of Scripture as a whole and of the pericopes underlies Luther's doctrinal statements.

There are also examples in our Confessions of intensive grammatical and historical exegesis of pertinent passages dealing with a single theme and also of the interrelation and agreement of these passages. The finest example of such procedure is Melancthon's discussion of justification of faith in Article IV of the Apology.

The Lutheran Confessions, therefore, make use of the Scriptures from a variety of approaches, each valid and significant according to its own perspective and purpose, thus presenting a scriptural theology which is broad in scope and eminently convincing. Such exegesis, while eschewing allegorization and specious questionings for hidden meanings (Ap, 24, 35; FC, SD, VII, 42, 45, 92; XI, 93) is more broadly based than the more atomistic, strictly analytical approach of our day as typified in much of the use of the so-called historical-critical method. But more significant, such exegesis invariably **leads** to doctrine ("We believe, teach, and confess") and application. This is

the very purpose of exegesis, particularly as it is employed in the Confessions. Again we see the crucial function of right exegesis which alone can lead to what our symbols call the **coelestis doctrina, die reine evangelische Lehre, die Lehre Gottes Wort, die unwandelbare Wahrheit göttliches Worts**, or simply, **evangelium Christi**.⁴ In some cases our Confessions identify the truth of the Scriptures with the truth of the doctrine drawn from the Scriptures.⁵

THE UNITY PRINCIPLE IN EXEGESIS

The Lutheran Confessions view and interpret the Scriptures as one book, the product of one author, the Spirit of God, testifying to one God and Christ, presenting one unified gospel and **doctrina coelestis**. This is more than a Christian presupposition. It is a working principle drawn inductively by our Confessions from the Scriptures themselves and accepted on the authority of Scripture.⁶ The unity principle is observed in the Confessions chiefly in the persistent use of the so-called **analogia scripturae**: the New Testament sheds light on the Old, and the Old on the New, and the entire Scriptures must be brought to bear on any theme, motif, or article of faith. Let me illustrate how this analogy of Scripture is operative throughout our Confessions as they do exegesis.

Analogical exegesis. Analogical exegesis in the first sense means thematic exegesis, tracing a theological theme throughout the Scriptures. An excellent example of such a procedure is found in FC, SD, VI, where the theology of

Romans 7 on the relation of flesh and spirit in the regenerate man to the law is discussed but in the light of massive Old and New Testament parallel data.

Analogical exegesis, however, is not merely an analytical sifting of all the biblical data pertaining to a specific theme or article of faith. Analogy can actually shed light on unclear passages of Scripture by applying grammatically and historically clear passages dealing with the same subject matter or article of faith, or it can add to our understanding of Scripture passages (Ap, IV, 87-101; Treatise, 23; Large Catechism, First Part, 64).

Analogical and thematic exegesis can mitigate what seems to be but is not the force of biblical assertions and injunctions. For instance, Galatians 1.20 and 2 Corinthians 1.23 mitigate what seems to be a universal prohibition in Matthew 5.33-37 (LC, I, 65). Melancthon uses Acts 5.29 to mitigate in a similar way a universal implication which the papists had attached to Matthew 23.3 (Ap, XXVIII, 21). And he employs the same principle (Ap, XXVIII, 20) to modify with Galatians 1.8-9 ("If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you have received, let him be accursed") a too stringent interpretation of Hebrews 13.17 ("Obey your leaders").

Analogical exegesis may produce a total thematic summary of a biblical subject. Melancthon, for

instance, offers a vast discussion of marriage, woman's calling, sex, and related subjects based upon data drawn indiscriminately from all over Scripture (Ap, XXIII, 7ff.). Again this is not a purely analytical enterprise, for his entire discussion is subjected to the article of the gospel and developed in the light of it, according to what may be called the **Hauptartikel** principle which I will discuss later. The same kind of procedure may be observed in Melancthon's discussion of sacrifice in Ap, XXIV, 16ff., which draws from Old and New Testament data but always from the perspective of the gospel of Christ as sacrifice. In this entire approach we see the seed of what later became systematic theology (**loci theologici**) in the Lutheran Church: the attempt to summarize the entire sweep of Scripture as it pertained to the articles of faith and to arrange them and view them from an evangelical perspective.

The analogical reading of Scripture results often in relating the articles of faith (of law and gospel) organically. In discussing original sin the Formula of Concord says, "... when it is presented clearly from and according to the Word of God and is purged of all Pelagian and Manichaeian errors, then (as the Apology declares [I, 44, 46]) we are led to understand better and to magnify more fully Christ's benefits, his precious merits, and the Holy Spirit's gracious activity. Furthermore, we are extolling God's honor properly when we carefully distinguish his work and creation in man from the devil's work, the corruption of human na-

ture" (FC, SD, I, 3). The thought here is that all Christian theology is a unit, and therefore the articles of faith, drawn inductively from Scripture, are organically related. Obviously there is no thought of mitigation at this point: the law does not mitigate the gospel, sin does not mitigate grace, or vice versa. Otherwise law and gospel would be hopelessly confused, as seen in legalism and antinomianism (FC, IV, V, VI). The point here is that only when law and sin are taught clearly "according to the Word of God" (i.e., Scripture) will the proper framework, context, and preunderstanding for the teaching of the gospel be present. Otherwise, to quote Melancthon, Christ is completely buried (Ap, IV, 81). Not only a corruption of a sacrament (which is gospel) contaminates the gospel itself (Ap, XXXIV, 91), but also a false teaching regarding sin or the law may completely destroy the gospel (Ap, IV, 110, 121, 223; XII, 77). A misreading of the law texts as gospel or gospel texts as law may result in a complete misreading of Scripture (Ap, IV, 7, 29ff., 224ff.).

Thus we see that the articles of faith, although related to each other and complementing each other, do not mitigate or conflict with each other. A Scripture passage dealing with obedience to authority (Hebrews 13.17) may indeed be mitigated by another pas-

sage concerning the priority of preaching the gospel (Galatians 1.8) (Ap, XXVIII, 20). But this is not the case with the articles of faith which have been drawn, using analogical exegesis, from the Scriptures. For instance, the doctrine of universal redemption clearly articulated in FC, SD, XI, 15, does not and cannot mitigate the doctrine of particular election which is taught throughout the entire article, although logically the two articles cannot be harmonized. Each article is gospel, and each must be taught with integrity as it is drawn from Scripture and in organic relation to the other.

Drawing inferences in exegesis.

The unity principle in interpreting Scripture will often lead to inferences in exegesis. These inferences are valid and as binding as biblical statements themselves. For instance, the biblical teaching that Christ is the propitiator who has reconciled us to the Father leads to the conclusion that we cannot appease God's wrath by setting forth our own works (Ap, IV, 80). Since the forgiveness of sins is something promised for Christ's sake, it can only be accepted by faith (Ap, IV, 84; cf., 17). Since the natural right to contract marriage is the result of God's created order, it is a divine right which must always remain (Ap, XXIII, 9ff.). Acts 15.9 (Ap, IV, 284), which teaches explicitly that hearts are purified by faith, may be used to prove by inference that bishops have no right to burden consciences with human traditions. Such examples of valid inferences or conclusions drawn from clear passages of Scripture

could be multiplied indefinitely. But all is done within the circle of the organic unity of Scripture.

Obviously there are illicit, but logical, inferences which cannot be drawn from Scripture passages simply because such inferences would run counter to definite articles of faith or other clear Scripture passages. For instance, the necessity of faith for salvation does not infer that baptism is not objectively valid for one who does not believe (LC, IV, 58, 60). It is extremely important that inferences and conclusions drawn from Scripture have the force of doctrine for a confessing church which wishes to use the Scriptures alone as a source of Christian doctrine. But it is equally important that such inferences be drawn according to the analogy of Scripture.

Exegetical meaning. There is nothing in the unity principle which would ever do violence to the meaning of a given text or pericope. The unity of Scripture is not imposed upon Scripture but found in it.

The meaning of a passage or section of the Scripture, according to the approach of our Lutheran Confessions, always inheres in the text itself and is a constant.⁷ For the Lutheran symbols there is no possibility of thinking in terms of "meaning then" and "meaning today"⁸ or of a "history of meaning." For there could never be definite and permanent pure doctrine and certainly no "single, universally

accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe . . ." (FC, SD, Rule and Norm, 10), which is the goal of the confession making process as well as of biblical exegesis.

Furthermore, the basic questions addressed to a text in Lutheran theology are always, "What does it say?" "What does it mean?" "What is its intention?" (Ap, IV, 231, 264, 267; XII, 84, 138). The question is not, "What did the Israelitish audience or Paul's original readership understand by it, or, what was its 'meaning' to them?" We must understand at this point that the entire exegetical enterprise was quite different for the writers of the Lutheran Confessions than for at least many exegetes today. This does not imply that even in that bygone day the writers of the Confessions were not interested in the context of a book or pericope or verse of Scripture in the so-called **Sitz im Leben**. It is just that they constructed the **Sitz im Leben** out of necessity (because of their limited knowledge) and from principle (because of their understanding of the meaning and application of the **sola Scriptura** principle) from the text and context itself. And their belief in the unity principle and in the continuity of God's revelation in Scripture culminating in Christ, including the New Testament apostolic Word, compelled them to see a much wider context and **Sitz im Leben** for a given passage or promise; namely, the entire history of God's dealing with his people, the entire biblical witness. This means that, although the meaning of a given passage

from the Old Testament is already there and is one and constant, the New Testament can indeed shed light on that meaning.

THE SPIRIT PRINCIPLE IN EXEGESIS

Although there is rather little said concerning the Holy Spirit as the true interpreter of Scripture and of the necessity of his enlightening the reader and expositor of Scripture, the principle is a pervasive one throughout our Confessions. This observation is brought out by two facts.

First, the Spirit of God is considered to be the primary author of Scripture. Scripture is clear not only because of its own coherent and consistent nature but also because God's Holy Spirit has authored it. We hear Melancthon alluding to this fact when he rails against his opponents: "It is surely amazing that our opponents are unmoved by the many passages in the Scriptures that clearly attribute justification to faith and specifically deny it to works." Thus far he could have been speaking of any clear and coherent book. But he goes on: "Do they suppose that this is repeated so often for no reason? Do they suppose that these words fell from the Holy Spirit unawares?" (Ap, IV, 107-08). The Scriptures are clear and purposeful soteriologically because the Spirit has authored them.

But man is a sinner, blind to spiritual things, having no "capacity, aptitude, skill, and ability to think anything good or right in spiritual matters . . ." (FC, SD, II, 12). This is the second fact that makes the Spirit principle so important. The gift of the Spirit is necessary to understand spiritual things, including the Scriptures which are themselves clear. As the Spirit must convert a man with the Word, so must he open the heart of man to accept the Scriptures and heed them. "He opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures and to heed the Word, as we read in Luke 24.45, 'Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures'" (FC, SD, II, 26; see also 55). This in no sense means that the Spirit is some sort of substitute for the normal exegetical tools necessary to the understanding of the meaning, the **sensus literalis**, of a given text. Any violation of the agreement or correspondence between the Spirit's leading and the meaning of the written text of Scripture would be absolute **Schwärmerei** (SA, III, VIII, 4ff.). That the Spirit "opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures" means that he causes us to believe the Word and apply it.

THE HAUPTARTIKEL PRINCIPLE IN EXEGESIS

An interesting example of Melancthon's exegetical method, using the unity principle, is seen in his argumentation for justification by faith. He argues for justi-

fication by faith from the fact that Christ is mediator (Ap, IV, 69). Melancthon clearly sees himself as doing exegesis at this point. But it is an oblique way of making a point which could have been made by clear passages dealing explicitly with justification by faith. Why does he do this? He is employing a hermeneutical principle which we might call the **Hauptartikel** principle. He is subjecting certain biblical data to the scrutiny of the chief article of the Christian faith, the heart of the gospel, the fact that Christ is mediator and propitiator.

Again Melancthon says, "We conquer through Christ. How? By faith, when we comfort ourselves by firm trust in the mercy promised because of Christ." Now just how does Melancthon prove this point? In the same way as mentioned above. "We prove the minor premise as follows. Since Christ is set forth to be the propitiator, through whom the Father is reconciled to us, we cannot appease God's wrath by setting forth our own works. For it is only by faith that Christ is accepted as the mediator. By faith alone, therefore, we obtain the forgiveness of sins when we comfort our hearts with trust in the mercy promised for Christ's sake" (Ap, IV, 80). Again it is shown in the context that Melancthon regards his procedure as strictly exegetical, for two paragraphs later he follows with passages which explicitly prove his point.

The **Hauptartikel** principle is commonly employed or alluded to in our Confessions. In Ap, IV, 2 (German text), Melancthon speaks of the doctrine of justification by faith as "**der höchste, vornehmste Artikel**" (**praecipuus locus**), "which is especially of service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasures and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible." Later in this same discussion the **Hauptartikel** is simply said to be Christ the propitiator and mediator. In a highly significant statement in the Smalcald Articles (II, I, 1-3) Luther speaks of Christ and faith in him as "**der erste und Hauptartikel**." "The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification' (Rom. 4:25). He alone is 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). 'God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all' (Isa. 53:6). Moreover, 'all have sinned,' and 'they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood' (Rom. 3:23-25)." Luther then goes on to say that all this is to be believed and apprehended by faith.

Now in every case, whether we speak of justification by faith or of Christ as he is apprehended by faith, the same **Hauptartikel** is referred to. And it has the same function, which Luther illustrates throughout the Smalcald Articles. This first article is to dominate and inform the entire Christian doctrine. It is this center of Christian and biblical theology to which all the other articles point (cf., the

structure of the Augsburg Confession and Apology, where all the articles of faith either lead to or from the central article of Christ and justification). It functions theologically in assessing the church's doctrine and practice and hermeneutically in assessing the church's understanding and reading of the sacred Scriptures. Luther uses this article as he goes on to assess various practices in the Roman Church: the mass, invocation of saints, chapters and monasteries, the papacy, etc., but also the article of repentance and other articles which the papists alleged to draw from the Scriptures.

Luther's discussions of these abuses and false doctrines do not often marshal specific Scripture passages to show their unscriptural and wrong nature, but rather to point to an article of faith, **der Hauptartikel**. In attacking the invocation of the saints Luther does indeed mention that it has no precedent in Scripture (which in itself would not preclude its practice for Luther), but that is not the prime concern. The burden of Luther's condemnation is, "It is in conflict with the first, chief article and undermines knowledge of Christ" (SA, II, II, 25). Melancthon argues in the same way when he contends that Roman doctrine of justification of good works buries Christ and obscures the gospel (Ap, IV, 70, 81, 110, 120, 149-50; XII, 77). Clearly, Luther is doing exegesis here. He is ranging all over the Scriptures and citing biblical themes and practices and bringing them to bear on the subject, but the use of the **Hauptarti-**

kel is his ultimate weapon in the debate, his final exegetical proof.

Is Luther here imposing something on Scripture by such a method, something alien and extra-biblical? Does such a practice conflict with the historical-exegetical method which he obviously uses and defends as an exegete? Not at all. And this can be said for two reasons.⁹

First, never in our Confessions does this overriding Christological principle violate the intended meaning of a biblical message or pericope. Never do Luther, Melancthon, and the writers of the Formula of Concord use such a principle to interpret a text grammatically or historically. Never is their procedure a substitute or shortcut for the grammatical exegesis.

Second, the **Hauptartikel** is itself subject to all the rigorous canons of grammatical exegesis. This is clear from the fact that the article on Christ or justification is ordinarily included (AC, Ap, SA, FC) in a series of articles all purporting to be drawn from Scripture and to be a summary of Christian doctrine. Luther's statement (SA, II, II, 15), ". . . the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel," applies to the **Hauptartikel** as well as any other article of faith. Furthermore, the longest discussion in the Confessions (Ap, IV) centers around a defense of the **Hauptartikel**, justification by faith. And here Melancthon clearly draws his conclusions from the Scriptures. It is true that he expresses his **Hauptartikel** principle (IV, 2, German) before he proves it from the Scrip-

tures, and he employs the principle throughout as he argues how the papists by their insistence on merit bury Christ, etc. But he does indeed exegete those passages dealing with justification, and he does so to establish the doctrine itself and its centrality (Ap, IV, 107, 293-94.) He specifically says, "What we have shown thus far, on the basis of the Scriptures [**et testimoniis Scripturae**] and arguments derived from the Scriptures [**et argumentis ex Scriptura sumptis**], was to make clear that by faith alone we receive the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, and by faith alone are justified, that is, out of unrighteous we are made righteous and regenerated men" (Ap, IV, 117; cf., FC, SD, I, 44).

The hermeneutical use of the **Hauptartikel** principle is closely connected with the Lutheran law-gospel dialectic which is employed hermeneutically in the same way (cf., Ap, IV, 2, with Ap, IV, 5; cf., Ap, IV, 69, with Ap, IV, 70). In fact, by observing the distinction between law and gospel we enhance the chief article concerning Christ (FC, SD, V, 1, 3). As a matter of fact, the gospel in the narrow sense is sometimes equated with the article of Christ and his work (FC, SD, V, 20; Ep, V, 5).

In Ap, IV, 5, Melancthon makes perhaps the most substantive statement about the hermeneutical function of the law-gospel dialectic. "All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines [**hos duos locos praecipuos**]." What does this statement

mean? Clearly the statement deals with the interpretation of Scripture, with a necessary (**debet**) application (**distribui**) of all Scripture (**universa scriptura**). Thus far Melancthon is speaking not of Scripture's meaning but of our approach to Scripture. The continuing sentences state what actually obtains in Scripture. "In some places it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ; this it does either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for his sake, or when, in the New Testament, the Christ who came promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life. By 'law' in this discussion we mean the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures. For the present we are saying nothing about the ceremonial and civil laws of Moses."

Does Melancthon say here that every verse or pericope in Scripture is either law or gospel and that we are to determine this in every case if we are to read the Scriptures rightly? Surely not. Isolated verses or pericopes simply cannot be forced to assert either law or promises in the strict sense. Melancthon knows as well as any one that such an exegetical procedure would be an utterly wooden, arbitrary, and insensitive reading of Scripture. He does not say "omnis scriptura should be divided" but "**universa scriptura**," that is, Scripture as a whole, Scripture in its entire sweep as the history of God's acts and dealings with men in terms of judgment and promise. He is saying that these

two doctrines (**hi duo loci praecipui**), which are not the only two doctrines, pervade all Scriptures and, as he later points out, are to be clearly distinguished and recognized as we find them articulated throughout Scripture. We must be alert to them, hear them for what they say, and never confuse them as the papists have done (Ap, IV, 7ff.). FC, SD, V, 1, is even more explicit in making the function of dividing law and gospel the same as that of the **Hauptartikel** principle, to enhance the merit of Christ and serve troubled consciences.

The role of the law-gospel principle, like that of the **Hauptartikel** principle, is not designed to substitute or add anything to the responsible enterprise of historical-grammatical exegesis. Rather, Melancthon and the other writers of the Confessions are pointing to a necessary attitude and cognitive presupposition (drawn itself from Scripture) for approaching Scripture as one seriously and in a salutary way reads it, a sort of spiritual **Erkenntnis** which, however, is wrought by Scripture itself and exegetically demanded.

This hermeneutical approach and application of the whole of Scripture is fundamental. Where the two doctrines are confused or where the work of the one is substituted for the work of the other, disaster befalls the exegete and the church (Ap, IV, 9; XX, 49-50), philosophy and Christianity are confused (Ap, IV, 12ff.), Christ is buried and no longer used as med-

iator and propitiator and the love of God is never understood (Ap, IV, 18, 69), men are brought to despair (Ap, IV, 21), civil righteousness is misapplied and vaunted above its value (Ap, IV, 24 **passim**), and human powers exalted above their abilities (Ap, IV, 28ff.)—all in all a gloomy, tragic picture. But where law and gospel are distinguished and each allowed to serve its own function an “especially brilliant light” is present for reading and applying all of the Scriptures (FC, SD, V, 1; Ep, V, 2ff.).

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE IN EXEGESIS

The eschatological burden of the Lutheran Confessions is clear throughout these writings. But there is also an eschatological burden in Scripture and an eschatological way of reading Scripture. Just as the reading and use of Scripture must lead to doctrine, it must lead also to hope. The passage from Scripture which announces this eschatological principle of exegesis is Romans 15.4: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

Commenting on this passage FC, SD, XI, 92-93 says the following: “But it is certain that any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit’s will and intent [**Meinung**].” We have here not a hermeneutical norm for exegesis, strictly speaking, but rather a norm and principle for the application of Scripture. The Confes-

sion goes on to say, “We shall abide by this simple, direct, and useful exposition [**Erklärung**] which is permanently and well grounded in God’s revealed will.” And again the statement condemns all that is contrary to such “true, simple, and useful expositions.”

The eschatological principle is here wedded to several other principles of interpretation. First, the unity of Scripture is seen in its purpose here set forth, which is comfort and hope. Second, the analogy of Scripture is operative here in that every exposition of Scripture must be “grounded in God’s revealed will.” Third, the **sensus literalis**, the one grammatical and historical meaning, far from being overlooked, is actually sought (“we should avoid and flee all abstruse and specious questions and disputations”) and seen to be in full accord with the eschatological principle.

HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD’S INCOMPATIBILITY

Is there a unique confessional and Lutheran exegesis and approach to Scripture? Our Confessions would, I believe, answer no to such a question. There are, however, principles for reading Scripture, principles drawn from the Scriptures themselves in every case, which our Lutheran Confessions have discerned and employed with a certain uniqueness and consistency. These principles which I

have attempted to trace are no child's play. They may be easy to discern from Scripture and to state but often are difficult to employ and apply. Yet they are crucial for the exegetical enterprise and for the evangelical orientation and activity of the church.

Can the hermeneutical principles underlying the doctrine of our Lutheran Confessions be harmonized with the modern historical-critical method as it is ordinarily applied in studying and exegeting Scripture? I believe not. One will need to reject what is essential to the older historic Lutheran hermeneutics if one is to accept and use in any consistent way the historical-critical method today and apply it to Scripture. But this question can be answered satisfactorily only when we know what the historical-critical method is in terms of its goals and assumptions and when we know if and where the method conflicts with the confessional Lutheran hermeneutics which led to the doctrine of the gospel and its articles as exhibited in the Lutheran Confessions. So let me attempt to define the method and then to answer the question at issue.

As far as I have been able to determine by examining the works or sources of reputable scholars using the historical-critical method today, a brief definition might run as follows. The historical method is a way of studying Scripture (or any piece of literature) that uses all the criteria of scientific historical investigation. The method analyzes the text of Scripture in terms of language, literary form, redaction criticism and source criticism, as well as historical, archae-

ological, and other relevant data. The purpose of the method is not merely philological or linguistic; it is to learn the intended meaning of texts and verses of Scripture. The overarching purpose of the method is historical; namely, to discover the history and background of the form and content of any given portion or unit in Scripture and to trace that history of the given unit through every step of its development until it finds its way into the text of Scripture as we have it. This procedure, essential to the method, would apply to any pericope or story recorded in the Old Testament, any parable or discourse of Jesus, any action or miracle of our Lord. The ultimate goal of the method, therefore, is to find the word or event behind the text of Scripture, to assess the historicity or truthfulness of what Scripture asserts, to discover the historical origin of what Scripture records.

I believe it is safe to say that whereas for Luther and the Reformers exegesis was seen essentially as a philological discipline, for modern critics exegesis is a historical discipline. For Luther and our Confessions biblical and extra-biblical historical investigation was undertaken to determine the meaning of the canonical text, the prophetic and apostolic Word as such. For the historical critic an investigation of the meaning of the biblical text is undertaken to help determine the history which may or may not lie behind the text; and "history" (historical research) in turn

may be used to authenticate, verify, or falsify the text.¹⁰

It is easy, I believe, to see some of the assumptions underlying this method of approaching Scripture—assumptions regarding revelation, Scripture, and history. The historical-critical method was first conceived and worked out in the 17th and 18th centuries by scholars who either denied the possibility of a divine revelation or denied at least that Scripture was such a revelation. These early developers of the method denied also the divine origin and inspired nature of Scripture, thus depriving Scripture also of its divine authority in the sense understood by the Reformers. They furthermore believed that all history was lived out according to principles of universal correspondence, analogy and uniformity within history and that all historical records, including Scripture, must be criticized according to such principles. Far-reaching changes have taken place in respect to the method over the past two centuries—e.g., form criticism has been invented, but the same assumptions underly the use of the method today by all reputable and consistent practitioners of it.

The results of the historical-critical method have at crucial points contradicted the doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions. Lutheran exegetes using the method have denied all God's activities recounted in Scripture until the time of Abraham; they have denied the authenticity of many of Christ's sermons and discourses; and in some cases

they have denied his deity and every miracle performed by him—all this as the result of employing historical-critical research. Regin Prenter, a relatively conservative Lutheran who uses the method but inconsistently, says quite frankly: "That it is the Creator himself who is present in Jesus' humanity has always been an impossible idea to historical criticism. Therefore historical criticism necessarily collides with everything in the tradition concerning Jesus which ascribes to him such divine majesty."¹¹

This statement of Prenter's is significant in that it suggests that one consistently using the historical-critical method cannot come to the same conclusions concerning the articles of our Christian faith as did our Lutheran Confessions. The reason is not only because of the different assumptions regarding revelation, Scripture, and history; and not only because the method has different goals from those of the Reformers as they engaged in exegesis. Ultimately the reason for modern historical-critical research coming to different conclusions from our Confessions concerning doctrine rests in the fact that historical-critical methodology has a different idea of what it is dealing with as it goes about its task.

Let me try to clarify this point. Any method of doing anything is determined by the subject with which the method deals. That is always the case, whether we think of a method of managing a corporation,

cutting meat, researching historical data, or reading a book. If this is true, then the nature of Scripture as God's revelation of himself and his will cannot be ignored or discounted at any point by any method, old or new, seeking to deal with Scripture in terms of its form or content. According to historic Lutheran theology, as typified in our Confessions, Scripture's form is its revelatory character as God's Word. Scripture's content is God himself—he is the one spoken of everywhere in Scripture—God, his will, his actions among people, etc. In the nature of the case one cannot use the same method for reading, understanding, and applying Scripture that one uses for understanding any other merely human book which recounts merely human events and ideas. This, I believe, is a principle of the Lutheran Reformers as they read and seek to understand Scripture in contrast to their method of reading Caesar's "Gallic Wars" or the so-called "Donation of Constantine."

To illustrate how this principle would work today, one might say the following: a historical-critical method is probably quite adequate and proper for understanding and analyzing Caesar's "Gallic Wars." The historian will immediately recognize, according to his principles of universal correspondence and analogy within history, that Caesar is a responsible and serious witness to events and a good historian in terms of his day. The critic will therefore accept Caesar's statement that his army built an elaborate and complicated bridge and crossed the River

Rhine. But the critic will recognize Caesar's limitations as he comments on the flora and fauna of Britain and Caesar's **Tendenz** as he speaks of his great victories over the barbarians.

But Scripture, though written by inspired men and reflecting their style of writing, thought forms, convictions, cultural milieu, etc., is not a human book or record like Caesar's "Gallic Wars." The Spirit of God is the author of Scripture, and the Spirit does not have any **Tendenz** which may be corrected according to any theory concerning continuity and analogy within history. Furthermore—and this is Prenter's point, as it was Luther's and the Confessions'—unlike Caesar's "Gallic Wars," which deals with the activities of Caesar, a man, the Scriptures witness to the mighty acts of God, acts which transcend space, time, secondary causes, historical analogy, and everything else within our created order. The readers of Scripture, as they confront the content of Scripture, God himself, and his mighty acts, can only accept the witness of the Spirit who testified through the writings of prophets and apostles to these revelations of God's judgment and grace.

Without going further into the matter, I think I have now sufficiently shown the incompatibility of the historical-critical method as it is

applied to Scripture and the hermeneutics of our Lutheran Confessions. I believe there is no way to reconcile these two approaches to Scripture without doing violence to one or both. I believe I will find wide agreement in this conclusion among theologians and scholars, both those who use and those who reject historical-critical methodology.

1 This has been the firm conclusion of the most competent students of the Lutheran Confessions: Holsten Fagerberg, *Die Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften von 1529 bis 1537*, tr. Gerhard Klose (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), pp. 14ff.; Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, tr. Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), pp. xvff.; Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968). This is also the conviction of the older commentaries on the Confessions. For instance, George Mylius insisted that the authority of the Confessions is directly dependent upon their being scriptural, and it is only out of this conviction that Lutherans subscribe them and identify with their doctrinal content. See *Augustanae confessionis quae ecclesiarum evangelicarum novissimi temporis augustissimum symbolum, & doctrinae lutheranae lapis vere Lydius est: explicatio*, Jena, 1596, p. A3. Cf. John George Walch, *Introductio in libros ecclesiae lutheranae symbolicos observationibus historicis et theologicis illustrata*, Jena, 1732, p. 754; Abraham Calov, *Commentarius apodictico-elenchiticus in augustanam confessionem*, Lepizig, 1646, pp. 14-16.

2 See C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church?" *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XVIII (April 1947).

3 An exception is Ralph Bohlmann, *op. cit.* In this brief paper I will attempt not to overlap Bohlmann's many valuable contributions in this area of research.

4 Fagerberg, pp. 3-5.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

6 See Bohlmann, p. 6ff. Cf., Robert Preus, "Guiding Principles, A Lutheran Confessional Approach to the Doctrine of Creation" in *Rock Strata and the Bible Record*, Paul Zimmerman, ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), pp. 15-16.

7 Fagerberg says, "Der Gedanke, die Worte der Bibel könnten grundsätzlich verschieden gedeutet werden und in ihrem Sinn variieren, kommt gar nicht auf . . .," p. 18.

8 See Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 418-32. The so-called "descriptive approach" to Scripture, espoused by Stendahl, speaks in terms of "layers of meaning" in the history and transmission of biblical texts and therefore operates with the categories of "meaning then" and "meaning now." A text like Habakkuk 2.4 consequently could have a variety of meanings in the Old and New Testaments. Cf. James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 22 *passim*. The older "conservative" (and liberal) view which held that each passage or pericope had one definite meaning (*sensus literalis unus est*), although capable of different interpretations and later elaboration, is summarily and aprioristically rejected by Stendahl.

9 See *Luthers Werke*, Weimar Ausgabe, 2nd ed., Vol. 5, p. 456: "The first concern of a theologian should be to be well versed in the text of Scripture, a *bonus textualis*, as they say. He should adhere to this first principle: in sacred things there is no arguing or philosophizing; for if one were to work with rational or probable arguments in this sphere, then I could twist all the articles of faith as easily as Arius, the Sacramentarians, and the Anabaptists have

done. No, in theology we must merely hear and believe and be convinced in our heart that God is truthful, no matter how absurd that which God says in his Word may seem to reason." Cf. Weimar Ausgabe, XVIII, p. 840; E. Thestrup Pedersen, *Luther som skriftfortolker* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag Arnold Busck, 1959), pp. 290ff.

10 See Sverre Aalen, "The Revelation of Christ and Scientific Research," *The Springfielder* (December 1970), p. 210: "A closer analysis shows that the so-called 'historical-critical' research in the form in which we know it today, where it concerns the more important motifs of the contents, is a child of the modern time. Its agreement with humanism or even with the existentialism of our time is obvious and perhaps denied by no one. That the decisive motifs with which this theology labors, cannot be relevant to the material, reveals itself among other things also in this, that the principle element is not sought in the words of the text, but as was stated above, behind the words, even at times in direct contradiction to the text." Aalen is opposed to the historical-critical method, but the same judgment is made by W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 196, who favors the method: "What is needed is precisely the historical quest, moving behind the kerygma in its various forms, into the public ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself in order in that way to obtain in the Christ-event itself a standard by means of which to judge the various witnesses to it, even those actually within the New Testament." Cf., p. 197 *passim*. Pannenberg frankly disagrees with the Reformation "unity principle" mentioned above (see p. 194). I think that to Pannenberg and modern historical criticism the intended meaning of the canonical text is often only a means to get to the historical fact or word behind the text, and the authority of the text as such is relativized. Not the text but the history behind the text becomes authoritative for doctrine.

11 Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 433.