

# NO OTHER GOSPEL

*Essays in Commemoration of the  
400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord  
1580 — 1980*

Edited by Arnold J. Koelpin

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## 12. THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE FORMULA OF CONCORD

**Robert D. Preus**

Hermeneutics may be defined as the art of interpreting the Scriptures. Hermeneutics includes the presuppositions the interpreter brings with him as he studies the Scriptures, his doctrine concerning Scripture and his attitude toward it as he carries out his task, the principles of exegesis peculiar to Scripture as they are expressed or assumed therein, and those principles of interpretation common to the intelligent reading of all literature in general. Hermeneutics deals with the method as well as the tools of exegesis. We must address ourselves to just these topics as we seek to offer a delineation of the hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord, the last of the great Lutheran Confessions. In the present study I shall discuss the Formula of Concord's doctrine of Scripture and attitude toward it and the basic scriptural principles of hermeneutics with which the authors of the Formula of Concord worked.<sup>1</sup>

An investigation into the hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord is important and justifiable. Like the early Christian creeds and the earlier Lutheran symbols the Formula of Concord claims emphatically and repeatedly to be biblical, to draw all doctrine only from the Scriptures as it seeks to settle controversies among the churches of the Augsburg Confession and to confess the Christian faith. Not only do the Preface to the Book of Concord and the Rule and Norm section of the Formula of Concord assert that all doctrine

presented there is "based solidly on the divine Scripture" (Tappert, p. 3, cf. 4,5,6,8; SD, "Rule and Norm," 4,5), but almost every article of the Formula of Concord repeats this assertion specifically in reference to the articles of faith presented (SD, I,4; II,8; III,8,17,59,66; IV,14,24; VII,9,22,23,30,107,112; VIII,51,53,62; IX,3; X,5,10). The Formula of Concord and other Lutheran Confessions have their authority as a pattern for doctrine in the church from Scripture alone (Epit., "Rule and Norm," 1,6,8; SD, "Rule and Norm," 1,9). Edmund Schlink has this significant and correct statement to make on this matter. Speaking of all the Lutheran Confessions he says, "Confessions in their proper sense will never be taken seriously until they are taken seriously as exposition of the Scriptures, to be specific, as the church's exposition of the Scriptures . . . Confessions are primarily expositions of Scripture, more particularly summary presentation of the whole of Scripture, that is, a witness to the heart of Scripture, a witness to the saving Gospel. Resting on Scripture as a whole, the Confessions aim to summarize the multiplicity of statements from Scripture in doctrinal articles directed against the errors of their day and designed for the protection of the correct proclamation then and for all time to come."<sup>2</sup>

If the Formula of Concord professes to be an exposition of Scripture on the doctrinal points discussed, our subscription to this confession will entail an acceptance of the exegetical conclusions offered in the confession and also the hermeneutical principles and method by which these conclusions were derived. Otherwise we do not subscribe the confession on its own terms. Precisely this is the prime reason, therefore, that we understand and accept the hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord, and this too is the justification, apart from purely academic or antiquarian interests, for the present study. The fact that the Formula of Concord, unlike the other Lutheran symbols, explicitly discusses the divine authority of Scripture and Scripture's place as the source and norm of all theology in the church and thus broaches directly a fundamental hermeneutical issue serves to justify further the present investigation.

But can we on the basis of internal evidence from the Formula of Concord arrive at sufficiently definite conclusions so that we can offer an adequate description of the hermeneutics of that confession? After all, the Formula of Concord is a relatively short document which presents rather little extensive exegesis, and it never addresses itself to the matter of hermeneutics per se. We could of course assume — and it would be a safe assumption — that the

hermeneutics in the 1570s among Lutherans were the same as in the 1530s. Again and again the exegesis of Luther (and only Luther among the Reformers) is appealed to and followed in the Formula of Concord. The anthropology in Articles I and II, the doctrine of justification in Article III, the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in Article VII, and the Christology in Article VIII represent Luther's position precisely. In fact the entire theology of the Formula of Concord is deliberately taken over from Luther. And his works, particularly his exegetical contributions, are cited profusely. In the case of Article IX on the descent into hell, the writers of the Formula of Concord do not really finish their discussion at all but merely appeal to a sermon of Luther's. Only in the case of Articles X and XI do the writers of the Formula strike out on their own and exhibit a certain independence, but not from Luther's hermeneutics. Would it not therefore be sufficient simply to produce a summary of Luther's doctrine of Scripture and his principles of interpretation and assume that the Formula of Concord followed him all the way?

Another approach would be to examine the exegetical works of those who wrote the Formula and of their contemporaries and to construct a hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord on the basis of our findings. A very great amount of exegetical material was written by Chemnitz, Selnecker and Chytraeus, authors of the Formula. And although they were compelled to reject the opinions of contemporaries like Flacius on certain issues, we may assume that they were very much in agreement with the discussions of hermeneutics offered in his monumental *Clavis Scripturae*, the most thorough treatment of hermeneutical questions up to that time.

In this brief study I shall confine myself to an examination of the Formula itself in full assurance that the conclusions would be the same, had I followed either of the two more oblique approaches. For there are sufficient data from the Formula of Concord to give us a clear picture of the hermeneutics of that confession. This could probably not be done with any of the other Lutheran Confessions except the Apology, which addresses itself to interpretative issues quite often and engages in some rather thorough exegesis at points.

It is important to recognize that the Formula of Concord is not merely a kind of confessional epitome of the exegetical work that had been carried on and gained acceptance since the early days of the Reformation. The Formula of Concord is itself an exegetical work. It is true that the Formula often offers only the results of previous exegesis. For instance, the exegesis of earlier confessions is

often cited verbatim and thus given a kind of symbolic status (SD, I,9-15; VII,20-41). It is true also that the Formula of Concord is clearly polemical, argumentive and at times pastoral in tone and purpose. The form of presentation of the biblical doctrine in the Formula, as in some of the other confessions, is dictated by dogmatic, confessional or polemical concerns and cast often in polemical or dogmatic or even philosophical terms. This is true of a good deal of the exegesis of the sixteenth century and of our century too for that matter. These observations, however, do not alter the fact that the Formula of Concord sees itself as and indeed is an exegetical work. The Formula is at the same time a confession in the true sense of the word and a piece of exegesis in the sense of an ordered presentation of biblical teaching on certain themes. In fact the goals of the Formula of Concord, viz. to confess the evangelical faith and to settle doctrinal controversies among the Lutherans, could only be realized if the biblical basis for every point of doctrine confessed be established by sound and convincing exegesis. Thus the form of the Formula of Concord, specifically the Solid Declaration, is exegetical. This approach is deliberate. The authors' formula for concord is to illustrate systematically that the position embraced relative to all the controverted articles is not only Lutheran (as they frequently cite Luther) and in accordance with the previous symbols but above all biblical. If they let Luther's exegesis speak for them — and notice that it is his *exegesis* they cite! — this in no way militates against their purpose to give a biblical basis for every point, but simply kills two birds with one stone, as they demonstrate that their position is both Lutheran and biblical.

We might say that the Solid Declaration seeks to present a thorough and consistent Lutheran reading of Scripture on all the controverted articles among Lutherans. This is done in order that Lutherans and all the world might see and be persuaded that the Lutheran doctrine on all the controverted points is biblical. This is the primary purpose of the Formula of Concord and of the form in which it, particularly the Solid Declaration, is written. The Formula is the most argumentative of any Lutheran Confession, argumentative in the sense of offering convincing biblical evidence and exegesis for the position taken.

One might be inclined to contest that the Lutheran Confessions, particularly the Solid Declaration, represent a kind or type of exegesis because they do not resemble typical commentaries and do not, except in a few instances, present extensive exegesis of pericopes or



verses of Scripture. I would only reply: neither do the so-called biblical theologies of modern theologians such as Bultmann, von Rad, Jacob, Richardson and many others, surely not the monumental *Theological Word Book* edited by Rudolf Kittel, resemble typical commentaries; yet we would not wish to disclaim that what they are purportedly doing in these instances is exegesis.

We might recall that exegetical, systematic and confessional theology were not delineated or distinguished at the time of the Formula of Concord. Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* and subsequent works of that sort first rose out of exegetical lectures and were considered a form of exegesis. In such cases theological themes (*loci*) were traced within a book of Scripture (e.g. Genesis or Romans), or throughout the Old and New Testaments, or throughout all of Scripture. The latter course was taken by the many theologians who constructed *loci theologici* based upon Melanchthon's formative work. The Augsburg Confession and all the confessions were produced according to that same synthetic, local, exegetical model. And so the Lutheran Confessions were symbols and exegetical expositions at the same time. How better and more efficiently would a confessing Lutheran express his faith than by a sound exegetical presentation of the articles and issues confronting the church at a given time!

Having established the fact that the Formula of Concord is an exposition of Scripture, we may confidently assume that there will be ample data within the Formula itself to illustrate its principles of biblical interpretation. And so we ask: are there principles of hermeneutics peculiar to the Lutheran Confessions or the Formula of Concord? Is there a Lutheran way of reading Scripture resulting in distinctive Lutheran doctrine and in contrast to a Roman Catholic or Reformed or unregenerate hermeneutics? The Formula which represents a more mature and self-conscious exegesis than the other confessions and which cites the Scriptures far more often will answer these and other questions. In seeking to determine the hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord I shall examine: a) the doctrine of Scripture in the Formula as the presupposition for all exegesis, and b) the principles of hermeneutics which the Formula sees as uniquely biblical and therefore essential to the correct and Christian (biblical) reading and exposition of Scripture. I shall not go into these basic principles of hermeneutics common to all literature (grammar, figures of speech, stylistics, etc.). As far as I can determine, Luther and the Lutherans who wrote the Formula of Concord were quite

knowledgeable and open to the tremendous advances made by humanists and later by Christian theologians in such matters. And they broke radically with the medieval allegorical method of exegesis with all its ramifications.

## **I. The Doctrine of Scripture in the Lutheran Confessions as a Presupposition for the Exegetical Enterprise<sup>3</sup>**

It has been stated<sup>4</sup> that the Lutheran Confessions offer no article on the Scriptures and no comprehensive doctrine of Scripture (there is no discussion of inspiration at all) and that this is significant in that they thus avoid “biblicism” and come to grips at once “with the *viva vox evangelii* itself.” A consequence of this view is that Lutherans today have no confessional basis, not even in the Formula of Concord, for any doctrine of biblical inspiration, authority or inerrancy. Not only is the conclusion of such reasoning a non sequitur, but the premise is not true. The Formula offers a thorough and comprehensive doctrine of Scripture and does so deliberately and explicitly in its introductory chapter entitled “Rule and Norm.” True, it does not expressly deal with the subject of inspiration or inerrancy, nor even use the terms which gained currency at a much later date. Neither did Luther nor the post-Reformation dogmaticians, for that matter. But the concepts underlying the terms — inspiration, authority and inerrancy — are not only adumbrated throughout the Formula but clearly affirmed in the “Rule and Norm” section.<sup>5</sup>

### **A. The Bible is the written Word of God.**

Although the Formula of Concord never talks about inspiration or the relation between the Holy Spirit and the writers of Scripture, it gives witness in a variety of ways to the divine origin of Scripture (that it comes from God) and its divine nature (that it is God’s Word, carrying with it the attributes of God himself). Following Luther (Smalcald Articles, II,II,15) the Formula often and indiscriminately calls Scripture the Word of God. For instance, the Preface to the Book of Concord speaks of “the pure doctrine of God’s Word” (Tappert, p.4), of being “preserved in the teaching of God’s Word” (ibid.), of basing doctrine on “the unalterable truth of the divine Word” and avoiding everything “contrary to the Word of God” (ibid., p. 5). The confessions themselves are “based on God’s Word” (ibid., p. 6) and are “agreeable and conformable first of all to the Word of God”

(ibid., p. 7). Later in the Solid Declaration the same phraseology is used with regularity as the confessors claim to draw their doctrine and specific articles “out of God’s Word [*aus Gottes Wort; ex sacris litteris*]” (SD, “Rule and Norm,” 4; cf. 5; I,4; II,8; VII,107,112; X,10; XI,36). In every case the referent to the term “Word of God” is Scripture. In identical language the formula speaks of drawing doctrine from the sacred Scriptures (Tappert, “Preface,” 1; SD, II,12; IV,44; VII,30; VIII,53,60, 62,64). Again, the Formula uses Scripture and Word of God interchangeably when speaking of the norm of doctrine. The Solid Declaration says that the Word of God should remain the sole rule and norm of doctrine (“Rule and Norm,” 9); the reference is to Scripture, for it is added that no human writings be placed on a par with it. But previously the Solid Declaration (3) said that the prophetic and apostolic writings are the clear fountain of Israel and the only norm of teaching in the church. And the Epitome (“Rule and Norm,” 1,8) stated that the Scriptures are the judge of all teachers and doctrine in the church. At times the Formula of Concord places Scripture and Word of God in apposition within the same context. Article II of the Solid Declaration (26) says that the Holy Spirit opens our hearts “to understand the Scriptures and to heed the Word.” Article III (SD, III,59) lists certain aberrations which are “contrary to the Word of God, the teaching of the prophets and apostles.” Speaking of the communication of divine attributes to the human nature of Christ, the Solid Declaration, VIII,53 says, “In his Word he has revealed to us as much as we need to know in this life, and wherever the Scriptures in this case give us clear, certain testimony, we shall simply believe it and not argue that the human nature in Christ is not capable of it.” Finally, there are several cases in the Formula of Concord where the German text refers to *Wort Gottes* in some form and the Latin translates with some form of *sacrae litterae* (SD, “Introduction,” 1,3,4; II,57; IV,7; VII,62,112,128; VIII,60; XI,12,43), indicating that the terms are used interchangeably in the Formula and Scripture is identified as the Word of God.

The fact that the term “Word of God” is often used in the confessions to denote the gospel or the entire Christian doctrine is clearly evident. One cannot merely equate Word of God with Scripture in the confessions. But the fact that the term “Word of God” is used in several senses and connotations is quite irrelevant to our present concern.

The only conclusion we can draw from the above data is that Scripture is divine (SD, V,3) and God’s Word in the double sense that

God is the author of Scripture and that Scripture is today divine as it reveals God's thoughts and will and conveys his power and authority. The Formula of Concord in one place attributes the words of Holy Scripture to the Holy Spirit (SD, X, 15). And elsewhere it teaches that God reveals therein the mysteries of faith to us (SD, XI, 43) and the Spirit works through the Scriptures today (SD, XI, 31-2, 36).

### **B. The Bible is the authoritative source and norm of all teaching in the church.**

The Formula of Concord speaks much more explicitly about the divine authority of Scripture than about its divine origin, although the authors do not use the term "authority" which gains prominence later, but refer to Scripture as "fountain of Israel", "rule", "judge" and the like. What do they mean when they speak this way? There are two aspects to the concept of biblical authority in the Formula: 1) it is the source, the cognitive principle, of all Christian theology; 2) it is the norm which judges all teachers and teachings in the church. And the Scriptures are the exclusive source and norm of all theology; there is no other source and no other norm of revealed doctrine. This position is clearly put in the Solid Declaration in the following words: "We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated" ("Rule and Norm," 3).<sup>6</sup> The metaphorical term "fountain" (*Brunnen*) refers to Scripture as the source of all theology. The adjective "clear" refers to the clarity of the church's cognitive source of theology, the adjective "pure" to its truthfulness. But the statement calls Scripture more than just source of all doctrine; it is norm and judge. The term judge is a deliberate hypostatization, indicating that Scripture carries out God's own function in the church on earth, the function of judging teachers and teaching. It is clear that the authority of Scripture herein described in terms of its function is a divine authority. The fountain of Israel, the source of the will and thoughts and mysteries of God, is a divine source, and only God (or his Word) can judge all doctrine in the church. For this reason all "symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood . . . in the church of God" (Epit., "Rule and Norm," 8). And that is why the "Word of God" (*Gottes Wort, sacrae litterae*) is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all

doctrine, and no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subjected to it" (SD, Tappert, "Rule and Norm," 9). Just as God is the only source of all theology, his Word, Holy Scripture, is the only source of our knowledge of theology. Just as God is judge over everything that is taught in his name, his Word, Holy Scripture, is the only norm and judge available to the church whereby teachers and teachings can be judged. There is no possible doubt concerning the relation between the divine origin of Scripture and its authority. Scripture is the only authority for doctrine in the church because it is God's Word.<sup>7</sup>

The assertions in the prolegomenous section concerning the function of the Word of God, Scripture, as source and norm of all ecclesiastical teaching are calculated to establish a principle of interpretation which the writers intend to observe faithfully throughout the Formula of Concord. This is no abstract principle, but one which, as we have seen and shall see, is followed on almost every page of the Formula Concord. It is a fundamental and prerequisite hermeneutical principle in reading any piece of literature purporting to speak authoritatively on any subject to determine who the author of the piece is and the degree of authority to be accorded it.

### C. Biblical authority and biblical infallibility

It is no accident that the same sections of the Formula of Concord which assert that Scripture is source and norm of all teaching refer to the truthfulness and infallibility of Scripture. The two concepts entail each other. The idea of an errant or fallible but authoritative Word of God is an utter contradiction in terms. The Preface which speaks repeatedly of drawing all doctrine from the Word of God refers to Scripture as "divine" (*goettlich*), (Tappert, p. 1), as being "the pure, infallible, and unalterable Word of God" (*reine, unfehlbar, unwandelbare Wort Gottes*) (*ibid.*, p. 8). Their doctrine is based on "the witness of the unalterable truth of the divine Word" (*auf das Zeugnis der unwandelbaren Wahrheit Goettliches Worts*) (*ibid.*, p. 5). The Rule and Norm section of the Solid Declaration speaks in the same way of the "pure doctrine" drawn from the Scriptures (13) and the "truth" of the divine word (5). And throughout the Formula this belief in the infallibility of Scripture comes through as the confessors interpret the Scriptures and confess their doctrine. God's Word is not false, and it does not lie (Epit., VII, 13). In discussing specific words of Holy Writ, the words of institution of the Lord's Supper, the Formula insists that these words are both clear and true (We recall

how clarity and truthfulness were linked together in SD, "Rule and Norm," 3). They are words of Christ who is truthful and wise and mighty (SD, VII,43), and therefore the words are trustworthy (50). But they are also the words of the apostle Paul and the Evangelists who reliably received the same information about Christ (52). Significantly, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10:16 are also called Christ's words (54). Our confessions see the entire apostolic New Testament as Christ's reliable and saving Word.

The adjectives "true" and "infallible" as applied to Scripture in the Formula of Concord are the strongest possible terms for the reliability and inerrancy of Scripture. They mean that the words and assertions of Scripture are true a priori. There is no need to verify them from extrabiblical sources or criteria. Inerrancy is an article of faith for the Lutheran writers of the Formula; Scripture is *ἀπόπιστος*, true and deserving of faith prior to the witness or judgment of any other authority. The reverent and ingenuously believing way in which they treat the Scriptures demonstrates this.

Again the inerrancy of Scripture is not for the Formula of Concord simply an academic and theoretical principle with no practical application. To the authors of the Formula, Scripture's inerrancy and agreement with itself offer total comfort and reassurance to the Christian who interprets the Scriptures and rests on the words he finds there (SD, XI,36). For God who is eternal truth can not contradict himself (35). If Scripture contradicts itself, we could no longer trust the promises of God therein. Yes, we could not even practice serious exegesis. Knowing that Scripture is infallible and noncontradictory, the exegete can in every case trust the divine Word and follow the intended sense. In this sense the inerrancy of Scripture undergirds serious exegesis.

## **II. Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics in the Formula of Concord**

Any piece of writing at all will be read with certain presuppositions and principles of interpretation, whether it be the stock market or sports section of the newspaper, a modern novel or poem, the dialogs of Plato, or the Bible. Sometimes these writings are put together with the assumption that the reader will know in advance through his acquaintance with similar such writings the necessary presuppositions and rules of interpretation essential for an intelligent and useful reading of the material. At other times, particularly

in the case of writings which purport to be unique or at least extraordinary in terms of their authorship, content, nature or *modus scribendi*, writings will include either explicitly or by implication some of the presuppositions and principles of interpretation necessary for a beneficial reading of the material. The writers of the Formula of Concord expound the Scriptures in their confession in the conviction that this is indeed the case with the Bible. The Bible, by telling us of its divine origin, its authority, its central and saving message, its purpose, etc., provides the reader with a number of biblical principles of hermeneutics invaluable to him if he is to interpret, understand and apply its saving message. Sometimes these principles, elicited from Scripture itself, will pertain to the spiritual insight and posture of the interpreter, sometimes to his preunderstanding or to his relationship to God. Sometimes they will approximate or resemble grammatical and linguistic principles of exegesis common to other ancient literature. There is no doubt at all that the writers of the Formula of Concord were controlled by a set of such principles which they believed to be biblical and fundamental for their task. In the remainder of this study I shall attempt to describe these principles and show how they work.

### A. The search for the *sensus literalis*

The first principle and goal of biblical exegesis is to ascertain the intended meaning of the biblical text, the *sensus literalis*. The utter and conscientious adherence to this principle and goal is evident throughout the Solid Declaration. As they apply this principle, the writers repeatedly maintain that their teaching is "according to the Word of God," "drawn from the Word of God," etc. (SD, II,6,8; III,8; IV,24; VIII,51,53,60,62,64). Specifically they express repeatedly their purpose to establish the intended sense (*Meinung, Verstand, vera et genuina sententia*) of a given text (SD, III,36; VI,5; VII,7, 22,23,50,51). Now the search for the intended sense of a text is the fundamental principle of exegesis and literary criticism of any literary piece. But the principle takes on a different role as the Lutherans interpret the Scriptures. In reading other documents, if the established intended sense does not agree with what is asserted elsewhere in the document or is contrary to data based upon philosophy, sound reason or empirical evidence, the interpreter will either attempt to reinterpret the text in the light of the other data and find a new and more plausible meaning, or he will stick with his first reading of the text but reject its intended meaning as fallacious, mistaken, solecism.

tic or the like. The Lutheran exegete, committed to the divine origin and utter truthfulness of Scripture, is incapable of such an approach. Rather, he is bound to accept the words of Scripture "in their strict and clear sense, just as they read" (SD, VII,45; cf. 38). Referring to the words of institution of the Lord's Supper the Solid Declaration says, "We shall not, can not, and should not permit any clever human opinions, no matter what appearance or prestige they may have, to lead us away from the simple, explicit, and clear understanding of Christ's word and testament to a strange meaning different from the way the letters read, but, as stated above, we shall understand and believe them in the simple sense" (SD, VII,92). And the presupposition relative to Scripture for this position is "that the Word of God is not false or deceitful" (96).

There is nothing glib, superficial or naive about the Lutheran insistence upon establishing and then adhering to the intended meaning of the biblical text. Although the Lutherans believed that God's Word was clear as well as truthful and they spoke of the "clear" and "simple" text of Scripture, they were fully aware that it was often no easy thing to arrive at the *sensus literalis* of a given text. From their studies they knew the historical and exegetical difficulties encountered by the most pious and scholarly interpreter as he sought the meaning of the text. They knew well (FC, SD, II) the spiritual handicaps and weaknesses encumbering even the regenerate exegete as he went about his task. And they were deeply impressed with the profundity of the mysteries of faith couched in the plain language of Scripture, so that they did not arrogantly suppose they had all the exegetical answers. They were also sufficiently sensitive to the stylistics and *modus loquendi* of Scripture and its human authors to know that the *sensus literalis* of a given text is often highly figurative. John 6:48-58 was taken metaphorically as referring to a figurative eating of faith (SD, VII,61). The right hand of God is a figurative expression referring to an activity, God's majestic rule, communicated to Christ's human nature and exercised in his exaltation; it is not a place, but is everywhere (Epit., VII,12; SD, VII,95; VIII,28). There is no evidence to suggest that the Lutherans of the day were literalists in their interpretation, failing to discern common and recognizable figures of speech throughout the Scriptures. Understandably they were most wary of allegorical interpretation, and they eschewed fanciful, figurative interpretations of passages where neither the context nor the analogy of Scripture nor good grammar suggested such a thing. An example of



such caution is their detailed exegesis of the words of institution (SD, VII,35-72).

And the writers of the Formula were acutely aware of the difficulties created when the theologian sticks with the *sensus literalis* of biblical texts consistently. For the principle we are describing here is not purely an analytical, atomistic search for the meaning of individual and possibly unrelated texts. Believing in the unity of the Scriptures (we shall discuss this later as a hermeneutical principle), the theologians of the Formula of Concord saw as their exegetical task not only to determine the meaning of individual verses, but also of pericopes and whole books and the entire Scripture itself. And so it was the task also of exegesis in searching out the meaning of Scripture to get at the sense of the entire sweep of Scripture as the various themes and articles of faith are taught or alluded to throughout and then to summarize these themes and articles of faith and arrange them in some kind of order (SD, III,37; VII,92-97). Such a synthetic activity is part of the exegetical enterprise of determining the burden, the meaning, of the entire Scriptures. And just such an activity was carried out in the Formula deliberately and specifically in the various articles. In summarizing into manageable headings the doctrine drawn from and conformed to the Word of God (SD, "Rule and Norm," 4,5) the Lutheran theologians were carrying out the necessary implications of the first principle of exegesis, to ascertain the *sensus literalis* of the text.

The difficulties they encounter as they carry out this total task are obvious. The exegetically determined meaning of one verse may appear to conflict with the meaning of another verse dealing with the same subject matter or article of faith. The meaning of a verse may appear to conflict with extrabiblical evidence from history or sound reason or experience. Or even more serious, the clear teaching of Scripture on one article of faith or subject may appear to conflict with the clear teaching of Scripture on another article of faith or subject. How can such conflicts be harmonized without denying the plain meaning of God's Word in this or that verse or section of Scripture? The answer is that the conflict can not be harmonized, if harmonization or solution of the difficulty involves any departure at all from the intended meaning of a single Bible text. In every case the meaning of the given text must stand, whatever the consequences (SD, VII,22,30,45).

The radical nature of the Lutheran hermeneutics at this point is not therefore the principle of determining the *sensus literalis* of the

text per se — any Calvinist would have enthusiastically subscribed to such a principle as the necessary implication of *sola Scriptura* — but the utterly conservative and consistent way in which the principle is carried out in practice and the unconditioned adherence and commitment to the *sensus literalis* in every case. Not only must reason and philosophy not sit in judgment of divine revelation, but they must not be allowed in any way hermeneutically to question or alter the intended meaning of a Scripture text (SD, II,8; VIII,41; XI,91; Epit., VII,42). The Lutheran principle of *sola Scriptura* means not merely that there is no norm of doctrine beside Scripture, but that any principle of hermeneutics alien to the principles of Scripture itself is rejected, whether the principle has to do with logic, philosophy, experience or science so-called (e.g. the Aristotelian world picture or principle *finitus non est capax infiniti*). It is not merely rhetoric when the confessors say, “We must only believe and cling to the Word” (SD, IX,3). They are putting into practice a principle which will keep them faithful to the divine Word.

And the radical practice of the principle results in radical consequences. The Lutheran doctrine drawn from Scripture in such a manner appears often to be puerile, irrational and self-contradictory. The Lutherans were the first to recognize this fact. The clear teachings of Scripture are against proud reason and philosophy (SD, II,8). At times the meaning of the divine Word conflicts not only with common sense and reason but, according to our thinking, with the gospel itself. Abraham is to cling to the divine Word and obey it even when it seemed to conflict with the gospel of the coming Savior (SD, VII,46). But then the gospel of the coming Savior was also contrary to reason; still it was true in spite of that. So we today believe in the plain meaning of the words of God [e.g. the words of institution] which seem contrary to reason or unnecessary in the light of other articles of faith.

There are two specific consequences of the rigid application of the principle we have been discussing. First, we have cases where the meaning (teaching) of Scripture appears to conflict with reason or experience or accepted principles such as the Aristotelian *finitum non est capax infiniti*. An example of this is the doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, based upon the plain meaning of the words of institution. The presence of Christ's body and blood wherever the Sacrament is celebrated, as taught clearly in the words of institution, “transcends nature and reason, even the comprehension of all the angels in heaven, and is known only to God” (SD, VII,102).

Second, we have cases where the *sensus literalis* of two texts dealing with the same subject matter or article of faith appear to be in utter conflict with each other. An example of this is the doctrine of the personal union and the resultant communication of attributes of the two natures of Christ (SD, VIII,6-14). Article VIII of the Solid Declaration in its entirety is the classic example of Lutheran hermeneutics at just this point: the Lutheran refusal to allow the intended sense of one pericope to militate against another pericope dealing with the same subject. In this article all the biblical passages pertaining to the person of Christ are arrayed and the exegetical conclusions drawn from all the biblical evidence summarized. But the summary defies all rational synthesis. Therefore the Formula of Concord simply lists in all their paradoxicalness the conclusions drawn from the Scriptures. The conclusions, each on the basis of solid biblical evidence, are the following: 1. By virtue of the personal union there exist in Christ two disparate natures, each with its appropriate attributes. These natures are inseparably united in the person of Christ. 2. Each nature retains those attributes peculiar to it and in no sense is ever changed. 3. Yet, there is a real communication or participation (*communicatio, Gemeinschaft, κοινωνία*) between the attributes of the two natures, including a communication of the attributes of the divine nature to the human nature of Christ. The Formula of Concord then offers a thorough discussion of the communication of attributes, summarizing everything Scripture teaches on the subject under three major classifications (*genera*). The result is a total biblical picture of the communication of attributes without the slightest attempt to harmonize what they find in the Scriptures (SD, VIII,20-87). That the Formula does not even consider a fourth *genus tapaneiticum* (that certain human attributes are communicated to the divine nature in Christ) which renders their position apparently inconsistent is not prompted by any preconceived notion about the divine nature (SD, VIII,49) or any logical consideration at all, but is the result of their utter adherence to the literal sense of all the biblical texts as an application of *sola Scriptura* (cf. especially SD, VIII,51,53,55. Paragraphs 67-69 provide the biblical basis for paragraph 55.). Again, the strong polemic against Zwingli's *alloeosis* is as much an attack against his rationalistic hermeneutics as against his Christology (SD, VIII,39-43). The discussions in Article VIII illustrate with clarity that the intended meaning of all passages dealing with a given subject must be retained at all costs, and if paradoxes or tensions emerge from the comparison of these passages and their intended meaning, they

must remain, and the force of all biblical data dealing with the subject must be retained in tension.

A somewhat different example of the second consequence of the consistent Lutheran application of holding to the *sensus literalis* occurs when one article of faith drawn legitimately from Scripture appears to disagree with another article of faith drawn exegetically from the Scriptures. In such cases one article must never be used to militate against another article or Bible verse teaching that article. What Scripture says in one passage about conversion must not militate against what it says elsewhere about justification (SD, III,24-26). Again, what Scripture teaches about love and good works must not be brought into the article of justification so as to mitigate what Scripture teaches about that (ibid., 35-36). Universal grace is clearly taught in Scripture (Jn 3:16), but this must not bear any force against what Scripture teaches about the ordered means of grace (SD, II,49-50) or election (SD, XI,28-32). Scriptures teach with clear texts that man can fall from grace (SD, IV,31) and with equal clarity that the elect will not fall (SD, XI,8).

The final result of this ardent search for the *sensus literalis* and commitment to it is that Lutheran theology, the theology of Scripture, will manifest many lacunae, apparent paradoxes, mysteries that cannot be probed or harmonized. To attempt to harmonize in any logical or coherent fashion the articles of faith or apparent meaning of Scripture passages which appear to disagree with each other will result in the rejection of the *sensus literalis* of some Scripture passages and a violation of *sola Scriptura*. And it will result in false and pernicious doctrine oftentimes. For instance, justification by faith alone is a legitimate consequence drawn from Scripture. So is the necessity of good works and the teaching that they are pleasing to God. But to draw good works into the article of justification, to interpret those passages dealing with justification according to verses that extol good works, denies the scriptural doctrine of justification (Php 3:7f.). At the same time the doctrine of justification by faith must not be used to make good works of no value or an impediment to salvation, for Scripture teaches that good works are a necessary fruit of faith (SD, IV,37-38) and have been commended by God (ibid., IV,40). And so the paradoxes, the lacunae, the mysteries we find in Scripture as we determine and hold to the *sensus literalis* in every case must remain unimpaired and unresolved. This is a rule extremely difficult for the exegete to observe with his bent toward order and coherence as he summarizes and organizes his conclu-

sions drawn from Scripture. The consistency with which the Formula of Concord (and the other Lutheran Confessions) follows this rule is a major and unique achievement in the history of exegesis.

But does not the position that we must as exegetes simply abide with the paradoxes and lacunae of Scripture deny the unity of Scripture, its clarity, and even its inerrancy, at least in the practical sense of providing any directive for hermeneutics? There is no doubt that the authors of the Formula were aware of this question and its cogency. And there is no doubt how they will answer the question. The answer is No. But now we must examine the second basic hermeneutical rule underlying the exegesis of the Formula of Concord, the principle of the unity of Scripture.

### B. The unity of Scripture (analogical exegesis)

The unity of Scripture is a property of Scripture deriving from its divine origin and its absolute truthfulness. The unity of Scripture means that Scripture teaches one message of law and gospel, one way of salvation, one *doctrina coelestis* (Tappert, Preface, p. 5). Scripture is not the product of various human penmen, each expounding his own peculiar theology, but the Word of very God. This means that all Scripture agrees with itself. It means also that Scripture interprets Scripture. Passages of Scripture dealing with the same article of faith or subject matter do not contradict each other, but complement each other and shed light on each other. Often passages which appear unclear for some reason are clarified by other passages which deal with the same subject matter. This agreement of Scripture with itself in the sense just mentioned is called the analogy of Scripture and is a very useful hermeneutical principle, like the search for the *sensus literalis*. In no way is the principle of the analogy of Scripture thought to be at variance with the basic exegetical task of finding and adhering to the intended meaning of the biblical text. Rather it appears to be an extension of just that first principle. Let me explain how this works out.

After the meaning of individual texts has been established the exegete must do two things. He must summarize all that Scripture says on the various theological themes or *loci*. And he must attempt to relate the articles of faith to each other, but in such a way that each article retains its own integrity on the basis of clear Scriptures and good exegesis.

Just such an exegetical program is the purpose of the Formula of Concord. The Formula of Concord is "A general, pure, correct and definitive restatement and exposition of a number of articles of the Augsburg Confession concerning which there has been a controversy among some theologians for a time, resolved and settled according to the Word of God (to the analogy of God's Word, *nach Anleitung Gottes Worts, ad normam et analogiam Verbi Dei*) and the summary formulation of our Christian doctrine" (SD, Title). What is meant by "the analogy of God's Word" in this context? It means that controversies are settled and doctrine is presented according to the guidance or direction of the Scriptures (SD, II,6), or according to the cumulative evidence of Scripture (SD, VIII,60). In other words, the exegetical task of the Formula of Concord is not merely to explain unclear passages or controverted exegeses by clear passages dealing with articles of faith, but to present the entire content and sweep of Scripture as it teaches the various articles of faith under discussion (e.g. original sin, free will, justification, etc.).

How is this done in the case of the Formula? By discussing and explaining all the biblical terms and themes pertinent to an article of faith. For instance, in presenting the bondage of the will of the unregenerate man (FC, II), all kinds of related terms and themes will be discussed and explained: original sin, the means of grace, spiritual death, the work of the Holy Spirit, regeneration, the effect of the fall, etc. In presenting the doctrine of justification such key biblical themes and concepts as faith, grace, the obedience and person of Christ, forgiveness, etc. will be discussed at length. Only then will an adequate presentation of justification result. This is the primary application of the principle of the *analogia verbi*.

It is worthy of note that the Formula is primarily concept oriented rather than word oriented (like a lexicographer) as it carries out this principle. This is of real significance. For if concepts or terms in Scripture are related to or entail each other they ought to be discussed together under one basic biblical theme or *locus*, rather than atomistically as in a lexicon. For instance, in the discussion of the article of justification forgiveness and reconciliation will be considered just as Paul does in Romans 3-5 (SD, III,30,62). In fact, justification cannot be discussed adequately without bringing in these concepts as well as the themes of grace and faith and especially Christ's work of obedience and righteousness (SD, III. 25,30,32,57). Furthermore, the *sensus literalis* (*Meinung*) of Paul as he speaks of the exclusive particles "without the law," "freely," "not of works"

must be brought into the discussion of justification if the biblical position is adequately presented (*ibid.*, 36). This orientation and kind of procedure springs not only from the desire to be thorough, but to be faithful to the literal sense of Scripture at all points. *Sensus literalis* and *analogia Scripturae* complement each other.

But carrying out the implications of the analogy of Scripture involves not only bringing parallel themes into the discussion of the articles of faith. It involves also relating the articles of faith to each other, showing the bearing of antecedent and consequent articles on each article of faith. There are many examples of this procedure in the Formula of Concord. Although contrition, along with renewal, must not be confused with justification (SD, III,32), it must be brought into the discussion of justification if a true presentation of the biblical doctrine is to be given (SD, III,24). Although the burden of Article III is to establish the nature of justification against Osian-drian and Roman aberrations, the antecedent and consequent themes of contrition and good works are essential to the orthodox scriptural presentation of the doctrine (SD, III,40-43). So also is a presentation of the exclusive particles (SD, III,35f.; cf. 44).

There is also a negative application of the analogy of Scripture. Bible passages can not be construed so as to teach what is patently false doctrine according to other passages from Scripture. Thus, when Strigel or Flacius interpret passages dealing with original sin in such a way that their conclusions teach or border on heresy (Pelagianism and Manicheanism) and a denial of other articles of faith clearly taught in Scripture, their exegesis must be rejected on the basis of the analogy of Scripture. This negative application of the principle is not seen as a mitigation in effect of the *sensus literalis* in the interest of harmonization, but as a safeguard against fanciful and dangerous exegesis. If the articles of faith do not always cohere with each other logically, they also do not flatly contradict each other so that the assertion of one entails the denial of the other. A good example of the way in which the negative application of the analogy of Scripture is applied in the case of Flacius' aberration is seen in the Solid Declaration, I,34. Flacius had insisted on identifying (perhaps not for strictly exegetical reasons) the very substance of fallen man with original sin. The theologians of the Formula maintain a distinction between fallen human nature and original sin and contend that "the chief articles of our Christian faith constrain and compel us to maintain such a distinction" (SD, I,34). And then they point out how his position which he insisted was biblical

conflicted with the articles of creation, the incarnation of the Son of God, sanctification and the resurrection. All such articles, the Formula argues, compel us to maintain the distinction between human nature *per se* as it is created and preserved by God and the reality of original sin itself which dwells in human nature and corrupts it. But not just the chief articles of faith are the basis for the distinction; Scripture passages are cited to prove both points. And it is for biblical reasons, because of direct biblical evidence and teaching, that these two facts can not be equated or confused (*ibid.*, 38).

An instructive example of the integrating function and also the negative critical function of the analogy of Scripture is, I believe, seen in the Formula's treatment of predestination. First of all we observe the solid and vast exegetical basis for the Lutheran doctrine of predestination. But as one reads more deeply the discussion of predestination and election in Article XI one notices that there is a conscious, integral relationship between this article and Articles II and III. It is in the light of the monergistic doctrine of conversion in Article II (SD, XI,45-47; *pass.*, cf. 60) and of the complete and universally applicable work of Christ in Article III (SD, XI,15-22,28.) that Article XI is written. Predestination is taught in the light of *sola gratia* of Article II and *gratia universalis* of Article III. But at the same time the doctrine of the divine election of grace exerts the critical hermeneutical function of keeping two evangelical articles of faith, the *sola gratia* and the *gratia universalis*, from being used against each other (SD, XI,43,44).

To sum up, the analogy of Scripture is never used as a cipher to mitigate the intended sense of any Bible passage. The principle, based upon the doctrinal unity of Scripture (and this doctrinal unity is always assumed in the Formula of Concord), is employed only a) to understand and interpret unclear passages by clear passages dealing with the same subject matter (Scripture interprets Scripture), b) to elicit the entire content and sweep of Scripture as it teaches the articles of faith, and c) to relate the articles of faith to each other.

### **C. The gospel principle (the centrality of justification and its function)**

#### *1. Law and gospel*

The proper distinction between law and gospel is a working principle of hermeneutics revealed in Scripture. This is the clear position of the Formula of Concord: "The distinction between law



and gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided (*recht geteilt, recte secari*) and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained (*eigentlich erklart, dextre explicari*) and understood correctly. We must therefore observe this distinction with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the gospel into law. This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort which they would otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached purely and without admixture, for by it Christians can support themselves in their greatest temptations against the terrors of the law" (SD, V,1; cf. Epit., V,2; Apol., IV,5,6). This statement tells us why we must divide law and gospel, but not how to do so. The rest of the article, like Apology IV, dwells also more on the reason for the distinction than on how to apply it.

How then do we use hermeneutically the principle of dividing law and gospel? As far as I can see, it is by simply a) knowing what the law is and what the gospel is, and by b) recognizing law and gospel in Scripture and not confusing the two.

The law is whatever in Scripture condemns, even if the suffering of Christ is described (SD, V,12). But in addition to such a formal definition, "the law is a divine doctrine which reveals the righteousness and immutable will of God, shows how man ought to be disposed in his nature, thoughts, words, and deeds in order to be pleasing and acceptable to God, and threatens the transgressors of the law with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishment" (ibid., 17; VI,12,15,17,22). This definition combines what the law is with its function. The gospel is defined in a similar way, first in terms of what it is and then in terms of its function. It is a "doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God . . ." (ibid., 20). Thus far the definition is formal again, telling us what is the function of the gospel. But then the actual material content of the gospel message is defined. "The content of the gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, himself assumed and bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through him alone we reenter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishment of sin, and are saved eternally" (ibid., 20). In every case a definition of the gospel is given in terms of what Christ has done to save us (SD, V,22). And then another formal definition, "For everything which comforts and which offers the mercy and grace of God to transgressors of the law strictly speaking is, and is

called, the gospel, a good and joyful message that God wills not to punish sins but to forgive them for Christ's sake" (ibid., 21). Once the interpreter knows what law and gospel are, as taught in the Scriptures, then he is prepared to distinguish one from the other and apply the Scriptures (and this too is a part of exegesis) in such a way that both doctrines are taught side by side in the church with the proper distinction (ibid., 15,23).

There are many ways in which the interpreter confuses law and gospel. In the Confessions, however, two aberrations are singled out. In the Apology Melanchthon criticizes the papists for interpreting law passages as gospel and ascribing to the law what only the gospel can offer and accomplish in us — forgiveness, faith, salvation, comfort (Apol., IV, 7,12f.,36f.; pass., SD, V,11). In the Formula of Concord the authors criticize the antinomians for ascribing to the gospel what only the law can work in us, namely contrition, sorrow over sin, also for the Christian (Epit., V,11; SD, V,9,22,24).

It is in just this way then that the distinction between law and gospel serves as a brilliant light to help us explain and understand the Scriptures. Throughout the Scriptures law and gospel are presented side by side. The work of both together is to work repentance in the broad sense, the law as God's *opus alienum* to work contrition and the gospel as God's *opus proprium* to work faith (SD, V,7f.,15; Apol., IV,257; XII,53-58).

## 2. *The hermeneutical function of the gospel*

Closely related to the hermeneutical function of the distinction between law and gospel is the emphasis upon the centrality of the gospel of justification and its function. Both Melanchthon and Luther in the confessions had stressed the centrality of the article of justification and used this chief article hermeneutically. Melanchthon calls justification by faith the *praecipuus locus* which affords us a clear understanding of the entire Scripture and opens the whole Bible to us (Apol., IV,2, German text), and Melanchthon repeatedly shows how this article is in conflict with every interpretation of Scripture which would promote work-righteousness. Luther called the teaching concerning Christ and his work and faith in him *der Hauptartikel* (Smalcald Articles, II,I) and used this teaching to reject all kinds of papal aberrations and unevangelical practices which denied the gospel (SA, II,II,1,8,24,31; II,IV,3).

The Solid Declaration agrees with the Apology and with Luther on the centrality of this doctrine. "In the words of the Apology, this

article of justification by faith is the 'chief article of the entire Christian doctrine,' 'without which no poor conscience can have any abiding comfort or rightly understand the riches of the grace of Christ.' In the same vein Dr. Luther declared: 'Where this single article remains pure, Christendom will remain pure, in beautiful harmony, and without any schisms. But where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to repel any error or heretical spirit' " (SD, III,6). It is reasonable to assume that the Formula uses this chief article in the same way hermeneutically as do the earlier confessions. How is this done?

Not as a cipher to mitigate the clear intention of any Bible verse or any article of faith. The very purpose of Articles V and VI is to show that the gospel in no way detracts from the force of the law, even though the law in fact and in God's economy serves the gospel. Article VI serves as a polemic not only against antinomianism but against any form of gospel reductionism. In the case of all the articles of faith Scripture must be the only source of the article; this is apparent in every single article of the Formula, and significantly so in Article III dealing with justification. Immediately after the assertion that justification is the central article of faith the discussion turns to a defense on the basis of Scripture of the Lutheran doctrine of justification and a deeper treatment than in the other confessions of the meaning of the term "righteousness" in Scripture. Scriptures are marshaled to demonstrate that Christ's obedience under the law for us and his suffering and dying in our stead is the righteousness that is imputed to us (SD, III,22-36). Rome's denial of justification by faith and Osiander's denial of the forensic righteousness are not refuted by some kind of appeal to the chief article of our religion (Osiander would have agreed that justification is the chief article) but to solid biblical evidence (cf. SD, III,8 with III,44).

The chief article is used hermeneutically in the Formula exactly as in the Apology and the Smalcald Articles. It is used to counter false and unevangelical practices which undermine the gospel, to combat rationalistic or legalistic exegeses which undermine the gospel, and positively to offer a setting for the presentation of articles of faith. Let me offer some examples of this.

The gospel principle is operative in the discussion of adiaphora in Article X. Any church custom or activity which does not go contrary to Scripture is permissible. But when these permissible practices (in cases of conscience and confessions) are made obligatory and thus tend to obscure the truth of the gospel, "the chief

article of our Christian faith" (SD, X,14), and thus inhibit our Christian liberty under the gospel, they must be eschewed and rejected.

The principle is also operative in the discussion of original sin in Article I. Original sin should be taught in such a way, "according to the Word of God" (SD, I,4), as "to magnify more fully Christ's benefits, his precious merits, and the Holy Spirit's gracious activity" (ibid., 3; cf. Apol. II,44). The gospel is a factor in rejecting Flacius' bizarre and unscriptural identification of fallen human nature with original sin.

In Article IV on good works the gospel, "the article of justification and salvation" (SD, IV,22), is used to show that good works are not necessary for salvation. At first it might appear that the gospel principle is used rather casually here as a cipher, but this is not the case, for in the discussion Paul's exclusive particles are cited from Scripture to prove the point.

The best example of the gospel principle serving to offer a proper biblical and theological context for the exegesis and presentation of an article of faith is found in Article XI on predestination. After defining what election means according to Scripture, the Formula presents the doctrine not *nude* but in the context of the entire counsel of God, that is, the gospel. And only after making eight points (SD, XI,15-22) dealing with the work of Christ, the means of grace, justification and the work of the Holy Spirit is the biblical doctrine of predestination with its application and all its comfort presented. The result is that election (as in Ro 8:28f. and Eph 1:4f.; SD, XI,14) which is gospel — for there is no predestination to hell — supports the chief article. Again, however, the entire argumentation is according to Scripture and exegesis. "Thus far God has revealed the mystery of foreknowledge to us in his Word. If we stay with this and hold ourselves thereto, it is indeed a useful, salutary, and comforting doctrine, for it mightily substantiates the article that we are justified and saved without our works and merit, purely by grace and solely for Christ's sake" (SD, XI,44). Then passages are cited which explicitly point to the evangelical comfort in the doctrine of election.

#### **D. Biblical realism, a presupposition for biblical interpretation**

In our day when theology and exegesis are still suffering under the bane of classical liberalism and more recently of secularism, we are accustomed to hear exegetes speak of faith events (we believe in Christ's resurrection although the body is still in the grave), didactic

tales or myths (we believe in the doctrine of the fall, although Adam and Eve never existed and there was no historic fall which plunged the human race into sin) and the like. These exegetes claim to be faithful to Scripture and even to its *sensus literalis*, although they do not believe often in the historic or ontological reality underlying biblical assertions.

One would hardly expect the Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth century to be aware of this issue and to be concerned about maintaining the reality of our redemption and the reality underlying all biblical assertions. But they were. Any interpretation of Scripture which would undermine this principle of biblical realism was rejected. Any genre suggested for a pericope or section of Scripture which would militate against a historical or real referent for theology would have been repudiated as allegorization and unbelief (e.g. etiological saga, didactic tale, symbolic history, faith event, midrash, etc.).

The Augsburg Confession stresses this realism of the Scriptures when it says that the Trinity is not only called God but is God (AC, I,2), when it insists that original sin is truly sin (*vere peccatum*), when it speaks of Christ as true God and true man and says that he truly suffered (AC, III,2, Latin text) and truly rose (AC, III,3, German text) and when it maintains that the body and blood of Christ are truly present in the supper of the Lord (AC, X). The "*vere*" is added to underline the fact that *est* expresses reality as used in Scripture and theology, even when figurative language is employed. For instance, the right hand of God may indeed be a figurative expression, but it denotes a reality.

This same realistic understanding of the theology of Scripture pervades the Formula of Concord. Scripture teaches a real communication of attributes, not a mere verbal one (SD, VIII,31,56-59,63). God himself ontologically dwells in the believer (SD, III,65). The antidonatism of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, that the body and blood of Christ are distributed even by a wicked priest, indicates the same theological realism (SD, VII,24). The principle of realism is brought out whenever the *manducatio indignorum* is stressed (SD, VII,8,18,33). In fact the very doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood is a classical expression of the principle. But not only in the Lord's Supper is Christ's body and blood present; in a different mode of presence he is really present as a person according to both natures "wherever he is," and this means everywhere (SD, VIII,82, pass.).

Like the Augsburg Confession, the Formula of Concord stresses the reality of original sin as described in Scripture. While rejecting the Flacian view that man's nature and original sin are identical, the Formula at the same time stresses the reality of this sin (against any Strigelian or Pelagian diminution) which corrupts our human nature by repeatedly alluding to the real historical fall and to the reality of man's present lost condition (SD, I,6,9,11,13,27; V,23). The common refrain is "since the Fall" and "through the Fall"; a real fall is the cause of original sin; and original sin, this "chief and root sin," as Luther called it, is in turn the cause of our present lost, sinful condition and the real death and damnation which are its punishment (SD, I,13,30,33). The very point of Article I of the Formula is to stress the reality of original sin.

#### **E. The purpose of Scripture**

The purpose of Scripture is to lead us to repentance and faith and hope (SD, XI,12; Ro 15:4). Just as the chief article of Scripture, the burden of the Bible, is the article of soteriology (justification through faith in Christ), so the purpose of Scripture is soteriological, salvation through faith in Christ. No article of faith, no passage in Scripture can be taught or interpreted against this saving purpose of God's Word. Thus predestination is taught in Scripture and must be so interpreted by us that we are in no way driven to despair, but to the word of forgiveness. The purpose of Scripture forbids us from thinking speculatively about our election and trying to probe the inscrutable knowledge of God (13). The purpose of Scripture shows us that the law serves the gospel, and we ought to coordinate all articles of the faith to the article of redemption and salvation (14,28-32). And finally, all exegesis ought to be done in the light of Scripture's purpose. "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" (SD, XI,92). We are immediately cognizant of the close relationship between the purpose of Scripture as a principle of interpretation and the unity of Scripture.

#### **F. The Holy Spirit and the interpretation of Scripture**

Although there is rather little said explicitly concerning the Holy Spirit as the true interpreter of his own Word, Sacred Scripture, and of the necessity of his enlightening the exegete as he goes about his task, the principle is taken for granted throughout the Formula and no doubt employed (SD, XI,92). The authors of the Formula are at all

times aware that the Spirit is the true author of what they are seeking to interpret and that they need his guidance if they are to read and apply the Word rightly.

It is part of the sanctifying office of the Holy Spirit, so strongly emphasized throughout the confessions, to lead the reader of Scripture into its intended meaning. He does this always through the Scripture, never apart from it. But *he* must do it. Obviously the words are clear in themselves. The Holy Spirit does not prevaricate or equivocate. But even the regenerated man is wont to go his own way in turning the Scriptures to suit his *opinio legis* and other fancies. And so it is the Spirit who "opens the intellect and the heart to understand the Scriptures and to heed the Word" (SD, II,26,27; V,11; XI,12; cf. Lk 24:25; Ac 16:14, etc.). Notice, he leads us to understand Scripture (this means exegesis) and to heed the Word (this means faith and application), the two aspects of exegesis.

Again, there is no conflict between what the Formula says about the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the exegetical endeavor and the other hermeneutical principles we have mentioned. For it is through the Scriptures, interpreted according to their own principles, that the Spirit works.

So we have arrived at the end of our brief study of the principles of biblical hermeneutics as we see these applied in the Formula of Concord. And we can answer our original question. There is indeed a Lutheran way of reading Scripture. But the authors of the Formula would have surely added that this is the biblical way of reading Scripture. The principles we have studied were not formally worked out, articulated or defended by the Formula. That was not its purpose. Perhaps our study has uncovered what appear to be certain inconsistencies as we tried to elicit the principles used and illustrate how they were applied. But we can safely say that the hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord was based firmly on the Scriptures themselves and the authors of the Formula were not aware of any serious inconsistency in their exegetical method, although it yielded conclusions which often seemed paradoxical. Nor would they have admitted that one of the principles they worked with should take preeminence over others or mitigate their validity. And we can certainly say that the hermeneutics of the Formula was evangelical in the biblical understanding of the word.

- Huss. I shut the book and left the library, comforting myself with the notion that Huss had written these sermons before he lapsed into heresy." These materials are printed in the Luther (Erlangen edition), Vol. 65, pp. 59-83.
49. In English the best study of this is Fraenkel's *Testimonia Patrum*. Cf. note 46.
  50. Luther (American edition), Vol. 2, pp. 87, 54, 55; Vol. 26, p. 65.
  51. Op. cit., Vol. 35, pp. 273-278.
  52. Op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 61.
  53. Kramer, op. cit., p. 262.
  54. Luther (American edition), Vol. 41, p. 21. Regarding the attempt of others to bring harmony into disharmony, Luther's reference was to the Italian monk Gratian who, in the mid twelfth century, produced the famous *Concordance of Discordant Canons*. This work, whose title was shortened to *Decretum*, became the standard textbook for the study of Roman canon law.
  55. Kramer, op. cit., p. 292.
  56. This is quoted in Schaefer, op. cit., p. 43. (Cf. note 46). Luther's comment may be found in the collection of letters published by Enders, Vol. I, p. 55.
  57. Koehler, op. cit., p. 60.
  58. Luther (American edition), Vol. 32, pp. 243, 244.
  59. Luther (Weimar edition), 39/II:305.
  60. Luther (American edition), Vol. 41, p. 108.
  61. Luther (Weimar edition), 30/III:548.
  62. *Triglotta*, p. 1149.
  63. For examples of patristic thought see Gregory of Nyssa, "Address on Religious Instruction" in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, pp. 288, 276, 283 and Augustine, *The City of God XI*: 6, 7. Also consult Luther in his "Disputation on John 1:14," Luther (American edition), Vol. 38, pp. 239-277.

## 12. The Hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord

1. Two brief works have been written on the hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions: Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St Louis: Concordia, 1968); and Robert Preus, "Bibeln och de lutherska bekaennelseskritertern" in *Ditt Ord aer Sanning*, En handbok om Bibeln Telaegnad David Hedegard (Uppsala: Stiftelsen Biblicum, 1971), pp. 214-233. The latter study was somewhat enlarged and adapted in a paper "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret and Use the Old and New Testaments?" delivered as the 1973 *Reformation Lectures* at Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato, Minnesota, November 1 & 2. Cf. also Wilhelm C. Linss, "Biblical Interpretation in the Formula of Concord," in *The Symposium on Seventeenth Century Lutheranism* (St. Louis, 1962), pp. 118-135. Hartmut Guenther, "Das Schriftverstaentnis der Konkordienformel" *Bekanntnis zur Wahrheit*, Jobst Schoene, ed. (Erlangen: Martin Luther-Verlag, 1979), pp. 25-34.



2. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J.A. Bouman trans. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), p. xvi. So far as I have been able to determine all commentators on the Lutheran Symbols from the very first have affirmed that according to the Confessions themselves they are to be viewed as expositions of the Scriptures. See John George Walch, *Introductio in libros ecclesiae lutheranae symbolicos* (Jena, 1732), p. 754; Bohlmann, op. cit., pp. 9-20; Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions*, Gene J. Lund, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), p. 15f. More conservative commentators, when addressing themselves to confessional subscription have pointed out that to subscribe the Confessions on their terms one accepts them as correct biblical expositions. Cf. Georg Mylius, *Augustanae confessionis quae ecclesiarum evangelicarum novissimi temporis augustissimum symbolum, & doctrinae Lutheranae lapis vere Lydius est: explicatio* (Jena, 1595), p. A3; John Benedict Carpvov, *Isagoge in Libros ecclesiarum Lutheranarum symbolicos* (Leipzig, 1665), p. 6; Abraham Calov, *Commentarius apodicticoelenchticus in Augustanum Confessionem* (Leipzig, 1646), pp. 14-16; Sebastian Schmidt, *Articulorum Formulae Concordiae Repetitio* (Strasbourg, 1696), preface.
3. The entire ensuing discussion is based on the assumption that what the Bible says about itself and the validity of these claims will have bearing on the way in which we read the Scriptures, on hermeneutics. This position that the claims or assumptions or even allusions in Scripture concerning its nature, its purpose, its origin and authorship, its authority and truthfulness are important considerations in interpreting Scripture, is the position of the Formula of Concord, as we shall see. I have found only one theologian to disagree with this position. Dwane Priebe, discussing the hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions, says, "Statements about the Bible as the Word of God or about the inspiration, efficacy, and unity of Scripture, as well as statements about the sufficiency, perfection, inerrancy of Scripture, are confessional/doxological statements and do not provide information about the nature [sic] of the Bible or the process by which it came into being [sic], information of the sort that would allow these statements to become hermeneutical principles." ("The Historical-Critical Method and the Method of the Lutheran Confessions," Paul D. Opsahl, ed., *The Function of Doctrine and Theology in the Light of the Unity of the Church* (Lutheran Council USA, 1978), p. 77.) Priebe seems to be saying as a presupposition that there are no presuppositions about Scripture for the reading of Scripture, apparently not even presuppositions based upon doctrine drawn from Scripture regarding its origin, nature and properties. Such a view which Priebe implies is Lutheran and confessional is in absolute contradiction to the teaching and practice of the Formula of Concord, and is hermeneutical nonsense in any case. It is like saying that the fact that James Michener wrote *Centennial* has no bearing at all on the interpretation of the book.
4. Schlink, op. cit., pp. 1, 2. Schlink does not define "biblicism" and I do not know what he means by "*viva vox evangelii*," at least in relation to the Scriptures. He goes on to say, however, that the absence of a section in

the Augsburg Confession on Scripture (there was a section on Scripture in the earlier Evangelical Declaration of Ansbach in 1524!) is due to the fact that the earlier Lutheran Confessions, like Luther, adhere to an evangelical doctrine of Scripture, a kind of preoccupation with the gospel center of Scripture, which "suggests that the Gospel is the norm in Scripture and Scripture is the norm for the sake of the Gospel" (ibid., p. 6). On this theory Schlink cannot explain why the Formula of Concord included a section on the Scriptures, unless it is unconsciously or even deliberately less evangelical than the earlier confessions. It is true, of course, that all of the confessions see Scripture as norm for the sake of the gospel, but there is no evidence anywhere that any of the confessions make the gospel the norm of Scripture. It will be shown that the Formula of Concord exhibits just as "intense a concern" for the gospel as do the earlier confessions. Elert's explanation for the lack of explicit discussion of Scripture's nature and function in the earlier confessions is more plausible: any such discussion would serve no purpose; the divine origin and authority of Scripture was accepted by Roman Catholicism. Cf. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Walter A. Hansen, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), p. 190f. Cf. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Position of the Church and Her Symbols" in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXI, 10 (October, 1954), p. 740.

5. Two excellent discussions of the bibliography of the Formula of Concord are Bohlmann, op. cit., pp. 21-80; Harry Huth, *Gospel and Scripture*, a Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of "the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972). See also Robert Preus, "Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions" in *Concordia Journal*, 4, 1 (January, 1978), pp. 11-24.
6. As the confessors in the Formula of Concord actually use the *sola Scriptura* here defined, we find that they make Scripture not only the source and norm for doctrine in the church, but also for the definition and use of terms in the teaching of a doctrine (e.g. the terms "free" and "necessary," SD, IV, 17, 18) and for the use and application of a doctrine (e.g. election, SD, XI, 26).
7. Space does not permit a discussion of the bizarre opinion of Edmund Schlink (op. cit., p. 10) and his more vociferous followers, that the authority of Scripture derives from its content, namely the gospel, rather than from its author who is God. I have mentioned the names and arguments of these reductionists in "Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions" pp. 19, 20 (e.g. Robert Smith, Kent Knutson, Ed Schroeder, Gerhard Forde, et al.). The opinion which has no basis in the Lutheran Confessions or in clear thinking has been effectively refuted by Fagerberg (op. cit., p. 30f.) and more recently by Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, Rudolph F. Norden, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), p. 27f.