

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

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,
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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.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Part 1: Report on the Study | 7 |
| Part 2: Definitions of Gospel, Doctrine, Theology, and Consensus | |
| As Used in the ALC — By Warren A. Quanbeck | 17 |
| As Used in the LCA — By Robert C. Schultz | 19 |
| As Used in the LCMS — By Roland A. Hopmann | 21 |
| Part 3: Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship | |
| ALC View: What Does Agreement in the Doctrine of the Gospel Mean? — By Warren A. Quanbeck | 27 |
| How the LCA Understands Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship — By Edgar M. Carlson | 29 |
| The Position of the LCMS on the Basis for Fellowship — By Ralph A. Bohlmann | 32 |
| Our Commitment to the Gospel — By Ralph A. Bohlmann | 40 |
| Part 4: The Interrelatedness of the Gospel | |
| Gospel and Scripture — By Charles S. Anderson | 47 |
| Gospel and Church — By Robert C. Schultz | 52 |
| Gospel and Doctrine — By H. George Anderson | 60 |
| Part 5: Biblical Interpretation | |
| The Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions and the Historical-Critical Method — By Robert D. Preus | 65 |
| The Historical-Critical Method and the Method of the Lutheran Confessions — By Duane A. Priebe..... | 76 |
| Part 6: Theological Diversity in a Confessional Church | |
| LCMS Doctrinal Position — By Albert M. Marcis | 83 |
| Limits of Theological Diversity — By Warren A. Quanbeck | 87 |
| The Nature of Biblical Unity and Its Implications for the Unity of the Church — By Duane A. Priebe | 89 |

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Part 4

The Interrelatedness of the Gospel

Gospel and Doctrine

By H. George Anderson

The question I propose to consider is whether the statement in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word," may be interpreted to mean, "We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments" (Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 7).

More specifically, can "**consentire de doctrina evangelii**" in Article VII be equated with "**in doctrina eiusque articulis omnibus**" or consensus?

The first question to be answered concerns the relation between "doctrine of the Gospel" and "doctrine and all its articles." Are they equivalent? The answer depends on the meaning of "gospel" in the first phrase. If it can be taken in a broad sense to mean "the evangelical position," then it could be equated with the quotation from the Formula of Concord covering "doctrine and all its articles."

A simple way to establish what the Augsburg Confession means by "gospel" is to examine its occurrences and see how it is used. The term "gospel" occurs 32 times in the German and Latin versions of

the Augsburg Confession, although not always at parallel points. Occasionally the Latin version will use the term where the German text employs another word and vice versa. Thus there are actually 35 passages in which one or the other text uses "gospel": Article V, 1, 2, 4; Article VII, 1 (twice), 2; Article XII, 5; Article XVI, 3, 4; Article XVI, 4, 5; Article XX, 10 (German), 19 (Latin); Article XXVI, 4, 20, 29; Article XXVII, 12, 36 (German), 54 (Latin), 61 (German); Article XXVIII, 5 (twice), 8 (English translation of Latin *verbum*), 11, 12, 19, 21 (twice), 23, 34, 50, 52, 59, 66 (Latin), 70.

The term is used in various ways, unfortunately, so it is not possible to perform a sort of verbal algebra

and simply substitute one occurrence for another. We must note the contexts in which "gospel" appears.

Article V gives the basic definition of "gospel" in the following explanation: ". . . the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this."

This use of the term occurs in XII, 5; XVI, 4; XXVI, 4, 20; and XXVIII, 52. Of special interest in this connection are the large number of passages that speak about practices which are "contrary to the Gospel" (*dem Evangelio entgegen*). These practices are described as instituting "ordinances and traditions . . . for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace" (XV, 3; similar uses are in XV, 4; XX, 10; XXVI, 29; XXVII, 36; XXVIII, 50). Should bishops condone or institute such practices, they are acting contrary to the gospel (XXVIII, 21, 23, 34). Clearly these passages all presuppose the definition of "gospel" given in Article V. Perhaps XXVIII, 59, belongs in this category as well.

Somewhat less clear in their meaning are a cluster of passages which distinguish the gospel from "outward and temporal" existence (XVI, 4) or from civil authority (XVI, 5; XVIII, 11, 19). While XVI, 4, makes the usual connection between the gospel and "proper fear of God and real faith," the next sentence implies that the gospel "requires" certain types of behavior. The passages from Article XXVIII simply state that the gospel

is **not** concerned with civil matters; they do not give much help on the **content** of the gospel. Three references to preaching the gospel (XXVIII, 5, 12, 21) also leave the content question open.

In a few other instances "gospel" seems to carry a technical meaning growing out of common usage. The most notable examples of this **terminus technicus** are references to **consilia evangelica** (XXVII, 12, 54) and the German equivalent, "**des Evangelions Rathe und Gebot**" in XXVII, 61. A similar expression may stand behind **ex evangelio consolationem** in XX, 19.

An extension of this technical meaning first appears in XX, 10, where the German phrase, "**wider das Evangelium**," is paralleled in Latin with "**cum Christus de se dixerit**," referring to John 14.6. Here "gospel" seems equivalent to "the Gospel of John" or, by extension, "the New Testament." This use of "gospel" as a broad term for the New Testament may cover passages containing the phrase, "according to the Gospel" (XVII, 5, 21 in Latin, 70), where doctrines of the power of the keys and marriage are mentioned.

To review, the Augsburg Confession seems to use the word "gospel" in four ways:

—The most common use, appearing in over half the instances, is as the teaching about a gracious God who saves people through Christ.

—The word also appears in technical expressions such as "evangelical counsels."

—Occasionally it is used to refer to a specific Gospel or to the New Testament.

—Other expressions, such as "preach the gospel," presuppose a definition but are of little help in forming one. They sometimes say what the gospel is **not**.

To which of these categories shall we assign the use of "gospel" in Article VII? There are no helpful parallels. The only other occurrence of the phrase, "**doctrina evangelii**," is in XXVIII, 70 ("But now they demand celibacy and will admit no one to the ministry unless he swears that he will not teach the pure doctrine of the Gospel"), where it is equated with teaching that priests may marry (see German text). Either we must settle on one of the four meanings above, or we must set up a new category. Attempting to put the occurrence in Article VII, along with the majority of other references, in the first category would correspond with what is sometimes termed "the gospel in a strict sense." The only other possibility would be the third category, but we must note that usage in that frame

of reference normally occurs within the phrase, "according to the Gospel."

Consistent usage, therefore, would require us to interpret the phrase, "doctrine of the Gospel," in Article VII in conformity with the definition given in Article V: "that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits, but by the merit of Christ, when we believe him."

This brings us to the second major question. Is "doctrine of the Gospel" in Article VII really to be interpreted within the frame of the Augsburg Confession alone or should we give it a broader interpretation, perhaps making it equivalent to "doctrine and all its articles"? Some help toward an answer can be given by noting that there are several points in the Augsburg Confession where the gospel is discussed in a manner that implies it has subdivisions or parts. Could these be "all its articles" mentioned in the Epitome?

Let us examine the relevant passages:

—Article XXVI, 4. ". . . the doctrine concerning the grace and the righteousness of faith, which is the chief part of the Gospel" (**praecipua pars evangelii**).

—Article XXVIII, 52. "It is necessary to preserve the chief article of the Gospel (**praecipuum evangelii locum**), namely, that we obtain grace through faith in Christ. . . ."

—Article XXVIII, 65-66. Although the "apostles directed that one should abstain from blood and from what is strangled. . . . Those who do not observe it commit no sin. . . . One must pay attention to the chief article of Christian doctrine" (**Hauptstück christlicher Lehre**; Latin has **voluntas evangelii**).

Although the passages imply that other "parts of the Gospel" exist, only one part is ever named. The chief part, and the only one mentioned, is "that we obtain grace through faith in Christ." One might note in passing that although the English text refers twice to a "chief article" the Augsburg Confession does not employ the word "**articulus**" or "**Artikel**"—as the Epitome does—but refers to "**pars**" or "**Hauptstück**." Thus a direct parallel with the Epitome on the order of "**doctrina evangelii = doctrina eiusque articulis omnibus**" cannot be made. It would conform better with the language of the Augsburg Confession to see the gospel as one article among those making up "the doctrine and all its articles." This usage would also suit the terminology of the Confession, where justification—the fullest definition of "gospel"—is one of 28 articles.

To sum up, it is apparent that the Augsburg Confession and the Epitome give different standards for unity. Rather than seeing "doctrine of the Gospel" and "doctrine and all its articles" as synonyms or congruent circles, we might consider the "doctrine of the Gospel" to be a smaller circle within the larger circle of "doctrine and all its articles." The changed basis of unity, then, would reflect the changed historical situation in the 50 years following 1530.