

The Authoritative Status of the Smalcald Articles

David J. Zehnder

Martin Luther's Smalcald Articles (SA) are probably the least known and studied part of the Book of Concord, which contains the normative documents for Lutheran churches. The SA raise a perplexing question: how did this little-known document beat a vast array of sixteenth-century theological writings to find a position of confessional authority? The neglect of the SA has impelled one scholar, William Russell, to emphasize this problem repeatedly in an attempt to place them in the limelight.¹ Russell's argument, though important in its own right, is significantly different from my own. Beginning in his 1989 dissertation, Russell framed the SA as "a window into the life and theology of Martin Luther,"² a theme that he carried on in various writings, most expressly in a book that further develops his graduate thesis.³ Russell's general thinking is that because Luther composed the SA during a time when he felt that death was imminent, the old reformer was able to see clearly and record the most important themes of his thought in this concise document. Thus, Russell sees the importance of the SA as a hermeneutical device for Luther studies.

There are limitations to this view, the first being its assumption that there is such a thing as the one "key" to Luther. Certainly the SA represent some pivotal issues on Luther's mind in the mid-1530s, especially his opinion concerning what he saw as the futility of reconciling Protestant and Roman Catholic positions. Luther's thought, however, was dynamic and constantly evolving: pivotal themes would better emerge from surveying many works and making a more inductive survey, lest some of the most important ideas in his *Small Catechism*, *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *Lectures on Galatians*, or *The Bondage of the Will*, for instance, be neglected.

Aside from the questionable nature of identifying a single document as the key to Luther, Russell's work deals almost completely with the history

¹ See William R. Russell, "A Neglected Key to the Theology of Martin Luther: *The Schmalkald Articles*," *Word & World* 16 (1996): 84–90.

² William R. Russell, "*The Smalcald Articles*" as a Confessional Document in the Context of Martin Luther's Life and Theology (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International [publisher], 1989), 1.

³ William R. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

of the SA from their first publication in 1538 back to Luther, thus overlooking the development and reception of the text(s). Admittedly, the resources for this task are sparse, leaving many questions unanswered or unaddressed, yet the study of this history may help to spring the SA from historical obscurity and demonstrate their relevance to Lutheran identity, past and present. Asking how this odd little document found its way into the Book of Concord and what that means for the nature of confessions is important for today's church and a worthy complement to Luther studies.

In view of these concerns, this essay combines three tasks. It traces the history of the SA's inception from 1536, the editions and textual issues involved, and the reception of the SA, in order to show the document's ascension to symbolical authority. Although the literature on the reception of the SA is scant, I hope to demonstrate that they gained formal authority from their content as Luther's clear testimony, making them a versatile resource for defending the faith. Though their origin from Luther's pen gave them weight early on, they eventually came to derive their authority as an interpretation of the Augsburg Confession, and ultimately of Scripture itself. Their use as a doctrinal standard by important individuals, institutions, and collections of doctrine becomes understandable only in light of the historical struggle for Lutheran orthodoxy. Although the SA never enjoyed a grand authorization quite like that of the Augsburg Confession, their content provided a pure witness to Lutheranism and thus facilitated the shaping of its identity. If Russell is correct in his claim that the SA are pure Luther, this perhaps explains why they influenced the formation of pure Lutheranism against many dissenters.

I. A Lutheran Statement of Faith

In the emergence of the SA, the first impetus in the chain of historical causes was the effort of Pope Paul III's papal league of 1535. With his favorable attitude toward a church council, Paul III represented a change from his predecessor Clement VII, who had shunned such a prospect. Paul III sent Paul Vergerio to Germany to assess the theological climate, visiting Luther in Wittenberg and John Frederick the Magnanimous in Vienna. The pope's motives for calling a council at that time are not certain. At the very least, he desired to quell the Reformation's spread and more tightly enforce the Roman Church's decrees through her bishops. Five years earlier at Augsburg, many Lutherans, most notably Philip Melancthon, believed that some reasonable compromise between Protestant and Roman Catholic groups might still be possible, but the situation had since changed drastically so as to preclude any later rapprochement. Luther himself had long resigned any hope for compromise. As Scott Hendrix writes,

The years following 1522 confirmed what Luther's memory would not let him forget: the papacy did not wish to reform itself or the church at large. . . . This conviction prevented Luther from taking seriously the evidence for papal reform that was initiated by Pope Paul III (1534–1549).⁴

Despite the hardening of Lutherans against the papacy, Vergerio's visit at least enabled Paul III to see some advantage in calling a council, with the result that on June 2, 1536, he requested a Lutheran statement of faith to be heard eighteen months later in Mantua (May 3, 1537). The council did not actually take place until 1545, partly because the Italians and Germans were suspicious of meeting on each other's soil, but the pope's early efforts did inspire Elector John Frederick of Saxony, by December 11 of 1536, to call for Luther's statement of faith.⁵ Given Luther's attitude toward Protestant reconciliation with the papacy, his work on the elector's task falls much within the category of "confessing the faith," standing for religious convictions in the face of opposition. Not only Luther's previous attitude toward Rome but also the extreme anti-Rome polemic within the SA demonstrates that he saw no turning from his course.⁶ Curiously, Luther added a Latin inscription that appears on the cover sheet of his draft and nowhere else:

This is sufficient doctrine for eternal life. As to the political and economic affairs, there are enough laws to trouble us, so that there is no need of inventing further troubles much more burdensome. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.⁷

Clearly Luther viewed this document's contents as a matter of eternal consequence that Rome had long compromised.

Luther set to work and completed sixteen pages by December 18, writing in his own hand. Having come under one of his many kidney stone attacks, however, he had to dictate the rest to Caspar Cruciger and

⁴ Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 148–49.

⁵ In the 1950s, two German scholars, Hans Volz and Ernst Bizer, debated the nature of the Smalcald Articles. Volz viewed them more as Luther's own personal confession, and Bizer believed them to be more of a corporate confession for the impending council. Apparently the debate resolved itself by both opinions being shown to be compatible. See Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, 38–39.

⁶ See Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 301–10. SA II contains Luther's trenchant remarks about many Roman Catholic abuses.

⁷ F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau, *Concordia Triglotta: Die Symbolischen Bücher Der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche, Deutsch-Lateinisch-Englisch* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 59; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 297.

others who assisted in the completion of the O text,⁸ his original draft, which today rests in the library of Heidelberg University.⁹ The O text has forty-two pages, minus the cover sheet, although nine pages are not filled completely. Of the forty-two, nine show significant editing and marginal notes while the other thirty-three are quite clean. One significant editing stroke appears in the first article, where the original draft first read, "both sides believe and (*glauben und*) confess them [viz., articles based on the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds]." Luther crossed out "believe and," indicating his suspicions concerning the Roman Catholics' belief in even these undisputed tenets. Another significant change is where he crossed out "under the bread and wine," referring to Christ's body in the Lord's Supper, thus strengthening the force of his testimony to the real presence.¹⁰

By December 15, Luther had invited several theologians to meet at Wittenberg's Black Cloister on the twenty-eighth to discuss the articles. John Agricola, George Spalatin, and Nikolaus von Amsdorf all arrived to meet Luther, with Melanchthon, John Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas, and Caspar Cruciger being already present. After discussing the O draft, Luther held firm with what he had written, and the articles remained essentially unchanged except for a short addition condemning prayers to the saints.¹¹ During this time, Spalatin was able to produce a clean copy of O,¹² the Sp text, to which he later added this section on prayers to the saints, and had it signed by all eight theologians present.¹³

Completed and signed, Luther forwarded the Sp text to Elector John Frederick on January 3. Having received it only three days later, Frederick wrote back already on January 7 with strong approbation, only qualifying that they seemed somewhat hastily composed. He flatly rejected the proviso Melanchthon attached to his signature stating that he would permit the civil authority of Roman bishops provided they allow the gospel. Given Elector Frederick's positive attitude toward these

⁸ The denominations for SA texts O, Sp, A, D, and J are taken from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 11th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992), 406 [henceforth BSLK]. For a summary of the interrelations between texts and a key to the denominations, see the Appendix to this article, 342.

⁹ Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, 96. Cruciger began writing for Luther at SA III, 4.

¹⁰ This information is available through a facsimile of Luther's O draft in *Die Schmalkaldischen Artikel vom Jahre 1537* (Heidelberg, Germany: Carl Winter, 1886).

¹¹ SA II, 2, 25–28; Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 305–306.

¹² Why Spalatin? Judging from his signature, my theory is that his handwriting was among the clearest, so he was responsible for producing quality copies.

¹³ BSLK, xxv. Sp resides in the Thuringian Archives in Weimar.

vituperative articles and his rejection of Melanchthon's suggestion, the Smalcald Articles evince their identity in their earliest recipients' view as a firm confession against Rome at a time when negotiation was impossible. Little is known about what Elector Frederick did with the Sp copy before the Smalcaldic League met, but he did want to start getting signatures and soon had Gabriel Didymus of Torgau sign.¹⁴ It is difficult to say why he only collected one subscription except that his plan for winning adherents was to find them at Schmalkalden about a month later.

The Smalcaldic League met in Hesse on February 10. Although Frederick promoted the Sp text at this meeting, he was unable to get this document on the agenda for several reasons. The most basic reason was simply that many delegates, including Philip of Hesse, were unfamiliar with the SA, and introducing them to these delegates would require inconvenient effort and persuasion. Also, Luther was still suffering from illness, and his normal authority and charisma were temporarily enervated. In addition, Melanchthon pitched the Augsburg Confession and the Wittenberg Concord to Count Philip because he thought these documents better suited to the fostering of agreement than the SA.¹⁵ Some commentators detect malice or at least selfishness on Philip's part: "Melanchthon plotted against [Elector Frederick] and Luther" by refusing to discuss the SA.¹⁶ But this detection of putative foul play seems underappreciative of Melanchthon's good intentions. Additionally, Russell argues that the SA were not really suited for the politically oriented Smalcaldic League because they were purely theological. Finally, because the document really was not written for a council of various Lutherans seeking unity but as a confession against Rome, their failure to appear on the docket was a natural matter of course.¹⁷

During the meeting, Count Philip of Hesse informed Strassburg delegate Jacob Sturm, Augsburg's Dr. Hel, and Ulm's George Besserer of Melanchthon's advice not to discuss the SA. Hessian chancellor Feige had also received a copy of the SA and questioned a number of them. Among other causes for reluctance, these authorities at Schmalkalden generally foresaw discrepancies on the Lord's Supper, which is readily believable. Luther states that "the bread and the wine in the Supper are the true body and blood of Christ. . . . They are not only offered to and received by

¹⁴ Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, 37.

¹⁵ F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books*, in *Concordia Triglotta* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 55.

¹⁶ BSLK, xxv. Bente's attitude is similar.

¹⁷ See Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, 47.

upright Christians but also by evil ones."¹⁸ This strong statement could be mistaken for transubstantiation, except that Luther condemns transubstantiation only two paragraphs later. If any of those present entertained the slightest of Reformed leanings, they would surely have disagreed with Luther's phrasing.

Regardless of how historians regard Melancthon, it seems that if political alliance was the central goal at Schmalkalden, he was right not to discuss the SA there, because several delegates refused to espouse them. Strassburg's Bucer and Fegius, Württemberg's Blaurer, Augsburg's Boniface Wolfhart, and Hesse's Fontanus did not sign, and Hesse's Melander signed with a proviso on the Lord's Supper.¹⁹ In this case, the SA would not have been capable of establishing the unity that the league needed. Even so, on February 24, John Bugenhagen got as many signatures as he could, totaling twenty-five, and the Sp text received its third signing; but these signatures designate personal convictions and not the seal of an official confessional document.²⁰ The final signing took place with the same unofficial tenor on March 4. Luther's company stopped at Erfurt on their way back from Schmalkalden, finding ten more people willing to commit themselves to the SA. The signings were complete at forty-four.

II. The Road to Confessional Status

The SA's rise to formal authority was a gradual process, requiring much more time and actual use to become official than a document such as the Augsburg Confession, which derived its formal authority from a state-sanctioned official signing. The present section is an attempt to trace the SA's sporadic appearances from their first printing to their canonization in the Book of Concord. The real story of the SA's authority begins here, precisely where most historical accounts come to a close. This general picture will become clear: the SA's pure witness to Luther's late-in-life convictions became in turn a pure witness to Lutheranism, as their use by

¹⁸ SA III, 6, 1.

¹⁹ See Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 327. In Luther's preface to his first edition of the SA, he writes about the Smalcaldic League: "They were also accepted and unanimously confessed by us," a claim that is obviously not historically accurate. Luther, beleaguered by illness, was not fully conscious of all of the affairs there taking place, and additionally, the detail that some delegates refrained from signing might have slipped his mind a year later.

²⁰ J.T. Müller, "Historical Introduction," in Ambrose Henkel, Socrates Henkel, and Johann Tobias Müller, *The Christian Book of Concord, or Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Newmarket, VA: Solomon D. Henkel and bros., 1851), 61. These signings were personal commitments that at the time did little other than hold the individual subscribers to be faithful to teach them and not contradict them.

individual movers and shakers, councils, and doctrinal collections demonstrates. Documents whose material authority arises from their agreement with Scripture gain subsequent formal authority in various ways. The SA, as is the case with Luther's catechisms, became formally authoritative in a manner different from the Formula of Concord. The reception of the SA demonstrates that their normative status is the result of their particular way of applying Luther's scriptural doctrine to many of his followers' pressing concerns.

If any document lacking royal sanction is to have influence, it must be published and made widely available for use. Even the most gripping prose will affect no one if it is not proliferated among those who will read it and sense its importance. Such is true of Luther's SA, though in originally publishing them, he hoped simply to ensure their availability for the supposed council with the papacy. He indicates as much in his preface to the first edition:

Therefore I still wanted to publicize these articles through the public press, in case (as I fully expect and hope) I should die before a council could take place. (For the scoundrels, who flee from the light and avoid the day, are taking such great pains to postpone and hinder the council).²¹

The SA enjoyed a future that Luther himself could not have predicted: they never stood in stark opposition to Roman ecclesial forces, but they did strengthen the theology of Luther's supporters in a variety of milieus. This influence began with the first printing.

In June of 1538, Luther edited his original draft and published the *editio princeps* in quarto under Hans Luft. This printing is the A text, a further development of the Sp signed copy. To A Luther added his preface and expanded four sections.²² In the preface he calls these articles his "testimony and confession to present" and explains the need for a statement of evangelical doctrine such as the SA for resisting Rome at a council and preserving the Christian piety possible only after the papacy's ecclesial abuses are overthrown. Luther made about fifty stylistic and material changes to form A, managing to sharpen his caustic tone even more than in the Sp copy. In five cases he added "without God's Word,"²³

²¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 298.

²² See Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, where the added sections are italicized within the text: II, 2, 5; II, 2, 13-15; III, 3, 42-45; III, 8, 3-13.

²³ E.g., "Such people also do not know what they are doing, because they are following a false human notion and innovation without the sanction of God's Word," SA II, 2, 8; "the Mass is a dangerous thing, fabricated and invented without God's Word and will," SA II, 2, 5.

and he called relics "the bones of dogs and horses," and the pope "the accursed Judas," implying his betrayal of Christ.²⁴

The four expansions within A itself serve several purposes. The first contributes to Luther's general argument in SA II, stating that the Mass is an impediment to salvation whose unscriptural origin proves that it should be dropped in its entirety. In the second expansion, Luther anticipates a Roman objection to his denunciation of purgatory. Some of his opponents would like to cite Augustine in support of this doctrine, but Luther clarifies that Augustine leaves undecided the question whether or not purgatory exists. Even if Augustine were willing to permit such a teaching, Luther contends that it would be of little consequence unless the Scriptures could be cited in support, and Augustine cites no verses indicating that purgatory is a biblical teaching.

The third and fourth expansions are notable because Luther turns his polemical guns on opponents other than Rome, thus broadening the SA's scope. That auspicious move partly explains why his followers could later use the document to answer a variety of opponents. The third addition is directed against antinomians (though Luther does not use this word), as well as those who do not think that the Spirit can be lost once apprehended by faith and who believe that post-conversion sins will do no harm to the believing person. Luther counters them with 1 John 3:9 and John 1:8. The fourth expansion is the longest, this time with the enthusiasts falling under his crosshairs. Luther condemns teachings such as those he attributes to Thomas M ntzer, as well as anyone claiming that the Spirit can be present in a person apart from the word and sacraments.²⁵

The A text served as the basis for many subsequent printings and editions of the SA. In 1541, only three years after the first printing, a Latin translation by the Dane Petrus Generanus appeared with a preface by Veit Amerbach. Generanus's translation is titled *Articuli a Reverendo D. Doctore Martino Luthero scripto, Anno 1538*, published twice in Wittenberg, first in 1541 and again with more refinement in 1542.²⁶ Because this translation is

²⁴ See BSLK, xxvii.

²⁵ Roman Catholicism, however, remained the greatest target in the SA. Some Roman Catholic scholars, most importantly John Cochlaeus, as well as George Wicel and John Hoffmeister, wrote responses to the SA.

²⁶ T. Kolde, "Schmalkald Articles," in Samuel Macauley Jackson and Lefferts Augustine Loetscher, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Embracing Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology, and Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Biography from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 13 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949–50), 10:249.

very good, it is unfortunate that the text fell into disrepute once Generanus evinced Roman Catholic leanings.²⁷ The A text's first printing and translation must have proved unable to meet demand in Saxony, because in 1543 Elector John Frederick ordered a reprint.²⁸ That year the Peter Seiz octavo edition, the D text, appeared under the title *Von der rechten und falschen Kirche*. The D text has little significance apart from disseminating A once again; its variation is quite minor, only omitting the first paragraph of the preface referring to the council that was soon to take place.²⁹

With these printings, the SA were beginning to win their normative status in Saxony, and the continued printings prove that demand for them remained strong. Overall, the 1538 A and 1543 D editions saw twenty-seven printings in the sixteenth century. None differed drastically from the first A text, but minor corrections and improvements were common. The last reprint that Luther likely oversaw himself appeared in 1545.³⁰ Most likely this octavo edition of the A text was produced in Wittenberg.³¹ Beyond the A text, the most important reprint was J (1553), printed in Magdeburg by Weimar court preachers John Stoltz and John Aurifaber.³²

The SA began gaining formal authority through content and usage rather than royal decree, and the continued printings facilitated their availability to theologians who strove to follow Luther's teachings. Still, it was not far into the 1540s before the SA gained official status. Elector John Frederick's order for a reprint (1543) was a kind of official sanction. By 1544, they began to be accepted in Hesse as confessions of authority comparable to the Augsburg Confession. Eventually, the elector's son John Frederick II (*der Mittlere*) took over Ducal Saxony in 1547, and he held the SA, along with other earlier Lutheran confessions, as a norm for all pastors there.³³ Duke John Frederick, although a minor figure in Reformation history, deserves credit for propagating Lutheranism through the SA, as he was their most significant advocate from the late 1540s until the mid-1560s.

²⁷ H.E. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1888), 44.

²⁸ See James L. Schaaf, "The Smalcald Articles and Their Significance," in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy: Essays in Honor of Edward C. Fendt*, ed. Fred W. Meuser and Stanley D. Schneider (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 80.

²⁹ See Hans Volz, *Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel und Melanchthons Tractatus de potestate papae* (Gotha: Leopold Klotz Verlag, 1931), 33.

³⁰ Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, vol. 2, 44.

³¹ Mueller, "Historical Introduction," 62.

³² BSLK, xxvii.

³³ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 296; cf. Schaaf, "The Smalcald Articles and Their Significance," 80.

Under Duke John Frederick, John Stoltz nominated Nikolaus von Amsdorf as chief visitor in charge of leading the Duke's effort to purify doctrine in his lands. At that time, evangelical territories such as Saxony and Hesse began meetings in Naumburg to negotiate religious peace. Whatever the benefits of political alliance, however, Amsdorf refused to compromise the gospel as he understood it. As visitor, he employed a new ordination formula in which "the candidate pledged to teach the gospel according to Luther's Smalcald Articles and to reject Zwinglian, Anabaptist, and 'Anti-Christian-Roman' teaching."³⁴ Amsdorf's exaltation of the SA against such diverse opponents seems to show his esteem for the document as a testimony of pure Lutheranism that cannot easily be distorted and used against the tradition's true torch-bearers. As the efforts begun at Naumburg in 1554 continued into January of 1556, Duke Christoph of Württemberg and Elector John Frederick of the Palatinate tried to reach a consensus at Weimar but achieved no further success than they had at Naumburg. To Amsdorf, they were needlessly complicating their own efforts: the recipe for evangelical unity was not difficult to him, as he responded two months later. He laid down his view of the SA as a non-negotiable part of the evangelicals' faith: "his condition for Evangelical unity was single and simple: all Evangelicals should accept Luther's Smalcald Articles in every detail."³⁵

The 1561 Diet of Naumburg eventually came as the culmination of the meetings that had begun in 1554, and this time Duke John Frederick himself had to stand by the SA under pressures similar to what Amsdorf had faced as visitor. Bente writes:

When Elector John Frederick of the Palatinate and the Crypto-Calvinists endeavored to undermine the authority of Luther, Duke John Frederick of Saxony declared that he would abide by the original Augustana and its 'true declaration and norm,' the Smalcald Articles.³⁶

In this case the SA reinforced Duke John Frederick's commitment to the early Augsburg Confession so that he could influence the Diet of Naumburg to reaffirm the 1531 Latin (octavo) and German (quarto) editions rather than Melanchthon's *Variata*, which leaned closer to Reformed doctrine.³⁷

³⁴ Robert Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483-1565): Popular Polemics in the Preservation of Luther's Legacy* (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. DeGraaf, 1978), 139.

³⁵ Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 183.

³⁶ Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 59.

³⁷ James W. Richard, *The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1909), 296.

Aside from the official status the SA achieved through Duke John Frederick's campaign, there are also several other facts that Bente lists to demonstrate their rise to normative status, though he gives little detail or elucidation. In 1557 the Convention of Coswig "declared them to be 'the norm by which controversies are to be decided, *norma decidendi controversias*,'" and the 1559 Synod of Mölln did the same. In 1560 the ministerium of Lübeck and the Senate of Hamburg accepted the SA as a confessional norm, as did the Convention of Lüneburg in 1561 and the theologians of Schleswig-Holstein in 1570.³⁸ Additionally, the University of Jena, founded in 1548 by Gnesio ("pure") Lutherans while John Frederick the Magnanimous was still elector, began requiring all professors and students to adhere to the SA after the school's status as university was officially established in 1558 during the reign of Emperor Ferdinand I.³⁹

Even though the SA's inception was characterized by no single decisive moment, they eventually received a kind of official status as Luther originally intended. This fact is nearly inexplicable apart from the efforts of conservative Gnesio-Lutherans such as Amsdorf, who began using the SA throughout the 1550s to preserve the content of their faith against Melancthon's followers (Philippists), Roman Catholics, Osiander, and others. The most important Gnesio-Lutherans for this study are John Stoltz and John Aurifaber, the Weimar court preachers in Magdeburg, who compiled the most significant edition of the SA, the J text, and published it through Michael Lotther in 1553. J is unique in a number of ways, all explicable from the historical reasons for this printing. At this time, in 1553, the Gnesio-Lutherans in Magdeburg were in conflict with Andreas Osiander's followers,⁴⁰ who denied the forensic nature of Christ's atonement. Stoltz and Aurifaber learned that Osiander himself had signed the SA back at Schmalkalden in 1537, and they felt this information would be incredibly useful in combating his followers. For negations, the SA contained heavy condemnations of any medieval suggestions of free will and the ability to merit grace or to become justified incrementally rather than by a single divine decree of exoneration.⁴¹ For affirmations, the SA furnished Luther's classic statement on salvation by grace through faith.⁴² These aspects of the SA carried weight independently, but Stoltz and Aurifaber had an ace to play on top of that. They dusted off the Sp copy

³⁸ Bente, *Historical Introductions*, 59.

³⁹ Schaaf, "The Smalcald Articles and Their Significance," 80.

⁴⁰ Osiander died on October 17, 1552, but his followers carried on his dissident views.

⁴¹ SA III, 1.

⁴² SA III, 13.

that had been in the Weimar archives for probably fifteen years so that they could reproduce the signatures that served a general and a specific purpose. Because the SA were signed by a number of the top authorities on Germany's theological scene, the addition of signatures simply increased the authority of the SA in general. More specifically, if the Gnesio-Lutherans could prove that Osiander had once espoused Luther's statement of faith, they could prove his later theology to be inconsistent and divergent not only from the true, catholic faith, but also from his own, thus discrediting him.⁴³ Their degree of success is not clear, but it did serve to bring the signatures into a printed edition of the SA for the first time. In the process of editing J, Stoltz and Aurifaber also endeavored to mark the four places where Luther had made his additions in the 1538 first edition A.⁴⁴ Even so, their commitment to unearthing the original text proved not to overpower their polemical impulses. Among minor changes, Stoltz and Aurifaber also pluralized some of Luther's language, making "I" into "we" to emphasize the more corporate aspect of the confession and to uphold the normative character they attributed to the SA.⁴⁵

Beyond the Osiander controversy, these Gnesio-Lutherans also used the SA against their classic enemy, the Philippists. The Augsburg Confession and its Apology could quickly be used by either side against the other, and in this case it did not help the opponents of Melanchthon's followers to use these more neutral documents written by Melanchthon. The Gnesio-Lutherans needed Luther to uphold Luther's doctrine. Hence they found an indispensable resource in his SA, which expressed no equivocation on the Lord's Supper or justification as Luther understood them. Against the Philippists, the SA would eventually find their way into compilations of doctrine (*corpora doctrinae*).

Even such worthy opponents as the Philippists could not exhaust the Gnesio-Lutherans' list of adversaries. Charles V had defeated the Smalcaldic League throughout 1546-47, and despite the Lutheran reprieve in the 1552 Truce of Passau, Stoltz still felt the Roman threat. This insecurity led him in 1554 to reprint J with a new preface explaining the SA's usefulness for combating Roman Catholic doctrine.⁴⁶ This enterprise

⁴³ Robert Kolb, "Luther's Smalcald Articles: Agenda for Testimony and Confession," *Concordia Journal* 14 (1988): 118.

⁴⁴ These marks disappear in the J text's incorporation into the 1580 Dresden Book of Concord.

⁴⁵ Volz, *Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel*, 35-36.

⁴⁶ Kolb, "Luther's Smalcald Articles," 118.

was perhaps the closest the SA ever came to fulfilling their original purpose as a polemical document against the papacy.

The versatility of the SA against sundry opponents made them an important resource for the Gnesio-Lutherans of the 1550s, with the result that J was printed at least three times. The final time was likely in 1555, when J was reprinted through Christian Rödinger in Jena. That was three years before the University of Jena held them as a standard for its students and faculty, again showing that the SA built their formal authority from the ground up as a faithful testimony to the gospel as Luther knew it. Only later did they function as an institutional standard.

By the 1560s, the Gnesio-Lutheran fight for identity had not diminished but had only strengthened as polemical battles with the Philippists continued. The SA's small but significant contribution to Lutheran identity in the last twenty-plus years won them a place in some collections of doctrine that, as the Gnesio-Lutheran versus Philippist debate evolved, began appearing on both sides as ways of differentiating and condemning each other's confessions of faith. Thus Kolb:

The Gnesio-Lutherans needed to introduce a counter-balance to Melancthon within the *corpora doctrinae* which their princes were developing. Luther's Smalcald Articles seemed a perfect pick, both because of its sharply and clearly worded teaching and because it had been subscribed by a number of Evangelical theologians at Schmalkalden in 1537.⁴⁷

The first *corpus doctrinae* in which the SA appear is the 1563 Brunswick edition, *Corpus Brunsvicense*, which Martin Chemnitz edited.⁴⁸ Chemnitz was not as extreme a polemicist as the true Gnesio-Lutherans, but he had no less a passion for pure doctrine leading back to Luther's own precedent, which is why the SA were a logical choice for inclusion when compiling a body of doctrine. Again Kolb:

He argued for the inclusion of [the SA] because it treated several topics that the Augsburg Confession had omitted—"the papacy, the power of the bishops, Zwinglianism, transubstantiation, and sins which drive away the Holy Spirit."⁴⁹

This use by Chemnitz is the crucial step in the process that led to the establishment of the SA's normative status. Because Chemnitz was

⁴⁷ Kolb, "Luther's Smalcald Articles," 118.

⁴⁸ Jacobs, *Book of Concord*, vol. 2, 44.

⁴⁹ Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 119.

important as a compiler of the Book of Concord's first edition, this *Corpus Brunsvicense* foreshadowed the SA's inclusion there.⁵⁰

The exact number of *corpora doctrinae* featuring the SA is not clearly established, but there are at least two additional solid examples. In 1571 the *Corpus Doctrinae Thuringien* was published in Jena by Güntherum Hüttich, who included the SA with its preface and signatures, meaning that this text is a reproduction of J. It is associated with Johan Wilhelm Hertzog in Thuringia and evinces Lutheran conservatism by including expressly the "old (*alten*) Augsburg Confession," to which the Jena Gnesio-Lutherans would have held firmly. In context, the *Corpus Doctrinae Thuringien* arose as a direct response to the *Corpus Philippicum* held by the Philippists.⁵¹ There is also a similar text from 1576: the *Corpus Doctrinae* printed in Heinrichstadt by the Vestung Wolfenbüttel-Braunschweig through Conrad Horn contains the SA with preface and signatures, also a J text. Among other documents, this *corpus doctrinae* also contains the 1530 Augsburg Confession, allowing it to function much like the 1571 text before it. These bodies of doctrine, if nothing more, demonstrate that the SA were being continually recognized as a tool for protecting pure doctrine and also as a ruling standard over Luther's legatees. The SA's eventual inclusion in the ultimate Lutheran statement of faith, the Book of Concord, was therefore quite natural.

In the historical battle for orthodoxy, the SA played a somewhat different role than what William Russell contends for today. Russell treats them as a clear path into the theology of Luther the man, which is a valid suggestion, but the document was not viewed in exactly this way by Lutherans of the later sixteenth century. We must ask why the SA, at least for some Gnesio-Lutherans, "became a *sine qua non* for defining Lutheran doctrine."⁵² The answer surfaces along with the very notion of "confession" as it was held by these theologians, who took the SA to be a true interpretation of the Augsburg Confession, from which it derives its formal authority for all Lutherans.⁵³ This use is evident, for example, in the Zerbster Theologian Convention of September 4, 1570, where Jacob Andreae, one of the formulators of the Book of Concord, presented his

⁵⁰ Additionally, Chemnitz refers to the SA at least eight times in his *Loci Theologici*, which shows his use of them to interpret Melancthon's *Loci Communes*. He does not, however, reference the SA in his examination of the Council of Trent, his treatise on the two natures in Christ, or his enchiridion on ministry, word, and sacraments.

⁵¹ Richard, *The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church*, 218.

⁵² Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 119.

⁵³ Recall that Duke John Frederick already recognized this use in 1554, as stated above.

Bericht von christlicher Einigkeit der Theologen und Prädikanten (Report on the Christian Unity of Theologians and Pastors). At that time, Elector August of Saxony was said to favor the Philippists and their interpretation of the Augsburg Confession, so Andreae drew heavily on the SA as a means of interpreting the foundational Augsburg Confession.⁵⁴

The contrast to Russell's view of the articles as key to Luther is apparent. By the 1570s, Luther's opinions were not the final authority of Lutheranism; authority came from true doctrine itself, which Andreae and his colleagues saw as those teachings testable by the Augsburg Confession rightly interpreted. Even that authority was only penultimate. Whatever Luther himself wrote, or whatever the reformers established at Augsburg, no doctrine, whatever pragmatic or political convenience it might afford, could function without a basis in Scripture. Thus, the SA were viewed as a true interpretation of the Bible's teachings, and in turn a true apprehension of the gospel itself. The Jena Gnesio-Lutheran Johannes Wigand offers a brief example with his book *Bekenntnis von der Rechtfertigung für Gott und von guten Wercken*⁵⁵ (*Confession of Justification before God and of Good Works*). The pure gospel is that which correctly upholds Christ's supremacy and justification before his Father. Here Wigand used the SA as a prime source for preserving this view (in its particularly Lutheran understanding) against the Philippists, who continually modified this teaching by exaggerating the role of the human will in salvation.⁵⁶

The SA's function in the Lutheran churches was determinative for their inclusion in the Dresden Book of Concord of 1580: they were used for ordination under Duke John Frederick and von Amsdorf, they served as a regulating norm at many councils and at Jena's University, they were incorporated into several bodies of doctrine, they were used by certain Gnesio-Lutherans against the Philippists (and others), and they were important to Chemnitz, Andreae, and Nikolaus Selnecker (all compilers of the Book of Concord). Not all of these factors contributed equally or even

⁵⁴ See Volz, *Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel*, 38–39. Volz says of this report: "*die Schmalkaldischen Artikel eine erhebliche Rolle spielten.*" That is, these articles played a considerable roll in Andreae's need to establish confessional authority. Also cf. the Formula of Concord, which treats the SA similarly; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 528.7, 529.11–13.

⁵⁵ Jena: Christian Rödinger, 1569.

⁵⁶ Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 104. Kolb writes: "So Wigand began his treatise *On the Confession of Divine Teaching and Necessary Actions* [translation of the Latin title]. He composed it in 1569, at a critical juncture in the course of the disputes between Wigand's Gnesio-Lutheran colleagues and their Philippist opponents."

in harmony with each other, but they all played a role in making the SA known and authoritative.

In the scholarly literature, there is some dispute about which edition was included in the 1580 Book of Concord. Bente and Russell both say that the A text was included.⁵⁷ Yet *Bekennntnisschriften*, J.T. Mueller, and Volz contend that J was actually included after being edited by A.⁵⁸ The confusion, at least in Bente, arises from the Formula of Concord's confusion of the details. It states: "[The SA] were approved and accepted [at Smalcald], as they were first composed and printed."⁵⁹ This statement seems to indicate that Luther's A text (first edition) was included, but that is impossible for at least two reasons. First, the A text did not exist until a year after the Smalcaldic League met; and second, the Dresden Book of Concord contains the signatures that never appeared in print until 1553. It was actually J that found its way into the Dresden Book of Concord, including all of the signatures, although the text was corrected by A, and the original marks distinguishing Luther's 1538 additions were left out. There is little information about how A corrected J. At least the "I" language of Luther was brought back where Stoltz and Aurifaber had changed it to "we," and the SA received the title "Articles of Christian Doctrine." Bente and Russell's statements about the A text being included at Dresden are still approximately correct because both A and the Dresden "Articles of Christian Doctrine" are nearly identical in wording. Dresden received a text that was only possible through Stoltz and Aurifaber's efforts back in 1553 at Magdeburg.

The Latin *Concordia* of Leipzig received the SA through a translation of Nikolaus Selnecker, who added many words that are bracketed in the *Concordia Triglotta*'s English column. Among his interpolations, Selnecker added "ever-virgin" to Luther's mention of Mary, which is uncharacteristic of the other Lutheran confessions. Selnecker did not know of the 1541/2 Latin translation by Petrus Generanus; otherwise that edition might have been included, being regarded as generally superior.⁶⁰ Selnecker's translation was later refined for the official Latin Book of Concord of 1584, thus gaining the formal authority intrinsic to that edition.

⁵⁷ See Bente, *Concordia Triglotta*, 59; Russell, "A Neglected Key to the Theology of Martin Luther," 89.

⁵⁸ See especially Müller, "Historical Introduction," 61; Volz, "*Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel*," 41.

⁵⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 528.7.

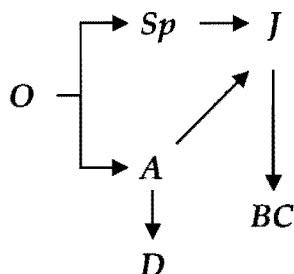
⁶⁰ Müller doubts that Selnecker actually did the translating, but he was at least the editor.

Selecting one version of the SA as the authoritative text for today would require a set of standards to test authority. There are three basic options. If one values the original text foremost (in this case the original copy that was signed by many important individuals), then Sp is the most authoritative, and Luther's later expansions and increased polemic should be held diffidently. If one values a lively text, the one that functioned within a body of believers, protecting and forming that body's faith, the A text is probably the best candidate, since Sp was never really used. If one values the official quality of the Book of Concord above all else, then the SA contained therein will reign. This study honors the authority of the A text because the important confession is that which is lived out in its practical consequences, and A was lived out in so many contexts during Lutheranism's formative years that it became more influential than the original copy. What authority the SA gained from Dresden would never have been possible had they not already won their prominence through those contexts; yet they needed Dresden for their authority to be confirmed in an unsurpassable way. As stated above, there are different ways a text can become authoritative, but a text such as the SA with no initial official ratification is left only with its content and usage until its authority is made formal. It had to rise from the bottom up, and that it did.

In an essay of this focus, it is easy to make too much of the SA, which served a relatively minor role in the history of the Lutheran Reformation. Their role, however, was significant to the extent demonstrated above. Based on the SA's use as a versatile resource for defending and preserving the Lutheran faith in the crucial decades of the Reformation, it is clear that the reformers of the late sixteenth century benefited from them. The SA derived their authority from their content as Luther's testimony to the teaching of the Scriptures, which in turn offered a clear lens for viewing the Augsburg Confession and ultimately the Bible itself. By the 1570s, the inherent material authority of the SA was established on several fronts: among institutions, individual theologians, and political authorities. Their inclusion in the Book of Concord was therefore a formalization of this norm that had been in place for over a quarter century. With that we can follow Müller in stating, "With great justice then do they receive a place in the *Corpora Doctrinae*, and in the Book of Concord."⁶¹

⁶¹ Müller, "Historical Introduction," 63.

Appendix: Major Editions



O is the basis for Sp and A, which received the preface and four expansions. A is the basis for D (with a slightly modified preface) and J, which uses Sp to reproduce the signatures and mark the four expansions. J, corrected by A, is the basis for the Book of Concord; some language is changed back to Luther's original wording, and the marks denoting the expansions drop out. For the Latin version, Generanus had to have translated A because that was the only text available in 1541, and Selnecker translated J, as he included the signatures.⁶²

O = Original draft (*Luthers Niederschrift*)

Sp = Spalatin's copy (*Spalatin's Abschrift*)

A = 1539 Wittenberg edition (*Artikel*)

D = 1543 Wittenberg edition (*Die Heubtartikel*)

J = 1553 Magdeburg edition

BC = 1580 edition as contained in the Dresden Book of Concord

⁶² Volz, *Luthers Schmalkaldische Artikel*, 40, n. 1.