

Luther And Chemnitz On Scripture
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Chemnitz On The Authority Of
The Sacred Scripture (An
Examination Of The Council
Of Trent)

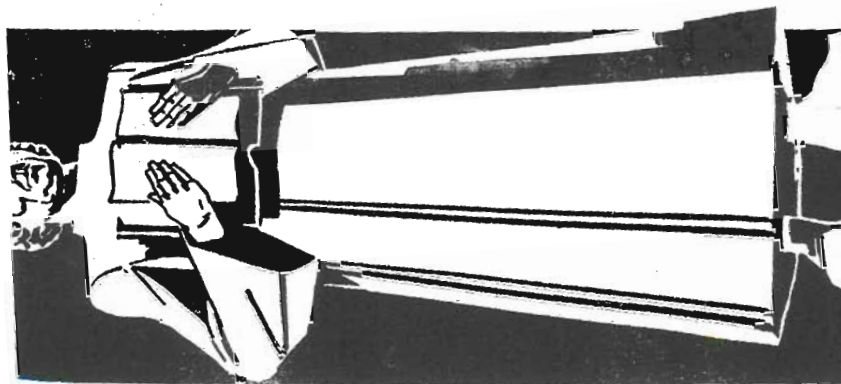
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"Shades Of Martin Chemnitz"
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Chemnitz on the Authority of the Sacred Scripture

(An Examination of the Council of Trent)

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A MODERN GERMAN encyclopedia of religious knowledge¹ credits Martin Chemnitz with having clearly worked out and set forth the Protestant Scriptural principle in his *Examination of the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*.

While Chemnitz did in fact clearly and powerfully work out and set forth the Scriptural principle, a modern reader who is acquainted with the writings of the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth century may find that some things stressed by the later dogmaticians appear to be missing in Chemnitz' presentation. Heinrich Schmid, in his *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*,² in which he sums up and presents important excerpts from the Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth century, speaks of both the causative and the normative authority of the Scripture. At first glance Chemnitz seems to treat only of the normative authority. The term causative authority seems to have been unknown to him. In the light of the situation in which he worked this is wholly understandable. From the beginning of the Reformation Luther and his followers had been faced with the determined attempt on the part of papalist theologians to replace the authority of Scripture with the authority of tradition, some of it old and genuine, much of it recent and spurious.

Later Lutheran theologians, in their steadily more elaborate systematic presentation of the dogmatic material, introduced the two-fold distinction, causative and normative authority. By the causative authority they understood the power inherent in the Scripture as the Word of God to work faith in the hearts of its readers. The normative authority, that is, the authority to rule the teaching of the church with respect to both faith and life, they understood to result from the causative authority, that is, from the fact that the Scripture is the Word of God with power, through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, to work acceptance of its teachings. Being what it is, the Word of God, the church must accept, and does accept, the Scripture as the norm for its teachings and life.³ This is at the heart of Chemnitz' teaching with respect to the authority of the Scripture, even though he does not use all the terminology employed by the later dogmaticians, e.g. the term "causative authority."

During the early years of the Reformation Eck and Emser had tried to fight Luther with the Scripture, however with no success. Then there came a time in which papalist theologians, either knowingly or unknowingly, followed the example of the unbelieving Jews during the early centuries of the Christian era. The Apostles had appealed to the Old Testament for the truth of the Christian procla-

mation. The unbelieving Rabbis had found it very difficult to counter their arguments, and many Jews had converted to Christianity. Then the Rabbis had turned to tradition, and had reduced the traditions to writing in the Talmud. After the Talmud was promulgated, very few Jews converted to Christianity.

Similarly, as long as papalists tried, unsuccessfully of course, to meet Luther and his adherents with Scripture, great throngs of Christians in a number of European countries had thronged to the banner of Luther. According to Chemnitz¹ it was after papalist theologians began to operate with tradition rather than with Scripture that the rapid spread of Luther's teaching was slowed down.

What was now being tried with some success by papalists, namely exalting tradition over Scripture, but had formerly not been officially taught in the Church of Rome, was at length set down as the official position of this church in the *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*. Speaking of the Gospel, the Council declares in Session IV:

... perceiving that this truth and instruction is contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions, which, after they had been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself or from the apostles, the Holy Spirit dictating, have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand; and following the example of the orthodox fathers, it receives and venerates with equal devotion and reverence all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament (since one God is the author of both) and also the said traditions, both those pertaining to faith and those pertaining to morals, as dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Spirit and preserved by a continuous succession in the Catholic Church.

This statement of the Council of Trent appears to place oral tradition on a par with the Sacred Scriptures so far as authority is concerned, for it declares that the church receives and venerates Scripture and oral tradition with equal devotion and reverence. In practice papal theologians of the time went even farther, for they sought time and time again to sweep aside clear teachings of Scripture by appeals to tradition and custom.⁵

Against the position of the Roman Church which now officially placed oral tradition at least on a par with Holy Scripture, and was very insistent in practice on upholding and making total use of this position over against Protestants in general and Lutherans in particular, Martin Chemnitz, in Part I of the *Examen*, clearly works out and sets down the Protestant principle that Holy Scripture is the highest authority in the church, because by virtue of its divine inspiration its authority is in the last analysis the authority of God Himself.

Some Lutherans may be surprised to learn that Chemnitz did not simply reject *all* tradition. He, in fact, separates the known traditions of the church into eight kinds. The first seven of these he does not reject, because they either agree with the teachings of Scripture,

or at least do not militate against them. It is only the eighth kind, traditions which are of late date, and which either cannot be harmonized with Scripture or militate directly against some teaching of Scripture that Chemnitz condemns.⁶

It is particularly against this eighth kind of traditions and against the use of this kind of tradition as authority equal to if not superior to that of Scripture that Chemnitz worked out and set forth the teaching of the normative authority of Scripture, or the Protestant Scriptural principle, as it has often been called.

In working out the Scriptural principle Chemnitz does not, as later Lutheran theologians often did, start with the Scripture itself, but with divine revelation, which as Chemnitz clearly saw and enunciated, antedates Scripture by thousands of years. He writes:

God has from the beginning of the world, both before and after the Fall, come forth from His hidden dwelling place, which is an unapproachable light, and has revealed Himself and His will to the human race by giving His sure Word and adding manifest miracles. In order that this divinely revealed doctrine might be spread by the living voice and transmitted to posterity as from hand to hand, God appointed Adam, as it were, a bishop for his time. There is no doubt that God bestowed on him a divine testimony and authority, and also gave him a very long life, in order that he, through his testimony, might safeguard the purity of the heavenly doctrine against corruptions and keep his people from patched-on foreign opinions.⁷

A number of things stand out clearly in this statement:

1. The authority for God's people on earth is God Himself;
2. In order that man may know God and His Word and will, God has revealed Himself to the human race from the beginning;
3. In revealing Himself, He also revealed a heavenly doctrine, which Chemnitz frequently calls the divinely revealed doctrine. This doctrine, as later statements of Chemnitz show, is the twofold doctrine of Law and Gospel, which sums up both the will of God for man's conduct toward God and toward his fellowman, and God's own good and gracious will toward man, the sinful, fallen creature;
4. The recipient of the revelation, or of the Word of God, in this case Adam, is to hand the content of the revelation on as from hand to hand, in order that also future generations may know it;
5. All this happens thousands of years before a beginning was made of writing Holy Scripture. The only possible mode of passing on the content of the revelation under the circumstances was by oral tradition.

Chemnitz is aware that the divinely ordained manner of handing on the revelation and Word of God in pre-biblical times did not work very satisfactorily. In oral tradition the revelation and Word was frequently corrupted. First Cain and his descendants departed from the purity of the Word. Next they corrupted the godly descendants of

Seth, who had at first maintained the heavenly, divinely revealed doctrine by oral tradition.⁸ As a result God saw Himself constrained to give additional special revelations to Noah, accompanying the revelations with the stupendous miracle of the Noachian Flood. Thus He sought to restore the fallen purity of the doctrine, and added a further explanation to the same.⁹

After the Flood the heavenly doctrine was committed to Shem and his descendants for safe-keeping and handing it on in purity to future generations. But again oral tradition proved an untrustworthy vehicle for handing on the Word of God. By the time of Terah, the father of Abraham, idolatry was rampant among the descendants of Shem. Then,

when the traditions had been adulterated and corrupted, God restored the purity of His doctrine through special revelations made to Abraham, which also He explained more fully, and made Abraham a prophet.¹⁰

Chemnitz assumes that this tradition of sound teaching was preserved all through the life of Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons. But after their passing the children of Israel, who were then in Egypt, turned to idolatry. It was only at the time of Moses that God, through special revelations accompanied by mighty miracles recalled Israel to the purity of the heavenly doctrine.

Oral tradition having failed time and time again to preserve the Word of God as made known in special revelations in truth and purity, God, at the time of Moses turned to a not heretofore used mode of preservation, namely setting down the revealed Word in writing. On this point Chemnitz writes:

It is worthy of observation, I say, what other way He Himself instituted and showed at the time of Moses, namely that by means of writings, approved and confirmed by divine authority and testimony, the purity of the heavenly doctrine should be propagated and preserved, in order that, when questions or controversies would arise about the old, genuine and pure teaching of the patriarchs, new and special revelations might not always have to be sought and looked for.¹¹

To help clear up the controversy which was at that time raging between Lutherans and Catholics with respect to the authority of the Sacred Scriptures as opposed to the authority of oral tradition, Chemnitz calls attention to the fact that God not only instituted this way of preserving the purity of the heavenly doctrine, but that He also by His own act and example initiated, dedicated, and consecrated that way when He Himself first wrote the words of the Decalog on two tables of stone. Chemnitz concludes: "Therefore the first beginning of Holy Scripture must have God Himself as the author."¹²

THE DIVINELY INSPIRED SCRIPTURES

Speaking of the Scriptures, which had their inception with God writing the Ten Commandments on two tables of stone, and which

were continued at God's command by Moses, and a number of named and unnamed writers after him, both before and after the advent of Christ, Chemnitz time and time again calls them "the divinely inspired Scriptures." This traces them back in their entirety to God. Divine inspiration gives the Scriptures their divine authority. The authority is not in the first instance the authority of a book, or of its human writers, but the authority of God, who inspired these writings.

In calling the Scriptures divinely inspired, Chemnitz was not in any way contradicting official Roman Catholic teaching. The Roman Church was heir to a long line of illustrious teachers, from the earliest church fathers on, who had spoken of the Scriptures as divinely inspired. Church councils, including the Council of Trent, had used the stock phrase "*Spiritu Sancto dictante*," speaking of the origin of Scripture. Unfortunately, the Tridentine fathers used this stock phrase also of the oral traditions for which an authority equal to that of the Scriptures was therefore claimed by the Council.

While he steadfastly held that the Scriptures are divinely inspired, Chemnitz showed that the oral traditions of the papalists, and in particular the eighth kind of traditions, for which the papalists were fighting so stubbornly, were far from inspired by the Holy Spirit, or going back in any true sense to God Himself. He shows that, on the contrary, some of these traditions were based on apocryphal books, some on the writings of heretics, and others on teachings of persons far removed in time from the apostles. Yet all were, as Chemnitz says, whitewashed from one pot, i.e., all were given the title of apostolic traditions, so that all might be received with the same reverence and devotion as the Scripture itself, even though some of them were diametrically opposed to the teachings of Scripture.

That which Chemnitz emphatically denied to oral tradition, namely origin from God, and therefore divine authority, he consistently claims for Holy Scripture by virtue of its divine inspiration. He does not define inspiration. It seems that there was no controversy between the adherents of the Augsburg Confession and the papalists on the subject of inspiration so far as this refers to the Scripture, or, if there was a difference, it did not surface in controversy. The argument was over the question whether oral tradition also was divinely inspired, and to be received with equal reverence and devotion as Holy Scripture, and therefore also given at least equal authority with Scripture. This Chemnitz emphatically denied to oral tradition, reserving it wholly for Scripture alone. The Scriptures were therefore to be the highest authority in the church. It was according to the Scriptures that all doctrine was to be judged. Speaking of the authority of the Mosaic writings Chemnitz says:

In order that those things which were either to be written through men of God, adorned for this by miracles and divine testimonies, or to be approved by them after they had been written, should not have a lesser authority or no authority at all for the confirmation of dogmas and the refutation of errors,

God chose not to write the whole Law Himself, but, having written the words of the Decalog, He gave Moses the command that he should write the remainder from His dictation.¹³

Concerning the authoritative nature of the writings of Moses Chemnitz writes:

These testimonies of the Scripture show how, after these sacred books had been written, the church of the children of Israel was a pillar and ground of the truth, because to them had been committed the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2). But this did not give them license either to establish anything arbitrarily or to impose upon the church from unwritten traditions as dogmas for faith things other and different from those which had been written. They were commanded to be the guardians of the Scripture, in which God by His divine inspiration had caused to be committed to writing the heavenly doctrine, which had been committed to the patriarchs from the beginning of the world and which had been revealed to Moses. It was not His will that the sacred books should lie buried in a corner of the tabernacle, but that they should show from this Scripture to seekers and to the ignorant what doctrine had been divinely revealed and handed down to the patriarchs and to Moses, namely, the true, genuine, and pure voice of the heavenly doctrine. If they departed from the commandments of God, this Scripture was to be a testimony (Deut. 31: 26). Therefore Moses commanded a copy of the Law to be written, that it might be canon, norm, and rule from which they were not to depart . . . (Deut. 17: 18-20).¹⁴

Chemnitz then proceeds to discuss the writings of the Old Testament prophets, of the Evangelists and the apostles, claiming for all of them the same divine inspiration and the same normative authority in the church.

In thus setting down what has been called the Protestant Scriptural principle, Chemnitz is not introducing something new into the Church. Scripture itself shows that Christ appealed to the Scripture of the Old Testament over and over as norm and rule for the teaching of the will of God, and that the apostles do the same. The early church followed Christ and the apostles in this. Chemnitz quotes Cusanus, who says that at the old ecumenical synods

it was the custom to bring the Holy Gospels into the midst of the synod, that the fathers might be reminded with what means and weapons they were to fight in the councils against errors for the truth of the dogmas.

Chemnitz adds: "That this was customarily done also in other disputations concerning religion Augustine tells us in his Letter No. 163."¹⁵ Chemnitz continues:

Well known is also the memorable statement of Constantine the Great, with which he in person opened the Synod of Nicaea. . . . He said: "It is the books of the evangelists and of the apostles,

and the prophecies of the ancient prophets, which clearly instruct us what we are to decide concerning divine matters. Therefore let us take the solution of the questions from divinely inspired utterances."¹⁶

From among a number of citations Chemnitz presents from famous church fathers we add only this from Augustine, taken from his writing, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*:

Let us bring to this examination no rigged balances, where we can weigh out what we please, and as we please, saying according to our will: "This is heavy; that is light." Rather let us bring forward the divine balance from the Holy Scripture, from the treasuries of the Lord, and on it let us weigh what is heavier, or rather, let us not weigh but recognize what has been weighed by the Lord.¹⁷

PAPALIST ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE AS SET FORTH BY CHEMNITZ

Papalist theologians at the time of the Council of Trent countered the position set forth by Chemnitz with two criticisms of Scripture, which generally they did not dare to express openly, because they feared the reaction of the common people if they expressed their objections to the authority of the Scripture openly.¹⁸ These two criticisms were:

1. That the Scripture does not contain everything needed by the church for doctrine and life, and that it must for this reason be greatly supplemented by oral tradition;

2. That the Scripture is not sufficiently clear for the common people to read and understand it, and that therefore the authority of the church is needed to interpret the Scripture.

1.

The argument that the Scripture does not contain everything needed by the church for doctrine and life.

This argument was advanced in order to make room for oral tradition as an authority in the church on a par with that of Holy Scripture. Andrada, whether officially or unofficially, acted as spokesman for the Tridentine fathers. He states the argument succinctly: .

(Christ) did not want us to read all things in the writings of the evangelists, but the greater part of His sayings and deeds, as a treasure of special value, He wanted us to hear from the traditions which are not written but handed down as from hand to hand.¹⁹

With respect to the Old Testament papalists were inclined to admit that it contained all that God considered necessary and sufficient for posterity of the doctrine of the patriarchs and prophets. But they contended that matters stood far differently with respect to the New Testament. They said that God Himself had constituted the

New Testament in such a way that the greater part should not be written down but entrusted only orally to the minds of the hearers and so preserved and handed down by oral tradition.

This Chemnitz refutes by showing with careful exegesis that the papalists were grossly misusing Scripture passages which they cited in favor of their position, and by showing from many New Testament books that what Christ and the apostles had taught orally was adequately laid down in writing in the books of the New Testament to form a sufficient basis for the church's faith and life. What all this comes to is what came to be called the perfection of the Scripture, by which the Lutheran dogmaticians did not mean, as a modern reader might suppose, the inerrancy of Scripture, but its sufficiency to accomplish God's purposes in the faith and life of the church.

At the end of his long section on the New Testament Scripture Chemnitz sums up his own argument for the perfection of the Scripture as follows:

The apostles committed their doctrine to writing from these considerations, for these reasons, and for this use: (1) that they might repeat in writing what they had personally delivered orally, and recall it to the memory; (2) that they might explain by means of epistles those things which were to be built on the first elements of faith which they had transmitted; (3) that the churches were being disturbed and the doctrine adulterated under the pretext and title of traditions supposedly received from the apostles; (4) that the doctrine received from the apostles by word of mouth was not being faithfully preserved by tradition; (5) that other teachers who were not apostles might have the written testimony from which they could prove to the churches that the doctrine which they brought was apostolic; (6) that the churches which could not hear the living voice of the apostles might be certain which doctrine they were to receive and venerate as truly apostolic; (7) that the apostles afterward laid down in writings the same things which they had delivered orally while they were present; (8) that in the writings of the apostles there is presented not merely a bare catalog of the chief points of apostolic doctrine but also adequate explanations; (9) that the rule of the Christian faith should be in the Scripture; (10) that it might be possible to know from the writings of the apostles what knowledge they had concerning the mystery of Christ; (11) that the apostles wrote in this way that the believers might be able, in the infirmity of this life, to grasp the mysteries of the Gospel; (12) that they afterward committed to writings the same things which they had previously transmitted, in order that it might be possible to preserve the purity of the doctrine against corruptions; (13) that the apostles comprehended in their writings both the first elements of faith and the fuller and more complete teaching which followed later; (14) that all Scripture given by inspiration is profitable that the minister of the Gospel may be complete,

equipped for every good work of the ministry; (15) that the apostles wrote to this end, that the church, after it was deprived of the voice of the apostles through their death, might have a means whereby it could retain and preserve the memory of the apostolic doctrine, especially because in the last times many errors would be foisted upon the church by means of lying words which would parade under the name of apostolic traditions; (16) that there might be a model, showing how a minister must conduct himself in the church, in order that the church may be and remain a pillar and bulwark of the truth. (17) that the apostles afterward wrote the same things which they delivered from the beginning, and this for confident use by people of every age, in every church, and for all time to come; (18) that they wrote both for those who believed already and for such as were yet to come to faith; (19) that they received the command to write from the Son of God Himself; (20) that the origin, cause, and use of the Scripture in the New Testament is the same as in the Old Testament, so that nothing may be added, nothing taken away, and nothing departed from either to the right or to the left

These things clearly and solidly prove and confirm the authority, perfection, and sufficiency of the Holy Scripture in the New Testament against all arguments, and against all fallacies of the papalists.²⁰

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The Argument that the Scripture is not Clear

The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent contain no statement which says in so many words that the Scripture is unclear, although this opinion was stoutly held by papalists at the time of the Council. It seems that this, together with the teaching that the Scripture is not sufficient for all that the church must know and teach about the Christian faith and life belongs to those things of which Andrada said that the common people might be stirred up, if Holy Scripture were attacked with such harsh and hateful words.²¹

But although the Council of Trent did not say in so many words that the Scripture is a dark book, not safe for the laity to read, this idea was nevertheless widely held by papalist theologians. Chemnitz mentions as one of the chief points of doctrine of the papalists of his time: "Concerning the . . . obscurity, and the uncertainty of Scripture."²²

While not explicitly expressed in the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent that the Scripture is a difficult, dark, and obscure book, this idea lurks behind what the Tridentine fathers had to say on the subject of the interpretation of the Scripture. It amounts to this, that the right of interpreting the Scripture belongs to Mother Church. On this subject the Fourth Session of the Council declared the following:

Furthermore, in order to restrain willful spirits, the synod decrees that no one, relying on his own wisdom in matters of

faith and morals that pertain to the upbuilding of Christian doctrine, may twist the Holy Scripture according to his own opinions or presume to interpret Holy Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church has held and holds, whose right it is to judge concerning the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scripture, or contrary to the unanimous consensus of the fathers, even though such interpretation should at no time be intended for publication. Those acting contrary to this shall be reported to their ordinaries and punished with the penalties appointed by law.²³

Responding in particular to the points made by the Council in Session IV, Chemnitz writes:

What aids, then, has the Synod of Trent decided to employ to confirm the dogmas? Is it the teaching of the Holy Spirit which, as Jerome says, is set forth in the canonical writings? By no means, say they, shall Scripture be the sole rule and norm of our judgment; but first of all they decree that the unwritten traditions, which have as proof only the fact that they have been custom for a long time, shall be accepted and venerated with the same pious affection and reverence as the Scripture itself. In the second place they destroy, abrogate, and set aside the difference between the canonical books of the Scripture and the Apocrypha, which is acknowledged by the whole true and pure ancient church, in order that the authority of the canonical books and of the Apocrypha may be equal and identical for the confirmation of churchly dogmas. In the third place, although in the old version (the Vulgate) the true sense of the Scripture is often not sufficiently expressed, and often also corrupted through errors of copyists, they decree that the Vulgate edition must be considered the authentic one, so that no one may dare to take it onto himself to reject it in disputations or expositions under any pretext whatsoever, even though it is clearly shown to depart from the original sources.

Because the Tridentine fathers do not sufficiently trust these aids, they, in the fourth place, add what is their strongest demand, namely, that they alone have the right and authority to interpret authentically the Scriptures: that is, as Hosius says concerning the express Word of God: "If anyone has the interpretation of the Roman Church, even if he does not see how it agrees or conflicts with the text, he still has the very Word of God."²⁴

A dark and obscure Scripture! The church as its only legitimate interpreter! With that it is but one little step to replacing the authority of the Scripture with the authority of Holy Mother Church.

Against the papalist appeals to oral tradition, against the claim that the Scripture is incomplete, and therefore insufficient for the doctrine and life of the church, against the claim that the Scripture is an obscure book, which needs the official interpretation of the church, Chemnitz stands fast with the greatest church fathers, St.

Irenaeus, Augustine, Jerome, Basil, Chrysostom and others for Scripture as the source and norm of Christian teaching and life, because the authority of the Scripture, which is divinely inspired, is the authority of God Himself, who speaks to the church in and through Scripture. This Scripture is perfect, that is, it is sufficient for all that the church needs to know for its doctrine and life. It is also not a dark and obscure book, although Chemnitz, as Luther had done before him, admits that there are individual dark and difficult pages in Scripture. It is clear in all the things the church needs to know for sound teaching and for a God-pleasing life.

This is the Protestant Scriptural principle as set forth by Martin Chemnitz in his famous *Examen Concilii Tridentini*. This is the principle the church must cherish and follow unless she is willing to get lost in the maze of darkness and error which has threatened in every age of the Christian era to engulf her, and which will threaten her until the end of time.

FOOTNOTES

1. F. Lau, in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. I, Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1957, in the Article on Chemnitz, Martin: "Die reife Frucht verschiedener Kontroversen . . . wurde . . . das *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, eine wuerdige und kenntnisreiche Darstellung und Kritik der tridentinischen Dekrete, der der vor allem das protestantische Schriftprinzip klar herausgearbeitet ist."
2. Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated from Latin and German by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, pp. 51ff.
3. The whole section in Schmid, *Op. Cit.* pp. 51-62 is well worth study in this connection.
4. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, p. 69f., p. 71 ff.
5. A notable example of this is the denial of the Dominical cup to the laity. Chemnitz treats this at length in the second volume of the *Examen*.
6. *Op. Cit.* pages 215-307.
7. *Ibid.* p. 49
8. *Ibid.* p. 49 ff.
9. *Ibid.* p. 50.
10. *Ibid.* p. 50f.
11. *Ibid.* p. 52.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* p. 54.
14. *Ibid.* p. 55f.
15. *Ibid.* p. 39.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.* p. 47.
18. *Ibid.* p. 94-96; 162.
19. *Ibid.* p. 98.
20. *Op. Cit.* pp. 71-149.
21. *Ibid.* p. 44.
22. *Ibid.* p. 41.
23. *Ibid.* p. 38.
24. *Ibid.* p. 39f.