

Concordia Seminary - Saint Louis

Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary

Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers

Concordia Seminary Scholarship

2-22-1998

Der Grund Der Seligkeit Luther's Evangelical & Christological Method of Distinguishing Doctrine Within the Early Church Councils & Fathers

Jeffrey Meyers

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, ir_meyerj@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/stmsp>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meyers, Jeffrey, "Der Grund Der Seligkeit Luther's Evangelical & Christological Method of Distinguishing Doctrine Within the Early Church Councils & Fathers" (1998). *Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers*. 32.

<https://scholar.csl.edu/stmsp/32>

This Seminar Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

DER GRUND DER SELIGKEIT
LUTHER'S EVANGELICAL & CHRISTOLOGICAL METHOD OF DISTINGUISHING
DOCTRINE WITHIN THE EARLY CHURCH COUNCILS & FATHERS

A SEMINAR PAPER
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF SACRED THEOLOGY
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY DEPARTMENT

BY
JEFFREY J. MEYERS

THE FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
FEBRUARY 22, 1998

Der Grund der Seligkeit¹

Luther's Evangelical and Christological Method of Distinguishing
Doctrine Within the Early Church Councils and Fathers

When everything is moving people look for a firm place to stand. Theologians and pastors are no exception. When the theological consensus breaks down or begins to break down and theological pluralism seems to threaten the stability of the faith, men begin to search for an authoritative foundation upon which the quivering edifice of the visible church might come to a settled rest. Finding such a foundation and standing squarely upon it would give teachers, pastors, and people in the church the kind of theological confidence they need to challenge error and to preach and teach the one true faith. This search for a firm place to stand has occupied Christianity's greatest minds, especially since the sixteenth-century Reformation, which by all accounts challenged the very foundations of the seemingly sturdy theological edifice of the late Middle Ages.² However tipsy such a consensus might have been, there was nevertheless the appearance of unity and stability in an institutionally united church which confessed allegiance to the pope and to the great tradition of councils and fathers. As long as a Western churchman was able to "forget" the Eastern church, which had its own claim to ecclesiastical and theological unity, the Roman ecclesiastical structure looked sufficiently settled. Luther's preaching and teaching changed everything (at least in the West); and since Luther's time, Western Christianity has largely

¹The phrase "der Grund der Seligkeit" is Luther's own: *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimarer Ausgabe, (Weimar: H. Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-1987), *Von den Konziliis und Kirchen*, vol. 50, 545, 13 (hereafter = WA).

²Actually, large tremors registered on the theological Richter scale long before Luther in the debates over conciliar authority and the rise of humanism in the fifteenth century; cf. James A Brady, Jr., Heiko A Oberman, and James D. Tracy, eds., *Handbook of European History, 1400-1600*, vol. 2, *Visions, Programs, and Outcomes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 1-125.

been characterized by dizzying theological and ecclesiastical motion resulting in an only-too-apparent instability.

Modernism and now what is popularly called “postmodernism” have certainly added to twentieth century Christians’ theological vertigo.³ Today, therefore, the search for foundational ecclesiastical stability continues apace. Ecumenism holds out hope that the institutional leaders of major confessional communions will over time come to agreements on consensus documents developed by committees of theologians and denominational executives.⁴ Roman Catholicism still invites wayward Protestant, even Eastern communions to return home to Rome’s papal authority.⁵ Modern Anabaptist fundamentalists, particularly in America, each offer their own idiosyncratic community as the only true genuine instance of primitive “New Testament Christianity,” finding stability in the New Testament alone.⁶ Some postmodern theologians celebrate confessional and theological diversity, eschewing the triumphalistic search for ecclesiastical unity and stability as evidence of a lingering pre-modern intellectual naïveté. Other postmoderns encourage adherence to

³Roger Lundin effectively argues that modernism and postmodernism, especially in America, are really both varieties of the legacy of the Enlightenment (*The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993]).

⁴See Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948* (London: SPCK, 1954).

⁵According to Pope John Paul II, speaking at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva on June 12, 1984, “When the Catholic Church enters on the difficult task of ecumenism, it brings with it a firm conviction. Despite the moral afflictions which have marked the life of its members and even of its leaders in the course of history, it is convinced that in the ministry of the bishop of Rome it has preserved the visible focus and guarantee of unity in full fidelity to the apostolic tradition and to the faith of the Fathers. St. Ignatius of Antioch in his time greeted the Church ‘which presides in the region of the Romans’ as that ‘which presides in charity’ over the communion. The Catholic Church believes that the bishop who presides over the life of that local church made fruitful by the blood of Peter and Paul, receives from the Lord the mission to be the enduring witness to the faith confessed by these two leaders of the apostolic community which, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, constitutes the unity of believers. To be in communion with the Bishop of Rome is to bear visible witness that one is in communion with all who confess that same faith, with those who have confessed it since Pentecost, and with those who will confess it until the Day of the Lord shall come. That is our conviction as Catholics and our faithfulness to Christ forbids us to relinquish it” (World Council of Churches Central Committee, Document no. 4.9.2, 9-18, July 1984; quoted in Paul G. Schrottenboer, ed., *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective* [Singapore: World Evangelical Fellowship, 1987], 26).

⁶Primitivism has found fertile soil in American culture; see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Richard T. Hughes and Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and T. D. Bozeman, *To Live American Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988). Even American Catholicism has its own flavor of primitivism; see Patrick W. Carey, ed., *American Catholic Religious Thought* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

one's traditional inheritance without attempting to judge other traditions.⁷ Those who call themselves Evangelicals hold out the Bible as the only inerrant authority upon which genuine unity and ecclesiastical security must be founded. Anglo-catholic apologists invite us to take refuge in the (supposed) unbroken succession of bishops (*successio apostolica*) undergirding the present Anglican ministry, sometimes even going so far as to suggest that their succession is "better" or "more sure" than Rome's!⁸ In many quarters within the American Evangelical church, disenchanted with the wax nose of a confessed inerrant Scripture, churchmen are seeking security and doctrinal authority within one of the Eastern or Russian Orthodox communions where the ancient tradition of the ecumenical councils seems to guarantee theological invulnerability.⁹ These are just a few of the more prominent options. Each of them are attempts to locate a firm place to stand, a foundation free from the shifting sands of post-Reformation ecclesiastical and theological uncertainty.

This is the situation in which churches that call themselves "Christian" find themselves today. All of these options, however, are not equally persuasive or even interesting, for that matter. What is alarming is how many American Evangelicals seem to be attracted to the apparent

⁷Diogenes Allen describes the problematic attempt at such a postmodern foundation: "Without a foundation for our claims that transcends our culture or subculture, we are left with relativism. It seems that the only thing to stop our free-fall from relativism into nihilism is some sort of legitimate or warranted social consensus. In America the best known attempts to provide such a consensus are Richard Rorty's work in philosophy and George Lindbeck's in theology. But both eschew universal claims and provide no warrant for universal truth-claims or claims that transcend a culture or subculture" ("Intellectual Inquiry and Spiritual Formation," in David F. Ford and Dennis L. Stamps, eds., *Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel W. Hardy* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996], 264). As a representative of what has sometimes been called the "New Yale School", George Lindbeck argues in his book *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) that confessions and creeds do not primarily provide us with first-order truth claims, but rather operate as sociolinguistic frameworks that define and give identity to particular Christian communities.

⁸I have heard Anglican clergy, members of small break-away, "continuing" Anglican churches in America, claim that the true, faithful apostolic succession ought to be traced back through England's clergy, that the "reformation" in sixteenth-century England would be better understood as a restoration of the true unbroken succession of the ancient English church.

⁹See Patrick Madrid, ed., *Surprized by Truth: Eleven Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic* (San Diego, CA: Basilica Press, 1994); Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1989); and Franklin Billerbeck, ed., *Anglican-Orthodox Pilgrimage* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1993).

stability of confessional communions which claim to be faithful to the "Great Tradition."¹⁰ More and more serious minded pastors from Reformation traditions are making the move into Roman and Orthodox communions precisely because of their claims concerning the comprehensive authority embodied in their traditions.¹¹ Often the early church councils and fathers figure prominently in these polemics.¹² As a result, Reformation Christians who find themselves embroiled in theological debate with these departing ministers will discover their own loyalty to the creeds and councils of the church challenged. The argument frequently revolves around the *extent* of one's faithfulness to the councils of the church, Protestant ministers and theologians too often standing accused of adopting a subjectivistic pick-and-choose methodology of interpreting the early church councils and fathers.¹³ In this it is not too hard to see that the modern ecclesiastical situation differs from the sixteenth century primarily in the multiplication of confessional options. When there were only three or four confessional churches, the problem may have been less

¹⁰I am borrowing the title of a recent book: James S. Cutsinger, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics, & Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

¹¹See Scott and Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993); and Thomas Howard, *Lead, Kindly Light: My Journey to Rome* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1994). For an analysis of these "conversions" see Kim Riddlebarger, "No Place Like Rome: Why are Evangelicals Joining the Catholic Church?" in Alister McGrath, et. al., eds., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 221-241. Frank Schaeffer, the son of the late Presbyterian Apologist Francis Schaeffer, has published his own idiosyncratic defense of his recent move into Orthodoxy (*Dancing Alone: The Quest for Orthodox Faith in the Age of False Religions* [Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Books, 1994]).

¹²According to the Eastern Orthodox Church, the dogmatic definitions and the canon laws of the first seven ecumenical councils are authoritative for the church (see Tomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith*, vol. 1 (New York: The Orthodox Church in America, 1981), 20-21; *The Living God: A Catechism for the Christian Faith*, vol. 2 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996, 307-308; and Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 251-258. Although Frank Schaeffer may not be an acknowledged "authority" on the subject, nevertheless his explanation of ecclesiastical authority expresses well the sense of security many going over to the Orthodox church are looking for: "In the Orthodox Church, congregations are not simply set adrift with their individual pastors, high-powered individual "gurus," their denomination's self-appointed "leaders," and their changeable interpretations of Scripture. In the historical Church the priest's authority is derived both from being in the apostolic succession and from being faithful to the Holy Tradition. The priest's authority derives from the authority of his bishop and the bishop's authority is subject to the precedent of changeless truth and history established by Christ and the Apostles that is called the Holy Tradition" (Schaeffer, *Dancing Alone*, 165).

¹³The charge of subjectivism has been repeatedly leveled against Luther by the counter-Reformation Catholic tradition. The "Lortzian" school within Roman Catholicism, however, has attempted to deemphasize the role of Luther's subjectivism in the Reformation; see Josph Lortz, "Die Reformation und Luther in katholischer Sicht" *Una Sancta* 10 (1955); "Why did the Reformation Happen" in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1972), 119-138; and Otto H. Pesch, "Twenty Years of Catholic Luther Research" *Lutheran World* 13 (1966): 302-316.

complex, but it was no less acute. The dilemma has remained essentially unchanged since the 16th century reformation.¹⁴ The same questions must be answered.

How should the creeds, councils, and fathers function in the church? How should they be received by twentieth-century Christians? Are they to be received as an authority? *The* authority? Do the early church fathers and councils serve as the foundation of the church? Does the “great tradition” establish the authoritative groundwork necessary for the continued existence of the church? If not, must one pick and choose among and within councils and fathers? If so, how is one to distinguish the doctrine that endures from that which does not, the wheat from the chaff, the kernel from the husk, that which is central from that which is peripheral or even erroneous?

One of the perennial temptations held out so persuasively to Reformation confessional communions is the siren song of those who call for a return to the ecumenical councils *in toto* as the only authoritative foundation for the church. The true church, we are assured, will submit to the creeds and canons of the ecumenical councils. Anyone who labors to resist such a temptation will find himself cast upon the horns of a most disturbing dilemma. If one rejects the councils *in toto*, then one is open to charges of pride, primitivism, and, indeed, of casting off the chords that connect him to the historic, orthodox Christian church. On the other hand, if one picks and chooses which councils and/or which portions of the councils to embrace, then, one will be charged with subjectivism or even sectarianism for allowing his own or his theological community’s standards to pick and choose between councils, canons, and creeds.

Must one cling to one of the horns of this dilemma? Must we lay hold of the horn of subjectivism to avoid the horn of authoritarianism? Are the Catholic and Orthodox churches the

¹⁴The Reformation itself forced this dilemma upon the church. Sasse says it as well as anyone: “After the expulsions of Luther and his followers from the communion of the papal church, for the first time the Evangelical Lutheran Church, in spite of the papal claim to be the one holy catholic church, had begun to gather around her confession to the truth of the Holy Scriptures and stepped before the world, a self-conscious confessional church. Since then, in like manner, the other western communions had to take on at least the form of confessional churches. . . . By ‘confessional church’ we mean an ecclesiastical communion which by an expressed consensus measured by confession is unified in its answer to the question posed by the Reformation. . . . The Reformation has posed the question to all of Christendom concerning the deepest essence of the church, and this question absolutely demands a clear response . . . an answer to the question posed by the Reformation on the relationship of church and the word of God. . . .” Hermann Sasse, “The Church and the Word of God,” trans. by Matthew Harrison, *Logia* 2.4 (Oct. 1993): 9.

only safe haven from the sectarian sea of independency?¹⁵ Might the one who has been charged with “responsibility” for this mess assist us in finding a solution to this dilemma? This essay explores Luther’s own argument for the one and only firm place to stand. By examining Luther’s way of distinguishing what has been received from the councils and fathers, we can better understand the evangelical-critical way in which the church ought to accept the tradition of the early church councils.¹⁶

Luther speaks directly to these questions in his treatise *On the Councils and the Church* (1539).¹⁷ These are questions over which Luther had been struggling for years. By 1538, Luther was convinced that the pope would never allow the convocation of a general council to address the genuine issues raised by Luther and the confessions of the evangelical churches.¹⁸ Christians had to look elsewhere than to the pope and his cardinals and bishops for stability and certainty. In this context Luther wrote words of encouragement to Christians. No one should despair of Christ or leave the church simply because the pope refuses a council, for “we so shamefully forsaken by the pope, cannot go on and must seek counsel and help elsewhere and first of all seek and ask our Lord Jesus Christ for a reformation.”¹⁹ This, however, raises further questions. Where should the Lord Jesus Christ be sought? Who speaks for him? Upon what basis or foundation should a re-*formation* of the church proceed? “The official councils of the

¹⁵But, of course, if the debate is framed like this, then who or what will serve as an objective criterion for arbitrating between Rome and Constantinople?

¹⁶The word “evangelical” will be used throughout the rest of this essay as the adjectival form of the Evangel or Gospel. No reference to the modern theological/sociological movement often designated as “evangelicalism” is intended.

¹⁷WA 50, 509-653; Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther’s Works*, American Edition (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-86), vol. 41, 9-178 (hereafter = AE). Luther also deals with the authority of church councils in his *Disputation on the Authority of a Council* (1536), WA 39¹, 189ff.

¹⁸The historical situation is detailed in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*, trans. by James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 193-198; Charles M. Jacobs and Eric W. Gritsch in the “Introduction” to *On the Creeds and Councils of the Church* (AE 41, xi-xvi); Mark U. Edwards, *Luther’s Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 68-96; and Lewis Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1985), 309ff.

¹⁹AE 41, 11; WA 50, 512, 17-18.

church!” the papal hierarchy was quick to answer! The Roman church thereby used the ancient councils and fathers as a polemical weapon against Luther and his followers.

This essay will analyze Luther’s *On the Councils and the Church*, especially Parts I and II, in search of the criteria he uses for distinguishing between true and false doctrine in the ecumenical councils and consequently for “locating” the “true” church amid the confusing whirl of ecclesiastical traditions. It is my desire to allow Luther himself to speak, to engage the reader in Luther’s own argument as it develops in this treatise. He does not show all of his cards in the first pages of the treatise. He builds his case slowly, methodically. As we shall see, according to Luther, everybody must pick and choose from the canons and creeds of these councils, and Luther has a fascinating, and I believe timely, evangelical method of differentiating between what abides and what falls away in church tradition.

Wood, Hay, & Stubble

In Part I Luther begins to answer these questions by exposing the folly of all attempts to *ground* the church upon the authority of ancient councils and fathers. Luther’s goal in this part (AE 41, 14-52) is to dismantle the papal claim regarding the necessary and foundational significance of the ancient councils and fathers. It is a preliminary work of deconstruction. By the end of Part I, Luther expects to have kicked out from underneath the reader any hope he might have harbored that the councils and fathers of the church could serve as a stabilizing foundation for the reformation of the church. There should be no lingering doubt about the possibility of standing on or reforming the church according to the ancient councils and fathers at the end of Part I. Through a variety of arguments Luther argues that the councils and fathers cannot function as a sufficient foundation for Christendom. Reforming the church according to these ancient sources is unnecessary, dangerous and simply impossible.²⁰ Luther proves that everyone must pick and choose within the received tradition of councils and fathers. By the end of this first part, Luther

²⁰Surely the Holy Spirit has something better to do than enslave the church again with “impossible, dangerous, and useless laws [*unmöglichen, ferlichen, unnötigen gesezten . . . beschweren*]“ (WA 50, 539, 8-9).

cannot help hinting at the basic contours of the proper foundation and ground of the church (AE 41, 48-52). The following outline may help us follow the direction and flow of Luther's argument.

- I. Preparatory answer to those who would like to see the church reformed according to the pattern of the councils and fathers (14-20).
 - A. To the pope and bishops who talk of such a reformation insincerely (14-19).
 - B. To those "good pious souls" who mean well (19ff.).
- II. Reasons for thinking that a reformation according to the councils is impossible (20-53).
 - A. The councils and fathers contradict one another (20-21).
 - B. The number of ordinances promulgated by the councils and fathers is intolerable and oppressive. Augustine's letter to Januarius (21-22).
 - C. Augustine's further testimony concerning the councils (22-25).
 - D. Augustine's evaluation of the fathers. The Scriptures as the "spring." (25-27).
 - E. Can we make our lives conform to the councils and fathers? (27-43).
 1. The councils? (27-43).
 - a. Apostolic Council (27-33).
 - b. Nicea (33-43).
 - (1) The canon re apostate Christians (33-34).
 - (2) The canon re penance for engaging in warfare (34-41).
 - (3) The canon authorizing the Roman bishop to assume authority over churches in the vicinity of Rome (41-42).
 - (4) The canon concerning eunuchs (42-43).
 2. The Fathers (43-52).
 - a. St. Cyprian & the Apostolic Constitutions (44-47).
 - b. The impossibility of bringing the fathers into harmony with one another (43-49).
 - c. The fathers cannot function as the foundation of the Christian church; hints at the true and proper foundation for the church (49-52).
- II. Transition to Part II: The necessity of speaking differently about the fathers & councils (52-53).

Luther sets the stage by exposing the false pretenses of the pope and his bishops (AE 41, 9-14). They are so enmeshed in idolatry and tyranny that simple, poor Christians will have to endure being labeled heretics by these men and cannot expect them to convoke a council and reform the church. Luther is convinced that the proposed counsel would attempt to "overtake the Holy Spirit." They would not hold a council unless they had "total freedom to decree whatever they pleased, to buttress their tyranny, and to oppress Christendom with far greater burdens than ever before."²¹ Already, in the first few pages, Luther invites us to consider the characteristic

²¹AE 41, 10.

temptation of councils—tyranny and oppression through the multiplication of legalistic burdens, “Egyptian blindness” and “Judaistic madness” as Luther calls it.²²

Luther accuses the Papal church of outright idolatry, since they would have the Devil himself as god and lord. Their sin is compounded by the fact that they ought to know better. Surely they know that they have Scripture and God against them! They are not like the “Turks, heathen, and Jews” who crucified Christ; at least these did so in ignorance! Not so the pope and his cardinals. Luther puts these words into their mouths: “We know that Christ’s words and deeds are against us; nevertheless we refuse to tolerate or yield to his Word. Indeed, he must yield to us and tolerate our idolatry; even so we want to be Christians and to be known as such.”²³ Councils and popes seem all too ready to degenerate into tyrants and this horrible posture of those who ought to be shepherds ruins the church as they coerce (*zwingen*) Christians to keep their decrees.²⁴

The pope and bishops of Rome prefer to let the church collapse in ruins (literally, fall to the ground [*zu grund*]).²⁵ No matter how desperate the Papacy gets, we must not allow them to “drive us also to despair of Christ or the leave the church without council and help.” Let them go to the devil as they desire; we, however, will do what we can to counsel and guide the church to listen to the Lord Christ.²⁶ Guiding the church to listen to Christ summarizes well Luther’s theological program. This proposition, however, as we have pointed out already, is not as simple as it sounds. Where is Christ to be found? Where does he speak and give counsel today? Exactly where are Christians to “seek and ask our Lord Jesus Christ”? Where will they hear his voice? Where will he give them his counsel and help? The church, you say? What church? The papal church? The ancient church? The councils? The fathers?

²²WA 50, 511, 14-15; AE 41, 10.

²³AE 41, 11.

²⁴WA 50, 512, 4, 9, etc.

²⁵WA 50, 512, 15. Luther may be using a bit of ironic wordplay here. The pope permits the church to fall *zur Grund*, but as Luther quickly notes, Christians cannot despair since they seek *Rat und Hilfe* from the Lord Christ, who alone is the church’s true *Grund*.

²⁶AE 41, 11; WA 50, 512, 17-18.

When we examine the confusing clutter of ecclesiastical tradition and hear the brash claims made by the Roman pontiff simple Christians can understandably get confused. Who has the answers? “Where now should we go—in or out?”²⁷ If we go “outside” the church of Rome, then they will harass us with the word “Church! Church!” You have placed yourself outside of *the* Church, they will insist. “They have pestered and harassed us with the word, “Church! Church!” . . . shouting and spitting that they should be regarded as *the* church.”²⁸ But surely the possession or use of the *word* “church” does not insure the presence of the *reality*. On the other hand, if we remain within their communion, then we place ourselves in the hands of “the enemies of the church,” specifically the pope, who “has put himself out of the church”!²⁹ He has said good-bye to the (true) church! So now what do we do? How do we proceed? Where do we turn? To *whom* do we turn? Should we hold a new council of bishops? Would that help? Should we stand upon the councils and fathers of old? What exactly is needed? Upon what foundation should the church be grounded?

Luther makes it clear that the pope and his followers are not essential to the church. The papists “exclude themselves from the church” by proving themselves to be “the church’s most bitter foes,” for they are even willing to contribute to the destruction of the church. One cannot be a member of the church of Christ if he refuses to listen to Christ and “mend his ways or yield on any point.”³⁰ The pope and his followers might perish, but the church will continue. If the church is to disappear, then Christ himself and even God will have to perish. How can the pope and his cadre be anything but enemies of the church when they would “let the church perish rather than perish themselves”?³¹ Nevertheless, the church can only perish if the rock upon which it is founded first perishes. The rock and foundation [*fels und grund*] upon which the church is built is

²⁷ *Wo wollen wir nun hinein oder hinaus?* (WA 50, 513, 7-8).

²⁸ AE 41, 12-13.

²⁹ AE 41, 13.

³⁰ AE 41, 12.

³¹ AE 41, 12 and 14.

Christ.³² This is the Lord's establishment, not man's. Luther here foreshadows the direction of his argument. Where are we to attain certainty and rest? In the papal church? The councils? Where can the Christian find rest and stability for his faith? Only where the Lord has given us to find rest and stability. Only in Christ the Lord.

When Luther repeatedly designates the papal church's leaders as *die bleibenden Herrn* he refers to their stubborn, unyielding grip on ecclesiastical power. The church could just as soon perish under their tyranny as long as they remain in power. Ultimately, all the talk about councils and fathers and the possibility of a "church reformed on the pattern of these same councils and fathers" is futile.³³ "If the councils and fathers were to be obeyed—God help them!—what would remain of the pope and today's bishops?"³⁴ Precisely this must be proven. Luther must show in this first part of his treatise that all such talk about a reformation according to the councils and fathers is contradictory and indeed dangerous. He will show that such a reformation would be of little help for the present church. *Was hilft nu deine Reformation nach den Vetern und Concilien?*³⁵ After all, before one asks for a restoration of the church of the past, whether 50 years or fourteen hundred years ago, one must first ask whether one really desires to live in such a church! And, secondly, one must be honest about the current prospects of such a reformation given the tyrannical power of the present day pope, who elevates himself "above councils, above fathers, above kings, above God, above Angels!"³⁶ The second problem is monumental, but not very interesting for Luther. The power of the pope and his stubborn lords must be taken to heart, but what is more central to Luther's purpose is to analyze the "great claims made for the holiness of the fathers and councils."³⁷ Do we "weak Christians" really want to live under the councils and

³²WA 50, 513, 11.

³³AE 41, 14; WA 50, 514, 30—514, 1.

³⁴WA 50, 515, 10-12.

³⁵WA 50, 515, 28.

³⁶AE 41, 15.

³⁷WA 50, 516, 35; AE 41, 16.

fathers? Is such an arrangement even desirable. Luther will pursue this with unremitting logic and rhetoric to prove the impossibility of submitting to the councils and fathers without some way of distinguishing the gold, silver, and precious stones from the wood, hay, and stubble.

To those who appear to insist on a reformation according to the councils and fathers from evil motives (*böser meinung*),³⁸ Luther asks, who has time to do all the reading and study necessary to determine what all the councils and fathers have to say? And why should we Christians “leave our work in matters of faith [*ins glaubens sachen*]” to “dare their great holiness in dress and food”?³⁹ If one wants to talk about works, then “the Ten Commandments occupy us poor Christians so much that we are unable to attend to other exalted works that they praise as spiritual, conciliar, and patristic.”⁴⁰ Why should we tolerate a reformation according to the councils and fathers, when we have enough work to do with God’s commandments. Why would we want a reformation that we would be unable to endure (*nicht leiden*)?⁴¹

To those who “mean well and hope, albeit vainly, that a fine reformation such as they have in mind might perhaps still be achieved on the basis of the councils and fathers” Luther regards this an “an impossible undertaking” (*unmöglich fürnehmen*). Why? Luther’s argument on pages 19-20 seems to be that in reading the Scriptures themselves he came across that which was more precious (*köstlich ding*) than all the glosses of the fathers and all the decrees of the councils. Coming across the precious substance of the Scriptures, Luther “was forced to slight [*geringe*]” the works of the Fathers.⁴²

Luther then quotes St. Bernard’s testimony that he learned his wisdom pondering the Scriptures under the trees. Bernard may have had a high regard for the holy fathers, but Luther

³⁸WA 50, 519, 12.

³⁹AE 41, 17; WA 50, 517, 16.

⁴⁰AE 41, 17.

⁴¹WA 50, 519, 10.

⁴²AE 41, 20; WA 50, 519, 30-31.

explains Bernard's understanding of the relationship between the fathers and Holy Scripture by decoding Bernard's own parable:

He would rather drink from the spring itself than from the little brook [*aus dem Born selbs, weder aus den bechlin trincken*], as do all men, who once they have a chance to drink from the spring [*Born*] forget about the brook, unless they use the brook to lead them to the spring. Thus Scripture, too, must remain master and judge [*meister und Richter bleiben*], for when we follow the brooks too far, they lead us too far away from the fount [*der Born*], and lose both their taste and nourishment, until they lose themselves in the salty sea, as happened under the papacy.⁴³

This image of the Scriptures as the "fount" or "spring" (*der Born / die Quelle*) occurs again a few pages later.⁴⁴ Note how careful Luther is with the image. To find the "spring" is not a matter of going *back* in history. Luther is not simply advocating the *ad fontes* methodology of the humanist, even if he is free to *use* such an approach in his own investigations into the meaning of the councils. The spring is nothing else but the presently flowing Scriptures.

But Luther is not ready to expound the final answer quite yet, so he returns to his capital agenda in this first part of his treatise. He is in the process of arguing for the impossibility of a reformation according to the councils and fathers. Positioned to confound anyone who desires a reformation according to the councils and fathers of the church stands the obvious fact "that the councils are not only unequal, but also contradictory."⁴⁵ How can we possibly reconcile them with each other? "We would first have to figure out a way to cull out the best and let everything else fall out [*So müsten wir erstlich das fur uns nemen zu erbeiten, wie man das beste herausklaubet und das ander faren liesse*]."⁴⁶ But this would lead to a further outcry. After all, how can one avoid the charge of *sitting in judgment* over the councils and fathers with this kind of

⁴³AE 41, 20; WA 50, 520, 3-10.

⁴⁴AE 41, 26; WA 50, 525. 25/

⁴⁵AE 41, 20; WA 50, 520, 13.

⁴⁶WA 50, 520, 17-18; AE 41, 20.

pick-and-choose mentality. And, who would ultimately distinguish between that which is to be retained and jettisoned? *Wer will hie scheidesman sein?*⁴⁷

Gratian attempted to do this very thing in his *Concordantia Discordantiarum*, but he often discarded the best and kept the worst! At this point, one wonders how Luther himself knows what's worth keeping and what should be discarded? He provides a preliminary answer with a reference to the Scripture:

“These young paper-pushers are much too untried when they think that whatever they read and imagine must be so, and all the world must worship it, although they neither know the ABC's of Scripture nor are they versed in the councils and fathers. They shout and sputter without knowing what they are saying or writing.”⁴⁸

Indeed, how shall we pick and choose among the councils and fathers? What should we reject and what should we retain? How will we know? Luther turns to *the* church father Augustine for help. That which oppresses the church, burdening her with legalistic requirements is to be rejected. Luther refers to Augustine's letter to Januarius, especially his frustration with the multiplication of rites and ceremonies. Jesus Christ ordained only a few “easy ceremonies” for his church. This is the Gospel way. No one who fails to keep any of these added ecclesiastical ceremonies should be condemned as a sinner. “He who takes the statements of many bishops and many churches and throws them into the fire, pointing solely to baptism and the sacrament, makes certain that Christ did not wish to impose any other burdens on the church—if that which is nothing but comfort and grace could be called a burden—when he says, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” [Matt. 11:30], that is, my yoke is peace and my burden is joy.”⁴⁹ Luther invokes the dominical way: what the Lord Christ wishes is of central importance, for the Lord Christ wants nothing more for his church than to remove the burdens and replace them with Gospel peace and joy.

⁴⁷WA 50, 520, 21; AE 41, 20.

⁴⁸AE 41, 21; WA 50, 521, 2-6.

⁴⁹AE 41, 22.

Having quoted Augustine's Letter to Januarius, Luther stops to explain at some length Augustine's handling of the councils and fathers (AE 41, 22-26). He praises Augustine as a "fine, sensible man" and his work of careful differentiation is called a "great" work. Augustine takes us part of the way when he distinguishes between the "great principal councils" and all of the other councils and decrees of the bishops. Nevertheless, he does not go far enough in winnowing out the wheat from the chaff even in the great principal councils. Augustine argues that even the decrees of the "great principal councils" are to be obeyed as *saluberrima autoritas*, but, maybe if Augustine had attended them, he would have written differently about them!⁵⁰ Perhaps, had Luther remembered that many of the "external" decrees and canons that gave him, the sixteenth-century Christian, so many headaches, were nonetheless useful for the church at the time of Augustine (as Luther himself admits later), he might not have been so hard on Augustine. Perhaps also, Luther is thinking of the histories of these councils that are now available to him, that may not have been available to Augustine, who himself attended none of them. Now that he reads these "histories" he sees that "the Roman bishops have from the first sickened, ailed, wheezed, and gasped for sovereignty over all the bishops. . . but no one paid any attention to this at the time, and the bishops in Africa, Asia, and Egypt proceeded as though they had not heard it," Luther thinks his disgust is justified.⁵¹

At any rate, by outlining evidence of the fourth-century bishops' impotence and petty power plays, Luther calls our attention to what is foundational in any study of the councils: "This is what you will find when you read the histories and compare them diligently. But you must pay no heed to their clamor or that of their adulators; rather, keep eyes and mind fixed on the text and the history [*sondern die text und geschicht*]." ⁵² Luther argues for the necessity of rightly interpreting the words of the councils and fathers throughout this document. Pay attention to the "text and the history," according to Luther, and you will be able to distinguish what is to be

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹AE 41, 24.

⁵²WA 50, 523, 25-26; AE 41, 24.

received and what is to be rejected from this tradition in the church. Now that sixteenth century Christians have access to the histories of these councils and the vicious effects of the Roman hegemony over the church, they are better able to discern between councils and within councils to understand what is lasting and what is temporary, indeed worthless and tyrannical.

If the Christian will but carefully investigate the facts of the councils (*die Sachen*), that is, their texts and histories, then he will not be confused by the deceptive, magical way in which the Papacy uses the *word* “council.” They would have the whole world “associate the name ‘council’ with themselves so that all Christendom would have to believe what they said, and so that they themselves might secretly become monarchs with the help of this fine name.”⁵³ Luther discloses here that the word “council” is being subtly misused, serving the interests of the monarchical bishops and popes. “I wager that I am here hitting the truth and also their own conscience [*die warheit und ihr eigen gewissen*], if they could have a conscience [*gewissen*].”⁵⁴ Thus, the bottom line for Luther here, drawing out as he does the implications of Augustine’s judgment on the usefulness of the councils,⁵⁵ is that the papal “council screamers” have commandeered the word “council” for their own selfish purposes, to buttress their own tyrannical power. Simple Christians are suckered in. Nevertheless, rant as they may, an inquiry into the facts, now that the facts are universally available to the doctors of the church, specifically “the story and the text,” will unveil the truth of the matter and expose the papal fraud. Luther does not yet quite tell us explicitly what usefulness the councils do have; he only leaves hints and clues here and there. He is primarily concerned at this point to make a case for the necessity of a careful examination of what has been received under the exalted names of “fathers” and “councils.”

Luther now moves on to Augustine’s opinion of the fathers (AE 41, 25-27). He begins by citing a comment from Augustine’s letter to Jerome (*Ep.* 82): “I have learned to hold the Scriptures alone inerrant. Therefore I read all the others, as holy and learned as they may be, with the

⁵³AE 41, 24-25.

⁵⁴AE 41, 25; WA 50, 524, 1-2.

⁵⁵AE 41, 22-25.

reservation that I regard their teaching true only if they can prove their statements through Scripture or reason.”⁵⁶ This comment need not imply a double source or criterion of truth for Christian doctrine. No doubt Luther did not understand the statement this way or he would have stopped to clarify the matter. Luther has not given us Augustine’s entire quotation, but compressed a longer passage into a handy *dictum*. Augustine’s own words will help us see his intent. Luther’s purpose is to highlight the categorically different way in which the Christian reads his Bible as compared with other books, religious and otherwise, the councils and fathers included. Teachings in other religious books must be proven “through Scripture” if they purport to set forth Christian doctrine. Indeed, we are called upon to use our reason to compare these extra-canonical writings with the Scripture. Indeed, non-inspired authors might also treat secular matters of politics, economics, science, etc. All such truth claims must succeed in convincing us by means of “arguments addressed to reason.”⁵⁷ Luther also quotes Augustine’s appeal from *De Trinitate*: “My dear man, do not follow my writing as you do Holy Scripture. Instead, whatever you find in Holy Scripture that you would not have believed before, believe without doubt. But in my writings you should regard nothing as certain that you were uncertain about before, unless I have proved its truth.”⁵⁸ There are many other such passages in Augustine, Luther says; passages that prove that Augustine “wants to be free” from *subjection* to the “fathers, councils, and bishops of Rome,” and instead, “have all of them, including himself, subjected to the Holy Scriptures.”⁵⁹ Clearly, then, Augustine recognized flaws in the “fathers.” Indeed, even though he is counted as

⁵⁶AE 41, 25.

⁵⁷*Ep.* 82.4; Philip Schaff, ed., *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine*, trans. J. G. Pilkington and J. G. Cunningham, vol 1 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (1886; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 350.

⁵⁸*De Trin.* 3.2; AE 41, 26.

⁵⁹AE 41, 26.

one, if not *the* preeminent “father” of the church, he himself warned against elevating his own writings to the level of Holy Scripture.⁶⁰

Therefore, he does not want to trust either his predecessors the holy and learned fathers or himself, and undoubtedly his successors much less, who very likely would be less trustworthy; but instead he wants to have Scripture as master and judge [*Meister und Richter*], just as it was related earlier of St. Bernard, that oaks and pines were his masters and that he would rather drink from the spring rather than the brook [*aus der Quelle trincken, weder aus den Bechlin*]. He would not have spoken like this if he had regarded the books of the fathers the equals of the Holy Scripture and had found no flaw in them. Then he would have said instead, “It is the same whether I drink from the Scriptures or from the fathers.” He does not do that, but rather lets the brooks flow and drinks from the spring.⁶¹

The analogy of the spring and brooks points in the direction of the *usefulness* of the fathers and councils. They will serve us well if they help us to find our way to the pure spring of the Scriptures. They must “direct us to Holy Scripture.” Again, we may note how Luther, claiming Augustine as his witness, refuses merely to take the church back to the early church fathers and councils, but to the Scriptures. Not *back*, but *to*. The “spring” is nothing else but the Holy Scriptures which even now “flow.” The Christian need not make a historical trek back, but rather he must drink from the Scriptures, from which flows the water of life. “Outside of that. . . all is uncertain, lost, and in vain [*ungewis, verloren, und umsonst*].”⁶² Against all reason, then, the papacy “forces on us the endless trouble and labor of holding up councils and fathers against Scripture and living accordingly.” It is endless, frustrating labor because one will consistently be led to the Scripture by the very fathers which are being elevated above them. Augustine himself

⁶⁰“For if Augustine is eliminated from the ranks of the Fathers, the others are not worth much. Moreover, it would be senseless and intolerable not to consider St. Augustine one of the best fathers, since he is revered as the best by all Christendom, and both schools and churches have preserved his memory above that of all others, as is clearly seen” (AE 41, 27).

⁶¹AE 41, 26-27; WA 50, 525, 20-30.

⁶²AE 41, 27; WA 50, 525, 36.

will confound every attempt to elevate himself or the councils such that Christians should be led to “trust” (*vertrauen*) them.⁶³

Next, Luther moves on to examine the “very best” of the councils “to see if we can make our lives conform to them [*nach inen richten*],”⁶⁴ We should be careful to observe that Luther investigates the councils according to the agenda of the papal church, whose interest centers upon enforcing or compelling [*zwingen*] conformity or judgment [*richten*].⁶⁵ The reader should remember this as he reads through Luther’s “exposition” of the councils at this point in his treatise. He is not offering a comprehensive interpretation of the councils quite yet. On the contrary, he is engaged in a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, one that examines the content of the councils “to see if we can judge [*richten*] our lives according to them.” The question is: can any or all of these councils function as an authoritative guide for Christian living? Is it even possible to submit to all of the judgments and decrees of any one of these councils? And if not, then surely the Christians of the evangelical confessions must also not be judged for failing to subscribe to all of the conciliar canons and creeds without discrimination. To this end, then, Luther briefly analyzes the councils (AE 41, 27-43) and the fathers (AE 41, 43-52) to discover whether it is necessary or even possible to obey [*gehorsam*] or hold to [*halten*] them *in toto*.

Luther tackles the apostolic council (Acts 15) first. After quoting the decrees of the council and the “boast” that they have their origin in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luther proceeds to examine the issue of whether the present church should obey such apostolic canons (AE 41, 28ff.). Luther thrusts and jabs consistently at the hypocrisy of the papal church.

Now, if anyone can begin to cause Christendom to obey [*zum gehorsam*] this council; I shall then be glad to follow. If not, I want to be spared the screams of “Councils! Councils! You neither heed the councils or the fathers!” Or I myself will attack crying, “You yourselves do not keep [*halten*] the councils or the fathers, since you scorn [*verachten*] even the highest council and the highest fathers, the apostles. Do you

⁶³WA 50, 525, 35; AE 41, 26.

⁶⁴WA 50, 526, 11; AE 41, 27.

⁶⁵WA 50, 526, 9-13.

think I should or must heed councils and fathers you yourself do not as much as touch with one finger.”⁶⁶

No matter what reasons are presented for the church’s failure to observe, keep, or obey the canons of this first council, “if we wish to be conciliar, we will have to keep [*halten*] this council above all others. If not, we need not keep any of the other councils either, and thus we are rid of all the councils.”⁶⁷

What prevents Christians from obeying the decrees of this council? Surely it is not *impossible* for us to obey these laws. We don’t *need* to eat blood and strangled animals. “So the impossibility does not help us at all to strengthen our conscience against the Holy Spirit because we could quite well revert, without harm to body or soul, to a fare not only free of blood or strangled animals, in accordance with the teaching of Moses, but also fishless and meatless, as before the Deluge.”⁶⁸ Secondly, no one can claim exemption from these laws on the excuse that they have fallen into disuse and are therefore no longer applicable. Does the church have the authority to alter the ordinances of the Holy Spirit? If the papal church admits as much, then, “we shall on the same day swiftly kick the pope with all of his encyclicals and bulls, saying, ‘If the first decree of the apostles is not valid [*nicht gelten*], though we are convinced that it was issued by the Holy Spirit, as they themselves boast, *visum est*, how much less valid are the power and decrees of the pope, since we are nowhere near as certain that the Holy Spirit is with them as he was with the apostles.’”⁶⁹ Since these justifications do not work, “therefore one must reason differently [*zu reden*] . . . for the Church must not be suspended (or sway) on a reed, but should stand on a rock and be firmly founded [*Denn die Kirche mus nicht auff einem rhor schweben (schwanken), sondern auff einem Fels ligen und gewis gestiftet sein*].”⁷⁰

⁶⁶WA 50, 527, 13-20.

⁶⁷WA 50, 527, 28—528, 2.

⁶⁸AE 41, 29.

⁶⁹AE 41, 30; WA 50, 31—529, 4.

⁷⁰AE 41, 30; WA 50, 529, 12-14

Maybe we should deny that these canons have the Holy Spirit as their author. Would it help to “scratch out the word ‘Holy Spirit’ and attribute the council’s work solely to the apostles, without the Holy Spirit”?⁷¹ Here, then, are the horns of the dilemma for the council screamers: “If the Holy Spirit is not scratched out of the council, one of two things must happen; either both we and the papists must study and obey such a council, or, if it is to be ignored and not obeyed, then we poor heretics should be spared the screams of ‘Councils! Councils! Councils!’ For as already stated, if this council is not to be kept, then none of the others is to be kept either.”⁷² What Luther means here is that if obedience to the entire apostolic council, to all their decrees, will not be enforced, then how can the decrees of the other councils, which cannot boast of the Holy Spirit’s authorship, be enforced?

The papacy, however, thinks it has a way out. The pope has the authority to differentiate between councils and decrees, deciding which ones he and others should be required to keep. If that’s the case, Luther says, “then lets stop using the word ‘council’ and stop preaching (that councils should be observed) and, instead, scream, ‘Pope! Pope!’ and, ‘One must obey the pope’s doctrine!’”⁷³ This answer solves the problem by eviscerating the councils of any foundational authority. Why then should anyone preach that the church should return to the decrees of the councils and fathers?

What is the way out of this dilemma? We might anticipate Luther’s destination here by noting that his own answer breaks through briefly when he notes in passing that the words of this council must not be obeyed by the church, except the church wish to keep the entire Mosaic law, with all of its regulations concerning eating.⁷⁴ The Holy Spirit’s inspiration notwithstanding, the decrees of the church’s first council cannot be obeyed, unless of course, we wish to return to

⁷¹AE 41, 31.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³AE 41, 32. The modern Roman Catholic church seems to have opted for this horn of the dilemma. Infallibility resides in the supreme power of the pope, who is above the councils and fathers (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994], 234-235).

⁷⁴AE 41, 29.

bondage to the Jewish law. Luther's "solution" is to locate the council firmly within history and interpret its specific decrees as pertaining to the particular situation at hand, namely, the relations between Jews and Gentiles—a problem that no longer exists. Luther concludes his treatment of the apostolic council with a sarcastic jab at those who wish to elevate the word "council" without thinking about these crucial matters of interpretation. The letters and the words are not enough. The implication is that the church will only be well-governed by men who know how to apply properly the words of these councils to the concerns of the present-day church. The professional penmen, popes, cardinals, bishops and preachers of the Roman church in effect fail to look past the simple letters c-o-u-n-c-i-l, as if there was no need to "think a little further."⁷⁵

Luther continues his examination of the councils and the propriety of living by their decrees by turning to the canons of Nicea, "the first principle council after that of the apostles."⁷⁶ He begins by pointing out that if the pope were to keep the decree concerning an apostate Christian's readmittance into the church after seven years of penance and the canon concerning the absolution of the penitent if he died in the process, then the entire papal ecclesiastical edifice built on the economy of penance, especially concerning the marketing of remission for people in purgatory—all of the masses, pilgrimages, endowments, brotherhoods, indulgences, and bulls—all of it would "fall to the ground [*zu grund gehen*]" without a foundation.⁷⁷ If the council-screaming papists do not keep (*halten*) this decree, how can anyone be expected to conform their lives to the other decrees? The same *reductio* holds true for the Nicea's decretal concerning those who violate sacred vows taken promising not to serve in civil militias (Canon XIII). Who keeps this decree in the Papal church? How would we govern the church (*die Kirchen regirn*) according

⁷⁵AE 41, 33.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷WA 50, 532, 3.

to this decree of the council?⁷⁸ But if we are *not* going to live according to the council, then what sense does it make “to boast about the *letters* in the word ‘council’”?⁷⁹

This repeated reference, most often sarcastically, to *die Buchstaben* of the councils reveals Luther’s intense interest in the proper interpretation of the words of the council, and even more basic than that, a proper understanding the word “council” itself. It is never enough merely to scream the word “council” or to speak in general of obedience to the councils. A Christian must think carefully about the meaning and purpose of councils and their decrees. In terms of Luther’s continuing *reductio* argument, what use is it for the papal church to elevate the councils and fathers while they themselves reserve “the freedom to act contrary to them and cull from them [herausklauben] whatever they want us perform?”⁸⁰ All the sophistical dodges in the world (AE 41, 36-41) cannot help the papal church wiggle out of the dilemma of their own nonconformity to decrees which, according to their categorical statements, demand absolute obedience on the part of the Christian church. If the Holy Spirit has inspired any conciliar decree, then he has inspired them all, according to the logic of the council-screamers. So if they refuse to disobey any one decree, then “we need obey none, for one is as good as another because the same Holy Spirit [supposedly] rules them all in equal measure”⁸¹

When Luther comments on the Nicene council’s decree concerning the Roman Bishop’s right to take charge of the churches surrounding the city of Rome, he notes that this decision was based on “an old custom” (*alter gewonheit*): “*Gewonheit aber heist nicht Scriptura sancta oder Gottes wort.*”⁸² For Luther, this is firm evidence that one must carefully distinguish the various articles of the councils. “*Damit wir lernen, das der Concilii Artickel nicht alle ewiglich gleich, wie*

⁷⁸WA 50, 532, 31.

⁷⁹WA 50, 533, 14.

⁸⁰AE 41, 36; WA 50, 534, 5

⁸¹AE 41, 41; WA 50, 537, 16-18.

⁸²WA 50, 538, 5-6.

des glaubens Artickeln zu halten sind.”⁸³ Although Luther has yet to explain this distinction fully, particularly the meaning of “articles of faith,” he has nevertheless effectively introduced the necessity of judging between some articles that are “not to be kept forever” and others that are “articles of faith.”

Luther wraps up his preliminary consideration of Nicea by disposing of two more canons: the decree to bar emasculated men from the priesthood (Canon I) and another that requires celibacy of the bishops (Canon III). “Here I do not understand the Holy Spirit in this council at all.”⁸⁴ Luther once again reveals his fundamental quarrel with decrees like these: “does the Holy Spirit have nothing better to do in the councils than to ensnare and burden his servants with impossible, dangerous, and unnecessary laws? [. . . *denn das er mit unmöglichen, ferlichen, unnötigen gesetzen seine Diener verstricken und beschweren mus?*].”⁸⁵

Luther now leaves the councils aside for a moment; he has made his preliminary point. One cannot appeal to the councils without first making some important distinctions because the decisions of the councils established (*ersetzen*) a great deal that is “impossible, dangerous, and unnecessary.” Turning to the “fathers,” Luther cannot resist reminding his reader that Augustine himself, one of the chief fathers, stands right up front to “confound us” because “he wants none of them. . . *believed*, but wants them all *held under* and *made subject to Scripture* [*weil er keinem will. . . geglaubt, sondern alle unter die Schrift gefangen und gezwungen haben*].”⁸⁶

Luther seems content to examine the North African church father St. Cyprian and to use him as a foil in bringing his argument to a climax at the end of Part I. He cunningly chose Cyprian’s categorical insistence on rebaptizing those who were baptized by bishops who had apostatized, a doctrine which, of course, explicitly contradicts the later authoritative decrees of the councils and fathers. This obviously was a serious theological blunder on St. Cyprian’s part, and

⁸³WA 50, 538, 23-24.

⁸⁴AE 41, 42-43.

⁸⁵WA 50, 539, 7-9.

⁸⁶WA 50, 539, 22-23.

reminds us that these men were “poor sinners” like us, who desperately needed the forgiveness of sins, even (or especially) doctrinal sins. Luther points out that Cyprian was not alone in holding this doctrine, but was joined by many others, even the much venerated *Canones apostolorum*, which counts the heretic’s sacrament “as nothing” and insists on rebaptism. What does this do to the supposed consensus of the councils and fathers?

As it turns out, if Augustine and all of Christendom after him are right, and Luther so believes, then this “council” and the “fathers” who produced it and supported it were actually foisting on the church “apostolic” doctrines under false pretenses! What now happens to the *buchstaben c-o-u-n-c-i-l-s* and *f-a-t-h-e-r-s*? Who will *arbitrate* between Cyprian and his fathers and councils and St. Augustine and his fathers and councils?

Who is going to preach to Christians as long as this dispute remains without arbitration and unsettled. Sure, it’s fun to dawdle with councils and fathers if one plays with the letters or constantly postpones the council, as has now been done for twenty years, and does not think of what happens meanwhile to the souls who must be fed with conscientious teaching [*mit gewisser lere*], as Christ says, “Pastor my sheep.”⁸⁷

Cyprian was “honestly mistaken,” but mistaken nonetheless. One can have a high regard for the holy martyr St. Cyprian, especially *seiner Person und glaubens halben*, but “his doctrine is subject to [*unterworfen*] the saying of St. Paul, “Test everything, etc.”⁸⁸ Luther is now coming to the conclusion of this long drawn out argument. He is showing his cards, so to speak. This debate is not about trifles, but concerns *what the church is to preach and teach to the Lord’s sheep*. Repeatedly he has shown the impossibility of bringing the councils and fathers into agreement with one another. According to the presupposition of the council- and father-screamers, one presuppose a consensus “so that we may become certain of what and how one should preach to the poor Christians [*was and wie predigen sollte den armen Christen*].”⁸⁹ But until this controversy is

⁸⁷WA 50, 541, 19-24.

⁸⁸WA 50, 541, 35-37.

⁸⁹WA 50, 542, 2-3.

settled—and Luther has taken pages and pages to argue that the controversy is very real—“who is going to preach and baptize”? How can the papists boast in the councils and fathers against the evangelical pastors? If some of the councils and fathers are found to be heretical, as is certainly the case with Cyprian and the Apostolic Constitutions on rebaptism, then how can anyone justify anything against Luther and the evangelical pastors by nebulous references to the councils and fathers?

However, while we both thus cull from the councils and the fathers, they what they like, and we what we like, and cannot reach an agreement—because the fathers themselves disagree as much as do the councils—who, my dear man, is going to preach to the poor souls who know nothing of such culling and quarreling? Is that tending the sheep of Christ, when we ourselves do not know whether what we are feeding them is grass or poison, hay or dung? And are they to dangle and hang until it is settled and the council arrives at a decision? Oh, how poorly Christ would have provided for the church if this is how things have to go on! No, there must be another way than proving things by means of the councils and fathers [*Nein, Es mus anders zugehen, weder wir aus Concilien und Vetern fürwenden*], or there could have been no church since the days of the apostles—which is impossible, for it is written, “I believe one holy, Christian church” and “I am with you always, to the close of the age.”⁹⁰

Luther’s lengthy argument thus far has not been for the sake of “our people, to whom I will later show what councils, fathers, and church are, if they do not know it (from which God has protected them!), but I am saying this for the sake of the screamers who think that we have never read the fathers and councils. . . these screamers who tear out of context whatever they choose and discard the rest if it annoys them.”⁹¹ Luther’s intent has been to expose the abstract, uncontextualized reference to the authority of the councils and fathers for the fraud that it is. Such vague appeals simply fail to come to grips with the fact that the councils and fathers themselves are a mass of contradiction and confusion. The conclusion: “Therefore we must approach the matter differently” or possibly “. . . we must have another way of dealing with the facts [*müssen wir*

⁹⁰AE 41, 47-48; WA 50, 542, 18-29.

⁹¹AE 41, 48; WA 50, 542, 1-11.

anders zur sachen thun].”⁹² The evangelical church cannot simply receive the traditions of the councils and fathers without carefully analyzing them. The real matter or substance (*die Sache*) of the councils and fathers remains to be thoroughly unveiled. Luther hints here that there is something more fundamental, something that stands behind the councils and fathers. More clues are revealed as Luther moves on to discuss the well-known systematizer of the sayings of the father, Peter Lombard.

Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* reveal the master’s own *Anfechtung* over the many contradictions of the fathers. He made a desperate attempt to harmonize them, but seems himself to have missed the real substance of the councils and fathers: “about the real articles, like faith and justification, he talks tenuously and weakly, even if he praise the grace of God highly enough [*von den rechten Artickln, als Fides & iustificatio, redet er zu dünne und zu schwach, ob er wol die gnade Gottes hoch gnug preiset*].”⁹³ These *rechte Artickeln*, as we shall see, comprise the matter or substance of the fathers and councils, the proof of which remains to be seen when Luther expounds the councils in the next section. For now it is enough that the reader be convinced that the “holy fathers” were mere human beings, that the evidence reveals that “they did not have the same promise of the Holy Spirit that the apostles had, but had to be the apostles’ students [*Schüler*].”⁹⁴

With this comment Luther begins to draw his argument to a close. If the Christian faith depended upon these mere men, then it would be suspended (*hangen*) on mere human testimony and there would be no need for the Holy Scriptures. In fact, the Holy Spirit himself warns us against trusting or relying upon (*vertrauen*) the councils and fathers in 1 Corinthians 3:12. There is one foundation (*fundament*) or ground (*grund*) upon which the holy church must build, even if there are many men who seek to build upon it with wood, hay, and straw. The heretics, to be sure build on alien foundation or ground (*andern grund*), but these fallible human fathers, though they

⁹²WA 50, 543, 11-12; AE 41, 48.

⁹³WA 50, 543, 21-23.

⁹⁴WA 50, 544, 11-12.

err in many things, nevertheless, “remain on the foundation [*auf dem grund*], that is, in the faith of Christ, are saved, and are called God’s saints.”⁹⁵ Luther offers Augustine as an example—a church father who did not refuse to acknowledge his own errors. “All the other saints do the same and gladly consign their hay, straw, and wood to the fire so that they may remain on the foundation of salvation [*auff dem grunde der seligkeit bleiben*], as we also have done, and still do.”⁹⁶ Care should be taken to understand Luther’s precise way of speaking of *der Grund*. It is not merely the Scriptures, but that, or better, *he* of whom the Scripture’s principally speak. The doctrine of salvation as revealed in the Holy Scriptures remains the only certain foundation of the Holy Christian church. Therefore, if Christians are to remain on this solid ground, “one must according to St. Paul’s verdict, know how to differentiate [*unterscheid wissen zu machen*] between gold and wood, between silver and straw, between precious stones and hay.”⁹⁷

Gold, Silver, & Precious Stones

Luther closes Part I with a summary paragraph that serves as an effective transition into the concerns of Part II. “If it had not been for Holy Scripture, the church, had it depended on the councils and fathers, would not have lasted long. And in proof of this: where do the fathers and councils get what they teach or deal with? Do you think that they first invented it in their own day, or that the Holy Spirit always inspired them with something new? How was the church preserved prior to these councils and fathers? Or were there no Christians before councils and fathers came up? That is why we must speak differently about the councils and fathers and look not at the letters but at the meaning [*Darumb müssen wir anders von den Concilien und Vetern reden, und nicht die buchstaben, sondern den verstand ansehen*].”⁹⁸ The evangelical church must “speak differently

⁹⁵WA 50, 544, 22-23.

⁹⁶WA 50, 545, 12.

⁹⁷WA 50, 545, 16-20; AE 41, 50.

⁹⁸AE 41, 52; WA 50, 547, 2-10.

about the councils and fathers.” We must discover each council’s “mind” (*Verstand*), their understanding of the fundamental “matter” (*die Sache*), if we are to ascertain their proper Christian utility. Having established the impossibility of standing upon the councils and fathers, considered separately or together, as the foundation of the church, Luther must now examine the councils themselves as to their true significance and function for the church.

Luther is sensitive to the fact that we receive the councils as *texts*—texts that must be interpreted properly. “I shall take for myself the dictum of St. Hillary in *De Trinitate: ex causis dicendis summenda est intelligentia dictorum*. That is, whoever desires to understand a speech must perceive why or for what reason it has been spoken [*Das ist, wer eine rede verstehen wil, der mus sehen, warumb oder aus was ursachen es geredet seu*]. Actions are understood by their causes [*Sic ex causis agendi cognoscuntur acta*].”⁹⁹ Hilary’s dictum does not function for Luther as a magic key that will automatically unlock for the user the true meaning of the councils; but rather, for him it is a handy summary of the need for critical investigation of these texts.¹⁰⁰ As a *Doctor* of the church Luther possesses the critical reasoning skills and has access to the necessary resources necessary to make sense of these theological texts. Although Luther does not quote Hilary verbatim,¹⁰¹ nevertheless he summarizes Hilary’s consistent epistemological/linguistic thrust quite well with his “quotation.” By referencing Hilary with this off-the-cuff quotation,

⁹⁹WA 50, 547, 17-20.

¹⁰⁰Brian Gerrish reminds us that Luther “refused to consider the interpretation of the Bible [or other theological texts, for that matter] as a purely technical matter.” (B. A. Gerrish, “Doctor Martin Luther: Subjectivity and Doctrine in the Lutheran Reformation,” in *Seven Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483-1983*, ed. by Peter Newman Brooks (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 15). No one should “play the master of the Word,” but instead, must faithfully hear the voice of Christ and his Gospel, the true content of the Scriptures. “You must hear him and not master him or prescribe method, goal, or measure to him” (AE 23, 229-30).

¹⁰¹Hilary’s actual words (*De Trin.* 9. 2) are: *cum dictorum intelligentia, aut ex praepositis aut ex consequentibus expectatur*. “The meaning of the words is to be sought either from the preceding or from that which follows.” Or possibly: “in the context before or after them.” The entire context of Hilary is helpful for understanding his concern (!): “But they [Arian heretics] speak of all these matters in their foolish and unintelligent rage against the nature of the Godhead, while they do not grasp their significance, or take into consideration the circumstances of time, or perceive the mysteries of the Gospel, or realize the force of the words, while they mention only these bare statements [*nuda memorantes*] in order to fill the ears of the uneducated, and pass over in silence either the explanations or the reasons that prompted them, for the meaning of words is to be ascertained either from those that precede or from those that follow” (*The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, vol. 25 of *The Fathers of the Church* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955], 324; *De Trinitate*, Migne, J.-P., ed. *Patrologia Cursus completus: Series Latina*, vol. 10 [Paris, 1844-1865], 282).

Luther hooks into all that Hilary says about the proper way of understanding theological language.¹⁰²

To illustrate how Hilary's principle works, Luther provides three examples. The first is an illustration from common life. Until the proper investigation is made, a judge may misunderstand the meaning of a lawsuit. "For until one discovers the background and reason for the words, it is only letters . . ." [*Denn ehe man grund und ursach der reden erferet, so sind es buchstaben oder Chorschüler geschreu und Nunnen gesang*].¹⁰³ Consider, secondly, how the pope misinterprets the words of Christ in Matt. 16:19, for he "takes the letters, rides into fairy tale land with them, and interprets them as 'Whatever I do in heaven and on earth is right.'" But what precisely is Christ saying? That can only be apprehended "when one sees the causes [*die Ursachen*]." Once we understand *die Ursachen*, then we can know that "Christ speaks in them of binding and loosing sins. . . Therefore, this word is not about Saint Peter's rule [*walten*], but applies [*angehen*] to the needs of . . . sinners."¹⁰⁴ The problem, then, is that the pope, like a fool, "looks at the letters and pays no attention to the grounds [*die buchstaben an und achtet der ursachen nichts*]."¹⁰⁵ Thus, he misses what Christ himself would say to the church. Thirdly, ascertaining the *Grund und Ursache* is the necessary presupposition for properly understanding the meaning of any Scripture. "Then, too, many passages in the Scriptures are contradictory, according to the letters [*nach dem buchstaben*], but when the causes [*die ursachen*] are pointed out [*angezeigt*], all is well. . . . And what is the entire existence of man but one frivolous antilogical and contradictory thing, until one hears the facts [*sachen*]."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰²Cf. *De Trin.* 1.18, 2.5, 9.15, 10.1; see Thomas F. Torrance, "Transition to the West: The Interpretation of Biblical and Theological Statements According to Hilary of Poitiers," in *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 392-427.

¹⁰³WA 50, 547, 30-31.

¹⁰⁴WA 50, 548, 5-8.

¹⁰⁵WA 50, 548, 13.

¹⁰⁶AE 41, 54; WA 50, 548, 14-19.

Luther is now armed to tackle the councils. He will investigate the available texts of the creeds and histories in order to determine the facts (*die Sachen*), thereby uncovering the proper causes (*die Ursachen*) and grounds (*die Grunden*) of each of the first four “ecumenical” councils of the early church. Luther does not appear to use these last two words with any kind of technical precision. They often function as virtual synonyms. He can just as well collapse the matter into one or the other of these words, as he does when he turns to an examination of Nicea: “Now we take up for ourselves the Council of Nicea, which was undertaken for the following reasons . . . [*das ist solcher ursachen furgenomen worden*].”¹⁰⁷ Ultimately, however, his agenda seems transparent enough—to uncover the central, abiding concern of these Christian councils. This alone will reveal the true and proper foundation of the church.

It will not serve our purpose to examine Luther’s analysis of each of the councils in exhaustive detail; it may be enough if we outline his understanding of the proper function and lasting value of the councils. As in Part I, Luther slowly and carefully builds a strong case.¹⁰⁸ He has already established the fact that the councils cannot be received *in toto*, that selective appropriation is inevitable; now he shows, through a careful inquiry into the histories and texts of these councils, *how* such a critical appropriation must be made. He does so not by imposing an alien grid upon the councils, but by elucidating their historical, theological, and administrative circumstances (*die Sachen*) in order to discover the main concern (*die Sache, die Haubtsache das Hauptstück*, etc.) of the councils

¹⁰⁷WA 50, 548, 24-25.

¹⁰⁸Part II can be outlined as follows:

- I. Introduction: Hillary’s Dictum & the necessity of finding the ground and cause (*grund und ursache*; WA 50, 547, 30) of the councils through careful analysis of their histories and text (53-54).
- II. The Council of Nicea (54-85)
- II. The Council of Constantinople (86-93)
- III. The Council of Ephesus (93-106)
- IV. The Council of Chalcedon (106-119)
- V. A Summary of the Analysis of the Councils (119-122)
- VI. What is a Council? What Is Its Proper Task? (123-131)
- VII. The Conclusion: A Church Council’s Pastoral Function (131-142)

First, since the decisions of the councils are passed on to us as texts, a careful examination into the historical circumstances of each council (the *con*-text) must inform any theological or ecclesiastical appraisal we make. Answering historical questions like “what caused a council to be convened” and “who convened it” and “who was condemned and what did they confess,” etc. will provide clues to the central purpose(s) of the bishops meeting together as councils. It is noteworthy that Luther begins his analysis of each council with a historical sketch in order to determine the causes or reasons or grounds (*die Ursachen*) for a council’s convocation.

“We shall now take up the Council of Nicea, which was undertaken for the following reasons [*aus folcher ursachen*]. . .”¹⁰⁹

Speaking of the apostolic council in Jerusalem he asks, “And why should we not also examine how this council can be understood within the context of the reasons [*aus den ursachen*] that made it necessary? This was the cause [*die ursache*]. . .”¹¹⁰

“The second principle council, of Constantinople. . . had these causes [*diese ursachen*]”¹¹¹

About Ephesus he begins, “Here was the reason [*die ursache*] for this council. . .”¹¹²

Of Chalcedon he writes: “Well, then, Platina and others say that this was the cause [*diese ursachen*] . . . Eutyches had advanced a doctrine against Nestorius. . .”¹¹³

“These then are the four principle councils and the reasons [*die ursachen*] they were held.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹AE 41, 54; WA 50, 548, 24-25.

¹¹⁰AE 41, 68; WA 50, 560, 9-11.

¹¹¹WA 50, 575, 12.

¹¹²WA 50, 582, 1.

¹¹³WA 50, 593, 15-17.

¹¹⁴AE 41, 121; WA 50, 605, 15-16.

How important discovering the “causes” for the councils was for Luther can be seen in his intense frustration with the meager, contradictory, and often suspicious historical data available for research on some of the personalities and theologies involved, specifically Eutyches and the council of Chalcedon. So paramount is a correct understanding of Eutyches error for understanding the doctrinal decisions of this council, that Luther can sit rather loose with the council as a whole precisely because its *Ursachen* remain somewhat opaque. “Therefore the later histories are uncertain and obscure too, so that no one can understand what Eutyches or the pope’s histories mean, and thus one loses the council together with the reasons for its convocation [Verlieren damit dis Concilium sampt der ursachen, warumb es versamlet ist].”¹¹⁵ Luther reads himself “into a bad humor” trying to ferret out the details behind this council.¹¹⁶

When he begins his reconstruction of the theological controversy involving Eutyches, he concedes, “I shall give you my ideas; if I hit the mark, good—if not, the Christian faith will not fall herewith.”¹¹⁷ He concludes his lengthy reconstruction of the theological *ursachen* of Chalcedon reminding the reader that the Christian faith does not depend upon the councils since their meaning may often be uncertain. “Even if I do not have this council or any proper understanding of it, I still have Scripture and a proper understanding of it. The council is bound to hold to it; and for me Scripture is far more certain than all councils.”¹¹⁸

The same nexus between understanding the acts of a council and discerning the reasons for their assembly is evident in Luther’s discussion of the other councils as well. In discussing each council a very large amount of space is given over to describing the historical, ecclesiastical, and theological *Ursachen*. The heretics and their own teaching must be understood properly if we are to interpret the councils correctly. The council of Ephesus, for example, remained opaque to Luther until Nestorius’ genuine error dawned on him. Luther tells us that he could not attain to a

¹¹⁵WA 50, 594, 26-27.

¹¹⁶AE 41, 119.

¹¹⁷AE 41, 108; WA 50, 595, 1-2.

¹¹⁸AE 41, 119; WA 50, 604, 7-9.

thorough (*gründlich*) understanding of it until he ascertained Nestorius' precise error. "For a while I myself could not understand just what Nestorius' error was."¹¹⁹ Luther makes the connection this way: "what was it that was condemned about Nestorius and why was this third principle council convoked against him? . . . Now in order to discover the reasons for this council [*die ursachen dieses Concilii erfahren*] we ask, what really was Nestorius' error?"¹²⁰

An examination into the causes for these councils serves to reveal the true facts (*die Sachen*) so necessary for evaluating the proper meaning and significance of the acts of the councils. Specifically, we discover the main fact or thing [*die Sache*], the chief matter, substance, or business (*hauptstück*) of each of the these councils. Luther uses this language throughout to identify the central concern(s) of each council. Identifying the chief matter of a council reveals its genuine purpose. The chief causes [*ursachen*] and the chief article of a council are logically correlative. "For the true conciliar decrees [*der rechten Concilien Decret*] must always remain—and indeed always have—especially the chief articles [*heubtsache*], for the sake of which the councils came into being."¹²¹ Thus, an examination of the historical, churchly, and theological situations of each of the councils establishes that the councils were called into being to clarify and boldly confess the biblical doctrine of Christ and salvation.

This becomes evident in Luther's summarizing statements concerning each of the councils. Of the apostolic council Luther concludes, "Now Peter asserts here that we must be saved solely by the grace of Jesus Christ . . . That, I say, is the substance or main concern [*substance oder heubtsache*] of this council, for which it was convened or convoked; and with which it was settled and adjourned."¹²² About Nicea he writes: "Therefore this article on the deity of Christ was the chief business [*heubtstück*] of this council; indeed, it was the whole council [*es ist das Councilim*

¹¹⁹AE 41, 96; WA 50, 583, 27-28.

¹²⁰AE 41, 97; WA 50, 585, 7-8.

¹²¹AE 41, 73; WA 50, 563, 23-26.

¹²²AE 41, 72; WA 50, 562, 29—563, 7.

gantz und gar].”¹²³ In another place, Luther identifies the kernel (*das hertz der Sache*) of Nicea’s concerns—that Christ is *homoousios* with the Father.”¹²⁴ Although, for example, Constantinople “did three things”—it affirmed the Holy Spirit as true God, deposed heretical bishops, and made Nectarius of Constantinople a patriarch—nevertheless, “the first is the real, main item and the sole reason [*das rechte heubstück und die einige ursache*] for holding the council, from which one can also understand the meaning of the council [*meinung*], namely, that it was to do no more than to preserve the doctrine of the divinity of the Holy Spirit.”¹²⁵ Even if Luther has his own problems with the way Ephesus dealt with Nestorius, and Chalcedon with Eutyches, he nevertheless zeros in on the main christological article defended by these councils.¹²⁶

As we have seen, the chief articles or decrees of the councils identify doctrines as “articles of faith”—christological and soteriological doctrines that one must believe in order to be saved. This presupposes, then, the existence of peripheral *ursachen* of the councils which resulted in secondary canons and decrees. By identifying the chief theological and christological concerns of each the councils, Luther is able to distinguish between these and the other peripheral matters dealt with in each of the councils. How are we to receive such secondary or peripheral acts of the councils? This is a decisive question. Indeed, recognizing this distinction between articles of faith and other peripheral matters as well as the proper ecclesiastical function of each of these two categories of Conciliar acts is at the heart of Luther’s polemical purpose. There is a sense in which everything discussed already serves the purpose of grounding this distinction.

In his analysis of each of the councils Luther defends this differentiation. Any internal critique of a council must recognize this basic categorical distinction. Conflating these two categories involves more than a simple historical mistake; rather, mingling these acts of the council will result in a confusion of Law and Gospel and the resulting misidentification of the true ground

¹²³AE 41, 59; WA 50, 552, 17-19.

¹²⁴AE 41, 82; WA 50, 571, 23.

¹²⁵AE 41, 91; WA 50, 579, 23-28.

¹²⁶AE 41, 95ff.

and foundation of the church. The papal church has commingled these two categories of conciliar acts and therefore muddled more than just the true significance of these councils. They are confused about the very foundation of the church of Christ! Only when one discriminates between the gold, silver, and precious stones as over against the wood, hay, and straw—only then will one be able to see how the councils themselves witness to the true and only foundation of the church. There is very definitely a hierarchy among the various acts, decrees, and canons of the councils.

One needs to be able to separate the chief matters of the council (“the articles of faith”) from the temporal, external rules of the church, most of which are evidence of nothing but pure clerical squabbling. Note the coordination of faith and reason:

“. . . it would have been a sin and a shame to call such a great council into session for such trivial matters [*umb solcher geringer sachen*], since for such outward matters [*eusserlichen sachen*] since reason, given to us by God, is enough to order these, and the Holy Spirit, whose should shine forth Christ [*verkleren*] and not to handle such matters as are subject to reason [*der vernunfft unterworffen*], is not needed for this—unless, of course, one would call every act of pious Christians, even their eating and drinking, the work of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit must have better things to do for the sake of doctrine than these works which are subject to reason.”¹²⁷

The second council’s acts, for example, give evidence of wranglings over primacy between Rome and Constantinople, wranglings that are nothing more than “vain, rotten, lame, and useless squabbles.”¹²⁸ The deposition and installation of bishops do not involve articles of faith, but are “external, tangible works, which reason, too, should and can perform and which does not require either the extraordinary action of the Holy Spirit (as do articles of faith) or the summoning of a

¹²⁷WA 50, 553, 14-23; AE 41, 60. Although it lies beyond the scope of this essay to argue this point sufficiently, it should be noted that when Luther dismisses some of the decrees as dealing “with other matters pertaining to the temporal, external rule of the church” he is not thereby discarding all that is outward and physical in the church. There is a vast difference between these “trifling externals” and the true external marks of the church (AE 41, 173).

¹²⁸AE 41, 91.

council.”¹²⁹ The debate over the proper date for Easter was another such “outward matter” subject to reason. “The pope and his church subsequently made of this [matter concerning the date of Easter] not only gold, silver, and precious stones, but also a foundation [*grund*], that is an article of faith, without which we could not be saved; and they all call it a commandment of, and act of, and obedience to the church.”¹³⁰

Luther utilizes this architectural-temple imagery from 1 Corinthians 3 throughout this treatise. Speaking of the peripheral conciliar decrees: “They are not kept and cannot be kept. They were hay, straw, and wood (as St. Paul puts it) built on the ground; that is why fire consumed them in time, just as other transitory things disappear. But if they had been articles of faith or commandments of God they would have survived, like the article concerning the divinity of Christ.”¹³¹ By removing all the canons, decrees, and edicts of the councils having to do with temporal matters of order and ceremony Luther leaves the central articles of faith shining forth—the gold, silver, and precious stones built upon the rock of Christ the Lord.

Furthermore, unlike the peripheral ceremonial, and administrative decrees, the foundational articles of faith were not established (*setzen*) or concocted (*machen*) by the church’s councils. Luther hammers this point over and over again—the councils were not convened for the purpose of creating new doctrine. The bishops convened at these councils never dreamed of inventing new doctrines. It is precisely when one understands the words of the council properly that one understands that the councils did not seek to establish or invent new doctrines, but rather sought to defend the *scriptural* articles of faith against the novel teachings of heretics. “If there were no Holy Scripture of the prophets and apostles, the mere words of the council would be meaningless, and its decisions would accomplish nothing. Therefore this article on the deity of Christ was the chief business [*heubtstück*] of this council; indeed, it was the whole council [*es ist das Councilim gantz*

¹²⁹AE 41, 92; WA 50, 579, 28-32.

¹³⁰AE 41, 67; WA 50, 559, 11-14.

¹³¹AE 41, 61; WA 50, 554, 1-5.

und gar].”¹³² Luther quotes Theodoret and then applies it to understanding the council: “‘At Nicea the faith was grounded on the writings of the apostles.’ Otherwise, if there were no Holy Scripture of the prophets and apostles, the mere words of the council would be meaningless, and its decisions would accomplish nothing [*So spricht auch Tripart. lib. 5. Cap. 29. Der glaube ist zu Nicea durch der Apostel schriftt gegründet. Sonst wo die heilige Schriftt der Propheten und Apostel thet, so wurden die blossen wort des Councilii nichts schaffen, und jr urteil nichts ausrichten*].”¹³³

Not only so, but if we were to lose the councils and fathers, we would nevertheless have the Scriptures, which can be understood by simple Christians who have no knowledge of the councils and fathers. “Even if I do not have this council [Chalcedon] or if I do not understand it correctly, I still have the Scripture and I understand it correctly, according to which, the council itself also is bound to hold, and which to me is certain [*gewisser*], more than all the councils.”¹³⁴ The councils may leave us in doubt, but the Scriptures will never do so. They alone are the certain ground of our trust. “So we also must have something greater and more certain [*gewissers*] for our faith than the councils, that something, greater and certain, is the Holy Scripture.”¹³⁵

The papal church thinks “that councils have the power and right to set up new articles of faith and alter the old ones. That is not true . . . No council ever did it, or can do it; the articles of faith must not grow on earth through the councils, as from a new, secret inspiration, but must be issued from heaven through the Holy Spirit and revealed openly; otherwise, as we shall see, they are not articles of faith.”¹³⁶ Here Luther differentiates “articles of faith” from the novel

¹³²AE 41, 59; WA 50, 552, 17-19.

¹³³AE 41:59; WA 50, 552, 14-17.

¹³⁴WA 50, 604, 7-9.

¹³⁵WA 50, 604, 24-26. “One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the Gospel of Christ. . . . Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing” (*The Freedom of the Christian* [1520], AE 31:345; WA 7, 50).

¹³⁶AE 41, 58.

promulgations of the councils, according to their origin or source. The Holy Spirit alone “through Scripture” delivers “articles of faith” to the church.¹³⁷ Only the Holy Spirit speaking through the apostolic Scriptures provides Christians with articles of faith. After analyzing Ephesus’ inadequate examination of Nestorius, Luther insists that the article about Christ was not established at this council: “This article was in the church from the very beginning and was not newly created by the council, but was preserved [*erhalten*] through the Gospel or Holy Scripture. . .”¹³⁸

Against the pretensions of the papal church, Luther’s own understanding of the relationship between the words of the councils and the Scriptures is such that ultimately the Word of God itself remains the true and proper *Grund und Ursache* of the articles of faith defended by the councils.¹³⁹ The chief usefulness of the councils is their function as a witness to the *viva vox evangelium*. Without the *viva vox evangelium*, the words of the councils are dead principles. The church must listen to the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, shining forth Christ. Clarifying, defending, and confessing matters pertaining to his Person and work ought to be the chief concern of Christian councils. “St. John, St. Paul, St. Peter, and the other apostles, these are solid [*fest*] and offer us a good foundation and defense [*guten grund und wehre*]; for it was revealed to them through the Holy Spirit given to them openly from heaven.”¹⁴⁰

No council can create an article of faith out of thin air. Articles of faith must be given to the church by the Lord himself in the Scriptures. Everything we need to confess Christ in any given situation is given to the church in the Word of God. “This is my answer to those also who accuse

¹³⁷Luther distinguishes the role of the Holy Spirit in the councils from his work in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit does not work in these councils giving new revelation. “The Holy Spirit has not been given to teach or instill in us anything except Christ, but he is to teach and remind us of all that is in Christ ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ [Col. 2:3]. He is to make him clear to us, as Christ says [1 John 16:13], and not exalt our reason and notions or make an idol of these.” (AE 41, 122). Moreover, the Holy Spirit is not finally interested in the trivial matters that seem so central to the papal church. “What does the Holy Spirit care about care about which bishop goes first and which goes last? He has other things to do besides fooling in such worldly child’s play!” (AE 41, 92).

¹³⁸AE 41, 105; WA 50, 591, 25-28.

¹³⁹WA 50, 547, 30.

¹⁴⁰WA 50, 551, 6-9. In *Von der Beichte* (1521), Luther writes: “Some councils, among them the Council of Nicea, have clarified the articles of faith and formulated them on the basis of Scripture. Affirming these doctrines is the same as affirming God’s Word” (WA 8:149, 34—150, 4).

me of rejecting all the holy teachers of the church. I do not reject them. But everyone, indeed, knows that at times they have erred, as men will do; therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred.”¹⁴¹

Ultimately, however, the Scriptures are given to the church by inspiration of the Holy Spirit to teach us nothing except Christ and the salvation secured by him. The Holy Scripture is not an abstract *principium* without a center. The confession of Christ found in these councils is not the consequence of making a deduction from a *principium*, but a living response to the Word of God by churchmen filled with the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit has not been given to teach or instill in us anything by except Christ, but he is to teach and remind us of all that is in Christ ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ [Col. 2:3]. He is to make him clear to us, as Christ says [John 16:13], and not exalt our reason and notions or make a idol of any of these.”¹⁴² Luther avoids a theoretical “biblicism” which transforms the Bible into an abstract authority without a center, a law-book of doctrines.

For Luther the confession of the Bible’s authority arises out of his understanding of its *instrumental* function in delivering the gift of Christ and salvation. Final authority resides in the Lord Christ alone; he speaks as the Lord through the Spirit in the Scriptures alone.¹⁴³ We might call this a means-of-grace formulation of biblical authority founded upon Christ’s promise to communicate his Gospel to man through the Spirit by means of the Holy Scripture. Lotz summarizes Luther’s position: “The authority of Scripture, therefore, is based on the preeminent authority of Christ and his Gospel. Hence Scripture’s authority is not formal and static, predicated

¹⁴¹ *Defense and Explanation of all the Articles* [1521], AE 32, 11. Referring to the Augsburg Confession (Article XIV, “. . . the Christian church is there where the word of God is correctly taught”), Sasse argues, “Here, with absolute clarity at the moment when the church of the west was disintegrating, the fundamental evangelical truth proclaimed that the word of God stands over the church, that the church is born of the word of God, and that the word of God is also the final and highest authority for the church” (Sasse, 13).

¹⁴² AE 41, 122; WA 50, 606, 16-20. “Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them” (Luther’s section on the clarity of Scripture in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525); AE 33:26; WA 18:606-609).

¹⁴³ Lotz argues that “Luther’s *sola scriptura* is misrepresented and distorted apart from due attention to Scripture’s servant status vis-à-vis Christ, its Lord and King” (David. W. Lotz, “Luther and *Sola Scriptura*,” in *Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, eds., Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker [Dearborn, MI: The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990], 262).

on the Bible's supernatural character. It is, rather, an authority that attaches itself directly to the Bible's content, its 'matter' (*res*), and that displays itself in action. Moreover, the *res scripturae* is not something obscure or hidden in the Word of God. For whenever Christ proclaims himself through the biblical Gospel and thereby awakens (and preserves) faith in himself, there the authority of Scripture is realized."¹⁴⁴ By means of Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*—note the ablative case!) Christ delivers himself and all the benefits of his salvation to the believing soul who hears the Word proclaimed and receives the substance of its message—namely, Christ alone (*solus Christus*).¹⁴⁵

Luther's position must be guarded against any attempt to reduce it to the kind of lowest-common-denominator Christianity that is so common today. The *satis est* of the Augsburg confession (AC VII)¹⁴⁶ and of Luther's christological/evangelical exposition of the councils must be understood against the backdrop of the Roman insistence on making ceremonies and canons obligatory for the evangelical Christians of the sixteenth century. It is not an attempt, as in some segments of modern Christianity, to define some bare minimum, bottom-line doctrinal basis for ecclesiastical union.¹⁴⁷

Brian Gerrish makes a passing comment to the effect that this treatise of Luther's "contains one of his most defiant assertions of individual interpretation."¹⁴⁸ He references page 119 in the American Edition as a proof text. Gerrish must be referring to the final two sentences of the first

¹⁴⁴Lotz, "Luther and *Sola Scriptura*," 259.

¹⁴⁵"For what still sublimer thing can remain hidden in the Scriptures, now that the seals have been broken, the stone rolled from the door of the sepulcher and the supreme mystery brought to light, namely, that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally? Are not these things known and sung even in the highways and byways? Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them? (*The Bondage of the Will* [1525], AE 33, 25-26; WA 18, 606, 24-29).

¹⁴⁶"For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere. It is as Paul says, 'One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,' etc. (Eph. 4:5, 6)." Tappert, 32.

¹⁴⁷See Hermann Sasse, *We Confess the Church*, trans. by Norman E. Nagel (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 67.

¹⁴⁸B. A. Gerrish, 17.

full paragraph. After contending (one again, as he does with each council) that the council of Chalcedon “did not establish any new article of faith” and for that reason, the council itself “offers no proof that councils are vested with the authority to foist new doctrines on Christendom” but that the christological “article is far more abundantly and firmly grounded in Scripture,” Luther makes these statements: “Even if I do not have this council or any proper understanding of it, I still have Scripture and a proper understanding of it. The council too is bound to hold to it; and for me Scripture is more reliable than all the councils.”¹⁴⁹ But this statement, as we have seen in our study, can only be described as “individualism” if it is wrenched from the entire context of Luther’s discussion of the councils in this treatise. Luther has not claimed to have discovered something new in the Bible. Neither is he advocating anything like an individual’s “right to private interpretation.” Luther also avoids the bottomless pit of individualistic interpretations of Scripture. We have seen no evidence that Luther raised himself or his own idiosyncratic reading of the Scripture above the church, the councils, or the Fathers; rather, he reminded the church that Christ himself was Lord over all these.¹⁵⁰ Luther did not elevate his own subjectivity or experience as authoritative. On the contrary, he attacks a hazardous pseudo objectivity—a defensive, undiscerning objectivity that seeks refuge in vague, generalized appeals to the councils and fathers of the church, without really inquiring into the possibility of such a foundation.

Conclusion: The Pastoral Councils

If Luther prunes the councils back so much, what good are they? Who needs them? Luther answers that question by reminding the reader that the “great” councils are themselves essentially gatherings of pastors to do the work of the pastorate (AE 41, 131-142). When one understands the proper role and function of the pastor, then one understands the proper role and function of the councils. To the extent that councils do or say anything that goes beyond what pastors have been given to do and say by the Lord as bishops and shepherds in the church, to that

¹⁴⁹AE 41, 118-9.

¹⁵⁰WA 6, 581, 14.

extent they are to be rejected. One should note the climatic character of this last section of Part II. Luther caps off and concludes his discussion of the councils by comparing them to pastors and school teachers.¹⁵¹ This is not merely an excursus or addendum peripheral to Luther's central argument, but sums up his understanding of the beneficial pastoral service the councils ought to render to the church.

If the councils are gatherings of pastors, what are pastors given to say and do by the Lord? Interestingly, just before he concludes Part II, Luther asks:

This brings us to the main question [*die haubt frage*] prompting me to write this booklet: what, then, is a council or what is its task [*sein werck*]? If it is not the place of a council to establish new articles of faith, then, until now, all the world has been led astray because it neither knows nor believes anything other than that a decree of a council is an article of faith or even at least something necessary to hold for salvation [*oder je zum wenigsten fur ein nötig werck zur seligkeit zu halten*], so that he who does not keep the decree of a council cannot be saved because he does not obey the Holy Spirit, the council's master.¹⁵²

Luther then sets out ten summary statements in answer to the “main question”—what are councils given to do or accomplish (*zu machen*)?

- First, a council has no power [*macht*] to establish new articles of faith. . .
- Second, a council has the power. . . to suppress and condemn new articles of faith. . .
- Third, a council has no power to command new good works. . .
- Fourth, a council has the power. . . to condemn evil works that oppose love. . .
- Fifth, a council has no power to impose new ceremonies on Christians, to be observed on pain of mortal sin or at the peril of conscience. . .
- Sixth, a council has the power and is bound to condemn such ceremonies. . .
- Seventh, a council has no power to interfere in worldly law and government. . .

¹⁵¹These “schoolteachers” were probably what we might call junior clergy. Young ministers often began their ministry training the parish youth. The AE gives the impression that Luther speaks of two “offices”: “Do you think then that the offices of the pastor and the schoolteacher are so low that they cannot be compared with the councils” (AE 41, 132). The text, however, implies that Luther is referring to one office (*Ampt*) performed in two different ways, by the parish pastor (*Pfarrher*) and by the schoolteacher (*Schulmeister*): “*Meinstu denn auch, das ein Pfarrher order Schulmeister so geringe Ampt sind, das sie nicht möchten etwa sein den Counciliis zu vergleichen?*” (WA 50, 614, 31-33).

¹⁵²WA 50, 606, 34—607, 2.

Eighth, a council has the power and is bound to condemn such arbitrary ways or new laws . . . that is, to throw the pope's decretals into the fire.

Ninth, a council has no power to create statutes or decretals that seek nothing but tyranny, that is, statutes on how the bishops should have the power and authority to command what they will and everyone should tremble and obey. . .

Tenth, a council has the power to institute some ceremonies, provided, first, that they do not strengthen the bishop's tyranny; second, that they are useful and profitable to the people. . .¹⁵³

If this is what councils are given to do, then how is this much different than what the Ministry is given to do? One might just as well replace "council" with "pastor" in this list without having to make too many additional changes. Indeed, that Luther expected the reader to make the connection becomes clear when upon finishing the list he concludes his argument in Part II with the climactic section on the duties of the office of pastor (AE 41, 131-142).

The councils are gatherings of pastors! What should pastors do? Preach Christ and his Gospel according to the Word of God! In the process of fulfilling his office, a parish pastor may need the assistance of other pastors in the region. It may then become necessary to call together a local or even a empire-wide gathering of pastors to act as judges, "hearing parties, pronouncing sentences, but with a certain humility."¹⁵⁴ Councils, like pastors, or better, as convocations of pastors, are bound to judge everything according to Holy Scripture. "Thus a council condemns a heretic, not according to its own discretion, but according to the rule of the empire [*des Reichs recht*], that is, according to Holy Scripture, which they confess, which is the rule of the holy church [*der heiligen Kirchen recht*]."¹⁵⁵ The Lord has his *Reich*, which is governed by *das Recht* of the Holy Scriptures. Pastors and councils are the servants of the Lord's *Reich* and *Wort*. "This law is God's Word, the Reich is God's Kirche, *der Richter is beider amptman oder diener*."¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³AE 41, 123-131; WA 50, 607-614.

¹⁵⁴AE 41, 133.

¹⁵⁵WA 50, 616, 3-5.

¹⁵⁶WA 50, 616, 6-7. "Not only the council but every pastor and schoolteacher is also the servant or judge of this law and empire [*und on unterlas solch richter ampt brauchen*]" (AE 41, 133; WA 50, 616, 10).

The Lord, however, has not given councils the charge of serving the church on a day to day basis. That task belongs to the local parsons and school teachers who fulfill the *Ampt* of pastor. They, too, must follow the rule of the Lord's *Reich*—the Word of God. Councils deal with big problems, pruning the large limbs from the tree or uprooting evil trees. “But a pastor and a schoolteacher plant and cultivate young trees and useful shrubs in the garden. Oh, they have a precious office and task [*köstlich Ampt und werck*], and they are the church's richest jewels; they sustain [*erhalten*] the church. For if indeed we cannot have the councils, the parishes and schools, small though they are, are eternal and useful councils.”¹⁵⁷

This is why we should listen to these councils of bishops. Do the councils function as servants of the “means of grace”? Do they serve the Lord and his church as pastors were given to function among the people of God? If so, then they should be heard. Indeed, they have been given to the Church by the Lord himself to be heeded. Not absolutely, of course. They are not infallible. No one, for example, rejects their pastor simply because he is not infallible. No, we learn to differentiate our pastor's voice when he speaks as the spokesman for the Lord and his Gospel in contrast to whatever “canons” and “decrees” he may require in fulfillment of his role as administrator of the church. This is why Luther, too, can indeed listen to the voice of the Holy Christian church.¹⁵⁸ Just like every pastor who faithfully speaks the Gospel and is vested with the authority of the keys, to bind and loose sins, so also “the councils, since they appeal to the Holy Christian church as to the true and supreme judge on earth, testify that they cannot judge according to their own discretion, but that the church, which preaches, believes, and confesses Holy Scripture, is the judge.”¹⁵⁹ The councils and fathers must never be mistaken as the ground

¹⁵⁷AE 41, 135; WA 50, 617, 18-24. This helps explain the “locatedness” of the acts of the councils. The pastors or bishops gathered together to deal with specific problems, and they accordingly acted as judges and servants of the Word in their united judgment against heretics. So, after acting as “great servants” and “judges” of the Lord's *Reich*, when the emergency is passed, “Therefore the laws that are made for these changeable things must also change. . . transient things have transient laws” (AE 41, 134).

¹⁵⁸The doctoral oath at Wittenburg in 1533, included this promise of loyalty to the creeds: “I promise the eternal God. . . that with God's help I shall faithfully serve the church in teaching the Gospel without any corruptions and shall constantly defend the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. . .” (cited in Gerrish, 17).

¹⁵⁹AE 41, 132-133; WA 50, 615, 21-24.

or foundation of the church, but they, as gatherings of pastors, are *instruments* through which the Lord grants his church the knowledge of Christ and salvation, according to the Scriptures.

Thus, for Luther, the councils and fathers of the early church are particularly weighty instances of the fact that the one holy church continues forever (*perpetuo mansura*; AC VII) as the congregation of saints that confess the Lord Christ as the only sure and certain *der Grund der Seligkeit*.¹⁶⁰ Wherever Christ as *der Grund der Seligkeit* is confessed by pastors and people, there you will find the true church.¹⁶¹ The councils do not form the whole or even a part of the *foundation* of the church. As Luther has reminded us throughout this treatise, one can be ignorant of the councils and still be saved.¹⁶² One cannot, however, be saved and remain ignorant of the one whom the councils confess as the foundation of the church, namely the Christ of salvation as he is revealed in the Holy Scriptures. One may come to believe in Christ *through* the testimony of the councils and fathers, but trusting *in* the councils and fathers would betray a profound confusion of their proper ministerial role: “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed [διακονοι δι’ων επιστευσατε], as the Lord gave to each one?” (1 Cor. 3:5). There is, therefore, an ecclesiology implicit in Luther’s work in locating the *Grund und Ursache* of the councils. Christ alone is the foundation and reason for the church’s existence. Where Christ is confessed, there you find the church (*ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*).

¹⁶⁰WA 50, 545, 13.

¹⁶¹“I have perceived and noted in all histories of all Christendom that all those who have correctly had and kept the chief article of Jesus Christ have remained safe and secure in the right Christian faith. Although they may have sinned and erred in other matters, they have nevertheless been preserved at the last. For whoever stands correctly and firmly in the belief that Jesus Christ is true God and man, that he died and has risen again for us, such a person has all other articles added to him and they firmly stand by him. [Luther quotes Col. 2:3, John 15:5, and Luke 11:23 as support.] For this it is decided (so speaks St. Paul) that in Jesus Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily [Col. 2:9] or personally, in such manner that whoever does not find or receive God in Christ shall nevermore and nowhere have or find God outside of Christ, even though he should go beyond heaven, below hell, or outside of the world. For here I will dwell (says God), in this humanity, born of Mary the virgin, etc. If you believe this, then good for you; if not, then have your own way, but your lack of belief will change nothing herein. And Christ will indeed remain in spite of you, together with all his believers, as he has remained heretofore, against all the power of the devil and the world. On the other hand, I have also noticed that all error, heresy, idolatry, offense, misuse, and evil in the church originally came from despising or losing sight of this article of faith in Jesus Christ. And if one looks at it correctly, all heresies do contend against this dear article of Jesus Christ. . .” (*The Three Symbols* [1538]; AE 34, 207-8).

¹⁶²AE 41, 107.

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is (1 Corinthians 3:11-13).

It follows that the true church will always keep the Lord Christ is the source and center of the church and her confession and that any faithful ecclesiastical council, composed of pastors who are cautiously discharging their office by saying and doing only what the Lord has given them to say and do, will confidently shine forth in its confession the genuine and only sure “foundation” of the church when they confess Christ as Lord.

The Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 22, 1998

Bibliography

I. Primary Sources: Texts and Translations

Hilary of Poitiers. *The Trinity*. Translated by Stephen Mckenna. Volume 25 of *The Fathers of the Church*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955.

Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. Volumes 1-55. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, gen. eds. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986.

_____. *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Volumes 1-63. Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883-1987.

Migne, J.-P., ed. *Patrologia Cursus completus: Series Latina*. Paris, 1844-1865.

Schaff, Philip, ed. *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustine*. Translated by J. G. Pilkington and J. G. Cunningham. Volume 1 of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 1886. Reprint: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979.

Tappert, Theodore G., et al., trans. and eds. *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959; reprinted 1983.

II. Books and Periodicals

Brecht, Martin. *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*. Translated by James L. Schaaf. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993.

Cutsinger, James S. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Revangelicals, Catholics, & Orthodox in Dialogue*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Edwards, Mark U. *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-46*. London: Cornell University Press, 1983.

Gerrish, B. A. "Doctor Martin Luther: Subjectivity and Doctrine in the Lutheran Reformation." In *Seven Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483-1983*. Edited by Peter Newman Brooks. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

Lohse, Bernhard. *Martin Luther: And Introduction to his Life and Work*. Translated by Robert C. Schultz. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Lotz, David W. "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority." *Interpretation* 35 (July 1981): 258-73.

_____. "Luther and Sola Scriptura." In *Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*. Edited by Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker. Dearborn, MI: The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990.

Lundin, Roger. *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993.

Sasse, Hermann. "The Church and the Word of God." Translated by Matthew Harrison. *Logia* 2.4 (Oct. 1993): 9-14.

_____. *We Confess the Church*. Translated by Norman E. Nagel. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986.

Spitz, Lewis. *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1985.

Torrance, Thomas F. "Transition to the West: The Interpretation of Biblical and Theological Statements According to Hilary of Poitiers." In *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995.

Hatch, Nathan O., *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.

Hughes, Richard T. and Leonard Allen. *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Bozeman, T. D., *To Live American Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988.

Carey, Patrick W., ed., *American Catholic Religious Thought*. New York: Paulist Press, 1987.

Ford, David F. and Dennis L. Stamps, eds. *Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel W. Hardy*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996.