

Is *this* “Catholic Principle” *Catholic*?

A response to “What Options do the Confessions Give Us? An Exploratory Essay Concerning the LCMS Crisis as it Relates to Those Who Hold to the 1580 Book of Concord.”¹

We can’t recall ever hearing a systematic use of the phrase “catholic principle”, and are equally unaware of any official definition. This response is regarding the use of the phrase as it is defined in the above-mentioned essay. We agree that there is such a thing as the catholic principle at play in how Lutherans do theology, yet we would define the catholic principle quite differently. We would further agree that an “inversion” of the “catholic principle” has taken place in the LCMS, and that this is a fundamental cause for the crisis in the LCMS, only not in the way that Pr. Fenton’s essay asserts.

Fenton states: “The overriding claim of the confessors, then, is that they are not formulating new doctrines, but keeping to what has always been taught. This, I suggest, is the catholic principle which not only resounds throughout the Book of Concord, but also—and most importantly—is the foundational assumption when reading any part of it.”² We affirm this statement to be accurate and true. But Fenton goes on:

Nowhere is this catholic principle more clearly and succinctly asserted than in the chief confessional document. In the paragraphs between the two parts of the Augsburg Confession, we confess that “there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman Church, insofar as we can tell from its writers.” We also confess that “the churches among us do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith but only set aside a few abuses that are new and were accepted because of corruption over time contrary to the intentions of the canons...” What these words say is that we receive and hold to the teachings that have been handed down. And when we confess that we “do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith,” we are saying that we hold to what has been handed down to us *not if it conforms to the Scriptures but unless it is contrary to the Scriptures*.

This point cannot be stressed strongly enough and bears repeating, for it is what separates the Lutheran Confessions from all other Protestant confessions and even from the Decrees of the Council of Trent. The confessors consistently state *not* that we hold to those doctrines and practices that have been handed down to us if, or when, they correspond to Scriptures. Rather, our confessional principle is that we hold to those doctrines and practices that have been handed down to us *unless* they clearly contradict Scriptures.³

Here we come to the heart of the matter. Is it really true that the Church may establish articles of faith or matters of practice simply if they are not in contradiction to the Word of God? And it is also true that we are “to hold to those doctrines and practices.” Are consciences to be bound to doctrines and practices not taught in the Word of God? No. On the contrary, we will argue that

¹ Paper delivered by Rev. John Fenton at “Confession and Christ’s Mission: Challenges to the Future of the LCMS.” October 22, 2004.

² *Ibid.* p. 6

³ *Ibid.*

this understanding not only contradicts the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, but also what the catholic Church has received and gives witness to.

Before we do that, we would like to address some of the fundamental assumptions that are behind Pr. Fenton's argument. Hilary reminds us that in our disputes the understanding of what is said must be taken from the reasons for saying it.⁴ We believe there is no question that the impetus for this entire discussion is the aberrant doctrines and practices that have arisen within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and a sincere and Christian desire to find a solution for these problems. If we understand Fenton correctly, implicit in this predicament is the observation that the Holy Scriptures alone have not been able to settle these issues. On the one hand, Fenton suggests, the Scriptures are, by themselves unclear, and need to be interpreted through the “lens of the church.”⁵ On the other hand, Scripture doesn't speak on every single issue. For this reason, Fenton suggests that when the Scriptures are silent, we are to listen to the voice of the church. This is behind the claim that we are to “hold” to what has been handed down to us unless it is contrary to the Scriptures.

Suggesting that the Scriptures must be interpreted through the lens of the church, Fenton writes:

However, as we all know from a multitude of experiences, maintaining that the Scriptures are the “one true guiding principle” is quite unhelpful if those same scriptures are heard within disparate contexts or read through widely varying lenses. The same is true whenever anyone claims that all decisions, doctrines, practices, or statements of faith will be based only on the clear passages of Scripture. Quite apart from the philosophical conundrum (“what is clear to me may not be clear to you”), it is apparent that no one can, and no one does, read the Scriptures according to the bare words alone. Rather, we read them within the context of faith—whether that is the orthodox faith of the church, some heretical or heterodox faith, and an anti-Christian faith. That is why the Book of Concord exists, and why it insists on list what is to be believed, taught and confessed. For our confessional standard is not Holy Scripture alone. Neither is it interpreting the confessions according to the Scripture. Rather, as C.F.W. Walther reminds us, our confessional standard is reading, interpreting and expounding Holy Scripture according to the Confessions. In other words, the catholic faith rightly articulated in the Book of Concord gives us the right way to hear the Scriptures and the right lens for reading the Scriptures. This is so because (as the Catalogue of Testimonies demonstrate) the Book of Concord affirms that it is the true summary of ancient truth handed down from the Apostles through the ages within the visible, historical church. In this way we are safeguarded from our own strange and wandering thoughts, and the peculiar imaginations or fanciful interpretations of pastors and theologians.⁶

Starting with the “philosophical conundrum” of epistemological clarity, would we really assert that something is unclear simply on the basis that one person, or group of people, do not understand it? Is the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ unclear in the Bible because it was

⁴ St. Hilary of Poitiers, as quoted in Martin Chemnitz, *An Examination of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971, translated by Fred Kramer, volume 1), p. 232.

⁵ Fenton, *Options*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

rejected by the Arians? Is the pre-existence of the Son, only something that we are able to agree to because the Church tells us this? Let us hear Luther, to start:

If the words are obscure at one place, yet they are clear at another place... But if many things still remain abstruse to many people, this does not arise from the obscurity of Scripture but from their own blindness and feebleness of understanding... With the same audacity he who covers his own eyes or goes from the light into darkness and there hides himself may charge the sun and the day with being obscure. Let miserable men, therefore, cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and the obscurity of their own hearts to the brilliantly clear Scriptures of God.⁷

Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, Bk 2, chapter 27 writes:

A sound mind, and one which does not expose its possessor to danger, and is devoted to piety and the love of truth, will eagerly meditate upon those things which God has placed within the power of mankind, and has subjected to our knowledge, and will make advancement in [acquaintance with] them, rendering the knowledge of them easy to him by means of daily study. These things are such as fall [plainly] under our observation, and are clearly and unambiguously in express terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures. And therefore the parables ought not to be adapted to ambiguous expressions. For, if this be not done, both he who explains them will do so without danger, and the parables will receive a like interpretation from all, and the body of truth remains entire, with a harmonious adaptation of its members, and without any collision [of its several parts].⁸

Augustine, in book 2 of *On Christian Doctrine*, chapter 6 states:

Accordingly the Holy Spirit has, with admirable wisdom and care for our welfare, so arranged the Holy Scriptures as by the plainer passages to satisfy our hunger, and by the more obscure to stimulate our appetite. For almost nothing is dug out of those obscure passages which may not be found set forth in the plainest language elsewhere.⁹

Augustine points out that the Scriptures contain both clear and more obscure passages. This, he says, is by design. But he goes on to say that almost nothing can be dug out of the unclear passages which may not be found in the “plainest language elsewhere.” Luther says the same thing:

It is indeed true that some passages of Scripture are dark; however, they contain nothing but precisely that which is found at other places in clear, open passages.¹⁰

A classic rule of Biblical interpretation is found here. *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Scripture is its own interpreter. The obscure passages are explained by the clear. The view that the light of

⁷ Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe, Weimar Ausgabe. 18:609.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Bk 2, chapter 27 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1), p. 398.

⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 2, chapter 6 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 2), p. 537.

¹⁰ Luther, WA op cited, 8,237.

the Scriptures can only be made clear when refracted through the lens of the Church is to be rejected. Concerning this, Pieper states (beginning with a quote from Luther):

“Be it known, then, that the Scripture, without any gloss, is the sum and sole light from which all teachers receive their light, and not the contrary.” (St. L. XVIII:1292 ff.) “The Word they still shall let remain.” It is characteristic of the Lutheran Church that it does not base its doctrine on any exegesis, not even the exegesis of Luther, but on the bare words of Scripture, while the Papists and the Reformed in all doctrines in which they differ from the Lutheran Church do not stand on the word of Scripture, but on an “exegesis” of the Pope, Zwingli, Calvin, etc.¹¹

Fenton quotes Walther’s essay on Confessional Subscription in favor of his position. Those who are familiar with this author will probably find this somewhat comical, but if the Devil can quote Scripture, we suppose Fenton can quote Walther. To base his conclusions on this sound-bite of Walther is disingenuous since it totally disregards the paragraph that proceeds the paragraph which is quoted. In fact, that citation in question begins with the word “Consequently,” which Fenton conveniently redacts away, although Walther’s use of the word “consequently” shows that what comes before is foundational to his argument. Here is the full context for Walther’s words:

Again, it is said that there can be no better interpretation of the symbols than that which is according to the Scriptures. I reply: First, only that can be interpreted according to the Scriptures which necessarily agrees with the Scriptures according to its nature; no human document can therefore be interpreted according to the Scriptures but only the Scriptures themselves. As the divine Scriptures are to be interpreted by the Scriptures themselves, so every human document should be interpreted in light of itself, but it should be tested and, when necessary, corrected in the light of the Holy Scriptures. If one interprets a human document according to the Scriptures, one makes the former equal to the latter and declares in advance that even what is not understood in the symbols must necessarily agree with the Scriptures, something that can be said only of a new and immediate revelation. Second, the symbols should be subscribed by ministers in the church in order to assure the church that they acknowledge as correct the interpretation and understanding of the Scriptures which is set forth in the symbols and consequently intend to expound the Scriptures as the church does when they bind themselves to serve.

Consequently (here begins Fenton) if the church conceded that its ministers should not be required to interpret the Scriptures according to the symbols but interpret the symbols according to the Scriptures, subscription would not give the church any guarantee that the pledge minister would understand and expound the Scriptures as it does but rather as he himself thinks right. Thus the church would actually set up the changing personal convictions of its ministers as the symbol to which it would obligate itself.¹²

¹¹ Francis Pieper. *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 1. p. 323. Earlier, under the same topic, Pieper explains that “According to Roman doctrine, Scripture becomes clear thought the light emanating from the “Church,” that is, from the Pope.” (p. 319)

¹² C. F. W. Walther, “Confessional Subscription,” *Essays for the Church: Volume I 1857-1879* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), pp. 24-25.

Let any pretense that Walther does away with *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* be expelled by Walther's own words. What Walther says is that the Scriptures interpret themselves, and that this interpretation is that which is "set forth" in the symbols. Said another way, one interprets the Scriptures according to the symbols because they contain the interpretation set forth by the Scriptures themselves. When one interprets the Scriptures according to the symbols, one interprets Scripture with Scripture because (*quia*) the confessions are drawn from the Word of God.

But how is *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* to be coordinated with the additional classic rule: *Omnis expositio Scripturae sit analogia fidei*. "Every interpretation of Scripture should be by the analogy of faith." This means that each interpretation must be in agreement with the faith the church believes. The analogy of faith is what Walther has in mind when he speaks of the church interpreting the Scriptures according to the Confessions. Walther isn't inventing anything new here. Chemnitz approves such an approach when he says:

Tertullian calls the Symbol (the Creed) the rule of faith, according to which, if it is preserved and kept in its proper form, one can study in the Scripture and inquire in it if anything seems to be either ambiguous or obscure. Thus, Augustine, when he was about to expound Genesis placed the articles of faith at the beginning, in order that in the explanations of the most difficult questions, it could not be said that he had erred, so long as he had not said anything contrary to this rule of faith but only what agrees with it, even though he might perhaps not have reached the sense and the mysteries of the words everywhere or might seem not to have done justice to the questions in all respects.¹³

In fact, this principle goes back to the apostle Paul in Romans 12:6, and Gerhard explains: "All interpretation of Scripture should be analogous to the faith. This canon is set forth in Romans 12:6." In fact the term itself comes from this passage, which states that those who prophesy are to prophesy according to the analogy of faith. (*κατα τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως*).

While it may appear that the principles *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*, as well as *Sola Scriptura*, are in conflict with *Omnis expositio Scripturae sit analogia fidei*, one sees that this is not the case when it is realized that what the Church confesses (the analogy of faith) is nothing else than the doctrine that is clearly set forth in Scripture. When one interprets Scripture according to the rule of faith, one interprets Scripture with Scripture. This is seen in the writings of Theodoret.

In *Dialogue 1 – The Immutable*, Blessed Theodoret, the Bishop of Cyrus, writes a dialogue between Orthodoxos (the orthodox teacher), and Eranistes (the heretic). In this dialogue we find one of the earliest expressions of "sola scriptura" when Orthodoxos says to Eranistes, "Do not, I beg you, bring in human reason. I shall yield to scripture alone."¹⁴ Yet earlier in the same dialogue, Orthodoxos says:

¹³ Chemnitz, *An Examination*, Vol. 1, p. 247

¹⁴ Blessed Theodoret, *Dialogue 1 – The Immutable (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series)*, Volume 3, p. 165.

I ask you in the next place not to suffer the investigation of the truth to depend on the reasonings of men, but to track the footprints of the apostles and prophets, and saints who followed them. (our emphasis).¹⁵

Likewise, in letter 89 to Florentius, Theodoret says:

So have I learnt not only from the apostles and prophets but also from the interpreters of their writings, Ignatius, Eustathius, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, John, and the rest of the lights of the world; and before these from the holy Fathers in council at Nicaea, whose confession of the faith I preserve in its integrity, like an ancestral inheritance, styling corrupt and enemies of the truth all who dare to transgress its decrees. I invoke your greatness, now that you have heard from me in these terms, to shut the mouths of my calumniators.¹⁶

Theodoret is not contradicting himself. Rather, his devotion to the authority of Scripture alone stands along side his use of Church Fathers. This is not because they are a second authority that can be used to interpret Scripture or fill in matters where Scripture is silent, but the Fathers are to be followed as witnesses of the truth contained in the Word of God. Thus in Letter 151, he writes:

In a word I assert that I follow the divine oracles and at the same time all these saints. By the grace of the spirit they dived into the depths of God-inspired scripture and both themselves perceived its mind, and made it plain to all that are willing to learn. Difference in tongue has wrought no difference in doctrine, for they were channels of the grace of the divine spirit, using the stream from one and the same fount.¹⁷

Scripture remains the sole source of doctrine, the “one fount”. The Church does not establish doctrine. She receives it and confesses it.

What more shall I teach you than what we read in the apostle? For Holy Scripture fixes the rule for our doctrine, lest we dare to be wiser than we ought. Therefore I should not teach you anything else except to expound to you the words of the Teacher.¹⁸

Therefore, the Formula of Concord, affirms that the writings from the ancient church are not be received “otherwise or further than witnesses” to that which doctrine which is taught in Scripture.

Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 161.

¹⁶ Blessed Theodoret, *Letter 89*, (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*), Volume 3, p. 283.

¹⁷ Blessed Theodoret, *Letter 151*, (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*), Volume 3, p. 325.

¹⁸ St. Augustine, as quoted in Martin Chemnitz, *An Examination*, Vol. 1, p. 152.

show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.¹⁹

Picking up on this, Walther writes:

The teachers of the church are therefore nothing else than *witnesses*. Every true Lutheran believes that.²⁰

A worthy analogy may be given here. Luther said “Scripture without any gloss is the sun and the whole light.”²¹ If the Scriptures are the Sun, then the witness of the ancient church is the moon. They only reflect the light emanating from the Sun. They provide no light of their own.

But contrary to this view, Fenton quotes Dr. Charles Robb Hogg in a yet unpublished article, in which Hogg asserts:

Whereas the *Formula of Concord* had called Scripture the *pure* source and *sole* norm, Gerhard speaks of the canonical books as *the* source of our faith. The formula’s way of speaking left some room for the idea of the catholic principle, with creeds, councils and fathers serving as sources (albeit impure) which could then be normed by Scripture. But by speaking of the canonical books as *the* source, Gerhard in effect nullifies any appeal to other sources for establishing dogma.²²

Even if one grants the premise that the language of the Formula leaves “some room” for the idea that other sources may establish doctrine, it still must be demonstrated that the Formula actually gives these sources that authority. At the very best, Hogg’s argument is a *posse ad esse* (*An argument from possibility to actuality*). The burden of proof is not satisfied here. While this section of the Formula of Concord establishes the Confessions and even writings of antiquity as norms, it never establishes them as sources. In fact, even these norms are not to be seen as something that stands along side Scripture (even in a subordinate sense), but these norms are normative because they witness to the sole source of God’s Word. For example, regarding the ecumenical creeds, the Formula states:

And since of old the true Christian doctrine, in a pure, sound sense, was collected from God's Word into brief articles or chapters against the corruption of heretics, we confess, in the second place, *the three Ecumenical Creeds*, namely, *the Apostles'*, *the Nicene*, and *the Athanasian*, as glorious confessions of the faith, brief, devout, and founded upon God's Word, in which all the heresies which at that time had arisen in the Christian Church are clearly and unanswerably refuted.²³

¹⁹ Concordia Triglotta. *The Formula of Concord. Epitome*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) p. 777

²⁰ C. F. W. Walther, “Church Fathers and Doctrine,” *Essays for the Church: Volume II 1857-1879* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), p. 80.

²¹ Quoted in Pieper. *Op cit.* p. 324.

²² Fenton, *Options*, p. 6

²³ Concordia Triglotta. *The Formula of Concord. Solid Declaration. Summary*, p. 851.

The creeds, being “founded on God’s Word” and “collected from God’s Word” have authority for precisely those reasons. Here there is no second source, but they are drawn from the one fountain. In fact, the Epitome of the Formula states the symbols and other writings are

only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned [by what arguments the dogmas conflicting with the Holy Scripture were rejected and condemned].”²⁴ (Triglotta, 779).

This same sentiment is that of the ancient Fathers. Chrysostom says,

Let us not therefore carry about the notions of the many, but examine into the facts. For how is it not absurd that in respect to money, indeed, we do not trust to others, but refer this to figures and calculation; but in calculating upon facts we are lightly drawn aside by the notions of others; and that too, though we possess an exact balance, and square and rules for all things, the declaration of the divine laws? Wherefore I exhort and entreat you all, disregard what this man and that man thinks about these things, and inquire from the Scriptures all these things.²⁵

Cyril says:

For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell you these things, give not absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.²⁶

And Basil says:

But we do not rest only on the fact that such is the tradition of the Fathers; for they too followed the sense of Scripture, and started from the evidence which, a few sentences back, I deduced from Scripture and laid before you.²⁷

Chemnitz, quoting Basil, shows that this is the Scriptural position:

Basil, in a discourse on the confession of faith, writes: “If the Lord is faithful in all that He says and if all His commandments are faithful, it is manifest falling from faith and a crime of pride either to reject something of what is written or to add something from the

²⁴ Concordia Triglotta. *The Formula of Concord. Epitome.. Summary*, p. 779.

²⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Second Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, Homily XIII*, (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers First Series), Volume 12, p. 346.

²⁶ St. Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures, IV:17*, (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series), Volume 7, p. 23.

²⁷ St. Basil. *On the Holy Spirit*, chapter 7. (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series), Volume 8, p. 23.

unwritten, since Christ said: “My sheep hear my voice; they will not follow a stranger but will flee, because they do not know his voice.”

The same Basil, in *Moralia*, summa 72, Ch. 1, declares: “The hearers taught in the Scriptures ought to test what is said by teachers and accept that which agrees with the Scriptures but to reject that which is foreign.” And to the rule he applies the statement of Paul, Gal. 1:8: “If an angel from heaven should preach to you a Gospel contrary to that which we preach to you, let him be cursed.” In the same treatise, summa 80, ch. 22 he says: “What is proper for a believer? Not to dare to add anything, for if everything which is not of faith is sin, and faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God, then everything which is outside of the divinely inspired Scripture is sin, because it is not of faith.”

The same Basil says in Letter No. 80: “We do not think that it is right to make what is custom among them into a law and rule of the right doctrine. Therefore let the divinely inspired Scripture be made the judge by us, and on the side of those whose doctrines are found in agreement with the divine words the vote of truth is cast.”²⁸

Lastly, the Smalcald Articles confess:

Our Papists, however, cite such statements [opinions] of men in order that men should believe in their horrible, blasphemous, and cursed traffic in masses for souls in purgatory [or in sacrifices for the dead and oblations], etc. But they will never prove these things from Augustine. Now, when they have abolished the traffic in masses for purgatory, of which Augustine never dreamt, we will then discuss with them whether the expressions of Augustine without Scripture [being without the warrant of the Word] are to be admitted, and whether the dead should be remembered at the Eucharist. For it will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers; otherwise their kind of fare, of garments, of house, etc., would have to become an article of faith, as was done with relics. [We have, however, another rule, namely] The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel.²⁹

What does this mean, however, for doctrines or practices concerning which the Scriptures are silent? Fenton’s paper makes clear that he rightly doesn’t want tradition to be equal or more authoritative than Scripture. The problem is when he claims that the church must hold to those traditions as long as they are not contradictory to the Scriptures.

Chemnitz takes a different stance:

Rites which are in harmony with Scripture are rightly to be retained, but those that conflict with scripture must by a just judgment and without rashness be rejected and abolished. But if the question is concerning indifferent rites which do not conflict with the Scripture, the answer is simple and clear: “If they are not put forth with the understanding that they are necessary for worship to earn merit but solely to serve order,

²⁸ Chemnitz, *Examination*, Volume 1, p. 153

²⁹ Concordia Triglotta. *Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article II.* p. 467.

decorum, and edification and do not conflict with Christian Liberty, a decision can be made concerning them according as it appears to be conducive to the edification of the church. For faith is not bound to certain rites instituted outside the word of God, but it is free, in which liberty, however, regard must be had for offense and for those who are weak in the faith.³⁰

While Chemnitz does not abolish such traditions, he makes it clear that consciences are not to be bound where Scripture doesn't bind them. This also is the approach of the Lutheran Confessions:

Nevertheless, very many traditions are kept on our part, which conduce to good order in the Church, as the Order of Lessons in the Mass and the chief holy-days. But, at the same time, men are warned that such observances do not justify before God, and that in such things it should not be made sin if they be omitted without offense. Such liberty in human rites was not unknown to the Fathers. For in the East they kept Easter at another time than at Rome, and when, on account of this diversity, the Romans accused the Eastern Church of schism, they were admonished by others that such usages need not be alike everywhere. And Irenaeus says: Diversity concerning fasting does not destroy the harmony of faith; as also Pope Gregory intimates in Dist. XII, that such diversity does not violate the unity of the Church. And in the Tripartite History, Book 9, many examples of dissimilar rites are gathered, and the following statement is made: It was not the mind of the Apostles to enact rules concerning holy-days, but to preach godliness and a holy life [to teach faith and love].³¹

Chemnitz provides Scriptural truth for this in the *Examination*:

In Matt. 15:14, where the question about the traditions of the Pharisees had been raised, Christ clearly says: Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” And what need is there for many words? For it is very clear in the entire Gospel history that Christ fought with the Pharisees because they burdened the consciences of men with the traditions of the elders without the Word of God, outside and beyond the Word of God. From these Christ recalls men to the Word of God, for He says: “In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men.”³²

Walther provides additional Biblical proof in his essay, “Church Fathers and Doctrine”:

Rom. 16:17: “Now I urge you, dear brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and obstacles beside the doctrine you have learned, and avoid them.” It does not say here: “*contrary to (gegen) the doctrine,*” but: “*beside (neben) the doctrine.*” So if a doctrine is not drawn from Scripture, even if it does not contradict Scripture, we must nevertheless trample it underfoot if it would be forced on us as divine truth. . . . So if one draws a teaching from the fathers and cannot prove that the fathers have drawn this

³⁰ Chemnitz, *Examination*, Volume 1, p. 306.

³¹ Concordia Triglotta. *Augburg Confession, Article 26.* p. 75.

³² Chemnitz, *Examination*, Volume II, p. 636

teaching from the Bible, one should reject him, no matter who engagingly he speaks of it. All that faith is to know (*glaubenserkenntnis*) is simply to have flowed out of Scripture.

Gal. 1:8 “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, let him be condemned.” The apostle does not say here, “whoever preaches *against* my gospel is condemned.” No. “whoever only preaches other than what I preached.” Though it seems to reason that the doctrine brought in beside harmonizes excellently with Scripture, it is condemned if I cannot prove that Scripture forces me to teach thus; and at the same time I must then also present it to my hearers in such a way that they must understand it. For only that is a true expositor.³³

A little later, Fenton states that Luther used the so-called “catholic principle” when he wrote in his letter *On Anabaptism*, “I did not invent [infant baptism.] It came to me by tradition and I was persuaded by no word of Scripture that it was wrong.”³⁴ Several things can be said concerning this quote. First of all, Luther is not conceding that the doctrine of infant baptism is not taught in the Scriptures. In fact, a complete reading of this work he goes to great length to defend infant baptism on the basis of such scriptures as Matthew 19:14, Acts 16:15, 1 Cor. 1:16, 1 John 2:14 and others. He says that these “all go to establish our position.” (Paragraph 93.) Rather, what Luther concedes is that there is no precise word of Scripture that says “Baptize infants!” Luther: “On the other hand, that children do believe, we are likewise unable to prove by a passage of Scripture which says clearly and expressly in language like the following: ‘Ye shall baptize children, for they also believe.’” (§82) The doctrine of infant baptism can be deduced from Scripture. Does Fenton really wish to concede that Infant Baptism is not taught in the Bible and must be based on the testimony of Church Fathers? For Luther, this is egregious. So he writes in his sermon on the Third Sunday after Epiphany:

23. But if you ask them for the proof of this answer and where this is found in the Scriptures, it is found up the dark chimney, or they will point to their doctor's hat and say: “*We are the highly learned doctors and we say so; therefore it is true, and you must not inquire any farther.*” For almost all their doctrine has no other foundation than their own dreams and imaginations. And when they prepare themselves most carefully, they drag in some quotation from St. Augustine or another holy father. But this is not enough in the things that concern the salvation of souls; for they themselves are, and all the holy fathers were, men. Who will be surety and guarantee that they speak the truth? Who will rely upon it and die by it? For they say so without Scripture and the Word of God. Saints hither, and saints thither; if my soul is at stake, either to be lost or to be saved eternally, I cannot depend upon all the angels and saints put together, much less upon one or two saints, where they show us no Word of God.³⁵

The fact that Luther appeals to the Church Fathers does not mean that he considers them a source for establishing doctrine concerning which Scripture is silent, but as we have discussed earlier, Luther finds value in the Fathers since they testify what is found in the Word of God. In so

³³ C. F. W. Walther, “Church Fathers and Doctrine,” p. 79.

³⁴ Fenton, *Options*, p.7

³⁵ Martin Luther. *Sermons of Martin Luther*, Edited by John Nicholas Lenker, Translated by Lenker and others (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988) Volume 2, pp. 80-81.

doing, Luther wants to show that what we believe is not only what is taught in the Bible but also what is witnessed to by the church. Luther, in his Christmas Day sermon says:

We should observe with particular care that the apostle attributes such authority to Scripture that we are under no obligation to accept anything not assert in it. If this were not the case, his declaration, ‘unto which of the angels said He at any time,” would not be conclusive. The Jews might say: Although He did not say it in Scripture, one may nonetheless assert it for not everything has been put down in Scripture. Since, then, He wants no one to feel obligated to hold to anything not offered by Scripture, we should likewise reject all non-Scriptural doctrine. This injunction can be used against the sacrilege of the pope and the papists who, in opposition to this apostle, shamelessly declare that we must accept more than Scripture contains.³⁶

We believe that these testimonies from Luther and Church Fathers make clear that the catholic principle as Fenton frames it is not catholic. This is not what the Church witnesses to, for it is not what the Scriptures teach. A reading of Chemnitz’ *Examination Concerning Traditions*³⁷ is helpful in showing that this is the case. Although Fenton cites Chemnitz, he concludes differently.

Having said all this, what precisely is the role of traditions in the Church? Why is it that the confessions make the point so often and arduously that our doctrine and customs are in agreement with the Ancient Church and Holy Fathers?

On the one hand, the confessions are clear that traditions instituted by men are matters of liberty, and yet it urges that they continue in the Church as long as that can be done without sin and binding consciences:

Of Usages in the Church they teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquility and good order in the Church, as particular holy days, festivals, and the like. Nevertheless, concerning such things men are admonished that consciences are not to be burdened, as though such observance was necessary to salvation.³⁸

And:

We believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God. Nevertheless, that herein all frivolity and offense should be avoided, and special care should be taken to exercise forbearance towards the weak in faith. 1 Cor. 8, 9; Rom. 14, 13.³⁹

³⁶ Luther. WA 10, I, 1, 168

³⁷ Chemnitz, *Examination*, Volume 1, p. 223 ff.

³⁸ Concordia Triglotta. *Augburg Confession, Article 15.* p. 49.

³⁹ Concordia Triglotta. *The Formula of Concord. Epitome. 10.* p. 829.

And:

We believe, teach, and confess also that no Church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: *Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei*, Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith.⁴⁰

And:

Therefore we believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power, and authority [in matters truly adiaphora] to change, to diminish, and to increase them, without thoughtlessness and offense, in an orderly and becoming way, as at any time it may be regarded most profitable, most beneficial, and best for [preserving] good order, [maintaining] Christian discipline [and for *eujtaxiva* worthy of the profession of the Gospel], and the edification of the Church. Moreover, how we can yield and give way with a good conscience to the weak in faith in such external adiaphora, Paul teaches Rom. 14, and proves it by his example, Acts 16, 3; 21, 26; 1 Cor. 9, 19.⁴¹

On the other hand, however, when the Romanists threw the accusation at our churches that they had abolished the mass and traditional ceremonies, the reformers did not simply say, “So what? ‘the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God’” or “no Church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other.” Rather, they adamantly denied the charge, and boasted:

For it is a false and malicious charge that all the ceremonies, all the things instituted of old, are abolished in our churches.⁴²

And:

Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added to teach the people. For ceremonies are needed to this end alone that the unlearned be taught [what they need to know of Christ].⁴³

And:

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Concordia Triglotta. *The Formula of Concord. Solid Declaration 10.* p. 1055.

⁴² Concordia Triglotta. *Augsburg Confession 21.* p. 59.

⁴³ Concordia Triglotta. *Augsburg Confession 24.* p. 65.

But just as the dissimilar length of day and night does not injure the unity of the Church, so we believe that the true unity of the Church is not injured by dissimilar rites instituted by men; although it is pleasing to us that, for the sake of tranquility [unity and good order], universal rites be observed, just as also in the churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's Day, and other more eminent festival days. And with a very grateful mind we embrace the profitable and ancient ordinances, especially since they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and train the people and those who are ignorant [the young people].⁴⁴

And:

At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we **1]** do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are celebrated every Lord's Day and on the other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things.⁴⁵

Why did the reformers religiously “maintain and defend” themselves on such practices so strongly? Not because they were required to, but for the sake of good order, unity, peace, discipline and to teach the Word of God:

Nevertheless, very many traditions are kept on our part, which conduce to good order in the Church, as the Order of Lessons in the Mass and the chief holy-days. But, at the same time, men are warned that such observances do not justify before God, and that in such things it should not be made sin if they be omitted without offense. Such liberty in human rites was not unknown to the Fathers. For in the East they kept Easter at another time than at Rome, and when, on account of this diversity, the Romans accused the Eastern Church of schism, they were admonished by others that such usages need not be alike everywhere. And Irenaeus says: Diversity concerning fasting does not destroy the harmony of faith; as also Pope Gregory intimates in Dist. XII, that such diversity does not violate the unity of the Church. And in the Tripartite History, Book 9, many examples of dissimilar rites are gathered, and the following statement is made: It was not the mind of the Apostles to enact rules concerning holy-days, but to preach godliness and a holy life [to teach faith and love].⁴⁶

The confessors go so far as to maintain that they hold to the traditions of the church more closely than their opponents:

But we cheerfully maintain the old traditions [as, the three high festivals, the observance of Sunday, and the like] made in the Church for the sake of usefulness and tranquility; and we interpret them in a more moderate way, to the exclusion of the opinion which

⁴⁴ Concordia Triglotta. *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 7/8. p. 239.

⁴⁵ Concordia Triglotta. *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 24. p, 383.

⁴⁶ Concordia Triglotta. *Augsburg Confession* 26. p, 75.

holds that they justify. And our enemies falsely accuse us of abolishing good ordinances and church-discipline. For we can truly declare that the public form of the churches is more becoming with us than with the adversaries (that the true worship of God is observed in our churches in a more Christian, honorable way]. And if any one will consider it aright, we conform to the canons more truly than do the adversaries. [For the adversaries, without shame, tread under foot the most honorable canons, just as they do Christ and the Gospel.]⁴⁷

There is, however, something more. The ancient canons, fathers, and ceremonies and rites, are used by the churches of the reformation for the edification and tranquility of those church, but the confessions point our such things in the confessions for the sake of proving that the “Lutheran” faith is no novelty, but reflects the doctrine and practice of the ancient Church. But why is this important?

In the Formula of Concord, the following confession is made:

In like manner, too, such ceremonies should not be reckoned among the genuine free adiaphora, or matters of indifference, as make a show or feign the appearance, as though our religion and that of the Papists were not far apart, thus to avoid persecution, or as though the latter were not at least highly offensive to us; or when such ceremonies are designed for the purpose, and required and received in this sense, as though by and through them both contrary religions were reconciled and became one body; or when a reentering into the Papacy and a departure from the pure doctrine of the Gospel and true religion should occur or gradually follow therefrom [when there is danger lest we seem to have reentered the Papacy, and to have departed, or to be on the point of departing gradually, from the pure doctrine of the Gospel].⁴⁸

On the basis of this, Walther says:

We refuse to be guided by those who are offended by our church customs. We adhere to them all the more firmly when someone wants to cause us to have a guilty conscience on account of them. The Roman antichristendom enslaves poor consciences by imposing human ordinances on them with the command: "You must keep such and such a thing!"; the sects enslave consciences by forbidding and branding as sin what God has left free. Unfortunately, also many of our Lutheran Christians are still without a true understanding of their liberty. This is demonstrated by their aversion to ceremonies. It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the difference between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when a person sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American denominations just so they won't accuse us of being Roman Catholic! Indeed! Am I to be afraid of a Methodist, who perverts the saving Word, or be ashamed in the matter of my

⁴⁷ Concordia Triglotta. *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 15. p, 325.

⁴⁸ Concordia Triglotta. *The Formula of Concord. Solid Declaration* 10. p. 1055.

good cause, and not rather rejoice that they can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them?⁴⁹

If then, a proper use of ceremonies is to show that we do not belong to the fellowships of the *sects* and *heretics*, it follows that their use also shows that we do belong to the *orthodox* church. The same principle applies to the use of the orthodox Church Fathers, they are quoted and esteemed among us because it shows where we belong. Thus the Formula of Concord again:

Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.⁵⁰

This is the reason for the catalogue of testimonies, as well as the numerous citations from the ancient Church in the body of the confessions. They should that we belong to the catholic church which witnesses to the doctrine of the Bible.

Walther goes on to illustrate this very well when we continue the citation given above:

The objection: "What would be the use of uniformity of ceremonies?" was answered with the counter question, "What is the use of a flag on the battlefield? Even though a soldier cannot defeat the enemy with it, he nevertheless sees by the flag where he belongs. We ought not to refuse to walk in the footsteps of our fathers. They were so far removed from being ashamed of the good ceremonies that they publicly confess in the passage quoted: "It is not true that we do away with all such external ornaments"⁵¹

This analogy is very helpful. For while the traditions of the ancient church are the flag by which we see where we belong, the Word of God is our only sword. So let us hold to both the sword and the flag while we fight on in the Church militant.

This is also the value of the name "Lutheran." It shows where we belong, but not to a sect, or innovation of the 16th century, but to the catholic church. This is clearly summed up by Gerhard:

We do not call ourselves Lutherans, but are so styled by our enemies, and we permit it as a token of our consent with the pure teaching of the Word which Luther set forth. We suffer ourselves to bear his name, not as of one who has invented a new faith, but of one who has restored the old, and purified the Church.⁵²

⁴⁹ C. F. W. Walther, "The True Visible Church," *Essays for the Church: Volume I 1857-1879* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992) pp. 193-194.

⁵⁰ Concordia Triglotta. *The Formula of Concord. Epitome.* p. 777

⁵¹ C. F. W. Walther, "The True Visible Church," pp. 193-194.

⁵² Johann Gerhard, *Loci XI*; quoted in Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1871), p. 118

Finally, with regard to recent theological controversies within the LCMS, we can certainly empathize with Fenton’s struggle. In fact, Fenton’s essay does well to point out that the root cause for the doctrinal controversies we face is a matter of method, particularly, in how doctrine is to be established. And yet, his conclusions are wrong. The problem is not in articles of faith concerning which the Church has spoken, but Scripture is silent, or even unclear. The controversies in the LCMS are in matters that are taught clearly in the Holy Scripture. Again, the problem is not that LCMS has failed to use the Church as a “lens” to interpret the Scriptures, but rather, it is precisely because many are indeed trying to interpret Scripture through the “lens” of the Church (CTCR Documents, CCM Opinions, Convention Resolutions, and even the Brief Statement, etc—not to mention culture, and human reason.) The *true* Catholic Principle, is that all doctrine shall be established on the basis of God’s Word, as it interprets itself, and the Church is to witness to this doctrine. The principle is inverted by making the Scriptures subject to the fallible interpretations of men.

We therefore disagree with Fenton when he suggests:

And while [Gerhard] would shudder in his grave at its consequences, the notion that we hold only those traditions which can be proved from the Scriptures has undermined all theological support for the some (*sic*) of the following doctrines and practices upheld by the Book of Concord: Private Absolution, the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Ordination; fasting as laudable preparation for Holy Communion and Easter; the jurisdiction by divine right of bishops as bishops to forgive sins, to reject teaching that opposes the gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the church the ungodly whose ungodliness is know; and that “churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops.”⁵³

Each of these topics are subjects which we could write separate papers on. But let it suffice to say simply that each of these topics, *as they are taught in the Book of Concord*, are taught by the Word of God, and those who set forth doctrine that opposes the Confessions on these points do so against the Word of God, not to mention, against the teaching of the Fathers and the Church catholic. But here we simply must reiterate the point that we are bound to the Word of God. We, the authors, also believe, for example, in the perpetual Virginity of Mary, yet not on account of tradition, but because this is what the Bible teaches. We realize that not all Lutherans agree with that or with us. So what? Here we stand with the fathers who have always argued this belief on the basis of Scripture. Those who want to argue the perpetual Virgin of Mary on the basis of tradition *only* are wrong, even though we agree with the conclusion. But with the present very serious doctrinal problems we face in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, we have more important things to argue about.

Many confessional Lutherans in the LCMS are now asking the question “Where should we go.” Perhaps the question would be framed better following the Holy Apostles: “Lord, to whom shall we go, You have the Words of Eternal Life.” Although this answer will seem too simplistic to some, if you want to find the catholic church, seek Christ and His word:

⁵³ Fenton, *Options*, p. 8.

Whatever they may adduce, and wherever they may quote from, let us rather, if we are His sheep, hear the voice of our Shepherd. Therefore let us search for the church in the sacred canonical Scriptures."⁵⁴

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⁵⁴ St. Augustine, as quoted in Chemnitz, *Examination*, Vol. 1. p. 159.