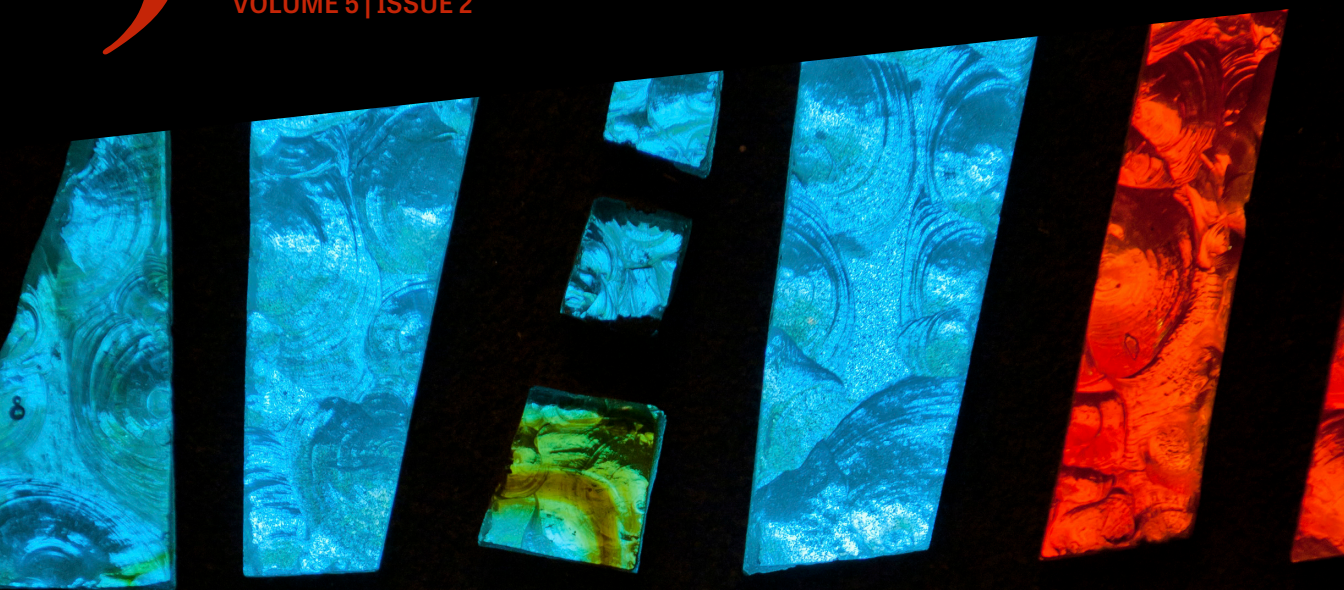
JBTS
Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies
VOLUME 5 | ISSUE 2



The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

Edited by Ryan A. Brandt and Matthew Y. Emerson

[JBTS 5.2 (2020): 297–310]

Catholicity in the Lutheran Tradition

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Lutherans want to affirm that the Scriptures are the only source of doctrine and the only standard by which doctrine is to be judged (*sola Scriptura*). At the same time, they recognize the importance of catholicity, or being in continuity with the church of previous ages. In this essay, I will seek to explain how they can do both.

The critical point is that there are different types of authority. The Scriptures have the authority of a judge in that they establish doctrine and serve as the norm by which doctrine is to be judged. The church, on the other hand, has the authority of a witness. This means that the church does not have the authority to invent doctrine, but it does have the authority to point out to future generations what the scriptural teaching is. Therefore, we rely on the early church the way we rely on teachers. The testimony of the church does not establish doctrine, but its lack calls into question the scriptural foundation of a given doctrine. In this article, I will trace how these two kinds of authority are articulated in the Reformation (and the early church) and reflected in the way Lutherans think through issues of catholicity in the specific areas of justification, canon, and infant baptism.

A few biblical examples may serve to clarify the nature of this relationship. John the Baptist was serving as a witness when he pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 [ESV]). This witness did not make Jesus the Lamb of God. Nor did it exalt John above Jesus. Rather, John confessed the truth that had been revealed to him so that his followers may believe (John 1:33). Similarly, when Peter confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16), he was not establishing doctrine. Rather, he was confessing or repeating back to Christ what he had learned from the Father (Matt 16:17).[1]

The church, through the ages, confesses as well. The church does not remain silent as it simply reads the Scriptures. Nor does it make theological pronouncements on its own authority. The church, like Peter, confesses Christ in response to revelation. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, for example, are confessions of that scriptural faith. As the twentieth-century Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse

1. This notion of confession is developed by Hermann Sasse in "Jesus Christ is Lord: The Church's Original Confession," in *We Confess: Anthology*, trans. Normal Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 9.

observed, no later confession in the church "can and wants to be anything else than a renewal of the original confession to Jesus as Christ and Lord."[2]

From a Lutheran perspective, those churches who oppose creeds in an effort to maintain the authority of Scripture are losing sight of the necessity for the church to confess. The church must answer Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" On the other hand, those churches who claim a magisterial authority that operates alongside (or in addition to) Scripture are losing sight of the fact that the church's confession is always a response to revelation. Recall that Jesus's response to Peter's confession was, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:17). The church must confess and must do so in accordance with the Scriptures.

The church, however, is not always faithful in carrying out its task of confession. When this kind of error occurs, the church's confession must be returned to its scriptural foundations because only then is that confession authoritative. One cannot simply appeal to catholicity or to the authority of the church to settle the issues. This view is not only Lutheran but can be found throughout the history of the church. For example, in his treatise *De decretis* (1) Athanasius is trying to win over a group of readers who were offended that the Nicene Creed employed the word *homoousios* ("of the same substance") to describe the Son's relation to the Father. They were offended that this word is not in the Bible. Clearly, they did not accord the church or the Council of Nicaea any authority to go beyond the witness of Scripture. And, indeed, the council itself stayed very close to scriptural language. If you examine the Nicene Creed, you see that nearly every phrase is a direct quote from Scripture stitched together to form the creedal narrative. In that context, the term *homoousios* does stand out.

So, how does Athanasius respond to his readers' commitment to Scripture alone? Does he insist on the authority of the Council of Nicaea? No, he does not. Instead, Athanasius argues that the content of what is being confessed by *homoousios* is the same as the scriptural teaching. He even admits that it would have been better for the council to stay with scriptural language, but he claims they could not do so because of the craftiness of the Arians.[3] Whenever the council fathers would suggest a scriptural word to confess the deity of Christ, the Arians would find a passage of Scripture that uses that word figuratively to describe humans or other creatures, and on that basis, the Arians were willing to use the same word of Christ. For example, when the Nicene fathers suggested that Jesus was unchangeably like the Father in all things, Athanasius reports that the Arians winked among themselves and reasoned that if human beings are in the image of God (1 Cor 11:7), then they could say that

2. Sasse, "Jesus Christ is Lord," 9.
3. Athanasius, *De decretis,* 32.

the Son is "like" the Father.[4] According to Athanasius, this is what forced the council to adopt a word that is not in the Scriptures.

Now it is possible to question the reliability of Athanasius's report. One cannot always take factual claims that appear in polemical literature at face value. However, what concerns us here is not the way the council arrived at the term *homoousios* but the kind of authority that Athanasius accords the council in *De decretis*. The fact that Athanasius maintains that the council was forced, almost against its will, to adopt a nonscriptural term supports the idea that Athanasius sees the council as serving as a witness to Scripture.

Here, we see both parts of the pattern of Peter's confession, as I have explicated it above. First, Athanasius does not concede that we can just have the Bible and dispense with the creed. The church's confession is necessary. But neither does he appeal to the authority of the Council of Nicaea, as if it had some authority beyond the Scriptures. Rather, he argues that the Nicene Creed has authority precisely because it confesses the scriptural truth.

From a Lutheran perspective, similar issues are in play in the sixteenth century. The simplistic version of the story is that the medieval church's confession had become muddled by the introduction of errors that overemphasized human merit and that this confession needed to be brought back into conformity with the Scriptures because only the Scriptures establish doctrine. However, that story is complicated by two factors. First, before a controversy occurs, it is often the case that earlier generations in the church did not articulate their doctrine in precise enough terms for one to be able to decide which side they would have been on. The sixteenth-century Lutheran dogmatician Martin Chemnitz pointed this out, and it figured prominently in his evaluation and appropriation of the early church. We will discuss his approach below. Second, there is some variety among Lutherans about the nature and extent of the error in the medieval church. Correspondingly, there is more than one way of looking at the Reformation within Lutheranism.

Narrating the Reformation

The story of the Reformation can be either a bridge or barrier to catholicity, depending on how it is told. There are two main options. Some describe the Reformation as the birth of a new church. Others describe the Reformation as an evangelical reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church.[5] Each of these views entails a different

4. Athanasius, *De decretis,* 20.

5. George Lindbeck describes these two ways of thinking about the Lutheran Church in "Ecumenical Directions and Confessional Construals," *Dialog* 30, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 118-23; Charles Arand, "The Identity of a Confessional Church in Post-Confessional Christianity," unpublished manuscript, 3-5.

approach to catholicity, which I am here using to refer to continuity with the church or previous ages, and to ecumenism.

In the first view, the Lutheran Church is construed as fundamentally a Protestant church body. The *Augsburg Confession* is the Declaration of Independence from Rome and forms the doctrinal core of a new denomination. This narrative often depicts a medieval church that was in total darkness until Luther came along and discovered the gospel. Consequently, it places little importance on continuity with the past. The Reformation is a break with the past. The ecumenical future of the Lutheran Church lies in dialogue with other Protestant churches since this view portrays the Roman Catholic Church as the antithesis of the Lutheran Church.[6]

In the second view, the Lutheran Church is construed as a reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church, at least until the Lutherans were expelled. The *Augsburg Confession* is not a declaration of independence but an ecumenical proposal. This narrative depicts the medieval church as a church that contained abuses that obscured the gospel but not as one that was in complete darkness. Continuity with the past is an important feature of this view. In terms of ecumenism, the ecumenical future of the Lutheran Church lies in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church because that was the origin of the Lutheran movement in the first place.

There is truth in both views. Historically speaking, the Reformation did give rise to the Lutheran Church as an independent church body, even if that was not its original intent. The differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics do, in fact, form a key part of Lutheran identity today. The three slogans of the Reformation, for example, are witness to this fact: *sola fide, sola gratia,* and *sola Scriptura*. These are not merely summaries of doctrinal positions but are markers of identity. Lutherans are the "faith alone" people.

On the other hand, the Reformation did, in fact, originate as a reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church. Luther drew up the *Smalcald Articles* in preparation for the upcoming Council of Mantua. That council never took place, but Luther was ready to argue his case within the structures of the Roman Catholic Church. The *Augsburg Confession* goes so far as to argue that the Lutherans more faithfully embody Roman Catholic tradition than do their Catholic opponents.

It is not my purpose to decide between these two views. In fact, Lindbeck sees them as "irreconcilable construals" that are not likely to be resolved.[7] However, the basic orientation of the second view may prove helpful for us to uncover what resources the Lutheran tradition has for appreciating catholicity since it places more value on continuity with the past. We turn, then, to the *Augsburg Confession*.

6. Arand, "Identity," 3.
7. Lindbeck, "Ecumenical Directions," 123.

Catholicity in the Lutheran Confessional Documents

The *Augsburg Confession* was presented before Emperor Charles V on June 25, 1530. Its purpose was to display the doctrine of the Lutheran Church and to show the emperor that the Lutherans were not some sect but had a legitimate claim to be considered the church. In that context, it asserts continuity with the catholic church of earlier times:

> Since, then, this teaching is clearly grounded in Holy Scripture and is, moreover, neither against nor contrary to the universal[8] Christian church—or even the writings of the Roman church—so far as can be observed in the writings of the Fathers, we think that our opponents cannot disagree with us in the articles set forth above.[9]

The conclusion of the document repeats the claim of continuity with the universal Christian church and adds that the Lutherans have "prevented any new and godless teaching from insinuating itself into our churches."[10] From these passages, one can see that the *Augsburg Confession* makes a very strong claim of continuity with the earlier church. Several features of this claim are worth noting.

First, the *Augsburg Confession* claims that the Lutherans, not their Roman Catholic opponents, are the ones who most faithfully embody the Roman tradition. For those who describe the Reformation as a birth of a new church out of the darkness of the Middle Ages, this claim is shocking. It places a high value on the Roman tradition and actively seeks to incorporate that tradition into the life of the church.

Second, the *Augsburg Confession* privileges the early church over the medieval church. The Reformation takes place at a time when there was great interest in returning to the sources (*ad fontes*) in both literature and theology. The reformers also had a view of history in which the world grew increasingly worse since the fall into sin.[11] In this view, it seems natural to assume that the church in the more distant past is going to be purer than the church in the recent past. This meant that the reformers were committed first to a return to Scripture but also to a return to the early church. Philip Melanchthon and, even more, his student Martin Chemnitz pioneered the field of patristic studies as they sought to provide the church with resources to better understand and more faithfully employ the witness of the early church. Chemnitz argued extensively in his *Loci Theologici*, *Catalogue of Testimonies*, and

8. The German word used is *Gemeine*, which is here the equivalent of the Latin word *catholica*. See Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran* Church (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 200), 58n199.

9. *Augsburg Confession*, Conclusion of Part One (Kolb-Wengert, 58).

10. *Augsburg Confession*, Conclusion, 5 (Kolb-Wengert, 104).

11. This is reflected in *Augsburg Confession* 23.14, "Now in these last times and days of which Scripture speaks, the world is becoming more wicked and human beings more frail and infirm" (Kolb-Wengert, 64). The topic here is the marriage of priests.

Examination of the Council of Trent that Lutheran theology stands in continuity with the early church.

The importance of the early church is also expressed in the structure of the *Book of Concord*. Assembled in 1580, this book contains all the confessional documents of the Lutheran Church. These documents are the following: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Luther's *Small Catechism*, Luther's *Large Catechism*, the *Smalcald Articles*, the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, and the *Formula of Concord*. These confessional writings exhibit the official position of the Lutheran church.

Two features stress continuity with the early church. First, the fact that it starts with the three ecumenical creeds reflects the fact that the reformers saw the other documents as standing in continuity with those creeds.[12] Second, the sixteenth-century documents often cite fathers like Augustine, Ambrose, Cyril of Alexandria, and many others in support of their positions. This is especially the case in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* and the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*. But what exactly is the nature of this importance, and how does it fit with the Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura*?

Judge vs. Witness: The Authority of the Scriptures and the Authority of the Church

For a more detailed discussion of the function of Scripture in Lutheran theology, we turn to the *Formula of Concord*, which was written in 1577 to address certain controversies that arose within the Lutheran Church. The *Formula* declares the Scriptures to be the only "guiding principle and rule of all teaching." All other writings must be subject to the Scriptures.[13] But, it continues, this does not mean that other useful books are to be rejected. Rather they should be used as "helpful interpretations and explanations."[14] It also refers to such writings as "summaries" of Scripture and maintains that they should be evaluated according to Scripture.[15]

When we reflect, then, on the role of creeds and confessions in the church, we must always see them in relation to Scripture. While the Nicene Creed, for example, does contain doctrine, it would be a mistake to view it primarily as a list of key Christian doctrines. If one were to view it this way, consider the implications. While the Nicene Creed does clearly confess the divinity of Christ because it was drawn

12. The Athanasian Creed is actually a Western creed, probably written in the sixth century, which expresses Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity. So it is not quite as ecumenical as the reformers thought it was.

13. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, Introduction, 9 (Kolb-Wengert, 529).

14. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration,* Introduction, 10 (Kolb-Wengert, 529).

15. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration,* Introduction, 10 (Kolb-Wengert, 529).

up in response to the Arians, there are many key Christian doctrines not mentioned in the creed, such as justification, to mention perhaps the most prominent one. The Nicene Creed fails if it is supposed to be a list of fundamental doctrines.

It succeeds, however, if it is meant to exhibit the basic plotline of the Scriptures. The Arians strongly argued that Jesus underwent many experiences in the Gospels that are not fitting for God: he was born, he grew in wisdom, he did not know things, he said that the Father is greater than he and that he came to do the Father's will, he received the Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan, he suffered and died. How could pro-Nicene Christians possibly confess the deity of Christ in the face of all these passages? The pro-Nicene answer is to place all of these humiliating experiences into the overarching plot of the Scriptures. The Nicene Creed notes that the Son became incarnate before he suffered under Pontius Pilate and rose from the dead. Correspondingly, the Pro-Nicene approach to all these passages is to say that the Son did indeed undergo humiliating experiences unfit for God, but he did so not because of some deficiency in his divine nature but because he humbled himself in the incarnation. That is perhaps the most basic example of how the Nicene Creed functions as a plot summary of Scripture in theological argumentation.[16] And if that is how creeds and confessions function in the church, then it is clear that they do not operate independently from Scripture.

Later Lutheran dogmaticians Chemnitz and Gerhard preserved this commitment to Scripture while finding a way to talk about the importance of the church in previous ages. They made a distinction between two kinds of authority: the authority of a judge and the authority of a witness. Scripture has the authority of a judge. It can render decisions on what is and is not the truth. The church, on the other hand, has the authority of a witness. It can testify to and confess what the Scriptures say, but it has no authority to render judgments independent of Scripture.

One area where this distinction makes a clear difference is in the question of which books belong in the canon. Chemnitz's Roman Catholic opponents were arguing that the church stands over Scripture because it is the church that defines which books are in the canon in the first place.[17] Chemnitz responds by arguing that the church is serving as a witness. While we rely on the testimony of the early church to establish the canon, it does not follow from this that the church of today has the authority to define the canon (as the Council of Trent claimed).[18] That is because the church of today is not in the same position as the early church to serve as a witness. No one in the sixteenth century knew the apostles personally or received

16. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see my article, "The Nicene Creed in the Church," *Concordia Journal* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 13-22.

17. Fred Kramer, trans., *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 181. All references to the *Examination of the Council of Trent* in this article refer to vol. 1 of Kramer's translation.

18. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 184.

their letters.[19] To say that the church of later ages has the authority to make a decree about the canon is to ascribe to the church the authority of a judge rather than the authority of a witness.

Consequently, the Lutheran church has never gone beyond the testimony of the early church on the question of the canon. Modern Lutherans even preserve the distinction between *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* books, as defined by Eusebius. Eusebius notes that some books, such as the four Gospels and the Epistles of Paul, were confessed (*homologoumena*) by all. Others, such as 2 Peter, James, and 2-3 John, were agreed on by most, but spoken against (*antilegomena*) by some.[20] Chemnitz argues that just as the later church has no authority to add to the testimony of the early church, so also it has no authority to remove the doubt expressed by the early church.[21]

Chemnitz's discussion of the canon shows how the distinction between judicial authority and the authority of a witness functions in the question of which books belong in the Bible. However, the distinction finds broader use in Lutheran theology to distinguish the authority of creeds and confessions from that of the Scriptures. Lutheran systematic theology has adopted the terms *norma normans* and *norma normata* to capture this distinction. Only the Scriptures are the *norma normans* (norming norm). That is, only the Scriptures have normative authority to judge all other writings. Creeds and confessions, in turn, function as *norma normata* (normed norms). That is, they do have normative authority in the church, but that authority does not stand on its own alongside Scripture. Rather it is derived from Scripture. Here the ordination vow for Lutheran pastors illustrates the principle,

> P. Do you believe and confess the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
>
> R. *Yes, I believe and confess the canonical Scriptures to be the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice*.
>
> P. Do you believe and confess the three Ecumenical Creeds, namely the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds, as faithful testimonies to the truth of Holy Scriptures, and do you reject all the errors which they condemn?
>
> R. *Yes, I believe and confess the three Ecumenical Creeds because they are in accord with the Word of God. I also reject all the errors they condemn.*

19. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent,* 176-77.
20. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 179.
21. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 180.

> P. Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? And do you confess that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord—as these are contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith?
>
> R. *Yes, I make these confessions my own because they are in accord with the Word of God.*[22]

In these vows, the three ecumenical creeds, as well as the Lutheran Confessions, are affirmed "because" (*quia*) they are in agreement with Scripture. They are not independent sources of authority but derive their authority from the Scriptures. Yet they do have authority. They are not affirmed "insofar as" (*quatenus*) they agree with Scripture. Such a view would accord them no authority at all because no claim would be made about the extent to which they might be in accord with Scriptures. The *quia* subscription, on the other hand, asserts that these creeds and confessions are authoritative in the church precisely because they are in accord with Scripture.

So far, we have discussed the conceptual framework Lutherans use in thinking about the authority of Scriptures and that of creeds and confessions (and by extension tradition more broadly). Now we turn to some specific examples of how that framework might be employed.

Catholicity and the Doctrine of Justification

How does the understanding of the church as a witness play out in evaluating the catholicity of the key doctrine in the Reformation: the doctrine of justification by faith alone? On the one hand, it means that when push comes to shove, the reformers would rather have Paul on their side than the church fathers. On the other hand, if the Reformation understanding of justification turns out to be totally new in the sixteenth century, there is a strong implication that the reformers were interpreting Paul incorrectly.

There are different modern evaluations of this question. Alister McGrath, for example, claims that the doctrine of justification in the Lutheran and Reformed churches after 1530 represents a "radically new interpretation of the Pauline concept of 'imputed righteousness.'"[23] Thomas Oden, however, compiles evidence to the contrary in his *Justification Reader*, arguing that the Reformation understanding of

22. The Commission on Worship of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 165-66.

23. Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 209.

justification is in line with a patristic consensus on the matter.[24] My own view is that this question is complicated enough that McGrath and Oden might both be right! There is both continuity and discontinuity with the church in earlier ages.

There are two aspects of Luther's understanding of justification that I would like to highlight in order to provide a more complete explanation of these continuities and discontinuities. The first is that justification is forensic. That means that the term "justify" refers to God speaking, declaring the sinner to be righteous. Since justification is a speech act, or more specifically a promise, it is received by faith since even in ordinary human discourse, promises are either believed or not, but they are not earned.[25] The other alternative would be to understand justification as sanative. That means that the term "justify" refers to God healing the sinner, transforming the heart by pouring in his grace and the Holy Spirit so that the sinner is able to accrue merit before God. The second aspect is the question of whether cooperation on the sinner's part is required in order to receive the benefits of justification. Luther's view is that justification is completely the act of God (monergism). Another possible view would be that the sinner must cooperate with God in some sense (synergism) in order to receive the benefits of justification.

What is the witness of the early church on these two questions? It turns out that there is some variation. Augustine does, at one point, list the forensic view as one possible interpretation of "justify,"[26] but he overwhelmingly understands justification sanatively in his theology. One of his favorite Bible passages is Romans 5:5: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." This has shaped Roman Catholic theology down to the present day. Cyril of Alexandria, on the other hand, defines justification as dropping the ancient charges, meaning forgiveness for the curse that God spoke against the human race in Genesis 3: "Dust you are; to dust you will return."[27] Since Cyril understands "justify" to refer to God forgiving sins, not God transforming the heart, his view would rightly be classified as forensic.

On the question of monergism, the situation is reversed. Augustine is the one who looks similar to Luther in that he too thinks that God alone acts when he gives grace, at least in his mature theology. Indeed, because of this similarity, the Augsburg Confession cites Augustine more than any other church father in support of the Lutheran position. Cyril, on the other hand, teaches synergism. He is concerned to distinguish Christian theology from a pagan view of fate, so he feels very strongly

24. Thomas C. Oden, *The Justification Reader*, Classic Christian Readers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 1.

25. *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 4.48-56 (Kolb-Wengert, 128-29).

26. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 26.45.

27. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. David R. Maxwell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, forthcoming). This is from his comment on Rom 4:2. The Greek original may be found in P. E. Pusey, ed., *Sancti Patris Nostri Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini* (Bruxelles: Impression Anastaltique Culture et Civilisation, 1965), 5:181, lines 1-5.

that he must affirm human cooperation in salvation so that it does not look like our destiny is out of our hands and controlled by the stars.[28]

There are two observations that emerge from this comparison of Augustine and Cyril. First, there is no monolithic patristic understanding of justification. So any claim that one church or the other has departed from what the church has always taught is being a bit careless about what the church has actually taught. Second, there are aspects of both continuity and discontinuity between the Reformation understanding of justification and that of these two fathers. Luther stands in continuity with Cyril but not Augustine on the issue of whether justification is forensic, but he stands with Augustine and not Cyril on the issue of whether it is monergistic.

But lining up sides on different aspects of justification is not the only way to talk about continuity. One's account of the function of doctrinal formulations is relevant as well. Perhaps the most nuanced account of this problem is Martin Chemnitz's treatment of it in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*. Chemnitz notes that before a controversy breaks out, the terminology of earlier fathers is not as precise before the controversy as after. He cites Augustine, who makes precisely this point in response to the Pelagians finding support for their position in earlier church fathers.[29] Thus, Chemnitz takes the problem of discontinuity and contextualizes it within the history of the church. Christians of all ages have had this problem simply because of the way doctrine is formulated over against the questions of the day.

Chemnitz then notes that regardless of how the fathers articulated their understanding of justification, when they imagined themselves before the judgment seat of Christ, they invariably relied only on God's mercy. He finds this to be the case in such fathers as Augustine, Bernard, Anselm, Bonaventura, and Gerson.[30] When it came to their actual faith (as opposed to their dogmatic articulation of their faith), they actually agreed with the Lutheran position.

From Chemnitz's argumentation, we see that a claim to catholicity is not optional. It is not sufficient to establish doctrine, but if there were absolutely no connection with the church in previous errors, the implication would be that the doctrine of justification would be suspect. Novelties cannot be part of the faith once delivered to the saints.[31] However, that does not mean that the continuity must always involve a straightforward affirmation of unchanging doctrinal formulations. As a patristic scholar, Chemnitz is well aware that doctrinal formulations are shaped in response to particular questions that may not be the same in all ages.

28. See my discussion of this in "Justification in the Early Church," *Concordia Journal* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 34-35.

29. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 261.

30. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 510.

31. Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent,* 258.

How does the view of the church as a witness affect how Lutherans think about the practice of infant baptism? If we frame the question as whether the New Testament commands infants to be baptized, the results are inconclusive. After telling the crowd to be baptized, Peter says, "The promise is for you and your children" (Acts 2:39), but does that refer to infants or simply to descendants? The jailer at Philippi was baptized along with his family, but Luke does not tell us whether there were infants in his family (Acts 16:33).

The witness of the early church on the matter is not unanimous either. Many church fathers do attest and approve the practice of infant baptism, such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Cyril of Alexandria. But Tertullian is an early dissenting voice. He tells us that infant baptism was practiced in the second century, but he does not approve of this practice. [32]

However, even if the witness of the early church were unanimous, that would not in itself be sufficient to justify infant baptism. That is because the early church does not have the authority to institute doctrine, or in this case, establish a means of grace. They only have the authority to testify to what Scripture says. It is fair to observe that the preponderance of the witness of the early church makes it more likely that this is the scriptural teaching, but that is not strong enough actually to establish the practice.

To get beyond this impasse, the question needs to be framed differently. The real question is not, "Does the New Testament command infant baptism?" but rather, "What is baptism?" Is baptism something we do for God or something God does for us? If baptism is something we do for God, such as a confession of faith, then it seems obvious that infants should not be baptized because they lack the intellectual capacity to make such a confession meaningfully. If, on the other hand, baptism is something God does for us, an act which bestows life and salvation, then it seems obvious that infants should be baptized because they are just as helpless and in need of God's saving mercy as adults who are baptized.

There is much more scriptural data on the question of the nature of baptism than there is on the narrower question of infant baptism. Lutherans would point to passages such as Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 3:27, Titus 3:5, and 1 Peter 3:21 to show that baptism is God's saving act. Now it is not my purpose here to make the case for infant baptism per se, but rather to show how one's view of catholicity affects how one thinks through this issue. In this case, it leads to framing the question in such a way that the question can actually be answered from Scripture and then relying on the witness of the church to support that view. And it turns out that the early church is fairly uniform in its affirmation that God bestows salvation in baptism.

32. See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 362-66.

This is reflected not only in the writings of the fathers but also in the baptismal liturgies themselves.[33]

Before leaving this topic, I would like to address the question of how Lutherans handle the question of whether infants can have faith. There are actually two different approaches to this. One is to argue for the possibility of infant faith. The early twentieth-century Lutheran dogmatician Francis Pieper is an advocate of this view. Drawing on the tradition of Lutheran orthodoxy, Pieper argues that saving faith is precognitive. The dogmatic term is *fides directa*. This means that faith apprehends God's promise, which is given in the word and in baptism, directly, even if the person cannot articulate it. Thus, people who are asleep, mentally disabled, or infants, can have saving faith even though they are not in a position to give a rational account of the contents of their faith.[34]

Martin Luther takes a different approach in his *Large Catechism*. Though he thinks infants can believe, he argues that it really does not matter whether the infant believes or not because baptism is God's work. It is God's word that makes the baptism, not the faith of the recipient. So even if, for the sake of argument, the infant does not believe when he or she is baptized, the church is praying for the infant that he or she may believe later. This is also why Luther says that if someone were to be baptized under false pretenses for ulterior motives and then were later to repent, we would not rebaptize them. The promise of baptism is good for their whole life. If you did not believe it before, we would say, then believe it now.[35]

Conclusion

These reflections on justification, *sola scriptura*, and infant baptism are intended to illustrate how Lutheran theology relates the authority of Scripture to that of the church throughout the world and down through time, that is, catholicity. Scripture is the judge, and the church is the witness. This means that catholicity plays an important role in the Lutheran tradition. It cannot establish doctrine, but it can confirm our reading or Scripture or raise a warning flag that no one ever read Scripture that way before. The weight of catholicity lies not in majority rule or strength in numbers, but in its ability to function like John the Baptist, pointing to Christ and declaring, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

33. These liturgies may be found in E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1993).

34. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 2:448-49.

35. Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* 4.47-63 (Kolb-Wengert, 462-64).