

Reformations Before the Reformation

In Nomine Jesu.

INTRODUCTION

As Lutherans, and as western Christians, we are accustomed to speaking of the tumultuous theological and ecclesiological events that surrounded the famous Wittenberg Monk-Professor as *the Reformation*. At the same time, we do recognize the existence of “reformations before the Reformation.” It is acknowledged that the sixteenth-century Lutheran Reformation did not emerge from nowhere, but that it arose as a culmination of a reformatory *process* – or at least of a reformatory aspiration – that reached back several decades, and perhaps even centuries, into the late medieval period.¹ Hermann Sasse summarizes this historical truth when he observes that the word “reformation”

had a long history before it was first applied to the movement which had its origin in the posting of Luther’s Theses. For more than two centuries before, a reformation of the church in the sense of both a moral-religious and a legal-organizational renovation...was being demanded. Theologians and humanistic scholars, clergymen and laymen, prelates and heretics, reform councils and popes, statesmen and monks had formulated theories for such a reformation and had tried to put them into practice.²

All of these late-medieval reformers and would-be reformers had reached the conviction that the western church – at least in its institutional life – had in some way, or in many ways, become deformed, and was not what it was supposed to be. As Sasse goes on to explain,

This was the problem which all of them had in common: What can be done in order that the church might once again become what it ought to be according to God’s will? All of them also had in common the conviction that there are ultimate authoritative norms according to which the church must again get its bearings after it had strayed from the right path; that there are commands which it must again obey; and that this obedience, this heeding of the ultimate authority, and the doing of what this authority requires, represents the reformation, or renovation, of the church. Councils and popes, the theological exponents of conciliarism and curialism, the Hussites, the monastic reformers, the humanists, Erasmus and Zwingli, Calvin and Bucer, Carlstadt and Münzer, together with the reform popes, the Anabaptists of Münster, and the Council of Trent – all of them agreed in this. There was dispute only over the authority which needed to be obeyed in order that the church might be restored...³

These reform agendas were essentially oriented to the law, and to a desire for one or another set of structural and behavioral changes in the life of the church. Luther’s movement did build on the movements that had come before him. But the Lutheran Reformation also broke with most of them, in the key issue of the nature and character of the reform that was needed. Luther’s unique contribution to “reformation” thinking was not simply that he declared the Word of God in

¹This is the main theme of James Kieker’s book *Martin Luther and the Long Reformation: From Response to Reform in the Church* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992).

²Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938), p. 53.

³Sasse, pp. 53-54.

Holy Scripture to be the ultimate authority by which a reformation should be governed and implemented. Where he departed from his predecessors was in his deeper and more profound recognition of the fact that it was a *theological* reformation that was needed. Quite literally, the word “theology” means “God-talk” or “God-words.” And it was a change, or a reformation, in the way preachers and teachers would talk about God, that Luther believed was most necessary for the church.

REFORMATIONS THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY

An acknowledgment of those late-medieval reformatory processes that led up, over time, to the remarkable work of Luther and his colleagues, does not, however, exhaust our understanding of “reformations before the Reformation.” The Reformation of the sixteenth century was not an essentially unique occurrence in the history of the church. In point of fact, the entire history of the church on earth is characterized by a series of reformations like this – some of which had a profound and continuing impact on the development of the theological life of the church. For almost 2,000 years, the Christian church has retained its evangelical catholicity by means of a continual process of reformation, in keeping with the apostolic directive to “test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, ESV).

Admittedly this is a uniquely Lutheran interpretation of church history – although it is an interpretation that we believe is true to the facts. This “reformational” interpretation of church history does differ from the interpretive paradigm of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, on the one hand; and of Zwinglian/Calvinist Protestantism and Evangelicalism, on the other.

The basic assumption of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy is that the history of the church, and of the church’s confession and implementation of its faith, is, in essence, linear. The church progresses in its development and in its embracing of revealed truth in an ever-forward movement. To be sure, according to this “traditionalist” conceptualization, controversies do often serve as catalysts for more careful reflection on certain points that perhaps had not been discussed very thoroughly in the past. And so, as the church moves forward from a time of controversy, its articulation of its faith will often be clearer and fuller than it was before. But the basic assumption is that there would never be a need for a *backtracking*, or for a repudiation of a theological pathway that had been followed by the church’s mainstream, up until a certain controversy would prompt a reconsideration and reworking of what had previously been assumed to be a normative form of Christian teaching.

In this “traditionalist” conceptualization, at a very basic level, the church’s theology is not understood to be static. The theological life of the church does move forward into the future. But the theology of the church’s past will never need to be corrected in any kind of substantial way, because in the past, just as in the present, the church on earth has been supernaturally guided by the Holy Spirit, and has been supernaturally preserved from error by the Holy Spirit. Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox have a relatively optimistic attitude toward the church as an institution, and as an institutional phenomenon of history. In earlier centuries, the institutional church may not yet have taught the whole truth of God in all of its fullness. But what it did teach, it taught accurately. *Ecclesiam non posse errare*. The church cannot err.

The basic assumption of Zwinglian/Calvinist Protestantism and Evangelicalism, in comparison, is one of deep skepticism concerning the faithfulness and constancy of the church in its earthly, institutional existence. Therefore every inherited dogmatic conviction is always up for reevaluation and reconsideration, in every generation. The dogmatic legacy of the past is functionally little more than the provisional dogmatic *opinion* of the past, which – with little compunction – can be altered or rejected when it now seems not to pass the muster of the

contemporary church's reading of Scripture. The way things were in the days of the apostles is seen as the baseline, and as the standard.

The more extreme elements of this school of thought would reject every creedal and hymnic development that ever took place in post-apostolic times. Campbellites and "restorationists" of all stripes would seek diligently to reclaim and reprimarize the supposed purity of the New Testament church – which, they imagine, was a church without creeds, without ceremony and liturgy, and without humanly-composed hymns beyond the inspired Book of Psalms. There is a naive belief that the many centuries of historical development and reflection that have occurred over the past two millennia can be ignored – indeed, that such developments and reflections *must*, as a matter of conscience, be ignored and rejected.

In contrast to both of these viewpoints, the Lutheran way stands between them with its own uniquely balanced approach toward ecclesiastical and theological history. In a way that is in some respects similar to the thinking of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the Lutheran Church does expect to see an essential continuity in the church from the time of the apostles to the present, in view of the fact that there is only one holy catholic and apostolic church. But in a way that is in some respects similar to the thinking of Zwinglian/Calvinist Protestantism and Evangelicalism, the Lutheran Church does not assume that every development in the *institutional* history of the church is necessarily a God-pleasing development – un-reformable and un-correctable.

Confessional Lutheranism, in its own way, does affirm that "the church cannot err."⁴ But in saying this it means something different from what Catholicism and Orthodoxy mean when they say this. Lutherans affirm this principle in regard to "the true church," and not in regard to any or every manifestation of the empirical church in this world. The saving faith of the church – anchored as it is in Christ and his promises – is always pure. But the outward confession and exposition of this faith is not always pure. The point of the church's ongoing reformation is, therefore, always to seek, with God's help and guidance, to bring the church's *confession* of its faith into ever greater conformity with its *actual* faith.

One of the best summaries of this distinctly Lutheran way of looking at Scripture and Tradition, and at the ongoing interplay of continuity and correction in the history of the church, is offered by the Swedish scholar Holsten Fagerberg in his book *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions*. We beg everyone's indulgence to quote liberally from this work, because it is so clear and well-stated in its explanation of the unique "reformational" view of doctrine and history to which the Lutheran Confessions bear witness. Fagerberg writes:

When Melanchthon supported the Evangelical position with arguments derived from the early church fathers, this was in harmony with his considered opinion concerning the Reformation as a continuation of the doctrinal formation of the early church. A study of those parts of the confessional writings for which Melanchthon was responsible reveals that the formal statements in the introduction and conclusion of the Augsburg Confession... reflect a well-thought-out and distinctive point of view. The frequently repeated quotations from the church fathers speak very clearly as the expression of the theological method upon which the Confessions are patterned. Reference is made first of all to the Bible, which must clearly support a doctrinal opinion, and secondly to the writings of the fathers. ... One

⁴Cf. Apology of the Augsburg Confession VII/VIII:27, in *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 178.

finds the same attitude in Luther, generally speaking...⁵

Fagerberg accurately summarizes here the conservative Lutheran instinct for continuity and unity with the church of the past. But this instinct or impulse is balanced off by the Lutheran belief in Scripture's supreme and infallible normative authority, and – if need be – its supreme and infallible corrective authority. And so Fagerberg continues:

Although the Confessions frequently point up areas of agreement with the early church fathers, they also include a variety of criticisms. Their attitude is that the church fathers cannot be accepted *en bloc*. They were not infallible; as men they could make mistakes; their opinions often revealed a serious lack of harmony. ... With regard to the sacrament of penance and the preaching office [the reformers] discovered an obvious development, which they looked upon as a deviation. ... Some of the fathers are appreciated more than others. In general, the testimony of those who lived closest to the time of Christ is accepted in preference to those who lived later. The risk of error increased with the passing of time. The scholastic theologians were criticized with particular sharpness for their blending of theology and Aristotelian philosophy. ... With regard to the doctrines of original sin, penance, and the Lord's Supper, the Lutheran Confessions seek support from the early fathers, inasmuch as their position was different from that taken by the scholastics.⁶

The Lutheran Reformers saw the pattern of ongoing ecclesial reformation in the church's earthly history as a normal process, which had had a positive impact on the continuing clarification and development of the church's theological life. What was going on in their lifetime was nothing new. This is what had always gone on in the past, especially when times of degeneration and crisis similar to the epoch of the sixteenth-century Reformation had required it.

Examples of doctrinal deterioration in the institutional church abound throughout the centuries of Christian history. But what also abounds is evidence of God's providential intervention in the affairs of the church, to bring needed reformation and restoration of his saving truth through the ministry of reformers who worked in his name, under their calling as teachers in the church. Fagerberg accordingly explains:

Melanchthon wanted to preserve the historical continuity between the Lutheran Reformation and the older forms of Christianity, and he also wanted to eliminate irregularities within the church. These were the basic guidelines which he derived from his study of church history. According to Melanchthon, the Lutheran Reformation was not an interruption of church history but a continuation. As he saw it, church history proceeds according to a definite pattern and is characterized by both apostasy and reformation. The divine truth concerning man's salvation is one and the same from the beginning of the world to the present. This truth has been stifled, and threatened with destruction, time after time, only to be brought back into the light through a reforming movement. The church has always existed, sometimes strong, sometimes enfeebled. During periods of decay the true church lives on as a minority church. In the earliest years of Christian history this pattern involved the revelation of the divine truth through Jesus and the apostles, whom Melanchthon considered to be reformers. Decay set in after the apostolic age, which reached its culmination in Origen and called forth a reformation via Augustine. After the Augustinian

⁵ Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529-1537)* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), pp. 48-49.

⁶Fagerberg, pp. 52-54.

purge the same course of events recurred anew: decay throughout the entire medieval period, which elicited the Lutheran Reformation. But during the entire process, characterized by renewal-decay- renewal, the truth was always preserved by a minority. The truth can be stifled, but it can never be completely destroyed. Melanchthon could see a dogmatic doctrinal continuity running throughout the centuries of church history and the periods of decay, and it was to this that the Reformation wanted to attach itself. The Reformation was not designed to introduce novelties but to revive the ancient truths which had been forgotten or obscured as a result of the church's decay.⁷

Fagerberg notes, too, that this basic way of interpreting the Christian past is not merely the private opinion of Melanchthon, or of Luther, or of any other individual. Rather,

This view of history is to be found in the Lutheran Symbols, and it throws light on both positive and negative expressions concerning the church's doctrinal development. Augustine is accorded the highest rating. He was the only church father lectured upon regularly in Wittenberg. It also explains the generally negative attitude the Symbols take toward the post-Augustinian epoch, in which Pope Gregory the Great was thought to have brought about a trend leading in the wrong direction. It also makes clear why certain medieval theologians could be consulted on particular questions: the light was never completely put out, and the truth never totally obscured.⁸

But again, for the Lutherans of the sixteenth century – and also for us as we would seek to be faithful servants of a “reformational” church in our time – this providential process of clarification and correction is a process that is always governed by the supreme authority of Holy Scripture. The faith of the fathers, and also our own faith, must always be tested on the basis of the Scriptures. It is not the great Reformers of the past *in themselves*, who by the force of their personalities, or by their own intellectual cleverness, brought about the reformations with which they are identified, and for which they are honored. It is, rather, the great Reformers with *Bibles* in their hands, and with *pure Biblical doctrine* on their lips and flowing from their pens, who are the instruments of God in these important times. And so, as Fagerberg explains further,

The truth was given and established once and for all time. Those fathers whose work was acceptable had not formulated any new doctrines; they had restored the original ones and freed them from irrelevant additions. The Confessions sought to return to those fathers who had preserved the pure doctrines, without falsification. But to attempt such a critical sifting of the church fathers' statements demanded the use of a higher norm, and the Lutherans found it in Scripture. ... The church has God's revealed Word, which is also a living Word. What the church proclaims cannot be altered; its content must remain the same from age to age. ...the only function or duty of the clergy is to cause the voice of Christ to be heard. Put another way, the church must give voice to Christ's Word.⁹

But this commitment to Scriptural authority and to Scriptural truth does not mean that the church is limited to the *terminology* of Scripture in its assertion of this authority, and in its explication of this truth. At various times in Christian history, when heretics have hijacked the terminology of the Bible, and have distorted the meaning of the Biblical words so as to make them

⁷Fagerberg, pp. 54-55.

⁸Fagerberg, pp. 54-55.

⁹Fagerberg, p. 58.

say something they do not say, the reaction of the responsible teachers of the church has been to devise *new* terminology – not for the sake of introducing new *doctrine*, but for the sake of preserving the *old* doctrine by means of the new, more precise terms. In the history of the church's ongoing struggle with heresy, we do not, therefore, see a development of *doctrine*, but we *do* see a development of *terminology*. Fagerberg observes that

Melanchthon – and Luther too – was profoundly convinced of the church's doctrinal continuity. The Confessions located the source and norm of the divine message in the Bible; as a result, the Bible occupies such a central position in Reformation theology. The apostolic Word is found preserved in Scripture, and all statements must be verified by Scripture. The fact that Scripture was accorded such significance did not mean, however, that its words had to be repeated in a literal way. ... What is said in the Bible is also to be found in certain of the early church fathers and has been codified in the ancient creeds of the church. It is certainly true that they sometimes use other words and different modes of expression, but they nevertheless preserve the meaning of Scripture. ... That which can be accepted as genuine ecclesiastical tradition must be capable of verification by Scripture. ... It is this principle which gave rise to the saying, "The Word of God shall establish articles of faith" (SA II II 15), and which explains the critical rejection of certain points in the older doctrinal development. ... But this appeal to Scripture in no way includes a demand to reiterate Scriptural formulations in a literal way. The Confessions...use terms that cannot be found in the Bible but are in harmony with its meaning. The same is true of the formulations employed in the ancient creeds of the church.¹⁰

This is something that Luther himself explicitly acknowledged, when commenting on the chief "shibboleth" of the Arian controversy – *homoousios* – and on the important role that this admittedly extra-Biblical term played in the service of catholic orthodoxy. He wrote that

It is certainly true that one should teach nothing outside of Scripture pertaining to divine matters, ... which means only that one should teach nothing that is at variance with Scripture. But that one should not use more or other words than those contained in Scripture – this cannot be adhered to, especially in a controversy and when heretics want to falsify things with trickery and distort the words of Scripture. It thus became necessary to condense the meaning of Scripture, comprised of so many passages, into a short and comprehensive word, and to ask whether they regarded Christ as *homousius*, which was the meaning of all the words of Scripture that they had distorted with false interpretations... It is just as if the Pelagians were to try to embarrass us with the term "original sin" or "Adam's plague" because these words do not occur in Scripture, though Scripture clearly teaches the meaning of these words...¹¹

The Scriptures are, as it were, both the fountainhead and the filter of the Christian church's theological tradition. The prophets and apostles stand at the head of this sacred stream, which began to flow out into the world about 2,000 years ago. The teachers and pastors of each generation of the church's history, who have come after them, are their successors, who have carried forward their doctrine – passing it on, eventually, to us. The Creeds and Confessions of the church are important mechanisms of this forward flow of the genuine prophetic and apostolic tradition through the centuries. The orthodox Symbolical Books were produced under divine

¹⁰Fagerberg, pp. 59-61.

¹¹Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 83-84.

providence by faithful teachers and pastors at crucial times in history, and they have served, since their production, as decisive and ever-reliable testimonies to God's unchanging Word.¹² Once they are brought into existence, by being drawn out of the Scriptures, the Symbols are thereafter able to guide later generations of the church in the accurate appropriation of the particular dimension of Scriptural truth to which they bear witness.

But as the stream of apostolic truth flows forward in this way through the generations, the Scriptures function also as a *judge* and *norm* in each generation, so that clarifications and corrections of current teaching can be made whenever they are needed. Either through carelessness to one degree or another, or through wickedness to one degree or another, the prophetic and apostolic message has, at various times in history, been muddled and polluted by error. The Scriptures are therefore continuously to be brought to bear on the church's total proclamation, so that the truth that was successfully carried forward from the past will indeed be accurately confirmed as such in the light of Scripture, and be allowed to be brought forward into the future as well; while any error that has been improperly mixed into this truth will be identified as error, and filtered out.

Fagerberg's summary of the theological method of the Lutheran Confessors describes this too:

The conviction concerning the identity of the church's proclamation also gives tradition a certain importance for the exposition of the Bible. Scripture therefore does not have a merely critical function to fulfill over against tradition; the latter also has a degree of importance as a guide for the church in its own exposition of Scripture. To support the argument that the Confessions did not introduce any novelties, it was important to be able to refer to patristic utterances. There is, in other words, a line which runs from the Scriptures to the later tradition; but also in the reverse: Beginning with tradition, one can also find the road which leads back to Scripture. During the sixteenth-century theological confrontations, the ancient creeds served as guides to the Scriptures. Luther and Melancthon approved of Biblical interpretations which affirmed the dogma of the Trinity, while those which did not were rejected as mistaken. ...Luther...traced all heresy back to the denial of the Second Article of the Creed, which sets Christ forth as true man and true God. Melancthon also upheld the idea that the ancient creeds can be used as guides back to Scripture. But the connecting line is not unbroken, not even in the first five centuries of the church's existence. Rather, the truth is to be found in isolated points, elucidated by individual theologians, with Scripture serving at all times as the supreme norm. The authenticity of what the church says today depends on its factual agreement with what the church has said in all ages, through those who have understood the true meaning of Scripture.¹³

The apostolic truth of the Gospel is always preserved, somehow, somewhere. The Lord's promise that his church will endure until the end of the world means that the witness of his saving message in the earth will likewise endure. During certain periods of church history this witness of saving truth may be transmitted through inadequate or weak forms of teaching, which preserve the essential points, but which also distort as they preserve. Such inadequate or weak forms of

¹²The Scriptures cannot err, and therefore they do not err. The Symbolical Books *can* err, but they *do not* err. "We do not claim that our Confessors were infallible. We do not say they could not fail. We only claim that they did not fail" (Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* [Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1871], p. 186).

¹³Fagerberg, pp. 61-62.

teaching may even assume a certain normative status for a time, until they are eventually judged to be deficient, and in need of supplementation or correction.

Sometimes, during low points of Christian history, this witness of saving truth will be preserved in the community of God's people through mostly *implicit* means – by way of creedal formulations and sacramental *verba*, for example – and will be forced to coexist institutionally alongside *dangerously* incomplete or even erroneous forms of teaching. But the truth will never be completely silenced. And there will always be at least some voices that retain the pure teaching explicitly, even if they are in the minority in the institutional church. This is why Martin Chemnitz says that “we disagree with those who invent opinions which have no testimony from any period in the church, as Servetus, Campanus, the Anabaptists, and others have done in our time. We also hold that no dogma that is new in the churches and in conflict with all of antiquity should be accepted.”¹⁴

The typical pattern – which has been repeated many times in Christian history, but with varying degrees of institutional disruptiveness – is that after a while, when weak teaching eventually degenerates into outright heretical teaching, a controversy finally ensues, and the church at large then begins to consider the relevant questions more carefully than it had before. A direct and overt attack on the truth of the Gospel jars the church into a higher level of care in its reading of Scripture, which then leads the church to a deeper understanding, and a more precise confession, of the revealed truth of God regarding the controverted point. The overt heresy is refuted and rejected, and the proponents of the heresy are repudiated as false teachers. And the misleading theological tendencies of the past that had laid the groundwork for the heresy are corrected. But at such times of reformation, the otherwise orthodox Fathers of the past who had taught or tolerated these tendencies in their day are nevertheless evaluated in a respectful and generous manner – in view of the fact that they lived before the time when controversy had more fully exposed the theological shortcomings of those tendencies; and in view of the fact that their teaching, such as it was, had been formulated with good intentions in opposition to other *more* dangerous doctrines. Such gentleness in evaluating the writings of earlier Fathers is proper, in part because – in the words of Johann Gerhard – “It is wicked to interpret a poor choice of words as error, when you know that the right meaning was intended.”¹⁵

In this spirit, the Lutheran Reformers of the sixteenth century acknowledge in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession that the church of all times

retains the pure gospel, and, as Paul says [1 Cor. 3:12], “the foundation,” that is, the true knowledge of Christ and faith. Even though there are among these people many weak ones who build upon this foundation structures of stubble that will perish (that is to say, certain useless opinions), nevertheless, because they do not overthrow the foundation, these things are to be both forgiven them and also corrected. The writings of the holy Fathers bear witness that at times even they built stubble upon the foundation but that this did not overturn their faith.¹⁶

¹⁴Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 258.

¹⁵Johann Gerhard, *Locus on Good Works*, sec. 38; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” *Essays for the Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), Vol. II, p. 59.

¹⁶Apology VII/VIII:20-21, Kolb/Wengert p. 177.

And the Fathers of the past who had actually preserved a more pure form of teaching on the controverted point are acknowledged and honored as the genuine guardians, *under* God, of the unchangeable *truth* of God – that is, as the ones to whom everyone *should* have been listening all along. And so, for example, in reference to the Biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith, as it had been taught by the famous fourth- and fifth-century bishops of Milan and Hippo, the Lutheran Reformers assert – in the Apology – that “what we have said agrees with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, with the holy Fathers Ambrose, Augustine, and many others, and with the whole church of Christ, which certainly confesses that Christ is the propitiator and the justifier.”¹⁷

Martin Chemnitz affirms the insights of St. Augustine on these kinds of educational and reformatory processes in the church, when he notes that in a time of controversy,

The Scriptures are examined more carefully, and those theologians who had preserved the correct teaching are now noticed with greater appreciation than perhaps had been the case before the controversy. Augustine is correct and truthful when he says in *De Civitate Dei*, 16.2, “Many points pertaining to the catholic faith have been stirred up by the cunning trouble making of heretics, so that we have had to defend these points against them, consider more carefully, define more clearly, and preach more powerfully. The question has been raised by the adversary, and the opportunity is present for better learning.” This point is certainly most true in church controversies.¹⁸

The Reformers know that Christ has promised to preserve his church until the end of time, and in the history of the church they observe that, “in order to keep the Gospel among men, he visibly pits the witness of the saints against the rule of the devil; in our weakness he displays his strength. The dangers, labors, and sermons of the apostle Paul, Athanasius, Augustine, and other teachers of the church are holy works, true sacrifices acceptable to God, battles by which Christ restrained the devil and drove him away from the believers.”¹⁹ Since the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, as here cited, highlights the ministry specifically of Sts. Athanasius and Augustine, let us illustrate the Lutheran way of looking at specific examples of “reformational” events in history by a further examination of these men, and of the way in which they each responded to the chief heresy that was attacking the faith of the church in their respective generations: Arianism in the case of Athanasius, and Pelagianism in the case of Augustine.

SAINT ATHANASIUS THE REFORMER

The Gospels and Epistles clearly teach the divinity of Christ. The full divinity of the Holy Spirit is likewise affirmed in the Scriptures. At the same time, all of Scripture is united in teaching the existence of only one true God. But as we all know, the Scriptures do not speak of these things with the kind of systematic and logical exactness that can be found in, say, the Ecumenical Creeds. And that is because the Creeds emerged historically from times of intense controversy between the faithful pastors of the church, who diligently struggled to defend and preserve the true doctrine; and manipulative heretics, who deceptively twisted some of the less precise terminology of the Scriptures, and taught a theology of God that contradicted what the Scriptures actually intend to say – even while using the Biblical terms which they had redefined.

¹⁷Apology IV:389, in *The Book of Concord*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 166.

¹⁸Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), Vol. II, p. 473.

¹⁹Apology IV:189-90, Tappert p. 133.

Before the era of Athanasius – that is, before the fourth century – the false teachings of Gnosticism, Adoptionism, and Modalism had already prompted the church to begin the process of coming up with ways of formulating its Trinitarian faith, and of explaining and defending that faith, that moved beyond the *terminology* of Scripture. The pre-Athanasian Fathers who confronted these heresies wanted to do nothing other than to explain and defend the Biblical truth. Gnosticism, with its teaching about two ultimate deities, denied monotheism. St. Irenaeus of Lyons and Tertullian of Carthage led the way in responding to this. Adoptionism – taught in its most sophisticated form by Paul of Samosata – preserved monotheism, but denied the essential divinity of Christ. A host of theologians and Fathers repudiated that falsehood. And Modalism – sometimes called Sabellianism, after Sabellius, one of its chief exponents – preserved monotheism, and also preserved the deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. But it denied the distinction of divine Persons, proposing that the one divine Person reveals himself in various “modes” at different times in history – sometimes as “Father,” sometimes as “Son,” and sometimes as “Spirit.” Tertullian and others rejected and warned against this teaching too.

In the midst of these overt heresies, with their challenges and threats, those who sought to defend the truth of God in pre-Athanasian times settled, for the most part, into a basic form of teaching regarding the Godhead and the divinity of Christ that is known as “Logos Christology.” Among those who were most closely associated with this form of teaching, as its expounders, were the second century Apologists (especially Justin Martyr), Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and most notably Origen – who fleshed out his particular version of “Logos Christology” with much speculation and philosophical elaboration.

Notably, however, the second-century writings of the great anti-Gnostic Father Irenaeus did *not* go very far in the direction of “Logos Christology,” but explained the mysteries of God and of Christ in a way that adhered quite closely to Biblical terms and concepts. St. Ignatius of Antioch, who came before Irenaeus, and St. Methodius of Olypus, who came after him, were also a part of this more conservative “Asian” school of thought.

“Logos Christology” attempted to be faithful to the totality of the Biblical witness especially in response to Modalism – its primary foil and nemesis. “Logos Christology” affirmed the eternity of the Logos – who was eventually incarnated in the person of Jesus. But Logos Christology denied that the Logos was, from eternity, his own divine Person, distinct from the Person of the Father. Rather, it was maintained that it was in the creative act of the divine *speaking* – whereby the heavens and the earth were brought into existence – that the Logos first *emerged* or *emanated* from God. Before creation, the Logos existed *within* God, as the inner mind or *reason* of God. The doctrine of the immutability of God is lost with this scheme. And a subordinationist positioning of the Son *under* the Father, with a diminished degree of deity, is strongly implied.

In commenting on the views of Justin Martyr, and the other Apologists of Justin’s era, Bengt Hägglund points out that, according to their teaching,

even though the Logos has always been a part of the divine essence as the indwelling reason, it did not proceed from the Deity until the time of the creation of the world. Christ, therefore, would have been generated in time, or at the beginning of time. This philosophical Logos doctrine would also seem to suggest that Christ occupies a subordinate position relative to the Father.²⁰

²⁰Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology* (translated by Gene J. Lund) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), p. 28.

To give credit where credit is due, this is not Arianism, since, as Hägglund also notes, “the Apologists posited the preexistence of the Logos in no uncertain terms, even though its appearance as ‘the Son’ was thought to have taken place initially at the time of the creation.”²¹ But the weaknesses of the Apologists’ “Logos Christology” are obvious. And this is true also in the slightly later writings of Tertullian, who reproduced the same basic ideas. In his summary of Tertullian’s way of explaining these things, Hägglund goes on to explain that

The doctrine of the Trinity occupies an important position in Tertullian’s theology. ...Tertullian adopted the Logos concepts of the Apologists and developed them further. ... Christ, he said, is the divine Word, which proceeded from out of God’s reason at the time of creation. When God said, “Let there be light,” the Word was born. Christ is one with God, and yet He is distinct from the Father. He has come forth from the essence of God as the rays emerge from the sun, as plants from their roots, or as a river from its source. Therefore the Son is subordinate to the Father. ...Tertullian...strongly emphasized that the Son and the Holy Spirit are one with the Father but at the same time somewhat different from the Father. “The Father is not the Son; He is greater than the Son; for the one who gives birth is different from the one who is born; the one who sends out is different from the one who is sent” (*Adversus Praxean*, 9).²²

It is easy to see how the Arians, in the fourth century, could and would exploit certain gaps and shortcomings in this teaching. In the minds of some, it was only a short step from believing that the Logos *emanated from* God at the beginning of creation, to believing that the Logos *was made by* God at the beginning of creation. While Arianism in its full-blown form was certainly a new departure, it did have some things in common with the preceding “Logos Christology,” which had in part prepared the way for Arianism. Therefore, when Arianism needed to be confronted and destroyed, the weaknesses of the “Logos Christology” that stood behind it – especially its rejection of the eternity of the divine Son *as divine Son* – also needed to be corrected.

The Christology and Trinitarian theology of St. Athanasius the Great was not only *anti-heretical*, in how he rejected the explicit error of Arius’s *new* way of explaining things; but was also *reformational*, in how he corrected the weaknesses of the church’s *relatively old* way of explaining things. According to Hägglund, Athanasius taught that

The Logos is not a part of creation; it rather shares in the same divinity as the Father Himself. Athanasius also overcame the earlier subordinationist point of view. The Logos is not another God, and does not stand lower than the Father, as a spiritual being which emanated from the Father. The Father and the Son comprise one Deity. ... “The Son is not another God. ... For if He is also something other, even to the point that He was generated, He is nevertheless the same as God; He and the Father are one through the unique nature which they share in common, and through the identity of the one divinity.” (*Orationes contra Arianos*, III, 4) ... Athanasius taught that the Holy Spirit, too, is “of the same substance.” He is a part of the same divine essence and is not a created spirit.²³

Many bishops were initially suspicious of what Athanasius was teaching. To some, it sounded like a revival of Modalism. Some of the Modalists had in fact taught that the “Father” and

²¹Hägglund, p. 28.

²²Hägglund, pp. 54-55.

²³Hägglund, p. 83.

the “Son” are of “one substance,” which was their way of saying that there was really just one divine Person or Hypostasis, who existed behind these two modes of manifestation. And so, when Athanasius used the same terminology to describe the essential unity of the Father and the Son, it took a while for many of the more conservative bishops to embrace this. For a while many of them thought that it would be better – and less Modalist-sounding – to say that the Father and the Son are of “like substance.” Their hesitancy to embrace the *homoousios* doctrine fully and enthusiastically was not in most cases based on any real sympathy for Arius and his teaching. Calling these foot-dragging bishops “semi-Arians,” which is commonly done by historians, is therefore somewhat of a misnomer.

The teaching of Athanasius did also resonate with the Biblically-conservative “Asian” school of thought, which still existed here and there among some of the bishops. The Trinitarian teaching of the chief figures of this Asian school – Ignatius, Irenaeus, and Methodius – had perhaps not been formulated in a very elaborate or sophisticated way. But it had also never degenerated into the speculative philosophical constructs that governed the “Logos Christology.” And so, in the light of the extreme degeneration of Arianism, and in the light of Athanasius’s Biblically-based opposition to Arianism, the larger church developed a greater appreciation, once again, for the representative teachers of this Asian tradition, as faithful guardians of important truths regarding the doctrine of God.²⁴

Athanasius was a great orthodox teacher in his time. In hindsight, all of Christendom would affirm that now. But a primary reason why he was controversial in his own time, and why his orthodoxy was not immediately recognized by all, is because he was clearly and accurately seen by his contemporaries to be *more* than a great orthodox teacher. He was a theological *reformer*, who sought to revise certain aspects of the church’s previous public teaching. This helps to explain why it took so long for the Nicene orthodoxy that he espoused and promoted finally to become normative in the mainstream church.

And the reforms of Athanasius were indeed governed and inspired by his high view of the unique and supreme authority of Holy Scripture. He said on one occasion that “The holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth.”²⁵ And for this reason, according to Athanasius, “Catholic Christians will neither speak nor endure to hear any thing in religion that is a stranger to Scripture; it being an evil heart of immodesty to speak those things which are not written.”²⁶ Athanasius put these principles into practice, in the way in which he formulated and advocated his Trinitarian theology:

Unlike the older Alexandrian theologians (Clement, Origen), Athanasius did not insert the Christian faith into a closed, philosophical system. On the contrary, he rejected the

²⁴Archibald Robertson writes: “Arianism was a novelty. ... With Origen and the Apologists before him it made much of the cosmic mediation of the Word in contrast to the redemptive work of Jesus; with the Apologists...it enthroned in the highest place the God of the Philosophers: but against both alike it drew a sharp broad line between the Creator and the Universe, and drew it between the Father and the Son. Least of all is Arianism in sympathy with the theology of Asia, – that of Ignatius, Irenaeus, Methodius, founded upon the Joannine tradition” (“Prolegomena,” in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria* [edited by Robertson]: *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Volume IV* [reprint: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980], p. xxix).

²⁵Saint Athanasius, “Against the Heathen,” I:3; quoted in Carl A. Volz, *Faith and Practice in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), p. 147.

²⁶*Exhort. ad Monachas.*

resources of philosophy in the development of Christian doctrine; the Bible was his sole source.²⁷

Athanasius was not a “Biblicist,” however. He was obviously willing to employ certain *terms* – such as *homoousios* – that were not *in themselves* used in Scripture. But the *content* of his theology was based squarely on Scripture, and was drawn directly from Scripture. A term like *homoousios* was used, not because it went *beyond* the Biblical teaching – in “developing” or “expanding on” the Biblical teaching – but because it did nothing more than *embody* and *summarize* the Biblical teaching.

SAINT AUGUSTINE THE REFORMER

Even while the Arian controversy concerning the Christian view of *God* was still being fought out in some regions, another controversy arose in the church, concerning the Christian view of *man*. Pelagius, a British monk whose life bridged the fourth and fifth centuries, was concerned that too much emphasis on the grace of God would have the effect of discouraging Christians from doing good works, and would breed an attitude of laxity and indifference regarding the holiness that is supposed to characterize the lives of Christians. He feared that the teaching that Christians are saved by grace alone, and not by their own works, would make the Christian faith seem to be a matter of divine determinism.

Pelagius knew that the orthodox Fathers of the church had always *rejected* the various forms of determinism or fatalism that were present in the teaching and worldview of the pagans and certain heretics. The Gnostics especially had taught that only *certain* people have a spark or remnant of divinity within them, and that these people alone will eventually be elevated to a higher spiritual plane; while all others, who lack this spark, are not the object of any divine soteriological interest. Pelagius knew that the earlier Fathers had generally emphasized instead, as the Christian alternative to determinism or fatalism, the *freedom of the human will*, by which Christians – without compulsion or coercion – earnestly and freely believe in Christ, and joyfully and willingly live out their faith in accordance with God’s revelation. This teaching was promulgated, in part, in the interest of emphasizing that the true God – as compared to the false gods of the pagans and the Gnostics – invites *all people* to be saved, and sincerely desires the salvation of all people.

Pelagius was especially drawn to the way in which St. John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople, had explained and applied these matters in his sermons. And so, in his desire to put forth a form of teaching in his own time that would encourage Christians toward a more fruitful life of good works, Pelagius picked up where the Golden-Mouth had left off, and expanded on the ideas of “free will” that he found in John’s writings.

Chrysostom, and many others like him, had not done a very good job in expounding on the mystery of divine “election” or “predestination,” which various texts of Scripture do mention. These Fathers for the most part “explained it away” in light of their overarching commitment to a “free will” mode of looking at, and interpreting, virtually everything regarding faith and the reception of salvation. Although some of the Fathers had a better grasp of these things than others, the general consensus of the earlier Fathers was that fallen man, even with his inherited tendency to sin, does retain an ethical “free will.” That was a misleading and imbalanced position, especially since these Fathers, as a rule, did not emphasize what would have been a necessary distinction between the human will *before* conversion, and the human will *after* conversion. These Fathers likewise did not emphasize, as they should have, an equally necessary distinction between the natural will *in regard*

²⁷Hägglund, p. 79.

to the things of earth, and the natural will in regard to the things of God. Such nuances in understanding when, how, and in what way the human will is or is not free, were not generally to be found in their writings. Rather, the will of fallen man was simply “free,” and not bound to an arbitrary, predetermined fate. That was what they felt they needed to say over against Gnosticism and similar forms of determinism, and so that is what they did say.

But Pelagius went much further than this. He said, in effect, that man is not really “fallen” at all. In principle, he maintained that the human race, by nature, retains its capacity to do everything that God commands, and to live a life without sin. As far as our innate moral character is concerned, we are born into the same moral condition in which Adam was created. Temptations to sin come as the result of negative *external* influences, and not from an *inner* corruption. There is no inherited sinfulness, passed on to us from our parents. There is only the bad *example* set for us by parents, insofar as our parents misuse their “free will” by making wrong ethical choices that are contrary to God’s law.

Pelagius could not completely ignore the existence of “grace” in the Christian scheme of salvation, since that word is plastered all over the Bible. But according to Pelagius, the reality of God’s saving “grace” is to be seen chiefly in the fact that God graciously gives us his law, so that we will know how to remain – or how to become once again – pure and good, as God wants us to be. God is “gracious” because in his law he tells us everything we need to know, when he requires us to live righteously, and when he promises to reward such righteousness. God is not capricious, and does not leave us guessing in fear and uncertainty, regarding the way of salvation by works that are pleasing to him. In his grace, he *tells* us what is pleasing to him.

Initially, Pelagius was reacting to some things that had been written in favor of a more genuine “grace alone” theology by the North African Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine. And when Pelagius went public in criticizing St. Augustine, and in putting forth his own new emphasis on human freedom and innate sinlessness, this elicited a strong and firm response from Augustine. G. W. H. Lampe summarizes this history in this way:

It was not until Augustine’s time that the relation of divine grace, to which every Christian ascribed the salvation of man, to the freedom of the human will, became a subject of controversy. It had...not been thought out in any systematic way by the early Christian writers. Predestination tended to be treated as a dangerous concept, and the Pauline passages which suggested it were something of an embarrassment which patristic commentators, such as Origen and Chrysostom in particular, sought to explain in terms which would not impugn the freedom of the human will to take the initiative in repentance and faith. This freedom was of central importance in the Christian apologetic against pagan fatalism and the influence of astrology, and in the orthodox repudiation of Gnostic determinism...²⁸

Augustine’s arguments against Pelagius were rooted chiefly in Scripture, and in what Scripture teaches regarding human sin and divine grace. In the process of digging into the sacred texts, he did reach the conclusion that many of the Fathers of earlier times, who were preoccupied with the threat of fatalism, did not read Scripture as carefully as they should have in regard to what it teaches on these topics. These well-intentioned Fathers were so concerned to make sure that they did not teach divine *determinism*, that they ended up not teaching divine *monergism* either. They over-corrected in such a way as to give encouragement – unwittingly – to someone like

²⁸G. W. H. Lampe, “Christian Theology in the Patristic Period,” in Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, editor, *A History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 155.

Pelagius, who came along later, and built his theology, not on their strengths, but on their weaknesses.

Augustine did not completely reject these Fathers as false teachers. He treated their writings with respect, as far as his Biblically-formed convictions would permit. In a sense, he built his theology on their strengths, while forgiving, and gently correcting, their weaknesses. But he also tested and evaluated their writings in the light of the supreme norming authority of Scripture, and accepted only what passed that test. Augustine said on one occasion:

What more can I teach you, than what we read in the Apostle? For Holy Scripture sets a rule to our teaching, that we dare not “be wise more than it behooves to be wise,” but be wise, as he says, “unto soberness, according as unto each God has allotted the measure of faith.”²⁹

And he wrote these words to St. Jerome:

To those writers alone who are called canonical I have learned to offer this reverence and honor: I hold most firmly that none of them has made an error in writing. Thus if I encounter something in them which seems contrary to the truth, I simply think that the manuscript is incorrect, or I wonder whether the translator has discovered what the word means, or whether I have understood it at all. But I read other writers in this way: however much they abound in sanctity or teaching, I do not consider what they say true because they have judged it so, but rather because they have been able to convince me from those canonical authors, or from probable arguments, that it agrees with the truth.³⁰

Augustine’s arguments for original sin and total human depravity in spiritual matters, and for salvation by the working of God’s grace alone, were fundamentally exegetical arguments. But he also knew that it was necessary to demonstrate that he was not inventing new doctrines, or new, unprecedented interpretations of the Bible, but was instead clarifying, and reiterating, the genuine catholic faith. One of his apologetic techniques in this respect was to appeal to the universally-approved practice of infant Baptism – which the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (quoting Acts 2:38) declares to be “for the remission of sins.” He noted, therefore, that the church has always implicitly recognized the sinfulness of people from birth, even if this belief was not explicitly unfolded and expounded in a systematic and thorough fashion.

Augustine also mined the writings of the earlier Fathers for examples of sound and valid insights on the teaching of sin and grace, which were brought to bear against Pelagius’s heretical teaching. Augustine’s treatise *Against Julian* – an ally of Pelagius – which is chock-full of citations from respected Christian teachers of the past, is the best example of this. In this treatise, Augustine sought to demonstrate that St. Ambrose (his own catechizer and baptizer) had consistently taught the Biblical position on these questions. For example, among other citations from the great Milanese bishop, Augustine quoted him as saying:

²⁹Saint Augustine of Hippo, “On the Good of Widowhood,” 2; in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983 reprint), First Series, Vol. III, p. 442. The quotation is from Romans 12:3.

³⁰Saint Augustine of Hippo, Letter to Jerome; quoted in *Biblia cum glosa ordinaria et expositione Lyre litterali et morali* (Basel: Petri & Froben, 1498), Vol. 1, “On the canonical and non-canonical books of the Bible” (translated by Michael Woodward).

“Adam was, and in him we all were. Adam perished and in him all perished.”³¹

And Augustine was also able to demonstrate that other influential figures of the past, who *sometimes* did not express themselves very well on these matters, had taught soundly enough and clearly enough at *other* times to indicate that, if they had had occasion to think these things through more carefully, they would have been more consistent, and not have articulated the admittedly weaker expressions that the Pelagians were now highjacking into their false system.³² Examples of such sound statements that he cited are St. Irenaeus’ reference to “the ancient wound of the Serpent,”³³ and a comment of St. Cyprian of Carthage regarding “the contagion of the ancient death.”³⁴

A questionable statement by Chrysostom that the Pelagian bishop Julian had quoted – that infants “not having sins” are baptized³⁵ – was interpreted by Augustine as charitably as possible, to mean that such infants had not yet consciously committed personal “sins of their own.” Augustine did not pretend that this was not, in itself, a weak expression. But Augustine also reminded Julian that the theology of Chrysostom must be evaluated in the context of the contemporary theology of his brother bishops, who on this point did not even give the *appearance* of allowing for a Pelagian notion of sin. He posed this question to Julian:

Do you, then, dare to set these words of the holy Bishop John in opposition to so many statements of his great colleagues, and separate him from their most harmonious society,

³¹Saint Ambrose of Milan, “Commentary on Luke,” 7.234 (on Luke 15:24); quoted in Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Against Julian: The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 35 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1957), p. 11.

³²Martin Chemnitz points out that there were similar personal inconsistencies in the teaching of the ancient and medieval Fathers on the article of justification: “...the ancient writers spoke with the greatest security (as Augustine says) – and most unfortunately – concerning this article when they were engaging in general rhetoric in sermons and homilies, or when they were carrying on a debate with heretical adversaries. But when they were forced to deal with those passages in which we find the *sedes doctrinae* of the matter, then the actual evidence of the divine revelation convinced them to explain this doctrine more correctly and properly, as we can see in the commentaries of Origen, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, and others. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that sometimes even monks who had preached at great length on merits and the righteousness of works learned the correct understanding of the article of justification, not in their idle contemplations, their sharp disputations, or their rhetorical declamations, but in serious trials, when the conscience was pressed down by a true sense of sin and the wrath of God, as if it had been dragged before His tribunal. For there, as the conscience worriedly looks around and wonders how it can escape the judgment of damnation and stand in the sight of God, it learns to understand Paul’s statement in Rom. 3:28. Thus Anselm and Bonaventura speak entirely differently regarding the article of justification in their disputations than they do in their meditations. There are some lovely statements in the meditations of Augustine and Anselm and in the Soliloquy of Bonaventura. Bernard [of Clairvaux] also speaks far more fittingly than the others about the article of justification, because he is not carrying on some idle debate but is presenting his conscience before the judgment of God as if it were to state its case, and from this come the most beautiful thoughts in Bernard’s writings” (*Loci Theologici*, Vol. II, p. 473).

³³Quoted in Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Against Julian*, p. 7.

³⁴Quoted in Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Against Julian*, p. 8

³⁵Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilia ad neophytos*; quoted in Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Against Julian*, p. 27. Julian had actually quoted this statement of Chrysostom by means of a garbled Latin translation, which had made his teaching seem much worse than it was. Augustine corrected that, and then put the best construction on what Chrysostom had actually said. See *Against Julian*, pp. 25-27.

and constitute him their adversary? Far be it, far be it from us to believe or say such an evil thing of so great a man. Far be it from us, I say, to think that John of Constantinople, on the question of the baptism of infants and their liberation by Christ from the paternal handwriting, should oppose so many great fellow bishops, especially the Roman Innocent, the Carthaginian Cyprian, the Cappadocian Basil, the Nazianzene Gregory, the Gaul Hilary, the Milanese Ambrose. There are other matters on which at times even the most learned and excellent defenders of the Catholic rule do not agree, without breaking the bond of the faith, and one speaks better and more truly about one thing and another about another. But this matter about which we are now speaking pertains to the very foundations of the faith. He who would overthrow in the Christian faith what is written: 'Since by a man came death, by a man also comes resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made to live' [Rom. 5:19], strives to take away all that we believe in Christ. Christ is fully the Saviour of infants as well. They shall certainly perish unless redeemed by Him, for without His flesh and blood they cannot have life. This John, too, thought and believed and learned and taught. But you twist his words according to your doctrine.³⁶

On the topics of original sin and divine monergism in human salvation, Augustine, like Athanasius, was not only an orthodox teacher for his time, responding to the heresies of his time. He was also a reformer, who recognized, from the vantage point of the controversy into which he had been drawn, that many of the earlier Fathers' statements on these matters could have been worded in a better way than they were. In responding to Pelagius, therefore, he did not limit himself to a repetition of what had been said before, and he also did not simply build on what had been said before. Some of the things that earlier teachers had said, on the doctrine of human sin and divine grace, he no longer said. And what he did say, in general, was better, clearer, and stronger than what had been said before.

And as is usually the case with theological reformers, his teaching was not accepted right away by the rest of the church. The Eastern Church, in fact, has never really accepted it.³⁷ Many polemical partisans of Eastern Orthodoxy even to this day deliberately slight the famous North African bishop with the appellation "Blessed Augustine," which is deliberately said as a substitute for "*Saint* Augustine." And even in the West, where his teaching in its essential points was considered to be normative for a time, the Augustinian doctrine of sin and grace – or more precisely, the *Biblical* doctrine of sin and grace which Augustine confessed – was largely

³⁶Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Against Julian*, pp. 25-26.

³⁷The modern Eastern Orthodox Church does not enjoy unanimity in its midst in its teaching on sin and grace. There are some segments of Eastern Orthodoxy that actually teach a view of sin that is, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable from the Pelagian view! The following originally appeared in an official publication of the Self-Ruled Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese; is posted on the web site of this Orthodox jurisdiction; was reprinted in an official publication of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the United States of America; and is also posted on the web site of *that* Orthodox jurisdiction: "My daughter just had a child. Holding him, I thought, 'It is so difficult to believe that an infant's heart is sinful.' Many teach this, but not Orthodoxy. We do not believe that we are totally depraved, as many Protestants do. Nor do we believe we are born with the guilt of sin, as the Romans teach. Instead, we are born in innocence and our heart is pure. To be sure, we all sin. Yet some, as did our Lady the Birthgiver-of-God, continue in purity of heart the rest of their lives, as blameless. Mary was as human as we are, yet morally pure throughout her life. We are all born in the same condition and we have the choice to keep our hearts pure and directed towards God, or to sin and rebel against the purity of a loving heart. Our lives become a continual struggle to conform our hearts to purity and holiness. Recognize this, and we are on our way to becoming Orthodox" (Rick Burns, "What is Primary to Orthodox Spirituality?," *The Word* [November 2006]; posted online at www.antiochian.org/node/17685; reprinted in *Ukrainian Orthodox Word*, Vol. LIX, Issue 3 [March 2009], p. 16; posted online at uocofusa.org/files/publications/UOW/2009/UOW-2009-03.pdf).

supplanted in the Middle Ages by a “semi-Pelagian” view, so that it was in need of being recovered and renewed in the sixteenth-century Lutheran Reformation (which it was).³⁸

CONCLUSION

The topic of this essay has been “reformations before the Reformation.” Were there reformations before the Reformation? From one perspective, there was almost nothing *but* reformations before the Reformation! And there have been many reformations *since* the Reformation. The entire history of the church, in its institutional life, has been characterized by a spirit of “reformation” in every generation. Sometimes these reformations have been small and almost unnoticeable. Sometimes they have been profound. But every generation is expected by the Lord of the Church to test itself in the light of Holy Scripture, to add what is lacking, to remove what is wrong, to strengthen what is weak, and to clarify what is obscure. “If you abide in my word,” Jesus says, “you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32, ESV). Hermann Sasse writes that “reformation,” broadly considered in this way,

is a *continuous process*. It is a continuous process not only in the sense that this renewal from the Word of God *ought* to take place again and again, but also in the sense that *it is actually happening* all the time. Every real sermon contributes to such a renewal. This kind of reformation takes place every Sunday – every day, in fact. For the church literally lives by the Word of God. It would not exist any longer, if it did not experience a renovation by the Word of God again and again.³⁹

This does not mean, of course, that God is “reinventing” the church over and over again every day. There is only one church of Jesus Christ. This is a deeply necessary Lutheran conviction. For this reason, as Sasse also states,

Lutheran theology...lays great emphasis on the fact that the evangelical church is none other than the medieval Catholic Church purged of certain heresies and abuses. The Lutheran theologian acknowledges that he belongs to the same visible church to which Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux, Augustine and Tertullian, Athanasius and Irenaeus once belonged. The orthodox *evangelical* church is the legitimate continuation of the medieval Catholic Church... For the orthodox evangelical church is really identical with the orthodox catholic church of all times.⁴⁰

The one, eternal church of Christ experiences its *continuity* in this world by means of its continuous *reformation*. The world, the flesh, and the devil are always threatening the church because they are always attacking the Gospel, and are always attempting to dilute, mute, and obscure the Gospel. But God, providentially, is also always raising up faithful and gifted pastors and teachers for his church, whom he calls and energizes to bring the Gospel back into focus; to

³⁸The Lutheran Reformers did not, of course, endorse everything Augustine ever said on every topic. Augustine’s teaching on salvation by divine grace alone, because of fallen man’s complete inability to save himself, or to contribute toward his salvation, was seen as his most important and most enduring contribution to Confessional theology. He was not often quoted on the topic of the Lord’s Supper, however, since here his teaching had notable weaknesses. In contrast, John Chrysostom was often cited by the Reformers as a sound teacher on the topic of the Lord’s Supper, but he was seldom considered to be an authority on the doctrine of sin and grace.

³⁹Sasse, p. 56. Emphases in original.

⁴⁰Sasse, p. 102.

correct the missteps of the past; and to proclaim the saving message of Christ with renewed vigor and clarity. *Ecclesia semper reformanda est.*

Soli Deo Gloria.

David Jay Webber +
Phoenix, Arizona
March 17, 2011
The Commemoration of St. Patrick,
Bishop, Missionary, Confessor

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