

The Correlation of Christ, Faith, Scripture, and Justification: A Doctrinal Investigation Based on the Distinction between Fundamental and Non-Fundamental Articles of Faith

Nebraska Lutherans for Confessional Study – March 27, 2014

Rev. Philip Hale

St. Paul, Bancroft; St. John, Lyons, NE — halepw@gmail.com

It is easy to be critical of previous generations for their weaknesses, flaws, and idiosyncrasies. Despite assumptions of progress or improvement, the current generation will also be seen in the same light. In fact, most of today's celebrated theologians, favorite seminary professors, and "ground-breaking" books will be forgotten, if the Lord allows the world to continue for several hundred more years. The very best theologians, whose work will endure, will likely be confined to footnotes in the history of theology. The task of proclaiming Christ's Word will go on, but the desire to say something new and seminal only fulfills the proverb: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9).

The old, enduring tomes of theology can provide a corrective to the near-sightedness and blind spots of present theology. The shift in emphasis between generations and historic periods provides distance and hindsight. This can be most helpful. The faithful proclaimers of the Word in the past can also be used to interpret the present. Their strengths are more difficult for us to uncover, because it requires exposing the shoddiness and short-sightedness of current times.

Interpreting and understanding an antiquated work takes real effort. It will not have popular cliches and well-worn patterns of thought. The concerns are likely different, as well as the language and terminology. This is definitely the case with the orthodox dogmaticians of the 17th century. Their scholastic methods and lengthy syllogisms make them abhorrent to the ADHD generation.

It is easy to dismiss out of hand a work as trite because it does not address the burning question of one's time. But there is value in considering works in their own context. Theological

products of another time provide isolation from the foibles and superficial assumptions of the prevailing theological atmosphere.

Theological Methods

In this technological day it is effortless to communicate rapidly. Perhaps it is too facile. Thoughts go out unedited, unformed, and unfiltered. Blogs and email make theological debate accessible to many, however, they make poor mediums for serious, comprehensive theological reflection.

Bite-sized communication media, fast-paced lives, and the desire to be pithy and biting have led to sloppiness and one word theologies. Have simple phrases replaced the multi-volume dogmatics of yesteryear? Slogans are bandied about without definition or context. Theological words are chanted as shibboleths or insults: “liturgical,” “incarnational,” “christological,” “sacramental,” “gnostic,” “pietist,” and “bronze-age.” But without context or definition, they are so imprecise as to convey anything but an emotional charge, like an explicative. A present theological deficiency is the desire to be so concise that terms are not accurately defined. With meanings waving like flags in the wind, it is impossible to reveal the depth and coherency of the doctrinal system given in Scripture.

The present topic, the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith, traces its fullest explication to the 1626 work of Nicolaus Hunnius, entitled *Diaskepsis Theologica*, meaning “Theological Examination.” The author’s father, Aegidius, was a respected Wittenberg Professor. Born in 1585, Nicolaus also was one himself for six years.¹ Afterwards, he became superintendent at the port city of Lübeck in northern Germany.² His chief work was not academic, but practical, as he “revitalized the somewhat moribund *Ministerium tripolitanum* of Lübeck, Hamburg, and Lueneberg in order to mount a combined offensive against the three enemies

¹“Hunnius, Aegidius,” and “Hunnius, Nikolaus” in *Christian Cyclopedia*, eds. Erwin L. Lueker, Luther Poellot, Paul Jackson (Internet Version: LCMS, 2000).

²Another of his works was well thought of: the 1525 *Epitome Credendorum*. William [Wilhelm] Loehe praises it in the preface to the 1847 English translation as: “an approved dogmatical work, in which every point of our faith is fully considered and represented agreeable to the true sense of Scripture.” Despite the desire for a more recent work, Loehe commends Hunnius’ work, written for laity and even youth, as the best available. *Epitome Credendorum: Containing a Concise and Popular View of the Doctrines of the Lutheran Church*, trans. Paul Edward Gottheil (Nuremberg, Germany: U. E. Sebald, 1847; online: https://openlibrary.org/books/OL24182681M/Epitome_credendorum), vi.

of Lutheranism there:” “enthusiasts;” “Roman Catholic missionaries,” “and the increasingly large Reformed communities.”³ The actions of the latter served as the impetus for Hunnius’ *Diaskepsis*.

Hunnius’ *Diaskepsis* is a salutary corrective for our own time. This work is still the classic formulation of the teaching of the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles. It is a difficult work to read. Scholastic definitions abound and the entire book is one giant syllogism. There are some theological weaknesses as well, as is wont with sinners handling God’s Word. Despite its style and format, it is a classic tome of Lutheranism, of which there are few.

This paper will not try to unravel Hunnius’ train of thought or justify his method in *Diaskepsis*. It will highlight some of his insights which show a well-thought-out relationship between doctrine, faith, and Christ. This paper contends for the relevance of the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles and aims to apply it to illuminate the article of justification and its relationship to all other articles of doctrine.

The Question Determines the Answer

The idea that certain doctrines are non-fundamental seems absurd without context. The classification of doctrines Hunnius made is often the object of ridicule today.⁴ But the goal of Hunnius was not to be lauded by the 21st century. Hunnius did not crassly rank doctrine from most important to least. He did not imply that “secondary fundamental” and “non-fundamental” articles of faith were easily discarded. Being sloppy or superficial is not a caricature that applies to the orthodox dogmaticians. We must meet Hunnius in his words which answer his theological question and purpose, which is not necessarily ours.

The narrow question of *Diaskepsis* is: how is doctrine viewed from the vantage point of faith? Hunnius highlights both differences and unity in scriptural doctrines as observed from God-given

³Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, quoted in the foreword to Nicolaus Hunnius, *Diaskepsis Theologica: A Theological Examination of the Fundamental Difference between Evangelical Lutheran Doctrine and Calvinist or Reformed Teaching*, trans. Richard Dinda and Elmer Hohle (Malone, Texas: Repristination Press, 2001), x.

⁴One article concludes mockingly: “Is God a secondary primary fundamental doctrine? Your call.” David P. Scaer, “God as Secondary Primary Fundamental Doctrine,” in *CTQ*, 75 (2011), 61.

faith in an individual's heart. While scholastic methods and the distinguishing of articles may be used to alienate doctrines from one another, Hunnius shows their inner consistency and united purpose.

C. F. W. Walther defended Hunnius: "It was not the purpose of Hunnius to show what must be believed, for among Christians it is self-understood that they believe Scripture. But here he wants to point out which articles of faith are necessary for kindling faith in the human heart and which are not."⁵ Hunnius' work answers a very specific question. By his definition: "The true foundation of faith is the characteristic and immediate cause which of itself generates faith. It allows no other causes in addition to itself and excludes those things which oppose the true cause."⁶

Diaskepsis is very much like an elegant mathematical proof, which makes it challenging to grasp as a whole and poor bedtime reading. But Hunnius articulates and fleshes out in a powerful way the typical Lutheran slogan: "Justification is the article by which the Church stands or falls."

The word "fundamental," "in the history of the Church has been so bandied about, so miserably perverted, so monopolized for certain ends, so twisted by articles of interpretation, as if a man could use it to mean anything he pleased."⁷ The idea of fundamental doctrines in our context usually denotes a reduction in doctrinal content and subscription, implying that the less than fundamental articles may be sacrificed on the way to ecumenical unity. As an example, the teaching of fundamental doctrines is said to be "useful, since by emphasizing the great cardinal articles of the Christian faith, it promotes the union of the various parts of the Christian Church and develops a spirit of tolerance with regard to the articles of lessor importance in which they disagree."⁸ Conversely, conservative fundamentalist groups today select a few biblical teachings to trenchantly confess, in polemical opposition to the dominant spirit of the culture—ignoring purity of doctrine and the unity of Scripture. Neither of these modern tendencies is what Hun-

⁵C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), I:182.

⁶Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 57.

⁷Charles P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1871; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 181.

⁸*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge: Embracing Biblical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology and Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Biography from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, eds. Albert Hauck and Samuel Macauley Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977), 411.

nus had in mind when he wrote *Diaskepsis* almost 400 years ago. It is tragically ironic that Hunnius' work was written to dissuade and prove union with the Calvinist Reformed impossible, though the results have been twisted as an invitation for doctrinal apathy.

The discrimination of fundamental and non-fundamental articles actually comes from Scripture, in I Cor. 3:9-17:

For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.⁹

Individual Christians, not doctrine in abstract, are buildings in various states. Faith in people varies with regard to strength and quality. Doctrine relied upon and believed builds the heart upon Christ. Trust in that teaching of God establishes the believer. Justified Christians are a building, the temple built by God, in various states of repair.

While doctrine is multifaceted with many articles and truths, and faith differs in strength, faith itself is binary. The foundation is Christ and one is either in Christ and righteous or outside of Him and under God's wrath. One is either in the one holy Church by faith in Christ, or outside and without true, saving faith. It is not the personal trust itself which makes one alive to God, but faith's proper object: Christ, the foundation of saving faith. "Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built" (Lk. 6:47-48). There are only two judgments on the Last Day. At that time the true object of each one's faith will be shown.

⁹All passages are ESV.

How do doctrine and saving faith relate? “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” But others build on the true foundation with “gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,” which is not the foundation itself. In other words, orthodoxy, the accurate knowledge of every Christian article, is not a prerequisite for saving faith. No one is saved by the purity of explicated doctrine.

Yet, there is a close relationship between faith and doctrine, explained by their connection to the foundation, which is Christ. Some articles are necessary to build the foundation, while some false teachings destroy the foundation. But not all untrue teachings added upon the foundation result in damnation for the believer who still possesses Christ. “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” The Apostle does not say that false teaching or a complete lack of true teaching is unimportant. That person who is taught, or teaches, falsely, while the foundation is unharmed, “will suffer loss,” but is saved. This passage also delineates the builder, that is, the teacher of doctrine, from the building, the one taught and who believes. I Cor. 3 relates doctrines to faith in Christ, which is the scriptural teaching of the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines.

The question that Hunnius deals with is not fellowship, but what doctrine is necessary to kindle and sustain faith, that is, found a person on Christ, the living Savior. *Diaskepsis* analyzes doctrine as a structure in the mind and heart of sinners. Like a physical structure, some doctrinal content is essential, while other articles do not make a building a building, that is, compose the sure foundation of Jesus Christ. But windows, doors and paint, the non-fundamentals, certainly improve the building and make it whole and more sure.

Scripture and Doctrine

Scripture is often the starting point in theological prolegomena, the things spoken beforehand. However, as a part of the prolegomena it is before the theological task proper. That does not diminish its importance in the least. But it must be used properly as God intended. It is not enough to be “in the Word,” a pious, though dubious, modern slogan. Many portions of Scripture

separate from God, cause despair, work sin, and actually damn. It is not contact with random biblical words that generates and sustains faith.

Scripture is the only doctrinal authority. It is not the proper object of faith or its foundation. Standing on pages of the Bible or memorizing them does not mean that one will stand before Christ righteous on the Last Day. “Curse God and die,” is inspired by the Spirit (Job 2:9), but would make a poor sermon theme. Lutherans do not hold to a “flat” reading of Scripture, as if every single word is proportionately useful to a Christian or in elucidating a particular doctrine.¹⁰ All of God’s Word is profitable for salvation, though not all parts are equally profitable in precisely the same way. It requires a skilled builder to engineer and erect a complete and unshakable temple that will last for eternity.

“Although the unity of Holy Scripture does not demand that all its statements be considered of equal importance for faith and life, this attribute of the Word of God will not permit any feat of subtraction.”¹¹ From the vantage point of the faith, which lays hold of Christ and founds the sinner upon God’s mercy, passages of Scripture are decidedly unequal. That does not make any of them extraneous or useless. Some teachings are closer and some are further from the foundation, which is Christ Himself, in the structure on which faith relies.

Early in Lutheranism it was sufficient to emphasize the singularity of Scripture as the source of doctrine. Rome’s insistence on tradition and its magisterium, made the teaching of Scripture alone enough to set Lutherans apart. “The Regensburg disputations [1601] exposed a weakness in early Lutheranism’s ecclesiastical thinking. While emphasizing their *sola scriptura* principles, Lutherans had given relatively little thought to developing a formal mechanism for adjudicating disagreements between competing interpretations of Scripture.”¹² Aegidius Hunnius, the father of Nicolaus, formulated the Lutheran response at Regensburg. It became clear that subscribing to Scripture alone is not enough to maintain doctrinal purity.¹³

¹⁰The use of *sedes doctrinae*, passages which establish and explain a doctrine, is a result of this reality.

¹¹Paul E. Kretzmann, “Fundamental and Non-fundamental Doctrines—and Church Fellowship,” online paper: <http://www.confessionallutherans.org/papers/funddocs.htm>.

¹²Kenneth G. Appold, “Abraham Calov on the ‘usefulness’ of Doctrine: Blueprints for a Theological Mind,” in *Hermeneutica Sacra: Studien Zur Auslegung Der Heiligen Schrift Im 16. Und 17. Jahrhundert. Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture*, No. 9, eds. Torbj Rn Johansson, Robert Kolb, Johann Anselm Steiger (Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 296.

¹³Appold, “Abraham Calov,” 295.

Today, being a “bible-believer” is the analogue for holding to *sola scriptura*. While good in itself, it says little to nothing about one’s doctrinal foundation or hope of eternal life.¹⁴ “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (II Tim. 3:16). Not all parts of God’s Word are necessary for building a living hope based on Christ risen from the dead. John 3:16 is rightly more pointed to than the ceremonial law in Leviticus. That should not diminish any part of Scripture in the eyes of the believer. There is a God-given unity and purpose in Scripture.

The Lutheran Confessions, referencing I Cor. 3, speak of

“the foundation,” that is, the true knowledge of Christ and faith. Even though here 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 did not overturn their faith. But most of what our opponents defend does overthrow faith, as when they condemn the article on the forgiveness of sins in which we said that the forgiveness of sins is received by faith.¹⁵

Scripture itself also speaks of some teaching as more essential and foundational to faith: “Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God” (Heb. 6:1). All doctrine supports faith, is God-given, and is intrinsically valuable. The various articles are united in their single purpose, though some support faith more directly and adhere closer to Christ.

The chronological order in which doctrine is to be presented is not fixed by Scripture. But the doctrinal structure built in hearts requires a skilled builder. The doctrine of election is a true comfort, but Romans 9-11 is not a standard passage for Lutherans in evangelizing unbelievers. Without knowledge of Christ’s work and the forgiveness of sins by faith, election by itself does not generate faith.

The Roman Church denied the distinction of statements in Scripture. “Jesuit Adam Tanner

¹⁴It actually seems to speak more of moral positions, such as those dealing with alcohol, abortion, and homosexuality.

¹⁵AP VII, 20-21; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 177.

asserted at the colloquy at Ratisbon [1541] that every statement in Scripture has the force of doctrine and could be considered an article of faith. Was it an article of faith that Judah committed incest and Tobias' dog wagged its tail?"¹⁶ By picking one's favorite passage, Scripture can be made to say anything, if every word is equal in regards to what is to be believed for salvation. Despite the many authors, books, and styles, God's Word features an intrinsic doctrinal unity and structure. It is helpful to know this distinction between articles, to see more clearly the overall, eternal purpose for which they were given: "each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done."

Doctrine and Faith

"Faith" is a much abused word. It has a secular meaning, in addition to a myriad of semi-pelagian definitions. Some theologians desire to avoid mentioning the word altogether because of all its baggage. However, it is a biblical teaching.

Faith is subjective, it resides in a person. It varies in quality,¹⁷ but that fact does not influence salvation. "If faith is not mistaken in its object, but lays hold of it, be it ever so trembling, with ever so weak a confidence, with only the striving for and desiring of it, such faith is indeed small and weak, but nevertheless true faith."¹⁸

An important conclusion is that there is no faith without doctrinal knowledge of Christ. The proclamation of the Gospel gives knowledge of Christ, so that faith actually lays hold of Christ.¹⁹ That is why the Gospel is called the "power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). All of God's Word is powerful, but not every individual passage lays the foundation of Christ for its hearers. There is a difference between the source of Scripture, God Himself, and how that Word is used

¹⁶Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: CPH, 1970), I:15.

¹⁷"O you of little faith" Mt. 14:31.

¹⁸Martin Chemnitz, quoted in: Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols., trans. T. Engelder, J. T. Mueller, and W. W. F. Albrecht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), II:428.

¹⁹"But if it is true faith, it is a sure and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in faith itself." Luther, *Lectures Galatians* (1535), LW 26:129.

upon men. It can make guilty; teach morals, grammar, or writing style; or forgive sins and save.

Faith is more than an intellectual knowledge of Scripture, memorizing doctrine, or reciting facts of Christ's life. It does have a doctrinal and intellectual component, but it is not merely a human work of understanding. Hunnius states: "Also, because I am not now worried about the foundation of piety but of faith—the historical and moral dogmas of things, not which one must *do* but which he must *believe*—we must remove completely for they [the things we must do] never deserve to be called 'articles of faith.'"²⁰

"Article of faith" is imprecise language. "Faith stems from doctrine; but part of this doctrine is not strictly a part of the faith which stems from this doctrine. It therefore deserved to be called not an article of faith but an article of the doctrine of faith."²¹ Faith is not doctrine, but it relies upon the doctrine which brings Christ. But not all articles of the one body of doctrine are equally foundational to making sinners God's temple.²²

Faith, according to Hunnius, is described by three contemporaneous elements: knowledge of God's mercy in Christ, assent to those truths as known, and confidence which appropriates Christ's righteousness.²³ While subjective faith in the person is impossible to study, true faith wrought by the Spirit "actually lays hold of Christ."²⁴ Faith is not concerned with its own subjective qualities. It is the "application of Christ merit," and "apprehension and application of divine grace made through Christ."²⁵ There is a common doctrinal foundation, witnessed to by Scripture, underlying all true faith in men. It is God who gives the promises which offer Christ, reckons faith as righteousness, and justifies in time with the righteous verdict that will be public at the Last Day.

The investigation into the nature of the foundation of faith is not a jettisoning of doctrinal integrity. It is an inquiry into the foundational promises based on Christ on which true faith must rest. The foundational articles are the heart of the Gospel which builds one on Christ,

²⁰Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 28.

²¹Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 27.

²²"An article of faith is so called through a metaphor taken from the parts of the body, especially the fingers which cling to each other with an intimate connection, and to note that an article is a part coupled to the rest by an intimate bond." Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 27.

²³Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 22.

²⁴Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II:423.

²⁵Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 23, 17.

without which there is no salvation.

Scripture and Justification

Doctrine is derived from Scripture, though not all scriptural statements constitute an article of doctrine on which faith relies. That has led some of the modern era to deny its historical statements. It is a sin to call God a liar, and Scripture is His Word. To deny any statement in it is dangerous and could lead to the loss of faith.

Scripture, while important, is not a part of the foundation of faith, since not all believers have had it. “The doctrine of Holy Scripture is not common to every time and to all people because at some time it was unknown; namely, when it did not exist.”²⁶ One may have Christ and His Word without the Bible. However, there is a distinction between being ignorant of Scripture, like Abraham, and denying clear statements it makes. By itself, an incorrect doctrine of inspiration does not damn. An error in this article of Scripture could cause one to deny the foundation of faith, since the written Word does give the doctrine which delivers Christ.

The one who denies that Scripture is God’s Word errs. Not because faith rests on this article of *sola scriptura*, but because it cuts one off from the source of the teaching which enlightens man and creates faith. “He who denies that the Word of God exists errs dangerously and morally but doesn’t undermine faith dogmatically.”²⁷ The error itself is not incompatible with faith, though practically this is a dangerous position to hold.

The denial of individual statements of Scripture is also hazardous. Depending on the statement, it may be incompatible with faith. To deny the general resurrection is to deny Christ’s resurrection and our future hope, which is to have no saving faith (I Cor. 15). However, to deny creation in six days does not necessarily negate faith, though it does endanger it. That would make it a non-fundamental doctrine. One could say that six days is much too long for God to take to create, that instead he did it in an instant. That is a denial of a clear article, but does not overturn by itself the foundation. On the other hand, an evolutionist might use his theory

²⁶Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 70.

²⁷Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 162.

to deny that God made man. If the conclusion is drawn that God cannot redeem what was not His creation originally, faith is no longer grasping the true Christ—the foundation has been overturned.

While Scripture is the source for theology, the actual list of books which comprise Scripture is not an article of doctrine for faith. “We deny, the catalog of canonical books to be an article of faith, the rest of what is asserted in Scripture having been added on. Many have faith and they are able to seek after salvation, who do not hold the number of the canonical books.”²⁸ Scripture is critical for the theological task, but it does not constitute a part of the foundation of faith.

Denial or ignorance of non-foundational dogmas must be analyzed as to their conclusions. It is false to say that heterodoxy condemns or that orthodoxy is a requirement to be justified. Such a position would actually be a denial of the forgiveness of sins Christ won for all men. This distinction allows one to judge scriptural errors in relation to faith. For example, some of the history presented in the Creed is extraneous to faith. Not knowing of Pontius Pilate does not harm faith, though denying it could lead one to doubt the certainty of Jesus’ historical expiation of sins. By itself, apart from believing the foundational articles, a confession of Scripture’s nature or its history does not justify.²⁹

Salvation and Purity of Doctrine

Be careful of making conclusions for others and damning them, when they do not state the conclusion one *could* make. The heart cannot be judged like explicated doctrinal statements. There is a wide difference between the ignorant, those misled by wolves in sheep’s clothing, and those who maliciously deny a teaching. Not every dogma serves faith in the same way and the consequences of a false teaching are dependent on things one cannot know. Not everyone who kicks in a wall or smashes a window bulldozes his temple, though that person should be warned

²⁸Quenstedt, quoted in: Johann Wilhelm Baier, *A Compendium of Positive Theology*, ed. C. F. W. Walther, trans. Ted Mayes (unpublished draft, 2012), 100 (I, 34, c).

²⁹“What good does it do the Jews to believe that there is one God and that He is the Creator of all, to believe all the doctrines, and to accept all of Holy Scripture, when they deny Christ.” *Luther’s Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-86), 27:38.

as to what he is doing if the trend continues.

Christians should not have fellowship with error, but to deny that every errorist has fellowship with Christ is to deny the mercy of God. Even the sin of doctrinal error can be forgiven, if that person has a faith which still relies on Christ. But all doctrinal error jeopardizes the stability of the entire structure. The goal is not to build a shanty which cannot withstand storms of suffering, but a cathedral which cannot be washed off Christ, the Rock. The goal of all doctrine is man's salvation in Christ, that is, his justification before the Father.

Lutherans are vigilant about the purity of their doctrine. Not as an end in itself or because all Lutherans have Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

Now, let it be observed that Paul in I Cor. 3 by no means wishes to say that a Christian merely has to accept the articles that are fundamental, that everything else belongs to the category of open questions where there is liberty and that nobody should look upon a person askance or censure him when in dealing with matters of this category [of non-fundamental articles] he either accepts or rejects what the Scriptures clearly teach. On the contrary, St. Paul and all other writers of Holy Scripture testify that a little leaven of false teaching leavens the whole lump, that no man has the liberty to add or subtract anything with respect to the Word of God.³⁰

All doctrine serves the purpose of faith. None of it is optional or up to man's discretion to believe. Yet, not every denial of a doctrine leads to the loss of the foundation. Everyone should be thankful, because there is much wood, hay, and straw strewn about in churches and even upon on the true foundation among laity in orthodox Lutheran churches. That does not absolve preachers of skillfully building upon Christ with "gold, silver, precious stone," that is, the true doctrines, including the non-fundamental.

Lutherans maintain purity of doctrine for the sake of Christ, that He may be formed in all sinners.³¹ A minister should demolish false doctrine, though that is not the end goal. Without contradicting error, sinners may be lost by depending on what does not justify. It is critical to remember that destroying error is not yet arriving at the truth. The foundation of faith is

³⁰C. F. W. Walther, "The False Arguments for the Modern Theory of Open Questions," in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, No. 4-11 (1939), trans. William Arndt and Alexander Guebert (online: Fort Wayne: Walther Library Concordia Theological Seminary, <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/etext/Walther/WaltherOpenQuestions.pdf>), 256.

³¹"It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" Gal. 4:18-19.

positive, so that it can be trusted with confidence. The content of the Gospel incites hope in the sinner. All polemics and all doctrinal exposition ultimately serve this purpose: to allow Jesus to shine as the light of the world, so that each individual may come to a knowledge of the truth and appropriate His righteousness.

An intrinsic unity binds all doctrine together, even though sinful man is often saved in spite of his dilapidated doctrinal state. One who holds that Scripture is God's Word should know that "one Word of God is all and that all are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond."³² The distinction of fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines actually buttresses this truth, by showing that all articles are different, yet serve God's evangelical will. "Only after a man is justified does he take the right attitude toward the entire Scripture, believing that Scripture is God's Word But this love of the Law and of the entire Scripture has nothing to do with faith so far as it justifies."³³ All doctrines, including the distinguishing of articles and the preservation of sound doctrine, serve the purpose of salvation, even if some sinners are saved despite their preference for no roof on their temple.

Christian doctrine has man's eternal salvation as its ultimate goal. All its parts are aimed at it. "Whether they lead directly to it or only remove the impediments, regardless of how they lead or aim, they must stir up, promote, help, drive, etc. Also, in whatever way these parts do that, they are articles of Christian faith."³⁴ In Hunnius' view, the fundamental articles of faith are not just correct religious views to hold, but weight-bearing footings within the entire body of doctrine, which together cause faith to spring to life. They do not just witness to Christ but comprise the essential doctrine which puts the sinner into God's grace and justifies him.

Justification and Faith

It is effortless to deny salvation to others, who hold to false doctrine. However, it is dangerous to show less mercy than God. Public fellowship and the doctrine one officially associates with is an

³²Luther, *Lectures Galatians* (1535), LW 27:38.

³³Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II:424.

³⁴Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 28.

important public confession. But it not the criterion for salvation. The forgiveness of sins is had by all who hold to Christ and His mercy by faith. Lutherans have traditionally condemned the false doctrine of other Christians, while allowing that Christ forgives all sins: moral, religious, and doctrinal. This does not condone sin, but establishes mercy, not purity of doctrine, as the prevailing current in theology. Christ's sacrifice for all sin must be central.

In 1619 the Wittenberg faculty condemned Calvinist errors, but they were careful to judge the marks of that church and the doctrinal danger, while not making judgments about whether individual members were justified before God by saving faith:

The Calvinistic sect is damnable, since it goes against the foundation of the faith. . . . Not everyone who holds the misleading doctrine is to be damned for that reason. . . . Although such people, if God wanted to deal with them according to his justice, would also have little hope of their salvation . . . nevertheless it is right to have patience with them, as with people weak in faith, and with Christian love to hope for the best, and to pray for them, that God may be gracious to them, for they know not what they do.³⁵

This echoes Jesus' words from the cross over people who did not seem ignorant. While purity of doctrine should be sought, the Father's mercy through Christ applied to the sinner is actually the center of the Christian faith.

Doctrine is not the same as faith. It can be collected in books and dissected by academics. But it is misused if it does not lead to Christ and declare the sinner righteous before the Father. The article of justification summarizes this action of the Father. The goal of the Church is not to make orthodox robots, but hearts founded on grace and in reality remove the guilt of sins. Any article of doctrine not used for this purpose, however accurate, is misused.

While the idea of a central article has been used to deny Christ and unpopular articles, the true use of it unites all doctrines into their single, God-given purpose: to justify the sinner in heaven. "Luther wants every other doctrine to be drawn from the depth of the doctrine of justification; whatever does not flow from it is to him a shameful denial of Christ."³⁶ The article of justification is not just a teaching to be mentioned the most times. It is God's own action.

³⁵Nicolaus Hunnius was a Wittenberg professor at this time and this faculty opinion is congruent with the later *Diaskepsis*. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, "Post-Reformation Lutheran Attitudes Toward the Reformed Doctrine of God," in *CTQ* 75:1-2 (2011), 131-32.

³⁶Walther, *Essays*, I:55.

Justification is the nexus or link between God and man, the touchstone by which man knows a gracious God in Christ. “The central doctrine [of justification by faith] forms the nucleus of the whole dogmatic system, and around which all other doctrines of the system revolve.”³⁷

Justification does not merely talk about Jesus, it delivers Christ’s righteousness and causes the sinner to rely on it. There can be no standard book definition of justification. It is not a formula, but an action. God is the one who justifies and causes faith through the Gospel. Christ turns the holy and just Judge into a gracious Father for the condemned sinner. “This transformation of God occurs in heaven.”³⁸ This is not a change in God’s nature or attributes, but through Christ, God is now seen as merciful to the individual. Faith describes this new relationship. “The Gospel not only gives information concerning a new relationship between him who hears it and God; but it brings this relationship about.”³⁹ “Justification is the judicial act of God by which He sets the believing sinner free, . . . with the result that man becomes a child of God.”⁴⁰ Doctrine is applied to the individual and received in faith, so God is relied upon and his foundation is Christ.

This doctrine of justification summarizes the Gospel and encompasses all other doctrines, but more than that, it forgives sins and brings the lost into God’s kingdom. It happened not on the cross, but when this doctrine encounters a person in time and the Spirit works faith to cause him to trust and find confidence in God because of the crucified Christ. The act of justification opens heaven, re-orientes the believer in God’s grace, and causes him to lay hold of Christ.

Whatever is necessary to justify the sinner is, by definition, the foundation of saving faith, because it brings Christ and changes how God is seen. “For [Christ] knows that if they cling to it as the foundational and chief article of faith, they are in the lap of the Holy Spirit,” and can overcome all enemies and “everything that happens to them. . . . For this knowledge does all things. It affords us all wisdom; it gives us God with all His goods; it opens heaven; it shatters

³⁷E. Hove, *Christian Doctrine*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1930), 29.

³⁸Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, trans. H. George Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 312.

³⁹Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism: The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: CPH, 1962), 65.

⁴⁰Conrad Emil Lindberg, *Christian Dogmatics and Notes on the History of Dogma*, trans. C. E. Hoffsten (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1922), 326.

hell, the devil, and the world with all their wisdom and might, lies and murder.”⁴¹ This personal application of Christ’s doctrine marks justification as the center of theology, so that it makes all doctrine practical for salvation.

The idea of a fundamental truth and kernel of doctrine upon which faith must rest is biblical, but historically it is traced back to Luther. With him, “it was the first time in all the history of theology and dogma that the decisive truth of Christian faith was concentrated in such a fashion on one specific article.”⁴² It is God reaching down from heaven and choosing to love an object of wrath and making him His child. Justification is an action of God, not merely a definition or arrangement of words. Faith is not knowing facts or history about Christ, though it does include those. It is to know Jesus as the image and face of the only gracious God. Justification is God’s granting of the righteous decree in time, along with all of the attendant gifts of grace. Without knowing Christ and trusting that His righteousness has been applied personally, “the sun has lost its brilliance, and there is nothing but darkness. . . . And even if the Word concerning faith and Christ is retained—the heart has no foundation for a single doctrine. Whatever remains there is merely froth, flimsy opinions or illusions, and a painted and tinted faith.”⁴³

Despite Luther’s lead, justification as the nucleus of all theology has been variously challenged, even by Lutherans. But all other doctrines are confined to a limited scope, no matter how critical. Justification, the objective act, unites all individual articles and is the point of contact between God, man, and Christ.⁴⁴ The result is not visible until the Last Day, so the believer lives by faith. Faith does not rest only in temporal promises about earthly life, but primarily eternal life. Faith looks forward to Judgment Day, already having been justified in time. “There will be a day on which the doctrine of a preacher must be put to the test. That day is the day of temptation, the day of death, and Judgment day.”⁴⁵ I Cor. 3 testifies: “each one’s work will

⁴¹Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537-1538), LW 24:322. Luther disagrees with this assessment that “justification by faith” is merely a polemical tool against Rome: “Lutherans settled on justification as the fundamental doctrine because Rome held that works and not faith in Christ determine our standing *coram deo* (before God).” Scaer, “God as Secondary Primary Fundamental Doctrine,” 57.

⁴²Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 259.

⁴³Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537-1538), LW 24:321.

⁴⁴Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 175.

⁴⁵Walther, *Essays*, I:175.

become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.”

This driving purpose, by which God declares sinners righteous, unites and orients all articles of doctrine. Without this personal application and laying of the saving foundation in condemned people, theology would be a theoretical discipline.

Whoever is ignorant of this dogma: “God wants to have compassion on people who have fallen into sin”; that person can never claim with firm confidence that God wants to have compassion on him. After all, how can a person who doesn’t know that God wants to have mercy on any person conclude that God wants to have mercy on him in particular? For this reason it follows that this dogma: “God wants to have compassion on people who have fallen into sin” is a primary article of the foundation.”⁴⁶

By constructing a new relationship between God and man, theology becomes the most practical discipline and knowledge in the world.

Christ and Faith

The Christian faith can be expounded from many points of view. Whether one starts a presentation with God in His eternity, Jesus, creation, original sin, or heaven, all is merely talk until the sinner’s heart is founded upon Christ and God’s mercy is opened up to him personally. This uniting article of justification requires several doctrinal conclusions, especially concerning Christ. Justification is not a vacuum or empty word. It draws in all other doctrines. Because the foundation requires doctrinal assumptions and “justification by faith” seems formulaic, some Lutherans have searched for another principle teaching.

Though lacking, here is one such attempt: “Traditionally justification informs all the articles of faith, but this honor more appropriately belongs to Christology, which begins with Jesus, in whom we are justified.”⁴⁷ Christology, narrowly speaking, is the relationship of Christ’s two natures. While this knowledge is essential, by itself, it does not make the connection to man.

⁴⁶Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 29.

⁴⁷Scaer, “God as Secondary Primary Fundamental Doctrine,” 60.

Perhaps because faith is such a meddled topic in Christendom, it is easier to avoid faith altogether and talk about Jesus: “Recognition of the historical figure of Jesus as God is the first theological topic and should penetrate all theology.”⁴⁸ While it is tempting to agree, due to the necessity of Jesus for salvation, this view disagrees with classical Lutheran theology.

If the historical reality of Jesus is the touchstone of all theology, man need not be involved with Him or know him any certain way. Christianity is more than facts about Jesus and His person. Many who had saving faith did not know many details about Jesus, recognize his face, or touch him. The Old Testament saints did not know the date of His first advent or the many details of what He would do, which we have in the Gospels. The example of Nathanael is illustrative:

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” (John 1:45-48b)

Nathanael did not know Jesus, the man. He would not have recognized him or worshipped him. But Jesus knew Him and declared Him “an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit,” that is, a justified child of God. How can that be? Nathanael trusted in the coming Christ and His forthcoming work of redemption, and applied the promise of eternal of life through Him to himself, without knowing His name (Jesus), or the time of His birth.

Many were reckoned righteous before there was a “Jesus,” that point in time when God’s Son became man in Mary. Nathanael did not know the Messiah’s birth, or care about anyone in Nazareth, yet he believed for salvation. Those like Abraham did not start with Jesus, but “believed in a Messiah who would come.”⁴⁹ “We must necessarily suppose that we look to the foundation of faith not by reason of times and of various persons; rather it is one and the same for every time and for any persons at all.” Hunnius describes his universal approach: “I am investigating the foundation common to all the faithful at whatever time they lived, even to

⁴⁸Scaer, “God as Secondary Primary Fundamental Doctrine,” 58.

⁴⁹Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 37.

those who did not know that the Messiah had been revealed and did not know how to express Him with His proper name.”⁵⁰ It is not contact with the skin of Jesus, as the soldiers had, or visible sight, as the Pharisees had, that brings God’s favor and causes every deceit and iniquity to be taken away by Christ’s resurrection.

We know Christ by His work, which involves necessary assumptions about His human and divine natures: “You see, if one is ignorant of the divine and human natures, he cannot place the hope for so great a work in Him. If he is ignorant of the union, he then either tears apart dangerously the object of his faith or his faith does not rest upon a firm foundation.”⁵¹ We live to God only by faith: “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). The theological question is how man becomes founded upon Him who became man for men. The historical knowledge of Jesus necessary for salvation is very limited, since His works and righteousness are personally appropriated in faith. The overriding concern is not how much man knows of Jesus, but whether Christ knows man salvifically and sees him as righteous.

Christ is grabbed and laid hold of only in faith, not factual knowledge of His two natures. Faith is the only instrument given by God by which men are joined to Christ and partake of forgiveness and life. Faith requires a promise, yet christology, narrowly speaking, is not a promise, though it is a crucial piece of the foundation of faith.⁵² “It is the fundamental error of modern positive theologians when they make the Person of Christ the object of faith to the exclusion of the work of Christ, i.e., His fulfillment of the Law and His suffering of the penalty of the Law in the place of man.”⁵³ What is doctrinally necessary is not necessarily the chief article. We demand a right understanding of the two natures, God and man, in Christ, not for its own sake, but because it is necessary to preserve what Christ did for all men: He died for sin and rose from the dead.

Luther’s great work in theology was his re-discovery of the living Christ. Instead of metaphysical analyses of God and definitions of the qualities of the two natures of

⁵⁰Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 37.

⁵¹Hunnius, 133.

⁵²“Faith is born narrowly from a consideration of the promises of God.” Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 36.

⁵³Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II:426.

Christ, which was an intellectual process of the mind, and never touched Christ's saving work, Luther made the Person of Christ a part of the blessed personal experience of justification by faith.⁵⁴

A preacher does not preach only about Christ—he connects Jesus' works to listeners and incites hearts to live in Christ.

The actual foundation is Christ. But christology by itself does not place the sinner's trust on Christ or inspire hope of eternal life. St. Paul does not speak of Jesus' real historicity, in general, as the main theme of proclamation, but His particular work which earned sinners absolution: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). This dictum shows the intimate connection between the God-man and what He did for all the world, not just that he was real. "This justification does not coincide with the atonement on the cross, but is rather its fruit. God justifies you by not only announcing grace to you, but truly and actually receiving you into the relation of grace and sonship."⁵⁵ To be declared as righteous sheep on the Last Day, all must be individually placed on Christ, the foundation of faith, in a moment in time.⁵⁶ Justification is the Father's act of removing sin from the sinner and clothing him with Christ's righteousness. It is perhaps mistakenly called an 'article,' because it actually encompasses all other articles and encapsulates the salvific effect of God's Word. "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). The Spirit grabs sinners in time through the Gospel and justifies in the present for eternity.

The subject of justification, and by coherence, all Christian doctrine, is man. A sinner is acted upon and made to be righteous to the Father. Faith receives this righteousness and latches onto it, making it his own.

Because we have no other doctrine closer to faith, we certainly must say that this very doctrine establishes the foundation of faith intrinsically and, in fact, very closely. This assertion is of that type: "God wants all people to be saved and to come to the

⁵⁴Theodore Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as Embodying the Evangelical Confessions of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 771.

⁵⁵Edward Preuss, *Justification of the Sinner Before God*, trans. J. A. Friedrich (*Theological Monthly*, 1928-29; reprint, Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1970), 11.

⁵⁶Preuss, *Justification of the Sinner Before God*, 15.

knowledge of the truth.” This statement stirs the mind of the person listening that he subsumes: “I am a person,” and concludes: “God therefore wants me to be saved.” which is a good part of saving faith.⁵⁷

Faith is an inference that the doctrine of Christ is “for me” personally. When any doctrinal topic, though of critical importance by itself, is not used to deliver Christ’s righteousness, it is not used correctly. God’s teaching fabricates faith in people, so that Christ, the living God, becomes their foundation.

Justification, a divine action, unites all members of the saving truth by actually offering, applying, and procuring Christ’s righteousness through faith. This does not lead to doctrinal reductionism, but rather fidelity. “In the fundamental doctrine of justification all the other doctrines of the symbols are involved, so that every one who sincerely believes the one will be compelled to believe the others, if he carry out his faith.”⁵⁸ Without this internal coherency and uniting purpose, the articles will be disjointed and not used for building people into God’s temple.

It is a great error of our time that Jesus’ earthly life and humanity are denied, but the opposite of that error is not enough by itself to generate saving faith. One may know all of Jesus’ earthly history and actions in the Gospels, without it moving his heart or establishing faith. Justification relates the main purpose and unifying center of all theology. “For no one in the church can successfully counter an opponent or teach what is orthodox who does not rightly understand this article [of justification], or as St. Paul calls it, this sound doctrine, or who does not . . . firmly cling to this doctrine.”⁵⁹ It is not the term “justification” or a book definition that causes the Church to exist, but the action which transforms the holy Judge into a gracious Father by Christ, the light of the world. Salvation surely involves Christ, but it must also engage and touch man, since Christ died for all the world.

⁵⁷Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 30.

⁵⁸Gottfried Thomasius, quoted in: Schmauk, *The Confessional Principle*, 761.

⁵⁹Luther, Letter to Johann Brenz, quoted in: Francis Pieper, *The Church and Her Treasure: Lectures on Justification and the True Visible Church*, trans. O. Marc Tangner (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2007), 14.

Faith and Sacraments

It is disconcerting to modern Lutherans that the sacraments are not a part of the primary foundation of the faith. In classical dogmatic terminology they are called “secondary fundamentals.”⁶⁰ Despite seeming to be an insult to their importance, there is sound reasoning in this distinction.

A fundamental article refers to the foundation of doctrine by which Christ is built in a person. Faith rests on the structure of doctrine, which is how one knows Christ to believe in Him. “To believe in Christ is to believe the doctrine about Christ.”⁶¹ No orthodox Lutheran disputes the importance of the sacramental acts or is willing to compromise any doctrine. However, their relation to faith is correctly explicated by distinguishing them from the foundation necessary to kindle faith. While the sacraments confer life and the forgiveness of sins, their doctrine does not lie directly next to Christ, supporting Him foundationally.

The sacraments as act and as doctrine are different matters. Baptism is effective on an infant who has not been taught the power of the water and the Word. A Baptist never told of the power of his baptism does not need to be re-baptized, after learning the truth of it. The sacramental act remains firm, because it is God’s act. Knowledge of baptismal doctrine is not necessary for Christ to justify in the washing of regeneration.

Of the Sacraments and, in particular, of Baptism, there is this necessity that Christ denies with an oath that anyone is going to enter into the kingdom of God unless he has been born again of water and the Spirit, John 3:5. Therefore, just as the Word is necessary so that no adult receives faith unless he receives the Word, so also the sacrament of Baptism. This however, refers to practice and is related among things that one must do, which things we have already before removed from this plan of ours. Furthermore, as he who hears the Word but has heard nothing about the power and efficacy of the Word, nothing about the manner and means of its revelation and preaching, nothing about the necessity of hearing the Word and nonetheless obtains faith and is saved, so also he who as an infant uses Baptism to his salvation, although he may have heard absolutely nothing about its institution, substantial, fruit and work, draws faith and salvation from the baptismal font.⁶²

While Baptism and the Word are the means of conferring salvation, the foundation of doctrine and their efficacy does not depend on their being comprehended dogmatically. One may know

⁶⁰Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I:86.

⁶¹Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena*, 146.

⁶²Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 125.

Christ by faith without knowing exactly how he became founded on the Cornerstone. Explicit knowledge of the sacramental means or awareness of personal faith do not constitute the saving object of faith. The Word and sacraments as tangible means are essential if one is to have faith kindled, but doctrinal cognizance is a separate matter. This makes the doctrine of the sacraments not a part of the primary foundation of faith.

This is a vital subject, considering the doctrine of Baptism and the Lord's Supper is mangled and twisted by every other church, save orthodox Lutherans. The final goal of preaching is salvation, the justification of people, not a correct knowledge of how God acts to save. Did Abraham trust in the salutary washing of the water with the Word or articulate the real presence of the body of Christ in the Supper? No, and it was not necessary for his faith in the coming Christ. So today, one may deny the institution of circumcision, an Old Testament sacrament, without necessarily voiding his faith. Many Christians deny the substance of Christ's Supper, yet still receive forgiveness through means, in Baptism and the Word. But one cannot hope to be saved if he follows that doctrinal conclusion through and absents himself from all the means of salvation.

Hunnius proves his point:

I argue this way: whatever dogma, first, is not a cause of faith; second, was not set before people at all times to this end that they receive faith therefrom; third, was completely unknown to many without harming their faith; that dogma is not fundamental as constituting the entire foundation or entering it essentially. The doctrine regarding the Sacraments is such a dogma. The doctrine of the Sacraments, therefore, is not fundamental.⁶³

One must pay heed to what is meant by "fundamental." This distinction does not deny the necessity of those means by which Christ's passion is applied to us or that faith should rest in those promises. It is simply the recognition that alone the doctrine of the sacraments is not the intrinsic cause and dogmatic foundation of faith.

This recognition is of practical import. The sacraments are preached falsely if they do not direct the hearer to God's good disposition through Christ. It is not talking about the sacraments or bringing them to the forefront that sustains faith. The sacraments are instruments which direct

⁶³Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 126.

to Christ by forgiving sins. They are promises of Christ to be trusted, because they distribute the forgiveness of sins. This gives rise to faith, which depends on Christ Himself, who works through the sacramental means. The words of the Supper's institution direct to Christ's atonement and its fruit, which it actually gives: "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26:28). The proper object of faith is the crucified Christ, who works through those elements by His Word.

Defending and confirming Christ's real presence in the Supper is a characteristic Lutheran activity. It is vigorously asserted that the bread is Christ's body and the wine is Christ's blood, as Christ stated. In actuality, it is a polemical statement to preserve the truth of the Supper's institution. It serves a negative purpose to preserve the integrity of the meal. While necessary to counteract the false doctrine of those who make it merely a symbol, it is not sufficient as a support for faith. Having Christ's body available to eat does not help one who does not know Christ or His work. Christ's righteousness must be applied to the believer, so that Jesus is trusted and faith is engendered by all articles.

The truth of the Sacrament's substance must be turned into a promise: the real Christ offers His body and blood as a gift which reconciles to the Father. That person is well prepared who believes that he is a worthy recipient of that forgiving meal for the sake of Christ. He places faith in those words and accepts the inference that the words and elements are meant for him, to save and open up heaven to him. One justified today has the same faith as Abraham, who lacked the New Testament sacraments, but had his own which founded him on Christ.

The sacraments do not require pure doctrine to work effectively. Theologians draw a distinction between their essence and the benefits they bestow. Many deny the power of baptism, while keeping the doctrine concerning the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in its institution whole. They do not deny that God is triune, therefore they have a true and certain baptism, even though they suffer by lacking the full doctrine of baptism which can support faith. But those who deny the essence of the Supper, that it is Christ's body and blood, are said to not have Christ's meal, no matter how much it looks like a valid Lord's Supper: "They, indeed, have only bread and wine, for they do not have the words and instituted ordinance of God but have perverted and

changed it according to their own imagination.”⁶⁴ While it does endanger faith to believe falsely concerning the means of God grace and His Word, such a doctrinal denial does not necessitate the denial of God’s mercy upon the sinner or remove the possibility of receiving it through any means.

While the sacraments do not constitute the very foundation of faith, that does not negate their importance for faith and eternal life. After all, one is baptized into Christ, not a teaching of baptism. Hunnius’ goal in defining the foundation is not to find a minimum of doctrine to unite churches. That is a misunderstanding of his endeavor.

“Fundamental” must be used in the right way. One current view is that: “Since Reformed do not see the sacraments as fundamental, they can live with Lutherans who see them as fundamental, but Lutherans cannot, or at least should not, return the favor.”⁶⁵ The problem is not that Reformed do not see sacraments as fundamental, it is that they deny either their institution or benefits. No one has permission to rearrange the doctrinal structure to enlarge his polemical war chest. False doctrine should be condemned as error, but an error does not change the positive foundation of faith which stirs confidence in the heart. Even after every false doctrine is destroyed, the foundation must still be built and maintained.⁶⁶

Church fellowship requires orthodoxy, not faith, which cannot be seen or judged. However, how that body of doctrine is related to faith is a much narrower question. The distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith shows the positive essence of doctrine. It is misused if made to construe fellowship with non-orthodox Christians, though there is hopefully inward fellowship of the Spirit, since heterodoxy is not the unforgivable sin. Lutherans refute error in doctrine, while hoping that God’s mercy is not thereby denied by those misled into theological errors.

It is not enough to the preach the sacraments as instituted by God and correct in their

⁶⁴FC SD VII, 32; Kolb/Wengert, 598.

⁶⁵Scaer, “God as Secondary Primary Fundamental Doctrine,” 56.

⁶⁶“Maintenance ministry” is degoratory, but without any maintence no building will last as long as intended. The goal of the Gospel is not to found as many as possible weakly on Christ, so that they quickly fall away when tribulation comes. Rather it is to ensure that God’s temple is preserved for eternity. The Lord gave a wealth doctrinal building materials in Scripture for our benefit, knowing the weakness of sinful flesh, the choking cares of the world, and the suffering which must test the faith of every believer.

substance. The guiding star of justification leads sinners to trust in those means as gracious actions of Christ, by which they may be certain of their justification. That means that a reading of Scripture which finds a sacramental theme or reference under every biblical meal and droplet is insufficient to cultivate faith. Allusions and hints of symbolism have not yet achieved the goal of all theology: to apply God's mercy to the guilty hearer. Faith relies on certain knowledge of Christ and His Word, which assures of one's standing before the Father leading up to the Last Day. Lutherans do not preach Christ for the sake of the sacraments, but the sacraments for the sake of Christ.

Unity of Purpose

Orthodoxy is not an end unto itself. One who has knowledge of all doctrines can be damned without Christ. Faith is not an intellectual work, though it does have an intellectual and doctrinal component. Theologians cannot directly diagnosis the heart's faith, but they can analyze doctrinal statements and public confessions. The distinction of fundamental and non-fundamental articles does not tell whether faith exists, but merely whether it is possible in the presence of certain errors. It also highlights how a person relates to Christ and the body of doctrine in faith. This distinction can at best be a guide, but used properly, it can show how all doctrine is united in purpose.

All doctrine is not essential for saving faith. But all doctrine does support faith—some articles more directly, others more remotely. This is a helpful corrective to an “abandon the non-fundamentals fundamentalism,” where love for Jesus is said to be enough. The question is then what kind of Jesus: one who is God, lived as a man, died, or was resurrected? A strong faith in a dead Jesus renders all love and belief worthless. Doctrine cannot be short-circuited by ignoring the object of faith to focus on its subjective qualities. Faith relies on doctrinal knowledge to know Christ and receive His life.

Even what seems to be unnecessary or remote to faith does support faith. The structure of faith built upon Christ does not have to be spartan and bare. All teachings given by God to believe lead to eternal life. Instruction and knowledge of all teachings is praised by God: “If the

work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.”

In *Diaskepsis*, some of Hunnius’ most insightful moments are his connections of non-fundamental doctrines to the foundation of faith. While “non-fundamental” may give the connotation of unimportant, he goes out of his way to show how even they decorate God’s temple and that all true doctrine is “gold, silver, precious stones,” which are appropriate to adorn and finish out God’s dwellings. One should by no means ignore or see as optional what is not foundational. Any doctrinal error is a danger to grasping Christ by faith. Even if false teaching does not lead to a fatal dogmatic error, it is perilous to not believe any element of truth which God has revealed and leads to grace.

When dealing with the non-orthodox, this distinction helps to show whether they may be founded on Christ. For example, a believer may even deny original sin, which is a grave error. But it is not the sin of Adam or grandpa which drives one to the Gospel, but one’s own guilt. It is conceivable that one may know personal guilt from the Law, yet deny that others are sinful. Rome, in a way, denies original sin by Mary’s supposed “immaculate conception.” That does not mean that every Romish believer thinks himself without sin, though it is a dangerous and false belief. Doctrine is not all or nothing. But each person is either founded on Christ for righteousness or under God’s wrath.

Knowledge of sin and hell is not yet the cure, though these doctrines are useful to faith. “If one does not take note of the damnation of the wicked, sins will not torment greatly the conscience of anyone so that he flees for refuge to Christ. Rather, if one should believe in Christ because of achieving temporal happiness and avoiding condemnation, he errs in his faith because Christ did not come nor did he take His responsibility upon Himself for such a thing.”⁶⁷ Hell is not just a mirage to frighten people, it is doctrinal truth and reality. That deserved consequence of sin is taken away by Christ’s punishment in the moment of justification. But without the teaching of eternal punishment heaven loses its savor and sin is nothing to feel guilty about. “He who denies that God condemns unbelievers to hell, how does he lift up his heart to God with this confidence that He is not going to condemn him as he believes. One cannot deny [this], therefore

⁶⁷Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 196.

without harming his faith.”⁶⁸ Hunnius is clearly no reductionist or modern fundamentalist. All doctrines should rest on the foundation for the temple of God to be undiminished.

A teaching of fundamental articles does not relegate the non-fundamentals to the wastebin of theology. Instead, the distinction shows in which article all doctrine coheres and finds its ultimate aim, strengthening the entire body of doctrine. “All the parts of the foundation are joined together for this: that they jointly carry the building.”⁶⁹ Johannes Quenstedt (1617-1688), another scholastic dogmatician, describes the connection between all articles of faith:

articles of faith are parts of the doctrine of faith, divinely revealed for our salvation, which are most intimately united to each other and to the whole, as the parts or joints of a finger, and into which the whole structure of the Christian religion may be resolved, as a finger into its joints. And their connection is so intimate that, when one is removed, the rest cannot continue sound and whole.⁷⁰

The goal of theology is not to reduce all doctrine into a single slogan or philosophical axiom, as if all its content could be intellectual derived from a single principle. A certain foundation leads one have to have skillfully erected walls, a sound roof, and the most appropriate ornamentation. The foundation is Christ, but “let each one take care how he builds upon it” (I Cor. 3:10).

Technical Definitions

For the sake of completeness, it is convenient to be familiar with the formal scholastic terminology. “The primary articles of faith are commonly said to be those which for salvation, faith and health are not able to be denied, but also are not able to be ignored.”⁷¹ In the words of Hunnius: “A primary article is a part of Christian doctrine which one cannot not know and yet keep safe his faith and salvation.”⁷² While the use of double negatives clouds the concept, it appropriately negates limiting God in His power.

⁶⁸Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 181.

⁶⁹Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 9.

⁷⁰Quoted in: Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1875; reprint, Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publishing, 1961), 93.

⁷¹Baier, *Compendium of Positive Theology*, 77 (I, 31).

⁷²Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 28.

Primary fundamental articles are ones which faith cannot be ignorant of. In other words, they, in total and in unison, comprise the essence of the dogmatic foundation upon which faith rests. Because this definition includes the faith of the saints prior to Jesus' birth, it is not that wide. While there is no attempt to precisely place each teaching, the various formulations give their nod to the article of justification. "Sound doctrine about God's grace and Christ's merit is the foundation of faith," especially in regards to their connection and universality.⁷³

Despite the intimidating definitions, Hunnius did not attempt to precisely delineate and categorize every doctrine. He abstrusely uses negative language and methods to not be dogmatic where God is not in Scripture. The category of non-fundamentals provides room for God's grace among those misled by false doctrine. No one should condemn holders of false doctrine and the ignorant who may be founded upon the one foundation of Christ. To condemn all heterodox who call themselves Christians would be a denial of God's grace. That would render Christ's redemptive work incomplete and unable to atone for sins in doctrine. Of course, those who have the truth have the duty to lead them out of ignorance, so they put aside childish ways.

The simple fact that not all doctrine is the same is the point. While all are important and God-given, they are not all equivalent or capable of trading locations in God's temple. There is no definitive list which categorizes every article of faith. That does not preclude value in seeing articles from the viewpoint of their use and connection to Christ.

The category of secondary fundamentals is said to be close to the foundation. While they do not create the foundation, their negation can upset the very core of doctrine. The secondary fundamentals preserve the foundation by averting the "contrary error." "Such articles, therefore, can be unknown with simple ignorance but cannot be denied through the assertion of the opposite."⁷⁴ No one requires a small child to verbally articulate the *genus maiestaticum*, but to deny the communication of divine glory to the human nature of Christ is to split Christ in two and destroy the unity of His person, and thereby His work. Theologians have come up with many useful terms and ways of speaking to prevent error, which is not the same as creating faith. Avoiding error is not identical with being renewed and cleansed in Christ. Ignorance of

⁷³Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 168.

⁷⁴Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 31.

the secondary fundamentals does not damn, if one does not subvert the foundation of faith. In fact, by showing that not all articles support faith in the same way, Hunnius shows their unity by cutting to the singular purpose and unity of all doctrine: to justify the sinner in Christ.

The Original Objective

It is a sad irony that Hunnius' explication of fundamental and non-fundamental articles is used to deny great portions of God's Word. While ecumenism has co-opted the terminology and meaning, Hunnius actually wrote his classic book to show how fellowship is impossible with the Calvinistic Reformed. The full title of His book makes that clear: *Diaskepsis Theologica: A Theological Examination of the Fundamental Difference between Evangelical Lutheran Doctrine and Calvinist or Reformed Teaching*. His entire book sets up the necessary definitions and syllogisms to prove the hypothesis in the title.

Hunnus was by no means advocating joint fellowship with Christians who differ doctrinally. He actually attempted to destroy "false irenic attempts."⁷⁵ "I have taken upon myself, therefore, to kill two birds with one stone: to destroy with the treatise which I am presenting that first idea [of the Reformed] of fundamental agreement and the second idea about the absolutely empty promise of a synod."⁷⁶ Calvinists could accept the Augsburg Confession, arguing that the errors are merely non-fundamental. At times they called Lutherans "brothers."⁷⁷ Instead of letting the opponents of Lutheranism set the terms of debate and decide what was "fundamental," Hunnius minced no words in proving their fundamental disagreement. He attacked a unity not based on unity in doctrine:

I am speaking about myself scrupulously that I love sincerely and am pursuing peace and truth; as far as I am concerned, that peace is cursed which is connected with the destruction and damage of truth and, in turn, whoever sows quarrels in the Church or fosters them in any way is cursed, especially at this deadly time when we happen to be living⁷⁸; that he is cursed who corrupts the correct statements of the other and eagerly twists them into a worse sense so that he hurts the one who is working in the

⁷⁵Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 99.

⁷⁶Hunnus, *Diaskepsis*, lxxvii.

⁷⁷Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation*, 181.

⁷⁸Editors' note: "That is, in the midst of The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648)."

truth and asserting it; and finally he is cursed who keeps quiet about something that can show their error to those who err, support the truth, preserve purity of doctrine and extend the glory of God.⁷⁹

Several main points of contention evolve in *Diaskepsis*. It extensively quotes Reformed public and private writings to assess their position. For example, Hunnius cites this Reformed attack on Lutheran christology: “As soon as the humanity through the personal union received all the divine attributes [according to the Lutheran teaching] in and of itself, then Christ no longer could let Himself be truly seen, touched, betrayed; He could no longer actually eat, drink, feel tired; He did not really become sorrowful, did not actually suffer, die, etc.”⁸⁰ Along the same line: “If Christ’s flesh is really omnipotent and thus really God, it is not true flesh, not of the same substance with our flesh; in this way, it removes the foundation of our consolation and salvation.”⁸¹ Although the differences first show in the Lord’s Supper, they are seen to be really a different understanding of the unity of the two natures in Christ. It is not enough to pinpoint error, a theologian must show how an error affects the foundation, Christ Himself. “If the communion of attributes is destroyed or denied, the characteristic and primary purpose of this union falls.”⁸²

Hunnus makes hay with the Calvinistic errors of irresistible grace, limited atonement, and especially election. “The true foundation of faith [according to the Reformed] is election for salvation and the understanding thereof, which anyone concludes that God wants **him** to be saved. Lutherans do not embrace this.”⁸³ The mercy of God is called into question by Reformed logic.⁸⁴ If faith rests on the certainty of election and not all are elect, unbelievers cannot rest on sure mercy from Christ. Thus, the very foundation of faith, which demands a certain promise, is subverted. Hunnius’ scholastic method does not diminish his vigor for the truth and orthodoxy. He expounded upon the foundation of the faith, to show how the Reformed disrupt it by their

⁷⁹Hunnus, *Diaskepsis*, 210.

⁸⁰*Grundfest* (1571), quoted in: Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 242.

⁸¹*Neustadt Admonition* (1581), quoted in: Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 250.

⁸²Hunnus, *Diaskepsis*, 349.

⁸³Hunnus, *Diaskepsis*, 290.

⁸⁴“According to the Reformed, therefore, God sets before us in his Word false things which nevertheless concern our eternal salvation. As a consequence, it is true that our faith does not rest on falsities nor can it rely on the Word of God as the foundation.” Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 358.

doctrine.

Relevancy Today

Rather than paving the path to union with erring churches, the distinction between doctrines is better put to use judging erring fellowships. It serves as a way to categorize the churches into sects, heterodox churches, and non-Christian bodies. Not every error is a heresy, and not every person holding membership in a heterodox church is a child of Satan.

A heresy is “an error in doctrine that is held and stubbornly defended by those who are in the church of Christ in opposition to the foundation of faith, causes divisions and offenses contrary to sound doctrine, and stubbornly rejects correction.”⁸⁵ Fellowships which deny God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cease to be Christian churches, even if they use copiously the word “Christ.” Sects do not destroy the foundation, but are separated without reason or have separated over what is not the foundation of faith. Without the distinction of doctrines, all errorists would either have to be accepted or condemned. That makes it a critical, non-fundamental teaching.

The other useful application of this teaching is in dealing with individual Christians. Many, even in orthodox Lutheran churches, are ignorant of important teachings and may speak incorrectly about the doctrine of the faith. But ignorance and simplicity, assuming the foundation which causes justification is not overturned, does not damn. Walther shows he is no idealist: “Just consider what the situation is in our own congregations; if an examination were had, how many rationalist, Methodist, Baptist, and papistic errors would come to light even among those Christians whose genuine faith we have no reason to doubt.”⁸⁶ Hunnius’ teaching shows that errors from ignorance and simplicity, even of important dogmas, are not always incompatible with saving faith. There is room for grace, but not fellowship, where the foundation remains, despite the believer’s errors. This possibility is not an excuse to revel in sin or to recrucify Christ: “You cannot say: I will err in a Christian way. A Christian error happens from ignorance.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵C. F. W. Walther, *The True Visible Church: An Essay for the Convention of the General Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States for Its Sessions at St. Louis, MO, October 31, 1866*, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: CPH), 23.

⁸⁶Walther, *Essays*, I:183.

⁸⁷Luther, *Vom Missbrauch der Messe* (1522), quoted in: Baier, *Compendium of Positive Theology*, 88 (I, 33,

Conclusions made for others are dangerous. Charity must remain even in theological debate. We should judge clear statements and warn of faulty conclusions. But to accuse others of denying Christ, when they do not arrive at that conclusion themselves, is loveless. The idea of a felicitous or fortunate inconsistency shows how errors in some articles of doctrine can coexist with saving faith.⁸⁸ It is analogous to a proud and happy homeowner taking a hammer to his walls. Yet in grace, he may remain a homeowner in a substandard dwelling.

The essential doctrinal components allowing justification may stand in heterodox churches along with falsehood. Charity in viewing Christians does not have to mean compromise in doctrine. Hunnius qualifies his intent, lest he limit Christ's mercy:

[God] knows how to work faith in ways completely unknown to us in those who are involved in error without malice and to have compassion on any of the sheep who err in this way. In fact, I rather hope here even for all the finest things with regard for His grace, and I desire to understand whatever has been asserted until now with regard to the ordinary manner of God's acting until He has been revealed though His Word.⁸⁹

Conclusion

While this topic is not fundamental or appropriate for a novice in doctrine, it is a necessary teaching. "Every handbook on dogmatics devotes at least a section of its discussion to this subject." "The distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines is undoubtedly Scriptural, as so many Lutheran dogmaticians have shown."⁹⁰ Walther even goes so far to say that a church cannot be Lutheran without holding to this distinction: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church distinguishes sharply between fundamental and nonfundamental articles set forth in Scripture."⁹¹ This is found under the thesis: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church assigns to every doctrine of Scripture the rank and significance which it is given in God's Word itself."⁹² Not only does this distinction center the theological task, it is necessary to grasp the complete unity

a).

⁸⁸Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I:87.

⁸⁹Hunnius, *Diaskepsis*, 155.

⁹⁰Kretzmann, "Fundamental and Non-fundamental Doctrines."

⁹¹Walther, *The True Visible Church*, 99.

⁹²Walther, *The True Visible Church*, 94.

of Christian doctrine. Used correctly, it clarifies the theological task and makes the relationship between Christ, faith, Scripture, and justification clearer.

Doing theology is not like making a stew. One may not toss around doctrines as if they are all equal and will meld together delightfully if only cooked long enough. That is not the task of a true preacher of the gospel, but the action of one who undermines the doctrine of Christ. The Gospel is not a matter of definition or saying the right words. A perfect statement of Christian truth may be undone, by adding “wood, hay, straw.” Error added to inspired truth can divert faith away from Christ by perverting its sole purpose. Doctrine is a unit, united in its purpose and truth.

While we must polemicize, destroying errors does not bring life to the dead. And if we overemphasize a denied doctrine, without setting it in the doctrinal order in which it is found in Scripture, Christ is not served. The opposite of error is not a promise to be relied on. Preachers must give the positive truth, which has not changed from the time of Adam to today. Though our knowledge is more complete, our faith is not of a different nature. Only when all doctrine is in its right place, as God intended, will the light of Christ’s Gospel shine forth most brightly.

[God] wants the doctrine of justification to be considered the fundamental doctrine, and he wants it so preached. Therefore whoever wants to be a preacher of the Gospel, a Lutheran preacher, must, like the apostles, above all things preach Christ into people’s hearts, and offer and present to them the redemption accomplished by Him. May God make us ever more proficient and willing for this.⁹³

⁹³Walther, *Essays*, I:170.