

# What Constitutes False Doctrine?

By Edmund Reim

One of the strange things about the negotiations between the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is that the question concerning the area of agreement that is required for church fellowship should have been deferred until after acceptance of the Common Confession by both bodies. It comes as something of an afterthought when Part II of the Common Confession finally declares: "Ultimately all the doctrines of the Holy Scriptures have an organic connection with the central theme of the Scriptures, which is the Gospel. A denial of any teaching of the Scriptures involves a mutilation of, and departure from, the complete Gospel, and it is for this reason that a full and common obedience to the Holy Scriptures is an indispensable requisite for church fellowship." (CC, Part II, viii, 7.) Even so it is not quite clear whether this may be taken as a reversal of the onetime ALC position that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines (*Sandusky* Resolution, No. 3). For, as President Behnken informed the Houston Convention of the Missouri Synod, it has now become necessary to discuss with the American Lutheran Church the question, "What is a Doctrine?" Because of the bearing which this has on the basic question concerning the area of agreement that is necessary for fellowship, as well as on the interpretation of the above-mentioned section of Part II of the Common Confession, we shall await the outcome with interest.

In the meantime it may be well to look into another matter, one that is closely related, but which approaches the problem from another angle. We refer to the question: *What constitutes false doctrine?* We shall frankly admit that our interest is again due to the Common Confession, concerning which our New Ulm Convention passed the following resolution:

"... that we not only find the Common Confession to be inadequate in the points noted (cf. Review of the Common Confession), but that we also hold that the adoption of the Common Confession by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled." (Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1951, p. 147, No. 2.)

The argument has been advanced that since the above resolution speaks only of the "inadequacy" of the Common Confession, it does not raise the accusation of false doctrine, and that a matter of "inadequacy" is merely a question of judgment, in which men may differ. The implication is that since the positive statements of the Common Confession have not been challenged, the document must be doctrinally sound. The Scripturalness of the individual statements is considered as the final test, on the basis of which (in the opinion of these pleaders) the orthodoxy of the Common Confession is vindicated.

While "inadequacy" is admittedly a moderate expression, and was so intended, the decisive factor is that we are here speaking of a document which is being presented as a confession, as a settlement of a number of controversies of long standing and of great importance. It is meant as an authoritative statement of doctrine. In this connection it is certainly in order to consider carefully the question which we have placed at the head of this article.

## The Analogy of Sin

If we bring the question of sin into this study, particularly for the sake of comparing it with the problem of false doctrine, it is not because there is any final proof that may be drawn from such a comparison. The argument from analogy is not conclusive. Yet it may help to throw some light on the question, particularly because the dividing line between sin and false doctrine is by no means absolute. Each in its own way is *hamartia*, a missing of the mark, so that false doctrine in its essence is simply a certain kind of sin.

There is one kind of sin that is easily recognizable, namely when there has been some positive act of disobedience, some flagrant, overt violation of the divine will. Where the authority of that will is recognized,

there can be no doubt as to the nature of such a deed. It is sin, and must be identified as such. But lest man resort to the smug excuse that he has not become guilty of any specific transgression since he has not been caught red-handed in some gross outward act of disobedience, our Lord unfolds the full implications of the Law, showing in the Sermon on the Mount that men break even such commandments as the Fifth and Sixth also by their words, or even the hidden thoughts of the heart. He makes another point in the parable of the Good Samaritan when the passing-by-on-the-other-side of the Priest and the Levite is exposed in its true nature, and when the failure of Dives to come to the aid of a Lazarus who had been laid at his door becomes one of the things that justify his subsequent condemnation. James sums it all up tersely: “Therefore, to him that knoweth to do good, *and doeth it not*, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17). Very properly, therefore, we speak not only of sins of commission. We likewise recognize, as a most important kind, also those grave sins of omission. For these are so often the hidden ones. No matter how impressive the list of man’s achievements may otherwise be, these omissions condemn him. So God has concluded all under sin.

### **The Problem of Doctrine**

Let us now apply this analogy to our question concerning false doctrine. As in the matter of sin, so here also we have an area where the problem of identification is relatively simple. When God had made His warning, “in the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die,” a part of His first commandment to man, it was patently a lie when the Tempter dared to say, “Ye shall *not* surely die.” It was false doctrine, and man’s acceptance of it constituted his great sin, his fall from his state of perfection. So it is false doctrine when man ventures to contradict any word of God. When, therefore, the Roman doctrine of Justification is so formulated as to include the works of man as a major cause of his justification, we have no difficulty in identifying this as false doctrine, knowing that a man is justified by faith, *without* the deeds of the law. So it is always false doctrine, and clearly recognizable as such, when men set themselves against the Word, whether it be to satisfy the dictates either of reason or of the flesh, or perhaps for power, for expediency, or for any other cause.

It becomes more difficult to identify false doctrine, however, when what is said on a given subject is at least in part true, or true so far as it goes. Then the error may be well concealed. It may perhaps even lie not so much in what is said in a given doctrinal statement, as in what is not said. For even the truth may be made a cover for error. Witness Satan’s use of Scripture in the tempting of Christ: “*for it is written*, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee ...”

That is why the Savior not only sent His disciples to be witnesses unto Him, even unto the uttermost part of the earth, not only instructed them to go into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature, to make disciples of all men, but also specifically directed them to teach men to observe *all things* whatsoever He had commanded them. This is entirely in keeping with what God told His people through Moses (Dt. 4:2), “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it,” a warning that is repeated most emphatically in the last book of the Bible (Rev. 22:18f).

Since the scope of divine teaching is so wide, and its content so profound, it may seem as though these words represent a remote ideal, rather than attainable reality. But the test comes at each specific point. Paul assured the elders of Ephesus that he had not shunned to declare unto them *all* the counsel of God (Acts 20:27). A glance at the preceding verse will show that the Apostle is not thinking in terms of quantity, but of the kind of teaching that he gave. He knows himself to be innocent of the blood of all men because he taught them those things that they needed to know for their salvation, the whole truth concerning their sinful state, and the whole truth concerning God’s saving grace. He makes this even clearer in verses 20–21: “how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That the things that were “profitable” were, humanly speaking, not always pleasant topics may be inferred from other incidents in the work of the Apostle—his public rebuke of Peter at Antioch, his severe criticism of the Corinthians for their tolerance of immorality in their midst, his burning denunciation of the

manner in which the Galatians had permitted themselves to be influenced by the seductive error of the Judaizers. On all these occasions and many others Paul could have contented himself with setting forth a large number of teachings which, while perfectly true in themselves, would have been unrelated to the immediate need. But then he would have failed to meet the occasion. Then he would have been teaching truths, but not the Truth. In spite of a certain superficial correctness, he would have become a teacher who was false to the trust that had been placed in him. All this strikes us as unthinkable, but is what Paul himself implies when he speaks of the blood-guilt that would have rested upon him had he not declared the *whole* counsel of God, particularly also with reference to the special situations with which he had to deal.

The real test for the correctness of our personal teaching is, therefore, not merely whether our individual statements are true or not, but rather how we measure up to the issues that confront us. The purest presentation of Scriptural truths will be vitiated if it is used to evade some painful issue.

Just so the correctness of a confessional document must be measured by the manner in which it serves the purpose for which it was written, the situation for which it was designed. Luther's Catechisms were written for the instruction of the simple people, the unlearned heads of families, and even for the guidance of those pastors and teachers who, in the early years of the Reformation, were themselves often so badly deficient in the knowledge that they were supposed to impart to others. This purpose the Catechisms fulfill superlatively well. The Augsburg Confession was meant to present a general picture of Lutheran teaching, and does that most effectively, although even there the specific issues were not evaded, but dealt with adequately. The Apology had as its own particular objective the defense of the Augustana. It surely leaves no one in doubt as to where it stands on the individual issues. And the Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord,—surely no one has ever charged these documents with failing to meet the issues. The individual statements that we find in them are true and Scriptural. But their claim to orthodoxy, their claim upon our loyal acceptance, does not rest upon this alone, nor even primarily on this, but rather on the fact that they constitute a satisfying Scriptural answer to the issues that they were meant to settle.

Mere correctness of individual statements is not enough. It has been pointed out that the decrees of the Council of Trent contain certain statements that are beyond criticism as far as their Scripturalness is concerned. But he who is aware of the place that Rome has assigned to faith in its own peculiar formulation of the doctrine of justification, and who knows how it has limited the scope of the redemptive work of Christ and modified the term grace until it has become a caricature of the original meaning, will not be taken in by this superficial correctness. He recognizes the error that is hidden behind this mask.

It has also been pointed out that the formula adopted for Holy Communion by the protagonists of the Prussian Union in the early part of the last century ("Take and eat, our Lord Jesus Christ says, This is My Body") is Scripturally correct. But it served to conceal an untruthful situation, the fact that the difference between the Lutheran and Reformed interpretation had not been settled. Obviously, more is required for the settlement of a controversy than the mere fact that men are able to agree on certain theological formulations that may be true in themselves.

### **Conclusion**

All of these observations lead to a single conclusion. A doctrinal statement may be Scriptural and correct, and yet fall short of meeting an issue that it is meant to settle. A confessional document may set forth nothing but Biblical truths in its various individual parts, and yet fail to meet the issue, to serve the very purpose for which it is designed. In either case this may be called an "inadequacy." If this term is used, it must, however, be with the clear understanding that by reason of this inadequacy such a statement or such a confession actually constitutes false doctrine. Otherwise we are only deceiving ourselves. Others will be quick to see through such a subterfuge.

That is why the claim that the Common Confession is Scriptural in its various statements means nothing. It certainly does not prove this document to be an orthodox confession. And to admit its inadequacy even while treating this as though it were but a minor weakness is to ignore the fact that in a confessional statement, in a

document meant to be the settlement of old doctrinal controversies, such “inadequacies” constitute a most serious failing. The document must stand or fall by the manner in which it settles or fails to settle the old issues. If it fails,—as we believe it does—this means that the Common Confession, in spite of all its correct statements, not merely contains false doctrine. It *is* false doctrine.