

Teaching Authority and Infallibility in the Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 6; ed. P.C. Empie, T.A. Murphy, and J.A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980). Both George Lindbeck and Gerhard Forde are among the signatories to this statement.

6. It next needs to be noted, however, that the theological difficulty many Lutherans today have with infallibility language and claims is much broader and more fundamental than the specifically interconfessional problems raised by the dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. The critique of such language and claims in recent history has been directed in the first instance against certain aspects of the Lutheran tradition itself, especially against claims made about the infallibility or inerrancy of Scripture.¹⁸¹ In defense of their normative scriptural principle, the fathers of the second Lutheran generation¹⁸² used the late medieval language of inerrancy for Holy Scripture as the Word of God and developed a doctrine of scriptural infallibility which was elaborated in ever greater detail during the period of Lutheran orthodoxy.¹⁸³ Some Lutherans even today regard the doctrine of the "inerrancy of Scripture" as the true touchstone of faithfulness to the Lutheran Confessions.

7. Others, however, have come to hold that such an emphasis on the letter of Scripture is not compatible with the doctrine of justification by faith, the article by which "the Church stands and falls."¹⁸⁴ Put most simply, this doctrine affirms that because God justifies the ungodly, forgiving sinners for Christ's sake, nothing else can be trusted for salvation. Neither scriptural inerrancy nor, even less, the infallibility of the Church's teachers, teaching offices, and doctrines is the basis of the Christian's confidence. All these may err, but not the gospel of God's unconditional mercy in Jesus Christ to which the biblical writings are the primary witness.

8. In the light of this, Lutherans believe that the transcendence which the gospel enjoys over human truth claims consists precisely in the fact that through the gospel God declares sinners righteous for Jesus' sake. The gospel, so to speak, establishes its own transcendence. Its truth becomes known and its authority acknowledged only upon being heard through the Word, received in the sacraments, and believed through the power of the Spirit. The authority of the Church's teachings and teaching office is dependent on the degree to which these further the proclamation of the gospel in accordance with Scripture.

9. One corollary of this emphasis on the self-authenticating character of the gospel is that questions about its authority can be answered ultimately only in its proclamation and celebration in preaching and sacraments when the Word of God genuinely encounters human beings in judgment and grace. Thus the Lutheran Confessions' use of something akin to infallibility language is in connection with the promises of God, i.e., "God does not lie" in such promises.¹⁸⁵ This, in turn, is inseparable from the conviction that the promises of God can be received only by faith, and that faith, by definition, is trust in such promises.

10. This understanding of faith has important consequences for the Lutheran view of church doctrine. It becomes necessary to make a careful distinction between faith as trust in the divine promises and those aspects of the faith of the Church which are responses to the divine promise through confession, action, teaching, and doctrinal formulations. These responses are necessary: the gospel (the promise of God) does indeed have a specifiable "knowledge" content. But the authority of this content, Lutherans believe, is established by its power to convict of sin and convince of grace through the work of the Holy Spirit and is not enhanced by saying that the teaching office or doctrinal formulations are themselves infallible.

11. Thus doctrinal formulations for Lutherans are, on the one hand, confessions and doxologies rather than promulgations of infallible dogma; and, on the other, they function as guides for the proper proclamation of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the right praise of God rather than as statements which are themselves objects of faith. Furthermore, the scriptural witness to the gospel remains the ultimate norm for such formulations. Yet this does not exclude a high regard for their authority. Although they are the result of human responses to the word of forgiveness, church doctrines when rightly used are vitally important in order to foster, insofar as possible in changing historical contexts, the proper proclamation of the Word and the transmission of that Word in its purity. Lutherans should be supremely conscious in all this that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us"