

The Book of Concord's Key to Itself

What do Lutherans believe? Some Lutherans say that they simply hold to the Bible and Confessions. Yet in the 1970's Lutherans in this country split over how to use the Bible as the "only rule and norm."¹ Thus to say one simply holds to the Bible and Confessions is to fail to engage the dilemma of hermeneutics over which Lutherans are split.

A similar failure to engage hermeneutics marks those who commonly say: "The Bible is perfectly clear"² – as if using the word "clear" were a persuasive argument rather than what it really is – an authoritarian club. To be sure, the Bible contains assertions that are logically clear – women must wear veils in church (1 Cor 11:5), divorce is not permitted except for adultery (Matt 5:32), Jesus is subordinate to the Father (John 14:28) – yet such clear assertions are nevertheless not normative for faith and life today.³

What is the plumb line by which we sort out the varied assertions found in the Bible? The Book of Concord uses a variety of phrases⁴ to describe **the doctrine of justification as the plumb line for judging all other doctrines**. Justification determines scripture⁵ rather than scripture determining justification.⁶

1. *Formula of Concord, Epitome, Preface 1,2,7*

"We believe teach and confess that **the only rule and guiding principle** according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and new Testaments alone...

"Other writings of ancient or contemporary teachers, whatever their names may be, shall not be regarded as equal to Holy Scripture, but all of them together shall be subjected to it

¹ Note: "only rule and norm" (Tappert, 464:1); "only rule and guiding principle" (Kolb/Wengert, 486:1). See #1 above. Bolding added here and below for emphasis.

² Other terms commonly used this way: simple, plain, self-evident, obvious.

³ Two kinds of clarity are often confused when the clarity of scripture is discussed: The clarity in the meaning of the words on the page is one thing. But clarity in the theological sense means clarity about Christ and salvation. As Luther writes, "If the opponents use scripture against Christ, then we use Christ against scripture" (LW 34:112, "Theses Concerning Faith and Law" #49 [1535]).

⁴ The varied ways of referring to the doctrine of justification in the citations below include the following: "chief article" #2, #4; "the principle one" #3; "the chief part" #5; "the most important topic" #6; "this article" #7; "the 'most important' of all Christian teachings" #7; "this one teaching" #7; "the pure teaching of the gospel" #8; "in teaching and in all the articles," #9; and "this teaching" #10. In context all these ways of referring to justification show how justification by faith alone is not only the chief article but also the article by which all other articles, including the article on scripture in the Preface to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, are to be understood.

⁵ The Aristotelian distinction between scripture as the formal principle and justification as the material principle does not accurately describe how the *Book of Concord* understands justification to be the chief article by which we interpret scripture.

⁶ "Accordingly, whoever conveys **this teaching** concerning the **gracious election of God in such a way that** troubled Christians gain no comfort from it but are thrown into **despair** by it, or in such a way that the impenitent are strengthened in their **impudence**, then it is **undoubtedly certain and true that this teaching is not being presented according to God's Word....**" See #10 below.

“Holy Scripture alone remains **the only judge, rule, and guiding principle**, according to which, as the only touchstone, **all teachings** should and must be recognized and judged....”⁷

2. *Smalcald Articles 2:1-5*

“Here is the first and chief article: That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4[:25])

“Now because this must be believed and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that **this faith alone justifies** us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:28, 26]

“Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. As St. Peter says in Acts 4[:12]: “There is no other name... given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53[:5]).

“**On this article stands all** that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world....”⁸

3. *Augsburg Confession 20:8-9*

“Therefore, because the **teaching concerning faith**, which ought to be **the principal one in the church**, has languished so long in obscurity—everyone must grant that there has been a profound silence concerning the righteousness of faith in preaching while only the teaching of works has been promoted in the church

“To begin with, they remind the churches that our works cannot reconcile God or merit grace and forgiveness of sins, but we obtain this **only by faith when we believe that we are received into grace on account of Christ....**”⁹

4. *Augsburg Confession 28:50-52*

“Inasmuch as it is contrary to the gospel to establish such regulations as necessary to appease God and earn grace, it is not at all proper for the bishops to compel observation of such services of God. For in Christendom the teaching of Christian freedom must be preserved, namely, that bondage to the law is not necessary for justification, as Paul writes in Galatians 5[:1]: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” For **the chief article of the gospel** must be maintained, that we obtain the grace of God through faith in Christ without our merit and do not earn it through service of God instituted by human beings.”¹⁰

⁷ *Book of Concord*, Tappert 464-64; Kolb/Wengert 486-87.

⁸ *BC*, Tappert 292; Kolb/Wengert 301.

⁹ *BC*, Tappert 42; Kolb/Wengert 53, 55.

¹⁰ *BC*, Tappert 89; Kolb/Wengert 98.

5. *Augsburg Confession* 28:65-66

“The apostles directed that one should abstain from blood and from what is strangled. But who observes this now? Yet those who do not observe it commit no sin. For the apostles themselves did not want to burden consciences with such bondage, but prohibited eating for a time to avoid offense. For in this ordinance one must pay attention to **the chief part of Christian doctrine** which is not abolished by this decree.”¹¹

6. *Apology* 4:2-3

“But since this controversy deals with **the most important topic of Christian teaching** which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need, we ask His Imperial Majesty kindly to hear us out on this important matter. Since the opponents understand neither the forgiveness of sins, nor faith, nor grace, nor righteousness, they miserably contaminate **this article**, obscure the glory and benefits of Christ, and tear away from devout consciences the consolation offered them in Christ.”¹²

7. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* 3:6

“**This article on justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the ‘most important of all Christian teachings,’** ‘without which no poor conscience can have lasting comfort or recognize properly the riches of Christ’s grace.’ As Dr. Luther wrote, ‘If **this one teaching** stands in its purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated.... but where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to ward off any error or sectarian spirit.’”¹³

8. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* 10:5

“We should not regard as free and indifferent, but rather as things forbidden by God that are to be avoided, the kind of things presented under the name and appearance of external, indifferent things that are nevertheless **fundamentally opposed** to God’s Word (even if they are painted another color). Moreover, we must not include among the truly free *adiaphora* or indifferent matters ceremonies that give the appearance or (in order to avoid persecution) are designed to give the impression that our religion does not differ greatly from the papist religion or that their religion were not completely contrary to ours. Nor are such ceremonies matters of indifference when they are intended to create the illusion (or are demanded or accepted with that intention), as if such action brought **the two contradictory religions** into agreement and made them one body or as if a return to the papacy and a deviation from **the pure teaching of the gospel** and from the true religion had taken place or could gradually result from the actions.”¹⁴

¹¹ BC, Tappert 92; Kolb/Wengert 91.

¹² BC, Tappert 207; Kolb/Wengert 120-21.

¹³ BC, Tappert 540; Kolb/Wengert 563.

¹⁴ BC, Tappert 611; Kolb/Wengert 636.

9. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* 10:31

“For this reason the churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in **teaching and in all the articles of the faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments.**¹⁵ As it is said, ‘*Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consanantiam fidei*’ (dissimilarity in fasting shall not destroy the unity of faith).”¹⁶

10. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* 11:91-93

“Accordingly, whoever conveys **this teaching** concerning the **gracious election of God in such a way that** troubled Christians gain no comfort from it but are thrown into **despair** by it, or in such a way that the impenitent are strengthened in their **impudence**, then it is **undoubtedly certain and true that this teaching is not being presented according to God’s Word** and will but rather according to reason and at the instigation of the wicked devil.

“For, as the Apostle testifies, “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” [Rom. 15:4]. However, **any interpretation of Scripture that weakens or removes our hope and encouragement is certainly contrary** to the will and intent of the Holy Spirit.

“We stand by this simple, correct, helpful explanation, which is **firmly grounded in God’s revealed will.** We flee and avoid all abstruse, specious questions and discussions, and we reject and condemn anything that contradicts and opposes **this true, simple, helpful explanation.**”¹⁷

¹⁵ Philip J. Secker, “The Gospel and All Its Articles,” *Lutheran Forum* (Fall, 2005) 42-51, points out that the famous words here (in bold) “are the doctrinal articles contained in the Ecumenical Creeds and the Augsburg Confession,” not “all the doctrines of the Scripture,” and that the rest of the *Book of Concord* is an explication of these articles (49).

¹⁶ *BC*, Tappert 616; Kolb/Wengert 640.

¹⁷ *BC*, Tappert 632; Kolb/Wengert 655.