



A Neglected Key to the Theology of Martin Luther: *The Schmalkald Articles*

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During the series of debilitating bouts with ill health that Martin Luther endured in the middle 1530s, he took quill in hand and began to write what he and those closest to him thought was his “last theological will and testament.”¹ Indeed, Luther intended this document to be a summary statement of his theological priorities that could be used by posterity as a guide to the most important features of his theology. Unfortunately, this writing, *The Schmalkald Articles* of 1538 (hereafter, *SA*),² has been virtually neglected by historians and theologians alike.

Because Luther was convinced that his death was so near, he wanted to write *SA* as a particularly clear and concise statement of his mature theological program. The reformer published *SA* over 20 years after the publication of his *Ninety-five Theses* and took the opportunity to reflect critically on the theology he had worked out in the heated theological battles of the preceding two decades. Given the clarity and content of *SA*, along with the sense of personal urgency with which Luther

¹William R. Russell, “The Smalcald Articles, Luther’s Theological Testament,” *The Lutheran Quarterly*, New Series, 5/3 (1991) 277-296.

²The translation of *The Schmalkald Articles* used here is from *The Schmalkald Articles by Martin Luther*, translated and edited by William R. Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

wrote this document, it deserves a much higher profile as a key to the interpretation and understanding of Luther’s life and theology.

I. OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES

An overview of the content of the articles demonstrates how they unlock Luther’s central theological concerns. In part I, “The Lofty Articles of Divine Majesty,” the reformer confesses his adherence to the shared creedal, trinitarian tradition of the church catholic. For Luther, the starting point of Christian theology was the threefold revelation of the one God in the scriptures. This relatively short opening section places all that follows, even Luther’s well-known polemical swipes at his opponents, in the context of a shared, ecumenical consensus. This opening section provides insight into the reformer’s self-understanding. Luther did not see himself as an innovator or revolutionary. He simply wanted to call the church of his day back to its own catholic confession. Indeed, he ended part I with these words: “These articles are not matters of dispute or conflict, for both sides confess them.”³

In part II, Luther establishes the second pillar of his theology: his evangelical view of Christ and faith. Luther clearly summarizes the distinctive character of his proposal for the reformation of the church's theology and practice, his basic understanding of the gospel. The remaining three articles of Part II evaluate contemporary teaching and practice on the basis of this view of the gospel. Luther writes:

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); and he alone is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1); and "the LORD has laid upon him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53); furthermore, "All have sinned," and "they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus...by his blood" (Rom. 3).

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 faith alone justifies us. In Romans 3, St. Paul says: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law"; and also, "that God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus."⁴

This is perhaps the most succinct theological definition of the Lutheran view of the gospel message, written by the reformer himself—at least Luther seemed to think so. He concluded the article with these words:

We cannot yield or concede anything in this article, even if heaven and earth, or whatever, do not remain....On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore, we must be quite certain and not doubt. Otherwise everything is lost, and pope and devil and everything against us will gain victory and dominance.⁵

³SA I:5.

⁴SA II:1.1-3.

⁵SA II:1.4-5.

Indeed, some years later, Luther indicated his continued adherence to this formulation when he referred to this article in a letter to Saxon Chancellor Gregor Brück: "I leave the matter as it is found in the articles adopted at Schmalkalden; I shall not be able to improve on them."⁶

Luther's strong and enduring adherence to this confession of faith is understandable, given the fundamental themes of Lutheran theology evident here. *Sola scriptura* is evident in the copious use of the Bible. *Sola gratia* is evident in the emphasis on God's initiating and saving grace, revealed in Jesus Christ. And *sola fide* is evident in Luther's conviction that "faith alone justifies us."

Part III of the articles integrates the creedal, trinitarian statement (one might say, the "catholicity") of part I with the "evangelicalism" of part II, as Luther applies these priorities to the practice and teaching of the church. The resulting "catholic evangelicalism" stands as a summary of what Luther himself thought was theologically most important about his life's work:

the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments as the means of grace. The article Luther entitled, “On the Gospel” (*SA* III:4), says it well:

We now want to return to the gospel, which gives more than just one kind of counsel and help against sin; because God is overwhelmingly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the particular office of the gospel); second, through Baptism; third, through the Holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also the mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters. Matthew 18: “Where two are gathered,” etc.

The occasion that prompted Luther to write *The Schmalkald Articles* was Pope Paul III’s 1536 announcement of a general council of the church, to be held at Mantua, Italy, in the spring of 1537 (this council did not meet at Mantua in 1537, but in 1545 at Trent). The primary motivation for the document, however, was the perceived need, on the part of Luther and those around him, for the reformer to make a definitive theological statement before he died. In a real sense, *The Schmalkald Articles* represent the theological legacy Luther wanted to bequeath to posterity.

II. A SURPRISING NEGLECT

Given the lucidity of *SA* and the sense of personal urgency and commitment with which Luther wrote these articles, it is surprising that so many people have never heard of them. They have simply been under-studied by scholars of the reformation.

The most telling instance of the scholarly neglect of *SA* is undoubtedly to be found in the current most widely-available English translation.⁷ In this translation, there are numerous omissions from the German critical edition.⁸ For example, in

⁶Letter dated 4 April 1541 (*WA,Br* 9:355). Translated in F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965) 58.

⁷Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959).

⁸*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 10th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 405-468. The text that Tappert used in 1959 was the same at the points in question.

the article entitled, “On the Mass,”⁹ Tappert allowed fully a dozen words and/ or phrases, which were part of Luther’s *editio princeps* (first edition) and the 1580 *Book of Concord*, to be left out of his English text. What is significant for the argument here is that for the last 35 years, no one has apparently noticed! Such a series of omissions in the article that Luther called “the decisive point in the council,” is embarrassing. That scholars have so neglected *SA* so as to allow these omissions to stand unchallenged for so long is downright surprising.

SA’s publication statistics further indicate its neglect. Outside of the “anniversary” years—1737, 1837, and 1937—significant treatments of this writing, in either German or English, have occurred at a rate of approximately one every five years. Among these, no single treatment of *The Schmalkald Articles* represents even a reasonably complete synthesis of the history and content of the document. Despite the propensity (particularly among Lutherans) to

study the confessional symbols of *The Book of Concord*, a book-length treatment of the articles has only now been published in English.¹⁰

III. REASONS FOR THE NEGLECT

What explains the scholarly neglect of *The Schmalkald Articles*? If these articles are really such a significant document in the life and thought of Luther (and subsequent Lutheranism), why has this confessional symbol received such insufficient attention?

Although the reasons for this situation are not self-evident, some plausible explanations can be offered. First, the fact that these articles were written relatively late in Luther's career has tended to keep scholarly attention from them. The sights of church historians and theologians traditionally have been focused on Luther's early theological development. Most biographies of Luther, for example, chart carefully the dramatic events leading up to the Diet of Worms in 1521 and, in some cases, to the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. Relatively few treatments of Luther give much attention to the last 15 years of the reformer's life.¹¹ The period of the "older" Luther has apparently been either too problematic or simply uninteresting to scholars.¹²

A second, rather ironic factor has curiously contributed to the neglect of these articles: they are included among the Lutheran confessional writings of *The Book of Concord*. This rather lofty status has itself helped to deflect attention away from SA

⁹SA II:2.

¹⁰William R. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

¹¹Three biographies which give significant attention to Luther's later life are: James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986); J. Köstlin and G. Kawerau, *Martin Luther: Sein Leben und seine Schriften*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Verlag von Alexander Dunker, 1903); and Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986).

¹²Mark Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1983) 2. Regarding the advisability (or lack of same) of such periodization of Luther's life into the "young" vs. the "old" Luther, see Heiko Oberman, "Teufelsdröck: Eschatology and Scatology in the 'Old' Luther," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 19/3 (1988) 435-439.

for two reasons. First, the systematic theologians who write "theologies of the Lutheran Confessions" tend to subordinate the individual confessional writings to their larger theological concerns. In such analyses, the role of SA, if they are mentioned at all, has tended to be one of supporting the main argument of the author, which is usually well established without these articles, via proof texts.

Also, where attention has been given to particular documents within *The Book of Concord*, it has primarily focused on the creeds, *The Augsburg Confession*, the catechisms, and *The Formula of Concord*. Thus the inclusion of *The Schmalkald Articles* among the Lutheran confessional symbols, while underscoring their authority, has also led paradoxically to their being overshadowed by the attention given the other confessional documents. There is a sense in which *The Schmalkald Articles* have been "buried" in the tome of the collected Lutheran confessional symbols.

This can be illustrated by a quick look at the 1988 "Bibliography of the Lutheran Confessions."¹³ This reference tool needs but six pages to list the works devoted to both *The*

Schmalkald Articles and *The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* (there has been a tradition, without precise historical warrant, of identifying the treatise as an “appendix” to Luther’s articles). By comparison, it takes 104 pages to list the works related to *The Augsburg Confession* and its apology. *The Small Catechism* and *The Large Catechism* receive 25 pages. *The Formula of Concord* receives 34 pages.

A third factor has also contributed to the scholarly neglect of this document. The writing of *The Schmalkald Articles* and their subsequent rise to confessional status occurred without a specific, easily identifiable public event. Unlike the other confessional documents of Lutheranism, there is no formal, generally recognized date for the articles’ composition, presentation, publication, or adoption.¹⁴ If such a fixed date existed, it could have lent itself to the kinds of anniversary recognitions by which chroniclers have traditionally marked significant events in history-and SA could have benefited from the attention, both scholarly and popular, such commemorations provide.

A summary of the circumstances of the articles’ origin will bear this out. The original draft of the document was written by Luther in mid-December of 1536.¹⁵ It was then revised and subscribed at a small meeting of leading Lutheran theologians at Wittenberg, between Christmas, 1536, and January 1, 1537.¹⁶ At Schmalkalden, in February, 1537, the document never made it to the floor of the convention, although it was signed by most of the theologians in attendance.¹⁷ It was not until

¹³“Bibliography of the Lutheran Confessions,” ed. David Daniel and Charles Arand, *Sixteenth Century Bibliography* 28 (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1988).

¹⁴F. Sander, “Geschichtliche Einleitung zu den Schmalkaldischen Artikeln,” *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie* 20 (1875) 475.

¹⁵*Urkunden und Aktenstücke zur Geschichte von Martin Luthers Schmalkaldischen Artikeln*, ed. Hans Volz and Heinrich Ulbrich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1957) 26-35.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 69-77.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 102-128.

the spring and summer of 1538 that Luther made some further changes, added an extended preface, and published the document in pamphlet form.¹⁸ It was this edition of *The Schmalkald Articles* that was first included in the 1563 Brunswick “Body of Doctrine,” the *Corpus Brunsvicense*, and then began its journey to full confessional status in earnest.¹⁹ In 1580, this 1538 *editio princeps* was accepted into *The Book of Concord*.

This rather uneventful evolution has served to keep SA in its rather low profile because anniversary observances have traditionally focused scholars’ attention on significant reformation events and doctrines. For example, the celebrations connected with the tercentenary of Luther’s *Ninety-five Theses* played an important role in the confessional struggles of nineteenth-century Lutheranism in both Europe and America. In Europe, this particular anniversary was the occasion that prompted the King of Prussia to initiate a “Union Church,” which would have brought Lutheran and Reformed Germans together into one ecclesiastical body.²⁰ His initiative prompted a sharply negative reaction among many Lutherans. Part of the movement against the Union Church can be seen as a result of the increased attention given Luther and historical Lutheranism leading up to the anniversary year of 1817.²¹

On the other side of the Atlantic, nineteenth-century American Lutheranism began a struggle over confessional issues that was similarly influenced by such anniversary celebrations and the attention they directed to Luther and the reformation.²²

Still another example of the energy that anniversary celebrations have traditionally given scholarly interest in this period is the existence of the modern critical edition of the Lutheran confessional writings. The 1930 critical German edition, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, was “published on the anniversary of the Augsburg Confession.”²³ In fact, the official publication date of the original *Book of Concord* itself was June 25, 1580—chosen to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the presentation of the *Augsburg Confession* before Emperor Charles V.

It is unfortunate that in the evolution of *The Schmalkald Articles*, there is no specific, easily identifiable adoption, presentation, or publication date so that this writing, too, could enjoy more of the impetus such anniversaries have given to the study of so many other important aspects of the reformation.

¹⁸Ibid., 178-184.

¹⁹Henry E. Jacobs, ed., *The Book of Concord*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: General Council, 1908) 2:44; Theodor Kolde, “Schmalkald Articles,” in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950) 10:249.

²⁰Theodore Tappert, ed., *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America 1840-1880* (New York: Oxford University, 1972) 5f.

²¹Ibid., 9.

²²Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Image Books, 1975) 1:624, 627.

²³*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930), title page.

A fourth factor also helps explain the ongoing neglect of these articles, when compared to the other confessional symbols of Lutheranism: *The Schmalkald Articles* are, one might say, “too Lutheran.” The reformer writes with a personal urgency and particularity in this document that is out of vogue in the modern west. Luther’s polemics in these articles, which actually point negatively to his central theological convictions, can be seen as indications of this particularity.²⁴ The modern tendency to downplay religious distinctiveness and stress commonalities has perhaps kept the attention of scholars focused elsewhere.

Whatever the reasons for the lack of attention to *The Schmalkald Articles*, the time has come to ameliorate this neglect. The theological priorities of Martin Luther and Lutheranism, as expressed in these articles, make them a theological key, however neglected, to what was most important to Luther about his life’s work. *The Schmalkald Articles*, as Luther’s testament of faith written under the pressure of his supposed pending death, were among the clearest and most significant documents to flow from his quill. They deserve the attention of thoughtful people everywhere, both in and outside of the church.

²⁴E.g., Luther calls the pope “the Antichrist” twice in the article “On the Papacy” (II:4). This epithet has been an explicit subject of discussion in the U.S. “Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue” (cf., *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church*, ed. Paul Empie [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973] 6f.).

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