**Fundamental and Non-fundamental Doctrines  
— and Church Fellowship**

By Paul E. Kretzmann, Ph.D., D.D., Ed.D.

There is no dearth of academic information on the question of fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines and related topics, as held in the Lutheran Church. Not only does every handbook on dogmatics devote at least a section of its discussion to this subject, but we also have a wealth of articles in various theological magazines, not to speak of monographs on the entire topic or on certain phases of it. And yet the situation is not altogether satisfactory. For one thing, the various dogmaticians do not fully agree as to the scope of the categories which have been generally accepted, even if their definitions are in essential agreement. For another thing, the relation of the entire question to the doctrine of inspiration has frequently not been stressed as it should. But the most important difficulty is found in the fact that some theologians have failed to make a clear distinction between matters which properly pertain to the invisible Church only and the Biblical regulations which govern the relationship of visible church bodies toward one another. Hence a short summary of the pertinent questions may serve to clarify the issues which are proving so difficult at the present time.

Our first question is: *How did the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines* (and related subjects) *originate, and how was it developed?*

Most Lutheran dogmaticians point to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession as the source of the distinction. The pertinent passage is found in Articles VII and VIII: Of the Church, and it reads:

And this Church is properly *the pillar of the truth*, 1 Tim. 3:15. For it retains the pure Gospel, and, as Paul says, 1 Cor. 3:11 ("Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ"), *the foundation*, *i.e.*, the true knowledge of Christ and faith. Although among these there are also many weak persons, *who build upon the foundation stubble that will perish*, *i.e.*, certain unprofitable opinions (some human thoughts and opinions), which, nevertheless, because they do not overthrow the foundation, are both forgiven them and also corrected. And the writings of the holy Fathers testify that sometimes even they built stubble upon the foundation, but that this did not overthrow their faith. But most of those errors which our adversaries defend, overthrow faith, as, their condemnation of the article concerning the remission of sins, in which we say that the remission of sins is received by faith. Likewise it is a remission of sins by love to God, prior to grace. (In the place of Christ they set up their works, orders, masses, just as the Jews, the heathen, and the Turks intend to be saved by their works. For this also is to remove the foundation, *i.e.*, Christ. Likewise, what need will there be of faith if the Sacraments justify *ex opere operato*, without a good disposition on the part of the one using them? (without faith. Now a person that does not regard faith as necessary has already lost Christ. Again, they set up the worship of saints, call upon them instead of Christ, the Mediator, etc.). (Triglot, 233, #22).

Walther also refers to the Large Catechism of Luther, in which the passage occurs: "In the first place, the Creed has hitherto been divided into twelve articles, although, if all points which are written in the Scriptures and which belong to the Creed were to be distinctly set forth, there would be *far more articles*, nor could they all be clearly expressed in so few words." (Triglot, 679, #5).

Just as this passage from the Lutheran Confessions is taken from the writings of Luther, so the Reformer has been cited in support of practices which at least savor of a compromise in doctrinal matters. He is said to have yielded to a compromise in the matter of the *Wittenberg Concord*, in permitting Bucer and his friends to persist in their denial that the godless do not receive the true body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament. But the fact that the text of the Concord uses merely the word "unworthy" is not a concession to error, since Bucer, according to the account of Myconius (St. Louis Ed., 17, 2096), had explained the distinction which he observed in his teaching. He did not want to have more than this understood that, if a Turk, or a Jew, or a mouse, or a worm should partake of the bread of the Sacrament, not knowing what was at stake, this would not be an eating (or drinking) unto damnation. Bucer and his companions distinguished between one who had no understanding of the essence of the Sacrament and one who, in spite of better knowledge of the doctrine of the Sacrament, is a guest at the table of the Lord. That the "godless" in the sense of "unbelievers" came under the condemnation of the "unworthy" in 1 Cor. 11:29 was conceded by Bucer. (*Cp.* col. 2098). One should read the entire exposition of Koestlin (Theology of Luther in Its Historical Development, vol. II, 167 ff., especially 171) and then compare this exposition with the account of Myconius and the letters of Luther, in order to get the right conception of Luther’s position. Every one who makes a careful study of Luther’s theology is bound to realize that Luther clearly distinguished between membership in the *una sancta*, where the Lord Himself declared a minimum of knowledge sufficient for salvation, and the purity of confession demanded of those who are members of the same visible organization. Luther assumed that members of the communion of saints might be found "scattered everywhere under pope, Mohammedans, Persians, Tartars" (Great Confession of the Lord’s Supper, 20, 1101; *cp.* 4, 1136; 9, 44), but he denied the hand of fellowship to all who willfully denied so much as one clear statement of the Bible, even in doctrines which are not essentials to salvation. (*Cp.* 17, 1942 f., 1953-1955; 9, 645 ff.; 17, 1179 f.; 20, 773 ff.)

The great theologian in the field of dogmatics who first introduced the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines (*articuli fundamentals et principales and articuli minus principales*) was Johann Gerhard, who was, as Luthardt states (Compendium, 42) somewhat under the influence of scholastic theology, whose argumentation he employed in a moderate degree. Gerhard writes:

Since those things which are propounded in the Scriptures as matters of faith are not of one kind, but some pertain to the faith directly and *per se*, and others in certain respects and remotely, such as historical descriptions of deeds performed by the saints, so not all matters contained in the Scriptures can be regarded as articles of faith, strictly and accurately speaking, but only those doctrines the knowledge of which is necessary to salvation. (Johann Gerhard, quoted in Schmid, Doctrinal Theology, Ed. by Hay and Jacobs, 94).

But the theologian who really systematized the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines was Hunnius, whose book, Diaskepsis theological de fundamentali dissensu doctrinae Evangelicae-Lutheranae, & Calvinianae, seu Reformatae (1626), has written against evident unionistic tendencies of the day. His distinction is summarized at the beginning of Chapter XII:

Articulus fidei aut est fundamentalis, aut non fundamentalis. *Fundamentalis*, vel est primaries, vel secundarius. *Primarius* est doctrinae Christianae pars, quae salva fide et salute non potest ignorari. Et est duplex: fundamentum constituens vel conservans. *Constituens* est pars doctrinae, causae fidei necessario substernitur. (p. 38, 39).

This division was adopted by Quenstedt, Huelsemann, and Meisner, as well as Hollaz, in the earlier group of dogmaticians, and is found also in the recent monographs by Schmid, Hoenecke, Pieper, and Mueller.

The Lutheran doctrine concerning fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines may be summarized very briefly, in accordance with the exposition found in these monographs, as follows:

I. *Fundamental articles* of faith are those that cannot be unknown, or at least not denied, consistently with faith and salvation, since they are immediately and intimately connected with the foundation of faith. These include:

A. *Primary* fundamental articles, which pertain directly to the foundation of salvation and may neither be unknown nor denied without repudiating salvation:

1. *Constitutive*primary fundamental articles, which in themselves constitute or form the foundation of faith unto salvation and must absolutely be known and accepted by everyone who will be saved;

2. *Conservative* primary fundamental articles are those which in themselves, indeed, are not immediately necessary for salvation, but are necessarily implied in the immediate cause of faith.

B. *Secondary* fundamental articles, which may be unknown to a person and hence denied in ignorance of the truth of Scriptures (but not with a knowledge of their clear revelation in the Word of God).

In the enumeration of the articles of faith pertaining to the various categories there is no complete unanimity among the theological writers, but, generally speaking, the following grouping is acceptable among the older dogmaticians. The fundamental articles include the teaching of the Bible on the redemption through the person and office of Christ, the existence of a divine revelation, the existence of God, the deity of the Mediator, the sinfulness of man, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, the merit and universal atonement of Christ, the communion of natures in Christ, the kingly office of Christ, the necessity of piety and love toward one’s neighbor as a fruit of faith, original sin (Quenstedt). Among the non-fundamental articles of faith these dogmaticians reckon the doctrine of the Antichrist, of the angels, and similar truths.

The list of fundamental articles of faith, as given in recent books on doctrinal theology, includes the following doctrines of Scripture: the doctrine of sin and its consequences; the doctrine of the person of Christ; the doctrine of Christ’s vicarious atonement; the doctrine of the Word of God; the doctrine of the resurrection. (*Cp.* Pieper, Christliche Dogmatik, I, 91-ff.; Mueller, Christian Dogmatics, 48 ff.). The list of passages adduced for the fundamental doctrines, as given by these writers, could well be augmented by referring also to these doctrines with their proof-texts: Jesus Christ as the Son of God, John 6:40; 8:24; 1 John 3:23; Jesus as the Savior, Acts 4:12; 1 John 1:1, 5, 10; faith in God and Christ, John 3:15; 5:24, 38; 6:47; 11:25-26; 12:44; 16:9; the redemption wrought by Christ, Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Gal. 2:20; Acts 20:28; Rom. 5:10; 1 John 1:7; justification, Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:28; 5:18; the Trinity, Matt. 28:19; 3:16-17; 1 Pet. 1:2.

In the list of secondary fundamental doctrines Hollaz places the following: the characteristic peculiarities of the divine persons, the inter-communication of attributes in Christ, original sin (?), the decree of election, the justification of a sinner by faith alone with the exclusion of meritorious works. Recent writers refer in particular also to the doctrine of the Sacraments, since they are so intimately connected with the foundation of the Christian’s faith that a deliberate denial of their efficacy would jeopardize faith, although one who errs from ignorance may yet be saved, provided he clings to the promise of forgiveness offered in the Gospel. We must keep in mind what Pieper and other teachers of the Church emphasize, namely that error and deliberate denial of any clearly revealed truth may never be permitted to gain admittance to the Church. Pieper writes:

It is a very serious matter about the teaching in the house of *God*, in the Christian Church. Those who are engaged in this office should never forget: 1. The Scripture nowhere and to no one give license to depart from the Word of God in any point. On the contrary, the rule in the Christian Church till Judgment Day is: "Teaching them to observe *all things*, whatsoever I have commanded you!" 2. Every departure from the Word of Christ, which the Church has in the Word of His Apostles, is expressly designated as an *offense*. The error which, by the special protection of God, may be harmless for him who errs in the first place, is and remains an offense for others who do not discount the error in themselves, but accept it as it sounds, pass it on to others, and possibly even, by an appeal to the "fathers," cause further disruption in the Church.

(Loc. cit., 99 ff.). In this connection Luther is quoted (St. Louis Ed., 20, 1781): "The Holy Ghost (who speaks in all words of Scripture) does not permit Himself to be parted or divided, that He should permit one point to be taught or believed as true, and the other as false." To this might be added another pertinent saying of Luther (19, 1132): "You must not say, I purpose to err as a Christian. Christian erring occurs only from ignorance." (*Cp*. 9, 642 ff.).

It is with regard to the difference between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines in their relation to church affiliation that we must be on our guard, lest confusion arise. The Scripture itself, as we shall presently see, makes a distinction between the condition of membership in the Holy Christian Church and that in visible or corporate bodies. Membership in the *una sancta* is one thing, and the Lord of the Church fixes His own minimum in the matter of requirements for being accepted into this body. But fellowship in a visible church organization of the orthodox type demanded by the Word of God is fixed by the same infallible rule of faith and life, namely the Word of God. And this Word draws the boundaries closer with regard to church fellowship, since it demands a full acceptance of "*all things* whatsoever [He has] commanded [us]." Hoenecke rightly says: "No person has the liberty to say: This article is written in the Bible, and yet I do not believe it; for thereby he would overthrow the authority of the Scriptures, and hence the organic foundation . . . . It cannot be left free to anyone whether he will believe and confess a certain doctrine which is clearly revealed in the Holy Scriptures." (Ev.~Luth. Dogmatik, I, 452, 454).

However, reference must here also be made to open questions which, in most cases, are identical with theological problems, so-called. An open question is not one which has not yet been fixed by the Lutheran Confessions, for the Church has no business to decide what articles of belief are to be accepted by its members. An open question, usually identical with a theological problem, is one which may occur to any Bible student as he ponders some Scripture doctrine, which, however, is not answered in the Bible, or at least not with sufficient clarity. Among problems of this kind we reckon the question as to the possibility of the origin of sin, since all creatures, including the angels, were very good as they were created by God. Other problems of this type are trichotomy as opposed to dichotomy, also creationism as opposed to traducianism, also the puzzling query: *Cur non omnes?* Such questions are theological problems because they cannot be solved in the Church on earth, since the divine solution in and through the inspired Record is missing. If teachers of the Church insist on spending much time on these problems, they will usually be given to vain disputations, which lead to doting about questions and strifes of words, 1 Tim. 6:4, 5.

It is very important, at this point, that we do not confuse non-fundamental doctrines and open questions. Non-fundamental doctrines are taught in the Scripture, not always with the same definiteness and clearness as to scope and comprehensiveness, but in a way which establishes their revelation as unquestionable. Open questions are not answered in Scripture, and therefore their solution can at best be only problematical, in agreement with certain general rules and principles set forth in the Bible. In most cases theological problems should merely be stated, if this should be deemed necessary, and the Christian theologian will then be ready to confess his ignorance as to the solution. It is not a correct procedure to relegate certain non-fundamental doctrines to the domain of open questions simply because certain orthodox teachers taught incorrectly concerning them. Gerhard was in error in his teaching concerning Sunday, as was Selnecker in his notion of a particular resurrection.

Thus other Lutheran teachers, from ignorance and weakness, have erred concerning the doctrine of the Antichrist, concerning certain eschatological questions, concerning the taking of interest in business, concerning some phase of the so-called apostolic succession, concerning the scope of the Christian ministry, etc. The question that confronts us in such a case concerns the attitude which must be taken by us. As we shall see, very much depends upon the nature of the case, the degree of aberration, the manner in which the erroneous position is defended, and other factors. One thing must be clear to everyone concerned, namely this: Where the Word of God has spoken with sufficient clarity, teachers of the Church cannot establish unity by declaring, in effect: "Let us agree to disagree, but let us resolve to love."

Having set forth, at some length, the position of the Lutheran Confessions and of some of the leading orthodox teachers of the Church on the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines (with certain other implications), our second question is: *What principles of the Word of God come into consideration?*

Here we cannot evade the challenge contained in the statement made by Christ in one of His disputes with the unbelieving Jews, when He laid down the principle: "The Scripture cannot be broken." John 10:35. It is particularly significant that the Lord did not quote these words with reference to a fundamental doctrine, but to a mere historical statement in Ps. 86:1, 6, where the designation "gods" is applied to the rulers of the people. On the strength of this principle, as enunciated by the Savior, no statement of the Word of God may be set aside or denied. "The Scripture cannot possibly be broken, no word of it can be dissolved; compare 7:23; its verity, unaffected by denial, human ignorance or criticism, charges of errancy or other subjective attack." (Lenski).

This principle and demand is borne out by many other passages of Holy Writ. The Apostle Paul admonished the Corinthians that they should be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment," 1 Cor. 1:10, the reference evidently not being to some subjective or social agreement, but to an objective unity based upon the Word of God. And Saint Paul knows of no degrees or distinctions of the truth when he writes: "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning," Rom. 15:4, the implication being the same as in the saying of our Lord in Matt. 5:18: "Verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled." *Cp.* Matt. 24:25. Whatever is clearly stated in the Holy Scriptures must be so accepted and held, lest its denial disrupt church fellowship on that basis alone.

Furthermore, 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. What the Lord said to the children of Israel by the mouth of Moses: "Ye shall not add unto the Word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it," Deut. 4:2, applies to Holy Writ in general. *Cp.* Rev. 22:18. It was one of the proud sayings of Paul: "We are not as many, which corrupt the Word of God." 2 Cor. 2:17. To the great missionary apostle the smallest admixture of error to the Word of Truth was equivalent to a perversion of the entire *corpus doctrinae*. Gal. 5:9. Nor did he confine his denunciation to the corruption of fundamental doctrines. When he writes that "in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils," he enumerates among such doctrines also the prohibition of marriage and of certain foods, 1 Tim. 4:1-3. And again, when he writes: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing," 1 Tim. 6:3-4, the context shows that he at least includes questions which come under the Table of Duties. It is well-known, also, that the second part of Paul’s Second Letter to the Thessalonians is practical, pertaining in a large measure to questions of Christian conduct, and yet, chap. 3:14 says: "If any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed." While he was still to be admonished in a fraternal way, brotherly fellowship was to be suspended until the offender had passed through a change of heart.

It is very true that the apostle admonishes the Thessalonians, in his first letter to them: "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men," chap. 5:14, yet this was not to be done at the expense of the truth. This is evident also from the oft-quoted passage: "To the weak became I weak," 1 Cor. 9:22, for this accommodation was not with reference to his teaching, but concerned only his tactful handling of the erring brethren, as the parallels in vv. 20 and 21 show. And when the apostle writes, 1 Cor. 11:19: "For there must be also heresies among you," he does not sanction falsehood in the midst of the Church, nor will he at any time tolerate error, for the divisions to which he has reference are not a necessity sanctioned by God, but the inevitable consequence and concomitant of perverse human nature. Toleration of weakness and ignorance we find in many parts of Scripture, but no acceptance of, or accommodation to, any denial of the truth revealed by God. In other words: The distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines is undoubtedly Scriptural, as so many Lutheran dogmaticians have shown, and a denial of the former *a priori* excludes from the Church in any meaning of the term, but persistence in denying any part of the revealed truth is out of harmony with the doctrine of inspiration and Holy Scripture’s own claim of clarity and perspicuity. If such denial or stubborn refusal to accept the truth is established, this alone is divisive of church fellowship.

But this leads us to the third question which we must answer in this short discussion, namely this: *What distinction must we observe, what conclusions must we draw, and what practical applications must we make in applying the principles of the Word of God to church conditions at any time?*

Some of these questions have been incidentally answered above, in connection with the discussion of fundamental doctrines. It is God’s judgment upon men when He states, 1 John 5:12b: "He that hath not the Son of God hath not life." Jesus Himself clearly draws the line of demarcation, when He declares: "No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me." John 14:6b. And again: "If any man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered." John 15:6a. The challenge of Peter still stands: "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." Acts 4:12. The declaration of Saint Paul is just as unequivocal: "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the Law: ye are fallen from grace." Gal. 5:4. These statements fully cover the fundamental doctrines of the Bible and leave no question as to their being divisive of church fellowship. It would be impossible for an orthodox congregation, for an orthodox synod, to practice fellowship with such as deny the doctrines of sin and its consequences, of the person of Christ, of the vicarious atonement, of the Word of God as the object of saving faith, of the resurrection, of the Trinity, and of similar articles of faith.

Let us, for the moment, disregard the so-called non-fundamental doctrines and consider open questions or theological problems. From the definition or description given above, with the various examples adduced, it is evidence that such questions cannot be regarded as being divisive of church fellowship, for the simple reason that the Holy Scriptures themselves do not give an answer. In this field a Christian theologian may hold an opinion, but he dare not insist upon making this opinion an issue. He may not propose it or make propaganda for it as *publica doctrina*. If he does, he becomes guilty of fomenting schisms in the Church.

The decision regarding questions of life is not quite so clear-cut. With regard to the unnatural bobbing of women’s hair, for example, 1 Cor. 11:5 ff., the apostle definitely states the principle that nature itself teaches long hair to be the correct thing for women. Yet he does not make this an issue which would lead to church discipline, according to verse 16. In a very similar way, the apostle very strongly urges his apostolic advice, with the plea that "the present distress" would seem to demand it, that the unmarried state should be preferred. Yet he explains that it is not his intention to cast a snare upon his readers, 1 Cor. 7:35, and he introduces the discussion of his suggestion with a statement of the principle laid down by God in instituting holy wedlock: "Let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband." V. 2. He does not make these matters divisive of church fellowship.

The question becomes somewhat more difficult in the field of *adiaphora*, for here we frequently enter the twilight zone, one in which doctrinal considerations are apt to become paramount. Saint Paul’s discussions in 1 Cor. 8 and in Rom. 14 must be studied very carefully in this connection. Out of fear that offense may be given on account of which a weak brother would perish, for whom Christ died, 1 Cor. 8:11, the apostle will eat no flesh while the world stands, lest he make his brother to offend. His argument in Rom. 14 is very similar: "For meat destroy not the work of God. . . . It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak." Vv. 20, 21. But in this instruction also the apostle does not make his example or his ethical advice an issue which would disrupt Christian fellowship. We take our cue from him in similar questions, as, for example, in the field of liturgics and paramentics. Much as we deplore the confusion which exists in this field in the Lutheran Church of America, these questions in themselves would certainly not be divisive of church fellowship. They might, indeed, become so if publicly initiated or maintained on the basis of a false doctrine, as is the case in many customs of the Roman Catholic Church.

There is another area or zone which is closely related to the foregoing, since it usually pertains to statements of the Bible as applied to particular life situations. Yet the questions which come into consideration here are primarily in the field of church discipline and might become divisive of church fellowship only if they involve, as in other cases, the direct denial of a clear truth of the Bible. Most questions in the domain of isagogics or Biblical introduction must be placed into this category. If we must rely entirely upon extraneous proof for certain conclusions, these cannot be made an absolute issue. For example, suspicious as we may be on account of the so-called Ephesian origin of the captivity letters and clearly as we may see its incongruity with evidence agreeing with the revealed truth, we cannot, on this basis alone, declare the non-conformer a properly established denier of the Word of God. Again: Firmly as we consider a properly established and conducted parish school to be the ideal instruction for a full and complete education, we cannot make this in itself an issue which would lead to excommunication or a disruption of church fellowship. The Missouri Synod has openly acknowledged the fact that, whereas an adequate training for adult membership is clearly taught in the Word of God, no particular institution may be designated as the only one commanded by God. In a similar way we are bound to regard the questions which have caused some severe disturbances in the past, such as that of the marriage of a man with his deceased’s wife’s sister ("Schwagerehe"), and other problems of life. In the case of the dance the decision depends upon the posture and the degree of intimacy between the persons of opposite sex, and hence upon the circumstances which would come under the heading of church discipline. With reference to true lodges the Missouri Synod has committed itself, for where the essential feature of such an organization involves the denial of the atonement wrought by Christ, the question certainly is one which must be declared to be divisive of church fellowship. With reference to the length of a creation day, the obligations of rightful betrothal, the status of women in the church, and the form of church government in a church body, the attitude of dissenters toward clear statements would be the deciding factor rather than the opinion itself. Quite frequently a distinction will have to be observed between a peculiar notion held by some individual, without propaganda, and a stubborn refusal to accept clear statements of the Bible or inevitable conclusions drawn therefrom.

We cannot but take note of the fact, however, as stated in the previous section of our discussion, that the Bible itself includes also certain questions of life in the category of those tenets whose denial disrupts Christian fellowship. If the context of 2 Thessalonians 3 means anything at all, we cannot confine the remarks of Saint Paul to doctrines pertaining to salvation, for he writes: "Now we commend you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he has received from us . . . . And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed." Vv. 6, 14. In 1 Timothy 6 we are likewise compelled, by the context, to apply the words of the apostle not to doctrines pertaining to salvation only, but also to questions of life and conduct, for he has just concluded his Table of Duties. And yet he says: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words . . . , from such withdraw thyself." Vv. 3-5. The apostle clearly does not look upon the divisions (*haireseis*) created by teachers holding wrong doctrines and tenets as an indifferent matter, not even according to 1 Cor. 11:19, but he places such seditions and heresies in the category of "works of the flesh," Gal. 5:20, and Peter, in a similar discussion, refers to "damnable heresies," 2 Pet. 2:1. With *haireseis* in this connotation, Saint Paul writes in Titus 3:10: "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject." *Cp*. Jude, v. 19. It is evident that not those who remain true to the Scriptures and refuse to tolerate obvious denials of the revealed truth are guilty of heretical conduct, but those who in any way deny this one foundation of doctrine and life.

What about the so-called non-fundamental doctrines, then? Is a teacher of the Church at liberty to accept them or to reject them, as he chooses? May a church body declare any doctrines, such as that of the angels, of the church and the ministry, and other articles of faith to be matters indifferent? And, on the other hand, may any synod or other church body state that such tenets as that of the Antichrist’s being a phenomenon of the future, of any kind of a millennium, and similar eschatological aberrations are points on which we may agree to disagree? Regardless of any distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, every willful and persistent denial of any doctrine clearly revealed in Scripture or any statement contained therein is divisive of church fellowship.

At this point we should take cognizance of the position taken by the former teachers of our Church. The attitude of the early dogmaticians was briefly sketched above. But it is evident that their distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines was intended chiefly to refer to the *una sancta*, for they correctly concluded that only the doctrines pertaining to salvation were there concerned. The same conception seems to have been held by Walther (*Die Ev. Luth. Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche*), where he, under Thesis XVII, C., distinguishes between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. That he insists upon this integrity of the Word of God and upon the acceptance of every doctrine which is clearly taught in the Bible, regardless of its immediate relation to salvation, is shown by the preceding thesis, which states:

The Evangelical Lutheran Church accepts the written Word of God in its totality as the Word of God, regards nothing contained therein as being superfluous or unimportant, but everything as necessary and important, and also accepts all the doctrines which necessarily follow out of the words of Scripture.

In expounding this thesis, Walter quotes extensively from the classical sayings of Luther, as contained in the latter’s writings, for example: That the Words, This Is My Body, Still Stand; Short Confession of the Holy Sacrament of the Year 1544;Exposition of Galatians of 1535, especially Gal. 5:9-12. In the discussion of the difficulty confronting us, Walther’s article in Lehre und Wehre (Vol. XIV, 1868) is frequently quoted. But in doing so, one should not overlook the qualifying phrases inserted by the writer, such as:

So long as a Church does not persist in its error. . . . The degree of comprehension should be kept in view when we are about to pass judgment .... If all means have been exhausted, so that it is clear that it is not a case of weak understanding or lack of comprehension; when also in the non-fundamental error it develops that the erring one consciously and persistently contradicts the Word of God and thereby wrecks the original basis of our faith,—such a one is living in mortal sin and is not to be tolerated as a brother in the faith. (quoted by Graebner, The Historical Lutheran Position, 22, 23).

But why did Walter take this comparatively lenient position at that time, while he and his co-laborers later, in the controversy on conversion and election, took such an unequivocal stand, also with respect to aspects of the doctrine which were not, in themselves, fundamental? (*Cp.* Ebenezer, 414, f.). And why had he, in the controversy with Grabau, taken such an unequivocal stand on the doctrine of the church and the ministry and church polity, matters which certainly are not fundamental doctrines? The answer is: Because he knew the distinction between a person’s personal relation with his Savior and any stand which the same person might take which was patently opposed to clear statements of the Bible, for such persistent contradictions finally wrecked the original basis of our faith, the infallible Word of God.

We might point out here, also, that the theological magazine of the Missouri Synod, in all the volumes which are now so frequently quoted, did not condone a willful and persistent denial of a clearly revealed truth of the Bible. The fathers were more than ready to assume, charitably, that it was at first a lack of comprehension on the part of the opponents that prevented their accepting the position taken by the leaders of Synod. Yet an article which appeared in *Lehre und Wehre* in 1873 (Vol. XIX) not only contains this statement: "With our fathers we hold that a difference of opinion in non-fundamental doctrines is not to be regarded as heresy, nor that it *absolutely* excludes from the ministerial office, nor that the unity of the spirit is hindered thereby, *provided there is no conscious sinning against the Word of God or any disruption of the Church*," but also the latter statements: "We repudiate in particular the following errors, as disruptive of the foundation (grundsteurzende), conflicting with the Lutheran confessions: . . . 6. The aberrations of recent times in the doctrine of the last things (chiliasm, twofold resurrection, general conversion of the Jews, Antichrist), in which we recognize, partly, arbitrary subjectively modern ideas, and partly a falsely realistic, unfounded exposition of the Biblical prophecy." (pp. 290, 294). While we realize that not the position taken by the fathers determines what God declares to be divisive of church fellowship, but what the Bible says, we find nothing in the official utterances of a generation ago which is at variance with the position taken by the first generation of Missouri Synod theologians, if we carefully study their writings and note the qualifying phrases as well as the practical considerations which actuated their stand.

The situation is well summarized by Pieper (l.c., 103):

But also in the case of a denial of non-fundamental doctrines there is danger that the divine authority of the Scripture is denied . . . . Baier therefore rightly says: "We are to be careful in regard to this matter, lest by embracing or professing error we rashly sin against divine revelation and God Himself; especially, lest something be maintained, through the persuasion of others, contrary to conscience, whereby the foundation and the truth of one or more of the fundamental articles of faith are overturned. For *thus, as by a mortal sin*, faith and the Holy Spirit may be and are entirely driven away."… He who does not believe the Scripture in the small matters of the historical, geographical, and other statements, how will he, under the terrors of conscience believe the Scripture in the great things, those which treat of the incarnation of the Son of God and of the vicarious satisfaction and oppose all religious ideas that man by nature harbors within himself? (*Cp*. Mueller, l.c., 57; Schmid, l.c., 97).

And Hoenecke writes (op.cit., I, 457):

That the Church has never reached a perfect, but only a fundamental unity of doctrine and faith, is a shame upon the Christians, for this defect has its cause nowhere else but in the flesh of the Christians. Yet the fact of the defect cannot involve its right to existence, and from the disgraceful fact that the Church has always attained merely a fundamental unity of faith the principle is not to be deduced that she should not go beyond that stage. We shall indeed, therefore, bear those who err from weakness; but their error may not demand recognition as an authorized position, as an open question, but it may be recognized only as something that militates against the Scripture, which may indeed not disrupt Christian fellowship at once, but certainly at the time when it demands recognition, although it has received a thorough repudiation from the Scripture and clearly finds itself unable to advance any argument for its existence.

An in another place Hoenecke states (IV, 223): "It is to be kept in mind that the concepts ‘fundamental’ and ‘non-fundamental’ have reference to salvation and not to church fellowship. We do not maintain that a person who does not believe this article (of the Antichrist) cannot be saved, but we deny him the fellowship of the Lutheran Church." It will be well for every Lutheran theologian to recall that he is pledged to uphold the Lutheran Confessions, not *quatenus*, but *quia*, at least in all his public utterances, in case he finds it impossible to accept some point of exegesis in the doctrinal expositions. Exegetical questions must not be permitted to alter articles of faith.

In conclusion it may not be amiss to quote a paragraph from the excellent monograph of Krauth, The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology, in the section on "Essential Union in Fundamentals":

We protest, therefore, alike against the basis which does not propose the fundamental doctrine of the Gospel as essential to unity, and the basis which, professing to accept the Gospel fundamentals as its constituent element, is, in any degree whatever dubious or evasive as to what subjects of the Gospel-teaching are fundamental, or which, pretending to define them, throws among non-fundamentals what the Word of God and the judgment of His Church have fixed as articles of faith. On such a point there should be no evasion. Divine Truth is the end of the Church; it is also her means. She lives for it; and she lives by it. What the Evangelical Lutheran Church regards as fundamental to Gospel doctrine, that is, what her existence, her history, her Confessions declare or justly imply to be her articles of faith, these ought to be accepted as such by all honorable men who bear her name. (p. 183).

And under the heading, "Course of Error in the Church," somewhat later in the same chapter, Krauth writes:

When error is admitted into the Church, it will be found that the stages in its progress are always three. It begins by asking *toleration*. Its friends say to the majority: You need not be afraid of us; we are few and weak; let us alone, we shall not disturb the faith of others. The Church has her standards of doctrine; of course we shall never interfere with them; we only ask for ourselves to be spared interference with our private opinions. Indulged in for this time, error goes on to assert *equal rights*. Truth and error are balancing forces. The Church shall do nothing which looks like deciding between them; that would be partiality. It is bigotry to assert any superior right for the truth. *We are to agree to differ,* and any favoring of the truth, because it is truth, is partisanship. What the friends of truth and error hold in common is fundamental. Anything on which they differ is *ipso facto* non-essential. Anybody who makes account of such a thing is a disturber of the peace of the Church. Truth and error are two coordinate powers, and the great secret of church-statesmanship is to preserve the balance between them. From this point error soon goes on to its natural end, which is to assert *supremacy*. Truth started with *tolerating*; it comes to be merely tolerated, and that only for a time. Error claims a preference for its judgments on all disputed points. It puts men into positions, not as at first in spite of their departure from the Church’s faith, but in consequence of it. Their repudiation is that they repudiate that faith, and position is given them to teach others to repudiate it, and to make them skillful in combating it. (p. 195 f.).

There is much food for thought in this discussion.

Our final conclusions may be offered in the following sentences: Non-fundamental doctrines are in themselves not divisive of church-fellowship, provided that any error in teaching them is held temporarily only, from weakness and in ignorance, without stubbornness, and with no attempt at teaching them as *publica doctrina*. A false position in non-fundamentals *is* divisive of church-fellowship if it is persistently held in opposition to Scripture truth and is tantamount to a demand for toleration of error. If an individual (especially a pastor or professor as teacher of the Church), or a congregation, or an entire church body, makes a false stand on a non-fundamental doctrine a part of its *publica doctrina*, or open confession, this error may not be tolerated in silence, for it is tantamount to a rejection of a teaching of Scripture (and of the Lutheran Church, if this is the general church body concerned). If two or more church bodies are trying to establish the fact of an existing unity of the spirit, any issues of the past which included a false position on any doctrine, fundamental or non-fundamental, must *first* be adjusted in accordance with the Word of God; otherwise any declaration of agreement will not be based on the Word of God as the one infallible guide, but on convenience and expediency.

P. E. Kretzmann   
Concordia Seminary   
St. Louis, Missouri