God So Loved the World
God So Loved the World

A Study of Christian Doctrine

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Author’s Preface

Why name a book on Christian doctrine *God So Loved the World*? There are several reasons for the title. In the first place, Jesus Christ and the good news of the salvation he won for us are at the center of all biblical teaching. The apostle Paul proclaimed the entire counsel of God (Ac 20:27). Yet he declared to the Corinthians, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Co 2:2). At the heart of all that Paul taught was the good news about Jesus Christ who was “delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Ro 4:25).

Without Jesus Christ, the Bible would simply become a book of ethics by which mankind is to live. However, the Bible’s chief purpose is to present to us Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, who came to save us. He led the life we cannot lead. He died the death we deserved to die. He rose again from the dead to conquer death for us. As we study Christian doctrine, we see how all of Scripture’s teachings relate to its central message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The title chosen for this book makes it clear what the focus of our study will be. We will study all teachings of the Bible in relation to the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6).

There is a second reason for naming this doctrine text *God So Loved the World*. It is to be a reminder that all doctrines of the Bible relate to the central teaching of Scripture: that God sent his Son to save us. We know that an error in any doctrine of Scripture will in one way or another undermine the Bible’s central teaching of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. For example, the teaching that people can contribute to their own conversion will undermine the biblical teaching that salvation is by grace alone (Eph 2:8,9). For this reason, we take every error in biblical teaching seriously. We will note it, refute it, and correct it, in the interest of saving sinners (2 Ti 4:1-5).

There is a third reason for naming this book of Christian doctrine *God So Loved the World*. God’s revelation of salvation is intended for all people. Jesus commissioned his church to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19,20). All who have the blessing of faith in Jesus have the privilege to share with others the good news about salvation
through faith in Jesus. Blessings received are blessings to share. We want to share the good news about what Jesus did to save us with others so that the Holy Spirit may also bring them to faith.

It is with fear and trembling that this text has been offered for publication. The writer is very aware of his own human frailty, weaknesses, and shortcomings. As Paul has noted, we carry the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay (2 Co 4:7-9). Yet this text is also offered with the confidence that God’s Word is the power unto salvation (Ro 1:16) and his Word will accomplish the Lord’s purpose (Isa 55:10,11). As Isaiah wrote and Peter repeated, “All men are like grass. . . . The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa 40:6,8; 1 Pe 1:24,25).

This book is also offered as a joyful expression of thanksgiving to our God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—who has been so gracious to me. With the hymn writer I confess, “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me” (CW 385:1). Thank God for “the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7)!

In conclusion, I wish to thank Northwestern Publishing House for asking me to work on this text. It was indeed a privilege. I also wish to thank my wife, Carol, who gave me so much encouragement while I was writing this text, because she was convinced that it was pleasing in the Lord’s sight for me to complete this work.

To God alone be the glory!

Lyle W. Lange
Abbreviations

**Lutheran Confessions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>Augsburg Confession</td>
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<td>Ap</td>
<td>Apology of the Augsburg Confession</td>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>Smalcald Articles</td>
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<td>Tr</td>
<td>Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td>Small Catechism</td>
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<td>LC</td>
<td>Large Catechism</td>
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<td>FC</td>
<td>Formula of Concord</td>
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<td>FC Ep</td>
<td>Epitome</td>
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<td>FC SD</td>
<td>Solid Declaration</td>
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**Kolb-Wengert**  

**Tappert**  

**Triglot**  
PROLEGOMENA

Introduction to
the Study of Christian Doctrine
Chapter 1
The Study of Christian Doctrine

The core of the teaching of Christian doctrine

At the heart of the study of Christian doctrine is Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus is the center of the entire Bible (Eph 2:20), so he is the heart and core of the study of Christian doctrine. The study of the entire body of Christian doctrine centers on Jesus and what he did for our salvation (1 Co 2:2). If you lose Christ, all you have left is an ethical system for the morality of mankind. Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no salvation. Apart from faith in Christ, there is no power or motivation for Christian living.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is the Son of God made flesh. Why did he come into this world? He came to save us from our sins. We come into this world corrupted by sin. We daily sin against God. We deserve nothing but his anger and condemnation. Yet God loves us and sent Jesus to save us. He lived the life we cannot live. He suffered the punishment for our sins. He died and rose again, conquering death for us. God has declared the world “not guilty” because of what Jesus did. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness for all our sins. We are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ. We are assured of eternal life with the Lord in heaven.

Therefore, as we approach the study of Christian doctrine in this book, we will follow two principles stated by the apostle Paul:

1. “I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Ac 20:27).
2. “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Co 2:2).

Martin Luther (1483–1546) and the other writers of the Lutheran Confessions were guided by three great principles in their teaching of Christian doctrine. These three principles were Scripture alone (sola Scriptura), grace alone (sola gratia), and faith alone (sola fide). Scripture alone: The Bible is the only source for the doctrines on which faith must rest. It is the only standard by which a Christian’s teaching and life must be judged. Grace alone: Salvation is by God’s grace alone through Jesus Christ. Human works do not contribute to our salvation.
Faith alone: Through faith in Jesus Christ, we receive, as our very own, the righteousness and forgiveness Jesus won for all by his holy life and substitutionary death. Those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Those who do not believe in Jesus reject the forgiveness he won for them on the cross, and they will perish eternally (Mk 16:16). The three principles of Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone are at the center of the study of Christian doctrine.

Lutheran teachers of Christian doctrine have also stressed the importance of properly using the law and the gospel. These two teachings of the Bible must be used in their proper roles. Souls are at stake. An improper use of the law can turn people into Pharisees who vainly imagine they are saved by their own works. It can drive sinners to despair by making them think there is no hope for them. Diluting the law with the gospel can harden people in their sin by diminishing the force of the law. Attaching conditions of the law to the gospel will rob poor sinners of the comfort of the gospel. It will rob a Christian of the power for living a thankful life in response to God’s grace. It can lead sinners to damnation by causing them to trust in their own works for salvation. In studying Christian doctrine, we must pay careful attention to the proper use of the law and of the gospel.

Lutheran teachers of Christian doctrine have always stressed the importance of the means of grace. Christ won salvation for us on the cross. God distributes this salvation to us through the gospel and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. If we want to find God, we look for him where he comes to us, through the gospel, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. We do not expect God to work salvation or sanctification apart from these means. The teaching of Christian doctrine must center on God’s work through the means of grace, through which he gives to us the benefit of all Christ won for us on the cross.

Before we study Christian doctrine itself, we will study the source for Christian doctrine, the Bible. The Bible differs from all other religious writings of the world. The Bible is given by inspiration of God. It is the only source for our teaching, and it is the only standard by which all doctrine and life must be judged. With Peter we say, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68,69).

The Bible is the only source and standard for a Christian’s faith and life

When Adam and Eve fell into sin, God promised them a Savior (Ge 3:15). From Adam to Moses, God’s precious promise of the Savior was
passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. This may be one reason why the patriarchs from Adam to Noah (listed in Ge 5) lived so long. After the time of the flood, people spread out over the face of the whole earth. God repeated his promise of the Savior directly to his people, as is evidenced in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ge 15, 26, 28). During the time of the sojourn of God’s people in Egypt, the promises of God were kept before Israel, giving them comfort during their slavery (Ex 3:14). Finally, God directed Moses to write down the record of his revelation (Ex 17:14). Once Moses had written the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch: Genesis through Deuteronomy), God, through Moses, directed his people to the written record of his revelation (Dt 4:2; Jos 1:7; 23:6). As the other writings of the Old Testament were added, God, through his prophets, directed his people to them also as the source of their teaching and for direction in their living (Isa 8:20).

In the New Testament, Jesus cited the Old Testament Scriptures as authoritative to establish doctrine. He said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44). (The three major divisions of the Hebrew Old Testament were the five books of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and a section eventually called the sacred writings. Since the book of Psalms was the first book in this latter group, it often was used to refer to the whole last division of the Hebrew Old Testament.) For Jesus, the Old Testament was authoritative to establish doctrine.

Jesus’ own words are authoritative for us in the New Testament. He declared, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (Jn 6:63). Peter said to him, “You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:68, 69). Jesus also declared, “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say” (Jn 12:48-50).

But how have the words of Christ been passed on to us? These words, which are authoritative for establishing doctrine and for guiding Christian living, have come to us by inspiration through the apostles and other writers of the New Testament. Jesus promised his apostles, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (Jn 14:26). “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes,
he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (Jn 16:13,14). Jesus also said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (Jn 8:31). Paul declared that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Ti 3:16,17).

The words of Christ, as they have come down to us in the four gospels, the epistles and Revelation, together with the Old Testament, are the sole source of salvation, the sole authority to establish doctrine and to direct Christian living. The warning with which the book of Revelation closes is applicable to the entire Bible: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Rev 22:18,19).

Our Lutheran Confessions echo this truth of Scripture. Luther wrote, “This means that the Word of God—and no one else, not even an angel—should establish articles of faith” (SA II II:15). The Formula of Concord states, “We confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated” (FC SD Rule and Norm:3).

Other approaches to the study of Christian doctrine

Confessional Lutherans follow the approach to the study of Christian doctrine that the Lutheran Confessions enunciated in the previous paragraph: “This means that the Word of God—and no one else, not even an angel—should establish articles of faith.” This is the principle of Scripture alone to which we subscribe. Not all church bodies, including those who call themselves Christian, follow this principle. Many add other sources from which they take their teachings. We will look at the other sources from which some church bodies or groups draw their teaching.

Roman Catholicism: Scripture and Tradition

The Roman Catholic Church has operated with two sources from which it draws its teachings. At the time of the Council of Trent
(1545–1563), Rome specifically listed the written Scriptures and Tradition as sources for its teachings. Tradition was defined as the unwritten teaching handed down by Christ to the apostles (as opposed to the written teaching of the Bible) and through them to their successors after them. Rome has often established doctrines through the pronouncements of the papacy and the declarations of church councils without any attempt to substantiate them from Scripture. In fact, it is safe to say that much of Roman Catholic doctrine is established by an appeal to Tradition rather than to Scripture. It was this establishment of doctrine by the authority of the Roman Catholic Church which the Lutheran Reformation rejected by asserting the principle of Scripture alone.

Rome has modified its teaching in recent years. Instead of speaking of two sources of doctrine, as it did at Trent, it now speaks of one source. Scripture is put into the category of Tradition, weakening its authority even more. At Vatican II (the church council held from 1962–1965), Rome stated, “Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is committed to the Church. . . . It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the other.” To say that the Bible cannot stand without the teaching authority of the Roman Church is to undermine and reject the authority of Scripture.

The Orthodox church: Scripture and Tradition

In studying the various sources that some churches use in their studies of doctrine, we will also need to understand how the Orthodox church views tradition. Before we look at their view of Scripture and Tradition, it will help to have some understanding of the history of the Orthodox church. We will spend some time looking at its history, more time than we will spend on the history of some of the other groups listed at this point. The reason for this is that we tend to know less about the Orthodox church than we do about the Catholic or Reformed churches. There are three million members in the Orthodox Church in America, and their numbers are growing. We do well to know something about them.

Various groups of the Orthodox we may encounter include the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, the Eastern Orthodox, and the Orthodox Catholic Church. The full and official title of the Orthodox church is “The Holy Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Eastern Church.” The
Orthodox church is not one church but a family of 13 independent and self-governing churches. Though they are generally united in teachings and worship, they each govern their own internal affairs. Each Orthodox church has its own head, who is referred to as either the patriarch, the archbishop, or the metropolitan.

These are the 13 Orthodox churches, each with its own head:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constantinople</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Greece</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexandria</td>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>Albania</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antioch</td>
<td>Romania</td>
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<td>Jerusalem</td>
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<td>Russia</td>
<td>Cyprus</td>
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The first four patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem) are normally given special honor because of their long-standing history. The patriarch of Constantinople is regarded as the universal patriarch, but he still is not given authority to interfere in the affairs of other churches. There is no pope in the Orthodox church. There are small bodies of the Orthodox in Finland, Japan, the Czech and the Slovak republics, the Sinai, and China. These groups are self-governing, but they do not have their own heads. In the United States, Orthodoxy is represented by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America—about two million members—and the Orthodox Church in America—about one million members.3

The Orthodox church’s history is rooted in the Near East and is centered in Istanbul in Turkey (formerly Constantinople). When Constantine became emperor of the Roman Empire in A.D. 323, he moved its capital from Rome to Constantinople. When the barbarians overran Rome, its political power waned. The bishop in Rome stepped into the vacuum to assume power. Christians in the West began to look to the bishop of Rome as their leader. Christians in the East accorded the bishop of Constantinople a position of leadership. When the bishop of Rome began claiming primacy over the whole church, East and West, the church in the East resisted.

The church in the East had been the host for the first seven ecumenical councils. It contributed greatly to the development of the Nicene Creed and the settlement of the early controversies over the Trinity and the person of Christ. But there were two issues that eventually divided the East from the West. One was the controversy over whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone (as the East claimed) or from the Father and the Son (as the West insisted). This was called the filioque controversy. The Nicene Creed was
adopted at Constantinople in 381 without the words that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son (filioque in Latin). In 589, the Council of Toledo, Spain, a council of the Western church, approved the inclusion of the words that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son into the Nicene Creed, to combat the growing threat of Arianism in the West. While it was wrong of the Western church to change a creed without the consent of all those who adopted it, the Western church was on biblical ground when it asserted the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son.

Photius, the patriarch of the Eastern church from Constantinople, branded the entire Western church as heretical for accepting the insertion of the filioque.

The other issue that divided the East and the West was over the claim of the bishop in Rome that he was the head over the entire church. In 865, Nicholas I of Rome declared that he intended to extend the power of the papacy over all the earth, over every church. The Eastern church was angered by this. The matter came to a conclusion in 1054 when Pope Leo IX from the West excommunicated Patriarch Cerularius of the East. When Western forces sacked Constantinople during the fourth crusade in 1204, any hope of reconciliation between the East and the West was ended.

The Eastern Orthodoxy is distinguished from Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in a number of ways.

- The Orthodox church understands itself to be “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, the true Church of Christ on earth . . . and claims [that] there is an absolute identity and continuity of this Church from the time of the apostles to the present day.” The Roman Catholic Church also asserts this position for itself. However, we do not believe that any visible organization can be identified as the only true church. Christ’s church is invisible, and all who believe in him are members of his church and will be saved.

- In the West, Catholics look to Rome for leadership. In the East, the Orthodox look to Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) for leadership.

- The Western church used the Latin language. At the time of the Reformation, the reformers used the speech of the common people. Vatican II (1962–1965) also moved the Roman Catholic Church to use the language of the people. The Orthodox, however, follow the Greek-speaking tradition, even though most of the Orthodox today do not speak Greek. Greek was the language of
the New Testament, the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), the first apologists and theologians, the seven ecumenical councils (all were held near Constantinople), and the creeds issued by those councils. That does not, however, give the Orthodox a monopoly on orthodoxy.

The Orthodox are fond of these great theologians who came from the Eastern church:

- **Clement of Alexandria** (150–215), who was the founder of the Alexandria school of theology. He believed that Scripture was written allegorically and that those who are wise go beyond the literal meaning of Scripture. His allegorical method allowed him to go beyond the natural meaning of the Bible and find in it teachings that are Platonic in nature.

- **Origen of Alexandria** (185–254), who was a disciple of Clement. His theology was also an attempt to wed theology to the philosophy of Neoplatonism. His allegorizing of Scripture created many theological problems.

- **Athanasius of Alexandria** (293–373), who championed the teaching of Scripture concerning Christ and the Trinity. He fought against the error of Arianism. He was instrumental in bringing together the theologians of the East, who emphasized there are three persons in the Godhead, with the theologians of the West, who emphasized that God is one.

- **Basil the Great** (329–379), who was one of the three church leaders known as the Great Cappadocians (Cappadocia was a region in southern Asia Minor, an area that now belongs to Turkey). Basil is regarded as the father of Eastern monasticism. He also was an opponent of Arianism and made contributions to the final victory of the creedal formulation of the biblical trinitarian doctrine.

- **Gregory of Nazianzus** (329–389), who was a friend of Basil the Great and of his brother Gregory of Nyssa. These three are called the Great Cappadocians. Gregory, who came from Nazianzus, became the bishop of Constantinople in 381. He was an opponent of the Arian error and wrote a number of hymns that have become classics of Greek hymnody.

- **John Chrysostom** (345–407), who was the patriarch of Constantinople. One hundred years after his death, he was given the name Chrysostom, the Golden-Mouthed, because of his great preaching ability. During his time, John tried to bring about reforms among clergy, royalty, and laity. He was also a monk.