



Misrepresenting Pieper on Persuading an Unbeliever: Flyover Method Failure

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Outline

Abstract

1. Introduction
2. How the Professor Derived His Interpretation
3. What the Professor Says His Own Position Is
4. Synopsis of the Professor's Moves
 - A. Argument from arrangement
 - B. An openly conceded inference
 - C. Argument from historical context
 - D. Analogy and contrast rather than citation
 - E. Extension into a larger cluster
5. What Does Pieper Himself Say?
6. Representation or Misrepresentation of Pieper
7. Assessment
 - A. Flyover interpretation
 - B. Confusion of dogmatics and practical theology
 - C. Innuendo
 - D. Ignorance of the publication sequence
8. Conclusion

Abstract

In a Systematics III lecture at Concordia Seminary on how to bring an unbeliever to faith in Christ, the professor portrayed Francis Pieper as holding that one must first persuade an unbeliever of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and only then, on that secured foundation, lead him to sin, Christ, and salvation. This paper examines how the professor reached that portrayal, sets it against Pieper's own words, and assesses its fairness and the method that produced it.

The professor derived the attributed position not from anything Pieper wrote about evangelism, but from the arrangement of topics in the *Christian Dogmatics*: Pieper treats prolegomena and Scripture first and reaches Christ and soteriology only later. Reading that sequence as a claim about evangelistic priority, the professor reinforced it with Pieper's historical context—writing amid the rise of higher criticism—and with analogy and contrast rather than citation, while conceding the inference was his own (“I tend to think he did”). He then associated Pieper's starting point with biblicism, bibliolatry, fundamentalism, and rationalism, and set it against his own “Christ-first” approach, which he credited to Luther and Childs.

Pieper's own exposition, including the very Prolegomena assigned for the lecture, states the contrary. “In dealing with an unbeliever we cannot begin with an attempt to convince him of the divine authority of Scripture. We must first bring him to the knowledge of his sins and to faith in Christ” (I.137–138); the recognition of Scripture follows as a consequence of faith, and Pieper calls this sequence the only way. His account of missionary practice (I.313) and his rationale in the doctrine of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* (I.312; I.268–269) confirm it. Several moves the professor claimed as his corrective—Christ first, Scripture confessed afterward, submission as childlike faith rather than enforced external authority, the appeals to John 10 and to Luther—are Pieper's own. On the question at issue, the professor and Pieper stand in substantially the same place.

The representation is therefore not merely inaccurate but inverted. The essay argues that the error is methodological rather than malicious and identifies three faults. First, a “flyover” interpretation conducted from the table of contents rather than the text. Second, a confusion of categories: a dogmatics is ordered by logical priority (the *principium cognoscendi*), evangelism by pedagogical and pneumatological priority (Christ as *principium essendi*); “first” means different things in each, and the two orders need not coincide. Third, an innuendo effect, by which juxtaposing the attributed position with biblicism and its cognates—without flagging the shift as separate from the exposition of Pieper—invites students to draw a damaging inference the professor never directly asserts.

1. Introduction

In a lecture at Concordia Seminary in Systematic Theology III,¹ the professor lectured and led an interactive discussion on how to persuade an unbeliever to believe in Christ. The reading assignments were in Francis Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* and in a writing by Brevard Childs. The Pieper assignment was in his Prolegomena.²

The professor portrayed Pieper as saying that one must first persuade an unbeliever about the inspiration and authority of Scripture as the Word of God. Only then and on that basis, Pieper

¹ Biermann, Joel, “Systematics III 05” (2016). Systematic Theology 3. 5, “Dr. Biermann discusses the readings from Franz Pieper and Brevard Childs on the Word of God and the Bible,” 10-5-2016, <https://scholar.csl.edu/systematictheo3/5>

² Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), I.3-190.

is portrayed as saying, can one bring an unbeliever to Christ.

Queries:

- How did the professor derive that position from Pieper's *Dogmatics*?
- What does Pieper himself say on the subject?
- Is the professor's portrayal a representation or misrepresentation of Pieper?
- What downstream effects does the portrayal have on the regard students have for Pieper's *Dogmatics*?

2. How the Professor Derived His Interpretation

The professor made an argument from the dogmatic arrangement of topics in Pieper's *Dogmatics*. He guided his students to observe that, in his sequence of topics, Pieper first addresses prolegomena and Scripture. Only later, in volume II, does Pieper reach the topics of Christ and salvation. This, the professor asserts, is Pieper's sequence for evangelism.

Of course, you should listen to the whole lecture and classroom discussion to keep the context of points the professor expresses, but here are some of his points:

- "Now, where does Pieper put his discussion about the Bible? Volume I. What's the first 190 pages about before he gets into this part? ... This is when he's doing prolegomena."
- "Then his very next move [after prolegomena], his very first move is to the Bible. Okay? So then, when does he get into God and creation? After he spends hundred some pages plus on the Bible. Then we get to God. Then we get to Volume II and Jesus and soteriology and then on we go."
- "Before we talk about Jesus, we first got to talk about the Bible, because that's going to be what we're going to discuss. Now, do we agree the Bible is the Word of God? ... So, once we get that established, we can move on. But if we don't get that established, we're cooked. And now, is that not what Pieper's up to? This is exactly what he's doing. So, very first thing we've got to do, establish the Bible. Boom! Lay that baby down. Now, now that we've got the Bible established, let's build our doctrine. And off we go. He builds his doctrine. This is what's going on."
- "So Pieper kind of approaches this the way a lot of you approach the question of how do you know Jesus is God? ... You go to the Bible. You're going to start bringing out Bible verses."
- "Maybe Pieper didn't intentionally lay it out, but I tend to think he did, especially because of his context, as Kyle points out."

Having derived Pieper's alleged position from the sequence of topics in *Christian Dogmatics*, the professor bolsters his interpretation with what he says is the context of Pieper's writing.

- "Maybe Pieper didn't intentionally lay it out, but I tend to think he did, especially

because of his context, as Kyle points out. Okay? Because this, he's writing in the 20s and the 30s. This is when the higher critical stuff has been going full blast and it's just kind of really starting to take off, and it's going gangbusters. Everybody's jumping on board, and Pieper's thinking like, holy smokes, they're taking away our Bible from us. No, no, no. We've got to fight for this thing. We've got to get this thing going back."

The professor then widens that context into the longer historical arc, framing the placement as the opening move in a defensive campaign:

- "And this fight continues all through the 20th century. And it culminates, of course, in the history of the LCMS in the 74 walkout, where just boom! ... This is all about the battle for the Bible. ... Pieper's kind of like the first salvo in this battle, and then the whole walkout debacle is the grand battle."
- "When did Wellhausen come up with the JEDP theory? Oh, this is before Pieper?³ Yeah. Exactly. This is going full blast in the Academy... they don't even have labels yet when Pieper's writing. But this idea of turning the scientific mind on the Bible... That's going full tilt. And Pieper is having conniptions about that."⁴

3. What the Professor Says His Own Position Is

The professor sets the position he attributes to Pieper in opposition to his own preferred approach, which he credits to Luther and to Childs: begin with Christ, not the book. On the professor's own view, Christ comes first, and the confession that Scripture is God's inerrant Word is a derived conclusion that follows from already trusting Christ—"a secondarily arrived at conclusion, not a major premise."

Here are excerpts where the professor states his own view of the evangelistic order. The clearest programmatic statement — start with Christ, not the book:

- "This is not the place to begin a discussion of Christianity. If you want to begin a

³ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1883). This is the work usually identified as the consolidation of the developed documentary hypothesis. The 1883 title *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* was the second edition. The first edition appeared in 1878 under the title *Geschichte Israels*, Bd. 1 (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1878). Wellhausen renamed it *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* for the 1883 printing, and that's the title it's been known by ever since. So, the first appearance was 1878. The form and title under which it became the canonical statement was 1883. The widely cited English translation is *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1885).

⁴ Conniptions? Examine the Francis August Otto Pieper (1852-1931) Collection, Collection ID-1415, Concordia Historical Institute on the campus of your seminary, link below. Pieper never learned to use a typewriter. There you will find everything he did in his own handwriting. He wrote almost entirely in pencil on the unused portions of bulletin inserts, the back sides of calendar pages, and such, making do, using it up, and wearing it out. See there how he worked, the steady, un-stampeded, unruffled, equanimous, unflappable industry. Read the biographical sketches of Pieper. Learn his humility, his selflessness, his servanthood, and his well-known classroom humor. He had the proper Lutheran response to the eschaton: plant a tree. That is what he was doing, not frantically reacting in panic to heresy. Heresy ye always have with you. This characterization by the professor about a conniption from the sheer imagination of the professor is an *ad hominem* that fails both logic and manners.

<https://concordiahistoricalinstitute.libraryhost.com/repositories/2/resources/2026>

discussion of Christianity, where should you start? Start with Christ. It's kind of in the name. Okay? It's not Biblianity. It's Christianity. So, we start with Christ. We talk about Him."

The direction-of-derivation claim — Christ first, Scripture confessed afterward as a consequence:

- "The Bible doesn't give us Jesus. God gives us Jesus. Christ comes to us. And the Bible confirms and narrates and establishes the story. But it's Christ that's the beginning. Christ that's the center."

His own adult instruction class method, stated as the corrected order:

- "Back to my adult instruction class. Instead of lesson one, first 15 minutes being on the Bible, what should my very first discussion be? Christ. The claim He makes. Who He is. What He says He is. ... And then we start going on from there. We'll talk about soteriology. We'll talk about justification. We'll talk about sacramental theology. And then we'll get to the Bible. And by that point, the guy has either said yes or no to Jesus."

The conditional structure — the confession of Scripture follows from a prior yes to Christ:

- "If you say yes to Jesus, what are you definitively led to say about His Word? It's His true Word. So, in other words, everything gets turned around here. ... We start with Jesus and we simply make the claim of Christ. That's the definitive thing. If He's yes there, then everything else comes with it. But if He's no there, we've got nowhere else to go."

His statement of how inerrancy is grounded — on Christ, not on proving the book:

- "I don't believe in the inerrancy of the Bible because the Bible has proven itself to me. I believe in the inerrancy of the Bible because I believe Christ is my Lord, and I trust the book He's told me to trust. ... my confession of the inerrancy of Scripture is a derived confession, not a primary one. ... So, it's a secondarily arrived at conclusion, not a major premise."

The contrast he draws with fundamentalism, which doubles as a restatement of his own order:

- "Fundamentalism makes the Bible the first move. They don't make Christ the first move. ... For us, Christ is the first and only thing that God gives, and anything else comes out and derives from Him."

And a practical application of the same principle to the catechetical/teaching setting:

- "Instead of trying to tell them how to think about the Bible, I'm going to tell them, well, what is the center of your faith? I'm going to start with Jesus and help them see the obvious answer."

4. Synopsis of the Professor's Moves

The decisive feature of the professor's case is that he does not derive Pieper's position from anything Pieper says about evangelism. He derives it from the arrangement of topics in Pieper's *Dogmatics*. The reasoning proceeds in roughly the following steps.

A. Argument from arrangement.

The professor's primary evidence is where Pieper places the doctrine of Scripture. Pieper completes his prolegomena, then turns immediately to the Bible—devoting a substantial block of pages to Scripture—and only afterward proceeds to God, creation, sin, Christ, and soteriology. The professor reads this ordering as a theological claim about priority: putting Scripture first communicates that Scripture is the foundational, prior thing on which everything else rests.

B. An openly conceded inference.

The professor does not claim Pieper says any of this explicitly. He acknowledges the move is his own interpretation: “maybe Pieper didn't intentionally lay it out, but I tend to think he did.” That admission is important, because it marks the attribution as a probable inference drawn from structure rather than the position Pieper asserts in words.

C. Argument from historical context.

The professor reinforces the inference by appeal to Pieper's setting—writing in the 1920s and 1930s, as higher criticism was “going gangbusters.” The reasoning is that Pieper, feeling Scripture under siege, fought to secure it first; the placement is therefore read as a defensive reaction to the critical threat of his day.⁵

D. Analogy and contrast rather than citation.

The portrait is filled in by analogy—Pieper “kind of approaches this the way a lot of you approach” the question of Jesus' divinity—and by contrast with Luther's comparatively fluid attitude toward the canon (“are you seeing him lining up right behind Pieper? Not exactly”). The attributed position is sketched chiefly by what it is set against, not by quoting Pieper directly on the question at issue.

E. Extension into the larger cluster.

Having established the placement reading, the professor folds Pieper toward Biblicism and rationalism, charging the starting point with an implication—even as he concedes Pieper explicitly opposes rationalism. Pieper is thus associated with the cluster by the logic of his

⁵ The professor's theory on this is myopic relative to Pieper's insight that not only does loss of the doctrine of Scripture lead to loss of the doctrine of atonement, but it also goes the other way: loss of the atonement leads to loss of Scripture. Pieper develops the latter at length and in multiple contexts. He has every bit as much to say about rejection of the person and work of Christ as he does about rejection of Scripture, and how the former leads to the latter. He even says that rejection of Scripture is only a *symptom* of the more *deeply seated disease* of rejecting vicarious satisfaction in the atonement, and that rejection of atonement is the *cause* of rejection of Scripture. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.6, 9, 12, 137-138, 196, 232, 268-269, 300-301, 312, 313, 326.

arrangement, not by his stated commitments.

5. What Does Pieper Himself Say?

Here we engage what the professor did not: Pieper's own exposition of the subject.

When Pieper speaks to the question of how to deal with an unbeliever, he states a position that is not merely different from the "Bible-first" strategy the professor attributed to him but is its direct contrary.

Following are four samples from *Christian Dogmatics*. The first passage, which, note well, is from the assigned reading for the lecture in the Prolegomena, leaves little room for interpretation:

- "In dealing with an unbeliever we cannot begin with an attempt to convince him of the divine authority of Scripture. We must first bring him to the knowledge of his sins and to faith in Christ, the Redeemer from sin. We should preach to him on the basis of Scripture — without discussing the authority of Scripture — repentance and remission of sin. If a man has in this way — and there is no other way — become a Christian, a sheep of Christ's flock, a child of God, then he will know that the Word of Scripture is God's Word, just as the children of God among the Jews knew and received the word Christ spoke as God's Word. If the camel has first gone through the eye of the needle (Hofacker's phrase), that is to say, if a man has by way of the *contritio* and *fides* wrought by the Holy Ghost become a Christian, he will refrain from criticizing anything in Scripture, even if he does not understand certain portions of it; the truth of the entire Scripture is guaranteed to him by the authority of Him (John 10:35; 17:14,17) whom he adores in faith as his Lord and Redeemer. That is the Christian attitude toward Scripture. Luther describes it thus: 'If you cannot understand how it could have been six days [at creation], then accord the Holy Spirit the honor that He is more learned than you. For you are so to deal with the Scriptures that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this.' (St. L. 111:21.) And this submission to God's Word is not an 'enforced' subjection to an 'external authority,' unbefitting the Christian, but a childlike, willing, glorious submission to God; even as the Christian in his entire life submits to God's ways and permits God to guide him." (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.137-138.)

Here Pieper insists on exactly the order the professor presented as the alternative to Pieper: do not argue the book first; preach repentance and Christ; the recognition of Scripture as God's Word follows afterward, as a consequence of faith in Christ. Pieper even supplies the same logical shape the professor claimed for his own view—the confession of Scripture is downstream of faith in Christ, not its precondition—and he calls this sequence the only way ("there is no other way").

In the following passage, Pieper turns this from principle into described practice, foreclosing any reading that it is a mere abstract concession:

- “Our missionaries... do not therefore begin with rational arguments for the divinity of Holy Scripture, but they preach ‘to one and all’... repentance and remission of sins. And when faith in *Christum ‘crucifixum’* has once been created, there is no need to worry about securing faith in the divinity of Holy Scripture.” (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.313.)

Two further excerpts supply the rationale beneath the method.

- “Nor can those have the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* who consistently deny the vicarious satisfaction of Christ, since the Christian faith is *fides Christi ‘crucifixi,’* and only with this faith does the Holy Ghost enter the heart of man, to enable him to judge correctly concerning divine things, and that includes Scripture.” (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.312.)
- “If a person actually believes the Gospel, if he believes that God has saved mankind from eternal damnation by the substitutional suffering and death of His Son, he will not be inclined to doubt that God has in addition given man the Holy Scriptures as His infallible Word. Whoever really believes the doctrine of justification may indeed for a time be assailed by doubts regarding the divinity of Scripture, but it is hard to assume that he could persistently deny it and still cling to the Christian doctrine of the remission of sins by faith in the merit of Christ.” (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.268-269, n. 80, quoting from *Lehre und Wehre*.)

Saving faith is *fides Christi crucifixi*—faith in Christ crucified—and it is through that faith that the Holy Spirit enters and enables a person to judge rightly concerning divine things, “and that includes Scripture” (I.312). And because faith in the Gospel carries the confession of Scripture with it, Pieper reasons that whoever truly believes the doctrine of justification will not finally be able to deny the divinity of Scripture (I.268–269, n. 80). In every case the gateway is Christ, and the confession of Scripture is the result that follows.

Several of the professor’s own signature moves turn out, on inspection, to be Pieper’s as well. The ordering of Christ first and Scripture second; the insistence that submission to Scripture is a childlike act of faith rather than an “enforced” subjection to an external authority; the appeal to John 10; the appeal to Luther on according the Holy Spirit honor—all of these appear in Pieper’s text in the service of the very position the professor presented as the corrective to Pieper. On the question of persuading the unbeliever, the professor and Pieper are standing in substantially the same place.

6. Representation or Misrepresentation of Pieper

On the question at issue—how Pieper would have one persuade an unbeliever—the representation by the professor is not fair, and the unfairness is not subtle. The discrepancy between what Pieper teaches and the professor’s misrepresentation of him cannot be brushed aside by the hackneyed appeal to “nuance.” The misrepresentation is too stark, too inverted, too diametrically opposed.

The professor attributes to Pieper a “Bible-first” strategy and offers it as the error his own “Christ-first” approach is meant to correct. Pieper’s own words state the “Christ-first” approach plainly and call it the only way. The professor has, in effect, described Pieper as standing across the room while quoting, as his own better alternative, a position Pieper articulated first. The degree of correspondence between the representation and the reality is therefore very low; where it is not simply low, it runs backward.

7. Assessment

The professor’s error is methodological, not evidently malicious. The mistake follows naturally from the method he used. Thus, method is the lesson here.

A. Flyover Interpretation.

The professor did not walk the ground of the text in Pieper’s *Dogmatics* to derive his portrayal of Pieper’s position. Instead, he made a flyover interpretation, from high above the text via the table of contents. This is an abject failure to engage the textual material.

B. Confusion of Dogmatics and Practical Theology

The reading assignment and the source for the professor’s portrayal of Pieper was a multi-volume dogmatics treatise. What would make a person think that a dogmatics treatise necessarily proceeds in the same order as evangelistic proclamation? I am only a layman, but to us ploughboys, this seems like a profound confusion of categories.

Dogmatics and evangelism differ in their *object*, their *ordering principle*, and their *audience* — and conflating their two orders is a category error.

Dogmatics (or systematic theology) is the orderly, scientific exhibition of the church’s doctrine: it takes the whole body of revealed teaching and arranges it according to its internal logical and material relations. Its question is, *what is the case, and how do the articles of faith cohere?* Its ordering principle is logical and architectonic — it treats first what is foundational *to the system*, so that later loci can be derived from or normed by earlier ones. This is why dogmatics texts typically treat the doctrine of Scripture early: Scripture functions as the *principium cognoscendi*, the source and norm from which the doctrinal content is drawn, so it is expounded before the doctrines it norms. The audience presupposed is, broadly, the church — those already within the circle of faith, for whom the task is understanding, ordering, and defending what is believed.

Evangelism (which falls under practical theology, and bears on the *order of proclamation*) is the church’s act of bringing the unbeliever to faith. Its question is not *What is the case?* but *How is a person actually brought from unbelief to faith in Christ?* Its ordering principle is not logical-architectonic but *pedagogical and pneumatological* — it follows the order in which the Holy Spirit ordinarily works faith in a hearer: the proclamation of law and the knowledge of sin, then the gospel of Christ crucified, through which faith is created. The audience is the one outside of faith.

The heart of the distinction is that “first” means something different in each. In dogmatics,

“first” is *logical priority within the system* — what must be stated before other things can be derived. In evangelism, “first” is *temporal-pedagogical priority in the encounter* — what is proclaimed at the outset to a particular hearer. These two orders need not coincide, and the classical Lutheran tradition holds that they positively do not.

Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi externum* — the external principle *by which* we come to know doctrine — but Christ is the *principium essendi*, the principle *of being*, the substance and center toward which all of it points. A dogmatics may rightly expound the *principle of knowing* before the doctrines known through it, while evangelism rightly leads with the *substance* — Christ — and lets the recognition of Scripture’s authority follow as a consequence of faith.

C. Innuendo

Innuendo is an indirect intimation — usually derogatory — that conveys a claim without stating it outright. The speaker arranges words, juxtapositions, or implications so that the hearer draws the damaging conclusion himself, while the speaker retains the ability to deny having asserted it. The word comes from the Latin *innuere*, “to nod toward” or “to signal by a nod”; the gerund *innuendo* meant “by nodding to,” and it entered English through legal usage. So, etymology captures the essence: you point at the meaning rather than speak it.

Innuendo operates on the gap between what is literally said and what is communicated. The literal content may be true, trivial, or merely a question; the implicature — what the audience is led to infer — carries the real payload.

What is the student or other onlooker at the lecture supposed to derive from the juxtaposition of the alleged Bible-first position of Pieper and biblicism, bibliolatry, fundamentalism, and so on? Except for the professor’s acknowledgment that elsewhere Pieper was a fierce opponent of Rationalism, he does not flag his move into discussion of biblicism, bibliolatry, fundamentalism, and the rest as being separate from the discussion of Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*. Where earlier the effect of the flyover interpretation was caricature, here the effect of innuendo is calumny.

While I would like to believe this is unintended, it is a lecture method error by a professor of a post-graduate seminary level class, and not a beginning course but Systematics III. A professor at that level ought to be cognizant of the innuendo effect.

Query: If Pieper fell into such grievous error by, as charged, zeal to save us from higher criticism, has the professor making that charge fallen into an equal error by zeal to save us from biblicism?

D. Ignorance of the Publication Sequence

If the order in which a publisher binds the elements of a multi-volume treatise together is so important for the interpretation of what the treatise says, then wouldn’t the order in which the author wrote them and in which they were published be equally important? One could have known the sequence simply by reading the Foreword to *Christian Dogmatics* which a professor

of advanced dogmatics might do.

Since the first volume [to be published, not meaning Volume I] was to appear in the quadricentennial year, the author chose to offer first the *loci* that are the very heart of Scripture's message and were the fundamentals of Luther's glorious testimony: the grace of God in Christ, Christ's person and work, saving faith, conversion, and justification by faith. This volume, issued in 1917, became the second of the whole work. Volume III, treating sanctification, preservation, the means of grace, the Church, the ministry, the election of grace, and eschatology, followed in 1920. With the publication of Volume I, embracing the *loci* on the nature of theology, Holy Scripture, God, creation, divine providence, angels, and man (*anthropologia*), the project was brought to completion in 1924.⁶

Volume 1 was published last. The volume on Christology, numbered II, was published first. As Charles Lehman has said of this, "Biermann fell for one of the classic blunders, reading *The Magician's Nephew* before *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*."

8. Conclusion

The professor and Pieper want the same thing. Both would lead the unbeliever to Christ first and let the confession of Scripture follow as the fruit of faith; both refuse to make the book the price of admission. The disagreement the lecture stages is not a real one between two theologians but an artifact of how the professor read—an order of exposition mistaken for an order of proclamation, a position inferred from a table of contents rather than found on the page, and a damaging association left unflagged for students to absorb. The cost is not borne by Pieper, whose text is untouched by the misreading, but by the students, who may leave with a diminished regard for a *Christian Dogmatics* that in fact stands beside their professor rather than against him. They are turned against an ally. The remedy is older than the dispute and simple to state: read the order of knowing as the order of knowing, the order of proclamation as the order of proclamation, and derive a man's position from what he wrote, not from where he placed it.

⁶ H. W. Romoser, A. H. Kramer, G. A. Fleischer, E. T. Lams, and H. M. Zorn, "Foreword" in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1950), I.v.