

What is the Future of
Confessional Lutheranism in the U.S.A.?

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What is the future of Confessional Lutheranism in the U.S.A.? This question has undoubtedly been in the minds of many people in the past, and is perhaps even more interesting to ponder in these troubled times. We ask the question concerning the future of our beloved cause for we feel it is one which is extremely important for the eternal lives of innumerable souls.

We, of W.E.L.S., believe that the Lutheran Confessions are the modern and practical symbols of the Holy Scriptures. The doctrines of Scripture are explained through them; in fact, along with the Bible, the Confessions display for us the whole counsel of God. For this reason we firmly subscribe and adhere to them — they are closely tied to the inerrant Word of God. Dr. C.F.W. Walther, the father of Confessional Lutheranism, labelled this stand an "Unconditional Subscription" and says of it:

"An unconditional subscription is the solemn declaration which the individual who wants to serve the Church makes under oath that he accepts the doctrinal content of our Symbolical Books, because he recognizes the fact that it is in full agreement with Scripture and does not militate against Scripture in any point, whether that point be of major or minor importance. ¹

The Confessions state simply the truths of the precious Word of the Triune God in Heaven. With them we can more accurately respond to Christ's command that we preach His Gospel and spread the message (Matt. 28:19). The Church is at its very healthiest when its mission of declaring and proclaiming the whole

counsel of God is accomplished. We can liken the work of the Confessions to that of the strong medication used by doctors against infection. However, the former's task is much more essential and frightening. It is the virus of sin and error which it must fight. Physical ills cannot compare. Thus the Confessions assure us of a healthy and solid base in the light of Scripture.

"The Lutheran Confessions take for granted the divine origin - and as a result also the inerrancy - of Scripture. In our Confessions they are called the 'Holy Scripture of God' (FC SD, V 3), 'the clear Scripture of the Holy Spirit' (Apol. pref. 9). Again and again 'God's Word' and 'Holy Scripture' are identified in our Confessions. This assurance concerning the Divine Origin and nature of Scripture is fundamental to a proper reading and approach toward Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions consistently read Scripture as God's Word, carrying with it God's authority, God's power, God's truthfulness.

And so our Lutheran Confessions speak of Scripture as the 'eternal truth' (FC SD, Rule and Norm 13). They urge us to believe the Scriptures; for 'they will not lie to you' (FC V. 76 df. IV, 57) the Scriptures cannot be 'false or deceitful' (FC SD, VII, 96). And why? Because God who is eternal truth cannot contradict Himself in Scripture (FC SD, XI, 35). It is 'pure infallible and unalterable' Word. (Preface to the Book of Concord, page 8)"²

Through the Confessions we, of W.E.L.S., have arrived at a special firmness in all of our convictions. This has been accomplished by the grace of God through the strong determination of fine gentlemen in our Synod's history. Dr. Walther, in his great classic, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church, the True Visible Church

of God on Earth", told us what was necessary to call ourselves the true Christian Church as it was restored in Luther's Reformation.:

"The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the sum total of all who without reservation profess the doctrine which was restored by the Reformation of Luther and was summarily submitted in writing at Augsburg in 1530 to the emperor and the realm, and was treated and expounded in the other so-called Lutheran Symbols, as the pure doctrine of the Divine Word."³

The Reverend John Muelhauser was one who initiated the struggle for confessionalism for the Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin. I consider him the Muehlenberg of W.E.L.S., for his style had the same flare for Lutheran confessionalism. He was of the conviction which advocated strict adherence to the confessions as seen in the following quote which Keebler cites. It was made originally the day after the Synodical Session in 1858 during which the Augsburg Confession in particular was being doubted and altered.

"Dear Friends,

Since at yesterday's synodical session the president's report elicited a protracted discussion of the position which we take as a synod in regard to our confession and to other denominations, we feel that we owe it to you, briefly, roundly, and comprehensively to state our confessional stand to you. With voice and heart we declare our adherence to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, aim to preach and practice in our congregations in accordance with it, in the same firm manner as said Augsburg Confession teaches.

Rev. John Muelhauser"⁴

Muelhauser's successor in 1860 as president of our Synod was also eager for strict allegiance to the Con-

fessions. Johannes Bading was of this firm conviction from the day of his ordination. He could conceivably be called a hero of Confessional Lutheranism for all to admire. That name seems to crop up whenever there is an emphasis upon the Lutheran Confessions. At any rate, it is sure that his insistence upon the Confessions being a part of his ordination vows left an impression upon the Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin which still is in effect today.

In the early 1880's the savage Gnadenwahlstreit broke out, centering on the predestination question "Cur alii prae aliis". Along with that question came that of conversion. The debate took place on dogmatical territory. Ohio Synod's "intuitu fidei" earned the favor of the dogmaticians. This pointed Wisconsin and Missouri toward the Confessions and Luther, and ultimately caused a greater consciousness of Scriptural inerrancy. It was from these debates the nickname "Wauwatosa Theology" emerged for the strict Wisconsinites. The Wauwatosa faculty, then consisting of the Professors John P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller played a key role in the debates.

Two other major steps toward the success of Confessional Lutheranism were the Gemeindeblatt and the Dengschrift. The Gemeindeblatt was founded in 1865 and was considered to be the living organ of the Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin. Objective Justification was the theme of

the Dengschrift, which was the most confessional piece of work ever written and was considered to be the answer to true Lutheran identity. Subscribers to this were the Mo. Ohio, Norwegian, Minn., Ill., and Wis. Synods. A single seminary was proposed for these 6 synods which would train all the pastoral candidates in sound, consistant confessionalism. This proposal led to the formulation of the Synodical Conference whose groundwork was based on the conservative view of the confessions. Dr. Walther solved the election controversy there in the light of the Confessions (FC, Art. XI, the 8 pts.).

The mounting discrepancies between the various synods in view of either the Bible or the confessions eventually dissolved the Synodical Conference, once so sound in its stand. Decline such as this is a grave problem which churches, especially Lutheran churches, ought to recognize as a major turning point to confusion and unbelief. When we are told that we must "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" we must first discover what is truth, - not the new and modern view of the truth but basic, consistant Scriptural truth. We must strive for this knowledge with reverent concern.

The decision to turn to the sound Confessions of the Lutheran Church is the wise and proper move for any individual who is concerned with seeking out the truth. In fact, it is clearly the only move. Any person who

searches the Scriptures will find all that he needs there, and certainly the Confessions will state for him the beliefs and truths contained therein. When searching for a Confessional Lutheran Church the individual could use Dr. Walther's guidelines:

..."an unconditional subscription refers to the whole content of the Symbols and does not allow the subscriber to make any mental reservation in any point. Nor will he exclude such doctrines as are discussed incidentally in support of other doctrines, because the fact that they are used stamps them as irrevocable articles of faith and demands their joyful acceptance by everyone who subscribes to the Symbols... However, since the Symbols are confessions of faith or doctrine, the Church necessarily cannot require a subscription to those matters which do not at all imply that it were impossible to improve on the line of argument employed."5

Genuine Christian theology has always been based on "sola scriptura, sola gratia, and sola fide". The full Atonement wrought by Jesus Christ in His blood has laid the solid foundation for salvation by faith alone. This confession has strongly withstood the years, sometimes backed by only a small number of theologians and clergy. St. Ambrose and St. Augustine are prime examples whom we might trace as history. As far back as the third and fourth centuries staunch conservative men were able, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to combat heresy with strict doctrine.

History shows us how often and in how many different manners the Word of God in Gospel and Sacrament has

been twisted and changed to fit the lives of mortal men. These departures from the truth have damaged the Church, brought about strife, divisions, schism, heresy, even bloodshed and burning at the stake. The previously mentioned Ohio Synod is a clear episode in our immediate history which caused the ideas of Confessional Lutheranism to be undermined. In their case the problem was the doctrine of election as set forth by the Confessions. The Ohio Synod could not accept it, and left the Synodical Conference only to join the liberal A.L.C. Association. This type of break-down, as history shows, is not uncommon, however.

The Churches of the A.L.C. can be identified as conditional subscribers to the Lutheran Confessions. The Confessions don't shape the characteristics of their Church; rather they liberally shape the characteristics of the confessions to suit their Church. Although their initial statement on their stand on Scripture seemed accurate, they soon strayed from it. The important purpose of Scripture and even the Confessions is defeated by theologians like Roy from Iowa. Works like his are the cancer which envelopes the heart of the Words of Salvation by faith. One must realize that he is not an authority when he says, "I personally believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, but I can't force or impose this theory upon my lay people." Confessions such as this

can easily lead many people to the wrong convictions. Remember, similar errors in the Roman Catholic Church were never corrected. It causes one to wonder what will now become of the Missouri Synod which is currently discussing fellowship with the A.L.C.

The L.C.A. is another example of a Church body which believes in adapting the Confessions to its own needs. Theodore Tappert, a member of that synod writes:

"When subscribing the Confessions today, Lutherans assert that, in view of the issues which were then at stake and the alternatives which were then offered, the Confessions were right."⁶

It is almost frightening to think how easily man's reasoning and beliefs in the modern wave of rationalizing ideas can lead us away from the strong, pure truths of the Lutheran Confessions. We must therefore constantly be on our guard against this seemingly reasonable move. Who can tell how future generations will act?

The earliest departure from Scripture which today is being openly practiced in several Lutheran churches is the tolerance of woman holding offices in the church. Along with other surrounding issues in 1930, it seems that those who questioned whether it was unscriptural for women to serve as congregational representatives were never given a conclusive answer; or was it that "modern times" had begun to outgrow the Scriptures? At any rate, they were never turned from their error. As a result, there are women in pulpits, at the alter and lectern,

and in offices of ~~the~~ Lutheran and Reformed churches across the nations.

Another major issue which has affected strict adherence to Scripture is the theory of evolution. It poses a grave danger for Christians today, especially for our youth. Darwin's theory is taught openly in public schools and generally accepted there as fact. It has become a universal, scientific "truth." Much more than just a teaching, the whole concept of evolution is dangerous to us because it's a theory upon which the origin of our race is supposed to be based. In plain speech, evolution is unbelief based on human reason and lies directly in opposition to the teachings of the Bible. I believe this concept has crept into modern society in direct response to rationalism, human reason and our advanced sciences. The increasing acceptance of evolution might be cited as an example of what future generations might be up against. With the advancements of technology and the state of the world today, belief in God is diminishing more and more. The reality of an infinitely gracious God is beyond reason. People of today are much more eager to accept a theory which "makes sense" to them. Their hope is for earthly mansions; their faith and trust are in themselves who can build them.

It was 1859 when Darwin's famous book, "The Origin of Species" was published. The number of souls lost through it is still increasing by leaps and bounds.

Unless science itself reaches a new and even more "reasonable" theory, evolution may remain a prime destroyer of the Christian faith. As a result of it, there are already Lutherans being taught that the Bible is merely a collection of great religious writings. According to them, Christianity is on the same level as Mohammedanism and Buddhism. They are no longer aware of the absolute kindness and love of our Creator.

Evolution is merely the first coat; it serves as a primer over which are spread even more "coatings" over Christian purity. These worldly ideas, together with the "epinio legis" con which the Roman Catholic Church pulled have given birth to yet another new religion. It is the Social Gospel, which almost imperceptibly changes the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ to a gospel of social salvation. Christ is lost as a Savior, and the Gospel is considered irrelevant. Today a person can easily say without troubling his conscience a bit, that as long as he remains "good", does what he can for his community, and lives by the laws of the land, that God will certainly not damn him. By behaving thusly, a man professes to be an upright, God-fearing person. This type of "modern gospel" has existed throughout the history of the United States, but for the average American today it is even more easy to accept. With all the conveniences and advantages

available, a man really has an easy life, and the idea of "good social status" seems to be the perfect and logical approach to religion. This deception has made Christ into merely a social teacher.

In a personal analysis in a Christian Magazine published by the Missouri Synod called Lutheran Witness, Rev. Kurt Marquart of the L.C.M.S. names and tries to isolate the cancer of the Social Gospel within even his Synod.:

"When the Witness appeals to Martin Luther King, the National Lutheran Council, the LCA's "Board of Social Ministries," and the World Council of Churches, it becomes very clear that it is not just a general Calvinistic Church-State mixture, but the specific, rather unsavory Religious socialism, known as the Social Gospel, which is being worked into the Missouri Synod...

The ecclesiastical "Social Action" which the Witness is now recommending to its readers, has in the past been entirely misdirected and has unwittingly made a tremendous contribution to Communist world-conquest. The bitter irony is that many sincere people have been imagining that they were merely putting the Christian Faith into action socially and economically, when in actual fact Christianity was merely verbally decorating the Socialist ideology, which at the bottom is atheistic, materialistic, and anti-Christian! The Christian Faith hasn't been applied to society at all; Socialist ideology has been applied to Christianity, instead! And modern theology itself - having jettisoned the historic Christian content is an effort to be "relevant"- is more irrelevant than ever!⁷

Obviously, when discussing any aspect of the future, the main element is the youth of today who are the future. In order to assure a bright future, we must provide adequate religious training for them. The paro-

chial school system of WELS is the perfect starting ground for the religious leaders of our future. Every effort must be made to save our children from the grasp of this world which is growing farther and farther away from God. As the Confessions become more meaningful to us in the advancement of our Synod, we must be sure our children understand and believe them. To teach our youth the same ideas in the same manner in which past generations were taught is unreasonable. Children at the age of 10 are wise to the facts of life in this world. Many at that age are already smoking, an alarming number use "street-drugs"; it was noted in an editorial on the radio that there is an epidemic of very young, unwed mothers in California. Do children in our parochial schools need extensive training at such an innocent and beautiful age simply to learn to live as a Christian in this world?

Our Christian high schools and colleges also have similar problems as they face a world of deception. Yet, their growth in our Synod is a great blessing of God's grace. He has called and enlightened for us, competent and devoted instructors who have continued steadfast in sound, consistent doctrines of Holy Scripture. The graduating class of '80 from the Wis. Luth. Seminary is an example of the efficient training in the inerrant Word and the Confessions which the faculties of WELS' institutions provide.

Our Synod's history can be traced through the light of the Confessions. The question concerning the future of our Confessional Synod must be answered with the help of Scripture. It is basically Scriptural to give two steps in laying the groundwork for the future. First, we must heed Christ's directive to continue steadfast in sound doctrine and His Word; and the second, we must at the same time recognize the need for God, in His abundant grace, to preserve His Holy Christian Church. He is the One who shall determine the future for her. Our hope lies in the promise that He gave us. We know that the gates of Hell shall not prevail against her. "My words", Christ said, "will never pass away."

Our Church may not always have the privilege of peace time security, however. The book of Revelations darkly warns of a period of time called the Armagedon which will come before the triumphant return of Christ. It has been interpreted by some that during this episode the Church will suffer severe persecution. A Christian's confession of faith could conceivably bring him the terror of a concentration camp or perhaps death. In view of recent events the question arises, "Could the rise of Soviet power be the final unleashing of Lucifer?" That Country has been becoming evermore powerful and threatening. The move into Afganistan was swift and unexpected, rather like the strike of a serpent, a creature so often referred to when Satan is mentioned. The Soviets

are keeping tabs on our technological advancements and weapon supply and are progressing along with us. Civil defense and the armed forces are the areas where a great share of their tax money goes. The USSR wants to prepare for anything at any time. The rumors of what they might be up to are everywhere. Could Communism be the next step? Is the Social Gospel paving its way? We must be watchful and wait, holding on strongly to the Scripture.

Despite these troubled times, the U.S. remains a free country today. People here may believe in and worship their God in any manner they wish. Was this not the very goal sought by our country's founding fathers? Many other nations envy our freedom and perhaps too many of us take it for granted. The U.S. is still the only country whose currency carries the inscription "In God We Trust".

Therefore, whether peace or persecution, the future will certainly prove a struggle for the cause of Lutheran purity. Scripture tells us so. Men's hearts will grow cold, increasing lovelessness and deep deception will take hold of the world; there will be wars and death all around.

When His disciples asked^{about} the signs signalling the end of time, ^{Jesus} He told them,

"Watch out that noone deceives you... You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things

must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation; there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all the nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come!"⁸

What is the future of Confessional Lutheranism in the USA? We can only speculate about the answer to this question. Fortunately for us our loving Father is the One in control. We know the purity of Strict Confessional Lutheranism is our guide. We must cling to it with all our might in order to face the trials which the future may hold. We must teach our young the great importance of Scripture and the urgent need to understand and accept all that is contained therein. Only then will the future seem bright. Only then will the future of Confessional Lutheranism track in line with success. May the Lord through it preserve His Gospel. May He grant us His Holy Spirit to guide us in applying the Confessions to our everyday lives. May God grant to our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod teachers and ministers who will reflect sound doctrine, sound faith, and absolute obedience to His gracious will.

End Notes:

- 1) C.F.W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of our Church." Concordia Theological Monthly, April 1947, p. 241ff.
- 2) Lutheran Layman, May, 1970.
- 3) The True Visible Church, translated by John T. Mueller; Thesis X, p. 42.
- 4) Koehler, John P. The History of the Wisconsin Synod; page 54.
- 5) Concordia Theological Monthly, April 1947, p. 241ff
- 6) Tappert, T. "Significance of Confessional Subscription", Essays on Lutheran Confessions.
- 7) The Christian News, March 10, 1980; page 18, column 1-2.
- 8) Matt. 24:4-14 (NIV)

- and others