

This paper was originally written to address issues concerning the Confessions that need to be dealt with by a free conference among Lutherans.

There are several problems concerning subscription to the Lutheran Confessions that are currently issues in the Lutheran church.

- 1. Some refuse subscription because they do not believe the basic teachings of the Bible.**
- 2. Some evade subscription with the claim “all we need is the Bible.”**
- 3. Some continue a “paper subscription” which honors the Confessions as a tradition but has no binding force in the church.**
- 4. Some subscribe to an altered Augsburg Confession or to the Augsburg Confession alone.**
- 5. Some advocate a qualified or limited (*quatenus*) subscription.**
- 6. There is the rather new danger of “over-subscription,” which seeks to extend subscription beyond the doctrinal content of the confessions.**

We will touch on all of these, but our special focus for this discussion is point 6.

I. WHY BIBLE-BELIEVING LUTHERANS SUBSCRIBE TO THE BOOK OF CONCORD WITHOUT RESERVATION

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SUBSCRIBE TO THE BOOK OF CONCORD WITHOUT RESERVATION?

The constitutions of confessional Lutheran churches usually include paragraphs which subscribe to the Bible as “the inspired and inerrant Word of God” and to the confessions contained in the Book of Concord as “a correct presentation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.” When they are ordained, confessional Lutheran pastors are asked to promise that their preaching and teaching will be faithful to the Bible and to the Book of Concord. But shouldn’t it be enough to subscribe to the Bible and to promise to teach nothing but what the Bible teaches? It would seem so. The Bible after all was written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Why should we then subscribe to confessions written by men?

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONFESSIONS

The importance and necessity of subscribing to a confession becomes evident from the example of Article X in the Augsburg Confession. In 1529 Luther and Zwingli met at Marburg to try to arrive at agreement on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Both men accepted the Bible as the Word of God, and both insisted that they were teaching what the Bible teaches. Both men could say, “Jesus said, ‘This is my body.’” But Zwingli taught that the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper merely represent the body and blood of Christ. Luther believed that the body and blood of Christ are really present with the bread and wine and are received orally by each communicant. At Augsburg in 1530 the Lutherans wanted to be certain that no one could claim that the Lutherans taught and believed the Zwinglian doctrine, which left only the shell of the sacrament. For the Lutherans simply to say “we teach what the Bible teaches”

would not have been a clear confession. They needed to state clearly their conviction about the correct understanding of the words of institution. In Article X of the Augsburg Confession they did this. They said that “the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat in the Supper of the Lord.” That was a clear, positive statement of what they were teaching on the basis of the Bible. It stated clearly the reason for their opposition to the Zwinglians, who falsely claimed to be teaching according to the Bible but were denying the meaning of the words of institution. To make that contrast very clear, the Lutherans added that “they reject those who teach otherwise.”

False teachers love to claim that they are following the Bible. Arius, Zwingli, Calvin, the Roman Catholics, and the Phillipists all claimed that they taught according to the Bible. Today Baptists, Pentecostals, and even unchristian sects like the Jehovah’s Witnesses all claim that they teach according to the Bible. From the beginning of the church until the present, teachers who are faithful to the doctrine of the Scripture have found it necessary to go on record, stating clearly and publicly what they believe the teachings of Scripture to be, because from the earliest days of the church false teachers have been twisting the Scriptures to support their false teachings (2 Peter 3:16). Even Satan, the father of lies, twists and misquotes Scripture in support of his schemes (Luke 4:10). As a result it has always been the practice of Bible-believing Christians to set forth the truths of Scripture in unambiguous confessional writings which summarize the truths of Scripture and which explicitly reject the errors that have been masquerading as the truth.

THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

The two greatest eras of confessional writing in the history of the church were the time surrounding the Christological controversies of the 4th century,¹ which produced the three ecumenical creeds as a testimony against the Arian threat to the person of Christ, and the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, which produced the Lutheran Confessions in response to the teachings of Rome and the Reformed, which threatened to undermine the work of Christ. These two sets of confessions, gathered into the Book of Concord, are still relevant and important to the church today.

Even today, by subscribing to the Book of Concord, a pastor goes on record and promises to teach that all communicants receive the true body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper as Scripture clearly teaches. If a pastor merely promised his congregation, “I will always follow the Bible,” no one would know what he would teach about the Lord’s Supper. He might teach what Zwingli taught and insist, as Zwingli did, that he was teaching according to the Bible. This is just one example. The same could happen in the case of many other doctrines. By subscribing to the confessions in the Book of Concord a pastor declares to us what he believes to be the true biblical doctrine.

WHAT IT MEANS TO SUBSCRIBE

Subscription to Scripture: We subscribe to everything

But doesn’t unconditional subscription make the Book of Concord, written by men, equal to the Bible, which is God’s word? Not at all. We are convinced that the holy Scriptures are God’s infallible, inerrant word in everything they say. Whatever the Bible says on any subject is true because it is the word of God. When, for example, the Bible tells us that Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians or the letters to Timothy, we are sure he really wrote them. There can be no mistake about the authorship of that letter. When the Bible tells us God created the world in six days, this is a factual account of how the

¹ Especially the work of the ecumenical councils at Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon.

world and everything in it came into being. We subscribe to every statement of Scripture, doctrinal or historical or incidental.

**Subscription to the Confessions:
We subscribe to the doctrinal statements**

When we subscribe to our confessions, we are subscribing to all the doctrinal statements of the confessions whether they are the main topic of the articles or supporting comments. This includes both the positive and negative statements. (See appendix 3)

When we subscribe to the confessions, we are not subscribing to non-doctrinal statements. Adolf Hoenecke gave a basis summary of our position in the very first volume of the *Quarterly*.

When we bind ourselves to the confessions of our church, we bind ourselves to all articles of faith contained therein, but not to all historical, archaeological, and literary remarks, not even to every exegesis, and just as little to a certain exegetical method employed, nor do we always consider every passage as proof in the very way in which it is carried out in the confession (p 113).

Not to the history or science

When we subscribe to our confessions, we are not asserting that we hold every historical or scientific statement in them as infallibly true. There are, for example, historical errors. Ambrose is listed as the author of a quotation in Article VI of the Augsburg Confession (*Triglotta*, p 47). The quotation, however, was taken from a document called the *Ambrosiaster*, which according to modern historians was not written by Ambrose. We do not subscribe to this historical error, but to the doctrine asserted in the quotation, “It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving remission of sins, without works, by faith alone.” Likewise the quotation attributed to Augustine in Article XVIII is from a work which is now attributed to someone else (*Triglotta*, p 51). In T.D. XI Matthew 22:14 is incorrectly cited as Matthew 20:16 (*Triglotta*, p 1079). In S.A. II, IV Luther incorrectly refers to Revelation 10:3 as coming from Revelation 12 (*Triglotta*, p 473). We do not think the origin of the word “mass” can be traced to Deuteronomy 16:10 (Ap. XII, *Triglotta*, p 413). The Apology’s interpretation of the words “the communion of saints” in the Apostles Creed as a description of the Holy Christian Church may not be a historically correct interpretation of the original meaning of the creed, which may have referred to the sharing of holy things, that is, to the means of grace (Ap. IV, *Triglotta*, p 229).

We do not subscribe to the scientific viewpoints mentioned in passing in the confessions. Article I of the Formula of Concord says, “When a magnet is smeared with garlic-juice, its natural power is not thereby removed, but only impeded.” We don’t subscribe to the idea the garlic juice weakens magnets. In this case, the attempt to use this statement against *quia* subscription to the confessions is actually quite silly because the statement about magnets and garlic is not an assertion of the confessors, but part of a statement of Strigel which they are rejecting. Their assertion is “we reject...that original sin is only an external impediment to the good spiritual powers, and not a despoliation or want of the same, as when a magnet is smeared with garlic-juice, its natural power is not thereby removed, but only impeded; or that this stain can be easily wiped away like a spot from the face or pigment from the wall.” Regardless of whether or not the confessors agreed with Strigel’s belief that the powers of a magnet are impeded by garlic juice, our subscription is to their rejection of Strigel’s doctrine that “original sin is only an external impediment to the good spiritual powers, and not a despoliation or want of the same.” We are not subscribing to the scientific views included in that rejection.

Not to every point of exegesis

Although we accept all of the doctrines of the confessions, we do not endorse their exegesis of every passage which they cite. Sometimes they do not list the best and most appropriate proof passages for a doctrine. They cite Romans 14:23, “Whatever is not of faith is sin,” in support of their teaching that only a Christian motivated by faith can do good works pleasing to God” (for example, in FC, TD, IV 8, *Triglotta*, p 941). This doctrine is true and is supported by other statements of Scripture, but Romans 14:23 is not among them. The context of Romans 14:23 makes it clear that “faith” in this passage does not refer specifically to saving faith in Christ but to confidence that a specific action is in accord with God’s law. Romans 14:23 teaches that if a Christian is doubtful whether something is right, he should not do it. In this case we subscribe to the confession’s doctrine, but not to its use of this specific passage to support it.

The confessors interpretation of “ the law as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ” in Galatians 3:24 (*Triglotta*, p 127, 961) seems to understand the role of the law in this passage as rule that guides conduct or as a curb against sin, but the context seems to indicate that the law here was a hedge that kept the Jews separate from the Gentiles until Christ came.

In 2 Timothy 2:15 the word *orthotomein* does not refer directly to “correctly dividing” law from gospel as the confessions suggest (Ap. III, *Triglotta*, p 173), but to “correctly handling” the Word. Distinguishing law and gospel is, of course, a prime example of correctly handling the Word of truth.

Though the confessions do not specifically cite Romans 12:7, the conception of the “analogy of faith” with which the dogmaticians operate rests on a different exegesis the term “analogy of faith” than that which we would derive from Romans 12:7.

Not to the terminology

In subscribing to the confessions we do not limit ourselves to using their terminology. When we change terminology from theirs, our purpose is not to compromise the confession, but to clarify misunderstandings that have arisen. The confessions themselves found it necessary to clarify Luther’s use of the term *Natursünde* as a name for original sin, because in the Flacian controversy the term was being misused (FD, Ep. I, 10, *Triglotta*, p. 783). We may occasionally face the same kind of problem with terminology of the confessions.

We don’t usually call our service “the mass” as Augsburg Confession XXIV does (*Triglotta*, p 65). Lutherans fond of the term might consider Luther’s use of the term in SA II, II.

The “satis est” of AC VII (*Triglotta*, p 47) is clarified by the “doctrine and all its articles” of FC X (*Triglotta*, p 831).

The explanation of the “third use of the law” in FC VI 1 is not particularly clear as to whether it is a reference to all uses of the law for Christians or just to the use as a rule, which is applicable only to Christians (*Triglotta*, p 805).

The Confessions speak of reconciling God to man (AC, III, *Triglotta*, p 45), whereas 2 Corinthians 5 speaks of God reconciling the world to himself. Regardless of whether the “change” in *καταλλασσω* was a change of status or a change of nature, it was man, not God that needed to experience change. So we may not be fond of their terminology here.

In the Bible “regeneration” is a justification/conversion term. “Renewal” is usually a sanctification term. (In Titus 3:5 both are justification terms.) The confessions, however, use “regeneration” as a sanctification term (FC VI 3, *Triglotta*, p. 805; cmp FC, TD III, *Triglotta*, p 920, 18-21). We use regeneration as a synonym for conversion, which is not a gradual process, not for sanctification, which is.

We don't echo Melanchthon's term that the papacy will be “a part of the kingdom of Antichrist” if he defends human services as justifying (Apology XV (VIII), *Triglotta*, p 319). Luther clarified this term in the Smalcald Articles, “the pope is the very Antichrist” (*Triglotta*, p 475).

We use new terms like “objective justification” to address an issue which the confessions taught correctly, but which they did not deal with in any depth.

On the other hand, the confessors might not be very fond of some of our terminology. Chief among these would be our term *norma normata*. The authors of the Formula of Concord make it very clear that they wish to reserve the terms canon and norm (*norma*) only for Scripture and do not wish to apply it to any human writing, including their own and the writings of Luther. They would be somewhat embarrassed to have their writings called a norm. For writings other than the Bible, including the confessions, they prefer the term “witnesses,” rather than norm. (See appendix 6)

Not to *Norma Normata Normata*

If the preceding paragraph is true, it is clear that subscription to the Confessions does not imply subscription to the entirety of every document which they refer to. Reference to a writing in the confessions does not confer confessional status on that writing. For example, the reference to Luther's sermon on the descent into hell in connection with FC X does not confer confessional status on that sermon. (See appendix 6). The opening of the Formula of Concord makes it very clear that they are subscribing to no writings except the enumerated confessions.

Not to all the practices of the Confessors

When we subscribe to the Confessions, we do not commit ourselves to observing every custom and rite exactly as they observed it. At Augsburg the confessors mention that they held one communion every holy day, and also on any other days on which some ask for it (AC XXI, 34). Their reason for mentioning this fact was to demonstrate that the respect for the sacrament in the Lutheran church was greater than that in the Roman church, since the Lutherans emphasized not just frequency of celebration, but reception with believing hearts. Where there were no communicants, as was the case in the Roman private masses, there was to be no mass. We do not commit ourselves to celebrate communion on every festival by subscribing to the confessions. In their various discussions of worship forms, the interest of the confessors was to uphold the principle that the forms are free, rather than to provide us with a mandatory or recommended list of forms.

Article XXIV in the Apology mentions that Lutheran congregations retain Latin readings and German hymns. Few advocates of a confessional “communion on every holy day” advocate the confessional “Latin readings and German hymns.”

In the same way, subscription to the Apology XIII (VII) 12 does not commit us to having ordained deacons, though we are happy to see this testimony of the confessions for WELS “forms of ministry” (*Triglotta*, p 310).

The prohibition of self-communion in SA II, II is not addressed directly to the issue of a pastor distributing the elements to himself during a congregational celebration, but it is aimed at private distribution in the *Winkelmesse* (*Triglotta*, p 465).

Not every conclusion

Nor do we endorse every argument or deduction the confessions make in setting forth their position.

We don’t agree with the observation that the Catechism is the Bible of the laity (*Triglotta*, p 776). The Bible of the laity is the Bible.

We perhaps are not ready to grant that Mary prays for the church (*Triglotta*, p 349, 27). Nor do we necessarily agree that a Thuringian monk, 30 years before the Reformation, prophesied that one who destroy monkery would come in 1516 (*Triglotta*, p 419, 1-3).

Summary

In short, we do not subscribe to every statement made on every subject in our confessions. We do, however, subscribe to all the doctrine confessed in the Book of Concord. We bind ourselves to all the doctrinal content of the confessions because they are a true exposition of the word of God. By subscribing to the confessions we are not doing any more than subscribing to the doctrine of the Bible, because before subscribing to the confessions we have compared the doctrine of the Bible and the doctrine of the confessions. We subscribe to the doctrines of the confessions only because study has shown us that they agree with the teachings of the Bible. Yes, the Bible alone is the only source for all we believe and teach. The Book of Concord is a basis for what we teach not on its own, apart from the Bible, but precisely and only because it is based on the Bible. We use Luther’s Small Catechism to instruct our youth, not as a source of religious teaching that stands on its own authority, but as a book that simply and clearly summarizes what the Bible teaches. To subscribe to the Book of Concord is to subscribe to Bible doctrine.

NOT “INSOFAR AS” BUT “BECAUSE”

We say that we “accept the confessions in the Book of Concord of 1580, not *insofar as* (*quatenus*) they agree with the Bible, but *because* (*quia*) they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.” Isn’t that saying too much? Shouldn’t we rather say, *insofar as* they agree with God’s word we subscribe to them? There are those who believe one should subscribe in that way, giving the seemingly valid explanation that this is the only way we can subscribe to any human confession, for man can err. That sounds like concern for the truth. Actually, such limited subscription questions the clarity of Scripture and destroys the value and purpose of a confession.

If a pastor, for example, subscribed to the statement that “Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord” *insofar as* this statement agrees with Scripture, he has not told you whether he considers all of it, or only part of it, or none of it to be scriptural. If you say to him, “I see you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin,” he could respond, “No, I do not believe that literally, for I do not find that taught in the Bible.” If you say, “But you believe that Jesus is true God,” he might say, “No, I do not believe that that is really taught in the Bible.” He

could believe only that Jesus Christ is a true man, the son of Mary and Joseph, and still subscribe to the above statement from Luther's Catechism "insofar as" it agrees with his opinion the Jesus is in some sense his Lord. Such a confession is meaningless. I could subscribe to the Quran or to any other religious writing *insofar as* it agrees with the Word of God. A Roman Catholic theologian could subscribe to the Lutheran confessions *insofar as* they agree with the Bible.

Antithesis: Historical Subscription

The *quatenus* subscription is a pious-sounding device used by liberal Lutheran churches to pretend that they are adhering to the confessions at the same time that they are denying their teachings. A modern form of this deceit is the so-called "historical subscription." A Lutheran theologian might say, "I support the historical judgment of Luther in the Smalcald Articles that the Pope is the Antichrist." By this he means that it was reasonable for Luther to conclude that the pope was the Antichrist in the 16th century, but he does not bind himself or others to teach this today.

We see a good example of such deceptive subscription in the endorsement of the Lutheran confessions by the liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In its confession the ELCA claims:

This church accepts the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church. COF 2.04

This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all the churches that likewise accept (its) teachings. COF 2.05

This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church. COF 2.06

Anyone who knows how flagrantly this fine sounding confession is disregarded by ELCA theologians will not be impressed by this paper pledge. But even the wording of the ELCA's confession contains adequate clues as to its emptiness.

The ecumenical creeds are accepted as "true declarations of the faith," but not as the only true teachings, which are binding on all members in a literal sense. The Augsburg Confession is elevated above the other Lutheran confessions as the only confession necessary to establish church fellowship. This elevation of the Augsburg Confession is intended to minimize or even to exclude the precise affirmations and the strict rejections found in the Formula of Concord. The Augsburg Confession is endorsed as "a true witness to the Gospel." Such an affirmation does not require acceptance of all its teachings, only of its gospel message. It also permits other "true witnesses" to be accepted as alternative interpretations of the faith as in the recent agreement on justification with Rome and the joint Communion with Reformed churches. In a similar way the other Lutheran confessions are accepted as "valid interpretations of the faith," but not as doctrinal statements which are binding on all teachers of the church in all their teachings.

Any real binding nature of this subscription to the confessions had been publicly repudiated, even before the ELCA confession was ratified. For example, Carl Braaten, a leading ELCA theologian, observed:

It is wholly erroneous to say that these confessions are not our confessions because we would not write them that way, or because we are not fully convinced of everything they say. (*Principles of Theology*, p. 34)

Even the series of articles in *The Lutheran* which explained to the laity the significance of the ELCA's confession made it clear that acceptance of the confessions' doctrine was limited. Concerning the Apostles' Creed Lull observes:

At times Christians may experience discomfort when saying these words. Some people may be puzzled or discouraged by the creed. Perhaps they do not understand the words. Perhaps they understand but they are not sure that they believe. ... But we can give the impression that our community has no identity and our faith has no content if we are not concerned about what we believe, or if we say only those parts of the creed about which we personally are certain. Reciting the creed puts a helpful pressure on us to be clear about what we believe. This pressure helps us grow into the fullness of the church's faith. (Dec. 19, 1988, p. 17)

Lull claims that the Formula of Concord, Lutheranism's most thorough confession, tends not to settle doctrinal controversies, but to set boundaries for debate (*Lutheran*, May 3, 1989, p. 15). It is incredible that a dogmatician could make such a statement about the most precise confession ever written. Once the determination has been made to leave the doors open to doctrinal laxity, it seems that no confession, no matter how precise, will be allowed to stand in the way. Yet the liberal Lutheran churches in America cling to a compromise subscription to the confessions to deceive the unwary. I suspect that the confessional subscription of the Nordic churches is no different.

Subscription to Limited Confessions

Subscription to the Lutheran confessions in principle should be subscription to the full Book of Concord. The altered Augsburg Confession is in most ways an excellent confession and, stretching the 8th Commandment a bit, we could probably understand all of it in a correct way. But we cannot accept subscription to the altered Confession as a genuine Lutheran subscription because the altered confession was specifically designed to blur a clear confession. In the same way, attributing greater status to the Augsburg Confession than to the other confessions or subscribing only to the Augsburg Confession is most often due to a desire to evade the much more pointed statements and rejections found in the Formula of Concord.

But there may be circumstances in which subscription only to the UAC may not indicate a weak or substandard subscription. During the free conferences in the 1850s some of Walther's supporters insisted that all attendees must immediately subscribe to the whole Book of Concord. Walther said:

As church conditions have been here in the last decades, and to some extent still are, there may well be many a genuine Lutheran who is loyal from the heart to the Augsburg Confession yet does not have a clear knowledge rightly to subscribe to the whole Concordia.² Also such Lutherans are, without a doubt, our brothers. ... We believe that one of the most important duties of the conference would be just this, to remove the uncertainties from the minds of those brothers who still harbor scruples against the consequent unfolding of the doctrine confessed at Augsburg and by the grace of God to

² There was, for example, no Norwegian Book of Concord available at this time.

lead them to a blessed, happy conviction that the other symbols of our church are *implicite* contained in the Augustana, which they accept.³

It is apparent that some in Missouri thought Walther was being too accommodating. Walther admitted that there was some risk in his approach, but some risk must be taken to rescue people.

Would it not, however, be equally dangerous and divisive for members of those synods who embraced all the Lutheran Confessions to participate in a conference whose basis was the Augsburg Confession alone, as the invitation to the conference suggested? Could not Satan use this device to rob them of the great treasure that united them?

Walther admitted the danger was real. And his answer to the dilemma was forthright.

When an action does not injure the faith but is called for by love for the brothers as individuals and for the church as a whole, it would be an act of both unbelief and lovelessness to omit such an action because of the possible danger. Furthermore, if those who by God's grace have come to recognize the glory of all our churchly confessions timidly withdraw from all those who have the same faith but not the same knowledge, an equally dreadful danger would threaten, namely that one part would become guilty of a pharisaic, carnal, spiritually proud, loveless insistence on its strict confessionalism, while the other part, instead of being filled with confidence and love for the continued building and further fortification of our confessional castle, would more and more be scared off as from a prison tower of the spirit and of faith."⁴

When we remember that the purpose of the confessions is subscription to the doctrinal content of the confessions, we may recognize that circumstances may exist in which unity in that doctrine already exists, before formal unity in the forms has been established. Formal adoption of the confessions is a goal to be worked toward, rather than as a prerequisite to a recognition of unity.

How Sure Can We Be?

But can we be sure that the doctrine to which we subscribe in the confessions is true to God's word? The question really is: Does God speak clearly in Scripture? The fact is that he does. True, there are those who may deny what is clearly taught in Scripture, but that doesn't make Scripture any less clear. When Zwingli denied the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, it wasn't because Scripture didn't clearly teach that, but because he didn't believe what Jesus said. Yes, we can say of our confessions that we believe what they teach because what they teach is clearly taught in Scripture. Only unbelief toward God's clear word will raise doubts against the teaching of Scripture.

IS THE DOCTRINE OF THE BOOK OF CONCORD OUTDATED?

You may hear, "The Lutheran Confessions and their condemnations were certainly necessary in the sixteenth century. The Christian world at this time was breaking out of its old ways. But we have come a long way in understanding since then. We know so much more about the Bible today. And we have learned to tolerate one another's teachings. After all, no one has an exclusive claim on the truth."

Speaking in this way, many Lutherans today regard the confessional writings as outdated, shown to be obsolete by historical-critical views of the Bible. Nevertheless, they still claim to respect the

³ *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, 84-86. Lueker, p 535-536.

⁴ See Walther, *Editorials*, p 41.

reformers' work and readily assign the Lutheran Confessions an honored place in the history of Christian teaching. But they are not willing to accept the articles of faith taught in the confessions without reservation. They consider them no longer "relevant to today's situation" or as "options or proposals for the church."

LIMITATIONS OF THE CONFESSIONS

Admittedly, the confessional writings have their limitations. There are Christian truths presently under fire which the confessions do not treat specifically (for example, the inerrancy of Scripture and the role of women in the church). The confessions do not have the same breadth as Scripture from which they are taken. They were not written as comprehensive statements of doctrinal, but as a response to doctrinal issues that were disputed in their day. For that reason subscription to the confessions does not remove the need for new doctrinal statements to deal with the new doctrinal conflicts of our day.

The confessions do not provide a thorough treatment of every doctrine which they touch upon. Even in the longer German version of FC, TD, IX, which appends part of a sermon by Luther, the treatment of Jesus' descent into hell in does not thoroughly bring out all the elements of this doctrine taught in 1 Peter 3 (*Triglotta*, p 1050). The treatment of church fellowship and of objective justification in the Confessions is insufficient to address the present situation in the Lutheran church. The Athanasian Creed does not adequately address the doctrine of justification. The Apology's declaration that the papacy is potentially "part of the kingdom of Antichrist" (*Triglotta*, p 319) falls short of the Smalcald Articles clear statement.

The Lord's command to be on guard against unscriptural doctrine applies also to the use or misuse of the confessional writings. While one person may disguise his self-chosen philosophies by claiming the support of Scripture, others may mislead the naïve by appealing to their acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions as proof of a common faith. In some cases what they teach may not directly contradict the confessions. Rather, the new doctrines they introduce, contrary to the Scriptures, may be such that lie beyond the articles of faith specifically treated in the confessional writings. To claim unity of faith and confession merely by pointing to a common subscription to the confessions in this instance is deceptive. The intent is to give the false impression that paper allegiance to past confessions is an adequate basis for unity. In the process, present error is overlooked or excused. But the Lutheran Confessions never claim to have dealt with all departures from the truth. They recognize their own limitations as subordinate to the Scriptures. They expect Christians of every generation to go to Scripture to resolve new doctrinal disputes.

In the church the Scriptures alone are the well of living water for all times. The confessions are waters drawn from that well. Any conflict, past or future, must then be judged by the Scriptures as God's revealed word and the source of all Christian teachings.

But what about the articles of faith and doctrine that are taught in the confessions? Are any of these outdated or even negotiable today?

The question whether or not the doctrines they were confessing were God's timeless truths faced the Lutheran fathers already in the sixteenth century. They were very sensitive to the charge that they were innovators. To be an innovator meant then, as it does now, to invent new doctrines and hence to lose the right of being a true teacher of the church. The reformers, therefore, consistently pointed out that their faith and confession were founded on the Scriptures and centered in the gospel. Only agreement with God's timeless revelation would preserve the confessions from becoming an outmoded tradition.

Has time changed all that? Shall we in our day surrender the scriptural truths taught in the confessions? Let us be more specific. Are we to believe those who ignore or reject the doctrine that “since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin” (Augsburg Confession I) as a dated dogma despite the record of Genesis? Is the teaching of Christ’s death as our substitute a trivial and old-fashioned doctrine of satisfaction, suitable only for a bloodthirsty God? No, Scripture’s testimony that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25) is very clear. Are we to join the Lutherans who are bowing down at the altar of Rome on the basis of shameful compromises of the doctrine of justification? No, Scripture’s “by grace alone and by faith alone” are clear. Are we to confess that infant baptism has become a negotiable doctrine, since “former condemnations no longer apply”? No, Christ’s clear command and his promise of grace to all for whom he died are clear (Matthew 28:19). When we make our confession regarding the Lord’s Supper shall we follow the Lutherans who have entered communion agreements with the Reformed thus denying the clear words of institution, “Take eat, this is My body”?

GOD’S ANSWER

Whatever limitations the confessions may have had in historical or scientific matters, they give a forthright and Scripture-based testimony concerning sin and grace, law and gospel, Christ and Antichrist, repentance, faith, and works, and all other doctrines which they deal with. They do so with the firm and joyous conviction that thereby faith is truly created and exercised. Thus we are able to glorify God in our lives and rightly serve our neighbor. Only the preaching of God’s wisdom revealed in the cross is so eminently practical as to accomplish these things. This preaching alone is God’s answer to sinful mankind.

“Why then aren’t all the churches having the name ‘Lutheran’ and claiming the same confessions united?” All of us have probably heard that question asked in some form or other. Perhaps we ourselves have asked it. For we all earnestly desire unity among Christians and pray, as Jesus did, that God would give and preserve it. But the Lord teaches that Christian unity is not our creation. True unity is the work of God and comes in and through his word. His very word which gives us new life in the communion of saints, he reminds us, is constantly under Satan’s attack in our own hearts and in the public confession of many (Jeremiah 23:30ff). Christ, therefore, commands us to be on our guard against preachers who come in his name but proclaim their own thoughts to the destruction of faith. Not submitting to God’s holy word, these innovators deceive their hearers and thus lose their right and authority to be true teachers of the church. We should not be deceived by those who claim the name Lutheran but whose hearts are far from the teachings of the Lutheran confessions. The purpose of the *Concordia* (which in Latin means “with united heart”) was not to divide the church but to unite it in the truth. This remains the purpose of the Book of Concord today. Subscription to its doctrines without reservation is the only way to true Lutheran unity.

Practically speaking, what does this mean for us? An appeal to a common subscription to the same confessions as evidence for true unity may be evasive of the truth. We, for example, share the Apostles’ Creed with the Church of Rome, and we rejoice in this. But the real issues concerning justification and faith and works, which divide us from that church, do not lie on the surface in the Apostles’ Creed. To appeal to unity on the basis of common confessions and at the same time to deny scriptural truth not dealt with in one’s common confessions does not edify the church.

For this reason, we cannot claim that all questions of faith and doctrine beyond what is expressly treated in the Book of Concord are open questions for Lutherans. Where Scripture clearly speaks, we must follow God’s word. The Scripture alone *rules* as God’s gracious revelation to us sinners. They are

the only “norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged” (Formula of Concord). Later creeds and confessions are not judges equal to the Scriptures; they are *ruled* by the Scriptures. As the Formula of Concord states, these other writings (creeds and confessions) are “mere witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned.”

Are we then bound to teach nothing more than what the confessions teach? The Lutheran Confessions themselves rightly forbid such a conclusion. That honor of being a touch stone belongs to the Scriptures alone. By the ministry of that divine Word, God graciously grants unity in faith and certainty in confession. With Scripture we must teach “the whole counsel of God,” neither adding nor omitting anything.

We must also warn that the confessions are not a second source of doctrine, but only a secondary testimony to the doctrine of Scripture. We cannot use the confessions as a sourcebook to manufacture doctrines which go beyond the statements of Scripture. Some in the Lutheran church have unfortunately used the confessions to try to answer questions left open in the Scripture, such as the moment that Christ’s body and blood become present in the Lord’s Supper. The confessions do not make assertions about such non-biblical doctrines unless one quotes detached statements of the confessions without regard to their context, but even if the confessions did assert extra-biblical doctrines, such doctrines would not be valid and binding.

Problem Doctrines??

To try to raise doubts about this claim and to raise doubts about *quia* subscription, critics of the confessions often raise the charge that the confessions teach the perpetual virginity of Mary in Article I, IV of the Smalcald Articles. First of all, it should be noted that Article I, IV is not about Mary. It is about the two natures of Christ. The German and Latin texts say:

Filius ita factus est homo, ut a Spiritu Sancto sine virili opera conciperetur, et ex Maria, pura, sancta sempervirgine nasceretur.

Daß der Sohn sei also Mensch [ge]worden, daß er vom Heiligen Geist ohne männlich Zutun empfangen und von der reinen, heiligen Jungfrau Maria geboren sei.

The Latin refers to Mary as pure, holy, and always-virgin. It is noteworthy that the German simply refers to the pure, holy Virgin Mary. If the confession was concerned to assert perpetual virginity for Mary, the author of the German version bungled the job because no reference to always virgin appears in the German. It seems that the Latin *sempervirgine* was simply a stock phrase for describing the virginity of Mary. The article is not concerned to make any assertion about Mary beyond the fact that she bore a child without any participation by a human father.⁵

Scripture makes no assertion that Jesus was born without the normal physical effects of childbirth on the body of his mother. It makes no assertion that Mary remained virgin after the birth of Jesus. Already

⁵ The same conclusion applies to the similar statement in FC, TD, VIII,24: “On account of this personal union and communion of the natures, Mary, the most blessed Virgin, bore not a mere man, but, as the angel [Gabriel] testifies, such a man as is truly the Son of the most high God, who showed his divine majesty even in His mother’s womb, inasmuch as he was born of a virgin, with her virginity inviolate. Therefore she is truly the mother of God, and nevertheless remained a virgin.”

in the ancient church there were three theories about Jesus' brothers and sisters who are mentioned in the gospels. One theory is that these were actually Jesus' cousins. Another is that these were children of Joseph, whose first wife had died before he married Mary. Both of these theories were motivated at least in part by the desire to preserve Mary's virginity even after Christ's birth. There is no direct evidence to support them in Scripture. The third idea is that these "brothers" were children of Mary and Joseph born in a natural way after Christ's birth. This third view is the most natural understanding of the passages in which Jesus, Mary, and these brothers and sisters appear together. See, for example, Matthew 12:46 and 13:55. Luther and many of his contemporaries seem to have retained the opinion that Mary had no other children besides Jesus, but most recent Lutheran theologians lean toward the third view. In the quotation from his "Large Confession concerning the Holy Supper" which is cited in FC, TD, VII, Luther refers to the belief that Mary bore Jesus "with a closed womb" as a possibility believed by some. Pieper treats both matters as open questions (III, p 307-309). Our subscription to the confessions makes no assertion about the duration of the virginity of Mary because neither Scripture nor the confessions make any such assertion.

The Last Word

The position accorded the confessions in the Lutheran Church is clearly defined by the Book of Concord itself. According to it Holy Scripture alone is to be regarded as the sole rule and norm by which absolutely all doctrines and teachers are to be judged. The object of the Augsburg Confession, as stated in its Preface, was to show "what manner of doctrine has been set forth, in our lands and churches from the Holy Scripture and the pure Word of God." And in its Conclusion the Lutheran confessors declare: "Nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic," and "we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures." "*Iuxta Scripturam*"—such are the closing words of the Augsburg Confession. The Lutheran Church knows of no other principle.

The Lutheran symbols, therefore, are not intended to supplant the Scriptures, nor do they do so. They do, however, set forth what has been at all times the understanding of the pure Christian doctrine adhered to by all sincere and loyal Lutherans everywhere; and, at the same time, they show convincingly from the Scriptures that our forefathers did indeed courageously confess nothing but God's eternal truth, which every Christian is bound to and which every Christian will consistently believe, teach, and confess.

Appendices⁶

Appendix 1, from the Introduction to the Formula Concord

This quotation demonstrates the view of the subscribers of the Formula of Concord concerning the authority of confessions and the meaning of confessional subscription is the same as that set forth in the preceding paper.

**OF THE SUMMARY CONTENT, RULE, AND STANDARD
according to which all dogmas should be judged,
and the erroneous teachings [controversies]
that have occurred should be decided and explained in a Christian way.**

1] 1. We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119, 105: *Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.* And St. Paul: *Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,* Gal. 1, 8.

2] Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.

3] 2. And because directly after the times of the apostles, and even while they were still living, false teachers and heretics arose, and symbols, *i. e.*, brief, succinct [categorical] confessions, were composed against them in the early Church, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal Christian faith and confession of the orthodox and true Church, namely, *the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed*, we pledge ourselves to them, and hereby reject all heresies and dogmas which, contrary to them, have been introduced into the Church of God.

4] 3. As to the schisms in matters of faith, however, which have occurred in our time, we regard as the unanimous consensus and declaration of our Christian faith and confession, especially against the Papacy and its false worship, idolatry, superstition, and against other sects, as the symbol of our time, *the First, Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, delivered to the Emperor Charles V at Augsburg in the year 1530, in the great Diet, together with its *Apology*, and the *Articles* composed at *Smalcald* in the year 1537, and subscribed at that time by the chief theologians.

5] And because such matters concern also the laity and the salvation of their souls, we also confess the *Small and Large Catechisms* of Dr. Luther, as they are included in Luther's works, as the Bible of the laity, wherein everything is comprised which is treated at greater length in Holy Scripture, and is necessary for a Christian man to know for his salvation.

6] To this direction, as above announced, all doctrines are to be conformed, and what is, contrary thereto is to be rejected and condemned, as opposed to the unanimous declaration of our faith.

7] In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.

⁶ Appendixes belong in medical books, not doctrinal papers.

8] But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned [by what arguments the dogmas conflicting with the Holy Scripture were rejected and condemned].

Appendix 2, from Bente's Introduction to the Concordia Triglotta

6. Subscription to Confessions.

The position accorded the symbols in the Lutheran Church is clearly defined by the Book of Concord itself. According to it Holy Scripture alone is to be regarded as the sole rule and norm by which absolutely all doctrines and teachers are to be judged. The object of the Augustana, as stated in its Preface, was to show “what manner of doctrine has been set forth, in our lands and churches from the Holy Scripture and the pure Word of God.” And in its Conclusion the Lutheran confessors declare: “Nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic,” and “we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures.” “Iuxta Scripturam”—such are the closing words of the Augsburg Confession. The Lutheran Church knows of no other principle.

In the *Formula of Concord* we read: “Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.” (777, 2.) In the Conclusion of the Catalog of Testimonies we read: “The true saving faith is to be founded upon no church-teachers, old or new, but only and alone upon God’s Word, which is comprised in the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles, as unquestionable witnesses of divine truth.” (1149.)

The Lutheran symbols, therefore, are not intended to supplant the Scriptures, nor do they do so. They do, however, set forth what has been at all times the unanimous understanding of the pure Christian doctrine adhered to by sincere and loyal Lutherans everywhere; and, at the same time, they show convincingly from the Scriptures that our forefathers did indeed manfully confess nothing but God’s eternal truth, which every Christian is in duty bound to, and consistently always will, believe, teach, and confess.

The manner also in which Lutherans pledge themselves confessionally appears from these symbols. The Augsburg Confession was endorsed by the princes and estates as follows: “The above articles we desire to present in accordance with the edict of Your Imperial Majesty, in order to exhibit our Confession and let men see a summary of the doctrine of our teachers.” (95, 6.) In the preamble to the signatures of 1537 the Lutheran preachers unanimously confess: “We have reread the articles of the Confession presented to the Emperor in the Assembly at Augsburg, and by the favor of God all the preachers who have been present in this Assembly at Smalcald harmoniously declare that they believe and teach in their churches according to the articles of the Confession and Apology.” (529.) John Brenz declares that he had read and reread, time and again, the Confession, the Apology, etc., and judged “that all these agree with Holy Scripture, and with the belief of the true and genuine catholic Church (*haec omnia convenire cum Sacra Scriptura et cum sententia verae καὶ γνηστῆς catholicae ecclesiae*).” (529.)

Another subscription—to the *Smalcald Articles*—reads: “I, Conrad Figenbotz, for the glory of God subscribe that I have thus believed and am still preaching and firmly believing as above.” (503, 13.)

Brixius writes in a similar vein: “I ... subscribe to the Articles of the reverend Father Martin Luther, and confess that hitherto I have thus believed and taught, and by the Spirit of Christ I shall continue thus to believe and teach.” (503, 27.)

In the Preface to the Thorough Declaration of the *Formula of Concord* the Lutheran confessors declare: “To this Christian Augsburg Confession, so thoroughly grounded in God’s Word, we herewith pledge ourselves again from our inmost hearts. We abide by its simple, clear, and unadulterated meaning as the words convey it, and regard the said Confession as a pure Christian symbol, with which at the present time true Christians ought to be found next to God’s Word.... We intend also, by the grace of the Almighty, faithfully to abide until our end by this Christian Confession, mentioned several times, as it was delivered in the year 1530 to the Emperor Charles V; and it is our purpose, neither in this nor in any other writing, to recede in the least from that oft-cited Confession, nor to propose another or new confession.” (847, 4. 5.) Again: “We confess also the First, Unaltered Augsburg Confession as our symbol for this time (not because it was composed by our theologians, but because it has been taken from God’s Word and is founded firmly and well therein), precisely in the form in which it was committed to writing in the year 1530, and presented to the Emperor Charles V at Augsburg.” (851, 5.)

In like manner the remaining Lutheran symbols were adopted. (853. 777.) Other books, the *Formula of Concord* declares, are accounted useful, “as far as (*wofern, quatenus*) they are consistent with” the Scriptures and the symbols. (855, 10.) The symbols, however, are accepted “that we may have a unanimously received, definite, common form of doctrine, which all our Evangelical churches together and in common confess, from and according to which, because (*cum, weil*) it has been derived from God’s Word, all other writings should be judged and adjusted, as to how far (*wiefern, quatenus*) they are to be approved and accepted.” (855, 10.)

After its adoption by the Lutheran electors, princes, and estates, the *Formula of Concord*, and with it the entire Book of Concord, was, as stated, solemnly subscribed by about 8,000 theologians, pastors, and teachers, the pledge reading as follows: “Since now, in the sight of God and of all Christendom, we wish to testify to those now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controverted articles aforementioned and explained, and no other, is our faith, doctrine, and confession in which we are also willing, by God’s grace to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it; and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but, by the help of God’s grace, intend to abide thereby: therefore, after mature deliberation, we have, in God’s fear and with the invocation of His name, attached our signatures with our own hands.” (1103, 40.)

Furthermore, in the Preface to the Book of Concord the princes and estates declare that many churches and schools had received the Augsburg Confession “as a symbol of the present time in regard to the chief articles of faith, especially those involved in controversy with the Romanists and various corruptions of the heavenly doctrine.” (7.) They solemnly protest that it never entered their minds “either to introduce, furnish a cover for, and establish any false doctrine, or in the least even to recede from the Confession presented in the year 1530 at Augsburg.” (15.) They declare: “This Confession also, by the help of God, we will retain to our last breath when we shall go forth from this life to the heavenly fatherland, to appear with joyful and undaunted mind and with a pure conscience before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (15.) “Therefore we also have determined not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves or from the phrases which are found in them (*vel a rebus ipsis vel a phrasibus, quae in illa habentur, discedere*), but, the Spirit of the Lord aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of the pure doctrine.” (23.)

7. Pledging of Ministers to the Confessions.

Such being the attitude of the Lutherans towards their symbols, and such their evaluation of pure doctrine, it was self-evident that the public teachers of their churches should be pledged to the confessions. In December 1529, H. Winckel, of Goettingen, drew up a form in which the candidate for ordination declares: "I believe and hold also of the most sacred Sacrament ... as one ought to believe concerning it according to the contents of the Bible, and as Doctor Martin Luther writes and confesses concerning it especially in his Confession" (of the Lord's Supper, 1528). The Goettingen Church Order of 1530, however, did not as yet embody a vow of ordination. The first pledges to the symbols were demanded by the University of Wittenberg in 1533 from candidates for the degree of Doctor of Divinity. In 1535 this pledge was required also of the candidates for ordination. The oath provided that the candidate must faithfully teach the Gospel without corruption, steadfastly defend the Ecumenical Symbols, remain in agreement with the Augsburg Confession, and before deciding difficult controversies consult older teachers of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. Even before 1549 the candidates for philosophical degrees were also pledged by oath to the Augsburg Confession.

In 1535, at the Diet of Smalcald, it was agreed that new members entering the Smalcald League should promise "to provide for such teaching and preaching as was in harmony with the Word of God and the pure teaching of our [Augsburg] Confession." According to the Pomeranian Church Order which Bugenhagen drew up in 1535, pastors were pledged to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology thereof. Capito, Bucer, and all others who took part in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, promised, over their signatures, "to believe and to teach in all articles according to the Confession and the Apology." (*Corpus Reformatorum*, opp. Melanthonis, 3, 76.) In 1540, at Goettingen, John Wigand promised to accept the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, and to abide by them all his life. "And," he continued, "if I should be found to do otherwise or be convicted of teaching and confessing contrary to such Confession and Apology, then let me, by this signature, be condemned and deposed from this divine ministry. This do I swear, so help me God." Also at Goettingen, Veit Pflugmacher vowed, in 1541, that he would preach the Gospel in its truth and purity according to the Augsburg Confession and the contents of the postils of Anton Corvinus. He added: "Should I be found to do otherwise and not living up to what has been set forth above, then shall I by such act have deposed myself from office. This do I swear; so help me God."

In 1550 and 1552, Andrew Osiander attacked the oath of confession which was in vogue at Wittenberg, claiming it to be "an entanglement in oath-bound duties after the manner of the Papists." "What else," said he, "does this oath accomplish than to sever those who swear it from the Holy Scriptures and bind them to Philip's doctrine? Parents may therefore well consider what they do by sending their sons to Wittenberg to become Masters and Doctors. Money is there taken from them, and they are made Masters and Doctors. But while the parents think that their son is an excellent man, well versed in the Scriptures and able to silence enthusiasts and heretics, he is, in reality, a poor captive, entangled and embarrassed by oath-bound duties. For he has abjured the Word of God and has taken an oath on Philip's doctrine." Replying to this fanatical charge in 1553, Melancthon emphasized the fact that the doctrinal pledges demanded at Wittenberg had been introduced chiefly by Luther, for the purpose of "maintaining the true doctrine." "For," said Melancthon, "many enthusiasts were roaming about at that time, each, in turn, spreading new silly nonsense, e.g., the Anabaptists, Servetus, Campanus, Schwenckfeld, and others. And such tormenting spirits are not lacking at any time (*Et non desunt tales furiae ullo tempore*)." A doctrinal pledge, Melancthon furthermore explained, was necessary "in order correctly to acknowledge God and call upon Him to preserve harmony in the Church, and to bridle the audacity of such as invent new doctrines." (*C. R.* 12, 5.)

Appendix 3, from WLS Dogmatics Notes

The dogmatics notes used at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary summarizes our manner of subscription thus:

Our subscription to our Symbolical Books is restricted to the Scripture doctrines contained in them:

- a) Whether they are formal declarations of faith or mentioned incidentally (as the inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture); cf *F.C. 778, 2; Large Cat. 746,57; 770,76.*
- b) Or doctrines introduced in dogmatical deductions; cf *A.C. XX, 9–10 (p 52).*
- c) Or the rejection of error. cf *F.C. 780, 11 etc.; A.C. I, 5 (p 42).*
- d) All things pertaining to the manner of presentation, as e.g. figures of speech, method of deduction, historical, archeological, scientific remarks, use of proof texts, etc., are excepted. cf *F.C. 782, 15; 940, 8.*

Appendix 4: Walther on Subscription to the Confessions

In an essay presented to the Western District Convention of the Missouri Synod in 1858 entitled “Why Are the Symbolical Books ... to be Signed Unconditionally?” C. F. W. Walther says the following on the question what the unconditional pledge means and what it does not mean:

Since the Symbols are confessions of the faith, or doctrine, of the Church, and are to be and desire to be nothing else, an unconditional subscription to them can mean nothing else than the solemn affirmation and oath, given to the Church by him who is entering on its service, that he has found the doctrinal content of the Symbols of our Church, without any exception whatever, as not conflicting, neither in a fundamental nor in a secondary point of doctrine, with Holy Scripture; that he, accordingly, sincerely believes in this doctrine as the divine truth and hence is resolved to preach this doctrine without adulteration. No matter, therefore, what place any doctrine may occupy in the doctrinal system of the Symbols and in what form it may occur there, whether it be the subject discussed *ex professo* or whether it occurs as an incidental reference, the unconditional subscription pertains to every one of them; none of them is excepted by the signer. Some doctrines, for example, are used in the Symbols merely to support the line of argumentation; but far from declaring these doctrines immaterial, our Church treats them as the irrefutable foundations of doctrine and takes for granted that they are gladly accepted by those who subscribe to the Symbols.

On the other hand, since the Symbols were never intended to be anything else but confessions of faith and doctrine, the confessional pledge does not cover things which do not pertain to doctrine. As little as he who unconditionally signs the Symbols of the Church, his Symbols, thereby declares them to be the norm of German or Latin orthography or of a perfect style, so little does his signature pertain to things which belong in the domain of the human sciences. When, e. g., Art. VI of the Augsburg Confession quotes a passage from an old commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians, and Art. XX (of the Latin text) quotes a passage from the *De Vocatione Gentium* as statements by Ambrosius, and when Art. XVIII quotes a statement from the ancient writing *Hypognosticon* as a statement by Augustine he who subscribes to the Augsburg Confession unconditionally self-evidently does not obligate himself to regard Ambrosius and Augustine as the authors of those books simply because they are attributed to them in the Confessions; and this would be the case even if it were not well

known that the writer of this our fundamental Confession himself knew that these writings were customarily cited as written by these men, without directly ascribing the authorship to them. And as anything that is properly a subject for criticism does not bind the servant of the Church, so in general nothing in the Symbols binds him that belongs into the realm of history.

This applies also to the interpretation given in the Symbols to individual Scripture passages. As an absolutely necessary requirement of an unobjectionable ‘prophecy’ or interpretation of Scripture the Apostle Paul himself names this: ‘Having prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith’ (Rom. 12:7). From this Johann Gerhard draws this exegetical canon: ‘Even though we may not arrive at the true and particular meaning of all passages, it suffices if in our interpretation we offer nothing conflicting with the analogy of faith.’ Granted that the exegete did not succeed in finding the particular meaning of some Bible passage, but nevertheless gave it a meaning which is supported by other clear passages, he would indeed be mistaken in finding that particular truth in this passage, but he would not be erring in the doctrine. One who therefore subscribes to the Symbolical Books unconditionally is simply declaring that the interpretations found in them are ‘according to the analogy of faith.’—Since, furthermore, the argumentation in favor of a doctrine may be faulty (though the doctrine to be proved, or the conclusion, rests on an immovable, divine foundation and the auxiliary doctrines used to prove it, or the major and the minor, are perfectly correct), the unconditional subscription does not imply that the line of argumentation is not subject to improvement; in other words, that the form, the method, and the process of the argumentation is perfect and that hence every faithful servant of the Church would be held to use the method followed in the Symbols and no other. In this way our fathers understood the unconditional confessional pledge.” Quoted in Pieper, I, p 357-358.

Appendix 5: Subscription to the Confessions in the Free Conferences of the 1850s

What was the situation during these free conferences? In the 1850s a number of Lutheran synods were united in the General Synod, organized in 1820. The confessional stance of that body was, generally speaking, unionistic. In the General Synod’s constitution the Lutheran Confessions were not even mentioned. The confessional position of the nominally Lutheran General Synod and of its constituent districts was, however, in flux and in confusion. Walther had sound reason for new-found optimism because many pastors in the General Synod had just rejected the Definite Platform, which would have effectively annulled the Augsburg Confession, and reaffirmed their adherence to that confession. For this reason, in 1856 Walther suggested the calling of free conferences of such Lutherans as subscribed to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession without reservation to discuss the situation and to pave the way for a doctrinally united, truly Lutheran Church in North America. Encouraged by numerous favorable replies, he published an invitation, signed by himself and four other men from St. Louis. This was not an act of the Missouri Synod. The invitation read:

The undersigned ministers of the Ev. Luth. Church in the United States, with the conviction that the unity and the well-being of our Lutheran Zion will be greatly advanced through the free expression of opinions regarding the various interests of our church in this land by *brothers who are united in faith*, herewith extend an invitation to all members of the Ev. Luth. Church in the United States *who hold the Unaltered Augsburg Confession* to be a true presentation of the teachings of the Word of God to

meet with them...in a free and brotherly conference concerning the status and needs of the church in America.”⁷

Participation was based on a wholehearted acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Under the circumstances that then existed, wholehearted acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession showed a readiness to submit to the full truth of the Scriptures. The invitation was not extended to heterodox church bodies nor to representatives of those church bodies but was a general call for *individuals who had taken a public stand* as confessional Lutherans to step forth and to meet with their confessional brothers. As reported in *Der Lutheraner*:

This led to the question as to how we are to look upon those who indeed for themselves accept the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, but who belong to a church body that does not recognize the binding force of this confession as a symbol. ... This question was answered in this way, that we acknowledge such as brothers as long as they testify with vigor against the prevailing errors and for the truth. It was also stated that we consider it their duty to continue membership in their respective church bodies as long as there still is a basis for hope of improvement.”⁸

Thus the fellowship expressed at the free conferences was not with the unionistic General Synod, but with individuals who had stepped forward with a positive confession for the truth, in public opposition against the General Synod’s laxness. Since the free conferences consisted of men who confessed unreserved acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, there was present a fundamental unity. Whatever errors one or the other may have held were a matter of weakness and not of persistence. To refuse opening prayer under such circumstances would, in Walther’s view, have been a violation of brotherhood. The situation in America was thus like that Walther had faced in Germany. The Lutheran church had been the orthodox visible church. Now it was becoming fragmented into orthodox and heterodox factions. The orthodox were struggling to find each other as they had done in the period from 1517 to 1537.

Walther explained his favorable impression of those from the General Synod who had come forward with a clear confession:

This constellation [that is, the united front of those who proclaimed allegiance to the U.A.C.] certainly fills all who love the Lutheran Zion of this land with great joy and also with hope for the future. It has become evident that the number of those who do not bow, nor wish in the future to bow, their knee to the Baal of the so-called “development” and the so-called “higher enlightenment” of the 19th century is without doubt greater than our feeble faith or despair had believed.⁹

Walther also displayed his concern to provide patient instruction for weak brothers. In response to the suggestion that all attendees must immediately subscribe to the whole Book of Concord Walther said:

As church conditions have been here in the last decades, and to some extent still are, there may well be many a genuine Lutheran who is loyal from the heart to the Augsburg Confession yet does not have a clear knowledge rightly to subscribe to the whole Concordia.¹⁰ Also such Lutherans are, without a doubt, our brothers. ... We believe that

⁷ *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, p 186-187 – emphasis added. “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 354.

⁸ *Lutheraner*, 1856, p 50. “Fellowship Then and Now,” p 355.

⁹ *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, p 3-4. Lueker, p 533-534.

¹⁰ There was, for example, no Norwegian Book of Concord available at this time.

one of the most important duties of the conference would be just this, to remove the uncertainties from the minds of those brothers who still harbor scruples against the consequent unfolding of the doctrine confessed at Augsburg and by the grace of God to lead them to a blessed, happy conviction that the other symbols of our church are *implicite* contained in the Augustana, which they accept.¹¹

It is apparent that some in Missouri thought Walther was being too accommodating. Walther admitted that there was some risk in his approach, but some risk must be taken to rescue people.

Would it not, however, be equally dangerous and divisive for members of those synods who embraced all the Lutheran Confessions to participate in a conference whose basis was the Augsburg Confession alone, as the invitation to the conference suggested? Could not Satan use this device to rob them of the great treasure that united them?

Walther admitted the danger was real. And his answer to the dilemma was forthright.

When an action does not injure the faith but is called for by love for the brothers as individuals and for the church as a whole, it would be an act of both unbelief and lovelessness to omit such an action because of the possible danger. Furthermore, if those who by God's grace have come to recognize the glory of all our churchly confessions timidly withdraw from all those who have the same faith but not the same knowledge, an equally dreadful danger would threaten, namely that one part would become guilty of a pharisaic, carnal, spiritually proud, loveless insistence on its strict confessionalism, while the other part, instead of being filled with confidence and love for the continued building and further fortification of our confessional castle, would more and more be scared off as from a prison tower of the spirit and of faith."¹²

Missouri's actions in the free conferences are also explained in part by their understanding of what a free conference was. Rightly or wrongly, Walther regarded free conferences as something quite different than contacts between churches. Later, Walther would not deal in any way with the more confessional but still compromising General Council. The Missouri Synod refused to allow even any unofficial participation in meetings with the General Council.¹³ Individuals of the Missouri would hold free conferences with individuals of other synods, but this was not regarded as dealings between the synods. The participants in the free conferences were regarded as members of the one church of the UAC, who were trying to find each other to join into confessions church bodies with defined boundaries. There are frequent references to "our church" in the documents concerning the conferences. Bluntly put, the free conferences were really subtle or maybe not so subtle invitations to confessional Lutherans to join the Missouri Synod. Nothing about the prayers at these conferences suggest that they were regarded as joint prayers with anyone who held to error.

The free conferences fizzled out after four meetings due to Walther's health which prevented his participation, the onset of the Civil War, and Ohio's declining enthusiasm. Ohio's waning interest may have been due as much to the realization that if the conferences were successful the goal would be the formation of "state synods" as to any doctrinal misgivings.

¹¹ *Lehre und Wehre*, 1856, 84-86. Lueker, p 535-536.

¹² See Walther, *Editorials*, p 41.

¹³ *Moving Frontiers*, p 256-257.

Appendix 6: NORMA NORMATA NORMATA?

It is becoming more common of late for some who wish to be confessional Lutherans to suggest that when the Lutheran Confessions cite writings of Luther and other fathers of the church, they confer a confessional status or at least a deuterо-confessional status on the work cited. An example of this is found in the Holy Trinity 2003 issue of LOGIA (p 37-40). In an introduction to a new English translation of an Easter sermon of Luther which discusses Jesus' descent into hell, the translators, Jayson Galler and Susanne Hafner, suggest that by referring to this sermon, Article IX of the Formula of Concord confers a confessional status on this so-called "Torgau Sermon."

Galler and Hafner acknowledge that the reliability of the extant manuscript of this sermon, as well as the time and place where it was preached, are questioned by some scholars, but they, nevertheless, assert, "Regardless of whether the sermon or some of its content is pseudo-Luther, the Formula still gives it a confessional status (as the Book of Concord does with other writings whose actual authors may not be who they were originally thought to be)" (p 37). The last part of this statement acknowledges that a number of quotations which the confessions attribute to leading church fathers such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome very likely were not actually written by those fathers. Such misattributions are one reason why we subscribe to the doctrinal statements of confessions, not to every historical opinion which they offer.

Galler and Hafner also claim that the confessional status of the "Torgau Sermon" applies to the whole sermon not simply to parts that are cited by the Formula (p 40). They further claim that since the Formula mentions Luther's "Torgau Sermon" but not his exegetical comments on 1 Peter 3, these commentaries have less authority than the sermon (p 38).

Is it true that the Confession, themselves a *norma normata* (a rule that is ruled), make another document into a *norma normata normata* (a rule that is ruled by another rule that is ruled) when that document is quoted or mentioned in a confession? We have to reply in the negative both to the specific claim that the "Torgau Sermon" has received a confession status and to the general principle that the confessions confer confessional status on other documents simply by citing from them with approval.

The introduction to the Formula of Concord specifically states which documents were receiving confessional status in the Book of Concord:

And because directly after the times of the apostles, and even while they were still living, false teachers and heretics arose, and symbols, *i. e.*, brief, succinct confessions, were composed against them in the early Church, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal Christian faith and confession of the orthodox and true Church, namely, *the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed*, we pledge ourselves to them, and hereby reject all heresies and dogmas which, contrary to them, have been introduced into the Church of God.

As to the schisms in matters of faith, however, which have occurred in our time, we regard as the unanimous consensus and declaration of our Christian faith and confession, especially against the Papacy and its false worship, idolatry, superstition, and against other sects, as the symbol of our time, *the First, Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, delivered to the Emperor Charles V at Augsburg in the year 1530, in the great Diet, together with its *Apology*, and the *Articles* composed at *Smalcald* in the year 1537, and subscribed at that time by the chief theologians.

And because such matters concern also the laity and the salvation of their souls, we also confess the *Small and Large Catechisms* of Dr. Luther, as they are included in Luther's works, as the Bible of the laity, wherein everything is comprised which is treated at greater length in Holy Scripture, and is necessary for a Christian man to know for his salvation.

To this direction, as above announced, all doctrines are to be conformed, and what is, contrary thereto is to be rejected and condemned, as opposed to the unanimous declaration of our faith (*Triglotta*, p 827).

It is clear that these are the documents to which the authors and adopters of the Formula of Concord intend to give confessional status. There is no indication of any intention to confer confessional status on the entirety of every document which may be cited somewhere in the confessions. Confessional Lutheranism has always distinguished confessional writings from other respected writings of teachers of the church. Hollaz says,

[The Symbols] are public confessions, drawn up after much deliberation and consultation, in the name of the church, by orthodox men with reference to certain articles of faith, so that members of the orthodox church might be removed from the ignorance and heretical wickedness of infidels and be preserved in the proper profession of the faith (*Examen*, 54).

Hoenecke says,

The weight and significance of the symbols lies in this—that they are not private writings and private opinions but the voice of the church (*Dogmatik*, I, p 459).

In the case that is of immediate concern to us, it is noteworthy that Article IX of the Formula makes no citations from Luther's sermon but simply points to it as an example of how the descent to hell should be taught in a simple scriptural way. The Epitome says:

But since this article, as also the preceding, cannot be comprehended by the senses or by our reason, but must be grasped by faith alone, it is our unanimous opinion that there should be no disputation concerning it, but that it should be believed and taught only in the simplest manner; according as Dr. Luther, of blessed memory, in his sermon at Torgau in the year 1533 has explained this article in an altogether Christian manner, separated from it all useless, unnecessary questions, and admonished all godly Christians to Christian simplicity of faith (*Triglotta*, p 827).

The Thorough Declaration says even less:

And since even in the ancient Christian teachers of the Church, as well as in some among our teachers, dissimilar explanations of the article concerning the descent of Christ to hell are found, we abide in like manner by the simplicity of our Christian faith comprised in the Creed, to which Dr. Luther in his sermon, which was delivered in the castle at Torgau in the year 1533, concerning the descent of Christ to hell, has pointed us (*Triglotta*, p 1049).

A quotation from Luther's sermon has been appended to the German version of the article in the Thorough Declaration, but the words that introduce this quotation make it clear that the quotation is not a part of the article but an appendix to it: "In the sermon of Luther on Jesus' descent to hell which is

referred to in Article IX of the Formula of Concord, it reads as follows:” The Kolb-Wengert edition also makes it clear that this quotation is not part of the article.

Neither Luther’s sermon nor Article IX provides an in-depth scriptural treatment of the doctrine of Jesus’ descent to hell. Luther confines himself to two main points: Jesus’ descent was with body and soul, and it was part of his exaltation. Article IX is the least thorough article in the Formula. It seems to be almost an afterthought to Article VIII on Christology, aimed primarily at preempting contemporary controversies on the subject of the descent. There is no evidence that the formulators of the Formula regarded either their article or Luther’s sermon as a definitive treatment of this doctrine. The Formula’s aim was to deal with contemporary controversies. Because the controversy about the descent was minor, their treatment of the article was minor.

Not only is there no evidence that the formulators of the Formula intended to confer *norma normata* status on Luther’s sermon—it is, in fact, doubtful that they wanted to call their confession a norm or that they would have favored the term *norma normata* for the confessions. The authors of the Formula make it clear that, strictly speaking, the church has only one canon (the Greek term) or norm (the Latin term), namely, the Holy Scriptures.

1. We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard (*regulam et normam*) according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone (*Triglotta*, p 777).

For other writings, including the confessions, they prefer the term “witnesses,” rather than norm.

2. Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, which are to show in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.

7. In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, (*iudix, norma, et regula*) according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.

8. But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned.

Later writers who use the term *norma normata* are very careful to qualify the term. Francis Pieper says:

To show the relation between Holy Scripture and the Symbols of the orthodox Church, the following terms have been used: *norma* and *norma normata*, *norma primaria* and *secundaria*. Both terms express the truth that the Symbols are a norm, but not by themselves (*absolute*), but only in a certain respect (*secundum quid*), namely, a derived norm, because the doctrines confessed in our Symbols are taken from Scripture. The purpose of the Symbols is brought out in the terms *norma decisionis* and *norma discretionis* (deciding norm and distinguishing norm). Scripture alone decides which doctrine is true, which is false; but from the attitude which one takes toward the Symbols

of the Lutheran Church we learn whether he knows and accepts the Scripture doctrine or does not accept it (*norma discretionis discernit orthodoxos ab heterodoxis*) (*Dogmatics*, I, p 358).

Adolf Hoenecke says:

Our [Lutheran] Church has deposited its knowledge derived from God's Word in its Symbols, and hence a Lutheran dogmatics must meet the standard of the Symbols. But that does not set up a second standard; for the Symbols themselves have their criterion in Scripture; they are therefore themselves a standardized standard (*norma normata*)” (Quoted in Pieper, I, p 172).

Both of these quotations reflect the axiom stated by Carpzov:

A symbolic book is called a norm, not of the faith itself, but only of the confession of faith (Cited in Baier, I, p 140).

These statements have a bearing on our response to the question, “Do we interpret the Confessions by Scripture or Scripture by the Confessions?” Neither of these alternatives is an adequate statement of the relationship of Scriptures to the Confessions. The statement “We interpret Scripture by the Confessions” is not correct because Scripture is its own interpreter. No other document can be used to judge it. The statement “We interpret the Confessions by Scripture” is not adequate either, because it is sometimes used as a disguised form of *quatenus* subscription, “We subscribe to the Confessions in so far as they agree with Scripture.” Such a subscription is no subscription at all.

We subscribe to the Confessions because they agree with the Scriptures. The proper relationship is that we first examine the Scriptures. They are the only canon and norm. We then compare the teachings of the Confessions and find that they agree with the Scriptures. As Pieper put it above: Scripture alone decides which doctrine is true and which is false; but since the Confessions are a correct summary of biblical teachings, from the attitude which one takes toward the Symbols of the Lutheran Church we receive a testimony whether he knows and accepts the Scripture doctrine or does not accept it. Or as Hollaz says: “The Holy Scriptures, by virtue of their divine canonical authority, constitute an infallible rule, whereby true doctrines are distinguished from false. The Symbolical Books have ecclesiastical authority, and by virtue of this are called a rule, namely, with regard to the public profession of faith, by which we declare the unanimous consent of the Church in doctrine” (*Examen*, 56; Schmid, p 101).

Confessional Lutherans will not elevate the Confessions to too high a position as a second norm that stands alongside Scripture. Neither will they make too little of the Confessions, but they will subscribe to them as a secondary norm under Scripture, a pledge of what we will believe and teach.

John F. Brug 2003

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