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Introduction from the Chair

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Introduction from the Chair

Editor's note: As each faculty department continues to take a turn with the Winter issue of Concordia Journal, this time systematic theology is up. Joel Okamoto, as chair of the department, provides the following introduction for the theme they chose and how they are addressing it.

“Confessionalism” is the theme of the articles in this issue of *Concordia Journal* and was selected by members of the Department of Systematic Theology.

Why confessionalism? We each have our own answers, and the articles themselves explore some of them, so I urge you to find and consider them for yourself. But generally we would agree that the notion of “confessionalism” is confused and confusing today. For many American Protestants, any version of confessionalism—any church that identifies itself with creeds and confessions—is strange, if not wrong-headed. Just for the sake of Lutheran identity today, confessionalism is an important topic. But even among Lutherans it can be hard to tell what we mean by the words “confessional” and “confessionalism.” This difficulty often arises when “confessional” is played off against “missional” and when one speaks of “confessional Lutheranism” as if there were other, non-confessional forms of Lutheranism. In such cases, “confessional” and “confessionalism” are like “radical” and “reactionary” in politics—words chosen to express approval or disapproval. Language such as this shows that it remains important for Lutherans to take the meaning of our confessionalism seriously and carry out its responsibilities faithfully.

The articles in this issue aim to help in doing these things. Of course, confessionalism is a theme too basic, too far-reaching, and too widely discussed for us to deal with comprehensively, but each piece covers something different.

David Maxwell deals with the Nicene Creed and argues that we should use it as more than a list of orthodox doctrines. Perhaps its most important function is hermeneutical. When interpreting the Scriptures, you need to know the entire story to interpret properly any part of the story. The Nicene controversy reflected this basic fact, because the overall story was essential to interpreting passages at the heart of the debate: those that render Jesus as inferior to the Father. One pro-Nicene approach placed the passages like “The Father is greater than I” in the larger story and pointed out that the incarnation comes first. The Nicene Creed not only reflects this story, stressing the pre-existence of Christ and highlighting his incarnation “for us men and for our salvation,” it also upholds this story as a key for biblical interpretation for Christians.

Charles Arand and Robert Kolb work out a concept of confessionalism from the development of the Augsburg Confession. Like Paul on Mars Hill, who took nothing for granted but began with the concept of “God,” Arand and Kolb review how the concept of a “confession” emerged out of the Wittenberg theology of the word of God and in the context of the Empire in 1530. After that, they show how the spirit, method, and content of the Wittenberg theology, as expressed above all in the Augsburg Confession, embrace all those who subscribe to it. In view of this, they conclude by noting ways in which elements of the content fit effectively into our very different twenty-first-century context.

Like Arand and Kolb, I also develop a concept of confessionalism, but unlike them, I took a synchronic approach. I propose that we think of “confessionalism” as understanding our identity and life as Christians in terms of the basic confession “Jesus is Lord.” I work out a notion of confessionalism that begins with this confession of faith and the conditions out of which it arises, and show how we may understand the ecumenical creeds and Augsburg Confession as elaborations on it. This understanding allows us to treat the articles of the Christian faith as genuine articulations that unfold in an organic, intuitive way rather than as varied claims rooted in something more loosely defined like the Bible. This approach also gives clear guidance for being confessional about matters that the creeds and confessions do not address like the biblical canon or the distinction between Israel and the nations (a basic biblical distinction).

I know that none of this pretends to be the last word about confessing and confessionalism or, short of the last day, that there is a last word about them. But all of us have tried to contribute constructively. I hope that you find something here that helps you as you try, too.

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