

2015

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Recommended Citation

Okamoto, Joel (2015) "Making Sense of Confessionalism Today," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 41: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol41/iss1/5>

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Making Sense of Confessionalism Today

Joel P. Okamoto

Confessionalism Today

Like the Dow Jones Industrial Average, Lutheran confessionalism in the United States has gone up and down. Unlike the Dow, however, confessionalism has experienced more breakdowns than breakthroughs, more conflicts than concords, more reverses than revivals. It is now approaching irrelevance. In a recent study, religious scholar D. G. Hart called Protestant—including Lutheran—confessionalism, “the lost soul of American Protestantism.”¹ “Lost” also describes confessionalism’s place on the usual map of American Christianity. National surveys of religion have categories for conservative evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and sometimes Mormons, but nothing corresponding to “confessionalism.” Neither did Richard John Neuhaus—who knew Lutheran confessionalism firsthand—when he wrote to American Protestants:

Switch from Presbyterian to Methodist, or start attending the evangelical “megachurch” in the neighboring exurb, and you will raise few eyebrows. People who move from one denomination to another, or from the denominational to the “nondenominational” (which is one of the biggest denominations), are exercising preferences that are so to speak, all in the religious family. Announce that you’re taking instruction to become a Catholic, however, and it is likely to prompt sharp questions. Not necessarily hostile questions, mind you, but questions of intense curiosity. Why would you want to join “them”? Catholics in America have always been the religious and, to a significant extent, cultural “other.”²

More than this, Lutherans themselves are divided about confessionalism. All Lutherans in the United States acknowledge that the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions are authoritative. But differences become apparent when we see what this commitment entails. Differences are most apparent on “cultural issues” like sex and sexuality (e.g., ordination of women to the pastoral office and homosexuality) and in questions about corporate worship (e.g., what liturgical orders are confessional?).

The confusion on confessionalism, however, runs deeper. This confusion is evident in the Missouri Synod’s *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (the so-called

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Synodical Catechism).³ If anything reflects the depth and seriousness of the church body's confessionalism, it is this elementary text.

So how does it answer, *who is the only true God?* The Synodical Catechism teaches:

The only true God is the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in one divine being (the Holy Trinity).⁴

One might defend this answer as *doctrinally* correct, but it fails in helping inexperienced, often young, learners to read and hear the Scriptures, and to pray, praise, and give thanks. Not only does a passage like John 3:16 become difficult (who is the "God" who so loved the world?) but even more passages like John 17:3, where Jesus himself prays about "the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent," and 1 Corinthians 8:6, where Paul teaches, "But to us there is but one God, the Father . . . and one Lord Jesus Christ." In the same way, this answer confuses rather than helps a child to know what she is doing when she prays: "Dear God . . ." To whom—or to what—is she praying? How should she know?

Turning from God to his Son—*Who is Jesus Christ?*—the Synodical Catechism teaches:

Jesus Christ is "true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary."⁵

This response fails even to answer the question. Instead of identifying Jesus Christ, the response tells of his personal constitution in two natures.

To complicate matters, this takes place at a time when American society features not only varied Christian traditions and sects, but ancient religions like Hinduism, new religions like Wicca, self-named religions like "Sheilism," and "none" at all.⁶ Now Christians have to be concerned not only about the identity of their god but also the "death of God." As much as at any time in the past thousand years, Christians in the West need to be clear about a great deal, including the identity of their God and of Jesus Christ, his Son. It is little wonder that confessionalism has been called "the lost soul of American Protestantism."

The most serious problems with confessionalism are our own. They are not about how Lutherans are misunderstood or misrepresented or ignored. They are about our own understanding of confessionalism and what it entails. Above all, the problems with confessionalism stem from taking the Confessions for granted.

This is neither a recent development nor a new discovery. Hermann Sasse recognized this in his 1951 essay, "Confession (Confessionalism) and Theology in the Missouri Synod."⁷ He praised the Missouri Synod as "one of the very few great Lutheran churches which have the courage [to make] the whole Book of Concord her own."⁸ But he also pointed out that confessionalism was a matter of faith. Therefore, each generation had to ask itself whether it was still Lutheran.

It is not the question concerning the strength of the external organization, the constitution, the growth of the congregation, or the school system. Nor is it the question with respect to the position of the Confession as the basis for the message and work of the church. Rather it is the question concerning the strength of the Lutheran faith in the sense of the genuine deep faith of the heart in the saving Gospel. It is the question whether, and to what extent this strongest confessional church of Lutheranism is a truly confessing church, a church in which the Lutheran Confession is not merely held in honor as the confession of the fathers and therefore in force and untouchable, it is the question whether the Confession is the confession of a living faith of the congregation, and therefore the life-principle of the church. It is the question which Missouri, even as every other church, must ask herself in humility and must answer before the face of God: *Are we still Lutheran?*⁹

Sasse's answer was "No." To show this he cited the case of P. E. Kretzmann, who had left the Missouri Synod over the question of church fellowship. Sasse noted how important and far-reaching this question was, because it "concerns the oneness of the church, and of a practice in conformity with this doctrine. For the essence of the Lutheran church becomes manifest in connection with the question, where the limits of church and church fellowship lie."¹⁰ But how was it handled? Not in terms of CA VII, but only around the exegesis of Romans 16:17ff. The Confessions played no role. What did this mean for the confessionalism of the Missouri Synod? "Here we must note a fact which at first glance seems hardly believable. *The Lutheran Confessions no longer play the role in the life and in the theological thinking of the Missouri Synod, in fact, of all of American Lutheranism by far which they played during the 19th century.*"¹¹

For Sasse, "The most necessary task . . . is this, that we learn again to read Luther and the Confessions."¹² But this counsel presupposed Christendom, a social consensus about God and the Christian Church. Today this consensus is gone. Today our task is larger. We need to think again about what "confessionalism" means and how to make sense of it for our current situation.

For this, I propose that we think of "confessionalism" as understanding our identity and life as Christians in terms of the confession "Jesus is Lord." This idea of confessionalism roots in something simple and basic: hearing and believing the gospel that gives rise to this confession of faith. This idea allows us both to articulate our accepted doctrines and practices in an organic, intuitive way and also to give clear guidance for articulating or testing other positions along the same confessional lines.

What Is "Confessionalism"?

To orient ourselves, let us consider a typical explanation of the Lutheran church coming from the time that Sasse was writing about confessionalism:

The Lutheran Church is a confessional Church. Everybody who knows anything about us is aware that our Church must be classified as a confessional one. What does that mean? It means that in our Church we have

confessions, or standards, or symbolical books, in which we set forth our faith and by which hence we are guided.¹³

Following this, we could define “confessionalism” as *understanding Christian identity and life in terms of these confessional documents*.

The idea of confessionalism, however, should be more secure. This one relies on documents that take us back only to the sixteenth century, not to the first century. They take us back only to Luther, Melancthon, Andreae, and Chemnitz, not to Peter, John, Paul, and the Lord Jesus Christ. These documents are exactly what we need to *describe* Lutheran confessionalism, but not to *define* it. In today’s situation, we need something more secure, something more fully catholic.

Specific *confessional documents* are unquestionably important, but none of them is essential to being Christian. *Confession of faith*, however, is both natural and essential to being Christian. Confession is natural in that it arises as a matter of course. Confessing Jesus arises from encountering him and believing in him, as Peter did (Mt 16:16). Confessing Jesus arises also from encountering those who question Jesus’ presence, authority, word, and work, as Peter also did (Acts 4:8–12). Confession is essential in the way Paul had in mind when he wrote: “If you confess [ἰσχυρολογῆσαι] with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9 ESV). Because confession is so clearly part of the Christian existence, viewing the Christian way of life in terms of confession—which is to say, adopting a confessional perspective—is natural for Christians.

We cannot settle, however, for the purely *formal* definition we would get were we simply to substitute “confession of faith” for “confessional documents.” Such a definition lacks any concrete content, so it could never get us to distinguish a truly confessional understanding of worship or explain a truly confessional position on justification. We need a *particular* Christian confession of faith.

One candidate is the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This follows Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16) and also the testimony of John in his gospel: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” (Jn 20:31). But I suggest the confession “Jesus is Lord.” Either confession will work. “Jesus is Lord,” however, fits several important New Testament formulae (e.g., Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11; 1 Cor 8:6; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 13:14), and also the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessions. The Apostles’ Creed confesses “And in Jesus Christ our Lord,” while the Niceno-Constantinopolitan (or Nicene) Creed confesses, “And in one Lord Jesus Christ.” Similarly both the Small and Large Catechisms teach that Jesus Christ is “Lord” under the Second Article.

And so we will define confessionalism as *Christian identity and life understood in terms of the confession “Jesus is Lord.”* This means that confessionalism answers questions such as “What is a Christian?” “What does it mean to be Christian?” and “Where do we find Christians?” in terms of confessing Jesus is Lord.

“Confessionalism” and the Creeds and Confessions of the Church

This conception of confessionalism roots it in something simple and essential. If someone were to demand the Lutheran Confession in ten words or less, you have seven to spare: “Jesus is Lord.”

Put like this, no one can deny or criticize confessionalism, but put like this, Lutheran confessionalism is merely a particular definition of “Christianity.” This is actually not trivial, because we certainly would want to claim that a specifically Lutheran confessionalism is nothing but “mere Christianity,” to borrow from C. S. Lewis. It is, however, much more fully elaborated than simply “Jesus is Lord.” We should not beg the question by asserting the catholicity of our confession. We should justify the claim, because, in the end, we should want to be ourselves confident and to show others confidently that our confessionalism is nothing other than a right way of being Christian. To do this, we should concern ourselves primarily with showing why and how anyone should embrace the creeds and confessions.

This task calls for explaining the way the confession developed in the creeds and confessions theologically rather than historically. This procedure is not difficult. It amounts to asking how the confession that Jesus is Lord arose in the first place, and asking whether those actions make sense of the creeds and confessions. But this procedure is often overlooked, because we usually and for good reasons trace their development in terms of questions, errors, and controversies. The Nicene Creed is usually associated with the Arian controversy, the Augsburg Confession with abuses and errors of the Roman Church, and the Formula with intra-Lutheran debates. The historical development is necessary for understanding and confessing the faith today, but focus on it means attention especially on the debated topics, not on the faith as a whole. In today’s situation, we need to show not simply how the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds are right about God, but more importantly how they are right about everything. This task calls for explaining their theological development.

The confession that Jesus is Lord arose from the preaching of the gospel itself. This preaching proclaims the coming of Jesus Christ to announce and to establish the reign of God. This understanding derives directly from the synoptic gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, and is reflected in Paul’s letter to the Romans:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with his heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth he confesses is saved. For the Scripture says,

“Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom 10:4–17 ESV).

We can see readily that this explanation works by examining the ecumenical creeds. All of them explicitly confess Jesus as Lord, and all of them relate his return to judge the living and the dead. The Nicene Creed also confesses “there will be no end to his kingdom.” In addition, each assumes the same account of God and creation, and each relates key features of this account (admittedly in varying degrees of completeness). The Apostles’ Creed confesses the Lord Jesus Christ and spells out basic features of the Christian story—creation; Christ’s conception, birth, death, resurrection, and return; and the Spirit and the life of the church—and it identifies the God of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed does the same, and it also spells out some implications of calling Jesus “the Son of God” and also implications about the Holy Spirit. The Athanasian Creed confesses Christ’s suffering and death, resurrection, ascension, return, and final judgment, and it goes into still more detail about the nature and relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity—and about the Incarnation.

All of these features are consistent with and readily arise from the gospel. The gospel proclaims and teaches that God the Creator sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to announce and establish his reign over all things, and to call God’s chosen people to repent and follow him. For this reason he was crucified. But God raised him from the dead and exalted him in the heavens. In the present, Christ continues to be proclaimed and to act in the power of the Holy Spirit through the one holy Church. And on the last day, Christ will return to judge the living and the dead and whose reign will be everlasting. This gospel naturally raises questions about the relationship of the one God, Jesus Christ, his Son, and the Holy Spirit, from which comes the doctrine of the Trinity, and also about Jesus Christ’s personal constitution, from which comes the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The key question for a specifically Lutheran confessionalism is whether the same explanation about confession arising from the gospel that proclaims Jesus as Lord applies also to the Lutheran confessions. Giving answer is more complicated for three reasons: 1) The Book of Concord is not a single coherent text but consists of several diverse documents. 2) Much of it is devoted to controversies and confusions of its own time. 3) The confessions are much more elaborate. But we can justify in principle, if

not in every detail, the account of Lutheran confessionalism proposed here by considering whether we can explain the *doctrinal* claims of the Augsburg Confession in the same way as we explained “Jesus is Lord” and the ecumenical creeds. This is because the Book of Concord itself regards the Augsburg Confession as the Lutheran “Symbol” and the primary Lutheran confession of faith.¹⁴ Moreover, we can simplify matters further by focusing on the first part of the Augsburg Confession, which contains a summary of preaching and teaching.¹⁵

But before starting we should acknowledge that this procedure is appropriate. The Preface to the Book of Concord shows us that the confessors regarded the Reformation as an event in salvation history and the Augsburg Confession as a response to the gospel and the saving word:

In these last days of this transitory world the Almighty God, out of his immeasurable love, grace, and mercy for the human race, has allowed *the light of his holy gospel and his Word that alone grants salvation* to appear and shine forth purely, unalloyed and unadulterated out of the superstitious, papistic darkness for the German nation, our beloved fatherland. As a result, a short confession was assembled out of the divine, apostolic, and prophetic Scripture. In 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg it was presented in both German and Latin to the former Emperor of most praiseworthy memory, Charles V, by our pious and Christian predecessors; it was set forth for all estates of the Empire and was disseminated and has resounded publicly through all Christendom in the whole wide world.¹⁶

Like the ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession confesses “the Lord Christ” and relates key features of the Christian story: God as Creator; the birth, death, resurrection, and return of Christ; and the Holy Spirit, the Church, the means of grace, and the last day. But like the whole Book of Concord, the Augsburg Confession is significantly more detailed than the ecumenical creeds. Even if we restrict ourselves to the doctrinal articles (I–XXI), which work from God (I) and Christ (III) to the last day (XVII), we still find it makes claims about sin, justification, good works, the Church and her life (means of grace, orders, rites), and civil government. To be sure, because of historical circumstances, we should not expect our theological articulation to fit exactly the articulation of the Augsburg Confession. But it should be close in explicit content, and consistent in any case. Moreover, the articulation of different claims should show clear connections between the different articles.

Where do we begin? Obviously, it should be justification (CA IV). The gospel teaches that all authority and judgment (Mt 28:18; Jn 5:19–28), including the authority to forgive sins (Mt 9:2–8; Jn 20:21–23), has been given to Jesus Christ, and that he will return to judge the living and the dead. Authority of this scope makes Jesus “Lord.” Authority of this scope also puts every human creature on notice: their standing before God is no matter of their efforts, merits, or intentions, because their justification before God depends entirely on Jesus Christ. We see this authority play out when Peter proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ on Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41). After recounting who

Jesus was and what he had done, Peter declared to the crowds that God had raised Jesus from the death they had perpetrated and made him Lord and Christ. The news strikes his hearers hard, because they know that when he returns, they will be among the first he will destroy. So they ask how they might be saved. Peter proclaims repentance and forgiveness through baptism in Jesus's name. Thousands believe the message and are baptized. This, of course, was only the beginning. The same message about Christ crucified and raised was proclaimed and continues to be proclaimed, and on that account repentance for the forgiveness of sins has been proclaimed in his name to all nations (Lk 24:47). And through this "it [comes] to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21 ESV, quoting Joel 2:32). And we learn from this that if we ask about how one is justified, that it must be solely by grace. If Jesus is Lord and all authority is his, then one's righteousness depends entirely on him.

From this point, everything else unfolds quickly and easily. The bare truth about justification by grace comforts no one, because it renders one completely passive. The crowds on Pentecost knew they were passive—they had nowhere to run and no excuses to offer—and so they feared the wrath of the Lord and sought to be saved. More generally, the idea that one is completely passive in justification is in itself not gracious, as the concept of election clearly illustrates. It is so difficult that it compels people to explain it away (e.g., synergism) or to deny it altogether. Their rejection, however, reveals their innate sinfulness, that is, their innate lack of fear and trust in God—which justifies the Confession's positions on sin as a condition and on the will as captive without God (CA II, XVIII). Neither bad theology nor unbelief can reconcile sinners to God. Only the preaching of grace in the Word and by the administration of sacraments can do this, because they are means by which God gives faith by the Holy Spirit (CA V). They give faith, however, not by infusion but by being words and signs of God's gracious favor that Jesus Christ by his authority instituted and commanded (CA IX, X, XI, XII). These words and signs of grace, like all promises, awaken and strengthen faith (CA XIII). How are these words spoken and these signs made? By those specially called to speak and act on behalf of the Lord (CA XIV). What are the results? From each of the justified come good works (CA VI, XX). Works cannot justify, but the faith that does justify also produces good deeds. Out of all the justified comes the church, which is the assembly of all who believe in Jesus Christ. Therefore the Church's unity does not depend on humanly devised traditions or rites but simply on the pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments (CA VII, VIII, XV). And although they wait for Christ's return in glory and in the hope of the resurrection of the dead, believers may participate in the civil government, which God has ordained for the present evil age (CA XVI).

Once again, I have not accounted for every feature or accent of the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession. This is because they were composed with particular questions and concerns in mind. They were not developed with our purpose in mind. But in fact we have accounted for nearly everything, and nothing in these articles has been contradicted or made irrelevant. This approach has shown us how to see the Augsburg Confession as an articulation of the confession "Jesus is Lord," and in an intuitive way that shows a unity in the articles of faith.

How Does Confession Work?

The account of confessionalism I am proposing makes sense of the Creeds and Confessions of the church as they answer such questions as “What is a Christian?” “What does it mean to be Christian?” and “Where do we find Christians?” in terms of the confession “Jesus is Lord.” The Creeds and Confessions, however, do more than identify Christians and summarize what they believe and do. They also *regulate* their faith and life. They have a normative function. This normative function bears two often-controversial topics: the confessional principle and confessional subscription. The confessional principle—the idea that churches have the right to demand ministers to pledge themselves and conform their ministries to the confessional documents—depends on the confessions *having* normative authority.¹⁷ The question of confessional subscription is a closely related question: it asks about the *extent* to which the confessions have normative authority.¹⁸ These topics make it important that we explain how confessions are normative.

When one confesses, one declares a commitment. The act of confession is like “stepping forward” or “standing up and being counted.” You step forward for a person, and by that act you commit yourself to the person. If he goes down, you go down. You stand up for a person, and by that act you commit yourself to that person. If she goes on, you go on. Similarly, you confess your faith in someone, and by that act you commit yourself to believing in him. If he comes through, you come through.

It is striking that simply by the act of confession—by saying certain words—you do something. Those who utter the sentence: “I confess that Jesus is Lord” have confessed. Those people have by their confession committed themselves to Jesus Christ. Confessors commit themselves to Jesus Christ, putting themselves under his disposal, and positioning themselves in a certain way against everybody else. Christ had called for precisely this when he said, “Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father” (Mt 10:32), just as Paul also had in mind when he said, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord . . .” (Rom 10:9). To borrow from the Small Catechism on Jesus the Lord, one confesses “that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”¹⁹ Christians today and in every age do so by the very act of confession.

But how can mere words do this? Confession is an example of what philosopher J. L. Austin calls a “performative.”²⁰ According to Austin, performatives “all will have, as it happens, humdrum verbs in the first person singular present indicative active. Utterances can be found, satisfying these conditions, yet such that: A. they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate [sic] anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something.”²¹

Some examples of what Austin called “explicit” performative sentences include:²² I promise to take out the trash. I bet five dollars that “Goofy” will win the race. I order you to leave the room.

What happens when people utter these sentences? They are promising to take out the trash; they are betting five dollars on a race; they are ordering someone to leave.

They are not, by contrast, describing a promise, reporting a bet, or recounting an order. They are doing those things. As Austin puts it, “There is something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering*.”²³

Confession works in the same way. When people utter the sentence, “I confess that Jesus is Lord,” they are confessing. They are not stating a fact about Jesus. They are enacting a commitment by speaking. By making the confession, you bind yourself to what you confess. This is how confession has normative force.

But what about confessional documents? It is one thing to say that uttering “I confess that Jesus is Lord” and other sentences of first person singular present indicative active are confessions and therefore binding and normative. It is quite another to maintain the same force on entire documents, especially when they are not composed entirely or even mostly in such sentences. Can we account for this?

We can in two ways. First, we should know that performatives need not be in the first person singular present indicative active. For instance, performative sentences can use plural verbs: *We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor*. They also can be rendered in the passive voice: *Passengers are hereby advised that all flights to Phoenix have been cancelled*. And a performative can be constructed by adding a separate operative clause or sentence: *I’ll come to see you next week, and that’s a promise*.²⁴

This last construction is most relevant for us, because it shows how entire documents can be made confessions in the strict sense being proposed. We see precisely this construction in the final words of the preface of the Augsburg Confession: As we herewith make public witness and appeal. This is our confession and that of our people, article by article, as follows.²⁵ This is what we hereby also publicly declare.²⁶

Second, as Austin points out, there is another common way to form a performative: by *signing*, that is, by *subscription*. To use one of Austin’s own examples, the performative “I, John Jones, warn you that the bull is dangerous” could be conveyed also by this notice: This bull is dangerous. (Signed) John Jones.²⁷

The Book of Concord does precisely this, but in much greater detail, as befits an official document:

In conclusion, to repeat once again for the last time, we are not minded to manufacture anything new through this work of concord nor to depart in either substance or expression from the divine truth . . . On the contrary, by the grace of the Holy Spirit we intend to persist and remain unanimously in this truth and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it . . . In testimony whereof we have with united hearts subscribed [*unterschrieben*; *subscripsimus*] our names hereto and ordered our privy seals impressed thereon.²⁸

There remain important questions about *how* the creeds and confessions are regulative. But those will have to wait.²⁹ At this point let’s return to the questions about the confessional principle and confessional subscription.

When Charles Krauth dealt with the confessional principle, his question was whether a church could insist on it. He showed why it could. But our question is dif-

ferent: *Should* confessional churches insist on it? We know that they can, but should they? The answer now should be clear: yes, they should. Just as the confession that Jesus is Lord is necessary, and that this confession is binding, so also the creeds and confessions of the church, because they elaborate just this confession, also are necessary and binding. From this the answer about confessional subscription also obtains. *Should* churches insist on an unconditional subscription? Yes, because the creeds and confessions of the church are nothing more and nothing less than ways of confessing that Jesus is Lord.

These views may strike some as more restrictive than the confessional principle and confessional subscription are usually thought of, because they make these questions matters of confession itself rather than practical concern. Such objections are mistaken: matters of confession are matters of practical concern. (The principle is not commutative: matters of practical concern are not necessarily matters of confession.) This proposal does recast the *argument* and restates the *position*, but these issues have always been practical *because* they are confessional. Those who object to these views are objecting to confessing Jesus as Lord, and this confession has practical implications. From the congregations' standpoint, which would want a pastor who doesn't confess Jesus as they do? Similarly, from the pastors' standpoint, who would want to serve a congregation that doesn't confess Jesus as they do?

But for this reason, this approach also may be less liable to using the confessional principle in a restrictive way or confessional subscription legalistically. It asks everyone to track everything back to the basic confession and from there to the gospel. It should forestall a lot of question begging (although promises to that effect are regularly broken!).

What Does It Mean To Be Confessional?

I have proposed that we consider "confessionalism" as understanding our identity and life as Christians in terms of the confession "Jesus is Lord." This proposal roots confessionalism primarily in hearing and believing the gospel that gives rise to this basic Christian confession. Its justification is "theological" in the sense that it makes sense of the creeds and confessions as elaborations of this confession, but it might also be called "evangelical" or "gospel-centered" because I propose that this message, which gives rise to people confessing Jesus as Lord, is also the message that gave rise and is embodied in creeds and confessions. I traced out an admittedly limited justification along these lines with the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession, not only because this is the prime Lutheran confession of faith, but also because the Book of Concord itself presented the Augsburg Confession as a response to God letting the light of the gospel and the saving word appear and shine on them. And I dealt with the concept of confession itself to make sense of the normative character of the creeds and confessions.

But the topic of confessionalism has many ramifications. Along the way I jumped over or stepped around things, like different construals of the current situations, alternative conceptions of confessionalism, and other basic ways to confess our faith. In

front of us there is still much to be seen, discussed, and tried. As mentioned already, we should see *how* the confessions are regulative.

Confessionalism Should Be “Caught,” Not Just “Taught”

Recall this explanation of the Lutheran church:

The Lutheran Church is a confessional Church. Everybody who knows anything about us is aware that our Church must be classified as a confessional one. What does that mean? It means that in our Church we have confessions, or standards, or symbolical books, in which we set forth our faith and by which hence we are guided.³⁰

How would “everybody who knows anything” be aware of this? Not merely because we say so, but because it is so plainly in sight. This kind of knowledge is, as the saying goes, “caught” rather than “taught.”

We should hope that “everybody who knows anything about us” today would know that our churches are “confessional.” But it is more important that they see what confessionalism is supposed to entail than whether the word comes to mind.

In his time Sasse urged the reading of Luther and the Confessions. Certainly I concur, but in post-Christendom America, we need to do more:

- Diligently preach the gospel in its fullness, not only some of it.
- Faithfully administer the sacraments, which means paying close practical attention to evangelism and baptism, catechesis and the Lord’s Supper, pastoral care and absolution.
- Fully explore the gospel’s implications for life, witness, and theological reflection.
- Embody our confession of faith, which means asking “What does the church look like that believes X?”

Confessionalism Is Apocalyptic

My proposal for confessionalism is like every other legitimate candidate in that it purports to be rooted in the gospel that proclaims Jesus as the one whom God called his Son and appointed to rule over all things. Therefore, along with every other proposal, it must be said that confessionalism is apocalyptic, because the gospel is apocalyptic: it announces that the world as we know it is coming to an end and no one can escape. The confessional church preaches repentance, and she stakes everything on God’s grace, because it is God who is coming.

Hermeneutics

In “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions,” Charles Arand argues, “the debate over the interpretation of the confessions today is, in fact, a debate over which texts or contexts should be used in order to interpret the confessions.”³¹ But these debates are interminable, because different parties work with different premises.³² So it makes no sense to wait out the conversation.

My own proposal ignores all such debates. But waiting it out does not mean sitting it out. Obviously this confessional proposal has an implied but undeveloped hermeneutical proposal, and not only about the creeds and confessions, but also the Scriptures. Following Arand, this hermeneutical proposal could be called “canonical” because it seeks to interpret the confessions in light of the confession “Jesus is Lord” and the gospel that gives rise to the confession. Perhaps this hermeneutic, once more fully developed, will show that this proposal is deeply flawed, but in any case, any evaluation of this proposal and any other proposal for confessionalism has to take up this work and enter the debate over interpretation.

Appropriating the Lutheran Confessions for Our Time

In concluding we recall Sasse once more. He said that “a truly confessing church” is one “in which the Lutheran Confession is not merely held in honor as the confession of the fathers and therefore in force and untouchable.”³³ Confessionalism means making the confessions one’s own. Already I suggested embodying the confessions—asking what it looks like to believe this article or that. “What does the church look like that believes in the doctrine of justification of grace through faith?”

Luther suggested how to do this with his explanations to the articles of the Creed. Following Luther’s lead we could account for and explain the confessional articles for our own time. There is an Apology of the Augsburg Confession, and that should remain in force. But there is no reason why there shouldn’t be a twenty-first-century Apology. This would not be a revision of the canonical Apology (nor would it ignore it), but a contemporary explanation for the current situation. This would have two benefits. First, it would be a way to appropriate the confessions as confessions—not merely as doctrinal standards or theological references. This could open a fresh appreciation for aspects of our confession, and at any rate would help us make them our own. Second, it would be constructive rather than defensive, proactive rather than reactive. Borrowing from Hart, confessionalism is also the “losing soul of American Protestantism,” too often giving up on the future, even the present, and digging in with fixed language and forms and practices from the past. Making the confessions our own by seeking to explain and defend them for our time and place would help us to look forward.

What might this look like? It might begin like this:

Article IV: Justification

The fourth article considered only the justification of the sinner. “[I]t is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith.”³⁴

Undoubtedly sin and forgiveness are essential features of the Christian’s life and central concerns for the Christian Church. But the topic of “justification” is much broader. It is at least as broad as human

experience. Everyone lives by judging and under judgment. Everyone wants to do right and have things done right and be done right by. Moreover, no one needs to be taught about justification. Every small child puts everything under judgment and comes to know that she is under judgment.

Since God is the creator, who made all things and governs all activity, he also subjects all things to his judgment. And for this reason, the Christian doctrine of justification rightly—is justified—in taking this into account. Moreover, in the present time, when God himself is subject to judgment and, so to speak, put to death, there may be much value in doing this. We should not neglect the justification of the sinner, but we are justified in putting it into its larger context, just as we should ask about what we are doing in this very article that justifies itself.

Endnotes

- ¹ D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, foreword by R. Laurence Moore (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).
- ² Richard John Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 4.
- ³ *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008).
- ⁴ Questions 19 and 94.
- ⁵ Question 118. I gladly acknowledge that the entire "Explanation" is undergoing a thorough review and revision.
- ⁶ "Sheilaism" comes from Robert N. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 235.
- ⁷ Hermann Sasse, "Confession (Confessionalism) and Theology In the Missouri Synod (1951)" in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kloha and Ronald R. Feuerhahn, Concordia Seminary Monograph Series, no. 2. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1995).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 202. Emphasis original.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 205. Emphasis original. Sasse also observed: "Even in the churches of the Synodical Conference the confessions are now the undebatable or no longer debatable presuppositions of the church rather than the expression of the great consensus of faith." (205).
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 220.
- ¹³ W[illiam] Arndt, "The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (1949): 674.
- ¹⁴ See "Preface to the Book of Concord," 3, 16. See also FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 4 and FC SD, Rule and Norm, 5. Note also that the Formula refers to Lutheran churches as "churches of the Augsburg Confession" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 2). English references to the creeds and Lutheran Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). German and Latin references are taken from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 12th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), cited as BSLK.
- ¹⁵ CA, "Conclusion of Part One," 1.
- ¹⁶ "Preface to the Book of Concord," 2. Emphasis added. This key expression, "the light of his holy gospel and his Word that alone grants salvation," is rendered in German as "das Licht seines heiligen Evangelii und alleinseligmachenden Worts" and in the Latin as "lucem evangelii et verbi sui (per quod solum veram salute accipimus)." BSLK 3. Cf. Irene Dingel, "The Preface of The Book of Concord as a Reflection of Sixteenth-Century Confessional Development," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 383–384.
- ¹⁷ On the confessional principle, see Charles Krauth, "The Confessional Principle of the Conservative Reformation," in *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology: As Represented in the Augsburg Confession* and in the

History and Literature of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 162–200, reprint ed. with introduction by Lawrence R. Rast Jr. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007).

¹⁸ On confessional subscription, see C. F. W. Walther, “Why Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947): 241–252.

¹⁹ SC, “Creed,” 4.

²⁰ See especially J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, second ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). See also Austin, “Performative Utterances,” in *Philosophical Papers*, 220–239 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). For a persuasive account of how performatives work, see John R. Searle, “How Performatives Work,” in *Consciousness and Language*, 156–179 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²¹ Austin, *How to Do Things*, 5.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 60.

²⁴ These examples are drawn from Searle, “How Performatives Work,” 159 (although he alludes to the Declaration of Independence).

²⁵ CA, Preface [German], 24. “. . . davon wir hiemit öffentlich bezeugen und protestieren. Und sind das unser und der Unsern Benkenntnis, wie unterschiedlich von Artikeln zu Artikeln hernach folgt” (BSLK 49).

²⁶ CA, Preface [Latin], 24. “. . . de quo hic etiam publice protestamur” (BSLK 49).

²⁷ Austin, *How to Do Things*, 62.

²⁸ “Preface to the Book of Concord,” 23, 25. See also BSLK 15.

²⁹ For an introduction to some relevant questions and useful insights, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984); William A. Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); and Robert L. Fossett, *Upon this Rock: The Nature of Doctrine from Antifoundationalism Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

³⁰ Arndt, “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” 674.

³¹ Charles P. Arand, “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Journal* 28 (2002): 10.

³² The echo of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) is intentional. His historicist approach to accounting for modern moral discourse may have some promise for accounting for modern confessionalism.

³³ Sasse, “Confession,” 202.

³⁴ CA IV.1.