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THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS IN
TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN LUTHERANISM

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology,
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Theology

by

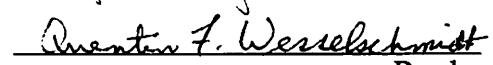
Charles Paul Arand

May 1989

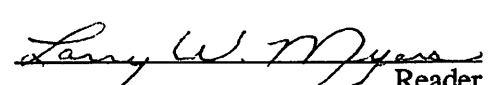
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The *Book of Concord* stands as the one identifiable banner under which Lutherans throughout the world and down through the ages have rallied. Nowhere has this been more true than in America. No longer needing legal recognition from the state, Lutherans have from the very beginning of their arrival in America turned to their confessional writings in order to define their identity, to organize, and to unite themselves. Yet in two centuries Lutherans have not united as one church and in the latter decades of the twentieth century are traveling along diverging paths. While Lutherans share a common confessional heritage, they have not and do not share common views about what loyalty to their symbolical writings means. Since confessional fidelity depends upon the character of the Confessions themselves, one may trace diverging definitions of confessional subscription to differing, even opposing attitudes in the way in which Lutherans perceive and understand the character of their confessional writings.

The Meaning and Nature of Confessions

The Lutheran Confessions possess both an historical and a biblical character. These horizontal and vertical dimensions highlight a tension for Lutherans between the pole of contemporaneity and the pole of continuity.¹ If the church stresses the historical character of the *Book of Concord* to the exclusion of its biblical character, it risks losing the ground and abiding validity of its message, thereby subjecting itself to the theological

¹Carl Braaten, "The Confessional Principle," in *Christian Dogmatics* 2 vols., eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1:51.

winds and whims of the day. If the church ignores the historical character of the Confessions in preference for its dogmatic content, it risks docetizing its message and rendering it irrelevant to the needs of its members. So the historical and biblical character of the Confessions cannot be separated from one another or stressed to the exclusion of each other. Yet one must begin somewhere. The specific point of departure from which Lutherans choose to approach their symbolical writings — either their horizontal or vertical dimension — holds important implications for whether they will regard their confessions above all else as man-made documents or God-given doctrine.

The historical character of the Confessions reminds the church that they are humanly devised documents. Special situations and occasions in the life of the church called forth their formulation; they address the questions and issues of their age. These historical circumstances condition the external form of the Confessions in a number of ways. The confessors frame their answers in the ecclesiastical and philosophical language of the day. They borrow illustrations from the scientific world as they know it. They use the historical methodology as it then existed. When approached from this perspective, the Confessions speak the words of men. To the extent that the limitations of their particular age conditioned these men, the documents produced by them will reveal the imperfections of their time.

Approaching the Confessions from the standpoint of their historical character raises the issue of contemporaneity. In the four hundred years since their formulation many theological, political, and scientific changes have taken place. This raises the question about the extent to which the historical form of the Confessions conditions and even relativizes their content. Does it limit and restrict the subject matter of the Confessions? In the twentieth century people ask different questions and speak a different language. Can the Confessions speak across the centuries to the needs and concerns of these people? The historical character of the Confessions highlights the changes which have taken place and

raises the concern of whether or not the Confessions can ensure the continuity of the church's message if it cannot provide a pattern for its proclamation.²

The biblical character of the Confessions reminds the church that they set forth God-given doctrines. The historical settings which called them forth involved misinterpretations of Scripture. The Confessions correct those misunderstandings of Scripture by restating the truths of God's Word in a way that avoids ambiguity and confusion. As explications of Scriptural doctrine the Confessions reflect the views of their formulators regarding the clarity and authority of the Scriptures. This biblical character brings to the fore the vertical dimension of the Confessions. To the extent that the Confessions express the truths of Scripture, they claim value and validity for all time. When approached from this perspective, the church stresses the Confessions as statements which set forth the doctrine given by God to the church; they speak the thoughts and words not of man, but of God.

Approaching the Confessions from the perspective of their biblical character highlights the continuity which the Confessions provide for the church's message. To the extent that they accurately convey Scripture, God's words become incarnate in human words. The Scriptures supply with its own meaning the historically conditioned vocabulary and expressions of the Confessions. This biblical content then elevates the vocabulary and terminology in which it is expressed above the relativities of time. It gives the very expressions of the Confessions a lasting value. Its form becomes a pattern for later expressions of God's Word. But as the historical character of the Confessions may undermine the continuity they provide the church, the biblical character may undermine the relevance and pertinence of the church's message. This raises the possibility that through the

²For a contemporary theology of the confessions which draws a sharp distinction between the "confession" within the "confessions," identifying the former with the message of the church and ascribes to the latter a primarily political and legal significance, see Friedrich Mildenberger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

changes of history, future generations may or may not understand those words and so the problem of contemporaneity.

Role of Confessional Subscription

The way in which Lutherans perceive the nature and meaning of their confessional documents conditions the role which they assign the Confessions within the church. In an important way, confessional subscription reveals one's view of the church and its unity. The Confessions and the doctrine of the church are inseparably connected. Not only was the Augsburg Confession the first creed in Christendom to set forth a doctrine of the church, but the formulation of the *Augustana* resulted from the practical application of the doctrine of the church. So the place which one assigns the Confessions within the church will suggest how one defines the identity and mission of the church. Attitudes toward subscription will reveal whether one regards the church as a visible or a hidden entity whose unity is to be sought in common documents or doctrine.

Should Lutherans stress the historical character of their confessional writings and so their outward form as human documents, one may expect that they would then place less stress on the normative function of the Confessions within the life of the church and with specific reference to the preaching and teaching of the church. Instead, they would stress the Confessions as human witnesses and testimonies to the truth which serve to point the preacher in the general direction that one should go. Such a stance would allow pastors and teachers greater latitude in the specifics of their theology. Similarly, with respect to the church *ad extra*, Lutherans would concentrate efforts on obtaining a formal agreement on doctrinal statements and documents. But the agreement on doctrine would be largely horizontal, stressing the doctrine which one holds in common with others now and with others in previous ages whether or not it expresses the pure doctrine of Scripture.

By contrast, should Lutherans stress the biblical character of their confessional

writings, one would then expect a greater concern that the church proclaim to its members only the doctrine given by God. So the Confessions would function primarily as “norms and forms” of the church’s message and serve to safeguard it against corruption or distortion. One would also expect a greater emphasis on doctrinal discipline of those who willingly choose to depart from that proclamation. With respect to the unity of the church, Lutherans who approach the Confessions from their biblical character would not stress the need to obtain simply an agreement in doctrine, but to arrive at an agreement on the *pure* doctrine of Scripture. Such a position would further lead the church to strive not for a formal acceptance, but for a practical reception of the doctrines set forth in the *Book of Concord*. In other words, the church must preach and teach that doctrine to those sitting in the pews on Sunday.

It is evident then that, if Lutherans approach their common confessional heritage from two different starting points, that is from two diametrically opposite views of the nature of confessions, they will arrive at two diverging views on the meaning of subscription and confessional loyalty. For this reason, the confessional attitudes of Lutherans and the starting points from which they approach the symbolical writings provide a most useful touchstone for understanding how Lutherans have expounded Scripture and have proclaimed the Gospel to the needs of their day. It also provides a convenient point of reference from which to understand how Lutherans have structured their lives with each other and with other Christian communities.

These diverging attitudes toward the nature and meaning of the Confessions have existed from the very beginnings of the nineteenth century confessional revival as Lutherans struggled over the extent of confessional subscription. The differences have continued and grown more pronounced in the twentieth century as Lutherans grappled with the very necessity and meaning of subscription.

Confessional Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century

In 1792 the Pennsylvania ministerium quietly dropped from its constitution all references to the Lutheran Confessions. By 1918, with the formation of the United Lutheran Church in America, nearly all Lutherans in America had accepted the entire body of confessional writings in the *Book of Concord*. During the century and a quarter between those dates Lutherans vigorously debated which documents and which doctrines are included in a confessional subscription. Four dominant attitudes emerged in which one can discern two diverging points of departure. Overall Lutherans moved toward a greater appreciation of the biblical character of the Confessions, but a pervasive emphasis on their historical character and the need to adapt to the changing circumstances of the American environment prevented many from wholeheartedly embracing the *Book of Concord*. This helps to explain why, despite the tendency of Lutherans to incorporate in their constitutions a reference to all the symbolical writings, many stopped at different points on the road toward achieving confessional unity.

Ecumenical Confessionalism

As Samuel S. Schmucker surveyed the American landscape in the exuberant years following its independence, he enthusiastically embraced the principles espoused by the young nation and applied them to the challenges confronting the church in its new homeland. While the church with which he identified was Lutheran, it was also American. On the basis of the American principles of freedom of religion, the separation of church and state, and the right of private judgement, Schmucker argued, "God deals with every man as an individual moral agent, possessing certain unalienable rights, and owing certain unalienable duties."³ On this basis, people have a moral right to reject the symbols if they

³Samuel Simon Schmucker, "The Doctrinal Basis and Ecclesiastical Position of the American Lutheran Church," *The American Lutheran Church, Historically, Doctrinally*,

desire. In America, “liberty of conscience is our birthright.”⁴

At the same time, Schmucker chose not to reject his Lutheran heritage entirely. He preferred to Americanize it and Protestantize it. He believed that it was no longer necessary to draw hard and fast lines of distinction between the various Christian traditions as churches no longer had to win legal recognition from the government. Given that and the vast unchurched population of America, churches needed to present a united front to concentrate their energies into mission efforts. So Schmucker stressed those doctrines which, with few variations, “are held in common by all the so-called orthodox churches.”⁵ His colleague, Samuel Sprecher, likewise argued that Lutheranism should not spend “all its energies upon the peculiarities which distinguish the Lutheran Church as an organism from others.”⁶ Instead it should “waive or subordinate all that which has separated the Lutheran Church from the reformed Churches without touching the great centre of her life.”⁷

These concerns led the General Synod to reject all the Confessions in the *Book of Concord* except the Augsburg Confession. One of the last vocal proponents argued that “the Augsburg Confession has become, and it alone is fitted to be, the one sole identifying Lutheran symbol. It made, marks and defines the Lutheran Church as such.”⁸ The *and Practically Delineated in Several Occasional Discourses* (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, Ranstead Place, 1852), 158.

⁴Samuel Simon Schmucker, “The Vocation of the American Lutheran Church; Now First Published,” *The American Lutheran Church, Historically, Doctrinally, and Practically Delineated in Several Occasional Discourses* (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, Ranstead Place, 1852), 256.

⁵Samuel Simon Schmucker, “Portraiture of Lutheranism,” *The American Lutheran Church, Historically, Doctrinally, and Practically Delineated in Several Occasional Discourses* (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, Ranstead Place, 1852), 51, 52.

⁶Samuel Sprecher, *The Groundwork of a System of Evangelical Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1879), 468.

⁷*Ibid.*, 470.

⁸J. W. Richard, “Melancthon and the Augsburg Confession,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 28 (July 1898): 378, 379.

remaining confessional writings he regarded as needlessly expanding the entire doctrinal *corpus* of Lutheranism, the result of which was only discord and disunity. Hence the Augsburg Confession stands for Lutheran catholicity; other Confessions having a Lutheran name stand for Lutheran particularity and remain the prime cause of division and strife in parts of the Lutheran Church.⁹

Schmucker argued that the more detailed the creed or confession, the more disruptive to the unity of the church it became because it elevated non-fundamental truths to the level of fundamental teachings. The “*proton pseudos*, the radical error, of the ultra-Lutherans on this point, is this, that they lose sight of the difference between generic and specific truths.”¹⁰ The more general the truth, the more agreement one finds. The more specifically the truths are stated and the more the minor relations are expounded, the more disagreement and disunity are brought about. Consistent with this attitude Schmucker believed that immense evils and endless dissensions have resulted from “the rigid requisition of extensive and detailed creeds.”¹¹ If the early Protestants had selected the few fundamental doctrines necessary for the Christian faith, Schmucker felt that they would have been spared many dissensions later in history.

Restricting the Lutheran Confessions to the *Augustana* was not enough. Even here, Schmucker felt compelled to further limit the extent to which the *Augustana* defined Lutheranism, first to its twenty-one “doctrinal” articles and of those, to its fundamental ones. Schmucker’s attitude toward the Confessions suggests several important implications regarding the clarity, unity, and authority of Scripture. He argued that the “grand reason” Christians have more difficulty in grasping and agreeing on the minor relations and

⁹ Ibid., 329.

¹⁰Schmucker, “Doctrinal Basis of the American Lutheran Church,” 179.

¹¹Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Elements of Popular Theology* (Andover, MA: Gold & Newman, 1834), 50. Schmucker, “Portraiture of Lutheranism,” 68.

implications of doctrine than the cardinal truths of Christianity is “that these minor circumstances and relations are less clearly revealed in Scripture, and in some instances, are mere human inferences from what is revealed. . .”¹² These confessional attitudes also conditioned the way in which the General Synod structured itself ecclesiastically and pursued closer relations with other church bodies.

Schmucker recognized that there were times when confessions were needed within the church: “to be without any other symbol than the Bible, was manifestly a defect.”¹³ A written creed seemed necessary to the purity of the church. Consistent with his views of the Confessions, Schmucker advocated the use of shorter doctrinal creeds as tests for ministerial candidates and ecclesiastical communion.¹⁴ He took pride in the practice of the General Synod that in it chose not to bind her ministers to the *details* of any human creed. It held that a general subscription sufficed. “The bible and the belief that the *fundamental doctrines* [*sic*] of the bible are taught in a manner substantially correct in the Augsburg Confession is all that is required.”¹⁵

Schmucker’s approach to Lutheran unity likewise reflected his confessional attitudes. His view that Lutheran identity is to be found only in the fundamentals of the Confessions, those held in common among all Protestants, found its logical culmination in the Definite Synodical Platform, a document through which Schmucker tried to “challenge and check the growing confessionalism that was manifesting itself around and within the General Synod.”¹⁶ With it, he “proposed, not abandonment, but revision of the

¹²Schmucker, “Portraiture of Lutheranism,” 68.

¹³Schmucker, “Vocation of the American Lutheran Church,” 268.

¹⁴Schmucker, “Portraiture of Lutheranism,” 68.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Edward C. Fredrich, “The Formula of Concord in the History of American Lutheranism,” in *No Other Gospel: Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary*

Confessions.”¹⁷ In his own revision, “An American Recension of the Augsburg Confession,” Schmucker “protestantized” the *Augustana* by removing those doctrines which he believed contained elements of Roman Catholicism.¹⁸ One of the ironies of the Platform is that it “attempted to replace the inclusive basis of the General Synod with an exclusive one.”¹⁹

With regard to the General Synod and its leaders, confessional attitudes provide an appropriate and useful perspective from which to understand Schmucker’s theology and the direction in which he tried to lead the Lutheran church of his day. Upon closer inspection, one observes that only by approaching the Confessions from their historical character, as documents which belonged to the Old World, could Schmucker suggest in the New World not only a relativizing of the Lutheran Confessions, but a modification of them.

Didactical Confessionalism

Early in their ministries Charles Porterfield Krauth and Henry Eyster Jacobs grew disenchanted and discouraged with the revivalistic techniques and methods for reinvigorating the life of the church that came out of the Second Great Revival — methods that had been adopted by the General Synod. They sought a new orientation by returning to the history of the Lutheran Reformation. Their study of the sixteenth and seventeenth century *of the Formula of Concord, 1580-1980*, ed. Arnold J. Koelpin (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), 110.

¹⁷Theodore G. Tappert, “The Symbols of the Church,” in *What Lutherans Are Thinking: A Symposium on Lutheran Faith and Life*, ed. E. C. Fendt (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Publishing House, 1947), 347. Schmucker, *Elements of Popular Theology*, 247, 204, 168, 169, 67.

¹⁸Among these he included: 1. Ceremonies of the mass; 2. Denial of the obligation of the Sabbath; 3. Private confession and absolution; 4. Baptismal regeneration; 5. Real Presence of the body and blood of Christ. Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44.

¹⁹John H. Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity? A History of Efforts to Unite the Lutherans in America* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1975), 29.

Lutheran theologians led them to embrace the Confessions of their church as the means for reviving the life of the church. They faced, however, a Herculean task to reverse the tide of indifferentism and unionism prevalent in the church of their day. This task was compounded by the scarcity of Lutheran literature available to the English speaking public. Not only were the majority of laity unfamiliar with the teachings of their church, but many pastors had had little contact with their Lutheran heritage.

To assist those who were unfamiliar and unaccustomed to creeds and their role within the church, the men of the General Council addressed a number of preliminary questions on the necessity, nature, and role of confessions and formulated what is commonly called “the confessional principle.” Krauth, the first to give expression to this principle, stressed that confessions gave external voice to faith's apprehension of Scripture. They do not supplant nor supplement Scripture, but find their source in the Scriptures for, as he wrote, “The object of a Creed is not to find out what God teaches (we go to the Bible for that), but to show what we believe.”²⁰ He and his colleagues stressed that the point of departure for approaching the Confessions must be the personal reception of the faith set forth in the Confessions (*fides qua*). Once that was achieved, the clergy and laity of the church could embrace the Confessions of faith (*fides quae*) as their own. This approach became the guiding and organizing motif for their approach to the interpretation and application of the Lutheran Confessions to the faith and life of the church.

As might be expected, Krauth, Jacobs, and especially Theodore Emanuel Schmauk, argued that the Confessions functioned within the church primarily as the medium of instruction of the Lutheran faith from one generation to another. Jacobs believed that the

²⁰Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology: As Represented in the Augsburg Confession, and in the History and Literature of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1871), 184.

Lutheran Confessions could only be fully appreciated to the extent that one passed through conflicts similar to those who had formulated them:

As we read in them the doubts and difficulties that have had an existence in our own inner life, and recognize the solutions there presented, as those also which God's Spirit in his Word has given us, the Confessions become as dear to us as our own Christian experience, and we can no more disown them, or fail to acknowledge and defend them, than we can deny our Christian life, and all upon which that life depends.²¹

This led Jacobs to highlight the need to share the faith of the Confessions before sharing the confession of the faith: the faith was primary; the confession, secondary.²² Similarly, Schmauk contended that a confession's primary purpose was to distinguish in order to teach, "and to teach in order to bring about a united avowal."²³ A confession, he wrote, is always the "principle of the Gospel, namely Testimony, and the object of Testimony is neither Enforcement nor Evasion, but is Teaching and Conviction."²⁴ In *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church* Schmucker wrote, "the chief value of a Church Confession is education. . . its purpose is to teach the Church."²⁵

Having embraced the faith of the entire *Book of Concord*, Krauth felt compelled to break with the General Synod, which then led to the formation of the General Council in 1867. Krauth incorporated his understanding of the purpose and role of confessions into the *Principles of Faith and Polity*, the foundational document of the General Council. In it

²¹Henry Eyster Jacobs, "The Confessional Principle and the Confessions," *Lutheran Quarterly* 11 (January 1881): 14-42.

²²Henry Eyster Jacobs, "The Confessional Principle [Review of Schmauk's work]," *The Lutheran* (20 July 1911): 677, 775.

²³Theodore Emanuel Schmauk, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as Embodying the Evangelical Confession of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 71.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 71, lxxxiii.

²⁵Schmauk, *Confessional Principle*, 21, 55, 76.

Krauth wrote, “the Unity of the Church is witnessed to, and made manifest in, the solemn, public and official Confessions which are set forth. . .”²⁶ Lutherans, Krauth asserted, accept the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession without equivocation or mental reservation and make, mark, and identify that Church, which is the Lutheran church. Furthermore, the General Council insisted that Lutherans must understand the Confessions in the same sense and meaning. Thereby they formulated one of the firmest constitutional statements in American Lutheranism.

At the same time, however, the General Council did not insist as a prerequisite that a church body’s practice must be consistent with its profession in order to unite with the Council. They regarded a constitutional statement acknowledging all the symbolical writings of the *Book of Concord* as sufficient. On the surface this raises a number of questions regarding the inconsistency in the General Council between its strongly confessional position and its apparent relaxed attitude toward consistent practice. But Krauth recognized and earnestly desired to achieve among the congregations of the General Council a practice consistent with their profession.

When we come to the real question—the heart of the whole question—the question of right relation, we consider the relation *de jure* of what is called the Lutheran Church, and with which the relation of the Lutheran Church *de facto* ought to coincide throughout.²⁷

But again, there must first be an internal apprehension of profession before the implications for life would follow.

In fact, however, they saw no inconsistency between profession and practice.

Stressing as they did the educational purpose of the Lutheran Confessions, they viewed the

²⁶ Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity*, 163.

²⁷ Charles Porterfield Krauth, “The Relations of the Lutheran Church to Denominations Around Us,” in *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 113.

confessional article of a constitution not as the culmination, but as the starting point from which to inculcate a confessional consciousness. It set forth the basis from which a church body would patiently work to bring its members around to a practice consistent with confession. Krauth, Jacobs, and Schmauk viewed their situation as analogous to the days of the Reformation when, they argued, it took more than a generation to fully imbibe the principles of the Reformation. So they chafed at the charges of indifferentism, unionism and calls for a more disciplinary approach. They countered that “changes had to be effected as a result of inner conviction, and by a process of quiet growth rather than by extreme violence.”²⁸ A disciplinary approach “would foster a rebellion and consequent break in those bodies themselves.”²⁹

This perspective also applied to its dealings with other church bodies. The leaders of the General Council did not require uniformity of doctrine and practice as a prerequisite for union. A *pro forma* recognition on the part of a Lutheran synod sufficed. Such an acknowledgement indicated that a church body intended to work from the basis of the Confessions toward a consistent practice. As the Confessions were the expression of the faith of the confessors, they contained the sum total of doctrine that was necessary to accept in order to be considered a Lutheran. Second, with an emphasis on faith’s apprehension and so the need for education, the General Council insisted that official acceptance of the Confessions was not the culmination of agreement in doctrine, but the starting point from which a church could instill the faith among its members. The faith could not be imposed upon the members of a church; it must be inculcated.

In some ways the General Council was an enigma. It actively promulgated the

²⁸Ibid., 191.

²⁹George W. Sandt, *Theodore Emanuel Schmauk: A Biographical Sketch With Liberal Quotations from his Letters and other Writings* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1921), 160.

Confessions as biblical expositions, as expressions of faith which stood in harmony with God's Word. Yet the point of departure for approaching the interpretation of the Confessions is the faith (*qua*) of the confessors. By approaching them from this subjective standpoint the General Council approached the Confessions from their historical character as the expressions of the faith of the Reformation. This point of departure provides great explanative power for understanding the paradoxes inherent in its conservation of theology and laxity of practice, in its movement toward the position of Missouri and yet an eventual reunion with the General Synod.

Decisional Confessionalism

Of all the synods in the nineteenth century, Iowa most clearly highlighted the historical character of the Lutheran Confessions, and in doing so foreshadowed one of the dominant approaches taken in the twentieth century. Wilhelm Loehe, father of the Iowa Synod, accepted all of the Confessions of the Lutheran church as that in which "all the roots" of the church's life are to be found and maintained. He asserted, "We do not know of a single express teaching in the Confessions that we would wish to reject or modify."³⁰ At the same time, Loehe took pride in that he did not "adhere superstitiously to the letter of the symbols."³¹ He did not want to reclaim them at the risk of losing what had been learned in the three hundred years since the Reformation. Loehe's ultimate break with Missouri was due to his position on the distinction between the substance and the form of a confession, and a commitment to the essentials, that is, the confessionally defined portions of the Confessions.

George Grossmann and the Fritschel brothers, George and Sigmund, received their

³⁰Quoted in Theodore G. Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 13.

³¹Erich H. Heintzen, *Love Leaves Home: Wilhelm Loehe and the Missouri Synod*, condensed by Frank Starr, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 13.

training at Loehe's mission institute at Neuendettelsau and their education at the Erlangen University in Bavaria. There they came into contact with the first generation of neo-confessionalists who wanted to use the new biblical tools and historical methodologies of the day without rejecting one's confessional heritage. While not adopting all the features that would be espoused by representatives of Erlangen, three traits stand out. First, Grossmann and the Fritschels, in 1854, stressed an historical interpretation over a "dogmatic" one as the correct approach to the Confessions. One must pay special attention to the specific heresies which called forth the response of the confessors who framed the Confessions. Grossmann and the Iowa Synod reaffirmed and clarified their intention in 1856 with the theses, "*Stellung zu den Symbolen*."³² The third thesis states that the Confessions take into account only those doctrines that "were disputed and especially attacked." In the fourth thesis they argue, accordingly, that as the symbolical writings were occasioned by doctrinal controversies within the church and had as their sole purpose the settlement of such struggles, one must recognize only the "historical interpretation as the right interpretation."³³

Having made the historical character of the confession their point of departure, the Iowa Synod limited the normative character of the Confessions to those articles expressly established by the Confessions to settle the doctrinal controversies disrupting the church of their day. The "confessional declarations" or "confessional decisions," those doctrines mentioned *ex professo* in thesis and antithesis constitute that which is distinctively Lutheran.³⁴ The Confessions "embrace everything that the church has hitherto acknowl-

³² George J. Fritschel, *Quellen und Dokumente zur Geschichte und Lehrstellung der ev.-luth. Synode von Iowa u. a. Staaten* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, n.d.), 145.

³³George Fritschel, *Quellen*, 145.

³⁴This is a milder form of Schmucker's fundamental and non-fundamentals. Initially confining itself to those statements which began with the formulas "we believe,

edged as scriptural truth and has from time to time defined confessionally against heretical attack.”³⁵ The Confessions must be accepted as having made the correct decisions for the particular problems of that age.³⁶

Initially, the Iowa Synod confined these doctrines as norms for teaching, ‘*norma docendi*,’ to those which were found in the “thetical and antithetical decisions” of the Confessions.³⁷ Those doctrines mentioned in passing or incidentally were excluded. Grossmann drew the distinction between the “confession of faith itself and the further constructions, explanations and defenses” used to support confessionally defined articles of faith.³⁸ He held that, although the Confessions used these elaborations and explanations in order to testify to the correct sense of the articles of faith, for which reason they should not be ignored, they nevertheless did not belong as essential, permanent components of the confession.³⁹ In answer to objections that the Iowa Synod restricted the doctrine of the Confessions to the symbolical decisions, its leaders eventually explained that their subscription did not apply merely to the articles which begin with “we believe, teach, and confess” or “we reject” or “we condemn,” but to the explanations, arguments and elaborations which comprise the doctrinal content of the symbolical decisions.⁴⁰

teach and confess” and “we condemn” the Iowa Synod later modified its approach to include also the elaborations and explanations of those doctrinal decisions.

³⁵Sigmund Fritschel, “The Doctrinal Agreement Essential to Church Unity,” in Theodore G. Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 90.

³⁶Tappert, “Symbols of the Church,” 348.

³⁷Fritschel, *Quellen*, 145,146.

³⁸[George Grossmann], *Denkschrift versast zur Gedächtnisfeier der vor zehn Jahren geschehen Gründung der Deutschen ev. luth. Synod von Iowa* (Ansbach: Druck von Carl Junge, n.d.), 28.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Sigmund Fritschel, *Die Unterscheidungslehren der Synoden von Iowa und Missouri* (Waverly, IA: Druck und Verlag des Wartburg Publishing House, 1893), 22.

This led to the third characteristic of the Iowa Synod. Since the church bound itself only to the confessional decisions of the *Book of Concord* as answers to the problems of the church in the sixteenth century, the church of the nineteenth century could be open to further development of doctrine. Thus Loehe and Iowa committed themselves to “the result of history, to historical development.”⁴¹ They did not believe that with the period of the Reformation “the doctrinal development of the church has come to an end.” They contended that greater insight and understanding into the doctrine of the Scriptures “could perhaps still arise out of doctrinal struggles, which their decisions in the time of the Reformation did not yet know.”⁴² Those articles of faith not confessionally defined would be regarded as “open questions.” On these questions, church bodies were free to adopt one tendency or another, which tendencies need not hinder church union.

While limiting confessional subscription to these points, Iowa nevertheless maintained the biblical character of the Confessions. Subscription meant that one accepted all the symbolic writings of the Lutheran church “because all of the symbolical decisions on the controversial questions which appeared before and during the time of the reformation are recognized as corresponding with the divine Word.”⁴³ For that very reason they are norms, rules and guiding principles of teaching.⁴⁴ Yet by drawing the distinction between essentials and non-essentials and by stressing the activity of the spirit in the history of the church, they also call into question the clarity and authority of Scripture.

The Iowa Synod carried their views on what belongs to the essence of the

⁴¹Quoted in Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology*, 13.

⁴²Fritschel, *Quellen*, 146.

⁴³[Grossmann], *Denkschrift versasst zur Gedächtnisfeier der vor zehn Jahren geschehen Gründung der Deutschen ev. luth. Synod von Iowa* (Ansbach: Druck von Carl Junge, n.d.), 6.

⁴⁴Fritschel, *Quellen*, 145.

Confessions with them as they sought to foster Lutheran unity. Consistent with their confessional understanding, they rejected Missouri's call for complete doctrinal agreement prior to any official relations between church bodies. In "Theses on Church Unity, 1867" they asserted, "Complete unity of doctrine has never existed in the church and must not be made the condition of fellowship."⁴⁵ The Iowa Synod felt that Missouri moved beyond the Confessions with their inclusive requirement of absolute unity in all, even minor, doctrines not clearly stated in the Scriptures, "or not taught at all, but derived at by dogmatic deductions."⁴⁶ The Iowa Synod did not regard differences on these as sufficient to prevent church fellowship.

As the General Council, the Iowa Synod held that "the symbols contain the sum of doctrines on which doctrinal agreement is necessary."⁴⁷ George Fritschel interprets agreement in the pure doctrine of the gospel as limited to "that which she herself has professed as the correct interpretation of the divine word over against error, which interpretation we have laid down in the books of our confessions (*Book of Concord*)."⁴⁸ These essentials belonged to the foundation of the faith, and unity has reference only to the foundation of faith.⁴⁹ Unlike the General Council, however, Iowa insisted that the practice of a church body must be consistent with its profession before it establishes fraternal ties.

Doctrinal Confessionalism

Like the others, Missouri also dealt with the tension between the historical and bib-

⁴⁵Wolf, 209.

⁴⁶Herman Fritschel, *Biography of Drs. Sigmund and Gottfried Fritschel* (Milwaukee: n.p., 1951), 70.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 209.

⁴⁸George J. Fritschel, "What is Necessary For Church Union Among Lutherans?" *Lutheran Church Review* 23 (1904): 81.

⁴⁹Herman Fritschel, *Biography*, 84.

lical character of the Confessions. It did not object to using history to understand better the doctrinal articles of the Confession. But Missouri felt that the Iowa Synod used their historical understanding in order to limit the extent to which the Confessions and, with them, the Scriptures, defined Lutheranism. They believed, however, that the way one attains a proper balance between the two aspects of the Confessions is to make one's point of departure their biblical character by stressing their *doctrinal* content. In doing so, one will not assign too great a priority to their historical character that would lead to a relativizing of their contents. At the same time, it would provide a more objective standpoint for evaluating the historical circumstances of the Confessions.

The Missouri Synod's doctrinal approach to the Lutheran Confessions embraced two important aspects. First, Missouri was concerned with the formulation of pure doctrine. The entire doctrinal content of Confessions were to be accepted, whether doctrines were mentioned *ex professo* or incidentally. Why? Because it all agreed with God's Word. Secondly, this objective, *extra nos* perspective led to an equally serious concern to weave that doctrine into the very fabric of the church's life. They asserted that pure teaching was merely a means to an end, not the end itself. Without the former the latter mattered little; without the latter, the former did not benefit the church. For them, there was "no such thing in the Christian Church as mere teaching; all teaching is to be reduced to practice. . . . Doctrine is the basis for every activity of the Church."⁵⁰ A confessional Lutheran upheld both of these concerns.

Three features stand out in C. F. W. Walther's view of the nature and meaning of confessions. First, while he acknowledged that confessions are the personal expressions of an individual's faith, he maintained that in the Lutheran Confessions one does not hear

⁵⁰Francis Pieper, *Unsere Stellung in Lehre und Praxis, Vortrag gehalten vor der Delegatsynode 1893 der Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1896), 42.

“the voice of a private individual but indisputably the voice of our dear church itself with regard to the most important articles of the Christian faith.”⁵¹ The Lutheran symbols set forth the “faith or the teaching of the church and neither wish nor intend to be anything else. . .”⁵²

Secondly, the churchly confessions possess a relative necessity, not an absolute necessity. Individual Christians cannot help but confess their faith, for “true faith is a heavenly fire ignited in the heart by the Holy Spirit which cannot remain hidden. Either it must break forth unhampered as bright flames in witnessing or it must burn out.”⁵³ In the Lutheran Confessions, however, the church has confessed its faith in response to emergency situations on controverted points.

Finally, churchly confessions are not needed as supplements to an insufficient norm.⁵⁴ The church formulated them to combat those who falsely misinterpreted the Word of God and spread their teachings while claiming divine sanction for them. This constituted their main point for Walther. The Confessions correct misrepresentations of Scriptural truth. He sets forth their relation to Scripture in the form of a dialogue:

The Bible is, so to say, God's confession to us. The symbolical writings are our con-

⁵¹C. F. W. Walther, “Forward to the 1877 Volume of *Lehre und Wehre*: On the 300th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord,” *Editorials from Lehre und Wehre*, tr. Herbert H. A. Bouman, Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther, ed. Aug. R. Suelflow (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 146.

⁵²C. F. W. Walther, “The Kind of Confessional Subscription Required,” [Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church?] in Theodore G. Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 56.

⁵³C. F. W. Walther, “Why Should We in Our Day also Hold Fast with Unwavering Loyalty to the Confessional Writings of the True Church in All Ages?” *The Word of His Grace: Sermon Selections by C. F. W. Walther* (Lake Mills, IA: Graphics Publishing Co., 1978), 78.

⁵⁴C. F. W. Walther, “Warum sollen wir an den Bekenntnißschriften unserer evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche auch noch jetzt unerschütterlich feßthalten?” *Der Lutheraner*, 5 (23 January 1849): 83.

fessions to God. The Bible is the question of God to men: 'Do you believe My Word?' The symbolical writings are the answer of men: 'Yes, Lord, we believe what you say.' The Bible is the chest in which all treasures of wisdom and the knowledge of God lie hidden. The symbolical writings are the jewel-room in which the Church has deposited, as in a spiritual arsenal, all of the treasures which in the course of hundreds of years with great effort she has dug out of the treasury of the Bible. . . . The Bible is the revealed Word of God itself, but the symbolical writings are the correct understanding of the Word of God as He has given it to the church.⁵⁵

Consistent with the stress on their doctrinal, and therefore biblical character, Walther contended that such confessions served the church as norms and standards for its teachers. He pointed out that they proclaim the faith and teaching of the Lutheran church to the world and distinguish the orthodox church from heterodox communions. But above all else, they serve the church as a "unanimous, definite, and common norm and form of teaching for its ministers" by which all other writings are judged.⁵⁶ This biblical, doctrinal emphasis is again reflected in the type of subscription that is appropriate to the nature of a confession. It embraces two important aspects, both the doctrinal content of the Confessions and the form in which that content is expressed.

For Walther, "everything that is part of the doctrinal content is essential to the confession" whether it was a subject "treated *ex professo* or as an incidental remark."⁵⁷ An unconditional subscription included every article of faith: "none of them may be set aside by any reservation of the subscriber."⁵⁸ The reason is that "they are taken out of the Bible as source, and are founded on the Bible as their foundation."⁵⁹ In light of this relationship, to hold to one meant to be faithful to the other. Only he is able to subscribe to them in good

⁵⁵Ibid., 82.

⁵⁶C. F. W. Walther, ed., *Joh. Guilielmi Baieri, Compendium Theologiae Positivae, Adjectis notis Amplioribus quibus Doctrina Orthodoxa ad Paideian Academicam Explicatur Atque Ex Scriptura S. Eique Innixis Rationibus Theologicis Confirmatur*, 3 vols. (Sancti Ludovici: Luth. Concordia-Verlag., 1879), 1: 139.

⁵⁷Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880*, 56.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., 82.

conscience who recognized “that in all points they have been taken out of the Word of God.”⁶⁰ With this view, Walther rejected the notion that some confessional doctrines are not as clearly revealed in the Bible. Scripture “is not a tower of Babel on whose erection theologians must work until Judgment Day, but it is a heavenly building long completed, on which the prophets and apostles did the final work.”⁶¹

Furthermore, subscription applies to the *rebus* und *phrasibus* of the Confessions. Walther could not imagine that one would subscribe to the symbolical books without having tested them against Scripture and being fully persuaded of their truth in *rebus und phrasibus*.⁶² He stressed that a person must not only believe as the church believes, but also speak as the church speaks. In this way the church assures itself that its ministers “will not depart from it with regard to the sense or *with regard to the language*. [sic].”⁶³ Walther defended his position by pointing out that those who corrupt the teaching of Scripture frequently employ the terms of Scripture. This compelled the church to develop and employ other words and phrases that not only conveyed the correct understanding of Scripture but exposed the heresy. So confessions norm both the the faith itself and the profession of that faith.⁶⁴

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹C. F. W. Walther, “Foreword to the 1859 Volume [On Doctrinal Development],” *Editorials from Lehre und Wehre*, tr. Herbert J. A. Bouman. Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 50.

⁶²C. F. W. Walther, *Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), 69.

⁶³C. F. W. Walther, “On Church Language,” *Editorials from Lehre und Wehre*, tr. Herbert J. A. Bouman. Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 71.

⁶⁴Walther, ed., *Joh. Guilielmi Baieri, Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, 1: 140.

Summary of the Nineteenth Century

The attitudes of this century center attention on that which Lutherans regarded as most important to renew the life of the church. The General Synod sought a united front among Protestants in order to reach the vast unchurched population of America. The General Council stressed the need for its members to possess personally first the faith of the confession before the confession of faith itself. The Iowa Synod warned that one dare not neglect the advances being made in biblical scholarship and the work of the Spirit through the church of every age. The Missouri Synod stressed the proclamation of the Scriptural doctrine as the *sine qua non* for building the church.

Whether Lutherans considered the Confessions from the vantage point of their historical or biblical character, the trend of Lutherans in the nineteenth century was to move toward a greater appreciation of their Scriptural foundation. These attitudes manifested themselves in the constitutions of the churches and the formulas used for subscription. At the same time, these confessional attitudes reveal that many Lutherans, consciously or unconsciously, allow the historic changes of their day to condition the extent to which they conserved their confessional heritage. Highlighting the changes that had taken place in the 300 years since the sixteenth century, they stressed that the starting point for considering the Confessions must be their historical or anthropological character. This led many Lutherans to limit the extent to which their symbolical writings defined Lutheranism and to advocate a *pro forma* subscription. The tendency among Lutherans to stress one or the other aspect of the Confessions would manifest itself even more clearly in the twentieth century.

The Twentieth Century

By 1918 Lutherans had largely resolved the question concerning the extent of confessional subscription. Yet they remained divided. At this time, dramatic and far-reaching

changes began to take place within American society and within the church that raised new questions about the relevance and pertinence of the Lutheran symbolical writings. The dominant issue of the twentieth century centers around whether or not confessional subscription can any longer have meaning? Not wishing to discard or ignore their heritage, Lutherans have answered affirmatively. But again, Lutherans approached subscription from two different perspectives, one that led to a cautious endorsement of the symbols' continued meaning and role, and the other which led to an unqualified affirmation of their value. During this century one can observe Lutherans coalescing and revolving around these types of Lutheranism as represented by the two dominant Lutheran communities.

The Lutheran Confessions as Historical Documents

The pole of contemporaneity that stressed the historical character of the Lutheran Confessions was represented by the United Lutheran Church in America, and later the Lutheran Church in America. Within the twentieth century one can identify three different stages in the development of this attitude, all of which, however, reflect the same point of departure. During the first quarter of the century, the first impulses of an historical orientation arrived from Europe. It led the church's leaders to contend for a developmental confessionalism. As the historical interpretation of the Confessions began working itself out to its logical conclusion, the Confessions were stressed as "historically conditioned" documents, and some Lutherans suggested that subscription to the Confessions must be hypothetical. By the mid-1960s, a number of theologians began to recognize the vacuousness of such an attitude and proposed a new attitude of "constructive confessionalism," one that approached the Confessions functionally.

The Lutheran Confessions as Biblical Expositions

The other major group of Lutherans, represented by the Missouri Synod, approached the *Book of Concord* from the pole of continuity and so stressed their confes-

sional writings as “Biblical Expositions.” Also here, one can detect several different themes emerging as the century progressed and the Missouri Synod emerged from its cultural isolation. Until 1932, its leaders stressed a “conservational confessionalism.” Convinced that their strict confessional stance was responsible for their astounding growth and strength, they sought to conserve and preserve what had been handed on to them by the synodical fathers. From 1932 through the 1950s, Missouri Synod became more involved in a number of efforts at achieving unity and grew increasingly acquainted with new theological trends. This led to a “confrontational confessionalism,” an attempt to address these questions without forsaking their heritage. From the mid-1950s through the 1980s, Missouri struggled over moving toward an increasing emphasis on the pole of change and the historical character of the Confessions and the pole of continuity and their biblical character. In the end, Missouri planted itself upon the biblical character of its confessional heritage.

Observations and Qualifications

Several observations are in order at this point. First, the initial definitions are not hard and fast. Variations occur within each category. Yet, as a whole, these are representative. Unlike the nineteenth century, these attitudes do not follow synodical lines as closely as they did then. It is possible to find examples of these attitudes in each body. Between these two ends of the spectrum, other Lutherans vacillated. The American Lutheran Church, organized in 1930, deliberately positioned itself between the United Lutheran Church in America and the Missouri Synod and throughout much of its history moved between one and the other. Likewise, the remaining smaller bodies of Lutheranism gravitated toward one or the other and the confessional attitudes they expressed corresponded accordingly.

Second, in spite of the importance that confessional attitudes have played in

American Lutheranism, relatively few studies have explored Lutheran history and theology from this perspective. The few that have appeared have been confined mostly to articles and essays. While they are valuable, they do not explore the confessional attitudes of Lutherans in depth. They neither fully account for the reason that Lutherans have adopted different attitudes toward their confessional writings nor for the theological and ecclesiastical implications of these attitudes. Of the more important studies, one may mention those written by Carl E. Braaten and Robert Preus.⁶⁵

Approaching them from the pole of change, Braaten identifies several inadequate attitudes.⁶⁶ The first, "Repristinating orthodox Lutheranism," seeks to revive and transpose original Lutheranism into our time. This results in an "externalization of religion, a doctrinal kind of methodism. . ." ⁶⁷ Secondly, a "Liberal non-confessional Lutheranism" applies to those nineteenth-century Lutherans who claim Luther's authority over against the Confessions and ignores the seventeenth century. Thirdly, a "hypothetical confessional Lutheranism," takes the relativizing impulses of history seriously, but the documents contained in the *Book of Concord* can no longer be our confessions in a direct and immediate way. Fourth, among the laity and many pastors may be found an "anti-confessional biblicism."⁶⁸ Each of these, according to Braaten, fails to take sufficiently into account contemporaneity. He proposes in their place a "constructive confessional Lutheranism" which combines the principles of continuity and contemporaneity.

Approaching the Confessions from their biblical character, Robert D. Preus identi-

⁶⁵For 19th century attitudes, see Theodore G. Tappert, "Symbols of the Church," 345-349; John Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity? A History of Efforts to Unite Lutherans in America*; and Charles P. Arand, "Historiography of the Lutheran Confessions, 1830-1930" (STM Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1987).

⁶⁶Carl E. Braaten, "Crisis of Confessionalism," *Dialog* 1 (Winter 1962): 38-48.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 41.

fies four ways which misrepresent the nature of confessional subscription and relativize the Confessions.⁶⁹ The first consists of those who relativize the Confessions historically or “hypothetically.” The second includes those who relativize them reductionistically, that is, limit their content to certain specifics. The third group of Lutherans, not as dominant in the twentieth century, ignores or avoids entirely the issue of subscription. Finally, he notes, one can “bombastically reject subscription.”⁷⁰ He regards each of these as inadequate because of the way in which they limit or qualify the meaning and validity of the Confessions for today. Preus argues that the only appropriate stance is one that regards the Confessions as biblical expositions.

In order to supplement these studies, the following lines of inquiry will be pursued. The first will observe the reception of these confessions within the church. The second will examine the acceptance of these confessions by church bodies. The former observes the way in which the Confessions have been received within the church and the way in which its theologians have expounded them and pastors have used them. It provides insight into the way in which the church has “lived” its confessional theology. The weakness of this line may lie in that the attitudes of individual theologians may or may not correspond to the official position of the church. The latter provides a corrective. It addresses the institutional attitude toward the Confessions and has the advantage of official sanction. Yet therein also lies its disadvantage. Constitutions and formal documents, while enjoying official status, tend to be relatively static, altered and changed only at the end of a long process or in times of dramatic upheaval.

⁶⁹Robert D. Preus, “Confessional Subscription,” in *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*, ed. Erich Kiehl and Waldo J. Werning (Chicago: Lutheran Congress, 1970), 44-45.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 45.

PART ONE

THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

CHAPTER II

A DEVELOPMENTAL CONFSSIONALISM

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, Lutherans of the Muhlenberg tradition grappled with problems from two directions. On the one hand they desired closer relations with the General Council. But any possibility of rapprochement required the General Synod to reconsider a number of confessional issues. For instance, when the General Synod affirmed the Augsburg Confession did it mean the *Invariata* or the *Variata*? When it distinguished between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines did it intend to restrict or qualify its endorsement of the *Augustana*? When the General Synod acknowledged only the Augsburg Confession, did it imply a rejection of the Formula of Concord? At the same time, the General Synod did not want a stronger confessional commitment to restrict or limit its freedom in such a way that would preclude further progress in theology. It sought to counter the charges of Modernism that a confessional church proclaimed a sixteenth century message irrelevant to twentieth century man, a message produced by idle, speculative minds of a by-gone era. The General Synod contended for a theology that was not settled definitively once and for all, but was dynamic and progressive in its confrontation with contemporary issues and needs.

The leadership which charted a new direction for the General Synod that was both conservative and progressive came from the Hamma Divinity School in Wittenberg, Ohio.¹

¹William Dow Allbeck confirms, "In the forefront of the conservatives in the General Synod were the theological professors at Wittenberg. . . . In preparing for union with the General Council and the United Synod in the South, Wittenberg Seminary led the way for the General Synod." *Theology at Wittenberg, 1845-1945* (Springfield, OH: Wittenberg Press, 1945), 83.

As early as the 1880s a shift toward a more conservative confessionalism took place under the direction of Luther A. Gottwald, Samuel F. Breckenridge, and Samuel A. Ort. In the first decades of the twentieth century, two other leaders, Juergen L. Neve (1865-1943) and Leander S. Keyser (1856-1937), stand out. Neve wrote more extensively on the Lutheran Confessions than any other man during this period—publishing confessional studies for both pastors and laymen. The attitudes he displayed frequently found expression in the official statements of the General Synod. Keyser, whose major interest centered on apologetics and demonstrating the reasonability of the Christian faith, did not write on the subject of the Confessions as prolifically as did Neve, but he played an important role in formulating the explanatory confessional statements of the General Synod.

The confessionalism proposed by the Hamma Divinity School moved in a decidedly more conservative direction than did the American Lutheranism of S. S. Schmucker. Yet it did not advocate the type of confessionalism which characterized the General Council or the Missouri Synod. In order to find a confessionalism that was conservative without being restrictive, and progressive without being radical, the faculty at Hamma turned to the theology propounded by the University of Erlangen during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In it they arrived at the position “that Lutheran doctrine had profound depths and massive strength to meet modern thought.”² Neve commented, “we must be prepared to follow also the contributions to the solution of these new problems by the scholars of European Lutheranism. These men of Lutheran background have an angle or approach and a method of work which are bound to be of special help to us.”³

²Ibid., 90.

³J[uergen] L. Neve, *The Story and Significance of the Augsburg Confession on Its Four Hundredth Anniversary* (Burlington, IA: Lutheran Literary Board, 1930), 6. As early as 1910 one finds Neve turning in the direction of Erlangen. In an article titled, “Thoughts on Confessional Questions,” he criticizes Matthias Loy for ignoring the “development of confessional theology” as represented by the Erlangen school. He defends the latter by arguing that between the sixteenth century and these men, “there is no

The Erlangen school proposed that the point of departure for any consideration of the Confessions must be their historicity; their interpretation must be “always historical.”⁴

By emphasizing the historical dimension, they suggested that Lutherans approach the Scriptures and the Confessions from the standpoint of experience.⁵ They regarded the Confessions not as external laws but the “expressions of the religious experience of the Church in its conflict with error and in its search for truth.”⁶ When men like Gottfried Thomasius discovered that their experience of Scripture corresponded with that of the confessors, they embraced the Confessions as their own. “We have confessed them from within because we found in them the expression of our own convictions and because we have been convinced of their scripturalness.”⁷ This historical and subjective orientation led them to emphasize the intention of the Confessions over their wording and to assert that confessional theology is a dynamic, developing organism in the life of the church.

The Nature and Meaning of Confession

The leaders of the General Synod did not at this time publicly advocate every view set forth by Erlangen. They aligned themselves with the more conservative tendencies of that school and found most helpful the historical orientation it provided for approaching material, but merely a *formal* difference. The difference is in forms of thought, in “Gedankenformen [sic],” *Lutheran Quarterly* 40 (1910): 25.

⁴J[uergen] L. Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom*, revised edition (Blair, NE: Lutheran Publishing House, 1944), 134.

⁵For features and representatives of this school, see Theodore G. Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), and Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century, 1799-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1: 218-27. For a general history of the school, see F. W. Kantzenbach, *Die Erlanger Theologie, Grundlinien ihrer Entwicklung im Rahmen der Geschichte der theologischen Fakultät, 1743-1877* (Munich: n.p., 1960).

⁶O. W. Heick, *History of Protestant Theology*, vol. 2 of *A History of Christian Thought* by J. L. Neve (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1946), 131.

⁷Ibid.

theology. As Neve worked out the specifics of this orientation, he came to stress the Confessions as the fruit of the church's growing, unfolding and developing experience of Scripture in history. They mark and express that "inner experience which the church of Christ has had in its study of Scripture, in its search for truth, in its conflict with error."⁸ This left open the door for future progress without closing it to the past results of the church's labor.

The Historical Character of Confessions

Making history one's frame of reference, Neve contended that one must consider the Confessions first and foremost as *Gelegenheitsschriften*.⁹ There must be that inspiration called forth by a great historical occasion. Special occasions, pressing problems, urgent questions, and severe doctrinal struggles called forth the formulation of the church's creeds and confessions. While doctrinal controversies are to be deplored, Neve held that God used them to give to the church new experiences in the truth of His Word, which now could be set forth in confessions that succeeded in bringing to expression what a previous age was "utterly incapable of doing."¹⁰ This means that the experience of the church is not only rooted in history and occasioned by history but it develops and evolves throughout history.¹¹ Frederick Knobel (1870-1945), the first president of the United Lutheran Church in America, stressed that this development took place "as successive steps in the understanding and appreciation of the Christian revelation. It . . . has come through throb-

⁸J[uerger] L. Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom*, (1944), 24.

⁹J[uerger] L. Neve, *The Formulation of the General Synod's Confessional Basis* (Burlington, IA: German Literary Board, 1911), 10.

¹⁰J[uerger] L. Neve, "The Confessional Basis for a Reunited Church," *Lutheran Church Review* 40 (1921): 366.

¹¹Though he uses the term "evolution" to describe the development of the church's dogma, Neve is careful to distinguish it from the materialistic use which science gives to it.

bing, living experience, through successive travails of soul; often through the inner struggle of an individual Christian first of all.”¹² These historical occasions which call forth the creeds push forward the development of the church’s confession by raising new issues, new questions, and new problems on matters that the church had hitherto not investigated.¹³

Neve defended his “developmental approach” to the dogma and confessions of the church both biblically and historically. With respect to the former, he appealed to John 16:13 and the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit who would lead the church in all truth. Neve contended that each creed or confession marked another step in the fulfillment of that promise. “Our creeds are monuments of how Christ has kept the promise that His Holy Spirit shall lead us in all truth. With each new creed the Church of Christ has had a new experience of truth.”¹⁴

Turning to the evidence of history, Neve points to the impact made on the church’s dogma by different nationalities. Greek, Roman, German, and Anglo-Saxon minds each stamped their distinctive characteristics upon the creeds. Each of the nationalities worked with the heritage of the apostolic age which gave them a unity of interest as one race takes over the heritage from its predecessor. Similarly, a number of philosophical influences have also shared in the “development of Christian doctrines on their way toward crystallization into dogmas.”¹⁵ Finally, the bent of mind and individuality of certain leaders in the

¹²F. H. Knubel, “Essentials of a Catholic Spirit,” *Lutheran Church Review* 38 (1919): 187.

¹³Neve, *Church's and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 23.

¹⁴J[uergen] L. Neve, *The Augsburg Confession: A Brief Review of its History and an Interpretation of its Doctrinal Articles with Introductory Discussions on Confessional Questions* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1914), 17, 32.

¹⁵J[uergen] L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1943), 1: 18.

development of Christian thought must not be overlooked, for example, the distinctive contributions from Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Luther, Melancthon, and Aquinas among others.

As his most important evidence, Neve cites the logical succession of topics with which each new creed has dealt. By looking at the ecumenical and particular confessions of the Lutheran church, as well as the confessional history of the Reformed churches, there can be no reasonable objection, he argued, to saying that the “whole content of these confessions represents a development. Later ages, in their confessional experience, have grown upon the shoulders of preceding ages.”¹⁶ Neve acknowledged that this development takes place in every age, but he identified two periods, the first four centuries and the sixteenth century, as especially important for the developing confession of the church. On the subjects with which they and other centuries deal one can see “developments and misdevelopment all through the centuries. Yet the logic of history in the succession of these topics is always noticeable.”¹⁷

The ecumenical creeds from the first four centuries represent the first distinctive stage in the dogmatic development of the church and center on the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ. The Apostles’ Creed grew out of the need for a confessional formula with which the church could instruct its catechumens and out of the need for a bulwark with which the church could stand against the Ebionites and Gnostics. Similarly, the Nicene Creed, Neve points out, came into existence not as a result of speculation, but as a “response to a deep need in the Church.”¹⁸ The church formulated it in response to its controversy with Arius. Again, a vital matter was at stake.

¹⁶Ibid., 1:16.

¹⁷Ibid., 1:17.

¹⁸Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 22.

Having exhausted itself in discussing the Trinitarian and Christological problems, the ancient church had yet to give dogmatic expression to the Scriptural doctrine of man's salvation. So the next question to be addressed began with the conflict between Augustine and the Pelagians on sin and grace. This question remained unanswered, however, and "moved during the whole of the Middle Ages in unclassified expressions."¹⁹ In fact, Neve suggests that the whole medieval age, was "one long drawn-out cry for an answer to the question, 'what must I do to be saved?'"²⁰ By the time of the Reformation, Neve believed the church had grown so much that it was now ready to give expression to doctrines of an altogether different kind, the doctrine of sin and grace and of how salvation is appropriated.²¹

Before the appreciation of soteriology could find expression, there had to come "some true experience as to sin—sin, not as so many deeds, but as an abiding condition of man."²² This did not happen until Martin Luther experienced in the depth of his soul the whole problem of soteriology. The answer he discovered to the question of salvation found formulation in the creeds of the Reformation. So the Reformation contribution consists in its introduction of a "new order of salvation" personified best in Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed. Neve pointed out that this evangelical idea did not represent a "modification" of the ancient creeds, but rather a "development and an amplification of them."²³ The Lutheran Confessions affirm these results in its opening articles of the *Augustana*.

¹⁹Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1944), 26.

²⁰Neve, *The Confessional Basis for a Reunited Church*, 364.

²¹Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 32.

²²Knobel, "Essentials of a Catholic Spirit," 187.

²³Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 20.

Although the sixteenth century may properly be called a creed-producing age, Neve contended that the doctrinal development of the church did not stop with the Formula of Concord. Even the age of orthodoxy, far from being a period of stagnation, brought remarkable progress, especially in developing the 'order of salvation.' Likewise, reacting to the perceived sterility of orthodoxy, Pietism contributed to the church's knowledge concerning the mystical union with Christ. With the dawn of the twentieth century, Knubel believed that the church was on the verge of a new experience of the truth as it moved toward a new struggle. Christendom, he suggested, "now must experience the doctrine of the Church."²⁴ The Augsburg Confession had sought the catholic truth of the church and Luther had struggled against the break of the church. Now the Lutheran church needs to ask, "is the Augsburg Confession a fourth ecumenical creed? Is Evangelical Lutheranism generic Protestantism, generic Christianity?"²⁵

In addition to his belief in these developmental stages as evidenced in church history, Neve further identified two periods of progress within creed producing ages. The form in which the Confessions of the church were expressed led Neve to distinguish between a prophetic and a didactic period of the church's experience. The former he identified as a creative time during which the church arrived at new insights and new knowledge into the truth of Scripture: "In their insight into the Scriptures these fundamental epochs of the church were prophetically creative. The struggle with fundamental errorists kept the eye of the Church keen. The insight into truth was deep, prophetic. There was intense religious experience."²⁶ Creeds and confessions produced during such a prophetic period of history accordingly possess a certain priority over those formulated later.

²⁴Knubel, "Essentials of a Catholic Spirit," 188.

²⁵Ibid., 191.

²⁶J[uergen] L. Neve, "The Faith of Lutheranism," *Lutheran Church Quarterly* 1 (January 1928): 80.

In the early church, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds belong to such a period. From the Reformation, the Augsburg Confession serves as *the* monument of this new experience and the new stage in the development of doctrine: "The best exposition of this new evangelical faith we have in the Augsburg Confession. God had led His Church to a new religious experience by which there should be given to the multitudes the vision of a way to a real assurance of the forgiveness of sins."²⁷ This added experience included the whole doctrine of Law and Gospel, sin and repentance among others—and in the *Augustana* one finds the most complete expression of this Reformation doctrine. In fact, he argued, in the Augsburg Confession all the articles of faith are related to this one question. In addition, the *Augustana* voices the public testimony of the church and stands out as the first and foundational confession of the Reformation and of Protestantism.

As the leading lights of the prophetic period of a creed-producing age passes away, the church moves into a didactic period, a time for it to examine its new experiences of Scripture and work out the implications of its recently acquired understanding. It becomes a time of reflection and consolidation—for which reason the creeds and confessions produced during this period are necessarily more theological in the treatment of their topics. Their significance consists in showing the church wherein lie the legitimate development and interpretation of the prophetic period. The Athanasian Creed represents the didactic period that followed the formulation of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Similarly, the time of the Formula of Concord represents "throughout a legitimate development of the principles of the Augsburg Confession."²⁸ For that reason its definitions and expositions are of the "greatest value."

By adopting this historical orientation and locating the creeds in their concrete his-

²⁷Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 24.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 36.

torical settings, Neve tried to blunt the charge of Modernism that the Confessions were the products of idle and speculative minds, that they had little relevance for the needs of twentieth century man. By emphasizing that they expressed the fruit of the church's experience with the most severe trials and struggles with error, he argued that the Confessions arose from and set forth the answers of the church to the innermost needs of its members. If this highlights anything, it means that a confessional church is in the final analysis a church which addresses and meets the needs of its members. As further evidence, Neve pointed out repeatedly that the content of the Confessions has frequently found its way into the liturgy, hymns and the prayers of the church.

In response to the charge of a static and stationary theology, Neve responded that the Confessions do not preclude future progress. The church's experience remains incomplete; it continues to grow through history. "Every age should try to make a contribution to further truth by a deeper understanding of Scripture."²⁹ Neve argued that all truth did not exhaust itself in the Reformation, nor did the Holy Spirit cease his work.³⁰ The church will continue to grow through a deepening comprehension of Scripture and through "added experiences" as the church struggles with new problems, new errors, and new religious crises. Neve had in mind not only new formulations, but new content: "We may also be able to add something of importance, something that the Church of Christ has learned since the formulation of the Confessions."³¹

At the same time, Neve argued for the conservative confessionalism of the church by stressing that this development did not ignore nor cast aside the heritage it has received from the church of previous ages. Any future progress or development takes place upon

²⁹Neve, "The Faith of Lutheranism," 84.

³⁰J[uergen] L. Neve, *History of the Lutheran Church in America* (Burlington, IA: Lutheran Literary Board, 1934), 343.

³¹Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 20.

the shoulders of the church's *paradosis*, upon the foundations laid in the past. Were one to stress the church's confessional writings as only symbols of one's historical origin, or as possessing only historical significance, "a kind of embalmed quantity, like an Egyptian mummy, for the sages to look upon occasionally,"³² one would relativize them to the point where they lose any value for later generations. This led Neve to stress the biblical character of the Confessions as that which ensures the continuity of the church's message.

The Biblical Character of Confessions

As Neve looked to the continuity of the church's theology in the Confessions, two things stand out. First, even though he made the historical character of the Confessions the point of departure for their interpretation, Neve added that, if they are to claim validity for future ages, the Confessions of the church must derive their authority from outside themselves. One must look to the Scripturalness of the Lutheran confessional writings. It is the biblical character of the Confessions, he insists, that gives them their confessional character and abiding value. Even as he affirms this, however, he tempers his endorsement of their correspondence with Scripture by approaching the Confessions as the fruit of the church's subjective apprehension of the Scriptures, that is, their historical character.

The Confessions explicate the church's interpretation of Scripture. Those crucial crises within the life of the church that led to the formulation of new creeds and confessions, Neve argued, arose out of misinterpretations of Scripture. The church cannot leave the Scriptures uninterpreted when these contradictory understandings arise.³³ While the Scriptures are the sole source of the truth they are not the sole witness to the truth. So the Confessions give the church's authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures and guards the

³²Neve, "The Confessional Basis for a Reunited Church," 369, 370.

³³J[uergen] L. Neve, *The Lutherans in the Movements for Church Union* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication House, 1921), 156.

words of the Lord and the teachings of the Apostles over and against misinterpretation.³⁴ In doing so, they reduce the leading truths of Scripture to practical principles.”³⁵ In this way the church discharges its pastoral duty to its members by taking a definite position in order to guide its members in Scriptural teaching and offer a bond of union.

Since the Lutheran Confessions represent the church’s interpretation of Scripture, the truthfulness of the symbols’ content must be measured by Scripture alone which always remains the *norma normans*. Neve maintained, “Creeds and Confessions have always claimed to be Scriptural. This must be their test.”³⁶ Again, the *Book of Concord* can admit truth of dogma “only in so far as its teachings are proven Scriptural in the experience of the investigating members of the Church.”³⁷ It is the extent to which the Confessions agree with Scripture and the eternal truths of which they deal—not their historical form—which gives the Confessions a unique role within the church and makes them both relevant and pertinent for the church of every age. The historical form of the Augsburg Confession, to be sure, does not give a complete presentation of doctrines for all times. Nor is it in all instances the best possible formulation. But, Neve argued, what “we insist upon is that its doctrines are Scriptural, and for this reason cannot be thrown away.”³⁸ Similarly, why is the Apology of the Augsburg Confession accepted? Because its principles are adduced from Scripture. The reason one chooses to be Lutheran is that one believes “the Confessions of the Lutheran Church to be Scriptural.”³⁹

³⁴Neve, “The Confessional Basis for a Reunited Church,” 365.

³⁵Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 15, 16.

³⁶Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1: 18.

³⁷Neve, *A History of Christian Thought.*, 1: 18, 19.

³⁸Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 20.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 16.

Even with respect to the more peripheral doctrines of the Christian faith, Neve argued, those more remote from its center are teachings of Scripture itself. In “our great Augsburg confession they have been formulated in entire agreement with the central doctrine of justification by faith.”⁴⁰ In connection with this, Neve stressed that the dogma of a church represents a system or an organism, be it Lutheran or Reformed. It is formulated from a particular perspective and in accord with a controlling principle. “One point of doctrine is an inseparable part of the whole doctrinal structure.”⁴¹ Lutheranism approaches theology from the perspective that the “revelation of the Scriptures is for man’s salvation. *All of it* is for that purpose.”⁴² So for Neve there are no doctrines of Scripture that can be regarded as indifferent or non-fundamental; they are Scriptural and they teach the Gospel rightly.

Having said this, Neve appears to qualify his strong affirmation of the Scriptural character of the Confessions by stressing the historical and subjective dimension of the Confessions. They are declarations, as to *how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained* in the articles of controversy in the church.⁴³ The Lutheran Confessions are “regarded as documents recording the valuable experience of the Church in the understanding of Holy Scripture.”⁴⁴ Behind this emphasis on the subjective apprehension lies the belief that Scripture does not clearly delineate every doctrine set forth in the church’s confession. Dogma, Neve held, is found *in* the Scriptures. “But the Scriptures do not offer this truth in formulated statements. Some of it is clearly expressed. But then

⁴⁰Ibid., 17.

⁴¹Ibid., 16.

⁴²Neve, “The Confessional Basis for a Reunited Church,” 364.

⁴³Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 180.

⁴⁴Ibid.

there are matters which seem only to be indicated.”⁴⁵ This raises the need for the proper interpretation of Scripture, the analogy of faith. But all Christians seek the truth; how can one explain that some fail to find it?

The reason for different interpretations of Scripture finally lies in the distinction between the objective truth of Scripture and the subjective apprehension of Scripture. “Objectively, the truth of the dogma is in the Scriptures; but there is a subjective and a group element that has much to do with the expression of this truth.”⁴⁶ While the Bible is complete and sufficient, the church’s experience of Scripture remains imperfect and incomplete. For this reason one can expect this knowledge, appreciation, understanding and experience to evolve with time as the “Church grows in its understanding of the Scriptures.”⁴⁷ Through history God guided the church through all errors so that the church could “arrive, step by step, at a clear understanding of what the Scriptures intended to teach as eternal truth.”⁴⁸

This view reflects the concern of the Erlangen school in the nineteenth century in its quest to relocate the certainty of truth. As a result of the theological developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they argued that certainty could no longer be found either in the Bible or in dogma since both must be historically investigated. It can be located only in one’s immediate experience.⁴⁹ But unlike Liberal Protestantism, the Erlangers claimed that such experience does not become a source of truth, thereby making Scripture only a corrective or commentary. Experience verifies that truth. For the Erlangen theolo-

⁴⁵Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, 1: 16.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 29.

⁴⁸Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 24.

⁴⁹Welch, 1:224.

gians, Neve argued, experience functioned an epistemological principle. They were not “theorizing on the Bible; they merely want to explain how the conviction of Christian truth, on the basis of communicated Scriptural revelation, originates *in the individual*.”⁵⁰ They dealt with experience as “*a theory of knowledge with regard to becoming convinced of the truth which is objectively contained in the Scriptures*.”⁵¹

However, unlike the Modernists, Neve argued, conservative Lutherans did not relativize away the special character of the Scriptures as God’s Word. They continued to maintain that Christianity is based upon a special and supernatural revelation. However, he acknowledged, at this point the conservative Lutherans fell into two camps. The “Old-Lutherans” declare that this revelation is simply the contents of the Scriptures as a result of “verbal” inspiration. Neve referred to it as a “static” approach to the Scriptures and devoted little space if any to defending this view. Instead he argued for the position of those conservatives who view the Scriptures as “a record of supernatural revelation that was worked out by God through a historical process culminating in Christ as the Savior of the world and the founder of a new spiritual creation (Frank).”⁵²

These “progressive conservatives” of the Erlangen School, following the direction of their founder J. C. H. Hofmann, regarded revelation as the history of redemption, *Heilsgeschichte*, and Scripture as the record of that revelation. In this “dynamic” conception of revelation, Neve pointed out, there is no special emphasis upon an inerrancy of the Scriptures in the purely external matters. But it is maintained by the faithful conservatives of this group that Scripture in its entirety is God’s Word and infallible as a guide in all matters pertaining to salvation. Neve did acknowledge that the Bible is the “record of

⁵⁰J[urgen] L. Neve, “Points of Cleavage Between Modernism and Conservative Theology,” *American Lutheran Survey* 19 (March 1927): 249.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

God's revelation to man," but explained, "Scripture speaks on eternal matters, sometimes through direct revelation by prophets, sometimes through experiences of biblical witnesses as interpreted by persons of inspiration."⁵³ He hastened to add, "as such *it is God's Word.*"⁵⁴

A consequence of approaching the Scriptures historically, Neve observed, is that theologians have learned a lesson from Hofmann and will not offer Scripture proof in quite the way this was done in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which came to be regarded as a detached and unhistorical way of doing theology. They were careful to use the "the Scriptures as historically interpreted and estimated as an organism of communicated truth."⁵⁵ The first question for proving fundamental doctrines requires that one find out what Scripture, "historically interpreted" as *Schriftganze*, has to say on the subject in question. Neve agreed with the basic validity of such an approach that the Bible cannot be used just for proof texts because it is preeminently a means of grace. But unlike others he remained unwilling to abandon entirely the Scripture proof method, insisting that a church's confession will be in harmony with such Scripture. This practice, he contended, is inseparable from Lutheranism. "Christ proved from Scripture, the New Testament writers did it, the church of all time has done it."⁵⁶

With this conception of revelation and view of Scripture, Neve believed that these theologians found a way to remain in harmony with the confessional experiences of the church. At the same time, it enabled the Erlangeners to investigate Scripture with the newer scientific methods. These include the investigation of Biblical manuscripts and "the estab-

⁵³Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1944), 24.

⁵⁴Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 199.

⁵⁵Neve, "Points of Cleavage," 249.

⁵⁶Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 200.

lishment of religious facts by historical means.”⁵⁷ But they insisted that they knew the limitations of such methods. “The nearer they are approaching the eternal values of religion, the more they feel that they must follow Scripture testimony and will welcome as a guide the confessional experience of the Church in the interpretation of Scripture.”⁵⁸

By stressing the Scriptural character of the Confessions Neve contended for the continuity of the church’s message which they provide. As monuments of the church’s past experience of Scripture, the Confessions preserve for those of later ages the “historical decisions” and the “doctrinal experience” of the early church and the Reformation church.⁵⁹ The contemporary church cannot disregard its previous development and growth in the truth nor try to return to an earlier stage of its development. The Apostles’ Creed, for instance, conserves only “a part of the doctrinal experience of the Church.” To return to it alone would be analogous to “compelling the full grown man to return again to the state of development of the child.”⁶⁰ By accepting the Lutheran Confessions, the church recognizes the “great experience” that came to the church of the Reformation and that these confessions have protected “the Church’s identity in times of confusion and conflict.”⁶¹ In doing so, the church distinguishes itself from Modernism which wants to tear down the past and lay new foundations in the present and degenerate into radicalism. But by stressing the historical and subjective character of the Confessions, Neve tried to avoid the danger of turning the Confessions into eternal laws. In this way, he keeps the door open for the future development of the church’s doctrine.

⁵⁷Neve, “Points of Cleavage,” 248.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Neve, *The Story and Significance of the Augsburg Confession*, 119.

⁶⁰Neve, *The Augsburg Confession, A Brief Review*, 33.

⁶¹Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 24.

The Role of the Confessions within the Church

Neve's attitude of a historical and developmental confessionalism structured the way in which he viewed the nature and form of confessional subscription. In order to maintain the two poles of both change and continuity, Neve believed that the best one can do is recognize the old Confessions and interpret them historically,

distinguishing between the confessional substance in them and their accidental or transient features. And then, in our interpretation of them we can add and contribute all we want of the further experiences of divine truth, which the Lord of the Church is giving us.⁶²

In this way, the Confessions will provide normative guides in showing the legitimate directions for the church's future development.⁶³ This led him to uphold the necessity of confessional subscription and at the same time to soften it.

The Role of Confessional Subscription *Ad Intra*

Neve maintained that when addressing the issue of confessional subscription the needs and mission of the church take precedence over the rights of the individual. Since the Confessions represent the experience of the church, it is the church which must be considered first in dealing with the matter of subscription. "The Church, like an individual, has a distinct life. This life manifests itself through its doctrine, cultus polity and piety. . . the Church cannot be indifferent to the teaching in its pulpits."⁶⁴ The mistake of many is that they look too much upon the Confessions as "an interest of the individual and not as a concern of the Church."⁶⁵ Moreover, the church is charged with the duty of leading many souls in the way of salvation. It is therefore essential for the health and future of the church

⁶²Neve, "The Faith of Lutheranism," 81.

⁶³Neve, *The Lutherans in the Movements for Church Union*, 157.

⁶⁴Neve, "The Confessional Basis for a Reunited Church," 371.

⁶⁵Neve, *The Lutherans in the Movements for Church Union*, 156.

to require some sort of confessional subscription on the part of its ministers.

Neve listed a number of ways in which confessional subscription serves the interests of the church. It ensures the continuity of the church's message whether through educating the ministers of the church, publishing church literature, editing church papers, and sending forth missionaries. In these matters "a doctrinal foundation or a confessional basis is needed for decision and direction."⁶⁶ Charged with the task of feeding and leading its people such "guides are necessary for the continuity of the pulpit's message and for religious education of the young."⁶⁷ When it comes to furthering the unity of the church, Neve contended that there is only one road to church union, and that is agreement in the truth of God's Word. So while the Confessions function as witnesses and testimonies of times in the history of the church when "usually after severe and trying conflicts, God gave much light, they are also symbols of the unity of faith between those who have united in one church communion."⁶⁸ While outward unity is not necessary, union in the faith as set forth in the Confessions of the church "is the goal that we must strive after."⁶⁹

The historical orientation of Neve conditions the way in which he addressed the type and form of subscription that best serves the church. The historical distance between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, observed Neve, raises a number of difficulties in the matter of subscription. When such obstacles arise, Lutheranism unlike the Reformed tradition, has historically not added to or changed its confessions. Instead it prefers to adjust the terms of its subscription. If the "historical insight changed so that a correction seemed to be justified, then they kept the original historical form and interpreted the text according

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 24.

⁶⁸Neve, *The Lutherans in the Movements for Church Union*, 157.

⁶⁹Neve, "The Confessional Basis for a Reunited Church," 373.

to the new information. Their interpretation is always historical.” Again, Lutherans “prefer not to change the document and simply explain.” By approaching the Confessions in this manner, Lutherans demonstrate that they are not “slaves and literalists in the use of their Confessions of Faith.”⁷⁰ In fact, Neve admitted that the General Synod gives more “liberty to the individual” than others.⁷¹

This led Neve to consider the form and content of subscription to the Confessions. The specific question confronted by Neve in the final days of the General Synod concerned the extent to which Lutherans subscribe, whether it is only the fundamental doctrines of the Augsburg Confession and whether also the Formula of Concord shall be included in the formula. Of all the Confessions, the Formula of Concord—on account of its length, language, and theological character—proved the greatest obstacle to the General Synod’s acceptance of the entire *Book of Concord*. Here the historical experience of the church, as a point of departure, asserts itself by demonstrating a greater concern on the form of the confession rather than on the content, on the document rather than on the doctrine of the Confessions.

One of the more troubling phrases in the General Synod’s confessional basis had been the distinction it made between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. Its original constitution stated that the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession were a “substantially correct exhibition of God’s word.” Historically, it used this phrase to limit and restrict the extent to which the *Augustana* defined Lutheranism. But in 1864 at York, the General Synod took its first steps toward a more conservative position by repudiating Schmucker’s contention that there were Romish errors in the Augsburg Confession. It resolved, “that in our judgment the Augsburg Confession, properly interpreted, is in perfect

⁷⁰Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (1940), 181.

⁷¹J[uergen] L. Neve, “Thoughts on Confessional Questions,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 40 (January 1910): 14.

consistence with this our testimony and with the Holy Scriptures as regard the errors specified.”⁷² Nevertheless, the troubling phrase lingered as well as suspicions that little change had in fact taken place in the General Synod’s confessional attitude.

The General Synod went further in 1869 at Harrisburg by dropping the statement, “in a manner substantially correct,” and substituting “fundamental doctrines.” This resolution in effect repudiated the position of Samuel S. Schmucker who had underscored these words with “pen and ink” in books he used.⁷³ Though stronger than before, the phrase “fundamental doctrines” remained an ambiguous term. Leander S. Keyser examined the variant interpretations and argued that it did not mean that some of the doctrines were fundamental, thereby allowing one liberty to reject any of the doctrines of the *Augustana*. Instead, it should be interpreted to mean that “the Augustana is a correct exhibition of the chief doctrines of God’s Word, those that belong to the foundation.”⁷⁴ In other words, “There are other doctrines of the divine word not here exhibited but these are the principal ones, the most important ones, the *fundamental* ones.”⁷⁵

The General Synod took another step forward in 1901 at Des Moines, Iowa. There the convention sought to fix the interpretation of this ambiguous formula “fundamental doctrines” by stating that no distinctions should be made. That convention resolved: “we hold that, to make any distinction between fundamental and so-called non-fundamental doctrines in the Augsburg Confession, is contrary to that basis as set forth in our formula

⁷²Jacob A. Clutz, “The United Lutheran Church in America,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 49 (January 1919): 11.

⁷³Neve, *The Formulation of the General Synod’s Confessional Basis*, 17.

⁷⁴Leander S. Keyser, “Fundamental Doctrines,” *Quarterly Review* (October 1897): 504.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

of confessional subscription.”⁷⁶ Still this was not an amendment to the constitution, it was offered only as an explanation. In the same resolution, the convention expressed its satisfaction with the confessional article of the constitution and reaffirmed its “unreserved allegiance to the *present* [italics added] basis of the General Synod.”

While the General Synod’s confessional basis continued to include the words “fundamental doctrines,” Keyser submitted a resolution of clarification to the General Synod Convention in 1909. As adopted it stated that, when the General Synod declares in its formula of confessional subscription that it accepts

the Augsburg Confessions as a correct exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of the divine word and of the faith of our church founded upon that word, she means precisely what she says, namely, that the fundamental doctrines of God’s word are correctly set forth in the Confession. She does not mean that some of the doctrines set forth in the Confession are non-fundamental, and, therefore, may be accepted or rejected; she means that they are all fundamental, and their exhibition in the confession is to be accepted by those who subscribe to the Confession.⁷⁷

Neve reaffirmed that this implied no intention to limit obligation to those parts of the Augsburg Confession which treat of such doctrines as are fundamental.⁷⁸

Still, Neve believed that even this did not remove the ambiguity. Even if one contends that the Augsburg Confession is a correct exhibition of THE fundamental doctrines of the Word, he inquired whether all of the fundamental doctrines of Scripture are represented here. One cannot limit the fundamental doctrines of the Bible to those set forth in the Augsburg Confession.⁷⁹ Neve questioned why, if according to the Des Moines resolution

⁷⁶*Proceedings of the Fortieth Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Des Moines, IA, May 29 - June, 6, 1901* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1901), 83-84.

⁷⁷Keyser, in *Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Richmond, Ind., June 2-10, 1909* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1909), 57.

⁷⁸Neve, *The Formulation of the General Synod’s Confessional Basis*, 16.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 31.

there shall be no distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, ought one make the distinction? He argued that for the sake of clarity, the General Synod should remove the troubling word altogether. Lutheranism, after all, is not a foundation; it is a structure. It includes the foundation and building. In its place he suggested the following formula: "I accept all in the *Augustana* that has, in any way, the character of *confessional substance* [*sic*]. This is the only distinction that we can make, the distinction between confessional and non-confessional substance."⁸⁰

The other issue which had brought the General Synod criticism was its refusal to incorporate recognition in its confessional basis of the so-called secondary symbols, especially the Formula of Concord. Based upon its historical position and form Neve argued that the Augsburg Confession alone embodied the true nature and spirit of a confession. On this basis he contended that the General Synod rightfully maintained the distinction between the primary creeds and the secondary creeds. This meant that the church need not include the Formula of Concord in the formula of subscription used when ordaining a ministerial candidate or installing a new pastor of a church. The Formula of Concord voices a most necessary testimony, "but this does not include that such new statement must now, like the Augsburg Confession, become the object of confessional subscription."⁸¹

In the face of a growing appreciation of the Formula of Concord, the General Synod ensured that it would not become an object of confessional subscription. At their insistence the General Synod at Hagerstown, Maryland in 1895 expressed

its entire satisfaction with the present form of doctrinal basis and confessional subscription, which is the word of God, the infallible rule of faith and practice, and the Unaltered Augsburg Confessions, as throughout in perfect consistence with it—nothing more, nothing less.

Three observations are in order. First, the General Synod asserted that the *Augustana* was

⁸⁰Ibid., 34.

⁸¹Ibid., 9.

consistent with the Word of God. Secondly, it explicitly mentions the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Finally, and most significantly, it keeps the General Synod planted on the Augsburg Confession, “nothing more, nothing less.”

In this convention, Neve observed that the General Synod strove to remove misgivings regarding its view of the Augsburg Confession. For by disavowing the *Variata* of 1540 the General Synod not so much rejected the document itself as it rejected the “Melanchthonian theology behind the document, a theology which labored to bridge over the difference between Lutheranism and Calvinism . . . and regarded doctrinal distinctions with indifference.”⁸² The weakness of Melanchthon, Neve believed, is not that he changes his views on the Lord’s Supper, “but he loses the appreciation of the difference between Luther and his opponents.”⁸³ This meant meant that the General Synod stood for genuine Lutheranism over against any modifications in favor of Crypto-Calvinism or Synergism.⁸⁴

At the same time, men like M. Valentine and J. W. Richard feared the enlargement of the confessional basis of the General Synod, thereby reducing it to a lower standard in thought and spirit. For that reason and at their urging the convention asserted that it would accept only the Augsburg Confession—“nothing more, nothing less!”⁸⁵ This insertion proved to be an important curb on later efforts to recognize in some manner the remaining confessional writings of the Lutheran church.

Still, in its desire for closer relations with the General Council, the General Synod felt compelled to move toward some form of recognition or acknowledgement of the sec-

⁸²Ibid., 13.

⁸³J[uergen] L. Neve, “Are We Justified in Distinguishing Between an Altered and an Unaltered Augustana as the Confession of the Lutheran Church?” *Lutheran Church Review* 30 (January 1911): 144.

⁸⁴Ibid., 160, 161.

⁸⁵Neve, *History of the Lutheran Church in America*, 343.

ondary confessions. It did so in 1909 at Richmond. Keyser submitted a resolution, which the General Synod adopted, that the Augsburg Confession “is the original and generic Lutheran Confession, accepted by Luther and his coadjutors, adopted by all Lutheran bodies the world over, and is therefore generally recognized as the adequate and sufficient standard of Lutheran doctrine.”⁸⁶

He submitted a second resolution regarding the remaining confessional writings in the *Book of Concord*. It read:

In making this statement, however, the General Synod in no wise means to imply that she ignores, rejects, repudiates or antagonizes the Secondary Symbols of the Book of Concord, nor forbids any of her members from accepting or teaching all of them, in strict accordance with the Lutheran regulating principle of justifying faith. On the contrary, she holds those Symbols in high esteem, regards them as a most valuable body of Lutheran belief, explaining and unfolding the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession, and she hereby recommends that they be diligently and faithfully studied by our ministers and laymen.⁸⁷

Important to note at this point is the distinction drawn between the symbols and the reasons given for maintaining the distinction.

The reasons set forth reflect the basic historical orientation enunciated by Neve. Based on its historical character rather than its biblical character, the General Synod considered the *Augustana* alone as a true *confession* in spirit and form. The *Report on State of the Church* held that the Augsburg Confession alone defined the true boundaries of a genuine catholicism. “To add to it confessionally would encumber our theological march and conquest of the modern world.”⁸⁸ Neve commented that what the General Synod, by limiting confessional subscription to the *Augustana*, wanted to distinguish between “the essential and universally acknowledged doctrines of the Lutheran Reformation” as they first came to light and the “elaboration of these doctrines in the form of theological reflection and specu-

⁸⁶Keyser, *Proceedings, 1909*, 57. Adopted resolution on p. 60.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 135.

lative exhibition.”⁸⁹

To subscribe the Augsburg Confession, nothing more and nothing less, does not mean to exclude the the Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord as “*a proper interpretation and a legitimate development of the doctrines of the Augustana.*”⁹⁰ In other words, the remaining confessions are welcomed as “commentaries to our ancient standard of faith.”⁹¹ Although in the past the distinction between primary and secondary confessions was made in order to bring contempt on Formula of Concord, Neve believed that such was no longer the case. As a result, he insisted that “the unaltered Augsburg Confession cannot be honestly accepted without including what the Secondary Confessions contain as legitimate interpretation of the great generic symbol of the Lutheran Church.” So the one who subscribes to the Augsburg Confession “practically enters the same obligation with those subscribing to the whole Book of Concord.”⁹² To choose the Augsburg Confession and ignore the other confessions reflects “an unhistorical study” of the symbols.

Nevertheless, in a doctrinal paragraph of a church’s constitution there can be no phrase regarding the secondary confessions. One may have explanatory reference in the constitution of the church, but not in ordination formulas.⁹³ Neve argued that should one in an ordination vow refer to the secondary confessions as a most valuable exhibition of

⁸⁹Neve, *The Formulation of the General Synod’s Confessional Basis*, 8.

⁹⁰Ibid., 10.

⁹¹*Proceedings, 1909*, 135.

⁹²J[uergen] L. Neve, *Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church: A Historical Survey of the Oecumenical and Particular Symbols of Lutheranism, An Outline of their Contents, and an Interpretation of their Theology on the Basis of the Doctrinal Article of the Augsburg Confession . . . with contributions by George J. Fritschel*, 2nd rev. ed. (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1926), 34.

⁹³Neve, *The Formulation of the General Synod’s Confessional Basis*, 35.

Lutheran belief which explains and unfolds the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession, it “would detract from the dignity of the form of confessional subscription” that should be used in such solemn services.⁹⁴ He granted that the secondary confessions must be regarded, “in the light of the Lutheran regulating principle of justifying faith,” as necessary interpretations of the *Augustana’s* doctrines and as inseparable from the teachings of the *Augustana*. But they can not claim to be a creed in the same manner as is the Augsburg Confession.⁹⁵

By 1911, the many resolutions and explanations proposed over the previous four decades created confusion among many of its members. So the General Synod moved to codify into one statement these resolutions in its 1913 convention. There they amended the constitution with an article pertaining to the secondary confessions. It read:

While the General Synod regards the Augsburg Confession as a sufficient and altogether adequate doctrinal basis for the co-operation of Lutheran Synods, it also recognizes the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalkald Articles, the Small Catechism of Luther, the Large Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord as expositions of Lutheran doctrine of great historical and interpretative value, and especially commends the Small Catechism as a book of instruction.⁹⁶

With this statement, the General Synod brought to a culmination nearly a century of debate regarding the extent to which the Confessions must be accepted for one to be considered Lutheran. The amendment also expresses the general historical and developmental orientation of the General Synod with regard to its confessional writings.

These emphases and distinctions found their way into the constitution of the United Lutheran Church in America in 1918. It receives the Augsburg Confession, in Article II, section 3, as a “correct exhibition of faith and doctrine. . . founded on the Word of God.”

⁹⁴Ibid., 7.

⁹⁵Ibid., 8,9.

⁹⁶*Proceedings of the Forty-Sixth Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Atchison, Kansas, May 14-21, 1913* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 126.

Reference to the remaining confessions was made in Section 4. There the ULCA “recognized” the Apology, Smalcald Articles, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and Formula of Concord “as in harmony of one and the same Scriptural faith.”

The Role of Confessional Subscription *Ad Extra*

Just as the General Synod focused on the outward form of the document known as the Augsburg Confession and regarded it as a sufficient basis for establishing its Lutheran identity, it also considered it a sufficient basis upon which to establish Lutheran unity. So the General Synod held up the Augsburg Confession in its entirety as the symbol and standard of her Lutheranism and as the basis upon which “she maintains that she is both evangelical and Lutheran.” Secondly, as a document it suffices “to cultivate fellowship and cooperate with all Lutherans who likewise accept, *ex animo*, the Augsburg Confession, whether or not they accept confessionally the other symbols of the Book of Concord.”⁹⁷ The doctrines set forth in the “secondary symbols,” regarded as developments, deductions, and interpretations, are not necessary for unity. Neve also adds that not only did the *Augustana* express the faith of the Lutheran church, but it is “really first of all an expression of Christian Catholicity.”⁹⁸

That the General Synod expressed a greater interest in establishing common agreement upon a document, in this case the document known as the Augsburg Confession, rather than agreement in the pure doctrine set forth in that document, comes to light by the way in which they regarded the doctrines they set forth in the secondary symbols. It also highlights the way in which they viewed the perspicuity of Scripture.

In response to Francis Pieper’s work, *Conversion and Election: A Lutheran Plea*

⁹⁷Keyser, *Proceedings*, 1909, 59.

⁹⁸Neve, *The Story and Significance of the Augsburg Confession*, 141.

for a United Lutheranism in America,⁹⁹ Keyser argues that one should not force union on the basis of a “deep and difficult” doctrine like election.¹⁰⁰ In the present state, it should remain in the sphere of Christian liberty. Why should Lutherans remain divided over it as long as they agree on *sola gratia* and *universalis gratia* as expressed in the *Augustana*?¹⁰¹ To insist on agreement in election involves profound and difficult issues, intricate and logical arguments, scholarly exegesis and refined distinctions. So it would be neither right nor necessary to divide the church on these “theological subtleties.” It would be better to make common cause against rationalism and negative criticism.

Instead, Keyser argues, since *all* genuine Lutherans in this country accept the *Augustana*, would not that be the most satisfactory basis for Lutheran community and cooperation?¹⁰² Keyser proceeds to suggest the following as a platform for Lutheran unity:

To hold and accept the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as our creed, and Luther’s Small Catechism as our book of instruction; then to acknowledge the abiding historical, doctrinal, and spiritual value of the Secondary Symbols of the Book of Concord, and to maintain that a thorough mastery of their contents is necessary in order properly to understand and appreciate the Lutheran system of faith.¹⁰³

Keyser believes that this platform would not keep before the church so many questions that engender division. It gives the church a fixed and fundamental Lutheran creed on which all Lutherans could stand, and yet would place the development and theological refinements of the supplemental Confessions in the domain of liberty and free discussion. He continues, “after all, the Augsburg Confession contains the seed and essence of the Lutheran faith, all

⁹⁹(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1913).

¹⁰⁰Leander S. Keyser, *Election and Conversion: A Frank Discussion of Dr. Pieper’s Book on “Conversion and Election,” with Suggestions for Lutheran Concord and Union on Another Basis* (Burlington, IA: German Literary Board, 1914), 159.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 160.

¹⁰²Ibid., 166.

¹⁰³Ibid., 167.

concisely and lucidly set forth; the other Symbols are only the development of these seminal principles.”¹⁰⁴

This approach to unity, agreement on the historical documents without agreement on the particular doctrines within them, culminated in the reunion of the General Synod with the General Council and the United General Synod South. These views would also find expression in the approach taken by the United Lutheran Church in America to the question of Lutheran Unity. As the General Synod, it insisted that all who accept the Augsburg Confession are entitled to the name “Lutheran” and therefore nothing stands in the way of an organic union of the various Lutheran synods.

Summary

In this transitional period of American Lutheranism, then, one finds the General Synod moving away from the American Lutheranism of S. S. Schmucker and toward a more conservative confessionalism. At the same time, unwilling to forsake its heritage of openness to contemporary theological movements, the General Synod opted for a confessionalism that it believed would not restrict or limit its freedom. Upon closer inspection, one can see that despite moving farther than Schmucker towards a greater appreciation and acknowledgment of the entire *corpus* of confessional writings, the confessionalism they adopted reveals much in common with that of Schmucker’s, especially in its emphasis upon the Confessions as historical, man-made documents rather than expressions of God-given doctrine. The succeeding generations of the ULCA would build upon this foundation and work out to its logical conclusions the implications of the specific directions as set forth by the Erlangen school and as suggested by a historical orientation.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 166.

CHAPTER III

A DICHOTOMOUS CONFSSIONALISM

In their desire for a churchly reunion with the General Council, the General Synod appears to have adopted more conservative positions than they would have liked and thus avoided the logical conclusions to which their developmental confessionalism pointed. But once the United Lutheran Church in America was formed in 1918, such concerns no longer silenced the voices of those Lutheran theologians who favored more radical interpretations of the Lutheran Confessions as historical documents or texts. As the ULCA began to explore the limits and consequences of its historical attitude toward the Confessions, the debate among Lutherans concerning confessional subscription shifted from the extent to which the Confessions defined what it meant to be a Lutheran to whether or not the Confessions could adequately define Lutheranism and ensure the continuity of its message.

The more radical direction in confessional attitudes taken within the ULCA coincides with the rise of a new generation of scholars who revealed a strong “preference for the confessionalism of Erlangen and a distaste for extra-confessional requirements for Lutheran unity.”¹ With the election of Henry Offermann (1910) to the chair of New Testament and Charles M. Jacobs (1913), the son of Henry Eyster, to the chair of church history at the Philadelphia Seminary, there came a new theological orientation.² Offermann (1866-1953) had been “deeply influenced” by representatives of the Erlangen school from

¹Clifford E. Nelson, *The Lutheran Church among Norwegian-Americans: A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), 284.

²*Ibid.*, 283, footnote 3.

J. H. C. K. von Hoffmann to his contemporary Ludwig Ihmels and came to look upon the Bible not “as a collection of proof texts but as a witness to God’s redemptive acts in history.”³ Jacobs (1875-1938) received his education at the University of Leipzig, a stronghold of the Erlangen theology.⁴ The distinctive accents he brought to the Confessions would influence the official documents of the church for the next three decades. He either wrote or assisted in the formulation of the “Washington Declaration” (1920), the “Savannah Resolution” (1934), and the “Baltimore Declaration” (1938).

Upon the death of Jacobs in 1938, Theodore G. Tappert (1904-1973) was elevated to the chair of Professor of Church History at Philadelphia. Reflecting on the faculty at this time, Tappert remarks that it became not only clearer to these scholars that “the form of every teaching and practice of the past was conditioned, but the need for a more conscious address by the church to the people of the new age was also recognized.”⁵ The Lutheran heritage of the Reformation continued to be respected and valued, but the *paradosis* of the past was “adapted to the needs of the changing world.”⁶ Others who belong to this period and reflect its confessional attitudes include H. Grady Davis and Willard Dow Allbeck, Warren Quanbeck and John Schmidt.

The Nature and Meaning of Confessions

These men reflect two important attitudinal changes toward the Lutheran Confessions. First, Lutherans in the ULCA begin to take a more critical attitude toward

³Theodore G. Tappert, *The History of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, 1864-1964* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1964), 97.

⁴Ibid., 100. See also Nelson, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans*, 283-87 and Theodore G. Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 15-16.

⁵Tappert, *Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia*, 122.

⁶Ibid.

history. No longer will they view the past as normative or foundational for the present and the future.⁷ Where Juergen Neve had identified more continuity than discontinuity in the development of doctrine throughout history, it was now asked whether twentieth century scholarship conflicted with sixteenth century conclusions. This possibility—even probability—led a number of theologians to see in the Lutheran symbols greater discontinuity than continuity. Secondly, not to relativize their confessional writings entirely, Lutheran scholars would stress the significance of the “confession” within the “confessions.” They defined the “confession” of the church as that to which the confessional documents witness, that is their message, and the “confessions” as denoting the texts of the historically defined documents embodying that message.

The Confessions as Historical Documents

Even more than Neve, the leaders of the ULCA stressed the Lutheran Confessions as *Gelegenheitsschriften*, as writings which “were very literally extorted from their authors by circumstances which these authors could in no respect control.”⁸ This means, added Offermann, that each confession is “a child of its time and bears the marks of the historical conditions by which it was occasioned and out of which it has arisen.”⁹ Consequently, Davis argued that the Confessions claim to be definitive, not for all time, but each for its own time, as over against the permanence and finality of the Scriptures.¹⁰ For these reasons then, Lutheran scholars argued that the historical dimension must be the point of de-

⁷Ibid.

⁸Charles M. Jacobs, “Inaugural Address,” *The Lutheran Church Review* 47 (1927): 221.

⁹Henry F. Offermann, “What is Lutheranism?” in *What is Lutheranism? A Symposium in Interpretation*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930), 47.

¹⁰H. Grady Davis, “What Does Confessional Subscription Involve?” *Lutheran Church Quarterly* 13 (October 1940): 369.

parture from which to determine the contemporary significance of the Lutheran confessional writings.

Tappert identified three ways in which the historical settings of the Confessions condition their form and, to some extent, their content. The most obvious way in which history highlights the discontinuity between “then and now” is the language of the Confessions be it philosophical, polemical, or ecclesiastical. For example, people no longer use philosophical categories like “substance,” “accident,” “merit,” and “satisfaction.” Likewise, those living in the twentieth century chafe at the “unlovely and abusive references” to opponents as “rude asses,” “godless sycophants,” or “windbags.”¹¹ These terminological difficulties and unedifying circumstances, Tappert holds, can be overcome by historical study. At any rate, he adds, the authority of the Confessions does not depend on their terminology and language, but on their inherent truth.¹²

Secondly, Tappert points to the patent errors of fact reflecting the lack of precision in the historical methodology of the age which are found within the Confessions. For example, a reference to Revelation 12 should be Revelation 10. Elsewhere the confessors misquote Jerome, and attribute the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope to “the theologians assembled at Smalcald” when in actuality it was written by Melancthon. Tappert also points to the “ridiculous etymology” of the word “Mass” which the Apology traces to a Hebrew origin as well as the etymology of the word “church” in the Large Catechism.¹³ Moreover, the Confessions contain such superseded notions as *clauso utero*

¹¹Theodore G. Tappert, “The Symbols of the Church,” in *What Lutherans are Thinking: A Symposium on Lutheran Faith and Life*, ed. E. C. Fendt (Columbus: Wartburg, 1947), 355.

¹²Theodore G. Tappert, “The Function of Creeds and Confessions in the Church,” *Lutheran Church Quarterly* 20 (July 1947): 240.

¹³Theodore G. Tappert, “Some Statements on Confessional Subscription Offered for Discussion,” in *Studies: The Confession-Making Process* (n.p.: Lutheran Council in the USA, 1975), 47.

and statements like “the world is growing worse.” Finally, Tappert muses, the confessors reject a theological position of the Romanists on the ground that their opponents are “asses.”¹⁴

More serious than these lapses of “seemliness or memory in historical, philological and scientific knowledge,” according to Tappert, are the problems growing out of their form, questionable statements that are either directly or indirectly doctrinal in their implications. For instance, the *Augustana* does not qualify that baptism is necessary to salvation by inserting the word “ordinarily.”¹⁵ In the Apology, Melanchthon appears to include ordination as a sacrament if properly understood. More importantly, the *Tractate* teaches an outmoded conception of the relation between church and state when Melanchthon calls kings and princes the “chief members of the church” whose duty is to “guard the interests of the church and see that errors be removed and consciences healed.”¹⁶ Luther’s prefaces to the catechisms suggest the same thing. Finally, Lutherans today are less sure than the Treatise that Matthew 16:18,19 refers to confession rather than to Peter. Related to this, Lutherans today hold that the confessional view of the Pope must be regarded not as a doctrine but as a historical judgment.¹⁷

Taken together, these philological, philosophical, and theological difficulties demonstrate that the Confessions contain “historical judgments of men, human interpretations of Scripture, explanations and illustrations of doctrine, rational deductions, theologi-

¹⁴Tappert, “Symbols of the Church,” 357.

¹⁵Ibid. See also Theodore G. Tappert, “The Significance of Confessional Subscription,” in *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (New York: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, 1961), 29.

¹⁶Tappert, “Symbols of the Church,” 357.

¹⁷Otto W. Heick, “The Meaning of the Lutheran Symbols Today,” *Lutheran Church Quarterly* 19 (October 1947): 361.

cal thought, and human formulations in the elusive and treacherous medium of language.”¹⁸ This implies that not only the form in which the Confessions present themselves, but their content as well were in some measure shaped by the circumstances.¹⁹ These matters bring to the fore the historical limitation of the Confessions and raise the problem of continuity.

Anticipating this, Tappert adds that the human and historical limitations of these documents do “not thereby rob them of their meaning for today.”²⁰ Jacobs too, believes that the Confessions can still speak to contemporary man, but they must be understood in their “historical sense.”²¹ The ULCA adopted this very position in 1934 when it declared, “We believe that these Confessions are to be interpreted in their historical context, not as a law or as a system of theology,” but as “a witness and declaration of faith as to how the Holy Scriptures were understood and explained on the matters in controversy within the Church of God by those who then lived.”²²

Tappert believed that the church, in order to interpret the Confessions historically, must read the Confessions in the light of three major points of reference. The first is Martin Luther. He penned three of the six confessions in the *Book of Concord*, and although he did not write the remaining four, including the *Treatise*, they nevertheless rest on him and his writings. To read the Lutheran Confessions in the light of Luther, how-

¹⁸Davis, “Confessional Subscription,” 365.

¹⁹Tappert, “Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 28.

²⁰Tappert, “Symbols of the Church,” 355.

²¹Charles M. Jacobs, “Inaugural Address,” 223.

²²*Minutes of the Ninth Biennial Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America, Savannah, Georgia, October 17-24, 1934* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication House, 1934), 416. See also *Doctrinal Declarations: A Collection of Official Statements on the Doctrinal Position of Various Lutheran Bodies in America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 59.

ever, does not set up Luther as an authority over the Confessions, it only recognizes that “the confessions are a historical expression of the Reformation of which he was the guiding spirit.”²³ It means that one cannot accept or subscribe the Confessions and at the same time repudiate the sum and substance of Luther’s theology which makes “a most valuable contribution to the common confession of the Lutheran Church.”²⁴

The second point of reference from which one must read the confessional writings is the pre-Reformation church. The Augsburg Confession claims for its teaching that nothing “departs from the Scriptures, or from the Church Catholic, or from the Church of Rome as known from its writers.”²⁵ This declaration, Tappert holds, gives the Lutheran church an ecumenical outlook. Moreover, the entire history of the Lutheran Reformation supports this claim by testifying to a profound and very genuine concern for the continuity of the church.

Finally, and most significantly, an historical interpretation requires an acknowledgement of the “larger setting of the Confessions in the Reformation movement.”²⁶ The confessors were involved in a two-front war. They had to clarify and defend their interpretation of Christianity over against Catholicism on the right and the Anabaptists and Zwinglians on the left. This recognition is important not only for determining what the confessors were actually declaring but whether they were justified under the circumstances in declaring what they did. Such a decision requires a “fair historical appraisal of the alternative interpretations of Christianity both on the right and on the left, and then also a careful theological decision as to whether ‘the Holy Scriptures were understood’ aright by those

²³Tappert, “Symbols of the Church,” 360.

²⁴Offermann, “What is Lutheranism?” 46.

²⁵Tappert, “Symbols of the Church,” 361.

²⁶Tappert, “Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 28.

who were ‘contemporaries.’”²⁷ Jacobs asserts that this means one can’t simply ask, “is this the truth?” but, “Which is right, this doctrine or its opposite?” The best one can say about the Confessions is that the confessors, in their search for truth, dealt “not with absolutes, but with alternatives.”²⁸

The conviction that the Confessions are conditioned by their history and must be interpreted historically led Lutheran scholars to dichotomize the human and external form of the Confessions, which is temporal, from the content or message of the Confessions, which lifts them above the relativities of their age. So Offermann admonishes, “What some of us will have to learn is the simple and obvious fact that there is a difference between truth and the formulation of truth, between faith and the expression of faith, between the substance of a confession and its form.”²⁹ In the same vein, Robert Fischer insists that “we must distinguish in the confessions between basic principles and individual manifestations of thought conditioned and limited by the times of their writing.”³⁰ By doing so, one can appropriate the real spirit of the Confessions “without being shackled by their historical limitations.”³¹ Similarly, Willard Dow Allbeck defines the “confession” as a living testimony of the Gospel and the “Confessions” as documents embodying that testimony.³²

²⁷Ibid., 29

²⁸Charles M. Jacobs, “Inaugural Address,” 222.

²⁹Offermann, “What is Lutheranism?” 52.

³⁰Robert H. Fischer, “The Confessions in our Congregational Life,” *Lutheran World* 7 (March 1961): 409. See Lowell C. Green who criticized the confessional article for the proposed formation of the American Lutheran Church in 1960. He wrote, “What is necessary is that we learn to distinguish between the dogma that is presented and the manner in which it is presented when the latter shows the limitations of the times.” In “Toward an Evangelical Understanding of the Lutheran Confessions,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 9 (1957): 24.

³¹Robert H. Fischer, “The Confessions in our Congregational Life,” 411.

³²Willard Dow Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1968), 3.

The “confession” then, not the “confessions,” ensures the continuity of the church’s proclamation. Offermann grants that the Lutheran Confessions are a standard and norm for the faith and life of the church, but insists, “It is the confession *within* these historic confessions that is the important thing. And it is the faith *back* of the confession which is the very heart and soul of them.”³³ It is this faith which connects one with the faith of the ancient church and with the faith that is a living possession in the hearts of believers. This means that the “common confession of Lutheranism is greater than any of the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church, and it is greater than all the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church taken together.”³⁴

The dichotomy between the witness to the truth and the form in which that witness is expressed by the Confessions keeps the door open for the further development of the church’s dogma by allowing scholars to use the modern tools of biblical scholarship—regardless of the results. Jacobs avers,

We have learned, and we are learning, to combine conservatism with progress. The life of faith within us is striving forward, as life must ever strive, toward new appreciations of the truth we have, new ways of understanding its relation to the lives and groups of men, new convictions about its meaning in the light of our knowledge of the world.³⁵

Writing for the laity, John Schmidt warns that it would be disastrous if confessional fidelity meant a rejection of contemporary obligations to revise views that were in accord with the

³³Offermann, “What is Lutheranism?” 51.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 45. See also Fischer who explains the distinction that “living faith in Jesus Christ as Savior is carried and communicated in “the faith, i.e., in theological forms, for which our Lutheran confessions remain normative for us, but that this living faith is neither automatically guaranteed nor exhaustively conveyed by them.” “The Confessionalism of American Lutheran Church Bodies of German Background,” in *The Church and Her Confessions: The Role of the Confessions in the Life and Doctrine of the Lutheran Churches*, ed. Vilmos Vajta and Hans Weissgerber (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 79.

³⁵Charles M. Jacobs, “Inaugural Address,” 224.

Confessions in the light of new insights.³⁶

In addition to the need for contemporary scholarship, George A. Lindbeck advances the suggestion that such an historical orientation to the Confessions may have been more ecumenically profitable in Lutheran history if Lutherans had been willing

to ask whether the *faith* to which the Confessions bear witness might not perhaps have become more widespread, more deeply influential, if less emphasis had been placed on the words of the Confessions themselves. Perhaps their content, their substance, would have been more effectively presented to the hearts and minds of men if less attention had been placed on acceptance of the form, that is, the actual historical documents.³⁷

Lindbeck, as the others, does not thereby seek to eliminate some sort of fidelity to the Confessions. He simply calls for the church to emphasize the pole of contemporaneity.

The dichotomization of the Confessions, then, underscores the documents known as the Lutheran Confessions as human, limited and imperfect writings. As historical texts, the Confessions come to be viewed as keepsakes of one's origin, as the "classical statements of Lutheran testimony concerning God's revelation" and "classical expressions of evangelical theology."³⁸ To put it even stronger, Schmidt contends, "No human creed can be more than a finger pointing with awe to the wonderful grace of God in Christ Jesus."³⁹ Since the message of God's grace becomes abstracted from the form which conveys it, the question is raised about how the church ensures that this message is proclaimed faithfully.

The Biblical Character of the Confessions

The dichotomization of the Confessions conditioned the way in which Lutherans

³⁶John Schmidt, *The Lutheran Confessions: Their Value and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1956), 38.

³⁷George A. Lindbeck, "The Confessions as Ideology and Witness in the History of Lutheranism," *Lutheran World* 7 (1961): 396.

³⁸Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, 4, 7.

³⁹Schmidt, 46.

understood the Scriptural basis of the Lutheran Confessions. While scholars in the ULCA recognized and affirmed the biblical character of the confessional writings of the Lutheran church,⁴⁰ several significant shifts in attitudes toward the Scriptures correlate with and support the dichotomy of words and message in the Lutheran Confessions. The identification of Scripture with the Word of God is altered to a view which identifies the Word of God with the message of the Scriptures, that is, the Gospel. Moreover, theologians begin to move away from stressing the authority of the Word of God in terms of its norming function and toward a position which emphasizes the instrumental purpose of God's Word. These shifts lead to a greater emphasis on the subjective apprehension of God's Word, and consequently, to a more restricted view on the way in which the Lutheran Confessions ensure the continuity of the church's message.

Once again, Jacobs articulated what would become the accepted meaning of the Word of God within the ULCA. In his inaugural address he announced, "With all the emphasis we lay upon the Scriptures, we do not identify them with the Word of God."⁴¹ The Word of God is a dynamic power which creates the faith that lies behind the Confessions. It has acquired the primary significance as the means of grace. But, Jacobs adds, "none of us will say that the Bible is a means of grace, save as it preserves in human language and passes down from generation to generation the record of God's Word."⁴² In fact, Jacobs observes, the Scriptures show both human and divine characteristics, not only the "perfect

⁴⁰Charles M. Jacobs asserts that the confessions claim, a "profound inner correspondence with the Scriptures," in "Inaugural Address," 223. Tappert asserts that the significance of confessions stands or falls "according to the correctness of their interpretation of Scriptures," in "Symbols of the Church," 363. Offerman reiterates, "What authority they possess is derived from the fact that they are a clear exposition of the Word of God itself," in Offermann, "What is Lutheranism?" 56.

⁴¹Charles M. Jacobs, "Inaugural Address," 217.

⁴²Ibid., 217-18.

truth as it is in Christ, but half-truth as it lived in the minds of men.”⁴³ This means that the criterion of truth shifts from the words of Scripture to the message of Scripture.

Offermann seconds Jacobs’ attitude toward the Scriptures. He also advocates the view that the Gospel as the proclamation of God’s grace and mercy in Christ Jesus determines the Lutheran conception of the Word of God.⁴⁴ So in its most real sense, the Word of God is the material principle of Lutheranism, the doctrine of justification by faith. It is that Word by which saving faith is wrought in the heart of the believer. The Gospel as the Word of God and the means of God’s living revelation is based upon the historical revelation of God in the person and work of Jesus. The twenty-seven documents which comprise the canon of the New Testament record that historical revelation of God in Jesus, for which reason, may be referred to also as the Word of God.⁴⁵ Because they are only records of that revelation, Offerman contends that the Christian theologian may not only use the historical-critical method, but he is duty-bound to use it.

These views found official ULCA expression a decade later in the Baltimore Declaration.⁴⁶ Authored in large part by Jacobs, it asserts that in its “most real sense,” the Word of God is the Gospel, that is, the message concerning Jesus Christ. Through this Gospel the Holy Spirit creates faith, and it is for this reason that “we call the Word of God, or the Gospel, a means of grace.” In a “wider sense,” the Word of God is that revelation of Himself which began at the beginning of human history, continued throughout the ages,

⁴³Ibid., 219.

⁴⁴Offermann, “What is Lutheranism?” 57.

⁴⁵Ibid., 69.

⁴⁶*Minutes of the Eleventh Biennial Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America, Baltimore, Maryland, October 5-12, 1938* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication House, 1938), 473. For the origin and formulation of this declaration, see Henry Offermann, “An Interpretation of the Baltimore Declaration,” *Lutheran Church Quarterly* 12 (1939): 279-87.

and reached its fullness and completion in the life and work of Jesus. Finally, this whole revelation of God to men is recorded and preserved in the Holy Scriptures through which it comes to the church today.

In a secondary sense then, the Scriptures are the Word of God because it is through them that God makes himself known. Moreover, Tappert adds, this is the view of the Confessions themselves.

The Scriptures were themselves sometimes called the Word of God. But when the Scriptures and the Word of God are thus identified, a distinction between the two must still be preserved, for the Scriptures are the Word of God *only insofar as* or *only because* [italics added] they are witnesses to the message of and about Christ.⁴⁷

For Luther and the Confessions, the real presence and activity of Christ in the Word is paramount. For this reason the reformers placed “such weight on the spoken Word, the oral Word, the Word that is proclaimed. In this Word, Christ himself, who is present, addresses us personally.”⁴⁸

The dichotomy of Scripture and Gospel implies that the conviction of the Gospel as the Word of God is established by one’s experience. It is an *a posteriori* conclusion of Christian experience: “The Scriptures are the Word of God because in them we experience the power of the gospel. To a person who does not experience the power of the gospel in the Scriptures, the Scriptures cannot be proved to be the Word of God.”⁴⁹ It is only after one experiences its power that then one can assert that the Bible is inspired also in its origin. “But notice that this is not the premise of our faith—it is a conclusion. We do not believe in God because the Bible is inspired, but because we believe in God and hear

⁴⁷Theodore G. Tappert, “The Word of God according to the Lutheran Confessions,” in *The Maturing of American Lutheranism*, ed. H. T. Neve and B. A. Johnson (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), 62.

⁴⁸Ibid., 63.

⁴⁹Ibid., 69.

him speak to us in it we can conclude that the Bible is inspired.”⁵⁰ For this reason, Tappert contends, the so-called mechanical theory is not harmonized easily with the Lutheran Confessions. It was “intended to buttress the authority of the Scriptures: The Scriptures are authoritative and true because they are inspired.” But the earlier Lutheran view, he holds, was the reverse.

Still, the Gospel which creates this experience is found in Scripture which is “the norm for determining what the gospel is.”⁵¹ The question that arises, however, concerns how the Scriptures can determine what the Gospel is unless they are the very words of God. Tappert acknowledges, “Significantly, no reason is given for this. The only reason that can be given is that God actually forgives, justifies, saves through the gospel to which the Scriptures testify.”⁵² It cannot be demonstrated by reason; it can only be experienced. So in the end it becomes a subjective evaluation: “It is important to notice that this understanding of the center of the Scriptures is a spiritual evaluation. It is an interpretation which rests on Christian experience and not merely on rational analysis.”⁵³

Such a view of the authority of the Confessions found expression in the founding documents of the Lutheran Church in America in 1962. Johannes Knudsen, who sat on the committee which formulated the doctrinal statement, held that since any statement about the character and authority of Scripture should “emerge from this commitment to Christ” the merger churches chose to break with “the practice of beginning with a statement of the Bible’s authority.”⁵⁴ They felt no need to include any comment on the literal inerrancy of

⁵⁰Ibid., 69, 70.

⁵¹Ibid., 70.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., 67.

⁵⁴Johannes Knudsen, *The Formation of the Lutheran Church in America* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1978), 32.

Scripture. The “time was ripe for setting a new pattern or a new approach to doctrinal statements.”⁵⁵ Accordingly, Article II begins with Jesus Christ before proceeding to declare the importance of Holy Scripture “as the inspired record of God’s redemptive act, and as the continuing voice of the gospel in the world today.”⁵⁶

These views of the Word of God led to a greater emphasis upon the Confessions as the subjective apprehensions of the Gospel than as objective restatements of Scripture. In doing so, it brought to the fore a tension between the witness of the Scriptures and the witness of the Lutheran Confessions.⁵⁷ It means that one must recognize the two ways in which God approaches man, namely mediately and immediately, horizontally and vertically, through history and Scripture. He addresses man mediately through His mighty acts in history, especially in the good news of Christ which has been handed down from the time of apostles. And so one can say that God comes to man as it were, on a horizontal plane through a long chain of witnesses who have at least preserved the Scriptures even when they have not had a univocal understanding of them. At the same time God addresses man vertically, directly, here and now, through the Word of God.

Since the confessional writings of the church are “a literary deposit of the living encounter which men in the sixteenth century had with God when they heard his Word,” Tappert observes, “they affirm that God will speak in later generations in a similar fashion.”⁵⁸ Today the church, in its encounter with Scripture, is arriving at its own experience of the truth. So while the church must listen to God as he spoke to and through the Reformers—indeed, as he spoke to and through Christians throughout the entire history of

⁵⁵Ibid., 33.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Tappert, “Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 30.

⁵⁸Ibid.

the church—it must also listen to God as he speaks in the witness of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, and the church . Tappert uses this tension to advance the argument that this implies the very real probability that at a later date the church will need to correct the Confessions' interpretation of the Scriptures.

In fact, Tappert argues, the confessors called for this very attitude. They formulated the Confessions in the belief that there was a contradiction in some fundamental matters between the testimony of the Scriptures and proclamation of the church of their day. They also reckoned with the possibility that similar contradictions might occur again. So when some Lutherans

today raise questions about what the Formula of Concord asserts concerning the third use of the law (Article VI), they are not only alleging that the Formula misunderstood Luther but they are also suggesting that statements in the Formula may be in conflict with the testimony of the Scriptures.⁵⁹

Tappert contends that one cannot simply rule the question out of bounds. Part of the continuing task of the church is “to discover, in so far as this is possible, what the truth is, and not merely to defend or apologize for an utterance in the Confessions.”⁶⁰ In time a solution will either establish or qualify the teaching set forth in the Formula of Concord.

The adoption of an historical and critical attitude toward the Confessions not only dichotomizes their formulation and message, it also draws a sharp distinction between the Scriptures and the Gospel. In doing so, it dichotomizes the continuity and contemporaneity of the Confessions. By relativizing the historical formulation of the Confessions, the way for adopting contemporary methodologies and their results was kept open. Jacobs argued that the Lutheran Church

would have our talent in circulation, not put away in a napkin. We are true to our Confessions, but they have not ended our development. We have learned, and we are learning, to combine conservatism with progress. The life of faith within us is striv

⁵⁹Ibid., 31.

⁶⁰Ibid.

ing forward, as life must ever strive, toward new appreciations of the truth we have, new ways of understanding its relation to the lives and groups of men, new convictions about its meaning in the light of our knowledge of the world.⁶¹

By spiritualizing the content of the Confessions, an attempt was made to maintain the continuity of the church's proclamation.

The Role and Function of the Confessions

The sharp distinction between the message and the expression of that message manifested itself in the way in which Lutherans perceived the role and form of subscription required by the church. As might be expected, scholars in the ULCA deemphasized the normative function of the Confessions in favor of a less restrictive role for the Confessions within the church. Jacobs articulated what would become the dominant view in the ULCA, namely that the Confessions are "not final utterances in theology" and not laws for religious thought, but witness and guides to the truth.⁶² This view would manifest itself in the way in which one subscribed the *Book of Concord*, namely "hypothetically," and in the basis upon which the ULCA proposed that Lutheran unity may best be attained.

The Role of Confessions

Tappert identified four historical functions of the Confessions within the life of the church. First, members of the same church need to hold some things in common because common actions flow from common convictions. Confessions "express the common faith of the church."⁶³ The second corresponds to the first. Anything that expresses the common convictions of the church becomes a bond of fellowship as an expression of unity. So confessions and creeds "preserve the unity of the church."⁶⁴ In fact, he notes, the original

⁶¹Charles M. Jacobs, "Inaugural Address," 224.

⁶²Ibid., 222.

⁶³Tappert, "Function of Creeds and Confessions," 236.

⁶⁴Ibid.

purpose of creeds was to unite rather than divide. Historically, the church formulated confessional statements in an attempt to “forestall disruption or to preserve at least the remnants of unity.”⁶⁵ They came after differences and consequent divisions occurred. They did not cause them.

Third, creeds exhibit the continuity of the church by reminding it of its unbroken fellowship with the church of all ages. But that continuity is not static. The Confessions evidence development as later formulations amplify earlier creeds for the purpose of meeting new issues.⁶⁶ When the church acknowledges that development has taken place from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries it also acknowledges that development has taken place since then. This does not mean that confessions no longer have any value. It means only that “they must be interpreted historically.”⁶⁷ Finally, if a line of continuity can be traced through the church’s past, it can be also projected into the future. The Confessions transmit to the future what has given the church its distinctive life and “safeguard the future of the church.”⁶⁸ For this reason the church requires some kind of confessional commitment. However, the purpose of such “confessional subscription is not to restrict the ways in which the gospel may be proclaimed but to make sure that what is proclaimed in the church is the gospel.”⁶⁹

Willard Allbeck contends that to view them as norms does not mean that Lutherans think of confessional subscription as a bondage. He compares creeds with highways.

The motorist drives his automobile only where there are roads; he could make little

⁶⁵Ibid., 237.

⁶⁶Ibid., 238.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Tappert, “Some Statements on Confessional Subscription,” 47. See Tappert, “Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 32.

progress through fields and woods. Because he can go only where there is a road, he would be moronic to consider roads a limitation to travel. It must be perfectly obvious that highways facilitate travel.⁷⁰

In an analogous way, the Confessions facilitate religious thinking, avoiding the impassable mountains of the unrevealed and the purely speculative, and skirting the disastrous swamps of error. T. A. Kantonen suggests that one look upon creeds as coal deposits. They are the light and life of bygone ages. “But coal is not something to be admired and cherished and handed on; the energy in it must be released for the present needs.”⁷¹

Confessional Subscription *Ad Intra*

How does the church then subscribe to the Confessions in view of their historical distance without cutting off the continuity they provide? Two options are available: revise the Confessions or revise the formula of subscription to the Confessions. Both Tappert and Davis argue that it is always dubious to tamper with historical documents and silence their testimony. But today nobody can honestly accept as true every jot and tittle in the *Book of Concord*, in content or formulation. So the form of subscription needs revision rather than the Confessions if men are “to subscribe without scruples of conscience.”⁷² To accomplish this, one must understand the Confessions “both in the light of history and in the light of their present meaning in the church.”⁷³ In the light of history means that with respect to the historical texts of the Confessions, one subscribes “hypothetically.” In the light of their present meaning implies that one recognizes that which is of abiding value in the confession, the “confession” within the “confessions.”

So when Jacobs proposed that Lutherans view the Confessions as historically

⁷⁰Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, 8.

⁷¹T. A. Kantonen, “Beset by Perils: Pits Dug for Pastors Which Must be Avoided,” *The Lutheran* 6 (December 6, 1939): 4.

⁷²Tappert, “Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 32.

⁷³Tappert, “Function of Creeds and Confessions,” 241.

conditioned documents in which the confessors confronted various alternatives, he intimated that today Lutherans can accept them in a sense, “hypothetically.” They can subscribe them with the conviction that “faced with the questions which the writers of the Confessions had to meet, we would have answered them as they did.”⁷⁴ Abdel Ross Wentz, a colleague of Jacobs, also insists that the Confessions are not a fetter binding one to antiquated ways of thinking. If “the same issues were to recur in the same intellectual environment the same statements would need to be made.”⁷⁵ In this way the church maintains a balance between authority and liberty, making it possible to conserve the basic values which the past has bequeathed the present generation and at the same time to meet the questions of later ages.

Following Jacob’s lead, Tappert argues that the church must maintain intellectual integrity without sacrificing confessional fidelity. To do so, it must recognize that the affirmations in the Confessions

were made in the context of alternatives which existed in the 16th century. Lutheran affirmations were made over against contemporaneous Roman (or right wing) and Anabaptist (or left wing) positions. Faced with the alternatives that then existed, the Lutheran answers were, and are, declared right and Christian.⁷⁶

Because they address different circumstances, the Confessions are cast into a variety of forms such as confession, apology, and catechism. This illustrates that the one Gospel can be set forth in diverse theological formulations. Davis agrees. To subscribe is to say of each one of them, “This was the right, the Christian answer in its time and place. If I had been here, this is what I should have said.”⁷⁷ It does not mean that they are the only way

⁷⁴Charles M. Jacobs, “Inaugural Address,” 222.

⁷⁵Abdel Ross Wentz, “What is Lutheranism?” in *What is Lutheranism? A Symposium of Interpretation*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930), 89.

⁷⁶Tappert, “Some Statements on Confessional Subscription,” 47.

⁷⁷Davis, “Confessional Subscription,” 369.

to express that truth. Nor does it involve “maintaining that every word, every statement, every idea in the Confessions is infallible Scriptural doctrine.”⁷⁸

Such a subscription, however, implies that were those issues before the church today, it would probably give different answers. And so the Confessions are relegated to the past. It has yet to deal with the contemporary value of confessional subscription for the minister of the church.

Addressing this question, Tappert maintains that an acknowledgement of the “historically conditioned expressions in the Confessions must not be allowed to obscure the impressive identity they possess with Scripture in what has been and still is believed, taught, and confessed. Confessional subscription asserts such identity and asserts that God has not left Himself without witnesses. “The understanding of the Word of God to which the Confessions are historical witnesses still commends itself to Lutherans as in harmony with the Scriptures and therefore as true.”⁷⁹ To read them in the light of their present meaning then means that one recognizes the dichotomy of the “confession” and the “confessions.”⁸⁰

Tappert suggests that it may be appropriate to substitute for a formula that implies “I subscribe the Lutheran Confessions [italics added] and all things therein contained as agreeable to the Word of God” with a more realistic formula such as: “I do willingly affirm and from my heart believe that the *teaching* [italics added] of the Lutheran Church, as witnessed in its confessions, is agreeable to the Word of God.”⁸¹ What this “‘confession’

⁷⁸Ibid., 363.

⁷⁹Tappert, “Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 32.

⁸⁰See Lowell Green who objects to the use of the confessions as norms and cites the distinction made by F. Brunstäd between the *Lerhgestalt* and the *Lehrintention*. The latter is binding, the former is not. “Toward an Evangelical Understanding,” 24, footnote 16.

⁸¹Tappert, “Function of Creeds and Confessions,” 241.

within the Confessions” is must be clarified anew in every generation after attentive consideration has been given to every jot and tittle in the *Book of Concord*. “Only thus can the continuity of the church be preserved without lapsing into sectarian obscurantism and without ultimately being untrue to the Confessions themselves.”⁸²

Davis contends that confessional subscription means that “we confess for our own time the living, eternal truth which achieved a specific, historical expression in each of our symbols.”⁸³ Does one subscribe to the Confession or the Confessions?⁸⁴ He cautions that if one subscribes only to the confession without at the same time meaning by it the historic confessions, it is no confessional pledge. But if it refers to the Confessions, why use the singular? Does it imply that there a Confession apart from the historic confessions? In its place he suggests a less ambiguous formula: “Will you preach and teach the pure Word of God in accordance with the faith which the Evangelical Lutheran Church confesses?” A true subscription means that with “all our heart, soul, mind, and strength we believe this Gospel in the way in which it is affirmed in the Confessions.”⁸⁵ This does not involve any theory or verbal or intellectual perfectionism in the Confessions themselves.

By 1961, George Lindbeck could declare approvingly that nearly all theologians made a distinction between “true confessional loyalty which shares the faith to which the Confessions and Scriptures bear witness, and a false ideological loyalty which makes the words of the Confessions and Bible themselves into idolatrous objects of belief.”⁸⁶ He

⁸²Tappert, “Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 32.

⁸³Davis, “Confessional Subscription,” 371.

⁸⁴Davis makes reference to the formula of subscription used in ordination services within the ULCA which states, “Will you preach and teach the pure Word of God in accordance with the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church?” *Occasional Services* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1943), 74.

⁸⁵Davis, “Confessional Subscription,” 368.

⁸⁶George A. Lindbeck, “The Confessions as Ideology and Witness,” 400.

applauded this trend as evidence that the church was entering a new era.

This dichotomy of confessional subscription rendered difficult an acceptance of the Confessions without reservation. In a sense one must subscribe *quatenus* with respect to the Confessions as texts, and *quia* with respect to the message of the Confessions. For this reason Tappert argues that the Confessions assert both a *quatenus* and a *quia*. Allbeck agrees, "Continued acceptance and use of creeds and confessions is based on the conviction that they properly speak the authentic Gospel message."⁸⁷ He admits that *quia* by all odds is the preferred term, but it says too much. A *quia* may carry with it an air of finality,

almost of infallibility, which no confessional tradition dare claim. It tends to absolutize statements which are human and never absolute. Its strength lies in the church's need to declare her faith with conviction, that the Gospel is true, that its meaning is clear, and that the expression of it is appropriate and valid, though limited by human factors.⁸⁸

On the other hand, *quatenus* says too little. For all "its humility, its openness to scholarship, and its sense of human fallibility," *quatenus* "tends to be indecisive." It opens the way to the dominance of individual opinion, whereby the voice of the Church is not heard. At its best it keeps confessional tradition open and productive. "At its worst it can substitute the opinion of today for the seasoned wisdom of the centuries."⁸⁹

Davis also argues that one must distinguish in subscription between the Gospel and the rational understanding, explanation and development of it. The Gospel is revealed, God-given. Its explication, however, is at "least partly a product of reason . . . and human reason even if using an infallible book, is still fallible and its product lacking divine authority."⁹⁰ So the Confessions are authoritative not as a verbal code, but as an affirmation and

⁸⁷Willard D. Allbeck, "Tradition," in *Theology in the Life of the Church*, ed. Robert W. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 48.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰Davis, "Confessional Subscription," 366.

a defense of the Gospel. When one subscribes them with a *quia* it means that “they are a true exposition of the revealed and saving truth of the Gospel, not that they are an infallible rational structure.”⁹¹ He admits that it is difficult to draw the line clearly. One can only assert that “we know Gospel.” It is “central and nothing else is central.”⁹²

In the same vein Heick contends that the Confessions record a subjective apprehension of the objective revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁹³ All the ideas of the Wittenberg Reformation stem from this central article. Unity of the Confessions and their relevancy are to be found in the Gospel. This suggests that the church cannot do away with the Formula of Concord because “there is too much Gospel-preaching” in it. So subscription is not subscription to a theorem or church law, but a personal, total commitment, a bondage to Jesus himself. Wentz adds, “Lutheranism is not based upon a creed or a group of creeds, else it might become obsolete with the changes of human language or the progress of human knowledge Lutheranism is based upon a person, the unchanging person of Christ.”⁹⁴

The Lutheran Church in America, formed in 1962, adopted these basic themes, if not the precise words. Knudsen observed that the problems facing the committee responsible for drafting the article of faith were two-fold. The first difficulty concerned the Church of Denmark and Norway which had never accepted the Formula of Concord. The second, and more serious one, was the problem “to determine how precisely these ancient creeds were to be considered by a church in the middle of the twentieth century.”⁹⁵ He

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid., 367.

⁹³Heick, “The Meaning of the Lutheran Symbols Today,” 351.

⁹⁴Wentz, “What is Lutheranism?” 85, 86.

⁹⁵Knudsen, *The Formation of the Lutheran Church in America*, 30.

notes that again it was time to set a new pattern or approach to confessional statements. Thus the ULCA broke with tradition in writing its confessional article.

Sections 4-6 of Article II explain the stand of the LCA in regard to the historic confessional documents of the church. "The stand is positive but qualified, and the choice of words was carefully considered."⁹⁶ First, in Section 4, the church accepts the ecumenical creeds "as true declarations of the faith of the Church." In Section 5 it states: "This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism as true witnesses to the Gospel . . ." Important here is the reference to the Confessions as witnesses rather than norms. In Section 6 the LCA accepted the "other symbolical books of the evangelical Lutheran church" as "further and valid interpretations of the confessions of the Church" by which it continues, for the sake of the Denmark Synod, the distinction between the primary and secondary symbols of the church.

The Role of Subscription *Ad Extra*

The dichotomy between the Confessions and the confession within them also shows itself in the way in which the LCA pursues the goal of attaining Lutheran unity in America. By "spiritualizing" or "abstracting" the Gospel, the LCA rejected approaches to Lutheran unity that required agreement in the wording of the church's message and the details of its doctrine. The best one could do is affirm that the documents of the Confessions set forth that message correctly. So, by accepting the texts or documents known as the Lutheran Confessions, one affirmed the basic confession within them, that is, their Gospel message. This was sufficient. As a result, the ULCA, and later the LCA, proposed Lutheran unity and organic union upon the historically defined documents known as the Lutheran Confessions and resisted attempts to set down as a precondition for unity agreement on individual doctrines such as the nature and authority of Scripture.

⁹⁶Ibid., 34.

The ULCA sanctioned this route to unity already in its Washington Declaration of 1920. With regard to Lutherans, it simply asserted,

In the case of those church bodies calling themselves Evangelical Lutheran and subscribing the Confessions which have always been regarded as the standards of Evangelical Lutheran doctrine, the United Lutheran Church recognizes no doctrinal reasons against complete co-operation and organic union with such bodies.⁹⁷

Here the ULCA “articulated its conviction that the Lutheran Confessions were sufficient testimony to the kind of unity called for by the Confessions themselves.”⁹⁸

The ULCA reaffirmed this road to unity in the Savannah Resolution of 1934. As adopted it set forth several principles. First, the ULCA recognized “all as Lutherans who recognize the Holy Scriptures as the only rule and standard of faith and life, and the ‘historic confessions’ as a witness to the truth. And we set up *no other standards or tests of Lutheranism apart from them or along side of them* [italics added].”⁹⁹ This meant that the ULCA stood ready to unite with any and all Lutherans. Since all Lutherans accept these same confessions, it was the ULCA’s sincere belief that “we already possess a firm basis on which to unite and that there is *no doctrinal reason* [italics added] why such a union should not come to pass.”¹⁰⁰

Nelson points out that the ULCA used this principle as a “description of its orientation rather than as a new legalism which might cut the church off from those bodies who

⁹⁷“Declaration of Principles Concerning the Church and Its External Relationships,” *Minutes of the Second Biennial Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America, Washington, D. C., October 19-27, 1920* (n.p., 1920), 96. For the sessions surrounding its adoption see pp. 451-55. See also Charles M. Jacobs, “The Washington Declaration: An Interpretation,” *The Lutheran Church Review* 41 (January 1921): 1-21.

⁹⁸Clifford E. Nelson, “A Case Study in Lutheran Unity Efforts: ULCA Conversations with Missouri and the ALC, 1936-1940,” in *The Maturing of the American Lutheranism*, ed. Herbert T. Neve and Benjamin A. Johnson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1968), 202.

⁹⁹*Minutes of the Ninth Biennial Convention of the ULCA*, 417.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

continued to insist on agreement in extra-confessional theses.”¹⁰¹ And so at the behest of those Lutherans who desired greater doctrinal agreement, the ULCA entered into conversations with both the American Lutheran Church and Missouri Synod throughout the 1930s. However, their disenchantment with the requirement for extra-confessional theses and their conviction that it resulted in more division than unity only grew. By 1940, the ULCA, “smarting under its experiences of the late thirties and the 1940 convention, replied to subsequent overtures regarding Lutheran fellowship and union that ‘no further definitions of doctrine are necessary . . . and beyond [the Lutheran Confessions] we will submit no tests of Lutheranism.’”¹⁰² In effect the ULCA returned to its original position of the Washington Declaration and Savannah Resolution.

Even as late as the 1950s, the ULCA repeatedly declined participation in interchurch negotiations on the ground that it already regarded “the confessional stance of the Missouri Synod and the ALC as sufficient for church fellowship.”¹⁰³ Nelson concludes that one thing which stands out clearly in the history of American Lutheran interchurch conversations is “the divisiveness which has occurred when negotiators have sought a doctrinal consensus on issues not explicitly addressed by the Lutheran Confessions.”¹⁰⁴ The LCA appeared to affirm this conclusion. Knudsen notes that in a deliberate and important declaration of unity and fellowship in its statement of faith, the ULCA “*acknowledges as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of these symbols.*”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹Nelson, “Case Study,” 203.

¹⁰²Ibid., 221-22.

¹⁰³Ibid., 222.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Knudsen, *The Formation of the Lutheran Church in America*, 34.

Summary

In the three or four decades of the twentieth century from the mid 1920s to the mid 1960s Lutherans in the ULCA increasingly adopted a critical orientation which led them to stress the way in which history conditioned both the Scriptures and the Confessions. They viewed the Confessions as little more than historical texts formulated by human beings and therefore subject to all the relativities and limitations of history. Human, finite language was regarded as incapable of expressing the infinite fullness of the Gospel. The logic of their historical orientation pointed theologians in the ULCA toward the conclusion that the Confessions are little more than artifacts of the past as evidenced in their acceptance of the confessional writings “hypothetically.” Yet they perceived the need to maintain continuity with the past. This led them to dichotomize the symbolical writings and to stress the abiding relevance of the “confession” within the “confessions.” This raised the question, however, whether one could communicate that confession from one generation to another apart from the texts of the Confessions. By the 1960s many began to recognize that such an attitude relativized the Confessions in such a way that they became little more than relics of the past. This would lead to a reconsideration, in the LCA, of the proper attitude with which one should approach the Lutheran symbolical writings.

PART TWO
THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AS BIBLICAL EXPOSITIONS

CHAPTER IV

A FUNCTIONAL CONFSSIONALISM

By the early 1960s, Lutherans found themselves no longer speaking of a confessional principle as much as a “confessional problem”¹ and a “crisis in confessionalism.”² While Lutherans did not reject the dichotomy of the form and content of the Lutheran Confessions, they soon recognized that approaching the historical texts of the Confessions “hypothetically” tended to relativize the documents and highlight the discontinuity rather than the continuity of the church. In practice it proved little more than an old declension of the *quatenus* formula. And yet, scholars in the Lutheran Church in America would not reject that dichotomy. Instead, they tried to find continuity if not in the words then in the function and intention of the Confessions. Furthermore, whereas the previous generation of scholars had won the right to use modern tools of scholarship, theologians now began to explore the implications of that scholarship for ecumenism.

This recognition of a crisis coincided with the entrance into the LCA during the mid-1960s of a new group of theologians who came from the Evangelical Lutheran Church by way of the American Lutheran Church. These scholars, Carl E. Braaten, Robert W. Jenson, and Gerhard Forde, received their education at Harvard and Heidelberg where they jumped from Norwegian pietism into the existentialism of Kierkegaard, the philosophy of Tillich, and the Bultmannian form critical study of the Bible. There they learned the whole

¹Ernest Werner, “The Confessional Problem,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 11 (August 1959): 179-91.

²Carl E. Braaten, “The Crisis of Confessionalism,” *Dialog* 1 (Winter 1962): 38-48.

movement from Schleiermacher on down and consequently were very much influenced by that history.³ Provincial Lutheran theologians like Charles Porterfield Krauth, C. F. W. Walther, Franz Pieper, and Hermann Sasse simply did not figure.⁴ Braaten remarked, “We never learned anything from these men. We never read their works. We did not even know they existed until we picked them up in Church history.”⁵ Awareness of the nineteenth century confessional revival came only after World War II when they became acquainted with the work of Edmund Schlink and Peter Brunner.

The Nature and Meaning of Confessions

As with their predecessors, the historical and human limitations of the Confessions again provide the point of departure for the way in which Lutheran scholars perceived the character of their symbolical writings. But Braaten and Jenson advance the thesis that these historical writings could still speak to the twentieth century church if only one takes into account the intention and function of the Confessions. This means that the Confessions do not set forth final or definitive restatements of scriptural truth; at most they are only the means to an end. The Confessions are proposals, pointers, compasses, maps, signposts, and gyroscopes which aid the theologian in his study of Scripture and the search for truth. They show a theologian what one should look for and how to find it. This proposal led to a corresponding view of the Biblical foundation of the Confessions by asserting that the authority of Scripture also lay in its purpose and function. Braaten believed that such a “constructive confessionalism” could maintain a creative tension between the pole of contemporaneity, “which keeps the church open to modern horizons of experience and under-

³Jon D. Vieker, “A Conversation with Dr. Carl E. Braaten,” *Concordia Student Journal* 10 (1977): 6.

⁴Ibid., 10.

⁵Ibid., 9.

standing,” and the pole of continuity, “which grounds dogmatics in the catholic substance of the faith.”⁶

The Historical Character of the Confessions

The Lutheran reformers, Braaten and Jenson contend, laid the Confessions before the church of their day as proposals of dogma. The precedent had been set before. In the Apostles' Creed the early church set forth the trinitarian dogma. Later, in the Nicene Creed the church asserted that Christ is not a “halfway station on the way to God,” and at the Council of Chalcedon it set forth the complementary dogma that Jesus is not halfway man. When one arrives at the Council of Orange, the church suggests that salvation is God's work and not ours. “That's about it,” Jenson concludes, dogma “is but a tiny part of the church's actual message and teaching.”⁷ The Lutheran Confessions presuppose these ecumenical dogmas which shows that they did not intend to depart from this catholic tradition of dogma and establish itself independently of the Catholic consensus as a new Christianity or the the making of a new sect.⁸

Upon that basis, then, the Lutheran reformers at the Diet of Augsburg simply proposed further dogma for the church. While the Confessions speak on a vast variety of subjects, Braaten observes that what they essentially constitute in addition to the classical dogmas is a “new definition of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, undergirded by the christological presuppositions required to carry this burden and rounded off with the

⁶Carl E. Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols., ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1:51.

⁷Eric Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 5.

⁸Carl Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” in *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 28.

soteriological implications that exhibit its meaning.”⁹ The Lutheran confessional heritage then stands for a concrete and specific witness to the Gospel, “continuous with the Catholic dogmatic consensus and in response to a new set of questions posed at a particular time in church history.”¹⁰

This means, according to Braaten, that the Confessions of the Lutheran church reject the Protestant dream of an undogmatic Christianity, one that “impinges on religious feeling or moral action and abandons the claim of doctrinal truth.”¹¹ Such a non-confessional Christianity, he observes, is a contradiction in terms. More significantly, it cannot exist for long, because an undogmatic Christianity can no longer tell the difference between true and false preaching of the Gospel. In the end it “becomes a cut-flower Christianity, bound to wither and die under the heat of competing religious and ideological movements.”¹² So Lutherans “cannot sustain a strong confessional principle, against the backdrop of a weak sense of dogma.”¹³

Moreover, Braaten notes, historically and biblically there has never been a pure “kerygma void of doctrinal substance.”¹⁴ In the New Testament, preaching was immediately accompanied by teaching (*didache*) and the transmission of tradition (*paradosis*). Christianity then involves more than existential relationships or religious feelings. It conveys a subject matter. The aim of any dogmatic statement is to make clear that subject mat-

⁹Carl E. Braaten, “The Lutheran Confessional Heritage and Key Issues in Theology Today,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 8 (1981): 261.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:47.

¹²Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 28.

¹³Braaten, “Key Issues,” 261.

¹⁴Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 27.

ter and provide “a definitive expression of *what* God has revealed.”¹⁵ In this way dogma serves as a “watchful witness to the gospel, protecting it from every alienating synthesis.”¹⁶ Jenson agrees. When the church masters a crisis it issues a theological word to its members about the Gospel. That word is called a dogma. It is “*merely a theological proposition addressed by the community to its members, rather than by members to the community.*”¹⁷

Therein lies both the value and limitation of dogma and the Confessions which set it forth. While the proclamation of the church requires statements about the content of that proclamation, dogma remains a product of the church, be its councils or creeds, and therefore a human and fallible formulation. As those before him, Braaten draws a line between truth and the formulation of truth. He points out that while the truth is permanent, “the statement of the truth is historically conditioned and open to change.”¹⁸ For this reason a dogma cannot be given a place within the church of absolute authority or finality. When the content of truth becomes “frozen in creedal propositions, lacking the existential dimension of the credo,” Braaten argues, preaching frequently becomes sterile.¹⁹

And so the distinctive Lutheran dogmatic proposal of justification must not be understood to mean that Lutherans contended for justification as but one more article of faith among the many teachings found within a dogmatics textbook. Jenson believes that if one understands justification as “one item on an ideological list” it will become yet another item

¹⁵Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:50.

¹⁶Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 28.

¹⁷Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 4.

¹⁸Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:46.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 1:54.

on a list of desirable deeds that one should perform.²⁰ More emphatically, Warren Quanbeck asserts that to believe that truth is capable of expression in propositional form and apprehended by man's intellect or reason, that truth is accessible in the form of theological statements, alters faith to mean the acceptance of statements which enshrine the truth rather than functioning as tools which aid one's witness to the truth.²¹

So the proclamation of the church requires dogma and yet the church cannot claim finality for its dogma without rendering its proclamation irrelevant and legalistically binding. This dilemma leads Braaten and Jenson to define the Lutheran proposal of dogma according to its function and steer between the extremes of orthodox confessionalism and liberal modernism. They observe that when the church formulated new dogma, whether in the first four centuries or the sixteenth century, it did so for a specific purpose. The Confessions of the church address themselves to the church catholic and make a few allegedly indispensable points about the discourse and life of the church, "points that ought always to be observed but must be explicitly made just because they often are not."²² To that end, confessions are means, tools, or instruments which aid the church in confessing the truth.

Pursuing this line of thought, Jenson asserts Lutherans proposed the dogma of justification in the sixteenth century as a norm of "orthodoxy and orthopraxy."²³ As a proposal of dogma, justification is essentially "an "hermeneutic" or "critical" or "meta-linguistic stipulation of what *kind* of talking—about whatever contents—can properly be procla-

²⁰Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 36.

²¹Warren A. Quanbeck, "Gospel, Confession and Scripture," in *Marburg Revisited: A Reexamination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966), 18.

²²Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 2, 3.

²³*Ibid.*, vii.

mation and word of the church.”²⁴ This means that whatever the topic or subject about which one speaks, it must be interpreted by the story about Christ. In practice then, the doctrine of justification functions to give “instructions to preachers, teachers, hymn-choosers, that whatever one speaks *about*, so speak that the justice, the rightness, your words open to hearers is opened to faith rather than to works.”²⁵

According to Braaten, the point of dogma is to “ensure the correct interpretation of the Gospel, not to make faith legalistically dependent on church authority.”²⁶ Braaten states that this means the Lutheran Confessions propose justification as “that doctrine which controls the meaning of the whole and all its parts.”²⁷ This means that the Confessions “are a means to an end, just that but not less than that.”²⁸ They show the preacher and theologian that for which one must search and how to find it. Picking up on these themes, Quanbeck points out that language and its formulations possess an instrumental function in relation to the truth, pointing to the Person in whom truth is to be known.²⁹

Asked to propose a confessional stance for the new synod (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America),³⁰ Robert Bertram compares the church’s confession to sneezing, an act which the body performs to clear its head of contaminants. *Confessio* is primarily an

²⁴Ibid., 42, 43.

²⁵Robert W. Jenson, “The U.S. Lutheran-Roman Dialogue on Justification by Faith,” *Dialog* 23 (1984): 85.

²⁶Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:49.

²⁷Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 36.

²⁸Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:53.

²⁹Quanbeck, “Gospel, Confession and Scripture,” 18.

³⁰Carl E. Braaten, “Introduction: The New Lutheran Church and Its Ministry,” in *The New Church Debate: Issues Facing American Lutheranism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 3.

act which the church performs to protest against the misrepresentation of its message. Whenever some other condition or qualification has been added to the Gospel, “however well meaning—whether to dignify the gospel or to reenforce it or even to safeguard it—then the gospel has in fact been diminished and subverted.”³¹ This particular feature of the Confessions, Bertram believes, stresses above all the *dynamics* of a confessing church. It means that while Lutherans possess a book of confessions, having confessions is secondary to being confessors of the Gospel of Christ.³²

Quanbeck notes that the Augsburg Confession itself performs this interpretive function by evaluating the truth of the church’s proclamation on the doctrine of justification. It is so central that the heart of the evangelical perspective “calls for a correction of emphases in all dogmatic and ethical topics, the whole understanding of the life with God and in the world.”³³ The remaining confessions share this hermeneutical function. For instance, the Small Catechism provides an introduction for lay people into the meaning of the Christian faith and the Large Catechism offers them an evangelical interpretation of their tasks and responsibilities. Unfortunately, Braaten observes, in the period of Orthodoxy, Pietism, Enlightenment, and nineteenth-century Lutheranism, justification lost its central place and became but one of the steps in the *ordo salutis*.³⁴

The significance of the Confessions as a proposal of dogma for the contemporary church lies in the responsibility it places upon Lutheranism to participate in the ecumenical movement. Far from being a Magna Charta or a “Teutonic” Declaration of Independence,

³¹Robert W. Bertram, “Confessing the Faith of the Church,” in *The New Church Debate: Issues Facing American Lutheranism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 127. See also, Robert W. Bertram, “*Confessio*: Self-Defense becomes Subversive,” *Dialog* 26 (1987): 201-08.

³²Carl Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 32.

³³Quanbeck, “Gospel, Confession and Scripture,” 17.

³⁴Braaten, “Key Issues,” 262.

the Augsburg Confession was intended as a “biblically based, patristically reinforced testimony of faith,” to protest the Romanizing and sectarian innovations of late medieval Roman scholasticism. Rome was charged with being not sub-Christian, but super-Christian.³⁵ Jenson also adds that the doctrinal articles appeared in the first section in order to show that they stood within the catholic faith of the church, in which faith they hoped to find their opponents. In other words, to be regarded as “catholic,” their opponents must agree with these articles. So it is possible that the opponents may constitute a group in distinction from the catholic consensus in which the Reformers assert their membership.

This implies, Braaten declares, that “we are, by origin and by present self-understanding, evangelical catholics.”³⁶ Since many within the church catholic could not accept them as their proposals, however, the Lutheran Confessions remain “*proposals of dogma*.”³⁷ If the proposals had been accepted, Braaten argues, there would be no Lutheranism today. So today Lutheranism remains “a confessional movement within the church catholic that continues to offer to the whole church that proposal of dogma which received definitive documentary form in the Augsburg Confession and the other writings collected in the *Book of Concord*.”³⁸ This means that Lutheranism exists as “a confessing and confessional communion within the church catholic”³⁹ whose legitimate and ongoing mission is to reform and renew the whole church by the criterion of justification.⁴⁰

³⁵William H. Lazareth, “Evangelical Catholicity: Lutheran Identity in an Ecumenical Age,” in *The New Church Debate: Issues Facing American Lutheranism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 30.

³⁶Braaten, “Key Issues,” 261.

³⁷Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 5.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 6.

³⁹Lazareth, 26.

⁴⁰Braaten, “Key Issues,” 265.

A functional view of the Confessions also keeps the way open for the acceptance of the results of contemporary scholarship. Braaten notes that since the Confessions always speak in the indicative “we believe, teach and confess” rather than the imperative, the Confessions do not intend to declare what must be believed in a law-oriented sense nor to present themselves as legal doctrine founded only on church authority. They are “not so much a legal requirement as an evangelical witnesses, not legally binding canonical norms, but human testimonies of faith in the Word of God.”⁴¹ So the confessional life and understanding of the church need not be static. The church is free to take the risk of extending the confessional limits of its tradition.

As proposals of dogma then, the Confessions assert that dogma is essential to the proclamation of the church. The crucial point lies in the use of that dogma. If one uses it to bind the servants of the church to a particular statement of the truth, dogma functions to restrict the way in which one may speak and exerts a legalistic authority. But in the Confessions Lutherans proposed justification as a dogma which functions as a control principle thereby showing not only what to say, but how to say it. It seeks to ensure that whatever the church proclaims, it does so in a way that opens rather than closes off one’s future. And so Lutherans must regard their confessional writings, first and foremost, according to their function or intention.

The Biblical Character of the Confessions

The recognition of the importance of dogma for the proclamation of the church and the important place it holds within the church is based on the assumption that dogma and proposed dogma claim authority. After all, in dogma “the community addresses the indi-

⁴¹Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:52. See, “Confessional Principle,” 32, and “Crisis of Confessionalism,” 42.

vidual, ‘this is how you should speak.’”⁴² The authority which dogma and the Confessions possess ensures the continuity of the church’s message from generation to generation. The authority which dogma claims, however, is the authority of Scripture and so is understood by the Confessions as a corollary to the authority of the Bible. The one supports and corresponds to the other. Dogma derives its authority from the Scriptures and the Scriptures give dogma its value.

In order to appreciate the authority of the Confessions, one must recognize which type of authority they and the Scriptures claim for themselves. To that end, one must distinguish between a spiritual and secular authority (Bertram), an evangelical and legal authority (Jenson), and a material and ecclesial authority (Braaten). A legal authority is that which belongs to the church and inheres in the text of the Confessions and the Scriptures. Its authority is human and horizontal. An evangelical authority is that by which the words of the Confessions and Scripture free one to speak in a way that opens another’s future. Braaten and Jenson contend in some measure for both, but they insist that the authority of the Confessions and Scripture is finally dependent not upon their subjective formulation but upon their objective content.

One of the ways in which Braaten and Jenson differ from their predecessors like Theodore Tappert lies in their recognition that the dogma and the Confessions possess the authority of the church’s tradition. Jenson admits that there must be some norm by which to make the judgment, “Is what we are saying authentic gospel? where ‘gospel’ has historical meaning.”⁴³ Having been created by the Gospel the church reflects “on how we are not to tell the church’s story, and also on how we are now to enact it liturgically and act upon it

⁴²Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 6.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 11.

socially.”⁴⁴ This reflection becomes the tradition of the church which in turn becomes the norm by which the church can judge its historical memory. So Gospel-talk is authentic only if it is “accurate recollection,” that is, if it is “faithful to the remembered Jesus.”⁴⁵ So dogma stands under the “legal” or ecclesial authority of tradition and of the church.

The recognition of the authority of tradition and its dogma is an important consideration. Because one of the first astonishing results of the critical study of Scripture was that “the orthodox dogmas of the Trinity and Christology . . . were simply not to be found in the Bible as such, but were products of later theological reflection,”⁴⁶ the authority these dogmas claim is the authority of tradition and the authority of the church.

Jenson points out, however, that tradition in general cannot function as a norm. There must be boundaries to the Gospel tradition. One must push tradition back to its very beginnings where one finds that the authority *in* the tradition *for* the tradition is a distinguishable set of witnesses known as the apostles. They are normative for the rest of tradition “in that if we try to get *behind* them we find *no gospel-tradition* at all; for their witness is that in which this particular story first comes to word.”⁴⁷ The New Testament documents then set forth the beginning recollection of the church and soon became a substitute for the living voices of the apostles. Scripture then possesses a prominent role in and for the tradition of the church, and the Gospel is authentic, in the specified sense, if it is “the same” Gospel as that of the apostolic period.

This view indicates that tradition and Scripture stand along the same horizontal line in that both possess ecclesial authority. Braaten points out that where there is no church

⁴⁴Ibid., 10.

⁴⁵Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶Carl E. Braaten, “Can We Still Hold the Principle of ‘*Sola Scriptura*’?” *Dialog* 21 (1982): 191.

⁴⁷Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 12.

there is no Bible and no need for it, because the Bible can only be studied as Holy Scripture within the context of the church. But outside the church the Bible is nothing more than an arbitrary collection of documents from the past, on par with other collections. Conversely, where there is no Bible, there is no church. So “the Bible forms the church, and the church has the Bible.”⁴⁸ Very early within its life then, the church accepted the Bible as a norm for its ongoing life and in this way bound itself to a given revelation, “not open to any new revelation above and beyond the Scripture.”⁴⁹ Without recognizing this ecclesial character of Scripture, Braaten contends, it makes no sense to speak of biblical authority.

Having asserted the ecclesial authority of the Confessions and dogma, Braaten and Jenson caution that it is a historical and human authority. If one should contend that dogma is true because the church has so decreed, then one will set forth a legal authority for Scripture and tradition. So it must still be asked by what authority does the church assign Scripture and tradition a normative role within the church. Braaten asserts that in each case, the Confessions and Scripture claim an authority which releases the power of the Gospel rather than restricts it.⁵⁰ Jenson also avers that in the final analysis, the Scriptures—and the whole tradition in its various ways—have a “legal authority in the church only because of their liberating authority.”⁵¹

More specifically, Jenson stresses that “tradition’s legitimate authority in the church is fundamentally the authority of the promise rather than of law.”⁵² Dogma is either a word that sets one free or it is not; and if it is not, it has no other authority. And so the Scriptures

⁴⁸Braaten, “Can We Still Hold the Principle of “*Sola Scriptura*” ?” 193.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:61.

⁵¹Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 13.

⁵²Ibid., 9.

acquire this authority over an individual, or they do not. If they do, this is a “contingent fact; if they do not, there is no other authority by which we could say they *ought* to acquire this authority.”⁵³ Any attempt to claim a legal force for them apart from their authority as Gospel, Jenson insists, is an arbitrary imposition. Equally pernicious is theory, interpretation, or practice of the Scriptures’ legal authority such as a declaration of Scripture’s verbal inerrancy, which obscures this derivation. “An authority of necessarily affirmed propositions is legal in its very form.”⁵⁴

Such a view of authority, Braaten adds, accords with the testimony of Luther and the Confessions. The point of departure for Luther consisted of “deriving the authority of Scripture from its gospel content” which “provided the canon by which the Bible as a whole and all its parts could be judged.”⁵⁵ For Luther, Braaten believes, the Gospel came first chronologically and was followed later by Scripture. Originally the Gospel was the oral proclamation of the promise. Only later was the Gospel written in Scripture, but even then, it was for the purpose of aiding “the ongoing oral proclamation of the church.”⁵⁶ The Confessions, following the lead of Luther, also claim for themselves an authority “derived from their connection with the Scriptures and the gospel’s authority.”⁵⁷

This means that Scripture’s authority is not a juridical or legal kind, “a book of true doctrines, inerrant factual reports, or inspiring devotional materials.”⁵⁸ Nor is the Bible errorless or infallible. Only as the cradle of Christ is the word of Scripture “to be believed

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., 13.

⁵⁵Braaten, “Can We Still Hold the Principle of ‘*Sola Scriptura*’?” 189.

⁵⁶Ibid., 190.

⁵⁷Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 33.

⁵⁸Braaten, “Can We Still Hold the Principle of ‘*Sola Scriptura*’?” 190.

and accepted as finally valid with respect to the concerns of faith and salvation.”⁵⁹ One can assert that Scripture is perfect only with respect to its purpose of getting the Gospel across to every age.⁶⁰ Authority in the church rests primarily on the Gospel of Scripture, and only secondarily on the creeds and councils of the church. The Confessions, Braaten believes, received a legalistic authority only during the age of orthodoxy when theologians shifted the ground of the authority of Scripture from the “gospel revelation to a verbal inspiration.”⁶¹

The significance of this view concerning the ecclesial and evangelical authority of the Scriptures lies in its ability, according to Braaten, to do justice to both, the “Protestant Principle” and “Catholic substance” of the faith and thereby open the ecumenical windows of the church. Historically, Braaten observes, Roman Catholic doctrine has emphasized that Scripture is a product of the church in a fundamental way. Today, he believes, every Protestant theologian will grant that the New Testament, for example, is a document that records the faith of primitive Christianity, Lutherans have learned not to pit the Scriptures against tradition, because Scripture overlaps tradition in the early church. Taking up the Catholic claim then, Lutherans can acknowledge that Scripture is already “the *result of the earliest traditions* of the church, generated by its life of preaching and worship.”⁶² They both stand in a horizontal line within the church and both have contributed to the dogma of the church. Scripture, however, has the final say as the starting point of that tradition.

Braaten laments that “Lutherans have not always been much concerned about the

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Carl E. Braaten, “Goodbye, Lutheran Unity!” *Dialog* 14 (1975): 246.

⁶¹Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:66.

⁶²Braaten, “Can We Still Hold the Principle of ‘*Sola Scriptura*’?” 194.

principle of continuity with the substance of the Catholic tradition,”⁶³ even though both the Augsburg Confession and Smalcald Articles claimed to voice the truth of the Gospel that concerns the whole church. By recognizing this Catholic claim, however, Lutherans can show that they are ready to come out of their confessional ghetto and reenter the “mainstream of the Catholic tradition along with other Christian communities in the ecumenical movement.”⁶⁴ Braaten believes that by stressing these two conditions, “the ecclesial context and the christological content, we have unified what came apart in the conflict between the Reformation and Roman Catholicism.”⁶⁵ This he calls an “evangelical catholic” doctrine of biblical authority.

So, in answer to what authority dogma claims to function as a norm within the church and ensure the continuity of the church’s message, Braaten and Jenson respond in two ways. “Our talk of Christ is gospel only if it is objectively about the same events as the witness recorded in the New Testament documents, and only if it opens our lives to the future in the same way as did that witness.”⁶⁶ Braaten adds that by finding continuity with the “catholic tradition” Lutherans can appeal not only to the particular confessions of the Lutheran tradition, “but to the ecumenical confessions of the whole catholic Church, of the common foundations of our Christian faith: the Scriptures and the classical dogmas.”⁶⁷ At the same time, the Lutheran contribution assists “the church to preach the gospel and actualize its reality within every new situation in which it finds itself in mission.”⁶⁸

⁶³Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 31.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Braaten, “Can We Still Hold the Principle of “*Sola Scriptura*”?” 194.

⁶⁶Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 13.

⁶⁷Vieker, 6.

⁶⁸Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 31.

The Function and Role of Confessions

According to Braaten and Jenson, the church requires a confessional position between the extremes of a rigid confessionalism and a liberal non-confessionalism, a stance which does justice to the classic witness of the church without being archaic and which applies the insights of contemporary theology to the needs of the church, without being faddistic. Braaten advocates a form of confessional subscription which enables one to “witness positively to the power of the confessions to free us for genuine insight into the gospel.”⁶⁹ Only in such a way can the Confessions function as emancipation proclamations for the contemporary church. Braaten and Jenson believe that can be accomplished, if one accepts the Confessions as a means to an end.

Function of Confessional Subscription

As proposals of dogma, the Lutheran Confessions essentially represent a hermeneutical proposal to the church. They make the claim that justification is the key for the right interpretation of the Scriptures and that it is “the criterion that decides what makes Christianity Christian.”⁷⁰ As hermeneutical proposals, the Confessions act like “pointers, treasures, and anchors”⁷¹ and “signposts or compasses.”⁷² In other words, the Confessions intend to provide the theologian with a map for the exegetical explorations of Scripture. As a map, the Confessions point beyond themselves to the history of salvation in which one finds the saving acts of God in Christ and the authoritative interpretation of those events. False approaches to the Confessions, however, misuse that map. Braaten

⁶⁹Ibid., 33.

⁷⁰Braaten, “Key Issues,” 262.

⁷¹Charles S. Anderson, *Faith and Freedom: The Christian Faith according to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 26-31.

⁷²Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 34.

observes that on the one hand, “the absolute confessionalist is like the one who studies the map but neglects to take the trip.” On the other hand, the “anticonfessionalist sets off on the trip with no map for guidance, and quickly gets lost on the way.”⁷³

This hermeneutical principle does not intend to limit Scripture in any way.

Responding to charges of Gospel reductionism, Bertram contends that by making the Gospel a norm or regulating principle within Scripture and the Confessions, far from reducing

Scripture to some minimalist gospel, the Spirited impulse is rather to approach all Scriptures through the prism of that *forma doctrinae* and to rediscover it—that is, to find Christ—in the most unlikely narratives and passages of the Hebrew Scriptures, even in the ceremonial legislation.⁷⁴

This evangelical approach is more a quest than a dogma, but a search which knows in advance, more or less, for what and whom it is looking. Moreover, if dogmaticians do not use the hermeneutical key provided by the Confessions in biblical exegesis, they will use some other. For this reason Quanbeck states, “Carrying out the hermeneutical program of Luther and the Augsburg Confession remains the unfinished task for Lutheran theology.”⁷⁵

Not only do the Confessions function hermeneutically for exegesis, they provide the controlling and regulating principle for dogmatics. During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of theologians moved away from organizing their theologies around the synthetic, locus method in which the Gospel serves as an integrating principle for each article to an analytical approach in which the Gospel serves as the point of departure, norm, and even source for the formulation of the various articles. And so in *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings*, Robert Jenson and Eric Gritsch chose not to pre-

⁷³Ibid., 35.

⁷⁴Bertram, “Confessing the Faith of the Church,” 134.

⁷⁵Warren Quanbeck, “The Confessions and Their Influence upon Biblical Interpretation,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 185.

sent a detailed, serial exposition of the Christian faith. Instead, they explicated “the one article of faith in the promoting of which the Lutheran movement exists.”⁷⁶ To that end they tried to show the difference that the proposed dogma of justification “makes for the great traditional topics of Christian reflection which became thematic in the Reformation controversies reflected in the *Book of Concord*.”⁷⁷

Along similar lines, Anderson, in *Faith and Freedom: The Christian Faith According to the Lutheran Confessions*, adopts justification as a point of departure for the development and organization of his theology. He proceeds then to explore those articles of faith which relate as the source, need, result and means of justification. Finally, while *Christian Dogmatics* was organized in the time honored *loci* method on account of the multiple authorship of the work, Braaten notes that those theologians for whom justification functions as a norm did, as a rule, seek to examine their *loci* from that standpoint.

The Formula of Subscription to the Confessions

The adoption of an attitude which considers the Confessions as instruments and tools toward a given end carries through in the way in which one defines the formula of confessional subscription. One finds in the Confessions themselves, Braaten observes, no formula of subscription for later generations—an omission or vagueness which leaves room for the possibility of “adopting either a legalistic or an evangelical attitude toward creedal statements.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he does not believe that the attitude of the more “rigid confessionalists” reflects that of the Confessions. He accordingly opposes the right wing appeals to the Confessions which exclude any developments in contemporary theology. Such a position tries to lift up the *Book of Concord* with seventeenth century scholasticism

⁷⁶Jenson, *Lutheranism*, vii.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 32.

as the golden age, as “the once-for-all model of what theology must be. Here doctrines become laws, creating a climate of doctrinal legalism in the church, snuffing out the freedom which is the church’s birthright from the gospel.”⁷⁹

Furthermore, Braaten argues, when such a confessional stance is adopted, confessional subscription in itself is not enough; it must be done “seriously.” Moreover, some also will require as a condition for altar-pulpit fellowship “a certain amount of confessional good works.”⁸⁰ Braaten also objects to the terminology that has traditionally been used in constitutions and ordination formulas. To speak of a person as being bound to the Confessions, he holds, is “dangerously legalistic language that conveys the impression that we tilt more to the side of heteronomy and authoritarianism in matters of religion than to the side of autonomy and freedom.”⁸¹ It is dangerous also because confessions are human statements which means that any act of confessional subscription involves a certain amount of risk. After all, the church is fallible, councils can err, and dogmas are provisional.⁸²

Another way of expressing a legalistic attitude toward confessional subscription, Anderson believes, is the requirement of an unconditional subscription to the Confessions because they set forth the doctrine of Scripture. He argues that when the Confessions are viewed as a body of legally binding statements, they are said to “convey God’s truth in propositional form, free from inadequacy and historical contingency.”⁸³ As a result, one reverses the proper relation of Scripture and the *Book of Concord* by asserting that one must interpret the Scriptures according to the Confessions and not the Confessions accord-

⁷⁹Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:51.

⁸⁰Braaten, “The Confessional Principle,” 29.

⁸¹Ibid., 33.

⁸²Braaten, “The Crisis of Confessionalism,” 42.

⁸³Anderson, *Faith and Freedom*, 24.

ing to the Scriptures. In the final analysis, this attitude recognizes the Confessions as little more than rules and laws.

At the same time, some form of subscription seems necessary if the Confessions are to become the possession of contemporary Lutherans and not merely relegated to the past as historical relics or artifacts. Without a confessional subscription, the church moves toward the other end of the spectrum which seeks to “dissolve the confessional principle in theology.” One way to do that is by reaching back to the Bible as not only the sole source of theology, but the sole witness to the truth. This, ironically, turns the “confessional principle of *sola scriptura* against itself, as a principle of self-dissolution.”⁸⁴ Here a pietistic tendency is joined with a kind of anti-intellectualism and pits the individual interpretation against that of the community. Historically, Braaten observes, “a creedless, nonconfessional Christianity has proven itself incapable of reproducing vital forms of witness to the New Testament gospel.”⁸⁵

Like his predecessors in the LCA, Braaten sees problems with both, the *quia* and *quatenus* formulas of subscription. The *quatenus* formula intends to emphasize that the Confessions derive their authority from Scriptures as the primary norm. The *quia* formula, on the other hand, intends to declare that these confessions are “*our* confessions, and not merely historic relics from the past.”⁸⁶ But both possess a measure of ambiguity. *Quatenus* fails to commit one to the “here I stand” character of a confession. *Quia* on the other hand, can give the appearance of “closing off the circuit between ourselves and Scripture, as if the confessions exempt us from continually examining the Scriptures with

⁸⁴Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:51.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Braaten, “The Crisis of Confessionalism,” 47.

modern tools to gain new light on our situation.”⁸⁷ In practice, neither term is capable of expressing what Lutherans intend to say, “neither one appropriately correlates the Scriptures and the confessions.”⁸⁸

Part of the solution to the problem of the Confessions no longer addressing us directly in the twentieth century, Braaten suggests, is to demythologize or dephilosophize them without robbing them of their substance. Both Scripture and the Confessions stand in living stream of preaching of the church. Both are exemplary summaries of the preaching which nourished and extended the church. So “we define the relation between the Scriptures and the confessions as the relation between the preaching which originates and the preaching which perpetuates the life of the church.”⁸⁹ He suggests that they are not legal norms, but creative norms as a seed is related to tree. This means, Anderson holds, that one does not witness *to*, but *with* the Confessions.⁹⁰ To witness to the Confessions rather than with them is symbolatry. The church does not confess a creed; it confesses a living faith in the phraseology of a creed.

In a genuine subscription Braaten believes that the church can affirm a substantial agreement between the understanding of the Gospel today and the content of the ecumenical creeds and the particular confessions of Lutheranism set forth in the *Book of Concord*. To accept them without reservation cannot mean anything more than to express essential agreement with the intention and meaning of the Confessions, “centering on the article of justification, and drawing out some essential corollaries of faith.”⁹¹ In this light, one can

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Anderson, *Faith and Freedom*, 31.

⁹¹Braaten, “The Crisis of Confessionalism,” 46. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 42.

accept the body of documents in the *Book of Concord* not in so far as (*quatenus*) but because (*quia*) they represent the “pure doctrine of the gospel and a trustworthy summary of the faith of the Christian church.”⁹²

The freedom with which Braaten regards confessional subscription shows itself in the way he believes that theologians put their subscription into practice. Speaking of himself and the other authors of *Christian Dogmatics* Braaten states,

I think all of us subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions in line with our churches and that each one applies his confessional subscription in his own way, that is, each one would take that confessional subscription as the basis of our own vocational self-understanding. But each one will use the Confessions differently depending on certain accidents: some people know more about them, some people warm up to the Confessions more, some people find in the Confessional writings more value for our time. But all of these authors are confessional Lutherans in the sense in which our churches are confessionally Lutheran.⁹³

In this way, he believes, one must embrace the Lutheran Confessions without restricting one’s freedom to pursue different theological avenues.

Nevertheless, as he looked ahead to the formation of the new Lutheran church, he believed that the issue of confessional subscription and with it, Lutheran identity, should be one of the first issues on the agenda of the ELCA. In particular, the issue must not deal with whether Lutherans have the “right dogmatic definitions lying about in our confessional documents.”⁹⁴ He argued that it needs to be decided in large part by the ecumenical policy which the ELCA chooses to forge. It will also be in part with the role the subscriptions will assume within the church and whether they will function as guides and norms for the seminaries and leadership of the church or whether the church will decide what is the Word of God by majority vote and thereby exchange the *vox evangelii* for the *vox populi*.

⁹²Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 42.

⁹³Vieker, 7.

⁹⁴Carl E. Braaten, “Theological Issues Facing the ELCA,” *Dialog* 27 (1988): 88.

Confessional Subscription *ad extra*.

Viewing the Confessions as proposals of dogma to the church catholic held implications not only for the way in which Lutherans define subscription but also for the way they approach the matter of the unity of the church. Having established the catholicity of the Lutheran Confessions as dogmatic proposals to the church catholic, an understanding which maneuvers between “the danger of scrupulous, self-imposed isolation and the danger of irresponsible dissolution to face the day of the Lord,”⁹⁵ Braaten and Jenson both turn their attention to the ecumenical dialogues of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, they would demonstrate greater desire for interconfessional unity than for Lutheran unity, particularly as it took shape as the ELCA.⁹⁶ Yet in spite of their enthusiasm for the progress to be made in the interconfessional conversations, they frequently criticized as unproductive and out of date the procedures adopted in those conversations which were based on the assumption that there must be a doctrinal consensus within the church prior to fellowship.

The attitude toward the Confessions as human formulations and therefore merely tools or instruments led to the conviction that complete agreement on doctrine was neither possible nor necessary for church fellowship. Since the Confessions are means to an end and not final statements of doctrine, Braaten warns that it is a “deadly sin” to insist “narrowly on doctrinal consensus as though it were the very essence of the unity in Christ’s Church.” All expressions of faith, be they prayer, confession, witness, being

⁹⁵Lazareth, 33.

⁹⁶This was in large part due to two factors. First, and perhaps most importantly, they felt that the ecumenical directions of the LCA and ALC pointed in opposite directions. The pressure to unite came in large part from the need to “rescue” the AELC from “the consequences of its folly.” Robert W. Jenson, “Stop the Merger” *Dialog* 25 (1986): 163. Second, they objected to the way in which the churches went about the formation and believed that they tended more toward a United Methodist model than an Episcopalian or Roman. Robert W. Jenson, “Now What?” *Dialog* 26 (1987): 6. See also Carl E. Braaten, “Then the Lutherans,” *Dialog* 26 (1987): 84.

human and therefore activities of sinners, are done by Christians in imperfect ways. He admits that purity of doctrine is much to be desired, but like heaven, it remains more an object of eschatological hope than a present attainment in the church. In fact, most of what passes as pure doctrine, he believes, is “more a sign of *rigor mortis* in the body than of the new community in Christ and life in the Spirit.”⁹⁷

Their attitude toward the symbolical books of the Lutheran church led Braaten and Jenson to advance the thesis that the hermeneutical proposal of the Confessions included an ecumenical proposal.

It is the purpose of the confessional writings in the Lutheran Book of Concord, for example, to serve the catholic church by referring it to the unifying gospel of Christ. This gospel is summarized in terms of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. This is a summary of the whole gospel.⁹⁸

Braaten insisted that “this route is still our best ecumenical hope for realizing the unity of the church.”⁹⁹

The perception of the Confessions as dogmatic proposals allows Braaten and Jenson to conceive Lutheranism not as distinct church but as a “movement” within the *una sancta*. By considering the Confessions as means to an end, as sign-posts, compasses, pointers or maps, one cannot claim finality for any dogmatic statements, and so Braaten insists, this proposal of dogma cannot be tolerated as a Lutheran peculiarity in context of ecumenical pluralism. “If the *raison d’etre* of Lutheranism is not oriented to the ongoing reform of the *una sancta catholica et apostolica ecclesia* in terms of the article of justification by faith alone, Lutheranism has defaulted on its reforming mission.”¹⁰⁰ Thus the question Lutheranism must continually ask itself is whether it has moved from protest to a schism to

⁹⁷Braaten, “Goodbye, Lutheran Unity!” 245.

⁹⁸Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:53.

⁹⁹Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 39. Braaten, “Key Issues,” 265.

¹⁰⁰Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 35.

a sect.

This leads Braaten to question the underlying assumption that doctrinal consensus is a necessary prerequisite to eucharistic fellowship. “Why cannot believers in Christ witness to their unity in spite of their doctrinal divisions and differences? The church has never had perfect harmony in any sphere of its life, and certainly not in the realm of doctrine.”¹⁰¹ That does not mean that doctrinal consensus is not desirable for the church’s proclamation of the Gospel. One would not know what the the content and substance of the Gospel was without specific assertions. It simply implies that in “a situation of theological pluralism it is still possible to discern in a multiplicity of different statements a witness to God’s revelation in Christ that has the *power to engender faith*” [italics added].¹⁰²

This means then, that if the particular confessions of the Lutheran church point to the Gospel, and nothing else, “and if other confessions point in their own way, in their own time and place, to the same gospel, we can expect a meeting of the confessions in their common reference to the same core and substance of the faith.”¹⁰³ This view recognizes that because the

final truth about God and man in Jesus Christ is only partially and provisionally grasped in our own traditions, then we should be able to recognize that same reality appearing in and through other Christian traditions, even in those conflicting with ours, and in this way proceed to an ecumenical act of reconciliation in the unity of the truth that frees and unites us.¹⁰⁴

Braaten believes that it is erroneous to conceive of the rich diversity of confessions in his-

¹⁰¹Carl E. Braaten, “No Breakthrough Whatever on the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue on ‘Justification by Faith,’” *Dialog* 23 (1984): 246.

¹⁰²Carl E. Braaten, “A Decade of Ecumenical Dialogues, (An Assessment of U. S. A. Lutheran Conversations with Reformed, Anglican, and Roman Catholic Theologians),” *Dialog* 13 (1974): 148.

¹⁰³Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:52.

¹⁰⁴Braaten, “A Decade of Ecumenical Dialogues,” 148.

tory on the adversarial model when they may be more complementary than competitive.¹⁰⁵ Instead, each communion serves the interest of the catholic church by remaining true to the substance of its own confession and by calling other communions to listen to its witness in a spirit of dialogue and mutual service.

This background enables one to understand the critique of the various dialogues set forth by both Braaten and Jenson. With respect to the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, which resulted in the production of *Marburg Revisited*,¹⁰⁶ Braaten remarked that while the old differences remain, they are not sufficient to warrant the continuing separation of Calvinists and Lutherans from altar fellowship. Nevertheless, he cautioned that the apparent rapprochement appeared to come at the expense of Lutherans by “rubbing off some of the edges in confessional Lutheranism.” The reason is that “the spirit on the Lutheran side is gentle and flexible; it is more Melanchthonian than gnesio-Lutheran.”¹⁰⁷

Braaten and Jenson’s central ecumenical interest, and with them the LCA’s, pointed toward Rome. After some of the initial Lutheran-Catholic dialogues, Braaten cautioned that one received the impression that Lutheran meanings were again being “co-opted by the very Catholic language on which our forefathers stubbed their toes.”¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, in the 1970s Braaten believed that the conversations had cleared a path for fellowship. He observes that the results mean, at least implicitly, that “Lutherans have here abandoned their usual game plan of demanding formal doctrinal consensus as the prior condition for altar and pulpit fellowship.”¹⁰⁹ He regards this, however, as a positive move.

¹⁰⁵Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:53.

¹⁰⁶*Marburg Revisited: A Reexamination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1966).

¹⁰⁷Braaten, “A Decade of Ecumenical Dialogues,” 145.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 147.

Braaten admits that he did not believe anything like a doctrinal consensus had been reached. "If we insist that a solid doctrinal consensus must precede eucharistic unity, the effect will be to postpone altar and pulpit fellowship until the eschaton."¹¹⁰ He acknowledges that he has serious doubts whether or not a series of statements is possible, desirable, or even necessary as a precondition for church fellowship. Furthermore, he believed that the move toward altar and pulpit fellowship could be taken without meaning that an organic merger of church bodies must follow. Braaten regards it as a positive move that both sides have come to acknowledge that doctrinal formulations and theological intentions somehow "constitute a real and genuine grasp of the truth of Christ, albeit in imperfect and provisional terms, and always at best subject to ongoing criticism and serious questioning."¹¹¹

At the same time, Braaten found it necessary to criticize the tendency of the dialogues to gloss over irreconcilable differences in their search for doctrinal consensus. This was especially true in the 1980s over the outcome of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue on the topic of justification. In the document on justification,¹¹² Braaten sees two currents: "The one claims convergence bordering on consensus, the other admits continuing tension amounting to perhaps irreconcilable difference."¹¹³ Braaten asks, "What sense does it make to say that Lutherans and Catholics enjoy consensus on the gospel but hold irreconcilable differences on justification?"¹¹⁴ The problem, he believes, again lies in the overall

¹¹⁰Ibid., 148.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²*Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985).

¹¹³Braaten, "No Breakthrough Whatever," 245.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

approach to the discussions which waters down the distinctive contributions of each communion in quest for doctrinal agreement. Lutherans make a mistake when they water down the Gospel for the sake of peace and unity in the church.

Braaten grants that the pressure to claim consensus is so strong that both Lutherans and Catholics traditionally have made consensus of doctrine a necessary precondition for the unity of the church. But again, he argues that it is no longer viable “to make the *unitas ecclesiae* dependent on a *consensus doctrinae*.”¹¹⁵ Lutherans and Catholics should instead look towards the Gospel’s normative and hermeneutical function. Unfortunately, a

study of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues will show that Lutherans mostly forgot to use their criterion of the gospel in justification by faith alone. The issue, as Forde pointed out, is not merely to get an agreement on the doctrine of justification, as one among many doctrines, but to agree on the *use* of the doctrine in relation to the whole of the faith and its proclamation.¹¹⁶

What Lutherans should seek in an ecumenical settlement is what they asked for in the beginning, “the freedom to preach and teach the gospel within the church according to the Scriptures, and not be treated as heretics.”¹¹⁷

Jenson takes the same attitude toward the Roman Catholic proposal in the 1970s to recognize the Augsburg Confession. Like Braaten he rejects the hermeneutical approach implicit in the methodology of achieving agreement by examining the *Augustana* article by article which, in his view, is a traditional argument with a long history of ecumenical disaster. He points to the Committee of Fourteen which attempted to reconcile the *Confessio Augustana* and the Confutation as a “classic” case of this style and its failure.¹¹⁸ Its Achilles’ heel lay in the treating of theological statements as if they were independent of the

¹¹⁵Ibid., 246.

¹¹⁶Braaten, “Then the Lutherans,” 84.

¹¹⁷Braaten, “No Breakthrough Whatever,” 246.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

doctrine of justification by setting the formula, "justified by faith," alongside the other articles of faith which divide the two parties and then attempt to ascertain whether or not they could be understood in a manner acceptable to all. This leads the participants to embark upon what Jenson calls "formula negotiation," in which each party adjusts their formulas for each other.¹¹⁹ But with sufficient skill, any formula could be understood and interpreted correctly.¹²⁰

Summary

During the quarter of a century of its existence, Lutherans in the LCA demonstrated a strong desire for the ecumenical movement as a result of adopting the results of nineteenth and twentieth century theological scholarship which had all but eliminated the confessional distinction between church bodies. These Lutheran scholars then approached the symbolical writings of their church from the pole of contemporaneity which led them to regard them primarily as human, and therefore fallible, witnesses to the truth. Nevertheless, in their desire to maintain the continuity of the church they tried to avoid relativizing the Confessions entirely. To that end, Braaten and Jenson advanced the suggestion that Lutherans could embrace the *Book of Concord* as their own according to the function and intention of the Confessions.

¹¹⁹Robert Jenson, "On Recognizing the Augsburg Confession," in *The Role of the Augsburg Confession: Catholic and Lutheran Views*, edited by Joseph A. Burgess (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 157.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 158.

CHAPTER V

A CONSERVATIONAL CONFSSIONALISM

The Missouri Synod entered the twentieth century with a strong sense of identity and a firm direction in mission. It had emerged from the Election controversy of the 1880s doctrinally united and strong. Numerically it continued to grow as it kept pace with steady flow of immigrants from Germany. By 1915 it could lay claim to being the largest Lutheran synod in the United States with the largest Protestant theological seminary in the country. As synodical leaders looked back on the first fifty years of Missouri's history they concluded that the growth and strength of the synod were to be attributed above all else to the confessional fidelity of the synodical fathers. It is not surprising then that during the third quarter of the first century of its existence, the leaders of the Missouri Synod sounded the watchword, "Back to the fathers!" They regarded it as their responsibility to build upon the foundations of the past and to retain for future generations the heritage that had been handed down to them.

This period of conservation in Missouri's history corresponds roughly with the death of C. F. W. Walther in 1887 and the publication of the Brief Statement in 1932.¹ Upon Walther's death, the mantle of theological leadership fell upon Francis Pieper (1852-1931) who would serve as sometime president of Concordia Seminary and president of the Missouri Synod until his death in 1931. Throughout that time, he stood as a "symbol of

¹For other reasons why these dates serve as appropriate *termini* see Carl S. Meyer, "Historical Background of 'A Brief Statement,'" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32 (1961): 403-14.

the conservation of the heritage and the theology of the past.”² His writings and his essays at various conferences and conventions were of great significance for retaining the theological position which the synod held and manifest a conscious effort to preserve Walther's attitude and approach toward the Confessions.³ In addition to *Christian Dogmatics*, Pieper formulated the most significant doctrinal declaration issued by the Missouri Synod during this period, “A Brief Statement,” a document that summarizes and reflects the theological climate and Lutheran unity efforts of Missouri during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The attitude of conservation likewise characterized Friedrich Bente (1858-1930), William Dau (1864-1944), and A. L. Graebner (1849-1904). Dau served as a member of the faculty at Concordia Seminary, holding the professorship in English Dogmatics, from 1905 to 1921. He also edited the *Theological Quarterly* (1905-20), the *Theological Monthly* (1920-26), *Ebenezer*,⁴ *Concordia Triglotta*,⁵ and *Four Hundred Years*.⁶ He was especially prolific in translating the works of the fathers into English, among them,

²Carl S. Meyer, *Log Cabin to Luther Tower: Concordia Seminary During One Hundred and Twenty-five Years Toward a More Excellent Ministry, 1839-1964* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 99.

³See Theodore Graebner, *Dr. Francis Pieper: A Biographical Sketch* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1931), and W. H. T. Dau, “Dr. Francis Pieper the Churchman,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 2 (October 1931): 730.

⁴William H. T. Dau, *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922).

⁵*Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English, Published as a Memorial of the Quadricentary Jubilee of the Reformation anno Domini 1917 by Resolution of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States*, ed. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

⁶William H. T. Dau, ed., *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Results* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917).

Walther's *Law and Gospel*.⁷ He later served as president of Valparaiso University. Known especially for his literary output in both German and English, Graebner was said to be a "valiant defender of the Christian faith, a champion especially of the *sola gratia* and the *sola Scriptura*, a true Lutheran theologian . . ."⁸ Bente would be best remembered for his editorship of *Concordia Triglotta* and the "Historical Introductions" to that work.

The Nature and Meaning of the Confessions

Building on the foundations which Walther laid, Missouri Synod leaders continued to stress the biblical character of the Confessions as the point of departure for understanding and appreciating their contemporary value. Not surprisingly, their strong confessional attitude corresponded with an equally firm adherence to the Scriptures as the Word of God. This does not imply, however, that Missouri leaders ignored the history of their confession nor the changes in history that had taken place in the three hundred years since their formulation. With other Lutherans, they agreed that history brings out the human limitations and imperfections of documents written in the past. Where they parted company, however, is by asserting that for this very reason the biblical character of the Confessions must be considered first and must condition the way in which one approaches their historical character, not the reverse.

The Biblical Character of the Confessions

The call "back to the fathers" was a call to heed their witness, a testimony which directed the church to the symbolical writings of the church. Dau argued that the sole reason

⁷C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928).

⁸F[riedrich] Bente, "In Memory of Prof. A. L. Graebner, D.D.," *Theological Quarterly* 9 (January 1905): 1. Also quoted in Karl Kretzmann, "The Reverend Doctor Augustus Lawrence Graebner, 1849-1904," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 20 (July 1947): 80.

for which the Missouri Synod was organized and for which it continued to exist lay in the issue of confessionalism. In a land that abounded with every religion and sect possible, the synodical fathers unfurled “the Lutheran banner” and stood by its colors, never “shirking or faltering in defending them against attacks from without or within.”⁹ This confessionalism was as “indestructible as faith, and the Word of Grace, which produces that faith, and Christ, the Author and Finisher of that faith.”¹⁰ Bente added that, being Bible Christians, the Missourians adopted the Confessions “only because they had found them to be *drawn* from the Word of God, which alone they recognized as the final and infallible norm of Christian truth.”¹¹ For this reason, every candidate who aspired to the office of the ministry was exhorted in his graduate year, “Let none of you enter the ministry with doubts as to the Scripturalness of any doctrine contained in our Lutheran Symbols.”¹²

To follow the fathers, then, meant to approach the Lutheran Confessions with the same attitude that characterized Walther. This led Graebner, Dau, Pieper, and Bente to argue that Lutherans must regard their confessional writings as nothing less and nothing more than expositions and summaries of Scripture.

As Lutheran Christians and theologians we also have the witness of the Holy Spirit in and with us, that our small Lutheran catechism and the Augsburg Confession, together with all the other writings of the Book of Concord actually teach nothing other than what the Scriptures teach, so that what we find here and there scattered in it [Scripture] are gathered together in the confession in a *brief form and summary* [italics added] and are defended and reproduced in its true, original and right sense against all other misrepresentations.¹³

⁹William H. T. Dau, “The Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod,” *Theological Monthly* 1 (1921): 4.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹F[riedrich] Bente, *Following the Faith of Our Fathers: A Paper Read at the Convention of the Missouri Synod in Fort Wayne, in June, 1923* (n.p.: [1923]): 6.

¹²Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3: x, xi.

¹³F[riedrich] B[ente], “Schrift und Bekenntnis,” *Lehre und Wehre* 66 (1920): 168,

Pieper reiterated, “the Symbols, or Confessions, of the orthodox Church are simply its affirmations of the Scriptural doctrine over against the denial of it by heretics.”¹⁴

Moreover, because the confessional writings of the Lutheran church simply restate biblical truth, theologians in the Missouri Synod contended that one dare not accept any article of the *Book of Concord* merely because it stands in the Confessions or because the church has so decreed it or because it is the product and development of history, but only because it holds the same doctrine as the Bible.¹⁵ This, Pieper enjoined, is the church’s only characteristic trait: “The one great treasure of the Lutheran church is her doctrine, pure and in all points agreeing with Scripture.”¹⁶ He acknowledged that the Missouri Synod possessed its share of weaknesses and shortcomings, but by God’s grace “we are certain that the doctrine proclaimed among us is the Christian faith, the faith revealed in Scripture, the faith confessed in the Lutheran Symbols, and that this doctrine demands and must be granted exclusive recognition in the church.”¹⁷

So convinced were they that the Lutheran Confessions were drawn from the Word of God and that every doctrine set forth by them, whether mentioned explicitly or implicitly, restated the teaching of Scripture itself, that Missouri Synod scholars spoke of a complete identification of the Confessions’ doctrinal content with Scripture. Bente observed

169. “Als lutherische Christen und Theologen aber haben wir auch das Zeugnis des heiligen Geistes in und bei uns, daß unser kleiner lutherischer Katechismus, daß die Augsbургische Konfession samt allen ander Schriften des Konkordienbuches wirklich nichts anderes lehren, als was auch die Schrift lehrt, so daß, was wir in ihr hier und da zerstreut finden, im Bekenntnis in eine kurze Form und Summa zusammengezogen und gegen allerlei Verdrehung in seinem eigentlichen, ursprünglichen und richtigen Sinne verteidigt und wiedergegeben ist.”

¹⁴Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:354.

¹⁵B[ente], “Schrift und Bekenntnis,” 169.

¹⁶Francis Pieper, “Foreword to Volume I, No. 1 of the *Concordia Theological Monthly*,” trans. Paul H. F. Baepler, *Concordia Journal* 1 (January 1975): 17, 18.

¹⁷Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3: x, xi.

that the founders of the Missouri Synod adopted the *Book of Concord* because they had found its doctrines to be in “*complete agreement* with the Bible, because they had found them to be the *identical doctrines* [italics added] of the Word of God.”¹⁸ This led him to refer frequently to the Confessions as setting forth doctrine which was “in *perfect agreement* [italics added] with the Holy Scriptures,”¹⁹ in “*perfect agreement* [agreement] with the Holy Bible,”²⁰ and “in *perfect agreement* with the eternal and unchangeable Word of God.”²¹ The doctrinal contents of the Formula of Concord are the “unadulterated truths of the infallible Word of God.”²²

When the theological leaders of the Missouri Synod asserted that the doctrine of the Confessions reproduced the doctrine of the Scriptures, they did not merely mean that the individual teachings are drawn from, and therefore correspond to the Bible, but also that the relation of those doctrines to each other was derived from Scripture itself and was not the result of the reformers’ decision. They argued that the connection of these doctrines with one another was just as important as the individual doctrines themselves. Graebner held that although the articles of faith may be arranged in different ways for the purpose of teaching, their internal relation is forever established in the revelation of Scripture, and any “change in this relation is a perversion of doctrine.”²³ So Lutheran theology demands “that

¹⁸Bente, *Following the Faith of Our Fathers*, 5.

¹⁹F[riedrich] Bente, “Preface,” *Concordia Triglotta: Die symbolischen Bücher der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), iv.

²⁰Friedrich Bente, *American Lutheranism*, vol. 1, *Early History of American Lutheranism and the Tennessee Synod*, 5 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919).

²¹F[riedrich] Bente, “Historical Introductions,” *Concordia Triglotta: Die symbolischen Bücher der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Friedrich Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 255.

²²Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 256.

²³A. L. Graebner, “What is Theology?” *Theological Quarterly* 1 (1897): 13.

not only the various theological truths in themselves, but also their relation to each other should be Scriptural.”²⁴

Specifically, every article of faith in the Confessions found its orientation in soteriology, “the birthplace and habitat of Lutheranism.”²⁵ For Luther, the entire Scriptures were “one grand, harmonious testimony to Christ.”²⁶ And so, Dau pointed out, in Lutheran theology every other doctrine of Scripture is “correlated to the doctrine of justification, either as a cause or an effect.”²⁷ It is the article by which the church stands or falls, namely, as this doctrine is “either maintained or repudiated.”²⁸ As Dau, Graebner referred to the article of justification by grace as the “cardinal and ruling” teaching, “the doctrine which forms the base of all other doctrines, the central doctrine from which all other doctrines radiate and to which they all converge.”²⁹ Bente likewise asserted, “The doctrine of justification is for the Lutheran confessors a touchstone of truth for other doctrines. . . . It is the central point, to which all other doctrines affix, the middle point, around which all others gather and congregate.”³⁰

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵William H. T. Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” in *What is Lutheranism? A Symposium in Interpretation*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Macmillan Company, 1930), 211.

²⁶William H. T. Dau, “The Heritage of Lutheranism,” in *What Lutherans are Thinking: A Symposium on Lutheran Faith and Life*, ed. E. C. Fendt (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1947), 17.

²⁷Dau, “Heritage of Lutheranism,” 21.

²⁸Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” 216.

²⁹A. L., Graebner, “The Doctrine of Predestination as Taught in Ephesians 1, 3-6,” *Theological Quarterly* 5 (1901): 32.

³⁰F[riedrich] B[ente], “Die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung nach der Apologie,” *Lehre und Wehre* 40 (1894): 166. “Die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung ist den lutherischen Bekennern ein Prüfstein der Wahrheit für andere Lehren Sie ist der Kernpunkt, an den sich alle andern Lehren ansetzen, der Mittelpunkt, um den sich alle andern scharen und sammeln.” See full article, *Lehre und Wehre* 40 (1894): 144-49, 161-71, 201-18,

Moreover, Graebner held that the central doctrine of justification and its relation to the doctrines that radiate about it are all found complete in, and taken in all their parts from the Word of God. In other words, the doctrine of justification was not made “the central doctrine in our theology by theological reasoning, but we give it that place simply because the Scriptures place it there.”³¹ Bente adds that the Apology assigns justification its position of importance not

by accidental, arbitrary, sectarian preference for this teaching, but because it has correctly recognized from the Scriptures, that this actual doctrine is central, the focal point, in which all rays of divine truth of grace converge, to which the experience of all godly people and the church witness.³²

When therefore the Apology treats the doctrine of justification as the kernel and star of the entire Christian doctrine, it does this with the clear knowledge that Holy Scripture itself attributes it this position, and the church in its teachers and the experience of Christians confirms that it deserves this position.³³

Similarly, with regard to the Formula of Concord, Bente insisted that it is Scriptural, “not only because all of its doctrines are derived from the Bible, but because the burden of the Scriptures, the doctrine of justification, is the burden also of all its expositions.”³⁴ *257-68, 324-33, and Lehre und Wehre* 41 (1895): 10-17, 135-40, 167-71, 209-22, 257-64.

³¹A. L. Graebner, “What is Theology,” 11.

³²B[ente], “Rechtfertigung nach der Apologie,” 40:166. “Diese hohe Wichtigkeit schreibt nun die Apologie der Artikel von Rechtfertigung nicht zu aus zufälliger, willkürlicher, sektiererischer Vorliebe für diese Lehre, sonder deshalb, weil sie aus der Schrift lebendig erkannt hat, daß diese Lehre wirklich zentral, der Brennpunkt ist, in dem alle Strahlen göttlicher Gnadenwahrheiten zusammenlaufen und daß auch die Erfahrung aller frommen Leute und angefochtenen Gewissen dem Zeugniß gibt.”

³³B[ente], “Rechtfertigung nach der Apologie,” 40:168. “Wenn darum die Apologie die Lehre von der Rechtfertigung als den Kern und Stern der ganzen christlichen Lehre betrachtet, so thut sie dies mit dem klaren Bewußtsein, daß ihr eben diese Stelle die heilige Schrift selber zuweist und die Kirche in ihren Lehrern und die Erfahrung der Christen das bestätigt, daß ihr gerade diese Stelle gebührt.”

tions, the living breath, as it were, pervading all its articles.”³⁴ He points out that for this reason the Gnesio-Lutherans realized that “adulteration of any part of the Christian doctrine was bound to infect also the doctrine of faith and justification and thus endanger salvation.”³⁵ Herein, he asserted, lies the greatness of both the Scriptures and the Confessions. Although they are distinguished as the norming norm and the normed norm, “their greatness lies chiefly and principally in their correspondence with one another on the chief article, the saving teaching of divine grace in Christ.”³⁶

Since the *Book of Concord* sets forth the individual doctrines of Scripture and Scriptural relation of these teachings to one another, any doctrine contrary to that of the Confessions is also contrary to the Scriptures. The Augsburg Confession is true “because it says what Scripture says, and for this reason and no other reason every doctrine is false which disagrees with what the Augsburg Confession says.”³⁷ For this reason, Bente could assert that the Lutheran church is the only known religious community which “in the Book of Concord of 1580, confesses the truths of the Gospel without admixture of any doctrines contrary to the Bible.”³⁸ It is the only church which proclaims the saving truth of the Gospel in its purity. Similarly, with regard to *reine Lehre*, Dau adds that “nobody wants any other kind of teaching and admits that the Church’s stamina of virility lie in her great Christcentered and soteriologically oriented doctrines.”³⁹

Missouri’s strong affirmation of the biblical character of the Lutheran Confessions

³⁴Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 255.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 104.

³⁶B[ente], “Schrift und Bekenntnis,” 169.

³⁷A. L. Graebner, “Bibliology,” *Theological Quarterly* 1 (April 1897): 398.

³⁸Bente, *American Lutheranism*, 1:4.

³⁹Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” 221.

required, rested upon and resulted from a corresponding attitude toward the Scriptures. Dau pointed to the claim of the fathers that when a synod made the Confessions of the Lutheran church its own, it at the same time pledged its loyalty to God's Word. "The Symbolical Writings are a confession by which the true Church that lives its faith solemnly pledges allegiance to the doctrine of the pure Word and testifies that it intends to adhere to the pure Word of God."⁴⁰ Moreover, every doctrine of the Confessions depended upon the reliability, authority, and clarity of the Scriptures. An acceptance of the Confessions because they agree with Scripture shows that one regards Scripture as the exclusive source of the knowledge of the truth.

Historically, Dau argued, it was the principle of *sola scriptura*, the appeal to the written Word of God, that ushered in the era of the reformation. The slogan of the reformers was, "Nothing beyond Scripture! Nothing but Scripture!" And "whatever is not from the Bible is no part of theology."⁴¹ This attitude toward Scripture manifested itself at the Smalcald Convention in 1537, where the Lutherans adopted what has since become the standing rule of the Lutheran church: "The Word of God should frame articles of faith, otherwise no one, not even an angel."⁴² So when the Formula of Concord

in words that vibrate with earnestness, waives every human authority as a determinant for men's faith, and traces Luther's teaching only to the pure fountain of Israel, the Word of God, the world must acknowledge that the Lutherans have done all in their power to clear their common denominational name from the charge of sectarianism.⁴³

Aside from these statements, Dau maintained that a study of the Confessions "evidences

⁴⁰Quoted in Dau, "Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod," 116.

⁴¹*Nil ultra Scripturam! Nil nisi Scriptura! Quod non est biblicum, non est theologicum.*

⁴²William H. T. Dau, *Lutheranism in America: Its Glory and Its Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1910]), 7.

⁴³F[riedrich] Bente, "Luther the Faithful Confessor of Christ," in *Four Hundred Years. Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Results*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 323.

how completely the thought and diction of these men has merged with that of the Holy Writers.”⁴⁴

The conviction which regarded the Confessions as restatements of the very words of God compelled Missouri Synod leaders to defend the doctrine of Scripture against any assaults on its divine character. For fidelity to the Confessions, and therefore to the Scriptures, rested upon the latter being the divine Word of God. Bente and Graebner cited two theses crucial for the doctrine of Scripture. First, the words of Scripture are the inspired words of the Holy Spirit, and second, as a corollary of the first, the Scriptures are infallible and contain no error or untruth in their words. Advancing and defending the inspiration of Scripture became one of the chief tasks of Missouri Synod theologians in the twentieth century. In addition, they demonstrated the implications of the doctrine of Scripture for the Christian articles of faith, especially the article of justification.

Missourians argued further that the Confessions themselves clearly held to the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Bente insisted that the symbols, with all their statements and doctrines in thesis and antithesis, are completely oriented to the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scripture and its corollary, the inerrancy of Scripture. The Confessions, he stated, declare clearly not only that the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets, that in the Scriptures the Holy Spirit sets forth his word, and that the Scriptures are distinguished from all the other books in the world in that they are the source and norm of all doctrine and teachers, but that “also the entire arguments of our confessions, from the *Augustana* to the last article of the Formula of Concord, rest exclusively on the axiom of the infallible inspiration of the Word of God in Holy Scripture.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴Dau, “Heritage of Lutheranism,” 15.

⁴⁵F[riedrich] B[ente], “Vorwort,” *Lehre und Wehre* 60 (1914): 9. “. . . sonder auch die ganze Argumentation unserer Bekenntnisse, von der Augustana an bis zum letzten Artikel der Konkordienformel, ruht ausschließlich auf dem Axiom von dem inspirierten, untrüglichen Gotteswort in der heiligen Schrift.”

When one rejects the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, Bente contended, one detaches Scripture from the contents of Scripture, Scripture from the Gospel, Scripture from divine truth, Scripture from the doctrine of salvation, and Scripture from Christ. In other words, one ends up affirming the reformed distinction between Word and Spirit. But he countered,

The *Augustana* knows of no divine truth, of no salvation, of no Christ and of no certainty of Christ outside Scripture, that means, it knows of no doctrine of salvation and of no certainty of salvation, which would not lead back to Scripture, as its final source and its only basis.⁴⁶

According to the *Augustana*, the certainty of salvation, the certainty of faith, is essentially the certainty of Scripture. From the Word of God Lutherans are convinced that the Gospel which Luther confessed is the eternal truth of God.⁴⁷

Moreover, this was the conviction of the synodical fathers themselves who realized that apart from the Scriptures as the Word of God it is impossible for any one to arrive at any knowledge whatsoever regarding God's gracious will toward sinners. They stood for the verbal inspiration and absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures because they knew that "just such was the pinnacle upon which God Himself had placed the Scriptures."⁴⁸ So Bente argued, if the verbal inspiration of Scripture falls, not only some doctrines on the periphery of Christianity waver, but all without exception, even the fundamental ones, the Trinity and the person of Christ.⁴⁹ In the same spirit, Pieper observed that that "theology which denies the inspiration of Scripture, as a rule also rejects the vicarious satisfaction of Christ."⁵⁰ Its

⁴⁶F[riedrich] B[ente], "Die Stellung der lutherischen Symbole zur Schrift - ein Beweis dafür, daß unser Bekenntniß die wörtliche Inspiration vertritt," *Lehre und Wehre* (1896): 27.

⁴⁷Bente, "Luther the Faithful Confessor of Christ," 96.

⁴⁸Bente, *Following the Faith of Our Fathers*, 13.

⁴⁹B[ente], "Vorwort," 60 (1914): 8.

⁵⁰F[rancois] P[ieper], "Das Fundament des christlichen Glaubens," *Lehre und*

denial strikes at the the foundation of the Christian faith.

Dau explained the relation between Scripture and its Gospel as follows. As the formal principle, Scripture gives theology the “proper form, face, lineaments, shape, appearance.”⁵¹ It certifies the authenticity of God’s message as a revelation from heaven to mankind. However, the wrapping may be counterfeited by a perverse use of Scripture and truth made to serve as cover for falsehood. “But the deception is discovered the moment the package is opened and its contents are spread out for inspection. The container of God’s truth is a priceless gift, but the contents are invaluable.”⁵² So the time had come, he argued, for laymen and pastors alike to unite efforts in upholding the basic principles of the Christian Church: *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Gratia!* Their all-engrossing concern should be to “diligently teach, confess, and enforce the truth of God’s Word and Luther’s doctrine pure to any one who will hear us.”⁵³

The Historical Character of the Confessions

The staunch emphasis on the biblical dimension of the Confessions led theologians in the Missouri Synod to relegate the historical dimension of the symbols to a subordinate role. Neither the historical setting of the Confessions or the historical changes which have taken place in science, history or psychology over the last four centuries must be allowed to restrict, limit, or condition the doctrinal content of the Confessions. This led critics of Missouri to charge that such a confessional attitude was unhistorical and speculative.

Missouri leaders denied it. To the contrary, they argued, they gave history its proper place

Wehre 71 (1925): 286. “Blicken wir uns in der Gegenwart um, so sehen wir, daß die Theologen, welche die Inspiration der Schrift leugnen, in der Regel auch die satisfactio Christi vicaria verwerfen.”

⁵¹Dau, “Heritage of Lutheranism,” 15.

⁵²Ibid., 16.

⁵³Dau, *Lutheranism in America*, 14.

in relation to the Scriptures. Either God's Word or man's word will provide one's point of departure in theology. Man's word is human and therefore fallible. For this reason it must be considered in the light of the Confessions' biblical character.

By approaching the Confessions from the standpoint of their doctrinal content, Bente studied the history of the Confessions not in order to discover how history has conditioned and relativized the Confessions, but in order to explicate and understand the doctrine set forth within the symbolical writings by shedding light on their doctrine and setting forth the origin, occasion, purpose, and role of the Confessions within the life of the church.

The historical setting of the *Book of Concord*, for instance, highlights the necessity and origin of the Confessions. While some coined appellations like "symbolism" and "symbolists" as an opprobrium to signify that the Missouri Synod overstated its case for the necessity of the Confessions, Dau argued that Missouri never asserted an absolute necessity, a necessity which would imply that for the preservation of the church and salvation of souls, the Scriptures were insufficient. Rather, the historicity of the Confessions demonstrated that the Lutheran Confessions were formulated as emergency measures. They were framed in order to defend the pure teaching of God's word over against false teachers who appealed to Scripture as they proposed to interpret. If there had never been any false teachers, there would have been no need for Confessions.

By means of public confessions, then, the orthodox church has "deposited the true understanding of such doctrines as have been controverted and rejected by enemies of these doctrines who falsely cite Scripture in favor of their views."⁵⁴ This also means, Bente points out, that the symbolical writings dealt with false interpretations of Scripture only on certain points. The *Book of Concord* does not, and was not intended to, deal with every

⁵⁴William H. T. Dau, *Lectures on Dr. Graebner's Outlines*, (n.p.: n.d.), 43.

point of doctrine that may be found in Holy Scripture. Nor do the symbolical writings present every article of faith in the same manner or with the same thoroughness, examining it from all sides, as does perhaps a compendium of theology or a dogmatics textbook. Instead, they treat in thesis and antitheses from the Scriptures what at the time of their composition was in controversy, or they defend against false accusations or misunderstandings of their doctrine, or explain more clearly those doctrinal articles mentioned in passing.⁵⁵

Although the historical setting of the Confessions conditions to some extent the contents of the Lutheran Confessions quantitatively, it does not diminish the value of the doctrines embodied in the *Book of Concord*. Bente asserted that Lutherans remain convinced that the orthodox church, to the end of the days, will have in the Formula of Concord a complete and sufficient confession, as it has had until now. That is based on Scripture alone. In the final analysis then, the emphasis on the biblical dimension and sufficiency of the Confessions determined for the Missourians the amount of attention given to the various aspects of confessional history and provided the criterion by which they evaluated that history.

In Bente's *Historical Introductions*, for instance, the political, ecclesiastical, and documentary histories of the Confessions receive less attention than the doctrinal history and are treated only to the extent that they had a bearing upon the doctrine of the symbols. Perhaps for this reason, when compared with the work done among Lutherans in the East, histories of the *Book of Concord* written among the western synods in general gave less attention to the Augsburg Confession, preferring instead to devote a greater amount of space to the history surrounding the Formula of Concord. Bente, for example, devoted only twenty-two pages to the history of the Augsburg Confession (including the *Variata* and Confutation) while devoting 163 pages to the doctrinal controversies which led to the

⁵⁵B[ente], "Schrift und Bekenntnis," 169, 170.

formulation of the Formula of Concord.⁵⁶

The biblical content of the Confessions also served as the norm for rendering judgments on specific aspects in the history of the Confessions. Especially when evaluating the role played by a given individual in the formulating of the *Book of Concord*, Bente uses as a criterion the doctrinal position of that person regardless of extraneous circumstances. The political and psychological exigencies, for instance, or the personal demeanor of an individual, which may explain why one adopted a particular position, are relegated to less important roles. When other historians, for instance, criticize Melanchthon's vacillations and alterations of the *Augustana*, they tend to attribute it in part to his gentle nature and diplomatic inclinations, his love of peace and humanistic frame of mind.

But Bente does not allow any such excuses. He insisted that Melanchthon was not a man who did not know what he was doing. This led him to speak of Melanchthon as the "primary mover" in the conflicts following Luther's death and to lay nearly every doctrinal controversy at the feet of Melanchthon, calling him the father of synergism and crypto-Calvinism as well as the spiritual father of a synergistic predestination. And so Melanchthon, with his doctrinal deviations from Luther, "was the ultimate cause and originator of most of the dissensions which began to distract the Lutheran church soon after the death of Luther."⁵⁷ Moreover, Bente concluded that one must charge Melanchthon with an intentional duplicity, that almost from the very beginning he sought to water down and corrupt the theology of Martin Luther.

By the same token, where other historians regarded Flacius and the Gnesio-

⁵⁶This is not to suggest that it's the only reason. The rejection of the Formula of Concord in the General Synod would perhaps lead Missouri to concentrate on the Formula. But even here, the issue comes down to one of doctrine.

⁵⁷Robert A. Kolb, "Historical Background of the Formula of Concord," in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert D. Preus and Wilbert H. Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 104, 128, 175, 107.

Lutherans as extremists and phraseology theologians,⁵⁸ Bente hailed Flacius as a defender of the faith. He argued that it was due to Flacius more than any other individual “that true Lutheranism and with it the Lutheran church was saved from annihilation in consequence of the Interims.”⁵⁹ So also it was with the party that would compose the Formula of Concord. Composed of loyal Lutherans who were doctrinally united with the Gnesio-Lutherans, this party differed from the latter in that they took no visible part in the controversies. Gnesio-Lutherans and the formulators both rejected and condemned all forms of indifferentism and unionism, and strenuously opposed every effort at sacrificing, veiling, or compromising any doctrine by ambiguous formulas.

Not only did the biblical dimension of the Confessions condition the way in which Lutherans approached the history of those documents embodied in the *Book of Concord*, it also provided the criterion by which they judged the changes that had taken place in history over the past three hundred years since it was formulated together with the results of contemporary theological movements. Leaders in the Missouri Synod argued that if the Word of God is relevant for every person of every age, then the Confessions which set forth the truth of Scripture also remain relevant and pertinent for the life of the church three hundred years later. History changes; God’s truth does not. So if contradictions occur between the modern discoveries of man and the doctrine set forth in the Confessions, it is the former that must give way to the latter.

In an address at Cooper Union Institute on Reformation, 31 October 1909, Dau declared, “The times have changed, our faith *has not . . . our loyalty to that Creed has not changed . . .*”⁶⁰ The Lutheran church rests satisfied with the achievements of the

⁵⁸See George J. Fritschel, *The Formula of Concord, Its Origin and Contents: A Contribution to Symbolics* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1916), 50-56.

⁵⁹Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 100.

⁶⁰Dau, *Lutheranism in America*, 14, 15.

Reformation, the movement which brought men “back to the arms of Jesus enfolded in the Scriptures of God, and which enabled them to have a free access by faith to the heart of the God of grace.”⁶¹

There is no reason why any Lutheran in view of the new isms and vagaries of our times should think of revising the creed and doctrinal attitude of his Church, but there is every reason why he should cling to the heritage of sound, pure doctrine and excellent evangelical church polities that have been bequeathed upon him by a great past.⁶²

In this light, one can appreciate Graebner’s refusal to apologize in the preface to his *Outlines of Doctrinal Theology* “for having nowhere, from the first point in Bibliology to the last in Eschatology, progressed beyond the theology of our orthodox fathers.”⁶³

Pieper laid down two principles he considered necessary for a theology to remain contemporary and abreast of the times. First, he held that the Scriptures were written not only for the Apostolic era, but for every age of the church. Those who refuse to accept this principle reject the source of Christian dogma and cease to be modern in the true sense of the word. “In no other way than by continuing in the Word of Scripture as the sole source of knowledge, the sole norm of the Christian doctrine, do we remain abreast of the times in every century, in every year, in every day, in every hour—up to the moment when our Lord will return.”⁶⁴ This leads to a corollary with respect to the ecclesiastical and theological developments of the current age. The church must propound a theology for all ages and against human deviations both in the past and in the present.

Characteristic of the Missouri Synod’s attitude toward modern theological move-

⁶¹William H. T. Dau, “Lutheranism and Christianity,” in *Four Hundred Years. Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Results*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 327.

⁶²Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” 221.

⁶³A. L. Graebner, *Outlines of Doctrinal Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1910), v.

⁶⁴Pieper, “Preface,” *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:vii.

ments and developments was an address delivered by Bente on the topic “Why Should We also in the Future Seriously Withstand the Modern Progress of the Church?”⁶⁵ in which he compared and contrasted the revelation of Scripture with the reason of contemporary theologians as a basis for theology. Dau believed that other Protestant communions continue to speak of the need to develop the doctrine and principles of Reformation because their ancestors “had bequeathed to them a task unfinished, or faultily executed by their founders.”⁶⁶ Theodore Graebner observed that other Christian communities had “trimmed off” sections of their earlier confessions or permitted them to lapse into a ritualistic form. Roman Catholics have added new doctrines to Trent and in the theory of evolution and the program of Ritschl one has seen Calvinism-gone-to-seed floundering in economic and political measures. But he observed, “It is an amazing thing that in the entire Christian world, Lutheranism alone holds within itself enough faith in its ancient standards to give them anew to the world as an authentic presentation of its present-day teachings!”⁶⁷

To be sure, Missouri Synod leaders did not ignore the developments of contemporary theology. They were well acquainted with the theology of both America and Europe. They had studied the works of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89), Franz Frank (1827-94), Adolph von Harnack (1851-1930) and the Wellhausen school. But from the standpoint of the confessional attitude, they were compelled to reject such theologies. Bente and Pieper especially regarded Schleiermacher as the most evil foe of Lutheranism and Christianity. “It was Schleiermacher who began the deadly work. He abandoned the old Scripture-method

⁶⁵*Vierunddreizigster Synodal-Bericht des Westlichen Districts der deutschen evang.-luther. Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten* (St. Louis: Luth. Concordia-Verlag, 1897), 12-97.

⁶⁶Dau, “Lutheranism and Christianity,” 327.

⁶⁷Theodore Graebner, “Review Article: Concordia Triglotta,” *Theological Monthly* 1 (October 1921): 290.

and injected into reviving theology the serum of ‘science.’”⁶⁸ In phraseology the new theology resembled the old, but in reality it was a theology detached from the Scriptures, empty of the pure Gospel. Moreover, the new theology all but abandoned and disavowed the infallibility and reliability of the Scriptures.

Similarly, if the findings of contemporary history and science contradicted the teachings of Scripture, Bente asserted, it is again the former which must yield. Since God was the author of “the book of nature, man, and history, as well as the Book of Revelation, then the former correctly read and interpreted, can never conflict with the declarations of the latter.”⁶⁹ William Dau concurred:

If the necessity of a divine revelation of matters that transcend reason is admitted, and if, besides, the finite character of all scientific inquiry and research is granted, there will be no conflict between reason and revelation, science and religion, but each of these respectable pursuits of the human mind will work in amicable fellowship with the other.⁷⁰

Scripture alone can be regarded as the *principium cognoscendi*.⁷¹ When science or history purports to interpret the true sense of Scripture, one must remain with the words of Scripture and learn from the Scriptures themselves what they mean, not from the modern sciences.⁷²

In the light of these convictions, Lutherans cannot hide or obscure their identity by adopting the theological or ecclesiastical fads of the day which upon closer inspection are found to be the religions of reason with a Christian label. But the Missouri Synod, by

⁶⁸Bente, *Following the Faith of Our Fathers*, 11.

⁶⁹Ibid., 13.

⁷⁰Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” 219.

⁷¹See William H. T. Dau, “The Principium Cognoscendi in Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 13 (August 1942): 604-10, and “False Principia Cognoscendi in Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 13 (September 1942): 654-61.

⁷²F[riedrich] B[ente], “Die Inspirationslehre in der lutherischen Kirche Americas,” *Lehre und Wehre* 48 (May 1902): 133.

clinging to the faith of the fathers in doctrine and practice, had been so successful that Bente could declare:

The entire literature of our Synod does not contain a single statement which in any way denies the incarnation, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection, or any other Christian miracle, nor even a single passage that charges the Bible with any kind of error—religious, historical, chronological, astronomical.⁷³

He exhorted the Synod to stand firmly and determinedly by our own Lutheran doctrine of inspiration and the inerrancy of the Bible. “The Confessions and the inculcation of doctrine have made the Lutheran church in America *great*.”⁷⁴

The Function and Role of Confessional Subscription

The strong emphasis on the biblical character of the Lutheran symbolical writings led leaders of the Missouri Synod to call for a practice consistent with the profession of faith. The doctrine set forth within the Confessions must not be considered an end in itself. Being biblical, it was directed to the faith and life of the Christian, for which reason they considered theology to be the *habitus practicus*. While the biblical character of the *Book of Concord* determined the verity and validity of the Confessions, the historical character indicated the distinctive purpose and role for the Confessions within the church and how best to use them. These twin *foci* combined to permeate every activity of the Missouri Synod.

The Value of Confessions for the Vitality of the Church

The theological leaders in the Missouri Synod believed that the Confessions must play a significant role within the church in order for the church to remain strong and growing. The history of their church body attested to the truth of that belief. Dau expressed the conviction that the seasons of vigor and success of the church “were the times when her confessional consciousness was thoroughly aroused, and her sons fought and toiled in

⁷³Bente, *Following the Faith of Our Fathers*, 13-15.

⁷⁴Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” 222.

loyal devotion under the banner that was unfurled at Augsburg, in 1530, and again at Kloster Bergen in 1580.”⁷⁵ By the same token, the periods of weakness in the church “have always been those when her children made light of their confessional heritage and were bartering away their birthright in the Lord’s family for a pot of lentils.”⁷⁶ This leads Dau to remind the current generation of Missourians that doctrinal and confessional fidelity was the only reliable basis of hope for “future success while the opposite course spells decay and ruin, slow it may be, but sure.”⁷⁷

Bente arrived at the same conclusion. Looking back on the origins of the Synod he observed that many had argued that congregations, synods and theological schools restricted in doctrine and practice could not thrive in a free and progressive America. They had warned that the road of confessionalism would lead Missouri to inevitable ruin. Nevertheless, Bente pointed out, the fathers were convinced that it is was “safer to go down confessing the truth than to live by falsehood and by disloyalty to God and His Word.”⁷⁸ They were also convinced that the only road to success was the one they had chosen. Lutheranism could not live without the Lutheran standards. In fact, they demonstrated that the Lutheran Symbols proved to be less a “millstone about the neck of our Synod,” than a “life-buoy that kept her afloat for many, many years.”⁷⁹

In the *Book of Concord* Lutherans had received enough not only to mark their doctrinal position sufficiently and clearly, but to venture out in God’s power, and with the

⁷⁵William H. T. Dau, “At the Milestone,” in *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century*, ed. W. H. T. Dau, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 534.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid., 535.

⁷⁸Bente, *Following the Faith of Our Fathers*, 7.

⁷⁹Ibid., 8.

weapons of battle to obtain spiritual victory against all present and future errorists. These convictions led Bente to exhort:

Brethren, let us follow our fathers. May we never grow indifferent and disloyal to our symbols! May they always govern our teaching and preaching as well as our life and practise [*sic*]! Wherever, in the past, Lutherans adhered faithfully to their Confessions, they flourished. But wherever these symbols were trodden in the dust, the Lutheran church always fell an easy prey to her enemies: to unionism, sectarianism, liberalism, and infidelity.⁸⁰

So the Scriptures and confessions served as the flag under which Lutherans dared to travel in God's name, the banner under which they fight, the watchword or password by which they recognize friends and enemies, and the basis upon which they stand.⁸¹

In order to strengthen the confessional convictions of their generation synodical leaders published a number of works in order to make the confessional writings accessible to laity and clergy alike. The most significant work to emerge from the presses of Concordia Publishing House during this period was the *Concordia Triglotta*. By 1914 deliveries of Müller's *Die Symbolischen Bücher der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* became irregular on account of the war making the need for such a work acute.⁸² In conjunction with the approaching quatercentenary of the Reformation in 1917, the Synod commissioned the publication of a new edition. In its preface Bente declared that the reason for the publication of the *Triglotta* was to "strengthen this loyalty and to further and facilitate the study of our 'Golden Concordia,' lest anyone rob the church of her treasure."⁸³

Wherever the Lutheran church ignored her symbols or rejected all or some of them, there she always fell an easy prey to her enemies. But wherever she held fast to her God-given crown, esteemed and studied her confessions, and actually made them a norm and standard of her entire life and practice, there the Lutheran church flourished

⁸⁰Ibid., 9.

⁸¹B[ente], "Schrift und Bekenntnis," 170.

⁸²Theodore Graebner, "Concordia Triglotta," 291.

⁸³Bente, "Preface," *Concordia Triglotta*, iv.

and confounded all her enemies.⁸⁴

Theodore Graebner regarded it as a sign that the church “has determined to draw new inspiration and direction for its life out these sixteenth-century documents.”⁸⁵

Pieper exerted a tremendous influence through his convention addresses, articles and books. The first and last books to be published by Pieper were for the laity and were one and the same. In commemoration of the 300th jubilee of the *Book of Concord* Pieper had written *Das Grundbekenntnis der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche. Mit einer geschichtlichen Einleitung und kurzen erklärenden Anmerkungen versehen*, in which he provided brief comments on each article. It was republished for the 400th anniversary of the *Augustana*. With a stress on the laity, the convention of the Synod in 1906 had also suggested that every voting member of every congregation in the Synod ought to own a copy of the Confessions, “especially since now they can be had so readily and inexpensively.”⁸⁶

Confessional Subscription and Identification of the Church

In order to maintain the Confessions as a foundation for the present and the future life of the church, Missouri Synod leaders repeated the call of their fathers for an unconditional subscription to the Confessions, a subscription that recognized that the *Book of Concord*, in all its teachings, accurately restated the truths of Scripture. Anything less would render them useless for the church. So Pieper stated that pastors and teachers in the Missouri Synod affirm that the Confessions of the Lutheran church

without exception and reserve, as we are convinced by them (either “ex professo” or incidentally) are in strict accordance with Holy Scripture, and we, moreover, maintain that a qualified acceptance of the Confessions of the Lutheran church makes a quali-

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Theodore Graebner, “Concordia Triglotta,” 290.

⁸⁶Report of the convention of the Minnesota and Dakota District, 17 July 1906. Quoted in Dau, “Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod,” 234.

fied Lutheran.⁸⁷

The Confessions are binding not because the church declares them so, but because “they are the doctrinal decisions of Scripture itself.”⁸⁸ Dau added that a subscription to the Lutheran Confessions “as far as” they agree with the Scriptures throws suspicion on the Confessions and opens the door to doctrinal latitudinarianism and insincerity.”⁸⁹

Leaders in the Missouri Synod found it necessary, however, time and again to defend their view of confessional subscription against charges of inverting the proper relation between the Scriptures and the Confessions and thereby elevating the Confessions above the Scriptures as a *norma normans*. The proper relation, Missouri critics contended, was to interpret the Confessions by the Scriptures and not the reverse. But synodical leaders defended their approach as the only one which in fact maintained the proper role of Scripture and the Confessions in relation to one another. With regard to content, they acknowledged that the Confessions are human writings liable to misstatement. So if one discovered an error, as for instance a faulty citation, it is corrected.

Likewise, if the exegesis adopted by the confessors at particular points is weak, it need not be imitated by those who have taken the confessional pledge. In an article titled “Variant Interpretations,” Graebner argued that any given passage of Scripture can have only one meaning. The principle *sensus literalis unus est* must stand or meaning cannot be conveyed. The question concerning exegesis is not what notions one might connect with the words of the text, but what thoughts the Holy Spirit actually connected with them. But

⁸⁷F[rancis] Pieper, “The Synodical Conference,” in *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, 4th revised and enlarged ed. (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1914), 148.

⁸⁸“A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States,” in *Doctrinal Declarations: A Collection of Official Statements on the Doctrinal Position of Various Lutheran Bodies in America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 57.

⁸⁹Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” 219.

in the Confessions one would appear to find some violations of that principle. In the Formula of Concord one will confront two different interpretations on the same page regarding the law as a schoolmaster to Christ. Not only are the two interpretations at variance with each other but they are both wrong. This does not imply that the passages in question are doctrinally wrong. But while “two variant interpretations cannot both be *exegetically* correct, both may very well be doctrinally correct.”⁹⁰

The doctrine of the Confessions, Missouriians argued, is so clearly stated throughout Scripture that a faulty exegesis at one point will not destroy the doctrinal correspondence of the Confessions with Scripture.

All errors of human interpreters cannot permanently move or remove one single stone in the doctrinal foundation of Christianity as long as every interpretation is inexorably and unconditionally rejected which is in conflict with any doctrine or point of doctrine clearly set forth in the infallible Word of God.⁹¹

Graebner further argued that there is not a single doctrine of the Christian faith which is not set forth in unmistakable terms in some text of Scripture which may be agreed upon by all orthodox theologians, or even laymen, as a *sedes doctrinae* of such doctrine.

Pieper also drew a distinction between the bare words of Scripture and the exegesis of the Scriptures. Comparing Walther with the Erlangen theologians (Delitzsch, Harless, and von Hofmann), Pieper argued that Walther was the true Bible theologian.⁹² Walther insisted on the bare words of Scripture. Among the Erlangeners, however, Scripture is no longer regarded as the Word of God, but the exegesis is deemed of most importance, that is, “the human thoughts *superadded* to the Scriptures, furnish the materials for this theol-

⁹⁰A. L. Graebner, “Variant Interpretations,” *Theological Quarterly* 6 (1902): 117.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 120.

⁹²Francis Pieper, *Conversion and Election: A Plea for a United Lutheranism in America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1913), 93.

ogy.”⁹³ But Lutheran church does not stand on interpretations of Scripture; it stands on Scripture itself. In “A Brief Statement,” Pieper reiterated: “All *doctrines* of the symbols are based on clear statements of Scripture.”⁹⁴

Graebner and Pieper believe that the above approach simply employs the unassailed principle of the analogy of faith. One cannot adopt an exegesis which conflicts with the doctrine of Scripture. For this reason, the Confessions interpret Scripture, and not the other way around. The criticism that Missouri inverted the relation between Scripture and the Confessions, making the latter the norm of the former, betrays a fateful flaw in reasoning according to A. L. Graebner. Such accusations, he contended, confound “interpretation” with “judgment” or “criticism.” If Lutherans claimed that Scripture must be judged or criticized according to the Confessions, the charge would be correct.

So the Confessions norm not Scripture, but the interpretation of Scripture. All explications of Scripture must be approved or rejected according to the degree that they are in harmony or at variance with the Confessions of the orthodox church which “are a correct exhibition of the doctrine of Scripture; or they would not be the Confessions of the *orthodox* church; and that doctrine is therefore divine; or it would not be the doctrine of Scripture, the Word of God.”⁹⁵ Although the Symbols must be judged by the divine word and accepted because of their conformity with them, it is equally true that the interpretation of Scripture must be in conformity with the doctrine of Scripture or, to put it another way, with the correct expositions of that doctrine, namely, the Confessions of the orthodox church, “and that every interpretation which is incompatible with such doctrine must be

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴“A Brief Statement,” 57.

⁹⁵A. L. Graebner, “Bibliology,” 400.

false, as being in conflict with Scripture itself, which cannot be broken.”⁹⁶

Furthermore, Pieper asserted that Lutherans “denounce any position as un-Lutheran according to which the Confessions are to take the place of Scripture.”⁹⁷ The church, he argued, never refers to the Confessions to support a truth. When that question arises the church turns to Scripture alone. “Whoever heard of a sensible old Lutheran referring to the Confessions for any other purpose than to point to those doctrines his church holds to be teachings of Scripture?”⁹⁸ Pieper added that the distinction must be maintained between *norma decisionis* and *norma discretionis* (deciding norm and distinguishing norm). The former is Scripture; the latter, the Confessions.⁹⁹ Bente added that “never for a moment did our fathers regard the Lutheran Confessions as an inspired source and norm of truth.”¹⁰⁰ They did not cite the symbols in order to prove that their doctrines were true and divine, but to establish them as truly Lutheran and always taught by the Lutheran church.

It followed then that when a church distances itself from her symbolical writings, it ceases to be Lutheran. When an individual qualifies his endorsement of the Confessions, he rejects in part, if not in whole, the faith of Lutheranism. A. L. Graebner observed that in the Confessions, Lutherans identify themselves by declaring the substance of their faith to others. They do not determine what to believe, but what Lutherans do believe. “In Scripture God tells *us* what we *should* believe; in the Confessions we tell *others* what we

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Pieper, “The Synodical Conference,” 148.

⁹⁸Francis Pieper, “Foreword to Volume I, No. 1 of the *Concordia Theological Monthly*,” trans. Paul H. F. Baepler, *Concordia Journal* 1 (January 1975): 18.

⁹⁹Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:358.

¹⁰⁰Bente, *Following the Faith of Our Fathers*, 5.

do believe.”¹⁰¹ So one believes the doctrine confessed in the symbolical writings because one knows them to be the doctrine of Scripture, and Lutherans confess the doctrine they believe because they would have others know it to be their doctrine. What is the doctrine of Scripture can be obtained only from Scripture; what is the doctrine of the Lutheran church can be ascertained from the Lutheran Confessions.

Dau added that by means of confessional writings the orthodox church declares its distinction from “heterodox societies that also appeal to Scripture in their behalf; and by means of its confessions the orthodox church seeks to assure itself that the teachers whom it has called and ordained, have attained to the correct understanding of Scripture.”¹⁰² So the practice of pledging the ministers of the church to the Confessions is still practiced for the same reasons which Melancthon asserted against the attack of Andrew Osiander on the oath demanded of teachers and graduates at Wittenberg: “to maintain the pure doctrine,” and “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.”¹⁰³ Confessing the creed, “we must with all our heart condemn modern rationalism and liberalism.”¹⁰⁴

Putting this principle into practice, Missouri Synod theologians frequently asked that their works be judged by the Lutheran Confessions. A. L. Graebner insisted that the “absence of references to the Symbols of our church, the *norma normata* of sound Lutheranism, must not be construed into a disparagement of the Lutheran standards or any point therein contained.”¹⁰⁵ In the same manner, Pieper in his *magnum opus*, *Christian*

¹⁰¹A. L. Graebner, “Bibliology,” 399.

¹⁰²Dau, *Lectures on Dr. Graebner's Outlines*, 43

¹⁰³Dau, “What is Lutheranism?” 218.

¹⁰⁴Bente, “Luther the Faithful Confessor of Christ”, 96.

¹⁰⁵A. L. Graebner, *Doctrinal Theology*, v.

Dogmatics, asked that it be judged on the basis of the Scriptures and the Confessions.

Confessional Subscription and Unity of the Church

For Missouri Synod leaders, not only did the Confessions identify and distinguish that which was the correct interpretation of Scripture from that which was in error, but as explications of Scripture the Confessions provided the church with a basis for unity and a rallying point around which Lutherans could unite. Missouri Synod leaders consistently maintained that even though the the *Book of Concord* set forth the Confessions of the Lutheran church, it was not intended to be particularistic or sectarian. To that end, the Missouri Synod continued to approach other Lutherans with a view toward furthering the unity of the church. Their efforts culminated in and capped this period of Missouri's history with the adoption of the *A Brief Statement* in 1932.

Dau in particular stressed that because the Confessions were Scriptural, the Lutheran church demonstrated continuity with the church of all ages, particularly the early church. In terms of mission the Lutheran church does not stake its success on

the spread of a human name or on the organization of one universal, visible Church, but on the dissemination of the truth as it is in Christ. She is content if, with Luther and his early followers, men accept the teaching of the apostles and prophets, and give full recognition to the personality and work of Christ, who is the chief corner-stone on which men's faith must be built up.¹⁰⁶

By professing allegiance to the *Book of Concord*, Lutherans profess allegiance to none other than the [afore-described] one, holy, catholic, Christian Church of all times, which alone has and holds the truth, and which comprises the sum total of believers and saints.

Bente seconded this role of the Confessions in defining the mission of Lutheranism. He regarded the Formula of Concord as the pattern which Lutherans should follow in their quest for unity. The way to settle controversies was "not indifferently to ignore them, nor unionistically to compromise them by adopting ambiguous formulas, but

¹⁰⁶Dau, "Lutheranism and Christianity," 328.

patiently to discuss the doctrines at issue until an agreement in the truth was reached."¹⁰⁷ For this reason, Bente argued, the Lutheran church alone is qualified to head a true unity-union movement. It alone is in full possession of those unadulterated truths without which there can be no true Lutheran union.

Only when united in undivided loyalty to the divine truths of God's Word will the American Lutheran church be able to measure up to its peculiar calling of restoring to Christendom the truths of the Gospel in their pristine purity, and in and with these truths the true unity of the spirit and a fellowship and union, both beneficial to man and well-pleasing to God.¹⁰⁸

On this basis, the Lutheran Confessions err neither *in excessu* nor *in defectu*, they neither extend the requirements for Christian union to human teachings and institutions, nor do they limit them to merely a part of the doctrines of the Bible. Most union efforts, he believed, are failures *ab initio*, because they seek outward unity without inward union.

To that end, the Missouri Synod proposed a number of free conferences during the first decade of the twentieth century. During the second decade of the twentieth century, the Missouri Synod found itself in the midst of a flurry of Lutheran mergers. The General Synod, the United General Synod South, and the General Council reunited in 1918 to form the United Lutheran Church in America. The Ohio Synod and the Iowa Synod moved toward closer relations and in 1918 established altar and pulpit fellowship which would eventually lead to the formation in 1930 of the American Lutheran Church. Perhaps the one with the greatest impact on Missouri was the Madison Agreement which led to the reunion of the Norwegian Lutheran synods in 1917. Unfortunately, from Missouri's standpoint, these efforts achieved union at the expense of doctrinal agreement.

In response, Pieper wrote *Conversion and Election*, and although he had in mind the immediate background of the Norwegian efforts toward unity, the book, as the subtitle

¹⁰⁷Bente, "Historical Introductions," 104.

¹⁰⁸Bente, *American Lutheranism*, 1:9.

indicates, was directed to the entire Lutheran union movement. He compared *Opgjoer* with Article XI of the Formula of Concord and in an irenic but firm spirit he pleaded for a unity based on the platform of the Lutheran Confessions, because the “Confessions state only the doctrine of the Scriptures and no human opinions.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, he argued, *all* of God’s word must be “respected as truth to be kept unbroken.”¹¹⁰ In answer to the question of whether such perfect agreement concerning doctrine is possible, Pieper answered with an emphatic yes. The reason is that the Scriptures are perfectly clear on all articles of faith, and every article of faith is revealed at least somewhere in the Scriptures in plain and proper words. Such agreement, however, depended on “agreement in doctrine and practice.”¹¹¹

After the intersynodical conferences between 1914 and 1917, Bente wrote a work in which he asked the question, *Was steht der Vereinigkeit der lutherischen Synoden Amerikas im Wege?*¹¹² In it he surveyed the various Lutheran bodies in America together with their historical development, and then he detailed the differences among them. After the formulation of the Chicago Theses, the Missouri Synod in convention in 1929 requested that a document be drawn up on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions which would serve as a basis for unity. *A Brief Statement* of 1932 sums up and reflects the previous three decades of theological trends and union movements. It was offered as a basis for Lutheran unity and set forth those doctrines about which there had been discussion or controversy.

Significantly, if not coincidentally, *A Brief Statement* frames its articles of faith by

¹⁰⁹Pieper, *Conversion and Election*, 13.

¹¹⁰Francis Pieper, *The Difference Between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches* (Coos Bay, OR: St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, 1981), 33.

¹¹¹F[rancis] P[ieper], “Wird Einigkeit werden?” *Lehre und Wehre* 60 (1914): 103.

¹¹²(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917).

beginning with an article on Holy Scripture and concluding with a statement on the Lutheran Confessions. In between it sets forth the biblically based, soteriologically oriented doctrines laid down in the Confessions. By doing so, it appropriately reflects and summarizes the dominant motifs and accents from this period in Missouri's history. It also reflects the conserving spirit that animated the synodical theologians and leaders as they sought to preserve the heritage of Walther for future generations. The dominant concern of these men was to uphold and proclaim *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia*.

CHAPTER VI

A CONFRONTATIONAL CONFSSIONALISM

As the Missouri Synod began to emerge from its language and cultural isolation, it came into increasing contact with both the ecumenical movement and contemporary theological trends. This compelled a number of Missouri Synod theologians to address the very questions with which the United Lutheran Church in America had been struggling for some time, namely, the adequacy and pertinency of the Lutheran symbolical writings for Lutherans in the light of twentieth-century man's knowledge and historical awareness. Traditionally, for the Missouri Synod, the Scriptural character of the *Book of Concord* had provided the point of departure for any consideration of confessional subscription. But one can begin to detect a weakening in the perceptions of that biblical character and with it, some shifts in emphasis toward a more historical orientation. The place where these changes take place manifests itself most perceptively in the practical application of the Confessions to the life of the church, both its internal strength and its outward unity.

The *termini* for this period of Missouri's history may be framed with a *terminus a quo* of 1932 (the publication of *A Brief Statement*), and a *terminus ad quem* of 1974 (the walkout of the Concordia Seminary faculty). These dates embrace two generations of scholars, in between which came a transition in the way synodical leaders viewed their continuity with the past and the changes of the present and future. The theologians born before 1900 and who represent the first half of this period include Theodore Engelder (1865-1949), William F. Arndt (1880-1957), and John Theodore Mueller (1885-1967). In their writings they continued to stress strongly the biblical character of Lutheran confes-

sionalism and to resist unequivocally many of the contemporary trends in theology. In particular, they addressed the debilitating effects of historical criticism and those theologies which denied the inspiration of Scripture.

Another group of scholars, all of whom were born after 1900, and who would attain a strong reputation for their scholarship, include Herbert J. Bouman and Arthur Carl Piepkorn (1907-1973). Addressing the tension between the biblical character of the Confessions and historical difficulties that the symbols raise for contemporary Lutheranism, Piepkorn cited the need for a position that did not “retreat into a biblicism that makes the theological enterprise irrelevant,” nor one that would tend to “jettison the symbolical books or to characterize them as outmoded and useless.”¹ Each of these men takes into greater consideration the historical character of the Confessions and appears to redefine the continuity which the Confessions provide the church’s message with their own distinctive accents: Bouman concentrates on the Gospel as an over-arching hermeneutical principle, while Piepkorn appears to turn toward the tradition and liturgy of the church.

The Nature and Role of the Confessions

During the 1940s and early 1950s one can observe a shift from a staunchly biblical to a more historical orientation in the way theologians perceived the symbolical writings. Missouri Synod theologians increasingly admitted that history shows all human language and formulated statements to be contingent upon their historical settings and their philosophical framework. This makes it a precarious enterprise to “absolutize” any phrase or formulation when explicating and defining the meaning of confessional theology for present day needs. As a corollary to losing the ability to make normative statements of the truth, theologians began to place a greater emphasis on the existential and functional di-

¹Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Do the Lutheran Symbolical Books Speak Where the Sacred Scriptures are Silent?” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (January 1972): 31.

mension of confessions and creeds than on their ontological or cognitive character. What the doctrinal content of the Confessions “does” is more important than what it “is.” The latter, it was argued, intellectualized faith while the former revitalized faith.

The Biblical Character of the Confessions

As did their predecessors, Mueller, Arndt, and Engelder also insisted that wherever the symbols speak on doctrine, they speak the words of God. Thus, as Arndt looked forward to the Synod’s second century, he exhorted, ““The Scriptures and the Confessions must remain the slogan, not because the fathers flew the banner, but because we have ourselves become convinced that it is in agreement with God’s Word and the truth.”² He believed that this was the key to Missouri’s strength and distinctiveness. Only for Missouri, Arndt held, did acceptance of the Confessions signify the whole doctrinal content as representing divine truth.³

We must say that we accept them because their teachings are in full agreement with the Bible doctrines, and not merely that we give them our approval in so far as their teachings are those of the Holy Scriptures. Our founding fathers correctly pointed out that if confessional writings are to have any value, they have to be accepted as to their total doctrinal content.⁴

He believed that for other Lutherans, subscription to the Confessions too often meant a “general but not a comprehensive approval of the doctrinal positions set forth in our symbolical books.”⁵

Mueller likewise contended that the approach of the Missouri Synod was distinctive

²W[illiam] Arndt, “Foreword,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947): 7.

³William Frederick Arndt, “Missouri’s Insistence on Acceptance of the Word of God and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as a Condition of Church Fellowship,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947): 173.

⁴William Frederick Arndt, “The Pertinency and the Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (September 1949): 679.

⁵Arndt, “Missouri’s Insistence on Acceptance of the Word of God,” 173.

in that it carefully avoided two extremes. On the one hand, it was careful not to stress a historical point of departure for consideration of the Confessions, thereby relativizing them, and on the other hand, it took care not to adopt a dogmatic or speculative view of the Confessions. In more concrete terms he held that “our Confessions are neither mere relics of a passé belief, of no practical significance at all to us today, nor doctrinal norms which independently of Scripture establish the official *corpus doctrinae* of a denomination.”⁶ So Lutherans neither Calvinize nor Romanize their confessional writings, actions which would lead them away from Scripture and into various forms of enthusiasm. Lutherans insist that the Confessions demonstrate “perfect loyalty to God’s Word,”⁷ which is, after all, the best antidote for enthusiasm.

Furthermore, Arndt contended, since the entire doctrinal content of the Confessions sets forth the doctrine of Scripture, the Lutheran symbols spotlight the heart and center of Scripture. The Augsburg Confession in its first seventeen articles, for instance, “brilliantly and yet in simple fashion sets forth the great Christ-centered teachings of the Holy Scriptures on which our holy Christian faith is based.”⁸ In fact, throughout the *Book of Concord* there is no more important doctrine than justification. It is the most prominent feature, the golden thread that runs through the confessional writings from beginning to end. The relation of all articles of faith to this doctrine, Arndt asserted, is the “chief reason, why our Confessions are not dry doctrinal disquisitions, but live, virile proclamations; they are intended to acquaint people with the joyous conviction held by Lutherans that the justification of a sinner is accomplished not through good works, but by God’s grace through

⁶John Theodore Mueller, “Professional Growth in the Study of the Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 9 (April 1938): 258.

⁷Ibid., 265.

⁸William Frederick Arndt, “Forward [Loyalty to the Confessions],” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 10 (January 1949): 5.

faith.”⁹ By being faithful to the Confessions, Lutherans are certain that they are “faithful to the Scriptures and to the message of salvation through the blood of Christ, our Lord.”¹⁰

Arndt, Engelder, and Mueller argued that one’s attitude toward the Confessions reflected one’s attitude toward the Scriptures as the Word of God. “Loyalty to the Confessions, Lutheran confessionalism, means loyalty to God’s Word. And loyalty to God’s Word breeds loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions.”¹¹ Arndt held that by adhering to the entire doctrinal content of the Confessions, Missouri Synod Lutherans have nothing else in mind than the Word of God.

It is the majesty of the divine Word which looms large before us and dominates our thinking. Where God has spoken, must we not hasten to yield our assent? The Confessions, that is our conviction, merely reiterate for us in convenient and at the same time heartwarming, thrilling form what the Scriptures teach.¹²

For this reason, he adds, if anyone or any church refuses to join Missouri in accepting the Confessions in such a manner, one suspects that such refusal is based not upon any objection to the Confessions, but upon an objection to the Word of God.

With the conviction that the Confessions stand or fall with the Word of God, Engelder and Arndt devoted a great deal of space and energy to defending the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Engelder’s works include *The Scriptures Cannot Be Broken*¹³ and *Reason or Revelation*.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Arndt addressed the so called discrepancies in

⁹Arndt, “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” 685.

¹⁰Arndt, “Forward [Loyalty to the Confessions],” 6.

¹¹*Popular Symbolics: The Doctrines of the churches of Christendom and of Other Religious Bodies Examined in the Light of Scripture*, ed. Theodore Engelder (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), 15.

¹²Arndt, “Missouri’s Insistence on Acceptance of the Word of God,” 175.

¹³*Six Objections to Verbal Inspiration Examined in the Light of Scripture* (Aitkin, MN: Hope Press, n.d.).

¹⁴(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941).

the Bible with *Does the Bible Contradict Itself*¹⁵ and *Bible Difficulties*.¹⁶ These men warn of historical criticisms' destructive tendencies on the entire body of Christian belief and of modern theologians' unwillingness to assert that the Scriptures alone are to be one's authority "and that they are inerrant, absolutely reliable."¹⁷ This threat had now become the chief question in Lutheranism.¹⁸

Engelder and Arndt asserted that when the *sola Scriptura* principle is minimized or undermined, another principle inserts itself as the point from which one does theology. What has replaced the *sola Scriptura* principle, Arndt argued, was none other than the age old threat of rationalism.

The reason why the authority of the Bible is rejected is not something that rests on new discoveries and special insights that have been gained, but simply on the old rationalism, the bowing before reason, which has frequently characterized the course of theologians in the past. The Bible is as pertinent, true, and divine as ever.¹⁹

Such rationalism manifested itself in those "theologians who maintain that in the light of modern critical research they can no longer accord a hundred-per-cent acceptance to the Holy Book."²⁰ This critical attitude, he asserted, having found its way into the Lutheran church, now divided Lutherans.

Furthermore, Arndt contended that the *sola Scriptura* doctrine, contrary to the claims of some, is a clear and definite teaching of the Confessions. Although the Confessions do not have a specific article on Scripture, this does not imply that the confes-

¹⁵*A Discussion of Alleged Contradictions in the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1930).

¹⁶*An Examination of Passages of the Bible Alleged to be Irreconcilable with Its Inspiration* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932).

¹⁷Arndt, "The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions," 694.

¹⁸Arndt, "Foreword," 18 (1947): 2.

¹⁹Arndt, "The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions," 695.

²⁰Arndt, "Foreword," 18 (1947): 3.

sors had no convictions regarding the subject. In fact, Arndt proceeded,

it is no exaggeration to say that it [the doctrine of Scripture] is found practically all over in the Confessions. The appeal is always to the Scriptures. Whenever proof is to be brought, the thing that decides it according to the Confessions, is the Bible.²¹

This indicates that for the confessors, no other authority is recognized in the Lutheran church than “God speaking to us in the Holy Scriptures.”²² In addition, Arndt continued, the Confessions have historically passed the Scriptural test and come off victorious in all debates carried out on the basis of the Scriptures.

Engelder especially contended that any diminution of the Scripture principle would lead to a diminution of Christology and justification. He argued, “If we yield the *sola Scriptura*, we lose the *sola gratia*.”²³ Because it cannot be found in any human authority, God gave the Scriptures. The more one loves the doctrine of justification, the more one will despise in this matter, all human authority. Moreover, he deplored the contemporary tendency to place Scripture and Christ in opposition to each other, to make their authority an either/or proposition. Engelder asserted that both must be maintained. Christ is the sole authority in matters of religion. Scripture is the sole authority in matters of religion. It is through the Scriptures that one hears Christ speaking.²⁴

The theologians who followed Engelder, Arndt, and Mueller continued to stress that Lutherans are bound to the entire doctrinal content of the symbolical writings. At the same time, one can observe shifts in the way in which they viewed that doctrine. Doctrine

²¹Arndt, “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” 687.

²²Ibid., 688.

²³Theodore Engelder, “The Three Principles of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides,” in *Four Hundred Years. Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Results*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 104.

²⁴Theodore Endgelder, “Holy Scripture or Christ?” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 10 (1939): 492. For full article see 492-506 and 571-87.

becomes regarded more existentially than ontologically and at times is treated as if the two views are mutually exclusive. One can say that formulations point to the Gospel, but not that they are the Gospel. This means that one cannot “absolutize” any statement of doctrine. Thus in both content and tone, later theologians show less confidence and more ambiguity in their assertions concerning the Confessions and Scripture. They demonstrate an unwillingness to set forth the confessional doctrine of Scripture, for instance, in normative terms for the present day.

Piepkorn acknowledged that one of Walther’s most significant contributions to American Lutheranism was his attitude toward the Confessions as biblical expositions. Walther had stressed that while the Confessions contain points that contradict reason, they do not contradict the Scriptures in even the smallest point.²⁵ In the same vein, Piepkorn affirmed that the doctrinal content of the Confessions is “strictly understood as the reformulation and reproduction of the doctrinal content of the Sacred Scriptures on the issues in question.”²⁶ For this reason only are Lutherans bound to the doctrinal content of the Lutheran symbolical books.²⁷ Moreover, since their value “lies in their correct interpretation of the sense of Sacred Scriptures,”²⁸ pastors are to interpret the Scriptures according to the Symbols and not vice versa.

Piepkorn and Bouman also strongly affirmed the centrality of justification within the Confessions. In its confessions the Lutheran church has tried to show how the center and the circumference are connected. The very structure of the *Augustana* brings the cen-

²⁵Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32 (October 1961): 613.

²⁶Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 29 (January 1958): 5.

²⁷Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Do the Lutheran Symbolical Books Speak,” 35.

²⁸Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today,” *The Seminarian* 45 (2 June 1954): 37.

trality of justification to the fore “by redistributing the articles of the creed in such a way that the first looks back via creation beyond creation and the third looks forward through the process of hallowing to the point where the faithful shall finally be made consummately holy” in the resurrection.²⁹ Bouman pointed out that entire *corpus doctrinae* is bound up inextricably with justification. All articles of faith have their place in this doctrine. All doctrines stand and fall with justification.³⁰ In the *Book of Concord*, one encounters on nearly every page the “*cantus firmus* of justification as the ever recurring theme which, though developed in a hundred fascinating variations, always remains plainly recognizable as the same theme.”³¹

However, the way in which this doctrinal content of the Confessions—together with its center—receives treatment differs from that of earlier Missouri Synod theologians. In *Luther to Kierkegaard*,³² Jaroslav Pelikan argued that the Lutheran church had been put on the wrong philosophical track by Chemnitz and the Formula of Concord. This track overemphasized objective and cognitive statements of the faith, thereby leading to an intellectualizing of faith itself. Lutheranism needed to correct that with a new philosophical and historical orientation. Pelikan asserted that the knowledge of which the Confessions spoke was not cognitive, but existential and dynamic.³³ According to the Confessions, he ar-

²⁹Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Lutheran Churches,” in *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, Vol. 2: *Protestant Denominations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 42.

³⁰Herbert J. A. Bouman, “The Doctrine of Justification in the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26 (November 1955): 804.

³¹Herbert J. A. Bouman, “Some Thoughts on the Theological Presuppositions of a Lutheran Approach to the Scriptures,” in *Aspects of Biblical Hermeneutics: Confessional Principles and Practical Applications*, *Concordia Theological Monthly, Occasional Papers*, 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966): 10.

³²(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950).

³³Jaroslav Pelikan, “Church and Church History in the Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 22 (May 1951): 305-20.

gued, to have knowledge is to know the benefits of Christ. And so knowledge and faith are not only one and the same, they are personal and vital.

Along similar, if slightly more conservative lines, Bouman held, "Our Confessions are markedly uninterested in viewing doctrine in the abstract, academically, philosophically, theoretically."³⁴ To the contrary, they present doctrine existentially, that is, as it relates man to God. He admitted that at times the formulations of the church's confessions, "being human, have not always done full justice to the concrete reality, encumbered, as they often were, by abstract philosophical terminology, but the motivation is unmistakable."³⁵ They sought to remind the church that the doctrine of Christ has a direct, "existential," eschatological bearing on man. So there can be no such thing as an academic, impersonal, theoretical interest in Christology. Piepkorn likewise warned against absolutizing what "are inescapably contingent formulations" and thereby turn them into "new revelations."³⁶

To approach the doctrinal content of the Confessions functionally rather than ontologically meant that one must not regard the Confessions as a book of rules to be applied mechanically or legalistically. To the contrary, Bouman asserted, "We shall do justice to the problem of our acceptance of them only when we take them on their own terms, in a way that is consistent with their purpose and function."³⁷ The central purpose of the symbols is "to direct men away from themselves to the Scriptures in such a way that they will

³⁴Bouman, "The Doctrine of Justification in the Lutheran Confessions," 802.

³⁵Ibid., 808.

³⁶Piepkorn, "The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today," 39.

³⁷Herbert J. A. Bouman, "Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription," in *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (New York: Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, 1961), 38.

find there what they are meant to find, a gracious God in Christ.”³⁸ That means, Bouman argued, that the Reformation was “in very truth a hermeneutical revolution.”³⁹ The perspective of the Gospel “informs and shapes Lutheran theology.”⁴⁰ It becomes the “judge and guardian and disciplinarian of the church’s theology and life and unity.”⁴¹ This Gospel orientation, he held, must thus shape one’s attitude toward the Confessions.

Bouman argued that the Lutheran Confessions propose that as new disputes arise in the future concerning articles of Christian teaching, including the doctrine of the Bible, that they be evaluated and resolved from the perspective that controls the enunciation of what Lutherans believe, teach, and confess, that is, the Gospel. So to accept the Confessions because they are Scriptural

means that the confessional *sola Scriptura* (Scripture as the only source and norm), the doctrine of God, of man, of the church, of the means of grace, etc., are eternally true and valid because the confessional *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola gratia* (by grace alone), and *sola fide* (by faith alone) are true to God’s revelation of Himself.⁴²

This furthermore implies that Lutherans would regard as valid and important “those questions that have explicit or implicit relevance for the proclamation, promotion, and preservation of the holy Gospel.”⁴³

These shifts in the understanding of the Confessions correspond to an altered perception of the nature and essence of Scripture. The conviction that the doctrinal content of

³⁸Ibid., 41.

³⁹Bouman, “Some Thoughts on the Theological Presuppositions,” 9.

⁴⁰Herbert J. A. Bouman, “Some Thoughts on the Church in the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 39 (March 1968): 178.

⁴¹Ibid., 191.

⁴²Herbert J. A. Bouman, “The Ecumenical Character of Lutheran Doctrine,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Sixth Convention of the Lutheran Synodical Conference Assembled at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August 2-5, 1960* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 24.

⁴³Bouman, “Some Thoughts on the Theological Presuppositions,” 20.

the Confessions must be viewed more existentially than ontologically, that one must approach it from the standpoint of its intention and not its essence, conditioned the way in which Bouman and Piepkorn approached the doctrine of Scripture. They were reticent to express the nature of Scripture in precise, clear, and unambiguous language lest one “absolutize” such formulations and draw attention away from its author to a book. They preferred to speak of Scripture, not as *Deus locutus*, but as *Deus loquens*. Bouman argued the confessors themselves approached Scripture in this way, for which reason their doctrine of Scripture was a “thoroughly existential one, not a detached, objective, academic consideration of a doctrine about the Bible” without regard for its unique and utterly practical power for faith and life.⁴⁴

Bouman affirmed that from the first to the last, and everywhere in between, “the Lutheran symbols accept the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures as the sole, authoritative, and unalterable, and final source of all Christian doctrine.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Piepkorn observed that although the terminology of “verbal” inspiration is not found in the Confessions, it does not mean it was not there. If there was any point of universal agreement among Lutherans, Catholics, and Calvinists, he asserted, “aside from the nude assertions of the Ecumenical Creeds, it was the authority, the inspiration, and the inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures.”⁴⁶ But one of the significant differences between the Confessions and the age of Orthodoxy is that the latter dealt with the doctrine of Scripture reflectively, abstractly, and philosophically, while the Confessions deal with the “implicit doctrines of inspiration, authority and inerrancy in an existential and functional way, without the use of philosophi-

⁴⁴Herbert J. A. Bouman, “The Inspired Word and the Lutheran Confessions,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, June 20-29, 1962* (N.p.: 1962), 15.

⁴⁵Bouman, “Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 39.

⁴⁶Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “What the Symbols Have to Say about the Church,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26 (October 1955): 740.

cally refined technical terms.”⁴⁷

Both Bouman and Piepkorn prefer to remain with the terminology and way of speaking about Scripture as found in the Confessions rather than to draw the conclusion from the doctrine of inspiration that the Scriptures are therefore inerrant. Bouman observed that although the Confessions do not deny the inerrancy of Scripture, neither do they for that matter, “affirm it in an across the board mechanical sense.”⁴⁸ In fact, they do not deal with the issue as it is brought up today. Bouman argued that the issue is “Lutheranly irrelevant and ultimately pretheological. It is the wrong *Fragestellung*, an inappropriate way to pose the question.”⁴⁹ Piepkorn agreed that the term was theologically irrelevant. After all, the same arguments in the age of orthodoxy were used for both inspiration and inerrancy. So why use the latter? Anyway, only the original texts were inerrant and they can’t be recovered.

Rather than speaking of the words and text of the Scriptures as inerrant, it was at times argued that it would be better to speak of the person behind the words, namely the Holy Spirit, as inerrant rather than the words — words in which human beings played a role in formulating. Piepkorn argued that etymologically, the term is more appropriate to a person or a hypostatization, to the author of a book, but not to a book as a book. He suggested that better terms to describe what one intends are “accuracy,” “truthfulness,” “dependability,” “credibility,” “correctness,” or “exactitude.”⁵⁰ Piepkorn admitted that one may infer the inerrancy of Scripture from the truth that the Spirit is the principal author, but

⁴⁷Ibid., 740-41.

⁴⁸Herbert J. A. Bouman, “Some Thoughts on Authentic Lutheranism,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (May 1971): 287.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “What Does ‘Inerrancy’ Mean?” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 36(1965): 580.

one must ask “if such an inference is rational or strictly theological.”⁵¹

To speak of the inerrancy of the Spirit meant then that one must speak of the intent and purpose of Scripture. In 1960 the faculty of Concordia Seminary adopted a statement which would establish a pattern for others to follow. It asserted that in fulfilling the function for which God intended, the Scriptures “are inerrant, infallible, and wholly reliable.”⁵² A decade later, in the document *Faithful to our Calling, Faithful to our Lord*, both Bouman and Piepkorn affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture in this manner. Piepkorn, for instance, was willing to speak of Scripture’s “authority” as that which points to the supernatural level where God is their author. Similarly, he would apply “infallibility” to the purpose of Scripture, namely, that according to its saving purpose and the ordering of the life of God’s people, it is completely true and dependable.

Bouman expresses himself in similar functional and personal terms. When the confessions speak of the Scriptures they place the stress on the “pure, unalloyed, and unadulterated light of his Holy Gospel.”⁵³ Authentic Lutheranism, he contended, views the “Scriptures as the Word of God, *who* [italics added] addresses the sinner for the purpose of judging him in order to be gracious.”⁵⁴ The Confessions are not interested in and refused to be distracted by “any question of Scripture in isolation from the Gospel message.”⁵⁵ When the Confessions speak of Scripture, they are concerned not with the essence of Scripture, but with the content, the function, the correct understanding, and the proper use of Scripture, and that not in isolation from one another, but as a whole. The

⁵¹Ibid., 582.

⁵²“A Statement of the Form and Function of the Holy Scriptures,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31 (1960): 626.

⁵³Bouman, “Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 41.

⁵⁴Bouman, “Some Thoughts on Authentic Lutheranism,” 288

⁵⁵Ibid.

Word of God is the powerful and efficacious vehicle or instrument of the Holy Spirit's activity to lead to repentance and faith.

The Historical Character of the Confessions

Not only do these two generations of scholars reflect differing emphases and orientations to the biblical dimension of the Lutheran Confessions, but these differences show through also in their perception of the historical character of the Confessions. As Bente and Pieper before them, Arndt and Engelder argued that the beginning of the theological task must be Scripture and the doctrine of Scripture. A later leader like John H. that the starting point of the theological task must be the historical situation in which the theologian and his hearers find themselves. Tietjen, however, would argue, "For theology to be relevant, the theological task has to begin not with the gospel but with the situation to which it is to be addressed."⁵⁶ Others would stress the historical contingencies of any formulation of the Gospel and the need to beware of absolutizing them or equating them with the Gospel.

Arndt addressed the very question of the pertinency and contemporary relevance of the Confessions in the light of historical contingencies and relativities several times in 1949. Each time he asserted that the biblical character of the Confessions must condition one's understanding of historical change and development. In the Foreword to the *Concordia Theological Monthly* he asserted that the banner under which the Synod has rallied and under which it continued to stand was the same which Missouri has flown from its founding in 1847, "it simply is that of loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions."⁵⁷ From that perspective, he addressed the continuing relevance of the Confessions by asking, first,

⁵⁶John H. Tietjen, "The Gospel and the Theological Task," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 40 (1969): 439.

⁵⁷Arndt, "Forward [Loyalty to the Confessions]," 2.

whether the Confessions deal with the great and religious problems of the day. Secondly, are they adequate and sufficient, “do they cover all the points that we have to grapple with today?”⁵⁸

Arndt observed that, despite the progress which man has achieved in all realms of human endeavor, he himself has remained the same and in fact knows little more about himself, with the exception of physiology, than he did in the sixteenth century. The fundamental questions of life have not changed. “There is still deep anxiety to be satisfied, it is the same old longing that comes knocking at the door of our heart.”⁵⁹ To these questions, the Confessions remain pertinent because their main themes treat sin and grace. “If there is anything that should make our Confessional Writings exceedingly precious to us, it is the emphasis which one meets throughout on the sacrifice of Christ. Certainly they are pertinent in *this* respect, if not in anything else.”⁶⁰ One cannot but talk about the former unless people stopped being sinners, and hence one cannot help but proclaim the latter, the solution for sin. “There is no more important question that can arise at any time. It is this fundamental issue which is, as it were, the Leitmotif of all our confessional writings.”⁶¹

Another question which Arndt addressed concerned whether or not the Confessions adequately deal with all the questions or topics with which the church is concerned today. After all, they were not formulated to present a complete dogmatics and deal with every topic of the Christian faith.

They were intended for very special occasions and dwelt on the subjects that at the particular time required discussion. The Augsburg Confession became quite a comprehensive instrument because the slander had been spread that the Lutherans taught

⁵⁸Arndt, “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” 676.

⁵⁹Ibid., 690.

⁶⁰Ibid., 692.

⁶¹Arndt, “Forward [Loyalty to the Confessions],” 3

things which were directly subversive of the grand fundamental truths of Scripture.⁶² Yet, in spite of their historical setting and necessity, Arndt believed that one must say that all the chief teachings of the Christian faith are found in the Lutheran confessional writings. Even with the so-called sociological or economic questions, Arndt held that if one studied the Confessions carefully, one will find “that the proper principles have been enunciated.”⁶³

In contrast to Arndt, Piepkorn reflected a stronger historical orientation by affirming the contingencies of history and the relativities of language. When one tries to define the doctrinal content of the Confessions and their relevance, one must ask to what extent is the philosophical frame of reference, the cosmology and metaphysics of the Confessions, “a part of the doctrinal content,” and to what extent is it a “part of the nonessential scaffolding.”⁶⁴ These questions, he noted, were a part of a larger one that is addressed to Scripture as well, “To what extent is the philosophical frame of reference implicit in the very vocabulary of the inspired authors” and to what extent is it part of the generous accommodation of the Spirit.⁶⁵

Piepkorn pointed out that the *Book of Concord* is contingent on history in several ways. First, the symbols were formulated in response to errors that were not merely repetitions of previous heresies. “There must be some characteristically new misconception to warrant a symbol, and such new misconceptions do not reoccur in the history of the Church with astronomical regularity.”⁶⁶ The reason Piepkorn suggested, is perhaps that either the devil is not very original or man is so gullible that Satan need only make simple

⁶²Arndt, “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” 683, 684.

⁶³Arndt, “Forward [Loyalty to the Confessions],” 3.

⁶⁴Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols,” 33.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., 34.

modifications of the standard perversions of the past. In either case no new symbols become necessary on a regular basis. Second, since the Confessions speak to the specific situations that precipitated them, one need not absolutize what are inescapably contingent formulations. He argued that the symbols always interpret the divine revelation of the sacred Scriptures; they are never therefore new revelations.

Piepkorn explained the contingencies of confessional formulations by a pattern of analysis as follows:

We should prefer to remain with the simple Biblical formulation *A*. But if, while professing loyalty to the divine revelation, you say *B*, and *B* is inconsistent with the right understanding of *A* as the Church has always received it, then, for the sake of precision in defining the traditional Catholic view, we must say *C*.⁶⁷

He pointed out, however, that *C* is not a statement that Lutherans can document from the sacred Scriptures (for example, the formula “in, with, and under”); it is a contingent statement, contingent upon perversions in statements *B1* and *B2*. So Lutherans cannot absolutize it and, apart from these antitheses, say that this is what the Bible teaches. “It is what the bible teaches only over against the perversions of *B1* and *B2*; and if *B1* or *B2* is not asserted, we had better content ourselves with *A* instead of replacing it with *C*.”⁶⁸

Again, the contingencies evident in the Confessions are analogous to those of Scripture. The Scriptures, Piepkorn wrote, “for all their divine inspiration and all their august authority, were inevitably conditioned by the languages in which the Holy Ghost inspired the words of the Divine Revelation and by the circumstances that evoked them.”⁶⁹ If such contingencies are true with Scripture, they are even “truer of the Confessions”; they are conditioned by the “language in which they were framed and the situation that evoked

⁶⁷Ibid., 40.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid., 36.

them.”⁷⁰ In the same way, he added, the continuous witness of the church that takes place in the public ministry is also conditioned. What one must affirm is that despite those contingencies, whether it be the Bible, creed, or preaching, God speaks through men and to men.

The contingencies of history have several implications for theology in general and the Confessions in particular. It means that no cognitive, ontological statement made by man concerning doctrine can claim permanent validity. To ignore the contingencies of history, Piepkorn argued, leads to the tendency of absolutizing statements of doctrine as permanently valid which then intellectualizes the church’s faith. This in fact took place, according to Piepkorn, during the age of Orthodoxy. Whereas the Confessions are existential in their formulation, careful dogmatic definition characterized the seventeenth century. This had the effect of formalizing and rationalizing “the creative, existential vitality of Luther’s theological insights and of the early confessional writings.”⁷¹ The truths of Christianity were “identified with Lutheran dogma with the result that faith was intellectualized. Although the ultimate authority and centrality of Scripture were professed, practical authority was assigned to the orthodox interpretations of Scripture.”⁷² Accordingly, the Bible frequently became little more than a source of prooftexts.

Pushing the implications of the historical contingencies to their logical conclusion and expressing a more radical view, Tietjen asserted that one dare not equate any theological formulation, creedal or otherwise, with the Gospel. At most, one can assert that a given formulation *points* to the Gospel, but not that it *is* the Gospel.⁷³ After all, creeds and con-

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 2:25.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Tietjen, “The Gospel and the Theological Task,” 437.

fessions are the products of particular theological systems and are formulated in the language and thought forms of a particular age and time. Hence they are conditioned by history, “their formulation of the gospel is not absolutely final.”⁷⁴ Thus, he asserted,

Ours is a confessional unity. Within that unity there is room — lots of it — for theological variety. While we go about the theological task of articulating the gospel for our time, we are united by our common subscription to the creeds as witnesses to the gospel proclaimed in the Scriptures.⁷⁵

Tietjen appears to have arrived at a view of the Confessions then as primarily formal, historical documents.

Bouman maintained the pertinence and relevance of the Confessions by asserting that they are “not *primarily* historical documents subject to attendant limitations.”⁷⁶ They have no interest, for example, in science or politics. Moreover, while the Confessions claim to be a comprehensive summary of the Scriptures, they have no desire to be considered as a complete dogmatics. This would indicate that “we need not remain chained to the formulations of the past, but we must remain grounded in the eternal truth and continue to have *firm convictions*.”⁷⁷ But the time- and place-bound matters of the Confessions all drop away from the Confessions, “while their timeless witness to the eternal Gospel remains abidingly valid for every tongue and kindred and people under heaven.”⁷⁸ Their doctrinal content can be translated without a loss of substance. Their proclamation of this truth is correct and therefore “permanently binding, because the truth of God is not relative.”⁷⁹ In this context, the problems raised by history, terminology, and logic will be seen

⁷⁴Ibid., 439.

⁷⁵Ibid., 442.

⁷⁶Bouman, “Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 38.

⁷⁷Bouman, “The Inspired Word and the Lutheran Confessions,” 17.

⁷⁸Bouman, “The Ecumenical Character of Lutheran Doctrine,” 30.

⁷⁹Bouman, “Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription,” 43.

in the proper proportion and not be allowed to obscure the glories of the eternal realities.

Although he affirmed the contingencies of historical formulations, what appears to have prevented Piepkorn from relativizing the Confessions, in the manner of Theodore Tappert for instance, is that not only did he stress the Confessions as expositions of Scripture, he emphasized them as declarations of the *church*. Piepkorn frequently pointed out that the confessors viewed themselves as standing within the tradition of Western Christianity. They did not approach Scripture in a biblicistic fashion by ignoring the tradition of the church. Consequently, the Confessions ensure the continuity of the church's message by being based on Scripture and being placed within the tradition of the church. As such, the Confessions are to be seen as interpreting the unchanging *analogia fidei catholicae*.

So Lutheranism defined itself over against those who broke with the past, namely the Reformed, by asserting its catholicity. Over against those who claimed catholicity, Lutherans advanced their evangelical insights. Lutheranism does not represent an effort to turn the clock of history back three, five, ten, fifteen or twenty centuries in a biblicistic or traditionalistic kind of repristination.

For all its professed loyalty to the written revelation of God, Lutheranism has not been blind to the historical nature of Christianity, the fact that God is working out the destiny of the church in history, that the Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets has illuminated teachers of the church in every generation to understand and to apply that speaking to the church's situation in each century.⁸⁰

As practical evidence, Piepkorn points out that Lutherans were content to retain historical developments such as altars, crucifixes, and the church year within their churches.

The Function and Role of the Confessions

At this point, one can discern two streams of thought confronting each other within the Missouri Synod. One hearkens back to the more traditional confessionalism of the

⁸⁰Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 2:41-42.

Missouri Synod and affirms that the biblical character of the Confessions ensures the validity and relevance of its formulated statements despite the historical contingencies of time. The other stream of thought, while affirming the essential biblical character of the Confessions, has increasingly acknowledged the relativities and contingencies of history and the role they play with regard to the terminology and formulations of the symbolical writings. This has led them to shift the continuity the Confessions provide from their objective formulations to their existential message and to the tradition and liturgy of the church. These diverging views become even more clearly pronounced in the way in which the Confessions are applied and explicated for the life of the church.

Their Normative Function

Arising out of the way in which theologians perceive the character of the Confessions are a number of questions regarding the nature and function of the authority which the Confessions claim and its relation to the authority of Scripture. Arndt and Engelder uphold the traditional distinction between the Scriptures as *norma normans* and the Confessions as *norma normata*. Other theologians would claim that the distinction is observed more in profession than in practice. Ironically, Piepkorn's churchly emphasis appears to have led him to question the distinction between *norma normans* and *norma normata* as introducing a schism of authority within the church and promoting a form of biblicism within Lutheran theology. In both of the latter views, however, there is a consensus and conviction that Lutheran theology must not fasten its attention and devote its energy to the formulation of normative statements of doctrine.

In *Popular Symbolics*, Engelder asserted that one of the features of the Lutheran church is that it will not tolerate any teaching that does not conform to the Confessions. The spirit of Lutheranism, he insisted, "is that of a burning love for the pure doctrine and a

corresponding burning hatred of all false doctrine.”⁸¹ This does not imply, however, that the Confessions supplant or supplement the Scriptures, but since the confessional writings conform to Scripture, they “are clothed with the authority of Scripture” and become themselves a norm, “*normata* indeed, but still *norma*.”⁸² Such a norm, he contended, remains the continual need of the church which must meet the changing conditions and the false interpretations of Scripture with concise and definite formulations of Christian doctrine. There can be no compromise with error.

Arndt further clarified the the role of Scripture and the Confessions for the theology and life of the church. He argued that Lutherans never lifted the Confessions to the rank of the Scriptures, nor were the Confessions ever made the supreme rule of doctrine and life, nor were they ever intended to be “documents that decide controversies between Lutherans and non-Lutherans.”⁸³ The Bible remains the sole norm, judge, guide, and the Bible alone.

The Confessions, we emphasize, play an altogether different role from the Scriptures. They are witnesses. They show the world what we Lutherans believe the Bible teaches on the great issues of our existence and our relations to God and our fellow men. They may be called our response, the response of our Church, to the proclamation of the divinely inspired penmen writing in the Scriptures.⁸⁴

As a “derived norm,” the Confessions show where the Lutheran church stands on a given doctrine. They simply serve as a “mouthpiece” through which Lutherans announce their religious convictions to their fellow men.

Piepkorn, on the other hand, believed that Lutherans had learned to speak too “glibly” of the distinction between the Scriptures as *norma normans* and the symbolical

⁸¹*Popular Symbolics*, iii.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 15.

⁸³Arndt, “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” 675.

⁸⁴Arndt, “Foreword,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (1949): 5, 6.

books as a *norma normata*. The *Book of Concord*, he held, does not observe the distinction. For the authors of the Formula, the Scriptures are *norma*, supreme and unchallenged in their divine authority; but the symbolical books are likewise *norma*, by which the doctors of the past are to be tested and the doctors of the future are to be guided.⁸⁵ The distinction, he argued, had all the earmarks of the era of Lutheran scholasticism. One cannot, for instance, find the distinction prior to John William Baier (1647-95). Inherent in the distinction, he believed, lay a biblicism which seeks to circumvent and devalue the church's history and tradition as set forth in the creeds.

In fact, Piepkorn believed that because of an inherent form of biblicism in both Orthodoxy and Pietism neither of them can be regarded as "holding the Lutheran symbols in high regard in any practical sense."⁸⁶ He observed that with the exception of Leonard Hütter (1563-1616) and Bernhard von Sanden (1636-1703), the theologians in the age of orthodoxy did not seriously try to construct a dogmatic system on the basis of the *Book of Concord*. Spenerian Pietism, on the other hand, prepared the way for all kinds of qualified subscriptions. In both orthodoxy and pietism, the symbols were, after all, only *norma normata*, and their representatives proposed to rest their case directly on Scripture. By circumventing the Confessions, Orthodoxy and Pietism each reflected a biblicistic attitude that

⁸⁵Piepkorn, "The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols," 34. See also Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 2:49.

⁸⁶Piepkorn, "The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols," 35. See Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Vol. 1: *A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 33-39. Preus acknowledges that the orthodox theologians did not cite the confessions as frequently in their works as they might. However, one must take into account their setting. Much of their work was directed against Rome and dealt with the unwritten tradition of Rome over against Scripture. Against non-Lutheran opponents they argued from Scripture, the formal principle of the Confessions. Among fellow Lutherans, however, particularly against the Syncretists, the Confessions were quoted at length. Moreover, many of the issues with which they dealt were not under debate in the confessions and perhaps at most, mentioned in passing. Finally, one of the chief purposes of dogmatics in those days was to establish Lutheran theology as solidly grounded on the Scriptures. In this work, however, they never departed "from the spirit or theology of the Lutheran Symbols," 37.

found its way into Missouri.

Piepkorn credited the synodical fathers of Missouri with correctly recognizing that if the symbolical books are to mean anything, teachers of the church must interpret the sacred Scriptures according to the symbolical writings, not vice versa.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, even

they did not take the Confessions altogether seriously in their dogmatic work. For while they rescued the symbolical books of the sixteenth century, they also revived the dogmatics of the seventeenth century and thus introduced a kind of schism of authority which still persists.⁸⁸

As an example, Piepkorn cited the synodical catechism as being based more on traditional dogmatics than upon the Symbolical books and the way in which it asserts some of its formulations in complete disregard of the statements that the Lutheran Confessions make on these same subjects. Piepkorn suggested that Missourians have often used their confessions neither as a source nor as a norm, but as an “arsenal of illustrations to be drawn upon when it reinforces our *a priori* conclusions and to be tacitly forgotten when it contradicts them.”⁸⁹

What Piepkorn appears to have in mind is not that the seventeenth century theologians seldom cited the Confessions, nor that they failed to confine themselves to the formulations of the Confessions, nor that their theology was necessarily out of harmony with the Confessions,⁹⁰ but that they failed to use the Confessions in such a way as to give their theology a proper shape and direction. He contended, for example, that it is possible and proper to distinguish between the roles of confessions as norms and as criteria or stan-

⁸⁷Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols,” 35. Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 2:50.

⁸⁸Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols,” 35.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 35, 36.

⁹⁰For instance, Pieper and Graebner had each asked that their works be evaluated and judged by the confessions, the latter having admitted that he did not cite the confessions for reasons of economy.

dards. The latter, he argued, “have methodological importance, but the former also possesses an objective regulatory force and has ontological importance. This does not mean that a norm cannot be also a criterion or standards, it merely says that the function of a norm “transcends its methodological utilization.

He pointed out that the term “norm” is not a term simply taken out of the carpenter’s craft. It is also a philosophical term. As such, a norm is the form which the tangible, palpable, matter seeks to express, “by which the matter is informed, and to which it is conformed.”⁹¹ The immediate context for this assertion is Piepkorn’s observation that all human formulations, whether those of Scripture, or the Confessions, or the church’s ongoing ministry today, are contingent upon their history, for which reason no formulation can be “absolutized.” To use the Confessions only in a methodological way with regard to the formulations does them an injustice. After all, the material element changes from language to language, situation to situation, and from generation to generation. But the *forma* of the Scriptures remains constant.

So, Piepkorn asserted that the Scriptures remain the only source and ultimate norm of theology and by which every dogma is measured. But the Confessions are witnesses, not in the sense that they express a certain opinion, namely, that at one time the church taught that Jesus was *homoousios* with the Father and at another time they affirmed the *filioque*, but the Confessions are “witnesses that these are the right interpretations not only of the mind of the Lutheran church or the mind of the Catholic church but of the mind of the Holy Ghost.”⁹² They are norms which the church subjected to the judgment of Scripture, by which the day-to-day expressions of the mind of God in the public ministry must be evaluated, “in order that the latter will as completely and correctly as possible exhibit the

⁹¹Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols,” 36.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 37.

form of the Sacred Scriptures properly understood.”⁹³

Others, however, who did not share Piepkorn’s churchly inclinations, argued that the historical contingencies of doctrinal formulations force one to make an even sharper distinction between the *norma normans* and the *norma normata* of the Confessions. C. E. Huber, for instance, argued that it was an unlutheran assumption “that the Confessions share an equal authority with the Scriptures in determining the doctrine and life of God’s people.”⁹⁴ He held, “it is no part of the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions, (which alone is binding) that they are to be used today as a rule and norm for Christian faith and life.”⁹⁵ Thus he appears thereby to have denied the very binding nature of their doctrinal content. Historically, he pointed out, they served a norming function with respect to the truth because the situation required it. But in the light of the historical changes which have taken place since then, they no longer serve that role for Lutherans. The most one can say is that the Confessions are witnesses. He argues that one must not confuse their historical use as witnesses to the truth of God against sixteenth-century abuses with their role today as accurate witnesses to the Gospel and the defining characteristic of the Evangelical Lutheran church.

In practice, neither Huber, Bouman, or Piepkorn appear to be far apart. Each of them shies away from objective, ontological, formulated statements of doctrine that may be considered definitive or permanently binding. Each has expressed a weaker view of Scripture than that traditionally espoused in the Missouri Synod. Each, accordingly, has redefined the continuity of the Confessions with their own distinctive emphasis, Bouman and Huber with the Gospel as an over-arching hermeneutical rule, and Piepkorn, with the

⁹³Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 2:50.

⁹⁴C. E. Huber, “The Gospel Needs Protection,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (May 1971): 259.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

tradition and liturgy of the church. Their commonly held views of the Confessions again emerge when applying confessional theology to the contemporary needs of the church.

The deemphasis upon the ontological, cognitive nature of formulated statements of Scriptural doctrine is perhaps best evidenced by the way in which a number of theologians approach the need to explicate the doctrine of the Confessions in binding statements of doctrine such as *A Brief Statement* and *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*.⁹⁶ In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, with the insistence that all teachers are obligated to uphold *A Brief Statement* as the doctrinal position of the Missouri Synod, this document became a center of debate as to the relation between the Lutheran Confessions and synodical statements. Those who welcomed *A Brief Statement* saw in it nothing more or less than the explication of the theology and views of the Confessions. With it, they appealed for the correct understanding of the confessional documents. Those who objected argued that its adoption set up another confession alongside the confessional writings of the Lutheran church.⁹⁷

A Brief Statement had already been debated in the 1930s and 40s over whether the Missouri Synod had set up an extra-confessional standard that went beyond the acceptance of the confession as a prerequisite for unity with other Lutherans. Arndt countered that charge by insisting *A Brief Statement* did not set up another norm alongside or in addition to the Lutheran Confessions. To the contrary, it was fruit of the church applying her confessional doctrine to the changing needs and conditions of the day. In *A Brief Statement*, Arndt held that Missouri has simply told the world where it stood. It served to acknowl-

⁹⁶(St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1972)

⁹⁷See Carl S. Meyer, "Historical Background of 'A Brief Statement,'" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32 (1961): 403-28, 466-81 and "The Role of *A Brief Statement* Since 1932," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 33 (1962): 199-209. See also Arthur C. Repp, "Scripture, Confessions, and Doctrinal Statements," in *A Symposium of Essays and Addresses given at the Counselor's Conference, Valpariso, Indiana, September 7 - 14, 1960* (n.p.: n.d.), 100-112.

edge that before there can be an organic union among Lutherans, “the various Lutheran bodies must not only pledge loyalty to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, but must likewise mean the same thing when they make this pledge.”⁹⁸

Later voices in the Missouri Synod, however, objected to the binding nature of extra-confessional statements and argued that the confessional paragraph of the constitution set up no other norms than the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.⁹⁹ Piepkorn believed that such declarations had significance only as statements of theological doctrine and opinion designed for limited uses, such as the reconciliation of past controversies or as pronouncements upon specific issues of provincial or national significance. Decisive for Piepkorn, however, was that in such cases the documents affected only a part of the Church. Other Lutherans may affirm their consonance with orthodox doctrine, but the documents remain only partial and often turn out to be rather temporal formulations once their immediate usefulness is past. Piepkorn added, “We need not, let it be remembered, formally bind ourselves to everything that is true.”¹⁰⁰ Huber argued that the Confessions also protect the Gospel against “the demand that sub-confessional statements and the declarations of some Lutheran denominational church bodies be made normative and binding on the life and teaching of the Lutheran Church.”¹⁰¹

The Confessions and the Unity of the Church

The increasing emphasis upon the contingencies of any confessional or doctrinal

⁹⁸Arndt, “Missouri’s Insistence on Acceptance of the Word of God,” 177.

⁹⁹Piepkorn asserted, “Since *all* other writings and teachings are to be judged and tested by the Symbols, it would seem that no subsequent document could acquire Symbolical status in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” 612, footnote 32. See also Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 2:47.

¹⁰⁰Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols,” 42.

¹⁰¹Huber, “The Gospel Needs Protection,” 260.

formulations affected the way in which the Missouri Synod sought Lutheran unity. In the four decades between 1932 and 1974, one can detect a shift in emphasis from stressing the hiddenness of the church and doctrinal agreement as the only way to advance it, to the visible church with less emphasis on the doctrinal consensus.¹⁰² With the loss of the ability to set forth the truth in definitive, formulated statements went the ability to distinguish between communions and the reason for maintaining synodical and denominational identities. After all, if formulations are human and only point to the Gospel, there is no reason to remain separated. Moreover, if one cannot agree on those formulations which advance the *una sancta*, outward unity becomes a goal in and of itself. During this time, Article VII became the subject of debate and an immense amount of literature.¹⁰³

Reflecting the traditional attitude of Missouri toward Lutheran unity, Mueller argued that the first concern and goal of Lutherans in its search for unity are to advance and increase “the *communio sanctorum*, the *ecclesia invisibilis*, rather than for that of an *ecclesia visibilis* á la Ritschl or Rome.”¹⁰⁴ Although Lutherans do desire an external union with confessing Christian groups who bear the same name, they are not greatly perturbed if outward affiliation in church union is not realized. They are “more concerned with the spiritual *Anschluss* of faith, the inward communion, which comes from diligent study and unqualified acceptance of God’s Word, and this especially, too, as the Word is presented in our Confessions.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²For the origins of this shift see Kurt E. Marquart, *An Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), 49-65.

¹⁰³See Mark Edward Wangerin, “Augustana VII and the Unity of the Church: Major Interpretive Accents in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American Lutheranism,” (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Library, 1981, Microform).

¹⁰⁴Mueller, “Professional Growth in the Study of the Confessions,” 264.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

Communities of Christians organized into congregations exist “to preach the Gospel and confess the divine truth.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, Mueller argued, *Augustana VII* dealt with the distinction between doctrine and ceremonies, not more or less doctrinal agreement. The confessors “aimed at complete unity in faith, or true doctrinal agreement, to the total exclusion of all uncertainty, indifferentism, and confusion.”¹⁰⁷ Such an approach, he argued, is truly ecumenical, for sectarianism is that which departs from God’s Word, but Lutheranism in its real confessional attitude is nothing less than adherence to God’s Word. This compels one to reject a view of unity that simply implies that as long as Lutherans belong to the same family or genus, they may unite. For this reason, Arndt contended that the cause for an underlying disunity within Lutheranism is that loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions does not mean the same thing to all Lutherans.¹⁰⁸

Yet within a few decades, other began to call for an interpretation of *Augustana VII* that sought unity not on the basis of complete doctrinal consensus but rather on the basis of agreement in the Gospel in its narrow sense. Bouman, for instance, examined the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article X, 7, and cited it as having been used to support “total agreement, if not uniformity or unanimity regarding the whole range of content as an indispensable prerequisite for fellowship.”¹⁰⁹ But the context, he concluded, refers to the chief parts of the Christian faith. In his judgement therefore, it was contrary to both the

letter and the spirit of the Lutheran Symbols to make “doctrine and all its articles” the equivalent of of the total content of the Bible and to insist that complete unanimity in the understanding of the Bible in a quantitative sense is necessary for fellowship.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶John Theodore Mueller, “Notes on the ‘Satis Est’ in Article VII of the *Augustana*,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (June 1947): 410.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸Arndt, “Missouri’s Insistence on Acceptance of the Word of God,” 177-78.

¹⁰⁹Bouman, “Some Thoughts on Authentic Lutheranism,” 286.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

The unity of the church must be sought not quantitatively but qualitatively in the question: “Where do you stand with respect to the Gospel in all its forms?”¹¹¹ The *satis est* of Article VII is neither an attitude of indifference or compromise in the Gospel nor a stance of inflexible separatistic rigor.

More extreme is Tietjen, who in *Which Way to Lutheran Unity?* proposed a constitutional approach to solve the problem of Lutheran unity. This means that one need not require any Lutheran community to accept the Confessions beyond a formal adherence and recognition of them in the constitution. He asked, “What right does any Lutheran church body have to deny the hand of fellowship to those whose espousal of the faith of the Lutheran Confessions marks them as fellow Lutherans?”¹¹² In other words, complete doctrinal agreement in profession and practice need not be an *a priori* condition for fellowship or union.

Summary

Throughout this period of Missouri’s history, one can identify many traditional themes and emphases of previous periods. At the same time, one can observe a weakening of the biblical basis of the Confessions and hence of the Confessions as expositions of Scripture. Their formulations come to be viewed as contingent upon history. This in turn enables some to argue for an existential approach to the doctrinal content of the symbolical writings and to claim that while the faith and creed has remained the same, there may exist, and must exist within the church a variety of theological opinions and tendencies.

¹¹¹Bouman, “Some Thoughts on the Church in the Lutheran Symbols,” 191.

¹¹²John H. Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity? A History of Efforts to Unite the Lutherans os America* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1975), 154.

CHAPTER VII

A NORMATIVE CONFSSIONALISM

As a growing number of theologians within the Missouri Synod adopted the confessional attitude of other Lutherans in America during the middle decades of the twentieth century, a number of scholars continued to voice the historic confessional position of the Missouri Synod as espoused by C. F. W. Walther and Francis Pieper. They believed that what Missouri was witnessing was not merely different formulations of the theology always held by Missouri, but that it was in fact a different theology—in substance as well as expression. This change was evidenced by a greater emphasis on the historical dimension of the church's historic confessions along with increasing limitations placed upon their binding function. In response, these theologians called for Lutherans to reclaim their heritage of a normative confessionalism that had characterized the Missouri Synod from its beginning — after all, they insisted, a normative confessionalism was simply a biblical confessionalism.

Among the scholars and theologians who addressed the confessional issues at the heart of the conflict within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and which culminated in the conflict of 1974, were Ralph A. Bohlmann, Robert D. Preus, Horace D. Hummel, and Kurt A. Marquart. Bohlmann and Preus were two members of the faculty who remained at Concordia Seminary after the majority walked out in 1974. Bohlmann argued that subscription to the Lutheran Confessions bound Lutherans to a particular view of the Bible as well as to a confessional hermeneutics of the Scriptures. He also addressed the role of the church's symbolical writings for Lutheran unity in particular, and the ecumenical move-

ment in general. Preus devoted many of his writings and essays to the same themes, but with a special accent on seventeenth-century orthodoxy from which contemporary Lutheranism inherited much of its terminology. He demonstrated that although the Age of Orthodoxy used a philosophical framework not found in the Lutheran Confessions, its theologians were in agreement with the confessors, if not in presentation, most certainly on doctrine.

Hummel and Marquart addressed the controversy in the Missouri Synod from vantage points outside Concordia Seminary. Alarmed by the developments taking place in the late 1960s, Hummel raised the possibility that Lutherans may be in need of a confessing movement in America. He examined the historical and philosophical frameworks within which contemporary theologians worked and demonstrated the destructive results upon Lutheran confessionalism and biblical interpretation that resulted when approaching theology from historical and subjective orientations. He also tried to show the positive implications of Lutheran confessionalism for the task of the exegete. Finally, a man who viewed with concern the happenings of the Missouri Synod from Australia, and who later came to teach at its Fort Wayne seminary, was Kurt A. Marquart. As Hummel, he also examined and explored the presuppositions and implications of contemporary historical and philosophical world views and their impact upon the very nature of Lutheran confessionalism.

The Nature and Meaning of the Confessions

The nature and essence of the Lutheran symbolical writings, Missouri Synod theologians believed, called for an attitude of a normative confessionalism. Anything less was a contradiction in terms. But as the doctrine which the Confessions define and defend is drawn from and therefore predicated upon the nature and authority of Scripture as the written Word of God, the *norma normata* character of the *Book of Concord* stands and falls with the *norma normans* authority of Scripture. This compelled LCMS scholars to argue

that Lutherans must uphold the biblical principle of the Confessions. This does not mean that Missouri theologians ignored the concerns raised by those Lutherans who advocated a more overt historical confessionalism. Missouri theologians recognized that the historical character of the Confessions played an important role in their formulation and continues to affect their explanation and explication. They argued, however, that history must serve a passive and instrumental role with respect to the Confessions.

Biblical Character of the Confessions

Perhaps the theme which stands out more than any other in the writings of Missouri Synod scholars was the persistence with which they called attention to the claim of the Lutheran Confessions to be nothing more or less than expositions and summaries of Scripture. Missouri Synod scholars stressed that the Confessions set forth the message of Scripture in objective, cognitive statements, in both thesis and antithesis. This means that the Confessions dare not be viewed in purely functional or existential terms which stresses the *bekennen*, the act of confessing, over against the *Bekennntnis*, the theological content of the confession. Neither must confessionalism be limited to the confession within the Confessions nor to a view that regards the symbols as little more than an ecclesiastical identification with one's heritage. Hummel insisted that the term "confessional" must "include the doctrinal content of that confession. The *fides quae* dare not be entirely absorbed by the *fides qua*."¹ Preus likewise held that the Gospel in the Confessions is more than a mere divine dynamic; it is a definite, authoritative "cognitive, dianoetic message, a doctrine."²

¹Horace D. Hummel, "The Influence of Confessional Themes on Biblical Exegesis," in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 216.

²Robert D. Preus, "Confessions and the Mission of the Church with Special Emphasis upon the Ecumenical Movement," *The Springfielder* 39 (June 1975): 26.

Furthermore, Missouri theologians insisted the Lutheran Confessions claim more than a provisional character and an historically-conditioned approximation of the Christian religion. Authoritative Christian teaching as understood by the Confessions is more than mere opinions; it is something to be believed. Thus, Marquart contended, the doctrinal content of the Confessions is set forth with finality. As expositions of Scripture, the Confessions provide not only *a* correct explanation as one among many possibilities and from which Lutherans may either choose or discard, but the Confessions exhibit *the* correct exposition of scripture on those issues and doctrines with which they deal.³ The Formula of Concord, for instance, intended to confess divine truth, not human interpretations of responses to the truth.⁴ To suggest less negates the self-understanding of the church of the Augsburg Confession and repudiates the entire *Book of Concord*.

Implicit in the claim of the Confessions to be the correct expositions of God's Word lies the conviction that the church must differentiate between truth and error and draw the boundary lines — sharply and concretely — with definitively formulated, cognitively understood statements of doctrine.⁵ This insistence, Marquart observes, frequently manifests itself in the confessional writings by the way in which the reformers speak of the “pure doctrine,” “pure teaching,” “pure doctrine of the Christian church,” “pure doctrine of

³Kurt A. Marquart, “The Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” in *No Other Gospel: Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord 1580-1980*, ed. Arnold J. Koelpin (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), 28. For example, see Warren Quanbeck who asserts that the confessions contain *a* true exposition of the Bible, but not *the* true exposition. “The Confessions and Their Influence upon Biblical Interpretation,” *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 181.

⁴Kurt A. Marquart, “The Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” 36. See, for instance, Carl E. Braaten who observes that for most Protestants “dogma is not revealed truth . . . but a concentrated summary of the history of revelation composed by the church for hermeneutical reasons, that is, as aids in the reading and understanding of Scripture.” *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 155.

⁵Marquart, “Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” 11.

God's Word," "correct Christian teaching" and the "pure Christian religion." The confes-
sors furthermore showed that they took very seriously the need to preserve pure doctrine
by "condemning false doctrine with countless antitheses and condemnations wherever it
crops up."⁶ This condemnation of false doctrine within the Confessions, Preus pointed
out, demonstrates a spirit that puts the truth of the Gospel above every other
consideration.⁷

The conviction of Missouri Synod theologians that the *Book of Concord* framed the
very truth of God in formulated statements of doctrine correctly and with finality was
predicated on the assumption that the symbols were not mere "position papers" of theolo-
gians, but explanations of *Scripture*. Bohlmann asserts that the Lutheran Confessions in-
struct "us that a biblical basis is absolutely essential to what Lutherans consider confessions
to be."⁸ There can be no confessions where the Scriptures do not speak. Conversely, ev-
ery doctrine upon which the Confessions speak is the teaching of the Bible itself. Preus
likewise insisted that the primary purpose for which the Confessions were produced was
that the entire world might see and be persuaded that the "Lutheran doctrine on all contro-
verted points is biblical."⁹ This indicates that while the Confessions are exegetical works,
they "must always be taken seriously as an exposition of the Scriptures."¹⁰

⁶Robert D. Preus, "Confessional Subscription," in *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*, ed. Erich Kiehl and Waldo J. Werning (Chicago: Lutheran Congress, 1970), 49.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ralph A. Bohlmann, "Is Writing Confessions Possible Only Where Scripture Speaks?" in *Studies: The Confession-Making Process* (New York: Lutheran Council in the USA, 1975), 20.

⁹Robert D. Preus, "The Hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord," in *No Other Gospel: Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord 1580-1980*, ed. Arnold J. Koelpin (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), 312.

¹⁰Robert D. Preus, "Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia*

To embrace and affirm the Confessions as explanations of Scripture assumes that the truth of God has been set down in the very words of Scripture. Marquart points out that the *Book of Concord's* entire method of proceeding presupposes that divinely revealed doctrine has been given to the church and "is quite concretely fixed and documented in the biblical texts so as to comprise an unassailable foundation, rule and norm."¹¹ LCMS theologians asserted that apart from Scripture as the Word of God, all statements are merely human opinions, suggestions, or propositions. This signifies, Hummel observed, that the issue of confessionalism is also the issue of Scripture. After all, the *norma normata* is only as strong as the *norma normans*. The two stand and fall together.¹² More pointedly, the Confessions "rest absolutely on the authority of the Scriptures, and once the foundation is gone nothing can save the superstructure."¹³

Implicit in one's fidelity to the Confessions is an acceptance of the confessional view of the nature and authority of Scripture as the written Word of God and as the church's only source and norm for doctrine and life. Bohlmann reiterated time and again the conviction that when Lutherans subscribe the Lutheran Confessions in any strong and meaningful way they bind themselves to the confessional teaching on the nature and interpretation Scripture.

We bind ourselves to the Confessional doctrine of the nature, content, and purpose of Holy Scripture (namely, that Holy Scripture is God's literary Word about Jesus Christ for man's salvation) and to all hermeneutical presuppositions and principles implicit in this doctrine.¹⁴

Journal 4 (January 1978): 18.

¹¹Marquart, "Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord," 21.

¹²Horace D. Hummel, "The Outside Limits of Lutheran Confessionalism in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation," *The Springfielder* 36 (1972): 264.

¹³Kurt E. Marquart, *An Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977), 35.

¹⁴Ralph A. Bohlmann, "Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions," *Aspects of Biblical Hermeneutics: Confessional Principles and Practical*

But he hastened to add, one accepts the confessional view of Scripture not simply because it is that of the Confessions, but because of the “fundamental principle that what is confessional is biblical.”¹⁵

Although the Confessions contain no explicit article on Scripture, Missouri Synod scholars held that it does not mean they have no doctrine about Scripture nor that they refused to articulate a teaching. Bohlmann questioned the explanation that because the confessors approached Scripture christologically, they saw no need for an explicit article on the doctrine of Scripture.¹⁶ A more likely explanation, he believed, lies in the nature and purpose of the documents in the *Book of Concord*. Preus added, however, that one can observe an increasing articulation of the doctrine of Scripture with each successive document in the *Book of Concord*. The earlier confessions simply asserted the *sola scriptura* principle against the claims of the papists and enthusiasts. As time went on, the “more specific doctrinal aberrations and faulty exegesis of Romanists and of the Reformed, Crypto-Calvinists, enthusiasts, and sects” gave rise to even clearer affirmations of Scriptural authority in the later confessions.¹⁷

Missouri theologians also acknowledged that the Confessions did not deal with Scripture reflectively and abstractly, but as the Scriptures, put “quantitatively more accent on the functional or existential dimension because God’s Word is first of all something to be believed and proclaimed, not explored theoretically.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Confessions

Applications, Concordia Theological Monthly Occasional Papers, 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 45.

¹⁵Ralph A. Bohlmann, “Confessional Biblical Interpretation: Some Basic Principles,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann in collaboration with Samuel H. Nafzger and Harold H. Ditmanson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 191.

¹⁶Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, revised ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 29.

¹⁷Preus, “Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions,” 17.

¹⁸Horace D. Hummel, “The Influence of Confessional Themes on Biblical

use many adjective modifiers like “divine,” “holy,” and “sacred” to describe Scripture and point to its divine origin. Harry Huth contends that whenever the Formula refers to the Word of God as the rule and norm of doctrine, it means “the Holy Scriptures, the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments in *toto*.”¹⁹ Perhaps the most compelling argument is the way in which the Confessions frequently use “Word of God” to designate Holy Scripture. It suggests “very strongly that the term denotes both divine authorship and authority.”²⁰

A number of theologians also pointed out that the determination on the part of the confessors to use Scripture as the sole source and norm of doctrine—as evidenced by the way in which the Confessions cite no other source for their teaching—premises that one must make an absolute distinction “between divine and human writings.” Marquart pointed out that only if Scripture really is in a direct and straightforward sense God’s Word, in a way in which other writings are not, does *sola scriptura* make sense. To include any other norm alongside Scripture, Preus observes, would give that norm preeminence by its very position and weaken Scripture as the sole norm as well as raise doubts about its status as the Word of God. “Unless Scripture is the *only* cognitive source and norm, it is not the source and norm at all.”²¹

As a consequence of the divine authorship of Scripture, the Confessions affirm and

Exegesis,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 219.

¹⁹H[arry A.] Huth, “Rule and Norm of Doctrine in the Formula of Concord,” in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert D. Preus and Wilbert Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 98. In this article, Huth documents each and every term that the Formula of Concord uses which points to their conviction that Scripture is the very Word of God.

²⁰Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, 35. Herbert J. A. Bouman showed that the Word of God is used interchangeably 77 times between the Latin and German texts in “Source Material on ‘The Word of God in the Lutheran Confessions,’” (N.p., n.d.).

²¹Preus, “Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions,” 20.

assert the clarity and unity of Scripture. Perhaps the most confessionally compelling argument for the fundamental perspicuity of Scripture, Bohlmann suggests, is the manner in which the Confessions cite the Scriptures, one passage after another. Of the more than 1,700 references to Scripture, most are quoted without explanation or extended commentary, which indicates that anyone, theologian, pastor, or layperson can understand the Scriptures. The unity of Scripture is likewise predicated on the single authorship of Scripture and the single message of Scripture. Hummel points out, however, that these characteristics of Scripture, namely its unity and perspicuity are finally theological matters of the Gospel, not simply formal and philological concerns, “and hence to be confessed, more than proved empirically.”²²

The divine origin and inspiration of Scripture also assure the confessors of its infallibility as the source and norm of doctrine. Hummel held that although the Confessions do not contain the term “inerrant,” given inspiration, inerrancy necessarily follows. For this reason, Marquart believes that the term “inerrancy” can serve as an “effective index and criterion of Biblical inspiration.”²³ But even if one did not use the term “inerrancy,” Preus believed that the confessional term “infallibility” actually gave a stronger witness to the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture. It means that the Bible *a priori* is incapable of error or leading one astray, *a priori* truthful under all circumstances. After all, he muses, a telephone book can be inerrant *a posteriori*. But Scripture is infallible: “it not only does not err, it cannot err or fail.”²⁴ It stands not as an item of observation or verification, but as an article of faith.

²²Horace D. Hummel, “Is There a Lutheran View of the Bible?” *Lutheran Scholar* 27 (1970): 9.

²³Kurt A. Marquart, “Truth and/or Consequences,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 8 (1967/68): 36.

²⁴Preus, “Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions,” 21.

Missouri scholars held that since the Confessions regard Scripture as the Word of God, it followed theologically that “only” Scripture could have *divine* authority for determining what is or is not the very Word of God. The authority of the Scriptures thus provides the basis of every appeal in the Confessions for their doctrine. This means, Bohlmann explained, that not only are the actual statements of the Scriptures authoritative for the confessors, “but deductions or inferences drawn from Scripture also have divine authority.”²⁵ Preus suggests that there is a “deliberate hypostatization, indicating that Scripture carries out God's own work of judging teachers and teaching in the church on earth.”²⁶ Yet this does not turn Scripture into a legalistic club or coercive authority or legal code. Scripture is regarded and treated as “an informative message about God and his mighty acts of judgment and grace in history.”²⁷

Not only do the Confessions exercise a normative authority as the source and rule of doctrine, but by observing meticulously the *sola Scriptura* principle, the Lutheran Confessions uphold the other fundamental principles, *solus Christus*, *sola fide*, and *solo verbo*.²⁸ Scripture not only gives correct information, but the Spirit uses it to work saving faith. The Augsburg Confession reflects this soteriological orientation by making Article IV central with the preceding articles pointing forward to it, and the subsequent articles bringing out the consequences of justification. The Smalcald Articles, especially, are more clearly organized around the doctrine of justification than any other confessional writings.

²⁵Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, 45. He cites the argument in the Apology for infant baptism on the basis that the divine promise is for all people.

²⁶Preus, “Hermeneutics of the Formula of Concord,” 316, 319. See also Preus, “Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions,” 19.

²⁷Preus, “Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions,” 21.

²⁸Harry A. Huth, “One Savior and One Confession: A Review of the Meaning and Applications of the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Journal* 2 (March 1976): 61.

In fact, Bohlmann points out, the confessions extol justification as the central article of the Christian faith to such an extent that any student of the Confessions soon becomes “aware of how frequently and steadfastly everything in Scripture is regarded as dealing directly or indirectly with Jesus Christ.”²⁹

One of the aching questions which troubled Lutherans in America dealt with the relation between the normative and causative authorities of Scripture. Two answers appeared possible. One asserts the infallibility and authority of Scripture simply on the basis of the obedience man owes God. But, Bohlmann points out, that solution stops short of the Gospel understanding of Scripture. The second solution swings to the other extreme by stressing a purely functional view of biblical authority which either minimizes or ignores the normative authority of Scripture.³⁰ It argues for Scripture’s normative authority on the basis of its causative authority rather than its divine origin. Here the “authority question is framed as an inappropriate either/or: Is the Bible God’s authoritative Word because it announces the Gospel, *or* because it is inspired?”³¹ It implies that one must choose between mutually exclusive options by stressing the Christological substance (*res*) at the expense of the form of Holy Scripture (*verba*).

Bohlmann argued that Lutherans must make two assertions: First, as Law and Gospel the Scriptures are God’s powerful instrument for salvation. Second, the Confessions understood that the chief function of Scripture as God’s inspired Word was to serve as the God-given source and norm regulating the use of Word and Sacrament within the church.³² These facets may be distinguished, but not separated. So confessional

²⁹Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, 73.

³⁰Bohlmann, “Confessional Biblical Interpretation,” 202.

³¹Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, 131.

³²Ralph A. Bohlmann, “Normen der Kirche: Schrift und Bekenntnis,” in *Die Eine*

Lutheranism stresses that faith in Christ is wrought by the testimony of Scripture concerning the Gospel which in turn leads one to recognize and accept the testimony of Scripture concerning itself. This does not mean, however, that one's faith establishes the authority of Scripture; Scripture *is* authoritative by virtue of its divine origin, "it is the speech of God, whether man recognizes it or not."³³ As such, it ensures one that the message of Gospel comes "from *God* and therefore expresses *his* will and possesses *his* power."³⁴

Historical Character of the Confessions

The strong emphasis on the biblical basis and character of the Lutheran symbolical writings led Missouri Synod theologians to contend that one must evaluate the changes of history from the standpoint of the Confessions and the Scriptures. For Lutherans to be true to the biblical nature of the Lutheran symbols and their theology, their attitude toward history, philosophy, and scientific methodology must be determined by the Scriptures. In other words, history cannot be a neutral term; it must be a theological term. At stake, Missouri Synod scholars contended, are two very different world views and orientations. One advocates what amounts to a kind of biblical "incarnationalism"³⁵ in which history and philosophy serves as the vehicle for revelation. The other orientation advocates what amounts to a "metaphysical dualism" which claims that the Absolute cannot be fully manifested in the material world,³⁶ and therefore history and revelation must be sharply distin-

Heilige Christliche Kirche und die Gnadenmittel: Ein Tagungsbericht, ed. Manfred Roensch and Jobst Schöne (Erlangen: Martin Luther, [1980]), 27. See also Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, 132. See also Preus, "Biblical Authority in the Lutheran Confessions," 20.

³³Bohlmann, "Confessional Biblical Interpretation," 199.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 202.

³⁵Marquart, "Truth and/or Consequences," 55. Marquart compares incarnation and inspiration and contends that, at root, inspiration is of a piece with the incarnation.

³⁶John W. Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology: The Validity and Relevance of Historical Lutheranism vs. Its Contemporary Rivals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book

guished.

Scholars in the Missouri Synod acknowledged the many changes which had taken place within theology over the last four centuries as well as the impact of the contingencies of history upon the confessional writings. Hummel noted that the use of some historical method is required “by the historical nature of the materials.”³⁷ Marquart also held that traditional, biblical Lutheran orthodoxy acknowledged and affirmed a human side to the Scriptures and the Confessions. What differentiated the Lutheran view of the role and function of history and philosophy within theology from contemporary thought is that Lutherans assigned the historical human element a purely passive and instrumental role. This meant that although the historical settings conditioned quantitatively which doctrines of Scripture were to be addressed by the Confessions, history does not provide the doctrinal content of the Confessions nor does it judge that content. In their passive role, the Confessions receive their content and value from Scripture, which lifts the human elements in the *Book of Concord* above the contingencies of time.

Such a theological view of history does not limit, Hummel argued, the freedom of the scholar to investigate and study the Scriptures or history. If anything, it provides the researcher with the proper boundaries within which he is free and thereby prevents the “domination of the material by alien, secular viewpoints.”³⁸ The Confessions simply bind one to the Word of God, about which Jesus prefaced his remarks about freedom, “if you continue in my Word.” Hummel observed that although the Enlightenment argued for the freedom of the human mind, which led it to rebel against all external authority—including Scripture, confessionalism provides a framework for the scholar which actually offers the

House, 1967), 23-24.

³⁷Hummel, “Is There a Lutheran View of the Bible?” 31.

³⁸Horace D. Hummel, “The Outside Limits of Lutheran Confessionalism in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation,” *The Springfielder* 35 (1971-71): 118.

greatest freedom, both in time and in eternity. He acknowledged that when one approaches the matter from God's standpoint, all human formulations are relative. At the same time, those symbols or words are what the church has been given to use.

A confessional view of history and philosophy as functioning in a passive and instrumental role will determine how one studies Scripture and the Confessions and ensure the proper reasons for which that study is undertaken, namely, in order to understand the symbolical writings better and to apply them to the needs and problems of the church — not to relativize them and ignore them. True to the spirit of the Confessions themselves, a proper confessionalism will not shrink from the realization that the Confessions, as any historical document, responded to the circumstances of their times, “so that their enrichment or supplementation from other traditions will not *a priori* be viewed as destructive of their integrity.”³⁹ Similarly, this does not mean that the church cannot make certain changes in vocabulary or terminology from time to time in order to proclaim its message faithfully.

In the light of a confessional view of history, LCMS scholars believed that, even though the Confessions appeared to stress the existential dimensions of the faith whereas the Age of Orthodoxy expressed itself in more ontological categories and made fine distinctions in its formulations, the theology of the orthodox theologians remained in accord with the Lutheran Confessions. The reason lies in their using philosophy as the servant of theology. Hummel acknowledges that orthodoxy placed much emphasis on the ontological aspect of God's nature and being, at times over the soteriological and functional aspect of God's saving work toward man. However, orthodoxy used Aristotelian logic and philosophy only as a tool, and a fairly neutral one at that. The important thing is “that every effort be made to see to it that Scripture, not the system and its presuppositions and struc-

³⁹Horace D. Hummel, “No Other Gospel! Do American Lutherans Need a Confessing Movement?” *Lutheran Forum* 3 (October 1969): 5.

tures, really be the *norma normans*. The Bible has no metaphysical system, but certainly has metaphysical presuppositions and implications which must be 'translated' faithfully."⁴⁰

Preus agreed and believed that this is in fact what both the Confessions and the orthodox theologians did. While later orthodoxy does not express itself in the existential categories of the Confessions, this does not mean that their philosophical framework provided a different theology. Preus contends that the *theology* of the Formula of Concord clearly corresponds to that of later orthodoxy on "every point of doctrine except the doctrine of election."⁴¹ Again highlighting that connection, Preus believed that there existed a significant amount of evidence that there was "close continuity and agreement in doctrine" among Lutherans from 1577 until almost the turn of the eighteenth century, "a remarkable fact indeed."⁴² The close genetic connection between the Formula of Concord and Orthodoxy then should counsel restraint in those who would drive a wedge between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

By evaluating history and philosophy from the standpoint of Scripture, Missouri Synod scholars rejected contemporary historical, scientific, and philosophical systems which did not function "ministerially" and "instrumentally" in their use or which were by their very nature "magisterial." Thus Hummel held that the root problem for Lutherans in the latter half of the twentieth century was rooted not in the narrow issue of "verbal inspiration," but in "a historicism and naturalism which challenges the entire conceptuality of in-

⁴⁰Hummel, "The Outside Limits of Lutheran Confessionalism," 35: 112.

⁴¹Robert D. Preus, "The Influence of the Formula of Concord on the Later Lutheran Orthodoxy," in *Discord, Dialogue, and Concord: Studies in the Lutheran Reformation's Formula of Concord*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz and Wenzel Lohff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 101.

⁴²Ibid. See also Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1955; reprint, Concordia Heritage Series, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981) "The aim of all the orthodox dogmaticians was to be faithful to the principles and the theology of the Reformation. With but a few exceptions they succeeded in this aim," 211.

piration and the authority of Scripture in any sense.”⁴³ In the same vein, Marquart believed that the opposition to the doctrine of inerrancy comes not from the “exact sciences” but from “disciplines amenable to a maximum of interpretation, ideology, and subjective bias: philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, etc.”⁴⁴ Thus in contrast to the way in which the sixteenth and seventeenth century theologians used the ontological philosophy of Aristotle, contemporary theologians use the historical and philosophical frameworks of the twentieth century in order to judge and regulate theology.

In particular, Hummel identified the two dominant philosophical orientations with which contemporary theology appeared to operate. The first is an existential philosophy which, together with its siblings (dialectical theology, phenomenology, and personalism), dichotomizes revelation and history. Hummel points out that there is an existential dimension to the Christian faith, but “the servant may also turn into a terrible master.” This form of confessionalism fails in “both its spiritualism and its dualism (dichotomy of the subjective world of religion and objective world of science) as the *fides qua* frequently swallows up the *fides quae* and confessing becomes reduced to a mere confessing—never mind what.”⁴⁵

The second major philosophical theme in addition to existentialism is an imentalism or process developmentalism. It is usually set forth as an alternative to inspiration of Scripture and an ontological realism in redemptive history. Once again, there are elements which may not be entirely incompatible with a Biblical theism, but Hummel observes, “when we note how limited its ‘god’ is in its power to act (‘persuasion and love rather than

⁴³Horace D. Hummel, “The Bible and the Confessions,” *Dialog* 8 (Winter 1969): 52.

⁴⁴Marquart, “Truth and/or Consequences,” 7.

⁴⁵Horace D. Hummel, “Critical Methodology and the Lutheran Symbols’ Treatment of the Genesis Creation Accounts,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (September 1972): 533, 534.

coercion and power'), even in its inability to overcome evil," one discovers how far away from the biblical God it is.⁴⁶ Moreover, in this view in which history and revelation merge, Hummel observes that there is in the final analysis, no qualitative difference between "the work of the Spirit in producing the Bible and His guidance of the church between Pentecost and parousia."⁴⁷

Among other philosophical and theological orientations that are essentially incompatible with Lutheran confessionalism, Preus believed, are the claims of linguistic analysts and positivists that biblical language is "not in any sense cognitive and bears no meaning, but is only emotive" or metaphysical or expresses merely man's thoughts about God.⁴⁸ Along similar lines, he argued that Lutherans must reject the Barthian presupposition regarding the finitude of language in that it cannot speak the truth about God infallibly and with finality.

Wilbert Rosin traced these theological variations and philosophical schemes which have supported or contributed to a general anticonfessional attitude within America back either directly or indirectly to the Enlightenment. He observes that for the most part, they all share a common core in the relativity of human understanding. "One could not *know* anything as absolutely true."⁴⁹ The next step, he observed, declares that absolute truth either does not exist or, if it does, one can never know it. Contributing further to these anticonfessional influences in America is the leveling of the democratic process which rejects

⁴⁶Ibid., 536.

⁴⁷Horace D. Hummel, "Response to John Reumann's 'The Augsburg Confession in the Light of Biblical Interpretation,'" *Concordia Journal* 9 (September 1983): 175.

⁴⁸Robert D. Preus, "Can the Lutheran Confessions Have Any Meaning 450 Years Later?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 44 (July 1980): 105.

⁴⁹Wilbert Rosin, "Looking at the Formula Today," *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert D. Preus and Wilbert Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 90.

anything that is beyond the reach of anyone else. It has produced a mind-set that religious truth can be and must be arrived at individually. As a result, many have come to believe that Christian truth is in large part achieved “through interaction with the cultural milieu and develops through time.”⁵⁰

Applied to Scripture and the theology of the Confessions, the use of these historical orientations and philosophical frameworks becomes especially evident and manifest in the scientific methods that biblical scholars have increasingly applied to Scripture. Missouri Synod scholars saw in these methods a direct threat to the scriptural foundation of the Confessions and therefore to the Confessions themselves. In fact, Samuel Nafzger cited the acceptance of the historical criticism by Lutherans as the greatest negative development in the rise of a non-confessionalism among Lutherans throughout the world. It grants the historian supremacy by holding that historical reports are to be interrogated and cross-examined like defendants in a court of law. The investigator then “evaluates the answers given, and confers authority upon them in proportion to their demonstrated reliability and credibility.”⁵¹ For this reason Lutherans must reject in principle the use of the historical-critical method.⁵²

Marquart points out that the historical-critical approach to theology is fundamentally incompatible with confessional theology because it makes the human element not simply “passive, receptive or instrumental, but active and substantively formative and determinative.”⁵³ Moreover, the difficulty with the historical-critical method is not an excess or an

⁵⁰Ibid., 92.

⁵¹Samuel Nafzger, “The Future of Confessional Lutheranism in the World,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 42 (1978): 224, 225.

⁵²Samuel Nafzger, “Scripture and the Word of God,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 121.

⁵³Marquart, “Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” 33.

abuse which can somehow be tempered. Its danger lies in the very essence of the method. By definition, the historical-critical method has had to divide the divine from the human side of Scripture. Once the “human side” has been isolated, “then criticism can operate on it without hindrance, while ‘faith’ is left to tender its courtesies to an ever vaguer ‘divine side.’”⁵⁴ In practice it has introduced a fatal split between history and theology; it is “deeply anti-incarnational.”⁵⁵ Comparing the medieval scholastics with the new theologians, Marquart observes that where the latter mingled the two realities of the human and divine in their desire to combine them, the latter theologians no longer can tell the difference between them.⁵⁶

By detaching theology from its formulation, the use of the historical-critical method destroys any possibility of making ontological statements of fact. Confessional theology comes to be viewed in terms of what it signifies or points to rather than what it is in its essence. Consequently, theology comes to be seen as an *encounter* rather than an assertion. Here contemporary theology, charged Marquart, has acquired the vice of treating the church’s confessions “not as actual restatements of revealed truth,” but as mere subjective responses to revealed truths.⁵⁷ It is this view more than any other, according to Hummel, which must be held responsible for reducing confessionalism to the mere act of “confessing—never mind what!”⁵⁸ But faith both believes *in* a person and believes *a that* about the person in whom it believes. In fact, the former is predicated upon the latter. The

⁵⁴Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 114, 118.

⁵⁵Kurt E. Marquart, “The Incompatibility between Historical-Critical Theology and the Lutheran Confessions,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 326.

⁵⁶Marquart, “Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” 33.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Hummel, “The Outside Limits of Lutheran Confessionalism,” (1971): 114.

confessors did intend to confess, but to confess the divine truth itself, not human responses to the truth.

As a result of the way in which these philosophical frameworks are used, and the “scientific” methodologies developed, the idea of an authoritative revelation as truth handed down from God has become distasteful to the modern mentality. No longer do theologians see themselves as confessors whose task is to preserve faithfully and transmit the priceless revealed truths of Christianity. To accept the so-called scientific method in theology gives the theologian no choice but to be unrelentingly undogmatic, if not antidogmatic. Thus contemporary man cannot “claim finality for *any* dogmatic statement.”⁵⁹ So, the Lutheran Confessions, with their boundary lines between truth and error, run contrary to the “whole antidogmatic temper” of the times.⁶⁰ One must choose then between the position of the Lutheran Confessions and the historicist-naturalistic theologies which are incompatible and at conflict with one another from their foundation to their structure regardless of their similar use of Christian terms.

The Role and Function of Confessions

As a result of their view of the Lutheran Confessions as cognitive, definitive expositions of Scripture, Missouri Synod Lutherans argued that the scriptural character of the Confessions gave them a greater role than mere witnesses within the church. The Confessions must function as norms and forms of doctrine. Moreover, they stressed that one must not regard the Confessions as only formal documents which one subscribes on the day of ordination, nor must one regard it as sufficient to have the proper formulations of doctrine within the Confessions, but the church and the individual must also put into practice their profession of the faith both within the church and in its relations with other

⁵⁹Marquart, “Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” 15.

⁶⁰Ibid., 11.

Lutheran and Christian communities.

Confessional Subscription *ad intra*

As biblical expositions and summaries of Scripture, the Confessions participate in the normative function of Scripture.⁶¹ The Lutheran Confessions themselves teach that their biblical foundation gives them a normative role in the church, but they do not supplant or supplement the Bible, thereby implying a second norm alongside of Scripture.⁶² Although the symbols are not *norma normans* they are, nevertheless, *norma*. Regarding the Formula's statement on "other writings," Huth states, "if in fact these other writings do present the correct position on the articles in controversy, and if indeed these other writings do preserve the pure doctrine, then they have abiding validity and are still normative."⁶³ Hummel pointed out, "What does not really and fully norm is no norm. If the Confessions do not norm, something else inevitably will."⁶⁴ He insisted that the Confessions do not "judge" the Gospel, but they "do *define* the Gospel—as Lutherans understand and confess it."⁶⁵

The Confessions themselves insist that as correct exhibitions of Scriptural doctrine, confessions and symbols can and should function as norms within the church by which to judge and regulate the doctrine of the church. This is most clearly evident in the Formula of Concord which sees itself not only as a biblical exposition but also as an exposition of the earlier confessions, especially the Augsburg Confession. Huth observes that the for-

⁶¹Bohlmann, "Normen der Kirche: Schrift und Bekenntnis," 10.

⁶²Ibid., 23.

⁶³Huth, "One Savior and One Confession," 67.

⁶⁴Hummel, "The Influence of Confessional Themes," 217.

⁶⁵Horace D. Hummel, "The Debate Continues on the Nature of Gospel and Confession: Hummel Responds Again," *Lutheran Forum* 4 (February 1970): 9.

mulators of the Formula of Concord did not regard the earlier writings as merely showing what the people “then living” believe without any implication “as to what ought to be believed.” They cited those writings “for the very purpose of indicating what should be believed.” If those writings correctly set forth the position of Scripture on the articles in controversy, and if they do preserve the pure doctrine, “then they have abiding validity and are still normative.”⁶⁶

The way in which one accepts the Lutheran Confessions as expositions and summaries of Scripture and therefore as normative for the proclamation and profession of the Gospel is by subscribing the symbolical writings. Harry Huth has pointed out that such subscription says something about both the church which requires it and the individual who subscribes them. It indicates that the church body has a confessional position, is convinced that what it believes is correct, wishes to preserve its confessional identity from all others, is willing to present a clear statement of what it believes and teaches, and has a genuine concern for the Gospel. Subscription indicates that the individual is performing a meaningful ceremony, that he has fully investigated the Confessions and knows their content, and that he has compared them with Scripture and found them in agreement. Finally, an unconditional subscription does not imply an ignorance of history, an “enforced, legalistic conformity,” an uncritical acceptance of tradition, nor that one is saved by such subscription.⁶⁷

Over against those who argue that the Confessions set forth no specific formula of subscription, Huth draws out the significance and content of confessional subscription by observing what it meant to those who signed their names to the Formula of Concord. Their

⁶⁶Huth, “One Savior and One Confession,” 67.

⁶⁷As summarized from “Confessional Subscription” (unpublished outline, 1971) by Samuel Nafzger in “The Future of Confessional Lutheranism in the World,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 42 (July 1978): 222, 223.

subscription, he observes, was meant to be an endorsement of the Formula's theological content and to show that the confessors were unwilling to approve any doctrine that conflicted with their confession. In addition, the subscription was meant to signify the unanimous acceptance of and commitment to the symbols, thereby indicating that the Confessions belonged to them all and not only any individual. Finally, by their subscription the confessors expressed confidence and certitude concerning the abiding validity of the Confessions, that they were convinced they were the "unchanging, constant truth;" and an "altogether uncolored declaration of the pure truth."⁶⁸

In the light of what the Confessions themselves have to say about subscription, Preus argued that Lutherans must hold a view of confessional subscription that does not relativize the Confessions historically, functionally, ecumenically nor reject or reduce them in any way. He asserted that subscription involves several matters. First, it is an act of confessing that one makes willingly and in the presence and fear of God by subscribing formulated statements of doctrine "in complete assurance that these confessions are true and are correct expositions of God." By subscription, the Confessions become for that person "permanent confessions and patterns of doctrine."⁶⁹ Second, he pointed out that the Confessions set forth the doctrine not of an individual, but the doctrine of the church. So confessional subscription becomes a public act done in the fellowship and union with the Christian church.

Finally, the spirit of confessional subscription springs from a love for the Gospel and for those who hear that Gospel on Sunday morning. The spirit of confessional subscription is not a form of "spiritual tyranny" which threatens religious and theological freedom. On the contrary, the confessors regarded such subscription as a "holy bondage into

⁶⁸Huth, "One Savior and One Confession," 64-66.

⁶⁹Preus, "Confessional Subscription," 46.

which they had been brought by the grace of the Holy Spirit who worked in them a great assurance concerning the certainty of their faith and confession.”⁷⁰ They subscribe willingly, gladly, sincerely, and whole-heartedly, without purpose of evasion. This means that one subscribes without any “ifs” or “buts.” Hummel points out that just as the “verbal inspiration” of the *norma normans* “implies that authority resides in the words of the Biblical text, so our confessional subscription is to the *norma normata* of the *Book of Concord*, not to Luther, as such, or to any earlier drafts.⁷¹ Abandoning the Confessions’ doctrinal content should be clearly labeled for what it is—a repudiation of the *Book of Concord* as “a pure exposition of the Word of God” and subscription to some other confession.⁷²

With regard to the specific content that confessional subscription entails, Preus asserted that it includes the entire doctrinal content of the Confessions, but not the Latin or German grammar, the logic or illustrations used, the historical or scientific matters, the liturgical usages, nor non-doctrinal “pious” phrases such as “*semper virgo*.” One is bound, however, to the exegesis of the Confessions. This does not mean that one must accept every choice of passages that the Confessions make in support of their doctrine. But one cannot reject the exegetical conclusions of the Confessions without rejecting the Confessions as statements of doctrine which are drawn from and based upon the Scriptures. For example, consensus on the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar is “contingent upon agreement on the exegetical conclusions drawn from the words of institution.”⁷³

Not only does one accept the exegetical conclusions of the Confessions, but on the

⁷⁰Huth, “One Savior and One Confession,” 67.

⁷¹Hummel, “Response to John Reumann,” 179.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Preus, “Confessional Subscription,” 48.

basis of their doctrine of Scripture one also accepts the confessional hermeneutical principles for interpreting Scripture. Missouri theologians warned that if Lutherans lose a confessional point of departure for interpreting the Scriptures then virtually all that is Lutheranism will be lost. But as norms, they are not a “straitjacket” which automatically determines all exegetical answers or choice of terminology. The Confessions “provide a basic orientation, framework, or ‘field’ for understanding what the Bible is all about.”⁷⁴ The hermeneutical axioms with which the exegete works, however, are again not the arbitrary impositions of theologians or the church; they proceed from the witness of the Bible itself. The doctrine enunciated in the Confessions represents how Lutherans understand Scripture and indicates the major direction and themes that Lutherans will pursue in their scriptural exposition.⁷⁵

One of the specific issues with which the Missouri Synod dealt was the use of justification as a general, overarching hermeneutic of Scripture. They acknowledged that one must use Scripture’s soteriological or christological paradigm for interpretation. If it is not used, some other will replace it, be it political, social, or a liberation one. This implies that the meaning of all passages in Scripture, directly or indirectly, sheds light on the great central content and purpose of Scripture. One approaches Scripture in order to hear the Gospel. Finally, not everything in the Bible is of equal importance, importance which is measured by the proximity which the doctrine lies to the Gospel. But Missouri Synod theologians warned that one must not turn the central message of Scripture into a rule or principle by which one is to derive the message of Scripture. Put another way, one must not substitute exclusivity for centrality: “what is indeed indispensably central is about all

⁷⁴Hummel, “The Bible and the Confessions,” 52.

⁷⁵Hummel, “The Influence of Confessional Themes,” 217.

that remains of the original substance as a sort of spiritualistic sole survivor.”⁷⁶

Missouri Synod scholars stressed that when one subscribes the Confessions as his very own on the day of his ordination, that one does not then place them and their doctrine on the top shelf of his book case. Bohlmann maintained that if confessional subscription has any meaning or relevance, then it must continue to be, as it always had been for Lutherans, a “pledge to uphold the doctrinal content of the Confessions, not merely to honor it or to regard it fondly as a position once viable but no longer valid.”⁷⁷ This means that “formal subscription to the Confessions must result in the actual confessing of the doctrinal content of the Confessions in the life of the church.”⁷⁸ In fact, Hummel identified the basic issue of confessionalism as to whether the Confessions will continue to be used as a norm and discipline of “what is actually taught and preached in the church, or whether they are, in effect, consigned to the dustbins of history.”⁷⁹

As a synod, the LCMS tried to take seriously the need for its practice to be consistent with its profession by clarifying the correct interpretation of the Confessions when contrary doctrines were advocated by its members. As pointed out by Hummel, if Lutherans are truly confronting their problems confessionally, their answers will often and characteristically “take the form of *statements* specifying their contemporary application and to which a confessional body might rightly require allegiance or subscription, at least provisionally.”⁸⁰ These are not additions to the *Book of Concord*, but ongoing efforts to keep

⁷⁶Ibid., 222.

⁷⁷Bohlmann, “Confessional Biblical Interpretation,” 191.

⁷⁸Ralph [A.] Bohlmann, “The Celebration of Concord,” in *Theologians’ Convocation: Formula For Concord* (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1977), 79.

⁷⁹Hummel, “The Outside Limits of Lutheran Confessionalism,” (1971): 106.

⁸⁰Hummel, “The Influence of Confessional Themes,” 229, endnote 1.

it relevant. One of the clearest evidences then that Missouri Synod intended to take the Lutheran Confessions seriously was the adoption in 1973 of *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*⁸¹ as a doctrinal resolution of the Synod. In it, the Missouri Synod declared its understanding of Scripture and the Confessions on those antitheses which are not discussed explicitly in the Confessions, but had been the subject of controversy within the Synod, especially those areas dealing with the doctrine and hermeneutical principles of Scripture and the meaning of confessional subscription.

Theologians in the Missouri Synod likewise tried to put their confessional convictions into practice. Having maintained the historic Lutheran position that the Confessions do not determine the truth, but as a norm they do determine that which is the Lutheran understanding of Scripture and that which is not, they frequently appealed to the Confessions when participating in intersynodical discussions with other Lutherans. This was especially evident as the Missouri Synod participated in the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. Division of Theological Studies, which had initiated a special study of hermeneutics in 1975 and which later published *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*. Harold H. Ditmanson observed, for instance, that one of the observable differences in the presentations between the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America was that the latter two church bodies rarely cited the Confessions, whereas the LCMS essayists “frequently cite the Confessions in order to indicate the authoritative criteria in terms of which a theological statement can be said to be correct or incorrect. This practice characterizes LCMS statements in general.”⁸²

The Missouri Synod also encouraged its pastors and laity to study and use the

⁸¹(St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1972).

⁸²Harold H. Ditmanson, “Perspectives on the Hermeneutics Debate,” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 90. He further recognizes that these differences in style reflect different attitudes among the various Lutheran bodies.

Confessions within their ministries and lives. To aid the pastor and layperson, Missouri published a number of Bible studies of the Scriptures and confessions under the theme “That We May Grow.” In commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord a number of popular studies appeared in the *Getting Into . . .* series.⁸³ For pastors, Missouri published several historical and theological works for their personal study.⁸⁴ In these writings, it was argued that the Confessions are not restrictive straitjackets, but decisional premises for life. They provide a “positive platform for Christian witnessing and for a satisfying understanding of God and His ways with man in the 20th-century world.”⁸⁵

Hummel has suggested, however, that many “pastors will have to search their souls as to whether they *really* still put their personal and professional confidence in the Holy Spirit’s real action (as well as ‘real presence’) in Word and Sacrament, or have transferred it to psychological and sociological skills.”⁸⁶ Is the pastor, Hummel asks, primarily “steward of the ‘mysteries of God’ or secular and empirical problem solver?”⁸⁷ Put another way, one’s confidence in the Confessions may reflect one’s confidence in the

⁸³*Getting into the Formula of Concord: A History and Digest of the Formula* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977); David P. Scaer, *Getting into the Story of Concord: A History of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977); Robert D. Preus, *Getting into the Theology of Concord: A Study of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977).

⁸⁴See Theodore R. Jungkuntz, *Formulators of the Formula of Concord: Four Architects of Lutheran Unity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977); Robert Kolb, *Andrea and the Formula of Concord: Six Sermons on the Way to Lutheran Unity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977); and Robert Kolb, “Historical Background of the Formula of Concord,” in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert D. Preus and Wilbert H. Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 12-87.

⁸⁵Rosin, “Looking at the Formula Today,” 94.

⁸⁶Hummel, “No Other Gospel!” 9.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

Scriptures as the Word of God.

Role of the Confessions for the Unity of the Church

The Missouri Synod carried its confessional attitude into the area of Lutheran unity and the ecumenical movement. But unlike many proposals for Lutheran unity or Christian union that were made on the basis of a bare minimum requirement of doctrinal agreement or on the recognition that every tradition witnessed in its own way to the same Gospel, Missouri participants consistently applied their conviction that the Confessions, as true expositions of Scripture, set forth the proper basis upon which altar and pulpit fellowship must be determined. They stressed with the symbols that that which was truly ecumenical was that which is biblical, because that which was biblical set forth the Gospel which alone advanced, promoted, and unified the *una sancta*. Bohlmann in particular frequently referred to this approach as a “confessional ecumenism.”

LCMS scholars frequently appealed to the doctrine of the church in Augustana VII and Formula of Concord X: 31, which they regarded as the correct exposition of the the former. They also called attention to the formulation of the Lutheran symbolical writings themselves as the concrete application and implementation of the confessional doctrine regarding the church. But it was no subscription formalities or only professed adherence to the Confessions that must serve as the basis for unity and concord within the church. Synodical theologians stressed that only the Word of God that was actually preached and taught served the unity of the church. The central features of the proposal for a confessional ecumenism are summarized best in Luther’s definition of the church in the Smalcald Articles, namely, the church is “sheep who hear the shepherd’s voice.” Two features stand out: first, “the church consists of believers,” and second, “that believers follow the Shepherd’s Word, the Gospel.”⁸⁸

⁸⁸Bohlmann, “The Celebration of Concord,” 59.

Taking up the first part of that definition, Missouri insisted repeatedly that the church is first and foremost the communion of all believers. This indicates that the church is “both smaller and larger than any denominational structure.”⁸⁹ As such, the church is one, and both its essence and unity remain an object of faith in this life. Taking up the second part of Luther’s definition, (“who hear the shepherd’s voice”), Missourians stressed that although the church is an object of faith, the Gospel marks the whereabouts of the church because the Gospel creates and builds the church. So the means through which the church is *called* and created is also the means by which it is *recognized*. Accordingly, Christians will not look for the church by seeking out buildings or organizations, but by looking for the Word. This emphasis assures one that the church is an actuality within the world as well as an object of faith. What is necessary for the unity of the church then is simply that which brings about man’s justification before God and that which brings about the unity itself, namely the Gospel Word.⁹⁰

At the same time, where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, there exists an outward assembly of real people. The church, in this broad sense as the gathering of people around Word and Sacrament, can also be measured and described empirically and sociologically. But within this assembly are mixed both believers and unbelievers. Yet it is only on account of the believers within that assembly who are nourished by God’s Word that this external or outward gathering may be and is called a church. Put another way, it bears the name “church,” however, “only because of the true church within

⁸⁹Ralph A. Bohlmann, “Confessional Ecumenism,” in *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*, ed. Erich Kiehl and Waldo J. Werning (Chicago: Lutheran Congress, 1970), 83.

⁹⁰Robert D. Preus, “The Basis for Concord,” in *Theologians’ Convocation: Formula for Concord—Essays* (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1977), 20.

it.”⁹¹ Marquart saw the failure to recognize this as the beginning of trouble within Missouri. Missouri’s style of church government “presupposes that it is *the church* which is here being governed, and that this must *therefore* be done with God’s Word alone, and not with human rules and regulations!”⁹²

As the Gospel alone builds the *una sancta* within the outward assembly, Missouri Synod theologians stressed that the external church did not exist as an end in itself, but existed only to advance the *una sancta*. In the same way, the external unity of the church serves the unity of the *una sancta*. “*Concordia* is intended to advance *unitas*, and this is done only when the Gospel is faithfully preserved and consistently employed.”⁹³ The burden and primary mission of the church is “to share and witness to the pure doctrine of the Gospel contained in her confessions.”⁹⁴ The church in the broad sense must, therefore, “be judged quite objectively, externally, by its faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Gospel of the one Christ and His one church.”⁹⁵

To that end, Missourians called for a consensus on doctrine and all its articles because all articles of faith within the Scriptures served the Gospel which alone builds and unites the *una sancta*. Bohlmann argued that Lutherans hold such a position not only because Christ has commanded his church to observe all things, but because all “articles of faith are integrally related to the Gospel in the narrow sense.”⁹⁶ In other words, Marquart points out, the understanding of the Gospel in the Lutheran Confessions is “holistic, not

⁹¹Bohlmann, “The Celebration of Concord,” 62.

⁹²Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 57.

⁹³Bohlmann, “Confessional Ecumenism,” 85.

⁹⁴Preus, “The Basis for Concord,” 26.

⁹⁵Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 18.

⁹⁶Bohlmann, “Confessional Ecumenism,” 84.

atomistic.”⁹⁷ They know of no “Gospel” which could be separated from the concrete particulars of its dogmatic and organic foundations.”⁹⁸ The whole point of FC X, for example, is that the church’s distinctive treasure, “the full, many-faceted Gospel, including the sacraments in their God-given integrity, must be maintained and confessed, without additions or subtractions, uncompromisingly—and not only in theory, much less as legal fiction, but in fact and reality.”⁹⁹ The Confessions understand that any preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding of it becomes an “impossibility whenever any article of faith is either falsified or denied.”¹⁰⁰

The Confessions themselves are a testimony to these fellowship principles. Marquart believes that the Formula of Concord draws the boundaries of church fellowship precisely where the *Augustana* draws them, at the purely preached Gospel and rightly administered sacraments. So the Confessions are “conscious of articulating that faith which is the common, ecumenical heritage of all Christians — not of course in any statistical or sociological sense of means and averages, but in the objective, theological sense of the full, unreduced and unabridged divinely wrought gift and reality.”¹⁰¹ The Formula’s view of the symbolical books is very high, not as ecclesiastical or organizational arrangements, but as actual vehicles of the real church’s pure marks.

One may even consider confession then, as a mark of the church because the church

⁹⁷Kurt E. Marquart, “Augsburg Confession VII Revisited,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45 (1981): 20.

⁹⁸Kurt E. Marquart, “The Church of the Augsburg Confession as the True Ecumenical Movement,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 8 (Winter 1967/68): 77.

⁹⁹Kurt E. Marquart, “Article X The Formula of Concord. Confession and Ceremonies,” in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert D. Preus and Wilbert Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 270.

¹⁰⁰Bohlmann, “Confessional Ecumenism,” 84.

¹⁰¹Marquart, “Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” 40.

and the truth belong inseparably together. Marquart cautions then, that if the Confessions are not allowed to define the boundaries of church fellowship, then they will have been “set aside as confessions.”¹⁰² Along the same lines, Huth observes that confessional subscription with complete unanimity and without reservation endorses the total theological content of the Confessions and signifies that those who subscribe are “unwilling to recognize the validity of theological positions which differed from theirs clearly precludes theological pluralism as a viable alternative to full agreement on all the articles of faith.”¹⁰³ After all, truth unites, but it also divides.

Even where they could not establish fellowship with other church bodies, or perhaps had to break it in the case of the ALC, the Missouri Synod felt compelled to maintain contacts and encourage discussions and conversations wherever possible. In this way they could continue to witness to the correct confessional understanding of Scripture. In fact, Bohlmann suggested that a confessional ecumenism could be correctly understood as “the practice of evangelism within visible Christendom.”¹⁰⁴ To that end, they encouraged ongoing conversations with their fellow Lutherans and participated in a five year study with the ALC and the LCA, culminating with a report issued by the three church bodies, *The Function of Doctrine and Theology*, in which they clearly delineated the areas of disagreement between themselves on such questions as the basis for fellowship, the authority of Scripture, the role of the Confessions, and the limits of doctrinal diversity.

Summary

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Missouri Synod set out to reclaim its her-

¹⁰²Kurt E. Marquart, “How to Give Up the Confessions Without Seeming To,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48 (1984): 249.

¹⁰³Huth, “One Savior and One Confession,” 68.

¹⁰⁴Ralph A. Bohlmann, “Theses on Confessional Ecumenism,” *Concordia Journal* 1 (June 1975): 101.

itage which stressed a normative confessionalism for the church. In order to do so, its theologians were compelled to address and contend for the very basis and foundation of confessionalism, namely the biblical principle of Lutheranism. The loss of Scripture as the sole source and norm of doctrine meant self-evidently the destruction of the very possibility of confessional subscription. In order to uphold the divine origin and authority of Scripture, LCMS theologians found it necessary to reject the historical-critical study of the Scriptures as incompatible in its very nature with the Scriptures. By upholding a strong scriptural principle, Missouri could once again, indeed was compelled, to claim a normative function for the Confessions in the life and faith of the church. Conversely, subscribing the entire doctrinal content of the Confessions directed one back to the *sola scriptura* principle of Lutheranism.

CONCLUSION

Confessional subscription and fidelity depend upon one's understanding of the character of the symbolical writings one subscribes. As confessions, the *Book of Concord* possesses both a divine and human, an evangelical and legal, dimension in their relation to both the Scriptures and the church respectively. The Confessions are expositions of Scripture. They presuppose a biblical principle as their foundation, for which reason they set forth biblical doctrine. Implicit in this claim and conviction lies a confessional view of the nature, essence, and function of Scripture along with the correlative hermeneutical principles for interpreting Scripture. The Confessions are also declarations of the church. They represent the way in which the church has received, apprehended and carried out the thrust and content of the biblical principle over against denials and distortions of Scripture's message. This confessional principle then is simply the reception and concrete implementation of the ruling norm, Scripture itself. As such, the Confessions imply a symbolical doctrine of the nature and unity of the church.

These two dimensions reveal the divine and human sides of the Confessions. The biblical dimension concentrates one's attention on the doctrine given by God to the church and highlights the evangelical character of the Confessions. The historical or churchly dimension accents the human act of confessing and brings to the fore the legal side of the Confessions. So on the one hand, as expositions of Scripture the Confessions claim to present the God-given doctrine of Scripture. On the other hand, as declarations of the church the symbolical writings bear the marks of humanly-devised documents with all the attendant characteristics and contingencies of history. Confessional fidelity, in the final

analysis, depends upon the way in which one understands the relation and role of the biblical and historical characteristics of the Confessions to each other. Both must be maintained; neither can be stressed to the exclusion of the other without lapsing either into speculation or relativism. What determines confessional fidelity is whether one approaches the Confessions from the standpoint of their biblical or historical character.

Inevitably, one will be regarded as the active and determining characteristic which conditions and structures the other dimension. The other will be regarded in a more passive and instrumental role. Two possibilities exist. When the biblical or God-given doctrine of the *Book of Concord* provides the point of departure for considering the Confessions, one can observe a kind “incarnational” or “sacramental” principle of Lutheranism at work. The human formulations and philosophical framework of the Confessions provide the vehicle through which the biblical content is conveyed and communicated. By the very framing of the Confessions, the church gives witness to truth which it has received from God through the Scriptures. The human limitations and historical contingencies of the creeds accordingly recede into the background and do not impinge upon or restrict the divine, biblical content of the symbols. In other words, since the Confessions receive their value and validity solely from God-given doctrine set forth, their external form is, as it were, lifted above the relativities of time and history.

Self-evidently, confessional fidelity becomes the only reasonable response to the nature, essence, and function of the symbols. As the formulation of the Confessions demonstrates what and how the church has received the words of God, confessional subscription becomes an act by which one testifies to the truth that he has received as God's Word. By accepting the confessional formulations and statements set forth within the symbolical writings of the Lutheran church, an individual indicates that he has received and apprehended the very truth and doctrine of God conveyed by these statements and formulations over against every denial and distortion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Moreover, by

accepting the entire theological content of the Confessions, one indicates that in the end, the entire Word of God directs one to the Gospel and is indeed given by God for the sake of the Gospel. When viewed in this way, confessional subscription cannot but be seen as an evangelical act, a reception of and a response to the Gospel.

When, in the second possibility, the human dimension and external form of the documents which comprise the Confessions provide the point of departure for their understanding, history will play an active and determinative role for evaluating the value of the symbols while the biblical side of the Confessions is relegated to a more passive role—one that is subject to the dictates of history. This implies that not only does history provide the vehicle and “delivery system” for the biblical content, but, to some extent, it also contributes to the content as well. This leads one then to evaluate critically and determine how much of the content within the Confessions is abiding and how much is historically conditioned. In the end, one finds it necessary to enunciate a kind “dephilosophical principle” or metaphysical “dualistic principle” in which the divine and the human are sharply distinguished, if not detached, from one another. The Confessions can become little more than tentative proposals or suggestions.

Confessional fidelity, according to this view of the symbols, inevitably becomes a somewhat risky and uncertain undertaking. To call for an unconditional subscription becomes a legal and law oriented enterprise in which one is asked to bind one's self not to God-given doctrine and the Gospel conveyed by that doctrine but to human formulations. Instead, to call for such a subscription to what are, in the final analysis, human and imperfect statements, is a requirement which borders on legalism and hence threatens the freedom which one has in the Gospel. At the same time, however, if the Gospel can never be formulated definitively in verbal, cognitive statements of doctrine, that freedom in the Gospel becomes an ever vaguer entity and any possibility of confessing it by means of subscription is denied and nullified.

The practical results of approaching the Confessions as either God-given doctrine or humanly-devised documents can be observed among Lutherans in American and can assist in explaining the reason why Lutherans appear to be on divergent courses in the latter quarter of the twentieth century. While the confessional attitudes displayed by individual Lutherans reflect the general mind set and orientation of their respective church bodies in many matters, the attitudes toward the Confessions will manifest themselves especially in the manner in which they view the doctrine of scripture and its role within the church. The two strands of Lutheranism which reflect the two divergent attitudes toward the *Book of Concord* are best represented by the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod and the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. While there are other Lutheran bodies that may be considered, for the most part it is safe to say that they have gravitated in varying degrees toward one or the other of the above mentioned communities.

An “Incarnational” or “Normative” Confessionalism

For the most part, one can observe in the history of the Missouri Synod during the twentieth century, and for that matter, from its formation, a consistency of profession and practice as it advocated the biblical dimension of the Confessions as the basis for subscribing. This becomes especially apparent in Missouri’s pastoral emphases and concerns. The overriding concern of the Synod was for faithfulness to and continuity in the proclamation of the Scriptures, thereby ensuring that the laity in the pew receive only the pure Word of God, which Word alone extends and unites the church. Synodical leaders were cognizant of the many historical changes in world views and philosophical and scientific systems around them, but they stressed that the Confessions, because they are biblical, remain relevant to the needs and concerns of modern man. To that end, they resisted many contemporary theologies which they regarded as diminishing the doctrinal content of the Scriptures.

As may be expected then, Missouri Synod theologians approached the Confessions

preeminently as biblical expositions and energetically maintained a strong biblical principle over against any diminution of the inspiration or infallibility of Scripture. Their assertion that the entire doctrinal content of the Confessions was the object of confessional subscription stood and fell with the authority of Scripture as the very words of God. Holding to the biblical principle of confessionalism led Missouri to deemphasize the impact of historical changes upon the interpretation and meaning of the Confessions for the present ages. Not surprisingly, they placed greater accent on the relevancy and pertinency of the content of the Confessions rather than the relativities of the formulations and world view with which the Confessions were framed. This approach also provided them with the criterion by which they evaluated contemporary theological developments.

For Missouri then, an unconditional and unqualified subscription of the Confessions on the part of pastors and teachers was the only possible outcome in view of the nature and essence of the Confessions. Indeed, it was the only responsible action that the church could take if it were to ensure that the message proclaimed from its pulpits and in its classrooms was the unadulterated Word of God. Moreover, it implied that the proper mission of the church was the faithful use and administration of the Gospel and the Sacraments. This same attitude then characterized Missouri's participation in the search for Lutheran unity as well as the broader ecumenical movement in general. The stress on the doctrinal content of the Confessions as exhibiting the very words of God led them to stress the doctrine in all of its articles as the basis for the extension of the church and bond of unity within the church. This conviction led them to place a greater accent on the hiddenness of the church, that is the *una sancta*, and its marks, than upon the sociological or structural dimensions of the external church.

A “Dephilosophical” or “Tentative” Confessionalism

Although one can observe a number of shifts in the way in which the Muhlenberg

Lutheran tradition approached the Confessions during the twentieth century, they do exhibit under the influence of neo-confessionalism a consistency in approaching the Confessions from the standpoint of their historical character. In this approach are also demonstrated a number of pastoral concerns for the laity within their churches, but with different emphases than Missouri. They too sought to proclaim the Gospel for twentieth century man but displayed a willingness to ascribe a greater role to the impact of historical changes on the theology and the need to take into account the intellectual integrity and world view of contemporary man when proclaiming the Gospel. To that end, they exhibited a greater desire than Missouri to embrace and consider contemporary theological developments or movements which took into account historical developments.

By approaching the Confessions from the standpoint of their historical character, many Lutherans stressed that the historical contingencies of their formulation limited and restricted the relevance and pertinence of the *Book of Concord* for modern man. They stressed the limitations of history, language, and philosophical frameworks, all of which to some extent conditioned and relativized the content of the Lutheran Confessions. These limitations especially come to the fore in the light of a modern critical attitude as evidenced by the “scientific” methodologies used for examining the Scriptures. The historical emphasis on the Confessions corresponded with a historical-critical approach to the Scriptures and the loosening of confidence in the Bible as the Word of God “without qualification.” This led theologians in the Muhlenberg tradition to stress that the Scriptures and the Confessions were simply records of the subjective responses which the church had in its encounter with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

At the same time that history highlighted the discontinuity between the Confessions and the present day, Lutherans sought to maintain some kind of continuity with their past, for which reason some form of confessional subscription appeared necessary. This led theologians of the Muhlenberg tradition to search for a proper formula of subscription that

was something less than a wholehearted and unqualified endorsement of the Confessions but that gave them some role, however limited. Hence, the Confessions came to be viewed as pointers, signposts, gyroscopes, maps, and instruments which pointed to the truth beyond themselves but was not necessarily contained within them. Similarly, with respect to the unity of the church, the decreasing confidence in the ability to know and to formulate with any degree of certainty the doctrine of God led them to assert that every Christian tradition in its own way pointed to the one Gospel of Jesus Christ. As a result, the emphasis on the unity of the church shifted from consensus in the pure doctrine of God's Word, which was seen as unattainable and uncertain in this life, to more external and visible manifestations of unity, be they structural or sociological. Yet that assertion reveals a shift in emphasis on the nature of the church away from its essential hiddenness to a visible assembly.

Some Concluding Thoughts

A few final observations and thoughts are in order at this point. One of the first concerns the relation of the biblical and historical dimensions of the Confessions to each other. They are not so much mutually exclusive and neither one can be considered in isolation from the other without veering off into complete dogmatism or relativism. Both play a vital role in the formulation and role of the Confessions. Second, part of the difficulty in exploring Lutheran attitudes toward the Confessions is frequently found not in what they do assert as in what they do not assert. For instance, it must be considered laudable that Lutherans continue to affirm and assert the centrality of justification in the Confessions. But what is not asserted without qualification is the *sola Scripture* principle as the basis of the Confessions. Similarly, some of the difficulty with confessional attitudes is not that some Lutherans outrightly reject the Confessions and explicitly deny the *sola scriptura* principle along with its divine origin and authority; however, they do ignore the biblical

dimension of the Confessions or do not affirm it as strongly as they might. Yet implicit in such an emphasis or lack of emphasis may in fact be a denial or rejection. Moreover, few if any theologians are willing to advocate an outright rejection of the Confessions. They frequently couch their lack of enthusiasm for them in terms of praise.

By concentrating on what theologians and church leaders have written on the subject of the confessional principle and confessional subscription, this study has dealt with those who had or have an interest in the subject. It may or may not be representative of the way in which the church at large regards and deals with the church's symbols. Attempting to address such a concern, this study has referred to official synodical resolutions and declarations as illustrative that the confessional attitude of the theologians was also representative of their church's position. At the same time, however, it may be pointed out that while a theologian's view coincides with that of church leaders and the church in general, it does not address whether or not such views are only those of the academics and administrators or whether the Confessions actually play a vital role in the studies of the pastors and within the life of the parishes.

Similarly, while addressing what has been written about the Confessions, this study does not address the question of the non-use of the Confessions and the attitude that may reveal. In other words, a formal acknowledgment of the importance of the Confessions may or may not reflect a corresponding emphasis in practice. Nevertheless, the way in which pastors use the Confessions, or not use them, will reflect their attitude toward the Confessions as either historical or biblical statements of faith and their attitude toward the church. To confine them to the uppermost shelf of the book case in the pastor's study in all likelihood will suggest a lack of confidence in the normative role of the Confessions for the proclamation of the Gospel, and in turn the Scriptures. It suggests furthermore that something else, such as external, managerial and administrative programs, may have replaced Scriptural doctrine as the essential means for building and extending the

church. Similarly, the marks for identifying the church thereby become structural and sociological rather than confessional and sacramental.

One's view and use of the Confessions will manifest one's view and use of Scripture. A high view of the Confessions will demonstrate a correspondingly high view of the Scriptures. A low view will similarly reveal a lower view of Scripture as the written Word of God and less confidence in the power of Scripture to extend, build, and unite the church. A lower view of Scripture will compel one to find in addition to Scripture, other means or methods for strengthening and uniting the church. This furthermore implies that one's view of the Confessions will reveal one's attitude toward the changes of history and the way in which history and philosophy influences the church, the church's proclamation, and the church's identity. Finally, one's attitude toward the Confessions will reveal whether or not an individual views the doctrine of Scripture, and hence of the Confessions, in evangelical or law oriented terms, and thus whether one looks upon confessional subscription as something to be embraced or evaded.

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