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Ein Prediger muss nicht allein *weiden*, also dass er die Schafe unterweise, wie sie rechte Christen sollen sein, sondern auch daneben den Wölfen *wehren*, dass sie die Schafe nicht angreifen und mit falscher Lehre verführen und Irrtum einführen.

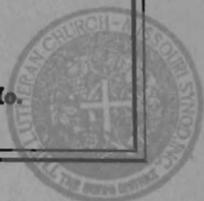
Luther

Es ist kein Ding, das die Leute mehr bei der Kirche behält denn die gute Predigt. — *Apologie, Art. 24*

If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? — *1 Cor. 14:8*

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ARCHIVES

Miscellanea

The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions

By W. ARNDT

Essay read at the 1949 convention of the Oklahoma District of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod and printed here by the request of the convention.

It is my intention to discuss with you in as simple and direct a manner as possible our attitude toward our Confessions in this year of our Lord 1949. Remember, I am not speaking of the attitude of Lutherans in 1549 or 1649, but in the present year. Our study is not to be simply a historical one. History, of course, will be given prominence, the origin of the Confessions will be dwelt on, the attitude of our fathers will be described, and similar historical factors will be mentioned. But our chief aim, as I conceive it, should be to see clearly what the Confessions mean to us at this stage of our history and development. There are two questions that I should like to look at—and I hope you will generously assist in the examination—Are the Confessions of our Church pertinent today, do they deal with the great religious problems which agitate us and our contemporaries? The other is, Are they adequate, are they sufficient, do they cover all the points that we have to grapple with today, that force themselves on us in our thinking, and that people all about us mention when they speak of religious topics and problems? Let me make a few more introductory observations.

The Lutheran Church is a confessional Church. Everybody who knows anything about us is aware that our Church must be classified as a confessional one. What does that mean? It means that in our Church we have confessions, or standards, or symbolical books, in which we set forth our faith and by which hence we are guided. Think, in the first place, of our congregations. A congregation is governed by a constitution, in which there is found what we call a confessional paragraph. It may be that the paragraph states that the congregation accepts as the only rule of doctrine and life the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and, as a correct exposition of Scripture teaching, the Lutheran Confessions, which are then enumerated. There may be another paragraph which says that whoever desires to become a voting member of the church must be acquainted at least with Luther's Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession. In the precise wording of the paragraph there may be a difference between the various constitutions, but the general idea is the same in every instance. It does happen now and then that a congregation applies for admission into Synod, submits its constitution, and is told that the document is not satisfactory because it does not contain a

confessional paragraph. It is a matter over which we watch with a good deal of solicitude. But let us these days think especially of Synod itself. When it was founded, in 1847, the confessional article of the constitution was considered very important, in fact, the most important one. It is Article II and has the title: "Confession." It reads thus: "Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation: 1. The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice; 2. All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit, the three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord."

The article of membership (V) says: "Membership in Synod is held and may be acquired by congregations, ministers of the Gospel, and teachers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church who confess and accept the confessional basis of Article II." You see here a great insistence on adherence to confessional standards. Very definite documents are mentioned which constitute the Confessions of the Church, and to be a member of Synod, you have to adhere to these standards.

The Confessions were not made the supreme rule of doctrine and life. Our position with respect to the Confessions must not be misunderstood to mean that we make the Confessions our chief norm of what is true and false in religion. There is only one book which has the right to claim that it be recognized as the source of doctrine and as the arbiter in all religious debates—the Bible, the Word of God (*norma normans*). The Confessions are merely a derived norm (*norma normata*), to use the old term. They show where the Lutheran Church stands. If there is a difference of opinion whether the Rev. X. Y. Z. Smith is a Lutheran, then I examine his teachings with the aid of our Confessions. If his teachings agree with what the Confessions say, then he is a Lutheran. But when, especially in discussions with non-Lutherans, the question arises whether a certain position is true or not, then I must go to the Scriptures, which are the only infallible source of information. The Confessions were never intended to be documents that decide controversies between Lutherans and non-Lutherans; in such circumstances there is only one Judge whom we can approach, our Holy Scriptures.

A somewhat rare position today. It must be admitted that this our confessional position is somewhat rare these days. While in the old times after the Reformation it was the rule for church bodies to have confessional standards and to urge that loyalty toward them be shown, such an attitude in our days is frowned on a great deal. In the sixteenth century the prominent opponents

of the Lutherans among the Protestants were the Reformed. While they did not present a united front, they all had their confessions. We think especially of the Resolutions or Decrees of Dortrecht, or Dort, in Holland and of the Westminster Confession in England — famous documents marking the respective churches as distinct from other Protestants.

It is impossible in the short time at our disposal to dwell on the changes that have come in the attitude of church denominations toward confessions, or creeds. Merely a few prominent facts can be mentioned. More than one hundred years ago a major attempt was made to get rid of creeds and simply to make the Bible the basis of church bodies. It was hoped that by this method, that is, by the elimination of creeds, it would be possible to bring the denominations together. The leaders in this attempt were the Campbells, father and son, who originally had been Presbyterians. They founded the so-called Christian Church, or the Disciples of Christ; often this Church is referred to as the Campbellites. They hold it is wrong to use the name of Luther or Calvin in giving a label to church bodies, and hence they call themselves simply Christians, or Disciples. The denomination became, and still is, powerful. But what these people tried to accomplish, the sweeping aside of the amazing web of warring denominations, they did not achieve. The only result of their huge effort was that they founded a new Church. Hence, instead of diminishing the number of denominations, they increased it by one. The same thing must be said of a sect that began about the same time which called itself simply "Christians."

The Universalists and the Unitarians and their sympathizers have, of course, always pointed fingers of scorn at denominationalism. They like to quote the stanza,

So many gods, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind;
When just the art of being kind
Is all this sad world needs!

Indeed, people a number of years ago thought that they were succeeding in teaching this world to be kind. About the beginning of the century, scholars and church leaders at the big schools were eliminating creeds more and more as unnecessary. They were teaching the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. How beautiful it all sounded! It seemed that the millennium was around the corner, when all spears would be made into plowshares and all swords into sickles. And then like a hurricane from some hidden place the First World War fell upon this globe, and all these finespun theories about the art of being kind, of the brotherhood of man, were dissolved in thin air. The world had actually come to the point that it believed it could hoist itself up out of the morass of conflict and social misery by pulling at its own bootstraps. It had to find that this method does not work.

During the last hundred years the slogan often was heard:

“Deeds, not Creeds.” “What is the use of debating about formulations of faith and to be very orthodox? That will not help anybody. What we need is deeds.” So the flag of good works was unfurled. We are, of course, not opposing good works, but the question is whether that slogan which says, “Down with creeds, let us forget about them, and put the emphasis on deeds,” is justified.

We naturally ask here, Does the course of simply rallying round the Bible not work? Is it not the very natural, the Christian way, of getting together with people with whom we wish to unite in a religious fellowship? They all appeal to the Bible if they are Christians. Why not make the Bible the basis? Even if we do not endorse the slogan “Deeds, not Creeds,” would it not be good for us to say, “The Scriptures and not Creeds”? The appeal of Alexander Campbell sounds quite logical and convincing, and it is no wonder that so many people flocked to his standard. But when you look at this matter carefully and soberly, the whole argumentation collapses. No one, as far as I know, has put the subject before the Church more convincingly than Charles Porterfield Krauth in his famous book *The Conservative Reformation*. Let me quote one of the important paragraphs (p. 183 f.):

“But it is sometimes said by very good men, as a summary answer to the whole argument for Confessions of Faith, that the very words of Scripture are a better creed than any we can substitute for them; better, not only, as of course they are, on the supposition that our words are incorrect, but better even if our words are correct; for our best words are man’s words, but its [Scripture’s] words are the words of the Holy Ghost. But this argument, although it looks specious, is sophistical to the core. The very words of Scripture are not simply a *better* rule of faith than any that can be substituted for them, but they are the *absolute* and *only* rule of faith, for which nothing can be substituted. But 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. Hence, the moment I set forth even the very words of the Bible as *my* *creed*, the question is no longer, What does the Holy Ghost mean by those words, but, What do *I* mean by them? You ask a Unitarian, What do you believe about Christ? He replies: ‘I believe that He is the Son of God.’ These are the very words of the Bible; but the point is not at all now, What do they mean in the Bible? but, What do they mean as a Unitarian creed? In the rule of faith they mean that Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity and that our Lord is not a mere man. All heretics, if you probe them with the very words of the Bible, admit that these words are the truth. The Universalists, for example, concede that the ‘wicked go away into everlasting punishment.’ Now, I know that in the Bible, the rule of faith, these words mean a punishment without end, and I know just as well that these identical words as a Universalist creed mean no future punishment at all or one that does end. Yet with the fallacy of which we speak do men evade the argument for a clear, well-defined, and unmistakable creed.”

You see what Dr. Krauth brings out. We need creeds. Before we can unite with somebody in a religious fellowship, we have to know what his attitude is toward the important questions of religion. He will probably say: "I believe the Bible." "That is very good," we reply, "all Christians believe the Bible. But now a number of questions have arisen as to the meaning of the Scriptures, questions of the greatest importance. Let me ask you about a thing or two. Do you believe in infant Baptism?" "No, I do not," he will probably reply. "I do," is my rejoinder. "You see, we are not agreed. How can we form a religious fellowship uniting us in joint work and worship?" Behind the statement "My faith is simply that of the Bible" there may hide a number of serious errors, of deviations from the Scriptures. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, says that it accepts the Bible, but every Protestant who is informed knows that in many details Rome deviates from the Scriptures. Generally speaking, on account of human weakness and the haughty intellect of man which insists on getting its own way, many parts of the Scriptures have been obscured, so that big groups of men, even though they say they adhere to the Scriptures, in reality do not take this course. It is a matter of common experience that even sects with the wildest views profess to place themselves on the Scriptures. Is it strange? You know what Communism behind the Iron Curtain does to subject classes and nations, and all in the name of liberty. Liberty is a sweet word, a term to conjure with, and the Communists have put it on their flag. We bring you liberty, say their leaders. In actuality they bring chains and slavery. Are they dishonest, devils incarnate? I suppose not, at least not in every instance. But they have their philosophy, which has led them into such to us unthinkable views of liberty. We need not be surprised, then, that when people profess to be guided by the Bible, the course that they take is often as far removed from the path of the truth as the assertion would be that Stalin is a dear old Democrat, who believes every word of our Declaration of Independence and of the Constitution of our United States.

Opposition to creeds is not justified. Why do we oppose this attempt to get rid of creeds? One reason is that a church body owes it to the world to state what its religious convictions are which have brought about its organization. When a new body is formed which intends to have a public existence, other people have a right to know what the nature of the new body is. You remember that in the Declaration of Independence, written chiefly by Thomas Jefferson, the statement is made that a decent respect for the opinions of mankind has induced Congress to issue a declaration in which the reasons for the separation from Great Britain are set forth. In the same way an organization which intends to build churches, form congregations, and seek new members must let us know where it stands. Even on the basis of the most ordinary and superficial views of responsibility and morality, the issuing of creeds is indispensable. That we in our Lutheran Church,

in presenting to the world our Confessions, take our stand on far higher ground than just mentioned, that they are to us really what the name says, confessions, instruments in which we set forth our faith in obedience to the word of Jesus "Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father which is in heaven," Matthew 10, is something which I shall dwell on a little more fully later on.

Not "in so far as," but "because." Here I must not omit to say a word on the manner in which we believe the Confessions should be subscribed and accepted. It is enough if I say that I accept the Confessions of the Lutheran Church in so far (*quatenus*) as they contain the teachings of the Scriptures, or must I say that I subscribe to them because (*quia*) their teachings are those of the Word of God? This matter received very earnest and diligent discussion in our Church. The founders of the Missouri Synod very energetically defended the position that if our attitude to the Confessions is to be the right one, 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. How can a congregation know whether the pastor whom it calls is a true Lutheran if he merely says that he accepts the Lutheran Confessions in so far as they set forth the teachings of the Bible. Such a subscription is meaningless. In such a way you can put your signature under the *Koran* of the Mohammedans and the *Talmud* of the Jews or *Science and Health* of Mrs. Eddy. Is there any religious document under which you could not put your name if the subscription may be phrased in this fashion? Therefore if we wish our Church and congregations protected against an invasion of un-Lutheran teachings, we must hold to this "because" (*quia*) subscription and reject the one which is characterized by "in so far." After these remarks, which I hope have prepared our minds a little for the discussions which are to follow, let us view our subject: "The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions."

I. The Pertinency of Our Confessions

The Confessions are the brightest jewel in the crown of the Lutheran Church. In speaking of our Confessions we dwell on facts that should make the heart of every Lutheran swell with joy and thanksgiving. We are looking here on one of the brightest pages of our history as a Church. It is true, I admit, that the laurels of our fathers must not become the soft bed of the children on which they repose in sweet indolence, and it may be that there is somebody who speaks about the achievements of his ancestors to such an extent that he entirely forgets about the plowing, harvesting, and threshing which he himself ought to do. But my plea is that we do not become so occupied with our daily tasks

in the churches that we forget the magnificent treasures which are furnished us in our Confessions. To study them, to read them frequently, to ponder their content, is like traveling in a mountain country where the air is pure, the brooks sparkle, the birds sing their most beautiful songs, and the clatter of the noisy streets cannot disturb and intrude.

The Confessions were pertinent when they were written. How did the Confessions of our Church originate? We shall not now speak of the three ecumenical symbols, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, which at least till comparatively recent times were quite generally accepted by all who call themselves Christians. I shall confine myself to the specifically Lutheran symbols. Let us first think of the Augsburg Confession. The blessed Reformation of the Church had begun in a way which no man had planned or even foreseen. Luther had posted some theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, protesting against certain abuses in the handling of indulgences, and that brought on a fire which constantly grew and spread, rushing from one doctrinal area to the other, till finally all the teachings of the Church had been investigated and the Roman Catholic system had been found in shockingly numerous sections and details to be unscriptural and contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the course of events Luther had been excommunicated by the Pope and placed under the ban of the empire. But the progress of the Reformation had not been stopped, the purification of the Church had proceeded apace. The head of the Holy Roman Empire, Charles V, desired strongly to see the breach in the Church healed and to have the two parties, the adherents of the old papal system and those that had broken away from Rome, make peace. He issued a proclamation to the effect that in the summer of 1530 a diet, or imperial assembly, should be held in Augsburg, Bavaria, at which not only the peril of the Turks, who were knocking at the door of the empire, but likewise the disunion in religious matters should be considered. The Elector of Saxony, in whose territory Wittenberg was located and where Luther did his work, was the chief one of the Lutheran princes. He at once asked the Wittenberg theologians to draw up a statement of doctrine which could be presented to the emperor. This was done. The details of the process, of the negotiations and deliberations, are intensely interesting and are well described in the so-called *Triglott*, the edition of the Confessions issued by Concordia Publishing House in commemoration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, but we have not the time now to occupy ourselves with these matters. It must be sufficient to enumerate the chief facts. Owing to the ban of empire, which was still hanging over him, Luther could not accompany his prince to Augsburg, but went along with him as far as he could without leaving the elector's territory, the Castle of Coburg. While there, he was in constant touch with the elector and his theological advisers, chief of whom

was Melanchthon. The latter drafted the document which was to be presented to the emperor, using materials which had been elaborated chiefly by Luther himself. Thus the Augsburg Confession can truthfully be said to be Luther's work, even though the final touches and much of the phraseology came from Melanchthon.

A red-letter day. It was an important occasion in the history of the Church when the doctrinal statement which we now call the Augsburg Confession was presented to the emperor and the whole diet. The date was Saturday, June 25, and the time three o'clock in the afternoon. It was read in the German language, the time required was two hours. When we think of the courage displayed by the Lutheran representatives, we are amazed. How many signatures does the Augsburg Confession have? There are only nine. What an intrepid little band of confessors! It is true, as we all know, that Melanchthon was seized every now and then by spasms of fear, but through the grace of God they did not floor him. The confessors knew that the Pope and his hierarchy, and the emperor, who was a powerful monarch, in whose dominions, so it was stated, the sun never set, because they were so extensive, were opposed to them as bitter enemies. It is true that the dangers threatening from the Turks had made this monarch somewhat conciliatory, but that his allegiance belonged to the Roman Catholic religion was well known. With the emperor were aligned in their religious sympathies a number of states of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. The empire, it must not be forgotten, was a sort of federation, in which the individual states retained a large measure of independence; and, as just mentioned, a number of these states were violently anti-Reformation and anti-Luther. To rise in opposition to such tremendous forces was not an easy matter. We can understand that Luther rejoiced and stated that the word of the Psalmist had been fulfilled, Ps. 119:46: "I will speak of Thy testimonies also before kings and will not be ashamed."

The nature of the Augsburg Confession. The Confession consists of 28 articles, of which the first 21 are considered the main ones, while the last 7 pertain to abuses in the Church that the Lutherans had corrected wherever they could. In the first 21 Articles great doctrines of the Lutheran faith are set forth in a clear, definite, but very objective way, without any rancor or undue polemics. This Confession will always remain a classic in its simple, direct, and yet forceful, virile manner of presenting Christian truth. Other important Confessions that were drafted, like the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, and the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians, were largely modeled after the Confession of Augsburg. On the real doctrinal significance I shall have to say a word by and by. From what has been stated thus far it is clear that this document had to do with the situation that confronted the Church, and hence its contents were truly pertinent when it was written.

A few remarks on the *other Confessions of our Church* will have to be submitted. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession was written to defend the Confession against the attacks of the Roman Confutation. The emperor, after the Confession had been presented, ordered his theologians to draw up a counter-document in which the Lutheran position would be refuted. This they tried to do, and their effort was termed the Confutation. It was read in public, and after the reading the emperor insisted that the Lutherans should accept it. This they had to refuse to do, and Melancthon, on the basis of notes which he and others had made, drew up a defense of the Augsburg Confession against the misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and other errors of the Roman Catholic document. It is a lengthy and extremely scholarly, valuable writing. When it was presented to the emperor, he refused to receive it. Melancthon soon published it and thus made it available to all who are in search of the truth. That it was pertinent in the situation when it was drafted can be seen from these few remarks.

The Smalcald Articles come from 1537. A general church council had been promised. What should be discussed? Luther in his fiery fashion put down the chief matters which would require investigation and deliberation, dwelling with vigor not only on the central teachings of the Christian faith, but on the errors and abuses in the Roman Catholic system of doctrine and church life. The Lutheran princes had formed a league for mutual defense, the Smalcald League, and it was in the city of Smalcald where this Confession was submitted and adopted by the Lutheran theologians. Melancthon drew up a document which has become an appendix to the Smalcald Articles, in which he investigates the claims of the Pope to be the vicegerent of Christ here on earth. It was accepted by the princes and theologians assembled in Smalcald in 1537. Since both Luther's articles and the appendix written by Melancthon deal with matters that had become the subject of deliberations in circles where the general church council that was to be called was discussed, we certainly must say that the documents were pertinent when they were written.

The Large and the Small Catechism of Luther were composed to relieve the serious want that existed in the Church, there being no books which the teachers and the clergy and Christian fathers and mothers could use in instructing the young. Luther in masterly fashion supplied this lack. He published these Catechisms in 1529, one year before the Diet of Augsburg. Certainly these writings, in which the Reformer in simple form sets forth the teachings which he had brought to light from the Scriptures, were pertinent at the time when they were given to the Church.

A word about the Formula of Concord. After 1546, the year in which Luther died, a period of sad disunion, strife, and disension fell on the Lutheran Church. It seemed that owing to bitter controversy all that Luther had achieved would be destroyed.

The Romanists must have exulted when they beheld the Lutheran ranks torn by differences in doctrines and opinions. Several bold men had gone too far in their affirmation of important Scripture truths, while others had not gone far enough. In this time of poignant distress God sent the Church able truth-loving men, who unselfishly worked for the establishment of peace. They drew up a long document, in which the points of controversy are calmly and impartially surveyed, and the right position, the truth, is given expression. It was to be a document of harmony, and so it was called the Formula of Concord, and that is what it proved to be, for when it had been issued, thousands of Lutheran pastors signed it, and the storms that had swept over the Church were terminated. Certainly we are here dealing with a document whose contents were pertinent when they were first set down on paper.

The Confessions were real confessions. My presentation has implied that in the confessional writings of our Church we have not treatises that were written in the quiet of the study for the delectation and mental and spiritual improvement of the learned. They are not erudite essays submitted by scholars for the consideration of their fellow craftsmen. It would be a serious error to regard them in that light. No, they are real confessions, drafted in the midst of the storm and stress of religious controversy, when persecution seemed to be at the door or the existence of the Church was jeopardized. They are documents in which our fathers humbly, yet earnestly confessed their faith. Situations had arisen in which the world and the Church had to be told what it was that actuated the Lutheran people. What were their beliefs? Had they been carried away by wild fancies and vagaries? Were they striking out along new, dangerous, unscriptural paths? It was necessary for them to speak, and they spoke. The Confessions were the answer to those that inquired about their faith. That was true both when the inquiry came from the outside, as in the case of the Augsburg Confession, and when it had to be given to people within the Lutheran Church, as in the case of the Formula of Concord. We have here the endeavor to be obedient to the word of the Apostle Peter, 1 Pet. 3:15, that we should always be ready to give an answer to people who ask for the reason of the hope that is in us.

The chief doctrines of the Scriptures are set forth in the Confessions. It is important that we remember how the Confessions arose to evaluate properly their contents. We must not expect them to be books in which the Christian doctrines are treated systematically and comprehensively, like those big tomes on doctrine which many of our theologians have given to the world. 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 things which were directly subversive of the grand fundamental

truths of the Scriptures, and so the fathers did not content themselves with an enumeration of the errors which they had corrected and the abuses which they had eliminated, but they briefly, and yet very definitely, gave utterance to their beliefs concerning God, Christ, sin, redemption, justification, the Church, the means of grace, etc. Hence, that this was done in the Augsburg Confession was due to the attacks of the enemies, who ascribed the grossest doctrinal perversions to the Lutherans. But in spite of the evident fact that the Confessions arose in response to particular historical occasions, we have to say that all the chief teachings of the Christian faith are found in our confessional writings.

The doctrine of justification by faith is found throughout. How did the Lutheran Church originate? Not through the endeavor of Luther to start a movement whose aim would be the purification of the Church. He was a young professor at Wittenberg, who did not in the least intend to become a great hero that would slay the wolves and lions that were devastating the Church. Like everybody else, he knew that there were abuses and aberrations in outward Christendom, but he was a loyal son of the Church, an ardent adherent of the Pope, and, moreover, a very humble man, who did not dream of undertaking the gigantic task of reforming the Church, a thing which had been attempted by several church councils with rather indifferent success. He desired to do his work faithfully as professor and preacher—that was all. But he was a deeply religious character, earnestly concerned about his own soul's salvation. He was studying the Bible constantly, seeking to understand what it states on the way to obtain God's favor and to travel the road to heaven. He had seen glimpses of God's love in Christ, but what Paul says on justification was still obscure to him. Then one day, as he was sitting in the tower of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, he had a marvelous experience. He was reading the Epistle of Paul to the Romans and was wondering what Paul meant when he repeatedly speaks of the righteousness of God. He had always considered that phrase to mean the righteousness which God possesses as one of His attributes, in virtue of which He is called righteous, just, holy, perfect in every way. But that was not at all a comforting thought. That God is holy, righteous, just—that is something that must strike terror to the heart of a sinner. Luther was not able to understand how Paul could with triumphant joy say that the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God. The Gospel, the good news, seems to be the very opposite of the righteousness of God; these two things were incompatible, as he saw them. Well, that day, as he was pondering the subject, suddenly the thought shot through him that the righteousness of God did not refer to a quality of God, but to something that God presents to us poor sinners, that it is a gift bestowed on us, that it is the forgiveness of sins, which God in great love has prepared through Jesus Christ. That was a momentous thought! Could it be true? He

quickly ran through the Bible, comparing all the statements that speak of the righteousness of God—and Luther, we must remember, knew his Bible as few people have ever known it—and he found his thought confirmed. It was then, so he himself says, that scales, as it were, fell from his eyes; the Bible became to him an open book, intelligible, consistent, full of sweet comfort; and he felt as if he had been transported from earth to heaven. A person may well say that it was on that occasion that the Reformation was born. Then and there Luther found the key to the Scriptures. Now his teaching and preaching could take on an altogether different complexion. We must not think that now he looked for a broom to start cleaning up the Church. He quietly continued his labors, sharing his newly found treasure with his students and parishioners. According to Luther's own statement in his preface to a collection of his Latin works issued in 1545, it was in 1518 that this understanding was granted him. That he nailed the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg was not intended at all as a revolutionary step. It was merely a protest, as I said before, against the flagrant way in which indulgences were offered for sale. But when he was attacked, then the cardinal question, How is a poor sinner justified in God's sight? soon became the center of the discussion, and Luther came forward with the insight which he had obtained from the writings of Paul and other sections of the Scriptures. It was the teaching of this doctrine of justification by faith that really brought on the Reformation. And this consoling teaching is the most prominent feature of our confessional writings. Wherever you turn, whatever the subject may be, before long you will find this teaching reiterated and other teachings brought into relation with it. It is the golden thread, as it were, that runs through the symbolical books from beginning to end. That is one of the reasons, and probably 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 faith.

The redemption of Christ. Another subject prominent in the Confessions, one which is closely allied to the one just dwelt on, is that of the work of Christ. In fact, it is the foundation on which the teaching of justification rests. What was the work that Christ performed? The Confessions again and again call Him the Savior and speak of His sacrifice. They bring out that He died on the Cross as our Substitute. Cf. Art. III and IV of the Augsburg Confession. The teaching was abroad in the Roman Catholic Church that Christ had indeed died for our sins, but that He had atoned fully only for original sin, and that the actual sins which we commit we have to atone for in part ourselves in works of penance, and since this cannot be accomplished here on earth except in a few cases, it will have to be done after this life, in

purgatory. How utterly this teaching destroys the assurance of our having God's favor and of being heirs of heaven, everybody can see. The Confessions combat it vigorously. One thought, for instance, occurs again and again in the Symbolical Books: If good works can save us, then Jesus died in vain. Why was His sacrifice necessary if we can through our performances satisfy divine justice? So our Confessions are a forceful declaration of the all-sufficient character of Christ's work, performed in our stead. Christ died for us, is the constant refrain in the Confessions.

The means of grace, the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Very important is the teaching pertaining to the means by which God confers on us the treasures which Christ has earned for the world. Shortly after the Reformation had begun, a strange phenomenon appeared on the religious scene. Misguided enthusiasts came, people who had heard a little of Luther's work and had been impressed with the liberty which through his efforts had been achieved—the liberty for the Christian to follow his conscience instead of blindly obeying the hierarchy. They said they were intending to be guided by the Spirit, and this Spirit, so they maintained, spoke directly to them, no special means was needed to bring Him, the divine Counselor, into their hearts, no Word, no Baptism, no Lord's Supper. In other words, they proclaimed the teaching one can well do without the means of grace; the Holy Spirit does not need a wagon or chariot to come to us. Many of these people formed the groups called Anabaptists, because they said that people who had been baptized in infancy would have to be baptized again; a person, they maintained, should be baptized only after he has arrived at the age of responsibility and discretion, so that the Sacrament is performed on him through his own choice and decision. Since under the old regime practically everybody had been baptized in infancy, their position meant that, generally speaking, their hearers had to be baptized anew. They taught that first a person must be instructed and be made a believer before he is entitled to receive Baptism. We see, they rejected infant Baptism. Beside them there were other false teachers who rejected the Lutheran doctrine of the means of grace.

To Luther this doctrine was both Scriptural and highly comforting. Whenever he heard the Gospel or when he saw an infant baptized or when he participated in a Lord's Supper service, he saw there evidence that God is gracious to us and forgives our sins for the sake of Christ. When the Anabaptists made derogatory remarks on the Baptism of infants, he rose in defense of the practice of infant Baptism, pointing out that while the ceremony might be very humble and apparently insignificant, it is in keeping with God's methods in dealing with us. When God revealed Himself in His Son, He did not let Him come as a mighty prince arrayed in costly armor and with a golden crown on the head, but as a little Babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a

manger. And when the world was to be rescued, this great deed was not accomplished by a host of angels, but by the Son of Man dying in deepest humiliation, pain, and sorrow on the accursed tree. The means of grace, likewise, appear humble and insignificant, but in them the Holy Spirit comes to us. So Luther defended eloquently, movingly, the precious significance of the means of grace. This teaching was put into our Lutheran Confessions; the position of the Enthusiasts, the Anabaptists, and other superwise people was condemned, the high meaning of the means of grace was definitely professed. Cf., for instance, Article V of the Augsburg Confession.

Sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura. The Lutheran Church in its Confessions gives expression to the three important "solas" taught in the Scriptures, by grace alone, by faith alone, in the Scriptures alone. How is our salvation caused? Does any credit for it come to us? Do we deserve it in any way? By grace alone, is the answer. We are *freely* justified for Christ's sake, says Article IV of the Augsburg Confession. In other passages this is asserted likewise of election and conversion. Innumerable times the same thought is repeated throughout the Symbolical Books.

The by-faith-alone teaching likewise runs through all the Confessions. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession may here be quoted in full: "Also they (that is, the Lutheran churches) teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who by His death has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight, Romans 3 and 4." We see there could be no clearer avowal of adherence to this teaching than is found in this brief article.

And, finally, the Scripture-alone doctrine is a definite teaching of the Confessions. It has often been remarked that our symbolical writings have no special paragraph on the Scriptures and on the inspiration of our sacred writings. Why is it? We reply, It was not necessary at the time that this matter be specially discussed, because there was nobody who called himself a Christian that doubted the inspiration and the divine character of the Scriptures; hence the subject is not given prominence through treatment in a special article. But it is no exaggeration to say that it 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, according to the Confessions, is the Bible. In the Preface to the Augsburg Confession the Lutheran fathers said: "In obedience to your imperial Majesty's wishes we offer in this matter of religion the Confession of our preachers and of ourselves, showing what manner of doctrine from the Holy Scriptures and the pure Word of God has been up to this time set forth in our lands, dukedoms, dominions, and cities, and taught in our churches."

The fathers, furthermore, insist, in Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession, after they have submitted the chief doctrines of the Christian faith, that in their teachings "there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures." Let me furthermore draw attention to the opening statement of the Formula of Concord. The heading of the respective chapter is: "Of the Summary, Content, Rule, and Standard according to which All Dogmas should be judged, and the erroneous teachings that have occurred should be decided and explained in a Christian way." What do the fathers say? Here are their words: "We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Psalm 119:105: 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path,' and St. Paul: 'Though an angel from heaven preach any other Gospel unto you, let him be accursed,' Gal. 1:8. Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses which are to show in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved." Could there be a more definite declaration to the effect that the Lutheran Church stands for the principle given in the slogan: "The Scripture alone"? No other authority is recognized in the Lutheran Church than God speaking to us in the Holy Scriptures. We see that thereby all other authorities that people have raised up, like tradition, the Church, the Pope, human reason, our feelings, are repudiated as guides whom the Church would have to follow.

The Confessions successfully passed the Scriptural test. All religious documents must be examined as to their agreement with the Bible, because it is the infallible Word of God. This is a position in which all conservative Christians are agreed. Our Confessions too had to submit to such a scrutiny. What happened? As we read history, we find that while the opponents most carefully examined our Confessions on the score of doctrine and while they often launched bitter attacks on our venerable symbolical books, they were not able to convict them of any error in their teachings. The Lutheran Confessions came off victorious in all debates carried on on the basis of the Scriptures. It could well be shown, by going into an examination of specific doctrines, how the Confessions in controversies took the path sketched in Scriptures, avoiding the pitfalls on the right and on the left. Think, for instance, of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The superstitious, extravagant dogma of transubstantiation of the Roman Catholic Church is rejected, which holds that bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, but likewise is the rationalistic Reformed error opposed, which finds in the Sacrament nothing but

bread and wine, and no eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood except that which is performed by faith in a spiritual way. Thus both errors, the one that claims too much and the one that claims too little, are rejected, and the truth which lies between them is upheld.

The pertinency of the Confessions today. The Confessions, we are convinced, were pertinent in their day—they were written for a certain purpose, and that purpose was achieved. But how about today? The Augsburg Confession was presented to the emperor and the Diet 419 years ago. Can that fact be overlooked? We are living in a different, a new age. What a cleavage between our world and that of only one hundred years ago, not to mention four hundred! Things are different: We plow our land with tractors, we go to church in self-propelled cars, we make our journeys transported in coaches at breakneck speed or flying far above the ground like birds, we destroy the enemy by means of the atom bomb, the criminals we largely execute in the electric chair or in the lethal chamber, we cook our meals with gas or electricity, we print our newspapers on gigantic presses that produce a thousand copies a minute, we cross the ocean in swimming palaces, we speak to our friends living hundreds of miles away without leaving our desk, we get the latest news from a little box on the table or in the corner, which speaks to us as long as we desire. Every one of you can add to this list. In the field of knowledge tremendous strides forward have been made: our explorers have been at the North Pole and the South Pole, with their telescopes our astronomers peer into recesses of the universe which nobody ever dreamed of before, our chemists almost daily discover new, startling combinations in their laboratories, our archaeologists have come upon new evidences of ancient civilizations in Babylonia, South America, and elsewhere. Where shall we stop? The old books and methods have been outmoded. Who thinks of teaching reading, arithmetic, and geography as these subjects were taught four hundred years ago? The manuals of that age are, of course, practically useless. Who would wish to go to a doctor who practices medicine after the manner of the court physicians of Charles V? Can we afford to ignore this progress when we think of the standards which we are to adopt for our religious life? As we view the tremendous distance mankind has traveled since the sixteenth century, can we say that our Confessions are still pertinent? Let us see clearly what this means. To be pertinent they have to answer the religious questions we ask today, they must deal with the problems that agitate our heart and mind in the twentieth century and set forth a message that our people need.

Man has intrinsically remained the same and does not know much more about himself than before. While there has been astounding progress in the fields of science, a candid observer has to say that man intrinsically has remained the same. Has he become better? That cannot truthfully be asserted. Four hundred years

ago you find proportionately as many, if not more, instances of devotion, love, honorable conduct, fairmindedness, obedience of children toward their parents, law-abiding attitudes, humility, unselfishness, as today. Nor can we say that man knows himself better now than he did at any time which lies in the past by four centuries. Man has explored the universe, but about himself, except in the area of physiology, he knows not much more than the fathers of the Reformation did. Do we possess more information about the soul, the spirit, the mystery of our life, the nature of death, about intelligence, reason, conscience, moral impulses, than the ancients did? The answer must be, No. It may be that here and there our terminology has become more precise and that certain insights have been achieved by us, especially in the field of psychology, but, generally speaking, we have not advanced in the understanding of the mysteries pertaining to our mental and spiritual life. Man is still an enigma to himself. Bowman (*The Sacramental Universe*, p.1) says quite correctly, after he has dwelt on the progress of man in science: "Man remains a mystery to himself. There is no consensus of opinion as to what he is, or how he came to be, or what is ultimately in store for him; and it is significant of the obscurity in which the problem is involved that if we were to ask how to designate the principle of being that gives us our identity as conscious subjects, we should be unable to agree upon its name. We speak of mind, of soul, of personality, of spirit; but there is about each of these terms a vagueness which, as often as we have recourse to any one of them, lays us open to the change of obscurantism." Strange words indeed, coming from a modern scientific philosopher! But how true they are! Speculations about man we have aplenty, whole libraries full of them, but actual knowledge accepted by all thinkers is lacking.

The problems of man remain the same. If what we have said is true, if man actually, in spite of the coming and going of centuries, has remained the same, then his problems have remained the same too. The fundamental questions of our existence, we have to confess, have not altered. There is still a deep anxiety to be satisfied, it is the same old longing that comes knocking at the door of our heart. We see this so well illustrated in the world of poetry. This genre of literature concerns itself with what is high, noble, beautiful, with man's desires and aspirations, with his joys and sorrows. Is the poetry of the present day superior to that of 400 years ago or 2,400 years ago? We have to answer negatively. Our own age seems to be remarkably poor in this field, but where it does strike responsive chords, they are the very ones that the poets of long ago touched.

The old doctrines are still pertinent. Finally we arrive at the confessional writings. If man has not changed and if his spiritual needs are still the same, then, at least so it would seem, the confessional writings are still pertinent. Remember, we are not here looking at the question whether the Confessions teach Scripture

doctrine. That such is the case we have seen before. We here ask ourselves whether the Confessions really are relevant. A few remarks will have to unfold what is here implied. The great problem of man is sin. There has been no change here during the ages: Man is as sinful now as he was when the first parents had become disobedient. Here speculation will not avail, we are dealing with an absolute, unyielding, most distressing fact. Here lies the tragedy of every one of us, that we are not the way God has a right to demand that we should be. The Scriptures say so, our conscience says so. The Lutheran Confessions speak about man's sinfulness in very definite, searching, and prostrating terms, pointing both to inherited and to actual sin. Listen to Article II of the Augsburg Confession, "Also they, that is, our churches, teach that since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost." And in the Large Catechism Luther says (*Triglot*, p. 683): "Therefore this article ought to humble and terrify us all if we believe it. For we sin daily with eyes, ears, hands, body and soul, money and possessions, and with everything we have, especially those who even fight against the Word of God." Is there anything that can be said against this article of universal sinfulness? Is it true today? Is it true of us? Is it the article that speaks of our chief need? We have to say that the article stands, that it applies, that it is as timely now as when it was first uttered by the Wittenberg Reformer.

It is true that, in many quarters of our world, people, even people who bear the name Christian, do not like to talk about sin. They will especially not accept the article of original, or inherited, sin and maintain that it is too crude, too insulting to our common human nature. It was especially in the first years of the century, in the days of optimism, before the First World War, that this teaching was deliberately put on the shelf by many people, never to be touched again. But when the war came, the vain notions about the perfectibility of the human race and about the Golden Age that was approaching had to vanish, and people again began to see how truly the Bible speaks of our being conceived and born in sin, of moral evil as being deeply ingrained in us and bursting forth whenever an opportunity presents itself.

In the light of everything that has been said, can anybody deny that this teaching of our Confessions concerning sin is pertinent today? It is often asserted that this doctrine is too old-fashioned. We tell the critics who come with that charge that we cannot help presenting this doctrine, that if people ceased being sinners, we should gladly forbear talking about this subject; but that as long as they continue in the paths of unrighteousness, we have to hold to the old position and make a declaration before the world about it.

The Redeemer. The Confessions speak in sweet, comforting tones of Jesus as our Redeemer and Helper, the Sin-bearer. Do we need Him? It is conceivable that somebody will rise with the claim that the human race has advanced to such a high degree of efficiency and wisdom that no divine Helper is required. Why, so we may hear him say, why ignore the exhilarating story of human progress, the forward march of the vast army of thinkers, philosophers, educators, scientists, and believe that we are still on the level of St. Paul and Martin Luther, who lived in comparatively primitive, unenlightened ages. This, of course, is the voice of the Modernist. He desires to distinguish sharply between the past and the present, the era of superstition and that of light and clarity, the old fear-complexes and the exuberance of cheering self-confidence and optimism. Is there any one of us who says that the Modernist is right? Everything protests against his position—in addition to the clear Scripture teaching that we are all by nature the children of wrath, there is the political outlook, which shows that the world is far from progressing to a condition of greater amity, peace, and understanding between nations; the suffering of the last decades of many millions of people, which hardly had a parallel in the darkest periods of the world's history; the social conditions involving moral decay in many a direction; and finally the voice of our conscience, telling us that we personally are sinful, condemned in the court of God, unable to make amends, and that we need a Savior both to atone for our wrongdoing and to overcome the power of evil in our own inward being. The Confessions reiterate to us on the basis of the Scriptures the sweetest story ever told, the story of Jesus and His love, of the Redeemer, who frees us from the guilt, the punishment, and the power of sin. Can we dispense with it? A thousand times no. 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.

Justification. What shall we say of the need for our age of the doctrine of justification by faith? Here, too, we hear men who are wise in their own conceits and who would like to be considered prophets of a new age proclaim that this teaching should be put on the shelf in museums like antiques that one inspects with curiosity, but would never think of using. They call this teaching wooden, outworn, unpsychological, and apply to it several other labels that by no means bespeak admiration. Shall we yield? Shall we say, Christ was wrong, Paul was wrong, Luther was wrong, it is not by faith that we obtain justification, but through works, or probably through works and faith? A person who does not know the power and weight of sin and who has a rather high opinion of his own abilities and righteousness may say so, but not the man who realizes how infinitely far he is away from that condition of purity and perfection which the Law

of God demands and who in deep contrition and repentance calls out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Here is the watershed, the great continental divide; on the one side you have self-righteousness, a state of satisfaction with one's self, confidence that one can make amends, and a somewhat low view of God's justice; and on the other you have the Biblical conception of God's perfection and justice watching over His commandments and a profound sense of our sinfulness and impotence in meeting God's demands, and hence a joyful appropriation through faith of the forgiveness which God freely offers for Christ's sake. In 1949 we need forgiveness as much as Paul needed it in A. D. 32, when he was converted, and we can obtain it only by placing ourselves in humble, grateful confidence into the wounds of Christ.

Means of grace. Can we in this enlightened age do without the means of grace, whose use the Confessions urge on us, the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper? Many people think so. The large cities and the hinterland are full of persons who will not go to church or read the Scriptures at home, who will have neither themselves nor their children baptized, and who look upon the Lord's Supper as an empty ceremony. We say on the basis of the Scriptures that the Holy Spirit approaches us in these means and operates through them. How do these anti-Church and anti-Bible people expect to receive the Spirit of God? Most of them, I am afraid, have no clearly defined idea on that subject at all and would absolutely be without understanding of what you mean if you spoke to them of God's Holy Spirit. A few might say that if God wishes to convert them, He knows their address. Among those people who do attend churches one finds shockingly derogatory estimates of the means of grace. But we have to state that God has not in the twentieth century given us any other means for receiving His gracious Spirit than in the first or the sixteenth century. Do you wish the hand of God to touch you, to make your heart a believing one, to lead you forward on the path of righteousness, then you have to employ these means. The modern inventions, like the airplane or the refrigerator in the homes, will not do it. Science has not discovered a new twentieth-century method of becoming regenerated. Penicillin is a marvel, but it cannot bring about the new birth. What the Confessions say on this topic is right, pertinent, indispensable.

The three "solas." We spoke before of "by grace alone, by faith alone, the Scriptures alone." Are those three Reformation pillars, standing strong and solid in our Confessions, the pride of the theology of our fathers, so to speak, still needed? Can we, and must we, cling to them?

Sola gratia — by grace alone — a word about that. Must we not all in deep humility say that since we are all sinners and transgressors of God's Law, it is only by God's grace toward us unworthy people that we have been born again and that our sins have been forgiven? Let the modern theologian exalt the dignity

of man, if he thinks he must do so; *we* exalt the love of God which bent down to us, as we were lying in abject misery and helplessness, in enmity against the Creator, the love which put us into the happy status of children of the heavenly Father. Arminianism, synergism, Pelagianism—to use the learned terms for once—all of them describing positions holding that man can do something more or less extensive to bring about his own salvation, have certainly been proved false by the stern, distressing events of the last decades.

Sola fide—not by works but through faith alone we become possessors of God's forgiveness, is the significance of the expression. What has our twentieth century to say about it? Has it proved that the fathers were wrong in their insistence on these words? Is it evident now that it is through efforts of our own, probably special works of penance, that we obtain God's pardon? We all know that such is not the case, that the words of St. Paul, Rom. 3: 28, still stand: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law," that all the inventiveness of man in the amazing decades which lie behind us has not availed to bring to light anything that could take the place of faith, faith in Christ. Why do people apparently lie awake at night trying to prove this teaching false? Not only is it anchored firmly in the Scriptures, but what is more consoling for a poor sinner than the message that God offers His pardon free of charge and that we simply have to take it in order to enjoy it?

And what shall we say about *sola Scriptura*, Scriptures alone? Is there any evidence, any fact, any development, that would show that now in the twentieth century this slogan has to be abandoned? It is probably here where the hottest contest is fought. The so-called new orthodoxy represented by Barth, Brunner, and Niebuhr is willing to see the grace of God exalted and faith assigned an important role, but that the Scriptures alone are to be our authority in religion, and that they are inerrant, absolutely reliable—that is something that these modern theologians balk at. Barth recently (in the *Christian Century*) published an article in which he takes Anglo-Saxon theology to task for not placing itself on the Scriptures. The charge is truly justified. But does he do it himself? Alas! He too makes subtractions and will not let the Bible alone decide all religious questions for him. According to his view it is a fallible book. So these people put human reason and culture into the judgment seat with the Scriptures, big books are written by them, not setting forth simply what the Scriptures say on our problems and questions, but what the Bible plus human reason and other factors, like history, teach. Why? Why is the Bible no longer regarded as the sole authority? People say it is fallible, it contains errors. Can they prove it? Not at all. What they present as evidence has throughout the centuries been examined and found wanting. We have not the time to pursue this topic more thoroughly. Let me merely say that 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.

Much more could be said to show that the confessional writings are still pertinent. We could with profit examine all the Articles of the Augsburg Confession and it would become clear that every one of them has a message for us in this year of grace 1949. Take the one dealing with the ministry, the teaching office in the Church; look at it calmly. Are we born into this world with a deep knowledge of the truth of God's Word so that we do not require any preachers or teachers? Or think of the one dealing with the government, superscribed "Of Civil Affairs." Do not the events before us every day in this twentieth century fairly shriek that we need instruction on this subject? The same thing can be said of all the other Articles of the Augsburg Confession and our other Symbolical Books.

II. The Adequacy of Our Confessions

Now let us ask the second question before us, Are our Confessions adequate today? Everything in them might be pertinent and necessary, but it would not follow that they contained everything that is required for our day and generation and that they are suitable for our circumstances. The Apostles' Creed, to use an example, is certainly pertinent; still it was not considered adequate for the needs of the Church, and additional Confessions had to be adopted. We see, then, I trust, what is involved when we make inquiry as to the adequacy of our Confessions. You accept the invitation of a friend to be his guest at dinner. The food is put on the table, and all of it is excellent; but, alas, there is not enough of it for you, being a man of goodly proportions and endowed with a healthy, aggressive appetite. The little homely illustration brings out that there is a difference between pertinent and adequate.

The Confessions are often considered inadequate from the point of view of style. We are told that the Confessions use long sentences and a clumsy, intricate style, and archaic words and phrases which are not at all in keeping with the modes of speech of the man who drives a 1949 Ford and who has his letters written by his wife or secretary on an electric typewriter. That may be true. But does that circumstance make the Confessions unusable and inadequate, works that cannot be read and understood by our church members? I think we should not rashly say yes. Everybody in the schools of the country is urged to read Shakespeare because of his eminence as a poet, and still his language is altogether different from the idiom of today, it is often difficult, and many of the words used are unintelligible to the average reader and require the use of a dictionary. If the Confessions are masterpieces, as

we think they are, we should be slow to discard them on account of their style. It may be that in our *translations* we have not been as successful as is desirable. There we are dealing with a condition which can and should be remedied.

The Confessions often are considered inadequate on account of antiquated views pertaining to matters of science and historical criticism. It is true, the Confessions were written in the sixteenth century, and words like sparkplug, tractor, automatic pistol, electric sweeper, and spectral analysis do not occur in them. Science was in its infancy in those days, and at least one strange view pertaining to the field of natural science found its way into the presentation of the unsophisticated fathers. In the Formula of Concord, when the authors in the First Article speak of original sin, they use an illustration from the science of their day to describe the teaching of certain errorists. They say that these false teachers held that original sin is only an external impediment, as when a magnet is smeared with garlic juice, "whereby its natural power is not removed, but only hindered." Such a statement makes us smile a little, but we had better be careful, for some views which many of our enlightened scientists held only a few decades ago, for instance, that a ship like the *Titanic* was unsinkable, have been proved false.

Let us remember, too, that our views concerning the structure of the universe and the properties of matter are constantly changing. Newton's theories, long considered as representing actual facts, have yielded to Einstein's, the views on the nature of light are being modified, what you read thirty years ago on the atom is thoroughly antiquated. Let us be humble.

With respect to historical criticism, too, it must be admitted that the Confessions are not faultless. Dr. Walther in his famous essay on the question whether the Symbolical Books are to be subscribed to not merely in so far as (*qua*), but because (*quia*) they contain the truth, draws attention to several erroneous assertions in the Augsburg Confession, to wit, one in Article VI, where St. Ambrose is named as the author of a statement of which actually he was not the author, another in Article XX, where the same church father is credited with having written the work with the title *The Calling of the Gentiles*, which work he in reality did not write, and another one in Article XVII, in which the authorship of a work called *Hypognosticon* is wrongly ascribed to St. Augustine. Is that something to worry about? Not at all. Historical science likewise in the sixteenth century was merely beginning to stand on its feet, it was still toddling, the art of printing had been invented only some eighty years before, and it would be unreasonable to expect the authors of our Confessions to possess the critical lore which later ages have laboriously amassed. These little historical inaccuracies do not render the Confessions inadequate. When we subscribe to them, we do not say that every statement in them is correct; our subscription merely says that

we believe that all the doctrines set forth in them are Scriptural, divine truth.

The Confessions might be thought inadequate because of cases of faulty interpretation of Scripture passages which one meets here and there. It must be admitted that not in every instance when the Confessions interpret Scripture passages the results arrived at will be endorsed by us. Luther, Melancthon, and the other men who composed the Symbolical Books were not infallible; now and then they missed the mark when they adduced Scripture proof. The sainted Dr. A. L. Graebner wrote an article in the *Theological Quarterly* which has the title "Variant Interpretations" (Vol. VI, No. 2). There he points out that there are several Scripture passages which in the Confessions are now interpreted this way and now in a different way. When there are several conflicting interpretations, only one can be right. Hence we cannot always follow the Confessions in their exposition of Scripture passages. Is this not a serious matter? Not at all, as long as the doctrine that is taught on the basis of these passages is not in conflict with other clear statements of Holy Scriptures. Probably an instance should be submitted so that we may clearly see what is involved. The Confessions at various times quote the well-known words of Paul, Rom. 14:23: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin," and they do it to prove that an unbeliever cannot do good works. Now, that is not the meaning of the passage. Paul in that connection is not speaking of unbelievers, but of believers, children of God, and he urges them to make sure that whenever they strike out on a certain course, they have the assurance that that course is the right one; they should not go against their convictions with reference to right and wrong. If you violate what your conscience tells you, you are sinning. That is the meaning of the words of Paul. But the *doctrine* which the pious fathers taught on the basis of that text is absolutely right and clearly taught in other passages of Holy Scriptures; for instance, in the words of Jesus, John 15:9, "Without Me ye can do nothing." Hence when we say that the Confessions are not infallible in their presentation of Scripture proof, we do not destroy their adequacy as a doctrinal standard. As Graebner in the article cited states, Melancthon at one time in a letter discussed a divergence between him and Luther as to the interpretation of Gal. 3:19. Agricola made much to-do about it, berated this disagreement between the two leaders, placed himself on the side of Luther, and endeavored to have Melancthon tried for holding a wrong view. Melancthon says: "I have in my exposition followed that opinion which I find the ancients too have embraced and which has nothing wrong about it. In the doctrine itself I agree with Luther, and there is no reason why I should be looked upon as dissenting from him even though I interpret some passage somewhat differently. For who is there that does not do this?" That is a sane view, preserving both the majesty of the Scriptures and our Christian liberty, the right

of private judgment. We have to repeat it again and again that when we subscribe to the Confessional Writings, we do not thereby endorse every argument that is presented and every exposition which is submitted there.

Live issues or not? The Confessions are often considered inadequate because, so it is charged, they do not deal with the issues of our times. Here, it seems, we face a grave, important difficulty. I myself in the course of my remarks have admitted a number of times that the Symbolical Books were written four centuries ago, and this implies, of course, that conditions were far different then from what they are now. They come from the Old World, and we have our home in the New; they were written by men living in a monarchy, we live in a democracy; how, then, can they be adequate for our era? This sounds pretty formidable, I admit. Every age, we know, has its own peculiarities and problems, its special controversies and afflictions; it would seem then to be unreasonable to hold that documents written centuries ago can satisfy the requirements of our era.

This consideration, I am happy to say, is not urged much, if at all, in the Lutheran Church itself. Lutherans quite generally are willing to let the old Confessions suffice them, if I am at all conversant with conditions. The reason is, to come to the point quickly, that in the Confessions doctrines and principles have been laid down which fairly well cover the whole field of doctrine and life, which, hence, will answer the questions that every generation must ask. I do not wish to be understood as holding that every detailed question of a religious and doctrinal nature that one may place before us has been dealt with in the Confessions, but my contention is that the doctrines and principles which are basic are contained in our Symbolical Books and that, standing on them, we can without difficulty arrive at the solution of the problems that confront us.

Take the lodge problem. The Confessions do not mention lodges. How could they? These organizations did not arise till the eighteenth century. But the doctrines that come into consideration, the doctrine of the Triune God and the teaching of salvation through the blood of Christ and justification by faith, are bountifully spread before us, and we merely have to apply them to see where we ought to stand in the lodge issue. A burning question today is that of the relation between capital and labor. The Confessions do not speak of labor unions, of the right or lack of right to strike, of lockouts, the closed and open shop, etc. Nor, let me add at once, does the Bible mention these matters. But in the Bible and in the Confessions the fundamental principles are laid down that have to guide a Christian employer and employee in the modern world, the chief one of which is that of brotherly love. This principle is quoted by Luther in the Small Catechism from Romans 13: "And if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." See the Table of Duties.

The Confessions do not deal with specific problems of the day—I admit it. Neither, in a certain sense, did they deal with the problems of their own day. They did not discuss the vexing questions pertaining to taxation that troubled the people of the sixteenth century just as much as they bother us in the twentieth. Grave political questions that refer to the structure of the empire confronted the statesmen of the era. In the Confessions you will hardly find a hint of such things. The conditions of the peasants, if we may believe well-informed historians, in some sections of Germany were still incredibly wretched; you have no paragraphs treating that subject from the sociological point of view and making recommendations as to the introduction of improvements. The Confessions are satisfied to set forth the eternal truths of God's Word—that is their goal. And that is their glory, I add. That is an aspect which makes them timeless, adequate for all generations, treatises that can serve the Church a hundred years from now as well as today, if the globe should continue to exist for another century.

The Lutheran Church has often been accused of quietism, that is, not taking an active part in the economic, social, and political discussions of the time, of merely preaching the Gospel and not endeavoring to answer the questions of the day. I admit that it is possible for a church body to withdraw to such an extent from the currents of thought and life which rush upon it that it will not instruct its members sufficiently on the way in which they should acquit themselves as citizens of God's kingdom and citizens of their own country, so that they can avoid the errors and evils that tempt them and contribute to the development of a healthy civic life. But the danger is just as great that a church body, through its pastors and through spokesmen, will spend so much time on the discussion of the passing phenomena of our daily existence that the churches will be turned into political or social clubs, that debates on taxes and civic improvements will resound in their auditoriums, that you will hear much about public highways and little about the narrow way leading to life; and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the only Help for poor sinners, will eventually be put under a bushel. Let our pastors, teachers, and our congregations be thoroughly alive to the reality of sin and to the comforting fact of the redemption by the God-Man; then the general principles of Christian life and conduct contained in the Scriptures and the Confessions will not be overlooked; they will be gladly studied, and the course to be pursued under given circumstances will be found.

The latest theological developments are not treated. Those of us who read the theological magazines and the latest books know that the so-called dialectical theology, whose chief representatives are the Swiss theologians Barth and Brunner, is talked about a great deal these days. Of course, the Lutheran Confessions do not mention the names of these men. But if anybody should

think that there are no criteria in the Confessions by means of which the theology of these men could be judged, he would be altogether in error. The dialectical theologians are chiefly Reformed in their theology, and the Reformed errors are referred to in our Confessions and rejected. Hence in this respect too our Confessions can be said to be up to date in the highest sense of the word.

More faithful study of the Confessions is needed. It is to be feared that all along the line our Confessions are not read as assiduously as should be the case. Our present generation is beset by so many distractions that the things that should be cultivated often are woefully neglected. But can it be denied that constant occupation with the Confessions, in which the heartbeat of our pious, courageous, deeply spiritual fathers is felt, would have a grand effect on all of us, that it would be stimulating in the very best sense of the word, that it would counteract the tendency to give way to apathy and indifference, that it would help us to remain close to the very center of the Christian faith, the doctrines of justification and of Christ, the divine Sin-Bearer? There are many *pia desideria*, pious wishes, that one would like to utter as one thinks of the present scene in our Church, and high among them must stand that of more ardent study of our Confessional Writings both by pastors and parishioners.

Conclusion. Thus we have once more endeavored to evaluate our Confessions and to visualize what should be our attitude to them in this modern age. Have we given them too high a status? If we have placed them on a level with Holy Scriptures, we have made an idol of them and committed the sin of symbololatry. Wherever such an attitude is adopted, the very opposite is done of what the fathers who gave us the Confessions desired; their principle was: Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve. But if we have looked upon them as witnesses in which the teachings are set forth which the Lutheran Church has held these four hundred years, witnesses by means of which inquirers can inform themselves as to the position of our Church on the various questions of faith and Christian conduct, and as witnesses, moreover, which according to our conviction correctly state what the Scriptures teach on the subjects discussed, then our course has been proper and in keeping with the views and practices of our pious fathers. May God grant that as the world hastens to the final consummation—the time is becoming short and the midnight hour apparently not far away—we may adhere to the precious Confessions of our Church and prayerfully, earnestly, zealously, make their content known to our fellow men both here and abroad. May we do it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

