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Theological Observer

A Shot in the Arm for Confessional Studies

LCMS seminary students receive a thorough study in the Lutheran Confessions. However in light of their later pastoral responsibilities, the Confessions may later prove not to be all that helpful. Apart from use of Luther's *Small Catechism* and groups of pastors who have devoted themselves to studying the confessions, most copies of the Book of Concord remain untouched on study shelves. Perhaps the prime reason for this inattention to the Lutheran Confessions is that they are presented in isolation from the situations in which they arose. Some time ago one instructor was known to have cut up the Lutheran Confessions into separate passages that were rearranged into dogmatical categories, a still popular way of studying the Bible. Such an ahistorical approach brings out their doctrinal content, but makes it difficult to understand why they wrote what they did. Historical criticism in the study of church documents is not without merit. Lutheran pastors are bound to preach and teach according to the Book of Concord, but this commitment would be enhanced if we knew more about the world in which they were written.

An answer to confessional doldrums has been provided in the recent publication of *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2001). Editors Robert Kolb of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, and James A. Nestingen of Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, have provided an invaluable service in assembling some documents that were later incorporated into the Lutheran Confessions and other documents that were written in refuting them. Fourteen documents have been translated from either Latin or German and assembled in *Sources and Contexts*. Our Augsburg Confession was not spun out of thin air at the Imperial Diet in June 1530, but was largely a reconstruction of the Schwabach, Marburg, and Torgau articles. Unless a student owned a copy of *Bekennnisschriften* (now about \$100), was familiar with arrangement of the footnotes, and could read the German and Latin, he had no access to these documents. These Reformation-era documents are now placed at our finger tips in a very readable form. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession was a response to the Confutation of the Augsburg Confession and really cannot be understood without it. Now we have the Confutation in English translation. For years, students have been taught that the Leipzig and Augsburg Interims forced unacceptable practices upon Lutherans, but now we can see for ourselves what these documents required.

Certain portions do not seem all that burdensome, but for our forefathers it was a matter of being forced to do what now others once did and can still do out of Christian freedom. Among the other collected documents are John Eck's 404 Articles presented at the Augsburg Confession, the Catalog of Testimonies, and Luther's Torgau Sermon, in which he describes Christ's descent into hell. Just out of curiosity, I found myself reading through the volume. Confirmed was the stereotype of Reformation figures like Eck, but now, at least, the stereotype could be reclassified as informed opinion and not sectarian bias. Along with the new translation of the Book of Concord (Augsburg Fortress 2000), confessional studies have received a real shot in the arm. Here's hoping it bears some fruit. Along with Kolb, other LCMS contributors include Charles Arand, Robert Rosin, and the late LCMS president, J. A. O. Preus.

David P. Scaer