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Renew the Study of Our Lutheran Confessions.*

In the Church the Word of God and its study takes precedence of everything else. Our Lutheran Church, as the Church of the Word of God (in its origin), has emphasized that as its chief principle. No testimony ranks with the Word. In this article that foundation lies as fundamental and changeless, — I deem it supreme.

But — the confession to that Word ranks next both in the teaching of our Church and in her articles of organization. In her creed the Church witnesses of her faith in the Word. So our pastors are pledged on the Word and the Confessions. Members are received as confessors of Scripture and the Confessions. In all disputes we test the teaching by the Word, as the norm, and our creeds as our Church's standard of witness.

Of all teaching, therefore, not directly Scripture-text the Confessions (or creeds) have first rank. No individual teacher's ideas, however prominent, dare cloud the shining testimony of the Confessions. We Lutherans are creedal confessors of the Word. In the creeds it is the Church as a totality that has spoken and speaks. "We believe, teach, and confess," is a phrase oft recurring in the last of the Lutheran Confessions, the Formula of Concord.

As a pastor or a professor of theology or a church writer, what I have to say must stand the test of Scripture and the witnesses to Scripture, the Confessions. Such is the position and the manifest publication of our Church in all her documents of an official nature, in her constitutions, in her formulas of installation into sacred offices, and in her liturgies.

It is a sinister fact that this sense has weakened. In the great breaking up of the Reformation Church now going on in the world we see her Confessions brutally violated, torn to shreds, neglected

* This article was written by Dr. Adolf Hult and appeared in the *Lutheran Companion* of March 24, 1924. It is reprinted here as sounding a trumpet blast which is much needed. — Ed.

by clergy and people. No doubt an honest expression of an inner state — she has not much to confess in large reaches. She lacks the witness conviction to the truth manywhere. When Luther and the other Reformers confessed their faith in our great creeds, there was in them the God-born faith in the Word which impelled them to testify. To-day each theologian of the Reformation Church, each preacher, and each leader in wide realms often stands for himself. In place of the glorious unity of the Confessions we have the strident disharmony of pure individualism. Each one grabs a little fragment of the Bible which he desires and then magnifies it out of proportion to the truth. Certainty causes a severe problem. Uncertainty is the key-note of the hour.

The study of our Lutheran Confessions has come to be an urgent necessity. Next to the study of the Bible it stands as pre-eminent in all doctrinal studies. The best churchman, doctrinally, is the man who is well at home in the Word and in the Confessions and can testify to a deep spiritual experience of both.

Our clergymen especially will be poorly fitted to give the souls entrusted to them a proper insight into the Word if they become ignorant of the Church's faith. They will be experimenters, whom we cannot trust, whose witness the Church will fail to accept with that magnificent quietude of conviction which the confessional spirit creates when born of the Word. And we need at least a few leading laymen who are familiar with the Confessions of our dear Reformation Church, — men who can prove and test, who can raise their voices for a witness to the truth and, if need be, for an intelligent critique and protest doctrinally. A renewal of the study of our Lutheran Confessions in connection with the Word of God, — what a change in the lax, flabby, convictionless trend among us that would aid in effecting! The terrible doctrinal crisis our poor, stricken Reformation Church in Europe is undergoing warns us in America of imminent dangers threatening us. Back to the Scriptures and to the Confessions! — that is the cry our Lutheran Church should heed.

Pure doctrine, which means also a living doctrine, and pure life in faith and love are the two poles of the Church's existence spiritually. Where the Word is loved in its purity and where a life born of faith is sustained by the Holy Spirit, there the power-reservoirs for soul-saving activity are at hand. Where the confessional status is low, unity is broken, false teaching cannot be distinguished from pure doctrine because of a weak-eyed vision, and there the mission spirit will not flourish long.

How do our still clear-eyed pastors and mature laymen expect to meet these needs? That is the point which this little article desires to urge. How true to the Confessions were our Synod's pioneer pastors! And it was the Augustana Synod which in the old General Council days stood as a monitor with regard to the confessional spirit. Where are we now?

At least let us inquire while we have treasures left.
