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# The Outside Limits of Lutheran Confessionalism in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation

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I INTEND THIS STUDY as somewhat of a sequel to my earlier ones on the same general topic. Therefore, I do not wish to rehearse all the theoretical points made in them, but will often simply presume them.<sup>1</sup>

I would hope that it would be clear that when I speak of "outside limits," I mean just that—not what is necessarily desirable, or even what I necessarily agree with, but of what is maximally permissible. Certainly, we want to foster "maximalism," not minimalism in our proclamation of the Gospel and faithfulness to Scripture. We want to defend the "whole counsel of God," rather than allowing theology virtually to be reduced to apologetics at its outer fringes, as is often the case today (and, in some cases, to put the very best construction on it).

It probably also bears emphasis that neither are we speaking of the outside limits of saving faith, as such, but rather of confessional *theology*. If we speak of the minimum required for salvation, that, of course, is very little—and is finally, God's to judge, not ours. Similarly, when we speak of sources of faith or of the basis of certainty, no one will deny that one can come to and remain in faith without any personal contact with the Bible, as, no doubt, countless numbers have. However, formal, professional theology will surely have far wider interests than merely an elementary statement of the Gospel! One fears that these two are often confused (especially under the influence of existentialism, as I accent below), and that here lies the root of many of our problems. Thus, it seems to me that assertions such as that Luther's faith was based on Christ and the Gospel, not the Bible, are usually—at best—beside the point. Similarly, one must be careful not to *over-correct* biblicistic formulations such as, "Scripture is inspired; hence I can believe them." In fact, one recurrent refrain of this paper will be the concern that supplements (or minor correctives, or different manners of expression in new circumstances) do not, in effect, displace and replace the substance.

Very easily, particularly when the fashions are elsewhere, the traditional concerns are, in effect, denied *by default rather than design*. The default may occur on any side: if accent on Bible and confessions may displace Gospel, the reverse is surely also true that one-sided "Gospel" accents readily begin to saw off the branch on which they rest. The danger is that both "conservative" and "liberal"

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sides may take something for granted, and as they both square off as champions of the Gospel, one suspects that *both* should sometimes begin by removing the log from their own eye! Certainly developments of recent years should illustrate amply how readily the church simply becomes a sounding board of its culture or of certain sub-cultures (activism) when a conscious, determined concern to remain confessionally faithful, and hence above all cultures, begins to fade. All segments of the church, not only teachers of Bible and confessions, must join in the concern. The *negative* sense of "world" the sense of separateness from culture, which is profoundly biblical, must be heavily underscored again to maintain the proper balance. It is, at best, simply an invidious comparison to suggest that concern for "pure doctrine" is necessarily and simply a sort of insecure, siege-mentality type of response, allegedly like rightist "law and order" cries in the realm of politics.

At the same time, we need to take care that "outside limits" are not defined *simply* on a traditionalistic basis. Tradition does not quite have that status in Lutheran theology! No doubt, no one will defend any absolute theoretical *bleiben beim Alten*, but we do need to explore mutually when and where this may happen quite unwittingly, especially as a result of a "guilt by association" reasoning. In addition, of course, many things have changed drastically since the sixteenth century. This paper will try to accent especially the concern with "history" that differentiates our intellectual climate from that of the Reformation and the age of Orthodoxy. Here, as elsewhere, we will have to explore together how much of this is simply a different manner of expression or a different line of attack, and how much of it subverts and contradicts. A parallel way of putting it will be to ask how much of it is permissible exegetical difference and how much of it doctrinal. We will have to look carefully at the underlying theological *principles*, at the *reasons* for reaching certain conclusions, at the *total context* in which they are presented, not merely at the conclusions themselves. Otherwise, of course, one can formally be very "orthodox" and miss the evangelical point, just as he also *can*—within outside limits—reach certain novel conclusions without theological error. This accent itself surely belongs under the rubric of "justification by faith," whereby *nothing* is right *coram Deo* apart from the covenant of grace.

However, as we shall also emphasize repeatedly, *caution* must be the watchword throughout. If "what this might lead to" can often be an alibi for inertia, it certainly cannot be discounted either. If we want to argue that, like every good teacher, the church must recognize that accents and approaches have to change somewhat with changing generations of students, and that, hence, we will often have to "get behind" or at least restate some aspects of the ancient formulae in a way faithful to their original intentionality, but which will communicate better today, we will also be hopelessly naive if we forget that such statements have been the alibi for virtually every sort of aberration in church history. No heresy ever presents itself as such, but rather as simply a new form of old truths. If we agree that some such "translation" is not only inevitable, but desirable,

then we must also insist that only that translation which reproduces the original as faithfully as possible is acceptable. "Translation" dare not become a cloak for demythologization, as often happens. That is to say that neither my proposals nor those of any other "*Herr Professor*" are to be accepted blindly. Rather, all who work with the same presuppositions will have to mutually test and weigh. By the same token, the blind, visceral objection to everything but the original formulae and conclusions, often resulting in what someone has called the "orthodox pounce" which easily judges before it really hears, will have to be curbed too.<sup>2</sup>

Having made these preliminary remarks, let me attempt to arrange the bulk of this paper around three captions: (1) Confessionalism and Freedom; (2) Gospel and Bible; (3) History and Revelation.

## I

### *Confessionalism and Freedom*

This paper assumes that its readers agree in understanding confessionalism as not only an ideal, but also as an actual standard which should be disciplined and enforced. One can scarcely be unaware that it certainly is *not* a common ideal or standard in most contemporary Protestantism—and often has not been for a very long time. Increasingly, it appears that the same thing will have to be said of the Roman Catholic communion. World "Lutheranism" certainly is not exempt either, and even within LCMS it plainly is not (at best!) a very fashionable emphasis in many quarters. I, for one, tend to cringe at the excessive chauvinism, rigidity, if not even fanaticism which appears at times to lurk behind the slogan, "*authentic* Lutheranism," but the concern, as such, is surely a most laudable one, and I am convinced that even its extreme expressions are often far closer to "the faith once delivered to the saints" than many of the alternatives. The mettle and virility of a confessional position will be determined precisely when it means swimming upstream and *not* simply conforming to the religious *Zeitgeist*. The issue can also be expressed in terms of one's ecclesiological position: whether it shall be the essentially *horizontal*, latitudinarian, and institutionalistic one generally prevailing today, or the *vertical* one centered about a common confessional position. In a way, it is a matter of what one considers the lesser of two evils: the chaos of "every man doing what is right in his own eyes" or the occasional unpleasantness of doctrinal discipline.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, as matters stand today, it is plain that there must be essential agreement on what "confessionalism" means before any further progress can be made. To urge Lutheran union on the basis of "confessional" agreement without agreement on what that term itself means is surely less than fully honest. We surely have every right to expect full candor from everyone as to which lexicon he is using! (One could also comment on the anomaly of churches as traditional guardians of morals behaving in such studiously ambiguous ways with respect to their alleged doctrinal standards!)<sup>4</sup>

In general, one may say that there are still two types of "con-

fessionalism," which one may call "normative" and "historical." No doubt, the two types often overlap to one degree or the other, but the basic issue is whether the confessions are still used to norm and discipline what is actually taught and preached in the church, or whether they are, in effect, consigned to the dustbins of history ("if we had been alive then, that's what we would have confessed too, but today nobody is asking the church those questions, etc."). To a certain extent, I suspect there is some truth in the assertion that one can judge which view of the confessions is operative according to whether they are assigned to historians or to systematicians to be taught. Of course, just as we will stress below with respect to the Bible, we need more, not less, historical study of the confessions, but it makes a world of difference in both instances whether this is undertaken in order to understand and apply them better in today's circumstances, or in order to relativize and evade them. In fact, as already stressed, unless the ideal of confessionalism has been completely abandoned, our problems arise precisely at those points where new issues are raised—or at least raised in different ways—than in the Reformation period. Some of these we may have to muddle our way through as best we can, while praying for the Holy Spirits' enlightenment, but we surely will get nowhere fast if we begin by discarding chart and compass. (Only along these lines, it appears to me, can any meaningful distinction between "confessionalism" and "fundamentalism" or "traditionalism" be attempted, namely that the latter often seem oblivious to changed circumstances and fail to distinguish surface and material change, whereas, it is anachronistic to judge the confessors on the basis of *Fragestellungen* they did not confront.)

Conversely, it is precisely for this reason that no mere bland assertion of confessional loyalty will suffice. We are called to be faithful in *today's* specific and concrete *theological* circumstances, i.e., not only ethically, as many onesidedly emphasize. Actual "confessing" is the point of all theoretical talk about "confessionalism," of course, but the question again is whether its substance is essentially the same confession, or merely analogous (*merely* "being" faithful as they were faithful—i.e., in practice, often in primarily political and social aspects). The confessions are not even being used as good "models" if their *damnamus* or negative theological assertions are not followed as well as their positive statements. It is precisely in this lack that utter ambiguity and confusion often ensues—although the point certainly is not to accent condemnatory and negativistic postures as such. Or, to use a double negative, it is not enough merely to "not deny" the confessions. (One is reminded that our Lord did not merely say "Whosoever shall *not deny* me before men . . .") Very little is usually denied, at least publicly. However, it certainly is often not *confessed* as the substance of the proclamation either! Under the current circumstances I think that merely "not denying" the confessions is often comparable to merely "not renouncing" formal membership in the state churches of Europe.

If these two types of "confessionalism" are not carefully distinguished, only mutual frustration and fury can follow. Those who

assume that the term implies normative discipline can only be enraged at what will inevitably appear to them as the insincerity and hypocrisy of those who proceed permissively. Likewise, those who see the confessions only in historical perspective will scarcely be pleased at challenges to their "openness," and whatever discipline is applied will likely be directed only at those who make such challenges. It should be clear to any objective observer that American Lutheranism is again at that crossroads, and one cannot hesitate there forever. One hesitates to specify precisely when, but there comes a point where such disparate understandings require separate and independent institutional embodiments. The "free" scholar will certainly not feel at home in a disciplined, confessional framework. Likewise, there comes a point where the confessional scholar can exist in a quasi-confessional context only at the sacrifice of his integrity or by retreating into the "neutrality" of becoming atheological or uninvolved in the institution's overall program. Of course, if he protests, *he* is the "apostle of discord" and "troubler of Israel" rather than it being a case of others sophistically evading their confessional subscription.<sup>5</sup>

The very glibness of some of the protestations of confessional loyalty (at least when within earshot of those with whom it is thought that might score a point or two, and the last one hears of it until the next challenge) is enough to arouse suspicion. One must insist upon reasonably precise definitions again if the pervasive odor of evasiveness about many such statements is to disappear. Many—perhaps all—of them *can* be understood satisfactorily, but *are* they? Are they disingenuous exercises in *double entendre*? Are they those kinds of definitions that would make it quite impossible *not* to be "confessional" (and if the word can mean everything, it obviously means nothing)? Let us look at a few of them briefly. (1) "Of course, we're confessional; everything we do and say around here is confessional. How could anyone possibly think otherwise?"—i.e., *if* word-games are not being played, and if by their fruits we can know them. (2) "We're not denying the confessions, just adapting them to new situations"—depending upon whether the "translation" is really faithful or reductionistic. (3) "The confessions are no longer adequate for all our problems"—which, of course, in one sense has always been the case in every slightly changed circumstance, since they were first written, but the question is whether or not they are still being considered *normative*. Nor dare we forget that we have precisely the same problem with the Bible if it is understood as, in one sense, a product of history. (What one often observes, then, in connection with slogans like this one, is that each tradition labors to explain or justify the current fads in terms of its own traditional language, often out of context and understood differently.) (4) "We don't disagree with the confession's intention, merely with their exegesis"—where we must distinguish carefully between, on the one hand, the mere details of the interpretation and application of isolated passages or precise way in which their thrust is restated, and, on the other hand, such material changes as would simply constitute a different "confession" of what we understand the Scriptures to be saying.<sup>6</sup> (5) "We

want an 'evangelical' not a 'legalistic' or 'scholastic' confessionalism." Here especially we need careful definitions if we are to avoid mere sloganeering with code-words. If those phrases imply concern that no precise terminology, as such, be sanctified, or that the various articles be approached holistically, not atomistically, i.e., always seen as functions of the Gospel, one can only say "Amen." However, as we shall also note with respect to the Bible, there is cause to fear that the slogans often may imply a *reductionism* of confessionalism to "Gospel" in some minimalistic sense. What must be central becomes the sole survivor—if that. Indeed, there is little justification for any hue and cry about "confessionalism," except in the conviction that it defends, defines, and upholds the Gospel. However, I believe the record amply demonstrates the fact that when the confessions (and the Bible) no longer define the fulness of the Gospel in all its aspects, "Gospel" too tends rapidly to vaporize into whatever one wants it to mean—into the cause of the week, into Jesus as an exemplar of a life-style which is "free" and "open" to others, an existential anthropology concerned with personal relations rather than with theological and historical facts. At times one is even tempted to ask if "gospel" has not become a sort of magical incantation which is supposed to automatically stop the mouths of all critics.<sup>7</sup>

We should also take a look at several other current terms which need careful definition if there is any serious intent to communicate. I mean terms like "fundamentalism," "biblicism," "legalism," "literalism," etc. There can be little doubt that such terms are used far more often to intimidate than to communicate evangelically. They can be used meaningfully only within a mutually accepted hermeneutical context. Otherwise, by destroying that context, thus opening the floodgates, they easily become code-words for nearly anything anyone considers objectionable. They are generally used in ridicule of more conservative positions, but there is no reason under the sun why they cannot be used just as readily of a host of "liberal" stances: if "biblicism" implies preoccupation with a host of biblical details but missing the evangelical center, it surely would apply to a vast amount of academic, "critical" study; and if "literalism" and "fundamentalism" means making individual points walk on all fours, as it were, at the expense of the total context, it emphatically also fits the common critical magnification of different accents or viewpoints into irreconcilable errors or incompatible theologies.<sup>8</sup>

Even within Lutheranism it is plain that "literalism" and "fundamentalism" sometimes imply anyone who takes the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith "literally," i.e., who does not somehow demythologize them into ciphers for ethical values, who is not some sort of universalist, who still believes in a personal God, a bodily resurrection, etc. Or if those doctrines are not denied, it is plain that many have been thoroughly cowed by the terms: they would apparently rather die than give anyone the slightest cause to suspect that they were "fundies," so much so that the Gospel, even in its most elementary dimensions, is scarcely enunciated at all. (One might also comment on the "illiberal liberals" who wouldn't be caught dead reading anything printed by Eerdmans, *Christianity Today*, or any

newspaper besides the *New York Times*.) That there is a real danger of "biblicism" should be apparent to anyone who has been repeatedly exposed to "The Bible Alone is the Word of God" type of sermon without any glimmer of the Gospel coming through (not to speak of various atomistic and moralistic procedures), but it is plain that the term is often used of anyone who understands the Bible as an objective, inspired norm—as though the Gospel could profit from emphasizing that less (cf. below). "Legalism" can easily mean that one does not have a "hermeneutics" which enables him to make the Bible mean whatever he wishes it to mean, or to disregard whatever he dislikes. We are to interpret the Bible "literally," but not "literalistically," that is beyond or more strictly than the writer's (and God's) intent. Correlatively, "liberalism" should be reserved for a *methodological reductionism* of biblical teaching, not for simple external deviation from traditional viewpoints when no doctrinal principles (including the doctrine of Scripture) are denied or subverted.

The latter point will be discussed in greater detail below, but it indicates why we can by no means exculpate the right either from the charge of sloganeering with its careless use of the term, "liberal." If one is recklessly condemned as "liberal" merely because of the flexibility of his language or because of novel exegetical conclusions without examination of his reasons and context in holding them, what language shall we borrow to describe those who really do deny Scripture's objective authority (surely the beginning of true "liberalism"), if not the very marrow of the faith. I am convinced that such abandoned use of "liberal" (not to speak of the simple heresy-hunting and irresponsible muckracking which sometimes accompanies it) has actually *contributed* much to the growth and popularization of real, hard-core liberalization. One is reminded of the boy who cried "wolf" too often! When the attacks come so malevolently and indiscriminately, such a "Hang together or hang separately" psychology easily settles in, that all the normal processes of self-correction are paralyzed, the middle becomes impotent to prevent further polarization, and many become so desperate to disassociate themselves from the opposition that they would embrace the serpent himself in order to be "free."

If we can return to consider further a more precise definition of "confessionalism," we must still analyze the concern that it not be identified with any one theological system or any one philosophical background. If no other hidden agendas hide behind those concerns, they contain no little merit. Like any good teacher, the church must not forget that familiar forms easily come to appear trite or are misunderstood in altered circumstances, and that hence she will have to make certain external changes in vocabulary and approach in order to communicate faithfully.

Confusion of symbolics and dogmatics easily can make confessionalism truly guilty of "repristination," but great care will also be needed lest that approbrious term conceal contempt for the substance of the Symbols as well. We can scarcely remind ourselves too much of the tentativeness of all *theologia viatorum*—as long as we remain firmly on the Way God has revealed to us. From God's standpoint,



indeed, all earthly formulations are relative, but we are men! The *Deus revelatus* makes himself known only under the masks or symbols of anthropomorphic forms (climactically, of course, in the incarnation), but those "symbols" are all we have! And his grace is sufficient for us!

Similarly, equation of doctrinal purity and uniformity of formulations might well entail "doctrinal legalism"—assuming (as, however, cannot always be done) that essential unity is maintained in the variety of expressions. When not over-emphasized, the discovery of the rich potential in the variety of scriptural formulations has, I think, been one of the great contributions of modern biblical study. The very existence of the subsequent creeds, confessions, and doctrinal treatises of the church testify to the fact that it has always been recognized that faithfulness to "biblical theology" cannot be measured simply by verbal identities.

Of course, such animadversions are usually directed against Orthodoxy, and specifically usually against Pieper's dogmatics. I have no doubt that there has been some truth in these concerns, with the result that sometimes *more* than the confessions have been required for church union. While such identifications must be corrected, of course, there is no doubt in my mind that anyone confessionally oriented will see far greater and more persistent dangers in the other direction. The very close genetic connection between the Formula of Concord and Orthodoxy should alone counsel restraint in divorcing the two—and, indeed, impulses to limit confessional subscription to only the Augsburg Confession are often among the first symptoms of real confessional indifference. Also sloganeering about "scholasticism" needs to be very restrained if basic change in substance is not to follow change of expression. Luther's own high regard for Melancthon (not to speak of the latter's authorship of the Augsburg Confession) should also warn us of the risk of acting as though we know the Reformer's mind better than he did himself. And since by common consent Luther was not a systematician, it will scarcely do to take him as a model of what a systematician should or should not do.

The litany of criticism of Orthodoxy is long and familiar. There probably is some truth in most of them—if, again, the supplements and correctives do not *replace* the substance.<sup>9</sup> Probably chief among these is the charge of excessive intellectualism: a tendency to view "Law" primarily in terms of legal penalty rather than as "nomological existence" (Elert); to present faith as primarily intellectual assent to propositions; to understand the role of the Spirit not so much as that of opening one's eyes to the message as of establishing the truth of one's arguments; to see sin as basically a problem of the intellect, etc. What truth there is to such charges, however, tends to be grossly exaggerated at the hands of modern existentialists who are guilty of the opposite extreme of exalting personal, subjective faith over intellectual understanding (cf. below). That neither the theologians of the Orthodox period nor the period in general neglected piety is clear if one has any acquaintance with the beautiful hymns, devotional literature, etc., which were also produced.<sup>10</sup> No doubt, the

whole revival of the medieval *Fragestellung* with its concern for the proper relation between reason and revelation led inevitably to a certain "rationalism," to a shift of center of concern from evangelical content to preoccupation with the externals of proof of the Bible's truth. Similarly, following medieval and Greek precedents, so much accent was sometimes put on God's being and nature, on ontological *status* and *analogia entis* that the soteriological and functional *actus*, the *analogia relationis* of God's salvific work and man's faith active in love, easily suffered by default. This, plus the need to establish biblical authority over against the claims of Rome, probably led to a greater apologetic accent upon the formal principle (Scripture as authority) and to an effort to "prove" the Lutheran faith true (to which the Law-Gospel dialectic was easily subordinated) than might otherwise have been the case. This context also explains the often strongly polemical coloration which many today find so unattractive. Hence, no doubt, if out of sympathy one approaches the products of this period "timelessly" and absolutizes them, problems will arise. Conversely, one must ask why many of the critics, who generally accent history so much (often to the point of simple relativism) seem to find it so difficult to accord Orthodoxy the same privilege. If seen and evaluated sympathetically, but in terms of its own historical circumstances and possibilities, like any other movement, we might even begin to be able to use "scholasticism" in a neutral, rather than in its usually pejorative, sense!

Another common charge has to do with Orthodoxy's local or topical method, and the subtle, abstract distinctions and minutely structured subdivisions which commonly ensued. As frequently happens, no doubt more often involuntarily than otherwise, *distinctions* easily became separations or divorces, at least in practice: Law and Gospel, faith and works, justification and sanctification, etc., and eschatology, rather than suffusing the whole, easily became simply the last chapter or locus in the series (hence, often done less than justice by the rushed professor at the end of the term).<sup>11</sup> No doubt, this procedure is not quite ours today, and may always be driven into the ground. However, assuming one is still interested in a Scripturally based pure doctrine (as well as existential, personal faith), it is hard to see how the difference is not going to be much more a matter of *style* rather than of substance. The tyranny of the *Systemzwang* is a real one, but theological anarchy or an existentialist nirvana is not the alternative! If the old pedagogical adage, *Qui bene distinguit bene docet* is still valid, one suspects that the Orthodox will not come off at all bad even today if used with any reasonable flexibility and imagination. Furthermore, I think it is quite demonstrable that most of their topical discussions do not ultimately differ substantially, *mutatis mutandis*, from those of a modern history-oriented, but topically arranged "biblical theology."

A third criticism faults the "proof-text method" current at the times, and charges that in merely searching the Bible atomistically for needed *dicta probantia* rather than hearing it on its own terms it obtruded before the Bible and actually obscured it. Some of this criticism, where valid, is simply anachronistic, judging again on the

basis of contemporary approaches which were not then at hand. Conversely, this same difference undoubtedly accounts for the intense fear at modern historical approaches to the Bible evinced by many who are unfamiliar with it. No doubt, once the work of deducing doctrine from the Bible has been accomplished, the temptation is at hand no longer to retrace those steps and hence no longer really to hear the Bible in its own uniqueness and variety. If used confessionally as *supplements* rather than alternatives, I think the value of many modern historical investigations, especially of the "biblical theology" type can scarcely be exalted too much. The old jest about Baptist children going to Sunday-school with their Bibles while the Lutherans brought catechisms or leaflets is not totally misleading in symbolizing the extent to which such supplementation is needed precisely in confessional churches. At the same time, if viewed in historical context, the very prominence of the "proof-text method" illustrates the extent to which the Orthodox wanted to be "biblical" theologians. If they did sometimes use passages out of context, the problem is sometimes more apparent than real, and, in any event, the flagrance with which one often notes the same thing today, especially among the "political theologians" makes one suggest that, at best, the pot should not call the kettle black.<sup>12</sup>

Inextricably bound up with any evaluation of Orthodoxy in relation to confessionalism is the issue of the former's beholdenness to Aristotelian logic and philosophy. Again, one must both abjure any suggestion of intrinsic connection and avoid anachronistic judgments. It is, no doubt, somewhat regrettable, even if inevitable, that his successors often abandoned Luther's profound dislike of philosophy and welcomed Aristotelianism as unguardedly as they did in their polemics. Nevertheless, they clearly intended to use it as only an inert tool, and if the tool inevitably did color the results at points, tending toward a certain impersonal abstractionism, it seems equally certain that no succeeding philosophy has ever—in practice, at least—been even remotely as neutral as theirs, especially when the very principle of *sola Scriptura* was often abandoned as well. One probably must insist on principle that *every* philosophy will have strengths and weaknesses in presenting the kaleidoscope of biblical truth. The important thing is that every effort be made to see to it that Scripture, not the system and its presuppositions and structures, really be the *norma normans*. The Bible has no metaphysical system, but certainly has metaphysical presuppositions and implications which must be "translated" faithfully. One probably ought to encourage confessional theologians today to experiment and produce more theologies with non-Aristotelian starting points—especially as an antidote to the "creative," inductive,<sup>13</sup> "constructive theology" with its horror of "authoritarian" approaches, often current elsewhere. One might even muse on how salutary a good revival of Platonism (basically *the* philosophy of the church during the first millenium of its existence) might be today in underscoring the supernatural and vertical aspects of the faith which are often so programmatically ignored, if not denied, today!

If Aristotelian forms do not quite represent the mind of God

itself, it clearly is a case where it is much easier to criticize than to demonstrate a viable alternative, and the cures are usually far worse than the "disease." Sometimes, especially from historicists, I think, protests against "philosophy" (i.e. Aristotelianism), whether out of naivete or out of something less than candor, leave the impression of proceeding from some completely neutral, a philosophical viewpoint, rather parallel to other claims to "scientific objectivity." In actual practice, the alternative usually tends to be a collection of solipsistic ruminations, a cafeteria of conflicting and competing systems in both form and content. *Quot theologi, tot theologiae*, depending upon the current fashions or from whom the teacher obtained his academic degree. We cannot review the history of modern philosophy here, of course, but from Descartes through Kant down to Heidegger, one could easily document a steady drift in directions which make the reluctance of confessional scholars to employ them in any version whatsoever easily understandable: the accumulating subjectivism and rationalism beginning with the reality of the mind or something else in man rather than the external reality of God; the Cartesian postulates that all conceptions are to be doubted until proved and that proof to be adequate must have the certainty of mathematical demonstration; Lessing's famous application of that axiom to the credibility of historical facts; Kant's assumption of the unbridgeable disjunction between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, etc.

Philosophies of the past century can probably be subsumed under two headings: subjectivistic and immanentistic. Schleiermacher and Hegel probably stand as the major exemplars of the two types. The first banishes God into the privacy of the individual soul, the second identifies Him with the ordinary historical and natural process. Both tend to reject what was absolutely central to biblical faith's struggle with paganism (thus betraying the *paganizing* tendencies of their modern counterparts!), viz., a *personal* God who actively intervenes in and guides both nature and history. Both agree in skepticism toward, if not outright rejection of, any objective, supernatural revelation, as in an inspired Scripture. If one does not have *mere* "witnesses" to "revelation" more or less apart from history ("kerygmatic theology"), one has external history plus its subjective "interpretation" (Pannenberg).

Since World War II some brand of existentialist philosophy (the subjectivistic type) has been dominant, and by my lights it to a large extent defines the nature of heresy in our time. In recent years, activism, among other impulses, has led to a certain revival of immanentism, but, at least so far, reports of the death of existentialism appear to be slightly exaggerated. As we noted above, existentialism may be helpful in delineating the *fides qua creditur* and thus in maintaining a balance, but its value as an instrument in describing the *fides quae* remains to be demonstrated. Perhaps its pivotal presupposition is that revelation is an *encounter*, not an assertion. Faith is a matter of a "meaningful relationship" with the deity, often virtually contentless and allegedly self-authenticating, and any volitional assent to intellectual information is, at best, secondary. "Truth" is simply Christ's address to man, and in that light "theology"

is reduced to an open-ended "search for truth." Whatever doctrinal vocabulary is retained is given such convenient, elastic definitions that, indeed, no one is encumbered! Probably no movement in recent times is as responsible for the doctrinal minimalism or indifferentism as this one (nor has it contributed to any raising of the traditionally none too high academic standards in many seminaries and religion departments!) Anything "objectifying" is considered a perversion, a stance which tends to be applied not only to doctrinal "propositions" (virtually an obscene word in this context!), but to historical facts, to ontology, and to all external authority. (McLuhan with his "the medium is the message" (= contentless medium) is perhaps one of the best known current examples of the anti-intellectual reductionism here, but he is only one!) No school of thought that I know of has such a penchant for word-games, transmuting virtually the entire religious vocabulary into what it likes to style "dynamic" instead of "static" categories.

Thus, the tremendous assimilation of existentialism to secular, psychological and sociological categories also becomes understandable.<sup>11</sup> "Gospel" easily comes to mean the possibility of full realization of human potential which all forms of "orthodoxy," it is assumed, are bound to frustrate. ("When I decide to love, the Gospel happens.") "Confessionalism" is reduced to the mere act of "confessing"—never mind what! One should "believe in people"—in the day to day goodness of human nature. Worship, and particularly the Eucharist, become a "celebration of life." Jesus becomes a metaphor or manifestation of the feelings people have in their deepest selves: cf. many current youth cults. (No doubt there are more "conservative" versions of some of these slogans, retaining some of the traditional, objective substance—but one never knows, and isn't supposed to ask!) The "mission" of the church becomes one of helping cultures and individuals to construct or retain their own "myth" or value system and thus fulfill their own unique potential. Everyday human encounters rate as "celebrations" of the experience of death and resurrection. In Lutheran circles the experiential side of "Law-Gospel" is all that is talked about (if the formula is heard at all), and the "celebration" of the Sacrament is oriented far more toward intrapersonal relationships than to the judgment and grace of God. Any kind of "hereafter theology" is conveniently forgotten about, if not sneered at. The reference point for understanding Scripture is not the text, but the testimonies to classical personal encounters with God recorded there. Naturally, a more or less situationalistic ethic soon follows; ethics is not a matter of obeying laws and instructions, but of being totally bound to a person. "Symbols" become almost totally demythologized, retaining value only according to the psychological usefulness. Or "remythologization" is undertaken almost without batting an eyelash, i.e., a change or reinterpretation of the referents of the traditional symbols to justify the retention of the symbols themselves. Whatever "myth" appears to serve one's self-expression is thereby authenticated as "true," and hence many of our more radical students feel quite free to savor the entire gamut—quite literally from A to Z, from astrology to Zen. Hence, whether the approach is *reductive* to

the symbols' alleged presymbolic or existential meaning (Freud, Bultmann) or *restorative* to the archetypal meaning presumed to be found in symbolic participation (Jung, Tillich), we still plainly have not gone beyond the level of the subjective and psychological to anything truly (objectively) sacramental and revelatory.

In most of the above instances, of course, one can frequently note half-truths, or useful supplements to mere intellectualism, if that were as far as the matter normally went. Modern biblical word-studies have underscored the dynamic and functional content of many words like "knowledge," "righteousness," "glory," etc., but, under existentialist influence, this was easily overstated or caricatured. If there is a God who *acts*—and in certain consistent ways—there must also be a God of a certain *nature*. Saving faith (not mere *fides historica*) must include information as well as encounter and commitment. One both believes *in* and believes *that*. The "knowledge" of God is often compared to the marriage relationship: far more is involved than merely knowing spouse's measurements or financial worth, but neither is it a matter of sheer emotionalism! And this points up one of the biggest anomalies of all in my judgment, namely, that existentialism, for all its theoretical accent on personalism, actually accomplishes far less of it than the traditional, evangelical proclamation of a "personal Savior"!

The time we have devoted to existentialism here would not be justified except for the fantastic extent to which it has contributed to the evaporation of the Christian substance. In fact, one must ask if it is not a specifically *Lutheran* type of heresy, which is always tempted to misunderstand faith as fideism, as mere faith in faith itself (although others have certainly proved very vulnerable to it too). Perhaps it is just a matter of primarily German scholars couching their existentialism in traditional Lutheran categories that has often made it so irresistible to Lutherans on this side of the Atlantic as well. In any event, one notes the tremendous extent to which Lutherans tend to justify it by appeal to Luther (often in more or less conscious opposition to Orthodoxy and sometimes the Formula of Concord as well). Surely, a counter accent on Luther's stress on reason (in the "ministerial" sense) is long overdue, in contrast to the currently popular portrait of him as an existentialist irrationalist. Furthermore, appeal to Luther's "existentialism" appears to confuse hopelessly that modern philosophy with Luther's "existential" accents as a *non*-systematician in piety and preaching (every man must believe for himself, etc.).

Above all, appeal to Luther's alleged "subjective" approach requires the most careful definition if simple misrepresentation is not to ensue. Of course the very objective-subjective problematic is a modern (post-Kantian) one that Luther himself would scarcely even have recognized. Indeed, if "objective" is defined in some quasi-magical way as denoting that existing outside of and hence irrelevant to us, obviously a corrective accent is required on the "subjective," or *faith* as the hand that receives what is offered *pro nobis* and which cannot ultimately be proved objectively or empirically like objects of sight, as Luther could scarcely stress too much. However, in

actual practice, the contemporary accent usually exalts subjective faith above any objective referent, not only commonly denying an inspired Scripture, but also the existence (or at least intellectual apprehension) of anything objective "up there." Then, of course, more word-games ensue: "eschatology" is either inwardness or what is immanently "out there"; "transcendence" (which again is supposed to be "in") turns out to be no more than personal and cultural non-selfishness, etc.

Before we leave the topic of philosophy, a word is in order also about the immanentalistic line, which may be making a comeback as a major competitor to existentialism (and which, in any event, often coexists in some uneasy symbiosis with it). Again, no one will deny that, in total context, it represents one indispensable aspect of the Christian verity: the "providence" of God on His "left hand," His control of even "natural law," even perhaps a "Christian pantheism." However, the uniqueness of the Christian faith certainly does not lie in those areas, and, hence, in my judgment, this trend has even less claim to the title "confessional" than a one-sided existentialist accent. Thus, it is entirely to be expected that one degree or another of universalism is nearly always present, while the "scandal of particularity" (or, if you will, the *sola's* of the Reformation) has rather rough sledding. The usual depersonalization of the deity, to one extent or another, follows just as naturally: "God" tends to become a mere cipher for the historical process, the *elan vital*, or "Change" (whereby "religious" men, presuming to know what direction change should go—nearly always leftward!—, can, in effect, play God by trying to direct that change). With such a viewpoint I submit one has come close to reverting to the classical mythology or paganism (Baalism) against which Yahwism first exerted itself—a personal God vs. mere personifications of natural forces and ideals! In modern times, Hegel has been the fountainhead of much theological immanentalism, and his influence is scarcely concealed in the works of Pannenberg and other "theologians of hope," although in the main their position is more conservative than that represented by the "process" theologians or disciples of Teilhard de Chardin, with whom they have much in common.

This first section was entitled "Confessionalism and *Freedom*," because the latter is so often the rallying cry of the more "liberal." I have no doubt that "freedom" can be—and probably always will and must be—a legitimate concern, also within confessional contexts, because of the tendency precisely there to become more precise than can rightly be insisted upon, and, above all, to judge the correctness of positions merely by their formal agreement with tradition, without regard for essential theological content, the underlying presuppositions, etc. Hence also this paper's concern for "outside limits." However, if it is true that "conservatives" are easily too indiscriminate in their conservation, "liberals" are certainly not known for their restraint in recognizing when to stop liberalizing. (The common denominator in the various understandings of "fundamentalism" often appears to be simply any refusal to accept a completely "free inquiry.") Hence, if there is good faith, both sides should be working together toward

a common understanding of "freedom" within a confessional context. If there is a mutual desire to retain the confessional substance at all costs, this will concentrate, I think, primarily on permissible variety of expression, on exegesis vs. doctrine, etc. Above all, if any agreement is to be worth more than the paper it is written on, the self-evident necessity of discipline on its basis will also have to be assumed.

It can scarcely be forgotten that "freedom" was a major cry of rationalism and the Enlightenment from the outset. The human mind was rebelling against *all* external authority—that of Scripture certainly not least of all. One must beware of assuming "guilt by association," of course, but neither can one forget the slogan's usual patrimony. Hence, some recent definitions of confessionalism and the Gospel almost completely in terms of some undifferentiated "freedom" cannot but legitimately arouse some suspicion.<sup>15</sup> (We will not comment at this point on the frightful extent to which theological "freedom" has often been assimilated recently to social and political ideals—certainly, one of the major symptoms in our times of confessional confusion and indifference!) We are also only too aware of the extent to which the companion slogan "openness" is widely used, with, at best, the same fatal ambiguity.

The biblical and confessional definitions of "freedom," "truth," etc., are prefaced by the condition "*if you continue in my word. . .*" They assume the fall, original sin, etc. (also among theologians!)—precisely the areas where "liberalism" of almost all varieties has always been at its weakest. It has certain inviolable axioms or absolutes, which, as in the area of ethics, it confesses do not bind and restrict, but articulate the nature and direction of *true* freedom. Even psychologically it is plain that a vast variety of circumstances, even highly structured and disciplined ones, can be "liberating," depending on a person's background and context. We confess that both subjectively and objectively our confessions and inspired Scriptures describe the freedom we have in the Gospel.<sup>16</sup>

The two antipodal concepts of freedom take institutional form especially in educational institutions. Virtually absolute intellectual freedom belongs to the very idea of the secular university. I doubt if anyone, even within the church, would challenge the usefulness of such institutions also for the church, including that of their divinity schools or religion departments—even if sometimes for no other reason than because of the general value of competition. However, something is seriously awry if denominational schools begin to model themselves almost exclusively after their secular counterparts, and allow the latter's *Fragestellung* to determine how they approach their subject-matter (primarily, of course, in the area of theology). If not by design, then by default, the properly theological increasingly recedes into the background.<sup>17</sup> It is no misguided zeal which focuses especially upon colleges and seminaries in the struggle to retain confessional integrity!<sup>18</sup> At the other extreme, there is, indeed, the rigidity (or poor teaching) which we characterize (or caricature) with terms like "defender of the faith," "indoctrination," etc. However, in the modern context, I think the danger is far greater of the



infiltration of non-confessional or anti-confessional notions of freedom. In any event, there is considerable middle ground between the two extremes. American higher education is cluttered with examples of erstwhile confessional colleges and seminaries, whose only remaining church-relatedness today, if any, is in the areas of student recruitment and fund raising. As concerns seminaries, the problem may well be approaching a critical stage in connection with the trend to "cluster" around secular universities. That such relocation may have great beneficial potential (at least for graduate work) no one will deny, but the detriment will surely be greater if there is no greater concern to maintain confessional identities than seems generally to have been the case so far. In general, if, as is by no means uncommon today, the seminaries' systematic departments (always pivotal in a confessional situation!) champion the various current academic heroes (today often some theology of culture, sociology of religion, or social anthropology, rather than their dogmatic traditions); if, in addition, confessional concerns are considered invalid in their "scientific" exegesis (often then mere philology or history and psychology of religion); and if, finally, the practical departments proceed in a quite atheological manner (but, in effect, with psychology and sociology, really supplying the "theology" of the institution's graduates), one is bound to ask what justification for independent existence still remains.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, involved in the whole issue of "freedom," is the myth of scientific "objectivity," which becomes especially pernicious when applied to the "social sciences," and to religion in particular. We have discussed this elsewhere, and need not repeat, but in our culture with its nearly blind faith in science, the fact that a *clash* of faiths is involved can scarcely be emphasized too much. "Nature abhors a vacuum," and if confessional axioms are abandoned (or even "taken for granted"), others—allegedly "scientific," but really just as much a "faith"—will inevitably rush in to replace them. There will *always* be some "hermeneutical circle," a framework which will inevitably norm the results somewhat. The more one leaves the initial philological concerns and the closer one comes to the center of ultimate theological import, the more this will be true. The "hermeneutical circle" will either be the objective one of Scripture as its own interpreter, or (as that phrase is commonly used in today's "new hermeneutic") one supplied out of the reader's own subjectivity, exegeting the exegete more than the text, and probably identified with some positivity behind the text purported to be discoverable by "scientific" devices. If such claims to "science" are not challenged and repudiated, in our culture they soon become well-nigh irresistible.

Precisely because no "scientific" objectivity is possible in the area of religion, confessionalism champions its confession of *freedom* in order to prevent the domination of the material by alien, secular viewpoints.<sup>20</sup> Even some ecclesiastical figures have accused me of anti-intellectual attitudes in this emphasis, which charge, needless to say, I reject out of hand. The point, rather, is that scholars too, individually and collectively, are *human*, with feet of clay, and

with the same range of strengths and weaknesses that are common to the rest of mankind born of woman. The image of a university as a collection of nearly superhuman searchers after truth and devotees of *Wissenschaft*, humbly listening to and learning from one another, etc., is a lovely one, of course, but "professional ideological combat" or the like would often be much closer to reality, except perhaps for the "hard" sciences. Sometimes it would seem that the alleged "free inquiry" of the "man come of age" is more akin to the adolescents' bondage to the fashions of his peer group, and the comparisons sometimes attempted with gang warfare or with the religious sectarian strife of earlier periods are not entirely gratuitous. *Within* a common presuppositional framework, great progress (given their assumptions) may often be registered, of course—but this is just the point: confessionalism proclaims that framework which offers the greatest freedom, both in time and in eternity. If we do not believe it, and cannot confess it unapologetically, we are, indeed, of all men most miserable!

### FOOTNOTES

1. See my review article of Ralph Bohlmann's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confession* (Concordia, 1968) in *Dialog*, where I first expressed my dismay at the extent to which American Lutheranism was increasingly ignoring this concern, or giving only nominal attention to it. There followed my article, "No Other Gospel" in the *Lutheran Forum*, Oct. 1969 (and the exchanges in Dec. 1969, Feb. 1970, and March 1970), polemicizing especially at the extent to which the entire issue was simply being swept under the rug in the interests of atheological activism and ecumenism at any price. Finally, there was the more theoretical study, "Is There a Lutheran View of the Bible?", *The Lutheran Scholar*, Jan. and April 1970. (Since I never personally saw the proofs of the latter article, I must disassociate myself from the rather wretched copy at points—but I trust that the thrust of my arguments came through, nevertheless.) Some of my accents in this article will parallel those made, e.g., by Sverre Aalen in his helpful article, "The Revelation of Christ and Scientific Research" in the Dec. 1970 *Springfielder*, pp. 202-221. However, I hope to relate my discussion more directly to the scene in American Lutheranism than he could, as well as to dwell more on the Old Testament aspects of the problem, where my own major expertise (or fate) lies.
2. Within the LCMS context, it seems to me, this means that, as the linguistic and ethnic factors which once worked toward solidarity fade, attention should be given to the development of new structures where "trial balloons" can be floated without fundamental challenge to *publica doctrina*, or where self-criticism may be encouraged without its degenerating into self-hate (as has plainly often happened), etc.

The entire issue of viable structures for *discipline* is closely related. None will work, of course, if a majority will to make them work is absent. Presuming that is not the case, however, just how does one proceed in a Lutheran context? Ideally, of course, there will be evangelical interaction among all segments of the church. Pope Paul recently insisted that it was the business of the bishops—not of the theologians, as such—to instruct the church. Can—or should—one translate that into a contemporary Lutheran context? (Cf. AC XXVIII, 20-23 where the "office of the bishop" is to "judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel.") If councils, church conventions, and hierarchies have often erred, seminaries and theologians certainly often have too! If conventions are scarcely the place to weigh and decide complex doctrinal issues, the alternative certainly is not for them to forget about theology and concern themselves primarily with social and political issues, as is

often the case today! (Cf. now A. C. Repp, "The Binding Nature of Synodical Resolutions for a Pastor or Professor of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod," *CTM*, XLII/3 (3/'71), pp. 153-62)

3. In this respect too one will recall that LCMS was founded in quite conscious distinction from "nondescript Lutherans." One will certainly want to avoid any programmatic separatism, and various secondary shifts are surely called for, but, in main thrust, I want to identify myself with a firmly confessional stance. I have recently heard many express the opinion that the horror at the rationalism infecting the German churches in the nineteenth century, from which stemmed both the confessional revival there and much religious emigration to America, is water long since over the dam. I suggest that they merely open their eyes to see to what a great extent, *mutatis mutandis*, it is still with us, as has become especially apparent the past few years. Sometimes, particularly in LCMS, as things have relaxed in recent years, one is almost reminded of a maiden who has too long been sheltered and isolated and who, as a result, is now just a bit too eager and willing! (One recalls occasional jests (?) that some day LCMS might turn out to be the most liberal of all American Lutheran bodies.)
4. If a more personal note will be allowed, perhaps I may be allowed to explain that this especially has been the point of departure for my own recent rage and polemical stance! I find the lack of candor and the proposed fellowship of Lutherans on the basis of an "agreement" on the confessions which they all interpret and understand differently entirely objectionable. Otherwise, of course, we can cordially agree to disagree and cheerfully go our separate ways, hopefully without much of the polemics of the past. No one will lament the change in atmosphere from dispute to dialogue, from polemics to irenics, but it is a different matter when ecumenics of the "Doctrine divides; service unites" type becomes a juggernaut that crushes every other concern.

At this point I fear I must record some dissatisfaction with the recent statement by the majority of the St. Louis faculty reiterating its confessional loyalty (*LW Reporter*, Nov. 15, 1970). I do not wish to be misunderstood as challenging the sincerity of that statement's profession of confessional loyalty, nor do I care to enter here into the substance of that theologico-political controversy about which I am not even fully informed. My only point here is to aver that, in my judgment, such a simple reaffirmation of confessional loyalty without relating it to the issues of the day will not suffice. I am sure this is not its intent, but that appears to me to be parallel to a purely theoretical preaching of Law and Gospel without concrete application. There surely is some middle ground between such a stance (and one has only to look at the LCA to see how little that can mean; cf. below) and some formal, official addition to the Book of Concord; the church surely has a right to make *pro tem* judgments of what confessional faithfulness means *today* and to enforce discipline on the basis of them. Cf. E. Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, p. 31: "Even the most solemn reaffirmation of the Confessions may be a denial of them, if the errors of the day are passed over in silence. Hence no confession of the church may be regarded as definitive in the sense of precluding the possibility of further confessions."

And, while I am at it, I think one has to fault the 1965 "Mission Affirmations" along similar lines for not suffering from any excess of unambiguity. Take at face value, they appear to be quite unexceptionable, but not surprisingly, it is plain that they are being given radically varying interpretations in different quarters—most objectionably, I think, by some quite atheological activists, who appear to have no further regard for the Law-Gospel or two-kingdom distinctions.

5. The practical upshot of all this is that I, regretfully, have cooled almost entirely toward the ecumenical enterprise, also within Lutheranism, at least as presently oriented. Some of the progress recorded in the various dialogues appears almost too glib to be credible; other aspects seem much more promising, but, in either event, it all seems quite irrelevant when much of the actual life and thought of all the churches involved proceeds

in entirely unrelated ways. The *external* reasons why all Lutherans should unite are as compelling as ever, but any virile confessionalism will also remain vitally interested in *internal* unity. No doubt, it is true that, on the whole, Lutherans in America are already more doctrinally united than any other traditional grouping—but I submit that that isn't saying very much!

I do not here wish to speak to the issue of LCMS-ALC fellowship, as such. Anyone who knows both bodies will, I think, testify to the fact that the ALC is, by the large, a far more conservative organism than the LCA. (Inevitably, autobiographical elements enter into these judgments, which I do not care to accent as such, but how could it be otherwise?) I have had only minimal personal contact with the ALC in recent years, but at least two factors do not appear to me to augur well for its confessional future: (1) its apparent head-long flight into the arms of the LCA, regardless of what shenanigans transpire there; and (2) its apparent frequent lack of careful confessional scrutiny in staffing its own institutions.

However, I do want to emphasize as emphatically as possible that, in my judgment, if much of the LCA and its institutions are "confessional," I can scarcely even imagine what non-confessionalism would be! (Cf. Fortress Press: however laudable its offerings may be from the perspective of academic *Wissenschaft*; it is plain that championship of a confessional position has hardly any priority at all. Or one could comment on the extent to which being anti-parochial schools is a simple, but militantly held dogma in wide areas of the LCA.) If what often goes on there represents the future of "Lutheranism," I, for one, simply am not interested! In my judgment, the LCA still remains very much the paratheological or subtheological organization it has long been judged to be—and I detect no particular concern there to do anything about it. (One can, of course, find a few in their own midst who lament that state of affairs.) I think one could also document a clear tendency to send its few people who are clearly confessional to inter-Lutheran discussions, thus giving the impression that they are really representative. The classical LCA insistence that no new confessions beyond the "historic" ones are necessary for Lutheran unity might have much merit if it did not appear to me to cloak a widespread indisposition to implement and apply their full contents to the current scene. As a result, "confessionalism" is often no longer even a good term to "conjure" by, but at best comes to imply only the more or less accidental ecclesiastical identifications typical of much of current Protestantism, and very often becomes a codeword for all that is reactionary, medieval, narrow-minded, etc.

There was once a time, in the far more congenial atmosphere of neo-orthodoxy and biblical theology, when I was optimistic that, if LCMS would only relax a bit in various non-essential areas, and the LCA would actually put its heart where its mouth was, we might actually achieve true confessional unity. I emphatically no longer retain such optimism! In my judgment, the LCA, as a whole, simply lacks the desire or will (or both) to move decisively in any such direction, and many centrifugal forces are obviously at work in LCMS. (In fact, I have myself been accused recently of allegedly "moving" in a confessional direction at the same time that the LCMS is understood to be moving the opposite way.) In any event, external union under current circumstances would, in my opinion, be more akin to total capitulation of everything that LCMS has traditionally stood for (and I am not among those who think that the latter ever represented eschatological perfection). I hope that my profound regret—if not disillusionment—also comes through as I find it necessary to write lines such as these.

In the middle generations I think the gap still often is not very wide, but I have seen too many of the old LCA "liberals" come out of the woodwork with utter impunity in recent years—and most recent graduates (with an often almost fanatically held "new concept of [no "the"!/] ministry") are anything but devoted to anything like traditional confessionalism. (Cf. the editorial "What Are Seminaries For?" (*Chr. Today*,

1/15/71, p. 21), pointing out how prominent on their agendas *evangelism* of their own students should often be. The article cites especially Garrett (Methodist), but I submit that it often would apply to some Lutheran seminaries as well. For at least partial confirmation one might cite, "Your Next Pastor," *The Lutheran* (12-2-70), pp. 6-9; cf. also reaction in subsequent issues.)

At the same time, whether or not one thinks in terms of possible new alignments, I believe that more should be done to bring the conservative and confessional-minded in all branches of American Lutheranism together. I suspect that the initiative in this respect lies more in LCMS—if for no other reason than because of the tendency there to think too strictly along external organizational lines and to tar everyone in the other Lutheran bodies with the same brush. I have nothing so grandiose or official as "selective fellowship" in mind, but simply the fraternal communion, in whatever external form, of those on basically the same wavelength. Secondary benefits might include a diminished temptation for individual confessional groups to adopt only defensive, polemical stances and/or to become little ingrown, introspective groups devoted to nursing and justifying maximally their *Minderheitskomplex*.

6. Two recent examples of this sort of evasiveness or reductionism which have come to my attention are: (1) the assertion that any interpretation of "Law-Gospel" from fundamentalism to Bultmannianism is compatible with the confessions. While everyone is aware that there always have been certain minor variations in even the "orthodox" deployment of that formula, the spiritualistic and subjectivistic reduction of that formula in much modern hyper-Lutheran thought of the Bultmannian variety is surely outside the "outside limits" because it leaves us with only the shell minus the ontological and objective substance, the form of godliness without the power thereof, or a "formula non-history" (to quote a German scholar's phrase in another connection). Such an assertion would almost appear to say that anyone who uses the magical formula, "Law-Gospel," must be adjudged confessional, no matter how he understands it—which, even if that were correct, forgets or overlooks the vast extent to which much of American Lutheranism is totally ignorant of that manner of thought and/or scornfully dismisses it as "not among the questions everybody is asking these days." (2) The virgin birth is held up as an example of dispensable confessional exegesis—which, at least for the sake of argument, one might conceivably concede as the extreme outside limits of permissible doctrinal variation, except that on the basis of consistency it is hard to see how it should be excepted before others (especially when one recognizes it as a guardian of the incarnation), or how it can ultimately be questioned on other than rationalistic grounds (and certainly not excluding "form-critical" arguments in a circle—cf. below). One recalls Luther's observation that, although it might theoretically be denied without any apparent loss to the Gospel, how can it be when it is so plainly taught in Scripture?
7. Within my own observation at points in American Lutheranism I think that I could establish such a typology of the evaporation of confessional substance: in the first stage "Gospel" and "Christ" replace "Bible" and "Confessions" as rallying cries, and in the following generation one has thorough-going *tohu wa-bohu*, including some who show not even the remotest signs of knowing what the Gospel is all about—or, if and when it is present, one would need Diogenes' lantern to find it. Such a "Gospel reductionism" appears often to lurk behind the common practice within especially the LCA of speaking about "the Lutheran confession" instead of "the Lutheran Confessions." Within LCMS I think cautions are in order that hearts do not leap with joy everytime the word "Gospel" (or "Christology" or "justification by faith") is heard, because it is by no means self-evident that it is understood in anything approaching the traditional sense.
8. In a syndicated (UPI) article appearing in the *South Bend Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1971, ("Radical Theories About Christ Offer Quick Fame for Authors"), Louis Cassels scores what he calls the "selective fundamental-

ism" of writers like Allegro with his "sacred mushroom" fantasy or W. Phipps' argument that Jesus was married. ("The curious thing about all novel Jesus-theories is that their proponents feel free to ignore any part of the Gospel record which plainly contradicts their idea, while placing complete reliance on the literal accuracy of any minor detail which may seem to support their view.") Any knowledgeable student of Bible-study will know that the criticism is by no means inapplicable to much less crass theorizing! I would observe here that I think both "conservatives" and "moderates" in LCMS need to define carefully their use of these terms if they are really interested in more than being right, the former to show cause why they should not at times be charged with mechanically upholding traditional exegeses, and the latter to demonstrate how they propose to prevent others from using their slogans to move far further to the "left" than most of them themselves have moved.

9. Some of my discussion here is based on R. Preus' *The Inspiration of Scripture*, which while certainly sympathetic to the Orthodox dogmatists is by no means entirely uncritical either. Unfortunately, at this writing, I have not yet found time to study his more recent work, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. Also very illuminating in its discussion of nineteenth century debates is G. Forde, the *Law-Gospel Debate* (Augsburg, 1968).
10. Some of the corrective material of this sort is collected and evaluated in F. Kalb, *The Theology of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Lutheranism* (tr. H. Hamann). Certainly, one of the major foci for a corrective to over-intellectualism should be the Eucharist and the liturgical ceremonies developing around it. Because of the polemical situation vis-a-vis Rome, even Lutheran confessionalism exploited this area only minimally until recently. In the changed atmosphere, one would hope it would come more and more into its own. However, it seems to me that the problem of the proper balance between emotion and reason is one of those perennial ones to which no final answer will ever be given; rather, as the temper of the times constantly changes, the perennial problem will much more be that of trying to keep the pendulum somewhere near the center.
11. With respect to eschatology, the superb study of James Martin, *The Last Judgment in Protestant Theology From Orthodoxy to Ritschl* (Eerdmans, 1963) should not be overlooked. Martin amply demonstrates that while Orthodoxy cannot escape censure in all respects, most subsequent theological movements missed the mark far more.
12. One of the most frightful examples to come to my attention recently is: F. Herzog, "The Political Gospel," *The Christian Century*, Nov. 18, 1970, pp. 1380-1383. The examples, however, are legion. One I recently heard orally began by protesting the common tendency to downplay or ignore the sharp dualism of church and world in the Gospel of John, but promptly continued by transposing the theme *eis allo genos* (sociological): the hippie communes, by withdrawing from the "world" and protesting against the establishment, were thus, allegedly, faithful to the "gospel"!
13. In proper context, one certainly does not wish to deprecate "creativity." I must confess, however, to having been exposed to so much virtual apotheosization of that ideal, that I almost cringe at its mention. And I cannot resist recounting the cartoon I saw recently: one convict tells his cellmate, "But I didn't think of it as embezzlement. To me it was just creative bookkeeping." Adaptation to the theological enterprise should not be too difficult.
14. I believe that conservatives would do well to direct much more attention in this area. In many church colleges and seminaries one suspects that so much concern is aimed at the biblical teachers (rightly or wrongly) that the often far more serious *defacto* undermining of traditional Christianity in other departments, especially the "behavioral sciences," goes virtually unnoticed. If one is going to speak of "faith" or the like, one cannot help but observe how many who seem unable accept any traditional Christian axioms any more can scarcely relate to the world at all except in terms of Freud, Marx, *et al.* One must not protest too much,

but I would submit that very often in the ministry today interest in psychology, etc., rises in direct proportion to the slackening of interest in solid exegesis, textual preaching, and confessional theology. In the fledgling continuing education programs of the LCA and of other churches as well, which once promised to resuscitate the moribund theology of many parsons, sensitivity training and the like have often all but taken over. Of course, the problem reaches back into the very structure of Seminary curricula, and, indeed, into the confirmation and other educational programs of the local parish as well. In all these areas, I believe that the overall impact of existentialism has been most baneful. (Might I also suggest that the commentary on the back of CPH's "Focus Bulletins" might bear some careful scrutiny along these lines?)

15. Hence, entirely apart from the merits of the case, I find the frequent appeals to "academic freedom" in many of the current LCMS anti-discipline petitions to be not a little disconcerting. At best, they do not appear to be very well thought out. Here it would be helpful if the critics would themselves be more positive and specify just how, when, and where they think *confessional* discipline should be exercised. Are they defending those under suspicion because they agree with them, or because they are opposed in *principle* to doctrinal discipline? Have they really decided that the chaos and disarray of most mainline denominations today is preferable to the occasional unpleasantry of the exercise of theological discipline? Do they really favor adding one more latitudinarian church body (albeit with a little Lutheran spice or "heritage") to the list? (Cf. the many self-descriptions today about being "Lutherans of sorts," or half-jokes to the effect that the LCMS is the only place within Lutheranism where it is still possible to start a good theological argument, or the LWF's decision "not to wait" for LCMS any longer.) Indeed, confessionalism is dead if we too have reached the point where the only heresy is to suggest that there is such a thing as heresy (not to accent the term as such, however!), where the only orthodoxy is that there is no valid orthodoxy, the only absolute that there are no absolutes, etc. "When the cat's away, the mice will play"—also theologians! I have noted with my own ears the explicit relish with which some have cast off all restraints, once they were sure there was no further danger of any official ecclesiastical displeasure. In general, there is ample evidence within Lutheranism to demonstrate how easily leaving it for everyone to interpret (or ignore) his confessional subscription as he sees fit can come to mean—**NOTHING!**
16. Cf. Schlink, *op. cit.*, p. 24: "Thus the Confession shows how to distinguish between theological movements within the church, on the one hand, and the separateness of church and heresy on the other. In every case the Confessions exclude the liberty to teach anything and everything, and they make the concept 'confessional freedom' impossible as a slogan for the church, inasmuch as such a concept signifies not only freedom with respect to *the* Confessions, but also with respect to *every* Confession, namely, freedom *from* confession."
17. This would be some of my reaction to Leigh Jordah's criticisms (in a generally favorable review) of Robert Preuss' new work, *op. cit.*, in the *CPH Commentator*, Winter, 1971, p. 9, wishing that more time had been spent on "the central theological issues of our day" (religion vs. revelation, etc.) rather than the doctrine of Scripture. Not that the former are not worthy topics, but in a *confessional* context will not *de Scriptura* remain a central issue of every day? Sometimes the best that can be said for much modern theology, it seems to me, is precisely its preoccupation with *apologetics*, as academe has posed the issues, to the virtual neglect of "the whole counsel of God."
18. This appears to me to be about the only point really made (except for obscure warnings about "confessional imperialism") by H. Diem in his diffuse article, "Is doctrinal discipline possible?", *Lutheran Forum*, 2/71, pp. 11ff. W. Künneth makes the same point in his companion and (to me) far more substantial piece, "Editor's Ambo" on p. 5 characterizes the latter's contribution as a "massive rejection of massively radical

positions," apparently almost as though K nneth's antitheses did not really appear in American Lutheranism to any degree. I wish I could be even remotely so sanguine!

19. I wish to emphasize that these descriptions are by no means theoretical, not even within American Lutheranism, and with respect to both colleges and seminaries. The sentiment is also widespread that the "wave of the future" is the ultimate disappearance of denominational seminaries, leaving at most a chair or two at university divinity schools to deal with individual heritages and politics. The LCMS probably was impoverished somewhat in earlier years by the unwritten law that future teachers should scarcely even expose themselves to the theology or ideology of other institutions of higher learning, but the solution is not to drop all scrutiny and leave each new Ph.D. "free" to echo uncritically all the great ideas of his mentor.
20. An excellent admission (and somewhat agonizing reappraisal) that the "objectivity" of many college religion departments is really a counter-faith appeared recently in: R. N. Bellah, "Confessions of a Former Establishment Fundamentalist," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion*, 1/3 (Dec., 1970) pp. 3-6. Just one choice quote: "The establishment view of religion in American universities today is what I have called 'enlightenment fundamentalism.' This is the view that science and historical scholarship have effectively disposed of fallacious beliefs. If the study of religion has any place in the university at all, which is doubtful to enlightenment fundamentalists, it is to disclose the true reasons why religious believers have been so misguided." Of course, the context of the article is that part of recent student disturbances which have been directed against the university itself, especially its failure to inculcate even humanistic—let alone metaphysical—values. Comparable to Bellah's language, some have spoken of an "inverse fundamentalism" which seems to assume that, given enough time and money, all scholars will eventually agree!

## Theological Refractions

### DO WE NEED BISHOPS NOW?

For some reason or other, the thoughts of having bishops quickens the pulse of many Lutherans. *The Lutheran World*, the officially endorsed theological periodical of the Lutheran World Federation, devoted an entire series of issues to this question in connection with negotiations with the Anglican Church. *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, 1970) goes over much of the same ground without turning up anything essentially new. There are the arguments from the history of the church and from certain Lutheran State churches where the church is still supervised by bishops. Then there is a general type of discussion on what a bishop should do. (This might be a simple question, but it is hardly clear since bishops in different churches have different tasks.)

But has anybody really answered the question of whether anyone really wants bishops today? The opinion of the clergy is somewhat unimportant since numerically the pastors account for only .0001 of the membership. (This figure is open to mathematical correction.) Unless someone is greatly deceiving us, the great thrust today is against the establishment. And the ecclesiastical establishment is taking it on the chin along with the political establishment. Wouldn't the current prob-