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The Lutheran Reformers' Understanding of the Historical Deformation of the Church

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The topic I intend to explore—I believe this is what the planning committee had in mind in assigning this particular title—is the attitude of the Lutheran reformers to church history and, in particular, to address the question: When did the reformers think the church began that decline from which they themselves sought to rescue it? Or, to put it more simply, when did the church start going downhill?

Now this is a very large topic, since church history played a major role in the polemics of the sixteenth century. Almost as soon as Luther began to publish his attacks upon contemporary church practice and teachings, the question came to the fore regarding which side in the debate reflected the historic position of the church, for both sides had an obvious interest in demonstrating that theirs was the original version of Christianity. Before the century had come to an end, both Lutherans and Catholics had undertaken major projects of historical writing to demonstrate the antiquity of their positions and to account for the aberrations of the other side. But the *Magdeburg Centuries* and the *Annales Ecclesiastici* are simply exclamation points in a debate that goes back to the beginning of the Reformation.¹

In order to get a handle on such a large topic, therefore, I thought it would be useful to see how the Lutheran Confessions view the history of the church, especially its "deformation." How do they account for the decline of the church from pristine purity to contemporary decadence?

From one point of view, of course, the strictly theological one, the Confessions do not describe the church as having declined, for the church is an article of faith, and thus is a transcendent reality whose author and creator is the Triune God. The Augsburg Confession describes it as the "assembly of all believers and saints" (AC VIII.1); the Apology says that it "is not merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments . . . but it is mainly

an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts" (Ap. VII/VIII.5); and the Small Catechism credits the Holy Spirit with creating the church, for He "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (SC II.6).²

Not only its existence but also the character of the church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" is entirely God-given, God-created, and therefore unassailable and certain: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The church is "one" not on account of geography, culture, hierarchy, rites or ceremonies, but on account of Christ. As the Apology says, its unity is a "true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God" (Ap. VII/VIII.31). All are one in Christ through faith in Christ and are knit together by the bonds of love.

Thus the church is not the product of historical forces or the works of men, but is the creation of God, especially the Holy Spirit. He creates and sustains this church, makes it one throughout the world, and effects its forgiveness by the apostolic Word. As Luther says, "God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation" (LC II.38). Therefore, it is this Word of God along with the sacraments as visible Word that signifies the presence of the church. Word and sacraments are the means by which the Spirit calls the church into existence; they are the marks of the church. Where the means are present, so also is the Spirit, creating and maintaining faith, and thus the church is present there also.

Therefore, because its life and existence depend radically and solely upon God's promises in the Gospel, the church cannot really be "deformed." The church is what it is because God has made it so, and it will always be what God has made it to be until the end of time. As we say in the Augsburg Confession, the "one holy Christian church will be and remain forever" (AC VII.1).

But all this does not mean that the church has no history. Quite the contrary, for when Melancthon insists that "we are not dreaming about some Platonic republic . . . but we teach that this church actually exists, made of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world" (Ap. VII/VIII.20), he reminds us that the church militant experiences grace and manifests faith, enjoys the means of grace, and carries out works of Christian love in our own

familiar, three-dimensional world of time and space. It is made up of real human beings who live, work, and die like all others. Most importantly, it is made up of real human beings whose Christian existence is also three-dimensional. Faith may be invisible, but Word and sacraments are not, Christian confession is not, Christian preaching and teaching are not.

Therefore, one can examine the records of the past—the documents, the treatises, the letters, the sermons, whatever—for evidence of the church.³ This was a subject of great interest for both Luther⁴ and Melancthon;⁵ and one important theme in our Confessions is the evidence of the historical church regarding the issues of the sixteenth-century Reformation.⁶ Its significance is rooted in what the Confessions teach about the unity of the church, an inward relationship that is created by external means.

Here is how the Apology describes the catholicity of the church: "[T]he church catholic' . . . is made up of men scattered throughout the world who *agree on the Gospel* and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and *the same sacraments*, whether they have the same human traditions or not" (Ap. VII/VIII.10). The Gospel and the sacraments determine whether people have Christ and the Holy Spirit; therefore, agreement in the Gospel and sacraments is an outward manifestation of the universal church.

In the Augsburg Confession also, our church ties the "true unity" of the church to preaching the Gospel "in conformity with a pure understanding of it" and to administering the sacraments "in accordance with the divine word" (AC VII.2). Both activities—preaching and administering—are visible and outward. They can be measured, assessed, and examined for their conformity to the divine Word. Indeed, the entire argument of the Augustana is that the Lutheran churches are doing just that, conforming to the Word of God, and only when such conformity was lacking have they made any changes (cf. AC Part Two, Introduction).

But if one can assess the contemporary church for its agreement in the Gospel and the sacraments on the basis of the Word, one can also do the same for the church in the past. One can locate those of previous ages who were likewise united in the pure Gospel and the sacraments rightly administered, for the unity of the church transcends temporal limitations as well spatial ones. Therefore, the Confessions employ the historical record as a subsidiary argument to demonstrate the agreement of our church through time with the

universal church in its teaching. Although the Scriptures clearly hold first place as doctrinal authority, the testimony of past witnesses is an important auxiliary proof that our church is not a new church but is one with the true church of all ages and times.

Let's see how this works, first of all, in the Augsburg Confession. By 1530, both Luther and Melancthon had devoted much attention to historical justifications for their reforms, and so it is no surprise to find such arguments in the Augustana.⁷ In its Preface, the confessors indicate their intention to justify the teaching and practice of their churches "on the basis of the Holy Scriptures," but in their conclusion they summarize their argument by saying that "we have introduced nothing, either in doctrine, or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church [*"gemeiner christlichen Kirchen"*; Latin, "church catholic," *"ecclesiam catholicam"*]" (AC Conclusion.5, emphasis added).⁸

Moreover, the testimony of the historical church is quite prominent in the Augustana and, significantly, in view of our theme of "deformation," it is predominantly the evidence of the early church. The first sentence of the very first article invokes not the Scriptures but the first ecumenical council: "Our churches teach with great unanimity that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three persons is true and should be believed without any doubting" (AC I.1; Latin). Similarly, the third article refers explicitly to the Apostles' Creed.

Church fathers are cited both generally (I.4; Conclusion to Part One; XXIII.10; XXVI.42-43) and by name—Ambrose (VI.3), Augustine (XVIII.4; XX.13; XXVI.17; XXVII.35; XXVIII.28), Chrysostom (XXIV.36; XXV.11), Cyprian (XXII.5; XXIII.25), Gregory (XXVI.44), Irenaeus (XXVI.44), and Jerome (XXII.6). Most of the citations occur in that part of the Augustana that deals with the correction of abuses, so that sometimes the citations are used simply to establish the historical record of what once was the practice of the church in comparison to that of their own times (cf. XXII.5; XXIV.6). But elsewhere, the citations are probative of the propositions set forth.

The fathers are quoted to show what the right teaching and/or practice of the church really are. For example, Cyprian is cited in support of releasing from their vows those who could not maintain the celibate state (XXIII.25); Chrysostom is quoted against mandatory auricular confession (XXV.11); and both Ambrose and Augustine are cited in support of justification by faith, the former in Ar-

ticle VI and the latter in Article XX.⁹ Indeed, the confessors single out Augustine as being of “no inconsiderable authority in the Christian church” before adding, “even though some have subsequently differed from him” (AC XXVII.35). Since the unity of the church depends upon doctrinal agreement, the confessors are eager to show that their teaching agrees with that of the fathers.

When it comes to practice, however, the Augsburg Confession clearly limits the authority of the early church: “Scarcely any of the ancient canons are observed according to the letter, and many of the regulations fall into disuse from day to day. . . . One recognizes that such rules are not to be deemed necessary and that disregard of them does not injure consciences” (AC XXVIII.67–68). The unity of the church depends upon right teaching, not rites and rules.

It is also true that the Augsburg Confession does not rely exclusively upon the witness of the early church, nor should it, since God will preserve His church for all time. In a couple of instances our Confession cites favorably the opinion of Jean Gerson, the fifteenth-century conciliarist, and in one of these Gerson in addition to Augustine is offered as an example of a “devout” as well as “learned” person (“*frommer, gelehrter Leut,*” AC XXVI.16–17; cf. XXVII.60). In another passage, the Augustana refers to the opinion of Pope Pius II (1458–64) regarding the marriage of priests and describes him as “a prudent and intelligent man” (“*ein verständiger, weiser Mann,*” AC XXIII.13); and in still another, it refers to certain “learned and devout men . . . before our time” who spoke out against the commercialization of the mass (“*gelehrten und frommen,*” AC XXIV.10). Nevertheless, such instances are few and far between, and by otherwise relying so heavily on the fathers and the creeds, the confessors strongly suggest that the first centuries of Christian history provide the clearest evidence of “the universal Christian church” in addition to the Scriptures.

Of course, the Augustana does not present the early centuries as some sort of “golden era,” for in condemning heresies it reminds us that the primitive period was fruitful in producing them. Manichaeans, Valentinians, Arians, Eunomians, Pelagians, and Donatists all plagued the early church (AC I, II, VIII, XII). Even so, however, the councils and fathers condemned them all and confessed Christ faithfully, so that from the standpoint of eliciting testimony to the catholicity of the church the early period remains unsurpassed by any other.

Furthermore, there is a clear sense in the Augsburg Confession that the situation of the contemporary church is far worse than it was in those early centuries. This is explicitly present in the text at least once, for in making the case for married priests the confessors comment, "We feel confident that . . . Your Majesty will graciously take into account the fact that, *in these last times of which the Scriptures prophesy*, the world is growing worse and men are becoming weaker and more infirm" ("*itzund in letzten Zeiten und Tagen, von welchen die Schrift meldet*," AC XXIII.14, emphasis added).

Here we have an important indication of the historical attitude of the Lutheran reformers. Although the church in its essence is unchangeable, nevertheless it is following a divinely-ordered, temporal trajectory toward the Last Day, a trajectory that is marked by increasing departures from the truth. In introducing Part Two of the Augustana, the confessors describe the abuses that they have corrected as "new" (*novi*; Latin), "some of the abuses having crept in over the years (*mit der Zeit*) and others of them having been introduced (*aufgericht*) with violence" (German).

Thus, "novelty" in the church is a clearly a cause for concern. False teaching is not only "godless," it is also "new" ("*nova et impia dogmata*"; "*neue und gottlose Lehre*" AC Conclusion.5). With some precision, the confessors argue that mandatory clerical celibacy was introduced only four hundred years before their own times and was contrary to the practice of the primitive church (AC XXIII.10-13). This innovation is clearly a milestone of deformation. The confessors are not so clear as to the temporal origins of other abuses, as, for example, the practice of communion in one kind; but they know that it is an innovation and that it was approved by the church only recently (AC XXII.8-10).

The practice of monasticism, they admit, goes back to the days of the fathers, but even so, it too has suffered from debilitating innovations. Originally schools for studying the Scriptures, monasteries only later became places for men foolishly to try and work out their own salvation, "*Formerly (olim; etwa) the monasteries had conducted schools of Holy Scripture But now (nunc; jetzt) the picture is changed. In former times (olim; dann vor Zeiten) people gathered and adopted monastic life for the purpose of learning the Scriptures, but now (nunc; jetzt) it is claimed that monastic life is of such a nature that thereby God's grace and righteousness before God are earned*" (AC XXVII.15-16, emphasis added).

Likewise with respect to rites and ceremonies, the confessors contend that the contemporary church is being overrun by innovations which are being prescribed as necessary for salvation: "Almost every day new holy days and new fasts have been prescribed, new ceremonies and new veneration of saints have been instituted in order that by such works grace and everything good might be earned from God" (*neue Feiertag, neue Fasten . . . neue Ceremonien und neue Ehrerbietung*; AC XXVIII.37).

Of course, the principal concern of the Confession is the teaching of "works righteousness," not the introduction of novelties per se, but the two go together since a failure to proclaim the Gospel faithfully paves the way for new and false doctrines and ceremonies. Commenting on the transformation of Sunday observance into a New Testament sabbath, the confessors say, "Such errors were introduced into Christendom when the righteousness of faith was no longer taught and preached with clarity and purity" ("*Dieselben Irrtumb haben sich in die Christenheit eingeflochten . . .*" AC XXVIII.62).

All these references that identify innovations with error and falsehood make it clear that in the Augsburg Confession, time has been the enemy of truth. The farther the church has progressed from the days of Christ and the apostles, the greater has been the departure from the truth—errors, false teachings, and abuses have multiplied. Although apocalyptic themes are not prominent in the Augustana, the one reference to being in the last times prophesied by the Scriptures and to the growing weakness of humanity indicates a fundamentally pessimistic view of human history that is redeemed only by the coming eschaton. The hope of mankind resides in the Gospel promises of God, not in the passing of time.

But what about the rest of the sixteenth-century Lutheran Confessions? Do they maintain the attitude of the Augustana towards the history of the church? For the most part, yes, but not without some modifications, intensification, and at least one important addition.

First of all, with respect to the fathers of the early church, subsequent statements in the Confessions retreat from the uniformly favorable opinion expressed in the Augsburg Confession.

Well before the presentation of the Augustana, the reformers had recognized difficulties in using patristic evidence. Already in his *Kirchenpostille* (1522), Luther had acknowledged that "[the fathers] often erred and often contradicted themselves and one another, and

very rarely spoke with one voice."¹⁰ And at Marburg, in responding to Zwingli's citations of Augustine regarding the sacrament as "sign," Luther is reported to have said, "Let us gladly do the dear fathers the honor of interpreting, to the best of our ability, their writings which they have left for us, so that they remain in harmony with Holy Scripture. However, where their writings do not agree with God's word, there it is much better that we say they have erred than that for their sake we should abandon God's word."¹¹ In other words, one should interpret the fathers by the Scriptures and not the Scriptures by the fathers. They are witnesses to the truth but do not determine it. Their authority is relative, not absolute. They can be wrong.

In the Apology, therefore, Melanchthon recognizes that the patristic evidence is not entirely on the side of the evangelical churches. He writes, "The writings of the holy fathers show that even they sometimes built stubble on the foundation but that this did not overthrow their faith" (Ap. VII/VIII.21).

Melanchthon acknowledges a concrete example of such "stubble" in the debate over the sacrifice of the mass. Although minimizing the significance of the sources quoted against them ("The ancients do not support the opponents' idea of the transfer *ex opere operato*. . . . [T]hey have support at most from Gregory and the more recent theologians"), the concern is great enough for Melanchthon to set the authority of the Scriptures over against the fathers: "We set against them [i.e., Gregory and the more recent theologians] the clearest and surest passages of Scripture. There is also great variety among the Fathers. They were men and they could err and be deceived" (Ap. XXIV.94-95).

A few years later, Luther too in the Smalcald Articles restricts the authority of the fathers. After minimizing a statement in Augustine regarding the possible existence of purgatory, Luther comments, "It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy Fathers' words or works. . . . This means that the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel" (SA II.ii.15).¹²

Consistent with these earlier comments, therefore, the Formula of Concord carefully defines the authority of the fathers; we might even say it restricts their authority to that of witnessing to the truth of Holy Scriptures. Although the formulators clearly affirm the ecumenical creeds and offer large amounts of patristic evidence, espe-

cially on the christological and eucharistic doctrines, they are explicit in subordinating such testimony to the Scriptures. "Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times" (FC Ep RN.2). Even the creeds, therefore, are here presented as "based upon the Word of God" (FC SD RN.2).

In spite of such cautions, however, the attitude of all the Confessions toward the early centuries of the church remains very positive. The ecumenical creeds are accepted; the fathers are quoted; the Catalogue of Testimonies is appended. Indeed, in the Apology, Melancthon insists that on the principal doctrine of the Christian religion, "We know that what we have said [regarding justification] agrees with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, with the holy Fathers Ambrose, Augustine, and many others, and with the whole church of Christ, which certainly confesses that Christ is the propitiator and the justifier" (Ap. IV.389).

But what about subsequent periods of church history? Luther developed an entire scheme of world history in his *Supputatio Mundi*, first published in 1541, in which he divided history into six millennia. As James Barr has pointed out, this work clearly reveals that, in Luther's thinking, the period of time since the days of Christ was a pathway to the Day of Judgment. The papacy first appears in the seventh century when the emperor recognizes papal primacy; around the year 1000, Luther notes that Satan is loosed to become the bishop of Rome, the Antichrist, who wields the power of the sword ("*solvitur nunc Satan, Et fit Episcopus Romanus Antichristus etiam vi gladii*"). He calls Gregory VII "the mask of the Devil (*Larva Diaboli*)" and a "monster of monsters who first deserves to be called the man of sin and son of perdition (*Monstrum monstrorum, qui primus qui homo peccati et filius perditionis digne vocetur*)." He describes Boniface VIII as "a monster who came in like a fox, ruled like a lion, and died like a dog (*Monstrum, intravit ut vulpes, regnavit ut Leo, mortuus ut canis*)." Whereas previous millennia of world history had human "governors"—Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and Caesar Augustus—the ruler of the present and last millennium is the Devil. And in his last note, written in 1540, Luther remarks that the end of the world is to be expected ("*Quare sperandus est finis mundi*").¹³

But did any of this make it into the remaining Confessions of the sixteenth century? How do they deal with the history of the church?

As in the Augsburg Confession, there are occasional positive references to persons in the medieval period, e.g., Bernard (Ap. IV.211; XII.73–74; XXVII.21, 32; LC IV.50¹⁴), Gerson (Ap. XV.28; XXIII.20; SA Preface.6; LC IV.50), Hus (LC IV.50), and even Francis of Assisi.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there is also a sense that the more recent centuries of church history have been the worst. In the Apology, Melancthon writes:

They have on their side some theologians of great reputation, like Duns Scotus, Gabriel Biel, and the like in addition to patristic statements which the decrees quote in garbled form. Certainly, if we were to count authorities they would be right. . . . Lest anyone be moved by this large number of quotations, it must be kept in mind that no great authority attaches to the statements of later theologians who did not produce their own books but only compiled them from earlier ones and transferred these opinions from one book to another. In this they showed no judgment. . . . Let us not hesitate, therefore, to oppose this statement of Peter [in Acts 10:43], citing the consensus of the prophets, to the many legions of commentators on the *Sentences* (Ap. XII.68–69).

Clearly, the Scriptures trump the theologians; but it is the “later theologians,” especially “the commentators on the *Sentences*,”¹⁶ who need trumping. The fathers have been misquoted. Medieval theologians are just plain wrong.

There are also references in the Apology to being in the last times and to increasing wickedness (Ap. XII.126; XXIII.53). In connection with this theme there is a significant addition in the later confessions to what we find in the Augustana, and that is the introduction and elaboration of an explicitly apocalyptic note, that is, the papacy as Antichrist. Luther’s full-blown, millennial scheme is absent, but a sense of being in the Last Days when Antichrist rages and rules is clearly evident.

Already in the Apology, Melancthon begins to make the identification between pope and Antichrist and also to tie the kingdom of Antichrist to the last times. He writes, “And it seems that this worship of Baal [i.e., the abuse of the Mass which they apply in order by it to merit the forgiveness of guilt and punishment for the wicked] will endure together with the papal realm until Christ comes to judge and by the glory of his coming destroys the kingdom of Antichrist” (Ap. XXIV.98).

But, of course, it is in the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope that our Confessions speak most clearly about the pope as Antichrist. It is not our purpose to rehearse that doctrine here in all its ramifications but only to examine it for what it reveals about the attitude of the confessors toward church history, for in their discussion of Antichrist the confessors provide important evidence regarding the downward movement of the church toward the eschaton.¹⁷

For one thing, the papacy as it was in the sixteenth century did not always exist. To show that one of the marks of the papacy as Antichrist is its claim to jurisdiction over the entire church, the Confessions resort to history and argue that in the first centuries of the Christian era the bishops of Rome did not make this claim. Although elsewhere in the Confessions, Gregory the Great is seen as a turning point in the development of bad theology, e.g., regarding private masses (Ap. XXIV.6), the sacrifice of the mass (Ap. XXIV.94), and the invocation of the saints (Ap. XXI.3), nevertheless in this instance he is cited as resisting claims to primacy for himself as well as others (Tr. 19).¹⁸

As in Luther's *Supputatio*, so here in the Treatise it is not until a few years after Gregory that Emperor Phocas acknowledged the primacy of the bishop of Rome.¹⁹ Over time since then, the papacy has advanced its claims to temporal power while also multiplying its perversions of the Gospel. Regarding the former, the Treatise refers to the historical record again, but this time the evidence comes from more recent centuries. Boniface VIII (1294–1303) is mentioned explicitly as claiming that "the pope is by divine right lord of the kingdoms of the world"²⁰ and acts of papal tyranny are referred to as having occurred after the assertion of such claims: "Then the popes began to seize kingdoms for themselves, transfer kingdoms, and harass the kings of almost all the nations of Europe, but especially the emperors of Germany, with unjust excommunications and wars, sometimes in order to make the German bishops subject to their power and deprive the emperors of the right to appoint bishops" (Tr. 33–35).

Besides its claims to power over secular authority, the Treatise also identifies the papacy with the doctrinal perversions about which the Confessions complain generally: "The errors of the pope's kingdom are manifest, and the Scriptures unanimously declare these to be doctrines of demons of the Antichrist." Among those specified

here are the sacrifice of the mass and its commercialization, penance, auricular confession, indulgences, invocation of saints, celibacy, and monastic vows and practices. Such abuses are blamed on the "pope and his adherents." They are the ones who have invented many of them and exploited all of them at the expense of the Gospel (Tr. 42-48).

Finally, as the capstone to his argument, Melancthon adds two points that reflect the most recent events: "The pope defends these errors with savage cruelty and punishment. The other is that the pope wrests judgment from the church and does not allow ecclesiastical controversies to be decided in the proper manner" (Tr. 49). The confessors knew about examples of the first from their own lifetimes,²¹ and the second point regarding the calling of a church council and its proper role had been an issue for years.²²

In short, the sense of the Treatise regarding history is that it shows the emergence of Antichrist through the papacy's egregious claims and its actions based on those claims, resulting in the complete perversion of the Gospel and assertions of tyranny over emperors and kings. The emergence of Antichrist began around the time of Gregory the Great or just after and became ever clearer over the course of what we call the Middle Ages, intensifying as time progressed toward the sixteenth century. Now, in their own times, the confessors see the papacy defending itself with outrageous arguments and extreme cruelties. Thus, history has revealed the Antichrist from which only the second coming of Christ would deliver the church at the end of time.

However, this rather gloomy picture of church history is not the last word in our Confessions, since the Formula of Concord adds yet another element to the story of the last days that challenges the previous picture of unrelenting decline.

It is well known, of course, that the Formula is directed to Lutherans and, for the most part, against the Reformed and their sympathizers. Not surprisingly, therefore, this confession does not include or elaborate upon the theme of the pope as Antichrist. It does, however, introduce another apocalyptic figure among the German Lutherans and that is Martin Luther himself.

In his recent book *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero*, Robert Kolb has done an excellent job of demonstrating the special place that Luther had among Lutherans of the sixteenth century, including for many identifying him with the angel of Rv 14:16-17, who

comes from heaven to proclaim the “everlasting Gospel” on earth. And, as Kolb points out, Luther as eschatological prophet remains a theme in the Formula of Concord.²³

Already in the Apology, Melanchthon hints at Luther’s special role by quoting the prophecy of John Hilten, the Eisenach Franciscan, who had reportedly threatened one of his detractors with the announcement, “But another will come . . . in the year of our Lord 1516. He will destroy you, and you will be unable to resist him.” To this possible reference to Luther, Melanchthon adds cautiously, “History will show how much credence should be given to this statement” (Ap. XXVII.1–4).

Some fifty years later, however, the Lutherans were explicit in their regard for Luther’s providential place in church history. The first sentence of the Solid Declaration points to Luther’s special role in recent times, “By the special grace and mercy of the Almighty, the teaching concerning the chief articles of our Christian faith . . . was once more clearly set forth on the basis of the Word of God and purified by Dr. Luther” (FC SD Preface.1). The confessional documents themselves are presented as “the sum and pattern of the doctrine which Dr. Luther of blessed memory clearly set forth in his writings on the basis of God’s Word and conclusively established against the papacy and other sects” (FC SD RN.9), and his catechisms are called the “layman’s Bible,” for “they contain everything . . . which a Christian must know for his salvation” (FC Ep RN.5).

Such statements are extraordinarily high praise and make Luther unique in church history, but they proceed from the conviction that God had employed Luther in a special way for the blessing of His church in the last days. The Formula says, “By a special grace our merciful God has *in these last days* brought to light the truth of his Word amid the abominable darkness of the papacy through the faithful ministry of that illustrious man of God, Dr. Luther” (“*in diesen letzten Zeiten*” FC SD RN.5, emphasis mine).

It is true, of course, that the Formula submits Luther’s writings like those of the fathers to the test of God’s Word, but in so doing it elicits Luther’s own testimony that this is the correct procedure: “He [Luther] expressly asserts . . . that the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and that no human being’s writings dare be put on a par with it but that everything must be subjected to it” (FC SD RN.9). Nevertheless, the fact remains

that, according to Kolb, in the twelve articles of the Solid Declaration Luther is cited over sixty times.²⁴ This compares to only three for Chrysostom, two for Cyril of Alexandria, and four for Augustine.²⁵

Of course, one can argue that the Formula relies so much upon the authority of Luther because it was written for Lutherans. But that is precisely the point. As far as Lutherans of the sixteenth century were concerned, God had lightened the darkness of these last days by raising up Martin Luther to proclaim the Gospel of Christ and to rescue the faithful from the kingdom of Antichrist. Satan may have deformed the church since the days of the apostles but God has now reformed it through Martin Luther.

But now, what does all this mean? What is the significance—if any—of the views of church history expressed in the Book of Concord? If I am correct in arguing that the sixteenth-century Lutheran Confessions include a definite understanding of church history alongside their doctrine of the church, what difference does that make for confessional Lutherans of the twenty-first century? For example, do we have a confessional, i.e., binding, position regarding the early church? On the one hand, certainly “yes,” because we subscribe to the ecumenical creeds. They are for us proper expositions of the truth of Scriptures. But on the other hand, in view of the generally positive attitude of the Confessions toward the church fathers, does it matter if historians in our own era have called into question the identification of sixteenth-century Lutheran teaching with that of the fathers? Does it matter if St. Augustine is, according to Herman Sasse, “the father of that spiritualistic understanding of the Sacrament which we find . . . [in] Berengar, Wyclif, Zwingli, and Calvin”?²⁶ Or should we be bothered if Alister McGrath is correct when he says that, regarding the doctrine of justification, Luther “introduced a decisive break with the western theological tradition as a whole by insisting that, through his justification, man is *intrinsically* sinful yet *extrinsically* righteous.”²⁷ What difference does it make if we are no longer so convinced that the fathers support the doctrines of our church?

Similarly, with respect to the medieval church. Are we confessionally bound to side with Henry IV and not Gregory VII, with the Ghibellines and not with the Guelfs, with Henry II and not Thomas à Becket? Must we read medieval history as the progressive revelation of the papal Antichrist?

And what about the history of the church in the centuries after the Reformation? How does that affect our commitment to the view of history in the Confessions? Does it matter, for example, that on many of the great issues raised by the Enlightenment, traditional Roman Catholics and confessional Lutherans stand on the same side? Even with respect to the pope, what are we to make of his obvious moral authority in a decadent age? And are his statements today regarding economics, politics, or even the death penalty, any more exercises of antichrist tyranny than similar—and probably worse—statements from the National Council of Churches?

And finally, what about Martin Luther? Perhaps on this question for most of us in this audience the attitude of the Formula of Concord is least problematical, for we still regard Luther as a special gift of God, a teacher unsurpassed in God's church. Or do we? And even if we do, what about our fellow Lutherans who are not in accord with this view? Are Luther's writings consulted when it comes to contemporary questions regarding the liturgy, the ministry, biblical interpretation, or ethics; and do his opinions have any more weight than anyone else's? Are pastors and teachers still directing Lutheran lay people to the Small Catechism as their "Bible"? Is Martin Luther still the preminent teacher in the church that bears his name?

On the one hand, questions like these need not be troubling since, after all, we subscribe to the Confessions because they teach what the Scriptures teach and not because we agree with their underlying assumptions regarding church history. Nevertheless, these issues are not insignificant, as Luther himself recognized when he wrote:

Though I was not at first historically well informed, I attacked the papacy on the basis of Holy Scripture. Now I rejoice heartily to see that others have attacked it from another source, that is from history. I feel that I have triumphed in my point of view as I note how clearly history agrees with Scripture. What I have learned and taught from Paul and Daniel, namely, that the Pope is Antichrist, that history proclaims, pointing to and indicating the very man himself.²⁸

Can we accept Luther's doctrine if we no longer accept his history? Luther thought they belonged together. Some decades ago we in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod realized that we could not endorse confessional doctrine as the teachings of the Scriptures without also assenting in an essential way to the Confessions' assump-

tions regarding the nature and origins of those same Scriptures. If then we want to assent to what the Confessions say about catholicity, the end times, Antichrist, and even the special role of Martin Luther, can we simply dismiss their view of church history? Probably not.

Notes

1. See, for example, A.G. Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 7–57; and Bruce Gordon, ed., *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, 2 vols. (Aldershot, U.K.: Scolar Press, 1996).

2. English quotations from the Confessions are from Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Quotations from the Augsburg Confession are from Tappert's translation of the German unless otherwise noted. References to the original languages are to *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 4th ed. (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959).

3. The AC Conclusion to Part One.1 [Latin] refers to the historical record this way: "There is nothing that departs from . . . the church of Rome, in so far as the ancient church is known to us from its writers." This suggests an acceptance of the documentary evidence while acknowledging that it is incomplete.

4. See, for example, Markus Wriedt, "Luther's Concept of History and the Formation of an Evangelical Identity," in Gordon, *Protestant History* 1:31–45; and John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

5. See Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Genève: Librairie E. Droz), 52–109.

6. See Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529–37)* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 45–62; and Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, vol. 1, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 476–91.

7. This argument was of critical importance at the Leipzig Debate (1519) and inspired Melancthon as well as Luther to further reflection and articulation regarding history and the church. Cf. Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 272–82; Headley, *Luther's View*, 42–43; and Kurt-Victor Selge, "Die Kirchenväter auf der Leipziger Disputation," in Leif Grane, Alfred Schindler, and Markus Wriedt, eds., *Auctoritas Patrum: Zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, 2 vols. (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1993) 1: 197–212.

8. See also the introduction to Part Two of the AC, "It is manifest that nothing is taught in our churches . . . that is contrary to the Holy Scriptures or what is common to the Christian church."

9. Tappert, 32, corrects the Augustana's citation in Article VI to Ambrosiaster instead of Ambrose. The point here, however, is not the accuracy of the Confession but its mode of argument.

10. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955–86), 52:176. Hereafter cited as AE followed by volume and page number. For original, see *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 65 vols., ed. J. F. K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff.), 10¹, 1:582. This edition hereafter cited as WA followed by volume and page number.

11. According to the account of Andreas Osiander, AE 38:69. Osiander's ac-

count is confirmed by Caspar Hedio who recorded "Luther's Rule" regarding use of the fathers, "When the Fathers speak, they should be accepted according to the canon of Scripture. But if they seem to write anything to the contrary, they should be helped with a gloss or rejected." See Scott H. Hendrix, "Deparentifying the Fathers: The Reformers and Patristic Authority," in Grane, *Auctoritas Patrum* 1:60. Hedio's original reads, "*Regula Lutheri: Quando patres loquuntur, accipiuntur juxta canonem scripturae. Quod si videntur contra scribere, adjuventur glossa, vel rejiciantur.*" See Robert Stupperich, ed., *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 4 (Gütersloh: Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1975), 348.

Melanchthon maintained the necessity of citing the fathers judiciously in the wake of the Leipzig Disputation. See Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 272–75.

12. Already in the AC, Augustine had been quoted regarding the supreme authority of the Scriptures, but this had been directed against the bishops not the fathers. Cf. AC XXVIII.28.

13. *Supputatio annorum mundi*, WA 53:1–184, especially pp. 142, 153, 154, and 156. For these and other observations, see James Barr, "Luther and Biblical Chronology," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 72 (1990): 51–67.

14. "Since God has confirmed Baptism through the gift of his Holy Spirit, as we have perceived in some of the fathers, such as St. Bernard, Gerson, John Hus, and others, . . . our adversaries must acknowledge that infant baptism is pleasing to God."

15. "Anthony, Bernard, Dominic, Francis, and other holy Fathers chose a certain kind of life for study or for other useful exercises. At the same time they believed that through faith they were accounted righteous and had a gracious God because of Christ, not because of their own spiritual exercises." Ap. IV.211. Cf. also Ap. XXIV.7 and XXVII.21.

16. A reference to the *Sententiarum libri quatuor* of Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160). This work became the standard textbook of theology in the universities of the late Middle Ages. See F. L. Cross, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) [hereafter cited as ODCC], s.v. "Peter Lombard."

17. A good introduction to "antichrist" in history is Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). For Luther and Lutheranism, see pp. 200–213. For the theological implications, see John R. Stephenson, *Eschatology*. Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, vol. XIII (Ft. Wayne: Luther Academy, 1993), 78–81.

18. For Luther, this was almost Gregory's sole saving virtue. See Johannes Schilling, "Luther und Gregor der Grosse," in Grane, *Auctoritas Patrum* 1:175–84. However, according to Gregory's modern biographer, while Gregory may have opposed the title "oecumenical patriarch" when used by the patriarch of Constantinople, he had no problem with papal primacy. See Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 212–27.

19. In the year 607. See Richards, *Consul of God*, 221. Luther discusses this in his *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, AE 41: 263–376. See especially pp. 290–97. For the original, see WA 54:206–99.

20. A reference of course to Boniface's *Unam Sanctam* (1302). See ODCC, s.v. "Unam Sanctam."

21. The first Lutheran martyrs were John van den Esschen and Henry Vos, put to death for their faith in 1523. For Luther's reaction, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 102–4.

22. E. Gordon Rupp, "Introduction" to *On the Councils and the Church*, AE 41: 5–8.

23. Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Re-*

former, 1520–1620 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 25–37, 63–65.

24. *Ibid.*, 65: “There are seventeen citations in the article on the person of Christ (VIII) and eleven each in the articles on freedom of the will (II) and the Lord’s Supper (VII). Except for Article XII, on factions and sects which had never accepted the Augsburg Confession, each article cites Luther at least once.”

25. Based on the “*Verzeichnis der Zitate aus kirchlichen und Profanschriftstellern*” in the *Bekenntnisschriften*, 1145–55.

26. Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide, S.Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 19.

27. Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, vol. 1: *The Beginnings to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 182–83. According to Headley, Luther himself recognized that his doctrine of justification was not to be found in Gregory, Augustine, or Jerome but in Scripture alone. *Luther’s View*, 172.

28. Martin Luther, “Preface to Robert Barnes, *Vitae Romanorum pontificium*” (1536) as quoted in Neelak S. Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 148. For the original, see WA 50:1–5.