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Confessional Loyalty or “I Let That Subscription Lapse”?

Scott R. Murray

What Is a Confession?

We must know what a confession is before we can speak of confessional loyalty. Theodore Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze, both of the General Council, offered this definition of confession: “Confessions are Scripture digested, assimilated, and beating the life pulses of the Church.”¹ Confessions are simply saying back to God what he has first said to us on the lips of the prophets, apostles, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Confession is therefore doxological as well as theological. A confession is the reflex of the church demanded by the promise of our Lord, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:32–33).² Ralph A. Bohlmann encouraged us, “Where God speaks, the only proper response of the church is to receive that Word, such reception being manifested in its ‘Amen,’ that is, its confession.”³ We can easily say that this act of confession is primal and primary. Confession is deeply rooted in the act of God by which he sent his Son to be incarnate of Mary and to pledge himself to our need by offering himself into death on the cross.

St. Paul says that Jesus is a confessor: “Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession” (1 Tim 6:13). Not only does Jesus confess, but St. Peter entwines our life with our Lord’s:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example [ὑπογραμμὸν], so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled,

¹ Theodore Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 9.

² All Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³ Ralph A. Bohlmann, “Foreword: Confessional Subscription” in *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1:19–20.

Scott R. Murray is the Senior Pastor of Memorial Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas, Chair of the CTSEW Board of Regents, and Third Vice President of the West Southwest Region of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. He can be contacted at smurray@mlchouston.org.

he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet 2:21–25)

A *ὑπογραμμὸν* is an outline or a *typrus*, not merely a moral example, but a theological one, a patterned pathway. No wonder then that Peter encouraged a clear confession: “Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (1 Pet 3:15–16). Clear confession is integral to life in Christ. Indeed, confession becomes the gateway through which those who ask might learn of the gospel and receive the divine mission. Scripture certainly requires us to confess.

Our confessions are not different in kind from what any faithful preacher thinks of his own preaching and teaching, *Deus dicit* (“God says”). Only God’s word is saving, thus we had better be preaching it. If we are incapable of saying “*Deus dicit*,” then we are saying to our hearers “be damned,” because we have not preached the saving word of God to them. This would be shepherding of the most horrifying sort! Schmauk and Benze write, “Confessions are the Scripture itself worked up . . . under the same guidance of the Holy Spirit that inheres in the office of the preacher in bearing witness to Christ in the pulpit—into Common Principles on which the Churches can rest, and in which the Church of the future can find anchorage.”⁴

The great woe of St. Paul (1 Cor 9:16) would impend on those who thought they were preaching only their own religious opinions or only close approximations of what God has actually said in his word. Such a preacher would be denying his Lord and their Lord to those who hear him. For example, it is my habit to subscribe every sermon I preach to God’s people. I will stand behind these words as correct expositions of the content of Scripture and in harmony with the analogy of the faith. I should not preach what I cannot subscribe. And contrariwise, I must preach what I have subscribed, namely, the Lutheran Confessions. Woe unto me if I divide between these things; as though the gospel could be proclaimed outside a sound pattern of words.

C. F. W. Walther defines the purposes of a confession in the following way:

1. That the church clearly and distinctly confesses its faith and teaching before the whole world.

⁴ Schmauk and Benze, *The Confessional Principle*, 11–12.

2. That the church may thereby be distinguished from all heterodox communions and sects.
3. That the church may have a unanimous, definite, and common norm and form of teaching for its ministers out of which and according to which all other writings and teachings that are offered for test and adoption can and should be judged and regulated.⁵

Primary and Secondary Theology

Of course, we must keep the distinction between primary and secondary theology. All of God's word is primary theology. Therefore, what God has said becomes the norm over all theology. The psalmist has it right: "All mankind are liars" (Ps 116:11), and only God is always right and truthful in the first order. It is an *a priori* judgment to say that God's word is always right and truthful, that is, it is not susceptible to human objection or scrutiny, because that would place God under human judgment and entail a breach of the first commandment. You will recognize this as the Lutheran Church's Scripture principle. Bohlmann said,

To deny or reject any part of the doctrine set forth in the Word places one outside of the stance of faith and puts one instead in the role of judge or arbiter. The question then becomes not: "How much must one accept [of the Confessions]?" but: "Does one deny any of the Lord's words, thus refusing to receive some of the gifts the Lord gives in and through His words?"⁶

The Scripture principle demands that the Scripture be understood as the *norma normans*, because there is nothing superior to it. Elegantly, Schmauk and Benze describe Scripture as the true foundation of the Confession, "The foundation of the Confession, that is, Scripture, determines every line and measurement and angle in the house."⁷ It is truly the Rule (measurement) and Norm (standard). The Formula of Concord puts it this way,

We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone, as it is written, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119[:105]), and Saint Paul: "If . . . an angel from heaven should proclaim to you something contrary, . . . let that one be accursed!" (Gal. 1[:8]).

⁵ C. F. W. Walther, "Confessional Subscription," in *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1:24.

⁶ Bohlmann, "Foreword," 1:19–20.

⁷ Schmauk and Benze, *The Confessional Principle*, 13.

Other writings of ancient or contemporary teachers, whatever their names may be, shall not be regarded as equal to Holy Scripture, but all of them together shall be subjected to it, and not be accepted in any other way, or with any further authority, than as witnesses of how and where the teaching of the prophets and apostles was preserved after the time of the apostles. (FC Ep Rule & Norm 1, 2)⁸

Scripture is and remains the norm and type for all teaching and practice in the church and the ultimate authority precisely because it is God's word.

Confessions, no matter their ancientness or resonance with us, remain second-order reflections on the content of God's word. They do not tell us what God's word means. The Confessions claim to be an exposition or a correct exhibition of Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions have what some might consider a naïve view: that Scripture speaks for itself and does not require wild exegetical gyrations through which the text can be tortured until it hands over its meaning only after the exercise of our exegetical prowess. Otherwise, the Bible could not be a saving text that the humble, meek, and untutored could study and apply to their own salvation (see FC Ep Rule & Norm 5). As the psalmist says, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple" (Ps 119:130). I wonder at the level of exegetical complexity being set forth by many exegetes. I am troubled by the amount of making simple things complex that is required by the academic enterprise, which is not always to the benefit of the church. In this sense, the content of both the Bible itself and our Lutheran Confessions is quite simple, granting light and understanding to the sinner (Ps 19:7).

The Lutheran Confessions claim a derived authority, an authority drawn from Scripture. This authority makes it a *norma normata*. This means that the Confessions bear the imprint of the scriptural truth. They are an antitype of Scripture. Scripture is the divine stamp. The Confessions are the coin pressed into the right shape when struck. The coin bears the marks of the original stamp. Robert Preus says that this means that "these symbolical writings become for me permanent confessions and patterns of doctrine."⁹ This must be my confession held with my whole being.

The Lutheran Confessions are not merely a personal confession, although they are not less than that. They are and remain the confession of the church. This is true because the Confessions purport to convey the biblical truth. The church remains

⁸ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 486.

⁹ Robert D. Preus, "Confessional Subscription," in *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*, ed. E. Kiehl and W. J. Werning (Chicago: Lutheran Congress, 1970), 46.

the church because God has spoken. She does not have an independent authority because she is the church. This would be the Romanist heresy. She is the repository of the truth because God has deposited the truth with her in his word which delivers the work of Christ. Therefore, there are no merely denominational or organizational guarantees to the truth. There is only the church under the word of God. The Confessions are above me as an individual. That's why Edmund Schlink says that the great consensus of which the Confessions so often speak "makes plain that the confession is not the doctrine of an individual but of the church."¹⁰ The churches and her pastors and teachers place themselves under the uniting confession of the shared expression of the faith. Both corporately and individually we freely place ourselves under the authority of these texts because we must. We are freely compelled by the authority which they convey. Their truth obligates us to the "Amen" of agreement. Of course, we may also freely reject their content, but in so doing we are abandoning the simple scriptural truth.

This short exposition of the idea of confessional authority as a norm for our teaching and practice leads us to consider the issue of confessional subscription. Subscription is literally placing our signature on a document as a token of our agreement and desire to not depart from the doctrinal content modeled there. Until at least the mid-1980s, our pastors placed their written signature on the Lutheran Confessions at the first district convention subsequent to their ordination. What exactly does this subscription imply?

Confessional subscription continues to be an important topic in the LCMS. From time to time, we hear reports of our clergy scoffing at the Confessions to which they have pledged to be faithful (even to death). At the installation of a pastor, the phrase which I have used in my paper's title was overheard: "Confessional subscription? I let my subscription to that lapse many years ago." This cavalier and crass mockery of our Confessions demands that we ask the question, "What does it mean to be Lutheran?" Is this an outmoded and stale doctrinal formulation, which simply makes it impossible to carry out biblical mission and stultifies evangelical preaching?

What about Subscription?

Perhaps we should begin with what the Lutheran Confessions themselves say about subscription. It seems so obvious that it could hardly require much to be said about it. The well-known phrase which is packed into our confessions everywhere

¹⁰ Edmund Schlink, *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. P. F. Koehnke and H. J. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 19.

can hardly be ignored: “*Ecclesiae magno consensu . . . docent*” (AC I). Or “We believe, teach, and confess . . .” (FC Ep I 1). We should never lose track of the fact that the confessors of Augsburg, every one of them a layman, were willing to lose their heads rather than depart from the content of the Augsburg Confession. The authors of the Confessions themselves pledged to confess with their whole heart (*toto pectore*) (FC SD Rule & Norm 4). They undertook to write down their church’s faith in terms for which they were willing to stand before God under his divine judgment. For example,

To demonstrate that this is our teaching, faith, and confession, as we want to account for it on the Last Day before the just Judge, our Lord Jesus Christ, and as we want to say or write nothing contrary, either in secret or publicly, but intend to remain in this teaching by the grace of God, we have upon careful consideration, in true fear of God and invoking him, subscribed with our own hands, done at Bergen, 29 May 1577. (FC Ep XII 31)¹¹

These Confessions also stood as symbols of a much larger body of teaching which was implied by the confessors. For example, the Formula of Concord often points us to the writings of Martin Luther, especially on the Sacrament of the Altar. The conclusion to the Augsburg Confession indicates that Melancthon thought its content to be only a short summary of what was believed and confessed by the Lutheran churches. “These are the chief articles that are regarded as controversial. For although many more abuses and errors could have been added, we listed only the principal ones in order to avoid prolixity and undue length. The others can easily be assessed in the light of these” (AC Conclusion 1).¹² “The others” here are primarily the faulty papistical practices, such as indulgence sales, the sacrifice of the Mass, and so on. Therefore, these Confessions claim to function as a standard or canon of public teaching and teachers as well as their practice in the church. “These writings, accepted officially and universally among us, have always been regarded in churches and schools that teach purely as the summary and model of the teaching that Martin Luther of blessed memory had thoroughly set forth in his writings, on the basis of God’s Word, against the papacy and other sects” (FC SD Rule & Norm 9).¹³ In the same way, the ecumenical creeds are short summaries that by necessity bring with them a more thorough confession. “Against [false teachers and heretics] the early church prepared *symbola*, that is, short, explicit confessions, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal, Christian creed and confession of the

¹¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 523.

¹² Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 104.

¹³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 528.

orthodox and true church of Christ” (FC Ep Rule & Norm 3).¹⁴ The Confessions consider themselves to be the pattern for the sound form of speech and writing. They are a *forma et typus*.

This does not mean that other good, useful, pure books that interpret Holy Scripture, refute errors, and explain the articles of faith are to be rejected. Insofar as they are in accord with this model for teaching, they should be regarded and used as helpful interpretations and explanations. Speaking of this summary of our Christian teaching in this way only indicates that there is a unanimously and commonly held, reliable form for teaching to which all our churches commonly pledge themselves. The extent to which all other writings are to be approved and accepted shall be judged and evaluated on the basis of and according to this form, for it is taken from God’s Word. (FC SD Rule & Norm 10)¹⁵

The unanimous agreement of the Lutheran Churches meant that these Confessions became a type to the antitype—that is, what was actually preached and taught in the Lutheran Churches was shaped and normed by these Confessions.

Inadequate Approaches to Confessional Subscription

The Old Bugaboo of Quatenus Subscription

The argument between a *quia* (“because”) subscription and a *quatenus* (“insofar as”) subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is old, but it must be mentioned because bad old ideas are hard to kill. Historically, even Zwinglians and enthusiasts were able to say that they would subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions, “provided they were permitted to interpret it according to the Scriptures.”¹⁶ Walther reports that even John Calvin wrote in 1539, “In truth I do not repudiate the Augsburg Confession, which I have gladly and willingly subscribed for some time as the author himself has interpreted it.”¹⁷ Of course, Calvin was counting on a weak Melancthonian interpretation of AC X. This was not a *quatenus* subscription with Scripture as the standard, but a *quatenus* subscription with Melancthon as the standard. This was a very low bar.

¹⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 486.

¹⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 529.

¹⁶ S. G. Wernsdorf, *Bericht von dem Indifferentismo der Religionen* (Wittenberg: S. G. Zimmermann, 1734), 860. Quoted in Walther, “Confessional Subscription,” 22.

¹⁷ *Epistolarum et Responsorum*, 2nd ed. (Lausanne: François Le Preux, 1576), 390. Quoted in Walther, “Confessional Subscription,” 22.

John Conrad Dannhauer puts the last nail in the coffin of merely *quatenus* subscription:

Although these symbols do not obligate anybody to adhere to all the circumstances, modes of expression, proofs, and citations in them, the doctrinal contents or the substance of the teaching must be adhered to as it is set down in writing, and not merely insofar as it may seem according to private judgment to agree with the Scriptures, for even the Quran could be subscribed in this way.¹⁸

Any *quatenus* subscription is no subscription whatsoever. The Lutheran Confessions claim to be an exposition of Scripture. Scripture is not an exposition of the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore, any *quatenus* subscription is a thoroughgoing rejection of the doctrinal content of the Confessions and a demotion of Holy Scripture to be an interpreter of something lesser, instead of as the doctrinal standard over all.

Picayunish Objections

Of course, picayunish objections abound among those who do not want to be bound by the actual doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions. They will bring up the fact that the Confessions say that garlic juice will mitigate the power of magnets (FC Ep I 15). This is beside the point. Our subscription to the Lutheran Confessions must ever remain faithfulness to its doctrinal content. How garlic juice affects magnets hardly rises to that level. Nor is it true that a false comparison makes the doctrinal point being illustrated false. Although, in this case, the Formula is using a false comparison to illustrate a false view of original sin.¹⁹

Exegetical Conclusions

Occasionally, people will object that they are not bound by the exegesis of the Confessions. This is true only in a very specific and limited way. First, we are bound to the exegetical conclusions of the Confessions, because that is the scriptural basis

¹⁸ John Conrad Dannhauer, *Lieber conscientiae Apertus*, 2nd ed. (Strasbourg, 1679), 1:258. Translation the author's. "Esto haec hujusmodi non obligent ad omnes in iis circumstantias, phrases, probationes, allegationes tenendas, ipsa tamen doctrinae substantia tenenda est, prout scripta, nec catenus tantum, quatenus sacris literis private iudicio consonare videbitur; qua quidem ratione etiam Alcorano subscribi posset, cum reservatione, quatenus cum sacris literis concordat."

¹⁹ "Or that original sin is not a deprivation or lack of spiritual powers but only an external obstacle for such good, spiritual powers, just as coating a magnet with garlic juice does not take away its natural powers but only impedes them" (FC SD I 22). Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 535.

for the doctrine delivered in the Confessions. Second, we are free to find other passages that equally well, or perhaps even better, support the doctrine which we are confessing. Robert Preus pointed out that “consensus on the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar is contingent upon agreement on the exegetical conclusions drawn from the words of institution (FC 8).”²⁰ To reject those conclusions would be tantamount to rejecting the doctrine of the real presence. Biblical exposition certainly buttresses every doctrinal conclusion drawn by the Lutheran Confessions. If you get rid of the biblical exposition, you will get rid of the doctrine. Generally, those who have these picayunish objections have that as their ultimate goal.

The Possibility of Doctrinal Error

If it is asked, “Could the Lutheran Confessions be in error?” the answer is, “Yes, of course!” However, this is not yet proof that they actually err. It is like saying, “Could the bridge to the airport collapse?” “Yes, of course.” That does not mean that it has or will. It remains to be seen whether those who question the truthfulness of the Confessions have proven its doctrinal faults.

Furthermore, the Christian’s willingness to confess the content of the Lutheran Symbols is an *a posteriori* judgment. It is done only after mature theological reflection. The candidate for the ministry is asked to confess the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions for themselves after proper study and reflection on its content. They are certainly welcome, and indeed encouraged, to decline to be ordained into a confessional Lutheran church body, if after study and reflection they cannot confess as true the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions.²¹ And we might say that anyone who has misgivings about the Confessions after reflection and study after ordination is free to repudiate a confession that necessarily must be repudiated precisely because it is in error. No Christian will willingly confess and

²⁰ Preus, “Confessional Subscription,” 48.

²¹ Kurt Marquart asked rhetorically, “Are the Confessions themselves interested in ‘subscription’ formalities (such as the pro forma acceptance of the confessional paragraph of the church bodies Constitution, see Article II, *Handbook*, 11) or in the actual doctrinal content? Clearly the latter. The much-tortured seventh article of the Augsburg Confession insists that ‘the Gospel be unanimously preached in its correct sense and that the Sacraments be administered according to the divine Word.’ In other words, the Christian doctrine (‘in all its articles,’ SD 10.31) must be actually proclaimed, the Sacraments actually administered. The living dynamic Gospel cannot be imprisoned like a museum display in some ‘constitutional paragraph’ . . . Doctrinal substance is primary, all else is secondary and subsidiary.” Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, Concordia Seminary Monograph Series 3 (Fort Wayne: CTS Press, 1977), 70–71. The doctrinal content of the Confessions must be taught in the church for the church to be rightly called a confessional Lutheran Church.

defend an error. A man of conscience, who resigned his post for this reason, would receive our praise and thanks for his clarity and honesty.

While we may squabble about the meaning of the Pauline dictum that our pastors should be “apt to teach” (see 1 Tim 3:2), it should mean at least that a person is capable of working his way through our Confessions and determining for himself that this is his own confession. Anyone unable to do this is certainly not apt to teach.

Postmodernistic

Postmodernism is quite hard not only on the truthfulness of the Scriptures, but also especially on the truthfulness of a confessional standard, like the Lutheran Confessions. Postmodernism presumes that truth is personal, that it cannot be carried by words and texts. There is no identifiable authorial intention.²² Texts have no objective basis, but are radically your own.²³ You are free to make any construction from them you desire. The book will always agree with you, because you tell it what it means. The possibility that the book tells me what I should mean is out of bounds. Of course, this makes confessional subscription impossible, by definition, because you would be subscribing to your own opinion, regardless of the content of the confessions. I hope that this is not what young people steeped in the postmodern truth—that there is no truth—mean when they subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions.²⁴

Historicistic

Confessional subscription is not a time-bound sixteenth-century doctrinal straitjacket that ought to be junked in favor of unbounded Christian freedom. The Formula of Concord, subscribed more than forty years after the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, pledged to a faithful confession of the Augsburg Confession not because it was written by our theologians. “We do so not because [the AC] was

²² “The effort to read books as their writers intended *them* to be read has been made into a crime, ever since ‘the intentional fallacy’ was instituted.” Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 375.

²³ “There is an enormous difference between saying, as teachers once did, ‘You must learn to see the world as Homer or Shakespeare did,’ and saying, as teachers now do, ‘Homer and Shakespeare had some of the same concerns you do and can enrich your vision of the world.’ In the former approach students are challenged to discover new experiences and reassess old; in the latter, they are free to use the books in any way they please. A teacher who treated the Bible naively, taking it at its word, or Word, would be accused of scientific incompetence and lack of sophistication.” Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 374.

²⁴ The postmodern rejection of objective truth is based on an internal contradiction: “The only truth is that there is no truth,” which is not true.

produced by our theologians but because it is taken from God's Word and is firmly and solidly grounded in it" (FC SD Rule & Norm 5).²⁵

If it is asked whether the Confessions need to be interpreted in a historically responsible way, the answer is, "Yes, of course." It is certainly helpful to know what the historical context was for the Augsburg Confession, created as it was in view of the predecessor documents, including the *404 Theses* of John Eck, the *Schwabach* and *Torgau Articles*, and the succeeding papal *Confutation*. However, this historical inquiry must never lead to a rejection of the doctrinal content. The crassest form of the historicist interpretation of the Confessions is simply to argue that the Lutheran Confessions were meaningful in the sixteenth century but have ceased to be meaningful through the passage of time. They can only testify to a long obsolete or even dead confession of faith.²⁶

Furthermore, the Confessions themselves expected their content to obligate Lutheran posterity. The confessors did not produce these statements only for their own day, as though they had no significance for the future. The last paragraph of the Formula of Concord says this passionately and elegantly,

Therefore, it is our intent to give witness before God and all Christendom, among those who are alive today and those who will come after us, that the explanation here set forth regarding all the controversial articles of faith which we have addressed and explained—and no other explanation—is our teaching, faith, and confession. In it we shall appear before the judgment throne of Jesus Christ, by God's grace, with fearless hearts and thus give account of our faith, and we will neither secretly nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it. Instead, on the strength of God's grace we intend to abide by this confession. Thus, after careful consideration and in the fear and invocation of God, we have subscribed our signatures to this document with our own hands. (FC SD XII 40)²⁷

To reject the Lutheran Confessions or part of its doctrinal content because they were not written by us or in our time is to fall into the historicistic error, or what I call the chauvinism of modernity. Would not a confession written ten years ago be equally suspect because of the passing of time as a confession written nearly five centuries ago?

Perhaps the obsolescence of which some are afraid is not so much in the document, but in their own minds and hearts. The passing of time does not

²⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 527.

²⁶ A recent example of this can be found in Timothy Wengert's *A Formula for Parish Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

²⁷ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 660.

invalidate the truth, but rather the opposite. As we mature, our confessional heritage becomes more attractive. What we passed over as young pastors and teachers in the church only becomes more precious as time passes, because we have seen the wonderful faithfulness of God's word reflected in our real-world experiences of preaching the content of the Confessions. Hopefully, as we become history, our respect for it increases.

Partial Subscription

To subscribe only to some of the doctrinal content of a confession is a meaningless subscription, because the rationale for what is doctrinally significant or fundamental is itself a moving target and indeed subject to the whims of the human conscience and the breezes of the times. For example, in the nineteenth century the Lutheran General Synod (a predecessor of the ELCA) regarded even the means of grace as nonessential parts of the confession.²⁸ This is why Francis Pieper spent so much time on fundamental and secondary articles in his *Christian Dogmatics* of the early twentieth century. Walther rejected subscription to only part of the doctrinal content of the Confessions: "In a doctrinal declaration everything that belongs to the doctrinal content belongs to its essence."²⁹

Walther warns us against the attempt to distinguish between fundamental and secondary articles in such a way that we need only confess some truncated list of so-called fundamental articles of the faith. It has been argued that so-called faithful Lutherans have disagreed about what doctrines the Confessions actually obligate us to confess. Walther says this is merely begging the question.

For loyal and resolute Lutherans are simply those who believe what the Lutheran church believes in conformity with its confessions. The casting of doubt on certain points of doctrine in the Lutheran symbols by men who are alleged to be resolute Lutherans will not convert these points of doctrine into open questions; the casting of doubt on parts of the Lutheran confessions rather makes it manifest that those allegedly resolute Lutherans are not what they are believed to be. Whoever allows such doctrines to be treated as open questions by alleged Lutherans thereby does nothing less than surrender the citadel of our church's confession.³⁰

Perhaps it might be said that the first proof of such surrendering of the citadel of the church's confession is the present ELCA. Once we are open to picking apart

²⁸ Walther, "Confessional Subscription," 25.

²⁹ Walther, "Confessional Subscription," 25.

³⁰ Walther, "Confessional Subscription," 26.

the substance of our faith one block at a time, quite quickly the whole structure becomes suspect.

Reductionistic Subscription

A number of theologians in the predecessor bodies of the ELCA, such as Carl Braaten, considered the Lutheran Confessions to be purely a witness to the gospel.³¹ Robert Preus reported that “Braaten claims that we are free today to work out our own approach toward the confessions. He then polemicizes without abandon against any unconditional subscription to the confessions as such. This he calls ‘symbolatry’ (a term used by Loehe), ‘doctrinal legalism,’ ‘confessional totalitarianism,’ ‘restitutionism,’ ‘a kind of doctrinal methodism.’”³² This is gospel reductionism, in which the content of the Confessions is reduced to what might be considered the good news. However, the gospel here was often defined merely as that which gave comfort to the troubled conscience, without reference to the specificities of the Christian gospel in the acts of God in Christ, such as the incarnation, the two natures in Christ, or the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

This viewpoint does not comport in any way with the actual views held by those who set the Book of Concord out for publication in the Lutheran Churches. They committed themselves to the content as well as to the specific forms of speech delivered in them.

In conclusion, . . . we are minded not to manufacture anything new through this work of concord nor to depart in either substance or expression to the smallest degree from the divine truth. . . . On the contrary, by the grace of the Holy Spirit we intend to persist and remain unanimously in this truth and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it. In

³¹ Unfortunately, Leif Grane’s wonderful commentary on the Augsburg Confession is affected by this gospel-reductionist thinking. When considering the meaning of the phrase *consentire de doctrina evangelii*, Grane presumes that the verb *consentire* means to proclaim or preach. “There can be no doubt that the phrase *consentire de doctrina evangelii* (to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel), refers to proclamation, not to ‘correct doctrine,’ or something similar. This means that the AC had not yet drawn the consequences from the church schism which were later drawn by Lutheran Orthodoxy, namely that pure doctrine in the sense of correct theology should be the criterion for the true church.” Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*, trans. J. H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 96–97. The problem with this is that the Confessions do not employ the verb *consentire* to mean proclamation anywhere else; rather, they employ it with the meaning precisely eschewed by Grane. See for example, FC Ep X 2: *etiamsi adversarii nobiscum in doctrina consentire nolint* (“although the adversaries refused to agree with us on doctrine,” translation the author’s). This cannot refer merely to proclamation, but refers rather to a substantive difference in doctrine.

³² Preus, “Confessional Subscription,” 44.

addition, we have determined and intend to live in genuine peace and unity.
(Book of Concord Preface 23)³³

Furthermore, when the Confessions are understood merely as *a* witness to the gospel (among others), it also implies that other (even contradictory) witnesses to the gospel are equally valid and equally true. This accommodated the ecumenical mania perpetrated in the late twentieth century and which culminated in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.³⁴ Of course, this is an entirely inadequate approach to confessional subscription, because it fails to take seriously the self-claims of the Confessions. Their content makes claims over against other churches' claims to Christian truth; both dispositively and polemically and based on biblical data. That may not be easily dismissed.

Pragmatic Subscription

Today, we hear that our Lutheran Confessions are no longer relevant to the American context. This is nothing new! Of course, this same view was held by the Schmuckerites of Definite Platform³⁵ fame in the nineteenth century along with mainstream American Lutheranism until the arrival of the Saxons and other Old Lutherans from Germany. In the last half of the nineteenth century, the predecessor bodies of the ELCA sought closer adherence to the Lutheran Confessions in response to the arrival of the Saxons. However, the view that the Lutheran Confessions are irrelevant in the American context has now triumphed completely in the ELCA. The adoption of the Leuenberg Agreement and the subsequent sharing of altar fellowship with Reformed communions³⁶—by which the Lutheran Confessions' teaching of the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper

³³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 15.

³⁴ See my "Introduction," *Logia* 18 (Holy Trinity 2009): 5, and the entire *Logia* issue which focuses on the JDDJ. Michael Root, "Ecumenical Winter? The Ecumenical Movement Has Stopped Moving," *First Things* (October 2018), accessed September 10, 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/10/ecumenical-winter>.

³⁵ See Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1966), 99–104.

³⁶ See William G. Rusch and Daniel F. Martensen, eds., *The Leuenberg Agreement and Lutheran-Reformed Relationships* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989). See also Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, eds., *A Common Calling* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), 65. "While the disagreements between our communities that led to the 16th-century condemnations regarding eucharist, christology, and predestination continue to shape and reflect our identities, they cannot claim to be church-dividing today and should not stand in the way of achieving 'full communion' among us. In addition, we affirm that the differences among these churches of the Reformation on questions of confessional commitment, ministry, and ecclesial polity fall within the bounds of allowable evangelical diversity and are therefore not church dividing."

is simply shunted aside—and the continued adoption of culturally normed sexual mores³⁷ all give glaring evidence of this irrelevance.

There is a move afoot to reject the Lutheran Confessions' doctrine of the ministry as a purely European phenomenon that doesn't work here in twenty-first-century America. We cannot consider our theologically sturdy way of training clergy to be faithful confessors to be some Europeanized pedagogical method.³⁸ We are somewhat removed from the European educational scene; not to mention the fact that both our seminaries have revised their curricula in the last twenty years. We may ask, what would be placed in the gap created by a rejection of the Confessions' doctrine of the ministry as a European construct? It would be replaced by an American-pragmatic doctrine of the ministry. It would not be a biblical doctrine. Junking our confessional doctrine of the ministry by labeling our theologically rigorous preparation of theological candidates would make us nothing but schismatics.³⁹

Yes, of course, the Confessions' doctrine of the ministry doesn't appear to work. In the jaundiced view of some, it is keeping the church from growing. I submit that a standard that confessional statements are required to conform to external definitions of success is driven not by the Bible, but by the American philosophy of pragmatism championed by John Dewey and William James. In American pragmatism, truth is not a static set of statements but an ever-changing flow of ideas the value of which is only certain according to their outcomes. For James, "truth is the 'cash-value' of an idea." Most crassly stated, a thing is true only when it can be externally shown to be successful or able to make money.⁴⁰ This is a uniquely American philosophy in which every American is swimming, whether he knows it or not. Pragmatism asks, "Does it work?" As an example, Timothy Wengert can say

³⁷ See "Exposing the ELCA," accessed December 9, 2020, <https://www.exposingtheelca.com/>.

³⁸ Michael W. Newman, "Next Steps for LCMS Multiplication: Two Actions to Reignite a Gospel Movement," *Lutheran Mission Matters* (November 2019): 274.

³⁹ Remarkably, the rejection of the Office of the Ministry is a heresy of the Schwenckfeldians, who believe "the church's ministry—the Word as it is proclaimed and heard—is not a means through which God the Holy Spirit teaches human beings the saving knowledge of Christ and effects conversion, repentance, faith, and new obedience in them" (FC SD XII 30). Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 659.

⁴⁰ "Instead of asking whence an idea is derived, or what are its premises, pragmatism examines its results; it 'shifts the emphasis and looks forward;' it is 'the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories," suppose it necessities, and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts.'" William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longman's, 1907), 54. "Scholasticism asked What *is* the thing? — and lost itself in 'quiddities;' Darwinism asked, What is its origin? — And lost itself in nebulas; pragmatism asks, What are its consequences? — and turns the face of thought to action in the future." Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Company, 1938), 558.

about the Formula of Concord: “The bottom line of any doctrine is not its correctness but its effect, its results.”⁴¹ This is a false dichotomy at best. Certainly, good theology saves. But good theology is good because it is true, correct.

Pragmatism may not be permitted to overrule the truth of Scripture and our Confessions’ witness to the truth. The American critic James G. Huneker called pragmatism “a philosophy of Philistines.”⁴² Will Durant, the historian, summarized beautifully: “James talks of God as of an article to be sold to a materialistically-minded consumer by every device of optimistic advertising; and he counsels us to believe as if he were recommending long-term investments, with high dividends, in which there was nothing to lose, and all the (other) world to win. It was young America’s defensive reaction against European metaphysics and European science.”⁴³ If this is what we mean by rejecting a “European view of the ministry,” count me out. I will not agree that what works is right. Nor should any confessional Lutheran. This is a standard of Philistines.

Ironically, both Wilhelm Loehe and J. A. A. Grabau of the Buffalo Synod considered the doctrine of the ministry as taught by the Lutheran Confessions to be an open question, according to C.F.W. Walther. The articles concerning church and ministry are “points of doctrine on which neither the Word of God nor the confessions of our church have made a definite decision.”⁴⁴ In other words, Grabau and Loehe argued as though the Lutheran Confessions did not have a settled view of the call and the ministry. Those who want doctrinal freedom from the Lutheran Confessions are always willing to assert that their pet doctrine is an open question. However, the irony deepens when it is recognized that Grabau brought a doctrine of the ministry to America by which he diminished the rights of the priesthood of all believers against which our Lutheran Confessions protest with great vigor.⁴⁵ Therefore, it is obvious that the slaying of the Lutheran Confessions’ doctrine of the call and ministry does not necessarily get its assassins where they want to go. Perhaps they will just end up like Marcus Brutus and his co-conspirators: having a dead authority and not knowing what to do next. Wouldn’t that be seven devils worse than the first?

⁴¹ Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Practice*, 194.

⁴² “Philosophy of Philistines,” in *The Pathos of Distance* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 347–357.

⁴³ Durant, *The Story of Philosophy*, 564.

⁴⁴ Walther, “Confessional Subscription,” 23.

⁴⁵ See for example, C. F. W. Walther, *The Congregation’s Right to Call Its Own Pastor*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 1997), 149, in which Grabau denies that the keys are given principally and immediately to the church (cf. Tr 24), a significant attack on the rights of the baptized priesthood.

The Legalistic Objection

Some argue that it is a legalistic imposition to expect an unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. The Lutheran Confessions are from beginning to end shaped and ordered for the sake of the gospel. Luther in the Smalcald Articles calls the article of justification the *Hauptartikel* (“chief article”), to which all other teachings must be conformed (SA II 1). Think of the length of Article IV in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, in which Melancthon painstakingly distinguishes the gospel from that which obscures the gospel and buries Christ. The authors of the Confessions loved the gospel and placed their lives on the line for its publication. Why? Robert Preus answered beautifully:

Not only because their personal salvation is involved, but because of their evangelical concern for lost sinners and their spiritual welfare, because of their love and concern over tender and terrified consciences, their concern over confused Christians, yes, concern for the eternal salvation of these people. It is this cause and concern with which a Lutheran pastor identifies when he wholeheartedly and joyfully subscribes and commits himself to the Lutheran symbols. The doctrinal content of the Lutheran symbols which he subscribes is the gospel and all its articles.⁴⁶

The preservation of pure doctrine is similar to the preservation of pure drinking water. Who would object to a pure clear fountain offering the water of life? Who would seek to drink water from a ditch made filthy by runoff? When confronted with an abundance of clean drinking water, who would drink from adulterated sources? Who indeed?

Because our Lord delights in our confession, we, too, seek to do this not because we must, but because it is a great joy to us and a glory to him.

Walther says:

No Law is in any way imposed on the person who wishes to undertake a ministry in the church; he is only asked to make a confession of his faith in order that the church may know whether or not it can with a good conscience commit the ministry in its midst to him. If he has the faith of the church he does not regard this requirement as a legal burden. It cannot be anything but a heart's delight and joy to him to confess openly and solemnly with his lips the faith that he cherishes in his heart and to make the sacred promise to preach this faith and none other as long as he lives.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Preus, “Confessional Subscription,” 48.

⁴⁷ Walther, “Confessional Subscription,” 26.

Those who object to confessional subscription as a legalistic imposition are ultimately objecting to the possibility of pure teaching and the rejection of the opposite. Great offense is taken when we condemn teachings that are contrary to the gospel in the Lutheran Confessions. Yet, Jesus and the apostles are quite happy to reject and condemn false teaching. Was St. Paul a legalist? “Was he not an obedient servant of Christ who loved his Lord, but he also emphasized the great importance of pure doctrine (2 Tim. 1:13–14 [cf. FC SD Rule and Norm,9]; 1 Tim. 4:16; Tit. 2:2). He did not hesitate to condemn false teachers (2 Tim. 1:[15]; Rom. 16:[17]; Gal. 1:8), even by name (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17).”⁴⁸ Paul was positively and wholly motivated by the gospel and was the most effective missionary who ever proclaimed Christ. He demands that we proclaim using a sound pattern of words (2 Tim 1:13). When we vindicate the Lutheran Confessions, we are vindicating the apostolic gospel given to us in God’s word.

Conclusion

We subscribe unconditionally to the evangelical Lutheran Confessions because we are evangelical Lutherans in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The gospel is the white-hot center of the Confessions’ content. To abandon them by some mealy-mouthed non-subscription will ultimately bring us to ruin because the gospel is in their every paragraph. To have our Confessions is to have the gospel. The requirement to confess the Lutheran Symbols is the law. But our Confessions may be precisely what we conceive of in the third use of the law, a law in service to the gospel; a requirement set upon preachers to vouchsafe the contents of the gospel to God’s people. Let me conclude with a quote from Ralph Bohlmann:

[Walther] viewed confession through the lens of the Gospel. Consequently, for him the Lord’s Word comes first. The doctrine contained in the Scriptures is a gift from God to His church. It is a gift that bears and brings the forgiveness of sins and every good gift to God’s people. The only appropriate response to this Word is the response of faith. Faith receives that Word, receives it in its entirety.⁴⁹

A confessional Lutheran cannot help but speak a hearty “Amen” to this and then ask, “Where do I sign up?”

⁴⁸ Preus, “Confessional Subscription,” 49.

⁴⁹ Bohlmann, “Foreword,” 19.