

Lutheran Confessionalism: Doctrine and Practice

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By declaring altar and pulpit fellowship with several churches of the Reformed communion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), in effect, surrendered its claim to the title Lutheran as this move embodies a rejection of the doctrinal content of The Book of Concord on the Lord's Supper. The erosion of confessional Lutheranism within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is not as blatant but is nonetheless troublesome. While the ELCA has become a generic, mainline liberal Protestant denomination, the LCMS is in danger of becoming a sect within American Evangelicalism.

Impressed with American Evangelicalism's conservative stance on the inerrancy of the Bible, their emphasis on moral values, and their zeal for evangelism, the LCMS has been profoundly influenced by this movement whose roots are deeply planted within Calvinism and revivalism.

Reformed biblicism coupled with the pragmatism of revivalism poses a critical challenge to the Synod's traditional understanding of confessional subscription. One is compelled to ask does confessional subscription make any difference in what actually takes place in LCMS congregations? Are the Confessions normative for the liturgical life of the congregation (AC/AP VII, XXIV)? Does the doctrinal content of the Confessions norm preaching (AC/AP IV; FC-SD V and catechesis or is preaching reduced to the sharing of pastoral advice and catechesis made so "relational" that it is void of the essentials of the Catechism? Does the confessional understanding of original sin (AC/AP II; FC-SD I) and the practice of confession/absolution (AC/AP XI-XII; SA III:iii, III:viii; SC V; LC-Confession) actually shape the practice of pastoral care? Does the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions on the freedom of the will (AC/AP XVIII; FC-SD II) direct our approach to evangelism? Has the equalitarian spirit of our age silenced the Confessions' extolling of the Office of the Holy Ministry (AC V, XIV)?

Convention resolutions and CTCR reports are no substitutes for what actually takes place in the life of the congregation. What happens at the altar and in the pulpit, in the catechesis of youth and adults, and in the pastoral care of Christ's holy people finally determines whether a congregation is confessional. Some in our day would argue that it is enough that congregation remain biblical. In his magisterial convention essay of 1857 on confessional subscription (see *Essays for the Church*, Vol. I, 19-29), Walther identifies Pietism as the source of this argument.

Walther understood that to be a theologian of the Word one must be a theologian of the church's confession. Hence, our confessional subscription is quia (because the confession conforms to Scripture) and not quatenus (insofar as it conforms to Scripture). Hermann Sasse echoes Walther: "Also for us Holy Scripture occupies the central position in the church. However, there is no denying that in this sinful world Scripture can also be misunderstood and misused. For a century before there was a New Testament the church had the same Bible as the synagogue. As soon as there was a New Testament it was commandeered by all the heretics. Today we share the same Bible with the worst of the sects. The true church is gathered not around Scripture but around the rightly understood, the purely and correctly interpreted Bible. It is the task of the church's confession to express the right understanding of the Scripture which the church has reached" ("*Church and Confession*" *We Confess Jesus Christ*, tr. Norman Nagel, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984, 83-84- emphasis in the original).

Sasse, like Walther before him, brings us to see that confessional subscription is no mere formality but a pledge made Coram Deo, in the sight of God. Far from being a theoretical commitment, subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is to determine and govern what is done in the congregation. There is "no such thing in the Christian Church as mere teaching; all teaching is to be reduced to practice....Doctrine is the basis for every activity in the Church" (F.Pieper quoted by Charles Arand in *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity*, St.Louis:Concordia Publishing House, 1995, 87). There can be no wedge driven between doctrine and practice (or substance and style!). Practice is derived from doctrine. And the doctrine does not belong to us, but to the Lord. To be indifferent to doctrine is to be indifferent to the Lord for it is His doctrine.

There are some signs of hope in the LCMS. Our seminaries are shaping pastors who are at home in the Confessions and are eager to let them norm their work in the parish. With large portions of the writings of Hermann Sasse now available in English, this rich legacy of confessional theology is enlivening and enriching the minds of many younger pastors. We have a synodical president who is providing the church with a renewed call to confessional commitment. Ultimately, the future is in the hands of the crucified and risen Lord. The confidence of our confession is in Him and so we pray:

"The cause is yours, the glory too.
Then hear us, Lord, and keep us true,
Your Word alone our heart's defense,
The Church's glorious confidence" (LW 344:6)

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