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## The Lutheran Confessions as a Distinctive Contribution to World Christianity

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One of the most common false antitheses heard in the Lutheran Church today may be stated very baldly thus: "Not Lutheran, but Christian"; or more intelligibly like this: "Our real concern must be to make Christians of people, not Lutherans." Now, this sentence is almost wholly wrong in all of its implications; so wrong, in fact, that it amazes me that it could have gained the popularity it has actually achieved. There is no statement so wrong as that which looks like the truth.

The most obvious criticism of the statement is that there is no antithesis between the two ideas, being Lutheran and being a Christian. A person could surely be a Christian and a Lutheran at the same time. Just as he could be a Methodist and a Christian at one and the same time. Another criticism may be put in the form of a number of questions. What is there in Lutheranism that is not Christian, that falls short of being Christian, or that goes beyond it? There must be something, and the speaker of the antithesis must know what it is, or else he could not rationally or logically make the statement at all. Imagine the nonsensicality of the sentence: "It is more important to be Christian than Lutheran, but I don't know what the difference between the two is." And then the next question must be put to the defender of the antithesis: "Very well, if that is the case, if it is better to be Christian than Lutheran, why are you a Lutheran? Why do you put up with the inferior state? Or what are you doing to remedy the lacks of your Lutheran state, so that it may be more Christian?"

There are other observations that could be made that would be pertinent as a criticism of this very misleading antithesis, but I shall proceed to a thought that is directly germane to the topic in hand. The only defensible sentence combining the two concepts is: "Since I am a Christian, therefore I am a Lutheran." A Christian living in the twentieth century cannot simply eliminate the many centuries of history and the development of the Church which link him with the beginnings of Christianity. He must somehow take account of that history and make his peace with it. He must be part of one of the historical churches, or he must establish one. Or better still, in the words of Charles Porterfield Krauth, "Every Christian is

bound either to find a Church on Earth, pure in its whole faith, or to make one."<sup>1</sup> And a Lutheran, to bear that name rightly, declares that it is in the Lutheran Church true to her confessions that the Christian faith is most purely proclaimed, taught, set forth. If that were not the case, he would not be Lutheran at all. Christian, therefore Lutheran—this paper is in essence a defence of that phrase, although its method will be to proceed in the opposite way, to show that the centre of the Lutheran Confessions and certain truths directly related to this centre are a true setting forth of the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and for that reason just those things which the whole Church of Christ needs to the end of time.

### Part I

The statement just made concerning the way this paper is to go involves the implicit rejection of what is on occasion advanced as a distinctive contribution of the Lutheran Reformation to world Christianity. It is a mistake to think, for example, that Luther's great gift to the world was the assertion of the right of private judgment in matters of religion. Luther was as far from asserting the right of private judgment as his opponents. He was as bound as they were. However, his private judgment was captive to a different power, that of the Word of God as opposed to that of the Pope or Church or Council. Nor did Luther urge the right of every man to read the Bible and formulate his own doctrines. It was rather his position that the Bible's own determination of its centre was to determine the individual's decision. The Christian is not free over against the Bible; the Bible asserts authority and is to assert authority over him.

Similarly, certain contributions of Lutheranism to the store of what is excellent in human achievements, in the way of culture, the arts and the sciences, cannot be regarded as distinctive contributions to world Christianity or, beyond that, to the world as such. We may be able to point to the treasures of hymnody arising within the Lutheran Church from Luther on to the end of the seventeenth century and beyond, or to the incomparable Johann Sebastian Bach and his prodigious output of church music of the very highest excellence, to the remarkable number of great men in Germany who came from the Lutheran manse. But there is nothing especially distinctive about this. There are many examples of exceptional flowerings of the human spirit, whether inspired by Christianity or not, which are in no way inferior to the Lutheran contributions just mentioned. We can think here of the extraordinary number of eminent men in a large variety of fields produced by the small

city state of Athens in the century following the battle of Salamis, or to eminent artists, writers, architects, painters, and sculptors which Florence produced in the late medieval and Renaissance periods, or, again, to a similar phenomenon in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the golden Elizabethan age in the centre. We shall have to look elsewhere for what are distinctively Lutheran contributions to world Christianity.

I think it must be granted that any distinctive Lutheran contributions to the church as a whole must be related to what the Lutheran Confessions regard as being the *raison d'être* of the Lutheran Church. What could not be regarded as of the essence, the centre, the heart of its own being could hardly be a distinctive contribution to the church as a whole. Now, there can be no doubt what the Lutheran Confessions mark out as being central to their witness. It is the teaching of justification by faith: the teaching that man as sinner is justified, or has the forgiveness of sins, not by works, but by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith. It may be regarded as a work of supererogation to enter upon a demonstration of the fact that justification by faith is indeed the central concern of the Lutheran Confessions, since it is so generally stated or conceded to be the case. However, it seems to me to be important, at least from the point of view of the balance of this paper, to indicate, however briefly, in what ways the central position of justification by faith in the Lutheran Confessions is pointed to by the confessional writings themselves.

We have, first of all, those few passages which directly make this assertion. The Formula of Concord,<sup>2</sup> quoting the German version of the Apology, makes the statement:

In the words of the Apology, this article of justification by faith is "the chief article of the entire Christian doctrine," "without which no poor conscience can have any abiding comfort or rightly understand the riches of the grace of Christ."

The more decisive and fuller statement is contained in the Smalcald Articles, where the teaching of justification for Christ's sake is held to be the only reason for the existence of the Lutheran movement in its opposition to Rome.

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, was "put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25) . . .

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3. "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom. 3:28).

and again, "that he (God) himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed . . .

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.<sup>3</sup>

The contrast that follows immediately is very germane to the point being made at the moment: "The Mass in the papacy must be regarded as the greatest and most horrible abomination because it runs into direct and violent conflict with this fundamental article."<sup>4</sup> The worst faults are those which conflict with what is best.

We may point, next, to the fact that a very full treatment is given in various articles to this teaching of the Confession: Articles IV, VI, and XX of the Augsburg Confession; especially article IV of the Apology; Articles III, IV, and V of the Formula of Concord. A short statement of the doctrine crops up repeatedly in other articles as well, in over half of the twenty-eight articles of the Augsburg Confession, and the same is true of the Apology.

The doctrine determines the position taken in matters not directly connected with justification. Thus, in almost all the articles dealing with abuses which have been corrected in the churches presenting the Augustana the position taken is tied up intimately with the teaching of justification and how the abuses involved relate to it. One would *expect* justification and the forgiveness of sins to be made central in the article dealing with confession (AC XXV), but the next one on the distinction of foods starts with justification also. "In the first place, the grace of Christ and the teaching concerning faith are thereby obscured . . ."<sup>5</sup> In the article dealing with monastic vows the same situation is to be noticed: "First, it is not a legitimate vow if the one making it supposes that by it he merits the forgiveness of sins before God or makes satisfaction for sins before God."<sup>6</sup> Article XXVIII tells the same story:

. . . our opponents' only reply is that bishops have the power to rule and correct by force in order to guide their subjects toward the goal of eternal bliss . . . These are the words of the Confutation, by which our opponents inform us that bishops have the authority to create laws which are useful for attaining eternal life.

In the church we must keep this teaching, that we

receive forgiveness of sins freely for Christ's sake by faith.<sup>7</sup>

As a final indication of the centrality of the doctrine of justification we mention the fact that a statement of the doctrine shows up in all sorts of unexpected contexts. This fact is almost more convincing than direct statements concerning the centrality of that teaching. "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks," and the pen writes. The doctrine of justification is so central that it comes out even when it is completely unnecessary. One example will suffice. When Roman theologians make the suggestion that celibacy is a purity which merits justification more than marriage, issue is quite properly joined with the opponents. The exposition goes on to say that one gift surpasses another, but there is no excess of righteousness on that account. Examples are given and the following conclusion drawn:

But as eloquence does not make an orator more righteous before God than building makes an architect, so the virgin does not merit justification by virginity any more than the married person does by performing the duties of marriage. Each should serve faithfully in what he has been given to do.

But the Apology does not stop there. It goes on to make the addition—quite unnecessarily and almost annoyingly because of the repetition—"believing that for Christ's sake he obtains the forgiveness of sins and that through faith he is accounted righteous before God."<sup>8</sup> A by-the-way phrase likewise shows most illuminatingly the centrality of justification for the confessors, like the well-known phrase in the Small Catechism: "where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

## Part II

How is the doctrine of justification by faith a distinctive contribution of the Lutheran Confessions to world Christendom? The first aspect of the answer to be developed now is that the Lutheran Confessions in making justification by faith the centre of their witness are pointing the whole church to the heart and centre of God's revelation in the Sacred Scriptures. The heart of the Lutheran Confessions is also the heart of the Scriptures. This is not to assert a merit or an achievement; it is no assertion of special intelligence, spirituality, insight, virtue on the part of the confessors. It is simply to state a fact; it is to acknowledge a gift. It is not to state that in this emphasis the Confessions could not err; it is to say that they did not err. Some sort of demonstration of the claim being made here must

be given, but the complete demonstration would be the subject for a whole volume or even more than one.

The New Testament writer closest to the Lutheran Confessions is undoubtedly St. Paul. (The discussion here is limited to the New Testament because it is the final speaking of God to this world, Heb. 1:1.) A reference to three central passages of his shows both his teaching of justification and the centrality of that teaching for him. There is, first of all, Romans 1:16-17.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."

Secondly, consider Romans 3:20-25.

For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

There is, next, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation . . . All this is from God . . . in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Finally, we have Paul's deliberate confession of Philippians 3:8-9.

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

It would be hard to produce a sharper formulation of the teaching of justification by faith or a more incisive statement that it is at the very centre of the Gospel.

Some have held that the sharp formulation of Luther, *simul iustus et peccator* (righteous and a sinner at one and the same time), is not to be found in the New Testament and that a

permanent attitude or disposition of repentance is strange to it. I should hold that Romans 4:5 ("And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness"), taken together with the natural understanding of Romans 7:14-25, is so close to a *iustus et peccator* view of the Christian in this life as to be indistinguishable from it.

When we turn to the other New Testament writings, we find a different terminology but no different view of what the Gospel is. "Forgiveness of sins," "salvation," "life" are terms that become prominent to describe the gift of God in Christ to be received by man, the unworthy. Paul, by the way, knows these terms too. Forgiveness is a synonym of righteousness or justification (Rom. 4:6-8); so is salvation (Rom. 1:16, 17); and so is eternal life (Rom. 5:12-21). John has given us the whole purpose of his gospel, a purpose which he develops very thoroughly in every chapter and with admirable discipline, right at the end of the gospel proper, John 20:30,31.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

There is no material difference between this and St. Paul's justification doctrine. The big word in the Synoptics is the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven." Many parables and sayings of Jesus set this kingdom forth as a precious gift to men from God. It is the consistent view that this kingdom and this gift are linked inseparably with Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel he calls all to come to him that they may have rest (Matt. 11:28-30). Both Matthew and Luke give a certain prominence to the teaching of forgiveness, Matthew in the episode of the Man Paralyzed (9:1-8), in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, and in his version of Jesus' words in the institution of the Lord's Supper, "which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"; Luke in the story of the sinful woman of 7:36-50, in his chapter dealing with the lost sheep, coin, and son (ch. 15), in the parable of the Pharisee and Publican (18:9-14), and in his form of the commission which the Risen Lord gave his disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations" (24:46-47). Luke's Acts is an unfolding of the theme of this preaching. Mark's Gospel begins with the message of the Baptist, "who preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4) and, although there is doubt whether 16:15,16 is part of this gospel, there is no real



doubt that the whole Gospel with its strong and virile presentation of the work and suffering of Christ tends to the debated words: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

If we turn to some of the non-Pauline epistles, we shall find that there, too, it is possible to demonstrate the centrality of the doctrine with which we are concerned. This is true, even though one does not expect a letter addressed to a specific issue or problem to contain a compend of Christianity and of its main thrust. Hebrews quite plainly sets forth Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the great priest of our salvation and so the end of the Law on the ceremonial side, as Paul set him forth as the end of the Law in its other aspects—the end of the Law, "that every one who has faith may be justified" (Rom. 10:4). I Peter contains the programmatic passage, "You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot . . . Through him you have confidence in God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (1 Pet. 1:18-21). James knew, too, that we are justified by faith, but in the famous passage of his letter, 2:14-25, he is concerned that only faith deserving the name, no dead thing of mere words, is the faith that justifies. The first letter of John belongs closely together with his gospel. As he does in the gospel, so in the letter he tells us what his purpose is: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1:3). A few verses further on the apostle John tells us the basic structure of this fellowship (1:6-9):

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

My first assertion, then, concerning the distinctive contribution of the Lutheran Confessions to world Christianity is that their big concern, their overriding interest, their whole reason for existence, to bear witness to the teaching of justification by faith, is just what the Holy Scriptures themselves (and these all churches and churchmen regard as being a

constitutive authority in the Church in one sense or another) point to as central, essential, as the message for which they exist.

### Part III

Now, closely connected with this contention is a second one, which is that the Lutheran Confessions point the Church to an essential principle of interpretation of Scripture. It is sometimes stated that it is characteristically Lutheran to hold to the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. This is not the case. It is Lutheran, but it is not a distinguishing mark of Lutheranism. There is no teaching on Scripture as such in the Confessions, although there are many references to its divine authority throughout the Confessions. There was no dispute on the nature of the Bible at the time of the great Reformation conflict with the Papacy. There was considerable conflict with Rome, indeed, on the respective authority of Scripture and Church, which came to a head in the Leipzig Debate, but not on the actual nature of the Bible itself. Reformed churches down the ages have been as insistent on the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Bible and its inerrancy as Lutheran churches. Many of the sects are quite vocally and adamantly devoted to plenary inspiration, and so are many modern charismatics.

Complete acceptance of verbal inspiration and inerrancy cannot by itself preserve the Church from error, as the errors of churches and sects mentioned just now already indicate. By themselves the concepts of verbal inspiration and inerrancy are not even a clear guide to the understanding of Scripture—particularly, if they are linked to a view of Scripture which sees no differences, which treats all of the very considerable body of material in Scripture as of the same nature, which cannot separate between prophecy and fulfilment, which pays no attention to a sentence like Hebrews 1:1: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." On such a view of Scripture one cannot argue against the Seventh Day Adventists on such matters as the Sabbath and diet. If one insists on certain New Testament passages, he insists on the Old Testament.

On the other hand, it is not Lutheran to set the Gospel up as an authority in the Church over the Scriptures. This is done, for instance, in a short pamphlet put out by the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strausbourg. It was published last year and bears the title *Lutheran Identity*. In it some ten basic theological convictions are advanced as essential components of the Lutheran identity, the ten together giving supposedly a

profile of what is Lutheran. The eighth one reads: "Using Holy Scripture as the norm for the church's proclamation and teaching while at the same time observing the differentiation (but not separation) between gospel and Scripture." In explanation of this phrase we find the following:

The gospel of Jesus Christ is witnessed in the Holy Scripture in a fundamental way. For this reason Scripture is the decisive and permanent norm of the church's teaching and proclamation. Nevertheless, as a collection of texts, Scripture is not the living gospel of Jesus Christ by which faith and the church live. Only the gospel is the liberating message of salvation disclosed to us by the Holy Spirit. It is the 'centre of Scripture' and in its light all statements and texts of the Bible are to be interpreted. It has to be imparted to people in living proclamation. Through this proclamation, bound to Holy Scripture as its norm, the Holy Spirit creates and bestows faith.

Emphasizing this position is a further statement: "The distinction between gospel—as the centre of Scripture—and the Scriptural text itself should, at any rate, be numbered among the basic convictions of Lutheran theology" (p. 27).

It is clear that if the Gospel is distinct from the scriptural text and set over it, then the scriptural text cannot be its source. So we must find some other source for it. What this source must be we can all conclude for ourselves, either tradition or our own reason. *Tertium non datur*. And then it is not reasonable or logical or sensible to go on to declare that "Scripture is the decisive and permanent norm of the church's teaching and proclamation." Scriptural authority has been effectively eliminated by setting up the Gospel as the "centre of Scripture" without making it derivative from the text of Scripture. Suspicion of the text, distrust of the written Word, and fear that the Bible will become a paper Pope, have led the writers of *Lutheran Identity* to surrender the *sola Scriptura* principle, which the Formula of Concord insists on so strongly: "We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged."<sup>9</sup>

The true Lutheran contribution on Sacred Scripture is that the doctrine of justification by faith, or the Gospel if you like, is that which gives unity to the whole Scripture, its central teaching which controls all Biblical interpretation. Note well the difference between this statement and the one rejected. The rejected statement separates the Gospel from the Scriptural text; my statement makes the Gospel the specific thrust,

emphasis, and teaching of the Scriptural text. It should also be noted what the claim just made does not suggest. It does not suggest that the doctrine of justification by faith is that from which all teaching may be deduced, a new norm and source and rule of teaching. What it does say is that Scripture cannot teach anywhere or be made to teach anywhere what runs counter to the doctrine of justification by faith. It is a negative norm, if I may put it that way, not a positive norm. No one could deduce the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper from the doctrine of justification by faith, but it is also quite obvious that they are completely in harmony with that teaching. Both of them are derived from specific dominical and Scriptural sentences, and so all teachings of the Church must be derived from specific passages dealing with the matters in hand. The inspiration of the Scripture, the truthfulness of God, and the consistency He must show in all His acts and doings, give us the confidence that nothing of the Scripture will be or can be contrary to or contradict what that same Scripture declares to be its centre and the very purpose for which it was written in the first place.

It would take us beyond the scope of this paper to give the full demonstration in the Confessions of this hermeneutical function of the central teaching of the Christian faith. Only a few salient passages of the Confessions can be referred to and an illuminating example:

The distinction between law and Gospel [and this is basically the same thing from a different point of view as the teaching of justification by faith alone without the works of the law] is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly.<sup>10</sup>

[The article of justification] is of especial service for the clear and correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible . . .<sup>11</sup>

To these clear and specific passages we may join the exegesis of certain passages dealt with in the lengthy article in the Apology devoted to the exposition of the central doctrine, Article IV. The obvious one to mention here is the treatment of James 2:24, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone." This sentence, as a summary of the lengthier section, verses 14-25, can indeed be well harmonized with the teaching of the apostle Paul and the New Testament generally, but not in the way the Apology tries to do it. The immediate

point is, however, that the Apology is determined in its exegetical method by the principle that James must be understood from the principle of justification by faith alone or, at least, that he cannot be understood in opposition to it. In this concern, the Apology is wholly right and completely consistent with the passages just quoted. In some ways, indeed, it may seem that the Confessions are similar in their treatment of the Scriptures than the Romanists or the Enthusiasts. They harp on one string like the others. The similarity of principle is crystallized in two sentences of Luther: 1) *Ipsi ponunt fundamentum ex suo captu et postea zufahren und glossieren omnes scripturas*; <sup>12</sup> and 2) *Nun müssen wir den Text führen, ne sit contra fundamentum hoc*. <sup>13</sup> There is no harm in understanding the whole of Scripture from one basic point of view, from one comprehensive understanding of its meaning. The really important thing, however, is that this one comprehensive understanding be the right understanding of what Scripture is all about. And that right understanding, so we claim, is the one which permeates the whole of the Lutheran Confessions, that summed up in the three phrases: *solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide*. Only when these three are kept intact, is there any real value in the *sola scriptura*.

#### Part IV

A third distinctive contribution that the Lutheran Confessions make to world Christianity is to be found in the fact that their central concern, justification by faith, makes for, produces, creates a life-style of the highest excellence, one that combines freedom and unselfish love of the neighbour. Because God is a God of grace, love, and mercy, who forgives men their sins freely for the sake of the obedience, sufferings, death, and resurrection of his own Son, therefore the Confessions conclude, like St. Paul in Romans 8, that He is wholly love, that the world and the universe which He has created is one which shows forth His love and concern. The creation is a good creation; all that this world contains is there for man's use and welfare, for his blessing and happiness. Nature with its beauty and its provision for man's food and drink, clothing and shelter, man himself with his various and multifarious abilities of body, mind, and spirit, the arts and sciences in all their proliferation, also the course of history with all its complicated and mysterious happenings—all this is of God's good creation, all part of His fatherly guidance and control, in which He has at heart nothing but man's welfare, especially the welfare of those who are His children in Christ Jesus. The Confessions know, too, of the dangers and temptations for men in the things of the world, these are not to be forgotten or treated as mere

bagatelles. But the abuse to which men so frequently put what this world has to offer is no argument against the very good use which these things in themselves are to serve.

A combination of the assertions of faith in both the first and second articles of the Creed, the truths of redemption and creation, leads the man of faith to see in himself, as Luther says, a lord of creation. All that happens and all that is around him, all serves him, is a blessing to him. He cannot achieve more security for himself, no matter what measures he undertakes or how hard he works, than he has by faith in the God who has created him and who has redeemed him in Christ Jesus. All possible causes and grounds for worry and anxiety for himself have been rendered inoperative because of the promises of the Gospel. Nothing prevents him now from living as a free man in Christ, free in faith, and free to become a slave of the fellowman, the neighbour, all those who are in need of his help and assistance. Freedom and unselfish love are a necessary result in the one who has the faith the Gospel calls for and creates and to which the Confessions witness. Part of this attitude of free and unselfish service of the neighbour is the Lutheran view of vocation: the view that I can serve my neighbour by any common, everyday action, that I can serve him best in the work I do and that I should therefore prepare myself for that work, job, calling in life for which I am best suited by the physical and mental gifts that I have inherited or that God has given me. McGiffert in *Martin Luther—The Man and his Work* remarks: "The great significance of Luther's ethical teaching . . . was his subordination of all human duties to the one end of human service . . . That one may better serve his fellow-men, for this he strives to be a better man. The effects of this principle were epochal."<sup>14</sup> *Lutheran Identity*, too, picks out this Lutheran lifestyle as noteworthy ("The affirmation of the world as God's good creation . . .") and adds as part of the elucidating commentary:

The Lutheran reformers were opposed to an ideal of piety which sees Christian perfection in a turning away from earthly reality, rather than turning towards it. They considered this false ideal to be embodied in both monasticism and the 'enthusiast' movements of the time with their rejection of marriage and secular vocations.<sup>15</sup>

This particular aspect of the Lutheran contribution to world Christianity is, to be sure, not given particular prominence in the Confessions as a whole. It is Luther's writings which are full of this teaching, and not many of these are part of the Confessions. However, we should note that the Formula of Concord deliberately sets Dr. Martin Luther forth as determining authentic Lutheranism: "Dr. Luther is rightly to be

regarded as the most eminent teacher of the churches which adhere to the Augsburg Confession . . . therefore the true meaning and intention of the Augsburg Confession cannot be derived more correctly or better from any other source than from Dr. Luther's doctrinal and polemical writings."<sup>16</sup> And we should note further that where the point just being stressed is found is in Luther's Small Catechism, in his comments on the First Article and in the section on Confession and Absolution, in other words, in that confessional writing meant especially for the instruction in the faith of the simple layman, the common man, just where, in other words, one might expect the matter to be taken up. Augustana XVI, "On Civil Affairs," presupposes the same insight.

## Part V

As a final aspect of the contribution to world Christianity made by the Lutheran Confessions, I point to its teaching concerning the Church. This is particularly appropriate and valuable in this present century, when the Church and its unity has been the dominant interest of Christianity. But one cannot say that the contribution of the Confessions has been generally recognized; in fact, very scant attention has been paid to it even by most Lutherans.

It is not always appreciated that Lutherans were the first to formulate doctrinal, confessional statements on the nature of the Church. And what the confessional writings have to say in definition is basically very simple and uncomplicated. Luther remarks in the Smalcald Articles, with thanks to God, that even "a seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd." A more complete definition appears in the Apology where, in addition to the hidden character of the church, the marks by which the hidden church may be recognized are pointed out:

But the church is not so much a society of external rites like other states, but it is above all a society of faith and the Holy Spirit in the heart. However, it has external marks so that it may be recognized, namely, the pure preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in agreement with the Gospel of Christ. It is this church which alone is called the body of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

The Augsburg Confession adds to its description of the nature or essence of the church a sentence concerning its unity: "For the true unity of the church it is enough [but also necessary!] to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments." The direct connection of all

these statements concerning the church, its nature, marks, and unity with the teaching of justification by faith is immediately discernible. At the same time, almost all of them are commonly rejected in outward Christianity. Christianity as a whole thinks only in terms of a visible church—the church of Christians in fellowship with the Pope, or the continuation down the years of the one, apostolic, catholic church in the Eastern Orthodox Churches. This general rejection of the Lutheran Confessions on the teaching of the church is due to various factors, but one of the most powerful today is undoubtedly the ecumenical movement. One wonders how long it will take before Christianity comes to see that the ecumenical movement has not only not succeeded in uniting the church but has almost succeeded in destroying it.

## Part VI

It seems appropriate to conclude with a few observations on the present and future of the Lutheran Church in relation to its distinctive contribution to world Christianity. The first of these concerns the relation between inheritance and development. If the Lutheran Confessions set forth the Gospel in its most Christian form, and such has been the contention of this paper, does this imply that there is nothing for the Lutheran Church to do but to repeat and continue to repeat that Gospel in its Lutheran dress as accurately as it can from here on to the end of the world, and that there can be no development in any direction of the presentation of the Christian Gospel as it has been confessed and set down in the Lutheran confessional writings? The criticism has been repeatedly raised against confessional commitment that creeds and confessions are limitations on intellectual freedom. The proper attitude is held to be one approximating that of the university, that no truth is final and that progress is made only by gradually discarding the past. The only loyalty is to be to freedom and the future. The Golden Rule is that there is no golden rule. *Lutheran Identity*, for instance, really takes this position in the tenth and last of its basic theological convictions:

*Intensive theological quest for the truth of the proclamation which is to take place here and now.*

Salvation in Jesus Christ is offered to people in the living proclamation of the gospel. The canon of the Holy Scripture, the church's confessions and office are essential presuppositions and instruments of this proclamation. But they are not identical with the gospel to be proclaimed in a living way nor can they, as such, secure and guarantee right proclamation. The



sovereignty of the gospel therefore demands an unremitting theological effort in quest of the truth of the message to be proclaimed here and now.<sup>18</sup>

It is plain that the framers of these statements mean more than that the Church must find the right way, the proper language, the adequate vehicle for bringing the Gospel clearly, convincingly, understandably to each new generation. No one could not quarrel with *that* demand. What is actually being demanded, however, is a continued quest for the Gospel itself, as if this were an elusive something which no Holy Scripture, no church tradition or confession can really set forth in appropriate words. We seem to be back with the famous parable of Lessing and the apparently humble choice made by the hero that he would rather spend all his life in the pursuit of truth with the proviso that he would never find it than be given the truth complete and entire for taking without effort.

No person committed to the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions could possibly accept the position upheld in *Lutheran Identity*. God's revelation is a clear one, and it is an unchanging one. We have an everlasting Gospel to proclaim to all the world. Loyalty to Christ is also loyalty to the tradition of the apostles. Remember St. Paul and his description of his task: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you" (1 Cor. 11:23)—where he uses technical language about the accurate passing on of a tradition; he does the same in other places like 1 Corinthians 15:3 and Galatians 1:9 and 1:12. Preaching and teaching the Gospel is in great part the passing on of a tradition; and the overriding requirement of such an activity is loyalty and faithfulness to the tradition. The Church has a perpetual reminder of the essential, unchanging, permanent character of its Gospel in the Sacraments. These have remained unchanged down through the history of the Church, and are in their very nature unchangeable, as they are also in their very nature pure Gospel. The same, I should say, is also true of the absolution. There is a static quality about the Gospel, and this is the case in the last analysis because it is of God, and God is One, unchangeable, the only unchanging entity where all things are in a state of flux.

But there is also a dynamic quality about the Gospel, and commitment to the Confessions must embrace such dynamism within itself. The history of the Church indicates quite plainly the sort of development which I have in mind and which is in keeping with the unchangeable character of the Gospel. Let us remind ourselves of the development of the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ. From the primitive confession "Jesus is Lord" to the statements of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, the Chalcedonian Decision, and Articles VII and VIII of the

Formula of Concord there is a very great development indeed. However, the development is one that is wholly in keeping with the biblical statements concerning Jesus. So also the soteriological significance of the work of Christ is only in embryo in the Nicene Creed, "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven . . .," but appears with some considerable maturity in the Lutheran Confessions and, of course, in other writings of the Church as well. In this case too there is a development harmonious with the Scriptural material, not a development which in effect denies it. This sort of development we must allow for in our acceptance of, committal to, and churchly use of the Lutheran Confessions.

It would probably go far beyond the limits of this essay to indicate areas where such development of the positions taken by the Lutheran Confessions is desirable, but a mere reference to them may be of some value. Have we said the last word, for instance, in the matter of the Two Kingdoms? Is there not room here for some considerable refinement and development of our Lutheran position? And what of the doctrine of creation? Our knowledge of the world is so much more accurate than that of the Lutheran confessors that there seems to be an immense field for theological thought to plough and sow and reap. And what of the doctrine of the Church? Has not the tremendous theological as well as practical attention given to all aspects of the Church in this century made it possible to speak of Church more deeply and more comprehensively than the sixteenth century Confessions could do? And the same observation could certainly be made concerning the doctrine of Holy Scripture, which is not even taken up for special treatment in the Confessions.

I cannot think of a better way of putting my thoughts on this matter than in the way used long ago by St. Vincent of Lerins, and so I shall quote from his notebook:

Is there to be no development of doctrine in Christ's Church? Certainly there should be great development.

Who could be so grudging towards his fellow-men and so hostile to God as to try to prevent it? But care should be taken to ensure that it really is development of the faith and not alteration. Development implies that each point of doctrine is expanded within itself, while alteration suggests that a thing has been changed from what it was into something different.

It is desirable then that development should take place, and that there should be a great and vigorous growth in the understanding, knowledge and wisdom of every individual as well as of all the people, on the part of each member as well as of the whole Church, gradually

over the generations and ages. But it must be growth within the limits of its own nature, that is to say within the framework of the same dogma and of the same meaning.

Let religion, which is of the spirit, imitate the processes of the body. For, although bodies develop over the years and their individual parts evolve, they do not change into something different. It is true that there is a great gap between the prime of youth and the maturity of later years, but the people who reach these later years are the same people who once were adolescents. So, although the size and outward appearance of any individual may change, it is still the same person, and the nature remains the same.

The limbs of infants are tiny, while those of young men are large, but they are the same limbs. The man has no more parts to his body than the little child: and if there are parts that appear with age and greater maturity they are already present earlier in embryo. As a result, it can be said that nothing new is produced in old men that was not already present in an undeveloped form when they were boys.

I shall conclude with a second observation which concerns the Lutheran Church's own response to its distinctive contribution to the world. My impression is that there is very little real appropriation by Lutheran churches and Lutheran people of the treasures their confessional writings contain. The Lutheran churches of the world generally seem to be unable to find a solid position between Catholics on the one hand and the Reformed on the other. Justification by faith seems to be more of a philosophical principle to play around with than an existential word of God which sets me right with God and puts me right with myself, with the world in which I live, and with my neighbour. Lutherans hesitate between rank Fundamentalism and a liberal attitude to the Scripture which most decisively overthrows the formal principle of theology. Lutherans speak of the Church in the same way as everybody else and find themselves a prey of ecumania. How many Lutherans live as men who know themselves forgiven by God, as His friends in Jesus Christ, as His children and heirs; as men who need fear no future, no foe, no catastrophe since the God who has redeemed them has also created them and still preserves them; as men who can freely serve their fellows, and are glad to do it especially in their respective callings, since in Christ they are masters of this world and universe; as men who can enjoy all that this world has to offer, while being alive to the dangers in it which may entrap their souls? My experience

seems to suggest that men like this are few and far between and that the great majority of Lutherans, too, live as though the Law were God's final word to men, and not his Word in Christ Jesus.

To be committed to the Confessions means continuing to confess them. It is possible for them to have a merely formal authority. They can be written into a church's constitution, while the actual life of that church is determined by different factors and influences altogether. It is a case of the proper understanding of James on faith and works all over again. What we want is not merely talk about the Confessions and what a blessing they are and the contribution they can make to the Church, but actual use of the Confessions. We need the Confessions as living, active factors in the existence of the Church, not as museum pieces. The call of the hour for the Lutheran Church is for church leaders, theologians, pastors, and teachers who can transmit the profound spirituality of the Confessions to all the members of the Church. We need men who are so on fire with the truths of which the Confessions are full and whose lives are so obviously expressions of that conviction that those who know them and hear them cannot but be gripped by the actual confessing that is going on in their very presence. Confessions are to be held as a sacred trust, but they are also to be confessed as a continuing, living reality. Where that happens, not only on the part of a small spiritual elite but by whole churches, there we may well be surprised by the powerful effects and the rich blessings which the Spirit of God will work in this world.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1871), p. 195.
2. FC, SD III, 6.
3. Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 292.
4. Tappert, p. 293.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 464; cf. pp. 503, 504.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 558.
11. *Apology* IV, 2 (German).
12. WA 27, p. 56, 11.
13. WA 27, p. 299, 15.
14. McGiffert, p. 176.
15. *Lutheran Identity*, p. 23.
16. Tappert, p. 576.

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17. *Ibid.*, p. 169 (Tappert's translation is slightly different from the one in the text).
  18. *Lutheran Identity*, pp. 29, 30.

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