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Confessional Subscription and Theological Pluralism

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THE QUESTION CONCERNING the position of the Lutheran Confessions vis-a-vis theological pluralism seems to have been raised for Lutherans of the second half of the twentieth century, especially in connection with the ongoing bilateral conversations among world confessional families. Reporting on these conversations Warren A. Quanbeck expresses the opinion that a new understanding of the nature and function of theological language has made a significant contribution toward mutual recognition by the various participants of the validity of each other's confessional formulations. He says:

The study of language has removed some of the pretensions of theology, taking away its claim to be the truth or to present truths and showing it to be symbols or signs pointing to the truth which is in Jesus Christ. It enables us to see that all theologies, to the extent that they really wrestle with the fact of Christ, are talking about realities and experiences common to all Christians. However much they may differ in language or method, they are attempts to expound the mystery of God's gift of life in Christ. By emphasizing the differences we can get the impression that the various theologies are quite different and that they cannot be reconciled to each other. But by stressing their attempt to expound the meaning of Christ and his mission for men we discover that they have much in common and that their differences are not contradictions of each other, but the contribution of different instruments to the full orchestration of God's praise.¹

In a similar vein, another report on these conversations, while discussing the kind of consensus toward which the bilateral dialogues are directed, says:

Although 'consensus' frequently is used interchangeably with 'theological agreement,' the bilaterals operate in fact with several distinctions which, while still ill-defined, shed light on the matter. Thus it is recognized that consensus denotes in the first place a consensus with the Gospel of Christ, and only in the second place a common mind among consentient believers. It is an accepted truism that a consensus in the faith can and does embrace vigorous theological disagreements, while on the other hand an agreed statement may well cover unresolved tensions. In a refinement of the analysis, the notion of consensus is related to the continuum kerygma-dogma-doctrine-theology, pictured as a series of concentric circles; for each step, the meaning of consensus becomes gradually transformed into a widening plurality of options.²

Lutherans will need to ask themselves whether their commitment to the particular Lutheran Confessions permits them to settle for a consensus that gradually becomes transformed into a widening plurality of options when the conversation reaches the outer of the concentric circles and deals with theological formulations. How Lutherans answer this question will depend largely, to begin with, on the way they understand the meaning of confessional subscription. A discussion of how Lutherans with their confessional heritage look at the idea of theological pluralism must, therefore, take into account what significance the Confessions themselves attach to subscription.

In the period from which our symbols date confessional subscription was an accepted practice. When our fathers subscribed and pledged themselves to the three Creeds (p. 465:3),³ the Augsburg Confession (p. 5), and the Book of Concord (p. 8), they did this in accordance with an old and well-known custom in the Church of God, for already "in ancient times Christian symbols and confessions were formulated . . . and orthodox teachers and hearers pledged themselves to these symbols with heart and mouth" (p. 502:4). The fact that 8,188 theologians, pastors, and teachers originally affixed their signatures to the Formula of Concord indicates that they were of the opinion that such a practice had some value and served a useful purpose. By subscribing the Formula of Concord the signers wished "to have testified that the present explanation of all the foregoing controverted articles here explained, and none other, is our teaching, belief, and confession" (p. 636:40).

Subscription to the Formula of Concord was meant to be an endorsement of its theological content. Lutherans had this document "read article by article to each and every theologian, minister, and schoolmaster in their lands and territories" and reminded and exhorted them "to consider diligently and earnestly the doctrine contained in it" (p. 7). Those who then subscribed wanted to testify thereby that they accepted and approved the Formula of Concord because they found that its "explanation of the dissensions which had arisen was agreeable and conformable first of all to the Word of God and then to the Augsburg Confession as well" (pp. 7-8). Subscription was a deliberate and formal affirmation that the subscribers regarded the doctrine contained in the Formula of Concord to be both thoroughly biblical and soundly Lutheran.

By subscribing the Formula of Concord our forebears meant to testify that the doctrine contained in it and none other was their teaching, belief, and confession. This "none other" (p. 636:40) indicates that the subscribers of the Formula of Concord were unwilling to approve doctrine that conflicted with their confession. They knew their position to be "the correct Christian interpretation of the Augsburg Confession" (p. 8) and they therefore did not hesitate to say, "our disposition and intention has always been directed toward the goal that no other doctrine be treated and taught in our lands, territories, schools, and churches than that alone which is based on the Holy Scriptures of God and is embodied in the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, correctly understood,

and that no doctrine be permitted entrance which is contrary to these" (p. 12). "We have ordered the incorporation of the Augsburg Confession . . . into our declaration and Book of Concord . . . so that everyone may see that we are not minded to permit any doctrine in our lands, churches, and schools other than in the form in which it was once confessed to Augsburg" (p. 9). After enumerating the creeds and symbols to which they subscribed the authors of the Formula of Concord said, "All doctrines should conform to the standards set forth above. Whatever is contrary to them should be rejected and condemned as opposed to the unanimous declaration of our faith" (p. 465:6).

Confessional subscription was meant to signify unanimous acceptance of and commitment to the symbols. Confessional unanimity was considered most desirable by our fathers (p. 4), desirable for the sake of unbelievers and believers alike (p. 502:7-8). Lack of unanimity was not regarded as a healthy state of affairs, but as instigated by Satan to "impede the course of the Gospel" (pp. 3-4).

That there was unanimity among those who were genuinely committed to the symbols is a fact to which our Confessions repeatedly witness despite the calumny of their adversaries who "had the effrontery to pretend and proclaim to the whole world that among our churches and their teachers there are not two preachers who are agreed in each and every article of the Augsburg Confession, but are so disunited that they themselves no longer know what the Augsburg Confession really is and what it really means" (p. 632:3). The Lutheran Confessors regarded such allegations as slanderous (p. 5) and time and again made it a point to emphasize their unanimity. They called the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and Luther's Large and Small Catechisms "the summary of our Christian doctrine" and say of these symbols that "they have always and everywhere been accepted as the common and universally accepted belief of our churches, that the chief and most illustrious theologians of that time subscribed them, and that all Evangelical churches and schools received them" (p. 506:11).

This unanimity was genuine. Our fathers did not draw up statements which were full of "loopholes" which permitted everyone to interpret them "to [his] own advantage" (p. 572:18). They were not satisfied with throwing together a document which was capable of concealing error behind "familiar terminology" (p. 507:16). They were not willing to affix their signatures to "a few bare words" which skirted the controverted issues in order to create the illusion of unanimity (p. 633:4). They wanted rather "to present a clear, lucid, and unmistakable exposition of all the articles which were in controversy among theologians of the Augsburg Confession" (p. 633:4).

Lutheran theologians "saw clearly that there was no better way to counteract the mendacious calumnies and the religious controversies that were expanding with each passing day than, on the basis of God's Word, *carefully and accurately to explain and decide the differences that had arisen with reference to all the articles in controversy, to expose and to reject false doctrine, and clearly to con-*

fess the divine truth" (p. 6). They wanted "to set forth and explain [their] faith and confession unequivocally, clearly, and distinctly in theses and antitheses, opposing the true doctrine to the false doctrine, so that the foundation of divine truth might be made apparent in every article and that every incorrect, dubious, suspicious, and condemned doctrine might be exposed, no matter where or in what books it might be found or who may have said it or supported it" (p. 507:19). They "wanted everyone to be able to see that [they] were not proposing or hiding anything with intent to deceive and that [their] agreement was not a mere pretense" (p. 633:5).

Subscription was meant to express and certify their unanimity. By their signatures they meant to testify that the symbols were the confession of them all (p. 500:31). Indeed, each signature was a witness to the faith of the individual signatory but by no means were the symbols regarded by anyone as "private writings" (p. 503:1). The Formula of Concord "is called and also is the unanimous and concordant confession not only for a few of our theologians, but generally of each and every minister and schoolmaster in our lands and territories" (p. 8). When our fathers prepared our symbols it was their intention "to have a single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe" (p. 506:10). "In testimony that this is the doctrine, faith, and confession of all of us . . . we have . . . subscribed our signatures with our own hands" (p. 500:31). In testimony that "we shall neither secretly nor publicly say or write anything contrary [to this confession] but intend by the grace of God to abide by it" they subscribed their signatures with their own hands (p. 500:31).

By affixing their signatures to certify that they would never call into question the confession they had presented, our fathers expressed the same certitude concerning the abiding validity of their confession that Luther in the following words expressed concerning his: "I am determined to abide by it until my death and, so help me God, in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence if anyone shall say after my death if Doctor Luther were living now he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not consider it sufficiently, let me say now as then and then as now that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again, in the light thereof, and wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I now have defended the Sacrament of the Altar" (p. 574:29-30). The subscribers of the Formula of Concord were certain of their confession and faith (p. 12).

Because they were convinced that their confession was agreeable to the Word of God (p. 8), they did not hesitate to claim that their confession was "unchanging, constant truth" (p. 508:20). The theologians who prepared the Formula of Concord were confident that with the benefit of many helpful suggestions they had produced an "altogether uncolored declaration of the pure truth."⁴ They were

not of the opinion that doctrinal formulations necessarily participate in the relativities of history. In their opinion the three creeds, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and Luther's Catechisms contained "divine truth" (pp. 13-14). They would not have conceded that their confession was historically conditioned in the sense that it contained theological viewpoints which would some day become outmoded. They were sure that their confession presented "divinely delivered truth,"⁵ and was "a true norm and declaration of the pure truth."⁶ They were therefore ready to "give an account" of their confession before the judgment seat of Christ and to do it with "intrepid hearts" (p. 636:40). They had no fear that perhaps they had permitted subjective factors to distort the infallible and unchanging truth of God's Word. The fathers in fact were so certain that our symbols represent a permanently valid and altogether uncolored declaration of the pure truth of God's Word that they considered them the standard by which "all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated" (pp. 506:10; 465:6).

The prescriptive, normative function of the symbols is affirmed not only by the solemn declaration of the subscribers to abide by them, but also by explicit statements of the symbols themselves, in the light of which an oft-quoted passage from the Epitome must be understood. This passage in the Epitome draws a sharp distinction between the Scriptures and other writings, affirms the sole normative authority of the Scriptures, and then goes on to say, "Other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the Church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned" (p. 465:7-8). If this were the only statement in the symbols pertaining to the purpose and function of "other writings" including creeds and confessions, it would seem possible to make a case for the propositions that (1) our symbols themselves disclaim any kind of normative authority and (2) the Formula of Concord, at least, regarded older Lutheran Symbols as of historical interest only, as documents from which one learns merely what "those then living" as a matter of fact believed, and not as documents which state what should be believed.

Fortunately, there are other passages in the symbols which clarify and elucidate this statement of the Epitome. The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord refers to our symbols as a "pattern of doctrine" according to which "all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated" (p. 506:10). This seems to be in direct conflict with the statement of the Epitome that other writings are not judges. Unless one is willing to grant an outright contradiction here, it seems that the words of the Epitome, "are not judges like Holy Scripture," must be understood to mean that other writings and symbols are not judges in the same sense as the Scriptures. The symbols are not a *norma normans* but they are, nevertheless, a *norma*. They are a *norma normata*. Their authority

as judges is a derived authority, derived from the fact that they are “drawn from the Word of God” (p. 506:10), “taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein” (p. 504:5), “supported with clear and irrefutable testimonies from the Holy Scriptures” (p. 505:6) and from the fact that “they formulate Christian doctrine on the basis of God’s Word . . . in a most correct . . . form” (p. 505:8). But far from diminishing their authority, this is the very factor that establishes it. Because the norm contained in the Book of Concord is taken from and agrees with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, it is a “pattern of doctrine” by which other writings are to be judged (p. 506:10) and controversies are to be regulated and explained (p. 14).

That the symbols introduce other writings, specifically those referred to as “our summary of faith,” not merely for the purpose of showing what people “then living” believed without any intended implication as to what ought to be believed, but that in fact they cite other writings for the very purpose of indicating what should be believed even by posterity is evident from two other passages in which the Formula of Concord explains why these other writings are introduced. These two passages read as follows: “Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times” (p. 464:2). “Just as we base our position on the Word of God as the eternal truth, so we introduce and cite these writings as a witness to the truth and as exhibiting the unanimous and correct understanding of our predecessors who remained steadfast in the pure doctrine” (p. 506:13).

It is important to note precisely what these two passages say. They expressly declare that other writings are cited as the “correct understanding” of the fathers and as a witness to the fashion in which the biblical doctrine “was preserved.” If these other writings contain a correct understanding of the topics treated and if in them the prophetic and apostolic doctrine is truly preserved, then these writings offer not merely historically conditioned, provisional viewpoints of passing validity, but afford the reader correct information as to what “he should regard and receive as correct and true” not only for those then living, but also for posterity (p. 507:16). If, in fact, these other writings do present the correct position on the articles in controversy, and if, indeed, these other writings do preserve the pure doctrine, then they have abiding validity and are still normative.

Our Lutheran ancestors subscribed their confession for the very purpose of leaving a witness to their faith not only among their contemporaries, but also among their posterity. Repeatedly in our symbols this concern for posterity is expressed. They took great pains to see to it that “a pure declaration of truth might be transmitted to . . . posterity” (p. 7). They clearly confessed the truth in order that a “correct explanation and direction might be provided for simple

and pious hearts, so that . . . they might be preserved from false doctrine in the future" (p. 6). They expressly state that they subscribed the Augsburg Confession "in order thereby . . . to secure our posterity in the future against doctrine that is impure, false, and contrary to the Word of God" (p. 5). Our fathers thought that it was urgent that they prepare their confession "so that the way may not be left open to restless, contentious individuals, who do not want to be bound by any certain formula of pure doctrine, to start scandalous controveries at will and to introduce and defend monstrous errors, the only possible consequence of which is that finally correct doctrine will be entirely obscured and lost and nothing beyond uncertain opinions and dubious, disputable imaginations and views will be transmitted to subsequent generations" (p. 13). They made their confession and subscribed it "that there might be a public, definite testimony, not only for those now living, but also for our posterity, of what is and should remain the unanimous understanding and judgment [decision] of our churches in reference to the articles in controversy."⁷

When the Augsburg Confession is referred to as the "Symbol of our time" (pp. 3; 465:4; 504:5), or when it is said that the Augsburg Confession is a pure Christian symbol which "at the present time" all true Christians ought to accept next to the Word of God,⁸ it is not thereby implied that the Augsburg Confession had only temporary validity and was never intended to be an authoritative expression of Lutheran doctrine for all times. The truth is that the Augsburg Confession is specifically mentioned together with Scripture and the creeds as among those things in which especially young men preparing for the ministry should be instructed "so that the pure teaching . . . may be preserved and perpetuated among our posterity . . . until the glorious advent of our only Redeemer and Savior Jesus Christ" (p. 12).

In conclusion something ought to be said about the way our fathers subscribed the symbols,—the spirit in which they did this. When our fathers subscribed our symbols, this action was the equivalent of a joyful "Amen." There is nothing in the Book of Concord to suggest that any of them regarded subscription to the Confessions as a form of spiritual tyranny which threatened their religious and theological freedom. On the contrary, there are explicit statements in the symbols which show that our fathers deemed their commitment to the Confessions a holy bondage into which they had been brought by the grace of the Holy Spirit who worked in them a great assurance concerning the certainty of their faith and confession (pp. 12-13). They testify that "of their own volition" they accepted, approved, and subscribed this Book of Concord and that they did this "gladly and with heartfelt thanks to almighty God" (p. 8). Always they thought of faithful adherence to the Confessions as a blessing which came by the grace of God.

Sincerely and without purpose of evasion the Lutheran confessors subscribed our symbols. It was before God and the whole Church and in view of the Judgment that they signed with their own hands. They considered it a most reprehensible thing that "some,

while boasting of and benefiting from their adherence to the Augsburg Confession, even dared to give a false interpretation to these articles" (p. 502:6) and thereby "sought forcibly to adduce and pervert the Augsburg Confession so as to make it appear to be in full agreement with" their own opinions (p. 568:1). They considered it equally reprehensible that some "diligently endeavored to employ terminology which is as close as possible to the formulas and speech-patterns of the Augsburg Confession," but all along were teaching in direct opposition to it (p. 569:2). Genuine Lutherans assure everyone, "We . . . whole-heartedly subscribe this Christian and thoroughly scriptural Augsburg Confession, and we abide by the plain, clear and pure meaning of the words" (pp. 502:4; 508:20). "It never entered our minds and hearts to want to introduce, palliate, or confirm any new, false, or erroneous doctrine or in the least point to depart from the Augsburg Confession" (p. 8). "We repeat once again that we are not minded . . . to depart in any way at all, either in content or in formulation, from the divine truth . . . confessed in the past" in the creeds, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the Catechisms of Dr. Luther (pp. 13-14).

Our fathers subscribed the symbols without "ifs" and "buts." They gave a *quia* subscription to the symbols. Other good and useful writings they accepted if and in so far as they are in accord with sound doctrine. When it came to the summary of our Christian doctrine, namely, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the two Catechisms, our fathers approved it, not if or insofar, but "because" it is drawn from the Word of God (p. 506:10). Without any kind of qualification they accepted the Augsburg Confession "because it is taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein" (p. 504:5). They pledged adherence to the Apology "because it is supported with clear and irrefutable testimonies from the Holy Scriptures" (p. 504:6). They declared their unanimous approval of the Catechisms "since they formulate Christian doctrine on the basis of God's Word . . . in a most correct . . . form" (p. 505:8).

Confessional subscription, signifying, as it was intended to, that the subscribers with complete unanimity and without reservation endorsed the total theological content of the symbols—signifying, as it was intended to, that the subscribers were unwilling to recognize the validity of the theological positions that differed from theirs—clearly precludes theological pluralism as a viable alternative to full agreement on all the articles of faith.

In determining the position of the Lutheran Confessions vis-a-vis theological pluralism, it is not only the significance of subscribing the positive content of the symbols that must be taken into account, but also the significance of concurring in the condemnations that are voiced frequently in the Book of Concord. The Preface to the Book of Concord says that there are many reasons "why condemnations cannot by any means be avoided" (p. 11). Hans-Werner Gensichen⁹ lists seven reasons why, according to the Formula of Concord, rejection of false doctrine is a necessity:

1. It is required by the Scriptures;

2. It is required by the ancient and by the Reformation confessional writings;
3. It is required for the sake of unity in the Church;
4. It is required in order to clarify the meaning of the positive doctrinal statements for the benefit not only of the "now-living" but also of posterity;
5. It is required to protect the members of our own churches from errorists;
6. It is required to admonish pious and innocent people in churches which are not in agreement with the Lutherans;
7. It is required to give a witness against the stiff-necked and blasphemers.

This formidable battery of arguments showing why "condemnations, censures, and rejections of false and adulterated doctrine . . . have to be set forth expressly and distinctively" (p. 11) indicates that our fathers regarded disagreement with their confession as a very serious matter. They agreed to "make a sharp distinction between needless and unprofitable contentions . . . and necessary controversy" (p. 506:15); they admonished churches not to condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies (p. 616:31); but when it came to the controverted articles of faith they said, "we have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquillity, and outward harmony . . . Still less by far are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors" (p. 632:95).

We end with the question with which we began. In the light of what the symbols themselves say about the implications of confessional subscription on the one hand, and about condemnation of errors on the other hand, can confessional integrity be maintained within the context of an ecumenism founded on a consensus which gradually becomes transformed into a widening plurality of options?

FOOTNOTES

1. Warren A. Quanbeck, *Search for Understanding; Lutheran Conversations with Reformed, Anglican, and Roman Catholic Churches* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), p. 54.
2. Nils Ehrenstrom and Gunther Gassmann, *Confessions in Dialogue; A Survey of Bilateral Conversations Among the World Confessional Families: 1962-1971* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1973), p. 85.
3. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 465:3. Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, the Lutheran Confessions will be cited according to this edition.
4. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), p. 7, Latin text.
5. *Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 6, Latin text.
6. *Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 15, Latin text.
7. Friedrich Bente, ed., *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 857:16.
8. *Triglotta*, p. 874:4.
9. Hans-Werner Gensichen, *Damnamus: die Verwerfung von Irrlehre bei Luther und im Luthertum des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1955), pp. 145-146.