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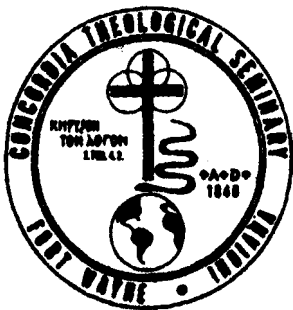
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The Future of Confessional Lutheranism in the World

Samuel Nafzger

Before proceeding to review recent developments regarding "Confessional Lutheranism in the World," it is first necessary to set forth very briefly the criteria for distinguishing between "positive" and "negative" developments. In order to do this, one needs to have a working definition of the term "confessional Lutheranism." In this paper the term "confessional Lutheranism" refers to commitment to the Book of Concord "as a witness to the truth and as exhibiting the unanimous and correct understanding of our predecessors who remained steadfastly in the pure doctrine" (FC, SD, Rule and Norm, 13) "because it is drawn from the Word of God" (FC, SD, Rule and Norm, 10). The members of a "Confessional Lutheran Church," therefore, accept "without reservation . . . all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God."¹ This means that a pastor (or professor or teacher) of a confessional church body subscribes unconditionally to the doctrinal content of the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church "because," in the words of C. F. W. Walther, "he recognizes the fact that it is in full agreement with Scripture and does not militate against Scripture in any point, whether that point be of major or minor importance . . . [and] that he therefore heartily believes in this divine truth and is determined to preach this doctrine without adulteration."² Such an understanding of "confessional Lutheranism" necessarily implies that all forms of conditional subscription to the Lutheran Symbols are incompatible with and actually contradictory to it. As Dr. Walther put it, "It is evident that a mere conditional subscription runs counter to the purpose of Symbols . . . an unconditional subscription is indispensable."³

It is necessary to point out that such an understanding of "confessional Lutheranism" is of no recent innovation. As Walther pointed out already in his 1858 essay to the Western District Convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod entitled "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," as early as 1532 Luther, together with Jonas and Bugenhagen, drew up the regulation that all those who wanted to be ordained "should give the assurance beforehand that they accept the unadulterated doctrine of the Gospel and understand

it in the same sense in which it is understood in the Apostolic, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Symbols, and in which it is presented in the Confession which our churches read before Emperor Charles at the Diet of Augsburg in the year 1530."⁴ Moreover, beginning in 1602 all the servants of churches and schools in Saxony were asked to take the following oath:

You shall vow and swear that you will continue and remain steadfastly and without guile in the pure, Christian understanding of the Gospel current in this territory as it is recorded in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, repeated and explained in the Christian Book of Concord, and preserved against all falsifications, and will neither secretly nor openly practice anything against it, but will at once fearlessly reveal anyone who departs from or practices against, that understanding. If God should decree—May He graciously prevent it!—that you follow the dreams and vagaries of men, depart from this pure doctrine and understanding of God's Word, and turn to the Papists or Calvinists or other sects that are described and rejected in the religious peace because they are not in sympathy with our pure Confession, you shall swear that because of your oath you will without fear immediately report your change of mind to the proper authorities and await further regulations and resolutions. May you do this faithfully and without deceit!⁵

Understood in this way, "confessional Lutheranism," as Dr. Harry Huth has pointed out, says something about *both* the church which requires unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Symbolical writings *and* the individual who subscribes them.⁶ It says in the first place that such a church body (1) has a confessional position; (2) is convinced that what it believes is correct; (3) wishes to preserve its confessional identity in distinction from all others; (4) is willing to present a clear statement of what it believes and teaches; and (5) has a genuine concern for the Gospel. At the same time, unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confession indicates that an individual who so subscribes (1) is not performing a meaningless formality; (2) that he has fully investigated and knows the contents of the Lutheran confessions; (3) that he has compared the confessions with the Holy Scriptures and is deliberately, voluntarily, genuinely, and publically prepared to identify himself with the church's confession because (*quia*) they are a true exposition of the Word of God. Unconditional subscription to the Lutheran symbolical writings in no way implies (1) a lack of a sense of history; (2) an enforced, legalistic conformity; (3)

an uncritical acceptance of tradition; (4) that an individual is saved by the good work of having an orthodox faith. In what follows those factors which militate against "confessional Lutheranism" as defined here will be called negative developments, and those developments which facilitate it will be called positive.

Negative Developments for Confessional Lutheranism

There are a number of developments in the latter half of twentieth century Lutheranism which do not bode well for the future of confessional Lutheranism. I shall refer tonight to only two of these developments, developments which raise the most serious problems for confessional Lutheranism. The first is the acceptance of historical criticism by the majority of Lutheran theologians throughout the world; and the second development, in some ways a result of the first development, is conditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions by the majority of Lutherans in the world today. Although neither of these developments is particularly new, both have made deep inroads among Lutherans.

Dr. Herman Sasse, in a 1949 letter to his "Brethren in the Ministry," spoke of a contemporary decadence of Lutheran doctrine," which he described in the following words:

It is the dying away of a faith which hides itself, as many another decline in the spiritual life of Christendom, behind a theological trend which seems to be on the up-grade. And as is the case with every decline in Christian life, so also this one goes hand in hand with a shocking weakness of character. To put it very frankly: The present-day theologians do no longer believe what they say and do no longer say what they believe. What great characters were the liberals of the past century who in public worship refused to confess the Apostolic Creed, because they did not any more believe some of its pronouncements! Today no theologian stumbles over such thin threads. We have no Sydow, Schrempf, or Knote incident any more; not because our times have a greater desire for dogma, but because theologians are no longer serious-minded in regard to their own confession and to confession as such. This is true despite all confessional movements of our times. No confessional church would dare to exclude one from its midst who denies the Trinity or the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. And that heresy has not yet been discovered which would compromise a pastor in one of our Lutheran Land churches. At the most it could only be the very un-

timely and inopportune loyalty to the Formula of Concord. Here, of course, all tolerance ceases and for no other reason than that it would involve insubordination toward a practically unconfessional church government. Proudly our churches acknowledge the fact that errorists are no longer being disciplined.⁷

If these words were an accurate description of the state of affairs in Lutheranism thirty years ago, then they are even more on target today. It is my contention that this contemporary "decadence of Lutheran doctrine" or dying away of faith results primarily from the acceptance of historical criticism as a way of studying and investigating the Holy Scriptures by the majority of Lutheran theologians today.

It was Peter Brunner who pointed out in his very timely and perceptive essay of almost ten years ago entitled "Commitment to the Lutheran Confessions - What Does It Mean Today?" that "all talk of commitment to confession is senseless when the Holy Scriptures have been lost as the concrete judge over all proclamation. Confession presupposes the Scriptures, that is, the Scriptures as a communicating authority, not merely as a historical factor!"⁸

But it is precisely the acceptance of the Scriptures as "a communicating authority, not merely as a historical factor" which historical criticism makes impossible. As has been pointed out by many, a fundamental presupposition of historical criticism is that historical documents are not themselves history and do not offer immediate access to history.⁹ The development of historical critical methodology presupposes "a revolution in the consciousness of Western man."¹⁰ In view of this "Copernican revolution,"¹¹ as Van Harvey calls it, regarding the very nature of historical knowledge itself - that is, that "no witness simply hands down a complete, photograph-like description of an event, rather, he selects, alters, interprets, and rationalizes"¹² - it is the function of the historian to assess the judgments of the witness reported in historical sources and "to establish not only their meaning but their truth."¹³ As R. G. Collingwood has pointed out, this is nothing less than a radical declaration of autonomy for the historian:

. . . The historian is his own authority and his thought autonomous, self-authorizing, possessed of a criterion to which his so-called authorities must conform and by reference to which they are criticized.¹⁴

In short, historical criticism holds that historical reports are to be regarded like witnesses in a court of law. The historian submits them to a rigorous cross-examination, evaluates the answers given, and confers authority upon them in proportion

to their demonstrated reliability and credibility. As Van Harvey has put it:

The historian, in short, is radically autonomous because of the nature of historical knowledge itself. If the historian permits his authorities to stand uncriticized, he abdicates his role as critical historian. He is no longer a seeker of knowledge but a mediator of past belief; not a thinker but a transmitter of tradition.¹⁵

The far-reaching implications of the application of historical criticism to the Biblical documents for confessional Lutheranism are immediately obvious and all but impossible to overestimate. What is a constant source of amazement is the apparent inability (or unwillingness) of some would-be confessional theologians to perceive the absolutely contradictory presuppositions which inform historical criticism and the understanding which the Lutheran Symbols manifest of Scripture as the Word of God and the authority which consequently belongs to it.¹⁶ Of course, the Confessions use the phrase "Word of God" to refer to the Second Person of the Trinity, the Gospel in the narrow and in the broad sense, and in a variety of other ways. Nevertheless, it has been clearly demonstrated by many that most frequently the Confessors use the phrase "Word of God" to refer to the Holy Scriptures. For the Confessors "Word of God" is a broader concept than Scripture, but Scripture is the Word of God.

Without attempting to present an exhaustive list of the problems which result from the attempt to apply historical criticism to that which the Confessions say is to be distinguished from all other human writings (FC, Ep., Rule and Norm, 7), let it suffice here to point out that the use of historical criticism undermines the understanding of the clarity and trustworthiness of the Scriptures and contradicts the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. Ted Peters, in a recent article in *Dialog*, after noting that the world view of the Reformation was "not fundamentally different from that of the Biblical period,"¹⁷ recognizes this fact. He writes:

We live in a different cultural or intellectual time and place from the sixteenth century, wherein the doctrine of *sola scriptura* received its definitive formulation. The assumptions regarding the literal and historical validity of the Bible which Luther could make we can no longer make. Life in Bible times looks strange to us. And nearly two centuries of Biblical criticism - which is a working out of the modern world view - have uncovered inaccuracies and literal impossibilities that undermine both the scriptures' clarity and trustworthiness.¹⁸

The rise of historical consciousness in the nineteenth

century on top of the naturalistic world view of post-Enlightenment modernity has undercut the supports for the scripture principle. Textual inconsistencies in the Bible, possible errors in historical data, and the rise of natural science which throws into doubt the veracity of mythical accounts of natural phenomena have all eroded our confidence that the Bible's literal content can be trusted as genuine history, let alone as guide for meaningful daily living. Critical consciousness has estranged us from the world of meaning found in Scripture.¹⁹

. . . whatever we make of *sola scriptura* today we cannot pit it clearly over against tradition as was done in the 16th century. We ourselves are immersed in a linguistic and cultural tradition that encompasses us

. . . Even without this, mere historical study has demonstrated that scripture is itself as much a product of tradition as it is a producer of tradition. It was the tradition of the Ecumenical Councils that determined the canon. And Luther's canon within a canon . . . makes clear that just what is and what is not scripture is unclear. . . . Given the alternatives, 'scripture alone' or 'scripture and tradition,' the Roman Catholic Church undoubtedly has the better position; for whoever admits *sola scriptura*, in the sense of holding that the canonical New Testament is the sole norm, rule, and standard, goes the way of the Roman Catholic - only not as consistently.²⁰

But how is confessional Lutheranism possible if Scripture is not essentially clear, and if it is not trustworthy?²¹ What possible meaning can subscription to the Lutheran Confessions have if the *sola scriptura* is forfeited? Peter Brunner presents the obvious answer to these questions:

But if the New Testament no longer harmonizes, if in the canonical writings of the New Testament a consensus is no longer heard regarding the Gospel that is to be proclaimed, then a confessional commitment has become fundamentally impossible. In the same measure that the Church loses the concrete authority of the Holy Scriptures, she also loses a binding consensus in regard to the content of the Gospel proclamation. The place of commitment to confession is taken by commitment to this or that theological opinion, which now itself must necessarily appear with the exclusive authority of a dogma. Where the authority of the Scriptures is lost,

the *hairesis* of a school of thought takes the place of the *confessio* of the Church.²²

The rise of historical criticism presents the greatest challenge to confessional Lutheranism. Where this methodology is applied to the Scriptures there can be no commitment to the Lutheran Confessions "without reservation." Vance Eckstrom does not overstate his case in opposition to what he calls "exclusivist confessionalism" at all when he says:

The greatest challenge to confessional commitment is modern critical thought, the kind of thought which takes as little as possible for granted, respects no authority but that of reason and concrete evidence, and looks with great scepticism on all truth claims based on any other kind of authority. Unless one chooses to retreat entirely from the contemporary scene, there is no way to escape this critical point of view . . .

Another form of critical thought is the historical-critical method of study of the Bible. A majority of Christian scholars have accepted this seemingly inimical method because they have wanted to come to terms with critical thought by submitting their interpretations of and beliefs about the Bible to examination before the bar of reason and objective evidence . . . Many traditional beliefs about the Bible have been demolished by this method . . . Two centuries of using this method has forced many adjustments in what were once deeply-held-convictions. We have come to recognize such things as the biblical account of creation, and of the origins of man, as something other than literal scientific and historical truth.²³

To a very great extent loss of confidence in the reliability of Scripture as a result of the use of historical criticism lies behind the undeniable fact, as Sasse charges, that many theologians no longer believe what they say and no longer say what they believe.

A second negative development for the future of confessional Lutheranism is the wide-spread tendency in contemporary Lutheranism to couch a conditional subscription to the Book of Concord in effusive rhetoric of praise for the Lutheran confessional writings. Only rarely does one hear today an open rejection of the sixteenth century Lutheran confessions and a direct call for a repudiation of them.²⁴ Most Lutheran theologians, despite their acceptance of historical criticism, profess some form of conditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. Perhaps the most common form of a qualified subscription is to accept the confessions as historically conditioned. While it is certainly correct to say that the Symbols

must be interpreted in their historical context, it is quite another matter to conclude from this fact that the Symbols do not teach eternal truths. Theodore Tappert has given classic expression to the view which would qualify subscription to the confessions because of their historical conditionedness. He writes:

When subscribing the confessions today, Lutherans assert that, in view of the issues which were then at stake and the alternatives then offered, the confessors were right.²⁵

More recently the president of a Lutheran seminary in this country has espoused this view: "When we state that we believe the Lutheran Confessions are true and completely reliable expositions of the doctrinal truth of the Gospel, we want to declare, without equivocation, that we are convinced that they correctly answered the issues which were at stake at the time the confessions were made."²⁶ Just how far such an acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions "without equivocation," no less, departs from an unconditional subscription is revealed by the writer's subsequent call for "repentance of the theological formulations - yes even confessional formulations." He goes on to say:

Only in repentance of our most treasured formulations can we find that honest openness to a renewed and vital hearing of the Gospel. Confessional integrity is served when we can acknowledge that.²⁷

Such a view regards the confessional writings as merely forming the starting point for theological reflection rather than as presenting final conclusions. Another theologian from this same church body both caricatures the position he rejects and masks a *de facto* rejection of the position taken by the confessions when he writes:

How is one to look on the Formula of Concord today? Is it the end point, the apex of Lutheran reflection on all matters therein contained? Or might it rather be but a beginning, a basis for further reflection which could enrich the thinking of the church and its proclamation? If we are to be at all serious about our confessions it must surely be the latter.²⁸

No one has suggested that unconditional subscription to the Confessions implies that the last word has been spoken on "all matters therein contained." If it means anything at all, however, it surely means that the Confessors were most certainly correct in the doctrinal position which they present. On the basis of such a conditional acceptance of the confessions, this theologian proceeds to criticize Holsten Fagerberg for pointing out that the attempt to use law and gospel as a

general hermeneutic affecting all of Scripture is a modern development and not to be found in the Confessions. He writes:

It would seem almost as though Fagerberg wants to celebrate what is a fault as a virtue. Fagerberg may be quite right in his assessment of what the confessions do at this point, but he seems oblivious to the fact that quite possibly that is just why there was so much trouble.²⁹

Others regard the Book of Concord as a *confession* rather than as *confessions*. This approach reduces the role of the confessions to a function, namely, the function of serving as an evangelical witness. Such a view regards unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Symbols as "symbolatry" or doctrinal legalism. According to this view, the confessions present us today with an example or model of how the church in the sixteenth century gave an evangelical witness during the crisis of their day. True obedience to the confessional writings, therefore, consists not in a passive submission but in an active obedience that trusts "the intuitions to be discovered in these writings," intuitions, of course, which are "yet to be revealed." One contemporary commentator writes:

The confessions, then, are not binding as a form of canonical law, but provocations toward expanded and free reflection. They do not establish the lowest common denominator of agreement but are identifying marks, literally 'symbols,' of a movement. The symbols are more or less adequate, depending on the direction the movement takes.³⁰

"Theology," he writes, "must argue rather than assert, convince rather than coerce, persuade rather than appeal to authority". It is precisely in such a view that we see most clearly manifested what Sasse calls the deadly disease which has taken hold of all churches including Rome. "Catholics and Protestants, Anglicans and Lutherans seem to agree with Erasmus who rejected Luther's 'firm assertions' and had to hear Luther's reply: *Tolle assertiones et tulisti Christianismum.*' Take away the dogmatic statements and you have taken away Christianity!"³¹

Conditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions takes any number of other forms: it is sometimes asserted that the Lutheran Confessions are "ecumenical" rather than "particular," dialogical rather than assertive, and that they offer a "particular perspective" to the truth rather than carrying "any claim to exhausting the truth."³² Vance Eckstrom has recently argued the case for what he calls "pluralist confessionalism," which he distinguishes from "exclusivist confessionalism."³³ But there are, in actuality, only two forms of confessional

subscription: unconditional and conditional, normative and historical, *quia* and *quatenus*.³⁴

An unconditional subscription to the Lutheran confessions is indispensable for confessional Lutheranism. It is in accordance with the purpose of symbols to be a confession of faith by which the church distinguishes itself from heterodox bodies and sects and by which the church norms the teaching of its pastors and teachers. Conditional subscription, on the other hand, leaves no symbol and establishes another norm. As Dr. C. F. Walther has stated:

By demanding only a conditional subscription to its Symbols the Church forfeits its distinctively Lutheran characteristics, and by admitting that its Symbols contain errors it places itself on the same level with the heterodox bodies . . . when the church is satisfied with a conditional subscription, it openly admits to its teachers that its Symbols may contain doctrines which are contrary to Scripture . . . if congregations demand only a conditional subscription to their Symbols they give the false teacher a weapon against themselves, and rob themselves of the right of deposing a teacher who teaches contrary to their Symbols . . . A mere conditional subscription . . . opens the door for a renewal of controversies that have already been settled and paves the way for everlasting discord.³⁵

Conditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions undermines confessional Lutheranism, and the fact that such a view characterizes the subscription of the majority of Lutheran theologians today casts a dark shadow over the future of confessional Lutheranism.

Lutheranism is seriously and deeply divided today. It is difficult to argue with Carl Braaten's 1975 conclusion:

Lutherans have never been more seriously divided than they are now. In the past we could blame our divisions on linguistic, geographical, cultural and ethnic differences, on so-called non-theological factors. Now it is clear the division goes to the heart of our faith, to the meaning of the gospel and its implications for the universal mission of the church.³⁶

While we must deplore this state of affairs and plead for God's forgiveness for those sins which we have committed which have contributed to this scandal of division, we dare never apologize for unconditionally subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions which correctly teach the Scriptural Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is Kierkegaard who has reminded us that the symptoms of truth are polemical. We are faithful to the Lutheran Confessions because

they teach us, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, the truth about the depths of human sin and also about the greater glory of divine mercy and forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. Herman Sasse has stated it well:

We are faithful to this church, not because it is the church of our Fathers, but because it is the church of the Gospel; not because it is the church of Luther, but because it is the church of Jesus Christ. If it became something else, if its teaching were something else than a correct exposition of the plain Word of God, it would no longer be our church. It is not the Lutheran liturgy that matters. The church can get along without it if it must. It is not the Symbolical Books that count. If it should ever be demonstrated that their exposition of the Gospel is false, that they contain essential errors, we would be the first ones to cast them into the fire; for our *norma normans*, the standard by which we judge doctrines, is the Bible alone . . . Since this is the character of Lutheran Confessionalism, it is in harmony with the breath of genuine ecumenical feeling. We are confident that the Evangelical Lutheran Church which is faithful to its Confessions is truly the church of Jesus Christ.³⁷

If the Lutheran Confessions are correct in their exposition of the doctrine of the Gospel and all its articles, then unconditional subscription to these confessions is necessary. Insofar as the divided state of affairs in Lutheranism today results primarily from differences regarding the doctrine of Scripture as taught in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran Symbols, an understanding which some claim the rise of criticism makes untenable,³⁸ then the recognition of this doctrinal division within Lutheranism must also be regarded as a positive development.

Positive Developments for Confessional Lutheranism

The most positive development in recent years for confessional Lutheranism has been the effort of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to reclaim its unconditional commitment to the Lutheran Symbols. The Synod had been organized in 1847 by a group of German immigrants who wanted, above all, to remain faithful to the Scriptures as the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions as a correct interpretation of them. Carl S. Mundinger writes of the founders of the Missouri Synod:

Not since the 16th century and never on American soil,

had a body of men so completely and so sincerely subscribed to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Catechisms of Luther, and the Formula of Concord. They regarded these instruments as clear and true expositions of the meaning of the inspired Word of God and they declared their readiness to abide by the decisions of the Lutheran Confessional writings.³⁹

But with the beginning of the Synod's second century of existence came the influence of the negative trends referred to in the first portion of this paper which had already made deep inroads into much of world Lutheranism, and the Synod began a slow but steady drift towards the acceptance of historical criticism and a qualified subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. Not until 1967 did the first signs of an impending reversal of this drift become visible. Significantly, in this year the Synod officially in convention reaffirmed its conviction "that the Holy Scripture is the inerrant Word of God."⁴⁰ At this same convention, the Synod "rejected and condemned" all those "world views, philosophical theories, exegetical interpretations, and other hypotheses which pervert biblical teaching and thereby obscure the Gospel."⁴¹ What has taken place since that time in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is well known to all of you and does not need to be reviewed here. It is sufficient to note at this time that through the painful ten years which have followed, a major Lutheran church body has made unprecedented strides toward reclaiming its historical confessional stance. One of the clearest evidences of the Synod's intent to take the Lutheran Confessions seriously was the adoption of "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" in 1973 as a doctrinal resolution of the Synod, for, as F. E. Mayer had written in 1947:

It is true that the Lutheran Confessions are a sufficient basis for Lutheran union. But there must also be a clarification of such antitheses as are not discussed in the Lutheran Confessions. Modern doctrinal statements are necessary as guidelines for doctrinal discussions on controverted points and as satisfactory summations of such discussions.⁴²

Moreover, as a direct result of the controversy which has ensued, a positive on-going program for the study of the Scriptures and the Confessions was inaugurated this past fall under the theme "That We May Grow." Pastors and lay-people throughout the Synod are actually studying the confessional writings of the Lutheran church. For the first time in a generation there is concord on the campuses of synodical seminaries and colleges. Healing is taking place throughout the

Synod. What has taken place in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in recent years has given hope to all those committed to Confessional Lutheranism throughout the world.

There are positive developments also taking place in other Lutheran churches throughout the world. Only a few isolated examples can be listed here. The Lutheran Church of Australia, which resulted from the merger of two Lutheran bodies in that country in 1965, has presented the world with an exemplary model for the carrying out of ecumenical endeavors. Their merger was achieved, not through compromise of doctrine, not by agreeing to disagree, not by searching for some lowest common denominator, but only after many years of discussions had resulted in doctrinal agreement and the adoption of a document entitled "Theses of Agreement." Careful scholarship under the norm of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions has resulted in some excellent statements on the inerrancy of Scripture, on the interpretation of Genesis 1-3, and more recently on the charismatic movement. In 1972 three Lutheran Free Churches in Germany merged to form the new *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*. Like the merger in Australia, this union demonstrates ecumenical confessionalism in the best sense of the term. Despite the fact that plans for one Lutheran Church in Canada by 1980 have had to be shelved, the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships (JCILR) voted this past November to continue to work towards altar and pulpit fellowship among the three Lutheran bodies by scheduling doctrinal discussions on the ordination of women and on the nature of Scriptural authority and methods of Biblical interpretation, thereby demonstrating their commitment to take doctrine seriously instead of opting for compromise. Confessional Lutheranism is alive and well in various parts of the world.

Exciting things are happening in many parts of the world with respect to making the Lutheran Confessions available in a variety of languages. Luther's Small Catechism has recently been translated into Indonesian, and the Augsburg Confession is presently being translated into this language by the Batak Church. Exciting developments are taking place among Lutherans in Brazil, a country which is bursting forth in a thousand directions. Progress is being made in translating the Lutheran Confessions into Portuguese. Elsewhere in South America work continues in translating the Lutheran Confessions into Spanish and is nearing completion. In India, in England and France, in Ghana and Nigeria, in New Guinea and the Philippines, in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, in Venezuela and Argentina, pastors and teachers committed

unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions are witnessing, often under the most trying circumstances, to the Scriptural Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Time allows me to refer to only one additional positive development with respect to confessionalism. I refer to the report of the recently concluded five-year study of "the function of doctrine and theology in light of the unity of the church" by representatives from the three large Lutheran church bodies in the United States, convened under the auspices of the Division of Theological Studies of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. Despite the fact that the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod all have solid statements in their constitutions regarding commitment to the Holy Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions, it is well known that major differences exist between these church bodies. Therefore, it must be regarded as a positive development when a committee of official representatives from these church bodies issues a report which clearly delineates the areas of disagreement. This report states that on such important questions as the basis for fellowship, the authority of Scripture, the role of confessions, and the limits of diversity, representatives of the three participating bodies tend to find themselves in two theological camps. LCMS representatives tend to take one position, ALC and LCA representatives another. The mutual recognition of these serious differences can only be viewed as a positive development beyond the frequently articulated claims that formal commitment to the Lutheran Symbols constitutes doctrinal agreement. It is to be fervently hoped that this report's recommendation for "theological discussions among professors, pastors, and laity" and for "official consultations" between representatives of the churches participating in LCUSA will be taken seriously and implemented.

Concluding Observations

We have come to the end of this presentation, and we have yet to speak directly to the topic "*The Future of Confessional Lutheranism in the World.*" Having briefly defined what we understand by confessional Lutheranism and having reviewed some of the negative developments which work against it and some of the positive developments which give witness to its continuing vitality, I will content myself with offering five concluding observations about confessional Lutheranism.

1. *Confessional Lutheranism always finds itself under attack.* Dr. Herman Sasse once wrote: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church is a church which has been sentenced to death by the

world. For four hundred years, now, it has been threatened by the sentence of death pronounced upon it."⁴³ Today is no different. This world, the modern world, is unalterably opposed to confessional Lutheranism. We dare never forget this nor be lulled into thinking that a momentary success here or there signals final victory. As Ralph Bohlmann has recently reminded us in his convocation essay, "The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is one of a very few major Lutheran bodies in the world who still confess and cling to the whole doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessional writings."⁴⁴ Confessional Lutheranism always has been and always will be under attack, if not from those who would destroy the Scripture principle apart from which subscription to the Confessions has no meaning, then by the enthusiasts of all ages who undercut the objective certainty of God's free grace of forgiveness for the sake of Christ in Word and Sacrament. Confessional Lutheranism always has been and always will be under attack, if not from those who reject outright the contents of the Church's Symbols, then by a conditional subscription which insidiously empties them of any significance in practice. Confessional Lutheranism always has been and always will be under attack, if not from the external and internal enemies of the church, then from the ever present temptation to degenerate into a smug and self-righteous "dead orthodoxy."

2. *Confessional Lutheranism is showing some signs of renewed vitality today.* Although it is doubtful that *Time* will soon feature a cover story on "Confessional Lutheranism, New Empire of Faith," there nevertheless are some small signs that a resurgence of confessional Lutheranism in the world is possible. In a presentation before the annual meeting of LCUSA last March, Harold Lindsell, editor of *Christianity Today* and author of *Battle for the Bible*, offered this appraisal of Lutheranism from the perspective of an Evangelical: "Lutherans possess a wonderful and rich well of water in their confessional writings, but they rarely draw from it." Recent developments, especially within The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, indicate that at least some Lutherans intend to go back to this well. Encouraging is also the fact that Lutherans in the U.S.A. seem to be somewhat more open to the recognition that doctrinal differences actually exist among them and should be opened up for discussion.

It is interesting to note that the *Time* December 26, 1977, story on the Evangelicals does not make a single reference to contemporary Lutheranism. This, it seems to me, is indicative of the opportunity and challenge which confronts confessional Lutheranism today. To meet this challenge, confessional Lutheran churches must place three tasks high on their agenda:

- a) The recruiting and training of sensitive, alert, and confessionally committed men for the pastoral ministry;
- b) The writing of apologetic and dogmatic texts in which the riches of the Symbols' insights are applied to contemporary problems and developments in society and in the world of theology;
- c) Close contact and doctrinal discussions between those Lutheran churches throughout the world who are unconditionally committed to the Lutheran Confessions as a correct interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

Commitment to the Lutheran Confessions demands, as Peter Brunner has put it, "not a repetitive, formalistic recitation of the statements of the fathers, but rather their binding, actualizing interpretation and application."⁴⁵

3. *Confessional Lutheranism is genuinely ecumenical.* Far from being the cause of division in the church, unconditional subscription to the Symbolical Books demands that every effort be made to manifest the unity of the church in external and visible harmony. Once again I turn to Sasse for an appropriate word:

Indeed, not such a one thinks and acts in an ecumenical fashion who looks upon the Confessions as something relative, who reduces them to a low level and practically does away with them, but who, like Luther, searches for the one truth of the one Gospel for the one Church. Let us again become *Confessional Lutherans* for the sake of the unity of the Church"⁴⁶

4. *Confessional Lutheranism rules out pride and demands a humble spirit.* Precisely because confessional Lutheranism demands unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions as a correct interpretation of God's Word, it leaves no room for self-righteous pride. As Alexander Schmemmann, the Orthodox theologian, has written: "Truth always makes humble, and pride in all its forms and expressions is always alien to truth and is always a sin."⁴⁷

5. *Confessional Lutheranism is fundamentally eschatological in outlook.* In his Great Confession, quoted in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Luther said (FC, SD, VII, 29):

I see that schisms and errors are increasing proportionately with the passage of time, and that there is no end to the rage and fury of Satan. Hence lest any persons during my lifetime or after my death appeal to me or misuse my writings to confirm their error, as the Sacramentarians and Anabaptists are already beginning to do, I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. 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.

A generation or so later, the authors of the Formula of Concord concluded their confession with these words (FC, SD, XII, 40):

Therefore, in the presence of God and of all Christendom among both our contemporaries and our posterity, we wish to have testified that the present explanation of all the foregoing controverted articles here explained, and none other, is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God's grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account. Nor shall we speak or write anything, privately or publicly, contrary to this confession, but we intend through God's grace to abide by it. In view of this we have advisedly, in the fear and invocation of God, subscribed our signatures with our own hands.

Such confessionalism as this has a brilliant future; if not always in this world, then most certainly in the world to come.

FOOTNOTES

1. Constitution of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Article II.
2. C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," *CTM*, Vol. XVIII, April 1947, p. 241. In this essay, Walther, to be sure, notes that "since the Symbols are confessions of faith or doctrine, the Church necessarily cannot require a subscription to those matters which do not belong to doctrine." Nor does unconditional subscription imply for Walther that it is "impossible to improve on the line of argument employed in the Symbolical Books for arriving at purity of doctrine" (p. 242).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 244. For a different understanding of "confessional," see Vance L. Eckstrom's "Pluralism and Lutheran Confessionalism," *Lutheran Quarterly*, XXIX (May 1977), p. 10. Eckstrom distinguishes between "exclusivist confessionalism" and "pluralist confessionalism." From the perspective of this paper "exclusivist confessionalism" is redundant and "pluralist confessionalism" is a contradiction in terms.
4. Walther, *op. cit.*, p. 250.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
6. This point is made and demonstrated with copious references to the Lutheran Symbols in an unpublished outline on "Confessional Subscription" prepared by Dr. Harry Huth in 1971 which is on file in the office of the CTCR in St. Louis.
7. Herman Sasse, "Concerning the Status of the Lutheran Churches in the World," *CTM*, XX (August 1949), pp. 622-3.
8. Peter Brunner, "Commitment to the Lutheran Confession - What Does It Mean Today?" *The Springfielder*, XXXIII, 3(December 1969), pp. 4-5.

9. See Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1966), pp. 38 ff.; Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) pp. 41 ff. Ted Peters, "Sola Scriptura and the Second Naivete," *Dialog*, XVI (Fall 1977), pp. 268 ff.
10. Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
14. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 236.
15. Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
16. For example, see Krentz, *op. cit.* After noting that "historical criticism serves the historian's need for valid, reliable evidence by enabling him to establish whether or not testimony actually was given by a competent and reliable witness" (p. 41) and that "historical criticism produces only probably results" (p. 67), he can nevertheless say that "historical criticism is not a threat to the Scriptures because it is congruent with its object, the Bible" (p. 61), "to refuse to use historical criticism in the face of the Bible's claim would deny that the history told is true history [and] . . . would be a form of the docetic heresy" (p. 63), and "the utility of historical criticism can no longer be questioned" (p. 87). Incredibly, Krentz seems to be unaware of the fact that the Biblical writers as well as the sixteenth century Reformers believed that God is the primary author of the Scriptures, that the Bible is God's Word, and that to question its reliability is to question the truthfulness of God Himself.
17. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 271.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 275. See also my review of *Peter in the New Testament* in *The Lutheran Witness*, August 25, 1974, pp. 26ff. Often, however, adherence to *sola scriptura* is professed, while it is denied in practice.
21. Herman Sasse, "Confessional Churches in the Ecumenical Movement," *The Springfielder*, 1967. "The sectarian relies on human opinions which he reads into the Bible. He is always sure of himself. The Reformer is never sure of himself, but he relies entirely on the written Word. He knows that this word contains immeasurable depths which no human mind can grasp, that also his understanding of that word, of this or that Biblical book may be insufficient or even wrong. So Luther spent a lifetime in searching the Scripture, constantly improving his translation and his exegesis, seeking always the advice of others. But this study of the Scriptures has convinced him of the '*claritas scripturae*.' In all things pertaining to our salvation Scripture is clear, it explains itself and does not need a teaching office which explains it infallibly. For in the Scriptures the Holy Spirit speaks. This is what Scripture says of itself, what Christ taught when he quoted Scripture . . . The clarity of the Scripture is, of course, not the clarity of a mathematical textbook, nor is it that kind of clarity which we expect in a work of modern Western historiography. It is the clarity with which the Holy Spirit speaks to those whose ears He has opened: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (p. 31).
22. Brunner, *op. cit.* pp. 7-8.

23. Eckstrom, *op. cit.* pp. 111, 112.
24. For an exception to this trend, see Rachael Conrad Wahlberg's "Let's Update the Confessions," *Lutheran Forum*, March 1970, pp. 10-11. Referring to the Augsburg Confession, Wahlberg contends that "parts of the statement are embarrassingly polemical and even ludicrous to a 'world come of age' " (p. 10). She continues: "We might even be so bold as to take issue with some of the statements in the confessions . . . If the Lutheran confessions were to be updated, such inconsistencies would be considered and reshaped in light of modern theology" (pp. 10-11). J. R. Christianson, Chairman of the History Department at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, recently criticized *The Lutheran Standard* for printing a series of articles on the Formula of Concord as being "strangely out of place . . . our church, the ALC, is a church of the Augsburg Confession, not really a church of the Formula of Concord." *The Lutheran Standard*, December 6, 1977, p. 16. It is also worthy of note that the June 1977 Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Dar es Salaam gave no formal recognition whatsoever to the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord.
25. *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation*, (The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and The National Lutheran Council), 1961, p. 29.
William Weiblen, "Confessional Integrity and the Crisis in the Church,"
26. *Lutheran Forum*, November 1974, p. 16.
Ibid.
27. Gerhard O. Forde, "The Formula of Concord Article V: End or New
28. Beginning?" *Dialog*, XV (Summer 1976), p. 184.
Ibid., p. 190.
29. Richard J. Neuhaus, "The Supreme Court and Confessionalism," *Lutheran*
30. *Forum*, April 1969, p. 15.
31. Herman Sasse, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
32. Paul Jersild, letter in response to Horace Hummel's "No Other Gospel," *Lutheran Forum*, February 1970, p. 72.
33. Eckstrom, *op. cit.*, pp. 130 ff.
34. It was maintained by Theodore Tappert that the Confessions themselves "assert both a *quatenus* and a *quia*, both that the Confessions should be acknowledged only insofar as (*quatenus*) they agree with the Scriptures and then also because (*quia*) they agree with the Scriptures." Tappert, *op. cit.*, p. 30. But as Carl Braaten and others have noted, this is really only a "new declension of the old *quatenus* formula."
35. Walther, *op. cit.*, pp. 245-6. In response to the question whether or not it is possible that the Symbols of the orthodox church contain errors in less important points, Walther says "yes, but the possibility does not establish reality. Only a skeptic, who is always learning and never coming to the truth, despairs of ever finding the truth and will maintain: Men have written this, and therefore it must contain error. But if error should really be found in our Symbols, we would be the first to pass the death sentence on them. But we defy the whole world to point out an error in doctrine in our Book of Concord. For the past three hundred years all the enemies of our church have tried in vain to find an error, but have failed" (pp. 248-9).
36. Carl Braaten, *Dialog*, Fall 1975, p. 245.
37. Herman Sasse, *Here We Stand* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), p. 172.

38. Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 270 ff.
39. Carl S. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947) p. 195.
40. *Convention Proceedings, 1967*, p. 95 (Resolution 2-30, "To Reaffirm Our Position on Certain Doctrines").
41. *Ibid.* (Resolution 2-31, "To Reaffirm Our Position on Creation, Fall, and Related Subjects").
42. F. E. Mayer, from an editorial note prefacing Herman Sasse's "Concerning the Lutheran Free Churches in Germany," *CTM*, January 1947, p. 39.
43. Sasse, *Here We Stand*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
44. Ralph Bohlmann, "The Celebration of Concord," Mimeographed essay, November 1977, p. 31.
45. Brunner, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
46. Sasse, "Concerning the Status of the Lutheran Church in the World," *op. cit.*, p. 624.
47. Alexander Schmemmann, "The Task of Orthodox Theology in America Today," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, X (April 1966), p. 186.

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