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Luther and the Confessions

Wilbert Rosin

Students of theology and church history may wonder at Lutherans' intense interest in their confessions and at Lutheran convictions that their confessions are important for the total church, and also for the unchurched. This can be understood in part by examining Luther's stance on confessional theology in general and his influence upon the documents that emerged. Luther himself was interested in a three-level movement: personal faith, the public declaration by the individual, and the individual Christian's statement of faith or public confession along with his fellow believers. We all know about Luther's "Here I Stand" speech and the great moments in which he himself publicly confessed. But sometimes we forget that Luther was very important also for the first public confessions for Lutherans. At Worms in 1521 he stood alone. At Augsburg in 1530 many evangelicals, city representatives, and princes stood by him. He himself had to stay at the Feste Coburg, though in spirit he was at Augsburg with the confessors. The Augsburg Confession was the product of Melanchthon's pen. But scholars now appreciate to what extent Luther contributed to the Augsburg Confession through his preparatory writing on the sacraments and other questions and through his constant urgent correspondence from the Coburg to Augsburg in which he discussed very substantial doctrinal matters and urged the evangelicals to stand fast.

Only the Formula of Concord of the Lutheran Confessions was written after Luther's death. The other specifically evangelical Confessions of the Lutheran Reformation, such as the Catechisms, the Smalcald Articles, the Augsburg Confession, and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, were all done within Luther's own lifetime, written by him or composed with his very active participation. So it is basically and generically wrong to drive a wedge between Luther and confessional statements of Lutheranism. When Melanchthon said in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (IV, 385), "No faith is firm which does not reveal itself in confession," he was reflecting Luther's position that what is in the heart must be orally expressed.

As early as 1509 Luther was moving in the direction of the *verbum evangelii vocale* (the spoken word of the Gospel). As a *sentenarius* Luther stressed the Word of God in his commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Through that whole tortured

decade from 1509 to 1519 he developed his ideas of conversion, of justification by faith, and of confession. What Melanchthon did in writing the Augsburg Confession and, of course, his Apology of the Augsburg Confession was basically to make a public statement of what Luther, he, and other evangelicals believed. Consider, for example, Melanchthon's statement of his *Loci* of 1521: "For Christ is properly known from these things, since to know Christ is to know his benefits. It is not, as they say, to know his natures or the modes of incarnation."¹ This central thesis of Luther's faith, namely, that Christian faith consists of trusting in the *promissa dei et beneficia Christi*, the promises of God and the benefits of Christ, is the heart of the Confessions. The emphasis on Law and Gospel in Luther's theology and in the Confessions is of decisive importance for Luther and for Lutheranism precisely because of Luther's new evangelical understanding of justification. If we are looking for continuity, we may begin with Luther and Melanchthon and follow through to the Formula of Concord in 1577.

As Hermann Sasse put it in his *Variata Semper Varianda*, "Whatever weaknesses one may find in the Formula of Concord, without it the Lutheran Reformation would have perished at that time in a chaos of varying opinion. The great 'We believe, teach, and confess,' with which each of its doctrinal decisions begins, restores the *magnus consensus* of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 which had been lost in the endless discussions within the Smalcald League until its dissolution and then in the doctrinal disputes . . . The much-maligned Book of Concord at that time preserved the Sacrament of the Altar in the world, and, with the Sacrament, the Gospel."²

What the formulators of the Formula of Concord really had in mind was the basic concern of maintaining unity and establishing harmony in the Protestant confession. That was essentially the *Lutheran* confession in the first instance, but they corresponded about this confession with people also in other communions.³ If we turn to the Solid Declaration, we find some magnificent statements of the purpose of the Confessions. Harmony is the badge of authentic Lutheranism. We read in Article XI (95-96): "We have a sincere delight and a deep love for true harmony and are cordially inclined and determined on our part to do everything in our power to further the same. We desire such harmony as will not violate God's honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth and the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor

sinner to sincere and true repentance, raise him up to faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him forever through the sole merit of Christ.”

It is quite clear from this statement that the whole concern of the formulators of the Formula of Concord as Lutherans and as evangelicals was the same as Luther's concern when he made his first confession at Worms and underlined the common confession at Augsburg. Any attempt to separate Melancthonian confessionalism from Luther's confession is really a distortion of historical fact. Luther was very much involved and the people who formulated the Formula of Concord were very much in harmony with Luther's essential concern with the benefits of Christ and the purposes of the Gospel. What kind of harmony did they want? It was not a kind of peace-at-any-price statement at all. It was, as they expressed it in the Solid Declaration (Article XI, 95-96), a harmony that would last because it was solidly based on the Scriptures, and they did not cite Luther's authority except incidentally, nor did they argue from purely rationalistic grounds but rather always referred to the authority of Scripture and essentially the Gospel message carried by the Scriptures.

On confessing the Confessions, the Solid Declaration speaks of Christian freedom in those church customs and practices that God has neither commanded nor forbidden as a precious gift of God. Such freedom is to be closely guarded against unwarranted liberty on the one hand and deadening legalism on the other hand. Article X (10) states, “We believe, teach, and confess also that at the time of confession [when a confession of the heavenly truth is required], when the enemies of God's Word desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire congregation of God, yes, every Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word as the leaders of the congregation of God [as those whom God has appointed to rule His church], are bound by God's Word to confess freely and openly the [godly] doctrine, and what belongs to the whole of [pure] religion, not only in words but also in works and with deeds.” There is then no gap between the *lex credendi* (the law of believing) and the *lex orandi* (the law of open confessing). Article II (16) says: “And after God, through the Holy Spirit in baptism, has kindled and wrought a beginning of true knowledge of God and faith, we ought to petition Him incessantly by the same Spirit and grace, through daily exercise in reading His Word and putting it into practice, that He would preserve faith and His Heavenly gift in us, strengthen us daily until our end. Unless God Himself is our teacher, we cannot study

and learn anything pleasing to Him and beneficial to us and others."

The question then for the present day is to what extent the Lutheran Confessions are an adequate statement in terms of completeness and to what extent they are adequate in terms of expression of essential truths, given the changes in theological discourse and philosophical language. Here is where we come to the heart of the matter. It has been said that the problem of authority is the Achilles heel of Protestantism. The hermeneutical problem, the method used in the interpretation of Christian truth, is a central problem, perhaps *the* central problem, in contemporary theological discourse. That the Confessions are very important for contemporary theological discourse is now widely acknowledged. Confessional statements are recognized not simply as important statements of individual religious philosophers but as statements of the community of God, namely, the church. Thus, in many of the recent books which have been devoted to the study of the Confessions there have been expressions of appreciation of the importance of the Confessions for the church today. For example, in a recent book edited by Wenzel Lohff and Lewis Spitz, *Widerspruch, Dialog und Einigung; Studien zur Konkordienformel der lutherischen Reformation*, there are such articles as the one by Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, "Modelle konfessioneller Hermeneutik und die Funktion der Konkordienformel im Neulutherthum" (pp. 277-296), in which Kantzenbach, who is a well-known Luther and Melancthon scholar, discusses confessional hermeneutics and the function of the Formula of Concord in modern Lutheranism. Joerg Baur has an essay in that same volume, "Kirchliches Bekenntnis neuzeitliches Bewusstsein" (pp. 315-335), in which he even explores the relation of the Confessions to Hegel and other formative philosophical minds.

FOOTNOTES

1. Robert Stupperich, editor, *Melancthons Werke in Auswahl*, II, 1 (Guetersloh, 1952), p. 7, lines 9-12.
2. *Lutheran Theological Journal* V (August, 1971), p. 49.
3. See Lewis W. Spitz and Wenzel Lohff, eds., *Discord, Dialog and Concord. Studies in the Lutheran Reformation's Formula of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), part II: "Historical Essays. The Response to the Formula of Concord — Lutheran, Scandinavian, Anglican, Dutch Reformed, French Reformed, and Catholic."