

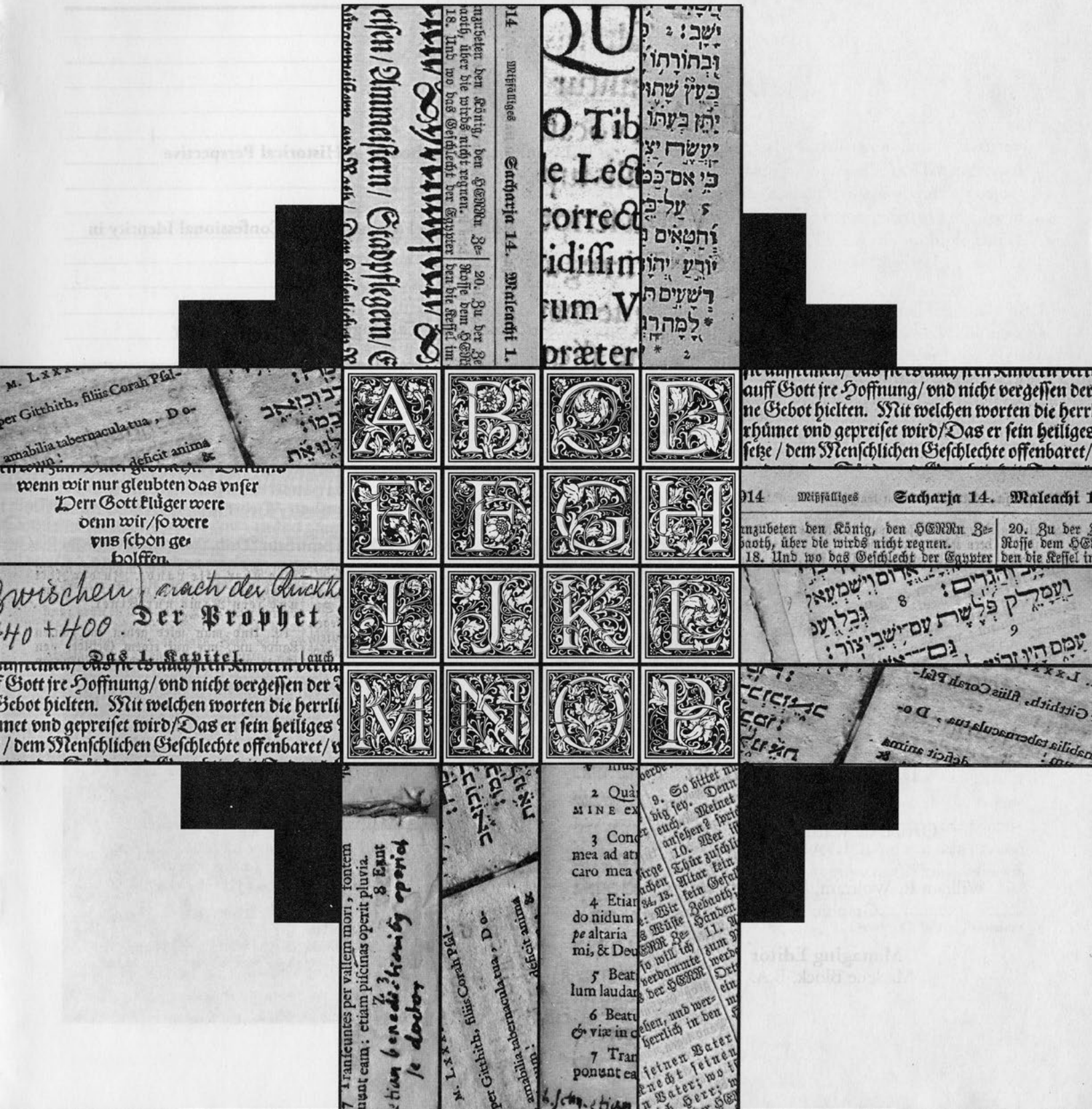
# ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Spring 1998

Volume 32, No. 1

## Who is a Confessional Lutheran???



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# ISSUES

IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

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## Who Is a Confessional Lutheran???

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## reflections

The spelling of one's name can be a challenge at times. Given my first and last names, mail arrives with various spellings. I have received letters addressed to Orv, Orval, Orvil, and Orville, and with last names such as Walz, Waltz, Walls, and Walsh. I am reminded of a relative in the teaching ministry who has at times included a multiple choice question on a quiz to determine if the students in his class can identify the correct spelling of his last name.

Even more important than the spelling of a name, especially in theological discussions, is the meaning attached to a word. While most people can spell "confessional," it is the meaning of the word that often can become a stumbling block. I believe the reader of this edition of *Issues in Christian Education* will appreciate the perspective of Walter Tietjen who points out in his editorial how the word "confessional" has many meanings in Lutheran circles today.

The authors of this edition direct attention to questions related to the identity of Confessional Lutherans, with implications for practices in the church. How are Confessional Lutherans identified in light of both Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions? Are there times when being confessional has resulted in attitudes and practices that are divisive rather than unifying? What implications are there for the institutions of the Concordia University System as they minister to international students when questions of confessional identity and practice are explored? In our church today, how can we focus on issues rather than personalities as Confessional Lutherans?

It is my prayer that this edition of *Issues* will provide growth opportunities for our readers. Charles Arand reminds us that "The collection of documents gathered into the volume known as *The Book of Concord* seeks to be nothing else from beginning to end than a confession of Jesus Christ in complete congruence with the Scriptures." John Johnson warns that "It is one thing to name the confessions as the touchstone of Lutheran theology. It is quite another to use them effectively." May this edition help us grow in the knowledge of how to use the Lutheran Confessions effectively.

Orville C. Walz, President



Graphic design by Stephanie Benzel  
of CONCORDesign, Concordia College, Seward

# Editorials

## Who Is a Confessional Lutheran?

These are the tokens ye shall mark:  
The swaddling-clothes and manger dark;  
There ye shall find the Infant laid,  
by whom the heavens and earth were made." Martin Luther

This stanza from Catherine Winkworth's translation of Luther's *Von Himmel hoch da komm' ich her* (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, Hymn 85) might seem a strange departure point for addressing the question of Lutheran identity. I would suggest, however, that beyond its suitability for the liturgical seasons of Christmas and Epiphany there is here the very core of what it means to be a confessing Lutheran, namely, the real presence of Christ. That God the Father chose a young woman in a remote part of the Roman Empire during the reign of Caesar Augustus to bear His Only-Begotten Son is a remarkable claim. Even more striking is the narrative of His life that led to His atoning death on the cross for the redemption of all of humanity. His bodily Resurrection and Ascension define all time as creation awaits His appearing (parousia) at the end of the Age.

The Confessional Lutheran is one who views all of life through these tokens of Christ's presence and knows that they are the key to understanding the heavens, the earth, and all that is in them. *Such tokens are Christ's real presence in baptismal water and in the meal of his very body and blood through the power of His life-giving Word.*

A visual analogy will expound Luther's hymn stanza further and address the question of confessional identity succinctly. In a culture that advances a variety of portraits of Christ, the Confessional Lutheran "believes, teaches, and confesses" that the Lutheran Confessions (*The Book of Concord*) portray Christ with biblical fidelity, clarity and richness. This confession is the opposite of sectarianism, for it is understood as one with the holy, catholic, and apostolic faith of the Creeds and ancient fathers.

How will such a confession look at the beginning of the third millennium? Certainly it will appear as strange and as radical as its antecedents did in the second or 16th century. To behold Christ in the tokens of swaddling-clothes and manger is scandalous to the ancient and modern mind. To

confess that He presently speaks clearly and perfectly through His prophetic and apostolic spokesmen and that He is truly present in wine, bread, and water is to challenge the assumptions of contemporary American, Western, and even global religiosity.

Where and how will such a confession distinguish itself from its alternative confessions?

First, it stands in stark opposition to the post-modern assumption that one can hold multiple and contradictory positions and embrace them all simultaneously. At a popular level, fewer Americans seem even to be interested in what is a faithful Scriptural portrait of Christ and His work. Hence, the question of whether the Roman Catholics, or Presbyterians, or Lutherans, are correct in their confession is not viewed as significant.

Second, a Confessional Lutheran will stand out for challenging the individualistic, privatistic and reductionistic understandings of popular religiosity. "What Jesus means" is very different than "what Jesus means to me" as that latter phrase is currently coined. The Confessional Lutheran will be defined by the tokens—"the means of grace"—as clearly as Luther was over against the enthusiasts of the Radical Reformation.

Third, a Confessional Lutheran will confess the coherence of the Christian vision over against its fragmentation, i.e., to be quiet in the face of the doctrinal innovations and ecclesial laxity as exhibited in casual divorce, abortion and promiscuity which contradict our very confession. This, of course, presupposes a knowledge of the faith once delivered by the fathers. Hence, the Confessional Lutheran will be one who challenges the view that only what is contemporary or recent is worthy of serious consideration. Rather, the sacred Scriptures, creeds and related texts will be seen as wholesome light in a world increasingly dark.

Finally, far from being a mere traditionalist or repristinator or upright conservative, the Confessional Lutheran is called to proclaim Christ and His tokens with great clarity, charity and missionary compassion. The Confessional Lutheran will worship and live in such a way as to make the tokens of Christ's presence sparkle with biblical clarity so that another of Luther's stanzas might, by God's grace, be on every human lip:

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,  
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,  
within my heart, that it may be  
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.

Dr. Dean O. Wenthe, President  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, Indiana

## Lutheran Confessionalism: Doctrine and Practice

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

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

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

Convention resolutions and CTCR reports are no substitutes for what actually takes place in the life of the congregation. What happens at the altar and in the pulpit, in the catechesis of youth and adults, and in the pastoral care of Christ's holy people finally determines whether a congregation is confessional. Some in our day would argue that it is enough that a congregation remain biblical. In his magisterial convention essay of 1857 on confessional subscription (see *Essays for the Church*, Vol. 1, 19-29), Walther identifies Pietism as the source of this argument.

Walther understood that to be a theologian of the Word one must be a theologian of the church's confession. Hence, our confessional subscription is *quia* (because the confession conforms to Scrip-

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

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

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

"The cause is yours, the glory too.  
Then hear us, Lord, and keep us true,  
Your Word alone our heart's defense,  
The Church's glorious confidence."  
(LW344:6)

The Rev. John T. Pless  
University Lutheran Chapel  
Minneapolis, Minn.

## The View from the Lutheran Window

A story is told about a couple who lived in a mansion. The spacious master bedroom was located in the cupola which served as the jeweled crown for this architectural masterpiece. Arched windows surrounded the room, giving a totally different view depending on the direction one was facing.

One afternoon the couple who lived in the house decided to take advantage of the beautiful weather and get some outdoor exercise. From her window the wife saw the inviting waters of the swimming pool several stories below. From his window her husband looked down on the tennis court and found that to be very appealing. Imagine the surprise when the two met outside, one with a colorful beach towel, the other with the latest in high tech tennis gear.

It occurs to me the Holy Christian Church is something like a cupola. First, it's singular. There is but one Church. For centuries Christians have confessed boldly, "I believe in *one* holy catholic and apostolic Church. . . ." At the same time, not all whom the Lord has gathered into this "cupola of God" are looking at Him and His Work through the same window. We stand together with people who confess with the Apostle that there is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, but our perceptions often show we are lined up behind different windows. We see what others don't see, and what they see we can't understand. The consequence is division within the Church. The external unity God wills has not yet been realized.

Consider the view through the Lutheran window. It includes all that God reveals to us about Himself, about creation, about sin, about grace and justification through faith in His Son, about the Church—its formation, life, mission, and about heaven. Historically, those who have gathered behind this window have formulated what they see into a system of categories of Christian teachings found in *The Book of Concord*. These writings, we believe, accurately represent and teach the content of the Scriptures. Because they accurately represent the witness of the Bible we also believe they are consistent with the teachings of the historic Church. People who look at God and the world through this window are called Lutherans.

But ours is not the only window in the cupola. The Roman Catholic Church has its window. The Orthodox line up behind another window.

Sometimes, even within a particular confessional group, it would appear people are looking through different windows.

Consider the Lutheran window. Even though we may agree on the design of the Lutheran window, those standing behind this window don't necessarily all see the same thing. This should come as no surprise. Someone no less than Simon Peter had to have his window enlarged before he could see that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10). Similarly, the Spirit of the living Christ expanded Martin Luther's window, and he saw the just live by faith and by faith alone.

This raises a very natural question. If the Church is one, and it is; and if the Church has not yet realized external unity, and it hasn't; then how do we interact with one another within the "cupola" of Christianity? The answer to that question gets at the heart of what it means to be a confessional Lutheran.

Far too many respond with one of two extremes. Either we withdraw from those whose confessional subscription differs from ours and we have nothing to do with them, or we ignore the differences that separate us as if they didn't exist. To respond with either extreme is to fail as a confessional church.

To be a Confessional Lutheran is to recognize we are a part of something far larger than those who view the Church through the window we stand behind. It means taking responsibility for confessing publicly what our eyes have seen and our ears have heard. But, it also means listening to others who confess Jesus as Lord but whose view is different from ours. This we do because it is not our theological perspective which makes us part of the Church. Rather, it is the abundant mercy of God revealed to us through His Son Jesus which incorporates us into the Church. So, without compromise, Confessional Lutherans are those who confess the faith to one another and before the whole Church. But, as Confessional Lutherans, we also listen and respect the witness of different voices rejoicing in the common hope we share in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Rev. Walter C. Tietjen, President  
California-Nevada-Hawaii District  
San Francisco, Calif.



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# Who Is a Confessional Lutheran? A Historical Perspective

David P. Meyer

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## What's in a Name?

**B**ELIEVERS AT ANTIOCH were named “Christians.” The name became a badge of honor for some, a label of contempt for others. The name “Lutheran” became a badge of honor for some and a name of contempt for others. After Luther’s death (1546) and even prior to the subsequent death of Melancthon (1560), a leadership vacuum occurred in the Lutheran Germany. Fragmentation and polarization within Lutheranism became a reality. The two traditions surfaced which were identified as “Gnesio Lutherans” and “Philippists.” In the wake of Luther’s death, controversy accelerated and was multiplied by the rapidly deteriorating military situation for Lutheran princes and the ascending power of the Western Catholic coalition. So the name “Gnesio-Lutherans” was born.<sup>1</sup> Their opposition was named after Philip Melancthon, being labeled Philippists.<sup>2</sup> Those who united the divided forces of Lutheranism were identified as pious, irenic and learned theologians who patiently and evangelically tried to avoid name-calling, malicious labeling, and censure of either camp.<sup>3</sup> The real heroes and Confessional Lutherans were not those who were champions for either side of the disputes, but those who were confessional and

who labored to bring new understandings, new appreciations of Christian truth to both ends of the extremes. These were the genuinely Confessional Lutherans.

To be “confessional” is an honorable descriptor and appellation. Statements of belief and articles of faith are called “confessions,” and this usage of the word is not far distant from our more standard use of the word “confession” in referring to the confession of sins. For a confession is at once an acknowledgment of sin, an acknowledgment of one’s sinfulness before the glorious Lord of all Creation who has called us to obedience. God’s “divine fatherly goodness and mercy” stands in sharp contrast to our fallenness. Confession acknowledges the unbridgeable gap between who we are and what God would have us be. But “confession” of sin does not go unanswered. The glorious Gospel and good news of Jesus Christ, His active obedience, passion, suffering and vicarious satisfaction are God’s eternal “Yes” to all His promises to us. In light of that glorious word and deed, a new dimension of “confession” is born, for we now respond to God’s answer of grace with praise and doxology. For now we truly make confession in the sense of *homologeîn*, speaking back to God who has so clearly spoken to us in His Word inscribed and Word incarnate.

We cannot allow such a personal and intimate forgiveness to remain a treasure hidden in a field, in a heart, but our confession must move from hearts to lips (Romans 10:9-10). For what one believes in the heart cannot but be confessed with the lips. As in marriage, the private words of endearment and promise take the form of public acknowledgment and celebration. So the Bridegroom of the Church announces His love to the world and to His bride and endows her with all His gifts. And the Bride of Christ, the Church, can only give Him in response everything which is ours. As Luther notes, while “Christ is full of grace, life and salvation, we are full of sins, death and damnation. But when faith unites bride and groom, sin, death and damnation become Christ’s while grace, life and salvation become ours. For as Bridegroom, Christ takes upon himself the things which are his bride’s and gives to her all that is his.”<sup>4</sup> So there is a movement from confession of sins to praise and celebration of God’s marvelous gift, movement from confession to praise and public proclamation of what God speaks in our hearts and ears, saying the same thing which God has spoken to us. Faith as an act within the believer recedes almost completely into the background.<sup>5</sup> “To confess,” then, is “to say the same thing.” Since our saying back to God what He has spoken to us in Jesus Christ focuses on the Gospel of grace, the public confession of faith takes the form of celebration and joy. For our nakedness and shame are now covered, and we are dressed in the glorious garment of Christ, without spot or blemish.

Confession becomes for the Christian then a form of praise, thanksgiving, and expression of identity. As in marriage, two people share in a glorious union—incomplete when one is missing. While human marriages are painfully torn by the death of one, the marriage of Christ and His Bride has no death-dissolving, stealing and fracturing to destroy it. For Christ is risen and shall die no more, death having no hold on Him, and we His people share with Him His life, power and His resurrection, confessing to a dumbfounded world that “we who live and believe in Him shall never die (Romans 8).”<sup>6</sup>

### The Confession of Augsburg and *The Book of Concord*

As Paul stood boldly before Roman governors Felix, Festus, and King Agrippa, confessing his indifference to the consequences, Luther at Worms and the Lutherans at Augsburg chose to be bold to do the same. The central theological concepts embraced by dukes, princes, mayors and city councils, to which they added their personal signatures, had long circulated in Germany, touching not only the peasants but the learned, powerful, and a host of universities.<sup>7</sup> When Lutherans were summoned to Augsburg to defend themselves before Church and Emperor, they came with their homework completed. The Schwabach and Marburg articles along with a careful listing of grievances regarding the then-contemporary Church became one powerful confessional tool.

Subsequent confessions in Lutheranism continued to support the Augsburg Confession as its chief and foremost Confession. The most meticulous and thorough Confession of Lutheranism would be the Formula of Concord which sought to close the time of bitter controversies within Lutheranism following the religious wars between Western Catholic and Lutheran forces. When the wars ended, the bitter memories and controversies during the painful interims would fragment Lutheranism for some years. It took keen theological awareness to discern the truth in various party-groups and care to identify error when present, addressing the erring pastorally whenever possible.<sup>8</sup> Those who brought harmony out of this painful post-Religious Peace of Augsburg era evidenced what could be identified as Confessional Lutheranism. For such Confessional Lutheranism trimmed away the extremism of each of

**“While Christ is full of grace, life and salvation, we are full of sins, death and damnation.”**

**“Faith makes people Christians, but confession alone marks them as Christians.”**

the several parties, cut away excesses, and fitted together those who for a time refused to see one another as fragments of the same piece of cloth. So it was that the Augsburg Confession of 1530, the Apology of 1531, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, the Smalcald Articles, the two catechisms of Luther, and finally the Formula of Concord rose to prominence as the Confessions of Lutheranism. The bold achievements of the Formula were celebrated by endorsement and signatures to *The Book of Concord* itself. In a short time some 8,000 theologians, pastors and teachers, Lutheran electors, princes, and estates embraced *The*

*Book of Concord* as its own public Confession. Everyone affirmed the following pledge:

Since, now in the sight of God and all Christendom, we wish to testify to these now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controversial articles aforementioned and explained, and no other, is our faith, doctrine and confession, in which we are also willing, by God’s grace to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it; and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but by the help of God’s grace intend to abide thereby; therefore, after mature deliberation, we have in God’s fear and with the invocation of His name, attached our signatures with our own hands.<sup>9</sup>

### What Does the Missouri Synod Ask of its Called Servants?

Following in the footsteps of those who subscribed to *The Book of Concord* of 1580, our Synod has asked its members to subscribe as well to *The Book of Concord*. Consider Article II, the *Synodical Handbook*, which reads: “The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation: 1) The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice; 2) All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit: The Three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered

Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord.”

From its beginning, Synod asks its members to subscribe unconditionally to *The Book of Concord* “because” it affirms God’s truth. A “quia” subscription to the confessions (“quia” meaning “because” or “since”) declares *The Book of Concord* our confession because it is a true and correct exposition of the Scripture. C.F.W. Walther states that the teacher is to discharge the office and duties in accord with the Word of God and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. . . according to the ability that God giveth. By declaring unconditional acceptance of Scripture as the ultimate authority and unconditionally subscribing to *The Book of Concord*, one has made a solemn declaration that one: 1) accepts the doctrinal content of our Symbolical books because he recognizes the fact that the Confessions are in full agreement with Scripture and do not militate against Scripture in any point, whether that point be of major or minor importance; 2) accepts and heartily believes in the divine truth and is determined to preach this doctrine without qualification and without adulteration. The purpose for which the Church asks such subscription is important to keep in mind: 1) that the congregation and Synod may convince itself that its teachers really possess the orthodox understanding of Scripture and the same pure, unadulterated faith as the Church; 2) that the Church may bind them with a solemn promise to teach this faith pure and unadulterated or renounce the office of teaching instead of disturbing the Church with their false teaching. Walther’s concern is an obvious one. A binding oath of office by a member of Synod should take precedence over any desire to subvert the teachings of *The Book of Concord*. For example, if a teacher becomes convinced that Luther was wrong regarding the Lord’s Supper, that teacher should leave office rather than disturb the Church.

But a more positive purpose and reason for confessional subscription is this: 1) the Church may clearly and unequivocally confess its faith and its doctrine before the world; 2) by the confession of faith one can distinguish what is Catholic, Apostolic, and Lutheran from heterodox and sectarian elements in Christendom; 3) and finally, the confession of faith provides a united, certain, general form and norm of doctrine for all its teachers on the basis of which all other writings and teachings can be judged and regulated.<sup>10</sup>

### What Are the Biblical Foundations of this Perspective?

It has been well-said, “Faith makes people Christians, but confession alone marks them as Christians.” By our faith

we are known to the Lord as His, but it is by our Confessions that we are known to one another as His people. It is an imperative of Christ to be ready to give such confession and reason and account of the hope that is within us (Matthew 10:32-33; 16:15-18; Romans 10:9; 1 Timothy 6:12; Hebrews 10:23; Jude 3, 20; 1 Peter 3:15). The Scripture is the source, rule and norm of faith, and the judge of what we confess and teach, but it is not what we believe and teach and confess that is our Creed and our Confessions. Creeds and Confessions are the response of faith which lays hold of God's grace focused for us in Jesus Christ. Creeds are responses of man to God's revelation of Himself. They are human responses, and such responses take place in time and history in reaction to that which opposes God and that which opposes His people (1 Corinthians 8:4ff; John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2; 1 John 4:2ff).

Faith expressed in words springs from the essence of believing, a clinging steadfastly to God and His grace (Acts 13:39; Romans 1:17; Galatians 2:15-16; 2 Corinthians 5:7). But faith is not simply auto-reflexive or self-referential; faith to be faith must have an object as Luther says. So it is that faith speaks of God, man and the world. This is why we can speak of the faith as a body of beliefs, a body which one affirms and to which one gives allegiance (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:9).

### What Distinguishes this Perspective of the LCMS When Compared with Other Lutheran Bodies?

To be a Confessional Lutheran links one to the faith once delivered to the saints, the saints of old, and especially those who framed the great Confessions of Lutheranism.<sup>11</sup> But what distinguishes us from other Lutherans in being a Confessional Lutheran? The question is a hard one and the answers many and painfully shared. For one, the Missouri Synod has celebrated and lamented accomplishments and weaknesses of the Lutheran World Federation, lamenting the fact that for many in the Federation *The Book of Concord* is little more than an heirloom and relic of religious history.<sup>12</sup>

For another, Missouri has celebrated the confessional elements in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America but is currently most distressed by the convention decision of this church body (August 14-20, 1997) which supported full communion with three Reformed church bodies, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Samuel Nafzger of Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations notes that while elca acknowledges that it has not resolved the historic differences between Lutherans and the Reformed, it assumes such resolution is impossible because Scripture itself fails to resolve its own differences.<sup>14</sup> Scripture is simply inconsistent under the new interpretation of ELCA. In decades prior to our own moment in history, we

know many now in ELCA who have affirmed strong support of the theology of *The Book of Concord* and Scripture as sole source and norm of theology. As one discussant in a dialogue of Missouri and the American Lutheran Church noted, dialogue should continue as long as there is separation of the formal principle of Christ from its material principle, the divorcing of the hermeneutical and exegetical from the kerygmatic and pastoral.<sup>15</sup> When the Missouri Synod broke fellowship with the ALC and withdrew from LCUSA campus ministry programs, Missouri was convinced that for many in the ALC the divorcing of the material and formal principle was necessary. This moment for many was at least as painful as the fracturing of our own Synod in the student and faculty exodus of 1974.<sup>16</sup> The divorcement of the Gospel, the doctrine of justification, from the formal principle of theology, Scripture, has become an axiom in the leadership of ELCA.<sup>17</sup>

And how does this differ from Confessional Lutheranism? Simply said, when a Confessional Lutheran was asked, "What do you believe?" the answer focused on the doctrine of justification. When asked, "What is your authority for this claim?" one turned to Scripture. If Scripture's text needed to be summarized, the Confessional Lutheran turned to Luther's Catechism or the Augsburg Confession. Lay voices and theologians have always stood side-by-side in confession. That is what it first meant to be a Confessional Lutheran. Such a caricature is no longer present in the New Lutheran Confession.<sup>18</sup> Without being biblicistic, Missouri has always insisted that the proper exposition of the Gospel and full elaboration of the Christian faith can be judged and normed only by Scripture itself, as has been the historic position of classic Confessional Lutheranism.<sup>19</sup> But David Preus in *The Lutheran Standard* suggested that unity in the church should take place as long as there is agreement on the Gospel, making no mention of Scripture as source and norm.<sup>20</sup>

The declaration of full communion by elca and Reformed churches should not come as a surprise to anyone.<sup>21</sup> The pivotal issue which once divided historic Lutheranism and Reformed denominations for centuries is now forgotten in the new union. Loyalty to *The Book of Concord* and Luther has disappeared in this new declaration of full communion. With regret Missouri laments the decision. The voices of Krauth and Schmauk of the General Council are no longer echoed at this time in ELCA.

**"The question is a hard one, and the answers many and painfully shared."**

**"Recovering a true understanding of who we are and what we confess is crucial"**

What choices, decisions, postures should be taken by Christian educators, pastors, and laity in Missouri regarding this shift in ELCA? We will have to be as keenly theologically astute as those who cut through the tangled theology following the Religious Peace of Augsburg, as irenic as any who tried to deal with laity, congregations and ordinary people puzzled by inter-synodical declarations and theological statements, candid when candor is called for, and pastoral when healing and comfort are in order. Prayers, petitions and aid should be offered for those in ELCA who lament and speak out against this

new direction! Not just a few in ELCA are convinced that the move to "Full Communion" breaks faith with Luther and the Confessions, forcing thereby a possible splintering of elca itself.<sup>22</sup>

On a more pleasant note, internationally Confessing Lutherans have attempted to relate to indigenous national Lutheran churches worldwide. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and disaffection of many toward State Lutheranism in the Scandinavian countries and Germany, new and free Lutheran churches have caught the eye of Missouri Synod laity and leaders. Support, encouragement and witness are major contributions we can make to these confessing communities.

What of our witness to other denominations? In times past the vehicle of the Lutheran Council of the United States of America (LCUSA) was an arena for discussion with various Christian bodies, including longer discussions with the Council of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, the bishops of the United Methodist Church of America, and representatives of the Reformed Churches in America.<sup>23</sup> The future of such discussions remains uncertain.

### The Future Hope

Abroad, Union Churches are no longer as popular as many hoped they would be, with attendance down and even non-existent. The World Council of Churches is losing support because it does not seem to know where it is going. Anders Nygren noted many years ago along with Hermann Sasse that the World Council of Churches is rapidly headed toward being little more than a syncretistic mass which has neither unity nor truth nor power.<sup>24</sup> What the confessing Lutheran finds most disturbing in the trends of the World

Council of Churches is not simply the lack of concern for any doctrinal consensus regarding the verities of Scripture but a growing lack of nerve in Christian outreach and mission. In recent days the old talk of "dialogue" with world religions has received severe criticism by powerful voices who insist that just as dialogue between denominations must come to an end with "reconciled diversity," so Christianity must embrace all religions which are prompted by a high ethical and moral presence and commitment to the ultimate, however that may be defined.<sup>25</sup>

With an explosion of renewed interest in religion and classic Christian truth in the United States, throughout the world, and in Generation X, it is time that confessing Lutherans give voice to the confessional statements which gave heart to countless generations through persecution, exile and even death at the hands of other Christians. More and more laity, young and old alike, are interested in Bible study and servant events across the globe, eager to be Confessional Lutherans in the best sense of the word. Confessing Lutherans are truly Gospel-centered, Christ-centered, living by the forgiveness of sins and having the mind of Christ, ready to provide mutual conversation and consolation to the brethren (SA/III/IV). Lutheran laity and non-Lutherans need instruction and encouragement in their faith and spiritual growth. We need to encourage our leadership to find new ways to enhance our mission, our message and methods of delivering God's great "treasure" conveyed in earthen vessels.

As the historic confessors declared, we must "do and continue to do everything that is useful and profitable to the increase and expansion of God's praise and glory, to the propagation of that Word of his that alone brings salvation, to the tranquillity and peace of Christian schools and churches, and to the needed consolation and instruction of poor, misguided consciences . . . it was never our disposition or intention . . . to keep this salutary and most necessary effort toward concord hidden and concealed in darkness, away from everyone's eyes, or to put the light of divine truth under a basket or a table . . . We likewise purpose to be cooperative with one another in the future in implementation of this effort at concord in our lands, according to our own and each community's circumstances."<sup>26</sup>

Recovering a true understanding of who we are and what we confess is crucial to impacting the world that is. So I close with a word from Dr. Charles Porterfield Krauth, who addressed the critic's claim, "Creeds divide, but love unites!" Suggesting that what the critic fails to note is that the creed, when delineating truth from error, seeks to be most ecumenical, seeking to embrace the whole of those belonging to the Christian faith in its confession. Krauth added:

No particular Church has, on its own showing, a right to existence, except as it believes itself to be the most perfect form of Christianity, the form which of right should and will be universal. No church has a right to a part which does not claim that to it should belong the whole. That communion confesses itself a sect which aims at no more than abiding as one of a number of equally legitimated bodies. That communion which does not believe in the certainty of the ultimate acceptance of its principles in the whole world has not the heart of a true Church. That which claims to be Catholic *de facto* claims to be Universal *de jure*.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>So named were such men as Nicholas Amsdorf, Matthias Flacius, Wigan, Gallus, Judex, Moerlin, Heshus, Timann, Westphal. The short article reminds us that "Gnesio" means "genuine" or "real." See p. 417, *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, ed. Erwin L. Luecker. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 1954.
- <sup>2</sup>Philippists included such men as Camerarius, Bugenhagen, Eber, Creel, Major, Cruciger, Strigel, Pfeffinger, and Peucer.
- <sup>3</sup>*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 6.
- <sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, "The Treatise on Christian Liberty," *Martin Luther: Selections of His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Doubleday), 1962, p. 60.
- <sup>5</sup>See Herbert Girgensohn, *Teaching Luther's Catechism*, translated by John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c. 1959), p. 123. Girgensohn notes that *fides quae creditur*, the objective facts with which faith is acquainted make up the content of confession, while the *fides qua creditur*, the faith with which we believe, as an act within the believer recedes in the simple words, "I believe." Contemporary Protestantism seems content that one "believe" something or another, very sincerely—making the act of believing itself salutary.
- <sup>6</sup>Confessions do have quite differing contexts, some being a confession of sin and praise, others taking place before a congregation as in baptism or in general confessions in liturgical events, and confessions before the world which serve as doctrinal confessions. It is the latter with which we are especially concerned. The document and doctrinal confession which marks Confessional Lutheranism is the document known as the Augsburg Confession.
- <sup>7</sup>See Robert Kolb's *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991). Kolb's work provides excellent insight to the tensions within Lutheranism and how it learned to resolve them.
- <sup>8</sup>*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), "Preface to *The Book of Concord*," p. 6.
- <sup>9</sup>F. Bente, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- <sup>10</sup>See English translation, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, xviii, April, 1947, 16ff.
- <sup>11</sup>For a full account of Missouri's beginnings and exodus to the New World, see Carl S. Munding's *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), Walter O. Forster's *Zion on the Mississippi* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953) and Carl S. Meyer's (editor) *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the*

*History of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964).

- <sup>12</sup>See Fellowship documents as framed and reviewed by Synod in Convention and Charles P. Arand, "Confessions as Ancient Heirlooms," 181-206, *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995).
- <sup>13</sup>See *Reporter: News for Church Leaders*, September, 1997, pp. 1 and 4.
- <sup>14</sup>*op. cit.*, p. 1.
- <sup>15</sup>Herbert W. Bouman, "Some Thoughts on Authentic Lutheranism," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, xlii 15, May, 1971, p. 284.
- <sup>16</sup>See Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978.
- <sup>17</sup>See *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, CTCR Study Document.
- <sup>18</sup>See Craig S. Stanford, *The Death of the Lutheran Reformation* (Fort Wayne: Stanford Publishing, 1988), p. 135.
- <sup>19</sup>See *The Lutheran Witness*, "Biblical or Biblicistic," January 28, 1973, and "Two Kinds of Authority," April 22, 1973. Both discussions are understandable by laity and useful presentations in understanding current issues in worldwide Lutheranism.
- <sup>20</sup>Patsy A. Leppien and J. Kincaid Smith, *What's Going on Among the Lutherans?* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), pp. 355-356.
- <sup>21</sup>Carl E. Braaten suggests that as long as conflicting confessions point to the same Gospel, we should proceed to the ecumenical act of reconciliation in the unity of the truth that frees and unites us. See Charles P. Arand, *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), p. 259.
- <sup>22</sup>Richard Koenig, "On the Way to Full Communion? The ELCA's Moment to Decide," *Christian Century* (September, 11-18, 1996), p. 861.
- <sup>23</sup>See as an example: *A Reexamination of the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, published by the National Lutheran Council.
- <sup>24</sup>See Robert D. Preus, "The Lutheran Church and the Ecumenical Movement," pp. 180-189, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery, II (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), pp. 186-7. See also Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith* (Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1938), especially his commentary regarding the doctrinal differences between the Lutheran and Reformed churches.
- <sup>25</sup>Father Thomas Keating, "Guidelines for Interreligious Understanding," as quoted in Mary Pat Fisher's *Living Religions*. Third Edition (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 427. See the following study which highlights a new trend toward religious pluralism: Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996). Key supporters of Normative Pluralism are John Hick, Paul Knitter, Raimundo Panikkar, and Father Thomas Keating.
- <sup>26</sup>"Preface to *The Book of Concord*," pp. 13-14, *The Book of Concord*.
- <sup>27</sup>Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and its Theology* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1871), pp. ix-xv.



# Remembering Who We Are! Maintaining a Confessional Identity in the New Millennium

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WHY SHOULD WE CARE about the matter of confessional identity? Consider for a moment a person who suffers from amnesia or someone who has contracted Alzheimer's disease. Such a person cannot remember who he is. Why not? Because he cannot remember his name. And thus he cannot remember his past, who are his friends, who is his family, perhaps even who is his own spouse. A name carries a family identity and a family tradition that spans generations. A name brings a set of relations and relationships that determine who a person is. It is also not without reason that people in our society have taken an interest in genealogies in the last several decades. In learning something about our past we learn something about ourselves (e.g., knowing the medical history of our parents may say something about our present and future health). The question of confessional identity is ultimately a question not only about our past and our present, but most importantly, about our future.

What is true for an individual or a society is all the more true for the church. Yet at times Lutheranism seems to suffer from a form of spiritual amnesia. Today, we find Lutherans leaving Wittenberg and

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running to Rome, or Constantinople, or Geneva, or Canterbury, or to Pasadena in order to find their theological, liturgical, or ecclesiastical bearings. The decisions adopted at the ELCA's church-wide assembly this past August suggest something of a schizophrenic ecumenical identity crisis. Are we more like the Episcopal or the Reformed church bodies? The answer appears to be "yes." Is there any difference between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on the Gospel? The answer appears to be "no." Matters in our circles are not in much better shape. The past two decades have witnessed many running to Pasadena and Evangelicalism to find resources for worship and witness (and theology?) as our church body has become increasingly Americanized. In a recent (and opposite) reaction, we see

signs of some seeking the security in the long held traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. So, exactly who are we anyway? And what does it mean to be a Confessional Lutheran?

### **The Basis and Focus of a Confessional Identity**

In the New Testament, the word used for confess is *homologeîn*, which means "to say the same thing," that is, "to agree with another's statements." Its corresponding noun, *homologia*, means "agreement or consent." In the case of the New Testament, both mean to "agree with God, with his revelation and witness." Intentional or not, *homologeo*, literally, "the same thing—I say," highlights the order and emphasis of confessing. Confession says "yes," or "amen" to what has been spoken.<sup>1</sup> The introduction to *Lutheran Worship* captures this well: "Our Lord speaks and we listen. . . . Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most sure and true (p. 6). For this reason, Lutherans have embraced and subscribed the Confessions as their very own, namely, *because* the Confessions say what Scripture says.

Theologically, to agree with what God said, is above all else to confess what God has said in Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate. At its heart, confession is an answer to a question elicited and prompted by Christ himself. In Matthew 11:2-16:20, Jesus' appearance and work raised repeatedly the

question, "Who is he?" Two motifs are entwined throughout these chapters, that of repudiation, and that of wonderment and speculation about the identity of Jesus. The world proposed a variety of answers: Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptizer. None was correct. So Jesus turns to his disciples and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Repeating what the Father revealed (16:17) about Christ makes Peter's answer a sure foundation for the church (16:18).

The collection of documents gathered into the volume known as *The Book of Concord* seeks to be nothing else from beginning to end than a confession of Jesus Christ in complete congruence with the Scriptures. The ancient Creeds sought to do nothing other than confess Jesus Christ, in his humanity, in his deity, and in the unity of his person. The distinctively Lutheran Confessions confessed strongly the work of Christ as it is based upon the person of Christ. Theodore Schmauk put it well: "It (Formula of Concord) concentrates the whole of the Lutheran Confession upon Christ, the Son of the living God."<sup>2</sup>

The clear and unequivocal witness to the Gospel provides the basic reason why Lutherans identify with the Lutheran Confessions. Their message and content give shape to our identity and direction to our mission. In the catechism, the church has gathered the fundamental components of Scripture that constitute the identity of a Christian. This is who we are. Thus, near the end of his life Luther could write Katie to quell her fears and say, "You, dear Katie, read John and the Small Catechism, about which you once said: 'Everything in this book has been said about me'" (LW 50:302). What is true of the Catechism applies to the entire *Book of Concord*. From the Augsburg Confession to the Formula of Concord, *The Book of Concord* sets forth our *raison d'être*, our theological priorities and our pastoral concerns. We are the church of the Augsburg Confession.

### **Cultivating and Strengthening a Confessional Identity**

If the actions taken by the church-wide assembly of the ELCA last year portend a further erosion of the Lutheran Confessional witness in America, it is only natural to ask, "How can we maintain a confessional identity and resist the tide toward a non-confessional Lutheranism?" But perhaps the idea of "maintaining" a confessional identity needs to be broadened so as not to sound merely defensive. After all, a confessional and confessing church should never be a church that adopts an apocalyptic outlook or a fortress mentality. Its motto is not, "Preserve what you can!" Such attitudes may in fact betray a lack of confidence in the Gospel itself. We want not only to preserve it, but to proclaim it.

In this connection, professional church workers, ordained and commissioned alike, have a particularly important role to play. For it is they who have been especially entrusted with the church's heritage upon taking up the responsibilities of their call. Such responsibility should begin with the cultivation and strengthening of their own sense of confessional identity and mission through an intentional, intensive, and ongoing study of the Lutheran Confessions. Just as the catechism has often been treated as a pre-confirmation textbook that is placed on the shelf at the end of eighth grade, so the Lutheran Confessions are often treated as a classroom textbook to be studied for the purpose of passing a doctrinal litmus test at ordination, installation or commissioning. After that, they lose their practical usefulness for day-to-day ministry. They need instead to be considered more as a completely reliable compass to Scripture for finding one's bearings in the ever-shifting and changing landscape of contemporary culture. The ongoing study will need to focus on three aspects.

First, we need to engage in an exegetical study of the confessional texts. Too often, they are treated as little more than a book of quotable quotes or an armory of passages and statements that can be lifted out and used for whatever purpose we desire. Such a concordance approach fails to cultivate a genuine understanding of their spirit and genius. In the end it homogenizes the confessions into an abstracted compendium of theology that misses the all-too-real pastoral issues addressed by the theology of the Confessions. An exegetical approach to the Confessions must among other things, take each document distinctively, examine it within its historical setting, examining the flow of its argument and rhetorical lines of thought. It must explore the different nuances of their message in light of their different settings (for example, it is noteworthy that the Small Catechism makes no reference to the terminology of "justification" in expounding the Gospel, yet its expression of the Gospel remains unsurpassed). Our study must ask, "How do the Confessions handle the Scriptures? How do they regard and appropriate the church fathers?" Such study cannot only lead to a richer and fuller appreciation and knowledge of the Confessions, but can enrich our proclamation of the Gospel.

Second, such study will also cultivate confessional attitudes of the mind and heart. It will develop a discipline that focuses on issues rather than personalities. For example, every article in the Formula of Concord opens by first stating the issue under consideration followed by the importance of the issue as it relates to the Gospel. The confessors then accurately and fairly describe the errors that can be found on both sides of the issue. And so Article I insists that we are *neither* Strigelist Synergists *nor* are we Flacianist Manicheans. While the Formulators addressed

the errors of the Philippists, they did not overlook the errors that had arisen among the Gnesio-Lutherans.<sup>3</sup> They carried out the hard work of biblical study and thoroughly examined the position of the church fathers.<sup>4</sup> In this way, we will become better equipped to face the complexities and challenges of today's world. In the end, it will develop the proper humility which recognizes that all confession is ultimately eschatological.<sup>5</sup>

Third, and most importantly, steeping ourselves in the Confessions will help us to develop a theological mindset that knows how to think theologically, in a holistic and organic manner, from the perspective of the Gospel. To be sure, we study the Confessions in order to learn *what* the Lutheran church believes and proclaims. We never want to underestimate the importance of having a clear understanding of the faith that we not give an ambiguous witness. But by studying what the Confessions have to say about the truth of God's Word, we also learn why they say what they did and how they articulated the message of the Gospel for their day. What were their concerns? Why do they call the doctrine of justification the "head article" or chief article of the Christian faith? How are all the other articles connected to it? How does this chief article shape their theological method with regard to their starting point and their goal? Only with this approach can we help our generation appropriate as its own the heritage of confessions and help us to articulate Gospel in a confessionally faithful manner.

### **Congregations: Confessing the Faith on the Front Lines**

We have not only the responsibility of growing in the theology of the Confessions ourselves, but also of instilling a confessional consciousness in our congregations. We face a situation today, not unlike that which faced Charles Porterfield Krauth in the 19th century, namely, the task of cultivating a confessional consciousness where there was little if any at all. Our goal must be to help people discover the joy of bearing the Lutheran name and convince them of the value of being a Confessional Lutheran.

**"We never want to underestimate the importance of having a clear understanding of the faith that we not give an ambiguous witness."**



## A Confessional Witness in and to Congregations

The work of DCES, teachers, lay ministers and other professional church workers is especially important for laying the foundation of a confessional identity within our congregations, for they are often involved in catechesis and the formation of people in the basics and fundamentals of the faith. These are the very things that we need today.

Toward that end, they could do no better than to use Luther's Small Catechism, which historically has been the means by which a confessional consciousness enters into and is cultivated in the congregation.<sup>6</sup> In the 16th century the catechism was one of the chief means for propagating the evangelical faith and cultivating an evangelical piety.<sup>7</sup> The popularity of Luther's catechism explains in part why "in a relatively short period of time, masses of people cast aside religious values and practices sanctioned by centuries of tradition in favor of new ones."<sup>8</sup> For over 450 years following its appearance, the Small Catechism has remained the most important pedagogical, theological and confessional text for shaping a common Christian identity among Lutherans. It has cultivated a Lutheran pattern of thought, served as the basis of a common grammar, and provided a pattern of piety for countless people around the world.

Our worship and liturgy must likewise reflect our confession. If Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the proclamation of the Word lie at the center of the church's definition and identity (AC 7), then these must continue to remain the very *foci* of our worship, the high points of our liturgy, and that for which we come to church in anticipation of receiving. They can never be relegated to afterthoughts or to the periphery of the service. If confessing that the Lutheran church is not a new church, much less an isolationist sect, but is indeed an heir of the one holy Christian church (sc), the orthodox ancient church (Chemnitz), then it becomes all the more important to confess the faith with the catholic church in the words of its catholic creeds and not in the words of creeds *du jour*. In this connection, many other elements of the liturgy bequeathed to us by the church can also aid in confessing our catholicity.

## A Confessional and Evangelistic Witness to the World

At the same time, we also need to equip our people to become confessors of the faith for the 21st century. Lutherans are living in a world where Christians are becoming fewer and fewer. It is they who find themselves talking with other non-Lutheran Christians in the health clubs, workplace, and Navigator type of Bible studies. Here

they have the opportunity to bring distinctively Lutheran insights to bear upon the conversations. Our historical understanding and perspective of our message can serve as something of a reality check for the theological trends and novelties of the day. Lutherans can make an especially important contribution in three areas.

First, the confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior—more specifically, the exclusiveness of salvation in Jesus Christ—will increasingly become a scandal as Christianity finds itself only one among a number of competing religious voices vying for a hearing in America. In a society where people have learned to distrust authorities (for they have discovered that even experts often disagree), Christianity will find it difficult to assert a privileged or authoritative stance from which to speak. Hence eclecticism and syncretism are likely to become more and more the norm for individual spirituality. Instead of calling themselves Lutherans, or even Christians, people may well refer to themselves as Christian-Buddhists or go by some other such hyphenated name. In this context, it will become all the more important that we learn to articulate the Gospel in all of its manifold richness in order to address the many different ways in which the universal need for a savior finds expression today.

Second, Lutherans must recapture their confessional understanding of the Word of God. Two decades ago we found ourselves as allies with American Evangelicalism on the issue of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Since then, however, we have increasingly adopted their tendency to equate the Word of God exclusively with the written Scriptures. Such, however, is too narrow an understanding. For Lutherans, the Word of God has always been first and foremost, the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ, in whom God has spoken definitively to us. The Word is also the oral proclamation of the Gospel in which and by which God is present among us with his gifts. This has its ramifications in the prominent place of the preached word within our services. The Word is also the word that comes "incarnated" in the sacraments, "in, with, and under" the water, the bread and wine. The Word is then inscripturated in the words of Holy Scripture. To maintain our Lutheran identity, we must recover our Lutheran understanding of the Word. With it we avoid a Platonic view of the world and instead find our theology and approach to life to be deeply incarnational.

Third, our people need to rediscover the Lutheran understanding of vocation, and with it the glory of the first article of the Creed. This is a particularly important issue for our universities which engage in the task of preparing Christians to take their place in society as citizens, business people, professionals, and in the establishment of families. Lutherans do not have a dualistic view of the world (all too

common in many of the world's religions as well as Evangelicalism) that regards the physical world and this life as a lower order of existence and the immaterial or spiritual world as a higher order of being. Instead, Christians find themselves to be the instruments of God's activity and blessing (both his creative and his redemptive activity) in every area of life. They find their vocations from God coming through the needs of their neighbors (e.g., through the needs of my children God calls me to responsibility of a father). Within our vocations we find our service to God and not only through certain churchly related activities. This was, in fact, one of the towering achievements of the Reformation. Its message of justification destroyed the two-fold tier of the Christian life where only monks and nuns had vocations (and hence were closer to God) and where the average lay person had mere "secular" duties.

## Conclusion

In this world it is all the more important that we remind people who we are. We must recall for them what it means to be Christian. But in order to do this, we ourselves must first know who we are. And that means that we must know our own history and our spiritual ancestry. All of this begins with the exhortation, "remember what the Lord has done." But this is based upon the fact that he will remember his promises to us.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Charles P. Arand, "The Vitality of Creeds and Confessions: A Study of Homology in 1 John" in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed., Gerald Krispin and Jon D. Vieker (Dearborn, MI, 1990), 213-36.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore Emanuel Schmauk and Theodore C. Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as Embodying the Evangelical Confession of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 817.

<sup>3</sup>And so the Formulators reject the positions of heroes and stalwarts of orthodoxy such as Matthias Flacius (FC I), Georg Major (FC IV), and Nicholas von Amsdorf (FC V).

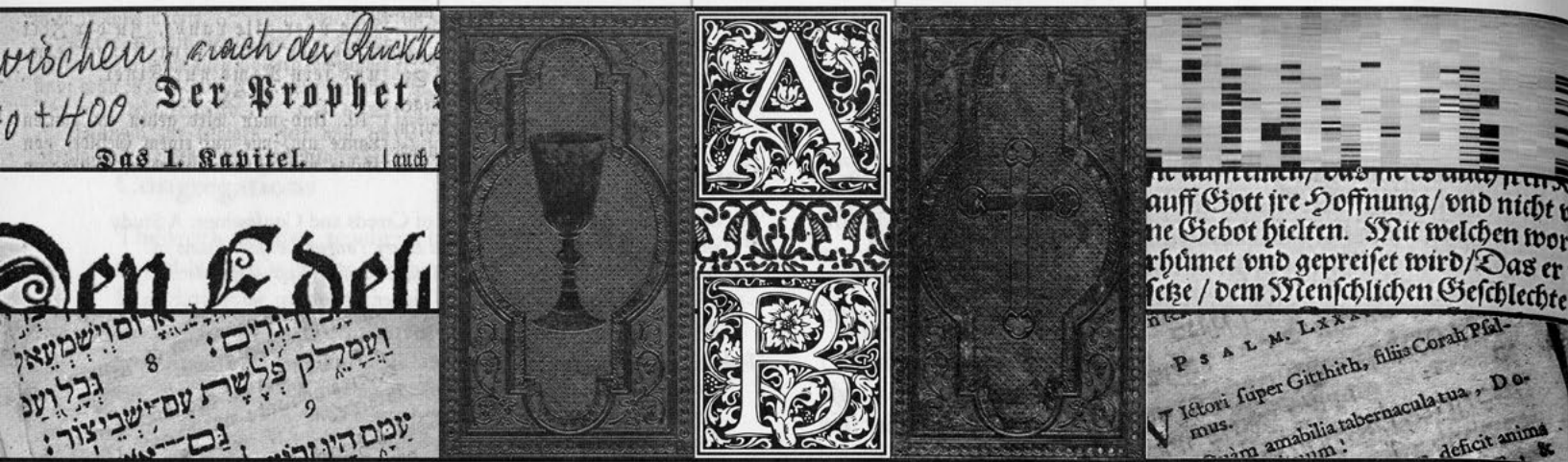
<sup>4</sup>Here, too, they adopt a critical attitude and do not simply accept everything that the church fathers said. The reformers wrote a number of patrologies in which they guided people into what was good and not so good in the teaching of the fathers.

<sup>5</sup>In the Preface to *The Book of Concord*, the confessors begin with the words, "In these last times of this transitory world. . ." and close with the sobering statement that this "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." Tappert, 3 and 636.

<sup>6</sup>Above all else, we need to recover the catechism as a living document of the church. It needs to be freed from the straitjackets of specific cultural forms into which it has been forced, rediscovering the poetry of the language and vibrancy of the images. It must be taken out of the classroom and incorporated into the total life of the congregation.

<sup>7</sup>See the debate over the success and nature of Lutheran catechizing begun with Gerald Strauss' *Luther's House of Learning: Indocination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978). For responses see James M. Kittelson, "Success and Failures in the German Reformation: The Report from Strasbourg," *Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte* 73(1982): 153-74, and Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther's Impact on the Sixteenth Century," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16(1985):3-14.

<sup>8</sup>Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 5. Between 1522 and 1529 sixty editions of thirteen different instructional booklets of one form or another were printed in Wittenberg (Timothy J. Wengert, "Wittenberg's Earliest Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly*, n.s. 7(Fall 1993):250). For the many editions published throughout Europe during the sixteenth century, see Johann Michael Reu on the spread of the catechism in *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A History of its Origin, its Distribution and its Use. A Jubilee Offering* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1929).



# Constructive Confessional Theology for the 21st Century

John F. Johnson

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WHILE IT IS MORE customary to speak in the Lutheran tradition of the confessional principle, it has become necessary on the eve of a new century to recognize a confessional problem. The problem is uniquely contemporary, and it centers on the challenge of constructing Lutheran confessional positions on issues which are, on the one hand, true to our common confessional heritage and, on the other, meaningful for Christian individual and ecclesial life in our time. In a very practical sense, the issue is determining where the theological “fences” are to be constructed as we approach the 21st century.

To be sure, each reader of this essay may provide pertinent instances from his or her own dealings with church leaders or congregations whose theological or practical non-negotiables collide, whether in fellowship principles, eucharistic practice, worship, or one of innumerable other areas in our common synodical life. The purpose of this essay is not to delineate a “confessional position” on such issues; rather, it is to offer three observations for constructing theological positions in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod at the edge of a new century. In these observations my aim is to be suggestive (not to mention brief) rather than definitive, so they may be of service for continued reflection and conversation in the Church.

## Adiaphora

The first observation is that critical to absolutizing the configuration of the “wagons” or the height of the “fences” in our theology and practice is the need for a renewed understanding and appreciation for the traditional notions of primary and secondary articles, *adiaphora*, and open questions.

Most Christian traditions have addressed the issue of negotiables and non-negotiables through attempts to distinguish the relative importance of doctrines or ecclesiological practices. Jesuit theologian, Gerald O’Collins, for example, traces the relationship between fundamental and non-fundamental theological positions in Roman Catholicism in his book, *Fundamental Theology*. In the Confessional Lutheran tradition, the categories, “open questions” and “*adiaphora*,” are more familiar.

Open questions are those which Scripture answers whether not at all or not clearly. That is to say, a clear corollary of the sola Scriptural principle of Lutheranism is that where Scripture speaks, we must speak, and where Scripture is silent, we must be silent. Since neither an individual nor the Church is permitted to supplement Scriptural doctrine, but is rather to continue in the “doctrine of the Apostles” (2 Thessalonians 2:15), open questions must remain open questions and never constitute doctrinal fences.

C.F.W. Walther composed a series of theses on open questions which was employed as the basis for church fellowship between the Missouri and Wisconsin synods. Thesis I states:

It cannot be denied that in the field of religion or theology there are questions which, because they are not answered in the Word of God, may be called open in the sense that agreement in answering them is not required for the unity of faith and doctrine which is demanded in the Word of God, nor does it belong to the conditions required for church fellowship, for the association of brethren and colleagues.

Similarly, Francis Pieper writes in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

... Let us heed Luther’s warning: “There are two hindrances to the Gospel: the first is teaching false doctrine, driving the consciences into the Law and works. And the second is this trick of the devil: when he finds that he cannot subvert the faith by directly denying the Gospel, he sneaks in from the rear, raises useless questions and gets men to contend about them and meanwhile to forget the chief thing (the proclamation of the Gospel itself).”<sup>1</sup>

Confessional Lutherans without qualification accept the Scriptures as the written Word of God. We agree that Scripture is the final standard, the ultimate judge, the deciding rule, for all that we believe, teach and confess. Scripture stands over the teachings of the fathers, over the traditions of the church, over doctrinal statements, over the resolutions of the Synod. As critical as it is that we submit to God’s Word, it is just as critical that we acknowledge those areas in which the Scriptures and, in fact, the Synod allow for freedom on the part of pastors and congregations to make judgments and decisions; that is, in cases where no “thus says the Lord” can be adduced. Upholding the Synod’s position on close communion, or any other issue, also includes what the Synod has said about the freedom that exists in some areas for exercising responsible pastoral care. So that, in the words of Walther, we do not allow unnecessary disputes to arise and cause division in the church that would hinder the proclamation of the Gospel.

It is in this sense that the confessional concept of *adiaphora*—in its fullest extent—must be developed as a resource in constructing theological positions in the 21st century. *Adiaphora* are those “middle matters,” those things not regarded as essential to faith which may, therefore, be allowed in the church.

Historically, a bitter controversy was prompted among Lutherans by the Augsburg Interim in 1548. As a consequence, Article x of the Formula of Concord spoke of

*adiaphora* as “church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God.” Humanly established ceremonies and institutions are not binding in the sense that such ceremonies are of the essence of the Church—a principle which, in itself, is helpful in days when some would “circle the wagons” around a specific worship order, or liturgical formula, or hymnal or style of music. A Confessional Lutheran understanding of *adiaphora* reminds us that it is the view of God and the creaturely relationship to Him that is of paramount concern and not customary ceremony. In point of fact, to assume that traditionalist worship or contemporary alternative worship is, in itself, sacred is idolatrous.

However, renewed attention to the meaning of *adiaphora* extends beyond merely contemporary conversation about worship. The Lutheran understanding leads to the most fundamental non-negotiable of all. That there ordinarily are such things as *adiaphora*—neutral issues which do not require taking a dogmatic stand against them—is important for Christian freedom precisely because the Gospel and the Sacraments are non-negotiable. In other words, what is commanded by God and is never optional is what He commanded through Jesus Christ—to proclaim His Gospel and administer His sacraments. There is only “one” which is enough. The Church is ultimately free from the necessity and the compulsion to employ any ceremony or practice not commanded by God as though it were required for righteousness and salvation.

The Lutheran confessional teaching about *adiaphora* stands as a rich resource for determining where the lines are to be drawn in theology and practice. Careful study and consideration of this concept will be a key to the construction of theological positions in the contemporary world.

## Confessions

A second observation about constructive confessional theology in the 21st century has to do with the nature and role of the Lutheran confessions themselves.

The 16th century confessional documents remain central to Lutheran identity. Indeed, one problem in developing a healthy sense of confessionalism is that significant segments of Lutheran church life in America have been galvanized by a naive Protestant biblicism which is unconfessional or even implicitly anti-confessional in basic orientation. Certainly, Lutherans do not often voice the explicit appeal, “Away with the Confessions and back to the Bible!” Yet in actual practice many Lutherans have become imitators of a non-confessional Protestantism. Or, a somewhat different approach has been taken. The term “confessional” has come to denote little more than a label for a particular partisan position. Being a “Confessional Lutheran” warrants little hard wrestling with exegetical and theological

study but is transmuted into confessional proof-texting or judgmentalism. The point is simply that it is one thing to name the confessions as the touchstone of Lutheran theology. It is quite another to use them effectively.

Professor David Truemper of Valparaiso University speaks of the "electric fence" theory of confessional loyalty in terms of forging theological positions—the temptation to view the Lutheran Confessions only as a static depository of orthodox utterances. "When an ecclesiastical cow is foolish enough to transgress the bounds of the pasture," comments Truemper, "she is zapped with a charge to keep her in bounds. Now, that's a rather effective way of keeping the herd together. But the cows soon learn to stay away from the fence, and thus they have no contact with it. And the Church learns to only avoid the Symbolical Books, to conduct her life and to do her care of souls unaffected, for good or ill, by them."<sup>2</sup> In other words, "electric fences" may keep the herd together, but they do not give nourishment or true strength.

In order to do the hard work of developing theological positions for a new century, the Church can ill afford a brand of "hyper-confessionalism" which perceives in the Lutheran confessional tradition merely material for fence building. Such an orientation may keep pastors and people from saying "Reformed things" in sermons or expunge "church growth" sentiments from church bulletins, "but it will not help us to say the Gospel effectively in our day. . . limits, however necessary and desirable they may be, do not nourish."<sup>3</sup> As a truly confessional church, we must rightly be concerned with norms, but we must treat our confessional heritage as a "feed-box" and not, to borrow Truemper's terminology again, an "electric fence."

A key to the help afforded the Church by its confessions is that they are confessions of faith. The confession of the church is in its innermost nature an answer to a question. It is the answer of faith to the question posed by the appearance of Jesus: "Who is He?" No one else but Christ puts this question to people. The credal confession of the church did not begin because of human initiative, but because of the will and deed of the Lord of the church. It was Christ who asked His disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" and who then pressed the question home with the demand of a clear, unequivocal answer: "But who do you say that I am?" The confessions of the church seek to be nothing more than an answer to that same query and, in so being, seek to vouchsafe the true interpretation of the original confession by which the church acknowledges Jesus as the Christ. Thus, the Lutheran Confessions are truly Gospel-centered and were written for the sake of the Gospel of Christ.

Indeed, at the heart of the Lutheran approach to theology is concern for preserving the Gospel of free forgiveness

through the merits of Jesus Christ. "The first and chief article is this," Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles, "that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was put to death for our trespasses, and raised again for our justification.'" Lutheran confessionalism enhances our hearing of God's voice in His Word by compelling us to concentrate on its central message. As Dr. Charles Arand notes in his *Testing the Boundaries*, the confessions are "maps to the Holy Scriptures," maps to what Luther referred to as the "cradle in which the Christ child is wrapped and laid."<sup>4</sup>

Viewed fundamentally from this perspective, genuine confessional allegiance is not simply servile submission to the doctrinal laws of an authoritarian church. Rather, the Confessions shape a distinctive mindset and outlook by showing how the church goes about the task of dealing with the questions and issues raised in our own day by making the Gospel the alpha and omega for all that the church says and does. Being confessional in the construction of theological positions for the 21st century not only involves absolute faithfulness to the 16th century content of the confessional writings, but also faithfulness to their spirit. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod must renew its understanding of the Confessions as joyful affirmations of faith if they are to provide a valid and meaningful basis for helping determine and promote an essential witness.

### Correlation

A third foundational observation relating to challenge of constructive confessional theology for the 21st century takes its cue from a most unlikely source. In his *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich develops a theology of correlation. Christian doctrine, he argues, must correlate to the existential condition of humankind. Prescinding from all the theological error and philosophical extravagances Tillich brings to his proposal, his point is valid. Confessional theology must correlate to the needs of people and the challenges of the contemporary culture. Obviously, the world must never be allowed to dictate the theological agenda of the church. Nevertheless, we should not allow the perversion of the old motto, "Christ is the answer," by the bewildering response, "but what is the question?"

The dominant spirit of our worldwide context on the cusp of a new century and the threats and questions prompted by that spirit are significantly different from the context in

**"When an ecclesiastical cow is foolish enough to transgress the bounds of the pasture, she is zapped with a charge..."**

**"Another mark of life in the contemporary world is the move toward a new spirituality."**

Behavior modification has taken the place of Christian conversion, and spirituality has become a matter of technique whereby one endeavors to secure happiness and peace through methodical self-development. In Protestant evangelical circles it is common to hear of the various steps (or techniques) required to be "born again." The non-negotiables of the technological society are utility and efficiency.

Another mark of life in the contemporary world is the move toward a new spirituality. The dethronement of God in an increasingly secular context can only lead, ironically, to the emergence of a new divinity. The 21st century, as the late 20th, will witness calls for a return to nature mysticism or it will find the new sacred in sex, or in an obsession with emotion and volition. The startling fact is that the dominant issue which will face the church in the world is idolatry.

And what does this admittedly simplistic analysis of two characteristic challenges of the 21st century have to do with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod forging its theological positions? Actually, it is this—we will need to bring our considerable confessional resources and theological energy to bear on the larger questions of the world. People in the world are dealing with anxieties prompted by the loss of meaning in their lives and the nihilistic spirit of the age, and some in the church are obsessing about qualifications for voting in a congregational business meeting! Christians in China and Eastern Europe who have lived in a deep dark night of the soul turn to a confessional church like ours for help, and some would hesitate because we are not yet fully in a recognized confessional fellowship!

The late Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston used to tell a story about himself as a young priest. One winter evening he was rounding a corner in a tough Boston neighborhood when he heard a commotion, looked up and saw a crowd

which our church previously operated. Two predominant trends exemplify this point.

One is the enthronement of "technique." French theologian Jacques Ellul warned about the new and powerful effect of technique on contemporary life in his book, *The Technological Society*. He warned of a soulless technology in the service of pleasure and power. The criterion of the technological society is scientific rationality. Sure enough, this cultural norm has come to impact the church and its message.

gathering around a body that lay in agony in front of a stopped streetcar. Father Cushing hurried over to the crumpled body and pushed his way past the people to where a police officer and a doctor who had been passing by were tending to the injured man.

When the doctor learned that the newcomer to the scene was a priest, he said, "It's too late for me to do anything, Father. You take over. You had better administer the last rites." The priest knew exactly what to do. Cushing got out his little black book and the materials he needed for last rites. Then he set out to address the writhing and now desperate man. "My son, are you of the Catholic faith? Yeah, yeah. . . . Do you know that you are a sinner against God? Uh uh. Yeah. . . ." The end was obviously near. Cushing went on, with an eye to getting in all the words in the book. "Do you believe in the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?"

The wretched man had just enough breath to gasp, "Say, what is this, Father? Here I am dying, and you want to run me all the way through the damn catechism!"

In telling that story, Cushing wrote that he wanted to get across a very important point that he finally learned through the seasoning of long years. We minister to a dying world—spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—and we had better not erect too many fences lest we do not attend the dying.

### Conclusion

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is a confessional and a confessing church. It acts out what it believes, namely, that God has empowered it through Word and Sacraments to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the world in word and deed. This proclamation is derived from and based upon the only rule of faith—the authoritative, sufficient and clear Word of God. Theological boundaries will be established; there are indeed non-negotiables. The thrust of these observations suggests certain foundational considerations as we go about theological construction in a new century.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>David Truemper, "Confession and Congregation," *The Cresset Occasional Paper*: III (1978), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Truemper, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Charles P. Arand, *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), p. 266.

# Book Reviews

## TESTING THE BOUNDARIES: WINDOWS TO LUTHERAN UNITY

by Charles P. Arand.

St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995.

Ideas have consequences! That's reality! It's a stated assumption of the *Concordia Scholarship Today* series. Dr. Charles Arand, professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, shows that well as *Testing the Boundaries* leads us through the 200 years American Lutherans have grappled with their identity, confessional subscription, changing biblical assumptions and with one another. Dr. Arand blends a thorough and careful historical and doctrinal study of Lutheran confessional identity in this country in a readable and balanced manner.

The work is helpful in three ways. First, it examines American Lutheran church history in light of four paths various American Lutherans have taken in embracing the confessions, the reasons for and implications of their choices. This clarifies contemporary identities and predispositions by various groups that were implicit in earlier decisions.

Second, Dr. Arand provides a dispassionate and clear analysis of the confessional and doctrinal thinking that led to the upheaval of the '70's in our own Synod. For those of us who lived through that era, it is perhaps seen more clearly in retrospect, freer of the emotions that hurt and embittered. Historically traced, the collision of convictions stands out clearly.

Third, he provides a vantage from which to identify persistent and emerging questions in confessional scholarship and clarity for those wrestling with their personal understanding of the confessions' meaning for their life and work. This will prove very helpful as questions of Lutheran identity and worship or church fellowship are discussed in years ahead.

"If Lutheranism is to be a vital force on the American scene and a leavening influence among America's varied religious traditions, the question of its identity—hence its mission—is not an irrelevant question. Lutherans must continue to define their identity and purpose of exploring, studying and discussing the values, place and function of their confessional writings within the life of the church." (p. 266) The volume is especially timely in view of the recent decision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the struggles the Missouri Synod encounters in a pluralistic society.

This reviewer recommends the book for the individual pastor or astute layman who desires a study of Lutheran confessional identity in America.

For professional study groups, it would lend itself more to the smaller circle of circuit conferences than a large gathering of pastors or a Sunday education experience.

**The Rev. Dirk Reek**  
St. Louis, Mo.

## THE EVANGELICAL LEFT: ENCOUNTERING POSTCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

by Millard J. Erickson.

Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997.

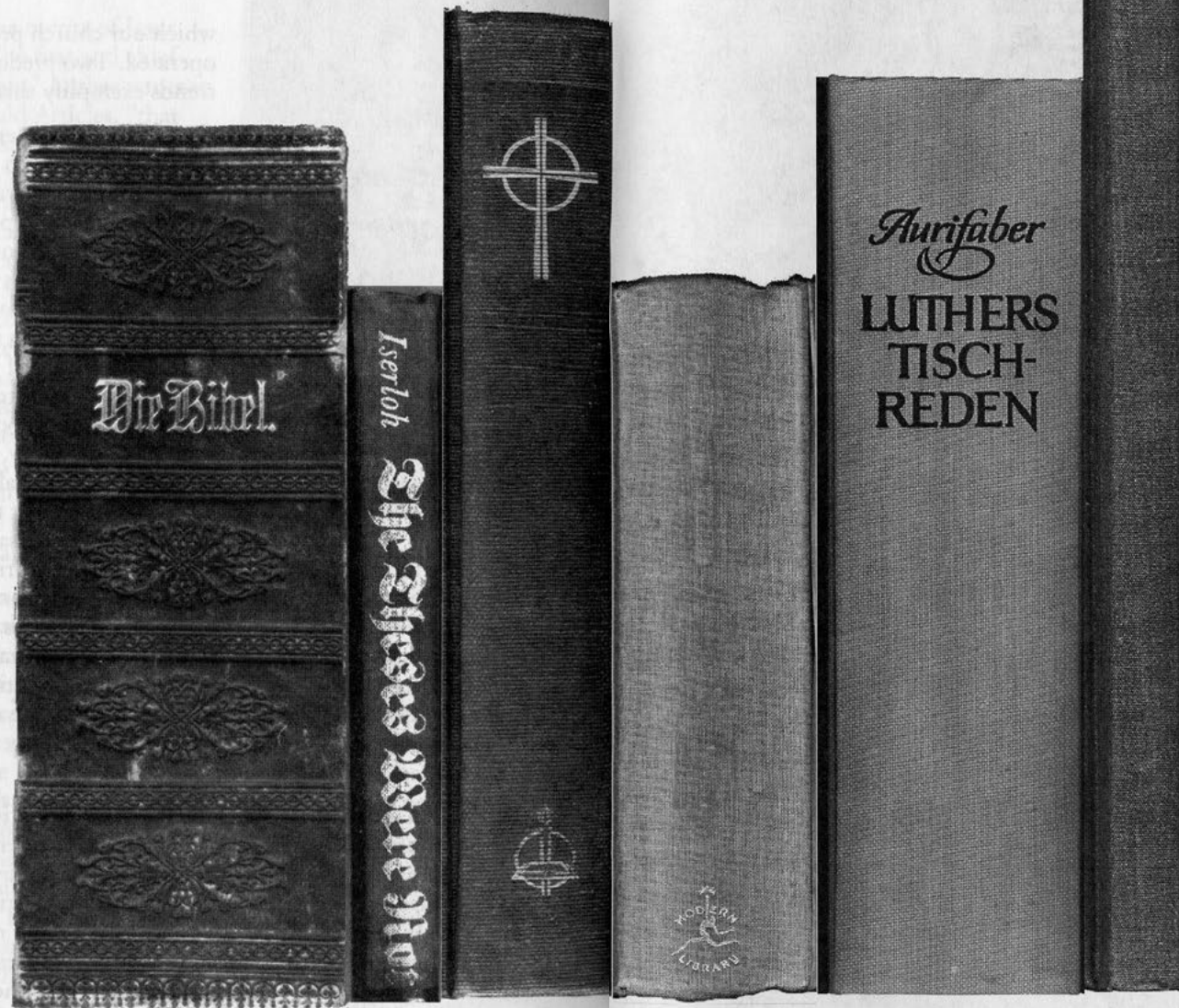
Just what counts as "evangelical" these days?

In recent years, several "evangelical" theologians have attempted to engage the main lines of 20th century European Protestant theology, especially the work of Karl Barth. These evangelical theologians seek to rethink the faith in light of contemporary theological and philosophical issues and ideas. Doctrines under revision include: God, divine election, the sacraments as means of grace, Scripture, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These theologians minimize the importance of the millennium in eschatology, and most support the ordination of women to the pastoral office.

The work of prolific Stanley Grenz is a good example of this kind of "postconservative" evangelical theology. Grenz, a Baptist, was bold enough to attempt to describe Pannenberg's systematic theology even before Pannenberg had written volumes two and three! Yet, if one compares Grenz's *A Reason to Hope* (Oxford, 1990) with Pannenberg's completed systematics, Grenz has done an admirable job, as even Pannenberg admits. Grenz has also co-authored, with Roger Olson, one of the best introductions to the history of Christian thought in the 20th century, *Twen-*

*tieth-Century Theology* (InterVarsity, 1992). Grenz's *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (InterVarsity, 1993) defines evangelical theology as reflection on a particular way of believing that is experienced within a believing community in a particular context. This depiction of the dogmatic task bears striking similarity to Schleiermacher's "liberal evangelical" theological program, though Grenz does not acknowledge such a connection to the "father of modern evangelical theology." More recently, Grenz has engaged aspects of "postmodern" philosophy (*A Primer on Postmodernism*, Eerdmans, 1996).

Erickson, a self-styled "fundamental evangelical" who is a professor of theology at Baylor University's Truett Seminary, does a fairly good job of describing some of the ideas current in this type of evangelical theology. His chapters explore such issues as the theological methodologies of Grenz, Donald Bloesch, Clark Pinnock, and theologians like them, and their understandings of Scripture, God and salvation. Erickson begins and ends his book with chapters that warn of the



possible loss of pure evangelicalism if Christians do not criticize several aspects of this newer evangelical theology.

Erickson is especially concerned that these theologians attempt to combine a "high" view of scriptural authority with a willingness to utilize contemporary methods of investigating the Bible. Unlike earlier breeds of evangelicals, these theologians maintain that the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible are not helpful ways for describing the nature of biblical authority. Instead, they seek to interpret the nature of biblical authority as "functional" and Christocentric, i.e., God uses the Bible to accomplish his purpose of witnessing to his actions in history, principally in the ministry of Jesus, but the Bible itself does not have an intrinsic, infallible authority. Erickson disagrees.

Unfortunately, Erickson's criticisms are not always convincing. Many of his negative criticisms are simple assertions that are not proved in the text. For example, Erickson notes that Pinnock's doctrine of God shares certain similarities to some notions current in process theology.

Pinnock is critical of Greek metaphysical influences on the classical Christian understanding of God. Erickson tries to criticize Pinnock's understanding by simply mentioning James Barr's criticisms of the biblical theology movement, as though Barr's work discredits the view that there were significant Greek influences on early Christian theology. Barr's criticism, however successful it was in dismantling the biblical theology movement, has not undermined the prevailing view that Greek metaphysics had a significant influence on the classical Christian view of God (and also on the idea of "the immortality of the soul," Erickson's protestations notwithstanding).

Despite his concerns, Erickson recognizes that there are positive emphases within this newer evangelical theology. For example, he notes that these theologians emphasize the practical dimension of theology. They also emphasize that all theologies are shaped and expressed within particular historical and cultural situations and that this conditioning affects theological meaning. Erickson affirms that these "postconservatives" are at least trying to define evangelical theology in meaningful, contemporary terms.

Because Erickson's book is merely an introduction to the issues, one should engage directly the works of Grenz or, for that matter, Schleiermacher, if one really wants to encounter "postconservative evangelical theology." (Much that passes for "postconservative" evangelical theology today is really not so new.) The critical analysis of postconservative evangelical theology still needs to be written.

**Professor Matthew Becker**  
Concordia University  
Portland, Oregon

## PREACHING DOCTRINE: FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by Robert G. Hughes and Robert Kysar.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.

The modern preacher addresses a highly secularized society which is intellectually nourished on the output of television and computer. It is theologically ignorant and in search of whatever entertains and makes one feel good. The short sermons we hear are heavy on exhortation to evangelize, to be stewards of God's creation and our money, and to help the needy, but light on significant doctrinal content. So when *Preaching Doctrine* came to my attention, I rejoiced inwardly: "Hallelujah! At last! A book on preaching doctrinal sermons!" But that's not what the book is about. The content presents a "new homiletic for the 21st Century" which adjusts itself to the culture, attitudes, experiences, hopes and intellect of the modern audience.

The preacher can learn much about the challenge of preaching and teaching in the new millennium from the insights of Hughes and Kysar. Much hard thinking, careful research and a scholarly grasp of sociological projections is reflected in the systematic presentation. The first chapter, for instance, is a fascinating analysis of the kind of audience which the 21st Century will provide. For any pastor who is serious about reaching the modern audience with his preaching and teaching, the book is a valuable tool. It is a manual on effective communication in this day and age.

We commend the authors for confessing humbly, "Those of us who teach preaching recognize that thinking, speaking and writing about it are far different from doing it on a weekly basis" (pg. viii). To that we add another caveat. A sermon that is ineffective, or that contains falsehood, or misleads, may also be "homiletically correct" according to all the standards and guidelines enunciated in a manual on preaching. The "new homiletic" of Hughes and Kysar dissects the "art of preaching" on the bases of learning theory and psychological, sociological and cultural considerations. It is common experience that when the subject has been dissected in the lab, the critter is dead. That's what happens when the art of preaching is dissected. The Spirit which gives life to the dead bones is absent. There is something about preaching the Word of God which defies reduction to a prescription for success in any century. God chose to extend His Kingdom through "the foolishness of preaching" (1 Corinthians 1:21-25) also in the 21st century.

**Herman A. Etzold**  
Professor of Theology, emeritus  
Concordia College-Seward

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