

6. Confessional Subscription

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What is a Lutheran? What is the nature of subscription to the Lutheran Confessions? These two questions which are often considered together and which are as inseparably related as Siamese twins have become increasingly important in our day when Lutheranism is fighting for its identity and life. Today most of the Lutheran pastors and teachers throughout the world subscribe, at least *pro forma*, all the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church: the ancient catholic creeds and the great Lutheran confessions of the 16th century, i.e. the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Luther's two catechisms, the Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord. What does such subscription mean? Is such subscription any longer possible in our day of academic freedom and vaunted autonomy, ecumenism and dialogue? Many today think that subscription to any creed or confession is no longer viable and can represent only an impossible legalistic yoke upon an evangelical Christian or pastor. This is the conviction not only of Baptists and other traditionally non-credal denominations, but also of such renowned and conservative theologians as Karl Barth who holds that any human formulation of doctrine (as a creed or confession must be) is only a quest, an approximation, and therefore relative.¹

Are such objections valid? Is the Lutheran church able to justify confessional subscription today? And is she able to explain and agree on precisely what is meant by such subscription?

Today questions concerning the nature and spirit and extent of confessional subscription have become a vexing problem, an enigma or even an embarrassment to many Lutherans.

There was no difficulty in answering such questions in 1530, however, when the great *Magna Charta* of the Lutheran Church, the Augsburg Confession, was presented by the Lutheran princes to Emperor Charles V, or again in 1580 when thousands of Lutheran pastors accepted and subscribed the Book of Concord.²

From the time of John Philip Spener in the late 17th century disagreement and debate among Lutherans concerning confessional subscription began to develop, and these problems centered largely in the extent of that subscription. The question was: ought one to subscribe the confessions *quia* (because) they agreed with Scripture, or only *quatenus* (in so far as) they agreed with Scripture. This latter *quatenus* mode of subscription meant that one subscribed the confessions with reservations; the act was therefore a contradiction in terms and no real subscription at all. As John Conrad Dannhauer said, one could subscribe the Koran in so far as it agreed with Scripture.

Questions still arise regarding the extent of confessional subscription, and one occasionally hears theologians asking whether we are bound to the belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary or to the judgment that the papacy is the Antichrist or to the number of sacraments listed in our symbols, etc. Often this sort of picayunish discussion and complaint is quite beside the point and represents only a subterfuge which serves to hide deeper misgivings concerning the theology of the confessions. Today, I am convinced, the confessional problem among Lutherans does not lie primarily in the extent of confessional subscription, or even in the theology of the confessions. After all, the Lutheran symbols can be used as a waxen nose (just like Scripture) and turned

to suit the fancy of liberal theologians who find themselves in territorial churches or synods which still give some sort of formal status to the symbols. No, the problem facing us today, as Peter Brunner implies,³ is whether a person can be loyal to any confession or creed at all, whether theologians who have abandoned the authority of holy Scripture can have confessions any longer, whether modern latitudinarianism and indifferentism so rampant in practically all synods and church bodies today is at all compatible with confessionalism. In short, the issue is with the very nature of confessionalism, with the spirit of confessional subscription, with the very possibility of subscription at all.

I. The True Nature Of Confessional Subscription Misrepresented

Today the *quia—quatenus* distinction is no longer in vogue. The mere *quatenus* subscription has been so thoroughly discredited that no Lutheran theologian, at least in our country, wishes to identify with it. Does this mean that a straightforward unconditional (*quia*) subscription is now acceptable to all Lutherans in our country? By no means.⁴ There are current in the Lutheran church today many utterly inadequate approaches to the Lutheran confessions and to confessional subscription. And there are many Lutheran theologians who relativize the confessions and subscribe to them only with various sorts of qualifications. I shall now list four of these inadequate modern approaches which seem to be quite common.⁵

1. *The first inadequate approach to the Lutheran confessions today is to relativize them historically.* This is an old ruse, already called attention to by Dr. Walther.⁶ Briefly put, this attitude toward the confessions argues that the Lutheran symbols, like every writing (including the Bible) are historically conditioned. They were indeed good and adequate confessions for their day. But we are living in a different age. And therefore these ancient writings cannot speak as directly to us as to their own day. And we cannot subscribe them in the same sense as the original subscribers. If we had been living at the time of the Reformation, however, we would have identified wholeheartedly with them. This seems to be the kind of qualified subscription that Theodore Tappert advocates when he says,⁷ "When subscribing the confessions *today*, Lutherans assert that, in view of the issues which were *then* at stake and the alternatives which were *then* offered, the confessors were right." There is good reason for Carl Braaten to comment,⁸ "This is merely a new declension of the old *quatenus* formula." And as we might expect Tappert's historically relativized subscription enables him to quarrel with the *doctrine* of the confessions, e.g. on the necessity of baptism and on the third use of the Law as a norm for Christian life.

2. *The second inadequate approach to the Lutheran confessions today is to relativize them reductionistically.* This approach reduces the role of the confessions to a function, namely as evangelical witness. This is the simplistic and arbitrary position of Carl Braaten.⁹ Gratuitously assuming that the Confessions provide no formula of subscription for succeeding Lutherans, Braaten claims that we are free today to work out our own approach toward the confessions. He then polemicizes without abandon against any unconditional subscription to the confessions as such. This he calls "symbolatry" (a word not coined by him), "doctrinal legalism", "confessional totalitarianism", "restitution", "a kind of doctrinal methodism". Again the ruse, this time pompous, declamatory and misleading, to bully and intimidate anyone who would subscribe without reservation the doctrinal content of our confessions. And what does Braaten offer as the only legitimate attitude toward the confessions? "Constructive confessional Lutheranism" is the term he employs, which means that we accept the confessions as an example of evangelical witness which were formulated in a "special *kairos*" for the crisis of their day.

Now, certainly our confessions are such a witness, but they claim to be much more than that, namely true, ecumenical, permanently valid expositi-

tions and formulations of biblical truth, which claim the acceptance of every pastor who desires the name Lutheran and evangelical.

A similar type of reductionism may be found in the recent document "A Call to Openness and Trust" issued by certain persons within the Missouri Synod. The statement is there made: "We *identify* too with the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church, understood, as all such statements must be, in the historical setting and terms of their time. We see these confessional statements as *setting forth a life of Christian freedom in the Gospel.*" And that is all that is said! Again the confessions serve as a mere example for us today. Interestingly, this statement too feels free to break with the confessions on their insistence upon a definite doctrine of the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper.

3. *The third inadequate approach to the Lutheran confessions today is to ignore or avoid the issue of subscription.*

A true Lutheran does not need to protest and avow continuously his loyalty to the Lutheran confessions. His ministry and teaching and personal confession will be a witness to his commitment to our confessions. However, there are times and circumstances when one must clearly enunciate his position toward the creeds and confessions of the church. To be silent would constitute a denial of meaningful commitment. Such is the case with two "Position Papers" on the subject "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church", delivered by Warren Quanbeck and George Lindbeck in consultation with several Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians.¹⁰ Not one word in either paper on the status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the church. The only statement pertaining to the subject mustered by Quanbeck, after all kinds of qualification, is the following: "Our confession of the Nicene Creed is our recognition that *given the fourth century situation* we stand with Athanasius against Arius on Trinitarian and Christological issues." Simply to take sides like this is a subscription to nothing. Meanwhile Lindbeck's presentation pedantically questions the Creed in a variety of ways, thus avoiding the subject of the status of the Creed in the church or our posture toward it today. How ironic to hear the Roman Catholic counterpart in the discussions, John Courtney Murray, addressing himself to the same subject and speaking unequivocally of "the immutability of the Nicene dogma", insisting that it will ever remain true and relevant to affirm that Christ, the Son, is consubstantial with the Father and that the Creed will always be relevant and "intelligible *suo modo* as a formula of faith."¹¹ Here is one speaking in the spirit of credal subscription.

4. *The fourth inadequate approach to the Lutheran confessions today is bombastically to reject subscription.* This approach resembles the relativizing principle enunciated above (point 2) but is overt and frank. For instance, Richard Neuhaus writes,¹² "A theologian worth his stipend can hardly be constrained, either in methodology or conclusions, by the statements of theologians of the 16th century." (One might ask whether he would include theologians of the first century such as Paul or John or Jesus!) Then follows the bombast which serves to sweeten the fare, like canned gravy over rancid beef, and thus palliate a simple rejection of confessional subscription. "Theology must argue rather than assert," Neuhaus asserts, "convince rather than coerce, persuade rather than appeal to authority." Again he magniloquently and irrelevantly asserts that confessions are not like "traffic cops directing theology's course"; they are "not binding as a form of canonical law", etc. In the end, after the reader is sufficiently embarrassed over even the semblance of confessional subscription, the bombast subsides and the concluding statement sounds almost magnanimous toward the confessions, although it turns out to be only a variation of the principle of relativizing the confessions historically (point 1).¹³

II. The Nature Of Confessional Subscription According To The Confessions

The modern approaches toward our confessions which I have just briefly described have one thing in common apart from their weakening or virtual

rejection of confessional subscription: they all (except perhaps for point 1) obscure or confuse or complicate the notion of confessional subscription. There is, however, nothing obscure or confused or even complex about the concept of confessional subscription. This is the reason why the notion is not discussed at length but only touched upon by our confessions themselves. The creeds do not bother to explain what is meant and involved by the formula "I believe". Nor do our Reformation confessions go into any disquisition on the meaning and implications of the formula, "*Ecclesiae magno consensu apud nos docent*" (Our churches teach with great unanimity), or, "We believe, teach and confess." Why not? Because the nation of confession, subscription to confessions, commitment to the Gospel and all its articles and to a definite doctrinal position was clear and clearly understood by all.

In our day too there has been little discussion on the meaning and nature of confessional subscription for the simple reason that there does not need to be. When orthodox Lutherans have written on the subject it has been usually to clear up misunderstandings and aberrations introduced by those who wish to make only some sort of conditional subscription to the confessions (Walther) or to recall Lutheran pastors to their ordination vow and to rally behind the confessions (Hummel) or to emphasize certain aspects of confessional subscription such as its relation to the *sola scriptura* principle (Brunner).

What then is the nature of confessional subscription?

Confessional subscription is a solemn act of confessing in which I willingly (AC, Conclusion: FC SD XII,40) and in the fear of God (FC Epit. XII,13; SD Source and Norm,20) confess my faith and declare to the world what is my belief, teaching and confession. This I do by pledging myself with my whole heart (*bekennen wir uns; amplectimur; toto pectore amplectimur; FC SD Rule and Norm, 4-7*) to certain definite, formulated confessions. I do this in complete assurance that these confessions are true and are correct expositions of Scripture (*aus und nach Gottes Wort; weil sie aus Gottes Wort genommen und darin fest und wohl gegründet ist; ibid.5,10*). These symbolical writings become for me permanent confessions and patterns of doctrine (*Begriff und Form; forma et typus. ibid. 1; einhellige, gewisse, allgemeine Form der Lehre; ibid.10*) according to which I judge all other writings and teachers (*wofern sie dem jetzt gemeldeten Vorbild der Lehre gemäzz. ibid. 10*).

Confessional subscription is not some sort of individualistic, autonomous act. It is not identical with what Jesus calls for when He tells me to confess Him before men (Matt.10:32; Rom.10:9; 1 Pet. 3:15; 1 John 4:2), although it includes that. It is a responsible public act of confession, done in fellowship and union with the Christian church and indicating that I share unconditionally the "unanimous and correct understanding" of the church which has steadfastly remained in the pure doctrine (*ibid. 13*). The confessions do not belong to me, but to the church as the unanimously approved pattern of doctrine (*ibid.1*). They are above me or any individual (*ibid.10*). As Schlink says,¹⁴ the consensus, so often mentioned in the confessions and so important to them, "makes plain that the confession is not the doctrine of an individual but of the church."¹⁵

It is essential that we base our notion of the nature and extent of confessional subscription on what the confessions themselves say or infer about such subscription. It should go without saying that we must either subscribe the confessions in the spirit and sense in which they were originally intended to be subscribed, or not at all.

A few statements from our confessions will bear this out. In speaking of the entire Book of Concord the Formula of Concord says the following (FC SD, Rule and Norm. 10):

Our intention was only to have a single, universally accepted certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe [*bekennen; agnoscant et amplectantur*] and from which and according to

which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated. Cf. par.13.

Concerning the Augsburg Confession and its permanent validity in the church the following is said (FC SD Introduction, 5):

Similarly we are determined by the grace of the Almighty to abide until our end by this repeatedly cited Christian Confession as it was delivered to Emperor Charles in 1530. And we do not intend, either in this or in subsequent doctrinal statements, to depart from the aforementioned Confession or to set up a different and new confession.

Possibly the strongest statement pertaining to confessional subscription is found in the Preface to the Christian Book of Concord (Trig.p.23). Having pledged themselves to the earlier symbols the confessors say:

Therefore we also have determined not to depart even a finger's breadth either from the subjects themselves nor from the phrases which are found in them, but, the Spirit of God aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of pure doctrine.

On the basis of such statements which tell us as much about the spirit of confessional subscription as the nature and extent of it Walther offers the following splendid summary of the nature of confessional subscription,¹⁶

An unconditional subscription is the solemn declaration which the individual who wants to serve the church makes under oath 1) that he accepts the *doctrinal content* of our symbolical books, because he recognizes the fact that it is in full agreement with Scripture and does not militate against Scripture in any point, whether that point be of major or minor importance; 2) that he therefore heartily believes in this divine truth and is determined to preach this doctrine, whatever the form may be in which it occurs, whether the subject be dealt with *ex professo* or only incidentally. An unconditional subscription refers to the whole content of the symbols and does not allow the subscriber to make any mental reservation in any point. Nor will he exclude such doctrines as are discussed incidentally in support of other doctrines, because the fact that they are so stamps them as irrevocable articles of faith and demands their joyful acceptance by everyone who subscribes the symbols.

Notice that Walther's description, like the confessions themselves, (Tr. Conclusion; FC SD Rule and Norm, 10ff; FC SD Introduction,3), makes the object of our subscription the *doctrinal content* of the confessions. That is what we pledge ourselves to, and that is all. To my knowledge no Lutheran ever required any more. Walther makes this clear, and so do the Lutheran Fathers before him.¹⁷ It should be unnecessary therefore constantly to repeat this obvious fact,¹⁸ unless theologians are deliberately beclouding the issue. We do not pledge ourselves and subscribe to the Latin or German grammar of the confessions, or to the logic or illustrations used there, or to what they might say about historical or scientific matters, or liturgical usages of vestments, or the numbering of the sacraments, or to the mode of baptism (which seemed to be immersion. See SC IV,11. Latin: *quid autem significat ista in aquam immersio?*), or to non-doctrinal "pious" phraseology like the "*semper virgo*" which we find in Selnecker's translation of the Smalcald Articles.¹⁹

We are bound however to the *exegesis* of the Confessions. This assertion requires just a bit of explanation. Obviously, as Walther points out, we are not bound to every choice of passages our confessions make in supporting their doctrine, or to every precise detail in their exegesis of Scripture passages. But we cannot reject the exegetical conclusions (many of which are only implicit in our creeds and symbols) of our confessions without rejection of the confessions themselves as being statements of doctrine *drawn from the Scriptures*. It is clear that a rejection one by one of the passages used to support Lutheran doctrine or a rejection of the exegetical methodology of our confessions is tantamount to a repudiation of the confessions themselves. It is not correct to say that it is un-Lutheran to require agreement in exegetical

conclusions. Consensus, for instance, on the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar is contingent upon agreement on the exegetical conclusions drawn from the words of institution (FC VII). And the same could be said for any number of articles of faith which the confessions defend exegetically.

III. Adjuncts To Confessional Subscription (The Spirit of Confessional Subscription)

Confessional subscription can be truly appreciated and understood not simply by knowing what it is, but by understanding what is involved and implied by it. Therefore we must mention two important adjuncts of confessional subscription.

A. Confessional Subscription and the Gospel

Confessional subscription is an act motivated and determined by the Gospel. A Lutheran's attitude toward the confessions will indicate his attitude toward the Gospel itself.

1. Our Lutheran confessions are truly Gospel centered and were written for the sake of the Gospel.²⁰ The Gospel of Christ is the central theme (*praecipuus locus doctrinae Christianae; doctrina praecipua de fide; fundamentum; der erste und Hauptartikel*. SA II,1ff. also Intro.). The very structure of certain confessions such as the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, and the Smalcald Articles is centered around the article of the Gospel, and when secondary topics and abuses are discussed, such as the mass, the invocation of the saints, chapters and monasteries, they are always related to the chief article of the Gospel which pertains to our knowledge of Christ (SA II,II,III). The two great discussions of the Apology which center in the doctrine of justification and repentance reveal the total Gospel concern and orientation of that great confession. Even the Formula of Concord which was written to settle controversies which had entered the Lutheran church deals with these problems and settles them from a definite Gospel perspective. For instance, the Flacian error concerning original sin is shown to conflict with the several articles of the Gospel (redemption, sanctification, resurrection, FC SD I,43-47).

Our confessions were written to preserve the Gospel. This is why Melancthon in the Apology condemns so strongly the work righteousness of the papists; for such a doctrine "buries Christ", "obscures" and "abolishes" the glory of Christ and the knowledge of the Gospel (Apol. II,44; IV,204,213; XI,9,77). And why is the Gospel so important to Melancthon, Luther and the other writers of our confessions? Not only because their personal salvation is involved, but because of their evangelical concern for lost sinners and their spiritual welfare, because of their loving concern over tender and terrified consciences, their concern over confused Christians (Apol. IV,301,321; XI,10; XII,28; XIV,4-5; SA Preface, 3,10; SC Preface,2,4,6), yes, concern for the eternal salvation of these people (FC Epit. Rule and Norm,5; SD, Rule and Norm, 8; XI,96; Apol IV,332. German, Bek.223).

It is this cause and concern with which a Lutheran pastor identifies when he wholeheartedly and joyfully subscribes and commits himself to the Lutheran symbols. The doctrinal content of the Lutheran symbols which he subscribes is the Gospel and all its articles.

2. The Gospel is doctrine. Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, motivated and determined by the doctrine to the Gospel, involves total commitment to this doctrine. And this doctrine of the Gospel is a definite, authoritative, cognitive message and proclamation (FC Epit. V,5-7,9; SD, V,20 *passim*).²¹ No wonder our confessions take doctrine so seriously and insist that they believe, teach and confess the pure doctrine (FC SD Introduction,3). The salvation of souls is at stake. "These important matters also concern ordinary people and laymen who for their eternal salvation must as Christians know the difference between true and false doctrine. . ." (FC SD

Rule and Norm,8; cf. Epit. Rule and Norm,5). No wonder they insist on condemning false doctrine with countless antitheses and condemnations wherever it crops up. Again the Gospel is at stake. "In order to preserve the pure doctrine and to maintain a thorough, lasting, and God-pleasing concord within the church, it is essential not only to present the true and wholesome doctrine correctly, but also to accuse the adversaries who teach otherwise (1 Tim.3: 9; Tit.1: 9; 2 Tim.2:24; 3:16)" (FC SD Rule and Norm,14).²² No wonder the framers of our confessions, convinced that their doctrine is true and based upon the Word of God (FC SD Rule and Norm 2,4,5,16), determine, as they put it, "by God's grace to remain steadfastly in our commitment to this confession until we die" (FC SD XII,6). Just listen to the spirit of doctrinal certainty, based upon Scripture and wrought by the Spirit of God, which breathes forth from their confession,

We have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility, and outward harmony. Nor would such peace and harmony last, because it would be contrary to the truth and actually intended for its suppression. Still less by far are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors. We have a sincere delight in and deep love for true harmony and are cordially inclined and determined on our part to do everything in our power to further the same. We desire such harmony as will not violate God's honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him for ever through the sole merit of Christ. (FC SD XI,95-96).

Listen again to the certainty, this time uttered with eschatological assurance, with which they make their confession also for their posterity:

Therefore, in the presence of God and of all Christendom among both our contemporaries and our posterity, we wish to have testified that the present explanation of all the foregoing controverted articles here explained, and none other, is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God's grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account. Nor shall we speak or write anything, privately or publicly, contrary to this confession, but we intend through God's grace to abide by it. (FC SD XII,40.)

Here we see the glad, free, confident spirit of an unconditioned subscription to the Lutheran confessions.

The pastor who pooh-poohs purity of doctrine, who squirms when false doctrine and teachers are condemned, who cannot be certain of his own doctrinal position cannot subscribe the Lutheran confessions and forfeits all right to the name Lutheran.

The notion has been expressed for various reasons by theologians ever since the Reformation that subscription, total, unconditional and unqualified subscription, to the Lutheran confessions is legalistic, a violation of Christian freedom, etc.²³ Opposition has centered especially against the condemnation of false doctrine so common in our confessions. Such a reaction not only manifests an ignorance of the spirit of confessionalism which puts the truth of the Gospel above every other consideration, but is itself a kind of insidious crypto-legalism, a pressure (using such pious phrases as "law of love", "freedom of faith", "tolerance" etc.) exerted to divert one from making total commitment to an articulated Gospel, a definite doctrinal position. Paul was an obedient servant of Christ who loved his Lord, but he also emphasized the great importance of pure doctrine (2 Tim.1:13-14 [cf. FC SD Rule and Norm,9] 1 Tim.4: 16; Tit.22). And he did not hesitate to condemn false teachers (2 Tim.1:20; Rom.16:16; Gal.1:8), even by name (1 Tim.1:20; 2 Tim.2:17). Was Paul a legalist? Not at all, he was positively and totally evangelical, motivated wholly by the Gospel. And so is the church and the

individual who like Paul, the slave of Christ, determines to subscribe a body of doctrine, a "pattern of sound words" (2 Tim.1:13), which both articulates the Gospel and is formulated and professed for the sake of the Gospel. No, the fact is that it is not only un-Lutheran but unevangelical *not* to subscribe the Lutheran confessions. Confessionalism springs from a love of Christ, a love toward lost sinners, and a loyalty to the Gospel. As Peter Brunner says,²⁵ "It is not a matter of vindicating the Lutheran Confessions of the 16th century at all costs in the present ecumenical discussion, but it is a matter of vindicating the apostolic Gospel given to us in the Scriptures."

To force legalistically, to pressure, to bribe or wheedle anyone into subscribing the Lutheran symbols has never been advocated or even suggested in the Lutheran Church.²⁶ Coersion would indeed have been legalistic and would constitute a denial of our confessions and what they are, namely symbols around which Christians rally willingly and joyfully and in all Christian freedom.²⁷

B. Confessional Subscription and the *Sola Scriptura*

The Gospel to which our symbols commit themselves and out of which they speak is the Gospel of Scripture. By relating oneself by unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions one *ipso facto* relates oneself not only to the Gospel, but also to the Scriptures of which the confessions claim to be an exposition. "All talk of commitment to confession is senseless when Holy Scriptures have been lost as the concrete judge over all proclamation."²⁸ It is significant that the Introduction to the Book of Concord and particularly the FC Rule and Norm which speak of the authority of the confessions are the very sections which affirm and delineate the authority and infallibility of Scripture as the only source and norm for judging all doctrine and teachers. The unconditional subscription to the confessions, far from closing off Scripture to the theologian, as Braaten suggests,²⁹ actually places the Lutheran pastor in the only correct relation to the divine Word, under its authority. The authority of the confessions as a definite form and pattern of doctrine (*Vorbild der Lehre, Form der Lehre, FC SD Rule and Norm.10*) is the authority of writings which are drawn from the Scriptures (*aus Gottes Wort genommen*) and present the doctrine of Scripture correctly.³⁰

What are the implications of this fact for our day? One implication is surely that confessional Lutheranism today must stand squarely upon the *sola scriptura* principle as it is understood and employed in the confessions themselves. Any diminution of the apostolic source of our doctrine, of biblical authority, will undermine or vitiate entirely our confessional subscription. As Peter Brunner puts it,³¹ "If the New Testament no longer harmonizes, if in the canonical writings of the New Testament a consensus is no longer heard regarding the Gospel that is to be proclaimed, then a confessional commitment has become fundamentally impossible." Our confessions speak repeatedly of the apostolic Scriptures and identify the doctrine of the Gospel (*doctrina evangelii*) with the doctrine of the apostles (*doctrina apostolorum*).

It is clear what Brunner is disturbed about. He is frightened over the destructive results of the so-called modern historico-critical method of approaching Scripture, a method which undermines the apostolic and divine origin of the New Testament witness by cutting it off from direct line with the divine, historical Christ, and then by a naturalistic and pagan understanding of the historical process, reducing that witness to a mere *Gemeindetheologie* or pious self-understanding of early Christians. There are many Lutherans today who, unlike Brunner, do not understand that there is a war on, quiet and largely unnoticed, but deadly serious. They sit at the sidelines and wonder, or they uncritically judge that this method can somehow be employed with Lutheran presuppositions. They do not realize or will not admit that the method has its own built-in presuppositions (as every method must have) regarding history and scripture and these rule out the *sola Scriptura* of our Lutheran confessions. It is high time that we who wish to be and remain confessional and evangelical Lutherans recognize that the evangelical *sola Scriptura* of

our confessions (as well as many articles of faith drawn from the practice of this principle) is incompatible with the historico-critical method of approaching the divine Word of Scripture. If we cannot face up to this crisis which is the great crisis facing Lutheranism today, we will lose our identity, true Lutheranism will pass away, we "will deny the Spirit of God, who now, today, here, in our historical situation, demands loyalty to the apostolic Gospel together with its actualizing interpretation" (Brunner). And Christianity will be poorer for all that (We have an ecumenical obligation!).

But we must not fail. Too much is at stake. And by God's grace we will not fail. God will see to that. We too will stand, like those confessors before us, "with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. . . and we shall give account." (FC SD XII,40). And then in that great day we will know all the glory of confessing Christ.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-69), I,1,9ff. The same position seems to be taken by responsible Lutherans. Cf. the position paper, "Doctrinal Concerns", issued by the Church Council of the ALC at Winnipeg, Manitoba, June 23-29 where par.C reads, "His [the believer's] best efforts to formulate a theology in terms of propositions and statements will fall short. To assume that the church can arrive at human concepts or expressions that are in every respect correct is as much a symptom of pride as to assume that the church or its members can achieve sinlessness in their daily life." Commenting on this statement, Hermann Sasse says, "What nonsense! . . . True Lutheranism has never and can never accede to that. The moment it does it has lost its sound confessional character and its certainty of the Gospel." See Waldo Werning, "Issues in Deciding the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod American Lutheran Church Fellowship Matter" (Milwaukee: no publisher, no date), p.10.
- ²Even in the early days of our Missouri Synod most Lutherans seemed able to comprehend the meaning of an unconditional subscription to the Lutheran symbols and were prepared to make this pledge, or not to. See C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of our Church?" Trans. by Alex Guebert, CTM, XVIII,4 (April, 1947).
- ³Peter Brunner, "Commitment to the Lutheran Confession—What Does It Mean Today?" *The Springfielder*, XXXIII,3 (Dec. 1969), pp.4-14.
- ⁴Ironically theologians whose acceptance of the confessions is clearly conditional offer the most disparate opinions of the old distinction. Theodore Tappert holds that one can and ought to subscribe the confessions both *quia* and *quatenus* and holds that the confessions themselves assert this, a position which seems very like nonsense, and certainly contrary to the original sense of the distinction. See Theodore Tappert, "The Significance of Confessional Subscription" in *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation*, published by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council (New York, 1961), p.30. Compare this with the position of Carl Braaten who finds fault with both the *quia* and *quatenus* formula for subscription. See Carl Braaten, "The Crisis of Confessionalism" in *Dialog*, I,1 (Winter, 1962), p.46 *passim*. The *quia* formula, he avers, "can make it appear as if the confessions close off the circuit between ourselves and the Scriptures, as if the confessions exempt us from continually examining the Scriptures with modern tools to gain new light on our situation." There is no evidence for such a declamation, and so Braaten offers none. But he betrays his loose stance toward the confessions when he says, "It [the *quia* formula] suggests that we believe in the inerrancy of our confessions and therefore that we aprioristically preclude the possibility of correcting them."
- ⁵Actually there is general disagreement, if not veritable confusion, among those Lutherans today who cannot accept the confessions unconditionally. This sad fact was brought out with force and pathos by the disparate reactions to Horace Hummel's recent sane attempt to recall Lutheran pastors to what they should all have confidently and intelligently affirmed at their ordination. See *Lutheran Forum*, Oct. 1969. Also Dec. 1969; Feb. 1970 and Mar. 1970.
- ⁶*Op. cit.*, "Again some say: the Symbols must be understood in their historical setting. This is correct, for the historical background sheds the necessary light on the manner in which men understood and interpreted Scripture at the time when certain articles were in controversy in the church and the contrary doctrines were rejected and condemned." But the statement is false if it is employed to create the impression that the doctrinal articles contained in the symbols are not eternal truths, but applicable only for certain times and conditions and therefore subject to revision and even rejection."
- ⁷*Op. cit.*, p.29. a more radical example of this same approach, and showing none of the appreciation of the confessions evinced by Tappert, is shown by non-theologian, Rachel Wahlberg, who frankly feels that the confessions are out of date, although she offers nothing constructive for updating them, but only criticizes them. See Rachel Wahlberg, "Let's Update the Confessions", *Lutheran Forum*, Feb. 1970, p.10.
- ⁸*Op. cit.*, 41.
- ⁹*ibid.*
- ¹⁰*The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church*. Theological Consultation between Representatives of the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs held July 6-7, 1965, in Baltimore, Maryland.
- ¹¹*ibid.*, p.21.
- ¹²*Lutheran Forum*, April, 1969, p.15. Cf. also Ernst Werner, "The Confessional Problem", *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XI,3 (Aug.1959), pp.179-191.
- ¹³"Within such historical realities, confessional statements continue to make a contribution to the living tradition of the Church." Perhaps it is fair to say that this position toward the confessions is the dialectical one that a person must break with them and even deny them to be truly faithful to them, analogous, I suppose, to the view that one must commit acts of civil disobedience and disloyalty to country in order to uphold the spirit of its constitution. If such a position seems illogical to us, we must not discard it as merely the gut reaction of an abnormally activist but uncritical theologian. The position, I think, would be compatible with various existentialist theologies, process theologies and marxist theologies of our day, if not with the static rules of rational thought. For this reason we must take such a position seriously (even if nonsensical) as typical of the subjectivistic madness of our *Zeitgeist*.
- ¹⁴Edmund Schlack, *The Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*. Trans. by Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p.19.
- ¹⁵Because the confessions are above the individual the Lutheran church in the past has periodically examined and investigated its teachers and pastors. In the light of what the confessions are and claim to be, such action is the right and duty of the church. To complain that such action or investigation is tyrannical or legalistic or to label such investigations as "inquisitions" as those who do not like to be examined doctrinally only reveals that such objectors do not understand the ecumenical nature of our confessions. See Preface to the Book of Concord, Tappert, p.14.
- ¹⁶*Op. cit.* Cf. the similar statement by John Benedict Carpozov, *Isagoge in Libros Ecclesiarum Lutheranarum Symbolicos*. Leipzig, 1965. p.6: "Therefore he who binds himself to profess and defend the symbolical books, if he desires to do so seriously, cannot commit himself or subscribe to these books with any mental reservations or under the condition that they agree with Scripture and the ancient church. For the question is not concerning the truth or falsity of the dogmas contained in the symbolical books—these dogmas are

presupposed by the one who subscribes and binds himself to these books--no, the question is concerning a person's professing and defending this doctrine in that church to which he pledges his support. Anyone who sincerely subscribes the symbolical books obligates himself to just such a profession. But he who doubts the doctrine contained in the symbolical books, and either does not allow himself to be correctly informed or attacks the doctrine and contradicts the language and matter of speaking, such a person transgresses the limitations which have been placed upon him by the church in which he teaches and cunningly vaunts himself over the church whose symbols he has subscribed."

¹¹Cf. *ibid. passim*. Also Abraham Calov, *Criticus Sacer vel Commentarius Apodicticoelenchiticus super Augustanam Confessionem*. Leipzig, 1646. Cf. also competent Lutherans today, i.e. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols", CTM, XXIX.1 (Jan.1958), pp.5,14ff. Herbert Bouman, "Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription", in *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation*, p.35ff.

¹²See Hummel, *op. cit.*

¹³Selnecker translated freely the words *von der reinen, heiligen Jungfrau Maria with ex Maria pura, sancta, semper virgine*. The "semper virgo" is a phrase used with great regularity by Selnecker as he spoke of the Virgin Mary.

¹⁴Preface to the Book of Concord, Tappert, p.13. See Herbert Bouman, *op. cit.*, p.41. Cf. also Walter Bouman, "The Gospel and the Smalcald Articles", CTM, XI,6-7, pp.405-414, where the author shows the evangelical character and structure of the Smalcald Articles. Cf. also Robert Preus, "The Confessions and the Mission of the Church", Essay delivered at the 1970 meeting of the overseas representatives of churches in fellowship with the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, p.10 *passim*.

¹⁵See Robert Preus, *ibid.* p.11: "We must bear in mind that the Gospel as understood by our Confessions is more than a mere divine dynamic. It is a cognitive, dianoetic message, a doctrine. The entire IVth article of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession struggles to articulate this Gospel of justification. True, the Gospel is no mere theoretical statement, but it is a true cognitive doctrine, nevertheless. Thus our Confessions speak of the *ministerium docendi evangelii* (AC V.1). The church whose burden is to preach the Gospel is a teaching church: *Ecclesiae magno consensu apud nos docent* (AC I.1). The church teaches the Gospel of Christ (Ap.IV, 400). The marks of the church are the pure doctrine of the Gospel (*pura evangelii doctrina*) and administration of the Sacraments (Ap. VI,5). And so the church is called the pillar of truth (1 Tim.3:15) because it retains the "pure Gospel" (Ap.VII,20). Without the true doctrine (*die reine Lehre*) concerning Christ and the righteousness of faith there can be no church at all (Ap. IV,377 German). Doctrine is stressed all through the Confessions; and the church of the Lutheran Confession with its burden to proclaim Christ's Gospel believes, teaches (*lehren*), and confesses the true doctrine (*Lehre*). In fact the Gospel is doctrine (Ap.XII,10); the *doctrina evangelii* is the *doctrina apostolorum* (Ap.VI,38). In fact the who teaches opinions contrary to the Gospel teaches contrary to the truth of the church (Ap.IV,400)."

The modern tendency to place pure doctrine in opposition to the Gospel (See Martin Kretzmann, "What on Earth Does the Gospel Change?" in *Lutheran World*, XVI,4 (Oct. 1969), pp.311,313,315,316,321) is utterly un-Lutheran and contrary to our confessions.

¹⁶See the statement of the Gnesio-Lutherans in the *Protestatio Wimarensium* of Sept.20,1557 (CR IX,286) as they defend the Gospel motivation for their use of antitheses: "Now if anybody should say that we are hereby seeking to exalt our name and not what serves the glory of God and the common good of the church, then we confess before God the Lord who also sees and judges the innermost thoughts of all men that from the beginning to the present hour we have sought by our condemnation of all corrupt teachings and now seek nothing else than the preservation of the pure teaching of the Gospel and the separation of the true church from all other rabble and sects." Hans-Werner Gensichen correctly says that, as a matter of principle in any confession, "The antithesis exists in fact only for the sake of the thesis and must be used in its service." See Hans-Werner Gensichen, *We Condemn. How Luther and the 16th Century Lutheranism* (1967), p.209. So it is with our Lutheran confessions, as Gensichen points out abundantly.

¹⁷This common slur against genuine confessionalism is not confined to our indifferentistic age (See the statements of Braaten and Neuhaus above), but was common also among the Calvinists and humanistically oriented Lutherans, like John Sturm, in the 16th century. See Gensichen for an excellent and full treatment of this entire matter. The Calvinists, who were really just as dogmatic as the Lutherans except in their political and psychological reasons, Sturm tried to rise above all "parties". It is primarily against the condemnations that the Calvinists railed, and, as Gensichen points out, they exploited the "law of love" in their polemics.

Today one of the tragedies of Lutheranism is its inability to understand the evangelical concern behind condemnations and the necessity of these antitheses to safeguard and clarify the true doctrine of the Gospel. For instance, the LWF at its recent meeting at Evian, France actually proposes, through its joint committee, the elimination of all doctrinal condemnations of the past as obsolete in the light of recent theological development. See NEWS BUREAU release 70-84, LCUSA, Erik W. Modean, ed. July 29, 1970, p.12. This is, in the interest of fellowship with the Reformed. Thus we observe the tragic demise of all true confessionalism in large sectors of Lutheranism.

¹⁸The Reformed in the 16th century argued that the Lutheran unconditional subscription to the confessions violated a Christian's freedom. Leonhard Hutter (*Libri Christianae Concordiae*, Wittenberg, 1608, p.34 as to the truth of their own doctrine and confession." And he accuses the adversaries of trying to impose their own uncertainty and indifferentism upon those who are able confidently to confess their faith. At the risk of poisoning the wells I would suggest that those who constantly harp and warn about a legalistic subscription to the confessions today are possibly revealing only the tentative nature of their own theology.

¹⁹*ibid.* p.12

²⁰*Concordia Triglotta*, F. Bente, Historical Introductions, p.248.

²¹Cf. the excellent statement by F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), p.138ff "The Lutherans consider the confessions not only a doctrinal standard; they place, the believer's joyful response to God's gracious offer in the Gospel. They are, in the first kerygmatic and prizable, i.e. they belong in the pulpit and the pew. The Lutheran confessions are placed the confessions establish the consensus with the fathers and with their own contemporaries. The act of confessing places the present church in the continuity of faith and is a public testimony that she shares the conflicts and the conquests of the faithful of all ages. And finally Lutherans believe that loyalty to the confessions is a precious heritage which each generation must recapture for itself and transmit to its descendants. Lutherans believe that divine truth is absolute, has not changed since Apostolic times, will not change during future generations in accord with Jesus' saying that His words shall never pass away. The Lutheran confessional principle is expressed in the slogan:

God's Word and Luther's doctrine pure
Shall to eternity endure.

²²Brunner, *op. cit.* 4, cf. also p.5: "The Lutheran Confession commits congregations, their shepherds and teachers exclusively to the apostolic Gospel. Therefore the Lutheran Confession contains no truths that rest in or consist of themselves, but all valid expositions it sets forth receive their validity solely from the apostolic Gospel. By committing the church exclusively to the apostolic Gospel, the Lutheran confession frees the church from the binding power of all teachings not based on God's Word." Brunner's entire article is to show the inextricable relation between confessional subscription and the *sola Scriptura*.

²³*ibid.* 47.

²⁴Hutter, *op. cit.* p.15: "It is easy to decide concerning the authority of these [symbolical] books. Although they can by no means be made equal with the canonical Scriptures, nevertheless because [quatenus] they agree with the Sacred Scriptures they deserve our faithful acceptance and they deserve that degree of authority which symbolical books can and ought to have."

²⁵*Op. cit.* p.7