

IS THE BOOK OF CONCORD THE LAST WORD?

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5 The year of our Lord 1980 is a special year for Lutherans. This year marks a dual celebration of praise to our gracious God--the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, read on June 25, 1530 before the Imperial Diet of Charles V at Augsburg; also the 400th anniversary of the Book of Concord, a compilation of the Lutheran Symbols, published at Dresden and made available to the general public on June 25, 1580, the date coinciding precisely with the 50th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession.

10 The Confessional Symbols contained in the Book of Concord include: 1) The three catholic [universal] or ecumenical creeds--the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed; 2) The Augsburg Confession; 3) The Apology [Defense] of the Augsburg Confession; 4) The Smalcald Articles and Tract [Treatise] concerning the Power and Primacy of the Pope; 5) Luther's Small Catechism; 6) Luther's Large Catechism; and 7) The Formula of Concord. The Latin name for the  
15 Book of Concord is "Concordia," meaning literally "with one heart," expressing the harmony and agreement in doctrinal confession which the original signers and proponents enjoyed.

20 These confessional writings of the Lutheran Church are also commonly and frequently referred to as "symbolical books" or "symbols." Perhaps a word of definition and explanation would be helpful. "A symbol is a sign, a badge, a confession, a creed; and so a Christian symbol is a confession of faith to make known a Christian from non-Christians. Augustine calls a symbol a rule of  
25 faith, short in words, but great in thoughts. Cyprian was the first to call the baptismal confession a symbol, and in time the term was applied to the three Ecumenic Creeds; and it was most natural for the Lutherans to call their confession their symbol." <sup>1</sup>

30 Adherence to these confessional symbols is the mark of true Lutheranism throughout the world today. Accordingly, the Constitution of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, after proclaiming its acceptance of and submission to the inspired and inerrant Word of God, declares under Article II--Confession of Faith, Section 2: "The Synod also accepts the confessions of the Evangelical  
35 Lutheran Church embodied in the Book of Concord of 1580, not insofar as, but because they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God." And every congregation in our synod has a similar paragraph in its constitution which acknowledges and accepts all the above-named confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to be the true and genuine exposition of the doctrines of the Bible, taken from and in full agreement with the Holy  
40 Scriptures.

45 Without genuine and unfeigned commitment to these Symbols, the name "Lutheran" becomes meaningless. And the unfortunate fact is that much in the world that claims to be and passes under the name "Lutheran" is not truly confessional. Our own Pastor Harold Wicke very aptly hit upon this inconsistency and dishonesty as he observed: "The pertinent paragraphs from the constitutions of the various Lutheran bodies seem to indicate uniform support for the doctrinal position of the Lutheran Confessions. However, the fact is that many doctrines which diverge  
50 from the teachings of Holy Writ and the Lutheran Confessions are supported and tolerated in various Lutheran bodies. The various Lutheran bodies by no means understand the Lutheran Confessions in the same way, and therefore their subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is by no means identical. The apparent similarity in the wording of the pertinent paragraphs in the respective constitutions can be very misleading. We must still compare what these Lutheran bodies  
55 actually teach with that which the inspired Word of God teaches." <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Concordia Cyclopedia, p. 741.

<sup>2</sup> Catechism of Differences, p. 11-12.

On the contemporary scene we are witnessing a sad spectacle. A majority of ships sailing under the Lutheran flag have left their confessional moorings, some adrift on the sea of an unscriptural ecumenism, and many even heading under full sail to join the fleet of Rome. Blatant evidence of utter disregard for and total surrender of the historic confessional Lutheran position shouts at us from a recent editorial in "Missouri in Perspective," a bi-weekly publication of Evangelical Lutherans in Mission, Inc. Under the by-line "Augsburg Anniversary" we are informed: "Lutherans and Roman Catholics in North America have entered a new era of co-operation and mutual understanding. It is quite a change from the centuries of misunderstanding which characterized our dealings with one another in the past. In this year of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, it is appropriate that we come to appreciate each other more and more as brothers and sisters together in Christ....By worshiping together and working together for the liturgical renewal of our churches, there is a basic understanding that it is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers and enlightens the Church through the Word and Sacraments. It is a recognition that by God's power we can work together to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Another important development in the dialogue process occurred on March 26, 1980, when Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians from around the world released a new document celebrating the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. Titled 'All Under One Christ,' the document of the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission declares that the Augsburg Confession 'reflects as no other confession does the ecumenical purpose and catholic intention of the Reformation.' That summary statement is a dramatic recognition by both groups that the Lutheran church is a confessing movement within the Church catholic. The statement recognizes that the Augsburg Confession was not and is not intended as the constituting document of a new church with a peculiar faith, but bears witness 'to the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.'

"The new document goes on to observe that dialogues between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the U.S. and in other countries have achieved 'striking convergences' and reached agreements on many doctrinal issues. In addition, the statement comments that the 'differences between us are also beginning to lose their divisive edge....We recognize and experience many of the remaining differences as a source of mutual enrichment and correction.'...What does all that mean for the future of the two churches? The official nature of the international and national dialogues gives hope that the agreements and convergences that have already been articulated will receive wider acceptance by the two churches. (The International Dialogues are sponsored by the Vatican Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation.)...

"The goal is to reach the point where we long to share with one another around the Eucharistic Table. We are not yet able to participate in that kind of community celebration because we have not yet viewed ourselves as that kind of fellowship community. We need to ache inside ourselves because we do not have that kind of sharing. We need to experience the pain of our separation even more than we have experienced our differences in the past. When we have come to that point, we will know that unity is not far off. In the meantime we are called to rejoice in the strides that have been made. We need to make a commitment to continued discussion of our differences. We are all members of the Body of Christ through the waters of Holy Baptism. We are called by the same Spirit through the same Gospel of Jesus Christ to be His people, His witnesses to the world. The 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession provides us with ample reason to celebrate this common venture of our common faith." <sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Missouri in Perspective, May 5, 1980, p. 5.

Thus we are once again alerted to the current "confessional stance" of the greater majority of our contemporaries within Lutheranism.--The content and purpose of our historic Symbols is being disregarded and twisted. Moreover, our cherished confessional heritage is being manipulated even to serve the designs of those who are bent on pursuing realignment with Rome at any price!

These are the fruits flowing from the long decades in which many Lutheran bodies have paid mere lip service to the Confessions, accepting them only for their "historical" value, and only "insofar" as they agree with modern interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. The Lutheran Confessions and God's Word go together!--The contemporary Lutheran scene bears witness only too clearly that those who chaff under the "restraints" of the Confessions and wish to regard them as mere "historical judgments" are the same people who deny such Biblical facts as the historicity of Adam and Eve, the Virgin Birth of our Lord, His redemptive death, His glorious resurrection, and numerous other divinely-revealed truths. We must be realistic and accept the fact that the differences among Lutherans today are in fact those which deal with the very heart of Lutheranism itself--to what degree must one be committed to the Scriptures as the inerrant and very Word of God and to the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of the doctrines found in that Word? Also as regards attempts at the removal of differences and discovery of God-pleasing fellowship, whether among Lutherans or Lutherans with others, the problem today is not that we have no basis for unity, but rather the refusal of many to accept what we already possess as the only basis for unity.

As one views the current theological divergence and confusion, both within Lutheranism and beyond, questions such as these naturally arise, especially in this dual anniversary year of our symbolical heritage: Has the time come for the voice of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church to speak out once again? Would the preeminent confessional status of the Book of Concord thereby be violated and denigrated if additional symbols were produced and accepted? Do the true champions of confessional Lutheranism need to be heard anew--redefining for the present situation those doctrines of Holy Scripture already set forth in the Book of Concord as well as those Biblical teachings not held in contention at the time of Reformation but which currently are being rejected and maligned? And, finally, how realistic is the possibility of formulating and gaining universal acceptance of additional confessions within orthodox Lutheranism?

These are some of the questions to which we will address ourselves as we undertake the topic before us: IS THE BOOK OF CONCORD THE LAST WORD?

Our treatment of this subject will be outlined thus:

- I. The Authority and Status of Our Confessions
  - A. What do they say of themselves?
  - B. How are they regarded on the Lutheran scene today?
    1. Various views of confessional subscription
    2. Various abuses of the confessional principle
- II. The Doctrinal and Practical Issues Facing the Confessional Church Today
  - A. Those treated in the Book of Concord but requiring elaboration
  - B. Those not treated in the Book of Concord and requiring definition
- III. The Prospects of Formulating Additional Confessions
  - A. Obstacles and hindrances
  - B. Promotion and implementation

## I. The Confessional Authority and Status of Our Confessions

5 What do they say of themselves? Before examining the claims found in our  
Symbols regarding their authority as binding confessional statements, it is ne-  
cessary to understand the reason for their formulation as well as their relation-  
ship to the Holy Scriptures. "In adopting its Symbols, or Confessions, the Luth-  
eran Church did not adopt doctrines which are foreign to Scripture, but confessed  
its faith in the doctrines revealed in Scripture. The attempts to spread unscrip-  
tural doctrines in the Church under the guise of Scriptural teaching forced the  
10 Church to set forth in its own words what the Scriptures actually do teach. The  
Symbols, or Confessions, of the orthodox Church are simply its affirmation of the  
Scriptural doctrine over against the denial of it by heretics." <sup>4</sup>

15 "To show the relation between Holy Scripture and the Symbols of the orthodox  
Church, the following terms have been used: norma and norma normata, norma pri-  
maria and secundaria. Both terms express the truth that the Symbols are a norm,  
but not by themselves (absolute), but only in a certain respect (secundum quid),  
namely, a derived norm, because the doctrines confessed in our Symbols are taken  
20 from Scripture. The purpose of the Symbols is brought out in the terms norma  
decisionis and norma discretionis (deciding norm and distinguishing norm).  
Scripture alone decides which doctrine is true, which is false; but from the  
attitude which one takes toward the Symbols of the Lutheran Church we learn whe-  
ther he knows and accepts the Scripture doctrine or does not accept it (norma  
discretionis discernit orthodoxos ab heterodoxis)." <sup>5</sup>

25 Thus orthodox Lutherans have always recognized and maintained that their  
Confessions contained in the Book of Concord "demand to be regarded as--and are  
in fact--objectively true and ecumenically normative statements of the Christian  
doctrine." <sup>6</sup> The Augsburg Confession states in its very first article that the  
30 doctrine being confessed "is true and should be believed without any doubting." <sup>7</sup>  
The closing paragraph of Article XXI claims: "This is about the sum of our teach-  
ing. As can be seen, there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or  
the catholic [universal] church...insofar as the ancient church is known to us  
from its writers." <sup>8</sup> With these words the Augsburg Confession claims to be both  
35 Scripturally true and universally valid for the whole Church as well as for all  
time. So also its Conclusion maintains "that nothing has been received among us,  
in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or to the church  
catholic." <sup>9</sup> Likewise the Formula of Concord confidently issues its Affirmative  
Theses and Antitheses in this same conviction as do also the other Confessions.  
40 All of which constitutes an incontrovertible testimony to their intent and mean-  
ing on this point of their objective truth and ecumenical validity for the Church  
Militant of all time.

45 We would also subscribe "that the Lutheran Confessions correctly derive  
their ecumenically normative mandate from the formal standard supplied by the  
Scriptures, which consist of objective historical and doctrinal propositions, on  
the basis of which the correctness or incorrectness of confessions, preaching and  
teaching can be judged--the Scriptures thus being the NORMA NORMANS, the sole,  
supreme, ruling norm on the basis of which, by virtue of its formal character,

<sup>4</sup> Christian Dogmatics, Pieper, Vol. I, p. 354.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>6</sup> An Ecumenical Declaration of Faith, Part II. (Note: This document was drawn up  
originally by a number of concerned pastors of the LCMS, some of whom subse-  
quently severed fellowship with that church body and joined the Federation  
for Authentic Lutheranism. Their Declaration was later revised and published  
in "Sola Scriptura," which became the official publication of the FAL.)

<sup>7</sup> The Book of Concord, Tappert, p. 27 (1).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 47 (1).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 95 (5).

doctrinal propositions can be drawn up in confessional form, which have universal objective authority as NORMA NORMATA, a correctly derived norm and therefore binding."<sup>10</sup> This formally normative character of the Scriptures is asserted in the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Of the Summary Content, Rule and Standard, paragraph 1 with the words: "We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged."<sup>11</sup> This statement is made in obedience to the Scripture which says, "You wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted." (Rom. 6:17). The early church in Rome had no voice in formulating the standard of doctrine. It was given to them by the apostle's inspiration and they were obliged to obey it. This is exactly the meaning of the Reformation's principle of Sola Scriptura on which the Confessions are predicated. This formal principle of the Scriptures as the standard authoritative pattern which regulates teaching, preaching and belief is the only thing which makes it possible for us to say that our doctrine is correct. Moreover, the Lutheran confessors assert and confirm the necessity of having public confessions with binding force upon all when they declare in the Thorough Declaration, Comprehensive Summary: "The primary requirement for basic and permanent concord within the church is a summary formula and pattern, unanimously approved, in which the summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God."<sup>12</sup> For this assertion and demand it has the authority of the Scriptures: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." (I Cor. 1:10).

We would affirm, moreover, "that the Confessions rightly regard the norm set forth in them as 'exclusive' and rightly demand that it be exclusively understood and applied by virtue of divine mandate."<sup>13</sup> The Formula of Concord, Epitome, Of the Summary Rule and Standard, paragraph 1 lays claim to exclusiveness when it appeals to Galatians 1:8, "Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed." Thus the Formula of Concord asserts that it is the only truth concerning the articles of doctrine of which it treats, all doctrinal statements expressing a different meaning being false. Like the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Large Catechism and the Smalcald Articles, the Formula of Concord, too, puts this rule and standard into practice by specifically condemning the teachings at variance with it which were then extant.

God does not speak to us directly today as He did during the era of revelation, consisting of the period of prophecy, the time of the physical appearance of the second person of the Trinity in history, and the apostolic era. The Holy Spirit does not directly lead us into spiritual insights, as all too many, even in the Lutheran Church, again claim today. But, as the Confessions assert throughout, making it the basis of their authority, God has bound us to the words of the Scriptures.

Since the Lutheran Confessions rightly claim for themselves the authoritative posture described above, the question arises: Would not the formulation of additional confessional statements by the orthodox church in our day amount to a relegation of the Book of Concord to a rank of lesser importance or even a denial of its normative position in relation to the Scriptures? Our answer is "that, though the Confessions are doctrinally correct in every respect, they are not

<sup>10</sup> An Ecumenical Declaration of Faith, Part II, A 2.

<sup>11</sup> Tappert, op. cit., p. 464 (1).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 503 (1).

<sup>13</sup> An Ecumenical Declaration of Faith, Part II, A 3.

necessarily complete, because completeness can be predicated only of the Scriptures; and that therefore circumstances may arise which make additional confessions necessary."<sup>14</sup> The Formula of Concord, in the foreward preceding the Comprehensive Summary of the Thorough Declaration, makes the necessity of drawing up confessions contingent upon the appearance of errors and heresies; and the authors declare that this example of the church throughout the ages is being followed by them in drawing up their Confession. They write: "Although the Christian doctrine set forth in this Confession has remained practically unchallenged--except for the charges of the papists [i.e., over against the Augsburg Confession]--it can nevertheless not be denied that some theologians did depart from it in several important and significant articles, either because they failed to grasp their true meaning or because they did not abide by them. Some, while boasting of and benefiting from their adherence to the Augsburg Confession, even dared to give a false interpretation to these articles. This caused serious and dangerous schisms in the true Evangelical churches, just as during the very lifetime of the holy apostles frightful errors arose among those who pretended to be Christians and gloried in the doctrine of Christ....The holy apostles were compelled vigorously to denounce all of these in their sermons and in their writings, though they knew that these titanic errors and the subsequent bitter controversies would involve serious offense for both the unbelievers and the weak believers. Similarly at the present time our adversaries, the papists, rejoice over the schisms which have occurred among us, in the unchristian but futile hope that these disagreements will ultimately lead to the ruin of the pure doctrine. The weak in faith, on the other hand, will be scandalized; some will doubt if the pure doctrine can coexist among us with such divisions, while others will not know which of the contending parties they should support. After all, these controversies are not, as some may think, mere misunderstandings or contentions about words, with one party talking past the other, so that the strife reflects a mere semantic problem of little or no consequence. On the contrary, these controversies deal with weighty and important matters, and they are of such a nature that the opinions of the erring party cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended. For that reason necessity requires that such controverted articles be explained on the basis of God's Word and of approved writings in such a way that anybody with Christian intelligence can see which opinion in the controverted issues agrees with the Word of God and the Christian Augsburg Confession, and so that well-meaning Christians who are really concerned about the truth may know how to guard and protect themselves against the errors and corruptions that have invaded our midst."<sup>15</sup>

The liberty of the church and of true believers to draw up confessions of faith was never questioned either by the Lutheran confessors or any of their opponents. For this conviction they had also the command of the Scriptures which make it the duty of the believer to confess when such action is necessary for the edification of the Church. The Apostle Paul declared that the inspired Scriptures are profitable for doctrine, reproof and correction (II Tim. 3:16), demanding that they be thus employed and implying the use of their authority in drawing up doctrinal statements and their antitheses when needed. And the same apostle who maintained, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God," (Acts 20:27) also affirmed this God-given will to be exclusively valid until the end of days, as he wrote to Timothy: "In the sight of God...and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this commandment without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Tim. 6:13-14).

<sup>14</sup> An Ecumenical Declaration of Faith, Part II, B.

<sup>15</sup> Tappert, op. cit., p. 502f., (6-10).

In compliance with Paul's injunction to his young coworker, we have also ample evidence that Martin Luther never hesitated to confess all the counsel of God whether before friend or foe. Nor did he shrink from proclaiming Scriptural doctrine in the form of "new" confessions, skillfully delineating both truth and its opposing error as circumstances demanded. And as a confessor, deeply conscious of his ultimate accountability to his returning Lord, he added the following to his "Great Confession" of 1528: "I see that schisms and errors are increasing proportionately with the passage of time, and that there is no end to the rage and fury of Satan. Hence lest any persons during my lifetime or after my death appeal to me or misuse my writings to confirm their error, as the Sacramentarians and Anabaptists are already beginning to do, I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide by it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>16</sup>

In tracing the history of preparation leading up to the Marburg Colloquy, Dr. Herman Sasse remarks concerning Luther's words above: "This seems a very bold statement to our contemporaries, most of whom do not realize that, according to the New Testament, to be a confessor means more than to express a religious or theological conviction. (...A real confession of faith is always made 'before God and all the world'...therefore it bears an eschatological character.) When a confession is demanded of us--and it is demanded by Christ himself of all who meet him, believers (Matt. 16:15) as well as unbelievers (Matt. 22:42)--nothing less is at stake than life and death for time and eternity (Matt. 10:28-33). One must always remember this biblical concept of a confession in order to understand the nature of the Lutheran confession with its seriousness and finality. The question has often been raised whether it is possible, in view of human frailty and fallibility, to speak with such bold confidence, and whether Luther himself would not later have changed his views."<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Sasse then quotes this reply of the Reformer: "Hence if any one shall say after my death, 'If Dr. Luther were living now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not consider it sufficiently,' etc., let me say now as then, and then as now, that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the Sacrament of the Altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert the Word of God, what will he not be able to do with my or someone else's words?"<sup>18</sup>

To which Dr. Sasse concludes: "The assurance with which Luther confesses his faith is not that false securitas which he criticized time and again, but rather the certitudo, the genuine certitude of faith, based on the Word of God. Not a subjective conviction, based on 'private judgment' as to what a biblical passage may or may not mean, but the objective doctrine of Scripture, contained in the clear words of the Bible, must be the content of a confession, in Luther's sense."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Tappert, op. cit., p. 574 (29).

<sup>17</sup> This Is My Body, Sasse, p. 151-152.

<sup>18</sup> Tappert, op. cit., p. 574 (29-31).

<sup>19</sup> Sasse, op. cit., p. 152

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In summary, the Lutheran Symbols are binding confessional statements because they are drawn from the objective historical and doctrinal propositions of the Holy Scriptures. They must be regarded, therefore, as objectively true, ecumenically normative (a derived norm, to be sure), and exclusively understood. Yet possessing all these imposing attributes, the confessional writings comprising the Book of Concord do not maintain for themselves a claim of completeness. While insisting repeatedly that their propositions are forever true and binding, they neither negate nor condemn the formulation of additional confessional statements. This is readily observable in that large portions of the Confessions, either whole or in part, themselves offer an elaboration and expansion of propositions previously set forth. Is, then, the Book of Concord the last word from the standpoint of its own perspective and witness? We find the answer to be negative.

Keeping in mind the authority of our historic Confessions as we have reviewed it, we come now to the question: How are they regarded on the Lutheran scene today? In answering, we shall first consider various views of subscription to the Confessions.

Long before the Book of Concord was completed, the Lutherans regarded it as self-evident that the public teachers of their churches should be pledged to the Confessions. Dr. Bente traces the earliest development of this practice by relating: "In December, 1529, H. Winckel, of Goettingen, drew up a form in which the candidate for ordination declares: 'I believe and hold also of the most sacred Sacrament...as one ought to believe concerning it according to the contents of the Bible, as Doctor Martin Luther writes and confesses concerning it especially in his Confession' (of the Lord's Supper, 1528). The Goettingen Church Order of 1530, however, did not as yet embody a vow of ordination. The first pledges to the Symbols were demanded by the University of Wittenberg in 1533 from candidates for the degree of Doctor of Divinity. In 1535 this pledge was required also of the candidates of ordination. The oath provided that the candidate must faithfully teach the Gospel without corruption, steadfastly defend the Ecumenical Symbols, remain in agreement with the Augsburg Confession, and before deciding difficult controversies consult older teachers of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. Even before 1549 the candidates for philosophical degrees were also pledged by oath to the Augsburg Confession. In 1535, at the Diet of Smalcald, it was agreed that new members entering the Smalcald League should promise 'to provide for such teaching and preaching as was in harmony with the Word of God and the pure teaching of our [Augsburg] Confession.' According to the Pomeranian Church Order, which Bugenhagen drew up in 1535, pastors were pledged to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology thereof. Capito, Bucer, and all others who took part in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, promised, over their signatures, 'to believe and to teach in all articles according to the Confession and the Apology.' In 1540 at Goettingen, John Wigand promised to accept the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, and to abide by them all his life. 'And,' he continued, 'if I should be found to do otherwise or be convicted of teaching and confessing contrary to such Confession and Apology, then let me, by this signature, be condemned and deposed from this divine ministry. This do I swear; so help me God.'"<sup>20</sup>

When Andrew Osiander, in 1550 and 1552, attacked the confessional oath being used at Wittenberg, claiming that it severed those who swore it from the Holy Scriptures and bound them to "Philip's doctrine," Melancthon responded to this fanatical charge by emphasizing the fact that the doctrinal pledges demanded at Wittenberg had been introduced, chiefly by Luther, for the purpose of "maintain-

<sup>20</sup> Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord, Bente, p. 8-9.

ing the true doctrine. For," said Melanchthon, "many enthusiasts were roaming about at that time, each in turn, spreading new silly nonsense, e.g., the Anabaptists, Servetus, Campanus, Schwenckfeld, and others. And such tormenting spirits are not lacking at any time."<sup>21</sup> A doctrinal pledge, Melanchthon further-  
5 more explained, was necessary "in order correctly to acknowledge God and call upon Him to preserve harmony in the Church, and to bridle the audacity of such as invent new doctrines."<sup>22</sup>

10 In such a spirit of concern for the defense and preservation of Scriptural truth, the Lutheran Church down through the centuries has insisted that its public teachers and congregations subscribe to the 16th-century Lutheran Symbols. Unfortunately, there has been something less than full agreement among Lutherans as to both the quantitative and qualitative significance of this subscription. Quantitatively, the greater majority of Lutherans have subscribed to all of the  
15 Confessions contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, the only major exceptions among those of the Danish-Norwegian tradition.

The major difference of opinion has involved the qualitative aspect of sub-  
20 scription--the question being, to what extent are the Confessions binding? Some Lutherans, such as our own Wisconsin Synod, understand their subscription to bind them to the doctrinal content of the Confessions quia ("because") this content is drawn from Holy Scripture. But others subscribe to the Confessions only quatenus ("insofar as") they conform to Holy Scripture.

25 The various forms in which the quatenus pledge has appeared are outlined by F. Pieper in this manner: "1. It is said that the Symbols 'offer an essentially correct' presentation 'of the chief doctrines.' It is left to the whim of the individual what is to be regarded as 'chief doctrines' and what is 'an essentially correct' presentation of these fundamental doctrines. (Cp. F. Bente, 'Ameri-  
30 can Lutheranism,' II, p. 39ff., on the doctrinal basis of the General Synod prior to 1864.)

"2. It has been said that the Symbols must be interpreted 'historically.' This is to say, not all doctrines contained in the Symbols are binding, but only  
35 those which the Church was compelled to discuss by reason of a doctrinal controversy in its midst. Everything in the Confessions which has not been 'historically occasioned' must be regarded as not belonging to the substance of the Confessions. It is plain that this conception of the Symbols lets the subjective judgment of the individual decide how much of the Symbols he will accept as 'his-  
40 torically occasioned.' If only so much of the Symbols obligates us as has been the result of a controversy within the Church, we might have to cancel Article XI of the Formula of Concord as not binding upon us. For concerning this article the Formula says that 'among the theologians of the Augsburg Confession there has not occurred as yet any public dissension whatever concerning the election of the  
45 children of God that has caused offense and has become widespread.' It was only 'to prevent disagreement and separation on its account in the future among our successors' that the article is here presented. (Trigl. 1062.) Again, under this 'historical' view of the Symbols someone might get the notion to put even the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture on the free list, for this doctrine had  
50 not been in controversy; and there is no special article on it in the Confessions; it is only incidentally that Scripture is 'identified' with God's Word, etc. We have previously stated that modern theologians seek indulgence for their denial of the inspiration of Scripture in these facts.

55 "3. Again, there are those who are ready to subscribe to the Confessions

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

with the understanding that they be interpreted 'according to Scripture,' or 'correctly.' In this sense, Reformed theologians, including Calvin, have signed the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. And a Lutheran pastoral conference in Germany proposed to the fathers of the Missouri Synod that the Lutheran Confessions be  
5 'understood according to Scripture and in the light of the error specifically re-  
jected' ('Lutheraner,' Vol. X, p. 90). That has a pious and Scriptural ring, but in fact it completely overlooks and does away with the purpose of the Symbols. By subscribing to the Symbols a man does not declare his readiness to interpret them 'according to Scripture,' but the minister or candidate in question makes  
10 the solemn declaration to the congregation that he has already discovered what Scripture teaches and he finds the Lutheran Confessions to be the expression of his own faith and confession.

"4. It is a quatenus form of subscription when men profess to follow, not  
15 the 'letter,' but the 'spirit,' of the Confessions. The rationalists of the eighteenth century were very willing to sign the Confessions with this restriction. By 'spirit' they meant their own spirit, which transformed the essence of Christianity into heathen morality.

"All these and other quatenus forms frustrate the purpose of the confession-  
20 al obligation. The congregation can never know how much of the doctrine contained in the Confessions is being accepted. These quatenus forms are, at bottom, in conflict with common honesty and uprightness. And experience shows that behind the demand for a conditional subscription lies the refusal to accept certain doc-  
25 trines of the Confessions. That applies also to those Lutherans of our day who insist on some form of the quatenus subscription because they are not in accord with the doctrinal position of the Confessions in the doctrines, e.g., of the Church, of the Ministry, of the Last Things (Chiliasm), and of Antichrist.

"Arguing against the unconditional subscription, the quatenus men ask whe-  
30 ther they are supposed to subscribe to all the historical, scientific and purely external remarks that are found here and there in the Confessions. Nobody asks them to do this. They are simply beclouding the issue. The confessional pledge covers only the doctrine. It is the confession of the Church, and the Christian  
35 Church is concerned about the doctrine. They also make much of the argument that no one can expect them to subscribe to 'all exegetical proof' offered in the Confessions. No one expects them to do this. We readily grant that together with the passages that prove a doctrine passages are occasionally quoted which belong elsewhere. But what we do claim is that there is no doctrine found in the Con-  
40 fessions for which there is not ample Scripture proof offered. And we add this: the Confessions may serve as a model of Scripture proof in that they employ little 'exegesis'--as this term is usually understood--but, to speak with Luther, are satisfied to let the nuda Scriptura, without much explanation, speak for it-  
self."<sup>23</sup>

45 At this juncture we might ask: Why this reluctance and even refusal to sub-  
scribe to the Confessions in the quia form? The answer is twofold--

First, it lies in the fact that many Lutherans today are not willing to ac-  
50 knowledge the Holy Scriptures themselves as the uniquely inspired and inerrant revelation of God. They simply will not equate the Bible with the Word of God. Declining such an unequivocal identification, much less can they allow any con-  
fessional formulation of men to have an authoritative voice in the church. An  
invaluable little book entitled "Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the  
55 Lutheran Confessions," reflecting upon one's attitude toward the Scriptures, very well measures one's stance over against the Confessions, as the author remarks:

<sup>23</sup> Pieper, op. cit., p. 355-357.

5 "The attitude of an interpreter toward the nature of Holy Scripture will materi-  
ally influence his principles of Biblical interpretation. If the Scriptures are  
regarded as some sort of esoteric language [intended only for select and private  
consumption], the interpreter is likely to follow some rather bizarre interpre-  
tative techniques. If he sees the Scriptures merely as the word of men written  
at different times and in different languages, he will adopt only such interpre-  
tative techniques as are common to the exposition of any piece of literature. If,  
on the other hand, he sees the Scriptures as God's own Word, his interpretative  
technique will reflect this unique factor. It is important, therefore, that we  
endeavor to understand the confessional view of the form of Holy Scripture."<sup>24</sup>

15 Secondly, many contemporary Lutherans reject the quia form of subscription  
to the Confessions because, being caught up in the false ecumenism rampant in  
outward Christendom, they are embarrassed by confessional statements in whatever  
form which demand a definite position on dogma and distinguish between truth and  
error. Yet this is precisely a major reason for unconditional subscription to  
the Confessions as C. F. W. Walther outlined in an essay of 1858: "Inasmuch as  
all parties within Christendom appeal to the Holy Scriptures--papists, enthusi-  
asts, rationalists, as well as orthodox Christians--and inasmuch as all say that  
their teaching is based on the Scriptures, as long as these are properly under-  
stood and interpreted, the confession that one believes what is in the Bible is  
not a clear confession of faith that distinguishes one from false believers, for  
in spite of this declaration nobody knows whether one takes the Scriptures in  
their true sense or not, whether one is a papist or an enthusiast or a rational-  
ist or an orthodox Christian. For this reason it is necessary to set forth how  
one understands and interprets the Scriptures insofar as the articles of faith  
contained in the symbol are concerned. Accordingly, as far as the primary pur-  
pose of a symbol is concerned, this is the intention: (1) that in it the church  
clearly and distinctly confesses its faith and teaching before the whole world,  
(2) that the church may thereby be distinguished from all heterodox communions  
and sects, and (3) that the church may have a unanimous, definite, and common  
norm and form of teaching for its ministers out of which and according to which  
all other writings and teachings that are offered for test and adoption can and  
should be judged and regulated. If the church requires of its ministers only a  
conditional acceptance of its symbols, (1) it thereby publicly retracts that it  
really has the faith and doctrine which it has there set forth, its alleged con-  
fession is not really its confession, and it can therefore justly be charged with  
duplicity and merely deceiving the world with its symbols. Moreover, by demand-  
ing only a conditional subscription to its symbols from its ministers (2) the  
church does not distinguish itself through its symbols from heterodox sects but  
places itself (with its symbols which admittedly contain errors) on the same  
level as the sects. In this case (3) it lacks a unanimous, definite, and common  
norm and form of teaching according to which everybody can both criticize his own  
teaching and judge all other writings and teachings.

45 "There is a second thing that pertains to the purpose on whose account the  
church requires of its ministers that they subscribe its symbols. This is (1)  
that the church may assure itself that those who wish to exercise a ministry in  
it really have the same orthodox understanding of the Scriptures and the same  
pure and unadulterated faith as the church itself possesses, and (2) that the  
church may obligate them by a solemn promise to proclaim this faith purely and  
plainly or to renounce the ministry in its midst, that is, either not to under-  
take it or, if one is already in it, to give it up rather than by false teaching  
to disturb the church and mislead its members. This purpose of confessional sub-  
scription on the part of ministers of the church is completely nullified, how-  
ever, if the ministers are required to confess adherence to the symbols of the

<sup>24</sup> Bohlmann, op. cit., p. 23.

church only on a conditional basis. For when the church openly admits to its ministers that its symbols may contain doctrines which are contrary to the Scriptures, (1) it gives up the means of assuring itself concerning the faith of the subscriber through his subscription and (2) it thereby cancels the obligation of its ministers to proclaim the Word of God purely and without adulteration according to the symbols of the church as its doctrinal norm. Furthermore, when congregations require those who wish to exercise their ministry among them to obligate themselves to the confessions, they are seeking a guarantee that neither a minister with an erring conscience nor a willful heretic can preach all sorts of error as if he were entitled to do so, but by the requirement of a subscription that is only conditional this guarantee is curtailed as far as the congregations are concerned; in fact, they thereby give the false teacher a weapon against them and deprive themselves of the right to depose from his office the man who teaches contrary to their symbols. Besides, through the obligation of ministers in the church to its public confessions an end should have been put to the unending controversies over questions which have already been debated and settled, at least in the orthodox church, and peace should have been secured in the church, but through a merely conditional subscription the ground is laid for a renewal of all the already settled controversies and for endless discord."<sup>25</sup>

Regrettably, not all who wave the Lutheran flag have shared Walther's views of confessional subscription, even from the earliest days of the Church of the Reformation in our country. And the present hour would reveal an even lesser number of Lutheran bodies and individual clergy willing to subscribe to the Confessions unequivocally, unconditionally, and without reservation. Such divergent views of confessional subscription have resulted subsequently in numerous abuses of the confessional principle.

An example of the all-too-common despoliation of anything that smacks of confessional commitment is voiced by Ernest Werner: "While it is more usual to speak of the confessional principle, it has become necessarily a confessional problem... which comes to light if we ask, What is our contemporary relationship to the documents which belong unmistakably to a past age? A surprising variety of answers could be gathered from American Lutheranism today, from the conservative Lutheran who considers himself unconditionally bound to the Confessions to the liberal Lutheran who arrives at different doctrinal conclusions when it seems necessary to do so. Our American Lutheran disunity emerges at this point as something far more than a disunity of organization. The understanding of the confessional principle differs from church to church and is not the least of our differences to overcome."<sup>26</sup>

He then raises the question whether the Confessions are relative today as either confessions or norms. He grants that while new doctrinal and confessional statements are continually being elaborated and might even be called for in contemporary Lutheranism; however, as regards those formulations of the 16th century, he maintains that it will not suffice "to point dumbly to the Lutheran symbols because they no longer apply directly to us or our world or speak directly for us. Yet we recognize a deep historical relationship between them and ourselves. Exactly what is this relationship?... My suggestion is that the Lutheran symbols are no longer our confessions, the unqualified confessions of contemporary Lutheranism, but that they are for us the classic documents of our Lutheran identity. Treating them that way, as documents of our identity, offers the possibility of doctrinal freedom together with a grasp of the entire doctrinal organism."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> "The Kind of Confessional Subscription Required," reproduced in Lutheran Confessional Theology in America by Tappert, p. 64-65.

<sup>26</sup> The Confessional Problem, p. 179.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 179-180.

We could cite also other crass examples. But the time allotted for the delivery of this paper does not allow an exhaustive treatment of the numerous abuses of the confessional principle, particularly those which violate the authority of our Confessions as noted above. We would comment, however, on just one point treated; namely, that though the Confessions are doctrinally correct, yet additional confessions may become necessary as circumstances require. (Cf. p. 5f).

For various reasons, some well-known voices within Lutheranism are insisting that no new confessions may be imposed on the Lutheran family. One is led to ask, Is this assertion made out of awe and respect for our four-centuries-old Symbols? Is this prohibition occasioned by a desire to preserve our Confessions as authoritative oracles in today's climate of "theological freedom"? Prevailing evidence indicates otherwise! While new confessions have been promoted in many denominations by those who no longer wish to be bound by the strictness and precision of their historic creeds (and on a more latitudinarian basis want to unite Christianity into one organizational power structure in which human ordinances and centralized control of offices and property take the place of God-ordained doctrinal fidelity), in the greater part of Lutheranism these same contemporary trends are being promoted by the opposite procedure! Those craving freedom to pursue the ecumenical grail--in whatever imagined form and lustre--are opposing new confessions. From their myopic perspective, additional formulations would be a hindrance; in fact, they are plainly unnecessary! For by taking an "inclusive" interpretation of Augustana VII [Augsburg Conf., Art. VII] and other articles,<sup>28</sup> they can claim adherence at least to certain of the Lutheran Confessions and some Lutheran traditions and idiosyncracies while engaging in more or less uninhibited altar and pulpit and working fellowship with all ecumenically-minded Christians. This has produced the confusing and dishonest hodgepodge that people who publicly deny some or all distinctively Lutheran doctrines remain pastors, professors and members in Lutheran church bodies while teaching and believing in accordance with their own personal notions and claiming the right and freedom to do so under the Lutheran name.

Moreover, "these same people also revive the error of the older Melanchthon that Christ rules the Church both by His right hand of grace and by His left hand of 'natural law,' as Melanchthon called it. This again introduces the confusion of the two realms which Luther's and the Confessors' insight so clearly separated. The result is that human ordinances, constitutional regulations and administrative influence usurp the function of the rule of the Word alone and take the place of strict and 'exclusive' confessional adherence... Let the Church be warned. By tolerating the 'inclusive' use of the Confessions it becomes the servant of men. Only if the Son makes us free are we free indeed, St. John 8:36. This means absolute obedience to His word, His doctrine, St. John 8:31f, and exclusive adherence to the confessions, old or new, which observe this obedience. This alone can make us free from the rules, domination, opinions, weaknesses and hesitations of men. This is the heritage of the liberty of the servants of the Lord who thereby condemn any contrary judgment, Isaiah 54:17 ['No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and this is their vindication from Me,' declares the Lord.]"<sup>29</sup>

If for no other reasons than we have observed thus far--that the authority which the Confessions claim for themselves is being set aside, confessional subscription violated, and the confessional principle grossly abused--we consider it necessary that new formulations of "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3) is again sorely required of the orthodox heirs of the Reformation.

<sup>28</sup> That is, allowing for the broad recognition of any teaching of the "Gospel" and administration of the sacraments within and among visible Christendom.

<sup>29</sup> Ecumenical Declaration, p. 16.

mation. But we believe further evidence of this necessity becomes apparent as we turn our attention to some of --

## II. The Doctrinal and Practical Issues Facing the Confessional Church Today

5 It is quite evident that our Lutheran Symbols addressed themselves to the issues facing the church of their day in a most forthright manner. Thus they display an overall tone of urgency throughout. The existing situation demanded a clear witness and a precise formulation of the truths contained in the sacred  
10 Scriptures as well as an unequivocal rejection of the numerous errors which were being perpetrated in opposition to God's holy Word.

The situation has not changed after all these centuries. If we take seriously the sobering prediction of the Apostle Paul, we must be aware that the god-  
15 lessness characteristic of the end of the age is upon us: "There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of  
20 God--having a form of godliness but denying its power." (II Tim. 3:1-5). We, therefore, charged by our Lord to contend for the truth in these perilous times, need to ponder seriously and then act upon that same apostle's earnest entreaty: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of His appearing and His kingdom, I give you this charge:  
25 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and  
30 turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry." (II Tim. 4:1-5).

Our ministry to the church and the world, whether called workers or lay  
35 workers, is as urgent (if not more so) as that confronting our forbears who championed the cause of orthodoxy in the 16th century. Now, as then, the confessional church is faced with doctrinal and practical issues of great moment and eternal consequence--issues to which the confessional church should be speaking both thetically and antithetically with the double-edged sword of the Spirit.  
40

To be sure, many relevant issues currently confronting the orthodox church are not new. They were addressed by our Lutheran Symbols, only now they appear in a somewhat different garb and demand application in another direction. We will then comment, first, on those doctrinal and practical issues already treated  
45 in our Confessions but which require elaboration of the Scriptural truth.

The broad appeal and universal sweep of the ecumenical movement in outward Christendom has occasioned an urgent need for a clear redefinition of church fellowship. Many souls, even among the orthodox, are being misled and deceived  
50 by a total disregard for the distinction between the Holy Christian Church and visible church bodies. Utter confusion exists in numerous hearts because they are unable to distinguish between: 1) the fellowship of faith as it exists in the one, invisible Body of Christ and 2) the Scripturally commanded fellowship of confession (of faith) in the visible church. The Lutheran Confessions certainly differentiated in great detail the mystical Body of Christ from those  
55 outward marks by which it is recognized--the preaching of the Word, including the administration of the Sacraments. But the widespread attempts to view the

invisible and visible as one and the same, along with the extensive unionistic practice resulting therefrom, were not commonly in vogue at the time of the Reformation. The various confessional camps were easily discernible. The lines were drawn and attempts to erase them were not made by appeals to the unity of the Holy Christian Church.

Certainly also in the forefront of theological confusion today--ashamedly among Lutherans of all people!--is the doctrine of Justification. Luther called it the articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae (the article on which the church stands or falls). Said the Reformer: "This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the Church of God; and without it the Church of God cannot exist for one hour....Whoever departs from the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater.... If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time....When the article of justification has fallen, everything has fallen....Of this article nothing may be yielded or conceded."<sup>30</sup> Yet even Lutherans are now contending that justification is not central to the Christian faith! The forensic nature of justification (that God declares the sinner righteous) is being called into question. The distinction between objective and subjective justification is being disregarded with the result that many are using justification in the objective sense as a stepping-stone to embrace universalism. The epidemic confusion and denial concerning this central doctrine of the Scriptures among Lutherans became all too apparent when the Lutheran World Federation met at Helsinki in 1963. Not only was this worldwide gathering of most Lutherans embarrassed by the overwhelming importance which the Lutheran Confessions have attached to the article of justification, but also subsequently this church conclave was unable to reach consensus on what justification really is!

Another recurring issue which has plagued the Lutheran Church from the earliest years of its American history is the doctrine of Election. In spite of the clear assertion of the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. XI: "Our election to eternal life does not rest on our piety or virtue but solely on the merit of Christ and the gracious will of the Father,"<sup>31</sup> as states also various other entire articles and sections of the Confessions, contemporary Lutheranism has not desisted in its insistence that the cause of man's election, in varying degrees, resides in man. We consider a clear exposition of this comforting doctrine most necessary in the light of the offensive dissension which has prevailed--the positive result, hopefully, that confused and troubled hearts might find solace in the balm of God's Word rather than doubt in the foolishness of man's wisdom.

The Book of Concord certainly speaks also to other doctrinal and practical issues on the contemporary scene which we might refer to briefly. Our Symbols condemn the Enthusiasts who claim that they can possess the Holy Spirit and receive His gifts apart from the Word. An amplification of those truths of Scripture which likewise apply to the charismatic movement is sorely needed today. The Lutheran Confessions also sharply distinguish the doctrine of justification (that the sinner stands acquitted by the meritorious works of Christ alone) from the doctrine of sanctification (which includes the works of men as necessary fruits of faith). The confusion of these separate but salient teachings of Scripture by the proponents of the social gospel in our day should certainly also be identified and condemned. Our Confessions, moreover, strongly denounce any attempt by man to rely on his own supposed righteousness rather than the holiness which Christ offers as necessary for salvation. The obvious relevancy of that precept over against the antichristian tenets of lodgery needs to be pronounced within Lutheranism and beyond. And so the list could well be expanded.

<sup>30</sup> What Luther Says, E. Plass, Vol. II, p. 703-704, 715, 718.

<sup>31</sup> Tappert, op. cit., p. 628 (75).



Another category of doctrinal and practical issues might be added--those not treated in the Book of Concord and requiring definition on the basis of God's Word, particularly as they relate to more recent and current theological innovations.

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The doctrine of Holy Scripture is paramount here. This doctrine was not specifically and thoroughly addressed by the confessors because the divine nature, inspiration, and authority of the Scriptures were not contested among the opponents of their day. Yet the Confessions did witness to the Holy Scriptures as the written Word of God. Says Bohlmann: "Although there is no specific article on the nature of Holy Scripture in the Lutheran Confessions, there are numerous statements and concepts that indicate clearly that the confessors regard the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God...For the Lutheran Symbols, the form of Holy Scripture is simply that it is the Word of God spoken through His holy penmen."<sup>32</sup> How far afield from such an assessment of Holy Scripture the Lutheran Church has ventured in this century! A wholesale capitulation to the satanic devices of higher criticism, with its hollow preconceptions of modern Biblical scholarship, has caused even many Lutherans to embrace the supposedly brilliant discoveries of the form critics, source critics, etc., etc. The tools of the historical-critical method have supplanted the historical-grammatical method of Biblical interpretation in many quarters with the result that the sacred Scriptures are relegated to the ranks of ordinary human literature and subject even to the judgments of the contemporary pagan literature of Biblical times. Such aberrations, as the confessors never confronted (nor perhaps even dreamed possible), must be condemned before the church and the world for what they are! Moreover, the necessity of restoring the divinely-inspired and authoritative Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to their uniquely pre-eminent position in theology must be clearly attested!

Other teachings of Holy Scripture not explicitly treated in the Confessions (that is, in respect to developing current matters in the church and the world) but which require a clear witness to the Word and will of God expressed therein include: the doctrine of Creation as opposed to the popular theories of evolution; the doctrine of the Ministry as it relates to the role of women in the teaching office of the church; the doctrines of Man and of Sin as they pertain to the "new morality" (including such matters as abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, etc.) and man's radical usurpation of the Lord's sovereignty as witnessed in the rapidly advancing dogmas of humanism. Finally, we should also include in this listing that theologically dishonest attempt to treat as open questions those points of doctrine on which men cannot agree or which the Lutheran Church has left undecided in its Symbols--"open" in the sense that such doctrines do not require agreement prior to the declaration and exercise of fellowship. This cavalier attitude toward the truths of Scripture is readily observable in numerous efforts to arrive at church union without unity in doctrine.

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In view of the widespread disregard for confessional commitment together with the need to redefine and elaborate upon the many doctrinal and practical issues facing the confessional church, we come now to an equally practical and pressing consideration ---

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### III. The Prospects of Formulating Additional Confessions

We need to recognize at the outset that numerous obstacles and hindrances discourage the development of creedal statements supplementary to those contained in the Book of Concord.

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<sup>32</sup> Bohlmann, op. cit., p. 30, 37.

For one thing, the prevailing winds in the world and in the visible church are not such as support a confessional posture. The cry for tolerance in almost all areas of human existence is also quick to condemn any additional formulation of creeds which distinguish between truth and error--implying and even requiring a defense of the former and a condemnation of the latter. "Christian love demands tolerance! In fact," we are told, "differing views are healthy and beneficial. After all, no one can claim to have a corner <sup>on</sup> of the truth!" We hear even well-meaning Christians lament, "Confessions and creeds serve no real purpose. They only generate greater dissension, and there's too much of that among the churches now!"

Such comments, of course, must be challenged and corrected. Tolerance is demanded by Christian love. We should not ordinarily be hasty in criticizing others. But in those matters where God in His Word has spoken, truth and error dare never be allowed to co-exist. Yes, we are troubled by the divisions in external Christendom and particularly within Lutheranism. But the offense which the world takes as it witnesses divided churches cannot be removed by pretending that no differences in fact exist. God-pleasing unity can be restored only when the separated bodies come to grips with the cause of their disunity and allow God's infallible Word, not man's wisdom, to be the source of their faith and the cause of their actions. Heresies will cease and divisions will disappear only as God's pure Word is elevated and defended, while error is suppressed and condemned.

But even among those who agree that the Book of Concord still serves a useful confessional role in the church, there is found often a lack of conviction that the development of additional statements of faith is necessary. "What we have is sufficient," they tell us. "Isn't even the Small Catechism enough? Let the interested pastors and professors dig into those other Confessions if they want! We will settle for a simple childlike faith and leave the confessing to others."

Such logic, however, does not coincide with the will of our Lord as Saint Paul expresses it. For that apostle insists that faith and confession must go together if we are to be saved: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom. 10:9). But more, confession presupposes a thorough knowledge of God's Word--knowledge that enables one, whether in pulpit or pew, adequately to defend the truth and expose the error. It was with this resolve that our Lutheran forefathers wrote their Confessions some four centuries ago. It is for this purpose that additional confessions are needed today.

Another factor which tends to impede the production of additional formulations is the fear that new symbols would have an "illegitimacy" about them. Some harbor such a profound reverence for our historic Confessions that they regard it as almost sacreligious even to consider adding to them. Others might question the validity of such an undertaking because they seriously wonder whether that which might be produced would be truly ecumenical. Since only a small part of worldwide Lutheranism would conceivably be interested in developing and affirming what might be developed, could such a document claim to represent the doctrine of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church?

We would answer: Most definitely, provided it offers a true and faithful exposition of the Holy Scriptures, as do the writings of the Book of Concord. Then of such additional normative statements of Christian doctrine could be stated also that which the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm said of Luther's pattern of doctrine on the basis of God's Word: "He expressly asserts by way of distinction that the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and

norm of all doctrine, and that no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subjected to it. This, of course, does not mean that other good, useful, and pure books, such as interpretations of the Holy Scriptures, refutations of errors, and expositions of doctrinal articles, should be rejected. If they are in accord with the aforementioned pattern of doctrine they are to be accepted and used as helpful expositions and explanations. Our intention was only to have a single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe 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....No one can blame us if we derive our expositions and decisions in the controverted articles from these writings, for just as we base our position on the Word of God as the eternal truth, so we introduce and cite these writings as a witness to the truth and as exhibiting the unanimous and correct understanding of our predecessors who remained steadfastly in the pure doctrine."<sup>33</sup>

Thus the Confessions establish the principle that doctrinal statements are ecumenically normative, not because the church universally accepts them (though this was the confessors' desire), but rather because they are objectively verifiable as God's truth by reference to the words and propositions of the Scriptures. This principle is clearly observable in Peter's confession concerning Jesus of Nazareth: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Matt. 16:16). Peter's statement was accepted and approved by his Lord, not because it had received prior consent among the company of the disciples, but because this truth had been revealed to Peter, said Jesus, "by My Father in heaven." And referring to this objective truth which had its origin not from within but outside of that apostle, our Lord added: "On this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it!" (Matt. 16:18).

We would disagree, then, with Schlink's assertion: "Apart from the church, no individual can confess."<sup>34</sup> Common consensus with and subscription to any creedal statement is certainly required if such formulation is to be regarded as valid "church" confession. But that which makes it authoritative and ecumenically normative is its correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures and not the number or credentials of its confessors--one or few or many, renowned or obscure in the eyes of men.

Finally, we would offer several thoughts and comments regarding the promotion and implementation of additional symbols within the ranks of confessional Lutheranism.

In the welter of confused and discordant sounds being hurled at us from so many voices in the visible church (and often eagerly amplified by the media), the true voice of Christ's one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is so often vague and distorted. If the true visible church is to rise above equivocation, not for its own sake but out of concern for the eternal benefit of souls redeemed by the Savior, it must identify mainline Christianity with conservative and confessional Lutheranism as did the framers of the Book of Concord. Not either that our primary concern should be one of image but, again out of concern for those who should be drawn to Him who is the Truth, a "new" restatement of the Scriptural position would witness to the world that our consummate passion is not to be negative "narrow-minded" Lutherans but positive "confessional" Christians. And such an addendum to our historical Confessions would not only testify to the truth of the Scriptures; it would also enable genuine Christians to take their stand by giving them another tool to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats along confessional lines.

<sup>33</sup> Tappert, op. cit., p. 505-506 (9, 10, 13).

<sup>34</sup> Theology of the Lutheran Confessions, p. 19.

Obviously, some very practical questions arise. Who would draft such a confession? How would the development of such a statement be implemented? The participants, of course, would need to be men convinced of the need for additional symbols and who themselves are solidly committed to a sound confessional position. It would be beneficial also if knowledgeable and dedicated laymen were encouraged to participate, emulating the function of those who so ably contributed to the development and advancement of our historical Symbols. Their involvement would to a great extent overcome the prevailing misconception that doctrinal scholarship and serious church administration and leadership lie solely upon the shoulders and in the talents of the clergy.

Further, to avoid a compromise of fellowship principles, a conclave could be called along the lines of a "free conference," in which the participants would not function as official representatives of their respective church bodies.

Who would initiate such an undertaking? Practically speaking, the impetus would have to come from those most convinced of the need. We would hope that, by God's grace, our own Wisconsin Synod might be so moved--deeply grateful for the blessings transmitted to us in our historical Symbols and persuaded that the Book of Concord is not the last word.

With the desire to be bold and faithful confessors, we pray:

O Christ, who alone is the Lord of Your Church, give us a good confession in our mouths before many witnesses as You gave to Your apostles; guide us in obedience to Your revealed Word as You led all true confessors in the history of Your Church for its preservation, that in the dangers of this final time Your message may not be stunted. Amen.

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