

The Formula of Concord in the History of American Lutheranism*

By E.C. Fredrich

When the time came for Lutherans in America to celebrate the centennial of the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord there was not much celebrating. In the late 1670s there were not all that many Lutherans in the New World to do the celebrating. The German Lutheran stronghold in Pennsylvania had not yet been established. In New Sweden just a fortnight after the anniversary of the Formula's signing, on June 9, 1677, Trinity Sunday, Pastor Fabricius dedicated Gloria Del Church on the site in today's Philadelphia, dominated by an expressway, at which an Episcopalian successor church building now stands. How slim the Lutheran holdings were is indicated by the use of a converted fort building for previous worship services held on alternate Sundays. There was no great concern about the Formula which had only a decade before achieved specific status in Swedish Lutheran circles back home.¹ Up in the New York area the few Lutherans might not have been all that desirous of celebrating the centennial of a confession their Dutch Reformed neighbors viewed as unduly hostile to them.

When the time came for Lutherans in America to celebrate the bicentennial of the Formula and Book of Concord, there were many more Lutherans to do the celebrating but there wasn't all that much more celebrating. In the late 1770s all the New World and all of its Lutherans were preoccupied with the Revolution. By that time enthusiasm for confessionalism was on the wane and an era was underway that would see little celebration of the Formula and much more opposition and departure.

By 1877 the situation had changed for the better. Two general Lutheran bodies had pledged themselves unreservedly to the Formula and the Book of Concord, the General Council and the Synodical Conference, together numbering about 420,000 of the 605,000 Lutherans in the United States.² The Synodical Conference was especially energetic, ordering the publication of Dr. Walther's "*Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern*" and of a "*Denkmal der dritten Jubelfeier der Concordienformel*," a resume of festival services held in over 300 areas where it had congregations.³

It has not been possible for 1977 Lutherans in America to recapture the zeal and enthusiasm for a Formula anniversary that their ancestors exhibited a century earlier. More Lutherans today are subscribing to the Formula, to be sure, but much of the spirit of commitment has been lost as the battleground has shifted from confessional to scriptural adherence.

The four '77 celebrations have been briefly depicted, not only to establish some historical background, but also to provide the framework for this essay. The four celebrations serve to highlight four distinct and delimited episodes in American Lutheranism's treatment of the Formula of Concord.

The 1677 minicelibration typifies the era that might be described as "Little Ado Long Ago," *little* referring to quantity rather than quality.

The 1777 noncelebration inaugurates the era that ranges "From Heedless Neglect to Open Hostility" in stance toward the Formula.

* This is another of the chapters in the Book of Concord anniversary publication of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod scheduled for appearance later this year.

¹ In 1663 the Book of Concord was accepted in Sweden as a norm for the instruction of the clergy. In the 1686 official language "all shall confess only and alone the Christian doctrine and faith, which is based on God's Holy Word ... as well as in the unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530, accepted at the Uppsala Synod in 1593 and explained in the whole so-called Book of Concord." See S. Erlandsson, "The Formula of Concord in the History of Swedish Lutheranism" in the July 1979 *Quarterly*.

² Detail will be supplied in the third section of this writing.

³ The first publication appeared in March 1877 with the full title reading, "*Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern. Mit einer geschichtlichen Einleitung und mit kurzen erklärenden Anmerkungen versehen. Dem lutherischen Christenvolke im Auftrag der hochwuerdigen ev.-luth. Synodalconferenz von Nord-America dargeboten von C. F. W. Walther.*" The second publication also appeared in 1877, printed in St. Louis under the editorship of Pastor E. W. Kahler.

The 1877 celebration of celebrations highlights a time when there was a *Formula Rediviva* in American Lutheranism.

The 1977 shadow celebration occurs in a time when the Formula pledge is “More Honored in Breach Than in Performance.”

I Little Ado Long Ago

In most connections one would be willing to acknowledge agreement with the statement of Dr. Tappert, one of the outstanding students of the Lutheran Confessions in this land who has given his name to one of their most widely used English editions, that “the Lutheran Confessions included in the Book of Concord have generally occupied a more important place in American than in European church life.”⁴ In the Colonial era, however, the churches in the New World were still closely linked to their European progenitors and had not yet then demonstrated distinct American characteristics developed by the frontier process in a pluralistic setting. Their confessional stance was by and large determined across the seas.

It is unrealistic to expect Lutherans in New Sweden to exercise themselves unduly about the Formula of Concord, a confession that had some difficulty achieving confessional recognition back in Old Sweden as an explanation of the *Augustana*. Instructions to Governor Prinz for the colony in 1642 stipulate “the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Council of Uppsala, and the ceremonies of the Swedish Church”⁵ The 1593 Council of Uppsala, however, had not included the Formula among recognized symbols. How much effect the very explicit 1680’s recognition of the Formula had on the New Sweden churches is not easily determined. It seems not much. What concerned the Lutherans on the Delaware more in those years was pastoral service. In the early 1680s Fabricius went blind; in 1688 Lock died. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that Formula recognition was not a primary discussion topic along the Delaware 300 years ago.

The first Lutherans in the New York area, with Amsterdam origins, were from the start committed to the Formula. The earliest documents, to be sure, limit the confessional stipulation to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession only, but that is understandable in an era when the New Amsterdam Lutherans were striving to achieve some religious rights in a Reformed colony. The first pastor sent from Amsterdam to serve these Lutherans, we know, was pledged at his ordination to the whole Book of Concord.⁶ This was Johannes Ernestus Gutwasser.

The first Lutheran pastor ordained with the blessing of authorities on American soil, Justus Falckner, published a book against the Reformed in 1708. In the foreword he expresses his allegiance to all the Confessions of the Lutheran Church.⁷ When Falckner’s successor, William Berkenmeyer, was called to the combined New York-Albany parish, it was to expound “from the pulpit the pure doctrine of God’s Word ... contained in the three chief symbols ... the Augsburg Confession and its Apologia, and the Smalcald Articles; by the Lutheran Catechism and Formula Concordiae.”⁸

It is this Berkenmeyer who is empowered by the Loonenburg church council to go to the Classical Assembly at New York and there “advise, vote, do, and act as His Reverend will see fit according to the Word of God, our Symbolical Books and the Amsterdam church constitution.” In his will Berkenmeyer does not fail to include the Formula among the symbols according to which he has taught his “dear flock full nineteen years long.”⁹

⁴ Theodore G. Tappert, “The Significance of Confessional Subscription,” in *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* published jointly in 1961 by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, p 27.

⁵ H. E. Jacobs, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, (New York, 1893), p 82, supplies an English translation of these instructions as found in Provost Acrelius’ history of the colony.

⁶ Harry Kreider, *The Beginnings of Lutheranism in New York* (New York, 1949) p 34.

⁷ A. L. Graebner, *Geschichte der Lutherischen Kirche in America* (St. Louis, 1892), p 91.

⁸ Arnold J. F. van Laer, *The Lutheran Church in New York, 1649–1772* (New York, 1946), pp 121–122.

⁹ John P. Dern, ed., *The Albany Protocol* (Ann Arbor, 1971), p 138 and p 532.

Far to the South at about the same time, the Salzburg Lutherans were building their Georgia establishment, Ebenezer. They too founded their German Evangelical Lutheran congregation “upon the basis of the Holy Bible, our Augsburg Confession, (and the other Symbolical Books).”¹⁰ Here again the immigrant Lutherans brought with them to the New World their Old World confessional tradition. For them adherence to the Formula of Concord was a matter of course, not any distinct and novel adaptation or adoption.

Of special concern must be the situation in Pennsylvania, where in the 1700s the majority of Colonial Lutherans were to be found and where the majority of these were Pietistically inclined. Two differing viewpoints regarding that situation have been expressed. There is general agreement on the basis of the available evidence that the Pennsylvania Lutherans from Germany under the leadership of H. Muhlenberg included the Formula of Concord in their confessional basis. There is disagreement regarding the significance of the inclusion.

Writing in 1909, before his church body, the General Synod, put the Formula in the confessional paragraph of its constitution, J. W. Richard declares:

We also know that at least some of the German pastors, as, for instance, Muhlenberg in 1739 and Brunholtz in 1744, had, at their ordination, pledged themselves to all of the Symbolical Books, and some, if not all those sent from Halle, were commissioned “to teach the Word of God in public and in private, pure and uncorrupt, according to the rule and guidance of the Holy Scriptures and also of the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.” But these, as a matter of course, had the Pietistic conception of the Symbolical Books. They were not confessionalists.¹¹

This point is made more specifically by S. S. Schmucker when he sums up the “doctrinal basis and ecclesiastical position of the American Lutheran Church” [his, not today’s] in certain propositions:

1. The patriarchs of our church did at first practically profess the former symbolical books of our church in Germany, by avowing them or in most instances the Augsburg Confession at the erection of their houses of worship, and in various cases at the induction of men into the ministerial office.
2. They soon relaxed from the rigor of symbolic requisition, and referred only to the Augsburg Confession, generally omitting all reference to the other former symbolic books, except the use of the Small Catechism of Luther in the instruction of the rising generation.¹²

This view of the confessional situation in Colonial Lutheranism was challenged already in 1857 when the struggle over Schmucker’s “American Lutheranism” was being bitterly waged. W. J. Mann, then a Philadelphia pastor and an opponent of Schmucker, insisted that Muhlenberg and his co-laborers

aimed at neither more nor less than to place the Lutheran Church in this country upon the same doctrinal basis upon which it rested in the German Fatherland, namely, upon the doctrines of the Holy Scriptures laid down in the Symbolical Books. This was in reality the foundation upon which Lutheran congregations in this country had been established before the year 1748, the year in which the first Lutheran Synod in America was organized, some receiving the collective body of the Lutheran Symbols, whilst others, as the Swedes, preferred more especially the Symbols

¹⁰ P. A. Strobel, *The Salzburger and Their Descendants* (Baltimore, 1855), p 94. The University of Georgia Press reprinted the volume in 1953.

¹¹ James W. Richard, *The Confessional History of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia, 1909), p 601.

¹² S. S. Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church* (Springfield, Ohio: 1852), p 157

officially recognized by the Church of their country, but none of them ever protested against any of the Symbolical Books, or against any part of their contents.¹³

Somewhere between these two descriptions of Colonial Lutheranism the actual picture may well be found. Both Mann and also Schmucker and Richard have their own axes to grind. In their confessional battles they do their utmost to draft Muhlenberg as an ally. He would hardly have volunteered for duty in either camp.

Muhlenberg would never have become a party to an effort at recension of the Lutheran Confessions. It is, however, equally difficult to conceive of the Halle protegee as one who would in principle and in practice take the ultimate stand for all that the Formula and the other Confessions teach.

This is not to question Muhlenberg's sincerity or his personal faith. This is merely to face the fact that his predilection was Pietism, his task was to organize an immigrant church, and his career was basically devoid of outright confessional challenges. One can surmise that a more rigorous confessional stance might have at least slowed the eventual doctrinal decline. One can regret that the course of history did not bring confessional matters to a head in an earlier age and thus place Muhlenberg personally at the critical crossroads.

As it was, however, the first era of Lutheranism in America, an era that culminates and concludes with Muhlenberg, was one of "Little Ado Long Ago." This was a time for transplanting the Formula of Concord and the other Lutheran Confessions from the old to the new soil. In the busy replanting time the major effort went into buildup and organization. The confessional heritage was taken, if not for granted, at face value, without any questions asked. Over a century would pass before such questioning suggested itself. When this happened, the result for the Formula and the other Lutheran Confessions was not that good. About the time of the two hundredth birthday of the Formula and Book of Concord a time in confessional history had come that could be described as ranging.

II From Heedless Neglect to Outright Opposition

That bicentennial fell squarely in the years of the Revolution, a time of trial that did not lend itself to lavish anniversary celebrations. Old Zion Church in Philadelphia, after serving as a military hospital during the occupation, lacked even seating accommodations for worshipers during most of the war years. The Ebenezer stronghold in Georgia was hard hit by Tory raids. All over the colonies there were vacant pastorates and damaged church buildings.

What put an even worse damper on any Formula or Book of Concord anniversary observance was spiritual lack and flagging zeal. An anti-confessional spirit was beginning to manifest itself among the Lutherans of the new nation. A competent observer remarks: "Soon after the passing of Father Muhlenberg the Lutheran Church in America passes into a period marked by confessional laxity, open fraternity, and a spirit of independent thinking which finds expression among conspicuous leaders in noticeable departures from doctrines set forth in the historic confessions."¹⁴

In the Pennsylvania Ministerium this is exemplified by constitutional changes. The 1781 constitution insisted that "every minister professes that he holds the Word of God and our Symbolical Book in doctrine and life..."¹⁵ The 1792 revision, however, casually dropped the confessional references, failing to mention even the *Augustana*. Cooperation with Reformed and Moravian congregations soon became the order of the day and was to play an influential role in taking the Pennsylvania Ministerium out of the mildly Lutheran General Synod in 1823.¹⁶

¹³ W. J. Mann, *Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia, 1857), p 109.

¹⁴ Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology* (New York, 1927), pp 18–19. Hereafter cited as Ferm, *Crisis*.

¹⁵ Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia, 1966), p 29. Hereafter cited as Wolf, *Documents*.

¹⁶ Wolf, *Documents*, pp 81–82 supplies the resolution that attributes the withdrawal, among other motivations, to a "hearty desire for a union of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in this country."

The New York Ministerium, organized in 1786 in the Pennsylvania pattern, soon followed the mother synod down the pathway of confessional indifference. In fact, the daughter overtook and surpassed the mother. New York Lutheranism was badly infected by rationalism. The second president, Dr. F. H. Quitman, made it his business to issue in 1814 his *Evangelical Catechism* as a substitute for what Luther had provided. Doctrines were rationalized and a position was assumed at variance with the Formula of Concord and the Augsburg Confession.

In the South a Ministerium of North Carolina was put together in 1803 without any confessional platform. The first constitution contains no explicit or implicit reference to any of the Lutheran Symbols.¹⁷

While S. S. Schmucker was admittedly marshaling evidence to support a position he was advocating, he can not be charged with exaggeration when in a “Discourse,” published in 1852, he defended the proposition:

That about the beginning of this century the fathers of our church ceased, in fact, to require assent even to the Augsburg Confession at licensure and ordinations, and demanded only faith in the Word of God, thus practically rejecting (as they had a right to do) all the symbolical books as tests, though still respecting and occasionally referring to the Augsburg Confession as a substantial expose of the doctrines which they taught.¹⁸

When in 1820 the General Synod, the first union of area ministeriums was formed, the Formula of Concord had no place in the confessional platform. In fact, the *Augustana* barely achieved minimum recognition. Actually the General Synod itself took no official confessional stance, letting that up to the determination of the member ministerium. The General Synod certainly wanted to be Lutheran and strove to counteract the rampant unionism that was threatening the existence of the denomination. It wanted to save the brand name but was reluctant to specify ingredients too accurately.

In the absence of a constitutional commitment to the Confessions one must look elsewhere for designations of the General Synod’s doctrinal position. Specifically indicative are the model constitution devised for local synods in 1829 and the pledge required of graduates and professors of Gettysburg Seminary established in 1826. The model constitution words the key question to candidates for ordination thus: “Do you believe that the fundamental doctrines of the Word of God are taught in a manner substantially correct in the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession?”¹⁹ The Gettysburg pledge is in the same vein.

The commitment is “substantial,” not total. It is to the first twenty-one articles, not all twenty-eight. It is to the fundamental doctrines, not to all of them. Only in this limited way is the *Augustana* accepted. The Formula of Concord isn’t even in the picture.

The notorious attack on the Lutheran Confessions, termed “American Lutheranism” and embodied in the *Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinarian, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods*, contended unsuccessfully for an “American Recension of the Augsburg Confession,” charging it with five specific doctrinal errors: approval of the ceremonies of the mass, private confession and absolution, denial of the obligation of the Christian Sabbath, baptismal regeneration, and the real presence.²⁰ “American Lutheranism” would obviously be at war with the Formula.

The *Definite Platform* avows its “rejection of all the other [symbolical] books except the Augsburg Confession.”²¹ The Formula is mentioned by name in a section that deplores forced subscription:

¹⁷ Ferm, *Crisis*, describes this constitution on p 30.

¹⁸ S. S. Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church Historically, Doctrinally, and Practically Delineated in Several Occasional Discourses* (Springfield, Ohio, 1852), p 187.

¹⁹ *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Fifth General Synod of the Ev. Luth. Church In the United States, Convened at Hagerstown, Maryland, October 1829*, pp 38–39.

²⁰ *Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinarian, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods; Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod* (Philadelphia, 1855). The next three notes refer to this volume.

²¹ The quotation is from p 5 of the *Definite Platform*.

Again a quarter of a century after Luther's death these and other writings of Luther and Melancton, together with another work which neither of them ever saw, the Formula of Concord, were made binding on ministers and churches, not by the church itself, acting of her own free choice, but by the civil authorities of certain kingdoms and principalities.²²

The Formula's *Solida Declaratio* is certainly on the mind of the *Definite Platform* author when he writes:

The extraordinary length of the other former symbolical books as a whole, is sufficient reason for their rejection as a prescribed creed, even if all their contents were believed to be true, because neither the Scriptures nor the practice of the early centuries, affords any warrant for an uninspired and therefore fallible creed nearly as large as the entire Old and New Testament together. The exaction of such an extended creed is subversive of all individual liberty of thought and freedom of Scriptural investigation.²³

This all-out opposition to a strong confessional stand by the *Definite Platform* advocates, S. S. Schmucker, S. Sprecher, and B. Kurtz, itself testifies to an improved state of affairs. The *Definite Platform* was an effort to challenge and check the growing confessionalism that was manifesting itself around and within the General Synod. The *Definite Platform* was roundly rejected, winning favor in only a few small bodies of the General Synod. Also, the *Platform* called forth a series of free conferences in which midwestern Lutherans with strong confessional views began an acquaintance that would eventually ripen into association in the Synodical Conference. A better day for the Formula had dawned and was preparing the way for the...

III Formula Rediviva

The confessional recovery was long in coming and had a variety of roots. In Europe one can look to the 1817 Reformation anniversary that triggered the Prussian Union and the Harms' second edition of the Ninety-Five Theses. It has been suggested that the 1820 organization of the Tennessee Synod "may be taken as the first organized effort to bring the Lutheran Church back to a confessional consciousness since the days of the Patriarch; and it may also be considered as the beginning of the strong wave toward confessionalism which was later to sweep over the American Lutheran Church."²⁴

What porridge had Paul Henkel? The question, once asked regarding a great poet who sprang from an unlikely background, can well be put in this connection. What made Paul Henkel so confessional in his own right and in his offsprings?²⁵ He and his sons left their stamp on the Tennessee Synod and the Ohio Synod, both of which stood aside from the General Synod's brand of Lutheran theology. The Tennessee Synod's unique *quia* subscription to the Augsburg Confession as far back as 1820 soon included also serious concern for the Formula.²⁶

Eventually the first complete English versions of the Book of Concord in 1851 would roll off the presses of the publishing house of Solomon D. Henkel & Bros. at New Market, Va., with three Henkels, Ambrose,

²² *Definite Platform*, p 3.

²³ *Definite Platform*, p 20.

²⁴ Fern, *Crisis*, p 64.

²⁵ A study of this interesting and encouraging question has recently been made by Richard Baur of Waldorf College. His essay, "Paul Henkel: Pioneer Lutheran Missionary," was delivered to the 1978 meeting of the Lutheran Historical Conference and will be published in its *Essays and Reports*, 1978.

²⁶ F. Bente, *American Lutheranism*, Volume I, (St. Louis, 1919) has an extensive treatment of the Tennessee Synod, pp. 148–237. See especially pp 193–195.

David and Socrates, and three collaborators, Stirewalt, Wetzel and Moser, providing the translations.²⁷ The Formula of Concord was coming into its own in the East.

In the West, today's Midwest, staunch "Old Lutherans" in Buffalo and Milwaukee and St. Louis and points in between were subscribing to the Formula of Concord, along with the other Lutheran Confessions, as a *sine qua non* and as a matter of course. "New Lutheran" neighbors were influenced. The Synods of Missouri, Buffalo, Iowa, Wisconsin and others stood for the Formula along with the other Confessions. For a time Iowa would want to restrict confessional subscription to only those doctrines in the Confessions that occur in the "confess and reject" sections but even then the Iowa Synod was much more serious about the Formula of Concord than many other Lutherans in older established areas.²⁸

It is true, full clarity regarding the necessity for Lutherans to pledge themselves to all their Confessions in word and deed may not yet have been achieved. President Bading, the recently elected head of the Wisconsin Synod, had good reason to plead in his first two presidential addresses in 1861 and 1862:

In our Evangelical Lutheran Church we have His Word in truth and purity. Let us like our fathers hold fast to it in life and death; if necessary, sacrifice for it goods and blood, life and limb and rather suffer all than depart one hair's breadth from the truth we have learned and from our beloved Confessions.

At our ordination into the ministry, we were pledged to the Confessions of our Church and indeed not *in so far as* but *because* they agree with God's Word. But it is one thing to have the right and truly pure doctrine on paper and it is something else to possess it in one's own clear understanding and one's own childlike faith.²⁹

Similar situations may well have prevailed in the other synods just mentioned, but the confessional issue was being faced and the confessional battle was being won.

The Ohio story is of special interest. Spawned by Pennsylvania Ministerium missionaries such as Stauch and strengthened by Henkel influence, the Ohio Synod was soon engrossed in significant confessional struggles through the advent of Loehe trained men and through other area developments. In the early 1840s the stage was set for a battle over confessionalism that resulted in the exodus of a group, headed by Sihler, that would aid in the formation of the Missouri Synod in 1847.

Those withdrawn from may well have been influenced by the withdrawers. In a decade Ohio men would be joining Missouri men in the previously mentioned free conference to contend for the Confessions. In another decade fellowship between the two synods would become a reality and pave the way for partnership in the Synodical Conference.

Meanwhile the older Lutheran grouping was heading for a fullscale confessional showdown. The *Definite Platform* had been repudiated but its original sponsors and its other adherents had not been disciplined. They achieved the admission of a pro-*Platform* Maryland Melancthon Synod into the General Synod in 1859.³⁰ In 1864 they even risked backing the membership candidacy of the Franckean Synod, notorious as the most unlutheran of Lutheran synods. Formula of Concord acceptance was not the issue; there had to be special instruction to the Franckean Synod to write the *Augustana* into its constitution in even the limited General Synod sense.³¹

²⁷ The latter two were the Formula translators. In the 1854 second edition C. F. Schaeffer was charged with this responsibility.

²⁸ *Colloquium der Vertreter der Synode von Iowa und der von Missouri, Ohio u. a. St., gehalten vom 13–19 Nov. in Milwaukee, Wis.* (Chicago, 1868). The lengthy discussion on confessional subscription and "open questions" is reported on pp 26–126.

²⁹ *Verhandlungen der Versammlung der Evangel.-Lutherischen Synode von Wisconsin*, 1861, p 6 and 1862, p 6. Incidentally, Bading himself had to battle for the right to make his ordination pledge to all the confessions. See J.P. Koehler, *History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Protestant Conference, St. Cloud, Minn., 1970), p 45.

³⁰ *Proceedings of the General Synod, 1859*, pp 10–12.

³¹ *Proceedings of the General Synod, 1864*, pp 18–19, 23–25, 41–42.

The *status controversiae* transcended a General Synod membership contest. The result was withdrawals and the formation of an opposition federation, the General Council, with such unaligned synods as Augustana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota and Michigan adding their strength. The new Lutheran body began under good auspices. C. P. Krauth's "The Fundamental Principles of Faith and Church Polity" was given a "shall not be changed" place in the constitution.³² Its doctrinal basis declared for the Formula in these certain terms:

Pre-eminent among such accordant, pure and scriptural statements of doctrine, by their intrinsic excellence, by the great and necessary ends for which they were prepared, by their historical position, and by the general judgment of the church are these: the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Catechisms of Luther, and the Formula of Concord, all of which are, with the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, in the perfect harmony of one and the same scriptural faith.³³

The General Council's confessional commitment envisioned more than a bare subscription. The previous quotation is preceded by the declaration: "That Confessions may be such a testimony of Unity, and bond of Union, they must be accepted in every statement of doctrine, in their own true, native, original, and only sense. Those who set them forth and use them, must not only agree to use the same words, but must use and understand these words in one and same sense."³⁴

A distinguished Council leader, H. E. Jacobs, offers this commentary on this thesis: "It is not subscription to Confessions of faith that is desired, so much as to the faith of the Confessors. The unity of the Church does not consist in subscribing to the same Confessions, but in the acceptance and teaching of the same doctrines."³⁵ Another General Council leader, Theodore Schmauk, is even more explicit when he declares: "The question is not what do you subscribe, but what do you believe and publicly teach and what are you transmitting to those who come after?"³⁶

When the General Council's earliest endeavors were marred by a reluctance to carry through such principles in dealing with questions of fellowship, lodgery and chiliasm, controversy and dissatisfaction arose. Member synods, Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota, withdrew.³⁷ Ohio refrained from joining, while Iowa limited its participation. The positive factor was that the dissatisfied synods, with the exception of Iowa, found occasion to join Missouri and its Norwegian ally in 1872 in forming the Synodical Conference, the Lutheran federation generally acclaimed for its full-fledged commitment to the Lutheran Confessions.

Did this commitment embrace the Formula of Concord? The Synodical Conference constitution in Article II, the confessional paragraph, committed itself "to the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as God's Word, and to the Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of 1580, named "Concordia" as its own."³⁸ This stand was shared by the Norwegian Synod, a charter member. The difficulty created by the traditional limitation of the confessional pledge to *Augustana* and Catechism among Norwegian Lutherans was easily obviated.

When the constituent convention of the Synodical Conference was organizing and examining the action of the member synods regarding the proposed constitution, it found that acceptance was unanimous. The minutes, however, add the explanation:

³² *Proceedings of the General Council, 1867*; p 26. The quotation is from Article IV, Sec. 2, of the Constitution.

³³ *Proceedings of the General Council, 1867*, p 21.

³⁴ *Proceedings of the General Council, 1867*, p 20.

³⁵ The Rev. Prof. H. E. Jacobs, "The General Council" in the Lutheran Publication Society's *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Philadelphia, 3rd ed., 1902), p 94.

³⁶ Theodore Schmauk, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as Embodying the Evangelical Confessions of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia, 1911), p 890.

³⁷ Space limitations prevent any extended discussion of the well-known "Four Point" controversy.

³⁸ The constitution appears in the *Denkschrift* (Columbus, Ohio, 1871) between *Vorwort* and the *Darlegung der Gruende*.

But since the honorable Norwegian Lutheran Synod has attached to its complete assent to the Constitution the question whether it could enter the Synodical Conference as a member, even though as an individual synod it pledged itself, as is well known, only to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism, the explanation was given by the Synodical Conference that the Scandinavian Lutherans had always been regarded as orthodox, even though not all symbolical books had achieved official ecclesiastical recognition among them; nevertheless the Synodical Conference naturally demands that the honorable Norwegian Lutheran Synod, in so far as it is a part of the Synodical Conference, pledge itself to all the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and in the event of a doctrinal controversy to be guided and judged thereby. Since this was agreed to by the representatives of the honorable Norwegian Synod, the Conference found no impediment to its acceptance.³⁹

This might be the place to mention an exceptional instance of a Norwegian pledge to the Formula of Concord in the previous century. In the 1870 division of the Scandinavian Augustana Synod, the Norwegians could not agree among themselves and split into two camps, the Norwegian-Danish Augustana Synod and the Conference for the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Church in America, each claiming to be the legitimate descendant of the Scandinavian Augustana Synod.

Since the original Scandinavian Augustana Synod had always accepted "the other Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church" as explanatory to the Augsburg Confession, the Norwegian-Danish Augustana Synod in America added weight to its claims by using constitutions specifying the complete Book of Concord as the confessional basis.⁴⁰ The contending "Conference" limited itself to the traditional form of Norwegian subscription.

As the tricentennial of the Formula of Concord dawned in 1877, that confessional document was achieving its heyday among the Lutherans in the United States. Of some 2,900 Lutheran pastors well over half were pledged to the Formula of Concord. This includes almost 1100 in the Synodical Conference, almost 600 in the General Council, and generous additions from such synods as Iowa, Tennessee, Norwegian-Danish and others. In communicants the numbers are even more impressive. Of slightly over 600,000, well over 400,000 were to be found in the Synodical Conference and the General Council alone. Adding others the figure is well in the area of three out of four.⁴¹

As has already been mentioned, the Synodical Conference observed the Formula's 1877 anniversary with emphasis. Dr. Walther's *Der Concordienformel Kern und Stern. Mit einer geschichtlichen Einleitung und mit kurzen erklärenden Anmerkungen versehen* was read by thousands of lay people. It was translated by the Norwegian Synod for their laity as a testimony that their 1872 recognition of the Formula was not just lip service. The *Lutheran Standard*, an Ohio Synod publication, presented an English version.⁴²

In startling contrast to the contemporary anniversary, that of 1877 concerned itself with the youth of the church. For them there were supplied in 40,000 copies, *Festgabe zum 300 jaehrigen Jubilaem der Concordienformel* and in 15,000 copies *Jubelfestbuechlein*, a record of the causes, the origins and the contents of the Formula in familiar question-answer form.⁴³ It is no flight of fancy to suggest that the celebration a century later was made possible, humanly speaking, by this 1877 endeavor of placing before the youth its confessional heritage. Nor is it a flight of fancy to voice the question: Will there be a celebration of the Formula anniversary in 2077?

³⁹ *Synodical Conference Proceedings, 1872*, p 13.

⁴⁰ E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian-Americans*, (Minneapolis, 1960), Volume I, pp 212–213.

⁴¹ The statistics are from the 1888 *Stalls Yearbook* as supplied in Georg Fritschel, *Geschichte der Lutherischen Kirche in Amerika* (Guetersloh, 1896), p 427.

⁴² Detail is supplied in *Denkmal der dritten Jubelfeier der Concordienformel im Jahre des Heils 1877* (St. Louis, 1877), pp iv–v of the *Vorerinnerungen*. Hereafter cited as *Denkmal*.

⁴³ *Denkmal*, p v.

Over the signature of H. A. Preus, president of the Synodical Conference, the following announcement appeared in the various publications of member synods of the Synodical Conference:

Therefore in recognition of the invaluable gift which the Lord with this work [the Formula] has given to his Lutheran Church also in our time all of our congregations belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference should feel motivated to hold on Tuesday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity, May 29, a service to commemorate this notable occasion with joyful hearts to the glory and praise of God, bound closely together through the one true faith, which has found its clear, definite expression in the Formula of Concord, even though separated from one another by language and distance.⁴⁴

The response was hearty. At Koshkonong, Wisconsin, four Norwegian congregations gathered at this historic spot for a service at which Pastor Ottesen preached on Mark 4:26–29.⁴⁵ In the Ohio Synod English festival services were held, among other places, in Baltimore and in Columbus, where President Loy preached on Psalm 126:3.⁴⁶ Milwaukee congregations of the Wisconsin Synod joined in an evening service at St. John's, with President Bading the liturgist and Pastor Jaekel preaching on Psalm 78:1–7.⁴⁷ St. Louis Lutherans stretched the festival observance to two days. On May 29 in Trinity Church Professor Schaller's *Jubelfestlied* was sung as the sermon hymn and Professor C. F. W. Walther preached on Isaiah 49:14–17. In the evening, services were held in the four district churches. The next afternoon on the Seminary grounds there was music with orchestra accompaniment and an English address by O. Wangsnaes, a Norwegian student. The accidental death of the child of a visiting Illinois couple necessitated the cancellation of the planned second evening's *Illumination und Concert*.⁴⁸

These few, in themselves insignificant, details are supplied in an endeavor to recapture some of the genuine enthusiasm that marked the Synodical Conference's observance of the tricentennial of the Formula of Concord. In the very next few years the tragic first rending of the Synodical Conference would demonstrate that commitment to the Formula was not just momentary festival enthusiasm. The bitter election controversy that broke out in the anniversary year centered the attention of both parties on Article XI of the Formula.

The election controversy had first flared in the early 1870s. It seriously perturbed the Missouri Synod from 1877 on when Dr. Walther's election essay to its Western District came under attack. By 1880 Walther's chief opponent, F. A. Schmidt, was editing *Altes und Neues* to air his views. All peace and truce efforts failed.

From Stonebridge, Canada, President Schwan sent all Missouri Synod pastors an *Einladung* to a special pastoral conference to deal with the worsening controversy. Schwan included in the *Einladung* various agenda suggestions: establish areas of disagreement and study them in the light of Scripture and Confessions (especially Article XI of the Formula of Concord), guide the discussion by the theses that had already been prepared for another special conference or let the assembly itself suggest a *modus operandi*.⁴⁹

The conference, meeting in Chicago from September 29 to October 5, after some debate opted for a combination of the third and first suggestions. It proposed to discuss the Formula's Article XI and offered this rationale:

Since obviously all conflict among us has only arisen because of the differing interpretation of the Formula of Concord and there is no one among us who does not want to be in agreement

⁴⁴ *Denkmal*, p vi.

⁴⁵ *Denkmal*, p 358-359.

⁴⁶ *Denkmal*, p 262 and 271.

⁴⁷ *Denkmal*, p 325.

⁴⁸ *Denkmal*, p 223-246.

⁴⁹ *Verhandlungen der allgemeinen Pastoralconferenz der Synode von Missouri, Ohio, u. a. Staaten ueber die Lehre von der Gnadenwahl* (St. Louis, 1880) reproduces Schwan's *Einladung* on p 3. Hereafter cited as *Verhandlungen*.

with this Confession, the Special Pastoral Conference resolved to put Article XI of the Formula of Concord on the table and carry on the discussions on the basis of it.⁵⁰

The Formula of Concord was being taken seriously by the Missouri Synod pastors. They had subscribed to it *quia* it reproduced the Bible's doctrines. As a matter of course they looked to the Confession's treatment of the doctrine in dispute to restore doctrinal unity.

Both sides sought the guidance of the Formula of Concord. Unfortunately Allwardt, Stellhorn and a few others misread Article XI. The condensed account of the discussions that lasted a week runs to 116 pages. If one would attempt to boil down the disagreement over Article XI to one single issue, he would have to center on the viewpoints regarding the Solid Declaration's eight points.⁵¹

To use homiletical terminology, Walther's opponents sought to use the eight points as part of the text from which to derive the definition and the doctrine of election and thus arrived at a so-called "election in the wider sense." Walther properly treated the eight points as the context that provides for the doctrine the proper setting and sheds on it the light of the full gospel. He consequently avoided the pitfalls of "wider sense" and *intuitu fidei*. Walther's position prevailed in the pastoral meeting and in the synodical convention the next year.

The Joint Synod of Ohio unfortunately committed itself to this same misreading of Article XI. When it withdrew from the Synodical Conference in 1881, it resolved:

We again herewith confess the doctrine of election as it is contained in the Formula of Concord, and also as it has in accordance therewith been always taught on the whole by the great teachers of our church; especially do we hold the doctrine of our fathers, that the ordination of the elect to eternal life took place in view of faith, i.e. in view of the merits of Christ appropriated by faith, to be in accord with the Scriptures and our Confessions; Therefore,

Resolved, that in the future as in the past the doctrine here anew confessed be alone authorized in our institutions, schools, publications and churches.⁵²

When Norwegian Lutherans were taking the steps that would lead to the 1917 merger and were trying to cope with the old election and conversion differences, they at least read Article XI of the Formula more correctly than had previous defenders of *intuitu fidei*. The *Madison Settlement* of 1912 in its first paragraph identifies the "so-called Second Form of Doctrine" with Pontoppidan's Catechism. The second paragraph states that all parties agree "that Article XI of the Formula of Concord presents the pure and correct doctrine of the election of the children of God unto salvation as taught by the Word of God and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church ..."⁵³

Even the compromising paragraph that tolerates the second form still insists that "some in accordance with the Formula of Concord, include under the doctrine of election the whole order of salvation of the elect from the call to the glorification (Formula of Concord, Sol. Decl., Art. XI, paragraphs 10–20) and teach an election 'unto salvation through the sanctification of the Spirit and the belief of the truth.'⁵⁴

It is neither necessary nor desirable to trace in the long election controversy every instance of Formula of Concord citation and application. Enough has been provided to indicate clearly the important role the Formula of Concord played in the election controversy in this land, especially in its first stages, and the high regard in which it was held in the Synodical Conference segment of United States Lutheranism.

⁵⁰ *Verhandlungen*, p 11.

⁵¹ *Triglotta*, The Formula of Concord, Thor, Decl. XI, 15–22. *Verhandlungen* re-ports the discussion of this section of Article XI beginning on p 28.

⁵² C. V. Sheatsley, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States* (Columbus, Ohio, 1919), p 176.

⁵³ Wolf, *Documents*, pp 232–233.

⁵⁴ Wolf, *Documents*, p 233. The parenthetical location was added. It should be noted that paragraph numbers in the Norwegian edition of the Book of Concord differ from ours.

Not fully realized was the aim of the formulators in adding to the list of articles on disputed doctrines a discussion of election “in order, by the aid of divine grace, to prevent disagreement and separation on its account in the future among our successors.”⁵⁵ Largescale disagreement and separation occurred. But the judgment of the formulators in providing Article XI was vindicated. That article aided in containing the division and in maintaining the precious and comforting truth of election of grace.

When almost 500 pastors gathered in Chicago in 1880 with *Concordia* in hand to discuss election and chose to do it by centering on Article XI of the Formula of Concord, a high point in the Formula’s influence in the history of Lutheranism in this country was achieved. After that it was downhill so that when finally in our time the Formula’s fourth anniversary came that Confession was...

IV More Honored in Breach Than in Performance

It is true, the General Synod finally joined the ranks of subscribers to the Formula of Concord in 1913, at least in a limited sense. The road to that position was long. It began with a constitutional subscribing to the *Augustana*’s position on “fundamentals” in 1869, moved on in 1895 to a “throughout” *Augustana* endorsement, and in 1901 repudiated any distinction between fundamentals and nonfundamentals in the *Augustana*.⁵⁶

Finally in 1913, as a price for rapprochement with the General Council, the General Synod stated in the constitution that “it receives and holds the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a correct exhibition of faith and doctrine of our Churches founded upon the Word.”⁵⁷

The following paragraph on “The Secondary Symbols” reads:

While the General Synod regards the Augsburg Confession as a sufficient and altogether adequate doctrinal basis for the co-operation of Lutheran Synods, it also recognizes the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Small Catechism of Luther, the Large Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord as expositions of Lutheran doctrine of great historical and interpretative value and especially commends the Small Catechism as a book of instruction.

As late as 1910 General Synod men were strenuously objecting to a requirement of Formula of Concord subscription.⁵⁸ They were voicing an accepted General Synod position stated by the Gettysburg systematician, M. Valentine, in 1893: “The Augsburg Confession is the symbol of Lutheran catholicity; all the other distinctive portions of the Book of Concord are symbols of Lutheran particularity, creeds of Lutheran Churches, but not in an undisputed sense of the Lutheran Church.”⁵⁹

The acceptance of the 1913 constitutional amendment is therefore as surprising as gratifying. So is the declaration of the new church body, the United Lutheran Church in America, that it “recognizes the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large and Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of

⁵⁵ *Triglotta*, The Formula of Concord, Thor. Decl. XI, 1.

⁵⁶ *Proceedings of the General Synod*, 1869, p 40; 1895, p 63. The 1901 minutes say that “to make any distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines in the Augsburg Confession is contrary to that basis set forth in our formula of confessional subscription.”

⁵⁷ This quotation of the General Synod constitution and the one that follows are from *Proceedings of the General Synod*, 1913, pp 387–388.

⁵⁸ An example is Professor J. A. Singmaster, “The Confession History of the Lutheran Church” in the *Lutheran Quarterly* XL, April, pp 160–173. On p 170 Singmaster writes: “We personally see no objection to the Formula of Concord as an exposition of the Lutheran faith. Nevertheless, we recognize that it is not entirely self-consistent, that it is entirely too lengthy for a creed, and that it has never given general satisfaction.”

⁵⁹ M. Valentine, “The General Synod” in *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1893 and 1902), p 47 of the latter edition.

Concord, as in the harmony of one and the same Scriptural faith.”⁶⁰ It should be added that already in 1886 the Southern Lutherans, influenced by the Tennessee Synod, had accepted “the Formula of Concord, consisting of the Epitome and Full Declaration . . . as true and Scriptural developments of the doctrines taught in the Augsburg Confession and in the perfect harmony of one and the same pure, Scriptural faith.”⁶¹

Large segments of Lutherans in the East and in the South may have been added to the ranks of those marching, out of step to be sure, under the banner of the Formula of Concord. There were problems. The banner was being stretched beyond the rending point.

The ULCA in 1934 at Savannah officially vitiated any apparent confessional gains by its blunt and unmistakable declaration that “we believe that these Confessions are to be interpreted in their historical context, not as a law or as a system of theology but as ‘a witness and declaration of faith as to how the Holy Scriptures were understood and explained on the matters in controversy within the Church of God by those who then lived.’”⁶² It should be obvious that it doesn’t necessarily take a Lutheran to confess that Chemnitz and Andreae believed what the Formula of Concord stated. Any Roman or Reformed or rationalist or atheist will do as well.

As late as 1961, on the eve of the translation of the ULCA into the LCA, one of the foremost students of the Confessions in both bodies stated: “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.”⁶³ This is a little better than the previous “how the Holy Scriptures were understood and explained” at some point in time, but not much. It just doesn’t answer the all-important question: What does this mean today?

In the very year of the Formula anniversary, 1977, the *News Bureau* of the Lutheran Council released results of a five-year study of “the function of doctrine and theology in light of the unity of the church.” The section on differences regarding the Confessions frankly states that some representatives of the Lutheran Church in America and of the American Lutheran Church “while affirming their continuing commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Lutheran Confessional writings, have tended to emphasize the historical character of these writings and to maintain the possibility of dissent from confessional positions on the fall of man into sin and the nature and interpretation of Holy Scripture.”⁶⁴ The church bodies named are, however, most insistent that subscription to the Confessions fulfills all requirements for fellowship and that there should be no “going beyond the Confessions.”

An even more disturbing situation than that posed by such very limited espousals of the Formula of Concord and other Confessions has been the increasing erosion of the very foundation on which the Confessions rest. These foundations are the Holy Scriptures. By their own admission the Confessions stand or fall with the Holy Scriptures. That is what every *quia*—and for that matter, every *quatenus*—subscription implies.

When there is a vitiation of the validity of the Bible passages, on which the doctrines set forth in the formula of Concord rest, then adherence to the Formula has actually ceased to be an issue of significant consequence. The historical-critical approach to the Scriptures endeavors just such vitiation. A situation is created in which it is very easy to call for acceptance of the formula of concord and the other Lutheran Confessions as the only condition for full fellowship relations. Who knows what those Confessions mean when there is insistence that they themselves fall under the old maxim of Heraclitus, *πάντα ῥεῖ*.

By the same token, it is extremely difficult for those who espouse a serious commitment to the Formula of Concord and the other Confessions to gain their point.⁶⁵ Perhaps the time has come for them to hear and heed the ultimate cry, *Sauve qui peut!* If this is deemed too pessimistic a view, let it be remembered that this writing fully acknowledges the possibility of a return and a rediving. There must, however, first be a return to a full

⁶⁰ *Minutes of the First Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America*, 1918, p 63.

⁶¹ Wolf, *Documents*, p 133.

⁶² *Minutes of the Ninth Biennial Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America*, 1934, p 416.

⁶³ Note 4 offers the location of Tappert’s essay. This quotation is found on p 29.

⁶⁴ *New Bureau* of LCUSA, Release 77–62 Dec. 1, 1977, p 8.

⁶⁵ K. Marquart underscores this difficulty in the section, “The Use of the Confessions as a Rabbit’s Foot,” in his *Anatomy of an Explosion* (Grand Rapids, 1978), pp 72–82.

commitment to the inspiration, inerrancy, clarity and authority of Scripture. Only then will confessional subscription have weight and meaning.

In any event, whether there is a second rediviving of the Formula of Concord in America or not, the church body sponsoring this writing and the book that includes it wants to maintain its espousal of the Formula of Concord as real and earnest.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod insists that its subscription to the Formula be taken seriously. It requires every one of the students at its theological seminary to study the document in depth, allotting as much required class time to this undertaking as to a study of the whole history of the Reformation. For almost two decades this important teaching assignment has been entrusted to Professor Carl Lawrenz, longtime head of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.⁶⁶

Wearing another of his hats, that of chairman of the Wisconsin Synod's Commission on Doctrinal Matters, Carl Lawrenz also took the floor of the 1971 synodical convention to expound briefly Article VI of the Formula which had just been read from beginning to end.⁶⁷ A controversy had developed in the church body over phrases in the kindergarten Sunday school manual involving the *tertius usus legis*.⁶⁸ The church body was disturbed. Precious convention time was utilized to look to the old symbol for clarification and settlement.

Perhaps this concluding anecdote tells us more than anecdotes usually do. Where in the world today are there to be found church bodies willing to give that much agenda time of their major conventions to a reading and expounding of the Formula of Concord? We wish there were many. We will always count it a privilege to be included in their number.

⁶⁶ While seminary president, Carl Lawrenz regarded his Formula of Concord course as a vital criterion in measuring the fitness of seminary students for the public ministry of the Wisconsin Synod. As a professor at the time of this writing, his word in this regard would still carry ultimate weight.

⁶⁷ The writer was not present but those who were recollect the event as a moving and unforgettable experience.

⁶⁸ See *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, 1971*, pp 114–117, for details. The account, however, does not mention the episode related in this writing.