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Editor's Note

As 2024 draws nears we cannot help but recall the events on this campus fifty years ago. Various volumes have been published in recent years that have helped clarify the significance of the walkout and its aftermath. This volume offers insight into a preceding document, namely, “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles.”

The title of the document witnesses its relationship to confessionalism. Before examining the Statement, the context is set by Joel Okamoto. “Making Sense of Confessionalism Today” was first published in this journal in 2015. Its pertinence to the topic of this edition prompts its return. Okamoto notes that confessionalism has been lost in the landscape of Christianity in America. There is plenty of discussion of evangelicals, but largely silence regarding confessionals outside of small circles. While that is concerning, Okamoto draws our attention to what confessionalism is and how confessing Christ will draw others to the beauty of confession. Using the New Testament confession “Jesus is Lord” as the standard for confession, Okamoto winsomely argues that confession is an activity. It is an active statement, and it engenders an active response in the life of the confessor. The Lutheran Confessions are shown to match this confessional identity.

Gerhard Bode then draws our attention specifically to the Statement with a historical overview of the immediately preceding events that led to it. Drawing on primary sources, attention is given to what occasioned LCMS President J. A. O. Preus II to request Ralph Bohlmann to draft the Statement. Though the original purpose for the Statement was to give guidelines for the Seminary Board of Control to handle the controversies that had arisen, the Statement would be shared with the Synod as a whole for study purposes. Eventually, it would be adopted by the Synod in its 1973 convention. While Bode’s work is the reporting of history based on primary sources, his summary conclusion sets forth how the Statement confessed the truth and beckons us to do the same.

Richard Serina also gives specific attention to the Statement. His focus is upon the nature of confessional subscription in the Statement. Plenty of historical background awaits the reader, though Serina is not focused on the few years leading up to the drafting of the document. A look back to confessional subscription within the early generations of the Synod proves significant as objectors to the Statement had

contended that it demanded a subscription that went beyond anything previously known in the history of the Synod. Walther, Pieper, Piepkorn, Danker, and more make appearances as the reader comes to grips with confessional subscription not only in the Statement, but within the preceding history of the LCMS.

The passage of fifty years places us in a different setting. Confessionalism may be lost to all but a few in America today. Yet the value of confession is not bound to the numbers of confessors, but to the object and sum of the confession. Jesus is Lord. At first, only a small number of confessors spoke such words. Yet those words changed the world. Jesus is Lord—that changes everything. Most certainly, that confession changes the one who confesses it. May Christ grant us boldness to confess as the faithful before us.

Kevin Golden
Dean of Theological Research and Publications

Articles

Making Sense of Confessionalism Today

Joel P. Okamoto



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Confessionalism Today

Like the Dow Jones Industrial Average, Lutheran confessionalism in the United States has gone up and down. Unlike the Dow, however, confessionalism has experienced more breakdowns than breakthroughs, more conflicts

than concords, more reverses than revivals. It is now approaching irrelevance. In a recent study, religious scholar D. G. Hart called Protestant—including Lutheran—confessionalism, “the lost soul of American Protestantism.”¹ “Lost” also describes confessionalism’s place on the usual map of American Christianity. National surveys of religion have categories for conservative evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and sometimes Mormons, but nothing corresponding to “confessionalism.” Neither did Richard John Neuhaus—who knew Lutheran confessionalism firsthand—when he wrote to American Protestants:

Switch from Presbyterian to Methodist, or start attending the evangelical “megachurch” in the neighboring exurb, and you will raise few eyebrows. People who move from one denomination to another, or from the denominational to the “nondenominational” (which is one of the biggest denominations), are exercising preferences that are so to speak, all in the religious family. Announce that you’re taking instruction to become a Catholic, however, and it is likely to prompt sharp questions. Not necessarily hostile questions, mind you, but questions of intense curiosity. Why

would you want to join “them”? Catholics in America have always been the religious and, to a significant extent, cultural “other.”²

More than this, Lutherans themselves are divided about confessionalism. All Lutherans in the United States acknowledge *that* the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions are authoritative. But differences become apparent when we see what this commitment entails. Differences are most apparent on “cultural issues” like sex and sexuality (e.g., ordination of women to the pastoral office and homosexuality) and in questions about corporate worship (e.g., what liturgical orders are confessional?).

The confusion on confessionalism, however, runs deeper. This confusion is evident in the Missouri Synod’s *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (the so-called Synodical Catechism).³ If anything reflects the depth and seriousness of the church body’s confessionalism, it is this elementary text.

So how does it do answer *who is the only true God?* The Synodical Catechism teaches:

The only true God is the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in one divine being (the Holy Trinity).⁴

One might defend this answer as doctrinally correct, but it fails in helping inexperienced, often young, learners to read and hear the Scriptures, and to pray, praise, and give thanks. Not only does a passage like John 3:16 become difficult (who is the “God” who so loved the world?) but even more passages like John 17:3, where Jesus himself prays about “the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent,” and 1 Corinthians 8:6, where Paul teaches, “But to us there is but one God, the Father . . . and one Lord Jesus Christ.” In the same way, this answer confuses rather than helps a child to know what she is doing when she prays: “Dear God . . .” To whom—or to what—is she praying? How should she know?

Turning from God to his Son—*Who is Jesus Christ?*—the Synodical Catechism teaches:

Jesus Christ is “true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary.”⁵

This response fails even to answer the question. Instead of identifying Jesus Christ, the response tells of his personal constitution in two natures.

Each generation had to ask itself whether it was still Lutheran.

To complicate matters, this takes place at a time when American society features not only varied Christian traditions and sects, but

ancient religions like Hinduism, new religions like Wicca, self-named religions like “Sheilaism,” and “none” at all.⁶ Now Christians have to be concerned not only about the identity of their god but also the “death of God.” As much as at any time in the past thousand years, Christians in the West need to be clear about a great deal, including the identity of their God and of Jesus Christ, his Son. It is little wonder that confessionalism has been called “the lost soul of American Protestantism.”

The most serious problems with confessionalism are our own. They are not about how Lutherans are misunderstood or misrepresented or ignored. They are about our own understanding of confessionalism and what it entails. Above all, the problems with confessionalism stem from taking the Confessions for granted.

This is neither a recent development nor a new discovery. Hermann Sasse recognized this in his 1951 essay, “Confession (Confessionalism) and Theology in the Missouri Synod.”⁷ He praised the Missouri Synod as “one of the very few great Lutheran churches which have the courage [to make] the whole Book of Concord her own.”⁸ But he also pointed out that confessionalism was a matter of faith. Therefore, each generation had to ask itself whether it was still Lutheran.

It is not the question concerning the strength of the external organization, the constitution, the growth of the congregation, or the school system. Nor is it the question with respect to the position of the Confession as the basis for the message and work of the church. Rather it is the question concerning the strength of the Lutheran faith in the sense of the genuine deep faith of the heart in the saving Gospel. It is the question whether, and to what extent this strongest confessional church of Lutheranism is a truly confessing church, a church in which the Lutheran Confession is not merely held in honor as the confession of the fathers and therefore in force and untouchable, it is the question whether the Confession is the confession of a living faith of the congregation, and therefore the life-principle of the church. It is the question which Missouri, even as every other church, must ask herself in humility and must answer before the face of God: *Are we still Lutheran?*⁹

Sasse’s answer was “No.” To show this he cited the case of P. E. Kretzmann, who had left the Missouri Synod over the question of church fellowship. Sasse noted how important and far-reaching this question was, because it “concerns the oneness of the church, and of a practice in conformity with this doctrine. For the essence of the Lutheran church becomes manifest in connection with the question, where the limits of church and church fellowship lie.”¹⁰ But how was it handled? Not in terms of CA VII, but only around the exegesis of Romans 16:17ff. The Confessions played no role.

What did this mean for the confessionalism of the Missouri Synod? “Here we must note a fact which at first glance seems hardly believable. *The Lutheran Confessions no longer play the role in the life and in the theological thinking of the Missouri Synod, in fact, of all of American Lutheranism by far which they played during the 19th century.*”¹¹

For Sasse, “The most necessary task . . . is this, that we learn again to read Luther and the Confessions.”¹² But this counsel presupposed Christendom, a social consensus about God and the Christian Church. Today this consensus is gone. Today our task is larger. We need to think again about what “confessionalism” means and how to make sense of it for our current situation.

For this, I propose that we think of “confessionalism” as understanding our identity and life as Christians in terms of the confession “Jesus is Lord.” This idea of confessionalism roots in something simple and basic: hearing and believing the gospel that gives rise to this confession of faith. This idea allows us both to articulate our accepted doctrines and practices in an organic, intuitive way and also to give clear guidance for articulating or testing other positions along the same confessional lines.

What Is “Confessionalism”?

To orient ourselves, let us consider a typical explanation of the Lutheran Church coming from the time that Sasse was writing about confessionalism:

The Lutheran Church is a confessional Church. Everybody who knows anything about us is aware that our Church must be classified as a confessional one. What does that mean? It means that in our Church we have confessions, or standards, or symbolical books, in which we set forth our faith and by which hence we are guided.¹³

Following this, we could define “confessionalism” as *understanding Christian identity and life in terms of these confessional documents.*

The idea of confessionalism, however, should be more secure. This one relies on documents that take us back only to the sixteenth century, not to the first century. They take us back only to Luther, Melancthon, Andreae, and Chemnitz, not to Peter, John, Paul, and the Lord Jesus Christ. These documents are exactly what we need to *describe* Lutheran confessionalism, but not to *define* it. In today’s situation, we need something more secure, something more fully catholic.

Specific *confessional documents* are unquestionably important, but none of them is essential to being Christian. *Confession of faith*, however, is both natural and essential to being Christian. Confession is natural in that it arises as a matter of course. Confessing Jesus arises from encountering him and believing in him, as Peter did (Mt 16:16). Confessing Jesus arises also from encountering those who question Jesus’ presence, authority, word, and work, as Peter also did (Acts 4:8–12). Confession is essential in the way Paul had in mind when he wrote: “If you confess [ὁμολογήσῃς]

with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9 ESV). Because confession is so clearly part of the Christian existence, viewing the Christian way of life in terms of confession—which is to say, adopting a confessional perspective—is natural for Christians.

We cannot settle, however, for the purely *formal* definition we would get were we simply to substitute “confession of faith” for “confessional documents.” Such a definition lacks any concrete content, so it could never get us to distinguish a truly confessional understanding of worship or explain a truly confessional position on justification. We need a *particular* Christian confession of faith.

One candidate is the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This follows Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16) and also the testimony of John in his gospel: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” (Jn 20:31). But I suggest the confession “Jesus is Lord.” Either confession will work. “Jesus is Lord,” however, fits several important New Testament formulae (e.g., Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11; 1 Cor 8:6; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 13:14), and also the ecumenical creeds and Lutheran confessions. The Apostles’ Creed confesses “And in Jesus Christ our Lord,” while the Niceno-Constantinopolitan (or Nicene) Creed confesses, “And in one Lord Jesus Christ.” Similarly both the Small and Large Catechisms teach that Jesus Christ is “Lord” under the Second Article.

And so we will define confessionalism as *Christian identity and life understood in terms of the confession “Jesus is Lord.”* This means that confessionalism answers questions such as “What is a Christian?” “What does it mean to be Christian?” and “Where do we find Christians?” in terms of confessing Jesus is Lord.

“Confessionalism” and the Creeds and Confessions of the Church

This conception of confessionalism roots it in something simple and essential. If someone were to demand the Lutheran Confession in ten words or less, you have seven to spare: “Jesus is Lord.”

Put like this, no one can deny or criticize confessionalism, but put like this, Lutheran confessionalism is merely a particular definition of “Christianity.” This

We should justify the claim, because, in the end, we should want to be ourselves confident and to show others confidently that our confessionalism is nothing other than a right way of being Christian.

is actually not trivial, because we certainly would want to claim that a specifically Lutheran confessionalism is nothing but “mere Christianity,” to borrow from C. S. Lewis. It is, however, much more fully elaborated than simply “Jesus is Lord.” We should not beg the question by asserting the catholicity of our confession. We should justify the claim, because, in the end, we should want to be ourselves confident and to show others confidently that our confessionalism is nothing other than a right way of being Christian. To do this, we should concern ourselves primarily with showing why and how anyone should embrace the creeds and confessions.

This task calls for explaining the way the confession developed in the creeds and confessions theologically rather than historically. This procedure is not difficult. It amounts to asking how the confession that Jesus is Lord arose in the first place, and asking whether those actions make sense of the creeds and confessions. But this procedure is often overlooked, because we usually and for good reasons trace their development in terms of questions, errors, and controversies. The Nicene Creed is usually associated with the Arian controversy, the Augsburg Confession with abuses and errors of the Roman Church, and the Formula with intra-Lutheran debates. The historical development is necessary for understanding and confessing the faith today, but focus on it means attention especially on the debated topics, not on the faith as a whole. In today’s situation, we need to show not simply how the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds are right about God, but more importantly how they are right about everything. This task calls for explaining their theological development.

The confession that Jesus is Lord arose from the preaching of the gospel itself. This preaching proclaims the coming of Jesus Christ to announce and to establish the reign of God. This understanding derives directly from the synoptic gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, and is reflected in Paul’s letter to the Romans:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) or “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with his heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth he confesses is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom 10:4–17 ESV).

We can see readily that this explanation works by examining the ecumenical creeds. All of them explicitly confess Jesus as Lord, and all of them relate his return to judge the living and the dead. The Nicene Creed also confesses “there will be no end to his kingdom.” In addition, each assumes the same account of God and creation, and each relates key features of this account (admittedly in varying degrees of completeness). The Apostles’ Creed confesses the Lord Jesus Christ and spells out basic features of the Christian story—creation; Christ’s conception, birth, death, resurrection, and return; and the Spirit and the life of the Church—and it identifies the God of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed does the same, and it also spells out some implications of calling Jesus “the Son of God” and also implications about the Holy Spirit. The Athanasian Creed confesses Christ’s suffering and death, resurrection, ascension, return, and final judgment, and it goes into still more detail about the nature and relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity—and about the Incarnation.

All of these features are consistent with and readily arise from the gospel. The gospel proclaims and teaches that God the Creator sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to announce and establish his reign over all things, and to call God’s chosen people to repent and follow him. For this reason he was crucified. But God raised him from the dead and exalted him in the heavens. In the present, Christ continues to be proclaimed and to act in the power of the Holy Spirit through the one holy Church. And on the last day, Christ will return to judge the living and the dead and whose reign will be everlasting. This gospel naturally raises questions about the relationship of the one God, Jesus Christ, his Son, and the Holy Spirit, from which comes the doctrine of the Trinity, and also about Jesus Christ’s personal constitution, from which comes the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The key question for a specifically Lutheran confessionalism is whether the same explanation about confession arising from the gospel that proclaims Jesus as Lord applies also to the Lutheran confessions. Giving answer is more complicated for three reasons: (1) The Book of Concord is not a single coherent text but consists of several diverse documents. (2) Much of it is devoted to controversies and confusions of its own time. (3) The confessions are much more elaborate. But we can justify in principle, if not in every detail, the account of Lutheran confessionalism proposed

here by considering whether we can explain the *doctrinal* claims of the Augsburg Confession in the same way as we explained “Jesus is Lord” and the ecumenical creeds. This is because the Book of Concord itself regards the Augsburg Confession as the Lutheran “Symbol” and the primary Lutheran confession of faith.¹⁴ Moreover, we can simplify matters further by focusing on the first part of the Augsburg Confession, which contains a summary of preaching and teaching.¹⁵

But before starting we should acknowledge that this procedure is appropriate. The Preface to the Book of Concord shows us that the confessors regarded the Reformation as an event in salvation history and the Augsburg Confession as a response to the gospel and the saving Word:

In these last days of this transitory world the Almighty God, out of his immeasurable love, grace, and mercy for the human race, has allowed *the light of his holy gospel and his Word that alone grants salvation* to appear and shine forth purely, unalloyed and unadulterated out of the superstitious, papistic darkness for the German nation, our beloved fatherland. As a result, a short confession was assembled out of the divine, apostolic, and prophetic Scripture. In 1530 at the Diet of Augsburg it was presented in both German and Latin to the former Emperor of most praiseworthy memory, Charles V, by our pious and Christian predecessors; it was set forth for all estates of the Empire and was disseminated and has resounded publicly through all Christendom in the whole wide world.¹⁶

Like the ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession confesses “the Lord Christ” and relates key features of the Christian story: God as Creator; the birth, death, resurrection, and return of Christ; and the Holy Spirit, the Church, the means of grace, and the last day. But like the whole Book of Concord, the Augsburg Confession is significantly more detailed than the ecumenical creeds. Even if we restrict ourselves to the doctrinal articles (I–XXI), which work from God (I) and Christ (III) to the last day (XVII), we still find it makes claims about sin, justification, good works, the Church and her life (means of grace, orders, rites), and civil government. To be sure, because of historical circumstances, we should not expect our theological articulation to fit exactly the articulation of the Augsburg Confession. But it should be close in explicit content, and consistent in any case. Moreover, the articulation of different claims should show clear connections between the different articles.

Where do we begin? Obviously, it should be justification (CA IV). The gospel teaches that all authority and judgment (Mt 28:18; Jn 5:19–28), including the authority to forgive sins (Mt 9:2–8; Jn 20:21–23), has been given to Jesus Christ, and that he will return to judge the living and the dead. Authority of this scope makes

Jesus “Lord.” Authority of this scope also puts every human creature on notice: their standing before God is no matter of their efforts, merits, or intentions, because their justification before God depends entirely on Jesus Christ. We see this authority play out when Peter proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ on Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41). After recounting who Jesus was and what he had done, Peter declared to the crowds that God had raised Jesus from the death they had perpetrated and made him Lord and Christ. The news strikes his hearers hard, because they know that when he returns, they will be among the first he will destroy. So they ask how they might be saved. Peter proclaims repentance and forgiveness through baptism in Jesus’s name. Thousands believe the message and are baptized. This, of course, was only the beginning. The same message about Christ crucified and raised was proclaimed and continues to be proclaimed, and on that account repentance for the forgiveness of sins has been proclaimed in his name to all nations (Lk 24:47). And through this “it [comes] to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21 ESV, quoting Joel 2:32). And we learn from this that if we ask about how one is justified, that it must be solely by grace. If Jesus is Lord and all authority is his, then one’s righteousness depends entirely on him.

From this point, everything else unfolds quickly and easily. The bare truth about justification by grace comforts no one, because it renders one completely passive. The crowds on Pentecost knew they were passive—they had nowhere to run and no excuses to offer—and so they feared the wrath of the Lord and sought to be saved. More generally, the idea that one is completely passive in justification is in itself not gracious, as the concept of election clearly illustrates. It is so difficult that it compels people to explain it away (e.g., synergism) or to deny it altogether. Their rejection, however, reveals their innate sinfulness, that is, their innate lack of fear and trust in God—which justifies the Confession’s positions on sin as a condition and on the will as captive without God (CA II, XVIII). Neither bad theology nor unbelief can reconcile sinners to God. Only the preaching of grace in the Word and by the administration of sacraments can do this, because they are means by which God gives faith by the Holy Spirit (CA V). They give faith, however, not by infusion but

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by being words and signs of God's gracious favor that Jesus Christ by his authority instituted and commanded (CA IX, X, XI, XII). These words and signs of grace, like all promises, awaken and strengthen faith (CA XIII). How are these words spoken and these signs made? By those specially called to speak and act on behalf of the Lord (CA XIV). What are the results? From each of the justified come good works (CA VI, XX). Works cannot justify, but the faith that does justify also produces good deeds. Out of all the justified comes the church, which is the assembly of all who believe in Jesus Christ. Therefore the Church's unity does not depend on humanly devised traditions or rites but simply on the pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments (CA VII, VIII, XV). And although they wait for Christ's return in glory and in the hope of the resurrection of the dead, believers may participate in the civil government, which God has ordained for the present evil age (CA XVI).

Once again, I have not accounted for every feature or accent of the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession. This is because they were composed with particular questions and concerns in mind. They were not developed with our purpose in mind. But in fact we have accounted for nearly everything, and nothing in these articles has been contradicted or made irrelevant. This approach has shown us how to see the Augsburg Confession as an articulation of the confession "Jesus is Lord," and in an intuitive way that shows a unity in the articles of faith.

How Does Confession Work?

The account of confessionalism I am proposing makes sense of the Creeds and Confessions of the church as they answer such questions as "What is a Christian?" "What does it mean to be Christian?" and "Where do we find Christians?" in terms of the confession "Jesus is Lord." The Creeds and Confessions, however, do more than identify Christians and summarize what they believe and do. They also *regulate* their faith and life. They have a normative function. This normative function bears two often-controversial topics: the confessional principle and confessional subscription. The confessional principle—the idea that churches have the right to demand ministers to pledge themselves and conform their ministries to the confessional documents—depends on the confessions *having* normative authority.¹⁷ The question of confessional subscription is a closely related question: it asks about the *extent to* which the confessions have normative authority.¹⁸ These topics make it important that we explain how confessions are normative.

*By making the confession,
you bind yourself to what
you confess.*

When one confesses, one declares a commitment. The act of confession is like "stepping forward" or "standing up and being counted." You step forward for a person, and by that act you commit yourself to the person. If

he goes down, you go down. You stand up for a person, and by that act you commit yourself to that person. If she goes on, you go on. Similarly, you confess your faith in someone, and by that act you commit yourself to believing in him. If he comes through, you come through.

It is striking that simply by the act of confession—by saying certain words—you do something. Those who utter the sentence: “I confess that Jesus is Lord” have *confessed*. Those people have by their confession committed themselves to Jesus Christ. Confessors commit themselves to Jesus Christ, putting themselves under his disposal, and positioning themselves in a certain way against everybody else. Christ had called for precisely this when he said, “Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father” (Mt 10:32), just as Paul also had in mind when he said, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord . . .” (Rom 10:9). To borrow from the Small Catechism on Jesus the Lord, one confesses “that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.”¹⁹ Christians today and in every age do so by the very act of confession.

But how can mere words do this? Confession is an example of what philosopher J. L. Austin calls a “performative.”²⁰ According to Austin, performatives “all will have, as it happens, humdrum verbs in the first person singular present indicative active. Utterances can be found, satisfying these conditions, yet such that: A. they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate [sic] anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something.”²¹

Some examples of what Austin called “explicit” performative sentences include:²² I promise to take out the trash. I bet five dollars that “Goofy” will win the race. I order you to leave the room.

What happens when people utter these sentences? They are promising to take out the trash; they are betting five dollars on a race; they are ordering someone to leave. They are not, by contrast, describing a promise, reporting a bet, or recounting an order. They are doing those things. As Austin puts it, “There is something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering*.”²³

Confession works in the same way. When people utter the sentence, “I confess that Jesus is Lord,” they are confessing. They are not stating a fact about Jesus. They are enacting a commitment by speaking. By making the confession, you bind yourself to what you confess. This is how confession has normative force.

But what about confessional documents? It is one thing to say that uttering “I confess that Jesus is Lord” and other sentences of first person singular present indicative active are confessions and therefore binding and normative. It is quite another to maintain the same force on entire documents, especially when they are not composed entirely or even mostly in such sentences. Can we account for this?

We can in two ways. First, we should know that performatives need not be in the

first person singular present indicative active. For instance, performative sentences can use plural verbs: *We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor*. They also can be rendered in the passive voice: *Passengers are hereby advised that all flights to Phoenix have been cancelled*. And a performative can be constructed by adding a separate operative clause or sentence: *I'll come to see you next week, and that's a promise*.²⁴

This last construction is most relevant for us, because it shows how entire documents can be made confessions in the strict sense being proposed. We see precisely this construction in the final words of the preface of the Augsburg Confession: As we herewith make public witness and appeal. This is our confession and that of our people, article by article, as follows.²⁵ This is what we hereby also publicly declare.²⁶

Second, as Austin points out, there is another common way to form a performative: by signing, that is, by *subscription*. To use one of Austin's own examples, the performative "I, John Jones, warn you that the bull is dangerous" could be conveyed also by this notice: This bull is dangerous. (Signed) John Jones.²⁷

The Book of Concord does precisely this, but in much greater detail, as befits an official document:

In conclusion, to repeat once again for the last time, we are not minded to manufacture anything new through this work of concord nor to depart in either substance or expression from the divine truth . . . On the contrary, by the grace of the Holy Spirit we intend to persist and remain unanimously in this truth and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it . . . In testimony whereof we have with united hearts subscribed [*unterschrieben; subscripsimus*] our names hereto and ordered our privy seals impressed thereon.²⁸

There remain important questions about *how* the creeds and confessions are regulative. But those will have to wait.²⁹ At this point let's return to the questions about the confessional principle and confessional subscription.

When Charles Krauth dealt with the confessional principle, his question was whether a church could insist on it. He showed why it could. But our question is different: *Should* confessional churches insist on it? We know that they can, but should they? The answer now should be clear: yes, they should. Just as the confession that Jesus is Lord is necessary, and that this confession is binding, so also the creeds and confessions of the church, because they elaborate just this confession, also are necessary and binding. From this the answer about confessional subscription also obtains. Should churches insist on an unconditional subscription? Yes, because the creeds and confessions of the church are nothing more and nothing less than ways of confessing that Jesus is Lord.

These views may strike some as more restrictive than the confessional principle and confessional subscription are usually thought of, because they make these questions matters of confession itself rather than practical concern. Such objections are mistaken: matters of confession are matters of practical concern. (The principle is not commutative: matters of practical concern are not necessarily matters of confession.) This proposal does recast the *argument* and restates the *position*, but these issues have always been practical *because* they are confessional. Those who object to these views are objecting to confessing Jesus as Lord, and this confession has practical implications. From the congregations' standpoint, which would want a pastor who doesn't confess Jesus as they do? Similarly, from the pastors' standpoint, who would want to serve a congregation that doesn't confess Jesus as they do?

But for this reason, this approach also may be less liable to using the confessional principle in a restrictive way or confessional subscription legalistically. It asks everyone to track everything back to the basic confession and from there to the gospel. It should forestall a lot of question begging (although promises to that effect are regularly broken!).

What Does It Mean To Be Confessional?

I have proposed that we consider "confessionalism" as understanding our identity and life as Christians in terms of the confession "Jesus is Lord." This proposal roots confessionalism primarily in hearing and believing the gospel that gives rise to this basic Christian confession. Its justification is "theological" in the sense that it makes sense of the creeds and confessions as elaborations of this confession, but it might also be called "evangelical" or "gospel-centered" because I propose that this message, which gives rise to people confessing Jesus as Lord, is also the message that gave rise and is embodied in creeds and confessions. I traced out an admittedly limited justification along these lines with the doctrinal articles of the Augsburg Confession, not only because this is the prime Lutheran confession of faith, but also because the Book of Concord itself presented the Augsburg Confession as a response to God letting the light of the gospel and the saving Word appear and shine on them. And I dealt with the concept of confession itself to make sense of the normative character of the creeds and confessions.

But the topic of confessionalism has many ramifications. Along the way I jumped over or stepped around things, like different construals of the current situations, alternative conceptions of confessionalism, and other basic ways to confess our faith. In front of us there is still much to be seen, discussed, and tried. As mentioned already, we should see *how* the confessions are regulative.

Confessionalism Should Be "Caught," Not Just "Taught"

Recall this explanation of the Lutheran Church:

The Lutheran Church is a confessional Church. Everybody who knows anything about us is aware that our Church must be classified as a confessional one. What does that mean? It means that in our Church we have confessions, or standards, or symbolical books, in which we set forth our faith and by which hence we are guided.³⁰

How would “everybody who knows anything” be aware of this? Not merely because we say so, but because it is so plainly in sight. This kind of knowledge is, as the saying goes, “caught” rather than “taught.”

We should hope that “everybody who knows anything about us” today would know that our churches are “confessional.” But it is more important that they see what confessionalism is supposed to entail than whether the word comes to mind.

In his time Sasse urged the reading of Luther and the Confessions. Certainly I concur, but in post-Christendom America, we need to do more:

- Diligently preach the gospel in its fullness, not only some of it.
- Faithfully administer the sacraments, which means paying close practical attention to evangelism and baptism, catechesis and the Lord’s Supper, pastoral care and absolution.
- Fully explore the gospel’s implications for life, witness, and theological reflection.
- Embody our confession of faith, which means asking “What does the church look like that believes X?”

Confessionalism Is Apocalyptic

My proposal for confessionalism is like every other legitimate candidate in that it purports to be rooted in the gospel that proclaims Jesus as the one whom God called his Son and appointed to rule over all things. Therefore, along with every other proposal, it must be said that confessionalism is apocalyptic, because the gospel is apocalyptic: it announces that the world as we know it is coming to an end and no one can escape. The confessional church preaches repentance, and she stakes everything on God’s grace, because it is God who is coming.

Hermeneutics

In “Toward a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions,” Charles Arand argues, “the debate over the interpretation of the confessions today is, in fact, a debate over which texts or contexts should be used in order to interpret the confessions.”³¹ But these debates are interminable, because different parties work with different premises.³² So it makes no sense to wait out the conversation.

My own proposal ignores all such debates. But waiting it out does not mean sitting it out. Obviously this confessional proposal has an implied but undeveloped

hermeneutical proposal, and not only about the creeds and confessions, but also the Scriptures. Following Arand, this hermeneutical proposal could be called “canonical” because it seeks to interpret the confessions in light of the confession “Jesus is Lord” and the gospel that gives rise to the confession. Perhaps this hermeneutic, once more fully developed, will show that this proposal is deeply flawed, but in any case, any evaluation of this proposal and any other proposal for confessionalism has to take up this work and enter the debate over interpretation.

*We should hope that
“everybody who knows
anything about us” today
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churches are “confessional.”*

Appropriating the Lutheran Confessions for Our Time

In concluding we recall Sasse once more. He said that “a truly confessing church” is one “in which the Lutheran Confession is not merely held in honor as the confession of the fathers and therefore in force and untouchable.”³³ Confessionalism means making the confessions one’s own. Already I suggested embodying the confessions—asking what it looks like to believe this article or that. “What does the church look like that believes in the doctrine of justification of grace through faith?”

Luther suggested how to do this with his explanations to the articles of the Creed. Following Luther’s lead we could account for and explain the confessional articles for our own time. There is an Apology of the Augsburg Confession, and that should remain in force. But there is no reason why there shouldn’t be a twenty-first-century Apology. This would not be a revision of the canonical Apology (nor would it ignore it), but a contemporary explanation for the current situation. This would have two benefits. First, it would be a way to appropriate the confessions as confessions—not merely as doctrinal standards or theological references. This could open a fresh appreciation for aspects of our confession, and at any rate would help us make them our own. Second, it would be constructive rather than defensive, proactive rather than reactive. Borrowing from Hart, confessionalism is also the “losing soul of American Protestantism,” too often giving up on the future, even the present, and digging in with fixed language and forms and practices from the past. Making the confessions our own by seeking to explain and defend them for our time and place would help us to look forward.

What might this look like? It might begin like this:

Article IV: Justification

The fourth article considered only the justification of the sinner.

“[I]t is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith.”³⁴

Undoubtedly sin and forgiveness are essential features of the Christian’s life and central concerns for the Christian Church. But the topic of “justification” is much broader. It is at least as broad as human experience. Everyone lives by judging and under judgment. Everyone wants to do right and have things done right and be done right by. Moreover, no one needs to be taught about justification. Every small child puts everything under judgment and comes to know that she is under judgment.

Since God is the creator, who made all things and governs all activity, he also subjects all things to his judgment. And for this reason, the Christian doctrine of justification rightly—is justified—in taking this into account. Moreover, in the present time, when God himself is subject to judgment and, so to speak, put to death, there may be much value in doing this. We should not neglect the justification of the sinner, but we are justified in putting it into its larger context, just as we should ask about what we are doing in this very article that justifies itself.

Endnotes

- 1 D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).
- 2 Richard John Neuhaus, *Catholic Matters: Confusion, Controversy, and the Splendor of Truth* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 4.
- 3 *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008).
- 4 Questions 19 and 94.
- 5 Question 118. I gladly acknowledge that the entire "Explanation" is undergoing a thorough review and revision.
- 6 "Sheilaism" comes from Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 235.
- 7 Hermann Sasse, "Confession (Confessionalism) and Theology In the Missouri Synod (1951)" in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kloha and Ronald R. Feuerhahn, Concordia Seminary Monograph Series, no. 2. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 1995).
- 8 Sasse, "Confession," 190.
- 9 Sasse, "Confession," 202. Emphasis original.
- 10 Sasse, "Confession," 203.
- 11 Sasse, "Confession," 205. Emphasis original. Sasse also observed: "Even in the churches of the Synodical Conference the confessions are now the undebatable or no longer debatable presuppositions of the church rather than the expression of the great consensus of faith."
- 12 Sasse, "Confession," 220.
- 13 William Arndt, "The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (1949): 674.
- 14 See "Preface to the Book of Concord," 3, 16. See also FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 4 and FC SD, Rule and Norm, 5. Note also that the Formula refers to Lutheran churches as "churches of the Augsburg Confession" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 2). English references to the creeds and Lutheran Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). German and Latin references are taken from *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 12th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), cited as BSLK.
- 15 CA, "Conclusion of Part One," 1.
- 16 "Preface to the Book of Concord," 2. Emphasis added. This key expression, "the light of his holy gospel and his Word that alone grants salvation," is rendered in German as "*das Licht seines heiligen Evangelii und alleinseligmachenden Worts*" and in the Latin as "lucem evangelii et verbi sui (per quod solum veram salutem accipimus)." BSLK 3. Cf. Irene Dingel, "The Preface of *The Book of Concord* as a Reflection of Sixteenth-Century Confessional Development," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 383–384.
- 17 On the confessional principle, see Charles Krauth, "The Confessional Principle of the Conservative Reformation," in *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology: As Represented in the Augsburg Confession and in the History and Literature of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 162–200, reprint ed. with introduction by Lawrence R. Rast Jr. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007).
- 18 On confessional subscription, see C. F. W. Walther, "Why Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947): 241–252.
- 19 SC, "Creed," 4.
- 20 See especially J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, second ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). See also Austin, "Performative Utterances," in *Philosophical Papers*, 220–239 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). For a persuasive account of how performatives work, see John R. Searle, "How Performatives Work," in *Consciousness and Language*, 156–179 (Cambridge:

- Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 21 Austin, *How to Do Things*, 5.
- 22 Austin, *How to Do Things*, 5.
- 23 Austin, *How to Do Things*, 60.
- 24 These examples are drawn from Searle, "How Performatives Work," 159 (although he alludes to the Declaration of Independence).
- 25 CA, Preface [German], 24. ". . . davon wir hiemit öffentlich bezeugen und protestieren. Und seind das unser und der Unsern Benkenntnus, wie unterschiedlich von Artikeln zu Artikeln hernach folgt" (BSLK 49).
- 26 CA, Preface [Latin], 24. ". . . de quo hic etiam publice protestamur" (BSLK 49).
- 27 Austin, *How to Do Things*, 62.
- 28 "Preface to the Book of Concord," 23, 25. See also BSLK 15.
- 29 For an introduction to some relevant questions and useful insights, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984); William A. Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); and Robert L. Fossett, *Upon this Rock: The Nature of Doctrine from Antifoundationalism Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).
- 30 Arndt, "The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions," 674.
- 31 Charles P. Arand, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Journal* 28 (2002): 10.
- 32 The echo of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) is intentional. His historicist approach to accounting for modern moral discourse may have some promise for accounting for modern confessionalism.
- 33 Sasse, "Confession," 202.
- 34 CA IV.1.

Towards A Walking Together The Origin and Purpose of “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles”

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Introduction

Scanning the landscape of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod history in the twentieth century offers much to the viewer. Certain features on the horizon stand out, ridges and furrows marking the ups and downs, contour lines that curve. Yet the lines following the points are connected,

stretching backwards and forwards, past and present and towards the future. There is plenty to observe. During the twentieth century the LCMS became Americanized—at least at a faster pace than in the previous century. There were benefits. Synod grew by leaps and bounds, doubling its numbers over a few decades. Foreign mission work increased in earnest with the synod sending servants across the globe like never before. Towards the middle of the century—in 1947—synod celebrated one hundred years, its “Century of Grace,” and looked forward confident of God’s enduring faithfulness. Synod charged ahead, but it was also changing its outlook, repositioning itself on the map of American Christianity. It became more actively engaged in the ecumenical movement, for instance, working toward official fellowship with other churches, even while straining relationships with long-time Lutheran friends. Some wanted the synod to open itself to modern theological scholarship—especially at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis—in the hope of helping the church meet the challenges and pressures of its time. And within the synod itself was a growing conflict over church doctrine that tried and tested the synod in the 1970s in a way it had never experienced before.¹

Perhaps it was difficult because the experience was new to synod members at the time. Certainly, it was hard because of the nature of the conflict and the doctrines involved: the person and work of Jesus Christ, God's word of law and gospel, the Scriptures, original sin, and other teachings, all impacting the mission of the church and the message it proclaimed. Perhaps the situation was difficult because of the way the synod had tried to handle internal controversy in its past—by advising one another on the basis of God's word and convincing one another of its truth—not always an easy task. Even put to the test was the synod's constitution, under which the union of the synod existed in the mutual commitment by its members to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. What does it mean to hold to the synod's confessional basis?

A key feature on the landscape of the LCMS in the twentieth century signaling a decisive moment in the course of its controversy in the 1970s, was the drafting of "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles." No single document was more effective at bringing resolution to the synod conflict, and no document likely met more opposition than "A Statement."

The purpose of this brief study is to describe the origin of "A Statement," with attention to its composition and initial purposes, leading to its adoption by the LCMS as a doctrinal statement at its 1973 convention in New Orleans, fifty years ago. This study does not intend to present a full examination of the controversy in the LCMS during those years, and it does not purport to offer a comprehensive analysis of the doctrinal content of "A Statement." Rather it attempts simply to shed a little light on the inception of the document and its objectives.

The Fact-Finding Committee

In April 1970, LCMS President J. A. O. Preus (1920–1994) announced the appointment of a Fact-Finding Committee (FFC) to examine the theological stance and doctrine of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.² The announcement was met with disdain on the Seminary campus. Seminary President John H. Tietjen (1928–2004) called the effort a "fishing expedition" that would "put a cloud of suspicion over every member of the faculty in a process that seemed to assume that they were guilty until they proved themselves innocent."³ Tietjen noted that the synod president's supervisory authority was to be carried out, in the case of Concordia Seminary, through the Seminary's Board of Control, a point which Preus acknowledged.⁴ Preus's instructions to the FFC were clear. Its purpose was not to render a judgement in the matter. It was simply to "obtain the facts and not question the orthodoxy of the man being questioned."⁵ As FFC chair Paul Zimmerman (1918–2014) maintained, the inquiry was to conduct interviews and gather materials, producing a report on what it found so that the Synod at large could have a better understanding of what professors were teaching at Concordia Seminary. "The task of

the committee was to translate the meaning and import of the theological language into terms that the non-specialist could understand.”⁶

Faculty interviews took place between December 1970 and March 1971 at synod headquarters, with a majority of the faculty participating under protest. Members of the faculty majority maintained that they were not obligated to teach in accord with doctrinal resolutions and doctrinal statements adopted by Synod, but only in accord with the Scriptures and the Confessions, as required by the LCMS Constitution. The FFC respected that position and questioned the faculty only on the Scriptures and the Confessions.⁷

In June 1971, the Fact-Finding Committee submitted its report to Preus. While its aim was to gather facts and compile material in an objective way, the FFC did know what questions to ask. For years, the controversy and its arguments on various sides had made clear which doctrines were being contested. Yet a thorough inquiry was still needed to collect facts and lay out contrasting positions on doctrinal questions, to find a way toward resolution and unity. The results of the FFC’s work highlighted the issues involved, as can be seen in the content outline of its report:

The Findings by Topics:

- a. The Holy Scriptures
- b. The Inerrancy of the Scriptures
- c. The Authority of the Scriptures
- d. The Gospel
- e. The Historical-Critical Method
 - 1. A General Statement
 - 2. The Historical Value of the Biblical Accounts
 - 3. The Determination of Intent of the Biblical Authors
 - 4. The Interpretation of Miracles
 - 5. The Authenticity of the Words of Jesus
 - 6. The Interpretation of Messianic Prophecy
 - 7. The Doctrine of Angels
 - 8. The Question of Authorship of Biblical Books
- f. Permissiveness
 - 1. Miracles
 - 2. Christology
 - 3. Creation and Fall of Man
 - 4. Virgin Birth of Christ
 - 5. Physical Resurrection of Christ
 - 6. Lord’s Supper
 - 7. Seminary Curriculum

- g. The Ordination of Women to the Pastoral Ministry
- h. The Third Use of the Law
- i. Commitment to the Lutheran Confessions
- j. The Seminary's Responsibility Toward the Synod's Doctrinal Stance⁸

The outline of doctrinal issues in the FFC report is important in this study, since ultimately “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” would directly address many of the problems listed in it.

1971 Synod Convention in Milwaukee

At the Milwaukee convention in July 1971 the next stage of the controversy was set. While the constitutionality of the appointment of the Fact-Finding Committee was discussed at length in floor committee hearings and on the convention floor, the Synod affirmed the opinion of the Committee on Constitutional Matters which had found the FFC constitutional.⁹ The convention also adopted a resolution supporting President Preus's judgment and action in appointing the FFC, commending his “pastoral concern for doctrinal unity and purity.”¹⁰ Regarding the FFC findings, the synod directed the Concordia Seminary Board of Control to receive the report, to take appropriate action on the basis of it, commending or correcting where necessary, and report progress to the President of Synod and to the Board for Higher Education. The convention also instructed the Synod President to report on all these actions within one year.¹¹

In his report to the Milwaukee convention, President Preus had raised the issue of doctrinal statements and their place in the synod. He noted that synod's doctrinal statements are binding on members because the synod has understood such statements as being in conformity with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. In times of misunderstanding or controversy, doctrinal statements have interpreted the standards of faith for the contemporary situation. In these cases, synod has attempted to help its members remain faithful to God's word and to the confessional teaching in a way that supports and strengthens their mutual confession of faith.

In times of misunderstanding or controversy, doctrinal statements have interpreted the standards of faith for the contemporary situation.

Preus explained that this does not put the action of a convention or majority rule above God's word. Doctrinal statements and resolutions do not have the same status in the church as the Scriptures and the Confessions. Like church councils, synod conventions can and do err; no claims of absolute infallibility are made regarding them, and the synod has established

procedures for dissent from such statements. Nevertheless, it was imperative that the synod address the matter of its doctrinal stance. Preus came to the key point before the convention:

The basic question we need to answer once again at this convention is simple and unbiased: *Does an evangelical and confessional church body such as ours have the right and duty to adopt doctrinal statements which are in complete conformity with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions—and then expect her pastors, teachers, and professors, out of faithfulness to Scripture and the Confessions, to believe, teach, and confess according to such statement?* In the past, the answer has been a resounding *yes*. (emphasis original)¹²

Preus went on to explain what was at stake in this issue and why it was imperative that the synod take action to address the problem:

Why is this matter of so great importance, and why has it been given so much attention at this point? There are two reasons. In the first place, there is a theological reason, namely, that our church must remain faithful to the Word of God. The church lives by and out of and with the Word. We have no other purpose than to proclaim the great message of reconciliation. This is not a manmade message. It is a Scripture-based message, a message that we have pledged ourselves always to proclaim. The one task of the church is to preach Christ, and we do not know Christ apart from the Scriptures. When the Scriptures are obscured, Christ will be obscured. We have, therefore, a very great theological reason for insisting on sound doctrine.

There is also a second reason. That is an ethical and moral one. The members of our church have been brought up to believe that our pastors are truly faithful to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. They read synodically adopted doctrinal resolutions and expect their pastors, teachers and professors to teach in harmony with them. Our people expect that our future pastors and teachers will be taught according to the doctrinal position of our church in our seminaries and colleges. They expect their pastors and teachers to preach and teach according to the official position of our church. They expect their servants in administrative offices or staff positions to produce materials and carry out their duties in harmony with the Synod's official position. Our people have a right to expect this of their pastors, teachers, professors, and officials.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, such expectations are not disappointed, for God has blessed our Synod with many faithful servants. But it is clearly unethical and unloving for our pastors and teachers to violate the legitimate expectations of our people.¹³

As the Milwaukee convention proceeded, it made clear its historic doctrinal position and its intention to maintain it. It reaffirmed its commitment to its confessional basis in Article II of its constitution and to uphold doctrinal resolutions adopted by the synod in its past.¹⁴ The convention recognized the desirability of formulating doctrinal statements on the basis of the Scriptures to present the teachings of the Scriptures to apply to contemporary issues. Synod stated that such doctrinal formulations are subordinate to the Lutheran Confessions yet reaffirmed the resolutions of recent conventions that the synod “honor and uphold the synodically adopted statements as valid interpretations of Christian doctrine.”¹⁵

Planning for a doctrinal statement, or at least laying out the case for the adoption of one, was in the works at the Milwaukee convention.

The Origins of “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles”

While the possibility of formulating a doctrinal statement to address the controversy in the Synod remained on the table, the first step was for the Concordia Seminary Board of Control to review the findings of the FFC and to take action on the basis of it, per the resolution of the synod in Milwaukee.¹⁶ As the board began the work of reading through the report, hundreds of pages of transcripts, and the copious collection of documents gathered by the FFC, some members of the board who were not trained in theology requested from President Preus a standard or guideline by which to evaluate the doctrinal positions of the Seminary faculty.¹⁷ After consideration, Preus asked Ralph Bohlmann to prepare materials to assist the board towards this end.

Ralph Bohlmann (1924–2016) was a professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, but on leave during the early 1970s, deployed to serve as executive secretary of the synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR). In his position with the CTCR, Bohlmann assisted the office of synod president in the area of church relations and as a “house theologian” at synod headquarters.¹⁸ Although “A Statement” ultimately was issued by the Office of the Synod President, and has been referred to as the “Preus Statement,” Bohlmann publicly acknowledged that he was the primary author of the document.¹⁹ Given his role at the synod office and his familiarity, as a faculty member, with the doctrinal problems at Concordia Seminary, Bohlmann was uniquely placed to serve as the drafter of a document attempting to address the theological issues in the controversy.

Bohlmann made clear that the original purpose of “A Statement” was not to introduce a new doctrinal position for the synod. Rather the intention was to offer

guidelines for Concordia Seminary’s Board of Control in dealing with the theological problems among faculty members, helping them as they worked through the nearly one-thousand pages of material gathered by the Fact-Finding Committee.²⁰ As Bohlmann noted in a later discussion:

What Dr. Preus was trying to do in that “Statement” was to illustrate to these Board members not only where The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod stood, doctrinally and theologically, but to demonstrate that the theological questions in this controversy were not just questions about the personal theology of J. A. O. Preus and fifty faculty members, but that the theology that he was trying to uphold and defend and promote with the Fact-Finding investigation was, in fact, the position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.²¹

For this reason, Bohlmann noted, the document emerged, in part, from doctrinal resolutions adopted by synod in the past, and from official statements of synod’s doctrinal position throughout its history.²²

Prior to drafting “A Statement,” Bohlmann reviewed the materials gathered by the FFC. That work helped him identify the major doctrinal categories that would serve as the articles in “A Statement.”²³

In collecting and organizing materials for the compiling of “A Statement” Bohlmann enlisted the help of Dr. Lewis W. Spitz Sr. (1895–1996) and Dr. Walter R. Roehrs (1901–1999), both emeritus professors at Concordia Seminary, assisted by theological students from the seminary. They reviewed doctrinal resolutions adopted by the synod in its history, along with synodical statements and study documents, and compiled relevant

passages from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, much of which was later included in the “Study Edition” of “A Statement” issued by the CTCR in November 1972. This material stating the synod’s theological position on the topics in question, would form the doctrinal basis of the document, ensuring that no innovative teaching was introduced. In its final form, “A Statement” is largely a composite of doctrinal resolutions previously adopted by the synod. The material from the FFC report informed the positions rejected by the synod in “A Statement.”

When it came to drafting the text of the document, Bohlmann worked alone.

Bohlmann was uniquely placed to serve as the drafter of a document attempting to address the theological issues in the controversy.

He wrote the penultimate draft of “A Statement” on a yellow legal pad over two successive nights in his Seminary-owned home located at 17 Arundel Place, St. Louis, just off campus. The manuscript was typed up at the synod office and delivered to President Preus. The whole project was completed in a period of a few weeks.²⁴

The President Bohlmann files in the Concordia Seminary Archives contain several manuscripts and typewritten documents which appear to be various drafts of what ultimately would be produced as “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles.”

Outlines of Drafts

“A Statement”: First Draft Outline

Introduction

I. Christ as Savior and Lord

II. Law and Gospel

III. Holy Scripture as Rule and Norm

IV. Confessional Subscription

V. Gospel and Bible

VI. The Authority of Scripture

VII. The Inspiration of Scripture

VIII. The Unity of Scripture

IX. The Canon of Scripture

X. The Inerrancy of Scripture

XI. The Relationship of New Testament and Old Testament

XII. Historical Methods of Biblical Interpretation

XIII. Literary Form and Truth

XIV. The Mission of the Church

XV. The Basis for Fellowship

XVI. Ordination of Women

Conclusion²⁵

“A Statement”: Second and Third Draft Outline

I. Christ as Savior and Lord

II. Law and Gospel

III. The Mission of the Church

IV. Holy Scripture

A. Inspiration of Scripture

B. Purpose of Scripture

C. The Authority of Scripture

D. The Gospel and the Scripture (Formal and Material Principles)

- E. The Canonical Text of Scripture
- F. The Infallibility of Scripture
- G. The Unity of Scripture
- H. Old Testament Prophecy
- I. Historical Methods of Biblical Interpretation
- V. Creation and Original Sin²⁶
- VI. Church Fellowship
- VII. Confessional Subscription²⁷

“A Statement”: Adopted Text Outline

Preface

- I. Christ as Savior and Lord
- II. Law and Gospel
- III. The Mission of the Church
- IV. Holy Scripture
 - A. The Inspiration of Scripture
 - B. The Purpose of Scripture
 - C. The Gospel and Holy Scripture (Material and Formal Principles)
 - D. The Authority of Scripture
 - E. The Canonical Text of Scripture
 - F. The Infallibility of Scripture
 - G. The Unity of Scripture
 - H. Old Testament Prophecy
 - I. Historical Methods of Biblical Interpretation
- V. Original Sin
- VI. Confessional Subscription
- Conclusion²⁸

While the initial purpose of “A Statement” was to assist the Board of Control in its evaluation of the doctrinal positions of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, it does not appear to have been used by the board in this way. At the time, many on the board were supportive of the faculty majority and voted accordingly. As the minutes of the Board of Control meeting reveal, the board viewed “A Statement” only “as guidelines to [Dr. Preus’s] assessment of the issues confronting our Synod and as to his understanding of how the issues should be resolved.” Thus, the board did not regard “A Statement” as reflecting the doctrinal position of the synod and declined to use it.²⁹ Zimmerman added:

The Board of Control made no use of *A Statement* except to receive it and to ask the faculty to *respond* to it. The faculty Response came

on April 4, 1972. It indicated that the faculty did not consider the positions rejected in *A Statement* to be descriptive of its teaching. The faculty also attacked the procedure of issuing *A Statement* as “improper.” Beyond this the faculty majority declared that “A Statement has a spirit alien to Lutheran Confessional Theology,” that it makes “binding dogma out of mere theological opinion,” and that it is “inadequate theologically.”³⁰

For his part, President Preus seems not to have waited for the Board of Control to complete its evaluation of the faculty, or for the faculty response, instead bringing the matter before the synod at large. In a letter dated March 3, 1972, Preus gave an update on the situation at the seminary. With the letter, he also sent out “A Statement” to the church, making the document public. This move made “A Statement” not merely an instrument for the internal review of the faculty by the Board of Control, but as a document for study by the synod at large. Preus explained: “I am sending you the guidelines for your information as a part of this preliminary report. You may want to study them in conferences and in congregations.”³¹ Preus’s letter was occasioned by the board’s decision not to renew the contract of seminary professor Dr. Arlis Ehlen in light of his doctrinal stance, but not in reference to the FFC report. Preus related the board’s action with Ehlen to the broader question of how the board was to make determinations about members of the St. Louis faculty and presented “A Statement” as a guideline for the board’s use. Preus explained his purpose:

In an effort to give aid to the board of control, I have attempted in consultation with the vice-presidents of the Synod to draw up a set of theological principles or guidelines which the board of control could use as it carries out its duties under Resolution 2–28 of the Milwaukee Convention. I believe that every sentence in these theses is derived directly from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions; in many cases the language is that of the Synod as it applied the Scriptures and the Confessions to new problems throughout the years in the light of Article II of the Synod’s Constitution. The vice-presidents of the Synod join me in the opinion that these guidelines are Biblical and confessional. The purpose of these guidelines is not to serve as a new standard of orthodoxy, but rather to assist the board of control in identifying areas which need further attention in terms of the Synod’s doctrinal position.³²

At this time, Preus may have seen the possibility of employing “A Statement” as a doctrinal statement to be adopted by the synod at the upcoming convention in

New Orleans. If so, introducing the document to the Synod fifteen months in advance was the first step.

The CTCR issued the “Study Edition” of “A Statement” in November 1972, recommending that it be studied in “conferences and congregations,” and expressing the desire that the document would “assist the Synod in the conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith.”³³ This study edition presented the various articles in the original document, followed by references from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, with citations from synod doctrinal resolutions and doctrinal statements, along with study questions. As Bohlmann noted in his preface to the text, the goal was to encourage the members of the synod “to study the document, not only to understand which issues were under discussion in the synod but to offer guidance in applying Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions to those issues.”³⁴

The Concordia Seminary faculty majority responded to the issuing of “A Statement” on April 4, 1972. The faculty majority denied that the doctrinal positions rejected in “A Statement” were accurate representations of what it taught. In some cases, they maintained, “A Statement” presented “caricatures” distorting the actual position of professors. They judged “A Statement” to be “invalid both as an assessment and as a solution of presumed problems at our Seminary.”³⁵ It was “theologically inadequate” with “a spirit alien to Lutheran confessional theology” and suggested that Preus was trying to turn theological opinion into dogma that was binding on the members of the synod.³⁶ The faculty majority’s rejection of the doctrinal position of “A Statement” would prove to be decisive when the synod in convention addressed the problems at New Orleans in 1973.

1973 Synod Convention in New Orleans

Precisely what was involved in the effort to introduce “A Statement” as an official doctrinal statement of the LCMS is not entirely documented. Bohlmann made clear that it was not his idea.³⁷ Certainly Preus would have been involved or at least would have known about it. The question may not matter, since it is clear from the overtures submitted to the synod in the runup to the 1973 New Orleans Convention that a campaign was being undertaken to adopt “A Statement” as a doctrinal statement. Dozens of overtures concerning “A Statement”—some for, some against—were

The faculty majority’s rejection of the doctrinal position of “A Statement” would prove to be decisive when the synod in convention addressed the problems at New Orleans in 1973.

This would lead ultimately to the walkout of the majority of faculty, staff, and students in February 1974.

brought before the convention for consideration. Committee 2 dealing with Theology and Church Relations and Committee 3 dealing with Seminary Issues both seem to have played a role in bringing “A Statement” before the convention for official action.³⁸

With the adoption of Resolution 2–12 the New Orleans Convention affirmed Article II of the Synod’s Constitution “as permitting, and at times even requiring, the formulation and adoption of doctrinal statements as definitive of the Synod’s position relative to controverted issues.”³⁹ Resolution 2–12 also reaffirmed the position synod had taken at its 1971 Milwaukee convention (Resolutions 2–21 and 5–24), “that such statements, insofar as they are in accord with the Scriptures and the pattern of doctrine set forth in the Lutheran Symbols, are, pursuant to Article II of the Synod’s Constitution, binding upon all its members.”⁴⁰ That action of synod, which passed by a vote of 653 to 381, prepared the way for “A Statement” to be adopted as a doctrinal statement, and was determinative for other actions of the convention in dealing with the faculty of Concordia Seminary.⁴¹

New Orleans Convention Resolution 3–01 “To Adopt ‘A Statement’” made it official. The Synod declared that “*A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, in all its parts, to be Scriptural and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions, and therefore a formulation which derives its authority from the Word of God and which expresses the Synod’s position on current doctrinal issues.”⁴² In keeping with Resolution 5–24 from the Milwaukee Convention, Resolution 3–01 added that the convention declared “A Statement” to have the status of an official doctrinal statement of the synod setting forth the teachings of the Scriptures and to be honored and upheld as a valid interpretation of Christian doctrine.⁴³ Although some delegates sought to persuade the convention to try other approaches to resolve the discord within the synod, the resolution eventually passed by a vote of 562 to 455.⁴⁴ While a clear majority of delegates approved of the resolution, the large number of those opposed highlighted the difference of views among the convention delegates.

The most significant moment at New Orleans was the convention’s debate over and adoption of Resolution 3–09: “To Declare Faculty Majority Position in Violation of Article II of the Constitution.”⁴⁵ The resolution detailed at length the questions involved in the controversy over the doctrinal position of the Concordia Seminary faculty majority. The resolution focused on three key doctrinal variances in the faculty majority’s stance: (1) the subversion of the authority of Scripture as the formal principle, or “touchstone, by which all teachers and all teaching are to be judged” (a

violation of the Synod's Constitution because it undermines Scripture as the norm of theology); (2) by introducing "Gospel-reductionism" whereby "the authority of Scripture is reduced to its 'Gospel' content" (a violation of the Synod's Constitution because it undermines Scripture as the norm of theology); and (3) by denial of the third use of the Law, that is, the function of the Law as a guide for Christian life (a violation of the Synod's Constitution because it contradicts Formula of Concord, Article VI).⁴⁶

While the Preamble to the Resolution noted the faculty's rejection of the doctrinal position presented in "A Statement," and accused those who supported it of being "unLutheran, unscriptural, unConfessional," the resolution identified numerous other examples of the faculty majority's departure from the synod's confessional basis, most of which had been compiled and documented in the FFC report. Since the resolution asserted that the position of the faculty majority was in violation of the synod's confessional basis as stated in Article II of its Constitution, the resolution repudiated those opinions as errors "which cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended" (a quotation from Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Preface, 9). The resolution concluded by turning over these matters to the Board of Control of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, a process in keeping with the synod's bylaws.⁴⁷ The synod adopted the resolution by a vote of 574 to 451.⁴⁸

The New Orleans Convention took no action on Resolution 2–12 "To Take Action Regarding the President of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo."⁴⁹ This resolution invited the resignation of Seminary President John Tietjen, charging him with numerous administrative failures as well as for his concurrence with the faculty's departures from the synod's doctrinal position and his defense of them. The refusal by Tietjen and the faculty to accept "A Statement" and the theology it presented signified a disagreement with the doctrinal position of the synod along with its confessional basis. Resolution 3–12A "To Deal with Dr. John Tietjen Under the Provisions of Synod's 'Handbook'" replaced 3–12 and was adopted by the convention by a vote of 513 to 394.⁵⁰ Resolution 3–12A determined that the provisions of the *Handbook* would be followed in addressing the problem with President Tietjen, meaning, in effect, that the Seminary Board of Control would take the procedural lead in the matter. This would lead to the board suspending Tietjen as president in January, and ultimately to the walkout of the majority of faculty, staff, and students in February 1974.⁵¹

The New Orleans Convention was a turning point in the synod's history. While it brought the controversy in the synod to a head and pointed to its eventual resolution, it was a critical moment since the synod successfully reaffirmed its position on key doctrines and further reestablished a means for dealing with theological conflict threatening the church. "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" played a central role in that effort.

Conclusion

“A Statement” remains an official doctrinal statement in the LCMS and continues to be helpful for understanding the questions involved in the synod conflict fifty years ago. The purpose of “A Statement,” both as an initial means to guide the Seminary Board of Control in dealing with the faculty majority, and later as an official statement of the Synod’s doctrinal position on controverted teachings, reflects the vicissitudes of the times. It was the right instrument to meet the changes and challenges before the synod at that moment in its history. The moment was unique, and the service into which “A Statement” was placed was suited for addressing a special need, namely, to deal with conflict in the church. While Christians always are called to confess God’s word before the world, at times recalling one another to the truth of that word, “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” is a reminder for the church of the challenges of professing and defending that truth it has faced in the past, and the need to continue to do so in the future.

Endnotes

- 1 See Paul A. Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis: The Inside Story of the Preus Fact Finding Committee* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007); Kurt E. Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion: Missouri in Lutheran Perspective* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977); Concordia Seminary Board of Control, *Exodus from Concordia: A Report of the 1974 Walkout* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1977). After his election as president of Concordia Seminary, Ralph Bohlmann was the editor and chief author (along with assistant, Greg Smith) of the Board of Control's report of the controversy. Bohlmann testified to his role in the production of the report in the Panel Discussion at Concordia Seminary, May 10, 2010 (video recording, Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis).
- 2 For a detailed account of the work of the fact-finding committee and additional primary source documents related to its report, see Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis*.
- 3 John H. Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 32.
- 4 Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, 32–33.
- 5 Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis*, 42.
- 6 Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis*, 42.
- 7 Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis*, 42, 46.
- 8 This outline is drawn from the FFC's summary document: "Report of the Synodical President to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: In compliance with Resolution 2–28 of the 49th Regular Convention of the Synod, held at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 9–16, 1971," (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1972), 2.
- 9 1971 Resolution 5–26, "To Affirm the Opinion of Commission on Constitutional Matters (Fact-Finding Committee)," *Proceedings of the 49th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod . . .* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1971), 165f.
- 10 1971 Resolution 2–23, "To Support the Judgment of the President of the Synod," *Proceedings of the 49th Regular Convention*, 120.
- 11 1971 Resolution 2–28, "To Direct the Board of Control of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to Act," *Proceedings of the 49th Regular Convention*, 122.
- 12 1971 President's Report, *Proceedings of the 49th Regular Convention*, 53f.
- 13 1971 President's Report, *Proceedings of the 49th Regular Convention*, 54.
- 14 1971 Resolution 2–21, "To Uphold Synodical Doctrinal Resolutions," *Proceedings of the 49th Regular Convention*, 117–120.
- 15 1971 Resolution 5–24, "To Define Status of Synodically Adopted Doctrinal Statements," *Proceedings of the 49th Regular Convention*, 163–165.
- 16 Zimmerman outlines the progress of the Board of Control's action, 222f.
- 17 Ralph Bohlmann, Panel Discussion, Concordia Seminary, May 10, 2010, video recording, Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.
- 18 Bohlmann, Panel Discussion.
- 19 Bohlmann, Panel Discussion. No author is identified in any of the drafts or later printed editions of "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles." However, the manuscript drafts are among papers given by the family of Ralph Bohlmann to the Concordia Seminary Archives after his death and appear to be in Bohlmann's own handwriting. In multiple interviews and conversations, in public and in private, both Bohlmann and Preus acknowledged Bohlmann's authorship of "A Statement."
- 20 Bohlmann, Panel Discussion.
- 21 Bohlmann, Panel Discussion.
- 22 Bohlmann, Panel Discussion.
- 23 Bohlmann, Panel Discussion.
- 24 Ralph Bohlmann, Presentation to students and faculty on the Walkout at Concordia Seminary, April 29, 2013 (Class: H-486 LCMS: Controversy in the 1960s and 1970s).

In a 1979 interview, Bohlmann described the process of drafting “A Statement”:

Q: And one final point, and I would feel derelict if I didn’t bring this up and give you the opportunity to comment. You have frequently had your name mentioned in connection with *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*. I wonder if you’d like to say anything about your role in that document.

Bohlmann: Yes, I’d be happy to say that I am the primary author of it. I don’t know that that’s said anywhere. I believe it is. It seems to me I did see it in one of the books on the controversy. But “author” of that particular—of that document in a very strange sense. The document itself was produced at the request of President Preus. As I said, I was Commission on Theology executive at the time, and Dr. Preus’ in-house theologian—staff theologian. And the request came to me from Dr. Preus to go through the interview manuscripts—transcripts—of the faculty, which were I believe ten or twelve hundred pages in length, to assist the Board of Control, which is made up of at least five laymen, to understand what questions are being asked and what is the Missouri Synod’s perspective on the theological questions that were being addressed. So it was in a sense a cataloguing job to go through it. What questions are being asked was my first task, and they fell into five or six categories that eventually became theses in the document, and then Dr. Preus wanted a clear statement of where the Missouri Synod stood on those areas and what would be in opposition to those areas. So you have a kind of thesis-antithesis sort of thing. The theses are so constructed that the wording in perhaps eighty per cent or more of the formulations are taken literally from resolutions or previous doctrinal statements of the Synod so that almost any wording that you point to in the theses, even if you point to it critically or positively, you can say, oh yes, that comes from the San Francisco statement of Scripture of 1959, because what was being attempted was to say what the Missouri Synod had said on a given doctrinal issue under question. The antitheses—and here there was widespread confusion on this—the antitheses were reflections of questions that had been asked in the various interviews with professors, not necessarily pointing to a particular professor who held a given antithesis, but rather questions that had been asked in the interview. And it didn’t—it wasn’t intended to imply that professors necessarily held all those antitheses. The draft was prepared rather quickly. A couple of nights I remember spending on the writing, and I recall showing it then to Dr. Preus and saying, well, this is just a rough draft and there are a lot of things I’d like to change in it. I didn’t see it again until it had evidently already been circulated to the Board of Control and several others, and I don’t even to this day know who the several others were. Some changes were made in the document by other people, perhaps by President Preus and other advisors of his. One whole section was omitted. I still have the first draft, by the way.... But in the sense of being a compiler and, you know, systematizer, a cataloguer, and pulling together the materials for that document, it is not inaccurate to call me its author.

(Ralph A. Bohlmann, Interviewed by William G. Rusch, February 1, 1979, Oral History Collection, Archives of Cooperative Lutheranism, Lutheran Council in the USA, 1980, 61–63.)

- 25 Draft of “Statement of S.[criptural] and Conf.[essional] Principles Bearing on the Theol.[ogical] Stance of the Sem. Professors; Guidelines for Board of Control’s Use in Evaluating FFC Report,” President Bohlmann Papers, Folder: “Statement for Sem,” Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, n.d.
- 26 The article on “Creation and Original Sin” appeared in a revised form in the adopted text of “A Statement,” in which it was entitled “Original Sin.” The earlier draft, in its entirety, read as follows (italics mark the words not included in the adopted text):

V. *Creation and Original Sin*

We believe, teach and confess that God, by the almighty power of His word, created all things *in six days by a series of creative acts*. We also believe that man, as the principal creature of God, was specially created in the image of God, that is, in a state of righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. We affirm that Adam and Eve were real historical human beings, the first two people in the world, and that their fall was a historical occurrence which brought sin into the world so that “since the fall of Adam all men who are

propagated according to nature are born in sin" (AC, II, 1). We confess that man's fall necessitated the gracious redemptive work of Jesus Christ and that fallen man's only hope for salvation from his sin lies in Jesus Christ, His Redeemer and Lord.

We therefore reject the following:

1. All world views, philosophical theories, and exegetical interpretations which pervert these Biblical teachings and thus obscure the Gospel.
2. The notion that *all things, including* man did not come into being through the direct creative action of God, but through a process of evolution from lower forms of life which in turn developed from matter that is either eternal, autonomous, or self-generating.
3. The opinion that the image of God in which Adam and Eve were created did not consist of con-created righteousness, that is, a perfect relationship to God.
4. The notion that Adam and Eve were not real historical persons and that their fall was not a real historical event which brought sin and death into the world.
5. The opinion that original sin does not deprive all men of their spiritual powers and make it impossible for them to be in the right relationship to God apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

(Draft of "Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles," President Bohlmann Papers, Folder: "Statement for Sem," Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, n.d.)

27 Draft of "Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles," President Bohlmann Papers, Folder: "Statement for Sem," Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, n.d.

One of the later drafts (perhaps the penultimate) contains an article on "Church Fellowship" which was not included in the final form of "A Statement." Why this article was omitted in the final draft of the document is unclear. This article reads:

VI. Church Fellowship

We believe, teach and confess that all believers in Jesus Christ, and only believers, are members of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church, and that they are all united by faith to Jesus Christ and to each other in a true spiritual unity. We affirm that the church and its unity is created and nourished by the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. We therefore regard any teaching or practice which weakens or falsifies the doctrine of the Gospel in any of its articles as detrimental to the true unity of the church and its expression in altar and pulpit fellowship. Accordingly, we believe that "mutual agreement in doctrine and all its articles as well as in the right use of the Holy Sacraments" (FC, Ep, X, 7) is the proper basis for the practice of altar and pulpit fellowship, including intercommunion, among Christians.

We therefore reject the following notions:

1. That the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church is to be conceived of primarily as an empirical organization which includes both believers and unbelievers.
2. That the spiritual unity of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church is a sufficient basis for the practice of altar and pulpit fellowship (that is, that all who believe in Jesus Christ can on that account practice altar and pulpit fellowship in spite of their denominational or doctrinal differences).
3. That concern for the visible and organizational expressions of Christian unity may justify the practice of fellowship with other Christians who reject or deny certain articles of faith.
4. That our communion tables should be open to all who call themselves Christians and recognize a presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper.
5. That members of our synod are free to engage in selective fellowship, that is, the practice of altar or pulpit fellowship with members of other synods and church bodies with whom our synod has not declared altar and pulpit fellowship on the basis of mutual agreement in doctrine and all its articles.

(Draft of "Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles," President Bohlmann Papers, Folder: "Statement for Sem," Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, n.d.)

- 28 “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles,” (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1972).
- 29 Concordia Seminary Board of Control Minutes, March 20, 1972, 4, quoted in *Exodus from Concordia: A Report of the 1974 Walkout* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1977), 30.
- 30 Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis*, 223.
- 31 J. A. O. Preus, “Letter to the Members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: Congregations, Pastors, Teachers,” March 3, 1972, Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This letter is reprinted in Zimmerman, Appendix III, 427–429.
- 32 J.A.O. Preus, “Letter to the Members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod: Congregations, Pastors, Teachers,” March 3, 1972, Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This letter is reprinted in Zimmerman, Appendix III, 427–429.
- 33 Bohlmann, Preface, “Study Edition of A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles,” (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1972), 5.
- 34 Bohlmann, Preface, “Study Edition of A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles,” 5.
- 35 Quoted in Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, 105.
- 36 Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, 105.
- 37 Ralph Bohlmann, Panel Discussion, Concordia Seminary, May 10, 2010, video recording, Archives, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.
- 38 See *Convention Workbook (Reports and Overtures) 50th Regular Convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, New Orleans, Louisiana, July 6–13, 1973* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1973).
- 39 1973 Resolution 2–12, “To Understand Article II of the Synod’s Constitution as Requiring the Formulation and Adoption of Synodical Doctrinal Statements,” *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod . . .* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1973), 114. For a description of the process of this resolution’s adoption, see the convention Minutes of Sessions 4 and 6, Proceedings, 26f. and 31.
- 40 1973 Resolution 2–12, “To Understand Article II of the Synod’s Constitution as Requiring the Formulation and Adoption of Synodical Doctrinal Statements,” *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 115.
- 41 Minutes of the Convention, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 31.
- 42 1973 Resolution 3–01, “To Adopt ‘A Statement,’” *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 128.
- 43 1973 Resolution 3–01, “To Adopt ‘A Statement,’” *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 127.
- 44 Minutes of the Convention, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 36.
- 45 1973 Resolution 3–09, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 133–139.
- 46 1973 Resolution 3–09, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 138.
- 47 1973 Resolution 3–09, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 139.
- 48 Minutes of the Convention, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 40f.
- 49 Although the convention did not act on this resolution, it was included in 1973 Resolution 3–12, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 140–142.
- 50 1973 Resolution 3–12A, *Proceedings of the 50th Regular Convention*, 140.
- 51 See Concordia Seminary Board of Control, *Exodus from Concordia: A Report of the 1974 Walkout* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1977), 61f.

Confessional Subscription in “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles”

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served parishes in Texas and New Jersey.

Introduction

When the 1973 convention adopted “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” (1972), it effectively rejected the use of historical critical methods of biblical interpretation and set in motion events leading to the walkout at Concordia Seminary in January 1974.¹ Not

everyone believed that “A Statement” was consistent with the confessional basis of the Missouri Synod, which entails a complete and unqualified subscription to Scripture as God’s true and authoritative word and the Lutheran Confessions as an accurate interpretation of that word. Many thought the document injected foreign ideas drawn from American Protestant Fundamentalism. Then-Concordia Seminary exegete Frederick Danker claimed that “A Statement” “appealed to a fundamentalist mindset.”² A faculty response to “A Statement” argued that it had a “spirit alien to Lutheran confessional theology.”³ It was maligned by other opponents as a “mis-statement.”⁴ Maybe the most respected confessional scholar of his era, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, alleged that it “breathes a Reformed fundamentalist spirit.”⁵ One prominent LCMS pastor at the time suggested that it was “to be used in addition to and in place of the Lutheran Confessions as the standard by which to determine scriptural teaching.”⁶ In his book on synod president J. A. O. Preus II, journalist James Adams described it as a “catalog of fundamentalist-leaning condemnations against contemporary liberal interpretations of the Bible.”⁷ More recently, another commentator on the controversies has called it a “reactionary document” written for a “church in crisis.”⁸

Such views, however, certainly do not reflect how those behind the production and endorsement of “A Statement” understood it. They did not see it as a novelty or a mere response to contemporary problems. On the contrary, for them, it expressed little more than what the Missouri Synod had long believed about biblical and confessional interpretation. Concordia Seminary professor Ralph Bohlmann, then on leave to serve as executive secretary of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, drafted the document, based in no small part on his historical study of sixteenth-century attitudes toward Scripture.⁹ It was President J. A. O. Preus who ultimately issued “A Statement” out of his office in 1972. In his letter introducing it, Preus specifically affirms the biblical and confessional fidelity of the theses. Yet he also notes their origin in Synod’s theological tradition: “I believe that every sentence in these theses is derived directly from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions; in many cases the language is that of the Synod as it applied the Scriptures and the Confessions to new problems throughout the years in the light of Article II of the Synod’s Constitution.”¹⁰ He makes a similar comment in his report to the pivotal 1973 convention. He appeals to the Statement as “nothing other than the position which has been confessed in our Synod on the basis of God’s Word and our Lutheran Confessions for 125 years.”¹¹ Likewise, the convention resolution adopting “A Statement” as the official position of synod stated that the document “presents what the synod throughout its history has confessed and taught on these issues, as witnessed to by synodical statements, catechetical expositions, and convention resolutions.”¹² When it comes to the view of confessional subscription in “A Statement,” the case is unambiguous: Its description of the role of the confessions is not only entirely consistent with Synod’s traditional position, but it directly applies language and concepts with roots dating back to C. F. W. Walther himself and running throughout subsequent synod history. This will be obvious from a close examination of the sixth section of “A Statement” and its parallels in Walther, Francis Pieper, and subsequent confessional theology up to its 1972 publication.¹³

Doctrinal Content and Confessional Subscription in “A Statement”

It should be said at the outset that “A Statement” is not principally about the Lutheran Confessions, their interpretation, or subscription to them among members of Synod. The issues of the day had far more to do with the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation and how that method impacted foundational doctrines of Scripture, including creation, original sin, justification, and the authority of Scripture itself. Other issues included the church’s mission to the world (mostly related to the controversial *Mission Affirmations* of the 1965 synod convention) and the role of the law in the life of the believer, which had explicit roots in the Formula of Concord itself. Where “A Statement” did touch on confessional subscription, it addressed attempts to exempt oneself from any doctrine that is not directly treated in the

confessions. This was particularly the case for the doctrine of Scripture.¹⁴ To this end, Article VI of “A Statement” concerns itself with what confessional subscription entails for how one reads and applies the confessions to the controversies of its day.

Article VI develops this line of reasoning in a series of nine theses. In a brief prologue to the section, “A Statement” affirms the confessional basis of synod yet underscores precisely what this implies for subscription to the confessions: “We accept the Confessions because they are drawn from the Word of God and on that account regard their doctrinal content as a true and binding exposition of Holy Scripture and as authoritative for our work as ministers of Jesus Christ and servants of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.” It then proceeds in the remainder of the section to describe what that “doctrinal content” of the confessions does and does not entail, and what that means for how one interprets Scripture where it relates specifically to such doctrinal content and where it does not.

We may group Article VI’s positions into two categories: the first (points 1–5) relates to the doctrinal content of the confessions, and the second (points 6–9) tackles the relationship between confessional subscription and the doctrine of Scripture. The first point deals with what the doctrinal content of the confessions includes. This doctrinal content entails both explicitly covered doctrines and indirectly or incidentally affirmed doctrines, such as Scripture, creation, the Holy Spirit and eschatology (§1). It acknowledges that confessional subscription does not necessarily include every passage used by the confessions. Yet, since the confessions understand themselves as “biblical expositions,” we are not free to categorically disregard how they use Scripture, and especially the “doctrinal content which the Confessions derive from individual Bible passages” (§2). When interpreting the confessions, one is free to read them in light of their historical context, but not in such a way as to relativize their doctrinal content as merely a “historically correct response” to Reformation-era problems (§3). More importantly, it targets so-called “gospel reductionism,” for which confessional subscription only covers the confessional statements that explicitly and directly deal with the gospel.¹⁵ While the doctrinal content of the confessions may center on Christ or justification, “A Statement” argues that the doctrinal content may not be reduced to a single locus, to the exclusion of other ancillary doctrines—such as the doctrine of Scripture, teaching of the law, or the historicity of Adam, Eve, and the biblical accounts of creation and the fall (§4). It then doubles down on the same point: though the confessions have no express article on Scripture, their doctrinal content includes “the nature of Holy Scripture and of the proper theological principles for its interpretation” (§5).

With that, “A Statement” pivots toward errors involved in the relationship between confessional subscription and biblical interpretation. The next point addresses the danger of dismissing doctrines of the confessions where explicit scriptural evidence seems to be lacking. Since the confessions understand themselves as expositions of

Scripture, those who subscribe unconditionally cannot deny their doctrinal content simply because one feels that the arguments lack sufficient biblical support (§6). Next, it appeals to a longstanding debate regarding what constitutes the confessional basis of Synod. Some had protested that matters not covered in the confessions were “open questions” and could not be binding upon members of Synod. “A Statement” claims that since confessional subscription “pledges us to preach and teach in accordance with the entire Holy Scripture,” one may not treat biblical matters that are not expressly discussed in the confessions as open questions (§7). The document also maintains that the inverse is true: one cannot accept the doctrinal content of the confessions without accepting their biblical basis (§8). In its final point, “A Statement” concludes that confessional subscription to the doctrinal content of the confessions is not simply *pro forma*; it requires that clergy “preach, teach, and confess the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions as our very own” (§9).

While each of these arguments merits further attention and discussion, it is worth emphasizing that they simply assert the same basic points we will see running from Walther through Arthur Carl Piepkorn himself. In fact, in response to the various expressions of dissent to “A Statement” on the question of confessional subscription, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations cited three direct quotes from those authors: two from Piepkorn and one from Walther. From Piepkorn, it noted both that one must interpret Scripture according to the Symbols (a point he lifts directly from Walther) and that one may not reject a “doctrinal conclusion” that the confessions draw from Scripture (similarly, a point that hearkens back to Pieper’s Brief Statement). From Walther, it includes the qualification that confessional subscription implies subscription to the confessional interpretation of Scripture.¹⁶ There is nothing fundamentally different in these assertions from what multiple generations had argued prior to “A Statement,” as the remainder of this essay will show.

Doctrinal Content and Confessional Subscription: Walther and Pieper

This concern with the “doctrinal content” of the confessions may ring strange to contemporary ears, but it was at the root of the controversy over confessional subscription—indeed, over many of the controverted issues—at the time of “A Statement.” There may be no more substantive commentators on that subject than the two individuals most formative for the Missouri Synod’s doctrinal heritage: C. F. W. Walther and Francis Pieper.

As early as 1849, Walther had been forced to defend the burgeoning Synod’s commitment to unqualified confessional subscription. In an essay in *Der Lutheraner*, he explains how other Lutherans characterize Missouri’s commitment to the confessions: “It is the paper pope of the Lutheran; it is the invention of fallible men; it is strictly the sayings of men; the colored glasses through which one views the bible

in the color of his sect; an impure drain, through which we are fed not by divine truth in its full purity, but are tarnished through the mingling of human error. Whoever insists on the symbols, he thus places a human book over the divine.”¹⁷ Against this misconstruing, he describes the Scriptures as a treasure chest and the confessions as a storehouse or treasury, where the riches of the Scriptures have been extracted, deposited, and maintained.¹⁸ At this stage, he is warding off claims that confessional subscription pits Scripture against the confessions. It is patently clear that the Missouri Synod did not see any contradiction between biblical authority and confessional subscription, even if it had not yet worked out the implications for the interpretation of each.

What Walther hinted at in 1849 he would make explicit in an 1858 essay at a convention of the Synod’s Western District. The premise here is straightforward: pastors of the Missouri Synod must subscribe to the doctrinal content of the confessions, precisely because they are drawn from Scripture. Walther notes what confessional subscription entails for that which is binding in the Symbols and that which is not:

Whatever position any doctrine may occupy in the doctrinal system of the Symbols, whatever the form may be in which it occurs, whether the subject be dealt with *ex professo* or only incidentally, an unconditional subscription refers to the whole content of the Symbols and does not allow the subscriber to make any mental reservation in any point. Nor will he exclude such doctrines as are discussed incidentally in support of other doctrines, because the fact that they are so used stamps them as irrevocable articles of faith and demands their joyful acceptance by everyone who subscribes to the Symbols.¹⁹

Yet that does not mean everything in the confessions is part of its doctrinal content, and therefore binding. The confessions are not inspired verbally, nor were its authors. “He who subscribes to the Symbols of the Church and accepts them unconditionally as his own does not declare them to be the rule and norm for German or Latin orthography or for a perfect linguistic style, nor does he declare that

Concern with the “doctrinal content” of the confessions may ring strange to contemporary ears, but it was at the root of the controversy over confessional subscription at the time of “A Statement.”

his subscription refers to some other things which belong in the sphere of human knowledge. For the servant of the Church is not bound by that which falls within the sphere of criticism or of history.”²⁰ The same is true for the interpretation of specific passages in Scripture. “If, for instance, an exegete does not reach the specific sense of a Bible passage and yet interprets it in such a manner that his interpretation rests on other clear Bible passages, he is indeed mistaken in supposing that a certain teaching is contained in this specific Bible passage, but he is not erring in doctrine.”²¹ What matters for subscription is less that one agrees with how the confessions interpret *each* biblical passage they cite than that the confessions find the basis for their positions in the clear teaching of Scripture.

Francis Pieper, longtime professor and president at Concordia Seminary, as well as president of Synod, would in his customary manner start with Walther’s premise and explain it more comprehensively. In his *Christian Dogmatics*, Pieper treats the doctrinal content of the confessions almost identically to Walther. Discussing attempts to qualify subscription to the confessions, he (again, like Walther) notes those who dismiss confessional doctrinal claims as simply “historical” or “historically occasioned,” and therefore not subject to subscription. “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 ‘historically occasioned.’”²² He also clearly identifies potential errors that would come home to roost at the time of “A Statement.” “Again, under the ‘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 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.”²³ For Pieper, a confessional hermeneutic that attempts to relativize or subjectivize the doctrinal content of the confessions is merely a pretext to qualify one’s confessional subscription. Yet an unconditional subscription should negate such a confessional minimalism.

At the same time, Pieper is clear that subscription to the confessions concerns its doctrinal content, not secondary matters. “The confessional pledge covers only the doctrine. It is the confession of the Church, and the Christian Church is concerned about the doctrine.”²⁴ He also anticipates the counter argument that one need not subscribe to “all exegetical proof” that the confessions marshal. “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 Confessions for which there is not ample Scripture proof offered.”²⁵ Unconditional confessional subscription requires unqualified affirmation of the doctrines set forth in the confessions, which understand themselves to be based on Scripture. Yet there was already an awareness on Pieper’s part that, while the doctrinal content of the confessions is sourced in Scripture, not

every interpretation of every biblical passage in the confessions is compulsory for synod clergy. Those cases, however, must be taken on their own merits individually.

Pieper will essentially follow this same line of reasoning in the Brief Statement's discussion of confessional subscription. The Brief Statement describes the Symbols as a "confession of the doctrines of Scripture" (§45). Their contents are the "doctrinal decisions of Holy Scripture itself" (§46). Subscription to them requires one "to accept as scriptural the doctrine set forth in the Lutheran Symbols and their rejection of the corresponding errors" (§47). He then provides a more explicit account of what that means practically for the interpretation of the confessions in language nearly identical to Walther: "The confessional obligation covers all doctrines, not only those that are treated *ex professo*, but also those that are merely introduced in support of other doctrines. The obligation does not extend to historical questions, 'purely exegetical questions,' and other matters not belonging to the doctrinal content of the Symbols. All doctrines of the Symbols are based on clear statements of Scripture" (§48). The key distinction for Pieper, then, is between obligatory content and non-obligatory content: doctrinal content, such as professions of doctrine, as well as certain doctrines used in support of others, such as the doctrine of Scripture, are obligatory; yet historical questions or exegetical questions unrelated to doctrines professed directly or indirectly are not obligatory. The task of confessional hermeneutics, then, is to distinguish between those.²⁶

While Pieper provides more detail, he follows the same essential lines as Walther. The confessions and the doctrinal content of the confessions are not equivalent. Certain secondary exegetical or historical or even linguistic matters in the confessions are not binding. The confessions themselves are not inspired or intrinsically infallible. Yet they are correct interpretations of biblical teachings, and therefore they are binding and normative for our own interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, the parameters of Walther and Pieper adumbrate many of the exact points laid out in "A Statement"—its doctrinal content, latitude in select exegetical and historical matters that do not impact doctrinal content, the implicit affirmation of a doctrine of Scripture, the biblical basis of the doctrinal conclusions of the confessions, among others.

Doctrinal Content and Confessional Subscription: From Pieper to Piepkorn

This discussion did not stop with the Brief Statement, nor are its ideas completely marginalized in subsequent decades. Rigorous discussion would continue as synod theologians wrestled with the implications of confessional subscription for both their interpretation of Scripture and their interpretation of the confessions. A general consensus held to that which was roughly identical to Walther and Pieper—and ultimately to "A Statement": subscription to the confessions entailed a degree of

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latitude in interpreting secondary exegetical, historical, or even scientific matters, yet did not free synod clergy from affirming the doctrinal content of the confessions as affirmations of biblical truth that were binding upon them. Space prohibits exhaustive detailing of these arguments and their proponents, but a select few will suffice.

Already in 1902, Concordia Seminary professor A. L. Graebner had drafted an essay on “variant interpretations” of Scripture.²⁷

Graebner specifically has in mind

disagreements over biblical passages that do not touch the basic *sedes* texts for a doctrine and thus do not threaten fellowship based upon unity in the faith. On *sedes* passages, there must be consensus. Others are less pivotal and may be subject to reasonable disagreement.²⁸ This does not, however, impact the doctrines they support. According to Graebner, “while two variant interpretations cannot both be exegetically correct, both may very well be doctrinally correct.”²⁹ He gives as an example Luther and Melancthon differing in their interpretations of Galatians 3:19 and how the law functioned as a tutor. Agricola attempted to drive a wedge between the two Wittenberg theologians by arguing that Luther supported Agricola’s opposition to preaching the law. Yet Graebner accounts for their divergence this way: “What [Melancthon] would say is, while we differ exegetically, we agree dogmatically. As two agree with a third, they agree with each other.”³⁰ Graebner’s essay shows that even in 1902 there was a conscious awareness that confessional doctrinal content is different from each supporting biblical passage in the confessions. Confessional unity (and, therefore, church unity) is established by doctrinal agreement, not agreement upon the interpretation of each and every biblical passage.

In a series of 1921 essays, W. H. T. Dau responds to the purported “Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod.”³¹ Dau sets out to defend Missouri against the contention that they had placed the confessions on the level of Scripture. “Within the first quarter of a century of the existence of the Missouri Synod its confessional attitude had led to the coining of catch-words by which its fidelity to the Symbols of the Lutheran Church was to be designated—‘symbolism’ and ‘symbolists.’”³² He cites an 1895 Canada District report that says: “Even such as wish to pass for Lutherans faithful to the Confessions have not hesitated to call the Missourians Talmudists, comparing us to the hardened Jews who are superstitiously devoted to the diabolical

tenets of the Talmud. Why are these Confessional Writings needed? Why is the Bible not sufficient?—these questions we have been and are being asked quite seriously.”³³ Such allegations are lodged, according to Dau, precisely because of how seriously Missouri takes the theology of the confessions and its subscription to them. He says, “Over against false teachers, who appealed to Scripture as they proposed to interpret it, the Church by means of a public confession declared what the true meaning of the Scriptures on a given doctrinal matter is.”³⁴ Confessional subscription does not come at the expense of biblical doctrine, but in support of it.

To take another example, Concordia Seminary professor William Arndt urges the study of the confessions in a 1949 essay on “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions.”³⁵ In order to focus that study, he begins to lay out more directive principles. One deals with the context of their argumentation: “It is important that we remember how the Confessions arose to evaluate properly their contents. We must not expect them to be books in which the Christian doctrines are treated systematically and comprehensively, like those big tomes on doctrine which many of our theologians have given to the world. They were intended for very special occasions and dwelt on the subjects that at the particular time required discussion . . . But in spite of the evident fact that the Confessions arose in response to particular historical occasions, we have to say that all the chief teachings of the Christian faith are found in our confessional writings.”³⁶ He makes another move to bracket out purported historical and scientific errors: “When we subscribe to [the confessions], we do not say that every statement in them is correct; our subscription merely says that we believe that all the doctrines set forth in them are scriptural, divine truth.”³⁷ He also applies this to the exegesis of the confessions, circling back to Graebner’s article, even to positions taken by Walther in 1858:

Confessional subscription does not come at the expense of biblical doctrine, but in support of it.

It must be admitted that not in every instance when the Confessions interpret Scripture passages the results arrived at will be endorsed by us. Luther, Melanchthon, and the other men who composed the Symbolical Books were not infallible; now and then they missed the mark when they adduced Scripture proof. The sainted Dr. A. L. Graebner wrote an article in the *Theological Quarterly* which has the title “Variant Interpretations” (Vol. VI, No. 2). There he points out that there are several Scripture passages which in the Confessions are now interpreted this way and now in

a different way. When there are several conflicting interpretations, only one can be right. Hence we cannot always follow the Confessions in their exposition of Scripture passages. Is this not a serious matter? Not at all, as long as the doctrine that is taught on the basis of these passages is not in conflict with other clear statements of Holy Scriptures.³⁸

What matters ultimately is the doctrinal content of those confessions: “But the doctrine which the pious fathers taught on the basis of that text is absolutely right and clearly taught in other passages of Holy Scripture . . . Hence when we say that the Confessions are not infallible in their presentation of Scripture proof, we do not destroy their adequacy as a doctrinal standard.”³⁹ This commitment to the doctrinal content of the confessions then provides fresh impetus to the study of the confessions. They are not to be stood against or in front of the Scriptures but understood rather as witnesses to the doctrine of the Scriptures. The confessions are witnesses to the truth of the Scriptures, witnesses to the teachings Lutherans have held since the Reformation, witnesses of the “position of our Church on the various questions of faith and Christian conduct” for those seeking to enter it, and witnesses concerning what the Scriptures teach on the subjects contained therein.⁴⁰

If there is one individual who epitomizes these arguments on the eve of “A Statement,” it is Arthur Carl Piepkorn.⁴¹ He channels the Missouri Synod tradition in claiming that confessional subscription implies certain parameters for how one interprets the Scriptures. Like his predecessors, he is concerned not to confuse the *norma normata* with the *norma normans*, nor to treat the confessions as inspired. Confessional subscription does not commit one “to the Symbols’ exegesis of a particular passage of the Sacred Scriptures, but his subscription is an affirmation that the interpretations in the Symbols are in accordance with the analogy of the faith.”⁴² Also like his synod antecedents, confessional subscription does not extend to matters of German or Latin style, human knowledge (like science), or history. It does not extend to how the confessions cite each scripture passage or this or that church father, to their polemics against opponents, or to their superstitions, such as the infamous notion of magnetization coming from rubbing a magnet with garlic juice.

What is unconditionally binding for Piepkorn? It is the same as the long Missouri tradition preceding him: the doctrinal content of the confessions. When it comes to interpreting the confessions, identifying, confirming, and explicating that doctrinal content is the central task. “Our concern is primarily the discovery of the doctrinal content of the Symbols, strictly understood as the reformulation and reproduction of the doctrinal content of the Sacred Scriptures on the issues in question.”⁴³ The foremost interest is what the confessions have to say *theologically on the basis of Scripture*. This means one cannot dismiss doctrinal claims of the confessions because of disagreement with their scriptural basis. If the confessions

make a doctrinal claim based upon Scripture, then that doctrine is obligatory.⁴⁴ Piepkorn's finely nuanced account of confessional subscription admittedly could lead in the direction of a more qualified interpretation of the confession's doctrinal content (for instance, in ecumenical matters, as Arand has pointed out).⁴⁵ At the same time, his ultimate conclusion is no

different than his synod predecessors: where the confessions stake a claim doctrinally, the one who subscribes to the confessions must likewise agree, and no interpretation of the Scriptures may detract from the biblical foundations for that doctrine.

None of these twentieth-century treatments of confessional hermeneutics seek to marginalize Scripture or the confessions in any manner. They rather continue a conversation that has existed in the Missouri Synod since its founding, and which must continue wherever both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions are taken seriously as *normative*—as the *norma normans* and *norma normata* they are for Lutherans. Both demand scholarly attention. Both demand theological conversation and debate. Both demand unqualified submission. Both serve the end of establishing and maintaining the unity of any church body committed to them. And it is this precise conversation which “A Statement” summarizes and seeks to clarify.

Conclusion

While I could only briefly and selectively touch on certain discussions of confessional subscription, one point should nonetheless be obvious: “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” says nothing new or different than synod previously had when it comes to confessional subscription. As a hallmark of Missouri's doctrinal stance, unconditional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions dates to the founding of synod. Walther was already compelled to defend it in 1849. He and Pieper clarified it for synod dogmatically at different times. Throughout the twentieth century, there was a lively exchange of articles detailing the hermeneutical challenges when interpreting the confessions. The concerns raised and solutions proposed drew repeatedly on the basic points made by Walther and Pieper. Unconditional subscription covers the doctrinal content of the Scriptures. This means it concerns the doctrines taught in the confessions and, crucially, the exposition of particular biblical passages used to substantiate those doctrines. It does not extend to how the confessions interpret each and every biblical passage, nor to every scientific, philosophical, or historical judgment of the confessions. None of this is intended to provide loopholes for dismissing this or that interpretation of Scripture or the

The concerns raised and solutions proposed drew repeatedly on the basic points made by Walther and Pieper.

confessions. It is rather to make clear what constitutes our unity: agreement upon what the Scriptures and the confessions teach about doctrine and its pertinence for the faith and life of the church. On this score, “A Statement” does little more than reiterate what synod had said in its first century.

Fifty years after the adoption of “A Statement” by synod, it is easy to take for granted the positions it defended. Historical criticism, gospel reductionism, among other errors, are no longer live options (at least for those who wish to be and remain official members of the LCMS), in part because “A Statement” deployed evidence from Missouri’s longstanding biblical and confessional positions to preclude those options. If that history is any guide for us in the present, it reveals a synod deeply committed to the confessions not just in principle, but in practice. It took the reading, interpretation, and teaching of the confessions seriously because it took the theology of the confessions seriously. It did not see this approach to the confessions as in any way contradicting the authority of Scripture or detracting from biblical interpretation. On the contrary, the demand of a rigorous confessional subscription should lead to a *better* reading of Scripture. None other than an exegete, Concordia Seminary professor Horace Hummel, expressed a healthy, reciprocal relationship between Scripture and the confessions this way:

It must function as [a] hermeneutical circle, that is, both as our confession that the doctrines here enunciated are ultimately based on and normed by Scripture, thus representing how *Lutherans* understand Scripture, and as indicating the major direction and themes that Lutherans will pursue in their scriptural exposition. There is a danger, of course, that the Scriptures will be twisted and strained to make them “talk Lutheran” (and in the current climate, that charge is usually quick to come), but there is far greater cause to worry about consistent *under*interpretation of the Bible, as measured by full confessional sensitivity [*italics in original*].⁴⁶

By “underinterpretation,” he clearly has in mind the historically-critically influenced exegesis of Scripture prevalent both inside Missouri and among many of its peers of the 1970s. Yet this same point undergirds what Walther claimed in 1849 against those who considered the confessions restrictive to biblical interpretation, or in 1858, when he urged an interpretation of Scripture in conformity with confessional subscription. It is the same point made by Pieper when underscoring the doctrinal content of the confessions as confessions of the doctrinal positions of Scripture itself. It is the same point made by twentieth-century Missouri Synod commentators against those who qualified their confessional subscription, or the theological claims of Scripture expressed in the confessions. It is finally the ssynodame point made by “A Statement” in 1972, when it sought to codify the longstanding

Missouri Synod commitment to reading the Lutheran Confessions as the confessions understand themselves: as doctrinal summations and conclusions drawn from Scripture that represent fellowship-constituting and church-dividing convictions. If we are to take the doctrinal content of the confessions and our confessional subscription to that doctrinal content as seriously as our predecessors, it will require being equally cognizant of and committed to the role those confessions play in establishing, maintaining, and strengthening that unity.

Endnotes

- 1 Resolution 3–01, 1973 *Convention Proceedings*, 127–128.
- 2 Frederick W. Danker, *No Room in the Brotherhood: The Preus-Otten Purge of Missouri* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1977), 95.
- 3 John H. Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile: Confessional Hope and Institutional Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 105.
- 4 Edward H. Schroeder and Stephen Hitchcock, “A Statement’: A Mis-Statement,” unpublished discussion paper from Evangelical Lutherans in Mission, 1976, Concordia Seminary Library.
- 5 Mary Todd, *Authority Vested: A Story of Identity and Change in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 225.
- 6 Dean Lueking, as quoted in Tietjen, *Memoirs in Exile*, 150.
- 7 James E. Adams, *Preus of Missouri and the Great Lutheran Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 175.
- 8 James Burkee, *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod: A Conflict that Changed American Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 124.
- 9 Bohlmann’s dissertation at Yale treated debates over the biblical canon during the Reformation. See Ralph A. Bohlmann, “The Criteria of Biblical Canonicity in Sixteenth-Century Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Reformed Theology,” unpublished dissertation (Yale, 1968). This study in no small part informed his later volume on biblical hermeneutics in the Lutheran Confessions, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983).
- 10 Introductory Letter to “A Statement” found as Appendix III in Paul A. Zimmerman, *A Seminary in Crisis: The Inside Story of the Preus Fact Finding Committee* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 428.
- 11 1973 *Convention Proceedings*, 61–63.
- 12 Resolution 3–01, 1973 *Convention Proceedings*, 127.
- 13 The most comprehensive study of confessional subscription within the Missouri Synod remains Charles P. Arand’s dissertation, “The Nature and Function of the Lutheran Confessions in Twentieth-Century American Lutheranism” (unpublished dissertation, 1989). Arand published a revised version as *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), with a second edition in 2012. However, the published version omits or substantially reduces his treatments of Missouri in the early twentieth century (“Conservative Confessionalism,” chap. 5 in dissertation), mid-twentieth century (Confrontational Confessionalism,” chap. 6), and the Seminex-era (“Normative Confessionalism,” chap. 7). In what follows, I will draw liberally on Arand’s narrative and sources, though focusing less on what role the confessions played within the theology of synod and more on how the individuals in question read the confessions and taught the interpretation of those confessions.
- 14 The Commission on Theology and Church Relations published a series of reports to tackle various aspects of this issue. See especially *A Review of the Question, “What Is a Doctrine?”* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1967).
- 15 On this, see The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1972).
- 16 The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Report on Dissent from A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles and Other Doctrinal Resolutions of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis, MO: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1974), 22.
- 17 C. F. W. Walther, “Warum sollen wir an den Bekenntnißschriften unserer evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche auch noch jetzt unerschütterlich feßthalten?” *Der Lutheraner* 5 (January 23, 1849): 81–84, here at 81.
- 18 Walther, “Warum sollen . . . unerschütterlich feßthalten?” 82.
- 19 C. F. W. Walther, “Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church (1858),” ed. and trans. Alex Wm. C. Guebert, *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947): 241–253, quote at 241. For a full translation, see C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the*

- Church*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 19–29.
- 20 Walther, “Why Should Our Pastors,” 241.
- 21 Walther, “Why Should Our Pastors,” 242.
- 22 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. Theodore Engelder, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1957), 1:355.
- 23 Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:355.
- 24 Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:356.
- 25 Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:356f.
- 26 Meyer interestingly notes that the article on confessional subscription in the Brief Statement was not in any of the antecedent documents offered by Pieper (for instance, his 1893 synodical essay; 1897’s “I Believe”; 1922’s “What the Synod”), and thus reflects a direct response to the 1928 “Chicago Theses” of Buffalo, Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin). See Carl S. Meyer, “A Historical Background of *A Brief Statement*,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32 (1961): 541.
- 27 A. L. Graebner, “Variant Interpretations,” *Theological Quarterly* 6 (1902): 110–120.
- 28 He specifically notes cases where Luther and the dogmaticians disagree (such as whether Ephesians 4:9f pertains to the decent into hell), where the Formula of Concord uses 2 Corinthians 6:1 in different ways in consecutive paragraphs, or where the Augustana and the Formula interpret Galatians 3:24 differently. Graebner, interestingly enough, considers *both* the Augustana and the Formula wrong on the Galatians passage.
- 29 Graebner, “Variant Interpretations,” 117.
- 30 Graebner, “Variant Interpretations,” 120.
- 31 W. H. T. Dau, “Confessionalism of the Missouri Synod,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 1 (1921):105–116.
- 32 Dau, “Confessionalism,” 105.
- 33 Dau, “Confessionalism,” 116.
- 34 Dau, “Confessionalism,” 106.
- 35 William Arndt, “The Pertinency and Adequacy of the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 20 (1949): 674–700.
- 36 Arndt, “Pertinency and Adequacy,” 683–684.
- 37 Arndt, “Pertinency and Adequacy,” 696.
- 38 Arndt, “Pertinency and Adequacy,” 697.
- 39 Arndt, “Pertinency and Adequacy,” 697.
- 40 Arndt, “Pertinency and Adequacy,” 700.
- 41 Piepkorn writes a series of articles in the 1950s and 1960s that explain the role the confessions have played in synod historically, the role they should play in the church at the time, and how they should be interpreted. They are, in chronological order, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today,” *Seminarian* 45, no. 10 (1954): 32–43; Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 29 (1958): 1–24; and Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32 (1961): 606–620.
- 42 Piepkorn, “Walther and the Symbols,” 611.
- 43 Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles,” 5.
- 44 Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles,” 20–21.
- 45 Arand has argued that Piepkorn represents a departure from traditional LCMS confessionalism toward a more ecumenically minded view of the confessions, “Nature and Function,” 158ff.
- 46 Horace Hummel, “The Influence of Confessional Themes on Biblical Exegesis” in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, ed. John Reumann, Samuel H. Nafzger, and Harold H. Ditmanson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 217.

*Homiletical
Helps*

Lectionary Kick-start and the Art of Sermon Preparation

David R. Schmitt

One of my favorite experiences as a pastor was the quiet of a Sunday afternoon. The morning services were over, and the craziness of the next week had yet to begin. After eating lunch and taking a nap, I would get up, make a cup of coffee, and go into my study. I would pull out the Bible and look up the readings for the next Sunday. I was not looking at the original languages. I was looking at the English translation that would be read in worship. For just a moment, I wanted to experience the Scriptures the way my congregation would experience them on Sunday. In English. Without any previous study. With whatever concerns they had bumping up against these three selected readings from the word of God.

What I loved about this moment was the freedom it granted me. It was like standing on the peak of a mountain and looking across a valley. For a moment, before the week began, I could see from a distance the different places I could go. Would I choose the Old Testament reading or preach from the Gospel? Did I see a theological theme running through the readings or was there a question I needed to explore?

During this hour, I was not trying to figure out what these passages meant in their original contexts. There would be time for that later. Instead, I was exploring what these passages selected by a lectionary committee could possibly mean in my specific context. How could they be heard? How could they be misheard? What questions would they raise? What challenges would they pose? What might I study more closely this coming week as I prepared for preaching next Sunday?

To be clear, this Sunday afternoon reflection was just a beginning. A starting point. It was not definitive but suggestive. Not explanatory but exploratory. I wasn't making any conclusions. I was simply thinking about possibilities.

Now, through a new podcast, my colleague Peter Nafzger and I invite you to join us in this weekly experience of brainstorming first impressions.

Lectionary Kick-start is a weekly podcast where we take a first look at the texts

from the three-year lectionary for Sunday. This is truly a first look. We have not done intense study of the texts. We work with the English translation. And we simply brainstorm. Each week, we compare and contrast our initial thoughts about the texts, identifying which text we think we might preach on and why. Thanks to the help of Jessica Bordeleau, our weekly conversations about the texts for Sunday are condensed and curated so that they can be a kick-start for your own sermon preparation. *Lectionary Kick-start* provides a place for dialog, a place to bounce around ideas, before you dive into your weekly sermon preparation.

So often in sermon preparation, we are nervous about these initial impressions. They are not grounded in exegetical study. They are not carefully considered in theological analysis. They are first impressions. That's all. And first impressions can easily lead us astray. Because of that nervousness, preachers can skip over this step of just reading the text and letting that first reading generate ideas. In fact, some explicitly try to guard themselves against this exercise. The argument is that we need to approach Scripture as if we were a blank slate ready to be inscribed by the word of God. What's going on in our lives doesn't matter. In fact, it is an impediment. We have to silence our lives and clear out our senses, so that we can be purely inspired by what is going on in the word of God.

Unfortunately, from my lived religious experience, I have found that I am not a blank slate. I can *pretend* that I have no presuppositions. I can *say* that I have no experience that shapes how I hear a text. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. In fact, I would argue that my presuppositions, my "second text," are all the more dangerous because they are not being acknowledged and, therefore, not able to be corroborated or corrected.

Silencing our lives and clearing our senses is not a true possibility. How do you silence a five-year struggle with cancer? How do you overlook the birth of your child? These things shape your sensibilities. They influence not only what you hear as you listen to a text but also how you hear it. What goes on in our lives matters. Not just to us, but to God.

In the art of sermon preparation, God is the potter and we the clay. While God indeed has the power to create out of nothing, in sermon preparation, God recreates out of something. He uses our life experience to bring sermons out of his word. For that reason, rather than try to make ourselves a blank slate, we are better off being honest with ourselves about who we are in the hands of God.

Lectionary Kick-start begins your sermon preparation or lesson planning by laying out initial impressions. In conversation, Peter and I share with one another the ideas we are interested in pursuing, the initial reactions we have to a text, the questions that puzzle us, and the certainties that propel us, Jessica often brings in questions or reactions from a lay perspective . . . We bring all of this before God and before one another because we believe that God uses it in bringing about preaching and teaching

his word. So, we hold loosely to our initial thoughts and let our mutual conversation around the text guide and inform our sermon preparation.

When we are honest about what we bring to the preparation process, it is amazing how God's word works in relation to our lives. A conversation with a parishioner about how tired she is as she cares for her mother suddenly takes on new meaning as Paul encourages us to bear one another's burdens. A parishioner's sigh of relief as he starts a new job that better aligns with his skillsets is pushed a bit deeper by Paul's encouragement to serve with the gifts God has given.

Our life experiences matter. They are not chaff that needs to be swept away in an artificial attempt to provide a clean slate for a fresh hearing of God's word. Instead, they are branches connected to the vine, sometimes laden with fruit to be tasted and other times barren and needing to be pruned.

At Concordia Seminary, the sermon preparation process we teach works with four threads of discourse that are found in a sermon: textual exposition, theological confession, evangelical proclamation, and hearer interpretation. In preparation, we take time to listen carefully to the Scriptures, to think theologically, to interpret Christocentrically, and to attend to the lives of the hearers. Because we have such a robust sermon preparation process, we are confident and free to begin by brainstorming various ideas early on. We know that other work will follow.

To some, reading the English translation (rather than the original languages) and brainstorming ideas (rather than critically analyzing the text) seems irresponsible. And, indeed, if we were to take these ideas, without study, and preach them, that would be irresponsible. But that is not what we are doing. In the imagery of hiking, we are on the mountain top, overlooking the lay of the land. A week's journey of sermon preparation lies before us. This preparation will lead us to the kind of study that either confirms our initial thoughts or turns us around to go in a different direction. What we are doing is pointing out places we might go when we hike into that valley. There are issues of cultural or historical context we may need to clarify, doctrinal teachings we might need to study, and this moment when we take in a much larger view prepares us for the coming week when we will journey with more purpose into a densely wooded terrain.

In the days to come, we will study the text closely in its original language and original context. Individual words may call out like birds hidden in the forest, inviting us to see something richly resplendent in its original habitat. Complex phrases might strike our curiosity, inviting us to hike a bit further and see the waterfall just around the bend. Hiking through this terrain during the week will be beautiful and part of that beauty comes from recognizing how God is working with our earlier expectations.

While we may start with a specific text and concrete ideas, we actually have no idea where we will end up. Sometimes, an insight we suggested is supported by our

study. An image we saw is deepened, broken open by God as we explore its contextual connotations so that we can see the wealth of wisdom hidden in this small glimpse of the kingdom of God. Other times, we are caught off guard. Textual study may reveal that we have been misreading the text because of an unintended nuance in the English translation. The study of God's word may take us in a completely new direction, and we are challenged to see something differently than we had seen it before. Yet, even here, the discovery of a different world, a different way of seeing things, gives preachers an experience to share with the congregation.

I've known preachers who are dismayed by these moments of correction. They feel that their earlier ideas were all for naught. That, however, is not always the case. As Fred Craddock explained in his classic, *As One without Authority*, preachers can always take their hearers along with them through the twists and turns of their journey. For example, I might begin such a sermon by saying, "when you first read this text, you think . . ." and then later in the sermon, expose my hearers to the strangeness of God's ways, saying, "but upon closer reading, you find that . . ." For this sermon or lesson plan, the preacher or teacher is not the sage on the stage beginning with certain propositional clarity, but the guide by the side of God's people, helping them explore the terrain, and experience how God leads them to discover something about his work that we had forgotten or about his wisdom that we had not seen.

Thank you for your faithful preaching and teaching. You are sharing the life-giving message of Jesus Christ with your congregations and communities for their eternal good. We know it's not always easy, which is why we want to help. Consider listening to *Lectionary Kick-start*. It is our invitation to you to join an ongoing conversation with God centered on his word. Each week, we will ponder God's word from a place of curiosity rather than clarity, taking the place of a student rather than a master, trusting that our Lord will guide our inquiry to a place of certainty from which we will be prepared to preach and teach his people on Sunday.

Lectionary Kick-start

A First Look

Lectionary *Kick-start* is a new podcast brought to you from Concordia Seminary St. Louis. Jessica Bordeleau hosts weekly conversations with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger, professors of homiletics at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Their 25-minute discussions on the lectionary texts are your first step in planning for Sunday. Here's a peek at a portion of a recent episode.

Jessica: Welcome to *Lectionary Kick-start*. We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson. I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau with Dr. David Schmidt and Dr. Peter Nafzger, they're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. You can learn all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they're pretty good preachers! All right, let's get started. David, where are we in the church year?

David: We are at the ninth Sunday after Pentecost, a time when the church celebrates the life of the Spirit and the Spirit's work among God's people.

Jessica: And what's the text for this week, Peter?

Peter: Our readings are from Deuteronomy 7, Romans 8, and Matthew 13.

Jessica: Peter, which text would you choose to preach this week?

Peter: Well, I'm still wrapping up this series on Romans 8 . . . this reading from Romans 8:28–39 has a lot of well-known verses in it. These are fun because people know these, and I think you can actually work with that a little

bit in the sermon. I think you've got a couple decisions to make. So, one would be to, to pursue verse 28. *We know that for those who love God, all things work together for good.* That's such a comfort to so many people and depending on your congregation, if things are really rough right now, that could be a compelling direction to take. It also could be a compelling direction to take when things are going really well, because we don't usually quote this verse when things are going really well.

David: That's right . . . you can get kind of scared when you've got verses like that because the verses are so powerful and so beautiful, and you're afraid that maybe your sermon isn't going to feel that way for people, right? <laughter>

Peter: That's actually where I would lean on this for this sermon. I'm going to follow a classical argument structure.

David: Oh, I love that.

Peter: I don't do that very often, but I was just thinking about how that classical argument has basically five movements in the sermon, or five main ideas. And the first one is to introduce the idea and this one would be really easy to introduce. You could even invite people to say it along with you. They probably don't even need to look at the text! The second, uh, rhetorical unit would be you'd be confessing this wonderful truth that nothing can separate us from the love of God. You could follow the list here that Paul gives us. You could add all sorts of local or contemporary things that seem to separate us from God's love, and then the key to the classical argument structure is you would address, head on, the opposing views.

David: The objections.

Peter: Yeah. And so, you know it would be appropriate to say *this is so great*. It's too great, it's too good because it sure doesn't seem like God loves me right now depending on what's going on in your life. Jessica, do you ever question that God is actively loving and caring for you?

Jessica: Doesn't everybody? Isn't that naturally where we would go when things are hard, even though you know God's love is true, sometimes it might not *feel* true.

David: When you worked with youth, have you ever had youth who felt that way?



David Schmitt and Peter Nafzger

Jessica: You try to tell them differently, but it's hard for them to argue against their feelings. Especially with youth, when emotions are really big about something it's hard to not listen to the voice of your emotions. For some people that does define what they think is true.

Peter: Well, and the three of us sitting here talking are professional church workers. We probably feel it sometimes that God doesn't love us . . . but we know it, we teach it, and we preach it. I think there's probably a lot of people in your congregation who don't actually know it.

David: And when things are not going well, things are falling apart, that's proof that God doesn't love us.

Peter: So, taking seriously opposition and concerns about this would be an important part of this sermon.

David: So, what do you think of when we say more than conquerors? I know

how in him we are conquerors, but what does it mean to be more than a conqueror?

Peter: I don't know! <laughter>

David: Well, I think it would be neat to think about the apostle Paul and his life, his journey. That would contribute to him confessing something like this. I mean you're talking about knowing intellectually and then knowing experientially, the apostle Paul knew experientially the victory in Christ.

Peter: So, I mean, you're thinking about how you kind of put some flesh and bones on these ideas. You could go with someone like Paul. Who else would have felt either separated from God's love or less than a conqueror?

David: Gideon.

Jessica: Joseph in prison, the men with leprosy . . .

Peter: I think you've got a number of biblical characters who have been through that personal experience. I think taking seriously those concerns as a means by which you can proclaim those promises anew, would be one way you could wrap up this series on Romans eight.

This is only a portion of the episode. Peter continues to describe his potential sermon theme and David goes on to share his first impressions of the lectionary texts. You can find episodes of *Lectionary Kick-start* on all major podcast hosting platforms, scholar.csl.edu, and concordiatheology.org/podcasts. Episodes are released 2 weeks before the lectionary texts are scheduled in the church year.

Reviews

**AHAB'S HOUSE OF HORRORS: A
Historiographic Study of the Military
Campaigns of the House of Omri.**

By Kyle R. Greenwood and David B. Schreiner. Lexham, 2023. Paper. 168 pages. \$22.99.

Admittedly, the title of this book caught my attention. Whoever chose it—whether the authors, an editor, or the marketing department—is to be commended for a catchy title. Yet, strangely, the phrase never occurs in the book. Certainly, the book deals with the negative characterization of the Omride dynasty, of which Ahab is the most famous king, but the focus is not on Ahab or his “house of horrors” as much as one might expect. In fact, anonymity, particularly the anonymity of the king of Israel, is a major point in the argument being developed. Thus, the title, while enticing, is misleading. The focus is both broader and more specific as the subtitle makes clear. Though the subtitle is far more revealing and helpful, it is, admittedly, much less alluring.

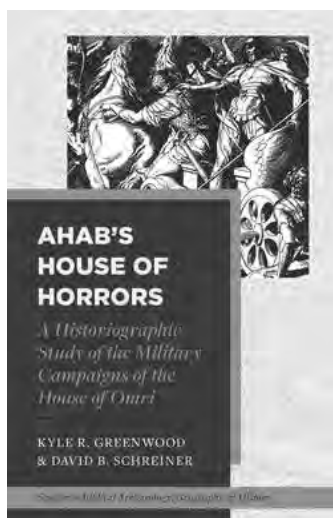
Greenwood and Schreiner have set out to engage with two complicated and controversial issues. There is much debate about how one should understand and write about the history of Israel. Great debate also surrounds

the question of how to understand the witness of Kings to the Omride dynasty, especially the battle accounts in 1 Kings 20, 22, and 2 Kings 3, especially in light of extrabiblical witnesses. In this relatively short study, they desire to develop and demonstrate a synthetic historiography that both uses and elucidates the controversial battle accounts. Due to space constraints, I will focus on their methodology. Such a

focus will help readers evaluate for themselves the results presented in the volume.

Their task is neither small nor uncomplicated, thus the book is not a simple read to be entered lightly. Readers should be intimately familiar with 1 Kings 6 through 2 Kings 10, the biblical witness to the rise and fall of the house of Omri. Essential also is familiarity with the

field of historiography and the debates that have surrounded a proper approach to the history of Israel. An excellent introduction can be found in part 1 of the second edition of *A Biblical History of Israel* by Provan, Long, and Longman. In fact, if one is familiar with the various writings of these scholars, the synthetic approach of Greenwood and Schreiner will be recognizable and not as novel as their presentation might lead one to believe. Unfortunately, their only



mention of *A Biblical History of Israel* is in a footnote in which they disagree with one particular point. More helpful would be a brief acknowledgment of the prior approach of Provan, Long, and Longman and a short discussion of how these authors distinguish themselves from that approach. Citing the most recent edition—2013 instead of 2003—in which the conversation about historiography has been continued, would also be good, right, and salutary.

Greenwood and Schreiner state that need for this particular study arises from the fact that the biblical material “quickly vilifies the Omride dynasty” which “creates a significant difficulty vis-à-vis the extrabiblical testimony” which “suggest[s] that the Omrides’ effect on the region was positive” (4). In other words, different ancient witnesses paint different pictures of the Omride dynasty. As they note, “the nature of historiography, or history writing—particularly ancient historiography—is intentionally sophisticated” having both an “antiquarian interest” and “an ideological agenda” that ancient authors held in balance as they presented the past toward their goals (132). Laudably, it is the goal of Greenwood and Schreiner to understand each witness as thoroughly as possible, reading “critically, with attention to nuance, linguistic ambiguity, and literary convention” (134), and then, rather than privileging one witness, to synthesize the findings in order to reconstruct the historical situation and to better understand the biblical text within the

reconstructed context.

In chapter 2, the authors demonstrate their methodology using a test case involving 2 Kings 9–10 and the Tel Dan Stele. These two witnesses are often said to conflict with one another regarding the end of the Omride dynasty. Second Kings credits Jehu with the deaths of Jehoram and Ahaziah while the reconstructed text of the stele appears to credit Hazael of Damascus. Much can be learned from the authors’ attention to the historical situation, to the literary and ideological nature of both texts, and to the semantics of particular words. Rightly, they give a caution about the tentative nature of reconstructed texts. Of concern, however, is their reliance on diachronic methodology even though “the difficulties of historical-critical studies are well-known” (22). They aver that diachronic methods are necessary and useful when warranted by the text. “Warrant appears when literary phenomena, such as doublets, repetitions, grammatical and syntactical difficulties, and other realities *reach a certain qualitative and/or quantitative threshold*” at which “the critic is *compelled* to shift from a synchronic posture to a diachronic posture” (27, emphasis added). How does one identify that threshold? Moreover, their example of “clausal resumption (*Wiederaufnahme*)” (25) could easily be a literary device of the original composition rather than evidence of redactional activity. Building an argument on the uncertainties of

diachronic study is dubious. In this case it allows them to conjecture a later addition of “divine sanction” (26–27) that was not present previously. It is hard to tell how they view this. It seems as though they are not denying some sort of prophetic activity as part of the historical event. Rather, it was simply added later to flesh out the account. Even if that is their position, others would more likely simply dismiss the so-called interpolation as an ideological addition with no historical value.

In chapters 3–6, four Omride battle accounts are examined using their synthetic methodology. A variety of thorny issues are addressed, and synthetic conclusions are presented. Again, much can be learned while various points deserve further attention. Again, for the audience of this journal, it is the reliance on diachronic methods that will be most objectionable. And that, in turn, will call into question the end conclusions, outlined in chapter 7.

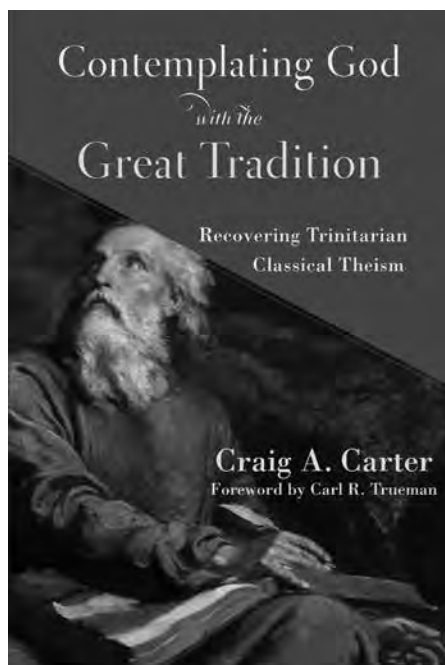
Readers interested in historiography as a discipline or in the Omride dynasty in particular will benefit from a careful, thoughtful interaction with what Greenwood and Schreiner present. Readers enticed by the catchy title might find themselves disappointed.

Philip Werth Penhallegon

CONTEMPLATING GOD WITH THE GREAT TRADITION: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism. By *Craig A. Carter*. Baker Academic, 2021. 334 pages. Paperback. \$32.99.

As a follow-up volume to his previous work, *Interpreting God with the Great Tradition*, the author presents an appealing case of what is called Trinitarian Classical Theism. Trinitarian Classical Theism, Carter argues, “is the historic orthodox doctrine of God” which states that “God is the simple, immutable, eternal, self-existent First Cause of the cosmos” (16) as opposed to what the modern era espoused of theistic personalism, theistic mutualism, or relational theism that weaken the radical otherness of God.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 explains the difference between two forms of theism (chapter 1) and summarizes Trinitarian Classical Theism into twenty-five theses (chapter 2). Here we find a classical Thomist



notion of God in statements like “God’s existence is evident to reason” (thesis 5), “God is the First Cause of all that exists” (thesis 6), “As pure act, God is simple” (thesis 10), “The language we use for God is analogical rather than either univocal or equivocal” (thesis 12) and “The God of the Bible is more than the god of the philosophers but not less” (thesis 20). The main drawback of the modern doctrine of God, for Carter, is its loss of grip on the classical, orthodox, trinitarian theism upheld by the Nicene fathers in favor of relational theism which blurs the distinction between the Creator, who is immutable, and creation, which is subject to change.

The four chapters of part 2 interpret Isaiah 40–48 theologically in order to find the biblical support of Trinitarian Classical Theism. The doctrine of God, embodied in the book of Isaiah and especially in its chapters 40–48, is that “the Lord, the God of Israel, is the transcendent Creator and sovereign Lord of history, who alone is to be worshiped” (125). This view of God—known as “transcendent monotheism”—is also “the view of the Nicene fathers and the trinitarian classical theism of the Great Tradition” (181).

The third part of the book, which consists of three chapters (chapters 7–9), brings the whole discussion back home by answering two key questions: why trinitarian classical theism championed by the Nicene fathers and the Great Tradition is biblical and orthodox in nature, and why we should reject the modern doctrine of relational

theism. Akin to the Old Testament authors, Carter argues, the pro-Nicene theologians of the fourth century “were determined to integrate what was salvageable from Greek philosophy into a Christian worldview built on the basis of biblical exegesis because they wanted to assimilate all human culture into a biblical framework, which is what one would expect from people who believer that God is the transcendent Creator” (205). What is useful in Greek philosophy for Christian assimilation is Platonism, for the Platonists were able to see God as the highest good from which all lesser goods are derived and creation as orderly constructed by a universal principle, though not as a personal, speaking Creator.

On the contrary, for Carter, the modern doctrine of relational theism is but a return to the pagan idea of pantheism that removes the critical distinction between the transcendent Creator and the creation and sees God as part of the creation that is subject to change. The main reason is the collapse of the distinction between immanent and economic Trinity in the modern discussion of trinitarianism. “Without this distinction, divine immutability and divine action in history become a contradiction rather than a paradox” (301).

The author presents his thesis in a coherent, well-ordered, and compelling way. The book is easy to follow, and Carter did a great job in pulling in all theological resources in the service of his overall argument. I personally relate to

and agree with many of his arguments, especially the proposal of recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism. In spite of this, several complaints should be followed in my concluding evaluation of this project:

1. The key problem of reading this book is its all too frequent oversimplification. All other minor difficulties are simply the upshot of this fundamental problem. What lies behind this problem, I suspect, is the author's use of Christian Platonism as a polemical tool against modernity. In this polemic context, the complex nature of both Platonism and modernism is flattened out.
2. The author oversimplifies Platonism. While I am willing to acknowledge that the church fathers readily made use of Platonic ideas in their theological construction, their attitude towards Platonism, when found contrary to the clear teaching of the Scripture, was no less critical than Carter's towards modernism.
3. The author misunderstands nominalism. For one thing, Carter seems inadvertently (and naïvely) equating nominalism with Ockhamism, which is more evidence of his oversimplification. What's more, whether the late Middle Ages was a waning (Huizinga) or a harvest (Oberman) of the Middle Ages is still a yet-to-be decided issue among scholars,

a discussion that Carter also overlooks. Thus, it became no surprise to me when Carter presents the late medieval nominalism as the main culprit for producing a capricious God of sheer will without even a mention of the doctrine of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, a teaching espoused by many nominalists, that accounted for both the sovereignty and faithfulness of God.

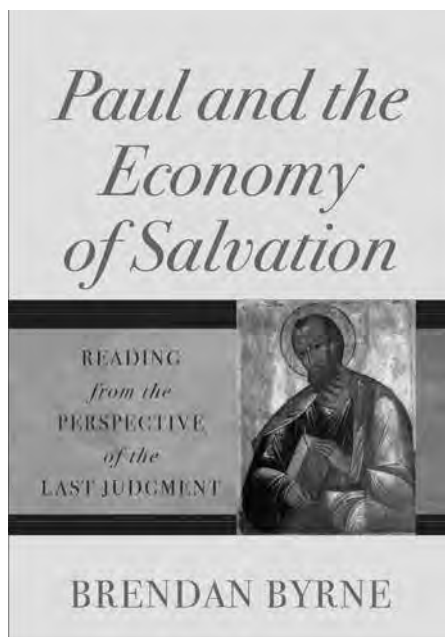
4. The author's presentation of modernism is overly negative. By making modernism the biggest enemy threatening the well-being of Christian theology, Carter is forced to ignore the multifaceted story of the rise of modernity and the still more complicated relationship between the Reformation and the Enlightenment. For me, modernity may be the repugnant enemy of Christian theology in a certain aspect (the secularization thesis). From another perspective, however, the modern doctrine of nature that brought forth the seventeenth-century scientific revolution can also be seen as the intellectual beneficiary of medieval Thomism and the late Reformation scholasticism. History is always more than the sum of its interpretation, and we should always keep that in mind in our interpretive pursuit.

*Vincent Kam
St. Louis, Missouri*

PAUL AND THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION: Reading from the Perspective of the Last Judgment. By Brendan Byrne. Baker Academic, 2021. 286 pages. Hardcover. \$45.00.

When I heard *Paul and the Economy of Salvation: Reading from the Perspective of the Last Judgment* was a serious engagement with the “now and not yet” of Paul’s theology, I immediately picked up this book to see if Brendan Byrne captured Paul’s thought. I am glad to report that Byrne brought Paul’s apocalyptic theology, as found in Romans, to life. Byrne drew upon Paul to bring out the vivid picture of the last day found in Romans, and he framed Paul’s theology within the apocalyptic background of first-century Judaism. Throughout the book, Byrne engaged with contemporary scholarship including Roman Catholic, Protestant, and the New Perspective on Paul scholars.

In the first chapter after a thorough investigation of Second Temple apocalyptic literature, Byrne agreed with E. P. Sanders that “soteriology” is a misleading term with Judaism—especially with the varied views of the resurrection in Judaism. However, he dismissed Sanders’s theory of “covenantal nomism.” The theory stated that Jews were saved by grace through election, and they maintained the covenant through obedience. Byrne presented evidence that debunks the theory of covenantal nomism. The Jews’ need to do good works to maintain covenantal



faithfulness to God and the writing of Ezra 4 meant synergism between God and man had to exist to maintain the covenant. This synergism mostly rebukes the claims that the Jews of the first century held to covenantal nomism as described by E. P. Sanders (33). As Byrne describes, Paul existed in a religious world where one was “saved” by works.

The greatest strength of this book is placing Paul’s vision of Christ on the horizon of the apocalypse. Paul thought the world could end at any time pressing him further into his missionary work. While Romans contains Paul’s most intellectual defense of the gospel, the letter to the Romans still has the press of the imminent coming of Jesus Christ. The ordering of the chapters in this book helps to prove Byrne’s thesis that the apocalypse is central to Paul’s

thought. The last part of the book, chapters 5 through 8, help to frame the entire letter to the Romans through the picture of the last day. By considering the later chapters before Romans 5–8, Byrne highlights that righteousness must overlap with judgment. Using the example of Romans 13, the obedience to the civil authorities is not just a nuisance to endure but constitutes “rational worship” that is owed to God (125).

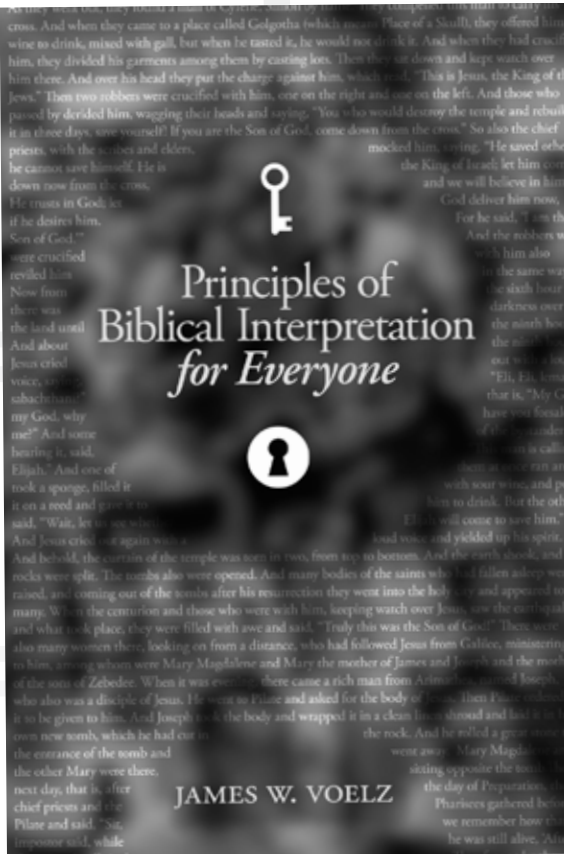
Romans 5–8 brings the theme of hope in the eschatological justice of God to the believer in the present. For Byrne, justification happens twice to the believer. First, when one comes to faith, God gives the eschatological judgment of the individual in the present by proclaiming the forgiveness of sins. Second, justification happens at the moment of death. This justification depends on the synergistic cooperation with the believer—a synergism found in Paul in Romans but especially found in Philippians 2:12–13 when Paul exhorts Christians to work out their salvation with “fear and trembling.”

Overall, this book is a great shift away from modern scholarship that seeks to minimize the eschatological thrust of the New Testament. Byrne brings to life Paul’s apocalyptic thought in a fresh and vivid way. To his credit as a scholar, Byrne admits he was wrong in his previous works about Romans 6–8 being an “ethical excursus.” Byrne now interprets Romans 6–8 through the apocalyptic vision of Paul. This position orients him toward the Lutheran position of the “now and not yet”

apocalyptic vision of Paul in Romans 6–8. This book promises to provide fruitful ecumenical dialog between Lutherans and Catholics. Even Byrne’s insistence of the need of “synergism” is easily viewed in light of the Augsburg Confession Article VI: The New Obedience—a concept not foreign to Lutheranism. This book is an excellent refresher on Paul that all can appreciate, especially for pastors and other scholars of Paul. I wholeheartedly recommend *Paul and the Economy of Salvation* and the challenge of Paul that Byrne channels to us today—to live a life of righteousness in the light of Christ’s imminent coming.

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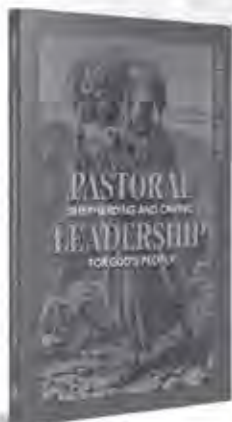


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