



Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?

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To subscribe to a confession means, literally, to sign one's name to it, to agree confessionally to be identified with it and by it. It means to make the confession one's own, to become a confessor with those who made the original confession.

But, of course, the literal sense of confessional subscription is only the beginning of the problem. We are always faced with the question of how literally we are to take the confessions themselves. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in its constitution declares that it accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession “as a true witness to the Gospel,” and the catechisms and other confessions of the Book of Concord as “further and valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.” One might will detect in such relatively mild language already some backing off from the tougher language of subscription. But we shall not argue that here.

According to the ordination rite of the ELCA, pastors are to promise to preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions. This seems a little more demanding than the simple acceptance language of the constitution, since it proposes a more normative role for the Confessions for those engaged in official teaching and preaching. And that is appropriate, no doubt, for the exercise of the public office of ministry in the church.

In spite of the nuances of the language in the official documents, I will assume that for the purposes of this exercise, “accept as true witness to the Gospel” and “valid interpretation of the faith,” or “preach and teach in accordance with,” are to be taken as roughly equivalent to “confessional subscription.” What is the language supposed to mean? To what does it commit us?

Confessionalists, and particularly Lutherans in this country, have had and continue to have considerable difficulty with such questions. Such difficulty arises mainly because of a failure to apply what the confessors confess to the interpretation and use of the confessional documents themselves. The confessors confess the liberating and life-giving power of the gospel over against all law and demonic power which enslaves and kills—wherever it may be found, even (or perhaps

especially!) if that be in the church itself.

In the first instance, therefore, the question for subscription is not whether one is bound enough to teach and preach in accordance with these confessions, but whether one is actually going to be free enough to do so. The fundamental question is not whether we will feel

legalistically constrained by the confession, but whether we will actually be so liberated by what they confess that we will dare to be so bold as they, and thus *con-fess*, i.e., speak with one voice together with them. The confession, that is to say, was an act of daring, a declaration of the liberating power of the gospel over against enslavement. To subscribe to the confession cannot be less than that. When one comes to understand the confessions in that light they are a source of strength and comfort for pastoral ministry, and not a strait-jacket or a burden.

Failure to keep this in view is what causes much of the trouble for confessionalism. Subsequent generations forget the liberating confession and take the documents as a kind of legal strait-jacket. Subscription becomes imprisonment. In order to escape, one appeals to the various interpretive devices at hand to relax the harsh servitude—to changes in “historical context” or “thought structures”; to advances in exegesis, linguistic analysis, or various forms of literary criticism; and so on and so on. In the end, escape from the seriousness of subscription is sought via the blandishments of relativism.

To be sure, subscription as con-fessing the liberating gospel with the confessors does commit us to exact historical and exegetical investigation to enable us truly to join them in that confession today. But that is something fundamentally different from using our interpretive tools to escape or relativize such subscription. Such attempts to escape will inevitably result in falling again into just that captivity from which the confessors sought to be freed. We do not really understand even the notorious battles of the confessional era if we do not see them precisely as battles for the liberating power of the gospel. One should be wary of bald pronouncements about differences in context which are used to signal easy departures from what the confessors sought to confess.

I said above that “in the first instance” confessional subscription asks not whether we are bound enough to subscribe, but whether we are freed enough by the confession itself to dare to con-fess the gospel they confessed. But, of course, there is also a second instance. The confession does propose a dividing line, or, to use Luther’s image, a plumb line, by which we, the church, its theology, and its pastors, can be measured and judged.

Perhaps one can say that the confession is like a charter of freedom, or a letter declaring the slave a free person. It does have legal status and character. Not only must one tend it and keep it carefully, but one can be excluded by it if one does not “dare” to confess it. Thus, especially those who do not preach and teach in accordance with it can and should be disciplined. Neither should the arts of interpretation be misused to reintroduce the slavery from which the confession aimed to liberate us. On the contemporary scene, particularly in ecumenical discussion, it is just this kind of question that has to be pursued with consummate care. For the confessional battle and the question of subscription is in essence always that stated by St. Paul in Gal 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

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The question of confessional subscription reminds me of St. Paul’s remarks about his joy at the gospel’s proclamation, no matter what the motives, good or bad (Phil 1:15-18). Similarly,

subscription seems to me almost always better than non-subscription. I am delighted that the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod professes to take the Confessions seriously, even if that profession is contradicted by its anti-ecumenism. Among ecumenists, confessionalists with the wrong tactics (e.g., with a Genevan rather than Roman tilt) are much to be preferred to non-confessionalists whose tactical ideas are more like my own. Not that subscription and gospel proclamation are identical; subscribers have at times been less faithful preachers of the Word than non-subscribers. Yet subscription rarely harms and often helps the gospel cause; the same cannot be said of non-subscription.

My arguments for this would not survive a test in court or before the bar of formal logic, but then my belief that Britain is an island (to borrow an example from Cardinal Newman’s discussion of a similar point) is also not susceptible to coercive proof. The total evidence seems overwhelming, yet each thread in the case I spin is frail indeed, a matter of “mere hearsay.” In what follows, I can only hint at my reasons. Those not already convinced are not likely to be persuaded; those convinced may want to give a quite different set of reasons.

Some of my reasons are communitarian and could be dismissed as merely sociological (or, in an odd sense, ecological) rather than properly theological. If, however, the church is truly in the world, even though not of it, sociology and theology cannot be neatly separated. It is theologically relevant that Lutherans have historically been held together by their shared confessions, not by the Book of Common Prayer like Anglicans, nor by polity like Presbyterians, nor by experientialist emphases à la revivalists and pentecostals, nor by tradition like the Orthodox, nor by papal primacy like Roman Catholics. It is hard to see how Lutherans could find another focus. Social and moral reform movements whether abolitionist, prohibitionist, or liberationist, do not build enduring large-scale communities because, quite properly, they change with the times and cut across denominational boundaries. We Lutherans are thus stuck with our Confessions if we wish to retain

whatever distinctiveness and unity we have. Nor is this an inefficacious bond. In my own case, for example, the discovery that I also memorized the Small Catechism for confirmation has more than once been an open sesame among third-world Lutherans and some Missourians.

But is Lutheran identity, community, and unity worth saving? Why not merge without remainder into larger groups? The currently most fashionable answers to these questions sound ecological: save endangered species; variety is enriching; don’t impoverish the gene pool. The ecumenical church needs many different voices and instruments to play the full-orbed gospel oratorio. Or, to speak less metaphorically, the proper model of ecumenical unity is not monolithic uniformity, but a reconciled diversity which retains, among other things, confessional propria. Lutherans can and should continue to subscribe to their historic teachings on law and gospel or the real presence, for example, as preferable (at least for them) to Roman or Reformed ones. Reconciled diversity can involve more confessional commitment than this, but not less. In any case, if reconciled diversity makes possible a more fully orchestrated proclamation of the gospel than would otherwise be possible, it becomes confessionally mandatory. That, if I am not mistaken, is why the Lutheran World Federation at Dar-es-Salaam in 1977 adopted reconciled diversity as the ecumenical goal. Preserving the distinctive treasures of the confessional traditions within the church universal is important, and that is why some form of subscription

remains desirable in an ecumenical age.

There are, however, other and stronger arguments than these socio-ecclesial ones. The Lutheran Confessions do not simply introduce enriching variety into the ecumenical chorus, but as Gritsch and Jenson put it,¹ they propose a dogma for all Christians, namely, that the triune God whose Word became flesh in Jesus Christ justifies sinners *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. If it were not for this doctrine of justification, there would not be sufficient reason for supplementing the authority of Scripture and creed with that of the confessional writings. Church teachings are to serve not replace Scripture and should be kept as spare as possible. The *regula fidei* which developed into the trinitarian and christological affirmations of the early church was needed to make sure that the Bible is not read any old way (as the ancient gnostics and contemporary deconstructionists do), but as testimony to and from the creator God whose Word enfleshed is Jesus Christ. To this the Confessions add, as Melancthon put it, that to know this God is to know his benefits. He is the one who justifies, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the meta-dogma by which all other doctrines and uses of doctrine are to be judged.

Everything else in the Confessions is commentary. They illustrate for us how to use justification by faith in its trinitarian and christocentric understanding in order to interpret Scripture and critically apply it to the church's life and teachings. Lutherans believe that the Confessions did so acceptably in the sixteenth-century situation. That is why pastors and teachers subscribe to the Book of Concord (or, in the more minimalist churches, to the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism) as "a pure exposition" of the biblical witness to the good news in Jesus Christ.

¹Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

The Holy Spirit, to be sure, imparts the reality of justifying faith through Word and Sacrament even where the doctrine is unarticulated or unsubscribed, but subscription may, nevertheless, be crucial even when vacuous or misused. Just as Israel's honoring of God merely with its lips provided leverage for prophetic protest, so the church's professions, even when pro forma, preserve possibilities of communal self-criticism. It was the Confessions which indirectly fueled Kierkegaard's *Attack on Christendom* and, more directly, the work of Bonhoeffer and others in the Confessing Church. The catholic creeds may have once sufficed as communally authoritative guides to scriptural interpretation, but the Reformation confessional witness has long been vital. Moreover, so it can be argued, it is more than ever needed in our ecumenical age, not only for Lutherans, but for the church universal.

If the potential of the Confessions is to be fully actualized in our day, their authority needs to be understood as tertiary and historically conditioned, yet—if I may risk the phrase—hermeneutically absolute for those who genuinely subscribe to them. Their authority is tertiary because they stand under and in service to Scripture (which in turn stands under and in service of the gospel message for the proclamation of which it is source and norm). In the second place, the Confessions are historically conditioned in the sense that they are, to repeat, no more than "a pure exposition" of scriptural teaching (made necessary, as the Confessions themselves recognize, by the particular conflicts of their particular age). Other expositions are not excluded,

and some of the Confessions' applications of scriptural teaching may not be relevant in new situations nor even tenable in their own day in the light of historical criticism. This invocation of exegetical reasonableness is authentically Lutheran, as Luther's appeal to "Scripture and reason" at Worms reminds us; it makes it impossible to approve of some confessional exegesis ("the pope is antichrist" being an oft-cited example).

In the third place, these two points, tertiary status and contextual conditionedness, enhance rather than undermine the hermeneutical authority of the Confessions. They sharpen the focus on the source of that authority, on the meta-dogmatic trinitarian and christocentric doctrine of justification by faith. This is the criterion of all teaching and practice. Everything and only what the Bible mandates, permits, or excludes when read in accordance with this doctrine is mandated, permitted, or excluded. Changes take place in these scriptural instructions—God speaks afresh in new situations—but not in the interpretive rule. To employ a metaphor of which I am perhaps over-fond, one and the same doctrinal grammar generates an endless stream of novel sentences expressible in varying conceptual and symbolic vocabularies. Or, to use traditional terminology, subscription to the particular exegetical conclusions of the Confessions is only *quatenus* ("insofar as" they agree with Scripture), while consent to their hermeneutical principles is *quia* ("because" they agree). The Confessions can be both firm and flexible in any age, including this ecumenical one.

In summary, the Confessions when properly deployed provide essential guidance in the ecumenical quest for unity; even when poorly used, they can still help protect against apostasy. Adherence to them deserves a better defense than the one I've sketched here; if others improve on it, so much the better.