

Hermeneutics and the Confessions

✠ *In the name of Jesus.* ✠

In an essay presented in 1858 C.F.W. Walther described the importance of unconditionally subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions. Walther built his case for why on a simple principle: the Lutheran Confessions correctly understand and interpret the Scriptures. He also presented a number of ways in which people water down this subscription. One of the examples Walther describes goes like this: "I will interpret the Confessions in the light of the Scriptures." This sounds pious and evangelical, in fact, more pious and evangelical, more *sola Scriptura*, than anything we could ever say.¹ But it can be a deceptive piety. Walther's response begins, "Consequently if the church conceded that its ministers should not be required to interpret the Scriptures according to the symbols but interpret the symbols according to the Scriptures...."² This has been turned into a question (and for some, a shibboleth of sorts): do we interpret the Confessions in the light of

the Scriptures or the Scriptures in the light of the Confessions?

Is this the sort of question the church of the *sola Scriptura* should even ask? Or is it just a way to distinguish a *quia* ("because") from a *quatenus* ("in so far as") subscription? To get ourselves off the horns of this apparent dilemma, and potentially make this a short, two paragraph essay, one might remind people that Walther wrote this essay to talk about confessional subscription and not hermeneutics.³ He was listing ways in which people wiggle out of the doctrine of our Lutheran Confessions. In other words, Walther very clearly says this to identify and close off every loophole to a *quia* subscription to our confessions. Notice how he finishes the sentence in question. Should someone subscribe the Confessions in the light of the Scriptures this "would not give the church any guarantee that the pledged minister would understand and expound the Scriptures as it does but rather as he himself thinks right. Thus the church would actually set up the changing personal convictions of its ministers as the symbol to which it would obligate them."⁴ In other words, behind these pious words about interpreting the Confessions in the light of the Scriptures we can find hiding

¹ Cf. Hermann Sasse, "Church and Confession," *We Confess* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 83-84; Daniel Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 84; Lyle Lange, ed., *Our Great Heritage* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 1:430; Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 1:355-356.

² C.F.W. Walther, "Confessional Subscription," *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1:25. Cf. also the new volume of Walther essays, *Church Fellowship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015). It includes this essay and a number of others on the topic of Scripture and the Confessions, confessional subscription, and what that means for how we use the Bible and the implications for confessional fellowship.

³ Thomas Nass, "Walther's Approach to Theology – With Application to the ELS and the WELS" (Commission on Inter-Church Relations White Paper, 2011), 5.

⁴ Walther, "Confessional Subscription," 1:25. Cf. also Erling Teigen, "The Quia Subscription to the Confessions: Do We Interpret Scripture in the Light of the Confessions or the Confessions in the Light of Scripture?" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, XLIX (December 2009) and Charles Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 162-169.

an “in so far as” subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.

We cannot solve this so simply because this statement by Walther has lived on among American Lutherans. Walther’s 1858 essay on confessional subscription is still studied by those of the old Synodical Conference and lays the groundwork for how we view the relationship between the Confessions and the Scriptures. Or, perhaps it is too strong to say that it lays the groundwork. Scripture and the Confessions themselves do that. Rather, we could say that this provocative (to us, perhaps, but not to Walther) statement opens the door to our study of the question about how we interpret the Scriptures as a *sola Scriptura* church body that also has a strong relationship to formal confessions of faith gathered together in the *Book of Concord*.

In addition to this, we can forget neither the context in which Walther wrote these words, nor the subsequent 150 years of American Lutheranism. Charles Arand suggests that the history of Lutheranism in America is nothing except the history of how the Lutheran Church interprets the Lutheran Confessions.⁵ So, we have Walther writing about confessional subscription in the 1850s, as the Missouri Synod establishes itself as arguably the most faithfully Lutheran church in America. American Lutherans had up until that point (and ever since, really) had an unsteady relationship to the confessions. The churches of the General Council and General Synod argued and debated over the role of the Confessions throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1850s Samuel Schmucker attempted a radical revision of the Augsburg Confession deleting private confession and

de-gracing the means of grace in his *Definite Platform*. Some Lutheran Churches subscribed only to the Small Catechism and the *Augustana*. Some only implicitly confessed all the confessions and some openly rejected the Formula of Concord. Some said only things prefaced by the words, “We believe, teach, and confess,” bound them. Others confessed that the *Augustana* was fundamentally true and correct. People coming from Scandinavia dealt with the ever-hastening decline of confessional fidelity at home. This caused some to want nothing to do with anything formal or confessional. The Apostles’ Creed or revivals satisfied others. In the early twentieth century historical criticism ascended into a dominant position among American Lutherans outside the Synodical Conference. This hermeneutic also made inroads into the Missouri Synod and contributed not only to the break-up of the Synodical Conference (which led to the end, or at least the steep decline, of Wisconsin’s involvement in broader Lutheranism), but also culminated in the explosion at the St. Louis Seminary called “Seminex.” Along the way, questions regarding confessional subscription and the authority of Scripture and the confessions played a prominent role in that controversy as professor after professor pledged himself forever (and only!) to Article II of the Missouri Synod’s constitution. This article dealt with confessional subscription and required them to confess only the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and nothing more (especially not the *Brief Statement* of 1932 or the *Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles* of 1973).

These battles help us understand why this phrase of Walther’s about interpreting the Scriptures in the light of the Confessions has hung around, even when this phrase makes some uncomfortable, or when it gives the impression that it elevates the Confessions to

⁵ Charles Arand, *Testing the Boundaries to Lutheran Identity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 2.

a position which makes some uncomfortable. One fears that somehow this statement separates the *Scriptura* from the *sola*. Those who hold Walther's 1858 essay and its key statement in high regard have watched people subscribe to Scripture and the Confessions and then blithely deny or become permissive about any and every doctrine under the sun. They have watched Seminary faculties raise their right hands in solemn oath that they are faithful to their calling and faithful to their Lord and then grant that Jesus' virgin birth may or may not be legendary and Genesis 1-3 (or 1-11) may or may not be mythical. Then they watched as these professors and faculties, the very moment they broke free from their confessional fellowship with the Missouri Synod, ordained women and pushed to ordain homosexuals and drove the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church into the disaster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

In the Wisconsin Synod, we have gone through almost none of this. Our fathers did not come from Scandinavia, so the degeneration of the Church of Sweden is not a part of our genetic makeup. While our fathers were pietistic and unionistic "new" Lutherans who began by calling the Confessions "paper fences" and dabbling in fellowship with the General Council and General Synod, we did not go through the existential struggles within our church body that men like Charles Krauth, Theodore Schmauk, or Henry Jacobs did. We had no Samuel Schmucker revising the Confessions. By 1872, Wisconsin found itself safely in the arms of the Synodical Conference with "old Lutheran" Missouri as a companion in our confessional journey. Compare twenty-two years of wilderness wandering with the nearly two hundred years other American Lutherans had dealt with.

Of course, our fathers did go through the election controversy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It touched on this vital question and pushed the so-called Wauwatosa theologians – John Philip Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller – toward their view of the supremacy of exegesis over dogmatic study and citation. This controversy relates to our topic because it centered on the proper use of the church fathers, including our Confessions, and the Scriptures. Walther himself addressed it in an essay on the Church fathers and doctrine in 1884. But after that, our battles within the Synodical Conference centered on Scripture almost exclusively. The questions about fellowship, the Scouts, the chaplaincy, prayer, the Scriptures, and inter-church relations featured pamphleteering about Romans 16:17 and Ephesians 4 and other Scripture passages more than about our confessional subscription or confessional documents (Though, the Overseas Brethren, in their essay on the Church and fellowship did try to return the conversation to *Augustana* VII and the marks of the Church as a possible solution to some of the issues. It was, however, viewed, by some, as too little, too late; and by others as something already done. Now some suggest that former members of the Synodical Conference return here as a possible beginning point for conversations.).

Following the break-up of the Synodical Conference, the Wisconsin Synod went its own way, focused on survival, defying the odds of the naysayers who said that without Missouri she would flounder and fail. Meanwhile, Missouri faced their own existential crisis, mentioned above, culminating in the walk-out from Concordia Seminary (St. Louis). In that war, new ways of interpreting the Scripture were suggested (though, really recycled, as all false teachings are). These new ways said the Bible (and the

Confessions themselves) is dominated by principles that come from outside of Scripture. This really rehashed the great “analogy of faith” debate from the election controversy: do we interpret Bible passages according to other Bible passages about the same topic, or according to a logical system or synthesis of the “totality” of Scripture? Rightly, our Wisconsin fathers came down on the side of the analogy of faith being equal to the principle that Scripture interprets the Scripture, especially making sure we use passages that are treating the topic in question. Seminex supporters reopened this hermeneutical can of worms when they trumpeted the gospel (narrowly defined) as the rule and norm of all biblical and confessional interpretation. The law-gospel principle decides everything. At its extreme – see, for example, the work of Edward Schroeder, Concordia Seminary’s *Faithful to our Calling, Faithful to our Lord*, and John Tietjen’s *Memoirs in Exile* cited in the bibliography – if something does not relate to the gospel or to the law-gospel distinction, then it is not worth quibbling over. It may even be sub-Lutheran. This becomes the so-called “canon within the canon,” a principle ripe for abuse, that can almost only be abused. This is so even if we agree that some doctrines are more fundamental than others (which we do) or that some books of the Bible are more “important” (which we do). This is so if we think that the gospel should predominate (which we do) and we let the law-gospel distinction be an especially brilliant light (which we confess along with the Formula of Concord).

This great war, a battle for the Bible that stretched from roughly 1945 until 1980, marks Missouri as deeply as our split with Missouri marks us. You can see it in their writing and in social media. That time really began what we see as an over-reliance on

convention resolutions, elections, political solutions, and perhaps a re-ascendancy of the warned against “father theology” that Koehler, Pieper, and Schaller loathed. Though, in this case, the “father theology” also includes a strong assertion of the dominance of the Lutheran Confessions. And, really, how can we say it is bad that the Confessions have been elevated?

But again, the point is, these are battles we did not fight in our safe, secure little Wisconsin Synod. After the election controversy, and not counting the split with Missouri, we have not really faced the same kinds of questions. We had our Protestant Controversy and the split with the Church of the Lutheran Confession, but we have not had to deal with a faculty teaching and promoting the historical-critical method. We agree on the historical-grammatical approach to Scripture. We have not wrestled with two distinct views of interpreting the Scriptures. We know that there is only one right way. We have not faced the election of a liberal versus a conservative president for the soul of our Synod. We have somewhat peacefully chugged along without having an existential battle in every generation. Make no mistake, this is what Paul calls for in 1 Corinthians 1:10 (“that all of you agree with one another”). This is cause for much rejoicing, as the psalmist says, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity” (133:1)! On the other hand, we can wonder if it has also, perhaps, in the phrase of Charles Arand, created a little “spiritual amnesia?”⁶ Already in the 1950s, Hermann Sasse suggested that the Missouri Synod had lost much of its desire to truly confess the Confessions. He blamed the American experience for this, an experience that creates “well-intentioned” men “who have

⁶ Arand, 1.

lost the sense for confession and dogma.”⁷ This happens for a variety of reasons. We become comfortable. We become more Americanized and thus interested in a bland, uniform, generic civil religion. You know, go along to get along. We create the false dichotomy between doctrine and missions that tamps down any confessional fervor in favor of evangelical outreach.

It is certainly a warning well worth considering. Even if we discover no truth in it among us, still, the blessed apostle says, “Watch your life and doctrine closely, persevere in them, because if you do you will save yourself and your hearers” (1 Ti 4:16). St. Peter talks about how every word we speak, we should speak “as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pe 4:11). We cannot help but speak: “I believed, therefore I said” (Ps 116:10, 2 Co 4:13). Again, St. Paul says that the heart’s faith confesses with the mouth (Ro 10:10), just as our Lord Jesus said in Matthew 10. It is what the Church does: we acknowledge Christ Jesus as Lord, and not only that, but we teach everything he has commanded (Mt 28:19) and hold to his teachings, all of them (Jn 8:31-32).

So it is worth it, as we discuss the interpretation of the Scriptures, to discuss the great interpretation, the great exegesis, if you will, of the Scriptures that we have as an Evangelical Lutheran Church: our *Book of Concord*. This is especially so since sin entered the world in the context of a hermeneutical question. That question resulted in an exegesis of God’s words and a confession of faith. What do God’s words mean, the devil asked, especially what did God mean when he said not to eat of this tree (Ge 3)? Additionally, the authors of our Confessions read 1

⁷ Hermann Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 1:65.

Corinthians 1:10 in the same way we do. There Paul encourages us not only to agree, but literally to speak the same thing (ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ λέγητε πάντες καὶ μὴ ᾗ ἐν ὑμῖν σχίσματα). Thus our confessions say (and by subscribing we say) that they will not depart a finger’s breadth away not only from Scripture, but also from the words and phrases confessed in the *Book of Concord* (Preface to the *Book of Concord*, 23). The original subscribers signed and subscribed the Formula of Concord “willing to appear before the judgment seat of Christ with this Confession and give an account of it. We will not speak or write anything contrary to this Confession, either publicly or privately. By the strength of God’s grace we intend to abide by it” (FC SD XII:40). Notice, it is not merely Scripture that they (we) will take to the throne of God, but “this Confession.”

This sure sounds like we are no different than all the church bodies and religions around us. Hermann Sasse noted this, as did others, how the Lutheran Church must continually ward off this charge that we are not really a *sola Scriptura* church, that we set something alongside of, or perhaps, even above, the Scriptures.⁸ Rome has tradition and the papacy. The Calvinists have reason. Mormons and Muslims add sacred books. The enthusiasts insert their feelings. “You, Lutherans, have your Confessions.”

This charge would be true except for the fact that we remain convinced, firstly, that even with the Confessions in hand and subscribed that the Holy Scriptures of God, the prophetic and apostolic writings of Old and New Testament, are the one and only source of doctrine and norm of all teachers and teachings. This is so because we have God’s voice right here in these holy writings, as

⁸ Sasse, “Church and Confession,” 83.

Moses said in Deuteronomy 30:9-14. When we seek the voice of the Lord, we do not need to go way up there to drag it down to us or sail across far distant oceans to bring it back here. The Word of God is right here, very near, in your mouth and your heart, in fact, by faith, because God has written it on the scrolls of the Torah (as the Hebrew says). Thus, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30 in Romans 10 as he applies it to the work of God's holy ministry. Our Lord brings his voice very near to us through the Word of Christ.

Secondly, the Holy Scriptures of God are alone sufficient. Among the Papists, Calvinists, Mormons, Muslims, and enthusiasts, their additional sources always add things to an insufficient Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions do not, because they find nothing lacking in the Scriptures that we have. This is the essence of a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. The Lutheran Church is convinced that the Lutheran Confessions are part of how we "keep as the pattern of sound teaching" everything we hear in Scripture (2 Ti 1:13). The Lutheran Church believes firmly that the words of the Confessions are healthy and hygienic words, to use Paul's word (ὕγιαινόντων; cf. 2 Ti 1:13, 1 Ti 1:10, 1 Ti 6:3), as healthy and hygienic as the Church's first great confessions, the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian.

Just consider for a moment the various ways we describe our Confessions. We call them norms for our public teaching (a normed norm [*norma normata*], but a norm nonetheless, to take Theodore Engelder's phrase).⁹ We call them a witness and testimony. We call them confessions of faith. We call them symbols. We say they summarize the Scriptures. We even say that they preserve the teaching of the Scriptures

(in an historical sense in controversy). We look at them as the Lutheran "what does this mean" among ourselves and in response to others with the same Bible as we have. Thus, they are an exegesis of Scripture. They restate Scripture. They have authority, but derived from Scripture. They are water drawn from the well. They are the testimony of our fathers. They shape our teaching. They are the external voice of faith. They are clothed with the authority of Scripture. They are a correct exposition of Scripture. They express Scripture, but do not extend the Scriptures or serve as a substitute for the Scriptures. They illumine, but don't determine Scripture. They confess our "Amen" to the Holy Scriptures. They are the voice of the Church. They restate, they repeat, they reproduce in miniature what the Scriptures say. They provide an overview and a snapshot. This is how we go on record. They serve as commentary on Scripture. They affirm Scripture. They are the theological definitions of the church. They serve as chart and compass for our exegetical labors. They ascertain and state what the Scriptures say. Or, to put it in yet another way, they have been found faithful to the Word of God. They are within that true analogy of the faith, where the words of God have been tested not according to man's reason or any other system put upon the Scriptures, not even the Confessions, but tested according to the words of God. Over and over and over again our Confessions direct us to that Word, compare all things with that Word, and subject everything to that Word. This is the principle of our confessions: "Everything should be subjected to God's Word" (FC SD Summary, 9). And so, "Because this Confession has been derived from God's Word, all other writings should be judged and adjusted to it to determine the extent to which they are to be approved and accepted" (*ibid*, 10). This applies even to the witnesses we call our Confessions (FC Ep, Summary, 8).

⁹ Quoted by Arand, 168.

This is the interesting thing about Christian (Lutheran) theology. It does not say new things. "The church cannot set forth any new words."¹⁰ It just says them well. Consider the Augsburg Confession, which says, "As can be seen, there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church universal, or from the Church of Rome" (AC Summary Statement, 1). This is theology at its best, not just Lutheran theology. In the above-mentioned essay on "Church Father's and Doctrine," Walther writes about Luther (and other church fathers): "A proper explanation of Scripture is precisely nothing else than Scripture itself."¹¹

In other words, Lutherans are fine with explanations of Scripture just as Scripture is. Walther (and others he cited) put a lot of stock

¹⁰ Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions, 1529-1537* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 32; cf. Luther, "On the Councils and the Church" (1539), *Luther's Works [LW]* 41:3-178. He makes this point *ad nauseum*.

¹¹ C.F.W. Walther, "Church Fathers and Doctrine," *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 2:70. Cf. also A. Pieper's, "The Closer to Luther the Better the Theologian" published by the online journal *Studium Excitare* (<http://www.studiumexcitare.com/content/128>). A shortened version appeared in the Spring 2016 volume of *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* under the title "*Quo Proprior Luthero, Eo Melior Theologus*" (CXIII:2, pages 116-118). Also read Carl Beckwith's interesting article "Lutherans and the Church's Fathers" in the Summer 2016 issue of *Lutheran Forum* (pages 56-60). In his 2005 Symposium essay (cf. bibliography), Paul Naumann interacted with John Fenton's essay that explored this area (as Fenton himself wrestled with his relationship to the Missouri Synod, the Confessions, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church; he left the Lutheran Church for Eastern Orthodoxy in 2006), "What Options Do the Confessions Give Us?" (2004).

in 1 Thessalonians 5:20 on this point. "Do not treat prophecies with contempt."¹² The "prophecies" referred to were understood to mean the preaching, teaching, and commenting done upon Scripture by the Church through its teaching office. But even if we debate the meaning of that passage (making use of good, hermeneutical principles), we have yet others. For example, 1 Corinthians 3:10-12, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light." Later in the same letter, Paul offers more explanations of Scripture that align with the analogy of faith, for example in 1 Corinthians 7:12, 25: "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)... Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." The book of Acts is filled with explanations of Scripture akin to our Confessions, whether we talk about the preaching of Stephen, Peter, or Paul, or the decisions of the Jerusalem Council and the letter emanating from it.

The last mentioned reference is especially relevant. Acts 15:12-29 narrates the decision made at Jerusalem in answer to the question regarding Gentile converts to Christianity which began at the home of Cornelius in Acts 10. James stood up and on the basis of Scripture, quoting Amos 9:11-12, declared that Peter and Paul were right (cf. Ac 10:43-48, 13:46-52). Forgiveness of sins is for Jews and Gentiles, as the Scriptures have always taught, "The righteous shall live by faith" (Ro 1:17,

¹² Walther, "Church Fathers," 2:68-70.

quoting Hab 2:4; confer also Paul's words in Ro 4), and "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham, 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal 3:8-9). Then they drew a conclusion based on Scripture and the sanctified judgment the situation called for. They asked Gentile converts to be sensitive to the Jewish sensibilities of their new brothers in issues not a part of the moral law: eating idol meat, strangled animals, and blood. In fact, when you add in Paul's Jewish piety narrated later in Acts and which he references in 1 Corinthians 9, you might come out with a document that sounds suspiciously like Article XXIV of the Apology: "We do not abolish the Mass, but religiously keep and defend it" (Ap XXIV:1).

We might call this part of the confessional cycle. We start with the Scriptures. They are the only source, rule, and norm (*norma normans*, the norming norm). They establish doctrine. We go from them to our Confessions. Tested by Scripture, found not to be in error, not to be proclaiming a different gospel than the one we learned from Scripture (Gal 1:8-9; a favorite of our Confessions, appearing in the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise, the Formula), we now have a reliable document, a normed norm, holding a derived authority, and yet an authority. Now we can, using that phrase that Walther gave us, go from the Confessions to Scripture. Because the Confessions say what the Scriptures say. Sure, they could err, having been written by men, but the ability to err does not guarantee or require error. So, when we discover that they have not erred, when we have been willing to stake our word and ministry upon it, as we do at our ordinations and installations, we now can go back and forth from Scripture to Confessions and

Confessions to Scriptures. This is only because the Confessions speak and use the sound and healthy words of Scripture, as Paul commanded Timothy (2 Ti 1:13). Our Confessions keep the pattern of sound words. They teach no different gospel (Gal 1:8-9). They speak in the daylight what Jesus told us in the dark. They proclaim from the rooftops what he whispered in our ears (Mt 10:27).

This is a key point. The Confessions do not usurp the Scripture's power or authority. The Scriptures do all the work and we always point to them, as Peter did at the home of Cornelius, "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Ac 10:43). The Scriptures make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and equip you for every good work (2 Ti 3:15-17). The gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Ro 1:16). The Scriptures expose, rebuke, and correct false teachers (2 Ti 4:1-5). On the other hand, these false teachers and teachings do come, and we must point them out (1 Ti 4:1-6, 2 Ti 4:1-5). Sometimes we must use our own words to do it, because these rascals like to hide their teachings behind the same words of Scripture that we use. Think of Jesus dealing with his Jewish opponents in John 5. There he deals with a group who have the same Scriptures he does. They both read the same words. Jesus finds himself in Moses. The Jews do not. They have the same book and come to a different place. Likewise in John 7, as the crowds react to Jesus and say, "Must not the Messiah come from Bethlehem, not Galilee, like this guy?" "Regular" people get and know and understand. They draw conclusions. They do exegesis. They practice hermeneutics. They make confessions. Confessions of faith are not erudite documents meant only for study in seminary classrooms and for deep background in

sermon prep. They are, all of them, Bibles for the laity, as the Formula referred to the Catechisms of Dr. Luther.

For those wondering, the Confessions leave no doubt how they feel about Scripture. Nor do they quibble about how to use Confessions. We could adapt Luther's aphorism from "The Freedom of a Christian." A Christian is a perfectly free lord, subject to no one but Scripture; a Christian is a perfectly devoted servant, subject to the faithful confession of Scripture in our Confessions. Think here of Luther's preface to the Large Catechism. He talks of the devil being a master of a thousand arts, and thus says we need God's Word, the master of one hundred thousand arts (LC, Preface, 12). Explaining the Third Commandment Luther calls God's Word "the true holy thing" (LC I:91). The Confessions claim no such power or status for themselves. They make themselves subject to the Scriptures over and over and over again and rely on the Word of God for any power that they have. Melanchthon makes much of Acts 10:43 mentioned above, and how one word from the consensus of the prophets and apostles is greater than all the gathered *Sentences* of the scholars (Ap 12:66-70). In the Smalcald Articles, Luther adamantly argues against both pope and enthusiast that God works through his Word alone (III:8:9-12): not through tradition or the magisterium, not through reason, not through emotions, the heart, or a buzzing in our ear, works of Satan all, who looks "like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon" (Rev 13:11). And yet, you have the Formula of Concord citing the previous Lutheran Confessions dozens of times. You have Melanchthon in the *Augustana* and Apology citing church fathers repeatedly to show the consistency of the Lutheran confession with the universal, catholic Church.

Yet, for all that, our Confessions make this point and make it clearly: We are on Scripture. According to Ralph Bohlmann, the Lutheran Confessions cite or allude to Scripture 1,700 times.¹³ Melanchthon says of Scripture, "These testimonies are so clear, that, to use Augustine's words in this case, they do not need a keen understanding, but only an attentive hearer" (Ap IV:33). Scripture speaks clearly. Again and again in our confessions passages are simply quoted with very little explanation given. They simply stand as if to say, "Need I say more?" When you read the Formula of Concord, especially when the authors wish to make a point, they simply offer up not just one passage, but a great list of passages from Scripture (e.g., FC SD XI:28). Luther's explanation of the chief article, justification by faith, is almost nothing except the words of Scripture without explanation (SA, II:1), because our faith and doctrine are not Luther's or Melanchthon's, but Scripture's.

Our Confessions, then, want nothing to do with anything that is not the Word of God. This truth causes some consternation for some. "If that's so, why no article on Holy Scripture in any of your Confessions?" There are a few ways to answer this. One is to say, "Have you read them? Do you have any doubt about how they feel about the Word of God when you see how they treat it over and over and over again from article to article and confession to confession? Don't you see how our Confessions practice the true analogy of faith? They let Scripture passages interpret Scripture passages when they speak on the same topics and do not let passages be misused or used outside their context." Or, you could answer sarcastically and say, "The ecumenical creeds don't have an article on

¹³ Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 42.

Scripture beyond saying, 'He has spoken by the prophets,' yet I don't hear you complaining about that." Another way to answer, as many do, is to say, "The doctrine of Scripture was not in dispute in the sixteenth century. For all the differences between Lutherans, Papists, Calvinists, and Anabaptists, this wasn't one of them. They agreed that prophecy did not come from men, but men spoke from God, as Peter said. They agreed with Hebrews that God spoke through the prophets and apostles and now through Jesus. They agreed that all Scripture was God-breathed. So they needed no article on Scripture." Or, you could point them to the already mentioned opening section of the Formula of Concord, called the Summary, Rule, and Norm, and say, "Here you go."

At that point our Lutheran Confessions make it quite plain. God's Word is the lamp for our feet and light for our path (Ps 119:105). No gospel can be taught or proclaimed except that which we learned from God's Word (Gal 1:8-9). "The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments" are "the pure, clear fountain of Israel. They are the only standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged" (FC SD Summary, 3).

So, once again, when dealing with questions of interpretation, we find our answers to these questions (e.g., What did God say about this tree?) by searching the Scriptures. What do they say? This is the true analogy of faith, comparing one passage to another. We do this using internal principles, not external principles, not even such good ones as "law-gospel" or "the Gospel" or "*was Christum treibt*" ("what preaches Christ"), or "Is it or is it not in the Confessions?" No, we compare one passage of God's holy Word to another passage of God's holy Word that treats the same topic. This is the Scripture interpreting

the Scripture. We let each one speak on its own, because each one has a God-given (θεόπνευστος; God-breathed) meaning. Yet they are in agreement, because there is one author, one content, one message, one truth.¹⁴ We start here, because this is the source, the norm, the rule. "The true, pure fountain of Israel." The canonical Scriptures. The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. They come from God through God's penmen: "men spoke from God" (1 Pe 1:21). Here God speaks, as he has always spoken (Heb 1:1-2). This establishes all articles of faith and nothing else, as Luther vehemently confessed at Smalcald. The classic confessional example of this is Melanchthon's essay on the Scriptures and justification in Apology IV.

And then we have these Confessions. Think back to that variety of things we called them above. It all circles around and back to the word exegesis. This is what the Lutheran Confessions are. They are an exegesis, an explanation, a commentary on the Scriptures. They are, in fact, the *habitus practicus* of hermeneutics. They are the living expression of Romans 10:8-10: "But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.'" Over and over and over again the Confessions say it, we discover it, and so we use them to confess. More than that, we confess *them*. We make *them* our own confession, our own explanation of Scripture. With no desire to institute anything without God's words, just as the Apology declares in many places (e.g., Ap 15:12-17), we simply let the true analogy of

¹⁴ Bohlmann, 77.

faith take over, “Examples should be interpreted according to the rule, that is, according to certain and clear Scripture passages, not contrary to the rule, that is, contrary to the Scriptures” (Ap 27:60). And since our Confessions do this, reading, learning, and inwardly digesting them should be a given among us. Their use among us with each other should be a given.¹⁵

The danger mentioned above, the fearful thing any *sola Scriptura* church watches out for, is an over reliance on the fathers, on tradition, on the Confessions, somehow making them a source for our doctrine. This is something that has been in the past at issue between former members of the Synodical Conference. Some wonder if the “Wauwatosa” way leaves the Confessions behind, perhaps as mere historical documents. Others wonder if a more “Waltherian” way, interpreting the Scriptures in the light of the Confessions, might end up trading one pope for another (to state it most uncharitably).

It is not clear to me that a problem among us, that is, among the Wisconsin Synod, is an over-reliance on the Lutheran Confessions. Thanks to the summons of the Wauwatosa theology, we revel in exegesis. It is the queen; all things rally around and serve her. We read Pieper (August!), Koehler, and Schaller. We hear their warnings against *Vatertheologie* quite well. And we spend our time immersed in the Scriptures. We make it clear that even dogmatics is nothing except exegesis writ-large. Then we go out into the parish and there is that mantra chanted by pastor and people, “We have the Word of God in its truth and purity.”

¹⁵ Cf. John Moldstad, “Hermeneutics – An ELS Overview” (Commission on Inter-Church Relations White Paper, 2013).

I will confess that lately this has sounded to me something like the Seminech confidence in their confessional (and constitutional) commitment. Over and over again those teachers who had imbibed the historical-critical method of exegesis assured those looking over their shoulders that the most negative of negative results from their method were not possible because of the Lutheran Confessions. They pointed to their promise to follow Article II of the Synodical Constitution, that one about holding to the Scriptures and Confessions, and, mantra-like, repeated it over and over again. While I hesitate to brand them as liars (others do not), I can say that it is a naïve thing to say, at best, and arrogant, at worst. The proof of the pudding was in the eating for Seminech. Their confessional subscription stopped nothing.

As I said, that is not the mantra in our circles: “The Confessions will stop us.” Neither do I suspect any historical-critical exegesis behind the scenes. Our mantra is, “We have the Word of God in its truth and purity.” Luther might suggest we at least make the sign of the cross when we say it. Or perhaps phrase it in the form of a prayer. That would be more humble. “Lord, preserve us in your Word in its truth and purity.”

The danger we face is something more like what August Pieper described. He talked about coming out of the Seminary this way, “We knew the Scriptures well, but could not use them.” He talked about how “one citation followed another.” Scripture itself was “a closed book,” a “merely theoretical authority.”¹⁶ Having fought no battles for a significant period of time, having not had to appropriate these doctrines for ourselves, just

¹⁶ Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 1:111-112.

simply inheriting them, we rest, and open ourselves up to the dangers Koehler felt the Synod had already fallen into, or was about to fall into, in the early twentieth century: the legalism among us. A legalism of relying on the dog notes or the *People's Bible* or the Seminary faculty. A legalism of assumptions: "We've got it. We've mastered exegesis. The exegesis is done." We can end up coming out not as the citation theologians our Wauwatosa fathers felt themselves to be, citing the father's blindly, but proof-texters, citing the Scriptures blindly. We have our mittful of passages. We know what they mean. After all, "We have the Word in its truth and purity."

Pieper and Koehler were not alone in thinking about this. Horace Hummel did as well, about fifty years later.¹⁷ Koehler feared that our desire for "right faith" would end up focusing more on the word "right" than on the word "faith."¹⁸ Hummel called this the "orthodox pounce."¹⁹ We see this most especially in action in the theological conversation that takes place on the internet, where the revolution perpetually eats its own children. There Koehler's greatest fears are made known. All theology is "I'm right and you're wrong." There the Scriptures and Confessions get used as a club, not as they are meant to be: healers of doubting consciences (Ap 12b:32/129). In this theological ghetto called social media and blogs, words like "confessional" and "missional" get thrown

around, along with "liturgical" and "CoWo." Just like the words "liberal" and "conservative" and "moderate" got thrown in the midst of the Seminec crisis. Koehler would, of course, hate this. Koehler did hate this. So did August Pieper, as described above.

Then something worse happens: the reaction. One could argue that the intent of those making the orthodox pounce is good and wholesome, a 1 Timothy 4:16 kind of thing. But the response often heard shakes you to the core: "We have the Word in its truth and purity. Why are you bothering us with these citations? There are souls to save." One could argue that this is the stranger, and worse, form of legalism. A legalism that almost refuses to pounce in any way. It is not exactly permissiveness, but it falls back into a different kind of traditionalism, a traditionalism that says, "We have the Word in its truth and purity. Let's just tell people about Jesus! We don't have anything to worry about." Or, apparently, anything to learn. It starts as trust, but then becomes a masquerade for, well, what word would we want to put on it?

So, we are like those despairing sailors Homer writes about faced with two terrible choices: to die in the clutches of the monster Scylla on one side, or be sucked down by Charybdis on the other. We can hear the call of Holy Mother Church and simply believe what the Church believes, whether we know what that is or not. And that is comforting, to be wrapped in the proper citations and bylaws. Or we can, as they did in the time of the judges, let everybody do as he sees fit, discard all confessions and traditions, and find whatever we wish to find in Scripture. One lets the Confessions (and the fathers and tradition) rule. The other lets exegesis – so-called – rule. This is the fate that Koehler saw in legalistic traditionalism. It becomes either

¹⁷ Horace Hummel, "The Outside Limits of Lutheran Confessionalism in Contemporary Biblical Interpretation," *The Springfielder* XXXV, XXXVI (September 1971, March 1972, June 1972).

¹⁸ John Philip Koehler, Hillmer, Alex, trans., "*Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law*," WLS Essay File, 1914 (original), 1959 (translation).

¹⁹ Hummel, "Outside Limits," *The Springfielder*, XXXV (September 1971), 105.

allegory or traditionalism. Hermann Sasse gives us a similar warning when he discusses the great battle between preaching and the sacrament. In the introduction to his book, *This is My Body*, he writes how overemphasizing either one becomes a problem. If we elevate preaching over the sacrament, then we have just one more religious message in a world of religious messages. If we elevate the sacrament over preaching, then we have just one more set of religious rites in a world of mysterious religious rites. No, we balance them. We have preaching and the sacrament.

Likewise, in the church of *sola Scriptura*, the church that Arthur Carl Piepkorn insisted upon calling "The Church of the Augsburg Confession," we are also able to balance the true fount and source of all doctrine, God's holy Word, alongside man's faith-wrought confession of that Word in our Lutheran Confessions. I hesitate to say it this way, but I will press on anyway. If we elevate the Scripture over the Confessions, in the way Walther and Sasse and others describe, we could make these confessions merely historical documents, of interest in church history class, but not much more than that. This tempts us, because then we can ignore their precedents and witness and testimony, or at least, like Schmucker, the parts we would prefer to ignore: AC/Ap XI or XV or XXIII or XXIV. Likewise, if we elevate the Confessions over the Scriptures (or even put the Confessions on the same plane as the Scriptures, as an unnormed norm), then we are no better than the Muslims and Mormons and Papists with their pope in Rome. This tempts us, because then all our work is already done, or at least we can lean on someone else (other than God) to tell us what to believe and do. We have no more responsibility except enforcement. And even then we have an out, because it is not us, but

the authority. Rather, as we do with sermon and sacrament, we rightly balance out the relationship between these two. Because we understand that relationship. Our Confessions "shall abide because the doctrines they proclaim are God's own."²⁰ We can go from Scripture to the Confessions and from the Confessions to Scripture; we can interpret in both directions, not because they are equal, but because they say the same thing.²¹ Paul Wendland wrote in 2013, "Our voice will be distinctive not because it's Lutheran, but because it's true."²² That is, to say it yet another way, the Confessions do not violate the analogy of faith, even when they use (or do not use) a passage that surprises us, or which we might use differently, or make their point in a way we might have written differently. I think here especially of Luther's explanation of Infant Baptism in the Large Catechism. We run almost immediately to Psalm 51:5 as a *sedes* for why we baptize babies (because they too are sinful). He does not use it at all. In fact, in three articles on original sin (AC II, SA III:1, FC I), the passage gets used only once, in parentheses, among a series of other passages.

Do you sense that perhaps this is hard work? It is. We would, as in all things, prefer one or the other. Either give me biblical exegesis and nothing but biblical exegesis, or give me the Confessions and nothing but the Confessions.

²⁰ S.C. Ylvisaker, "Does Endorsement of the Book of Concord Involve Endorsement of Every Statement in the Confessions?" WLS Essay File, 1944, 8.

²¹ Erling Teigen, "The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, XLVI (April-July 1982), 147.

²² Paul Wendland, "An Overview of Lutheran Hermeneutics in the 21st Century," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, CX (Summer 2013), 190.

We feel like we could do theology just fine either way. With exegesis we work with the Scriptures, the nude Scriptures, as Luther was wont to say. With the Confessions, we can say, "It's already all been settled" (Except it has not all been settled since there are no articles in the Confessions about original sin and cloning. Are clones born according to the normal order of things? If not, are they exempt from original sin?).

Instead, we have both. We have Scripture and the Confessions. We have the Confessions and Scripture. We have exegesis and what we can properly call tradition handed down to us from our fathers. In a picturesque phrase from otherwise uncommendable theologians: "It is always difficult to pussyfoot through a revolution."²³ And would you believe that choosing either exegesis or tradition, either the Scriptures or the Confessions would be pussyfooting, not taking the harder, but more biblical path (cf. Ro 10:8-10, He 10:25)? Well, believe it. To choose one or the other would be to "give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing", of "encouraging one another" (He 10:25), and taking the easy path of either purely private judgment or already decided, magisterially handed down father theology that says, "I believe what the Church believes, and the Church believes what I believe."

I go on and on and you wonder, "What's he saying? What's the meat and potatoes? What's the *habitus practicus*? Because it must always be *practicus*!" Is there such to be found here? Of course. Let us listen to Scripture, humbly. Let us read, learn, and inwardly digest it. Not any of us know nearly everything there is to

know yet, especially those of us still at the Seminary, or out a year, or two, or ten. Or even twenty. Yet, because we prize exegesis so much, and spend so much time on it at every level of our education and in the parish, there is much in the theological world that we do not spend our time on, movements and currents and history that are beyond our ken and outside our library and reading habits and circuit or conference meetings (and may never be a part of our world in whatever parish setting we are in). Yet they are there. They are part of the world in which we live and move and breathe and read Scripture. I think especially of the New Perspective on Paul we will learn so much about tomorrow. It is a world unto itself. It is the way that Paul is read by almost everyone but us. And what do we know of it? Our answer is, I think, "Well, we know Paul!" God be praised for that! May we make Paul one of the first and last authors we read. But we must read him well, quietly, humbly, repeatedly. And listen, actually listen. Peter Nafzger cites John Webster in his recent book on hermeneutics: "One of the chief fruits of the Spirit's conversion of the reader is teachableness, a teachableness which extends into the disposition with which Scripture is read. To read Scripture as one caught up by the reconciling work of God is to abandon mastery of the text, and, instead, to be schooled into docility." Nafzger goes on: "To 'abandon mastery' of the text is not to sacrifice confidence in hearing and confessing what God has spoken through his prophets and apostles. Nor is it to give up the hard work of struggling with the intricacies of the text. It is rather a humble disposition toward the entire practice of biblical interpretation. It recognizes that the written Word of God is, in fact, the written Word of God."²⁴

²³ Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 26.

²⁴ Peter Nafzger, *"These are Written": Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 156.

This seems to take completely the side of the Scriptures over the Confessions. But that is only apparent. That is simply the first part of hermeneutics, listening to the Word, hearing the Word, reading the Word, praying the Word. It is, by far, the most important part. As Francis Pieper said, we must show how important the Bible is by putting it on one side of the room and all the other books on the other side, including the Lutheran Confessions.²⁵ But this supremacy of Scripture, this *sola Scriptura* we rightly prize and defend, does not rule out a respectful listening to the testimony of the fathers.²⁶ For all their railing against father-theology, our Wauwatosa fathers did not dismiss the Confessions one single bit. And neither did our Lutheran Confessions dismiss the fathers. The Formula cites the previously made Lutheran confessions around fifty times and other of Luther's works countless times. Melancthon makes liberal use of the church fathers in the *Augustana* and Apology.

And again, here is the key. This use of our Confessions does not establish doctrine or prove the truth of anything. Not one single bit. Only the Scriptures do that. The Confessions offer up a consensus, a declaration, that to which the Church conforms her preaching and teaching, which we as Lutherans also do (FC SD 12:39-40). Kurt Marquart wrote in 1980, "The ruled rule is the concrete implementation of the ruling rule."²⁷ Again, the Confessions are the *habitus practicus* of hermeneutics. They do what the apostles and disciples did throughout the book of Acts as they preached and taught and what John described in the opening words of his first

letter: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1 Jn 1:1). This is a good thing, that under the authority of God's Word, our God graciously provides for us spiritual daily bread: a prophecy, a teaching, that we dare not despise, but rather, that aids us in our own confessing. In Romans 8:26-27, when Paul talks about how the Spirit prays for us in groans words cannot express, and in Matthew 10:19-20, when Jesus assures his apostles that when they stand before authorities they need not worry because he will give them the words, we have to consider the fact that perhaps one of the ways that God keeps this promise is by providing faithful confessors and confessions such as we have been given in the Church of the Augsburg Confession. And we consider Charles Schaeffer's revealing question, "Have we really made such progress in the discovery of truth since the era of the Reformation, that we understand the Scriptures more thoroughly than those who framed the Symbolical books?"²⁸ Or, as Joel Otto put it in a past Symposium: the Confessions "have something to say."²⁹

They have something to say, because while we have not, by God's grace, faced an all-out theological war in the past decades, who is to say that it will not happen tomorrow? And perhaps that would be a good thing, to have to wrestle with Scripture for our very souls. Paul does not rejoice in the schisms at Corinth, but he does say, "I hear that when you come together as a church, there are

²⁵ Pieper, 1:216.

²⁶ Bohlmann, 38.

²⁷ Arnold Koelpin, ed., *No Other Gospel* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), 42.

²⁸ Quoted by David Webber, "Confessing the Faith in the Language of America," *Logia*, IV (July 1995), 47.

²⁹ Joel Otto, "The Augustana and Lutheran Worship," WLS Essay File, 2005, 1.

divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval" (1 Co 11:18-19). Division would force us to immerse ourselves in the Word not just professionally for sermon prep or Bible class study, or for circuit and conference presentations, but for our very personal faith and confession. This would have the beneficial result (as it does whether in war or peace) that God would once more convince us of what he says, by what he says; the very thing his Word does, "Faith comes from hearing the message," "you have known the Holy Scriptures which make you wise for salvation.... [A]nd is useful...so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (Ro 10:17; 2 Ti 3:15ff; cf. also Heb 4:12). Again we see the practical result, the *habitus practicus*.

Or, perhaps, you say, we are wrestling more than we think; we just have not realized it yet. The Lutheran Church in America has always dealt with tensions in various doctrinal areas. And we will discover that they are the areas of tension among us. We see tension in our doctrine and practice of church and ministry, worship, roles of men and women, church government and authority. Time and again these topics come up among us and in inter-synodical conversations. By God's grace quietly or politely, but still they have arisen. These issues have been sore spots in American Lutheranism since the seventeenth century. They have not gone anywhere and will not go anywhere. They are issues that require a healthy dose of hermeneutical patience and historical study. But they are also issues that, implicitly or explicitly, our confessions have spoken upon. Think in more specific terms of the tensions that surface on social media and in conferences and inter-synodical conversations: contemporary versus traditional worship, youth services, lay

readers, ordaining teachers, who should preside over the liturgy or sacrament, women lectors, women communing women, voters assemblies versus open forums and consensus. There is nothing new here. When the ELCA formed, they had so many questions in the general area of church and ministry, and such divergent practice among the three founding bodies, that they ended up punting the decision on how they would structure their ministry until after the merger officially took place. American Lutherans have been looking for the one hymnal and liturgy to rule them all since the eighteenth century and the time of Muhlenberg. The debate over the appropriateness of worship forms gleaned from the American revival experience has not stopped since it started.

And, as Prof. Otto said, the confessions have something to say here. There may be no explicit article that word-for-word deals with some of our topics, but they do deal in broad terms (and sometimes quite specific terms) with church and ministry, worship issues, and church government. And more than that, they show us how to wrestle with these questions: under the authority of Scripture; asking what God's Word says or does not say; demanding unity in God's Word where God speaks and peace when things are of men (AC VII). In addition, they teach us to patiently consider our brothers and sisters in Christ and the unity of the Church (cf. AC VII, XV, XXIV, XXVIII and the coinciding articles of the Apology). The Confessions offer us a hermeneutical model of how to deal with and settle questions, because in all things they point us to and drive us to Scripture.

And since we live in America and in the post-modern time, where and when all things are free to all men and all truths are equal truths, having a confessional standard serves us well. This is why we have and keep "Lutheran" in

the name of our church body and our parishes. That may seem superficial, and it is certainly not a divine requirement, but it means something. Words mean something. Titles mean something. The general framework in which we operate means something. Having what Theodore Gullixson called a “hermeneutical framework”³⁰ will help us not only deal with these issues, but instruct those before us. For many will come to us like Apollos in Acts 18. They know something of the Scriptures, many of them much something, but not quite all. They know of Baptism, but “only the Baptism of John” (Ac 18:25), so to speak. They come with the baggage of “that’s how we’ve always done it” or American Evangelicalism or American civic religion or historical criticism or whatever it may be. They come armed with a Bible they may or may not have read. And your first task is to get them to read (or listen to or download) that Bible, to study it, and to read it in the right way, that is, to do hermeneutics, even if you never teach them that word. So it is the discipline of daily Bible reading that becomes a goal, culminating in the corporate reading of the Word in the Divine Service. But then it is how to read that Bible, with the law-gospel distinction front and center, finding out it testifies about Christ in every point (Jn 5:39), and how to deal with relating the two main themes of the Scriptures, the justification of the ungodly through faith in Christ and the sanctified life of those declared righteous by God through faith in Christ.

In other words, one thing we fight for is God’s objective truth. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth,” Christ says (Jn 17:17). A confessional standard that gives us a Bible properly confessed, rightly confessed, rightly

³⁰ Theodore Gullixson, “Practical Hermeneutics,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, XLVIII (June/Sept. 2008), 244.

understood, purely and correctly interpreted, as Sasse says, becomes our goal.³¹ That allows us to explain, “What does this mean?” with full confidence. That is what we seek for ourselves and for our people, to say, “This is what God says and means.” That is what our Lutheran Confessions do. Those seventeen hundred citations of Scripture in our Confessions make it plain and clear where they stand: on Scripture, with Scripture, and under Scripture. Our Confessions take to heart the words of Abraham in Luke 16: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them” (Lk 16:29). Article after article after article, the Confessions invent nothing. They only confess, witness, and testify. They confess the objective teachings of a clearly spoken Scripture that the perversion of sinful minds just cannot and will not keep straight.

Without such a public body of doctrine, there is only “theological anarchy,” only “abortive thrusts” toward this truth or that truth.³² Or, there is, as seems more and more likely, even sometimes among us, a theological time of the judges, where every man does as he sees fit, even if only in areas where we are nominally free to do so: “The Bible doesn’t say we can’t!” Horace Hummel used a striking phrase. He called it chasing “theological miniskirts.”³³ The Scriptures, for all their power, have not stopped theological aberrations and miniskirt chasing. They never have, they never will. This is the depravity of the sinful nature. You can see it throughout the Scriptures as Israel built altars on high places and worshiped, made the bronze serpent into an idol, turned hand washing and food restrictions into idols, worshiped angels,

³¹ Sasse, “Church and Confession,” 84.

³² N.S. Tjernagel, “Conference Report,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, XVIII (June 1978), 70.

³³ Horace Hummel, “No Other Gospel!” *Lutheran Forum* (October 1969), 6.

and *et cetera* and so on and so forth. As it is in marriage, where God does not say that man cannot separate only that they should not (Mt 19:6), so it is with false doctrine or bad (false) practice. In a sinful world God does not absolutely prevent it from happening.

But since we all have the same Bible, how are we to know? We know because we have a standard, a line, a confession, that says, "This is what it means to be a Lutheran." *The Book of Concord* defines us, just as the ecumenical creeds defined the true teaching about God for the Church for centuries (and still do). The Confessions, like the Scriptures, will not address or eliminate all the tensions or answer all the questions we have. They do not exist to do that. They will, however, guide us as to method (search the Scriptures, submit to the Scriptures). They will teach us to respect and consider highly the traditions that we have received about the church and her ministry, worship forms, the means of grace, and church authority. They will teach us these traditions. They will teach us the value of a "conservative" reformation, in the sense of holding on to that which is true, rather than re-inventing in each parish and generation. And they will remind us that "I'm free" is not even close to a final answer, just as Paul knew and taught in Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 6-10, and Galatians 2.

Here again, we find our troubles not in our over-reliance on this confessional standard. And even when people do over rely on them, we do not let the baby get thrown out with the bath water. Abuse does not invalidate the use. As Luther says about the sacraments in the Large Catechism, that something gets misused proves its proper use: "For if Baptism was not right and true in itself, it could not be misused or sinned against. The saying is, 'Abuse does not destroy the essence, but confirms it.' For gold is not the less gold even

though a harlot wears it in sin and shame" (LC IV:59). No, rather, I suspect our trouble is perhaps more in our vaunted rugged individualism. While we do not go to the lengths of congregational autonomy argued by some in the Missouri Synod ("The Synod is only advisory!") our ministerium happily goes its own way. When was the last time you submitted a proposed change or practice to your circuit or conference, and then, if you did, when there were questions or concerns, for the sake of your brothers and unity, delayed or stopped implementation? The danger we face is to forget that we are still a part of the Church, the whole Church, and nothing but the Church. I do not mean that we do not understand that we are Christians or what the Holy Christian Church is (all believers in Christ) or any such thing. Rather, I wonder if our individualism leads us to overreact against our true, organic connection to the Holy Christian Church with our ever-so-vocal, "That's too Catholic!" As we make decisions personally or locally, how highly do we prioritize what the truly catholic Church has said, thought, taught, witnessed, and testified? We dare not let it slip too far down the list. Peter Nafzger cited a theologian's reminder, "Being a Christian necessarily involves being a part of the Church."³⁴ Think back to how the *Augustana* protested against this at the end of Article XXI, or how they open Article XXIV in both the *Augustana* and Apology, vigorously protesting against the slander that the Lutheran movement radically overthrows all that ever came before.

This is a good reminder in a world that surrounds us with so much piffle and theological manure. There are many books on our shelves and on our people's shelves that are hardly worth the paper they are printed on, what Charles Krauth called "cartloads of

³⁴ Quoted by Nafzger, 29.

insipid trash" and "pious twaddle."³⁵ Yet they make their way into our shelves, into our hands, and into our practice. We forget the maxim of Dr. Luther from his *Address to the German Nobility*, "It is not many books that make men learned, nor even reading. But it is a good book frequently read, no matter how small it is, that makes a man learned in the Scriptures and godly. Indeed, the writings of all the holy fathers should be read only for a time so that through them we may be led into the Scriptures. As it is, however, we only read them these days to avoid going any further and getting into the Bible. We are like men who read the sign posts and never travel the road they indicate. Our dear fathers wanted to lead us to the Scriptures by their writings, but we use their works to get away from the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the Scripture alone is our vineyard in which we must all labor and toil."³⁶

You see Dr. Luther strike the balance. The good book that we have – in this case our Lutheran Confessions – is only for the purpose of driving us into the Scriptures. They exist in a symbiotic relationship, by God's grace. The Confessions do not distract us from the Scriptures. When they do, they are not being used properly. They exist to protect us, believe it or not, to protect us (and our laypeople) from those theological miniskirts Hummel mentioned, and from something else.

Not only are we tempted to look up the skirts of the American Evangelical churches and the Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, but there is also another worrying tendency Hummel noted. It is related to a thought expressed by Martin Franzmann in

³⁵ Quoted by Arand, 46.

³⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44:205.

one of his many essays on hermeneutics. Franzmann wrote, "Ministry is the motivation for the severest kind of scholarly discipline."³⁷ He warned against short cuts and sloppiness. The kind of sloppiness our Wauwatosa theologians identified in the over use and abuse of the church fathers. The kind of sloppiness and abuse that can come from not having fought many theological battles. The kind of sloppiness and abuse that can come from unthinkingly repeating that mantra like phrase, "We have the Word of God in its truth and purity", which can quickly become, "We're the WELS, we don't make mistakes." The kind of sloppiness that can come from that dangerously pious sounding phrase, "I have enough with my Bible; don't bother me with your Luther."³⁸ There is a strain of all of this among us. I do not know if it is a casualty of the Protest'ant Controversy when we became fearful of publishing, or if it is a casualty of the split with Missouri and watching their liberal intellectuals who wore clerical collars drive them down the broad road to destruction. But there is a suspicion among us of scholarship, academia, intellectualism, liturgy, even confessionalism. We cloak it in a defense of exegesis, but it is not just that, because exegesis is good. The queen. Scripture rules all and is our starting point. But perhaps, just perhaps, we are in danger of something Leigh Jordahl said to a Seminary senior as he worked on his church history project about J.P. Koehler. He suggested that our weakness is that we have begun to skim not just the Confessions, but also the Scriptures, because we have not fought the wars. We look like, talk like, and act like "old Lutherans," but we no longer ask the right questions. Or, perhaps, one might argue, sometimes we are not

³⁷ Martin Franzmann, "Scripture and Interpretation: Posture of the Interpreter," WLS Essay File, 1961.

³⁸ Walther, "Church Fathers," 70.

asking any questions at all.³⁹ As one brother commented to me, "We've forgotten how to have debates."

I mentioned Hummel and then got sidetracked. He had another picturesque phrase. He talked about how in the Missouri he observed in the late 1960s he saw a lot of "generalized Protestant blaaaaa...."⁴⁰ The only defense against Protestant blaaaaa is an immersion in our Lutheran Confessions. This will erase so many of those embarrassing memes we see from our people by Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen and the like. This will end the infatuation some people always seem to have with the latest tricks, gimmicks, doodads, and gizmos. Not because it will force us into some lockstep Lutheran march, but because it will direct our eyes to the one task of Scripture and the one task of the Church: to maintain the chief article (justification) or return to the pope (SA II:1:2), to prepare us and drive us to the Sacrament (cf. preface to the both Catechisms), to give us the one "holy water" and "holy sign" (Preface to the LC 10). This is why God gave us the Church and his Scriptures, as John writes, "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing have life in his name" (Jn 20:31), and Paul, "How from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Ti 3:15). This is what our Confessions confess from Scripture. This is their only hope, their only goal, to keep us on task: "We further believe that in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sin, which is wrought through the holy Sacraments and Absolution and through all kinds of comforting promises from the entire

³⁹ Robert Johannes, "J.P. Koehler: His Hermeneutic and the Wauwatosa Theology," WLS Essay File, 1980, 13-14.

⁴⁰ Hummel, "No Other Gospel," 6.

Gospel. Therefore, whatever ought to be preached about the Sacraments belongs here. In short, the whole Gospel and all the offices of Christianity belong here, which also must be preached and taught without ceasing. God's grace is secured through Christ, and sanctification is wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian Church. Yet because of our flesh, which we bear about with us, we are never without sin.

"Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sin. This is because God forgives us and because we forgive, bear with, and help one another" (LC II:54-55).

In other words, in a world where the Bible gets blaaaaaa-ed, our Lutheran Confessions drive us back to the center, back to Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus, always Jesus, Jesus dying for the ungodly, Jesus putting himself in the balance scales, Jesus washing us in his baptismal bath, Jesus feeding us with his own body and blood. This is all our Confessions are concerned about: restoring this to the front and to the center and letting the Church do what the Scriptures tell us our job is, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven" (Jn 20:21).

I am afraid that our mantra of "We have the Word of God in its truth and purity," ironically opens the door to generalized Protestant blaaaaa, to sermons that are nice, and you can find nothing wrong in them, but still, you

wonder, “Is that all the text said?” “Was I damned and forgiven today?” Or, what about when you hear someone gladly exclaim, “That sure sounded like something my Methodist preacher would say.” Already we have lost private confession and absolution to counseling. Let us not even mention weekly communion. Bible classes that do an exegesis of a Scriptural book or, dare I say it, read from the Confessions, meet with resistance (and not just from the people always). Pastors – arguably busy – wish only to hear some expert present to them and not dig into the Scriptures and Confessions themselves. And conferences bring us great speakers with “cutting edge” this or that that is sure to aid and help our Lutheran ministry, even though they sometimes come from non-Lutheran or secular backgrounds. I know I am a young buck, wet behind the ears and I have not been in every circuit or district, but I do not think it is arguable that such things exist among us. Some I have seen with my eyes or heard with my ears or watched argued out on various social media. We are in danger of forgetting that *ecclesia semper reformanda est*, and we are all three. The Church. Always. Reforming.

But we are not without hope. Where the Scriptures are, there is always hope. For the Word of God is living and active, powerful and effective: it cuts through our bones and marrow (Heb 4:12). The Word of God never returns empty: it does what God wants (Isa 55:11). Faith comes from hearing the message (Ro 10:17). The Word of God endures forever (Isa 40:8, 1 Pe 1:25). Heaven and earth pass away, God’s Word does not (Mt 24:35). That is why August Pieper said once, I believe in “The True Reconstruction of the Church,” that every Reformation begins in the pastor’s study, where he reads the Scriptures. That is why Luther said proudly that he did nothing (except drink beer), the Word did everything.

Yet, as Lutherans, we have another tool, another weapon, another arrow in our quiver. Reacting to a conference he attended and a paper by Samuel Nafzger, N.S. Tjernagel commented, “Given the heritage of the Lutheran Confessions the Lutheran Church will always have at hand the means for its own revitalization and renewal.”⁴¹ And if you hear that as a replacing of Scripture, you have not listened at all. Or I have done a poor job. Because the Confessions say what Scripture says. When we read them, study them, discuss them, confess them, we will be reading, studying, discussing, and confessing Scripture itself. They will occupy us with God’s Word, which, as Luther said, is a helpful thing. And he said that in reference to catechism study. By God’s grace, when you are studying one (the Confessions), you are studying the other (the Scriptures) and vice-versa, and “Certainly you will not release a stronger incense or other repellant against the devil than to be engaged by God’s commandments and words, and speak, sing, or think them. For this is indeed the true ‘holy water’ and ‘holy sign’ from which the devil runs and by which he may be driven away” (Preface to the LC 10). I submit that anyone who thinks differently has not really read the Lutheran Confessions attentively. As one of our brothers in the ministry observed at a recent theological conference, “Our best defense against viewing the Book of Concord too highly is to know the Book of Concord.”

For a moment, I would like you think about three pastors that the Swedish bishop Bo Giertz wrote about in his classic novel, *The Hammer of God*: Pastors Savonius, Fridfeldt, and Torvik.

We meet poor Dr. Savonius in the first novella. And he is an unwilling *Seelsorge*.

⁴¹ Tjernagel, 79.

Called to the side of a dying (and somewhat raving) man, a man doubting his salvation, Savonius does not know what to do. Giertz describes him this way: "He had, of course, always viewed the confessional writings as remnants of medievalism, understandable only against the background of papal darkness."⁴² To Savonius, his ordination vow is more of an historical thing. He finds himself mired in philosophy and poetry, a real rationalist. He can preach beautifully, but not about Jesus. He can comfort no one in their dying. When, as happened to me recently, a man says, "I don't know how to pray anymore," Savonius has nothing. Generalized Protestant blaaa has nothing either. What will help such a man? A ten part series on prayer with slides? New screens on the front of the church? A children's church? A newly modernized or dummed down Lord's Prayer? Or, could we turn to the same place Luther did in his preface to the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism? He points us to God's commands: "Ask, seek, knock." He points us to God's words: "Our Father." He points us to God's promises: "It will be given to you." So say boldly "Our Father" and "Amen" in the name of Jesus.

In that room, Savonius sees a woman comfort this dying man and realizes that perhaps that ancient papal darkness is not so far away. "But in Odesjo the darkness was perhaps just as thick. Such rude means as orthodox theology and true Lutheranism might perhaps be needed to make headway against it."⁴³ Have we been shocked into such a thought? Do we need to be? Is true Lutheranism something "rude"? Perhaps, but only to those who have different goals than delivering and administering the forgiveness of sins to dying

souls. Maybe we have been lulled into thinking such "means" are rude, old, backward, "then," but not now. Maybe we do not see just how near and how nearly universal the "papal darkness" still is.

Or there's Dr. Fridfeldt, the true Christian, the true believer, the born again man. He has strategies and tactics, he has techniques, and something old like baptismal regeneration is not it. The Scriptures are not really enough. Something will help the word. Something will make it work. Something more is needed. He is the true believer, the pietist, the sanctimonious *schwaermer*. Until he too sees that all these tactics and methods have not changed the people of the parish. They still, though outwardly revived and reborn, are nothing but adulterous, idolatrous, thieving sinners. And only the Word works upon them; that word that delivers the continuous and uninterrupted forgiveness of sins that we need, as the Small Catechism teaches, "daily and fully."

Then we meet Torvik, the real twentieth century man. He sees the evil of proof texting, just mining the Scriptures for a word. He loathes a mechanical use of the Word and treating it like some instruction book or text that can be magically mined like a theological horoscope. He reduces everything to the canon within the canon. He was a gospel reductionist before the Seminexers could proudly wear the mantle and title. But he found that when his people asked him questions from Scripture or answered him from Scripture, he could not reply nor explain his reduced theology. He knew, but could not use, the Scriptures. Though, we would argue that he really did not know the Scriptures at all.

Savonius, Fridfeldt, Torvik. We see ourselves in all three. We preach many things, but not

⁴² Bo Giertz, *The Hammer of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005), 11.

⁴³ Giertz, 11.

always Jesus. We have the Scriptures, but we are not always quite convinced that they will do the trick. We look for themes that transcend the simple power of God (cf. 1 Co 1:18-2:5), be it miracles, or wisdom, or ten simple steps to..., or relevant this and relational that. We find ourselves to be smarter than God and those who came before us. For this we must repent. But as he did in the case of all three men, our God has not left us alone. He has spoken plainly in his Word. His holy words "restore our confidence" because as Savonius learned "Here, nothing depended on himself. Here he was simply a steward, a nameless link in the long succession of hands which Christ had used throughout the ages to distribute his gifts to men." While we may chafe at this, it is, as Savonius learned, actually a relief, these "rude means" of "orthodox theology and true Lutheranism." Because it makes us servants, unworthy servants (Lk 17:10), "without any contribution of [our] own, and with no other glory to seek than to steward the holy heritage honorably."⁴⁴ Our blessed, holy, heavenly Father has shown us Jesus and only Jesus (cf. Jn 5:39, Jn 6:35-69, Mt 16:13-19, Eph 2, He 12:2). In his holy Word, our God shows us that though we are great sinners, yes, this is true, yet, behold, "Jesus is a still greater Savior."⁴⁵ He has shown us that the work of true Lutheranism – that is, the work of the Holy Christian Church – is the cure of souls. The one thing that God's holy Scriptures care about. The one thing that our Lutheran Confessions care about. The one thing that the Scriptures and our Confessions do. They cure souls.

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⁴⁴ Giertz, 28.

⁴⁵ Giertz, 23.

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