

Why Bible-Believing Lutherans Subscribe to the Book of Concord

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Introduction

The constitutions of confessional Lutheran churches usually include paragraphs which subscribe to the Bible as “the inspired and inerrant Word of God” and to the confessions contained in the Book of Concord as “a correct presentation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.” When they are ordained, confessional Lutheran pastors are asked to promise that their preaching and teaching will be faithful to the Bible and to the Book of Concord. But shouldn’t it be enough to subscribe to the Bible and to promise to teach nothing but what the Bible teaches? It would seem so. The Bible after all was written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Why should we then subscribe to confessions written by men?

The Importance of Confessions

The importance and necessity of subscribing to a confession becomes evident from the example of Article X in the Augsburg Confession. In 1529 Luther and Zwingli met at Marburg to try to arrive at agreement on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Both men accepted the Bible as the Word of God, and both insisted that they were teaching what the Bible teaches. Both could say, “Jesus said, ‘This is my body.’” But Zwingli said that the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper merely represent the body and blood of Christ. Luther said that the body and blood of Christ are really present with the bread and wine and are received orally by each communicant. At Augsburg in 1530 the Lutherans wanted to be certain that no one could say that the Lutherans taught and believed the Zwinglian doctrine. Merely to say that they taught what the Bible teaches would not show that. They needed to state clearly what they believed the true understanding of the Bible was. In Article X of the Augsburg Confession they did this. They said that “the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat in the Supper of the Lord.” That was a clear, positive statement of what they were teaching on the basis of the Bible in opposition to the Zwinglians who falsely claimed to be teaching according to the Bible but were denying the meaning of the words of institution. To make that contrast very clear, the Lutherans added that “they reject those who teach otherwise.”

False teachers love to claim that they are following the Bible. Arius, Zwingli, Calvin, the Roman Catholics, and the Phillipists all claimed that they taught according to the Bible. Today Baptists, Pentecostals, and even unchristian sects like the Jehovah’s Witnesses all claim that they teach according to the Bible. From the beginning of the church until the present, teachers who are faithful to the doctrine of the Scripture have found it necessary to go on record, stating clearly and publicly what they believe the teachings of Scripture to be, because from the earliest days of the church false teachers have been twisting the Scriptures to support their false teachings (2 Peter 3:16). Even Satan, the father of lies, twists and misquotes Scripture in support of his schemes (Luke 4:10). As a result it has always been the practice of Bible-believing Christians to set forth the truths of Scripture in unambiguous confessional writings which summarize the truths of Scripture and which explicitly reject the errors that have been masquerading as the truth.

The Lutheran Confessions

The two greatest eras of confessional writing in the history of the church were the time surrounding the Christological controversies of the 4th century,¹ which produced the three ecumenical creeds as a testimony against the Arian threat to the person of Christ, and the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, which produced the Lutheran confessions in response to the teachings of Rome and the Reformed, which threatened to undermine the work of Christ. These two sets of confessions, gathered into the Book of Concord, are still relevant and important to the church today.

Even today, by subscribing to the Book of Concord, a pastor goes on record and promises to teach that all communicants receive the true body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper as Scripture clearly teaches. If he only promised his congregation, "I will always follow the Bible," you wouldn't know what he would teach about the Lord's Supper. He might teach what Zwingli taught and insist, as Zwingli did, that he was teaching according to the Bible. This is just one example. The same could happen in the case of many other doctrines. By subscribing to the confessions in the Book of Concord a pastor declares to us what he believes to be the true biblical doctrine.

What It Means To Subscribe

But isn't that making the Book of Concord, written by men, equal to the Bible, which is God's word? Not at all. We are convinced that the holy Scriptures are God's infallible, inerrant word in everything they say. Whatever the Bible says on any subject is true because it is the word of God. When, for example, the Bible tells us that Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians or the letters to Timothy, we are sure he really wrote them. There can be no mistake about the authorship of that letter. When the Bible tells us God created the world in six days, this is a factual account of how the world and everything in it came into being.

On the other hand, when we subscribe to our confessions, we are not asserting that we hold every historical or scientific statement in them as infallibly true. There are, for example, historical errors. Ambrose is listed as the author of a quotation in Article VI of the Augsburg Confession (*Triglotta*, p 47). The quotation, however, was taken from a document called the *Ambrosiaster*, which according to modern historians was not written by Ambrose. We do not subscribe to this historical error, but to the doctrine asserted in the quotation, "It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving remission of sins, without works, by faith alone." Likewise the quotation attributed to Augustine in Article XVIII is from a work which is now attributed to someone else (*Triglotta*, p 51). In T.D. XI, Matthew 22:14 is incorrectly cited as Matthew 20:16 (*Triglotta*, p 1079). In S.A. II, IV, Luther incorrectly refers to Revelation 10:3 as coming from Revelation 12 (*Triglotta*, p 473). The Apology's interpretation of the words "the communion of saints" in the Apostles Creed as a description of the Holy Christian Church may not be a historically correct interpretation of the original meaning of the creed, which may have referred to the sharing of holy things, that is, the means of grace (*Triglotta*, p 229).

We do not subscribe to the scientific viewpoints mentioned in passing in the confessions. Article I of the Formula of Concord says, "when a magnet is smeared with garlic-juice, its natural power is not thereby removed, but only impeded." We don't subscribe to the idea that garlic juice weakens magnets. In this case the use of this statement against *quia* subscription to the confessions is silly because the statement about magnets and garlic is not a statement of the confessors, but part of a statement of Strigel which they are rejecting. Their assertion is "we reject...that original sin is only an external impediment to the good spiritual powers, and not a despoliation or want of the same, as when a magnet is smeared with garlic-juice, its natural power is not thereby removed, but only impeded; or that this stain can be easily wiped away like a spot from the face or pigment from the wall." Regardless of whether or not the confessors agreed with Strigel's belief that the powers of a magnet are impeded by garlic juice, our subscription is to their rejection of Strigel's doctrine that "original sin

¹ Especially the work of the ecumenical councils at Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon.

is only an external impediment to the good spiritual powers, and not a despoliation or want of the same,” not to the scientific views included in that rejection.

Although we accept all of the doctrines of the confessions, we do not endorse their exegesis of every passage which they cite. Sometimes they do not list the best and most appropriate proof passages for a doctrine. They cite Romans 14:23, “Whatever is not of faith is sin,” in support of their teaching that only a Christian motivated by faith can do good works pleasing to God (for example, in FC, TD, IV 8) (*Triglotta*, p 941). This doctrine is true and is supported by many statements of Scripture, but Romans 14:23 is not among them. The context of Romans 14:23 makes it clear that “faith” in this passage does not refer to saving faith in Christ but to confidence that a specific action is in accord with God’s law. Romans 14:23 teaches that if a Christian is doubtful whether something is right, he should not do it. In this case we subscribe to the confession’s doctrine, but not to its use of this specific passage to support it.

In subscribing to the confessions we do not limit ourselves to using their terminology. We don’t usually call our service “the mass.” We use new terms like “objective justification. The Confessions speak of reconciling God (*Triglotta*, p 33), whereas 2 Corinthians speaks of God reconciling the world. Nor do we endorse every argument or deduction they make in setting forth their position.

In short, we do not subscribe to every statement made on every subject in our confessions. We do, however, subscribe to all the doctrine confessed in the Book of Concord. We bind ourselves to all the doctrinal content of the confessions because they are a true exposition of the word of God. By subscribing to the confessions we are not doing any more than subscribing to the doctrine of the Bible because before subscribing to the confessions we have compared the doctrine of the Bible and the doctrine of the confessions. We subscribe to the doctrines of the confessions only because study has shown us that they agree with the teachings of the Bible. Yes, the Bible alone is the only source for all we believe and teach. The Book of Concord is a basis for what we teach not on its own, apart from the Bible, but precisely and only because it is based on the Bible. We use Luther’s Small Catechism to instruct our youth, not as a source of religious teaching that stands on its own authority, but as a book that simply and clearly summarizes what the Bible teaches. To subscribe to the Book of Concord is to subscribe to Bible doctrine.

Not “Insofar as” But “Because”

We say that we “accept the confessions in the Book of Concord of 1580, not *insofar as* (*quatenus*) they agree with the Bible, but *because* (*quia*) they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.” Isn’t that saying too much? Shouldn’t we rather say, *insofar as* they agree with God’s word we subscribe to them? There are those who believe one should subscribe in that way, giving the seemingly valid explanation that this is the only way we can subscribe to any human confession, for man can err. That sounds like concern for the truth. Actually, such limited subscription questions the clarity of Scripture and destroys the value and purpose of a confession.

If a pastor, for example, subscribed to the statement that “Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord” *insofar as* this statement agrees with Scripture, he has not told you whether he considers all of it, or only part of it, or none of it to be scriptural. If you say to him, “I see you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin,” he could respond, “No, I do not believe that literally, for I do not find that taught in the Bible.” If you say, “But you believe that Jesus is true God,” he might say, “No, I do not believe that is really taught in the Bible.” He could believe only that Jesus Christ is a true man, the son of Mary and Joseph, and still subscribe to the above statement from Luther’s Catechism “insofar as” it agrees with his opinion the Jesus is in some sense his Lord. Such a confession is meaningless. I could subscribe to the Quran or to any other religious writing *insofar as* it agrees with the Word of God. A Roman Catholic theologian could subscribe to the Lutheran confessions *insofar as* they agree with the Bible.

The *quatenus* subscription is a pious-sounding device used by liberal Lutheran churches to pretend that they are adhering to the confessions at the same time that they are denying their teachings. A modern form of

this deceit is the so-called “historical subscription.” A Lutheran theologian might say, “I support the historical judgment of Luther in the Smalcald Articles that the Pope is the Antichrist.” By this he means that it was reasonable for Luther to conclude that the pope was the Antichrist in the 16th century, but he does not bind himself or others to teach this today.

We see a good example of such deceptive subscription in the endorsement of the Lutheran confessions by the liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In its confession the ELCA claims:

This church accepts the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church. COF 2.04

This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all the churches that likewise accept (its) teachings. COF 2.05

This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church. COF 2.06

Anyone who knows how flagrantly this fine sounding confession is disregarded by ELCA theologians will not be impressed by this paper pledge. But even the wording of the ELCA’s confession contains adequate clues as to its emptiness.

The ecumenical creeds are accepted as “true declarations of the faith,” but not as the only true teachings, which are binding on all members in a literal sense. The Augsburg Confession is elevated above the other Lutheran confessions as the only confession necessary to establish church fellowship. This elevation of the Augsburg Confession is intended to minimize or even to exclude the precise affirmations and the strict rejections of the Formula of Concord. The Augsburg Confession is endorsed as “a true witness to the Gospel.” Such an affirmation does not require acceptance of all its teachings, only of its gospel message. It also permits other “true witnesses” to be accepted as alternative interpretations of the faith as in the recent agreement on justification with Rome and the joint Communion with Reformed churches. In a similar way the other Lutheran confessions are accepted as “valid interpretations of the faith,” but not as doctrinal statements which are binding on all teachers of the church in all their teachings.

Any real binding nature of this subscription to the confessions had been publicly repudiated, even before the ELCA confession was ratified. For example, Carl Braaten, a leading ELCA theologian, observed:

It is wholly erroneous to say that these confessions are not our confessions because we would not write them that way, or because we are not fully convinced of everything they say. (Principles of Theology, p. 34)

Even the series of articles in *The Lutheran* which explained to the laity the significance of the ELCA’s confession made it clear that acceptance of the confessions’ doctrine was limited. Concerning the Apostles’ Creed Lull observes:

At times Christians may experience discomfort when saying these words. Some people may be puzzled or discouraged by the creed. Perhaps they do not understand the words. Perhaps they understand but they are not sure that they believe. ... But we can give the impression that our community has no identity and our faith has no content if we are not concerned about what we believe, or if we say only those parts of the creed about which we personally are certain.

Reciting the creed puts a helpful pressure on us to be clear about what we believe. This pressure helps us grow into the fullness of the church's faith. (Dec. 19, 1988, p. 17)

Lull claims that the Formula of Concord, Lutheranism's most thorough confession, tends not to settle doctrinal controversies, but to set boundaries for debate (May 3, 1989, p. 15). It is incredible that a dogmatician could make such a statement about the most precise confession ever written. Once the determination has been made to leave the doors open to doctrinal laxity, it seems that no confession, no matter how precise, will be allowed to stand in the way. Yet the liberal Lutheran churches in America cling to a compromise subscription to the confessions to deceive the unwary. I suspect that the confessional subscription of the Nordic churches is no different.

But can we be sure that the doctrine we subscribe to in the confessions is true to God's word? The question really is: Does God speak clearly in Scripture? The fact is that he does. True, there are those who may deny what is clearly taught in Scripture. But that doesn't make Scripture any less clear. When Zwingli denied the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, it wasn't because Scripture didn't clearly teach that, but because he didn't believe what Jesus said. Yes, we can say of our confessions that we believe what they teach because what they teach is clearly taught in Scripture. Only unbelief toward God's clear word will raise doubts against the teaching of Scripture.

Is The Doctrine Of The Book Of Concord Outdated?

"The Lutheran Confessions and their condemnations were certainly necessary in the sixteenth century. The Christian world at this time was breaking out of its old ways. But we have come a long way in understanding since then. We know so much more about the Bible today. And we have learned to tolerate one another's teachings. After all, no one has an exclusive claim on the truth."

Speaking in this way, many Lutherans today regard the confessional writings as outdated, shown to be obsolete by historical-critical views of the Bible. Nevertheless, they still claim to respect the reformers' work and readily assign the Lutheran Confessions an honored place in the history of Christian teaching. But they are not willing to accept the articles of faith taught in the confessions without reservation. They consider them no longer "relevant to today's situation" or as "options or proposals for the church."

Limitations of the Confessions

Admittedly, the confessional writings have their limitations. There are Christian truths presently under fire which the confessions do not treat specifically (for example, the inerrancy of Scripture and the role of women in the church). The confessions do not have the same breadth as Scripture from which they are taken. They were not written as comprehensive statements of doctrine, but as a response to doctrinal issues that were disputed in their day. For that reason subscription to the confessions does not remove the need for new doctrinal statements to deal with the doctrinal conflicts of our day.

The confessions do not treat every doctrine which they touch upon thoroughly. Even in the longer German version, which incorporates part of a sermon by Luther, the treatment of Jesus' descent into hell in FC, TD, IX, does not thoroughly bring out all the elements of this doctrine taught in 1 Peter 3 (*Triglotta*, p 1050). The treatment of church fellowship and objective justification in the Confessions is insufficient to address the present situation in the Lutheran church. The Athanasian Creed does not adequately address the doctrine of justification. The Apology's declaration that the papacy is potentially "part of the kingdom of Antichrist" (*Triglotta*, p 319) falls short of the Smalcald Articles' clear statement.

The Lord's command to be alert against unscriptural doctrine applies also to the use or misuse of the confessional writings. While one person may disguise his self-chosen philosophies by claiming the support of Scripture, others may mislead the naïve by appealing to their acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions as proof

of a common faith. In some cases what they teach may not directly contradict the confessions. Rather, the new doctrines they introduce, contrary to the Scriptures, may be such that lie beyond the articles of faith specifically treated in the confessional writings. To claim unity of faith and confession merely by pointing to a common subscription to the confessions in this instance is deceptive. The intent is to give the false impression that paper allegiance to past confessions is an adequate basis for unity. In the process, present error is overlooked or excused. But the Lutheran Confessions never claim to have dealt with all departures from the truth. They recognize their own limitations as subordinate to the Scriptures. They expect Christians of every generation to go to Scripture to resolve new doctrinal disputes.

In the church the Scriptures alone are the well of living water for all times. The confessions are waters drawn from that well. Any conflict, past or future, must then be judged by the Scriptures as God's revealed word and the source of all Christian teachings.

But what about the articles of faith and doctrine that are taught in the confessions? Are any of these outdated or even negotiable today?

The question whether or not the doctrines they were confessing were God's timeless truths faced the Lutheran fathers already in the sixteenth century. They were very sensitive to the charge that they were innovators. To be an innovator meant then, as it does now, to invent new doctrines and hence to lose the right of being a true teacher of the church. The reformers, therefore, consistently pointed out that their faith and confession were founded on the Scriptures and centered in the gospel. Only agreement with God's timeless revelation would preserve the confessions from becoming an outmoded tradition.

Has time changed all that? Shall we in our day surrender the scriptural truths taught in the confessions? Let us be more specific. Are we to believe those who ignore or reject the doctrine that "since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin" (Augsburg Confession I) as a dated dogma despite the record of Genesis? Is the teaching of Christ's death as our substitute a trivial and old-fashioned doctrine of satisfaction, suitable only for a bloodthirsty God? No, Scripture's testimony that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25) is very clear. Are we to join the Lutherans who are bowing down at the altar of Rome on the basis of shameful compromises of the doctrine of justification? No, Scripture's "by grace alone and by faith alone" are clear. Are we to confess that infant baptism has become a negotiable doctrine, since "former condemnations no longer apply?" No, Christ's clear command and his promise of grace to all for whom he died are clear (Matthew 28:19). When we make our confession regarding the Lord's Supper shall we follow the Lutherans who have entered communion agreements with the Reformed thus denying the clear words of institution, "Take eat, this is My body"?

God's Answer

Whatever limitations the confessions may have had in historical or scientific matters, they give a forthright and Scripture-based testimony concerning sin and grace, law and gospel, Christ and Antichrist, repentance, faith, and works, and all other doctrines which they deal with. They do so with the firm and joyous conviction that thereby faith is truly created and exercised. Thus we are able to glorify God in our lives and rightly serve our neighbor. Only the preaching of God's wisdom revealed in the cross is so eminently practical as to accomplish these things. This preaching alone is God's answer to sinful mankind.

"Why then aren't all churches having the name 'Lutheran' and claiming the same confessions united?" All of us have probably heard that question asked in some form or other. Perhaps we ourselves have asked it. For we all earnestly desire unity among Christians and pray, as Jesus did, that God would give and preserve it. But the Lord teaches that Christian unity is not our creation. True unity is the work of God and comes in and through his word. His very word which gives us new life in the communion of saints, he reminds us, is constantly under Satan's attack in our own hearts and in the public confession of many (Jeremiah 23:30ff). Christ, therefore, commands us to be on our guard against preachers who come in his name but proclaim their

own thoughts to the destruction of faith. Not submitting to God's holy word, these innovators deceive their hearers and thus lose their right and authority to be true teachers of the church. We should not be deceived by those who claim the name Lutheran but whose hearts are far from the teachings of the Lutheran confessions. The purpose of the *Concordia* (which in Latin means "with united heart") was not to divide the church but to unite it in the truth. This remains the purpose of the Book of Concord today. Subscription to its doctrines without reservation is the only way to true Lutheran unity.

Practically speaking, what does this mean for us? An appeal to a common subscription to the same confessions as evidence for true unity may be evasive of the truth. We, for example, share the Apostles' Creed with the Church of Rome, and we rejoice in this. But the real issues concerning justification and faith and works, which divide us from that church, do not lie on the surface in the Apostles' Creed. To appeal to unity on the basis of common confessions and at the same time to deny scriptural truth not dealt with in one's common confessions does not edify the church.

For this reason, we cannot claim that all questions of faith and doctrine beyond what is expressly treated in the Book of Concord are open questions for Lutherans. Where Scripture clearly speaks, we must follow God's word. The Scripture alone *rules* as God's gracious revelation to us sinners. They are the only "norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (Formula of Concord). Later creeds and confessions are not judges equal to the Scriptures; they are *ruled* by the Scriptures. As the Formula of Concord states, these other writings (creeds and confessions) are "mere witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned."

Are we then bound to teach nothing more than what the confessions teach? The Lutheran Confessions themselves rightly forbid such a conclusion. That honor belongs to the Scriptures alone. By the ministry of that divine Word, God graciously grants unity in faith and certainty in confession. With Scripture we must teach "the whole counsel of God," neither adding nor omitting anything.

We must also warn that the confessions are not a second source of doctrine, but only a secondary testimony to the doctrine of Scripture. We cannot use the confessions as a sourcebook to manufacture doctrines which go beyond the statements of Scripture. Some in the Lutheran church have unfortunately used the confessions to try to answer questions left open in the Scripture, such as the moment that Christ's body and blood become present in the Lord's Supper. The confessions do not make assertions about such non-biblical doctrines unless one quotes detached statements of the confessions without regard to their context, but even if the confessions did assert extra-biblical doctrines, such doctrines would not be valid.

To try to raise doubts about this claim and to raise doubts about *quia* subscription critics of the confessions often raise the charge that the confessions teach the perpetual virginity of Mary in Article I, IV of the Smalcald Articles. First of all, it should be noted that Article I, IV is not about Mary. It is about the two natures of Christ. The German and Latin texts say:

Filius ita factus est homo, ut a Spiritu Sancto sine virili opera conciperetur, et ex Maria, pura, sancta sempervirgine nasceretur.

Daß der Sohn sei also Mensch [ge]worden, daß er vom Heiligen Geist ohne männlich Zutun empfangen und von der reinen, heiligen Jungfrau Maria geboren sei.

The Latin refers to Mary as pure, holy, and always-virgin. It is noteworthy that the German simply refers to the pure, holy Virgin Mary. If the confession was concerned to assert perpetual virginity for Mary, the author of the German version bungled the job totally because no reference to always-virgin appears in the German. It seems that the Latin *sempervirgine* was simply a stock phrase for describing the virginity of Mary. The article

is not concerned to make any assertion about Mary beyond the fact that she bore a child without any participation by a human father.²

Scripture makes no assertion that Jesus was born without the normal physical effects of childbirth on the body of his mother. It makes no assertion that Mary remained virgin after the birth of Jesus. Already in the ancient church there were three theories about Jesus' brothers and sisters who are mentioned in the gospels. One theory is that these were actually Jesus' cousins. Another is that these were children of Joseph, whose first wife had died before he married Mary. Both of these theories were motivated at least in part by the desire to preserve Mary's virginity even after Christ's birth. There is no direct evidence to support them in Scripture. The third idea is that these "brothers" were children of Mary and Joseph born in a natural way after Christ's birth. This third view is the most natural understanding of the passages in which Jesus, Mary, and these brothers and sisters appear together. See, for example, Matthew 12:46 and 13:55. Luther and many of his contemporaries seem to have retained the opinion that Mary had no other children besides Jesus, but most recent Lutheran theologians lean toward the third view. In the quotation from his "Large Confession concerning the Holy Supper" which is cited in FC, TD, VII, Luther refers to the belief that Mary bore Jesus "with a closed womb" as a possibility believed by some. Pieper treats both matters as open questions (III, p. 307-309). Our subscription to the confessions makes no assertion about the duration of the virginity of Mary because neither Scripture nor the confessions make any such assertion.

"The position accorded the [confessions] in the Lutheran Church is clearly defined by the Book of Concord itself. According to it Holy Scripture alone is to be regarded as the sole rule and norm by which absolutely all doctrines and teachers are to be judged. The object of the Augsburg Confession, as stated in its Preface, was to show 'what manner of doctrine has been set forth, in our lands and churches, from the Holy Scripture and the pure Word of God.' And in its Conclusion the Lutheran confessors declare: 'Nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic,' and 'we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures.' 'Iuxta Scripturam'—such are the closing words of the Augsburg Confession. The Lutheran Church knows of no other principle. ..."³

The Lutheran symbols, therefore, are not intended to supplant the Scriptures, nor do they do so. They do, however, set forth what has been at all times the understanding of the pure Christian doctrine adhered to by [all] sincere and loyal Lutherans everywhere; and, at the same time, they show convincingly from the Scriptures that our forefathers did indeed courageously confess nothing but God's eternal truth, which every Christian is bound to and which every Christian will consistently believe, teach, and confess.

Appendix from the Introduction to the Formula Concord

² The same conclusion applies to the similar statement in FC, TD, VIII, 24: "On account of this personal union and communion of the natures, Mary, the most blessed Virgin, bore not a mere man, but, as the angel [Gabriel] testifies, such a man as is truly the Son of the most high God, who showed His divine majesty even in His mother's womb, inasmuch as He was born of a virgin, with her virginity inviolate. Therefore she is truly the mother of God, and nevertheless remained a virgin."

³ Bente, F. "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books," Concordia Triglotta. (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 1921.), p. 7.

This quotation demonstrates the view of the subscribers of the Formula of Concord concerning the authority of confessions and the meaning of confessional subscription is the same as that set forth in the preceding paper.

**OF THE SUMMARY CONTENT, RULE, AND STANDARD
according to which all dogmas should be judged, and the erroneous teachings [controversies] that have
occurred should be decided and explained in a Christian way.**

1] 1. We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119, 105: *Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.* And St. Paul: *Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed,* Gal. 1, 8.

2] Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.

3] 2. And because directly after the times of the apostles, and even while they were still living, false teachers and heretics arose, and symbols, *i. e.*, brief, succinct [categorical] confessions, were composed against them in the early Church, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal Christian faith and confession of the orthodox and true Church, namely, *the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed,* we pledge ourselves to them, and hereby reject all heresies and dogmas which, contrary to them, have been introduced into the Church of God.

4] 3. As to the schisms in matters of faith, however, which have occurred in our time, we regard as the unanimous consensus and declaration of our Christian faith and confession, especially against the Papacy and its false worship, idolatry, superstition, and against other sects, as the symbol of our time, *the First, Unaltered Augsburg Confession,* delivered to the Emperor Charles V at Augsburg in the year 1530, in the great Diet, together with its *Apology,* and the *Articles* composed at *Smalcald* in the year 1537, and subscribed at that time by the chief theologians.

5] And because such matters concern also the laity and the salvation of their souls, we also confess the *Small and Large Catechisms* of Dr. Luther, as they are included in Luther's works, as the Bible of the laity, wherein everything is comprised which is treated at greater length in Holy Scripture, and is necessary for a Christian man to know for his salvation.

6] To this direction, as above announced, all doctrines are to be conformed, and what is, contrary thereto is to be rejected and condemned, as opposed to the unanimous declaration of our faith.

7] In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.

8] But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned [by what arguments the dogmas conflicting with the Holy Scripture were rejected and condemned].

6. Subscription to Confessions.

The position accorded the symbols in the Lutheran Church is clearly defined by the Book of Concord itself. According to it Holy Scripture alone is to be regarded as the sole rule and norm by which absolutely all doctrines and teachers are to be judged. The object of the Augustana, as stated in its Preface, was to show “what manner of doctrine has been set forth, in our lands and churches from the Holy Scripture and the pure Word of God.” And in its Conclusion the Lutheran confessors declare: “Nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic,” and “we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures.” *Iuxta Scripturam*—such are the closing words of the Augsburg Confession. The Lutheran Church knows of no other principle.

In the *Formula of Concord* we read: “Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.” (777, 2.) In the Conclusion of the Catalog of Testimonies we read: “The true saving faith is to be founded upon no church-teachers, old or new, but only and alone upon God’s Word, which is comprised in the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles, as unquestionable witnesses of divine truth.” (1149.)

The Lutheran symbols, therefore, are not intended to supplant the Scriptures, nor do they do so. They do, however, set forth what has been at all times the unanimous understanding of the pure Christian doctrine adhered to by sincere and loyal Lutherans everywhere; and, at the same time, they show convincingly from the Scriptures that our forefathers did indeed manfully confess nothing but God’s eternal truth, which every Christian is in duty bound to, and consistently always will, believe, teach, and confess.

The manner also in which Lutherans pledge themselves confessionally appears from these symbols. The Augsburg Confession was endorsed by the princes and estates as follows: “The above articles we desire to present in accordance with the edict of Your Imperial Majesty, in order to exhibit our Confession and let men see a summary of the doctrine of our teachers.” (95, 6.) In the preamble to the signatures of 1537 the Lutheran preachers unanimously confess: “We have reread the articles of the Confession presented to the Emperor in the Assembly at Augsburg, and by the favor of God all the preachers who have been present in this Assembly at Smalcald harmoniously declare that they believe and teach in their churches according to the articles of the Confession and Apology.” (529.) John Brenz declares that he had read and reread, time and again, the Confession, the Apology, etc., and judged “that all these agree with Holy Scripture, and with the belief of the true and genuine catholic Church (*haec omnia convenire cum Sacra Scriptura et cum sententia verae kai / gnhs i / hj catholicae ecclesiae*).” (529.) Another subscription—to the *Smalcald Articles*—reads: “I, Conrad Figenbotz, for the glory of God subscribe that I have thus believed and am still preaching and firmly believing as above.” (503, 13.) Brixius writes in a similar vein: “I ... subscribe to the Articles of the reverend Father Martin Luther, and confess that hitherto I have thus believed and taught, and by the Spirit of Christ I shall continue thus to believe and teach.” (503, 27.)

In the Preface to the Thorough Declaration of the *Formula of Concord* the Lutheran confessors declare: “To this Christian Augsburg Confession, so thoroughly grounded in God’s Word, we herewith pledge ourselves again from our inmost hearts. We abide by its simple, clear, and unadulterated meaning as the words convey it, and regard the said Confession as a pure Christian symbol, with which at the present time true Christians ought to be found next to God’s Word.... We intend also, by the grace of the Almighty, faithfully to abide until our end by this Christian Confession, mentioned several times, as it was delivered in the year 1530 to the Emperor Charles V; and it is our purpose, neither in this nor in any other writing, to recede in the least from that oft-cited Confession, nor to propose another or new confession.” (847, 4. 5.) Again: “We confess also the First, Unaltered Augsburg Confession as our symbol for this time (not because it was composed by our theologians, but because it has been taken from God’s Word and is founded firmly and well therein), precisely in the form in

which it was committed to writing in the year 1530, and presented to the Emperor Charles V at Augsburg.” (851, 5.)

In like manner the remaining Lutheran symbols were adopted. (853. 777.) Other books, the *Formula of Concord* declares, are accounted useful, “as far as (*wiefern, quatenus*) they are consistent with” the Scriptures and the symbols. (855, 10.) The symbols, however, are accepted “that we may have a unanimously received, definite, common form of doctrine, which all our Evangelical churches together and in common confess, from and according to which, because (*cum, weil*) it has been derived from God’s Word, all other writings should be judged and adjusted, as to how far (*wiefern, quatenus*) they are to be approved and accepted.” (855, 10.)

After its adoption by the Lutheran electors, princes, and estates, the *Formula of Concord*, and with it the entire Book of Concord, was, as stated, solemnly subscribed by about 8,000 theologians, pastors, and teachers, the pledge reading as follows: “Since now, in the sight of God and of all Christendom, we wish to testify to those now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controverted articles aforementioned and explained, and no other, is our faith, doctrine, and confession in which we are also willing, by God’s grace to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it; and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but, by the help of God’s grace, intend to abide thereby: therefore, after mature deliberation, we have, in God’s fear and with the invocation of His name, attached our signatures with our own hands.” (1103, 40.)

Furthermore, in the Preface to the Book of Concord the princes and estates declare that many churches and schools had received the Augsburg Confession “as a symbol of the present time in regard to the chief articles of faith, especially those involved in controversy with the Romanists and various corruptions of the heavenly doctrine.” (7.) They solemnly protest that it never entered their minds “either to introduce, furnish a cover for, and establish any false doctrine, or in the least even to recede from the Confession presented in the year 1530 at Augsburg.” (15.) They declare: “This Confession also, by the help of God, we will retain to our last breath when we shall go forth from this life to the heavenly fatherland, to appear with joyful and undaunted mind and with a pure conscience before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (15.) “Therefore we also have determined not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves or from the phrases which are found in them (*vel a rebus ipsis vel a phrasibus, quae in illa habentur, discedere*), but, the Spirit of the Lord aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of the pure doctrine.” (23.)

7. Pledging of Ministers to the Confessions

Such being the attitude of the Lutherans towards their symbols, and such their evaluation of pure doctrine, it was self-evident that the public teachers of their churches should be pledged to the confessions. In December 1529, H. Winckel, of Goettingen, drew up a form in which the candidate for ordination declares: “I believe and hold also of the most sacred Sacrament ... as one ought to believe concerning it according to the contents of the Bible, and as Doctor Martin Luther writes and confesses concerning it especially in his Confession” (of the Lord’s Supper, 1528). The Goettingen Church Order of 1530, however, did not as yet embody a vow of ordination. The first pledges to the symbols were demanded by the University of Wittenberg in 1533 from candidates for the degree of Doctor of Divinity. In 1535 this pledge was required also of the candidates for ordination. The oath provided that the candidate must faithfully teach the Gospel without corruption, steadfastly defend the Ecumenical Symbols, remain in agreement with the Augsburg Confession, and before deciding difficult controversies consult older teachers of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. Even before 1549 the candidates for philosophical degrees were also pledged by oath to the Augsburg Confession.

In 1535, at the Diet of Smalcald, it was agreed that new members entering the Smalcald League should promise “to provide for such teaching and preaching as was in harmony with the Word of God and the pure teaching of our [Augsburg] Confession.” According to the Pomeranian Church Order which Bugenhagen drew

up in 1535, pastors were pledged to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology thereof. Capito, Bucer, and all others who took part in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, promised, over their signatures, “to believe and to teach in all articles according to the Confession and the Apology.” (*Corpus Reformatorum*, opp. Melanthonis, 3, 76.) In 1540, at Goettingen, John Wigand promised to accept the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, and to abide by them all his life. “And,” he continued, “if I should be found to do otherwise or be convicted of teaching and confessing contrary to such Confession and Apology, then let me, by this signature, be condemned and deposed from this divine ministry. This do I swear, so help me God.” Also at Goettingen, Veit Pflugmacher vowed, in 1541, that he would preach the Gospel in its truth and purity according to the Augsburg Confession and the contents of the postils of Anton Corvinus. He added: “Should I be found to do otherwise and not living up to what has been set forth above, then shall I by such act have deposed myself from office. This do I swear; so help me God.”

In 1550 and 1552, Andrew Osiander attacked the oath of confession which was in vogue at Wittenberg, claiming it to be “an entanglement in oath-bound duties after the manner of the Papists.” “What else,” said he, “does this oath accomplish than to sever those who swear it from the Holy Scriptures and bind them to Philip’s doctrine? Parents may therefore well consider what they do by sending their sons to Wittenberg to become Masters and Doctors. Money is there taken from them, and they are made Masters and Doctors. But while the parents think that their son is an excellent man, well versed in the Scriptures and able to silence enthusiasts and heretics, he is, in reality, a poor captive, entangled and embarrassed by oath-bound duties. For he has abjured the Word of God and has taken an oath on Philip’s doctrine.” Replying to this fanatical charge in 1553, Melancthon emphasized the fact that the doctrinal pledges demanded at Wittenberg had been introduced chiefly by Luther, for the purpose of “maintaining the true doctrine.” “For,” said Melancthon, “many enthusiasts were roaming about at that time, each, in turn, spreading new silly nonsense, *e.g.*, the Anabaptists, Servetus, Campanus, Schwenckfeld, and others. And such tormenting spirits are not lacking at any time (*Et non desunt tales furiae ullo tempore*).” A doctrinal pledge, Melancthon furthermore explained, was necessary “in order correctly to acknowledge God and call upon Him to preserve harmony in the Church, and to bridle the audacity of such as invent new doctrines.” (*C. R.* 12, 5.)

The dogmatics notes used at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary summarizes our manner of subscription thus:

Our subscription to our Symbolical Books is restricted to the Scripture doctrines contained in them:

- a.) Whether they are formal declarations of faith or mentioned incidentally (as the inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture); Cf. *F.C.* 778, 2; *Large Cat.* 746,57; 770,76.
- b.) Or doctrines introduced in dogmatical deductions; Cf. *AC XX*, 9–10 (*p* 52).
- c.) Or the rejection of error. Cf. *F.C.* 780, 11 etc.; *AC I*, 5 (*p* 42).
- d.) All things pertaining to the manner of presentation, as *e.g.* figures of speech, method of deduction, historical, archeological, scientific remarks, use of proof texts, etc., are excepted. Cf. *F.C.* 782, 15; 940, 8.