

Thursday Theology: The Other Focus and Unfinished Business: A Project for Seminex-style Theology in 2024 and Beyond (Part Two)

Co-missioners,

Last week we sent you the first half of an intriguing essay by Ron Roschke. Now comes the rest of it. It's as meaty as the first portion was and will leave you with a lot to think about. We heartily encourage a quick review of [last week's Part One](#) before you plunge in here.

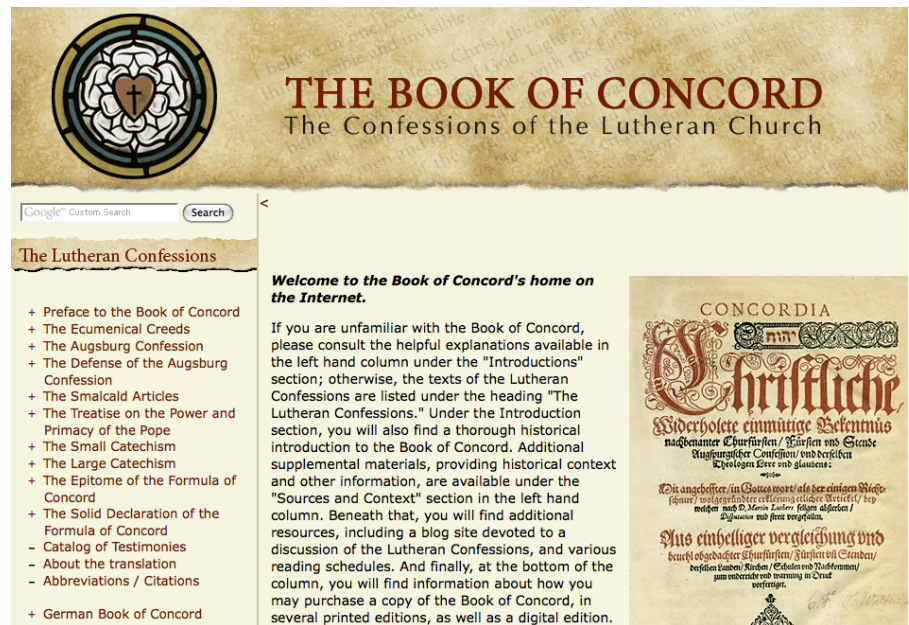
Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

The Other Focus and Unfinished Business: A Project for Seminex-style Theology in 2024 and Beyond (Part Two of Two)

by Ron Roschke

Historical Criticism for *both* the Scriptures *and* the

Confessions



A screen shot of the Web site for the online Book of Concord, the contents of which are all in the public domain – [From Wikimedia Commons](#)

In order to think more creatively about the relationship between Historical Critical Method (HCM) and the Lutheran Confessions, we need to go back to Ed Schroeder's helpful insight: For those of us in the Seminex movement, our theology is best described as an ellipse having two foci—HCM and the Law/Gospel Hermeneutic (LGH) derived from the Lutheran Confessions. I believe it is time for us to think more deeply about the HCM focal point of the ellipse. We *need* to do that. Because we were theologically and politically required to emphasize the Confessional focal point 50 years ago, the power of HCM to inform our theology was blunted.

What I propose is that, as the Seminex tradition moves into the second half of its first century, we consider how HCM can deepen not only our understanding of the

Bible but also sharpen our ability to articulate the Lutheran Confessions so they can release their effective power in addressing our own post-modern cultural reality. In other words, I am suggesting we use HCM to help us read *both* the Bible *and also* the Confessions.

When we seek to apply the Confessions to our theological tasks, we need to think historically/critically about the Confessions. This is a double-arrowed pointer directing our attention to the past and to the future of the Confessions. In terms of the past, we often use the Confessions' insights from the sixteenth century as the hermeneutical lens for reading the Bible, without applying HCM's passion for self-criticism. In doing this, we unintentionally (or maybe intentionally) impose a sixteenth-century interpretation upon the Bible, assuming that this interpretation is what the text *really* has said all along.

Nowhere is this more obvious than a Confessionally Lutheran treatment of Paul. We assume that the debates of the sixteenth century were Paul's as well, letting "Jews" and "Roman Catholics" morph into each other in Paul's key texts. In doing this we ignore how 1,500 years separated the Reformers from the Apostle. We stand in danger of silencing Paul and preventing ourselves from hearing what he wants to say from his own vantage point in the first century CE. We turn Paul into a Confessional Lutheran. He was not. He could not be. That reality lay a millennium-and-a-half in a future far beyond him.

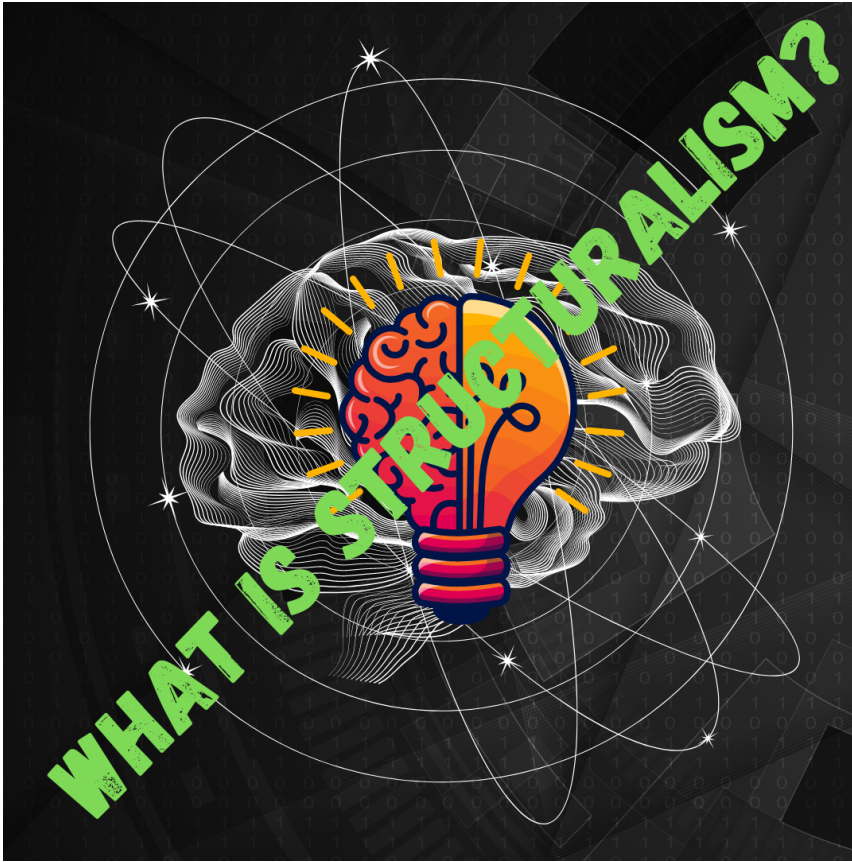
Equally problematic, we assume that theological points the Confessions made in the sixteenth century are somehow universally valid and understandable—that they can be transposed an additional half-millennium into our own

time; that they can speak, without any kind of cultural or theological translation, to the situation in which we and our contemporaries find ourselves. Perhaps they can; perhaps they do. But without reflection and thorough investigation, these are untested assumptions. Here, again, we need to bear responsibility for how easy it is to speak only to ourselves, uncritically.

We need to ask and answer: How have words, ideas, cultural assumptions evolved in the last half-millennium? We need to be self-critical of the distance between us and the sixteenth century. We need to account for how our own cultural assumptions—gender, race, social/political standing, sexual and gender identity—shape the way we understand the Confessional documents. Without this accounting, we really cannot hear the Confessions on their own terms. We end up talking only to ourselves in the language of what we assume was and is universal truth cloaked in assumptions we make about the sixteenth century. And, sadly, we miss the opportunity to release the Confessions' power to speak to our own contemporary situation.

A Way Forward

Permit me, please, to suggest one possible way forward. One of the second-generation interpretive strategies that emerged in the mid-twentieth century was structuralism. Structuralism was an application of semiotic analysis upon texts. It applied basic linguistic principles to larger semantic structures: parables, narratives, entire books of the Scriptures. Structuralism is different from many second-generation strategies in that it breaks from HCM by intentionally *ignoring* the historical aspects of a text, that is, its *diachronic* nature ("across time").



From Canva

Structuralism seeks to discern, instead, a *synchronic* interpretation based upon a kind of grammatical/mythical understanding of the structure of human reality and language. Structuralists read and analyze texts through this lens. It doesn't matter whether the text is from antiquity or a contemporary novel reviewed in the *New York Times*: the same rules apply to both texts because they are based upon a linguistic reality hardwired into human brains.

An example may help here. A *diachronic* reading of the gospels would focus on the historical distance between us and those texts; it would use analytical tools to help us understand what the text meant to its original audience and correct false assumptions we might make about what the gospel writers are saying. A *synchronic* study of a

gospel, on the other hand, would use some aspect of linguistic or semiotic theory to uncover the universal mechanisms that generate meaning—that are hardwired into our own brains just as much as they operated in the linguistic structures in the mind of the gospel writer. One example of this is [Daniel Patte](#)'s analysis of the Gospel according to Matthew, using the theory of [Algirdas Greimas](#) to explore pairs of oppositions within the text. [4]

Confessional Lutherans often approach the reading of the Scriptures as if we, the interpreters, are structuralists—without ever applying that term to our methodology. Often Lutherans tend to think synchronically—using the same lens to read Paul's letters as well as contemporary experience. Approaching the Confessions this way creates a synchronic theological and cultural “world” in which both the Bible and contemporary experience “make sense”; this has obvious parallels to the “grammatical/mythical” world created by structuralism for understanding texts.

But here's the thing about structuralism: it never totally “replaced” HCM. The truth about us humans is that we exist in time; we are historical, like it or not. Time matters. And sooner or later if we are to understand reality, we have to take the passage of time into account. Personally, I find it helpful as we interpret texts to strike a balance between diachronic and synchronic approaches—between structuralism and HCM; each reveals part of the truth of reality. In my own approach to biblical hermeneutic, I seek to understand texts with an awareness of the diachronic “gaps” that exist between me and the text—taking accountability for my own biases that can short-circuit that work—while at the same time

looking for some kind of synchronic structure that allows me to live within the world created by a text, to learn from it, to let it shape me. [5]

I think the same approach—balancing diachronic and synchronic interpretations —should be used with the Lutheran Confessions, but there is a lot of unfinished business ahead of us if we want to test that. It would have been valuable to be well underway in this critical work by now, having dedicated a number of the past half-century's decades to this important task in the time since Seminex came into being. That's water under the bridge, however. It's still not too late to begin this work now.

As the "other focus" of the ellipse, HCM can serve as a powerful tool, not only in deepening our understanding of the Scriptures, but also in reinvigorating our reliance on the Lutheran Confessions as a tool for proclaiming God's good news. As *Lutheran* practitioners of HCM, we have in the Confessions an especially helpful way for understanding the workings of HCM. Let's think about this....

In this paper I have promoted HCM as an indispensable tool we need to use if we are to honestly deal with texts in a way that releases their power for the present. It is possible, however, to misunderstand the way in which this method functions. I have suggested that without HCM, textual interpreters run a very real risk of "listening only to themselves" rather than hearing what an author intended to say. In that case, the Bible and the gospel can become distorted or even silenced. And if that is true, we could imagine that what is required for the church's proclamation is not only reliance upon the good

news of Jesus but also a required engagement with a hermeneutical method that assures we will hear it.

At this point, our Lutheran antennae start to tingle! Isn't this simply an example of "gospel plus" theology—adding an additional requirement to the faith and grace that save us? "Faith and grace alone—but only with HCM."

A Mirror to Help Us Read the Scriptures and the Confessions

This is why I think it is so essential to frame HCM as a method that is critical of *our own* biases and presuppositions as we approach a text. HCM serves as a *mirror* to show us ourselves as we prepare to read a text.

And as soon as we say that—Lutherans that we are—we may begin to sense that HCM operates on the *law* side of the law/gospel dialectic that defines human reality. This is especially important as we think about second-generation HCM methodologies that have continued to develop since the time of Seminex. In its post-modern versions, HCM pays attention not only to what we do not know about *ancient texts*, but also what we do not know (and perhaps do not want to acknowledge) about *ourselves*. It explores how we are woven into cultural, social, political, and economic human realities—human constructions—that help to define who we are.

These human constructions sometimes operate simply and benignly, doing no more than mapping our place and position in the world. But quite often, these same human constructions can also restrict our ability to hear what a text says, as we impose our own agendas on text making and text reception. They can organize themselves into

ideological projects meant to protect and increase the power of one group against the claims of another—White against Black, male against female, rich against poor, straight against queer, colonialist against indigenous.

These ideological projects are *social*, and they work through our *collective* behaviors. Sometimes they promote their own ideological objectives; sometimes they subvert the meaning of texts. *Being brought to an awareness of these ideological forces is a work of the law*. Failing to participate in this work brings us into danger, as the author of the First Letter of John reminds us: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1:8). Martin Luther also had some sense that human brokenness was *collective* as well as *individual* by repeatedly referring to that “unholy trinity”: the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Our collective and individual identities are tangled around each other. Luther expressed that truth as a citizen of the sixteenth century. We need to work diachronically to express that truth in the language of our own time. Second-generation HCM provides us with important tools for doing that.

One of the gifts that HCM—both in its original form and also in its second-generation incarnations—can give to Confessional Lutherans is a new set of tools for understanding how basic theological categories—law and promise, sin and grace—operate *collectively* as well as *individually*. As a text from the sixteenth century, the Confessions focus primarily upon the individual. Protestantism—both shaped by and in dialogue with the Confessions—continued and expanded this emphasis upon the individual almost to the exclusion of the social dimensions of human reality altogether—“Jesus Christ as my personal Savior.”

An invigorated Lutheran Confessionalism, shaped by a more profound engagement with HCM and its second-generation offspring, may offer twenty-first century citizens a more robust self-understanding of what it means to be human. To equip ourselves for such a project, we will need to deepen our sense of how the Confessions are not only distant from us but how they also invite us to describe an authentic synchronic view of humanity that can speak more powerfully to the ways in which God in Christ addresses us—personally *and* collectively—with both law and promise, in language that acknowledges our own historical nature. This is the work of a confessing movement that affirms and builds upon both foci of the ellipse of Seminex theology.

Easter 2024

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Endnotes

[4] *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987)

[5] This is the method I use in my current writing project *Wordloom*. Each week, we analyze the three lectionary readings historically/critically. The final section, "Weaving the Word," attempts to create a synchronic world in which the three texts, intersecting with each other, also speak to our own contemporary experience.

**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to
use**

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