

Confessional Subscription

(An Outline for Discussion)

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1. The Issue

To say that confessional subscription is currently an "issue" among us is to say it is a subject of controversy. It exposes differences among us. That no one will deny. But then if it is to that disputed issue that we are now to address ourselves, there is no point in discussing confessional subscription in the abstract, detached from the current controversy. That would be evasive and really not very constructive. On the other hand, to face up to the issue for what it is is bound to evoke disagreement, maybe within this very room. Still, none of us objects to disagreement so long as it is the kind the Holy Spirit can use. In fact it was out of just such controversy, and out of the desire for reconciliation, (not a desire for separation and self-assertion) that the original Confessions emerged. That was as true of the Formula of Concord as it was of the Nicene Creed. Can we still use them today in the same Spirit?

So then, with respect to our own confessional subscription, what is currently the issue? Haven't we declared again and again "without reservation" that "the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church are a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God"? (LC-MS Constitution, Art. II). If anything, we might now want to add to that that these symbolical books are not just "Lutheran." Nor were they ever intended to be. They are not the Christian faith from merely one denomination's point of view. To settle for such a narrow view of the Confessions is sectarian. For the confessors, as for all of us Christians, there is only one faith, just as there is only one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (AC, Preface, 3, 4, 10). It is that one Christian faith, no less, which the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church confess. And so do we.

Therefore, to imagine that what our confessional subscription commits us to is but a "Lutheran tradition," or a synodical one, what our critics might call the traditional position of our Synod--that is a sectarian, overly modest constriction of the Synod's own bold confessional Article II of its Constitution. To want to be merely Lutheran is not very Lutheran, nor really "synodical." To force a particular synodical tradition upon the Confessions, as a normative interpretation of them, is to belie both our own tradition and the Confessions themselves. Why, some of the original confessors insisted that even the Formula of Concord was not to be seen as a "norm" for interpreting the Augsburg Confession (Preface, [Tappert] p. 8, fn 9).

To imagine, as some of our critics seem to do, that for a Lutheran to compromise his Confessions would forfeit his membership merely in his own denomination, leaving him still "free to seek fellowship elsewhere" in the Christian Church--that is much too easy a way of disposing of him and much too sectarian a view of the Confessions. The confession which we subscribe is (as the Formula of Concord says about the Augsburg Confession) "a genuinely Christian symbol which all true Christians ought to accept." It involved the Church of Rome, the Anabaptists, the Queen of England, "the whole of Christendom" (FC, Preface, 12). Really, in view of how large a faith we Lutherans wish to confess, the appropriate place for us to discuss it is not in a corner behind closed doors, but as it was four centuries ago, "published and proclaimed in all of Christendom throughout the wide world," "both before God and among all nations, present and future," calling them to be our witnesses (Ibid., 3; Ap. 215, 5).

But then, if we have nothing to hide from anyone, why is our confessional subscription still suspect? Since we do say of the Symbolical Books that they are "a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God," what else is there to say? Do our critics perhaps fear that our subscription is not really quia but merely quatenus? That is, do we commit ourselves to the Confessions only insofar as rather than because they are "a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God"? No, we do not. We agree with C. F. W. Walther that, if that were the case, Christians could subscribe even the Mohammedans' Koran "insofar as" it agrees with the Word of God. Such a subscription is hardly confessional. Nothing less than a quia subscription will do.

If anything, we regret that far too many confessional subscriptions in our churches, also among our critics, do seem to be merely quatenus subscriptions in actual practice. Not that men deceitfully profess quia but then, with fingers crossed, really mean quatenus. Not that, but rather that anyone of us can meaningfully subscribe only "insofar as" he knows the Confessions, let alone the Scriptures. But how many of us actually do know them? How many of us clergy (critics included) have read the Book of Concord all the way through, just once, since seminary days--or ever? How many of our lay leaders have worked through the Catechism, Large or Small ("the layman's Bible"), since their Confirmation? Then isn't it premature to talk about adding new confessions, especially if they are meant to separate false teachers from faithful ones, until we have first familiarized ourselves with those old Confessions which we all have subscribed quia?

If we have, then why do our critics still object? Is it that we subscribe only the Confessions' "doctrinal content," that that is all we are bound to? But these critics themselves have to concede Walther's point, namely, that "doctrinal content," not "exegetical details," is all that any confessing Lutheran is bound to. If anything, "bound" may no longer be the best way to express that, seeing how some of our critics twist such expressions legalistically. For doctrine is not something we are "bound" or have to confess; we get to confess it, as our privilege. And why say about the doctrinal content that "that is all" we confess, as if only-that-much-and-not-one-bit-more? Why be so preoccupied with "limits," with negatives? Rather say, we confess all that!

Indeed, the "doctrinal content" of the Confessions might well expand and deepen for us more and more as we rediscover them, perhaps right within their "exegetical details." For what else was the confessors' exegesis but a single-minded search for one thing, and for one thing only, the Scriptures' "doctrine of the Gospel"? And this exegetical search of theirs, even if sometimes it succeeded only partially and sometimes brought them to differing conclusions, nevertheless went daringly on and on. Theirs was not the spirit of men under restraint. They had been turned loose by a promise, the promise of what they could hope to find in those Scriptures, Christ Jesus Himself. "To Him," as they loved to quote from the Book of Acts, "all the prophets bear witness" (Apol. 148:273; 191:65; 227:2). But had not the same apostle also said, "The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired . . . what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory" (I Pet. 1:10)? And so for the confessors to locate just how and where these prophets "bear witness" to Christ was hardly automatic. It was a quest, promising though painstaking. It took some doing--search and research. It took all the help the confessors could get, if need be also from the methods of

the rabbis, the logic of pagan philosophers, the grammar of Roman rhetoricians, the latest exegetical skills of Renaissance humanists, even the risky allegorical method.

Still wasn't it Christ Himself who had made the promise? It was, indeed, in direct opposition to the legalistic exegesis of the Pharisees. What was wrong with the Pharisees was not that they didn't search Scripture. They did, every letter of it. And not that they didn't search it for "eternal life." Still, all they found was "the letter which kills." The one thing they missed, as Jesus told them, was the promise: the way in which Scripture "testifies of Me" (John 5:39). Yet that is everything. That is the promise of Scripture's "doctrinal content," and the exegete's driving objective. Without that, everything else about Scripture, including its history, would be as the confessors said, "worthless" (Apol. 159:337). Confessional exegesis, right down to its "exegetical details," is a venture on the strength of a promise. It is not, as it was for the Pharisees, a legal prescription. But then how out of character it would be, how out of tune with the Confessions, if their exegesis, so spurred on by the promise of Christ, would now be taken by us and reduced instead to a kind of church legislation, a new canon law. What a stifling of The Promise!

Does that mean then, exclaims the critic, that there are no safeguards? Are there no "limitations" upon a man's confessional subscription? Is he then "free," does he have the "right" to preach and teach just anything he happens to call "gospel"? Doesn't all this pious talk about interpreting Scripture solely in terms of its Gospel make for "uncertainty"? Doesn't that leave us without any basic minimum of agreement on doctrine? Who will be left to prescribe what the Confessions do and do not "permit"? Isn't it time we "put some teeth" in this Gospel? Questions like these are terribly misleading and basically fear-ridden. They insinuate, for one thing, that we are infiltrated by pastors and teachers who are just straining to break loose from their confessional subscription and who would regard that as real freedom. (I know no one like that among my fellow confessors.)

But these fearful questions betray a distrust not only of the brotherhood but also, and worse, of the Gospel. As if the only alternative for keeping brothers faithful to the scriptural Gospel were not the Gospel itself but instead something far short of the Gospel, namely, law--and not even real law at that, not the awesome and mortifying Law of God. It is still true, isn't it, that there is no power among us like the power of the Gospel? That must be so if that Gospel could surmount the mightiest of all God's other actions, His Law. We do still trust, don't we what the confessors trusted, that "this impulse of the Holy Spirit is no coercion or compulsion" (FC, SD, 533:64)? God help us if that now strikes us as sentimentality.

What is the one thing which finally safeguards a man's confessional subscription? It is the very thing which safeguarded the Confessions themselves. They are as they claimed to be, a genuinely Biblical "form of doctrine . . . drawn from the Word of God," Form der Lehre . . . aus Gottes Wort genommen" (FC, SD, 506:10). But if the Confessions are taken from the Scriptures, what "form" do they take? What is it about the Scriptures which shapes the Confessions scripturally? Is it simply that the Confessions are supported throughout by numerous, individual Bible quotations? That they are. And that is important. But if that were all, we could easily lose sight of the Biblical forest for the trees, the way the Pharisees did. Scripture is also a grand whole, with its own characteristic structure throughout. It too,

and first of all, has a unique "Form." And what is that? What is the original form of the Word of God which in turn in-forms the Confessions--without which the Confessions, though they might still be Biblical here and there, would be badly de-formed?

Or put the question in other words. For all Christian teachers and teachings, as the Confessions insist, Scripture is the "only rule," die einige Regel, unica regula (FC, Ep. 464:1; 465:7; SD, 505:9). However, not only does Scripture rule or regulate those writings which come after Scripture and stand outside it. Also, Scripture has its own internal rule by which all the Biblical writings themselves are regulated. If the exegete should misread that "rule" within Scripture itself--as the Pharisees did and as the confessors' Roman Catholic critics at Augsburg did--then he misses the whole point of Scripture, no matter how many Biblical passages he quotes. Then it is impossible for the exegete himself to be "ruled" by Scripture.

But then the crucial question is: what is this fundamental intra-Biblical regula? It is, as the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states: "the distinction between the law and the promises or Gospel"; this "rule . . . interprets all the passages they [viz., the Roman Catholic critics] quote on law and works" (132:183-186). Or as the Apology usually prefers to put it, quoting directly from Scripture: "apart from [Christ] you can do nothing" (John 15:5); "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6); "since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1) (147:269; 148:277; 186:36 and passim). This grand motif, the distinctive Gospel ruling over the Law, is what the confessors call the Biblical regula. Here is Scripture's own inner "regulator." "This is," as the Apology declares, "the essential proclamation of the Gospel" (148:274). "That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification,'" say the Smalcald Articles, "on this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world" (292:5). This alone is the "form" which informs Scripture, and by which alone Scripture in turn determines the Confessions' "form of doctrine." This alone is the "rule" which regulates Scripture, and by which alone Scripture in turn exercises "sole rule" over the Confessions.

Finally, it is this distinctively evangelical "form of doctrine . . . drawn from the Word of God"--and not some other, lesser form drawn from the Word of God--by which "all other writings are to be . . . regulated" (FC, SD, 506:10). All other writings and, we might add, all confessional subscribers. Is that one scriptural "form of doctrine," the Biblical Gospel distinct from and superseding the Biblical Law, still powerful enough to "regulate" confessional subscription today? Or better, do we still have the faith that it can? That is the measure of our own confessional faithfulness. Isn't that the issue? And isn't it a sign of God's blessing upon you, my fathers and brothers, that He still gathers us, like this, in that faith and that Spirit? That itself is Christian confession.