

The Role of the Lutheran Confessions in Establishing the Teachings of the Church

By, Paul S. Naumann

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Introduction

“Who do you say I am?” That is the question of Jesus that prompted Peter’s beautiful confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:15-16). Jesus seeks a clear confession of faith from his disciples in every age. Whether church body or congregation, called worker or layman, we want our confession to be as clear and faithful as Peter’s.

To be as clear as possible we Lutherans always make reference to two kinds of documents when we make a formal confession of our faith. Article II of our WELS constitution spells out our “Confession of Faith” as follows:

Section 1. The synod accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testament as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God and submits to this Word of God as the only infallible authority in all matters of doctrine, faith, and life.

Section 2. The synod also accepts the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church embodied in the *Book of Concord of 1580*, not insofar as, but because they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.¹

The “Model Constitution and Bylaws,” which serves as a pattern for congregations in our synod, has a similar article which specifies both the Bible and the Book of Concord as a single “norm of doctrine and practice.”² At his ordination or installation every pastor, teacher or staff minister in the WELS makes a solemn promise that all his teaching “will conform to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.”³ Even our communicants on the day of their confirmation promise to be faithful until death to the teachings of the Bible and that Lutheran Confession they have learned and studied, Luther’s Small Catechism.⁴ In each case both the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions are referred to as a norm of doctrine and practice, faith and life.

These words would indicate that we in the WELS believe the Lutheran Confessions have an important role to play for us as individuals and as a church body, even these 425 years after their publication in the Book of Concord. But what exactly is that role, and what is the proper relationship between Scripture and the confessions? Historically our Lutheran Church has distinguished between the two by referring to the Scriptures as the *norma normans* or ruling norm, and the confessions as the *norma normata* or ruled norm. But that distinction has not always been clearly maintained, and there is evidence of a blurring of that distinction in recent years, even among those who wish to be considered “confessional” Lutherans.

¹ *Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, Issued by WELS Committee on Constitutional Matters (Milwaukee: WELS, 2005), 5.

² *Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations of the WELS*, Printed under the auspices of the WELS Conference of Presidents (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997), 11.

³ *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2004), 248, 253, 265, 270.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

In what follows we will see why the Holy Scripture is the only source of doctrine in the church; we will review the basic principles for interpreting the Scripture; we will consider what role the confessions have in establishing the teaching of the church, and we will look at some examples of why we need to keep the roles of the confessions and the Scriptures distinct.

I. Holy Scripture, the only source of doctrine in the Church

When I first considered the topic of this essay my initial reaction was, “This is going to be the shortest symposium essay on record.” What is “The Role of the Lutheran Confessions in Establishing the Teaching of the Church”? In a word, none. Every Lutheran worthy of the name ought to know that the confessions do not establish doctrine; the Bible does. That is certainly true, if by “establish” doctrine we mean, to serve as the source for doctrine. One of the fundamental principles of the Reformation – one chiseled in the cornerstone of this institution and appearing on its seal – is *sola Scriptura*. The Scripture alone is to serve as the source of all that we believe and teach in the church. The confessions do have a role to play in establishing doctrine, in the sense of proclaiming it or demonstrating it. But they do not serve as the source. Scripture alone is the source of doctrine.

This is the clear position taken by the confessions themselves. The opening words of the Epitome of the Formula of Concord state:

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”⁵

The confessors said that everything we need to believe and do as Christians is found in the Scriptures alone. We base our faith and our life on the Scriptures and nothing else, not tradition, not reason, not our experiences or feelings or anything else. *Sola Scriptura* is our watchword. There are seven good reasons for this.

The Bible reveals Christ

The Scriptures are the only source of doctrine, because only the Scriptures reveal the heart of God’s revelation, Christ crucified. Paul wrote, “‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ -- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Co 2:9-10). While the Holy Spirit employed about 40 different men over a period of about 1500 years to write its 66 separate books, they all contain the same central message. “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” Jesus declared. (Jn 5:39). It is all about Jesus. Luther asked, “Take Christ out of the Scriptures and what will you find left in them?”⁶ Without Christ the Scriptures are useless. With Christ they provide the only way to eternal life for sinful human beings. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

The Bible is God’s inspired Word

The Bible is the only source of teaching for the church, because the Bible is the very Word of God. On the pages of Scripture we hear the voice of God himself speaking to us in human language. Paul wrote to

⁵ Formula of Concord, Epitome, *Concordia Triglotta*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921) 777. Hereafter *Triglotta*, 777.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 25. Hereafter LW 33:25.

Timothy “All scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tm 3:16). The words of the Scripture were uttered by God himself. All of them. Peter tells us more about this miraculous process we call inspiration. “Prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pe 1:21). While God employed human writers to pen the words, each with their own unique vocabulary and style, it was the Holy Spirit who gave them the impulse and guided them to every word they wrote. The doctrine of inspiration is one that permeates the Scriptures. The expression “This is what the Lord says” or its equivalent can be found in the Scriptures more than 2000 times. And what was true of the Old Testament Scriptures, is equally true of the New Testament, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” (1 Th 2:13).

The Bible is inerrant

Since the Bible is the Word of the God who never lies (Nu 13:19), the Bible is absolutely true in everything it says. Jesus declared “Your word is truth” (Jn 17:17) as he prayed to his Father the night before he died. In speaking to his enemies, he made the point that the Scriptures cannot be proved wrong (Jn 10:35). While the main purpose of the Bible is to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tm 3:15), it does also touch on matters such as history, geography, science, etc. When it speaks of these matters as well, its statements are the infallible truth of God.

The Bible has absolute authority

As God’s inspired and inerrant Word, the Bible possesses an absolute authority. Paul claimed that authority as God’s inspired apostle when he wrote to the Corinthians: “If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (1 Co 14:37). The Lord expects unqualified acceptance of his truth: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Is 66:2). Jesus threatened condemnation for anyone who would reject what he has revealed: “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day” (Jn 12:48).

The Bible is sufficient

The Bible is also sufficient. By revealing to us the truth about Jesus, our Substitute, it tells us everything we need to know for life and salvation. In Jesus’ account of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man was told that in “Moses and the prophets” his brothers had all they needed to escape the torments of hell and be saved (Lk 16:29). Paul encouraged Timothy to cling to the Scriptures because they are “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” More than that, the Scriptures are also “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Ti 3:15-17). The Bible tells us all we need to know to be saved, and to live a God-pleasing life. Through his inspired writers the Lord makes it absolutely clear that we are not to look for other revelations which will alter or supplement what he has revealed. Moses’ warning in the last book of the Pentateuch not to add to or subtract from what God has revealed (Dt 4:2) is echoed by John in the last chapter of Revelation (Re 22:18-19). To the Galatians Paul issued the solemn warning: “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Ga 1:8).

Nevertheless false prophets at the time of both the Old (Jr 23:31) and the New Testaments (2 Th 2:1), and in every age since, have sought to pass off their own ideas as God’s revelation. Therefore Luther warned in the Smalcald Articles, “We must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiast, i.e., spirits

who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word.” He identified not only Zwickau’s Thomas Muenzer as a contemporary example, but went on to state, “The Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word.”⁷ It is easy to identify modern-day examples, such as those who point to the Book of Mormon as “another testament of Jesus Christ,” or Rick Warren in his best-selling *Purpose Driven Church*: “As I sat there in the dusty, dimly lit basement of that university library, I heard God speak clearly to me: ‘That’s where I want you to plant a church!’ My whole body began to tingle with excitement, and tears welled up in my eyes. I had heard from God.”⁸ What surprises us is when those who claim to hold to Luther’s theology look to sources other than the Scripture to establish doctrine, or do not shrink from establishing articles of faith in matters the Scripture has left open. (Examples will follow in the final section of the paper.)

The Bible is clear

The Scriptures are the only source of doctrine in the church also because the Scriptures are clear. The psalmist says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps 119:105). For people who are otherwise lost in spiritual darkness and ignorance, God’s Word clearly reveals the way of salvation in Christ, and the way of sanctified, Christian living. While it is true that some parts of Scripture may be “hard to understand,” as Peter described some of Paul’s writings (2 Pe 3:16), the essential message of Scripture is simple enough for a child to understand. Paul mentioned that Timothy had known the saving wisdom of Scripture “from infancy” (2 Tm 3:15). Our difficulty in understanding some of the passages of the Bible is not the fault of God’s revelation, but may be due to our lack of complete understanding of the language of the original or its historical setting; or it is the result of a sinful nature that blinds us to the truth or a weak faith which hinders our full understanding.

The Bible is powerful

Finally, the Bible can be the only source of doctrine because it is powerful in a way that is true of no other writing. The Bible is not just an ancient text, lifeless words scratched on scrolls centuries ago. The writer to the Hebrews declared, “The word of God is living and active” (He 4:12). Jesus said, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (Jn 6:63). The Holy Spirit not only worked a miracle in the men who penned the texts years ago; he still works miraculously through its words today, bringing about the effect he desires (Is 55:10-11). “Through the law we become conscious of sin” (Ro 3:20), but “the Gospel . . . is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Ro 1:16).

Sola Scriptura, that is the principle. Scripture alone is the source of doctrine in the church, because only in Scripture do we hear the voice of God. No other writings but the Scriptures can claim to be the Christ-revealing, inspired, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, clear and powerful Word of God.

II. Principles of biblical interpretation

But how do we use the Scriptures to establish doctrine? Throughout history there are those who have felt the need to look outside the Scriptures to find a key to unlock their true meaning. To understand how Scripture establishes doctrine we need to understand how Scripture is properly interpreted. There are three truths the Bible interpreter needs to keep in mind to understand God’s Word correctly:

⁷ Triglotta, 495.

⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 34.

1. Only the believer understands the Scripture.
2. Every passage of Scripture has one simple sense: the natural meaning.
3. Scripture interprets itself.

1. Only the believer understands the Scripture

No one can approach the study of Scripture from a purely neutral or objective point of view. With respect to Christ and his Word everyone falls into one of two camps: believer or unbeliever. Jesus declared: “He who is not with me is against me” (Mt 12:30). The Bible declares that only the believer can understand God’s Word properly: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Co 2:14). The only proper interpreter of the Bible is the person who sees Christ at its center and the Bible as the inspired and inerrant record of him. These are what Prof. David Kuske calls, “the presuppositions of faith.”⁹ How fitting, then, for everyone to approach Bible study with the simple prayer of the psalmist: “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Ps 119:18).

2. Every passage of Scripture has one simple sense: the natural meaning

A second key principle of biblical interpretation is that each passage of Scripture has but one simple sense: the natural meaning of the words. As we have seen above, the Holy Spirit revealed his truths in language clear enough for a child to understand. He did not use language that only scholars could understand, and he did not trick us by saying one thing and meaning something else. He used ordinary language, and he meant what he said. Therefore, we need to read the Scriptures in that way. Luther wrote: “Brother, the natural meaning of the words is queen, transcending all subtle, acute sophisticated fancy. From it we may not deviate, unless we are compelled by a clear article of faith. Otherwise the spiritual jugglers would not leave a single letter in Scripture.”¹⁰

We must hold to “the natural meaning of the words.” That means to interpret the Scripture according to the ordinary use of language. The Bible is unique in that it is God’s inspired and inerrant Word. But since God chose to reveal his truths in human language, in every other respect the Bible is like other human literature. To interpret literature properly one must assume that the words mean what they say. Luther wrote in another place: “The Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and adviser in heaven and on earth. That is why his words could have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue.”¹¹

This does not rule out the use of figurative language. Quite the contrary. Figures of speech are a natural part of human language; they help to communicate ideas in a clear and memorable way. To describe my son’s car as a lemon vividly communicates the sour feeling it gives without launching into a technical description of its mechanical woes. Since the Holy Scriptures were written in human language, they also make frequent use of figurative language to communicate God’s timeless truths to us.

Examples of figures of speech which are common in the Bible are the *simile* (“Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion,” Pr 11:22), the *metaphor* (“I am the Vine,” Jn 15:5), *personification* (“I will make my arrows drunk with blood,” Dt 32:42), *anthropomorphism* (“The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,” Ps 34:15), *metonymy* (“They have Moses and the Prophets,” Lk 16:29), and *synecdoche* (“My tongue rejoices,” Ps 16:9). Numerous other shorter figures could be listed as well. Jesus’

⁹ David Kuske, *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1995), 18.

¹⁰ LW 40:190.

¹¹ LW 39:178.

favorite teaching tool was the *parable*, which is actually an extended simile. An *allegory* can be described as an extended metaphor. Prof. Kuske writes:

An allegory uses the details of a historical event to teach one or more spiritual truths. Allegory is rarely used in Scripture. The only allegory in the New Testament occurs in Galatians 4:21-31. Since it is a rare use of this longer figure of speech, it is not surprising that the Holy Spirit led Paul to clearly label it as such as he began to use it.¹²

The key to understanding all figures of speech is to stick to the point of comparison. In a figure of speech the writer wants to teach his readers that something unknown to them (e.g., “the kingdom of God” in Mt 13:31) is like something known to them (“a mustard seed”) in one respect (it starts small and grows large). This third element is the point of the comparison (*tertium comparationis*). If one substitutes another quality for the point of comparison, he will miss the message entirely. This is especially important to remember in interpreting parables. Since a parable is an extended and more detailed comparison, one often is tempted to over-interpret the details. Sometimes the details are explained in Scripture; other times they are not. But in either case, as Prof. Kuske points out,

The interpretation of details in the figure of speech must be limited to those details which develop the one point of comparison. Any interpretation of details which leads to a second point of comparison is illegitimate interpretation. . . . Pulling the details of a figure of speech out of the background and trying to interpret them will do more than complicate the interpretation. Often it will also destroy the one real point that the biblical speaker or writer is making. Proper interpretation is always limited to the one point of comparison, because this is the only way the simple, plain meaning of figurative language will be maintained.¹³

When dealing with figurative language, the Bible itself makes it clear that the figurative understanding is the plain meaning of the words. In fact, some figures of speech are so obvious that readers may not even realize they were figures of speech. The Holy Spirit chose these figures because they were a clear, simple and powerful way to communicate his saving truth.

While such figurative language is common in the Scriptures, however, we dare not interpret any passage figuratively where the text does not give us warrant to do so. The Scriptures are always to be taken literally, unless they themselves indicate that a figure of speech is being used. When historical-critical interpreters assert that Genesis 1-3 is a parable, they ignore the clear indications in the text that Moses is writing an historical narrative. Likewise, when Zwingli insisted that Jesus’ words, “This is my body . . . This is my blood” be understood metaphorically, he was unable to point to anything in the text which proved his assertion. Luther warned against finding figures of speech where the text does not indicate their presence:

If everyone is allowed to invent conclusions and figures of speech according to his own whim . . . nothing could to a certainty be determined or proved concerning any one article of faith that men could not find fault with by means of some figure of speech. Rather we must avoid as the most deadly poison all figurative language which Scripture itself does not force us to find in a passage.¹⁴

Each passage of Scripture has only one simple sense: the natural meaning of the words. Where the Scripture indicates the language is figurative, we are to interpret it figuratively. Where the Scripture indicates the language is literal, we are to interpret it literally. This is a basic principle in interpreting Scripture correctly.

¹² Kuske, *op. cit.*, 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 90ff.

¹⁴ Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says, Vol. I* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 93.

3. Scripture interprets itself

A third key principle in interpreting Scripture is that Scripture interprets itself. Since the books of the Bible were all inspired by the God who never lies, they possess a wonderful unity. They have one Author and one purpose: to teach of the way of salvation in Christ. This means that every part of the Bible can help us to understand each individual part. When we run into a dark or difficult passage (as Peter described some of Paul's writings in 2 Pe 3:16), we do not need the pope, or the church fathers, or even the Lutheran Confessions to interpret it for us. The Scripture interprets itself. The clear passages of Scriptures will shed light on the more difficult passages. This means reading each passage in its immediate context and in the wider context of Scripture.

Immediate context

Every passage of Scripture must be understood in the light of its immediate context. This means recognizing who wrote the words, as well as to whom and when and why they were written. It means paying attention to what precedes and follows the passage under consideration. It means determining the meaning of the words and phrases and sentences and paragraphs by applying the common rules of lexicography, grammar and syntax. This is what is called the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. Through it the Bible interpreter will in most cases discover the one divinely intended sense of each passage of Scripture, because God revealed his truths in simple, plain language.

No verse should be divorced from what surrounds it. An example of taking a passage out of context is the use of Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" as a blanket prohibition against passing judgment on the sins and false teachings of others. A careful reading of the entire chapter will show that what Jesus is forbidding is hypocritical judging, and judging by man's standards instead of God's. When Jesus warns us in verse 15: "Watch out for false prophets" he expects us to be able to tell the difference between true and false teachers, and that can only be done by making a proper judgment about what is true and false, good and bad, right and wrong.

Wider context

To properly interpret the Scriptures we need to interpret each passage also in the wider context of the rest of Scripture. When we run into a difficult or obscure passage, we need to examine all that the Bible teaches on the particular point of doctrine presented in that passage, and let the simple, clear, literal passages illuminate and set the limits for our understanding of the difficult, obscure, and figurative passage. In this way we find God's own inspired interpretation of the text in question. This is possible, because the Holy Spirit has seen to it that no doctrine of Scripture is revealed in only one place in his Word, but all are presented in a number of different books and contexts.

Many false teachings, particularly in the area of eschatology, stem from the failure to let the Scripture interpret itself in this way. Many millennial interpreters, for example, begin with the most difficult books of the Bible, books filled with figures and symbols, such as Revelation, Ezekiel and the prophetic portions of Daniel. Then, following their own imaginations, they construct fanciful errors such as a double resurrection, a rapture of all believers prior to the great tribulation, a mass conversion of all the Jews, a thousand year reign of Christ on earth, etc. In all these cases they ignore simple, clear and unequivocal passages elsewhere in the Scripture, such as Jesus' statement to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18:36), his clear teaching of the end that "no one knows about that day or hour" (Mt 24:36), Peter's statement that Joel's prophecy of "the last days" was being fulfilled on Pentecost (Ac 2:16-17), Paul's statement "that those who believe are children of Abraham"

(Ga 3:7), Jesus' statement that there will be one resurrection when "all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out" to face the judgment (Jn 5:28-29), etc. Proper interpretation of the Bible begins with these simple statements of Bible truth or *sedes doctrinae*. Then these simple and clear passages are used to shed light on the more obscure and challenging passages, such as those from Revelation and other highly symbolic or figurative parts of Scripture.

There are two other general examples of how the wider context of the Bible can enrich our understanding of God's Word and help us to avoid misunderstanding. The New Testament serves as the wider context of the Old Testament Scriptures in teaching us that the civil and ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic code for Israel are no longer in effect for Christ's New Testament Church. Only the immutable will of God imbedded in the moral law since creation still applies to us. It is also in the wider context of the New Testament Scriptures that the Holy Spirit reveals Old Testament types of Christ. Allowing Scripture to interpret itself means that we will identify with absolute assurance only those types of Christ which God himself indicates elsewhere in his Word.

Scripture alone is the source of doctrine, because it is the Christ-centered, inspired, inerrant, authoritative, clear, sufficient and powerful Word of God. Scripture alone is the source of doctrine, because in it God reveals his message of salvation to believers in natural language, and interprets that message for us.

III. The role of the confessions in establishing doctrine

If the Bible is the only source of doctrine, and the Bible interprets itself, then what is the need for confessions, and what role, if any, do they play in establishing the teaching of the church?

Confessions are necessary because from the very beginning Satan has moved false teachers to pass off his lies as God's truth. Through Jeremiah the Lord warned "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The Lord declares'" (Jr 23:31). Jesus warned against false prophets (Mt 7:15) and through his apostle John urged us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1). Throughout the history of the church, there have always been false teachers who proclaimed that their teachings were based on the Bible. Arius and Nestorius, Zwingli and Calvin, the Roman Catholics and the Crypto-Calvinists – all claimed to teach according to Scripture. So do today's Baptists and Pentecostals, and even such non-Christian cults as the Jehovah's Witnesses. When false teachers assert their errors as God's truth, believers have no choice but to publicly confess the truth and reject what is false. Jesus declared, "Whoever confesses me before men, him I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven." (Mt 10:32, NKJV). In writing to Titus about the qualifications of those who serve in the public ministry, Paul stated, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Ti 1:9).

That is why, throughout its history, the Christian Church has found it necessary to construct formal and permanent statements of its faith, which present in clear and unmistakable language what it believes and teaches on the basis of Scripture, and which clearly expose and reject the errors that have been masquerading as the truth. Such public confessions make it possible to see what people believe about God's Word. They make it possible to "test the spirits" in the light of that clear Word.

The introduction to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord lists the other eight confessions which were to be gathered in the Book of Concord, and indicates that in nearly every case it was the presence of false teachers that made them necessary:

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.

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.

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.

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.¹⁵

At the end of the introduction, the Epitome is careful to spell out the distinction between the role of Scripture and the role of the confessions:

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.

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 condemned¹⁶

The same careful distinction is made in the Thorough Declaration. It states: "*The Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*" are "the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged."¹⁷ And later: "the Word of God alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything should be subjected."¹⁸ After renaming the Lutheran Confessions listed earlier, the introduction concludes: "as we lay down God's Word, the eternal truth, as the foundation, so we introduce and quote also these writings as a witness of the truth and as the unanimously received correct understanding of our predecessors who have steadfastly held to the pure doctrine."¹⁹

¹⁵ *Triglotta*, 777f. Here and in subsequent quotations, the italics are from the printed edition of the Triglot.

¹⁶ *Triglotta*, 777f.

¹⁷ *Triglotta*, 851.

¹⁸ *Triglotta*, 855.

¹⁹ *Triglotta*, 855.

God's Word is the truth. The confessions are a witness to the truth. In the Scripture we hear the voice of God revealing the truths of our salvation. In the confessions we hear the voice of the church speaking its "Amen." "This is what we believe, teach and confess." Both are normative, and both are necessary. But the Scriptures, as the voice of God, are the *norma normans*, the ruling norm, the absolute, divine authority. The confessions are the *norma normata*, the ruled norm, which are based on and derive their authority from their agreement the Scriptures, and are binding on everyone who professes to be a Lutheran.

In a recent article in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Prof. John Brug has pointed out that the confessions decline to apply the term "norm" or "standard" to themselves, but prefer the term "witness" or "testimony."²⁰ They consistently refer to the Scriptures as the "sole rule and standard" etc. It was later dogmaticians who began using the terms *norma normans* and *norma normata*. But they are always careful to qualify the term *norma* when applied to the confessions. Three of Brug's citations are especially helpful. Franz Pieper writes:

To show the relation between Holy Scripture and the Symbols of the orthodox Church, the following terms have been used: *norma normans* and *norma normata*, *norma primaria* and *secundaria*. Both terms express the truth that the Symbols are a norm, but not by themselves (*absolute*), but only in a certain respect (*secundum quid*), namely, a derived norm, because the doctrines confessed in our Symbols are taken from Scripture. The purpose of the Symbols is brought out in the term *norma decisionis* and *norma discretionis* (deciding norm and distinguishing norm). Scripture alone decides which doctrine is true, which is false; but from the attitude which one takes toward the Symbols of the Lutheran Church we learn whether he knows and accepts the Scripture doctrine or does not accept it (*norma discretionis discernit orthodoxos ab heterodoxis*).²¹

Brug also cites this axiom of Carpzov:

A symbolic book is called a norm, not of the faith itself, but only of the confession of faith.²²

Hollaz' distinction is perhaps the most useful:

The Holy Scriptures, by virtue of their *divine canonical authority*, constitute an infallible rule, whereby true doctrines are distinguished from false. The Symbolical Books have *ecclesiastical authority*, and by virtue of this are called a rule, namely, with regard to the public profession of faith, by which we declare the unanimous consent of the Church in doctrine.²³

Prof. Brug aptly sums up the matter as follows:

Confessional Lutherans will not elevate the Confessions to too high a position as a second norm that stands along side Scripture. Neither will they make too little of the Confessions, but they will subscribe to them as a secondary norm under Scripture, a pledge of what we will believe and teach.²⁴

Two examples will illustrate the normative role of the confessions. At the beginning of the fourth century Arius and his followers taught that Christ was not true God from all eternity, but the first of God's creatures; and they claimed that this was the teaching of Scripture. The church responded by setting down in

²⁰ John Brug, "Norma Normata Normata?" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 101:2; (Spring 2004), 139-144.

²¹ Cited in Brug, *op. cit.*, 143.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p 144.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

what we now call the Nicene Creed the Bible's teaching that Jesus Christ is "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father."²⁵

In the 1520s Huldreich Zwingli taught that the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper merely represent the absent body and blood of Christ, and claimed scriptural support for his teaching. When the Lutheran princes presented their confession before the emperor at Augsburg in 1530, they wanted it clearly known that they did not hold to the error of Zwingli and his followers. So they confessed in Article X, "that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present, and are distributed to those who eat the Supper of the Lord; and they reject those that teach otherwise."²⁶

The confessions still fulfill that valuable function to this day. When our church body and congregations state their adherence to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions and our called workers pledge themselves to the same, we have every reason to expect that their teaching and practice will be aligned with these confessions. We would have no such confidence if our churches and our workers merely pledged themselves to teach "what the Bible teaches."

Unconditional subscription

Jesus warned us that false teachers hide their wolves' fangs underneath "sheep's clothing" (Mt 7:15). Beginning in the 16th century deceivers sought to hide their destructive heresies underneath a qualified subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. All faithful Lutherans respond by requiring their churches and teachers to give an unconditional pledge to the confessions. That's why we have a *quia* and not *quatenus* subscription. Our synod's constitution states that we accept "the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church . . . not insofar as (Latin, *quatenus*), but because (Latin, *quia*) they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God."²⁷ C. F. W. Walther listed seven different methods used to qualify ones subscription. He referred to Reformed theologians who were willing to subscribe even the Unaltered Augsburg Confession "provided only that they were permitted to interpret it according to the Scriptures."²⁸ Calvin himself subscribed the unaltered Augsburg confession to gain a teaching position in Strasbourg. But he did so with this clever qualification: "I have gladly and willingly subscribed for some time *as the author himself has interpreted it.*"²⁹

Prof. Armin Schuetze gives a simple illustration which shows how empty any qualified subscription is:

A person, for example, may subscribe to the statement that "Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary" *insofar* as this statement agrees with Scripture. He hasn't told you whether he considers all, or only part, or none of it to be scriptural. If you say to him, "I see you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin," he might respond, "No, I do not believe this, 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, that too I do not believe is really taught in the Bible." He might 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 in his thinking with Scripture. Such a confession is meaningless.³⁰

²⁵ *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993), 18.

²⁶ *Triglotta*, 47.

²⁷ *Constitution and Bylaws of the WELS*, 5.

²⁸ C. F. W. Walther, "Confessional Subscription" *Essays for the Church, Vol. I*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

³⁰ Armin Schuetze, "Subscribing to the Book of Concord" *Our Great Heritage, Vol. I*. (Milwaukee, Northwestern, 1991), 431.

The Lutheran dogmatician J. G. Walch pointed out that a Christian could even subscribe to the Koran “insofar as” it agrees with the Bible.³¹

In requiring such an unqualified subscription to the confessions, it is important to note that what we bind ourselves to is the doctrinal content of the confessions, not every statement made on every subject. Unlike the Word of God, the confessions are not infallibly true. They contain a few historical errors,³² and the references for certain Scripture passages are in error.³³ It could also be noted that confessional Lutherans reject not only Strigel’s doctrinal error “that original sin is only an impediment to the good spiritual powers, and not a despoliation or want of the same.” They may also reject his curious scientific opinion “when a magnet is smeared with garlic-juice, its natural power is not thereby removed, but only impeded” without jeopardizing their *quia* subscription to the Formula of Concord.³⁴ Our subscription to the doctrinal content in the confessions is also not an endorsement of the exegesis of every Scripture passage.³⁵ To sum up, we do not subscribe to every statement on every subject in the confessions. But we do give our unqualified subscription to all the doctrines presented in the confessions; and we do so *because* they are in perfect agreement with the doctrine of the Bible.

“Open questions”

In noting that Scripture alone is the source of all doctrine it is important to issue two cautions regarding the matter of “open questions.”

The confessions are a correct exposition of the doctrines which were in controversy at the time they were written. They are not an exhaustive summary of all of Christian doctrine. Unfortunately, in every generation Satan spawns new false teachers. That is what led one of the authors of the Formula of Concord to pray,

The haughty spirits, Lord, restrain
Who o’er Thy Church with might would reign
And always set forth something new
Devised to change Thy doctrine true.³⁶

With each new challenge to the doctrine of Scripture it becomes necessary to return to the sole source of teaching in the church, the Holy Scriptures. Certain doctrines under attack in the church today were not directly addressed in the confessions, such as the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the six-day creation, the distinct roles God has assigned to men and women as part of his order of creation. It would be wrong to conclude, as some have, that these matters are “open questions” for Lutherans, or that agreement in these teachings of Scripture is unnecessary for church fellowship. This is the reason for the careful wording of the synod’s *Model Constitution* in its second article, “Hence, no doctrine shall be taught or tolerated in this congregation which is in any way at variance with these symbolical books *and the Holy Scriptures*.”³⁷

³¹ *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Dogmatics Course Notes*. electronic ed. (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1999).

³² Ambrose (*Triglotta*, 47) and Augustine (*Triglotta*, 51) are erroneously listed as authors of certain quotations.

³³ Mt 22:14 is erroneously listed as Mt 20:16 in *Triglotta*, 1079; Re 10:3 listed as in Re 12 in *Triglotta*, 473.

³⁴ *Triglotta*, 783.

³⁵ An example would be the citation of Ro 14:23, “Whatever is not of faith is sin,” to support the teaching that only believers can do good works. *Triglotta*, 941. He 11:6 would have been a better passage to cite.

³⁶ From Nikolaus Selnecker’s “Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide,” Hymn 292, Stanza 6 (composite translation) in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941).

³⁷ *Model Constitution*, 10. Emphasis added.

An opposite warning is also in order. Some have sought to use statements in the confessions, and even other writings quoted or alluded to in the confessions, as a basis for establishing doctrines not contained in Scripture.³⁸ Examples include the attempt to determine the moment of the real presence in the Lord's Supper, and the notion of the perpetual virginity of Mary. Either of these are matters on which an individual Christian may hold his own pious, personal opinion. But because neither question is one which is definitively answered for us in the Scriptures (nor in the confessions, for that matter), elevating either one to the status of an article of faith would be attempting to close a matter the Holy Spirit has left open. Our WELS "Statement on Scripture" addresses the matter as follows:

We believe and teach that where Scripture has not spoken decisively or is silent, differences of opinion may be held without violating Scripture or breaking the bonds of fellowship. Such matters fall into the area called "open questions." Scripture itself must determine which questions are to be considered as open. The term "open questions" may legitimately be used where the Scripture language leaves open the precise scope of a passage, or where linguistic, textual or historical problems make the perception of the intended sense difficult. But where Scripture has spoken, there God has spoken, whether it be on a central dogma or on a peripheral point; where Scripture has not spoken, the matter must forever remain open. 1 Pe 4:11; Jer 23:22,23.³⁹

In summary, what is the role of the confessions in establishing the teaching of the church? If you ask a Lutheran "What do you believe" he will point you to the Lutheran Confessions. But if you ask him why he believes that, he will point you to the Scriptures. The confessions establish what the Evangelical Lutheran Church believes to be the teaching of the Bible, and what we, therefore, believe, teach and confess. The Scriptures are the only source of that teaching and the only norm for judging those who teach it.

IV. Lutheran deviations from the *sola scriptura* principle

We now turn our attention to several examples of a false understanding of the relationship between the Scriptures and the confessions.

"The analogy of faith" in the election controversy

In the election controversy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries the theologians of the Ohio and Iowa synods followed a hermeneutic that effectively elevated their understanding of the confessions above the words of Scripture. This hermeneutical approach was known as "the analogy of faith." It was the focus of considerable debate between them and the representatives of the synodical conference. Pres. Paul Prange explains how the Ohioans understood the term:

Ohio's Professor Stellhorn defined the term [as] . . . the *aggregate of Scripture (das Schriftganze)*, which represents a harmonious system by which all Scripture passages must be interpreted. He said that the *analogy of faith* in Romans 12:6 was a reference to the *fides quae creditur* (the objective faith, the creed, the body of doctrine which we believe) rather than the *fides qua creditur* (the faith by which we believe, that is, the personal faith worked in each believer by the Holy Spirit). Other Ohioans added the idea that the human intellect, informed by faith, could draw logical conclusions apart from the direct words of Scripture to connect or explain clear doctrines.⁴⁰

³⁸ Brug, *op. cit.*

³⁹ "Statement on Scripture" in *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, Prepared by the WELS CICR, 1997, 10.

⁴⁰ Paul Prange, "The Analogy of Faith: 50th Anniversary of the Death of J.P. Koehler." A conference essay delivered in Remus, Michigan, on September 18, 2001; 3.

Prof. E. C. Fredrich summarized the analogy of faith this way: “Ohio and Iowa theologians . . . viewed [the analogy of faith] as a sort of harmony of Bible truth in which all doctrines would have to fit neatly and logically.”⁴¹

In the midst of the controversy the Wisconsin Synod launched its *Theologische Quartalschrift*. Appearing in the first issue was an article by Prof. J. P. Koehler entitled, “*Die Analogie des Glaubens, eine hermeneutische Untersuchung*.”⁴² Koehler contended that Romans 12:6 does not present any principle of interpretation and that the expression “analogy of faith” was adopted because of an erroneous understanding of this passage. He then reviewed the principles of biblical hermeneutics, noting that in Scripture God speaks to us in simple, clear language. By following the historical-grammatical method of interpretation we can understand God’s message, allowing clearer passages which speak of the same doctrine to shed light on more difficult ones. But when two passages seem to contradict each other according to our reason, we are simply to believe them both without distorting either one, and give the Holy Spirit credit for being smarter than we are.

Representatives on both sides of the issue met in Fort Wayne in August of 1905. Their discussion illustrates the results of their two different methods of interpretation. The discussion focused on Ephesians 1:3-8, especially verse 4: “[God] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his sight.” The synodical conference representatives stated that according to the rules of grammar the phrase “in Christ” can only be understood as modifying the verb, “chose.” God chose us in Christ, i.e., for Christ’s sake. Our redemption in Christ logically preceded our election. The only two reasons for our election, then, are the merit of Christ and the mercy of God. The Scriptures never mention those who are lost. We must not try to answer why God chose the persons he did.

The opponents insisted that the phrase “in Christ” modifies “us,” i.e., God chose us “who are in Christ,” or “chose those he found to be in Christ.” The two reasons for election are thus the merit of Christ and faith. God chose individuals “in view of their faith” (*intuitu fidei*). Prof. Armin Schuetze reports:

One speaker [on the Ohio/Iowa side] acknowledged that it is not “grammatically” correct to connect the phrase “in Christ” with “us” but that this is “theologically” correct and “agrees with Scripture.” It was also said that “we must let Article XI [Election] of the Concordia [Lutheran Confessions] direct us in the exegesis of ‘in Christ.’” All of this showed how they were using their understanding of the “analogy of faith” as a principle of interpretation.⁴³

The controversy separating the two groups remained unresolved, because the different hermeneutical approaches remained unchanged.

As J. P. Koehler demonstrated, the term “analogy of faith” has been used for centuries with many definitions. The analogy of faith principle is misapplied when one’s doctrinal system is used to over-rule the simple words of Scripture, and ultimately to invent new doctrines (such as election “in view of faith”) or to fill in logical gaps or rational inconsistencies in the doctrine of Scripture. Our WELS Doctrinal Statement on Scripture defines the proper understanding and use of the term “analogy of faith”:

Scripture alone is to interpret Scripture. The hermeneutical rule that Scripture must be interpreted according to the rule, or the analogy, of faith means that the clear passages of Scripture, not any theological system or dogmatical summary of Bible doctrine, are to determine the interpretation.

⁴¹ E. C. Fredrich, *Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 111.

⁴² *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Jahrgang 1, No. 1, Januar 1904, 18ff. “The Analogy of Faith” appears in translation on pages 221-268 of volume 1 of *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1997).

⁴³ Armin Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2000), 186.

Seemingly obscure passages must not be interpreted so as to pervert or contradict clear passages. This means that every statement of Scripture must be understood in its native sense, according to grammar, context, and linguistic usage of the time. . . .

Since Scripture is in all its parts and in all its words the inspired Word of God, we reject and condemn any use of the phrase “totality of Scripture” which tends to abridge or annul the force of any clear passage of Scripture.⁴⁴

The method of Biblical interpretation used by the Ohio and Iowa synods is still alive and well in their churches to this day. Paul Prange reports:

The current successor body of Ohio and Iowa, the ELCA, has made their version of the *analogy of faith* into something much easier to understand: “Sometimes the gospel must be taken over the Bible.”⁴⁵ This is interpreted in the ELCA that if the Bible condemns homosexuality but the gospel asks us to forgive sinners, we ought not condemn homosexuality. The same principle is applied when the ELCA asks women to serve in the pastoral office, exercising authority over men, contrary to the Scripture.⁴⁶

Sadly, there is much evidence that a hermeneutical method which gives undue weight to the confessions is not restricted to those outside the former Synodical Conference.

James Voelz in *What Does This Mean?*

James Voelz, professor of hermeneutics at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, has written what he calls “a basic hermeneutics textbook” with a very Lutheran sounding title, but a worrisome subtitle: *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*.⁴⁷ Once the reader gets past the cover, he will discover that whatever worries he may have had are well-founded. The following is typical of the prose the beginning hermeneutics student will encounter.

Words are signifiers which evoke conceptual signifieds (=meanings) in the mental world of a hearer/reader from his or her memory world. Otherwise expressed, when a sound or sight symbol is encountered by a receptor (i.e., hearer, reader), a mental concept is elicited from the memory world of that receptor. It should be noted that neither the word/signifier nor the meaning/conceptual signified is the thing the speaker/writer is talking about (= the referent).⁴⁸

Prof. Voelz not only makes his own book hard to understand. He succeeds in doing the same with God’s book.

His approach to hermeneutics is an attempt to apply post-modern reader-response theory to biblical interpretation. His basic premise is that “Meaning is interpersonal.”⁴⁹ It is dependant upon both the author and the reader of the text. In an article in *The Cresset* he expressed his theory in this way: “No communication is complete unless it is received,”⁵⁰ and that, therefore, “each reader is an active participant in the process by

⁴⁴ “Statement on Scripture” in *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 11f.

⁴⁵ Spoken by the [then] presiding bishop of the ELCA, Rev. H. George Anderson, as reported in *The Saginaw News*, Saturday, August 11, 2001.]

⁴⁶ Prange, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁴⁷ James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 87f.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁵⁰ James Voelz, “What Does Biblical Scholarship Today Offer the Church?” *The Cresset*, (Easter 1996), 10.

which meaning arises in a text.”⁵¹ In reading Voelz, one is repeatedly struck by the question, “How can one who claims to believe in the divine authorship of the sacred Scriptures make such a statement?” His approach appears to ignore the truth that each text of the Bible has one simple sense, the meaning intended by the real author of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit. In fact, regarding the “intentionality” of a given text, Voelz asserts,

What a text’s intended meaning is, however, is often somewhat elusive or obscure, and one can never appeal to it (i.e., the intentionality of the author) as a hermeneutical key to the interpretation of a given text. . . . Furthermore, it is doubtful whether the intended meaning of a given text exhausts the meaning of that text.⁵²

Contrast this with the clear and simple statement of the Apostle Paul: “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, *that we may understand what God has freely given us*” (1 Co 2:12).

Voelz tries to avoid the radical post-modern idea that the meaning of the text is a purely subjective thing determined by each individual reader. He does so by asserting that there is an “implied reader” for whom the text of the Bible was written, i.e., the believer, and that this reader is taught how to properly read the text by the Christian community to which he belongs.

We may affirm, therefore, the church’s ancient viewpoint, confirmed, as it were, by post-modern literary theory, that valid interpretation of the sacred Scriptures can be done only by a believing Christian within a Christian community in accordance with the credal understanding of those Scriptures by the historic Christian church.⁵³

Elsewhere Voelz describes such “valid interpretation” in terms of

those who confess the faith which [the church] has sworn she will confess. . . . Historic Christianity, true “catholic” – universal – doctrine and belief, these are the womb of the church’s book. Which can only mean that the readers who are among those who both believe and hold this faith, these are the implied readers of that book which is the foundation of that very faith.⁵⁴

Pres. Paul Wendland responds to this idea:

The church gives birth to the book, rather than the book giving birth to the church. Against this we would simply say that God creates believers through the Word, and that faith – in its purest form – is merely the receiving hand that takes in and takes to heart every Word of God. To speak of “active roles” for readers as they “make meanings” is, at the base, a confusion of law and gospel, faith and works.⁵⁵

In the final chapter of *What Does This Mean?* Voelz outlines “the Lutheran Confessional Approach” which is to use the confessions as a hermeneutical guide to the Scriptures. “The creeds and confessions were composed for the purpose of clarifying the meaning of Scripture on disputed points, and confessional interpreters will interpret the Scriptures according to the confessions, not vice versa.”⁵⁶ Once again, the confessions are elevated to a position along side, if not above the Scriptures, and the voice of God remains

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵² Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 213f.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 228f.

⁵⁴ Voelz, “What Does Biblical Scholarship Today Offer the Church?”, 13.

⁵⁵ Paul Wendland, from the handout at a seminar entitled, “Post-Modernism: How it Affects Our Ministries,” at Dowagiac, Michigan, April 11-12, 2005.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 359.

unclear unless interpreted properly by the voice of the church. In a review of Voelz's book in the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Prof. W. A. Maier aptly comments: "Voelz holds that a valid interpreter of the New Testament must be taught to read by the Christian community; yet Luther, essentially in isolation, was led by the Holy Spirit through the Word to interpret that Word properly."⁵⁷

Contrary to Voelz's view that the text of the Bible is complex with levels of meaning that are often intangible and inexhaustible, the psalmist declares: "The unfolding of your words gives light, it gives understanding to the simple" (Ps 119:130). The text of the Bible has one, simple sense, which the Holy Spirit will most often make clear from the immediate or the wider context, as the Bible interprets itself.

John Fenton's "catholic principle"

The danger of abandoning the *sola Scriptura* principle is amply illustrated in a essay delivered by Father John Fenton of Zion Lutheran in Detroit, Michigan. "What Options Do the Confessions Give Us?: An Exploratory Essay Concerning the LCMS Crisis as It Relates to Those Who Hold to the 1580 Book of Concord" was presented at a gathering of concerned LCMS members following their 2004 synod convention. Fr. Fenton is on the vanguard of the liturgical movement in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod; he serves as editor in chief of *The Bride of Christ: The Journal of Lutheran Liturgical Renewal*, and is a regular columnist in *Gottesdienst: A Quarterly Journal of the Evangelical-Lutheran Liturgy*.

In the essay Fenton contends for what he calls the "catholic principle explicitly and implicitly articulated in the 1580 Book of Concord."⁵⁸

Nowhere is this catholic principle more clearly and succinctly asserted than in the chief confessional document. In the paragraphs between the two parts of the Augsburg Confession, we confess that "there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman Church, insofar as we can tell from its writers." We also confess that "the churches among us do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith but only set aside a few abuses that are new and were accepted because of corruption over time contrary to the intention of the canons..." What these words say is that we receive and hold to the teachings that have been handed down. And when we confess that we "do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith," we are saying that we hold to what has been handed down to us not *if it conforms to the Scriptures* but *unless it is contrary to the Scriptures*.⁵⁹

If you are not sure what Fenton means or where he is going, he removes all doubt in the next few paragraphs. He takes the Lutheran dogmatician, Johann Gerhard, to task for insisting that Scripture alone is the source of all doctrine in the church. This, he calls "a clear inversion of the Book of Concord's catholic principle." Fenton quotes a Charles Robb Hogg approvingly:

Whereas the *Formula of Concord* had called Scripture the *pure* source and *sole* norm, Gerhard speaks of the canonical books as *the* source of our faith. The *Formula's* way of speaking left some room for the idea of the catholic principle, with creeds, councils and fathers serving as sources (albeit impure) which could then be normed by Scripture. But by speaking of the canonical books as *the* source, Gerhard in effect nullifies any appeal to other sources for establishing dogma.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Walter A. Maier, "A Hermeneutics Text for the Advanced Student," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 62:3 (July, 1998), 172.

⁵⁸ John Fenton, "What Options Do the Confessions Give Us," 3. Available at <http://www.ziondetroit.org/publications/confessions-options.php>. For a fuller analysis of Fenton's essay, see Daniel Woodring, "Is this 'Catholic Principle' Catholic?" Available at <http://www.consensuslutheran.org/>

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6, emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

Fenton proceeds to explain in his own words how the Holy Spirit reveals his truth to us in other sources apart from Scripture:

[Gerhard] set the stage for abandoning the true confessional understanding of Tradition as deriving from both explicit and implicit Scriptural testimonies; or, to say it another way, from what the Lord Jesus taught when we could bear it, and what the Spirit now adduces, testifies and brings to our remembrance through creeds, confessions and received interpretations.⁶¹

It is astonishing, to say the least, to hear one who wishes to be considered a confessional Lutheran assert that tradition should supplement the Scriptures as a source not just for indifferent matters we may or may not adopt in our Christian liberty, but for articles of faith. Jesus repeatedly rebuked the Pharisees of his day for burdening consciences with teachings God had not revealed. When the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for not following "the tradition of the elders," Jesus replied,

Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.

Luther also spoke in very strong language in the Smalcald Articles:

It will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers; otherwise their kind of fare, of garments, of house, etc., would have to become an article of faith, as was done with relics. [We have, however, another rule, namely] The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel.⁶²

Christ taught us never to go beyond his Word. Luther reminds us of this truth in his exposition of John 6:63:

God has ordained that His Holy Spirit comes in an orderly fashion through the Word. Christ Himself says so here. Therefore if anything comes before you that appears to be so beautiful and holy that you think it is positively angelical, then take it and compare it with God's Word; see if it is grounded in Holy Scripture and if God has commanded and enjoined it. If it is a mere notion, a private opinion, and a good idea, but without God's Word, then spit at it.⁶³

Luther labeled every attempt to divine the truth of God apart from Scripture *Schwärmerei*.

Fenton, however, sees the need to find an additional source for doctrine because he questions the objective clarity of the Scriptures, and asserts, as did Voelz, that they can only be properly understood when viewed through the lens of the church.

Central to our confessional standard are the Holy Scriptures which are "the pure, clear fountain of Israel which alone is the one true guiding principle according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated." However, as we all know from a multitude of experiences, maintaining that the Scriptures are the "one true guiding principle" is quite unhelpful if those same Scriptures are heard within disparate contexts or read through widely varying lenses. The same is true whenever anyone claims that all decisions, doctrines, practices, or statements of faith will be based only on clear passages

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Triglotta*, 467.

⁶³ *What Luther Says, Vol. III*, 1478.

in Scriptures. Quite apart from the philosophical conundrum (“what is clear to me may not be clear to you”), it is apparent that no one can, and no one does, read the Scriptures according to the bare words alone. Rather, we read them within the context of faith—whether that is the orthodox faith of the church, some heterodox or heretical faith, or an anti-Christian faith. That is why the Book of Concord exists, and why it insists on listing what is to be believed, taught and confessed. For our confessional standard is not Holy Scriptures alone. Neither is it interpreting the Confessions according to the Scripture. Rather, as C. F. W. Walther reminds us, our confessional standard is reading, interpreting, and expounding Holy Scripture according to the Confessions. In other words, the catholic faith rightly articulated in the Book of Concord gives us the right way to hear the Scriptures, and the right lens for reading the Scriptures.⁶⁴

One wonders how an individual can quote, and claim agreement with, that outstanding statement of the Formula of Concord on the clarity and sufficiency of the Scriptures, and then immediately proceed to deny it. Yes, people deny the clarity of Scripture and say, “That’s just your interpretation.” The apostle foretold that “men will not put up with sound doctrine” (2 Tm 4:3). But Jesus declared “If you hold to my teaching . . . you will know the truth” (Jn 8:31-32). The truth comes from his Word because it is clear in itself. The confessions do not determine the meaning of Scripture. The Scripture interprets itself. Nor is it the purpose of the confessions to discover articles of faith. The Bible is our only source for doctrine.

But there is more. Fenton goes on to demonstrate that his belief in tradition as a source for doctrine and practice in the church is not merely theoretical.

The notion that we hold only those traditions which can be proved from the Scriptures has undermined all theological support for the some of the following doctrines and practices upheld by the Book of Concord: Private Absolution, the perpetual virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Ordination; fasting as laudable preparation for Holy Communion and Easter; the jurisdiction by divine right of bishops as bishops to forgive sins, to reject teaching that opposes the gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the church the ungodly whose ungodliness is known; and that “churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops.” Additionally, opposing the confession’s catholic principle by requiring that all doctrines and practices rely exclusively on “clear passages of Scripture” makes it extremely difficult to defend (among other things) infant Baptism, the true understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the christological nature of the office of the holy ministry. For it is well known that heterodox communions which subscribe to the *sola scriptura* principle reject these catholic traditions.

The persistent, willful and deliberate rejection of traditional dogmas which do not contradict Scripture has led to the anti-confessional notion of the Scriptures as the sole source of doctrine and practice.⁶⁵

How astounding to hear one who bears the name Lutheran, especially one who claims to believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, actually deny the *sola Scriptura* principle in so many words. This position is so contrary to the teaching of the Scripture and the confessions that it hardly requires comment. But since Fenton claims that the Book of Concord upholds as doctrine traditions not supported or proved by Scripture, we should hear what the confessions themselves say about tradition.

Fenton points to the words introducing the second section of the Augsburg Confession as the basis for his “catholic principle”: “Our churches dissent in no article of faith from the Church Catholic.”⁶⁶ The context reveals the intent of these words. The entire confession was intentionally conciliatory in tone. The confessors at Augsburg in 1530 were at pains to demonstrate to the emperor and their entire audience that they had no

⁶⁴ Fenton, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁶ *Triglotta*, 59.

intention of starting a new church, but only to cleanse their churches of the abuses which had crept in over the years. They also needed to answer the “false and malicious charge that all the ceremonies, all the things instituted of old, are abolished in our churches.”⁶⁷ Against these charges, and specifically the notion that the Lutherans had abolished the mass and traditional ceremonies, the confessors responded,

Falsely are our churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among us, and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added to teach the people. For ceremonies are needed to this end alone that the unlearned be taught [what they need to know of Christ].⁶⁸

Far from establishing traditions as articles of faith, however, the confessors clearly stated in Article XV that human traditions are matters of Christian liberty:

Of Usages in the Church they teach that those ought to be observed which may be observed without sin, and which are profitable unto tranquility and good order in the Church, as particular holy days, festivals, and the like. Nevertheless, concerning such things men are admonished that consciences are not to be burdened, as though such observance was necessary to salvation.⁶⁹

This matter of Christian liberty later received extensive treatment in Article X of the Formula of Concord, which states:

We believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God. Nevertheless, that herein all frivolity and offense should be avoided, and special care should be taken to exercise forbearance towards the weak in faith. 1 Cor. 8, 9; Rom. 14, 13. . . . We believe, teach, and confess also that no Church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: *Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei*, Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith.⁷⁰

In response to Father Fenton’s “catholic principle” we repeat the *sola Scriptura* principle. The Scripture alone establishes what the voice of God says and means. The purpose of the confessions is to establish that the voice of the church agrees.

Walther on confessional subscription

We need to say something here about an oft-quoted statement of Walther, cited by both Voelz and Fenton, which supposedly supports the idea that “confessional interpreters will interpret the Scriptures according to the confessions, not vice versa.”⁷¹ The quotation is usually limited to this paragraph:

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, subscription would not

⁶⁷ *Triglotta*, 59.

⁶⁸ *Triglotta*, 65.

⁶⁹ *Triglotta*, 49.

⁷⁰ *Triglotta*, 829f.

⁷¹ Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 359.

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.⁷²

These words are a favorite of those who are unclear about the proper relationship between the Scripture and the confessions. Perhaps this is just another example of the *Vätertheologie* of the Missouriians. August Pieper is remembered to have said in the classroom, “*Wir konnten die Missouriier nicht mit der Bibel überzeugen; da wir ihnen aber Walther vorlasen, da glaubten sie uns.*”⁷³ We do well to remember that just because Walther said something, that does not make it true.

A better solution, however, is to apply the sound hermeneutical principle of letting Walther interpret Walther. When you read his words in context, especially the very two paragraphs that precede this quotation, he says something very different than is regularly ascribed to him. As the title of his essay indicates, Walther was not speaking about hermeneutics here, but about confessional subscription. As noted earlier, he listed as many as seven different formulas which were used to qualify ones subscription to the confessions. The particular one he was addressing in this part of the essay was that form of *quatenus* subscription used by the Zwinglians of the 16th century down to the followers of Wilhelm Loehe in the 19th: “I subscribe the confessions as interpreted according to Scripture.” Such a qualified subscription is no subscription at all. Walther says, “Every honest Calvinist or Reformed person can declare without compunction that he cordially accepts our Book of Concord insofar as it agrees with the Scriptures and still regard the decrees of the Synod of Dort as purely Biblical.”⁷⁴

Then, in the paragraph immediately preceding the one so often quoted, Walther reiterates the basic principle championed by Luther:

Again, it is said that there can be no better interpretation of the symbols than that which is according to the Scriptures. I reply: . . . only that can be interpreted according to the Scriptures which necessarily agrees with the Scriptures according to its nature; no human document can therefore be interpreted according to the Scriptures but only the Scriptures themselves. *As the divine Scriptures are to be interpreted by the Scriptures themselves*, so every human document should be interpreted in light of itself, but it should be tested and, when necessary, corrected in the light of the Holy Scriptures.⁷⁵

The Scriptures interpret themselves. That was Luther’s rule. That was the confessions’ rule. That also was Walther’s rule. Just as it is wrong to say we interpret the confessions according to the Scriptures, so it is equally wrong to say we interpret the Scriptures according to the confessions. Actually, we read the Scripture in its own light, and the confessions in their own light. Hermeneutically speaking, both documents are clear enough to stand on their own.

Walther’s point could be summarized this way: “That interpretation of the Scriptures which has been set down in the Lutheran Confessions is the correct one.” He is not saying that the confessions are the hermeneutical key to the Scriptures or the lens through which one must view the Scriptures properly.

A return to allegorizing

⁷² Walther, *op. cit.*, 25.

⁷³ “We couldn’t convince the Missouriians with the Bible, but when we recited Walther to them, then they believed us.” From “*Tischreden von August Pieper*,” an unpublished journal of class quotations, circa 1937.

⁷⁴ Walther, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

In recent years some who wish to be known as confessional Lutherans have become advocates for a return to the use of allegory in expounding the Scriptures. They would assert that, when operating with orthodox, Lutheran presuppositions gained from the confessions, and benefiting from two millennia of patristic exegesis, one is able to find deeper meaning behind the natural sense of the text of the Bible. Citing Jesus' words, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (Jn 5:39) and Luther's, "All of Holy Writ points solely to Him"⁷⁶ we are told to look for Christ in every text of the Old Testament.⁷⁷

Therefore, we do not run amuck, for instance, if we see in the cruciform form of Samson, strapped to the pillars of the temple of Dagon, which he brought down upon the enemies of Israel, an intended image of the crucified Christ who stretched out his arms for the salvation of sinners. In similar fashion, . . . Moses' salvific cruciform posture, supported by priestly aid, intentionally reminds us of Christ's victory over our foes through his death on the cross, mediated by the priests of God.⁷⁸

It was Augustine who taught the medieval church to tease four different senses out of each text of the Bible, and his method of interpretation dominated the church for the next thousand years. Nevertheless, his dictum, "*Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet; Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet*"⁷⁹ reminds us that it is on the pages of his sacred New Testament that the Holy Spirit opens up and clearly reveals the meaning of his Old Testament to us, not in our own subjective imagination. Augustine's words are true, whether he actually followed this hermeneutic himself or not.

Applying the same subjective creativity to a New Testament text, the oil and wine applied by the Good Samaritan become the baptism and Lord's Supper Christ administers to us, and the donkey on which the wounded rides become Jesus' "yoked servants, his ministers," on which Christ carries us to his inn, the Church.⁸⁰ I do not imagine the expositor would suggest that these meanings were clear to the disciples and the rest of Jesus' audience who first heard his parable. Such an exposition will certainly also confuse modern day hearers as to the simple clarity of Scripture.

Granted, if the allegorizer approaches the text with the presuppositions of faith and guided by true, biblical doctrine as faithfully expounded in the Lutheran confessions, his interpretation may not produce false doctrine. But how can he be certain that he has expounded the one simple sense intended by the Holy Spirit when he moved the words to be spoken or written to the original hearer or reader? Finally, what makes one person's orthodox, sanctified imagination any better than another's? Such an approach to interpretation truly makes the Bible a "waxen nose," as Luther put it, which can be bent and shaped in any way to suit the interpreter's fancy.⁸¹ Prof. Kuske warns about the use of one's subjective imagination when interpreting the Scriptures:

Imagining an implied sense for the words of Scripture is always illegitimate interpretation. It makes no difference whether it is narrative or apocalypse, simile or metaphor, allegory or parable, symbol or type. No matter how sanctified we might think our imagination is, we need to remember that subjectivity has no place in the interpretation of God's inspired Word.⁸²

⁷⁶ AE 23:16.

⁷⁷ Peter Berg, "Reflections on a Christological Hermeneutic with a Glance Toward John 6" *The Motley Magpie*, III:3 (July 2005), 3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old; the Old Testament lies open in the New." *WLS Dogmatics Notes*. electronic ed.

⁸⁰ John Berg, "The Good Samaritan" *The Motley Magpie*, II:4 (October 2004), 17.

⁸¹ LW 14:338.

⁸² Kuske, *op. cit.*, 102.

It is the Holy Spirit himself who must reveal his meaning to us; and he does so infallibly and clearly only in his sacred Scripture, not in our own creative thinking.

A danger closer to home

Much of this essay has warned against the danger of making too much of the confessions, and I hope we have seen that that danger is real. I suspect that for most of us reading this essay, the opposite danger is more real.

In the waning days of my first year at the seminary I was impressed by the hard work my senior roommate devoted to finishing all his writing assignments. What impressed me even more was the hard work he put in after those papers were done. Even though it was spring time and his school work was largely over, he spent hours and days poring over his Triglot. In a few weeks he was going to pledge himself to the content of that book and he took that pledge seriously. I have to confess I did not do the same prior to my ordination. I suspect I am not alone.

Yes, we all read and studied the confessions during our years at college and the Seminary. Yes, nearly every pastoral conference I have attended for over 25 years has had the study of an article of the confessions on the agenda. (I hope that is true of all of our conferences, though I suspect it is not.) But is taking the Triglot off the shelf three or four times a year being faithful to the Lutheran Confessions and our promise to conform all our ministry to them? We need to read and study these documents personally on a regular basis. Again, I must confess that it was not until I was some years into the ministry before I began to include the confessions as part of my daily routine of study and devotion. But now that I have I am convinced it has greatly enriched my preaching and teaching.

Our confessions live and breathe the Gospel. They are in complete agreement with God's Word. In them we confess our faith, the faith on which our salvation depends. We have pledged, many of us more than once, never to depart from the truths they contain. Let us treasure these documents as they deserve, by our regular and faithful reading and study of them.

Luther taught that confession of sins has two parts: we confess; God absolves. Confession of faith has two parts as well: God speaks his truth; the church speaks its agreement. We need to pay careful attention to both voices, always remembering that God's voice is more important.

Conclusion

We are living in a world that tells us we cannot be sure of anything. But in this uncertain world we have a confessional heritage that tells us we can be sure – sure of our salvation in Christ, sure that God has spoken to us in his Word.

It is that certainty that gave Luther peace of mind in the face of martyrdom, and courage to take his stand before the emperor in 1521.

It is that certainty that made the Lutheran princes unwavering at Augsburg in 1530, and willing to sacrifice their heads rather than sacrifice the truth of the Gospel.

It is that certainty that we hear in the closing words of the Formula of Concord, and in the eight thousand who gave it their unqualified subscription:

Since now, in the sight of God and of all Christendom [the entire Church of Christ], 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.⁸³

It is that certainty the Spirit has worked in us through his powerful Word. And it is that certainty that the Spirit will work in others as we proclaim its sacred, saving truth to them.

⁸³*Triglotta*, 1103.