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Walter Ritter

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LUTHERAN IDENTITY —

A CONFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Walter Ritter

In 1531 Melanchthon groaned over the blight of scholastic “terminolaty”: “Nothing can be said so carefully that it can avoid misrepresentation.”¹ Had he wished to employ the “*rabies theologorum*” through definition and terminology, he “could lead our contemporaries still further from the opponents’ position.”² Thirty years later, Matthias Flacius had rejected Melanchthon’s caution. In his tragic debate at Weimar, he demanded “yes or no” answers and the following year this vigorous defender of Lutheran orthodoxy had to be deprived of his academic office at Jena. The charge was slander under the pretense of rejecting error and arrogantly founding the church on his own opinions.³ In 1577, while preparing the Formula of Concord, Chemnitz called a halt to the flacian spirit exhibited by the critics of terminology and phraseology in the Formula: “There must finally be a limit and an end to finding fault if we don’t want to lose the whole substance in the end.”⁴

• Nineteenth century American Lutheranism knew “the blight of definition” in numerous controversies which espoused the “first pure, then peaceable” principle. Should this principle not be inverted in matters of church fellowship? C.F.W. Walther raised that question when he observed:

The church has never achieved a higher degree of doctrinal unity than unity

1. Apology 7/2, p. 168. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *The Book of Concord*, T.G. Tappert editor (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).
2. Apology Preface 11, p. 99.
3. Cf. Henry W. Reimann, “Matthias Flacius Illyricus - A Biographical Sketch” pp. 69-93 in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XXXV, 2 (Feb. 1964) pp. 83-88
4. Ernest Koch, “Striving for the Union of Lutheran Churches . . .”, pp. 105-122 in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. VIII, 4 (1977) p. 121

in the fundamental articles. Only a misguided chiliast could hope that the church might ever attain to a higher degree of unity.⁵

Canadian Lutheranism has also known this blight from the “misguided chiliast.” At a consultation in Edmonton in October 1976, the report of the respondents to a presentation on Lutheran identity cautioned against “defining too precisely our identity; rather, it should be described.”⁶ This caution expresses an important confessional principle.

To identify by *defining* is to determine extent and to fix boundaries. *Characterization*, on the other hand, involves portrayal of peculiar qualities and description of that which is typical or distinctive. Definition is concerned with absolute external limits. Characterization is more concerned with the internal core and identifies acceptable limits with that which is consistent with the core. The thesis which this discussion hopes to demonstrate and illustrate is that the biblical and confessional way to determine or to isolate Lutheran identity is by characterization not by definition.

Biblically, this approach is acknowledged by Paul: “We know in part and we prophesy in part.”⁷ Even the gospel proclamation, though certain, is nevertheless fragmentary and not conclusively circumscribed. One is never told that our Lord “taught them in dogmas” but rather in parables — signs that always admit some ambiguity in their design both to reveal and to conceal the truth. In the parable of the Good Samaritan he discredited those who must first define and debate definitions (“Who is my neighbour?”) before proceeding to function.⁸ He cautioned against pressing for rational consistency in his parable of the The Laborers in the Vineyard.⁹ Our Lord’s parable form demonstrates well the superiority, for theology, of a painting over a photograph, i.e., of Hebrew thought form (description) over the later Aristotelian or Greek penchant for precision (definition). “Love” is not only better described than defined, but it may, in fact, be lost in the process of defining.

The principle of using characterization rather than definition is evident both intensively and extensively also in the Lutheran Confessions. For example, in treating the Descent of Christ into Hell, the Formula refers the reader to Luther’s Torgau Sermon of 1533 for an adequate answer to the “different explanations” that “have been discovered among some of our theologians.” In this sermon Luther encourages the use of pictures, plays, and songs to direct the doctrinal focus of this article on the *who* rather than on the *how* or *what*.

Indeed, we must grasp all things which we do not know and understand through pictures, even if things are not exactly or in truth as we draw them.¹⁰ This sermon is an excellent expression of Luther’s concern that, “believing in” is basic to “believing that . . .” — not in static propositions about, but in the persons of the

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5. Quoted by Henry Grady Davis, “What Does Confessional Subscription Involve?” pp. 360ff in *Lutheran Church Quarterly*, Vol. 13, 4 (Oct., 1940) p. 373
 6. Norman J. Threinen, editor, *In Search of Identity - A Look at Lutheran Identity in Canada* (Winnipeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1977) p. 71
 7. I Cor. 13:9. “Ek merous” or regionally!
 8. Helmut Thielecke, *The Waiting Father*, translated by John Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, Jubilee edition, 1975) p. 128
 9. *Ibid.* p. 120
 10. J.G. Walch, editor, *Doktor Martin Luther’s Saemmtliche Schriften*, revised edition, 23 in 25 Volumes (St. Louis: Concordia, 1880-1910). Vol. X, 1130. Numerical references to this edition, hereafter abbreviated SLE, are to columns.

Holy Trinity and their activity *pro nobis*.

This does not mean that the confessions play “open-mindedness” against the certainty of faith. But their contention is for a treasure, not for terminology. They wish to “sell all and buy the field” because of the “pearl” rather than spend time measuring the acreage. They wish to *bear* witness even more than to *weigh* witness. Confessions confess!

CHURCH AND MINISTRY

Identity by function and method, without definition, is the evangelical way. Thus, while the church needs a ministry by divine right and even ordains by divine right,¹¹ neither church, nor ministry, nor ordination, nor divine right are actually defined. The church is described as “the assembly of all believers”¹² but this hardly qualifies as definition. Identity by definition would also not permit the church to be identified by its two marks (word and sacrament)¹³ or three (word, confession, and sacraments).¹⁴ The “Office of the Ministry” (AC V) is not described as a clerical state but as a glorious function which relates Justification (Article IV) to the New Obedience (Article VI).

Just as “The Office of the Ministry” (AC V) precedes “What the Church Is” (AC VIII), so the articles on Baptism (AC IX) and on the Holy Supper (AC X) precede the discussion of what the sacraments are (AC XIII). Schlink observes:

Neither the doctrine of Baptism nor the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is derived from a general sacramental concept.¹⁵

Rather than proceeding from any prior definitions, the articles on the church and on the sacraments follow functional descriptions for what they are to do. Even the article entitled “What the Church Is” (AC VIII) does not contain definition but only descriptions of the church’s activity or function.

Furthermore, while the sacraments are essential to the church, the church cannot be defined in terms of the number of its sacraments. In a classic statement against the approach of the scholastics, Melancthon writes:

No intelligent person will quibble about the number of sacraments or the terminology . . . It is much more necessary to know how to use the sacraments.¹⁶

Even the singular and most peculiarly distinguishing statement of Lutheranism regarding the real presence in the Lord’s Supper is not definition. “In, with and under” cannot be documented biblically in any strict sense. Hence,

we need to remember that we cannot absolutize what are inescapably contingent formulations . . . It is what the Bible teaches only over against the perversions (of transubstantiation, concomitance, and representation).¹⁷

11. Treatise 72, p. 322.

12. Augsburg Confession (AC) 7/1, p. 32.

13. Apology 7/7, 20, pp. 169, 171.

14. Apology 7/3, p. 169.

15. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, transl. by Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J.A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961) p. 182

16. Apology 13/17-18, p. 213.

17. A.C. Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today,” *Seminarian*, Vol. 45, 10 (June, 1954), p. 39.

In spite of all these ambiguities, Lutheran identity remains marked by a strong emphasis on church and ministry, and on word and sacrament. This identity is blurred when the divinely established functions of church and ministry are distorted. One can observe the distortion in many current theological emphases: the substitution of the selfish “God-and-me” relationship for the corporate fellowship of the church; the substitution of “Is Christ your personal Saviour?”; the use of the humanistic or even pagan slogan, “Have you found it/Him”? for the biblical “Has He found you?”; the emphasis on “accepting Christ” as an act of the human will or decision instead of “receiving Christ” as the result of God’s decision; the use of the non-confessional “visible/invisible church” distinction which permits the denial of the church and makes of it a “platonic dream”;¹⁸ the distinction of some Christians as “born-again-believers” as though some are not reborn even though baptized,¹⁹ while the Biblical distinction between Gospel/Law oriented Christians remains relatively obscured; the call to “decide for Christ” instead of to return to Baptism when evangelizing among nominal Christians; the confusion of “universal priesthood” with the ordained ministry of word and sacrament as though public and private function needs no distinction; the confusion of “Bible-believing Christians” with gospel-proclaiming Christians; the substitution of printed literature for the living spoken word, as though the unconverted could meditate on print in a salvific way.

THE GOSPEL

The Lutheran emphasis on the church and her ministry of word and sacrament is an emphasis on subservient means for the sake of the end, i.e., the Gospel of Christ. Lutheranism is not based on a sacred book, on creeds or confessions, on organizations, codes or systems, but on a person — Jesus Christ.²⁰ It can be described as “a way of understanding Christianity,”²¹ i.e., the person and work of Christ in human history. It wishes to describe itself always as it would describe simply the evangelical church which was not born in the 16th century but was established by Christ. Lutheranism is christocentric.²² Its worship is altar-and-pulpit centered for the sake of the pew, *Christus pro nobis*. Its loyalty is characterized by doctrine for only here does it “find the Christ identity”²³ with any certainty. But “Lutheran doctrine” means only one doctrine, the “doctrine of the gospel.”²⁴ The many “articles of faith” which are related to this one doctrine are not dogmatic formulations but proclamations of the “mystery of godliness,” i.e., the revelation which occurred in Christ.²⁵ The pure (*reine*) gospel

18. Apology 7/21, p. 171.

19. Solid Declaration 2/67, p. 534.

20. Abdel Ross Wentz, “The Long Range Logic of Reformation Thought” pp. 11-35 in *The Maturing of American Lutheranism - Essays in Honor of Willard Dow Allbeck*, Herbert T. Neve and Benjamin A. Johnson, editors (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968) p. 22

21. *Ibid.* p. 13

22. John O. Evjen in *What Is Lutheranism? — A Symposium in Interpretation*, edited by Vergilius Ferm (New York: MacMillan Co., 1930) p. 18

23. Wenzel Lohff, “Legitimate Limits of Doctrinal Pluralism According to the Formula of Concord,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* (Vol. VIII/4, 1977), p. 30.

24. Solid Declaration 3/6 p. 540

25. I Timothy 3:16

or doctrine is simply and primarily the one (*eine*) gospel or doctrine, and “pure gospel” is a synonym for “pure doctrine.”²⁶

In spite of the highest confessional regard for the scriptures as chief witness, the main question about traditions in the church is “Do they conflict with the Gospel?”²⁷ rather than with the scriptures. For even the scriptures record apostolic and conciliar decisions which “fell of themselves in time” so that, even in connection with apostolic decrees “one must consider what the perpetual aim of the gospel is.”²⁸ The scriptures are “the only rule and norm” because Paul says, “Even if an angel preach to you another *gospel* . . .”²⁹ Thus “the gospel is the norm in scripture and the scripture is the norm for the sake of the gospel.”³⁰ Christians do not believe in Christ because they believe the Bible; rather, they believe the scriptures because they believe in Christ.³¹ As *the* doctrine the gospel is not a doctrine which one can express strictly by statement and dogma. It is rather proclamation for which dogma provides normative meaning and toward which dogmas only serve to point.³² Reu remarks:

The high regard for the scriptures which is already evident in Luther is scarcely more pronounced than was usual in the writers of the Middle Ages . . . but a new path was opened by his conception of Christ as the real content of the scriptures.³³

THE SCRIPTURES

As to the authority of the scriptures, the confessional principle is often expressed in the formula “*Sola Scriptura*.” But “scripture alone” is neither an absolute or a completely exclusive principle. It does not exclude “*Sola Fide*” and “*Sola Gratia*” as complementary and valid principles. It does not even exclude the witness of the church fathers whose “opinions . . .” we also follow.³⁴

It is significant that the first three articles of the Augsburg Confession — all of them on subjects of prime importance (God, Original Sin, the Son of God) — cite evidence only from councils and creeds. The significance is heightened when one considers that the earlier evangelical statements which became a basis for the Augsburg Confession, cited only scriptural support for the doctrine of the Trinity. Contrary to the

26. The use of “pure” for “one” resulted at times as an error between manuscript and printed edition. Cf. *Book of Concord* p. 486 fn. 1. Would it have helped the orthodox dogmaticians had they resisted this substitution?

27. Augsburg Confession 26/29 Latin, p. 68

28. Augsburg Confession 28/66 Latin p. 92. This is one of the most significant statements on biblical interpretation in the confessional corpus.

29. Epitome, Rule and Norm, I p. 464

30. Schlink, p. 6

31. E. Clifford Nelson, “A Case Study in Lutheran Unity Efforts: ULCA Conversations with Missouri and the ALC, 1936-1940,” chapter 9 in *The Maturing of American Lutheranism*, I p. 212

32. Ernst Kinder, “The Confession as Gift and As Task,” *The Unity of the Church: A Symposium* (Rock Island: Augustana Press, 1957) p. 113.

33. M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession — A Collection of Sources with An Historical Introduction* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1930), section II, p. 228

34. Apology 2/51 p. 107. Cf. the extensive patristic quotations in the “Catalog of Testimonies”, an appendix to the first editions of the *Book of Concord*, in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, Fifth edition (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Rupprecht, 1963) pp. 1101 ff. Hereafter quoted as BKS.

view of Carlstadt, *sola scriptura* was not to be viewed as “*nuda scriptura*” which makes of the scriptures a legal codex for sources of isolated quotations all of equal authority.³⁵ Confessional usage indicates even that the “literal sense” of the scriptures is really the prophetic sense, i.e., that which urges Christ in the distinction between law and gospel. *Sola scriptura* is therefore an abbreviated formula for “*sola scriptura solus propter Christum*” since the scriptures have authority only as the “masks” (*larvae*) and the “swaddling clothes” of Jesus Christ.

In the Rule and Norm of both Epitome and Solid Declaration, *sola scriptura* means scriptures primarily since its use here reckons with the existence of a secondary or derived standard. Both documents describe the scriptures not only as “the only (*sola, allein*) judge” but also “the only (*einige, unicam*) rule and norm, that is, the one unique, unparalleled standard.”³⁶ At the same time the Rule and Norm presents itself as a list of the earlier confessions which constitute the norm “to which all doctrines should conform,”³⁷ and “according to which . . . all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated.”³⁸ In order to avoid a legalistic function for confessions which fails to see that “other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scriptures” the Solid Declaration wishes to be considered especially as exhibiting a methodology which shows “*how* all doctrines should be judged in conformity with the Word of God.”³⁹

As to inspiration of the scriptures, confessional usage and interpretation of them constitutes a statement which is stronger than any formal article on the subject could have been. The scriptures are cited as the chief witness for divine truth and are usually listed before the patristic witnesses are cited. But no process or theory of inspiration is defined. Lutheran confessional identity does not seek or require a statement of definition on the nature of biblical inspiration.

Similarly, the extent of the biblical canon is nowhere officially defined. The term “canonical scriptures” is used only once⁴⁰ “but this is a quotation from St. Augustine, whose canon includes the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament.”⁴¹

What can a Lutheran affirmation of the *sola scriptura* principle mean without a canonical list? For both Luther and the confessors the *content* of the scriptures is Christ who is also “lord of the scriptures.” The *intent* of those scriptures is the proclamation of law and gospel, judgment and grace. The most that can (and should!) be said is that evangelical theology pledges itself “to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of

35. “Proof from the scriptures” is the frequently unfortunate rendering in the Tappert edition of the Book of Concord for “testimonies (*testimonia*), statements (*Sprueche*), witness (*Zeugnis*) and reasons (*Ursach*) from the scriptures.” Cf. Augsburg Confession 21/2 Latin p. 47, 26/22 p. 67, Apology 21/10 p. 230 etc. AC 21/2 renders the “*sed Scriptura non docet*” (teach) with “do not prove.” Testimonies and reasons are evidence and witness which may finally constitute proof. But they are not cited as “proof-texts”!

36. Epitome, Rule and Norm, 1 and 7 p. 464-465

37. Ibid. 6, p. 465

38. Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm 10 p. 506

39. Ibid., Subtitle, p. 503

40. Augsburg Confession 28/28 Latin, p. 85

41. A.C. Piepkorn, “Correspondence from A.C. Piepkorn to Dr. John Reumann” in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol XLIII, 7 (July-Aug., 1972), p. 449

Israel.”⁴² The question of the dimensions of that fountain is overshadowed by the nature of what flows therefrom.

THE NATURE OF THE CONFESSIONS

The focus of Lutheran theology on the summary content and intent of the scriptures rather than on their extent applies equally to confessions. Unlike the general Reformed practice, Lutheranism subscribes not a single confession but a body of documents. This *corpus* represents selectivity inasmuch as it does not include all of the earlier confessions, even though they could qualify. In fact, the canon of the Book of Concord has known many valid variations and has never been fixed in an absolute sense. These developments also inform evangelical concern.

The confessional canon has its core in the Augsburg Confession. The Formula clearly describes all subsequent documents in the Book of Concord as further elaborations and explications of the Augsburg Confession.⁴³ The Formula also presents itself as “definitive restatement and exposition of a number of articles of the Augsburg Confession.”⁴⁴ This confession, together with the two catechisms, comprise “the canon within the canon” and subscription to one or more of these has generally been acceptable as adequate recognition of Lutheran doctrine in the history of both European and American Lutheranism.⁴⁵ This development simply reflects the concern of the Formula that it not be considered as the norm for the Augsburg Confession. The catechisms qualify as “core” because the Augsburg Confession and all subsequent documents present “the sum and pattern of the doctrine which Dr. Luther of blessed memory clearly set forth in his writings.”⁴⁶

Variation in extent and content is also part of the history of most of the individual documents contained in the Book of Concord already in the early years of Lutheranism. Luther included his 1526 edition of the Baptismal Booklet and his 1529 Marriage Booklet in all editions of the Small Catechism which he published. They were finally omitted when the Small Catechism was posted in the Book of Concord due to objections against baptismal exorcism and against the inclusion of “ceremonial” writings in the Book of Concord. Yet, some first editions of the Book of Concord contained both booklets. Others omitted them, and still others marked their absence.

Even the content of the Augsburg Confession is not capable of precise and absolute definition. Both the Latin and German quarto editions of 1531 — the *Editio Princeps* used in the Book of Concord — “contained a number of considerable changes from the text presented to the Diet . . .”⁴⁷ The authors of the Formula

42. Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm 3, p. 503

43. Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm 6-8, p. 504f

44. Solid Declaration, Title, p. 501

45. For the history of the confessional documents included in the constitutions of European Lutheran Churches cf. especially Vilmos Vajta and Hans Weissgerber, editors, *The Church and the Confessions — The Role of the Confessions in the Life and Doctrine of the Lutheran Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) and Vilmos Vajta, editor, *The Lutheran Church Past and Present* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977). For the American bodies cf. especially Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

46. Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm 9, p. 505

47. M. Rev, I, p. 154f.

mistakenly believed that the German copy of the confession in the archives of Mainz, from which they had made a copy, was the original. But it was “probably a poor copy antedating the presentation of the Augustana”⁴⁸ and taken from the collection of initial drafts contained in the minutes of the evangelical party at Augsburg.

Also the texts of the confessional documents are not free from diversity and ambiguity of expression, errors of fact and of judgment, misquotation and unharmonized argument. Among the non-theological factors one can illustrate erroneous scriptural quotation and citation of references; misquotations from church fathers; erroneous ascriptions of authorship for patristic, creedal, and even confessional documents within the Book of Concord like the Treatise; false etymologies of key words like “Mass,” “God,” and “church”; erroneous historical and scientific judgments; and unacceptable philosophic and exegetical judgments. Several catalogs of illustrations for each of these factors are available.⁴⁹

The ambiguities also involve numerous theological matters of consequence. In the Apology, Melancthon often combined and even equated justification and regeneration or vivification.⁵⁰ The Formula attempts to provide a corrective by separating them and emphasizing justification as forensic imputation.⁵¹ In the process it even misreads the Apology!⁵² But it is important to the Formula that “these terms (regeneration and vivification) refer to the renovation of man and distinguish it from justification” since, in this life, justification is always complete and singular, while regeneration is incomplete and calls for frequent reconversion.⁵³ Examples of further exegetical and dogmatic ambiguity could be multiplied.⁵⁴

Diversity is further brought about through documentary multiplicity which brings with it the benefit of a biblically patterned richness. Bunnar Billing, arguing before the Swedish parliament in 1893 against the proposition that legally binding confessions must be brief, said:

I am convinced that the pages are liberating. If a person says little about something then I am bound to the letter because I cannot be sure as to what he really means. But if he writes a long treatise, then I am not bound to the letter, but I am able to see clearly what his meaning is.⁵⁵

48. Theodore E. Schmauk and C. Theodore Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confession of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), p. 535.

49. Cf. T.G. Tappert, “The Symbols of the Church” in *What Lutherans Are Thinking*; A.C. Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols” in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XXIX, 1 (Jan. 1958) pp. 14-24; C.F.W. Walther, “The Kind of Confessional Subscription Required” pp. 57-58 in *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America 1840-1880*, edited by T.G. Tappert (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972). This essay is often cited under the title: “Why Should Our Pastor, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally the Symbolical Writings of Our Church?”

50. Cf. the references in *Book of Concord*, p. 474, footnote 7

51. *Epitome* 3/8, page 474

52. *Solid Declaration* 3/19 p. 542. See footnote 2

53. *Epitome* 3/20 p. 475; 6/4 p. 480 and *Solid Declaration* 2/68-69 p. 534. This ambiguity sparked the famous Loofs controversy in 1884 ff. Cf. Schlink, op. cit., p. 93, footnote 12.

54. Schlink, Appendix, pp. 297-317.

55. Sven Kjollerstrom, “The Confessional Writings of The Church of Sweden” *The Church and The Confessions*, p. 37.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CONFESSION

Multiplicity and diversity in the confessional *corpus* is not incidental; it is essential to Lutheran understanding of creedal authority. Three ecumenical creeds are affirmed, not because one supplies unfortunate omissions in the others and thus completes the definition of apostolic dogma. Each creed can stand independently as an adequate summary of the faith.

The combined use of the creeds and their evident inter-relatedness helps to establish the patterns for both content and method in evangelical confession of faith. All confessional documents claim dependence on and relationship to the Augsburg Confession and the catechisms. When this inter-relatedness is forgotten then the tendency is to move away from the center or core proclamation and to justify the veracity of isolated words and statements.⁵⁶ These opposing tendencies have been expressed in many ways. Does subscription call upon one to concur with the doctrinal "form" or to seek the "doctrinal intention"?⁵⁷ Is the authority primarily "formal," i.e., to preserve orthodox teaching, or is it rather "functional," to assist in responsible and faithful gospel proclamation?⁵⁸ Is its authority based on what and how it speaks, or on "the way in which it is bound to the Bible"?⁵⁹ "Confessional fundamentalism" finds authority in the objectifying usage of individual statements of dogma established as "revealed truth." "Confessional actualism" recognizes the situations which compelled the design and the universal historical relativity of thought, speech, and judgment.⁶⁰

Historically, Lutheran identity is marked by a carefully delineated subscription which, though not without some ambivalence and ambiguity, relativizes its own authority both formally and materially. What is at least implicit in every other confession is most explicit in the Formula. The evangelical creed "should not be put on a par with the Holy Scripture" but "should be subordinated to the scriptures."⁶¹ The confessions are not the "rule and norm of all doctrine."⁶² nor "judges like Holy Scripture."⁶³ Nevertheless, these statements are not meant to exclude the further view that the documents do comprise a "rule and norm according to which all doctrines should be judged" and "a common form of doctrine (by which) all other writings should be approved and accepted, judged and regulated."⁶⁴ It is not that the scriptures are the sole judge of doctrines and teachers while the confessions comprise only a norm for all other writings since "all doctrines should conform to the standards set forth above,"⁶⁵ i.e., biblical writings, creeds, and the confessions cited. While the scriptures stand as the ruling norm (*norma normans*) or chief norm, the confessions

56. Vilmos Vajta, "The Confession of the Church as Ecumenical Concern" *The Church and The Confessions*, p. 178

57. George W. Forell, "The Formula of Concord and The Teaching Ministry" in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. VIII, 4 (1977) p. 43

58. Karl H. Hertz, "Some Suggestions for a Sociology of American Protestantism" pp. 36-58 in *The Maturing of American Lutheranism*, p. 55.

59. Vilmos Vajta, "The Confession of the Church . . ." p. 169.

60. Wenzel Lohff, pp. 26-28

61. Epitome, Rule and Norm 2, p. 465

62. Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm 9, p. 505

63. Epitome, Rule and Norm 8, p. 465

64. Epitome subtitle p. 464 and Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm 10, p. 506

65. Epitome, Rule and Norm 6, p. 465

are only a scripturally ruled norm (*norma normata*) or a secondary and derived norm.

This description is not wholly without ambiguity. "Because (*weil, quia*) it is taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein"⁶⁶ and "because (*quia*) it is supported with clear and irrefutable testimonies from the Holy Scriptures"⁶⁷ the confession is subscribed without reservation in heart or mind.⁶⁸ But because the confession is a secondary or derived norm it is also subscribed conditionally or with limitation. The creed or confessions,

should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times.⁶⁹

Both forms of subscription, *quia* and *quatenus*, are necessary and valid when applied to the confessions themselves. The insistence on *quia*-only subscription fails to reckon with the fact that "no further than" is almost synonymous with "insofar as." The primacy of methodology in evangelical witness and the importance of the cultural context and the historical contingency of the formulations are indicated by expressions such as "witnesses to the fashion . . . in post-apostolic times" and "setting forth how at various times." There is no pretense in the confessions to ultimate and final expression of the truth, but there is certainty about the permanent validity of its proclamation. "Merely witnesses" recognizes that every creed or confession is not an end in itself and has no intrinsic value. It is only symbol, guide and signpost whose value is merely functional, that is, to lead to the core of the Scriptures and to their sum total in Christ.⁷⁰

THE CONFESSION IN CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The first formal evangelical receptions of the Augsburg Confession in the years following the Diet of 1530 did not really mark the beginning of the Lutheran or evangelical identity. The various confessions came, not to establish the fellowship, but to publicly affirm and nourish it. Long before a fixed confessional corpus was created in the Book of Concord there was a Lutheran identity amidst much theological diversity, both acceptable and unacceptable. The authors of the Formula attempted to determine the limits of that diversity by requesting critiques of their preliminary *Torgau Book*.⁷¹ Not only *before* they defined their form of church government, but without ever approving any fixed form, the Lutherans nevertheless had an ecclesiastical identity! The Confession did not, therefore, establish church fellowship.

Unqualified subscription to the Confessions also did not establish this fellowship. Some signators to the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise subscribed provisionally (Melanchthon and Aepinus)⁷² and some by proxy (e.g., Bugenhagen for Brenz,

66. Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm 5, p. 504

67. *Ibid.*, 6 p. 505-506

68. Preface, p..8

69. Epitome, Rule and Norm 2, p. 465

70. Ernst Kinder, "The Confession as Gift . . ." p. 106, 109

71. During three years of study over twenty critiques were received and incorporated. Cf. *Book of Concord*, Preface p. 7; F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 247; and Ernest Koch, "Striving for the Union of Lutheran Churches," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. VIII, 4 (1977), pp. 104, 119.

72. *Book of Concord* pp. 316-18 and 334-35. Cf. also BKS, xxv and p. 467.

Myconius for Menius, etc.). Still others added the Wittenberg Concord to their subscription in a spirit of legitimate theological compromise (e.g., Melander and Brenz, the latter by letter of proxy). Some subscribers had just recently stated their reservations on Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Smalcald Articles (e.g., Bucer).⁷³ Yet none of them were ever denied fellowship because of their manner of subscription. Was it more a matter of the integrity of the subscriber than of the formal method of subscription or even the formal content of the document subscribed?

These patterns indicate that, unlike the two Thuringian peasants who came to blows because one followed Martin while the other followed Luther, the confessions wished to recognize the principle of sustained fellowship which Paul expresses in his letter to the Galatians. He speaks his "damnamus" to the troublers who are moving the congregation into "another gospel." But he still calls them "church" and "brothers" and he refuses to terminate his fellowship with them. His misled brothers are retained in fellowship, at least for a while. This is also the confessional approach.

It is not the failure to subscribe a given document, nor even a somewhat defective mode of subscription which hinders the empirical unity. It is rather the failure to recognize the sufficiency for fellowship of gospel-centered word and sacrament (AC VII) which leads to the futile quest for organizational unity. Failure at this point leads the church to seek an assumed unity by constantly raising demands for total conformity. Contrary to the confessional witness, unity is then seen as a goal, rather than as a gift which awaits realization in the evangelical community. The confessors wished Lutheran identity to flow *from* evangelical service and *for* its preservation, and not from the sectarian security of a particular church body.

As a body, Lutheranism hopes constantly to change without loss of historic continuity and constantly to grow without loss of biblical identity, knowing that "what you sow does not come to life unless it dies."⁷⁴ Lutheranism can therefore compromise on human traditions, rites, and ceremonies — including theological statements which do not compromise the gospel. Lutheranism contends vigorously not only *against* that which threatens the "*doctrina evangelii*" but also *for* that measure of doctrinal tolerance which comes from the diversity of the biblical and confessional witness. While recognizing the vital distinction between core and periphery, Lutheranism presents no list of "fundamental" and "non-fundamental" doctrines (as American Lutheranism in the 19th century would have it), knowing that statements may not indicate motive, posture, or even meaning. Lutheranism does not confuse confession with theology or dogma with dogmatics, knowing that confession and dogma express the unity of consensus while theology and dogmatics express the plurality of teachings which will never know uniformity "this side of heaven."⁷⁵ Lutheranism distinguishes between "compelling necessity" and "mere admissibility" for all biblical exposition, including its own.⁷⁶ Above all, Lutheranism seeks identity in its quest to proclaim and to receive the incomparable mercy and glory of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.

Confessional Lutheran identity is therefore not a matter of static definition but of

73. Schwiebert, *op. cit.*, p. 712

74. I Corinthians 15:36

75. Ernst Kinder, p. 69

76. cf. Schlink, p. xx

dynamic description. It has no formal definitions for Bible, canon or inspiration, for church or ministry, for word or sacrament, for biblical authority or confessional subscription. But it does have functional descriptions for all of these, and many descriptions of its central concern in the person and work of Jesus Christ: gospel, grace, faith, justification, church, ministry, etc. Given the core-from-which, the center-to-which, and the focus-through-which its theology moves, it can decline all definitions and joyously affirm with Augustine:

In this diversity of true opinion
let truth itself beget concord.

THE REV. WALTER RITTER is Professor of Religion at Camrose Lutheran College.