

# CONTENTS

Volume Twenty-Eight, Number One

## FEATURES

### 4 **Seminex at the Half-Century** **Lawrence R. Rast Jr.**

Many—today perhaps most—of our students were not even born in 1974. What they know of the Seminex controversy is secondhand at best. But they are keenly interested in what transpired. And I strive to put it in the context of the larger narrative of American Lutheranism, neither overstating nor understating its importance.

### 7 **Confessional Subscription: What Does This Mean?** **Scott R. Murray**

The first verb in the introduction to the *Book of Concord* is “we subscribe.” Remarkably, the last word in the text of the *Book of Concord* (except the signatures themselves) is “we subscribe.” What does it mean to subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions?

### 10 **Memories of Seminex** **David P. Scaer, Dean O. Wenthe, Walter A. Maier III, and Christian A. Preus**

At the time of the 1974 Walkout, two of our authors were serving at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, one was a student at Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne, and one was a teenager living in faculty housing on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

### Also in this Issue

<b>Remembering Dr. Robert Preus</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>New Faculty Chairs Dedicated</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Faculty News</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2024 Continuing Education</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Celebrating 25 Years of Christ Academy</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Events</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Bible Study:</b>	
<b>The Word of the Lord Endures Forever</b>	<b>30</b>

### Corrections: Winter 2023 *For the Life of the World*

- Page 15: Dr. Todd Peperkorn presented at a campus ministry event at College Hill Lutheran Church in Cedar Falls, Iowa, not Cedar Rapids.
  - Page 22: CTSFW student Aaron Wade, not Andrew Berg, appears in the fieldwork assignment day photo with the Rev. Andrew Yeager.
- Thank you, readers, for letting us know.



## For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

# Confessional Subscription:

What Does This Mean?

Scott R. Murray



Photo: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod/Erk M. Lunsford

The first verb in the introduction to the *Book of Concord* is “we subscribe.” Remarkably, the last word in the text of the *Book of Concord* (except the signatures themselves) is “we subscribe.” What does it mean to subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions? Lutherans have been subscribing to the *Book of Concord* or its constituent parts for more than 400 years. However, there is no guarantee that just because a signature is affixed it will be taken seriously. But what does an appropriate seriousness look like?

Subscription may not be considered as separate from what is being subscribed. Confessional subscription is not the same as endorsing a check or signing a legal contract. The modifier “confessional” makes a demand on us by drawing us back to the source of the confession, the Word of God itself, the Holy Scripture. Often when people take their subscription to the Lutheran Confessions lightly, they will also take the Scripture lightly, making it subject to their own faulty human reason.

By subscribing to these Confessions, we are binding ourselves, our churches, and our posterity to these statements. Confessionalism must not become an artifact, like the family Bible that gathers dust in the formal living room; honored, but seldom used.

Sadly, by the middle of the twentieth century American Lutheranism had settled into a confessional formalism in which non-Lutheran sermons, teaching, and practice were tolerated in parishes with confessional clauses in their founding documents. If the title “Lutheran” could be seen on the sign board of the church, everything would be all right. Being Lutheran was simply presumed. In 1951 Hermann Sasse, writing from Germany to his American friends in the LCMS, said the drift away from the Confessions was “the most astonishing turn in the life of American Lutheranism which formerly took its stand so firmly on the *Book of Concord* and lived in it.”<sup>1</sup> Sasse thought that the Missouri Synod had given up a living confession of the Lutheran symbolical books and their content. About this Sasse was right. This would have baleful outcomes in the future of the Missouri Synod. Ironically, Sasse himself foresaw these disastrous consequences yet to come when he predicted that although the Missouri Synod had a great future ahead of her, “the contrasts which are visible today should lead to a schism.”<sup>2</sup> Tragically, Sasse’s foresight was correct.

Formalistic confessionalism, about which Sasse warned, had no strength to provide appropriate responses to the ecumenical movement, an effort to establish Christian unity that swept across all denominations after World War II and gained momentum as a result of the ecumenical turn of Roman Catholicism in the Second Vatican Council. As a result of the many mergers of Lutheran church bodies in the twentieth century, the LCMS was forced to consider issues of church fellowship. Although a leader of the discussion of Lutheran theology in nineteenth-century America, the LCMS seemed to be late to the party in the twentieth century because of its isolationistic attitude, born in part of the formalistic confessionalism described above.

The theological center of the Confessions is Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession, which delivers the faith that Christ suffered for us (Latin: “*qui sua morte pro nostris peccatis satisfecit*”; “who by His death made satisfaction for our sins”). There is no room for a vapid pseudo-gospel of good feeling, but our Confessions tie justification to the satisfaction of Christ.

The Confessions deal with and disclose things that are spiritual and therefore not susceptible to the arguments arising from naked reason. Such a rubric touches the very center of our faith: justification, the incarnation, the real presence, baptismal regeneration, etc. We must ever remain on guard against the attempts of human reason to rip the guts out of the Confessions.

The Confessions make an ecumenical catholic claim to teach what the church at all times and in all places has taught and believed. Philip Melancthon contended that the medieval accretions that were injected into the faith and practice of the medieval church were novelties and could not be sustained by the teaching of the Bible. In the Apology Melancthon argued: “Nor should we be regarded as teaching anything new in this matter, since the Church Fathers have so clearly handed down the doctrine that even in good works we need mercy” (Ap 4.204).

Some theologians denied that the Confessions had the authority to “enforce theological conformity,” and that they instead served church unity. Thus, their purpose

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was to bring about unity, even without agreement in doctrine. Of course, the text of the Confessions described their use in a somewhat different way: “All teachings should conform to these directives, as outlined above. Whatever is contrary to them should be rejected and condemned as opposed to the unanimous explanation of our faith” (Ep R&N, 6). The truth must conform to this standard, and what does not conform must be rejected and condemned.

The Confessions must be taken seriously by accepting the threat of the condemnation of false teaching that is inherent in their text. Theodore Schmauk identified the theological content of the Confessions as their proper use when he wrote, “The real question is not what do you subscribe, but what do you believe and publicly teach, and what are you transmitting to those who come after?”<sup>3</sup> Subscription to the Confessions must not become merely formal. This is precisely what had happened as the Confessions were affirmed as part of the constitutional baggage of the American Lutheran churches in the twentieth century while the actual appropriation of the faith and pattern of the Lutheran Confessions was shoved into the background. In some cases, “subscription” was reduced to mere “identifying with” the historic Confessions of the Lutheran church. This is like “identifying with marriage” while committing adultery against your spouse.

Concordia Theological Seminary’s rejection of this confessional formalism led the confessional revival of the late twentieth century.

When Robert Preus described confessional subscription, he described something that was intensely personal. It was obvious that he himself took subscription seriously. He would rather die than defect from it. Confessional subscription could only be whole-hearted.<sup>4</sup>

Confessional subscription was also a churchly act. The Confessions could never be “mine” as opposed to “yours.” We are obligated to confess because it is the faith of our church; it is the biblical faith which is the bulwark of the church catholic (Ap 12.90).

Subscription must be made in the same sense in which the Confessions themselves intended. Preus quoted from the Preface to the Book of Concord: “Therefore we also have determined not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves, or from the phrases which are found in them, but, the Spirit of the Lord aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of the pure doctrine.”<sup>5</sup> Notice that the confessors promised not to depart from the subjects or the actual phrases used to express those subjects. It can hardly be argued that these subjects would only include some trimmed-down gospel as the only compelling and binding content of the Confessions.

A wholehearted confessional subscription requires our constant attention to the Lutheran Confessions. Let us use them for our devotions, as a source of preaching and prayer, and as a standard to which we are bound in joyous service to the bride of Christ. Let us love them without nit-picking evasions and modernistic quibbles. 🏰

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- 1 Sasse, “Confession,” 207.
- 2 Sasse, “Confession,” 214.
- 3 Theodore Schmauck and C. Theodore Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 890.
- 4 FC SD N&R, 4-7.
- 5 *Trig*, 23. The language is much more arresting than the insipid text in K-W. The *Trig* is translating the Latin.

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