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The Meaning of Confessional Subscription

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IN A REAL SENSE, confessional subscription has to do with the outward framework and inner mechanisms of church polity of Lutheranism everywhere.

Every Lutheran pastor is caught up personally in the significance of the topic. We were individually ordained into the ministry of our church body. At that time we expressed faith in the canonical Scriptures as "the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice." We pledged ourselves to the three Ecumenical Creeds "as faithful testimonies to the truth of the Holy Scriptures" and rejected "all the errors which they condemn"; we stated that we "believe that the Unaltered Augsburg Confession is a true exposition of the Word of God" and that the remainder of the Book of Concord is "in agreement with this one Scriptural faith." We also promised that all our teaching would "be in the conformity with the Holy Scriptures and with the aforementioned Confession."¹

Furthermore, as members of our Synod we have accepted "without reservation: . . . All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God . . ."² If we are pastors of congregations, our congregations are committed, as groups of Christians and as individual members, to the same confessional writings. They called us as pastors specifically because the confession of our ordination and of our Synod membership assured them that we believed as they confess and that we would "preach and teach the pure Word of God in accordance with the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church."³ This we promised them to do. To the members, then, of all of the congregations of Synod, confessionally united, the matter under discussion is of essential significance. The very existence of the congregations, which alone give validity to our calls; the consensus of faith which prompted the founding of Synod and which alone can justify its existence—all this is involved in our subject.

It is perhaps a very commonplace observation that the confessional commitments to which we have referred involve a judgment and a basis for the judgment. There are unexpressed presuppositions of a very radical nature. Any person who has thus confessionally committed himself (we assume that he wishes to take him seriously, and not to regard his confession as merely a signature on a union card entitling him to a job and a vote at meetings and implying in no way that he knows the union rules and their philosophy as fully as those who wrote them) must of necessity himself have a view of the Scriptures, an understanding of their

character, a grasp of their content, of such a nature that he feels compelled to sign the Confessions, because the symbols to which he subscribes are in his estimation a necessary thing, with all their antitheses and rejections, and they correctly set forth, they "are a true and unadulterated statement" of, the Word of God. This is the judgment of our confessor because he *already* knows how one must set forth the truths of the Word of God.

Where do we find these presuppositions set forth? Not in the Formula of Concord or in the Book of Concord. Intimations we find. But for an articulated statement on Scripture which justifies the act and substance of confessing we must look to what the confessors say elsewhere.

Meanwhile, we search in vain today in Lutheranism for any sort of consensus in the area of confessional presuppositions. Within our own Synod we find views of Scripture which are mutually exclusive. Our historic *publica doctrina* of a verbally-inspired inerrant Scripture has been radically challenged by prominent theologians from among us. The exposition of what formerly were regarded as clear passages speaking plainly has been called into question. Conclusions as to the meaning of Scripture which formerly were espoused by those who attacked and rejected the Lutheran Confessions and our own publicly taught doctrine of Scripture—these conclusions are now being pushed in our own circles. There is no consensus in our clergy, at least none has been evident to me, as to the propriety and validity of doctrinal statements which reflect the same view of Scriptures as do the Confessions and which are binding simply because a proper view of Scripture permits no other view.

When we look farther afield in Lutheranism, today as well as in the past, we likewise do not find among those who say that they uphold the Confessions a uniformity of understanding as to what the Confessions actually say and why they say it. There is no such thing as a doctrine of Scripture which all uphold who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions, Confessions which presuppose precisely such a doctrine. The doctrine of a verbally inspired inerrant Scripture, which we in the past have claimed is implicit in the Confessions,⁴ not only is rejected by many other Lutherans, but is also labelled as un-Lutheran, un-confessional, contrary to the teachings of Martin Luther himself.⁵ In agreement with the proposition that the Lutheran Confessions are an exposition or interpretation of Scripture, but convinced that a proper view of Scripture and proper interpretation is different from what it was in the sixteenth century, many Lutheran theologians explain their subscription to the Confessions as being a relative subscription, *quatenus*, in so far as the Confessions agree with Scripture.⁶ Because of the allegedly valid change in the interpretation of the Scriptures, Lutheran theologians in Germany in 1957 found it possible to draw up the *Arnoldshainer Abendmahlsthesen* in conjunction with Reformed and Union theologians, a doctrinal statement intended to set forth the Scriptural doctrine of the Lord's Supper in a way agreeable to all signers.⁷ This is certainly not an overall picture of agreement among Lu-

therans on the Scriptures, a clear understanding and definition of which are, however, presupposed in the Confessions. One finds no difficulty, given the confusion on a doctrine of Scripture, in understanding the growing prevalence of a *quatenus* approach to the Confessions and a surging pressure for fellowship among Lutherans regardless of *quia* or *quatenus*.

Just what are the basic issues for you and me in this whole matter? Let us attempt to find out.

I. THE CONFESSIONS THEMSELVES

Theoretically, not only do we who have signed the confession *quia* know that they correctly expound Scripture, but we ourselves know, first, how correctly to expound the Scriptures, and, secondly, how to identify such correct exposition. Shall we be simple and naive and check back on ourselves? Let us ask, What do the Confessions say? We do not intend to enumerate the doctrines handled by the Confessions in answering that question. But what were those who drew up the Confessions and signed them saying about Scripture and correct exposition? Among other things, the confessors asserted, directly or by implication, the following:

1. The canonical Scriptures alone are to be the source of what the Christian teaches about God.⁸
2. The Scriptures are clear and understandable. They are utterly true and reliable in all which they say. One may grab right and left for examples in Biblical history to illustrate doctrine. One may cite the quotations which occur in Scripture as the actual words of the individual who is quoted.⁹
3. The Confessions are a correct understanding of the Scriptures. Others should accept the Confessions as such a correct exposition.¹⁰
4. There arises the need for new confessions, yet there is no new doctrine. The most recent confession teaches the same as the first.¹¹
5. The confessions are for all time.¹²

It was one thing for the confessors to speak thus. But were they right? What lies behind their statements? Nowadays most exposition of Scripture involves a prior definition which takes into consideration historical criticism, form criticism, and a rejection of the implications of verbal inspiration. Exposition involves not only a prior definition of tradition, history, and community theology, but also the epistemological viewpoint of the expositor. What do we mean when we say that the Confessions are a "true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God?" Do we mean what the confessors meant? Do we *know* what the confessors meant? Do we say what the confessors said for the same reasons that the confessors said it? Or are our reasons different reasons? And if so, do we nonetheless have the right to say what the confessors said?

It is evident that the confessors wrote and confessed from a prior viewpoint. What was their viewpoint which permitted—no,

required—the kind of all-embracing statements they made? Obviously, they had a viewpoint on Scripture. But when we look into the Confessions, we find that they quote Tobit and 2 Maccabees without denying canonicity to these two books. Did the confessors accept the Apocrypha as canonical?

This raises the question, "What were the canonical Scriptures for the confessors?" To find the answer of the framers of the Formula of Concord, we turn to the writing of "the second Martin," the *Examen Concilii Tridentini* of Martin Chemnitz. There we find our answer. The prophetic Old Testament Scriptures are the Palestinian canon, attested by Christ and the apostles.¹³ The apostolic New Testament Scriptures are the books written or commended by apostles, i.e., by the apostles and by Mark and Luke, who wrote when there were living apostles to commend their writings to the Christians.¹⁴ The books concerning which there was doubt as to their being written by apostles, the antilegomena, are, with the Old Testament apocrypha, not to be used for confirming the dogmas of the church.¹⁵ The New Testament books receive their authority from the apostles who wrote them or commended them.¹⁶ The church does not have the authority to make true scriptures out of false ones, nor sure, canonical, and legitimate scriptures out of those that are doubtful and unsure.¹⁷ In the instance of the New Testament antilegomena, when the confessors do use them in the Confessions, they use them as Chemnitz himself uses them and as the councils of the fourth century used them, as authentic writings from a known apostle.¹⁸

But what about Luther? The Muenster theologian Brunstaed, amount countless others, in his denial of verbal inspiration as a presupposition of the Confessions, asserts: "Luther's judgments on individual books of the Bible are irreconcilable with the acceptance of verbal inspiration." But after referring to all of the constantly quoted statements of Luther concerning canonical books (of which the chief are his rejections of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation), Brunstaed notes that "Luther in his rejection of the canonicity of one or the other books, calls also upon the ancient church and her debate about the canon."¹⁹ This is a most important observation. W. G. Kuemmel remarks, in somewhat the same way, that, although Luther used the Christological criterion in looking at books like Hebrews and James, he was not able to follow through in applying this principle consistently "because for him, finally, in agreement with the formulation of the ancient church and humanism, the decisive criterion remained the composition by an apostle."²⁰ Contrary to what is frequently said and written about Luther as a free-wheeling historical critic, this essayist is of the firm conviction that a careful study of Luther's statements on Scripture bears out that Luther, having found Christ as his Savior and having received the witness to Christ by the apostles in the homologoumena writings of the New Testament, used the content of undoubted writings by apostles as a yardstick. Since, in his opinion, Hebrews and James contradicted Paul, he concluded that an apostle could not have written them. The section of the ancient church which

denied that Paul had written Hebrews and that James the Less had written James was, in Luther's estimation, right. These books, not by apostles, were consequently not God's Word. This was Luther's conclusion.²¹

We ask now, "What is the authority of the 'prophetic and apostolic Scriptures' for the Confessors?" When we look at the way in which the Scriptures are quoted, in our opinion one must conclude that the writers of the confessions looked upon the Scriptures as utterly trustworthy in everything that they said. For instance, the confessors refer to Adam and to various incidents related in Genesis 1-8.²² Selecting some items which we noted, we mention the references to David's call and to Abraham's willingness to slay Isaac, references to the Rechabites, to Paul's conflict with Peter, to the institution of the Lord's Supper, to the destruction of idolaters, to Christ's words at the last judgment, to Lydia, to the Emmaus disciples, to Paul's activities in Acts, and to Paul's relation to Peter.²³ There are countless statements which, according to the New Testament, were made by Christ and which are quoted by the confessors. Yes, for the Confessions, the Scriptures do not deceive.

Furthermore, the confessors accepted the plain meaning of a passage. While this is stated many times by the confessors, most clearly it shines through in the Apology: "... examples ought to be interpreted according to the rule, i.e., according to certain and clear passages of Scripture, not contrary to the rule, that is, contrary to the Scriptures."²⁴

We do well at this point to clarify a matter which is sometimes misunderstood, namely, the distinction between "clear passages" and "exegesis." It is the assumption that Scripture speaks clearly, in clear passages, which lies behind the statement of our Synodical constitution: "All matters of doctrine and of conscience shall be decided only by the Word of God" (Art. VIII, C). In contrast to clear passages the Confessions place interpretation. This contrast has been taken for granted heretofore in our circles. The section in Pieper's *Dogmatik* on "Schrift und Exegese" deals with this matter at length.²⁵ What is important to notice is that nowadays we use the word "exegesis" to cover the whole field of the exposition of Scripture, including the presentation of the content of clear passages. Our Confessions, however, and our literature up until probably the last twenty-five years, in my experience, distinguish between passages that are clear and passages the meaning of which must be set forth through exegesis.

Finally, when the Scriptures spoke clearly to the confessors, the confessors responded with obedience. It is this authority of the Scriptures which required that the confessors confess. We do well to quote the Formula of Concord on the words of institution of the Lord's Supper to illustrate this.

We are certainly in duty bound not to interpret and explain these words of the eternal, true, and almighty Son of God, our Lord, Creator, and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, differently, as allegorical, figurative, tropical expressions, according as it seems

agreeable to our reason, but with simple faith and due obedience to receive the words as they read, in their proper and plain sense, and allow ourselves to be diverted therefrom by no objections or human contradictions spun from human reason, however charming they may appear to reason.

Even as Abraham, when he hears God's Word concerning offering his son, although, indeed, he had cause enough for disputing as to whether the words should be understood according to the letter or with a tolerable or mild interpretation, since they conflicted openly not only with all reason and with the divine and natural law, but also with the chief article of faith concerning the promised Seed, Christ, who was to be born of Isaac, nevertheless, just as previously, when the promise of the blessed Seed from Isaac was given him, he gave God the honor of truth, and most confidently concluded and believed that what God promised He could also do, although it appeared impossible to his reason; so also here he understands and believes God's Word and command plainly and simply, as they read according to the letter, and commits the matter to God's omnipotence and wisdom, which, he knows, has many more modes and ways to fulfill the promise of the Seed from Isaac than he can comprehend with his blind reason;—

Thus we, too, are simply to *believe* with all humility and obedience the plain, firm, clear, and solemn words and command of our Creator and Redeemer, without any doubt and disputation as to how it agrees with our reason or is possible. For these words were spoken by *that Lord* who is infinite Wisdom and Truth itself, and also can execute and accomplish everything which He promises.²⁶

We asked earlier, "What did the confessors say?" We summarize: The confessors showed that they, as believers in Christ Jesus as Savior, had been brought face to face with the Word of God in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. These Scriptures spoke to them with unconditional authority. The confessors identified as the Scriptures the Palestinian canon used by our Lord and New Testament writings either written or commended by the apostles. These Scriptures spoke clearly. These Scriptures required of the confessors that they refute error with new confessions as necessary.

II. MODERN DAY SUBSCRIPTION

When today our church asserts that the Confessions are "a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God," what are *we* saying?

In dealing with the matter of *quia* subscription back in 1858, Doctor Walther emphasized that the modern *quia* confessor accepts the *doctrinal* content of the symbolical books *without mental reservation*. In doing so he does not refer to contents which belong "in the sphere of human knowledge," or within the sphere of exegetical criticism or of history. He *does acknowledge that the interpretations*

contained in the Symbols are "according to the analogy of faith" or in accordance with clear passages.²⁷

We note in passing that a prior conviction on the part of a *quia* subscriber that the Scriptures are the kind of books which the original confessors considered them to be and that the plain meaning of these Scriptures must be accepted in simple faith—this prior conviction eliminates most problems that may nowadays arise in the mind of the signer of the Confessions. But we do well to refer to at least the matter of the *semper virgo*.

The Latin of the Smalcald Articles, by Melancthon, calls Mary *sempervirgo*.²⁸ The German translation, by Viet Dietrich,²⁹ does not. The short reference which Arthur Piepkorn makes to this particular matter places the *sempervirgo* interpretation of pertinent Scripture passages, which are not mentioned in the Symbols, outside the scope of doctrinal subscription.³⁰ In agreement, I find this to be one of the exegetical problems that is not settled by clear passages. Walter lists this among theological problems.³¹

This one matter to which we have alluded finds its proper perspective in the view of Scripture which underlies the Confessions, a view which we have delineated. But there is a matter of greater concern for us. That is the view of Scripture which any subscriber to the Confessions holds. We all realize that the various facets of the meaning of Scripture are matters of controversy today—of course, outside of Lutheranism—but within most branches of Lutheranism as well: The matter of inerrancy and its meaning, its extent or limitations; the full implications of inspiration; the full significance of so-called "isagogical" problems, when the answers to these problems affect radically the whole concept of Scripture and authority.

To put all of these and related matters into a proper relationship and to evaluate them properly, we must step back and view what has taken place in Biblical scholarship over a period of years. For summary of this we draw upon what men like K. G. Kuemmel, Gerhard Ebeling, Erich Dinkler, Ernest Kaesemann, Gunther Bornkamm, Kristen Skydsgaard, and Hans Lilje write.³² The proper, scientific view of Biblical scholarship today demands, these men say, that the scholar, from the very outset, assume that the Scriptures cannot be inerrantly inspired. Rather, the scholar must assume that everything in Scripture is conditioned, in its being recorded, by history. The men who record the so-called sacred history are themselves conditioned by history and in turn condition that which they record. To speak, therefore, of inerrancy and infallibility and inspiration is out of the question. In the area of New Testament records, the scholar must deal with books which are, generally speaking, not the products of inspired apostles, but the results of an ongoing editing process. One cannot state with any definiteness what Jesus' contemporaries wrote of Him, if anything, and what He actually said, as opposed to what the later Christian community believed about Him and what words they put into His mouth. The entire New Testament itself becomes part of tradition. And since the early church, in its decisions on canon, excluded various streams of com-

munity theology from the total Christian message when it excluded various books from the canon, we are not in a position to claim that the content of the present New Testament necessarily is the entire content of earliest community theology. In the books of the New Testament themselves we find contradictory and opposing theologies. To speak then, concerning the New Testament, of any normative function, or of content that determines a confessional position, is utterly beyond contemplation. The Christian faith is consequently a matter for each individual, and he alone must determine what is his conviction concerning the historical Jesus and the Christ of community theology in response to whatever influence the message of the New Testament exerts upon him.

One dare not attempt to ignore, or to play down this approach to Scripture or what is involved in the methodology which is used. Ebeling writes well: "The question of the historical-critical method is far removed from being a formal, technical problem of method, but affects, when one sees it historically and factually, the deepest foundations and the most serious relationships of theological thinking and churchly existence."³³ Concerning the conclusions of the historical-critical method, Erich Dinkler states:

"We must give up every hope that we may in such a way overcome the shaking of the authority of Biblical revelation which resulted from the shaking of the authority of the Bible and its inspired infallibility as a historical document, so as to permit the historical authority of Scripture to reassert itself and the attack on Scripture to be considered an historical error."³⁴

It is obvious that with this approach to Scripture there can be no such thing as a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. The existence of the *Arnoldshainer Abendmahlthesen* demonstrates the radical results of the historical-critical approach to Scripture for a confessional position. To be very practical, we may point out that in the simplest and most practical area of our confessional position, the teaching of the Small Catechism to our children, as pastors we do not have a leg to stand on in asserting "This is God's Word" about the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, or the Lord's Supper, if the historical-critical approach to Scripture is valid. With every phrase of the Apostles' Creed we should have to toss a coin to determine if we were operating with community theology or genuinely valid statements of faith, received through His own Word from God. For all we have, given the correctness of this approach, is, not God's Word in an inspired Scripture, but a record of Hebrew and Christian community theology.

"But is there not a middle way?" many Lutherans ask. One can very well grant that the New Testament books developed as the historical critic asserts, we are told. Nonetheless, the Scriptures are still inerrantly inspired. It makes no difference who wrote Matthew or John, or Ephesians, or the Pastoral Epistles, or 1 Peter, or Hebrews. God would certainly not permit the Church to use books for doctrine which are not inspired, the argument continues.

We can be sure, it is contended, that the books which the church uses are inspired, because God guided the choice.

In the first place, we must note that this is not the view of Scripture behind the Lutheran Confessions. In the view of the confessors, it was authentic New Testament homologoumena and authentic New Testament antilegomena, deriving their authority from apostolic authorship or commendation, which caused the confessors to maintain their position. The distinction between homologoumena and antilegomena hinged on authorship, based on the testimony of the church of the time of the apostles. It is precisely this authorship which is denied by historical critical scholarship. It is, furthermore, of deepest significance that this approach to New Testament authority is persistently maintained by Walther, Pieper, and J. T. Mueller in the texts by which our ministers have been taught³⁵ and is a confessional statement of the 1857 convention of the old Missouri Synod.³⁶ If, then, one bases the authority of New Testament books elsewhere than on their known, divinely inspired apostle-author, or apostle-recommenders, he is then operating with a new view of Scripture and a new view of inspiration; he is not speaking the language of the confessors.

In the second place, if one does find in the Scriptures authoritative statements, then he will be able to ascertain that the Apostle Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2, specifically denies to the Thessalonian Christians any ability derived from the Holy Spirit to judge as to whether a letter is from him, an apostle, or not, independent of the evidence of his signature. The position, in essence a doctrine, that God gave to a group of believers the ability to ascertain that a book is God's inspired word without their knowing the author or without being told by a divinely inspired apostle or, in the instance of Old Testament books, a prophet — this is a teaching which is un-Scriptural.

Moreover, this approach to New Testament authority actually destroys the Word of God. It asserts that the Christian community, by believing that something is God's written Word, thereby proves that this is God's written Word. With this approach every variant reading becomes God's written Word. For every variant was once a part of a text used and accepted as God's Word by a Christian community. For instance, the variant on Matthew 1:16 in the Sinaitic Syriac version to the effect that Joseph begot Jesus³⁷ is by this approach proved to be God's written inspired Word. We have hereby proved that God's Word denies the virgin birth. With the same approach the Letter to the Laodiceans of the western European canon, used from about 500 A.D. for about 700 years, must be considered God's Word.³⁸ For the same reasons the adoption of the Old Testament apocrypha from the Alexandrian canon of the Jewish church by New Testament Christians from the late first century down to the present proves that the apocrypha are God's written word. Likewise does the usage in the Ethiopic church of a New Testament canon of some thirty-five books prove that our New Testament excludes one-fifth of God's New Testament word?³⁹ Furthermore, the question arises, "When does **God** cease to send His Holy Spirit to

Christian communities so as to enable them to decide correctly on the identity of the written Word of God?" If the Holy Spirit guides inerrantly in these instances, must not decisions in other matters be likewise true doctrine? Is there not then a continual doctrinal development, governed by the Holy Spirit in the living body of Christ, the Church?

We have attempted to demonstrate that the view of New Testament Scripture, as to kind of book and origin of book, which historical-critical scholarship supports, prevents the existence of any sort of confessional stand. We have also tried to show that if we accept the evaluation of the historical critic of New Testament books as to kind and origin, and at the same time claim inspiration for these books, we are utilizing, even if we know it not, a doctrine of the Holy Spirit which is un-Scriptural, which ultimately destroys the concept of objective authority, and in its logical consequence would cause us to accept the teachings of the majority group of Christendom, the Roman Catholic Church.

Now let us look at another aspect of the matter. We have noted the clear-passage approach of the Confessions. The doctrines of the Symbols are based on the validity of this approach. One of the problems confronting Lutherans in general, and us *quia* subscribers in particular, is the usage of methods or approaches in interpretation of portions of Scripture dealing with matters not handled specifically in the Confessions—methods or approaches which, if applied to the doctrines of the Confessions and their *sedes doctrinae*, would deny the content of the Confessions. Let us note the principal methods or approaches.

In dealing with sections of Scripture which tell us something different from what some modern scholarship may state, some Lutherans use the arguments of positivism or logical positivism to get away from the plain statement of the Scriptures. A shining example is the instance of the serpent of Genesis 3. "Whoever heard of a talking snake?" we are asked. Since we have not experienced such an animal, God cannot communicate to us about one, it is claimed. He can tell us only about things that we have experienced. Consequently, we need not take the Genesis account of the fall into sin literally. Perhaps I am oversimplifying. But this is the way the argument emerges in its practical application. If this is a correct approach to Scripture, we can write off a literal acceptance of every miracle of our Lord. Who has ever had experience with a virgin birth? Who has ever experienced a man raising another man from the dead? To become really down-to-earth in our parish ministry, who has ever experienced bread that is flesh and wine that is blood? Obviously, we cannot accept a doctrine of the Real Presence. This question therefore cannot be shunted aside: If we by virtue of the nature of Scripture must accept the plain, clear meaning in one place, can we refuse to accept it elsewhere? Or, if the nature of Scripture permits us to explain away its plain meaning in some places, can we confessionally insist on the plain meaning at the points that suit us? We dare not forget that a proper under-

standing of the interpretation of *all* of Scripture precedes the Confessions, including the Small Catechism.

Another argument involves literary form or genre. It is argued that because a type of literature is used in one of the ancient civilizations with which the Old Testament people of God had contact and because this type, used for a religious purpose, does not convey factual truth, therefore the usage of this type of literary form in the Old Testament Scriptures implies likewise absence of factual truth and only religious or theological generalizations. We are all acquainted with this type of argumentation as applied, e.g., to Genesis 1-3 or 1-11. At this point we shall allude only to the fact that in various instances of this sort other clear references in Scripture to the factuality of the section under discussion are simply ignored or denied. "By what principle of interpretation is this done?" one asks of the *quia* confessor. But applicable again at this point is the argument of consequence. If one can on the basis of the argument of literary genre disregard the clear and plain statement of Scripture in one place, one cannot reject this kind of interpretation elsewhere, even in those areas treated in the Confessions. To illustrate, we know from countless examples that the literary genre of historical writing at the time of the New Testament did not include the purpose of recording the actual words of a character. In fact, it is a mark of the literary product at that time that speeches were written by the historian and put into the mouth of the character to convey what the historian thought ought to have been said on the occasion. Many New Testament critics argue that this is exactly the case with the Gospels and Acts.¹⁰ One has no right to assume that in any given instance we have the spoken words of Jesus or Peter or Paul. We have no right to expect or to demand this of the historical-literary form at that time in world's history. When one has applied the argument of literary form so as to divest Genesis 1-11 of historical accuracy, if this method is valid, then it is also valid in the New Testament. At least one cannot deny the possibility of its validity. But what happens to all the quotations of Jesus in the Confessions? What happens to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, of Baptism? What happens to the Lord's Prayer? What happens to the Gospel sermon texts we preach on? To be very practical, we can note simply that the pastor who teaches the Small Catechism as a correct exposition of the Word of God but who applies the argument of literary form to get away from the historicity of Genesis 1-11 is apparently claiming a special charisma for picking out, by one way or another, exceptions to his own rules of interpretation, meanwhile passing off his allegedly true understanding of the words of institution to his young flock as a special gift of the Holy Spirit to some Lutherans. He should not be surprised to discover that various of his own flock learn from his example to disregard the clear word of Scripture about the cross and the resurrection.

Another argument is being used in passages and doctrines not specifically treated in the Confessions to deny, avoid, or simply disregard the plain, ordinary meaning of a Scriptural statement. One can perhaps call this approach "exegesis of intent." One finds it

used, in various circles and in our own as well, to avoid the apparent meaning of Jesus' statements about the historicity of various parts of the Old Testament record and about the authorship of various Old Testament books or sections of books. If the person who is pledged to a doctrine of verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility, and to a *quia* confessional subscription wishes to avoid the charge of Biblicism and Fundamentalism in scholarly circles, he must find some way to square his acceptance of the conclusions of historical-critical scholarship in the Old Testament with the plain and simple words of Jesus about the historicity of Adam and Eve, Noah, and Jonah and about the authorship of the Pentateuch, Isaiah, and various psalms. The way out has been an exegesis of intent. Jesus, so the argument goes, did not intend to prove the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the historicity of the book of Jonah, etc. He was intent, rather, on teaching a lesson in repentance or whatever else the context permits. So Jesus simply accommodated himself to the current view with no implication as to its correctness.

There are two aspects to this argumentation, one the matter of intent, the second the matter of accommodation. In analyzing the argument of intent, one notices that the interpreter himself has arbitrarily limited the intent of the speaker and then has used the arbitrary limitation to disregard parts of the statement which do not serve the arbitrary limitation. One could discourse at length on the failure to let the text speak for itself. But to the *quia* subscriber to the Confessions one can only state that, if such arbitrary interpretation is valid in the instances referred to, it is valid everywhere, also in the words of institution. There is no difficulty in proving by this approach that Jesus wanted to institute only a memorial meal. The whole context can be forced to illustrate this idea. Furthermore, Paul's emphasis in Colossians 2: 16-17, on the unimportance of meat and drink reinforces the approach that Jesus would not want to stickle on the meaning of bread-body and wine-blood. But how can the *quia* subscriber then insist on the Lutheran doctrine of the Real Presence? If exegesis of intent is valid, then he has to renege on the doctrine of the Real Presence.

With regard to the argument of accommodation, it is argued that perhaps Jesus, in his state of humiliation, did not know any more about Mosaic authorship, etc., than His contemporaries. One notes that one must first prove that He and His contemporaries were wrong. One notes also that in applying the argument of *kenosis* here, the exegete is himself choosing the areas of Jesus' ignorance, and this for extra-Biblical reasons. He is not permitting Jesus to indicate His own limitations. Let us apply, then, the argument of consequence. While the *quia* subscriber at this point introduces Jesus' *kenosis* in order to avoid Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch or the historicity of Jonah, he has no *a priori* reason for refusing some non-Lutheran exegete the right to apply the *kenosis* argument anywhere he chooses. A liberal critic can, and does, easily find the source of some doctrine in Mandaean circles, shows the acceptance of the doctrine by Jesus' contemporaries, and then points out that Jesus in ignorance

uses the same doctrine. A good example is the doctrine of the angels. Critics trace it from Persian influence into various of the Old Testament books, into the intertestamental literature (to which a part of the Old Testament, they allege,) really belongs, and thence into Jewish thought at the time of Christ. The fact that Jesus in ignorance accepted the doctrine or that the later Christian community in its later community theology perpetuated it does not make it true. Thus, we must disregard Jesus' statement about the angels. He did not know any better on account of His *kenosis*. Besides, how do we know what He actually said anyway?

But the argument of consequence cuts a still broader swath. If Jesus was ignorantly accepting the contemporary view, a wrong one, on certain aspects of the Old Testament, why was Jesus not wrong in other areas of knowledge about the Old Testament? Jesus could have been wrong, and the Palestinian Jews wrong, on the extent of the Old Testament canon. At this point the argument has already supposedly proved that the Jewish community of intertestamental times recognized as inspired books that were allegedly written during that period, i.e., Daniel, Maccabaeen psalms, and the like. Why should not the Jewish community of believers in Alexandria, as well as that in Babylonia, be led by the Holy Spirit to acknowledge various books not used in Palestine but used in Greek Jewry as inspired Word of God? Jesus does not say that these books are not God's Word. Moreover, one can argue that Jesus did not intend to delineate the Old Testament canon. The believing community of intertestamental times and of the New Testament post-Pentecost period was supposed to do that. For the argument of the Spirit-led community recognizing inspired writings, the argument which must be used by the verbal inspirationist who wants to be acceptable in Old Testament historical critical circles, this argument is exactly the argument used to prove that authenticity is not necessary when the New Testament community is allegedly led by the Spirit to acknowledge various books as inspired Word of God. And it is the New Testament community that accepts the Alexandrian canon as God's Old Testament Word. Quite an interesting development! The arguments of intent and *kenosis* simply prove in legitimate fashion that the Old Testament canon of Roman Catholicism is correct. And having proved that, we are ready for quite a few conclusions which are alien to the Lutheran Symbols.

There is another argument used to avoid the meaning of clear passages not handled by the Confessions. It is argued that Scripture is clear, is infallible, but in the areas of Law and Gospel only. In areas of history, no. A part of this argument is the use of 2 Timothy 3:15: "... the holy Scriptures . . . are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus . . ." Since one may be ignorant of how the world came into being and yet know Jesus as Savior, the historicity of Genesis 1-11 is irrelevant to the purpose of the Scriptures, and one may interpret as he will. Genesis 1-11 is not necessarily a part of the preaching of the Law or of the Gospel.

Several comments are in order. In the first place, when the

Apology speaks of the two great topics (*Stuecke* in German, *loci* in Latin),⁴¹ it expressly states that "all Scripture" (*universa Scriptura, die ganze Schrift*) is divided or ought to be divided into Law and the promises. There is nothing here of a two-fold principle of hermeneutics which rules on the factuality of historical statements within Scripture. Furthermore, Melancthon, further on, points out where the Law-Gospel rule applies, namely, to "all the passages that are cited concerning the Law and works."⁴² There is no attempt made to limit the applicability of Scripture by two yardsticks of interpretation, Law and Gospel. It is just the opposite. All Scripture may be placed under these two categories.

But let us apply the argument of consequence again. Who is to define "Law" and "Gospel" when these become instruments for selection of true statements in Scripture? Is the incident of Jesus and Peter and the coin in the fish's mouth Law or Gospel (Matt. 17: 24ff.)? When New Testament critics term such a miracle story a legend inserted by community theologians, need one insist on its truth? Thus, one forgets it; it makes no difference anyway. One may be wise unto salvation and not know about it at all. But, one asks, where does the process stop? Who finally draws the line on the essential Gospel and what is no longer necessary? And what are the standards of judgment? How about the doctrine of the Real Presence? Is this Law or Gospel? Gospel, did I hear? That means that it is necessary in order that one be wise unto salvation. But it was not a part of the Gospel that Jesus and the disciples proclaimed in Galilee. Neither was the doctrine of the Lord's Supper part of the Gospel then. When does the doctrine of the Lord's Supper and then, in addition, the doctrine of the Real Presence become a part of the Gospel, and why? What if the argument of form has already ruled out the historicity of the words of institution? What if form-criticism or community theology has made the account of the institution one of doubtful historicity? Really, does one need to know of the Real Presence, or of the Lord's Supper itself, for that matter, to be wise unto salvation? What about believing children who have not received the Lord's Supper yet, or who have not learned of its meaning, or even have not learned that there is such a thing? And while we are pursuing the argument of consequence, what about children who pray to Jesus but who do not know what one is talking about if one inquires about the Holy Spirit or the Father? Is the doctrine of the Trinity, explicitly expressed, necessary in order to be wise unto salvation?

One realizes that a consistent application of the so-called Law-Gospel hermeneutic to determine which parts of Scripture need not be accepted at face value in reality makes impossible a *quia* subscription to the Confessions. In contrast to use of a Law-Gospel hermeneutic, we find the Confessions emphasizing, in the portion about Abraham's sacrifice quoted above from the discussion of the words of institution, that even though the words of God to Abraham conflicted "not only with all reason and with the divine and natural law, but also with the chief article of faith concerning the promised Seed, Christ, who has to be born of Isaac," nonetheless Abraham

"understands and believes God's Word and command plainly and simply, as they read according to the letter . . ." ¹³

We would refer briefly to the argument that, outside of those things with which the Confessions deal, we need not worry about upholding the truth of anything in Scripture unless it preaches Christ. But it would seem that anyone who is seriously interested in preaching Christ must ask himself concerning the source of his information about Christ and the scope or extent of the information that he will accept. In the first instance he must answer the rock-bottom questions of authority to which we have addressed ourselves and from his *a priori* position look at the Scriptures. He then must either accept the approach of the Confessions to Scriptures and consistently apply them, or in honesty refuse either to sign the Confessions or to continue to have his name among those who do.

In our presentation thus far we have attempted to show how historical-critical scholarship is in diametrical opposition to the view of Scripture which the confessors held and, in fact, makes impossible any significant confessional statement at all. We have also attempted to show that the usage of the conclusions of historical-critical scholarship in various critical areas now in controversy is a denial of what the *quia* subscriber says in his subscription and that a uniform and consistent approach to Scripture will cause him either to abandon the doctrines of the Confessions or to abandon his historical-critical anti-Scriptural conclusions in the areas untouched by the Confessions.

There is, in my experience, a transitional stage in the confessional picture. It is what develops when the *quia* subscriber changes his view as to the authority of Scripture. He for various reasons wishes to assert his continued acceptance of the Lutheran Symbols as a "correct and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God." But he no longer believes in an inerrant and utterly trustworthy Scripture, written, in the case of the Old Testament, by prophets (some of whom the New Testament names) and, in the case of the New Testament, written or commended by apostles. He has accepted the validity of the historical-critical method and its conclusions. He applies the method and conclusions in matters of Scripture with which the Confessions do not deal. In order to justify his *quia* confession, he must produce a doctrine of the Holy Spirit and of the Church which justifies the "we teach" and "we condemn" of the Confessions. Perhaps he does not think through this matter. If he does, he asserts, in my experience, that he is convinced that the Holy Spirit led the Lutheran confessors and the Missouri Synod and him to believe the doctrines of the Lutheran Confessions as opposed to false doctrine. From an erring Scripture they all, over a period of four centuries and still today, in a miraculous way choose divine truth. The actual difference between this doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the Roman doctrine of the Spirit of God leading the living Body of Christ in doctrinal development is difficult to discern. In essence there is no difference. For many, this stage of transition is a passing one. The logical consequences of the position of Scripture at which they have arrived cannot be denied

They seem to develop a weakening, *eine Abschwächung*, in the importance attached to the confessional stand they have espoused. Perhaps there comes a time when they see the incongruence of their confessional subscription and their doctrine of Scripture. The position of their church body in confessional matters, if they are in sufficient number, begins to reflect the gathering influence of what each of them believes, or rather no longer believes.

Sometimes there appears an individual who has the courage of his convictions, wrong though they be from the viewpoint of the *quia* subscriber, to act consistently. One such is Prof. Heinrich Schlier, erstwhile Lutheran theologian and exegete, more recently a convert to Roman Catholicism. Hans Lilje, in his article "Some Notes on the History of the Ecumenical Movement," in the September, 1961, *Lutheran World*, after discussing the significance of Christology and the prior question of revelation, refers to the problem which the conversion of Professor Schlier poses for a confessional Lutheran position. Bishop Lilje writes:

In his account of the history of his conversion he says no less than this: it was precisely the theological approach adopted by Bultmann which had shown him the way into the Catholic Church, because, as he engaged in historical analysis, this kind of theological approach revealed to him that one question is in fact unavoidable. What tribunal is to make decisions about these various strata of tradition which have been worked out, and who is to decide about their relative value? He preferred to attach himself to a tradition historically as well established as that of the Church of Rome, rather than to trust himself to the unsure path of conflicting human opinions. That is roughly the gist of this account by Heinrich Schlier, which amazingly, has gone unnoticed, although it represents a theological challenge of the first rank.⁴⁴

To phrase the matter differently, if we are trusting in the Holy Spirit to guide us, immediately, to pick out and to confess what is true from an erring Scripture, which is the theology of so-called believing communities, we had best turn to the largest numerical group of Christians today that represent the guidance of the same Holy Spirit in choosing their teachings, rather than to smaller splinter groups scattered throughout visible Christendom, one such group of which is the Missouri Synod.

This challenge faces The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The *quia* confessional subscription which the Synod demands in reality requires that each member of the Synod, every clergyman and congregation, understand, before subscribing, the definition of Scripture, its source and its proper exposition. Such an understanding requires of the convinced Christian not only a *quia* subscription, but the consequences of such a subscription. When errors in teaching the content of Scripture arise, additional confessional statements must be drawn up in order to preserve the truth of God's Word. But practical considerations demand that the proper understanding of Scripture must first be confessionally delineated.

We may here refer to the significance of the *quia* subscription to the binding force of Synodical doctrinal statements. It is important that we be realists. As realists who understand the past, we know that the Formula of Concord was possible only because there was a common understanding of the identity of, the meaning of, and the authority of Scripture. Those who did not accept the consequences of such a view of Scripture and who, although they had signed the Augsburg Confession, could not now sign the Formula, were not permitted within the fellowship of those who signed. We in our day have signed the Formula, and all the Confessions. But we have not necessarily done so with the same conviction and consensus concerning the Scriptures. In fact, a realistic appraisal gives ample evidence that such a consensus does not now exist in our Synod. Since such is the case, the presupposition and prerequisite for any additional confessional statements beyond the Book of Concord which should be binding is non-existent. Because they do not agree on a doctrine of Scripture, the aggregate of the individual members of Synod actually cannot achieve a statement of exposition of Biblical truth to which all the members feel compelled to subscribe and which limits fellowship to the subscribers. I am convinced that unless and until Synod, or an overwhelming majority of its members, arrives at a consensus on the doctrine of Scripture, Synod will more and more become a divided camp, doctrinally speaking.

In my opinion, then, the thing that is most necessary, in contrast to the encroachment of historical-critical scholarship and all that it involves in denial of God's Word (and, therefore, of the Gospel, the message of the forgiveness of sin in Christ Jesus), is the recapturing under God's mercy by each of us of the proper understanding of the Scriptures, their identity and qualities, their exposition and our obedient response in faith; even as this faith and understanding was held by the Lutheran confessors. This understanding we must articulate in binding confession, or we shall gradually lose all that we have previously confessed. Then, having confessed the doctrine of the Scriptures in the context of the significance of historical criticism, we shall be ready to speak confessionally on controverted doctrines. In the company of the early church and in response to the demands of the Scriptures and the Lord who speaks to us in them and reveals to fallen man His salvation, we shall then use as normative in all doctrines and life, in faith and practice, these same sacred writings, writings written or commended by apostles, writings in which the Lord of the Church and of the apostles, Redeemer of the world, identified His Old Testament Word, writings to which we answer with joyful obedience, "Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth."

Elmer Moeller,
Castle Rock, Colorado,
January 17, 1973.

FOOTNOTES

The Lutheran Agenda, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), pp. 104ff.

Handbook of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1966 Edition, p. 15.

The Lutheran Agenda, p. 112.

Cf. Fred Kramer, "Sacra Scriptura and Verbum Dei in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXVI, pp. 81ff.; Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), I, pp. 322ff.; A. C. Piepkorn, "The Position of The Church and Her Symbols," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXV, pp. 738ff.

Cf. Friedrich Brunstaed, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Muenster: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1951), pp. 20ff.

Ibid. Cf. Pieper, pp. 427ff.

Paul M. Bretscher, "The Arnoldhain Theses on the Lord's Supper," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXX, pp. 83ff.

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Ibid., pp. 437, 439, 507, 537, 589, 635, 787, 891, 1055, 1057; 47, 53, 55, 59, 61, 89, 193, 215, 113, 139, 157, 163, 221, 227, 231, 233, 259, 263, 267.

Ibid., pp. 11, 19.

Ibid., pp. 777, 847, 851, 853, 857, 859, 1095, 1097.

Ibid., pp. 1103; 7, 15, 21.

Martin Chemnitz, *Examen Concilii Tridentini* (Frankfurt: S. Feyrabend, 1596), p. 11.

Ibid., pp. 13ff.

Ibid., p. 48. Chemnitz quotes Jerome and Cyprian (or Rufinus).

Ibid., pp. 45ff.; cf. p. 17.

Ibid., pp. 49ff.; "... ex falsis scripta vera . . . ex dubiis & incertis facere certa, canonica, & legitima . . .," p. 49.

Ibid., p. 38, Jude and Peter. *Triglotta*, p. 196 (Paulus in the German of the Apology), p. 872 (*apostolus* in the Latin of the Formula), p. 946, the same for Heb. 3:6 (cf. pp. 955 and 965 where "the apostle" is not named for 2 Cor. 3 or Rom. 7).

Brunstaed, pp. 22ff. (translation our own).

W. G. Kuemmel, "Notwendigkeit und Grenze des Neutestamentlichen Kanons," *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche*, XLVII, p. 292.

Franz Pieper, "Dr. Walther's Stellung zur Offenbarung St. Johannis," *Lehre und Wehre*, L, p. 58.

Triglotta, pp. 267, 867, 366, 61, 365, 366, 999, 79, 109, 117, 477, 959, 383, 867.

Ibid., pp. 437, 439, 507, 537, 589, 635, 787, 891, 1055, 1057.

Ibid., p. 441. Cf. pp. 39, 101, 113, 153, 209, 215, 239, 265, 291, 341, 447, 457, 467, 477, 493, 589, 595, 709, 711, 747, 755, 759, 763, 771, 777, 779, 793, 795, 803, 811, 815, 817, 823, 827, 851, 853, 855, 859, 883, 915, 921, 937, 945, 957, 975, 983, 987-991, 1011, 1014.

Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, pp. 434ff.

Triglotta, pp. 987-9.

Dr. C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," translated and condensed by Alex. Guebert, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XVIII, p. 242.

Triglotta, p. 461.

Ibid., p. 60.

30. A. K. Piepkorn, "Hermeneutical Principles of Lutheran Symbols," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXIX, p. 20.
31. C. F. W. Walther, "Dr. Walther's Foreword for Volume XIV of 'Lehre und Wehre,' 1868," translated by Alex. Guebert, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XVII, p. 486.
32. W. G. Kummel, "Notwendigkeit und Grenze des Neutestamentlichen Kanons," *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche*, XLVII, pp. 277-313; Gerhard Ebeling, "Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode fuer die protestantische Theologie und Kirche," *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche*, XLVII, p. 46; *Die Geschichtlichkeit der Kirche und Ihrer Verkuendigung als Theologisches Problem* (Tuebingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1954); Erich Dinkler, "Bibelautoritaet und Bibelkritik," *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche*, LXVII, pp. 70-93; Ernst Kaesmamn, "Begrundet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?" *Evangelische Theologie*, XI, pp. 13-21; Kristen Ejner Skydsgaard, "Schrift und Tradition," *Kerygma und Dogma*, I, pp. 161-179; Hans Lilje, "Some Notes on the History of the Ecumenical Movement," *Lutheran World*, VIII, p. 134.
33. Ebeling, p. 6.
34. Dinkler, p. 81.
35. Cf. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, I, 398ff.; *Verhandlungen der dreizehnten Jahresversammlung des Mittleren Districts der Deutschen Evang.-Luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. Staaten vom Jahre 1864 u. 1866* (St. Louis: Aug. Wiebusch u. Sohn, 1867), p. 36; Pieper, "Dr. Walthers Stellung zur Offenbarung St. Johannis"; J. T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), pp. 131-132.
36. *Neunter Synodal-Bericht der allgemeinen deutschen Ev.-Luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. Staaten vom Jahre 1857* (St. Louis: Druckerei der Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten, 1876), pp. 334ff. The same position is assumed in question 8 of the Synodical Catechism, *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 40.
37. Cf. Kurt Aland, M. Black, C. M. Martini, B. M. Metzger, A. Wikgren, eds., *The Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1966).
38. Cf. B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1881), pp. 465-466, 456ff; cf. Adolph von Harnack, ed., *Apocyppha*, IV: *Die Apokrypher Briefe des Paulus an die Laodiceer und Korinther* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Company, 1931), p. 3. Laodiceans appears in at least a hundred and twelve old manuscripts.
39. Edgar J. Goodspeed, "The Canon of the New Testament," in George Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), I, p. 69.
40. Cf. E. M. Blacklock, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 19-20, for a discussion of Thucydides' statement (I, 22) as to the content of speeches written by the historian and the implications for the historical accuracy of speeches in Acts.
41. *Triglotta*, p. 121.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 987-9.
44. Lilje, p. 134.