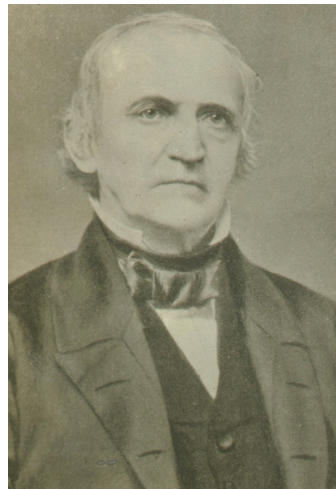


# The American Recension of the Augsburg Confession and its Lessons for Our Pastors Today

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I.

Those creeds and confessions of the Christian church that are of enduring value and authority emerged in crucibles of controversy, when essential points of the Christian faith, as revealed in Scripture, were under serious attack. These symbolical documents were written at times when the need for a faithful confession of the gospel was a matter of spiritual life or death for the church and its members. For this reason those symbolical documents were thereafter used by the orthodox church as a normed norm for instructing laymen and future ministers, and for testing the doctrinal soundness of the clergy, with respect to the points of Biblical doctrine that they address.

The ancient Rules of Faith of the post-apostolic church, which were used chiefly for catechetical instruction and as a baptismal creed, existed in various regional versions. The version used originally at Rome is the one that has come down to us as the Apostles' Creed. These Rules of Faith were prepared specifically with the challenge of Gnosticism in view. As the Apostles' Creed in particular summarizes the cardinal articles of faith regarding God and Christ, it emphasizes the truth that the only God who actually exists is the God who created the earth as well as the heavens; and the truth that God's Son was truly conceived and born as a man, truly died, and truly rose from the grave.<sup>1</sup>

The Nicene Creed was formulated in the context of the Arian Controversy. The terminology employed in this fourth-century text exemplifies an important didactic principle that had by this time begun to be embraced by the church – namely that an official credal statement may depart from the *terminology* of Scripture, in order to clarify and preserve the *meaning* of Scripture. Arius and his followers has put a false meaning onto all the Biblical terms that were originally intended by the prophets and apostles to testify to the eternal divinity of Jesus Christ. This then made it necessary for St. Athanasius and the other orthodox Fathers of the fourth century to employ precise extra-Biblical terms – such as *homoousios* – in their explications of the Biblical doctrine. The orthodox Fathers did not think that this represented an addition of new binding doctrine, above and beyond what the Scriptures required. In fact, they understood, as a matter of conviction, that such a thing was *forbidden* to them as pastors and teachers of Christ's *apostolic* church.<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, in reflecting on the

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<sup>1</sup>Each one of these doctrinal points, while seemingly self-evident and obvious to us, was a deliberate finger in the eye of the Gnostics – with their extreme spiritual-material dualism; and with their idea that human salvation requires *man's escape from* the physical world, and not *God's entrance into* the physical world.

<sup>2</sup>St. Athanasius himself stated that “The holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth” (Against the Heathen I:3; quoted in Carl A. Volz, *Faith and Practice in the Early Church* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983], p. 147). And among the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil the Great expressed himself on this point in this way: “They are charging me with innovation, and base their charge on my confession of three hypostases, and blame me for asserting one Goodness, one Power, one Godhead. In this they are not wide of the truth, for I do so assert. Their complaint is that their custom does not accept this, and that Scripture does not agree. What is my reply? I do not consider it fair that the custom which obtains among them should be regarded as a law and rule of orthodoxy. If custom is to be taken in proof of what is right, then it is certainly competent for me to put forward on my side the custom which obtains here. If they reject this, we are clearly not bound to follow them. Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the Word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth” (Letter 189 [to Eustathius the physician], 3, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983 reprint], *Second Series*, Vol. VIII, p. 229). Again, St. Basil wrote: “What is the mark of a faithful soul? To be in these dispositions of full acceptance on the authority of the words [of the Scripture], not venturing to reject anything nor making additions. For, if ‘all that is not of faith is sin,’ as the Apostle

actions undertaken at the Council of Nicea, describes the deceptive verbal tactics that had been employed by the Arian heretics, and the theological and pastoral response of the Nicene Fathers to those tactics:

It is certainly true that one should teach nothing outside of Scripture pertaining to divine matters, ...which means only that one should teach nothing that is at variance with Scripture. But that one should not use more or other *words* than those contained in Scripture – this cannot be adhered to, especially in a controversy and when heretics want to falsify things with trickery and *distort* the words of Scripture. It thus became necessary to condense the meaning of Scripture, comprised of so many passages, into a short and comprehensive word, and to ask [the Arians] whether they regarded Christ as *homousius*, which was the *meaning* of all the words of Scripture that they had distorted with false interpretations...<sup>3</sup>

The original form of the Nicene Creed, as adopted at Nicea in 325 A.D., was revised at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., chiefly by the addition of a lengthy section on the Holy Spirit, his person, and his work in and through the church.<sup>4</sup> This was to address the errors of yet another new heretical group, the Pneumatomachians, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

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says [Rom. 14.23], and ‘faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God’ [Rom. 10.17], everything outside Holy Scripture, not being of faith, is sin” (Cap. 22, The Morals, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 9 [Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962], pp. 203-04).

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 83. Emphases added.

<sup>4</sup>The later addition of the *Filioque* by the Latin Church, and all the issues surrounding the controversy that ensued, need not be discussed in detail here. We will simply refer to the way in which Martin Chemnitz deals with this subject in his *Loci Theologici*, especially noting his statement that this issue was actually resolved (in 1439) by representatives of the Eastern and Western Churches at the Council of Florence: “Long and acrimonious was the controversy between the later Greek theologians and the Latin church regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit. The older Greeks often said that the Holy Spirit was from the Father through the Son, as we have it in that most notable confession of Gregory of Neocaesarea. And Hilary, *De Trinitate*, at the same time clearly and with express words writes, ‘The Holy Spirit is, proceeds, and emanates from the Father and the Son, and just as He proceeds from the Father, so He proceeds from the Son.’ ... Epiphanius says the same thing in his *Ancoratus*, 9, and Augustine in his *Contra Maximinum*, 2.5. ... Both parties confessed that the Spirit is of the Son as well as of the Father; but the Greeks said He is ‘from the Father through the Son,’ and the Latins said ‘from the Father and the Son.’ They each had reasons for speaking the way they did. Gregory of Nazianzus, on the basis of Romans 11, says that the prepositions *ek*, *dia*, and *eis* express the properties of [the three persons in] one unconfused essence. Therefore, the Greeks said that the Holy Spirit proceeds from (*ek*, *ex*) the Father through (*dia*) the Son, so that the property of each nature [or person] is preserved. Nor did the Latins take offense at this formula for describing the matter. For Jerome and Augustine both say that the Holy Spirit properly and principally proceeds from the Father, and they explain this by saying that the Son in being begotten of the Father receives that which proceeds from the Father, namely, the Holy Spirit; but the Father receives from none, but has everything from Himself... But in the passage of time, when major distractions arose, the Greeks spoke anathemas against those who confessed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son. ...and the Latins in turn condemned those who say the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son. ... This division was healed at the Council of Florence... When the Greeks saw the explanation of the Latins and how they believed that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and on the basis of what evidence they established their case, they agreed with the statement” (*Loci Theologici* [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989], Vol. I, pp. 142-43).

<sup>5</sup>The version of the Creed that had been adopted at Nicea in 325 A.D. was intended chiefly to be a mechanism by which the soundness of a bishop’s doctrine could be tested. But the augmented version that was approved in 381 A.D. soon became, in the Eastern Church, also the chief catechetical text for the instruction of the

The Western Church's third Ecumenical Creed is the *Quicumque vult*, commonly called the Athanasian Creed.<sup>6</sup> In a style that shows the influence of St. Augustine's formulations, this creedal document once again and in its own way addresses the errors of Arianism – which was still embraced by some of the Germanic tribes in western Europe, and which for this reason posed a continuing threat to the church in that part of the continent. And this creedal document – more so than the Nicene Creed had done – clarified the doctrine of the person of Christ, by setting forth the basic position of the Council of Ephesus of 431 A.D. and of the Council of Chalcedon of 451 A.D., over against the errors and imbalances of Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism.<sup>7</sup>

This was the creedal patrimony of the church catholic, of which the Lutherans in the sixteenth century were heirs.<sup>8</sup> And the Lutherans understood the importance of this heritage and legacy, as can be seen in Article I of the Augsburg Confession, which – in effect – picks up where the Ecumenical Creeds left off:

In the first place, it is with one accord taught and held, following the decree of the Council of Nicea, that there is one divine essence which is named God and truly is God. But there are three persons in the same one essence, equally powerful, equally eternal: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three are one divine essence, eternal, undivided, unending, of immeasurable power, wisdom, and goodness, the creator and preserver of all visible and invisible things. ... Rejected, therefore, are all the heresies that are opposed to this article...<sup>9</sup>

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laity – supplanting the local Rules of Faith that had previously been used in the various regions. In Greek Christendom, the Nicene Creed accordingly came to play the role that the Apostles' Creed plays in Latin Christendom – as each Christian's "baptismal" creed. This is also why the Nicene Creed is liturgically confessed in the Eastern Church in the personalized form of "I believe...", rather than "We believe...", as was the case with the version from 325 A.D.

In addition to its primary focus on refuting the Arian and Pneumatomachian heresies, the Nicene Creed retains the standard verbiage of the ancient Rules of Faith, thereby reiterating the church's opposition to Gnosticism. It also takes on one of the errors of the third-century controversial figure Origen, who had suggested that the scope of Christ's redemption included the fallen angels as well as fallen humanity. The Creed's response to that particular notion was to frame its discussion of the incarnation, and of Christ's salvific work, in such a way as to state that it was "for us *men*" that God's Son "became man" (or that it was "for us *humans*" that God's Son "became human"). The loose translation of the Nicene Creed that is used in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* deletes an important component of the Nicene Fathers' carefully-chosen anti-Origenist terminology, by stating merely that it was "for us" that God's Son became "fully human." Does this mean for us Christians? For us elect ones? For us earth creatures (animals included)? For us creatures in general (angels included)? The original Greek is deliberately clear on this point. The *Christian Worship* alteration of this conciliar text unfortunately removes that clarity. The original Greek also does not contain any term which corresponds to the qualifier "fully" in the *Christian Worship* version of the Creed. God's Son became *human*, or *man*, plain and simple.

<sup>6</sup>Its historical origins are still a bit murky, but it probably arose in what is now southern France, in the late fifth or early sixth century. This originally-Latin creed was not, however, authored by the Greek Father Athanasius.

<sup>7</sup>Apollinarianism denied that Jesus had a human mind. Nestorianism divided the human nature from the divine nature. Eutychianism blended the human nature into the divine nature.

<sup>8</sup>For more on the place of the Lutheran Reformation within the broader sweep of Christian ecclesiastical history, see David Jay Webber, "Reformations Before the Reformation," *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (December 2011), pp. 303-30.

<sup>9</sup>Augsburg Confession I:1-3,5 (German), in *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 36.

## II.

The writing of the Augsburg Confession was occasioned by the Lutheran Reformation movement in general; and in particular by the request of Emperor Charles V that those within the Holy Roman Empire who had introduced various ecclesiastical reforms should, at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, be prepared to explain and defend those reforms. The Lutheran Reformation in general had arisen in the context of the pastoral crisis that was brought on in 1517 by the sale of indulgences in regions close to Wittenberg, Electoral Saxony, where Luther was serving as preacher and professor. The Dominican monk Johann Tetzel's hawking of these indulgences was carried out with the use of dangerously extravagant claims regarding their benefits, even by medieval standards. This fired up Luther's pastoral heart, and set in motion his theologian's pen.

It was soon evident that Luther's criticism of indulgences was also a criticism of the medieval penitential system as a whole, since that system obscured and distorted the gospel of God's free and full forgiveness in Christ, to be received by faith alone. And it was soon evident as well that Luther's criticism of indulgences was also a criticism of the pope, and of papal authority, since it was on the basis of the authority that the pope claimed for himself that such indulgences were promulgated in the first place.

By 1523 Luther had been excommunicated by the pope. But in the larger church, his biting criticisms of papal abuses, and his clear proclamation and application of the gospel – which were made known far beyond the environs of Wittenberg by the printing presses of Germany – were like a match in a tinder box. The Reformation movement that Luther had inaugurated spread like wildfire, far beyond the reach and impact of his own personality, because the pastoral concerns that led him to say what he said were shared by other churchmen throughout the Western Church. By 1530, within the Empire, Lutheran-type religious reforms had been formally instituted in seven territories, and in two free cities.

The modest original intention of the Elector of Saxony was to describe and defend the various corrections of abuses that he had undertaken in his territory, and the reasons for these corrections, and a document had been prepared for that purpose. But when he and his party arrived in Augsburg for the Diet, they were there confronted with a published tract, written by the Romanist theologian Johann Eck, which accused the Lutherans of holding to, and advocating, a total of 404 historic heresies. As a response to this slander, the Saxons resolved to draft a series of doctrinal articles also for presentation at the Diet – which would reject the claim that the Lutherans were advancing any heresies at all; and which would set forth instead, systematically, their Scriptural and genuinely catholic teachings. These doctrinal articles, when combined with the previously-prepared articles on corrected abuses, became the Augsburg Confession. The primary author and editor was Luther's Wittenberg colleague Philip Melancthon. And when the representatives of the other Lutheran territories and cities who were on hand in Augsburg reviewed Melancthon's work, they were pleased by what they saw, and all decided likewise to become signatories to this one unifying document.

When the Augsburg Confession was formally presented and read, on June 25, 1530, the Lutheran reform movement became, in that moment, the *Evangelical Lutheran Church*: testifying to the divinely-given marks of the church, and confessing, with thoroughness and clarity, its Christ-centered evangelical faith. The Lutheran confessors at Augsburg declared to their Emperor: “Wherefore, in most humble obedience to Your Imperial Majesty, we offer and present a confession of our pastors' and preachers' teachings as well as of our faith, setting forth on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture what and in what manner they preach, teach, believe, and give instruction in our lands,

principalities, dominions, cities, and territories.”<sup>10</sup>

Luther, as an excommunicated “heretic” under the imperial ban, was not there. And it is probably a good thing that he was not there, exercising a direct influence, because the faithfulness of Melancthon and of those who stood with him, without Luther’s personal presence, demonstrated that none of this was really about Luther, or the mesmerizing power of his personality. It was about God, God’s Word, and God’s church. Luther was a servant of all this, as were many others. People other than Luther can indeed confess the faith of Luther, because the faith of Luther is not a faith that *comes from* Luther. And in this spirit, Luther himself became an enthusiastic subscriber to, and a devoted promoter of, the Augsburg Confession – and of its Apology, which was prepared by Melancthon (with the assistance of others) in the following year. Luther solemnly affirmed:

We must confess that the doctrine which was declared and submitted at Augsburg is the true and pure Word of God, and that all who believe and keep it are children of God and will be saved, whether they already believe it or will be illuminated later. For this Confession will endure to the end of the world on Judgment Day. It is indeed written that whosoever believeth on Him and shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom. 10:11,13). And we must take note not only of those who will be added in the future, but also of the Christian church, which preaches the Word, and of our own people, according to the word: “As many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), which passage excludes none; therefore all who believe and live according to the teaching of the [Augsburg] Confession and its Apology are our brethren, and their peril concerns us as much as does our own. As members of the true church we dare not forsake them, regardless of when they join us, whether they do so secretly or openly, whether they live among us or in the diaspora. This we say and confess.<sup>11</sup>

The ancient Creeds, the Augustana, and the Apology were combined with the Lutheran Symbolical Books that came later – to bring added clarity to Reformation teachings – in the Book of Concord of 1580. They all, collectively, are a true and faithful statement and exposition of the Word of God, and are accordingly able to serve as a normed norm for doctrine and practice in the church. We therefore appreciate Joseph A. Seiss’s description of these Confessions as timeless teachers of Biblical truth, within any church that embraces them. He writes that

The Symbols of the orthodox Church of Christ are the matured fruits of the deepest devotion, experience and learning of its greatest and wisest members in its most trying ages; and as we may practically learn much from the biographies of the good, so we may learn much more from the Spirit-moved biography of the Church and the principles and testimonies which mark her life of faith. They are the sign-posts set up by the faithful along the King’s highway of salvation to designate the places of danger to those who come after them, to warn and admonish us where we would otherwise be liable to err and miss the goal of our high calling in Christ Jesus. They are not laws to rule our faith, for the Word of God alone is such a Rule; but they are helps and tokens to enable us the more surely to find the true import of the Rule, that we may be all the more thoroughly and sincerely conformed to that Rule. They are the human tracks which the best of the saints have left, by which we may the better detect the way which

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<sup>10</sup>Augsburg Confession, Preface:8 (German), Kolb/Wengert p. 32.

<sup>11</sup>Martin Luther, “Opinion on the Recess of the Imperial Diet”; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *The True Visible Church* (translated by John Theodore Mueller) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 44.

God has laid out and opened for the fallen and sinful children of men to travel, that they may fill their Christian vocation and come to everlasting life.<sup>12</sup>

### III.

The ancient Fathers, as they composed and promulgated the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Reformers of the sixteenth century, as they composed and promulgated the distinctly Lutheran Confessions, were acutely aware of the fact that almighty God had appointed them – as called public teachers of the church – to defend and proclaim the truth of Christ as it is revealed in Holy Scripture, over against the faith-destroying heresies of their respective eras. The Symbolical Books of the church, written by divine vocation and under divine providence in such circumstances, are not just curious historical relics of bygone ages. They are, rather, highly relevant testimonies to God’s unchanging truth, for the benefit of the church of all generations. This is why those in our time who conscientiously seek to confess the full truth of God’s Word, will, as a matter of principle, “reject every effort to reduce the confessions contained in the Book of Concord to historical documents that do not have binding confessional significance for the church today.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, they will gratefully and humbly acknowledge – for the sake of their own faith and teaching – that

The Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord clarify, as precisely as human language allows, what the Bible teaches about God, sin, Christ, justification, church and ministry, repentance, the sacraments, free will, good works, and other articles of faith. They identify abuses in doctrine and practice, and most clearly state what Lutherans do not believe, teach, and confess. They are declarations of belief, making clear that Lutherans have convictions which are not open to question. The confessions clarify the Lutheran concern that only the Word be taught. Soon after its initial publication, the Book of Concord became the standard in doctrinal confrontations with Roman Catholics and with Calvinists. Where a Lutheran position seemed unclear or uncertain, the Book of Concord became a reference point for the authentic Lutheran view. Whereas the writings of Luther, as notable as they are, reveal the insights of one man, the Book of Concord expresses the theology of the whole Lutheran movement.<sup>14</sup>

Martin Chemnitz affirms the insights of St. Augustine – with respect to those unique occasions in history when God brings the church to a greater depth of conviction, a greater precision in expression, and a greater consistency in teaching and practice – by pointing out that this happens, providentially, when an important article of faith is overtly challenged or denied, and must therefore now be earnestly defended. Chemnitz writes that in such a time of doctrinal controversy,

The Scriptures are examined more carefully, and those theologians who had preserved the correct teaching are now noticed with greater appreciation than perhaps had been the case before the controversy. Augustine is correct and truthful when he says in *De Civitate Dei*, 16.2, “Many points pertaining to the catholic faith have been stirred up by the cunning trouble making of heretics, so that we have had to defend these points against them, consider more carefully, define more clearly, and preach more powerfully. The question has been raised by

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<sup>12</sup>Joseph A. Seiss, “Our Confessions in English,” *Lutheran Church Review*, Vol. I, Whole No. 3 (July 1882), p. 216.

<sup>13</sup>*This We Believe* (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod), I:17.

<sup>14</sup>James F. Korthals, “Publication of the Book of Concord – 425th Anniversary,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 227-28.

the adversary, and the opportunity is present for better learning.” This point is certainly most true in church controversies.<sup>15</sup>

The Creeds and Confessions of the church were produced precisely at such times in history, and the Fathers and Reformers who labored over them were beneficially impacted in their work precisely by these kinds of advantageous circumstances and salutary influences.

The Reformers knew that Christ had promised to preserve his church until the end of time, and in the history of the church they observed that, “in order to keep the Gospel among men, he visibly pits the witness of the saints against the rule of the devil; in our weakness he displays his strength. The dangers, labors, and sermons of the apostle Paul, Athanasius, Augustine, and other teachers of the church are holy works, true sacrifices acceptable to God, battles by which Christ restrained the devil and drove him away from the believers.”<sup>16</sup> And from our perspective today, looking back on the events of the Reformation era, we would say as well that the dangers, labors, and sermons of Luther, Chemnitz, and their colleagues were likewise providentially used by Christ for the protection of his believers from devilish deceptions. The Creeds and Confessions of the church are enduring testimonies to these historic victories for truth and salvation, won for his church by Christ through the ministries of Fathers and Reformers who were uniquely gifted for the challenges that they rose to meet.

#### IV.

Regarding the state of the Lutheran Church in the generations that followed the publication of the Book of Concord, Robert D. Preus observes that “The strict confessionalism of Lutheran orthodoxy is a well-known fact.”<sup>17</sup> While the seventeenth-century dogmaticians did not often directly cite the Confessions in theological writings that were intended to be read also beyond the confines of the Lutheran Church, they did cite the Confessions when the issue at hand was the question of what the genuine Lutheran position on some subject actually is. Preus points out that

Among fellow Lutherans, particularly against the Syncretists, the Lutheran Confessions very often entered into discussion and were frequently quoted at great length. In such cases the Symbols were never placed above the Scriptures but were used as a touchstone for genuine Lutheranism. In fact the Syncretists, like the Roman Catholics, compelled orthodox Lutherans to rethink the whole question of the relation between Scripture and the Symbols of the church and to reiterate unequivocally the Lutheran position.<sup>18</sup>

This kind of respect for the Confessions began to be diminished when Orthodoxy gave way to

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<sup>15</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), Vol. II, p. 473.

<sup>16</sup>Apology IV:189-90, in *The Book of Concord*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 133.

<sup>17</sup>Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Volume I: A Study of Theological Prolegomena (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 36.

<sup>18</sup>Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Volume I, p. 38.

Syncretism was a theological movement based in Helmstedt, Germany, and led by George Calixtus, which advocated the idea of reuniting Christendom on the basis of the consensus of the ancient creeds and councils of the church – turning back the clock, as it were, on medieval and Reformation-era developments and divisions.



Pietism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. And this attitude changed dramatically and tragically when Pietism gave way to Rationalism in the mid- to late-eighteenth century.

The mainstream adherents of Pietism – when that movement was in the ascendancy – continued to profess their agreement with the doctrinal content of the Confessions, and continued to subscribe to the Confessions. But they minimized the overall importance of sound doctrine, as compared to their greater emphasis on interior religious experience.<sup>19</sup> There were some key divergences between this new emphasis and the Biblical dogmatic content of the Confessions, especially with respect to matters of soteriology. Much of what the Confessions teach about conversion and regeneration, justification and sanctification, would need to be minimized or ignored – even if formal lip-service were still given to this teaching – in order to press the Pietist agenda.

An interesting historical datum that illustrates the theological weakness of Pietism comes from the time when the (Protestant) Stuart dynasty of the British royal family died out in 1714, with the passing away of Queen Anne.<sup>20</sup> The heir to the British throne was now Elector George of Hanover.<sup>21</sup> He was a second cousin of Anne and a matrilineal descendant of the Stuarts. And he was a Lutheran. As Elector of Hanover he was the *ex officio* overseer and guardian of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Hanover. We might expect this to have been a problem for George, in view of the fact that the King of England is obligated to function as the earthly head of the Church of England, and accordingly to be a member of *that* church.

C. Emmanuel Schultze offers us this interesting – yet bewildering – historical account of how that potential problem was solved: “At the accession of George I. the agreement of both churches was, by a conference of English and German divines, investigated into and pronounced to be as perfect as possible, which removed the doubts of their king, who is said to have declared that he would not

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<sup>19</sup>Martin Schmidt summarizes the character and grandiose intentions of the Pietist movement, noting that “Its avowed purpose was to bring about a second reformation. After a good start, so Pietism asserted, the Reformation had stranded in orthodoxism and was stuck in the shoals of institutionalism, dogmatism, and polemics. Favorite pietist concepts and slogans were: ‘Life versus doctrine,’ ‘Holy Spirit versus the office of the ministry,’ or ‘Reality versus the appearance of godliness’... Faith, the chief element in the teachings of the Reformation, was more clearly defined as ‘living faith’; and the evidence that faith is ‘living’ was sought in the ‘fruits of faith’..., i.e., in sanctification of life, above all in the exercise of love. ... The reformers and the orthodox theologians had given central place to the Word of God and the doctrine of justification. But Pietism’s central subject was regeneration (conversion, rebirth). ... Pietism focused its attention on man, on individual man. ... As a result, Pietism also modified the concept ‘church.’ The church is no longer the community of those who have been called by the Word and Sacraments, but the association of the reborn, of those who ‘earnestly desire to be Christians.’ ... Only little weight is attached to the ministry of the Word, to worship services, the Sacraments, to confession and absolution, and to the observance of Christian customs; a thoroughly regenerated person does not need these crutches at all. Pietism stressed the personal element over against the institutional; voluntariness versus compulsion; the present versus tradition, and the rights of the laity over against the pastors” (“Pietism,” in *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, edited by Julius Bodenseick [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965], Vol. III, pp. 1898-99). In the Pietists’ reading of the Scriptures – as compared to the Reformers’ reading of the same Scriptures – different assumptions led to different conclusions, different priorities, and different methodologies in the faith and life of the church.

<sup>20</sup>Queen Anne was the mother of several children, but they all died before she did.

<sup>21</sup>There were still active Stuart claimants to the throne until the nineteenth century, but since they were Roman Catholic, the Crown and Parliament Recognition Act of 1689 disallowed their claims. That act, passed in conjunction with the Glorious Revolution, requires the monarch to be a Protestant.

renounce his religion for a crown.”<sup>22</sup> George’s desire to remain true to his Lutheran faith – to the extent that he understood its character and obligations – is admirable. But the behavior of the Hanoverian theologians – who told him that the agreement between Lutheran doctrine and Anglican doctrine is “as perfect as possible” – is not admirable at all. At this time in history, the notorious “black rubric” was printed as a part of the Communion Rite in every copy of the Anglican Church’s *Book of Common Prayer*. That rubric states that “the natural Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ are in Heaven, and not here; it being against the truth of Christ’s natural Body to be at one time in more places than one.” What were those Lutheran theologians who advised King George thinking?

Pietism, with the intense and draining experiential demands that it made on people, was not able to endure as a large-scale movement. It basically wore people out, spiritually and emotionally. The time when the appeal of Pietism was beginning to diminish was also the time in which Enlightenment thinking was beginning to rise up in France. And when Enlightenment ideas crossed the border into Germany, Rationalism invaded the church in its now-weakened theological condition, and wreaked havoc.

## V.

Most of the German Rationalists could fairly be described as Socinians and Unitarians as far as their own beliefs about God were concerned. But they did not usually expend much effort in attacking the classic dogmas of the faith as much as they simply ignored them, and focused their attention instead on the inculcating of a practical morality in those who still came to church – and who were willing to listen to the inane sermons that were preached during this time period. John A. W. Haas summarizes the horrid effects of this insidious movement:

Rationalism...changed the whole appearance and life of the Church. Churches were made lecture-rooms, the pulpit became the desk above the altar, which dwindled into insignificance. From the hymns all distinctively Christian thought was removed, and commonplace rhymes of the shallowest order were added, which praised reasonable virtue, delight of nature, and care of the body. Sermons were long-winded moral treatises on the utility of things. The old Church Orders and Agenda were mutilated, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper robbed of their meaning, Private Confession totally abolished, and Confirmation degraded into a promise of virtue. Catechisms contained natural religion and shallow morality on the happiness of man.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>C. Emmanuel Schultze, Preface, *Six Sermons Preached by the Late Mr. Lawrence V. Buskirk, Candidate for the Holy Ministry* (1797), p. 5; quoted in Henry Eyster Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), p. 279.

<sup>23</sup>John A. W. Haas, “Rationalism,” in *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, edited by Haas and Henry Eyster Jacobs (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), p. 402.

Evidence of how far Rationalism departed from the beliefs and practices of the Reformation could be seen most vividly in the area of public worship. The Lutheran Confessions lay out a well-thought-through theology of worship, and a theologically-based understanding of the purpose and character of the rites and ceremonies that are used in worship. The Augsburg Confession teaches, “Concerning church rites,” that “those rites should be observed that can be observed without sin and that contribute to peace and good order in the church, for example, certain holy days, festivals, and the like. However, people are reminded not to burden consciences, as if such worship were necessary for salvation” (Augsburg Confession XV:1-2 [Latin], Kolb/Wengert p. 49). It further states that “ceremonies are especially needed in order to teach those who are ignorant” (Augsburg Confession XXIV:3 [Latin], Kolb/Wengert p. 69). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession elaborated on this point, in saying that “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies” (Apology XXIV:3,

At this point in Lutheran history, at least as far as the institutions of the church were concerned, Lutheran Confessionalism was dead. There were still some pockets of Pietism that had never surrendered to the ascendant Rationalism. And there was also now a new push in certain corners – especially in Prussia – toward joining together what was left of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches, into a confessionally-tolerant united “evangelical” church. It was felt that this kind of non-confessional homogenized Protestantism would be able to push back more effectively against the rank infidelity of Rationalism. And so finally, in 1817, the King of Prussia decreed such a church into existence in his kingdom – forcibly joining the Lutherans and the Reformed into one ecclesiastical structure.

But also in 1817, Claus Harms of Kiel penned a new set of “95 Theses” against both Rationalism and Unionism, and thereby inaugurated a Confessional Revival within institutional Lutheranism. Many people who had never completely forgotten the soothing evangelical doctrine of their Small Catechism finally decided that they had had enough of the lunacy of Rationalism. They knew that they did not want to be Reformed either. And so a new fire of faith was ignited. Three telling theses from Harms are these:

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Kolb/Wengert p. 258). The overall relationship between Christian freedom and pastoral responsibility in matters of liturgy and worship, according to the understanding of the Lutheran Reformers, is well summarized in these words of the Apology: “But just as the different lengths of day and night do not undermine the unity of the church, so we maintain that different rites instituted by human beings do not undermine the true unity of the church, although it pleases us when universal rites are kept for the sake of tranquillity. Thus, in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord’s day, and other more important festival days. With a very grateful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and teach [the] common folk and [the] ignorant” (Apology VII/VIII:33, Kolb/Wengert p. 180).

Some of the Pietists, when they were in positions of influence in the late seventeenth and early-to-mid eighteenth centuries, may not have liked certain aspects of the public ritual of the Lutheran Church. But few substantial changes were made by them in the orders of service of the various Lutheran territories.

The iconoclastic arrogance of the Rationalists was, however, of a completely different spirit. Joseph Herl describes the liturgical agenda of Rationalism in Germany, and the motivations behind the implementation of this agenda: “Calls for liturgical reform written from a Rationalist perspective began to appear in the 1780s. They called for drastic modifications to the traditional liturgy or even wholesale abandonment of it. ... Johann Wilhelm Rau argued in 1786 that the old formulas were no longer usable because the expressions in them were in part no longer understandable and in part objectionable. Fixed forms in general were not good, and even the Lord’s Prayer was meant only as an example to follow and not as a prayer to be repeated. Some said that liturgical formulas served to ease the task of the pastor and preserve order in the service. But [according to Rau] the advantages were specious: very few pastors had so little time left over from other duties that they could not prepare a service, and in Dortmund (for example) no liturgical formulas were prescribed, without disruption to the service. Each pastor used his own self-written order or spoke extemporaneously. According to Rau, the most important abuses to curb were the too-frequent use of the Lord’s Prayer, the making of the sign of the cross, the Aaronic benediction, chanting by the pastor, the use of candles on the altar, private confession, the use of the appointed lectionary texts for sermons, and various superstitious practices surrounding communion, such as carrying the houseling cloth to catch crumbs that might fall and referring to the ‘true’ body and blood of Christ. ... Peter Burdorf, writing in 1795, argued that repetition in the liturgy weakened the attention of the listener and the impact of the form. The current liturgy did not hold people’s attention, nor did the sermon. ... Some liturgy was necessary for public services to be held, but it should be as simple as possible in order to meet the needs of contemporary Christians. Rationalist writers backed up their words with deeds and produced a number of new liturgies written with the above concerns in mind. Luther Reed...offered the opinion that these liturgies ‘ranged in character from empty sentimentality to moralizing soliloquy and verbosity.’ ... Hymns were rewritten as well with a view to removing ‘superstition’ and outdated theology” (Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism: Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], pp. 127-29). The rationale and rhetoric of the Rationalists were frighteningly similar to the rationale and rhetoric of many advocates of so-called “contemporary worship” in our day.

50. We have a sure Bible Word, unto which we take heed (2 Peter 1:19); and to guard against the use of force to turn and twist this like a weathercock we have our Symbolical Books. ...

75. As a poor maiden, the Lutheran Church is now to be made rich by being married. Do not perform the ceremony over Luther's bones. They will become alive at it, and then – woe to you! ...

78. If at the colloquy at Marburg, 1529, the body and blood of Christ was in the bread and wine, it is still so in 1817.<sup>24</sup>

## VI.

These developments in European Lutheranism were paralleled in the history of North American Lutheranism. The Lutheran Church had originally been brought to America in the seventeenth century by Swedish and Dutch settlers, and many German Lutherans arrived in the first half of the eighteenth century. The earliest Lutherans in the American colonies were for the most part Orthodox in their orientation. For example, the avowedly Orthodox ministers of the New York Classis, under the leadership of Pastor Wilhelm Christoph Berkenmeyer, declared in their 1735 church order that they would “regulate their teaching and preaching according to the rule of the divine Word, the Biblical prophetic and apostolical writings, also according to our Symbolical Books, the Unaltered Confession of Augsburg, its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, both Catechisms of Luther, and the Formula of Concord.” They declared furthermore that they would not “teach or preach, privately or publicly, anything against these [Confessions] nor even use any other new phrases which would contradict the same.”<sup>25</sup>

The Confessions also held an important place in the theology and practice of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, who is often styled the “Patriarch” of the Lutheran Church in America.<sup>26</sup> The congregations and pastors of the Pennsylvania Ministerium, organized in 1748 under Muhlenberg's leadership, were expected to subscribe to “the Evangelical Lutheran doctrine, according to the foundation of the Prophets and Apostles, and the unaltered Augsburg Confession and all the other Symbolical Books.”<sup>27</sup> And at a personal level, Muhlenberg took great umbrage at those who questioned his doctrinal soundness as a Lutheran pastor. He stated:

I ask Satan and all his lying spirits to prove anything against me which is not in harmony with the teaching of the apostles or of our Symbolical Books. I have stated frequently that there is neither fault nor error nor any kind of defect in our evangelical doctrines, founded on the

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<sup>24</sup>“Theses of Claus Harms,” *The Lutheran Cyclopaedia*, pp. 513-14.

<sup>25</sup>Karl Kretzmann, “The Constitution of the First Lutheran Synod in America,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, Vol. 9 (1936), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup>Socrates Henkel notes that Muhlenberg and his co-laborers in the Pennsylvania Ministerium, organized in 1748, did not “teach any other doctrines, nor endeavor to establish, in this country, any other system of faith, than that inculcated in the Lutheran Confessions and Catechisms” (*History of the Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod* [New Market, Virginia: Henkel & Co., 1890], p. 2).

<sup>27</sup>Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, report of the consecration of St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, *Hallische Nachrichten* (1787), pp. 284-85; quoted in Vergilius Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology: A Study of the Issue between American Lutheranism and Old Lutheranism* (New York: The Century Co., 1927), p. 9.

teaching of the prophets and the apostles, and set forth in our Symbolical Books.<sup>28</sup>

Muhlenberg was, and was known to be, an adherent of the Pietist movement. But his Pietism was of a pronounced churchly bent.<sup>29</sup> When the Pennsylvania Ministerium was organized in 1748, one of the first orders of business was the adoption of a standardized Lutheran liturgical order and agenda. This Liturgy included a few modifications for circumstances in America, but it was clearly rooted in the Orthodox Lutheran liturgical traditions of Europe. In essence, “The service reproduced in Pennsylvania is the old, well-established, conservative service of the Saxon and North German liturgies.”<sup>30</sup>

## VII.

But there were noticeable weaknesses in Confessional understanding and practice in some sectors of eighteenth-century American Lutheranism, which established an unhealthy trajectory for the future of the church in the New World. Bishop Dr. Jasper Svedberg of Skara, in Sweden, wanted the Swedish congregations in America to follow a very “ecumenical” policy in their relations with the Anglican Church. And the Swedish congregations in America complied with his wishes. Pastor Andreas Sandel – the Swedish Lutheran Provost in Philadelphia from 1702 to 1719 – explained this:

Although between them and us there is some difference with respect to the Lord’s Supper, yet he does not want that small difference to rend asunder the bond of peace. We do not attempt any discussion upon it; neither do we touch upon such things when we preach among them, nor do they attempt to persuade our people to their opinion in this respect; but we live on intimate and fraternal terms with one another, as they also call us their brethren. They have the government in their hands; we are under them; it is enough that they want to have this intercourse with us; we can do nothing else than render them every service and fraternal favor...<sup>31</sup>

Muhlenberg, too, in spite of his sincere desire to be and remain a Confessional Lutheran, is known to have preached in Reformed and Anglican/Episcopal churches, and to have invited Reformed and Anglican/Episcopal clergymen to preach in his.<sup>32</sup> As someone who was born and raised in Hanover, and who then served as a pastor in British North America, Muhlenberg may very well have been taken in by the errant judgment of those who had told King George that Anglicanism and Lutheranism are essentially the same. Muhlenberg put to paper his perceptions of the Church of

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<sup>28</sup>Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, *Hallische Nachrichten*; quoted in Jürgen Ludwig Neve, *A Brief History of the Lutheran Church in America* (Second Revised and Enlarged Edition) (Burlington, Iowa: The German Literary Board, 1916), p. 72.

<sup>29</sup>Muhlenberg’s clash with Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf in Pennsylvania, and his opposition to the Moravians’ enthusiastic indifference to the doctrinal norms of the Lutheran Church, are well known.

<sup>30</sup>Beale M. Schmucker, *Lutheran Church Review*, Vol. I, p. 171; quoted in Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 268.

<sup>31</sup>Andreas Sandel; quoted in Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, pp. 98-99. In the nineteenth century, the churches of the former Swedish colony along the Delaware River were finally absorbed into the Episcopal Church.

<sup>32</sup>Neve, *A Brief History of the Lutheran Church in America*, pp. 72-73. Among those from non-Lutheran churches who preached in Muhlenberg’s pulpit was the “Great Awakening” English preacher George Whitefield.

England in a 1771 letter:

Their articles of faith have been extracted from the Word of God as well as ours; their church prayers are taken from the Holy Bible as well as ours; they have the two holy sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as we; their explanations of their articles of faith are as good Evangelical Lutheran as one could wish them to be; in a word, the doctrines of the English Established Church are more closely allied to ours than those of any other denomination in the wide world. We, therefore, have always studied to live in harmony with them.<sup>33</sup>

We must agree with the opinion of Henry Eyster Jacobs, that in this letter "The great founder of the Lutheran Church in America was giving away far more than he was conscious of."<sup>34</sup>

Article XXVIII of the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles, after stating that the doctrine of transubstantiation "cannot be proved by holy Writ" and "is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture," teaches instead that "The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner," and that "the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith." And Article XXIX asserts that when those who are "Wicked, and such as be void of a lively faith," partake of the bread and wine of the sacrament, "in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing." In his claim that these Anglican articles are as "Evangelical Lutheran" as one could wish them to be, Muhlenberg was obviously lacking in discernment – either with respect to the dogmatic substance of the Lutheran Confessions, or with respect to the dogmatic substance of the Thirty-nine Article, or both.

The Thirty-nine articles of the Church of England clearly teach the Calvinist position on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. They basically set forth a false alternative: One either believes in transubstantiation, or one believes in a spiritual presence of Christ – according to which an unbelieving communicant receives merely the outward "sign" of the body and blood of Christ, while "in no wise" receiving the Lord's actual body and blood in the consecrated elements that are eaten and drunk. Gone is any semblance of the Lutheran shibboleth of the *manducatio indignorum*, by which Lutherans in the Reformation era tested the genuineness of someone's belief in an objective Real Presence – as based on the Word and institution of Christ, and not on the subjective personal faith of the communicant.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, Letter to Nova Scotia (Nov. 15, 1771); quoted in Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 280.

<sup>34</sup>Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 280.

<sup>35</sup>C. Emmanuel Schultze, who was married to Muhlenberg's daughter, was even more bold than his father-in-law – ecumenically-speaking – in opining that "There is not a great difference in point of doctrine in all the Protestant churches. ... With the Church of England, however, the Lutherans have and ever had a closer connection than with others, owing to a more perfect similarity in church government, festival days, ceremonies, and even some particulars in doctrine. ... The Thirty-nine Articles fully agree with the Augustan Confession, and every Lutheran can subscribe them" (Preface to *Six Sermons Preached by the Late Mr. Lawrence V. Buskirk, Candidate for the Holy Ministry* [1797], p. 5; quoted in Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 279). Schultze's brother-in-law and the Patriarch's son, John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg – when he was serving a Lutheran parish in Woodstock, Virginia – had done just that in 1772. That is, the younger Muhlenberg subscribed formally to the Thirty-nine Articles, and received Anglican ordination in London, England, so that he could serve as a pastor in Virginia with all the rights and privileges that were afforded there to a clergyman of the established church. He had

## VIII.

The confessional situation in the American Lutheran Church got much worse, however, when Father Muhlenberg and his generation passed from the scene, and when men who had come under the influence of European Rationalism (and of New England Unitarianism) rose to prominence in the church in their stead. References to the Symbolical Books disappeared from “Lutheran” synodical constitutions and from “Lutheran” ordination rituals. *Confessional* Lutheranism almost completely disappeared.<sup>36</sup>

The situation was worst in the New York Ministerium, which had been founded in 1786 under the leadership of a son-in-law of Muhlenberg, John Christopher Kunze. Kunze himself was a Pietist, who like his father-in-law harbored some naïvely optimistic views regarding the theological compatibility of Lutheranism and Anglicanism.<sup>37</sup> But after Kunze’s death in 1807, and the election of

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already been ordained as a Lutheran pastor in 1768, and even after 1772 he still considered himself to be a Lutheran. The Woodstock parish that he served likewise considered itself still to be a Lutheran parish. (Even with his two ordinations – Lutheran and Anglican – J. Peter G. Muhlenberg did not remain in the ministry. During the Revolutionary War he served as a General in the Continental Army. After the war he went into politics, serving at various times in the Pennsylvania state government, as a member of the United States House of Representatives, and as a United States Senator.)

<sup>36</sup>Charles Porterfield Krauth describes the grievous situation in which both European and American Lutheranism – and European and American Christianity as a whole – found itself, at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century: “After our fathers fell asleep our Church in America began to exhibit evidences of decline in faith and life. ... Deism had run riot in England, and Atheism in France, and from those powerful nationalities had spread their influence through Europe and America. Rationalism in the Lutheran, Reformed, and Romish Churches, had been growing stronger in times so well fitted for its growth. Socinianism, which had triumphed in the Calvinistic Churches of the Continent, and of England, ...appeared in New England, the American Geneva, and from it went forth with a might which seemed to threaten the very existence of the Gospel faith in all the churches. Universalism arose and spread. ... The religious life characteristic of the period, in some sense, aided the evil. Unionism, Pietism, Moravianism, and Methodism were alike in the indeterminate character of their doctrinal basis. The defenders of revelation showed a difference of opinion, rather than of spirit, from its assailants; the maintainers, in some degree, of the old faith, often made good their cause by abandoning a large part, and half betraying what they pretended to advocate. It was the saddest era in the history of the Church since the Reformation – the era of spurious “illumination.” The light itself had become darkness, and the darkness was great indeed. Our Church in America shared in this terrible defection. Socinianism worked furtively, and at length openly, in parts of it. Precious doctrines were diluted, ignored, or abandoned. The Confessions were set aside virtually, even where the antecedents of the past made it impossible to abandon them openly. The history of our Church, the tradition of her faith and life, was still strong enough to make caution necessary; and the evil worked rather by the withholding of the truth, than by the formal annunciation of error. The Church was drugged with narcotics, not with irritants, or, indeed, was starved to death, rather than poisoned. We had a weak, indecisive pulpit, feeble catechisms, vague hymns, [and] constitutions which reduced the minister to the position of a hireling talker, and made Synods disorganizations for the purpose of preventing anything from being done. Our sun had gone down, and the only relief from absolute night was the diffused light which still lingered from a happier time. ... In the United States there were nominally Lutheran Synods which were largely Unitarian... In the deadness of our whole land, in the rationalism of Europe which was imported, and in the Socinianism of New England, which was of native growth, had originated the fearful change which came over our Church, and to these influences we owe nearly every trouble under which our Church afterward labored” (“The General Council Before Its First Anniversary,” *The Lutheran Church Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. 4 [October 1907], pp. 660-62).

<sup>37</sup>In 1797, under Kunze’s presidency, the New York Ministerium adopted a comity policy which held, “That on account of an intimate relation subsisting between the English Episcopalian and Lutheran churches, the identity of their doctrine and the near approach of their church discipline, this consistory will never acknowledge a newly erected Lutheran church in places where the members may partake of the services of the said English

Frederick Henry Quitman as his successor to the presidency of the Ministerium, the character of New York Lutheranism changed for the worst very quickly and very noticeably.

Quitman had been trained in the Rationalism that was prevalent in Germany during the time of his education there in the late eighteenth century, and had thoroughly imbibed it. Quitman joined the New York Ministerium in 1796, and as an intellectually-gifted individual rose quickly to prominence within that body. Perhaps because of Quitman's highly-developed sense of morality and ethics, the older Pietist pastors among whom he and others of his persuasion worked and exercised influence – as the nineteenth century dawned – seem not to have grasped the serious threat to genuine Christian faith that his Rationalism posed.

In 1814, Quitman published his *Evangelical Catechism*, as a replacement for Luther's Small Catechism in providing religious instruction to the youth of the church. It differed from Luther's Catechism both in its highly cerebral form, and (in spite of its title) in its unevangelical doctrinal content. The closest that this work comes to affirming the divinity of Christ is its statement that, "Although born of a humble Jewish woman, the Deity was closely and in a supernatural manner connected with him."<sup>38</sup> Much is also left to be desired when Quitman writes that "the chief tenor of the Gospel" is "that God is a propitious Father of the whole human race, that as a pledge of this truth had sent his only begotten Son into the world, so that if men repent of their errors and sins, and believing in Jesus Christ as their Savior take him for their guide, he will not only pardon their sins, but also enable them, by the assistance of his Holy Spirit, to lead a godly life, and in this manner prepare and render them meet for a better and happier world."<sup>39</sup>

In his catechism, Quitman says nothing about the regenerating power of Holy Baptism, or about the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. And this does not surprise us, in view of Quitman's assumptions about faith, and about why people believe the things that they believe. He asserts that "To believe in anything" is "to take it for granted; to be convinced of its truth." He adds that "The grounds that ought to constitute the basis of rational belief" are "either natural perception and experience, or the authority of competent witnesses, or finally,

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Episcopal Church" (quoted in Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 318). At this time overtures were being made from representatives of the New York Ministerium to the Episcopal Church, exploring the possibility that the Lutherans might actually be united with the Episcopal Church officially and formally, via the Episcopal re-ordination of the Lutheran pastors (Jacobs, p. 319). Nothing, however, ultimately came of this.

<sup>38</sup>Frederick H. Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism: or a Short Exposition of the Principle Doctrines and Precepts of the Christian Religion* (Hudson, New York: William E. Norman, 1814), p. 164.

In a bit of prosaic silliness, Quitman states that "In the character of Jesus, as delineated by the evangelists, there is something so excellent and divine that few of his most violent enemies have attempted to find fault with it" (p. 33). He also speaks of Jesus being "styled the 'only begotten Son of God,' as well on account of his exalted dignity and preeminence above all created beings, as on account of the great love which his heavenly Father has manifested for him" (p. 34).

<sup>39</sup>Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, pp. 36-37.

Quitman's doctrine of sin is likewise severely lacking. He writes that (natural) man is not "deprived of free moral agency." If man were so deprived, then "how should God judge the world and treat us as accountable beings? Besides this, religion addresses man as a free agent and ascribes to him the power of choice and resistance. She admonishes him to exert all his powers and faculties in her service, and whilst she promises great rewards to her faithful friends, she threatens severe punishments to those that neglect to obey her precepts. All this would be absurd and even insulting if man were not a free agent" (p. 20).



unquestionable arguments of reason.”<sup>40</sup> And more specifically, “Faith in Christ” is understood to be “a firm belief in the divine authority of Jesus, and of his doctrine and promises, expressed by a sincere zeal to cherish Christian sentiments and dispositions, and to cultivate Christian graces.”<sup>41</sup>

In other writings, Quitman expands on his views regarding the relationship between human reason and the revelation of Scripture. Demonstrating that nothing of the spirit of Luther remains in him, he writes in his *Three Sermons* that

Reason and revelation are the only sources from which religious knowledge is to be derived, and the rules by which all religious questions ought to be decided... And where else should we look for certainty in the pursuit of religious truth? Are not both reason and revelation descended from heaven, always in harmony with and supporting one another?<sup>42</sup>

And in *A Treatise on Magic*, Quitman articulates a very un-Lutheran hermeneutic, declaring “that in dubious scriptural passages we must first enquire what reason dictates and what daily experience teaches, and explain such passages accordingly.”<sup>43</sup>

## IX.

All of this nonsense was, in the final analysis, too much for most Lutherans in America to stomach, and this resulted in a decisive reaction. There were some Lutherans who had never fully abandoned their commitment to a theology that followed the basic contours of the Lutheran Confessions, and who, of course, would never have had any interest in the Rationalism of Quitman and those who followed him. This conscious Lutheran remnant was to be found especially in the Tennessee Synod, organized in 1820, with a clerical membership comprised largely of members of the

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<sup>40</sup>Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>41</sup>Quitman, *Evangelical Catechism*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>42</sup>Frederick H. Quitman, *Three Sermons...*, second edition (Philadelphia: William Fry, 1818), pp. 33-34.

<sup>43</sup>Frederick H. Quitman, *A Treatise on Magic, or, on the Intercourse Between Spirits and Men* (Albany, New York: Balance Press, 1810), p. 57.

The sterile theology that one finds in Quitman’s personal writings is reflected also in the English-language service book and hymnal that was edited by Quitman and Augustus Wackerhagen (who was married to Quitman’s step-daughter), and that was published by the New York Ministerium in 1814. Henry Eyster Jacobs makes these observations, with respect to the liturgical prayers and sacramental rites of this work: “‘Supremely exalted and adorable Jehovah,’ ‘Infinite and Incomprehensible Jehovah,’ ‘Self-existent and infinite Jehovah,’ have become favorite modes of addressing God, instead of the nearer and more familiar term of ‘Father, reconciled in Christ.’ ... All allusion to original sin is omitted from the baptismal address, which dwells upon the significative character of the sacrament. The Lord’s Supper is preceded by the invitation: ‘I say to all who own him as their Saviour, and resolve to be his faithful subjects: ye are welcome to this feast of love.’ The formula of distribution has, ‘Jesus said,’ and the rubric says that the ‘minister is at liberty to substitute any other words in place of these’” (*A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 342).

This is an example of the kind of absurdly bombastic and theologically insipid hymn verses that fill this book: “Supreme and universal light! / Fountain of reason! Judge of right! / Without whose kind, directing ray, / in everlasting night we stray. / Assist us, Lord, to act, to be, / what all thy sacred laws decree; / Worthy that intellectual flame, / which from thy breathing spirit came” (*A Collection of Hymns and a Liturgy for the Use of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches*, edited by Frederick H. Quitman and Augustus Wackerhagen [Philadelphia: G. & D. Billmeyer, 1814], p. 192; quoted in Benjamin A. Kolodziej, “Frederick Henry Quitman and the Catechesis of the American Lutheran Enlightenment,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 70, Nos. 3/4 [July/October 2006], p. 345).

Henkel family. Pastor David Henkel, intellectually gifted and articulate, was a particularly forceful proponent of a restoration of a consistent Confessional consciousness within American Lutheranism. In this way he was, in certain respects, the American equivalent of Claus Harms.

But most of the opposition to Quitman's kind of post-Lutheran "Lutheranism" arose from those who were influenced more so by the residual religious culture of American Puritanism, or by the Revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, or by both, so that their response to Rationalism was decidedly less Lutheran than that of the Henkels. Many of these Lutherans, to the extent that they still had some awareness of developments in Germany, were also influenced by the generic "evangelical" theology that was a driving force behind the Prussian Union.

The weakness of Muhlenberg and those of his era – in not fully appreciating classic Anglicanism's divergence from a sound sacramental theology – was now amplified; and a general indifference to the doctrines that historically separated Lutheranism from *all* other Protestant churches settled in as the norm. Jacobs notes that movements in America for a union, or at least for a closer cooperation, between Lutherans and the Reformed, were indeed

partially reactionary against the widespread rationalistic influences that were entering. When the most vital and most central doctrines were assailed, it was not unnatural for Christian ministers of diverging confessions to feel drawn toward each other in their defense. There would be more sympathy between a conservative Lutheran and a conservative Reformed theologian than between him [i.e. the conservative Lutheran] and the professed Lutheran theology represented by the catechism bearing in 1814 the indorsement of the New York Ministerium.<sup>44</sup>

In keeping with this sort of non-confessional, broadly-Protestant spirit, Johann Augustus Probst, a pastor in the Pennsylvania Ministerium, made a series of truly breathtaking assertions in a book advocating an American version of the Prussian Union:

The doctrine of unconditional election cannot be in the way. This doctrine has long since been abandoned; for there can scarcely be a single German Reformed preacher found who regards it as his duty to defend this doctrine. Zwingli's more liberal, rational and scriptural view of this doctrine, as well as of the Lord's Supper, has become the prevailing one among Lutherans and Reformed, and it has been deemed proper to abandon the view of both Luther and Calvin on the subject of both these doctrines.

The whole mass of the old Confessions was occasioned by the peculiar circumstances of those troublous times, has become obsolete by the lapse of ages, and is yet valuable only as matter of history. Those times and circumstances have passed away, and our situation both in regard to political and ecclesiastical relations, is entirely changed. We are therefore not bound to these books, but only to the Bible. For what do the unlearned know of the Augsburg Confession, or the Form of Concord, [or] of the Synod of Dort...[?]

All enlightened and intelligent preachers of both churches agree, that there is much in the former symbolical books (or confessions of faith) that must be stricken out as antiquated and contrary to common sense, and be made conformable with the Bible, and that we have no right

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<sup>44</sup>Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 324.

to pledge ourselves to the mere human opinions of Luther, or Calvin, or Zwingli...<sup>45</sup>

Even though this unionistic attitude was purportedly in the interest of a greater effectiveness in beating back the errors of Rationalism, more of the assumptions of Rationalism than they may have realized still permeated the theological methodology of the “Lutherans” who were now thinking in this way. Samuel Simon Schmucker, the President of the Lutheran seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, emerged as the leader of what came to be called the “American Lutheran” movement in the first half of the nineteenth century. He had much more of an affinity for the hermeneutical assumptions of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin than for those of Luther. This can be seen in a speculative theological soliloquy that he included in his seminary textbook, *Elements of Popular Theology*, about the manner in which God “ought” to give humans “information” about himself, and about religious subjects in general – beyond what is accessible to their reason and their powers of rational observation in the world. Schmucker writes:

In short, if God sees fit to grant to mankind any additional information beyond what the heavens and the earth and the structure of the human soul afford, the most suitable method of its accomplishment so far as we can see, would be this: To communicate these truths *which will of course be reasonable in themselves*, to one or more suitable individuals; appoint them to teach these doctrines; attest the divinity of their mission by satisfactory evidence, and provide for the accurate transmission of these truths and evidences to all future generations for whom they were intended.<sup>46</sup>

Schmucker goes on to opine that the written Scriptures, inspired and infallible, satisfy this need for the church of all time. What Schmucker writes here calls to mind Calvin’s bold statement that “the Lord has instituted nothing that is at variance with reason.”<sup>47</sup> Schmucker himself reproduces Calvin’s rationalistic sentiment when he writes elsewhere in his textbook that “A divine revelation cannot contain any thing which is contrary to the plain and indisputable dictates of reason.”<sup>48</sup> This, of course, contrasts sharply with Luther’s significantly *different* assumptions, as he approaches the reading and interpretation of Sacred Scripture:

The knowledge of lawyers and poets comes from reason and may, in turn, be understood and grasped by reason. But what Moses and the prophets teach does not stem from reason and the wisdom of men. Therefore he who presumes to comprehend Moses and the prophets with his reason and to measure and evaluate Scripture according to its agreement with reason will get away from the Bible entirely. From the very beginning all heretics owed their rise to the notion that what they had read in Scripture they were at liberty to explain according to the teachings

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<sup>45</sup>Johann Augustus Probst, *Die Wiedervereinigung der Lutheraner und Reformirten* (1826), pp. 74, 76, 80; quoted in Samuel Simon Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church, Historically, Doctrinally, and Practically Delineated* (Springfield, Ohio: D. Harbaugh, 1851), pp. 220-21.

<sup>46</sup>Samuel Simon Schmucker, *Elements of Popular Theology* (Philadelphia: S. S. Miles, 1845), pp. 21-22. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup>John Calvin, “Genevan Catechism,” *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, edited by J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 26.

<sup>48</sup>Schmucker, *Elements of Popular Theology*, p. 73.

of reason.<sup>49</sup>

The doctrinal character of the “American Lutheran” movement that emerged from this religious stew – as contrasted with the convictions of the “Old Lutheran” Confessionalists in Germany who were inspired by Claus Harms’ theses – is reflected in an 1845 letter from several of the “American Lutheran” movement’s leaders to representatives of the Prussian Union Church:

Now as to our doctrinal views, we confess without disguise, indeed confess it loudly and openly, that the greatest majority of us are not old Lutherans, in the sense in which a small party exists in Germany under that name. We are convinced that, if the great Luther were still living, he would not be a member of it either. We believe that the three last centuries have also produced men who were capable of independent thought, research and growth equal to the 16th. Yea, as insignificant as we consider ourselves, we are nevertheless emboldened, particularly through our feeling of duty, to investigate and explore Scripture, and to draw our doctrinal views from this heavenly source. But, nevertheless, we are Evangelical Lutheran. Committed to Luther’s fundamental principle that God’s Word is without error, we have proved that Luther’s doctrinal construction is essentially correct. In most of our church principles we stand on common ground with the union or merged church of Germany. The distinctive views which separate the old Lutherans and the Reformed Church we do not consider essential; and the tendency of the so called old Lutheran party seems to us to be behind our time.<sup>50</sup>

The Prussian Unionists in Germany, with the force of the Prussian state apparatus, physically persecuted the “Old Lutherans” in their midst. Their kindred spirits in America did not have access to those kinds of coercive civil mechanisms for suppressing their ecclesiastical opponents. But the “American Lutherans” were not above taking pejorative verbal swipes at those in the New World who wanted to be and remain Confessionally Lutheran. And in the process, they also often mischaracterized the actual teachings of the Confessionalists, so as to make those teachings – and those teachers – seem as unsophisticated and backward as possible.

One of the nastiest examples of this comes from the pen of Pastor John Bachman of Charleston, South Carolina – who, interestingly enough, had grown up in New York, and had been trained for the ministry there by Quitman. Referring to the Tennessee Synod, and to David Henkel in particular, Bachman stated in 1837:

Some years ago several individuals residing in North Carolina, who had previously been members of our church, on account of some dissatisfaction separated themselves from our communion. They chose as a leader an individual by the name of Hinkel, (hence they are called Hinkelites,) a weak and illiterate man, whose ground of dissent, as far as can be gathered from the crude, visionary and inflammatory publications, which have from time [to time] appeared, either under his name or that of his sect, was, the Evangelical Church had departed from the true doctrines of the Reformation, which he and his church had attempted to

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<sup>49</sup>Martin Luther, Sermon on Luke 2:21; quoted in *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, edited by Ewald M. Plass (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 1165.

<sup>50</sup>“Aus Amerika,” *Zeitschrift fuer Protestantismus und Kirche*, Vol. 11 (1846), pp. 263-64; quoted in E. Clifford Nelson, editor, *The Lutherans in North America* (revised edition) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 220. The letter was signed by Samuel Simon Schmucker, Benjamin Kurtz, Henry N. Pohlman, John G. Morris, and Henry I. Schmidt.

restore. ... Those doctrines which they profess to have derived from the Lutheran Church...may be classed under the three following heads: 1st, that baptism is regeneration. 2nd, that in the Lord's supper the elements become the actual flesh and blood of Christ; and thirdly, that the participation of the sacraments entitles us to salvation. These sentiments, so directly opposed to the Gospel of Christ, and the express declaration of the Reformers, and fraught with so much evil, were immediately denounced by all the members of our Church as unscriptural, and not warranted by any article of our creed. No Synod in our country has ever acknowledged, or given countenance to, this sect.<sup>51</sup>

One wonders if Bachman was deliberately lying in this slanderous execration, or if he was himself “a weak and illiterate man” as far as his understanding of classic Lutheran theology was concerned.

## X.

One interesting contribution that Schmucker did make to the character of the “American Lutheran” movement, was a partial reintroduction of the Augsburg Confession, as a qualified norm for doctrine in the church. As we have already noted, under the influence of Rationalism, after the death of Muhlenberg, all references to the Confessions disappeared from synodical constitutions and from the approved rites for ordination. But under Schmucker's influence, the seminary where he taught, beginning in 1825, required of its professors an oath that included the following affirmations:

... I do *ex animo* believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the inspired word of God and the only perfect rule of faith and practice. I believe the Augsburg Confession and the Catechisms of Luther to be a summary and just exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of the word of God.<sup>52</sup>

There is a deliberate ambiguity in this wording. Do the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession and the Catechisms *correlate with* the fundamental doctrines of the Word of God, so that the professors are subscribing to all of the doctrines in these standards, while acknowledging that there might also be non-fundamental doctrines that are not included within them? Or do the Augsburg Confession and the Catechisms contain a mixture of fundamental doctrines, to which the professors are subscribing, and non-fundamental doctrines, to which they are not subscribing? And if the latter interpretation is the intent of this oath, which are which?

The Gettysburg seminary was operated by the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States of America, which had been formed by several “American Lutheran” regional synods in 1820. A further development in the wording of the doctrinal basis of the “American Lutheran” movement can be seen in the recommended constitution for district synods of the General Synod, which was approved by the general body in 1829. District synods were therein called upon to restrict pastoral ordination to those men who were willing to state publicly their agreement with a series of interrogatories, which included the following:

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the word of God, & the

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<sup>51</sup>John Bachman, *A Sermon on the Doctrines and Discipline of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (1837); quoted in part in Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church*, p. 216; and in part in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, pp. 154-55.

<sup>52</sup>*Constitution of the Theological Seminary of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States of America*; quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 79.

only infallible rule of faith and practice? 2. Do you believe that the fundamental doctrines of the word of God are taught in a manner substantially correct, in the doctrinal articles of the Augsb[urg]. Confession?<sup>53</sup>

This ordination pledge is noticeably less restrictive than the seminary oath. The Catechisms of Luther are not mentioned – although it was expected that most pastors would use the Small Catechism as the basis for catechetical instruction in their congregations. The reference to the Augsburg Confession is now limited to the first part of that document, excluding the section on corrected abuses. And an additional qualifying term – “substantially” – is now added. So, there is enough wiggle-room here for a General Synod pastor to say that he rejects any doctrine of the Augsburg Confession that he does not consider to be a “fundamental doctrine”; and also to demur from any formulation that is used to explicate even a fundamental doctrine, as long as he considers that incorrect formulation not to be impinging on the “substance” of the doctrine in question.

But even if these official texts are ambiguous, Schmucker himself was not ambiguous in his own explanations of what he thought his qualified subscription to the Augsburg Confession actually obligated him to teach. In a thorough presentation that he made at a General Synod district synod convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1840, Schmucker said that “Luther had wisely regarded the reformation as unfinished, and exhorted his followers to turn away from his works, and study the bible more attentively.” And yet, in spite of Luther’s advice, the Lutheran Church – after his death – rigidly adhered to his interpretations, and elevated his writings almost to a “canonical” status. This improperly stifled “all efforts to continue the work of reformation so gloriously commenced by him.”<sup>54</sup> Now, however – at least according to Schmucker – the necessary continuing “reformation” of the Lutheran Church has finally been allowed to recommence. And on the basis of a more careful study of the Bible, several notable “improvements” have accordingly been made in the contemporary Lutheran Church. Schmucker elaborates:

*The first feature of improvement...is the entire rejection of the authority of the Fathers in ecclesiastical controversy. ...it is a principle which the experience of ages has clearly established, that in all controversies..., the bible, the whole bible, and nothing but the bible, must be the armor of the Protestant.*

*Another feature of improvement in the Lutheran church consists in her no longer requiring assent to the doctrine of the real presence of the Saviour in the eucharist. ... At the present day, whilst some shades of difference exist in the Lutheran church, all are permitted to enjoy their opinions in peace, and the most general received view, if we mistake not, is: “That there is no presence of the glorified human nature of the Saviour, either substantial or influential; nor anything mysterious or supernatural in the eucharist; yet, that whilst the bread and wine are merely symbolic representations of the Saviour’s absent body, by which we are reminded of his sufferings, there is also a special spiritual blessing bestowed by the divine Saviour on all worthy communicants, by which their faith and Christian graces are confirmed.”<sup>55</sup>*

Schmucker’s third and fourth items of “improvement” are the abandonment of the practice of personal

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<sup>53</sup>“Chapter XIX, Ordination,” quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 83.

<sup>54</sup>Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>55</sup>Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church*, pp. 60-61, 63. Emphases in original.

announcement to the pastor, and private confession and absolution, before communion; and the dropping of the exorcism of the baptizand (or a similar abjuration) from the baptismal rite. He then continues:

The *fifth* item of improvement in the Lutheran church is the more *systematic adjustment of her doctrines*. Luther...in the earlier part of his life...believed the Augustinian view of predestination. ... But he at the same time entertained other views inconsistent with this. Melancthon...led the way in the process of harmonizing their conflicting elements. ...

The *sixth* feature of improvement is the adoption of a more regular and rigid system of church government and discipline in this country. ...

The *last* item of improvement...is the practice of the Lutheran church in this country, not to bind her ministers to the minutiae of any human creed. The bible and the belief that the *fundamental doctrines* of the bible are taught in a manner substantially correct in the Augsburg Confession, is all that is required. ...the orthodox denominations of the present day coincide as much in doctrinal views, as did the Christians in the golden age of Christianity. If they could walk together in love, and their minor differences created no difficulty then; why should not Christians in the present day unite in the same manner? ... Happy, thrice happy too is the Lutheran church, that she, who was the first to cast off the yoke of Roman superstition and oppression, should lead the way in breaking the bonds of Protestant sectarianism...<sup>56</sup>

Although it is not directly mentioned in this essay, the “American Lutherans” also dissented from the Reformers’ teaching on the regenerative power and efficacy of Baptism, especially with respect to infants. Bachman, in his diatribe against the Tennessee Synod, had asserted, in regard to apostolic practice, that

When men became converted to the Christian religion they were admitted by water baptism as members of the Church of the Redeemer. But the water that was used was only an emblem of the Holy Spirit. ... Something more was necessary, and our Saviour taught Nicodemus, that in order to be prepared for the invisible Kingdom of God, he must be born of the Spirit – his heart must be converted to God by the divine influences from above.<sup>57</sup>

In describing where his instruction at the seminary departed from the teaching of the Book of Concord, and from the teaching of those who were trying to revive the theology of the Book of Concord in his time, Schmucker referred to “the obsolete views of the old Lutherans, contained in the former symbols of the church in some parts of Germany, such as exorcism, the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, private confession, baptismal regeneration, immersion in

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<sup>56</sup>Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church*, pp. 65-69. Emphases in original.

<sup>57</sup>Bachman, *A Sermon on the Doctrines and Discipline of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*; quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 155.

In formally setting forth its doctrinal position in 1834, the Synod of the West – a district synod of the General Synod – was a little more careful in what it said regarding Baptism: “We consider baptism to be a sacrament appointed by Jesus Christ, as the initiatory rite into his Church, and as a *means of grace*, i.e., of regeneration and sanctification. By the right use of this ordinance, we believe that the promised grace is not only offered and exhibited, but really conferred by the Holy Ghost; yet we do not confine the efficacy of the rite to that moment of time, wherein it was administered” (Evangelical Lutheran Synod of the West, *Proceedings of the Convention* [1834], p. 7; quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 103. Emphasis in original).

baptism, as taught in Luther's Large Catechism, etc."<sup>58</sup> With respect to the teachings of the Augsburg Confession in particular, Schmucker claimed that while certain "remnants of Romanism" were "retained indeed in the Confession," those errors are "universally rejected by our church in the present age." Included in this category is "especially the doctrine of the bodily presence" in the Lord's Supper.<sup>59</sup> Positively, Schmucker elsewhere expressed his opinion that "the grand and cherished doctrines of the illustrious reformers of the sixteenth century, which threw a halo of heavenly light around the renovated church," and which *are* therefore enduringly binding on all Lutherans, are the following: "the doctrine of the unity of God and the holy Trinity of persons in the Godhead – [the] divinity of the Saviour – the fall and depravity of man, both by nature and practice – the glorious work of redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ – regeneration by the Holy Spirit – justification by grace alone through faith – the divinely appointed sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper – the immortality of the soul, and eternal rewards and punishments."<sup>60</sup>

## XI.

The lack of orthodox Lutheran books in the English language, during the time when Lutherans in America were making their transition to that language, was probably one of the important factors that facilitated the development of "American Lutheranism." Lutherans of the "Muhlenberg tradition" had begun to switch over to the use of English during the time of Rationalism's ascendancy. As we would expect, there was little interest at that time – on the part of Rationalist pastors – in translating the Book of Concord and other classic Lutheran materials into English. When the critical reaction to Rationalism finally set in, those Lutherans who knew that they did not want to be Rationalists, but who were unable to read German, were limited in their exposure to the full range of alternatives to Rationalism. For many, the situation was not that they had really understood Confessional Lutheran theology, and had made an informed decision to reject it in favor of a Puritan or Revivalist alternative. Rather, they had a very weak grasp on what their Lutheran forebears in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had actually believed, and on why they had believed it – because there was no body of literature available to them that was able to introduce them to, and instruct them in, the orthodox Lutheran faith of their ancestors. Jürgen Ludwig Neve writes that

The English language reached ever widening circles at a time when there was not yet an English literature breathing the Lutheran spirit. English speaking Lutheran laymen had to resort to a devotional literature full of Methodistic and Puritanic suggestions; while ministers, barely familiar with the German tongue, filled the shelves of their library with books of Reformed authorship and assimilated erroneous view-points. Thus many lost the sense of consistent Lutheranism. They recognized as fundamental those features which all denominations held in common, and considered as non-fundamental the special heritage from the Church of Luther.<sup>61</sup>

The Tennessee Synod and its pastors sought to remedy this problem. Before his untimely death in 1831, David Henkel had written several theological treatises in English. He and others also

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<sup>58</sup>Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church*, p. 270.

<sup>59</sup>Schmucker, *The American Lutheran Church*, p. 219.

<sup>60</sup>Samuel Simon Schmucker, in *Lutheran Observer*, Vol. 23, No. 52, Whole No. 1163 (December 21, 1855), p. 2; quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 275.

<sup>61</sup>Neve, *A Brief History of the Lutheran Church in America*, p. 104.



translated some of the writings of Luther into English. The Tennessee Synod's crowning achievement in this respect was an English translation of *The Christian Book of Concord*, published in 1851 in New Market, Virginia, by the press of Solomon D. Henkel and Bros. An improved second edition appeared in 1854. The second edition was produced with the direct assistance of Lutheran scholars from outside the Tennessee Synod, including men from within the General Synod who were at this time moving away from Schmucker and his influence, and toward the theology of the Confessions. And a movement away from "American Lutheranism," and toward historic Confessional Lutheranism, was indeed beginning to take place within the General Synod, in the middle part of the nineteenth century.

Abdel Ross Wentz notes that "It is a clear indication of the new spirit that was arising in the General Synod that this English book found a ready acceptance in all parts of that body." Wentz notes that even "The professors and students in the seminary and college at Gettysburg studied it."<sup>62</sup> This is not as surprising as it might seem, when we note that Charles Philip Krauth – the father of a more famous son, Charles Porterfield Krauth – was also teaching at the Gettysburg seminary during this period. The elder Krauth, who was among those who assisted in revising the Henkel Book of Concord for its second edition, had been moving further and further away from the theological ideas of his faculty colleague Schmucker.

At an earlier stage of his theological struggle and transition, Charles Philip was quoted to have said: "I find the Lutheran doctrine of the Sacraments hard to accept, in view of my Puritanic training, but I find the Scripture passages quoted in favor of them still harder to get over and explain away, and this I apprehend is the feeling of many who see the truth, but are slow to make a decided and public demonstration of it."<sup>63</sup> By 1849, however, he had publicly "come out" with a ringing endorsement of orthodox, Confessional Lutheran theology:

Our verdict is unequivocally in behalf of the study, the thorough study, of this theology. We would have it thrown over our Church with a liberal hand; we would have all our ministers acquainted with the Symbolical Books; we would have them all versed in the distinctive theology of the Church. We would have introduced into our theological schools the study of the Symbols, and didactic and polemic theology so administered as to bring before the view pure, unadulterated Lutheranism. The gain to our ministry and to our Church would be immense, if this course were adopted. As things are, we have no standard, no guide. Everyone is left to fix his own views; and while we presume there is general agreement in our Church on the fundamental doctrines of the Bible, our ministers display, in the opinions they entertain, sometimes a decided Calvinist influence, sometimes an extreme Arminian, sometimes a Pelagian.<sup>64</sup>

And in the following year, Charles Philip had reached the point where he was able to share these observations *with a convention of the General Synod*:

The Lutheran church in this country is in a state of reaction. She has passed, in some

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<sup>62</sup>Abdel Ross Wentz, *A Basic History of Lutheranism in America* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955), p. 134.

<sup>63</sup>Charles Philip Krauth; quoted in Adolph Spaeth, *Charles Porterfield Krauth*, Vol. I (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1898), pp. 18-19.

<sup>64</sup>Charles Philip Krauth, a review of Heinrich Schmid's *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, *Evangelical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1849); quoted in Spaeth, *Charles Porterfield Krauth*, Vol. I, pp. 21-22.

parts, through an extreme subjectivity, an extreme leaning to the emotional in religion... She is now retracing her steps, acknowledging her error, seeking release from crude views and objectionable measures. She is hunting amongst the records of the past for the faith of former days, and endeavoring to learn what she was in her earliest form. The desire for the symbols of our church, the attention that is paid to them, [and] the admiration that has been expressed of them...all indicate a new state of things. ...the church is disposed to renew her connection with the past, and in her future progress to walk under the guidance of the light which [the past] has furnished. There is no fear of any doctrine which our symbols contain, no unwillingness to give it a fair examination, and a predisposition, rather than the contrary, to receive and assent.

In speaking specifically of the theory and practice of Confessional subscription in the General Synod, the elder Krauth goes on to say:

We believe that there has been too much looseness in our church, in regard to the necessity and utility of creeds, in general. The change from the original ground occupied by the church, the disuse of the symbols, [and] the latitudinarianism about them, were calculated to be productive of much evil. ... Now we suppose that this requires a remedy, and we can suggest no other, in the present state of our church, than the use of the Augustan Confession as a creed, and requiring the subscription of it, within certain limits, by every minister of Jesus Christ who serves at our altars. It may be said, that it has been used, [and] that it has received the sanction of the General Synod of our church. ... This is true, but we object to the liberty allowed in that subscription... The terms of the subscription are such as to admit of the rejection of any doctrine or doctrines which the subscriber may not receive. It is subscribed or assented to as containing the doctrines of the word of God substantially; they are set forth in substance, the understanding is that there are some doctrines in it, not contained in the word of God, but there is no specification concerning them. Every one could omit from his assent whatever he did not believe. The subscription did not preclude this. It is at once evident that a creed thus presented is no creed, that it is anything or nothing, that its subscription is a solemn farce.

And then, in a concluding admonition, he states:

Too ignorant have we been of our own doctrines, and our own history, too little have we known of the fountain from which we sprang, and we have taken pride in times past in claiming a paternity in every reputable form of Christianity, and have denied our proper parentage, in our mendicancy for foreign favors. Shame that it has been so! ... Let us go back to our father's house...<sup>65</sup>

The war was on.

## XII.

The theological character of the Pennsylvania Ministerium – which in 1826 had harbored men like Johann Augustus Probst – had changed dramatically by mid-century. This change occurred through a combination of the Ministerium's receiving into membership of many recently-arrived Lutheran immigrants from Germany, who had in their fatherland come under the influence of the Confessional Revival; and the theological reassessment that many native members of the Ministerium

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<sup>65</sup>Charles Philip Krauth, "The Lutheran Church in the United States," *Evangelical Review*, Vol. II (July 1850), pp. 1-16; quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, pp. 168-69.

were undertaking. In its 1853 convention – at which it voted to rejoin the General Synod, after many years of aloofness from the general body – the following resolution was unanimously adopted by the Pennsylvania Ministerium:

Whereas the Evangelical Lutheran Church has, of late, arrived at clearer views of its doctrinal and other distinctive features; and Whereas, we are justified in expecting that both the internal and external welfare of our church will be thereby essentially promoted; and, Whereas, we recognize the importance of a historico-confessional basis for the church; therefore, *Resolved*:

(A) That we also, in common with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of our Fathers, acknowledge the collective body of the Symbolical Books, as the historico-confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and that we also, like the Evangelical Lutheran Church of former times, accord to the unaltered Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism, an especial importance among our Symbolical Books generally.

(B) *Resolved*, That we enjoin it on all the Ministers and Candidates of our church as their duty to make themselves better and more thoroughly acquainted with these venerable documents of the faith of our fathers, than has hitherto been the case with many.

(C) *Resolved*, That it is not by any means our intention hereby to diminish the absolute authority of the Holy Scriptures, but much rather to place them in the clearest light possible, and that we by no means design through these Symbols to place constraint on the consciences of any, but much rather through them to bind the conscience to the Holy Scriptures as the divine Source of Truth.<sup>66</sup>

The same kind of developments were taking place also within various regional synods of the General Synod. And new independent synods were also forming – especially in the mid-western region of the country – which were comprised almost exclusively of recent immigrants from Europe, who were fleeing from the darkness and oppression of Rationalism and Unionism, and who had come to embrace the theology of the Confessional Revival. Most notable among these was the Missouri Synod, organized in 1847. The Missouri Synod was also exercising an influence on many within the General Synod – at least on those who could read German – through two popular and theologically-conservative publications edited by the Missourian leader C. F. W. Walther: *Lehre und Wehre* and *Der Lutheraner*.

Within the General Synod, Samuel Simon Schmucker was *losing* influence. Even his own son, Beale Melancthon Schmucker, repudiated his father's compromises, and embraced the Confessional Revival. Desperate times called for desperate measures. And so, in a last-ditch effort to hold the line against what the "American Lutherans" feared might be a total Confessional take-over of the General Synod, a scheme was devised among several "American Lutheran" leaders to publish an edited version of the Augsburg Confession, to remove any ambiguity as to which doctrines in the original Augustana were the fundamental ones that still needed to be held to, and which were not.

### XIII.

What emerged from this effort, in 1855, was a pamphlet entitled *Definite Platform, Doctrinal*

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<sup>66</sup>*Minutes of the 106th Annual Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania and the Adjacent States* (1853), pp. 31-32; quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 148. The Pennsylvania Ministerium had left the General Synod in 1823 because it wanted to cultivate closer relations with the Reformed Church. In 1853 it rejoined, because it now wanted to cultivate stronger relations with other Lutherans, and to try to have an influence on them in the interest of encouraging a stronger Lutheran consciousness.

*and Disciplinary, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods; Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod.* Those who prepared this document were not identified within its pages, although in time Samuel Simon Schmucker admitted that he was its primary author. The rationale and methodology for this effort were explained by its anonymous editors as follows:

This Platform was prepared and published by consultation and co-operation of ministers of different Eastern and Western Synods, connected with the General Synod, at the special request of some western brethren, whose churches desire a more specific expression of the General Synod's doctrinal basis, being surrounded by German churches, which profess the entire mass of former symbols. As this Platform adds not a single sentence to the Augsburg Confession, nor omits anything that has the least pretension to be considered "a fundamental doctrine of Scripture," it is perfectly consistent with the doctrinal test of the General Synod... Hence any District Synod, connected with the General Synod, may, with perfect consistency, adopt this Platform."<sup>67</sup>

The Definite Platform included the Apostles' Creed,<sup>68</sup> the Nicene Creed, some material from the Formula of Concord testifying to the supreme authority of Scripture, and additional commentary that took issue with various "errors" in the Confessions and that defended the "American Lutheran" alternatives. The centerpiece of the Definite Platform was an "American Recension of the Augsburg Confession," based on the 21 doctrinal articles of the historic Augustana, but omitting all antitheses, as well as those lines and sections of the historic text that taught the doctrines which the "American Lutherans," in their private writings, had long alleged to be erroneous and unbiblical. But the Definite Platform was intended to be more than just another private writing, repeating these criticisms of the old Augsburg Confession. It was, instead, intended to be a *new* Augsburg Confession, to be formally adopted by as many of the district synods of the General Synod as could be persuaded to do so.

From the perspective of its advocates, the Definite Platform, when adopted, would serve two purposes. First, it would clarify for the public where the General Synod and its regional affiliates differed from the more recently-organized emigre synods that taught all the old doctrines of the Reformation. It was no doubt hoped that potential church members from within the American Protestant environment, who were repelled by the foreign character and Romanizing doctrines of groups like the Missouri Synod, would be drawn to a kinder and gentler version of Lutheranism, if they knew that there was such an option. And second, the Definite Platform, when adopted by a synod, would make it official that this synod was not going to allow itself to regress in its doctrinal position in the way that the Pennsylvania Ministerium (for example) had done. It was hoped that a formal adoption of the Definite Platform would decisively settle whatever theological controversies might be taking place within a synod – between those who held to the received "American Lutheran" position, and those who were agitating for a return to the Confessional position – and permanently curtail the influence of the latter.

According to Jacobs, the preparation of this "American Recension" of Lutheranism's chief symbolical book was prompted by a newly-strengthened conviction on the part of the "American Lutherans," that "confessions of faith should declare with such explicitness the faith of those who

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<sup>67</sup>*Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinary, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods; Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod* (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855), p. 2.

<sup>68</sup>The Apostles Creed as it appeared in the Definite Platform omitted – in Methodist fashion – the clause on the descent into hell.

subscribe them, that all ambiguity and room for variety of interpretations should be excluded; and that the General Synod, no longer holding to certain articles in the Augsburg Confession in the sense in which they were understood by its authors, should, without hesitation or reservation, say so.”<sup>69</sup> Previously, it was thought that the combination of an ambiguous wording regarding the scope of the authority of the Augsburg Confession, combined with the general consensus that existed in the General Synod on which Reformation-era doctrines were not Biblical and correct, would preserve the theological character of the General Synod as Schmucker and his friends envisioned it. But due to the influence of the Confessional Revival, that consensus was no longer there. And so, the ambiguity regarding the Augsburg Confession’s scope of truth and authority should now be tightened up as well.

The five “errors” in the historic Augsburg Confession that were edited out of the American version were: 1) Approval of the Ceremonies of the Mass, 2) Private Confession and Absolution, 3) Denial of the Divine Obligation of the Christian Sabbath, 4) Baptismal Regeneration, and 5) the Real Presence. Examples of the kind of altered texts that were to be found in the “American Recension” of the Augsburg Confession can be seen in its renderings of these articles:

IX. Concerning baptism, our churches teach, that it is “a necessary ordinance,” that is a means of grace, and ought to be administered also to children, who are thereby dedicated to God, and received into his favor.

X. In regard to the Lord’s Supper they teach that Christ is present with the communicants in the Lord’s Supper, “under the emblems of bread and wine.”<sup>70</sup>

One can easily detect the influences that had led to this travesty. And a rejection of these five objectionable Lutheran teachings – to the extent that they were being accurately summarized by Schmucker and his people – was not a new phenomenon either. Already in the sixteenth century, the Reformers had dealt with Enthusiasts and Sacramentarians who held to the essential components of the “American Lutheran” viewpoint. Now that the Book of Concord was being studied once again, both by German-speaking and by English-speaking Lutherans, its testimony against these old errors, which the “American Lutherans” had revived, was persuading people in large numbers of the soundness of the classic Lutheran position. Schmucker noticed this, feared this, and wanted to protect his unique brand of Lutheranism against this.

Some of the charges preferred against the Augsburg Confession in this document were reflective of serious doctrinal differences that did exist between the “American Lutherans” and genuine Confessional Lutherans. But others were downright silly. Jacobs noted that “Some of these charges could have no weight among an educated ministry.” The two instances of this kind of ignorant criticism, to which he was referring, were these:

The Augsburg Confession, e.g., refers to the Lord’s Supper by the name “mass,” without in any way compromising the abhorrence of its adherents toward “the mass” as understood in the Roman Catholic Church. To the present day Scandinavian Lutherans designate their chief service on the Lord’s Day as “the mass.” But it was not so easy a matter to dissipate the prejudices of people to whom such words of the confession as these were read: “Ours are falsely accused of abolishing the ceremonies of the mass.” Between the “private” – that is,

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<sup>69</sup>Henry Eyster Jacobs, “Definite Platform,” *The Lutheran Encyclopedia*, p. 153.

<sup>70</sup>*Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinary, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods; Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod*, p. 11.

individual – “confession” of the Lutheran, which is a voluntary privilege of a sin-burdened conscience, and the private, or enforced, confession of the Romanist, demanded as a condition of the forgiveness of sins, there is all the difference in the world. Nowhere is this difference more clearly explained than in the Lutheran confessions. But the similarity of terms was employed to excite a storm of prejudice.<sup>71</sup>

The Definite Platform’s ludicrous assertions concerning the “Ceremonies of the Mass” in particular, were no doubt strongly influenced by Schmucker’s lifelong Puritanical “antipathy for ceremonial observances, liturgies, and rigid ecclesiastical customs.”<sup>72</sup> Schmucker’s son Beale remarked that “the whole cast of his mind” revealed “his aversion to a liturgical service” and “his rejection of all right of past usage to influence the present.”<sup>73</sup> Yet at the same time, Schmucker harbored no reservations in allowing the introduction of revivals and other “new measures” into the Lutheran Church, freighted though they may have been with wide-eyed fanaticism and implicit semi-Pelagianism. Schmucker’s friend and fellow “American Lutheran” Benjamin Kurtz was especially known for his advocacy of such practices.<sup>74</sup> The Definite Platform attempted to impose these personal bigotries and subjective tastes onto the whole General Synod.

#### XIV.

Within the General Synod, the reaction to the publication of the Definite Platform was not what Schmucker and his collaborators had expected. They had misjudged the extent to which the Confessional Revival had in fact already penetrated the General Synod. And there were many in the General Synod, who may not have been all that strong in their own embracing of the historic Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church, who nevertheless felt that actually changing the text of the Augsburg Confession – to suit the interests of a relatively localized and idiosyncratic version of “Lutheranism” – was both arrogant and presumptuous. And so, as Jacobs notes, “Wherever the attempt was made to secure for it synodical approval, the ‘Platform’ was almost universally rejected, while strong resolutions repudiating and condemning it were passed in a number of the larger and older synods.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Jacobs, *A History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, p. 425.

<sup>72</sup>Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 327.

<sup>73</sup>Beale Melancthon Schmucker, “Samuel S. Schmucker,” *The Pennsylvania College Book, 1832-1882* (Philadelphia: Alumni Association of Pennsylvania College, 1882), p. 157; quoted in Ferm, *The Crisis in American Lutheran Theology*, p. 327.

<sup>74</sup>Benjamin Kurtz wrote: “If the great object of the anxious bench can be accomplished in some other way, less obnoxious but equally efficient – be it so. But we greatly doubt this. We consider it necessary in many cases, and we believe there are circumstances when no measures equally good can be substituted. Hence we are free to confess that we go for this measure *with all our heart*” (“Notes on the ‘Anxious Bench’,” *Lutheran Observer*, December 1, 1843, p. 3; quoted in Nelson, *The Lutheran in North America*, p. 215. Emphasis in original.). And with a remarkably obtuse interpretation of how Rationalism had developed in the Lutheran Church, Kurtz also wrote: “The Catechism, highly as we prize it, can never supercede the anxious bench, but only, when faithfully used, render it more necessary. During the whole time that the Church was declining in Germany, and even in the most languishing state, it was gorged with catechetical instructions, and so continued to be until nearly the whole church had fallen into neology and lifeless formality” (“Notes on the ‘Anxious Bench’,” *Lutheran Observer*, November 24, 1843, p. 2; quoted in Nelson, p. 216.).

<sup>75</sup>Jacobs, “Definite Platform,” p. 153.

The issuing of the Definite Platform did not inaugurate a new controversy, as much as it was the last gasp of the “American Lutheran” side, in a controversy that had been raging already for many years. More than anything else, it served as a rallying point for the advocates of a restoration of the teaching and practice of genuine Confessional Lutheranism, so that in the end, the position and influence of “American Lutheranism” within the General Synod was significantly weakened, and not strengthened, by this scheme.

William Julius Mann of the Pennsylvania Ministerium led the way in opposing the “American Recension,” and in defending the original Augsburg Confession, in a treatise entitled *A Plea for the Augsburg Confession, in Answer to the Objections of the Definite Platform*. Mann – who served as a pastor in Philadelphia – described the Definite Platform as its authors’ “Declaration of Independence” from the Augsburg Confession, “by which the Lutheran public is informed of their absolute freedom from any pollution produced by contact with the errors of the Augsburg Confession.” And Mann’s wittiness continues, when he goes on to say of these authors:

We give them credit for this honest avowal of their partial apostasy from the most important Confession the Lutheran Church, as such, has to boast of. We do this the more cheerfully because we expect that they will give us credit for our open and unequivocal free-will offering of a Plea for the old Augsburg Confession, and even for those parts which seem to be very unbecoming stains on the face of the old document.<sup>76</sup>

In the course of his pamphlet, Mann pointed out those places where the Definite Platform is mistaken in its characterization of what the original Augsburg Confession actually teaches. But Mann’s primary efforts were expended in defending the Biblical and evangelical character of the sacramental teachings of the Augsburg Confession, which he did very effectively.

Schmucker responded to Mann – and his other critics – with a book entitled *American Lutheranism Vindicated*, in which he restated his view that the Augsburg Confession should be conditionally and qualifiedly subscribed to, only with reference to the “fundamental doctrines” of the Christian faith which it accurately sets forth, and not with reference to all of its doctrinal content. And according to Schmucker, “A *fundamental doctrine* of Scripture is one that is regarded by the great body of evangelical Christians as essential to salvation, or essential to the system of Christianity; so that he who rejects it cannot be saved, neither be regarded as a believer in the system of Christian doctrine.”<sup>77</sup> But notice the human factor in determining what a “fundamental doctrine” is. A doctrine is understood to be of a “fundamental” character if it is so regarded by “the great body of evangelical Christians.” Left un-contemplated is the possibility that “the great body of evangelical Christians” might be *wrong* in their rejection of the sacramental theology of the Scriptures, because of the unsound rationalistic assumptions through which they filter the Scriptures.

In any case, Schmucker then offered a listing of what the “fundamental doctrines” of the Christian faith are, which he had previously honed for another publication the previous year:

1. The Divine inspiration, authority and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures.
2. The right and

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<sup>76</sup>William Julius Mann, *A Plea for the Augsburg Confession, in Answer to the Objections of the Definite Platform* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1856), p. 4.

<sup>77</sup>Samuel Simon Schmucker, *American Lutheranism Vindicated* (Baltimore: T. Newton Kurtz, 1856), p. 4. Emphasis in original.

duty of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures. 3. The unity of the Godhead, and the Trinity of persons therein. 4. The utter depravity of human nature in consequence of the fall. 5. The incarnation of the Son of God, his work of atonement for sinners of mankind, and his mediatorial intercession and reign. 6. The justification of the sinner by faith alone. 7. The work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion and sanctification of the sinner. 8. The Divine institution of the Christian ministry, and the obligation and perpetuity of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and 9. The immortality of the soul and the judgment of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, with the eternal blessedness of the righteous and the eternal punishment of the wicked.<sup>78</sup>

So, insofar as the Augsburg Confession teaches these articles of faith, which sectarian churches also claim to teach, it is subscribed to. Insofar as the Augsburg Confession goes beyond these articles of faith, and teaches doctrines which the sectarian churches renounce and declaim, then it is not subscribed to.

In the minds of most observers, “American Lutheranism” was *not* vindicated through this exchange, but rather stood accused, under the indictment of the real Augsburg Confession – and behind it, of Holy Scripture itself. The Confessional movement continued to grow and develop, leading not only to the organization of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America in 1867 – by synods that had withdrawn from the General Synod – but also to a relative firming-up of the confessional position of what remained of the General Synod. In comparison to the General Council, and especially also in comparison to the more recently-organized Confessional synods in the mid-west, the General Synod remained a confessionally weak church body. But after the controversy that had been stirred up by “American Lutheranism” in general, and had been brought to a head by the publication of the Definite Platform in particular, the General Synod was not as confessionally weak as it used to be, or as confessionally weak as Schmucker had wanted it to be.

In 1855, with respect to the then recently mailed-out Definite Platform, James Allen Brown – at that year's convention of the East Pennsylvania Synod – had called upon that body to express its “unqualified disapprobation of this most dangerous attempt to change the doctrinal basis, and revolutionize the existing character, of the Lutheran Churches now united in the General Synod”; and also to warn its sister synods “against this dangerous proposition.”<sup>79</sup> When Schmucker – under some pressure – retired from his professorship in the Gettysburg seminary in 1864, he was replaced on the faculty by Brown (who remained as a professor there until 1881). When Schmucker died in 1873, the overt agenda of “American Lutheranism,” which was already dead, was buried with him.

## XV.

What lessons can we learn from this? Insofar as there are some strictly historical lessons to be learned, we would agree with these observations of David A. Gustafson:

The American Lutherans advocated that the Lutheran church should possess characteristics similar to those of their Protestant neighbors in America. These characteristics included the

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<sup>78</sup>Schmucker, *American Lutheranism Vindicated*, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup>James Allen Brown; Quoted in John Alden Singmaster, “The General Synod,” in *The Distinctive Doctrines and Usages of the General Bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (fourth edition) (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1914), p. 51. Punctuation slightly revised.



practice of revivals, an essentially Zwinglian view of the sacraments, and an informal liturgy. The American Lutherans held liberal views regarding the Lutheran Confessions. They accepted only certain portions of the Augsburg Confession and claimed that, ultimately, the Bible was the only rule of faith. The confessional party, on the other hand, argued that the Lutheran church should adhere to both the Scriptures and the Confessions, should not give up its particularities, and should continue to maintain a unique identity in America.<sup>80</sup>

But for us, the matters we have been discussing cannot be seen simply as detached historical curiosities, with no bearing on the challenges and temptations that we face in the life and mission of the church today.

In this essay we have concentrated on the processes that led up, over the decades, to the publication of the Definite Platform. The Definite Platform did not emerge in a vacuum. In order to avoid the kind of culminating error that was embodied in the Definite Platform, the church of the present and of the future must also avoid the kind of contributing errors that preceded it and prepared the way for it. And therefore the church must be aware of what preceded it and prepared the way for it.

The Lutheran Church in America did not go to bed one night with Berkenmeyer, consciously embracing the sacramental theology of the Book of Concord, and then wake up in the morning with Schmucker, consciously rejecting it. This loss of faith and identity was a gradual process, passing through a Pietist stage, which saw a neglect of the Confessions, and a lack of valuing and carefully studying them; then passing through a Rationalist stage, which saw a total ignoring and rejecting of the Confessions; and then coming finally to the “American Lutheran” stage, which saw a partial correction of Rationalism, but also a hybridization of Lutheran theology and various sorts of sectarian theology. The “American Lutherans” formally recognized the Augsburg Confession, albeit in a highly qualified and incomplete way. But the underlying spirit of their beliefs was fundamentally incompatible with the underlying spirit of the Augustana. The Augsburg Confession, while acknowledged *de jure* as a matter of remote tradition, was repudiated *de facto* in actual preaching and practice. It had become a foreign thing to their hearts, even while their rhetoric had kept its bare name on their lips.

How familiar are we with the Confessions? How often do we allow ourselves to be instructed by them? How much do we allow them to shape our thinking and speaking, with respect to the articles of faith that they address? Perhaps there is a fear that if we devote ourselves too much to their study, we will thereby be elevating them – at least in our own minds – to the level of Sacred Scripture. So, in order to show our honor for the Bible, we may dishonor, by neglect, the Book of Concord. But we should not think of this as a “zero sum game.” The time and effort spent in increasing our appreciation for the teachings of the Symbolical Books, do not, to that same degree, diminish our appreciation for the teachings of the Sacred Scriptures. To study the Confessions, and to learn from them, is to study, and to learn, the doctrine of Scripture, which they faithfully reproduce. This is the satisfaction and the edification that open-minded and open-hearted Lutherans have and experience, when – through their attentive reading of the Symbolical Books – they, in effect, sit at the feet of some of the greatest teachers the Christian church has ever known.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>David A. Gustafson, *Lutherans in Crisis: The Question of Identity in the American Republic* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 165.

<sup>81</sup>This is especially the case when one considers also the patristic quotations that are included in the Reformation-era Confessions, from the writings of St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and other notable Fathers of the church.

The more we learn from the Confessions, the more we are led into the Scriptures and into their true Christ-centered meaning. The Lutheran Confessions serve the purpose of facilitating a “Fundamental, enduring unity in the church,” by virtue of the fact that they are “a general summary of teaching” that has been “drawn together from God’s Word.”<sup>82</sup> To be sure, the Confessional principle of the Lutheran Church is not premised on the notion that the Scriptures are not intrinsically clear, and require a creed to make them clear. But the Confessional principle *is* premised on the observation that the Scriptures as a whole are *fully* clear, in regard to a certain article of faith, only when *all* the passages of Scripture that pertain to that article have been “drawn together” and taken into account. The Confessions, as they draw together all the various strands of Biblical teaching on the subjects they address, thereby draw us ever more deeply into what the Bible says about those subjects.

## XVI.

The Confessions are not a supplement to the Scriptures, speaking dogmatically on matters with regard to which the Scriptures do not speak dogmatically. And the Confessions, in their practical use in theological discussions, should not be employed and treated as if they were such a supplement. It should be possible for anyone who quotes from the Book of Concord, in making a point in a theological debate, also to show where in Scripture the statement that he has quoted is rooted or has its basis.<sup>83</sup> The Book of Concord has no authority *over* our conscience, beyond its ability to *persuade* our conscience that its doctrine is the Bible’s doctrine. This happens as our reason is taken captive by the Word of God, through the Confessions’ contextual and hermeneutically-responsible expositions and explanations of Scripture. This would include also a recognition of the *ministerial* use of reason that was employed by their authors, as they explicated – through a careful analysis of interrelated lines of Biblical thought – what Chemnitz describes as “dogmas...which are not set forth in so many letters and syllables in Scripture but are brought together from clear testimonies of Scripture by way of good, certain, firm, and clear reasoning.”<sup>84</sup>

We believe *a priori* that whatever the Scriptures teach on some particular point will be and is true, before we have even studied the Scriptures on that particular point. This is because the Scriptures are inspired by God, and are by necessity reliable and infallible. In comparison, we believe only *a posteriori* that what the Confessions teach on some particular point is true, by virtue of the fact that their teaching is in accord with the teaching of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are like the sun, and are for us the source of the light of divine truth. But the Confessions are like the moon, which reflects upon us that light of divine truth. The light of the Confessions is accordingly the same light as the light of the Scriptures, because it is a light that originates in the Scriptures.

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<sup>82</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration: Rule & Norm Heading, Kolb/Wengert p. 526.

<sup>83</sup>A good resource for showing the Biblical basis especially for the various articles of faith that are included in the Augsburg Confession, is Carroll Herman Little, *Lutheran Confessional Theology: A Presentation of the Doctrines of the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943).

<sup>84</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 249.

Harold Wicke writes: “We may establish our doctrinal statements by means of true inferences, deductions, enumeration, comparison, conclusion, summarization, identification, direct quotation. If in so employing our reason we are faithful to Scripture, these statements have the same force as Scripture, because they are but Scripture faithfully reworded. But we dare never go beyond Scripture” (“What is ‘Doctrine’ According to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 2 [April 1960], p. 89).

To borrow some terminology from Charles Porterfield Krauth, we recognize “that *correct human explanations* of Scripture doctrine are Scripture doctrine, for they are simply the statement of the same truth in different words.”<sup>85</sup> Together with all Confessional Lutherans throughout history, we have concluded that the Confessions are indeed correct human explanations of Scripture doctrine. In keeping with this conclusion, but also and in keeping with the distinction that exists between Scripture as such and correct explanations of Scripture,

We do not claim that our Confessors were infallible. We do not say they could not fail. We only claim that they did not fail.<sup>86</sup>

While the Lutheran Church’s confessional obligation “does not extend to historical statements, ‘purely exegetical questions,’ and other matters not belonging to the doctrinal content of the symbols,” nevertheless, “All *doctrines* of the Symbols are based on clear statements of Scripture.”<sup>87</sup> Consequently, the authority of the Book of Concord, as “a confession of the doctrines of Scripture over against those who deny these doctrines,”<sup>88</sup> rises or falls with the authority of Holy Scripture itself. In speaking of the relationship between a creed or a *confession* of faith, and Scripture as the *rule* of faith, Charles Porterfield Krauth also states:

We do not interpret God’s word by the Creed, neither do we interpret the Creed by God’s word, but interpreting both independently, by the laws of language, and finding that they teach one and the same truth, we heartily acknowledge the Confession as a true exhibition of the faith of the Rule – a true witness to the one, pure, and unchanging faith of the Christian Church, and freely make it our own Confession, as truly as if it had been now first uttered by our lips, or had now first gone forth from our hands.”<sup>89</sup>

And as Seiss aptly remarks, “We do not believe *in* the Symbols; we only believe *with* them, and that for no other reason than that we are persuaded that they do fairly and truly grasp and declare what, on adequate examination, is found to be the true sense, intent and meaning of God’s holy Word on the

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<sup>85</sup>Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1899), p. 184. Emphasis in original.

<sup>86</sup>Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, p. 186.

<sup>87</sup>*Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932), Section 48. Emphasis in original. This section of the *Brief Statement* also affirms that “The confessional obligation covers all doctrines, not only those that are treated *ex professo*, but also those that are merely introduced in support of other doctrines.”

<sup>88</sup>*Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, Section 45.

The distinction that the *Brief Statement* makes between the doctrinal and non-doctrinal content of the Confessions is a valid distinction. But this distinction should not be misused in such a way as to mute some of the legitimate doctrinal content of the Confessions, or to obscure some of the necessary practical implications of that doctrinal content, through resorting too quickly to related distinctions between doctrinal “prescriptions” and non-doctrinal “descriptions,” or between doctrinal “principles” and non-doctrinal “applications.” The context of many of the statements in the Confessions shows us that its doctrine is often simply confessed, without accompanying prescriptions or commandments, in so many words, that others also must confess it. And in many cases, the practical application of a doctrine is actually an intrinsic component *of* that doctrine – such as with the Formula of Concord’s teaching on the divinely-instituted threefold sacramental action of the Lord’s Supper, which dogmatically is not just a matter of “This is,” but also of “This do.”

<sup>89</sup>Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, p. 169.

points presented in them.”<sup>90</sup>

The authority of the Confessions – as true and faithful statements of Scripture doctrine – is a derived authority. The authority of the Confessions is not an autonomous, self-contained authority. But the authority of the Confessions, for the reasons we have stated, is a *real* authority. We do not dishonor Scripture by studying them and seeking to learn from them. Instead, the more we know the Confessions, the more we will know the Scriptures, because the Confessions lead us into the Scriptures, not away from the Scriptures.

Schmucker and the “American Lutherans” set up their human reason as a grid or filter, through which the Scriptures were to be read. This the Confessions do not do. We likewise must not do this. The Confessions testify to the profound mysteries of the Trinity and the incarnation, of God’s redemption and revelation in Christ, of justification and regeneration, and of the means of grace and the gift of faith – as all of these weighty, integrated truths are taught in Scripture. And as the Confessions testify to these mysteries, they teach us to be in awe of these mysteries, and to believe in these mysteries.

The Scriptures are inherently clear in what they intend to teach. And the basic message of Scripture, that Jesus Christ is our Savior from sin and death, is clear to anyone who reads those passages where this basic message is set forth. But we should not overestimate the clarity of *our human minds*, infected as they are by sin, in fully and accurately perceiving and appreciating what the Scriptures as a whole say about all the subjects they address. Surrounded as we are by a theological environment of experiential religion, and by a secular culture of postmodernism, we should welcome the assistance that is rendered to us by the Confessions of our church, in shining a spotlight on the Scriptures, and in showing us how the Scriptures work together to teach the whole counsel of God.

We are in some respects like the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Book of Concord is in some respects like Philip the deacon and evangelist:

So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8:30-31, ESV)

What Philip then did was explain to the Ethiopian that the passage from Isaiah that he was reading was a description of Christ; and he shared with him, beginning with that passage, the full message of Christ’s redeeming work – including also a discussion of the Lord’s institution of Holy Baptism, and of the blessings that are offered and bestowed by means of Baptism (vv. 36-38). Philip guided the Ethiopian into and through the Scriptures, and in this way was a servant of the Scriptures for the sake of the Ethiopian’s faith. And that is what the Confessions can be for us.

As tested touchstones of Biblical orthodoxy, and as timeless testimonies to God’s truth, they guide us into and through the Scriptures, and help to diffuse from our minds the smoke and mist of our contemporary confusions. The Confessions serve to lift our minds above the limitations of our own experience and personal blind spots, and to carry us into the larger catholic consciousness of the church – not so that we will not need to hear the divine voice of the Scriptures, but precisely so that we then *will*, with greater clarity of perception and fewer distractions, be able to hear the divine voice of the Scriptures.

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<sup>90</sup>Seiss, “Our Confessions in English,” p. 215. Emphases in original.

## XVII.

The kind of unionism that the “American Lutherans” embraced in the nineteenth century did not go away when the “American Lutheran” movement as such was ultimately discredited. The Prussian “Evangelical” Church remained, as an ecclesiastical “black hole” into which European Lutherans, whenever they weakened in their theological stamina, would be sucked. And the twentieth century saw a great resurgence of this unionistic spirit, not only in Europe, but also once again in America – largely through the influence of the “Neo-Orthodox” theology of the Reformed theologian Karl Barth; and of disciples of Barth, such as the Lutheran theologian Martin Niemoeller.

Norman A. Madson, the Dean of the seminary of the Norwegian Synod (now the Evangelical Lutheran Synod), addressed this problems in a sermon that he preached at the diamond anniversary gathering of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1948. Looking at the American situation, and at the dangerous trends that he saw in the bigger picture of American Lutheranism, Madson said:

It is not only the European churches bearing the Lutheran name which are so under the spell of Barthian theology, that they imagine the only way to ensconce themselves against the threats of a resurgent Rome, is to unite so-called Evangelicals. That spirit of surrendering the *sola Scriptura* of a Luther and his fellow reformers is making itself felt throughout large sections of American Lutheranism. And what is at the root of it all? May it not be that there has been too little study of Martin Luther in our seminaries of late, too little searching of that monument to the Christian faith, the Book of Concord?

Madson then refocused his attention on some similarly dangerous attitudes that he saw closer to home, within the Synodical Conference. He continued:

What was it that made a Walther the tower of strength which he became in our American Lutheran Zion? Walther was an assiduous student of Luther, even as a Luther had been but an humble follower of Paul. Yes, we hear ever so often, even within our Synodical Conference: “Let us forget the fathers, and get back to Scripture.” Again that may sound very pious and praiseworthy. But what if Scripture, to which they appeal, has something to say about those fathers who have spoken unto us the word of God? Can we then do as we please about what they have spoken? Not unless we want to violate this injunction of the Word itself. And this is what Holy Writ enjoins upon us all: “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.” Heb. 13, 7.

Madson goes on to ask two rhetorical questions, to both of which the implied answer is to be a resounding “No!”:

Is it isolationism to hold aloof from those whom God Himself has admonished [us] not to fraternize? Is it narrow legalism to be bound to the clear-cut statements of our Lutheran Confessions? A Niemoeller may tell us that “God is not bound by any such confessions.” But God is bound by His Word. And until it be shown that the Confessions to which we stand pledged are not a proper exposition of that Word, let us not be over-troubled by those who accuse us of sixteenth century confessionalism. Let us continue to ask for the old paths, where

is the good way, and walk therein.<sup>91</sup>

## XVIII.

In the Preface to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon very sensibly writes: “In these controversies I have always made it a point to adhere as closely as possible to traditional doctrinal formulas in order to promote the attainment of concord.”<sup>92</sup> This touches on another important role of the Lutheran Confessions within the larger Lutheran Church, namely their ability to serve as an aid in helping us to recognize doctrinal agreement where that agreement does exist, and as a guide for fraternal understanding and fraternal cooperation among those who are so agreed. It is possible for a particular Lutheran synod to develop its own internal parochial theological vocabulary to such an extent that Lutherans whose theological formation took place in other settings would not be fully able to understand what is being said from within that synod. But if Lutherans in general agree that, whenever possible, they will not only learn together from the Confessions, but also teach their common faith together with a shared use of the terms and categories of the Confessions, the cause of unity is helped.

This is the underlying theme of what Jakob Aall Ottesen and Nils O. Brandt reported to the old Norwegian Synod in 1857, after they had been tasked by their church body to investigate the various manifestations of what was then passing for “Lutheranism” in America, to see if there were any genuinely Confessional Lutherans out there with whom the Norwegian Synod could, with a clear conscience, establish God-pleasing fraternal relations. This was their conclusion, once they had gotten acquainted with the pastors and institutions of the Missouri Synod of that time:

It is a real joy to be able to say, in gratitude to God, that we have invariably got the impression that they are all possessed of the same spirit...: a heartfelt trust in God, a sincere love for the symbols and the doctrines of the fathers, and a belief that in them His holy Word is rightly explained and interpreted; and therefore a sacrificial, burning zeal to apply these old-Lutheran principles of doctrine and order. May the Lord graciously revive this spirit throughout the entire Lutheran church, *so that those who call themselves Lutherans may no longer wrangle over questions settled by the Lutheran Confessions*. May they rather show their true Lutheranism by truly believing that God’s Word is taught rightly and without error in the Lutheran Confessions. Otherwise, the Lutheran name is but duplicity and hypocrisy.<sup>93</sup>

Ottesen and Brandt, in their American Lutheran odyssey, had apparently also bumped into some of the “American Lutherans.” And they wanted nothing to do with them!

The Lutheran theologian Joseph Stump elaborates on Ottesen’s and Brandt’s basic point:

Confessions or symbols are official formulations of the common faith of the Church. They are

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<sup>91</sup>Norman A. Madson, “The Crying Need of our Beloved Conference” (sermon preached at the 75th Anniversary gathering of the Synodical Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 10, 1948), *Preaching to Preachers* (Mankato, Minnesota: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1952), p. 203. Punctuation slightly revised.

<sup>92</sup>Apology, Preface:11, Kolb/Wengert p. 110.

<sup>93</sup>Jakob Aall Ottesen and Nils O. Brandt, “Indberetning fra Pastorene Ottesen og Brandt om deres Reise til St. Louis, Missouri; Columbus, Ohio; og Buffalo, New York” (1857); in Carl S. Meyer, *Pioneers Find Friends* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1963), p. 63. Emphasis added.

public testimonies as to the manner in which the Church apprehends and teaches the doctrines of the Holy Scriptures. ... They serve the twofold purpose of exhibiting what the Church believes and teaches, and of guarding against error and heresy. ... They are useful also as criteria by which those who hold the same faith may know one another and join together in one organization.

Stump then explains the way in which the Lutheran Church – as a confessing ecclesiastical entity – uses its Confessions to ensure that the doctrine that its individual preachers preach, will be the Biblical doctrine that it believes, and in which it wants its members to be instructed:

Bona-fide subscription to these Confessions is required of Lutheran ministers, because the Church must see to it that those who go forth in her name preach only the pure doctrines of the Gospel as she holds them. No one is compelled to subscribe. But if any minister refuses to do so, he thereby testifies that he is not in harmony with the doctrinal position of the Lutheran Church, and has no right to preach in her name. On the other hand, if he is a Lutheran in his convictions, he will be glad to subscribe to the Confessions and to preach the doctrines set forth in them.<sup>94</sup>

We have no right to teach as we please, according to our own perceptions and judgment, when what we have been *called* to teach is a certain defined body of established doctrine. The Confessional pledge that the church demands of us, before it in God's name lays upon our shoulders the mantle of pastoral authority, is not a declaration of our hermeneutical method. It demands instead a declaration of the *results* of our hermeneutical method. When we are ordained, the church is not satisfied simply to hear us say that we will set forth the doctrine of Holy Scripture. It wants to hear from us what we – through our preceding study and reflection – understand the doctrine of Holy Scripture to be. The church is not satisfied with a formal rhetorical articulation of the *Sola Scriptura* principle, such as can be heard also in any Baptist, Reformed, or Pentecostal church; and such as would have been heard in any “American Lutheran” church in the nineteenth century. The *real* Lutheran Church wants to hear from us an articulation of what we believe “Scripture alone,” when rightly interpreted, really teaches.

For a pastor or a theologian, constantly reinventing the wheel, and always trying to come up with new ways to articulate old truths, is, with few exceptions, an unwise and unnecessary exercise in futility. It often betrays more than a little misplaced pride in one's own ability. And it raises suspicions. If someone believes the old faith, then why can he not use the old familiar terms to confess it? We must avoid any steps – even small steps – that would take us back in the direction of the “American Lutheran” chaos of the mid-nineteenth century, which caused Charles Philip Krauth to bemoan in exasperation: “As things are, we have no standard, no guide. Everyone is left to fix his own views.”

## XIX.

The Book of Concord does not offer detailed expositions of doctrinal points that were not in controversy in the sixteenth century. For this reason the Lutheran Church of our time may and should explore and implement helpful ways of explaining and defending the Biblical teaching on matters such as creation and the order of creation, and the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, which are not addressed in a comprehensive way in the Confessions. But even if we would recognize that the

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<sup>94</sup>Joseph Stump, *The Christian Faith: A System of Christian Dogmatics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), pp. 24-25.

Symbolical Books do not contain exhaustive treatments of these modern controverted issues, we can still see that they do touch on them to one extent or another.

The sixteenth century was a virtual cauldron of competing and conflicting theological ideas. Nascent versions of almost all of today's heresies were already a part of the mix that was the religious chaos of Reformation-era Europe. The Lutheran Confessions accordingly do usually address and refute, at the very least, these *nascent* versions of the popular false teachings of our time. And so, where the Confessions *do* touch on the things that we today are working through and discussing, we should use the Confessions in our theological efforts: to show that we are willing to be instructed by them in accordance with God's Word, to the extent that they are able to help us better understand a certain disputed point; and to show that what we are saying about this disputed point in more detail today, is in harmony with what the Symbols already say, more briefly, about this point.

And when we are dealing with a topic that the Confessions do explicitly and thoroughly address and discuss – because it was a subject under discussion in the sixteenth century – then our Confessional subscription does obligate us to teach as the Confessions teach on these matters, even if that means correcting some inadvertent departures from the Confessional pattern of teaching that we may have slipped into ourselves, or that others within our ecclesiastical fellowship may have slipped into. For example, the Book of Concord has a lot to say about the true purpose and character of public worship, and about the public administration of the means of grace. The Reformers were prompted to a careful study of these matters by the errors of both Rome and the Enthusiasts. The same can be said about the doctrine of the ministry and the doctrine of the sacraments, which are both dealt with at length in the Symbolical Books. These subjects, too, needed to be explored and understood in an evangelical and Biblical way in the sixteenth century, in response to the unevangelical and unbiblical teaching of Lutheranism's opponents on both the right and the left.

It is troubling when Lutherans today, who should know better, contradict, or seem to contradict, what the Lutheran Confessions already say about these and other topics. Perhaps the Book of Concord does not answer every question that is being raised in contemporary conservative Lutheran circles about the liturgy, about pastors and teachers, or about the Lord's Supper. But it does answer more of them than many seem to realize.<sup>95</sup> “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings...” (Hebrews 13:8-9a, ESV).

If, after careful study, reflection, and consultation, a Lutheran minister concludes that he cannot teach what the Confessions teach – either because he no longer believes that it is what the Bible teaches, or because he no longer believes that what the Bible itself teaches is correct – then he must lay down the mantle of his office. We are servants of the Lutheran Church, not its masters. We are not allowed to change the established, public doctrine of the Lutheran Church – as Schmucker and his associates thought they had the right to do; as the Rationalists before them thought they had the right to do; and as many liberal and “ecumenical” Lutherans in our own time still think they have the right to do. But, we *should* allow the established, public doctrine of the Lutheran Church to *change us*, when and where such changes are necessary. And that is because this doctrine is God's doctrine.

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<sup>95</sup>For more on this, see David Jay Webber, “‘Walking Together’ in Faith and Worship: Exploring the Relationship between Doctrinal Unity and Liturgical Unity in the Lutheran Church,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, Vol. 52, Nos. 2-3 (June-September 2012), pp. 195-248; and David Jay Webber, *Spiritual Fathers: A Treatise on the Lutheran Doctrine of the Ministry, with Special Reference to Luther's Large Catechism* (second edition) (Phoenix: Klotsche-Little Publishing, 2015).



## XX.

Wilhelm W. Petersen, a former president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod's Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, points out – from the perspective of both doctrine and history – that it is important for Lutherans to be acquainted with the Confessions of their church,

because the Confessions are a correct exposition, or interpretation, of the Bible; and it is in our Confessions where we as a Lutheran Church publicly confess our faith before the world, and confidently declare: “This we believe, teach, and confess.” They are also the banner under which we march, and by which we identify one another as brethren. I believe that it is fair to say that if it were not for our Confessions, the Lutheran Reformation would not have gotten off the ground; and consequently, there would be no Lutheran Church today. It is also fair to say that if we depart from our Confessions, as many have, the time may come when there will be no true Lutheran Church.<sup>96</sup>

The nineteenth-century Lutheran pastor and theologian Charles Frederick Schaeffer was married to Samuel Simon Schmucker's sister, but he strongly disagreed with his brother-in-law's way of doing theology.<sup>97</sup> In the midst of the controversy over “American Lutheranism,” Schaeffer – even at the risk of family disharmony – posed several provocative questions that are just as applicable to our time as they were to his:

Have we really made such progress in the discovery of truth since the era of the Reformation, that we understand the Scriptures more thoroughly than those who framed the Symbolical Books? When Luther and his associates were prepared to surrender their lives, but not the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Schmalkald Articles, and the Catechism, had these men of faith and prayer discovered treasures of divine truth of less extent and less value than we possess in modern times? When the Elector Augustus with holy fervor prayed to God that the authors of the Concord-Formula might be guided by the Divine Spirit in the preparation of that admirable work, was his prayer for the illumination of the Spirit less efficacious than modern prayers are? If the writers of the Symbols were unworthy of regard, or are erroneous in their exhibition of truth, who are the men that are more competent to unfold the Scriptural doctrine? ... Are we wiser, more holy, richer in divine grace, more useful through the inspiration of the “spirit of the times” than our pious fathers were? We are weary of the superior intelligence of the Nineteenth Century in matters of Christian faith.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Wilhelm W. Petersen, “Pastor, I Have A Question,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Feb. 1985), p. 4. Punctuation slightly revised.

<sup>97</sup>Together with his brother-in-law and Charles Philip Krauth, Schaeffer also served for several years on the faculty of the Gettysburg seminary.

<sup>98</sup>Charles F. Schaeffer, *Evangelical Review*, Vol. I (1849), p. 482; quoted in Theodore E. Schmauck and C. Theodore Benze, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), p. 684.

Henry Eyster Jacobs reports a statement made by Elector John Frederick the Magnanimous to an ambassador who had been sent to Saxony by King Henry VIII of England: “...the Elector...assured the English ambassador that ‘he received the living Word of God according to the Augsburg Confession, and thus publicly professed it, without which there is no true knowledge of God or hope of salvation; and from this Confession he would not recede even though he were compelled to lose life, and all that he had’” (*The Lutheran Movement in England during the Reigns of Henry VIII. and Edward VI., and Its Literary Monuments* [revised] [Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1908], p. 152; quoting Veit Ludwig von Seckendorf, *Commentarius Historicus*

May it likewise be said among *us*, that *we* are weary of the superior intelligence of the *twenty-first* century in matters of Christian faith. And may the joyful confidence that animated the authors of the Formula of Concord also animate us, as we – through our own subscription to the Book of Concord – with them repeat these solemn words:

Therefore, it is our intent to give witness before God and all Christendom, among those who are alive today and those who will come after us, that the explanation here set forth regarding all the controversial articles of faith which we have addressed and explained – and no other explanation – is our teaching, faith, and confession. In it we shall appear before the judgment throne of Jesus Christ, by God’s grace, with fearless hearts and thus give account of our faith, and we will neither secretly nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it. Instead, on the strength of God’s grace we intend to abide by this confession.<sup>99</sup>

Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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*et apologeticus de Lutheranism sive de Reformatione* [3 Vols.] [Leipzig, 1692], Vol. III, pp. 225 sq.).

<sup>99</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XII:40, Kolb/Wengert p. 660.