

Promissio

A Journal of Confessing Theology

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Creeds and Confessions

“This is what it means to be a heretic: one who understands the Scriptures otherwise than the Holy Spirit demands” (Thesis 64 of Luther’s *Disputation concerning the Humanity and Divinity of Christ*; WA 39/2, 98, 15).

The orthodox sense of theological speech is provided by Spirit-given “usages or formulations of speech” (*usum seu formulas loquendi*).

As Luther puts it in the Preface of the Disputation: “Therefore in order that we might somehow understand, God has given us *formulations of speech*, that Christ is God and man in one person, etc.” (emphasis added; *Ideo ut capere aliquomodo possimus, dedit Deus nobis formulas loquendi, quod Christus sit Deus et homo in una persona, etc.*,” referring to the Christological statement of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon).

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A Journal of Confessing Theology

Theology is not freethinking but “freed thinking” and therewith bound to its liberating Lord. Therefore, *Promissio* undertakes theology for the sake of informing and enabling the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In order to do so, it operates within a zone in which constraint and freedom are neither separable nor confused.

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Table of Contents

Editorial

- “Stingy Orthodoxy?”
 Creeds and Confessions after Christendom 5
 Paul R. Hinlicky

Guest Editorial

- Generous Orthodoxy and Christian Hospitality
 Youth Ministry As a Case Study 25
 David K. Delaney

Articles

- Confessional Renewal for Baptists 35
 Daniel E. Harris
- The Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict of the 1920s
 in the Augustana Synod—and Beyond 51
 Thomas E. Jacobson
- Can American Lutheranism Recover Its Confessional Center?
 Piepkorn, Catholicity, and the Augsburg Confession 71
 William S. Wiecher
- When the Church Says What Is So 93
 Dennis Bielfeldt
- A Church that Believes, Teaches, and Confesses
 that Jesus Is the Christ, the Son of the Living God 115
 Patrick K. Welton

A Book Worth Discussing

- Duane Larson
*Ubi Deus Dixit. Where God Has Spoken:
 The Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms* 133
 Andrew L. Christiansen

Symposium

- on Gordon Jensen’s *A Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community* 143
 Maria Toomey, Empathetic Encounters in the Call to Discipleship 145
 Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, Mutual Consolation As Answering the Call 153
 Mark D. Tranvik, Love’s Austere and Lonely Offices 164
 Allen G. Jorgenson, Creation’s Vocation, and Ours 171

Opinion outside the Theme

- The West Is Christian—The Gospel Is Not Western 181
 Georg Warnecke

“Stingy Orthodoxy?”

Creeds and Confessions after Christendom

Paul R. Hinlicky

ABSTRACT: “To be God is to give” (Luther), and in this light, the gospel purpose of creeds is to articulate belief in divine generosity. This editorial essay argues for the creedal belief that true God is essentially and eternally, and thus also economically self-giving. It clarifies the contested relationship between belief about God and trust in God in arguing that beliefs about trustworthiness are entailed for trust to persevere in adversity. Adversity is then characterized theologically as the absurdity of actual evil in the good creation of God as figured in the devil who out of the malice of envy would drive creatures to lethal despair of God and even, for this purpose, corrupts creedal belief into instruments of a stingy, death-dealing orthodoxy. This devil must be named, defeated, condemned, and doomed for the generous love of God to prevail in time and for eternity; we should learn this from the genesis of Christian doctrinal theology in the primitive baptismal creeds that coupled renunciation of the devil with faith’s new allegiance to the God of the gospel. A confessing church of divine generosity, in distinction from a confessionalized church of stingy orthodoxy, situates itself in this apocalyptic confrontation to conceive of its doctrinal beliefs as antithetically structured. “To believe God is to disbelieve the idols” (C. Morse), yet herein the danger arises of a literalistic misunderstanding of the apocalyptic genre which demands clarity about the referent in whom the truth of creedal beliefs consists. The creativity of the Nicene Creed is explained in its ontological grounding of the economy of salvation in reference to the eternally self-giving life of the Father of the Son on whom he breathes his Spirit. The ecumenical intention of the Augsburg Confession is lifted up in this light to point the way beyond the end of Christendom and the institutional collapse of denominationalism to a realignment, which may require doctrinal reformulations in the Spirit’s ongoing work of constructing a gospel-mandated generous orthodoxy.

To Be God Is to Give

At the heart of Lutheran Reformation theology, the God of the gospel was freshly understood to live in inexhaustible self-giving for us and our human salvation, as seen in a Luther slogan, *esse Deum dare est*, “to be God is to give.” Within the

context of Western Augustinianism's doctrine of divine absoluteness, Lutheran theology maintained on the one side universal atonement against strong pressures from the Reformed for a doctrine of atonement limited to the elect alone and, on the other side, the Holy Spirit's sovereignty in the free and gracious gift of justifying faith against the papist doctrine of election on account of foreseen merit. Core belief in the gracious God sustains the gospel message through adversity, telling of something yet unseen in its fullness, a promise vouchsafed in the New Testament of Jesus Christ and delivered by the Spirit for venturing *faith*—*but*, just so, faith *not* yet fulfilled in sight. The self-giving of the self-promising God is a gift that therefore cannot be controlled, manipulated, or predicted by humans who would game it; trusting faith in this God comes on the scene of a conflicted and contested world to be granted by the free-blowing Spirit “where and when it pleases God” (AC, VI) who, as such, permits and justifies only trust in God who gives.

The message of divine self-giving for us, newly enacted and attested in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, tells the best news, then, in a world still not transformed by it, proclaiming his cross until He comes again. The message has immediate consequence, to be sure. “Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). Believers have *already now* passed through the *last* judgment on account of this gracious present justification, if only they persevere through trial and testing in the lifelong penitence of *trust* in the promising God, i.e., disbelieving idols, newly living in its defiant hope that He fulfill divine self-giving for us visibly in the consummation when “God will be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) upon the defeat of contra-divine powers. Genuine trust in *this* God for the time that remains, filial not servile, is therefore always accompanied by a healthy reverence of God as properly fearful trust echoes back love in response to the self-giving love which the promising God is. *Esse Deum dare est*.

Doctrine of the God of the gospel accordingly intends a *generous* orthodoxy (2 Corinthians 8:9). Such generous orthodoxy is made a rule of faith or norm in the creeds and confessions of the church through history, *rightly* understood to articulate the gospel's remarkable exchange in which the Son of God undertook human poverty in order to bestow divine riches (for, as sad experience teaches, creeds and confessions can be *gamed* when *badly* understood to produce a self-proclaimed and stingy, even death-dealing “orthodoxy”).

Faith as Trust (*fiducia*) and Belief (*fides*)

The Latin expression *esse Deum dare est* articulates a *belief* about true God based upon the event of divine self-giving effected and made known in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Luther's correlation of true God and true faith thus bears an important consequence. Trusting perseverance in contested human reality entails faith as *beliefs* about God as powerful, wise, and good to deliver on the gospel's promise; these beliefs are expressed in definite articulations, “articles” of faith, by which confessors

tell the good reasons for their hope on the witness stand of history. Essentially, they warrant trust by identifying and describing the generous God of the gospel. With these beliefs, confessors take a stand by making a claim to theological truth about the One in whom final trust is defiantly invested.

When in justifying *trust* we surrender ourselves to the care of One who first gave Himself for us, such questions of belief become urgent and inescapable: *who* is this One worthy of all our trust? *Why* is this One worthy of all our trust? Also, *why* then must we still walk by faith and not yet by sight? Note well: the necessity here is *analytical*, for the articulation of such beliefs is a matter of *logical entailment* explicating the *unique object* of justifying trust who as *living subject* is indeed trustworthy. It is precisely not the addition of a legal demand making the promise of God received in trusting faith conditional upon the intellectual work of adopting a belief from the smorgasbord table of human religiosity, let alone servile prostration before an authoritarian religious demand. Such transactional “orthodoxies” would be stingy, not a joyful exchange but a business as usual quid pro quo. Christians do not *have to* but rather *get to*—freely and joyfully—confess *the* faith in *the* God of the gospel.

Such are the kinds of questions to which the creeds and confessions in Christian history give answer; they spell out the beliefs *about* God by which genuine trust *in* God may flourish through adversity. It is important to grasp this situation under trial and testing in the world of penitent and properly fearful faith and of confessors put on the witness stand to give an account of their hope when all else seems desperate. Lacking awareness of this situation in life, the creeds and confessions may seem to issue answers to questions that no one is asking, answers that then fall upon the ears with a dull thud as an unintelligible demand to believe this or that improbable thing, which honest folk may conscientiously defy by saying, “I don’t believe *that*.” However, honest disbelief in beliefs demanded by stingy orthodoxy can be the sanctifying Spirit’s own critique at work to open up the window to the fresh clean air of self-entrusting faith in the self-giving God of the gospel. To believe in God is indeed to disbelieve the idols, even the idols of dying Christendom.

When I was pastoring a small rural congregation in Bible Belt Southwest Virginia some years back, a teenage girl who was friends with some of our kids started coming to church with them. As I met with the youth for Bible study, this young lady constantly piped up with a recurring refrain, “I don’t want to go down under.” She didn’t mean Australia. “I don’t want to go down.” When I asked her why she was worried about that, she produced a list of trivial reasons for nonconformity with puritanical ideals in which she had been indoctrinated. I got so exasperated with her anxious oppression by stingy orthodoxy that I burst out, “You’re going to have to work a lot harder than that to go to hell”, immediately telling how Jesus had descended into hell to proclaim his victory for its captives.

What is at stake in creeds and confessions is true God and false god. There is an ancient precedent, the salience of which renews today in post-Christendom, for such discriminating Christian “atheism:” Justin Martyr wrote to the Roman

Emperor Marcus Aurelius acknowledging that Christians are indeed “atheists,” as the Empire accused, in that they positively disbelieve the idols of Rome. Let us note such selective “atheism” as the possibility, indeed, necessity, for the reformation of dogma, when mandatory Christian belief in the self-giving God has been turned into some dogmatism of stingy orthodoxy, in the ongoing theological task under the Spirit’s unfinished work of generous orthodoxy.

The statement of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:19-20 helps us here: “the Son of God, Jesus Christ...was not ‘Yes and No’; but in Him it is always ‘Yes.’ For in Him, every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason, it is through Him that we say, ‘Amen,’ to the glory of God.” The amen of trusting faith is voiced in response to this best of news in a world still not transformed to accord with it but rather awash with competing messages of liberation. In Christ, the ancient promises to fallen Eve on the first couple’s way out of the Garden of God into the trial of human history, to the idolater Abram summoned to wander in exile from his idolatrous homeland into an unknown but promised habitation, to wavering Moses at the burning bush that he announce to the slave master Pharaoh the Lord’s deliverance of captive Israel from bondage, to Israel under Joshua to receive by the obedience of faith the divinely promised inheritance of the land of Canaan, to sinfully righteous king David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to rest in Jerusalem as a place for the Name of the promising God to dwell, to chastened exiles returning from Babylon to live anew in the ruins of Jerusalem as Ezra’s “slaves in our own land,” there awaiting Messiah—all these scriptural promises of God are recapitulated in the Christian message of the promising God as summoned up and vouchsafed in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus “who loved us and gave himself for us” (Gal 2:20). Thusly we sing this *belief about God the Giver* who so loved the world:

Christ Jesus is the Ground of faith,
Who was made flesh and suffered death;
All that confide in Him alone
Are built on this chief Cornerstone.

(TLH 245, v. 2)

This confident trust, articulated and warranted as belief in the incarnate Son who was crucified for us, is free and joyful as well as penitent and fearful, reflecting the double nuance of the ground of faith. This ground of faith is the Spirit’s “already” of the “not yet,” pointing forward to the coming in fullness and power of the gracious reign of this self-giving God over us and all, indeed, to be “all in all.” In the middle of time, the gospel comes as *the* recapitulated promise of *Israel’s* God, well-grounded in Christ Jesus by his New Testament death for us *Gentiles*, summing up the scriptural promise of the God of Israel to succeed in becoming our God, thusly to prove to be the One at last who is God truly and to demonstrate it by the fulfillment of the promises in the consummation of all things.

A well-catechized Reformation Christian, if asked whether she *has been* “saved,” but knowing that the fullness of salvation consists in the redemption of our bodies

at the promised Parousia of Christ, would reply, "in Christ, this is my certain hope, the fulfillment of my faith. But as for now, I am in Christ by faith at peace with God. And what about you?" This blessed assurance under trial and testing is borne witness by the Holy Spirit who has been given to believers to assure them that they are indeed *already now*, and *despite* present appearances to the contrary, beloved children of God. Thus, for Luther, confession, e.g. the church's public assertion of its militant unity and integrity in gospel-necessitated beliefs about what the generous God in Christ has already accomplished and has yet to accomplish, is the first and chief theological work of trusting faith, active in love, by which public account is given for the hope that is in us.

But wait! Should not trust alone suffice? Wouldn't emphasis on belief in public, corporate, unified confession of beliefs as in the creeds and confessions threaten to slide into some noxious intellectual works-righteousness, thereby promoting a self-proclaimed ecclesiastical "orthodoxy" self-righteously boasting, "Unlike these others, we believe, say, that Christ descended into hell, that the damned will burn there eternally, that Christ himself will be their judge on the last day?" Is not such "orthodoxy" stingy? Isn't faith *as trust* nothing but a gift, no strings attached? Isn't faith *as belief* a pastiche of arbitrarily selected notions from an outdated worldview, a self-aggrandizing human act of exclusion in the religion business, falsely esteemed as meritorious for one's own sect yet therewith injurious to others outside the tribe who may now be religiously despised? Isn't the flip side of belief in divine vindication license for such vindictiveness on the part of true believers, luridly envisioning the tortures of the damned as part and parcel of their heavenly reward? To be sure, there is evidence for such stingy orthodoxy in the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism and traces of it survive in the Christologically modified apocalyptic of the New Testament: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (Rev. 18:2).

Horried at the prospect of cruel, disproportionate and intolerant judgment and enabled by Enlightenment epistemology and cultural secularization, many in modern Lutheranism seized upon such objections to the emphasis descending from post-Reformation Protestant Orthodoxy on faith as belief. Charitably assessed, they were honestly motivated to address a crisis of confidence regarding traditional Christian doctrinal beliefs as articulated in the ecumenical creeds and historic confessions. Liberal theology accordingly put forward the revisionist alternative of childlike trust in a benevolent heavenly parent. They rationalized this reduction to minimal belief as the scientifically reconstructed religion of Jesus—a simple personal trust in a grandfatherly deity as opposed to the intellectual demand to hold traditional but complex and, in the modern age of science, increasingly dubious creedal beliefs: Virgin Birth? Resurrection? The Nicene Creed was impugned as an intellectualizing of the simple trust of Jesus, a "Hellenization of the gospel." Ironically, this reduction of belief in liberal Lutheranism itself precipitated a massive decline to the vanishing point of trust itself, epitomized when Nietzsche asked and answered, "Why atheism today? No one believes in God the Father!" If *belief* in God the Father is not indicated and understood rightly by the generous divine gift

of His beloved Son Jesus, the kind of fearful *trust* in God taught and enacted in the life and in the death of the beloved Son has ceased to be the ground and measure of faith and instead become a willful human utopianism.

That is exactly what happened. Scant years after Nietzsche's question-and-answer, Adolf von Harnack expressed revisionist Lutheranism's doctrine of God concisely: "God and the soul, the soul and its God." This characteristic modern reduction from unifying corporate belief in the triune God of the gospel to childish, privatized, and individualistic trust in a deified Benignity entailed neither penitence nor fear in the trust it recommended in that it had ceased to ponder the gospel-necessary question, "Why *not yet*?" Failing to ask this critical question, the experience about to overwhelm liberal Lutheranism in the "the land of Luther" during protracted years of trench warfare, snapped any surviving illusions of a benevolent heavenly parent, proving it rather to be modernity's "stillborn God" (Mark Lilla).

A discriminate Christian "atheism" is called for here, especially in the ongoing work of doctrinal theology to construct a generous orthodoxy from the *costly* grace of Christ. Adults, in any case, quickly learn that the rain falls upon the just and the unjust alike so that experience in life on the earth crushes what remains of privatized and childish faith. By contrast, the child's trust matures into adult faith's knowledge of the One who is God truly precisely in giving Christ *crucified* according to the Scriptures for our *sins* so that those who die with Him by faith in true fear and penitence may live with Him henceforth and eternally. Of course, adults can persist in being childish and even think themselves in this way to be spiritually elite, like the proto-docetists of I Corinthians 15 who imagined that resurrection had already taken place, that their select souls were already exalted to heaven, elevated beyond the cares and burdens of bodies on the earth and in society. There was no "*not yet*" operative in their theology, guarding against religious illusion as well as against grouchy illusion in stingy claims to have achieved "orthodoxy" in the fog and friction of the Spirit's ongoing warfare against the flesh, including the fleshly church of the religion business that would market belief in a good deal.

The Surd of Actual Evil

If we would retrace these developments to restore for theology the necessity of well-grounded and well-articulated beliefs for genuine trust to persevere in a world that has not yet been transformed to accord with the gospel promises of life, righteousness, and peace, we face a significant difficulty but one crucial for understanding the organic necessity of creeds and confessions that emerge in the pilgrim course of the church militant. As mentioned, this necessity is to articulate the beliefs of persevering faith, particularly salient when trust is put to trial. That *real* difficulty is, in a word, *the devil*. Reflect for a moment on what *this* reality means. The *reality* of a determined agency of malice in opposition to the creator God and the goodness of his creation! The figure of the devil, crucially important within the

gospel narrative, thusly betrays a genuine *absurdity* at work, defying comprehension. It is an absurdity that afflicts all of Christian doctrine from the beginning with the figure of the serpentine "father of lies" (John 8:44), a "murderer from the beginning." Moreover, this actual evil will afflict creation until its final resolution (Revelation 20:7-10) by the God who makes all things new by making an end of actual evil. The distinction aimed at here in generous orthodoxy is this: there is a last and final judgment. In it the devil is to be damned, not its human victims.

However, how is it possible for such opposition to God, who is creator of all that is not God, to be actual? How can such virulent rebellion against the Creator and His goodwill for the creature be contested radically by that the *unlikeliest* of messiahs, the crucified "King of the Jews?" Why is it just *this One* who is needed to proclaim and enact an *approaching* sovereignty of God, on the march to roll back the dominion of this old evil foe and, not less unlikely, by his consequent death and ultimate vindication as the risen One, to mediate human reconciliation, not to what *now is* but to what is *promised yet to come*?

Notwithstanding our speechlessness before this acknowledged absurdity of actual evil, an important benefit attends our inability to answer difficult questions about its origin and ontology even while disciples acknowledge its actuality, as that unlikeliest Messiah taught them urgently to pray, "save us from the time of trial and deliver us from the evil one." It is redemptively salient today that Christians are therewith forbidden the characteristically modern presumption of thinking that by our own power, wisdom, and goodness we can get to the so-called "root causes" of evil, putting us in the "radical" position once and for all to "root" out evil in a "final solution." In one fell swoop of our cross-modified apocalyptic theology, all of the attempts in recent centuries of ideological secularism to root out evil are forbidden to us: Marx and the capitalists, Hitler and the Jews, Stalin and the kulaks, Mao's Cultural Revolution and Pol Pot's killing fields, "manifest destinies" at work in enslavement regimes, genocides and apartheids, total war mass destruction bombings (whether by utilitarian Truman or vengeful Churchill), not to mention countless other military misadventures since then up to the present day, all justified in the lofty but lethally ironic slogan from Vietnam: "bombing villages to save them."

Christians living under modern secularism ought to know better insofar as they squarely face up to the *not yet* of God's promise. *Believers* who will someday judge angels are *not yet* wise enough or good enough but are merely sufficiently powerful to imagine that they can uproot mysterious evil once and for all. Evil behaviors, to be certain, must be recognized and outwardly constrained (as Romans 13 affirms), but evil cannot be eliminated without eliminating our common humanity in which it is deeply rooted (the very insight, lethally distorted by secularist self-exculpation and scapegoating, that rationalized the "radical" modern slaughters). Such is the humiliating but salutary perplexity forced upon us when theologically we face up to the devil as figuring a root absurdity besetting Christian doctrine and its surprising but ultimately realistic interpretation of this frustrated world. Facing up to this, the

contours of Christian hope can thusly be narratively sketched: the accusing Satan *already* has been cast down from heaven by the risen Christ who intercedes for us there as our Great High Priest, but this cruel accuser now rages on the earth (Rev. 12:7-17) like a lion seeking to devour until the ascended Christ prevails in battle against it for the peoples of the earth—until the “not yet” is no more, when Christ the victor has put all enemies under his feet so that God becomes all in all. This battle is His, not ours; it is not waged by us but for us *one and all*, or, *not at all*.

Such a doctrinal roadblock against root-evil curiosity in theology further comes to our benefit today as we realize that Christian doctrinal affirmation in the creeds and confessions bears an indelibly *antithetical* character so far as it continues to be informed by its biblical sources. The Shema of Israel (which should be translated, “YHWH is our deity, YHWH alone!”) shares in this antithetical structure (it articulates this-worldly henotheism not metaphysical monotheism) just as it is recapitulated by Paul in I Corinthians 8:6. When we reiterate the primordial confession that Jesus is Lord, we, affirming this belief, deny saving lordship to any and all other comers. The reign of God Jesus proclaimed and enacted is poised against the kingdom of the devil, and the Holy Spirit comes to do battle with unholy spirits. Apocalyptically framed, the point of such Christian belief is not to comprehend God in majesty, as Luther would put it, as if to grasp God “in his naked essence,” but rather to identify the God of the gospel on our ground, the ground on which the cross stood. Be it noted and registered immediately, however: in Luther, this important distinction is not a dualism because true God clothed in His word to us as the God of the gospel is this very divine essence presenting itself in a form hospitable to human creatures and just so also hostile to their Enemy. Thus, the chief cognitive purpose in doctrinal theology attending to Christian beliefs is to identify the actors in the cosmic conflict between creator God and Satan, the foe of God and of creation, so that Spirit-endowed believers may intelligently cooperate with God to struggle *appropriately* as redeemed creatures, to struggle *not* against flesh and blood with swords of steel but rather with the gifts of the Spirit against spiritual forces of wickedness. Believers participate in Christ’s battle for us by battling the evil deeply rooted within themselves (Rom. 7: 24), penitently and fearfully, by bringing the judgment of the cross to bear upon themselves in lifelong repentance. In just this way, trust is made pure and precise as belief requires sole reliance on the *God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Back to the Drawing Boards

Broadly speaking, the preeminent 20th century Lutheran systematic theologians, Pannenberg, Jenson, and Jüngel, have thusly argued each in their own way with varying degrees of success for the dePlatonizing of Christian theology in favor of apocalyptic as “the mother of Christian theology” (Käsemann). The most basic concept of theology in the doctrine of God is to be newly resourced in scriptural eschatology by constructing a gospel-informed doctrine of the Trinity to provide the deep

grammar of divine generosity. These well-intentioned endeavors, however, remain too dependent upon the philosophical theology of Hegel (an idealist, post-Kantian reprise of Neoplatonism for "divine simplicity *comprehending difference*") according to which the verdict of history provides both verdict of God and the true theodicy. However, Hegel's quasi-divine verdict of history always entails the justification of evils necessary to accomplishing history's rational goals. Antitheses exist to serve syntheses in the dialectical forward march of progress toward the consciousness of human unity with God. There is no eschaton of judgment identifying, defeating, and condemning the devil. As in Origen of Alexandria, even the devil must be reconciled for the love of God to prevail in history.

There is much to learn, certainly, from Hegel's post-Kantian philosophy of religion in which he attempted by philosophical means to continue basic elements of the Lutheran dogmatics and ethics he had internalized as a seminarian. Hegel was right in critically judging that the ontotheological scaffolding of simplicity *without difference*, otherwise known as Perfect Being Theism or Classical Metaphysics, has collapsed beyond repair and is no longer available to serve culturally as the rational-philosophical foundation of Christendom. But Hegel's modernized alternative of simplicity *comprehending difference* nevertheless perpetuates the Platonic idol of simplicity. In Hegel, difference is ultimately overcome by incorporation, in the recognition of otherness as one's own self enriched. This reconciliation of the negative (of the not-I to the I) is Hegel's updated iteration of Origen's reconciliation of the devil. Giorgio Agamben is right, then, to critique Hegel as modernity's preeminent anti-messianic thinker. In place of an apocalyptic break-in from outside the system of mendacity prevailing on the earth to assert saving truth for the inferior and unworthy, Hegel gives us an immanent evolution of that system to consciousness of its own divinity, producing today a culture that is not only post-Christendom (and increasingly post-denominational) but weirdly convinced of its own divinity. What would a return to genuinely messianic thinking bode for the future of creeds and confessions, where Jesus as the Christ is necessary to break the spell of a totalizing system of mendacity?

If we take our clues from the origination of Christian creeds in the sacrament of baptism, we rediscover how affirmations of believing trust entail definite renunciations declaring what is *not* to be believed. To believe in God is with ancient Israel to disbelieve the idols and indeed with Pauline apocalyptic to identify and renounce the demons that animate them. Converts in early Christianity accordingly underwent catechetical preparation for their baptism so that they would fully comprehend the new life of spiritual struggle they were getting into and to understand the gifts conferred upon them in the rite of Christian initiation to live in this new way. Forgiveness of sin entailed letting go of one's sins to receive in their place the righteousness of Jesus with the unction of the Holy Spirit and, henceforth in that power, to follow Jesus, the author and pioneer of faith, living already now into the reign of God.

Consequently in the drama of the baptism, the candidates solemnly renounced the kingdom of the devil with all its pomp and circumstance and counter-confessed allegiance to the God of the gospel: the Father who so loved his captivated creation that He gave his only Son into the hands of sinners; this beloved Son out of love so obeying His Heavenly Father's perplexing will that he drink the bitter cup of divine wrath to rescue those very sinners under its righteous indictment; the Holy Spirit who steeled Jesus for this world-turning ordeal and raised Him from the dead to declare the Father's vindication of Him who gave Himself for us. Easter is *God's* gospel, God's *ownmost* word spoken and acting to declare for us this obedient, humiliated, shrouded-with-sin and sealed-in-the-tomb Jesus as nevertheless and indeed the Father's beloved Son, that Jesus's self-giving love for the ungodly is also His own heavenly and eternal love. The baptismal creed gave expression to this "economic" Trinity, the Trinity as known in the gospel narrative battling here below on the plane of immanence against demonic forces to regain and liberate the creation.

It is one thing to recover and acknowledge this apocalyptic sense of the primitive Christian baptismal creed as an historical fact and quite another thing to take it seriously, let alone preach it in the 21st century for the world that imagines itself to have come of age. Truth be told, many of us are embarrassed by it. Some years ago, in a congregation I was serving, I was preaching on one of the dramatic stories of exorcism in the Gospel of Mark when a relative newcomer to the congregation, a professor at the local university, started loudly groaning during the sermon until he got up and, as he exited the sanctuary, burst out, "Why do we have to listen to these old stories!?" Meeting with him afterwards, I discovered that the previous pastor had taken him in without any catechesis and that in fact he had never been instructed in the Christian faith. I peacefully released him as he would not confess faith in Jesus because he could not see what difference it would make. He just wanted to belong to a convenient neighborhood fellowship of nice people. In painful fact, confessing belief in Jesus as Lord made no difference to him because the enemy of God and of us all had totally fallen out of the picture we present today of the Christian message. In most iterations, both "liberal" and "conservative," we market religion as little more than "monotheism and morality," practically as "therapeutic deism," wherein the demonic has been trivialized into psychological hangups inhibiting personal advancement according to secularist standards of success.

On the other hand, it is also certainly true that a literalistic interpretation of the economic Trinity according to the gospel narrative presents definite difficulties that inhibit contemporary embrace in full understanding. If anyone points out that the narrative presents us with three distinct personal agents at work collaboratively against another distinct agent in a battle taking place over the heads of human beings, a chorus of protests erupts: Tritheism! Superstition! Mythology! Belief in the economic Trinity thus called into question, belief in the devil cannot be anything but a noxious remnant of a superstition that will bring in its wake witch trials to persecute "uppity" women, exorcism in place of psychiatric pharmacology, even holy war against perceived infidels by a new licensing of idolatrous Christian nationalism

at war with real or imagined antichrists. In fact, however, such difficulties of apocalyptic literalism were early on acknowledged and addressed in the development of creedal Christianity. Indeed, they *necessitated* the qualification of the baptismal creed by the ontological affirmation of Nicaea to clarify the gospel's claim to truth.

The Ecumenical Creativity of Nicaea

What we know as the Apostles' Creed derives from the old Roman baptismal creed. For the faith in which we baptize and are baptized, it identifies the God of the gospel on the plane of immanence, i.e. within human time and space, in potent figures readily relatable as they are publicly portrayed in proclamation. However, without questioning what these figures ultimately refer to, the Apostles' Creed is satisfied to reassert in condensed summary the gospel narrative to form the trust and practice of Christian community life in the world. This corresponds to George Lindbeck's "cultural linguistic" model of doctrine based upon an external word that summons a religious community into existence and ever sustains it there. The cognitive purpose here is pragmatic, as we have seen, not to comprehend God metaphysically but to identify God and believers in their world on the plane of immanence. A probing question, however, arises which cannot finally be begged. Identification refers to something beyond the significations themselves to make sense, and the sense consists in successfully identifying the referent. Reference to what? What in the world is the scripturally derived and creedally parsed language operative in the Christian community concerning the economic Trinity of the Apostles' Creed talking about?

An insurmountable difficulty in answering this important question arises when these figures of the economy, as constructed in the gospel narrative, are taken and demand to be taken with wooden literalism. Then the heavenly Father ceases to be the Almighty Creator of all that is not God and becomes someone's sugar daddy (or abusive parent) in the sky; the beloved Son becomes an invulnerable warrior striding triumphantly upon the earth laying waste to enemies (whose destiny to the cross was essentially a temporary setback, if not a big mistake); and the Holy Spirit becomes warm and fuzzy feelings that energize my piety and unite my tribe in collective self-cheerleading posing as praise of God. Feeling the force of this objection against mistaking metaphorical narrative in wooden literalism and wanting to clear the air, the arch-heretic Arius drew an ontological line of division between the transcendent deity and immanent figures of it, thusly to subordinate if not utterly disqualify such naïve literalism. He, in fact, reiterated the Platonic subordinationism: the unbegotten God is singularly true God in the metaphysical sense so that even the closest figurations of this Deity as Son/Logos and Spirit are finite and creaturely. Incoherently, Arius continued to refer to the unbegotten God as the eternal Father ("incoherent" in that, as Athanasius countered, father and son are correlative terms so that father too is a figure on the plane of immanence; otherwise, the correlation of father and son implies reference to an ontological

plurality of relationality on the plane of transcendence, violating the simplicity that Arius defends). Arius's successor in the heresy, Eunomius, brought the Arian position into strict consistency when he discarded the appellation, father, to replace it with the metaphysical designator, the Unbegotten, as alone truly God.

As such, the Nicene Creed, which was finalized at Constantinople in the year 381, arose not only to refute Arian subordinationism but also to protect the baptismal creed from literalistic trivialization. The serious question to which the Nicene Creed gives answer is: "What *in the world* are we talking about when here and now on this earth we identify true God as Jesus, His heavenly Father, and Their sanctifying Spirit?" On the grounds of the middle axiom that God is truthful in His saving self-giving and thus self-revealing, the Nicene Creed executes a necessary and much needed inference—with the gospel narrative of the economic Trinity confessed at baptism in defiance of the devil's regime, we are referring to an eternal Trinity from whom the entire economy proceeds *as a free and sovereign decision of inexhaustible generosity*, even as its expression and depiction in the gospel narrative is accommodated to the mundane capacities of embodied creatures that they may grasp and cling to the thusly named God "clothed in his word" and so persevere through many trials and tribulations.

If we do not mistake Luther's formulation of this for the error of modalism (according to which an unknown deity temporarily adopts revelatory modes, e.g. at one time of the Father, at another the Son, and yet another the Spirit), the economic Trinity of the gospel narrative is thus in Luther's sense "the mask" of the eternal Trinity. The Christian claim to truth is that the self-giving of the God of the gospel is grounded in the eternal being of God to which the economic language refers. The self-giving portrayed in the economy, moreover, is a truthful expression for us of the deity whose eternal being consists in self-giving. True deity from eternity to eternity is the Father generating the Son on whom He breathes his own Spirit so that in the Spirit, the Son returns the glory to the Father. The self-giving of God for us in the gospel is not adventitious nor capricious but a truthful expression for us of who and what God is eternally as will be publicly demonstrated in the consummation of all things. Obviously, this ontological inference remains an act of faith in that the validity of the inferred reference depends wholly and ultimately upon the promised action of the eternal Trinity to bring the redeemed creation to fulfillment in the eternal kingdom.

This, then, is the gospel necessary creedal affirmation. God truly is eternally the Father of His own beloved Son on whom He breathes His own Spirit so that in time human creatures united to the Son by the Spirit are fulfilled in the eternal glorification of God the Father. When Christians employ the title, "God," for the creator of all that is not God, they name "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, the one who is God truly. Amen." For Christians, consequently, the divine is not an aloof, lonely, naked perfection of being on the analogy of temporally perduring things but a living dynamism of personal communion, a generative

being of self-giving love. That affirmation is what the Nicene Creed is good for when it affirms ontologically "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." Strictly speaking, moreover, we are herewith assigned the subject matter of dogmatic theology precisely as doctrine of God since the Nicene Creed ventures to enunciate the ecumenically binding common confession, "we believe"; it is *the* dogma of *the* corporate Christian faith, the public faith in which we believe, the faith in which we baptize and we are baptized. The triune God is essentially the God who gives antecedently and eternally and thus truthfully and definitively in time and space. The knowledge of such a God is the essence of generous orthodoxy.

Affirming that Christian faith *logically* entails such definite beliefs about God binding on the Christian conscience of trusting confidence in the God of the gospel and so articulated in "dogma" is merely to say that none of us already knows what the Christian faith is, that it rather must be learned, and that this life-long learning stretching into eternity is based upon divine teaching, if it indeed is to make claim to truth binding upon Christian conscience. In the Lutheran tradition, however, a real difficulty arises when logical entailment as has just been described is not sharply distinguished from a heteronomous demand to submit intellect to a mystifying rational puzzle on pain of salvation.

In the freedom of faith, *only joyfully* do we get to confess Jesus as Lord and the Triune God; in the freedom of this belief, we likewise do not submit either conscience or intellect to any other claim to salvation, sacred or secular, even when dressed in Christian verbiage. Thus, even, if not especially within the field of Christianity, belief that would be imposed by the coercion of conscience with threatening alarms of fire and brimstone must be actively repudiated while the belief that is given with trust in the named God of the gospel must be articulated, explained, and taught from the primary norm of Scripture and as guided by the historical creeds. Indeed, this very ordering to gospel freedom may impose on contemporary doctrinal theology the obligation not only to test novel spirits but also to repair traditional formulations for adequacy to the gospel and vulnerability to co-optation by stingy orthodoxies. For this ongoing theological task of creedal Christianity, it is imperative to recognize that *generous* "orthodoxy," with respect to the *self-giving* God of the gospel, is the Holy Spirit's work in progress, not fixed formulations carved in stone.

Creedal Declines, Surprising Renewals

It is sad to say, then, that difficulties did not cease after the accomplishment of the Nicene Creed, and from this point onward, *creedal contestation* arose in dividing Christendom to claim orthodoxy for one faction and to reject the heterodoxy of the other faction. This intellectual arrogance, indeed the triumphalism of such human-all-too-human one-upmanship in the religion supposedly of the Prince of Peace, has given dogma and dogmatic theology a bad reputation. In the East, subsequent to Constantinople, there were four more claims to ecumenical orthodoxy in

councils addressing difficulties in Christological doctrine that arose from the Nicene Creed's Trinitarian approach (albeit still entangled with the metaphysics of divine simplicity), thereby resulting from the outset in the simultaneous excommunication of Miaphysite followers of Cyril and their Nestorian foes at Chalcedon.

The end result of the East's seven ecumenical councils was, in any case, ambiguous Christologically, as may be seen in John of Damascus in whom the Patristic Era is often said to have concluded. He succeeded in articulating the assumption of human body and soul by the Trinitarian person of the eternal divine Son but went on to divide the humanity between the deified rational soul and the mortal body and its passions, which it wore like a cloak. As a result, the portraits in the gospel narrative of Christ in perplexity, anguish, and finally extinguished in the utter defeat of death had to be offloaded not merely onto the human nature but within the humanity from the deified soul, in any case innately immortal, onto the corruptible body. The nearly unconcealed purpose was to explain away the gospel narrative's portrait of Jesus's soul in anguish of death, explaining His despair as "playacting" for our sakes. The gravamen of the Fifth Ecumenical Council that "one of the Trinity suffered in his human nature" was, strictly speaking, sidestepped by body-soul anthropological dualism. In the process, the doctrine of the resurrection became the riddle of how, or even of why, the naturally immortal soul would need to have its decomposed body parts reassembled for eternity.

On the Western side of Latin-speaking Christendom, there was a failure to grasp the *logical* nature of the Nicene Creed as an *inference* on the grounds of divine truthfulness (in antithesis to demonic mendacity) from the economy of salvation to the reality of the eternal Trinity as its referent. Within this inference, the ontological unity of the eternal Trinity was grounded in the so-called "monarchy" (*not* "the divine right of kings," but the "sole principle of origin") of the Father, meaning that the unbegotten first person, bearing aseity as a distinguishing personal property, logically precedes and orders the other persons in the one eternal life, the so-called *taxis*. The Father is the unbegotten begetter of the Son and unbreathed breather of the Spirit. Ontologically, the Father is thus the sole principle of origin even as the Holy Spirit is the corresponding agent of the personal unity of the three persons in loving communion. The Father, (note well: *not* an abstract divine nature), provides as such the *ontological* unity in the divine life of the three persons. Accordingly, the original Nicene Creed's formula in Greek concerning the Spirit reads "who proceeds from the Father;" i.e., *ontologically* in the life of the *eternal* Trinity. This wording, however, seemed to Westerners to ignore the economic teaching—important for the identification of the Holy Spirit in the world as the Spirit of Jesus as of the Father—that it is the divine Son together with the Father in heaven who has promised upon His ascension to send Their Spirit upon disciples. Gradually, the language of the Nicene Creed was altered in the Latin West by the *filioque* to read that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." Not only did the unauthorized emendation of the text of the Nicene Creed offend the Easterners but, as it seemed to them, it ignorantly violated divine unity in thinking

ontologically of a collaborative generation of the Spirit, i.e., a ditheism threatening return from monarchical trinitarianism to pagan theogony.

As these abstruse but antithetical positions hardened, alongside the growing political alienation of Byzantium from the Latin West, a deeper motive emerged among the Westerners that came to supreme expression in the so-called Athanasian Creed (which is not a product of Athanasius or his school but of later Augustinianism). Stretching all the way back to some anxieties of Augustine, whose concern was to affirm the ontological sameness of the three as equal expressions of the same divine substance, the Athanasian Creed grounded divine unity in the simple divine nature to constitute a single divine subject; this creed solidified *filioque* Trinitarianism. At length it perpetuated, if not generated, the notorious logical conundrums to be embraced as "mysteries" on pain of salvation (as expressly threatened in the Athanasian Creed): "The Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God. And yet not three gods." We are well on our way to treating the Trinity as a mathematical riddle, as Tillich lampooned, a mystification "put on an altar to be adored" but playing no role in the economy of salvation and ceasing to do any theological work aside from sonorous mystery-mongering. Here we have left far behind the economic Trinity's distinct personal agencies collaborating in intricate and passionate drama to overthrow the tyranny of the devil and set free its captives. Despite good intentions in Augustine, the West lost sight of the Nicene Creed's confession of the *eternal* tri-unity of divine being upon whose freely willed action turns the fulfillment of the promise of creation, the truth of the gospel narrative and the creature's redemption. On these fully articulated beliefs, human trust in the gospel promises of God depends.

The Ecumenical Intention of the Augsburg Confession

Up until the time of the Reformation, such doctrinal grievances of regional churches against one another were articulated in overreaching anathemas and new creedal formulations produced in new councils or, when this procedure proved cumbersome, increasingly by episcopal or papal decrees. The papal Fourth Lateran Council, for example, codified the influential doctrine of analogy that every similarity between creator and creature is encompassed by an ever-greater dissimilarity, a decision that reinforced divine simplicity *without difference*, a transcendence ironically *limited* ontologically by its negation of immanence, producing, as Hegel later pointed out, a "false infinite," i.e., a self-contradictory finite infinite delimited as "the Beyond" by an opposing sphere of finitude. Eschewing such entanglements, the Lutheran Reformation had attempted to reframe divisive metaphysical disputes over Christian doctrine by putting them back into the apocalyptic frame of confession under trial (Matthew 10:32). Indeed, the epigraph of the Augsburg Confession from Psalm 119:46 reads, "I will also speak of your decrees before kings and shall not be put to shame." As the Preface to the Augsburg Confession, written with the ecumenical intention of making a claim to divine truth that ought to be binding

upon the conscience also of *Christian* opponents, states: "In this way, by correcting whatever has been treated differently in the writings of both parties, everything could be brought together in return to one simple truth and to Christian Concord. Moreover, we may thus honor and serve one, pure, and true religion. For just as we exist and fight under one Christ, so we may also be able to live in one Christian church in unity and concord" (BOC, 31).

To be sure, the Augsburg Confession does not raise the issue of inadequate Trinitarianism on both sides of the Reformation dispute, as this editorial essay is suggesting. However, in attempting to resolve the disputed issues surrounding the doctrine of justification solely on the plane of immanence, i.e. anthropologically, it could not persuade opponents with deep reasoning about the eternally self-giving God in favor of the Lutheran proposal for gracious justification by faith alone in Christ alone. As such, it was not regional pride nor schismatic self-justification but a correct intuition of deep underlying continuity in theological purpose when the Formula of Concord called the Augsburg Confession "the Nicene Creed of our times." This invocation of precedent in the unitive ecumenical intention of the Creed of Nicaea in affirmation of the generosity of God was retrieved in that signature confession of the Lutheran Reformation that Christians together in common confession unite to fight the devil rather than one another. It was in addition an implicit recognition of the historicity of the confessing church, not the stingy stasis of a confessionalized church claiming to have achieved orthodoxy once and for all. Why is this so difficult?

David Bentley Hart, in his recent *Tradition and Apocalypse*, puts his finger on this endemic difficulty of Christian creedalism in the "apocalyptic ferment" of the gospel. Genuine faith, he writes,

is not the assurance that one possesses the fullness of truth but is rather a fidelity to the future disclosure of the full meaning of what little one already knows. The venture of belief is, before all else, a trust in the reality of a vital and essential truth that transcends the forms it animates. Otherwise, every historical transition would constitute a defeat. This is the greatest folly of traditionalism: when a believer abandons faith's preoccupation with the invisible and instead adopts traditionalism's desperate adherence to the beguiling contingencies peculiar to some particular epoch or school, he or she has effectively forsaken the venture of faith altogether and sought shelter instead in blissful memories (or, more likely, fantasies) (104-105).

For Hart, that ferment was carried forward in the empirical Christian tradition in spite of everything obscuring it to burst upon a confused scene to enunciate with renewed clarity the divine purpose in the great and saving exchange taking place in the event of Jesus Christ. For Hart, this event was formulated in Johannine idiom: "the Logos became flesh in order that human beings become divine." Arguably, the same apocalyptic ferment burst out in Luther's "joyful exchange," with its more Pauline-forensic rendering of the saving exchange: "For our sake he made him to be sin who

knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). The Lutheran Reformation thusly sought to re-conceive Christian concord by foregrounding this decluttering by “one simple truth” of the saving exchange of the generous God giving Himself for others, clearing away accumulated theological detritus to enunciate with fresh force the saving import of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus who was “put to death for our sins but raised for our justification.”

The apocalyptic ferment carried forward in the empirical Christian tradition (however obscured) told forth the promised divine redemption of the frustrated creation with the reconciliation of its sinfully complicit creatures and their liberation from the tyranny of the devil to live already now in newness of life. Little wonder that Luther admired Athanasius, a child of the last great Decian persecution, as one who also grasped the saving import of the great exchange that conferred courage upon the martyrs to stand defiantly (as Luther stood in Worms), confessing the Name of the divine Logos who became human in order that humans receive eternal life, if only per Matthew 10:32; they persevered in confessing this Jesus as Lord.

The Confessing Future

Similarly to the post-Nicene decline, however, we could now rehearse a sad story of the breakdown of the Reformation confession into contending confessions of divided Christendom in the following so-called “age of confessionalization.” It suffices to say here that in large part, the Enlightenment arose in protest against a divided Christendom of warring confessions, each maintained by non-adjudicable appeals to authority backing mutually exclusive claims to be the true visible church of Christ on earth. Creedal Christianity consequently collapsed in the next two centuries into a sterile antithesis between authoritarian dogmatisms encamped in ever shrinking and mutually anathematizing ecclesiastical fortresses and, on the other side, the freethinking deism spreading through secularizing culture. The *freed* thinking of those liberated from the idolatries of this present age and therewith bound to the liberating Lord Jesus to confess him boldly before the world as the inbreaking truth of the self-giving God transmuted into the captivating thinking of ecclesiastical ideologies contending for this-worldly recognition. How profoundly modern Christianity has since succumbed to the status markers of secularism, i.e. *as if* this present age is all there is! *As if* being on the “right side of history” were the same as being right in the eyes of God! Luther’s “temporal kingdom,” ordered to the “eternal kingdom,” is now disjointed, severed from divine purpose. In dogmatic secularism, the present becomes the only real, the ultimately real, and with that the demonic lie about attaining sovereignty in a godless world is readmitted to cultural plausibility. That threat makes answering our question urgent.

Do creeds and confessions have a future? These historic testimonies certainly bore Christian truth against the father of lies and murderer from the beginning which we disregard to our own peril, but we can retrieve creedal truths for ourselves

in the future only if we do not take their formulations idolatrously as a fixed and settled statements of gospel truth, constituting a seamless garment which must be bought whole cloth, as it were, to be defended at all costs against all comers. Truly the historic creeds were *timely* truth but just so not *eternal*. In Lutheran theology, creeds and confessions are *norma normata* to be received appreciatively yet critically, i.e. only in the light of the *norma normans*, which is the word of God spoken on Easter morning to justify the ungodly who entrust themselves to its apocalypse of the divine Sonship of the crucified Jesus.

The deep reason for such critical reception is not the formal inadequacy to its eternal subject matter that attends all human speech about God since the God of the gospel gives Himself to us in scriptural terms of human language sanctified to this communicative purpose. Instead, the reason for the secondary authority of creeds and confessions is the gospel's apocalyptic ferment, the present groaning labor of the Holy Spirit who has not retired and gone out to pasture but ever awakens the sleeping church to the risen Christ's continuing work of salvation. "Orthodoxy" is teaching and living true to the gospel according to the Pauline "canon" in Gal 6:16 (the original articulation of the meta-doctrine of justification as the article on which the church stands and falls). Such *public faith of ecclesial life* under the gracious rule of the living and liberating Lord Jesus is what we should mean by "orthodoxy," as in Gal. 2:14 that points to *both* the claim to truth *and* its orthopraxis, the faithful life together that accords with it. Thanks be to the God who ever gives, orthodoxy is the Holy Spirit's work in progress to which we are summoned as laborers in the vineyard, active coworkers in the *missio Dei* rather than passive consumers who bury their talents.

The future for the creeds and confessions lies in the renewal of such *critical* dogmatics in service of a *confessing* church. The term "critical" is not meant in the Kantian sense, as if to deduce some epistemological foundation on which to erect a human regime of knowledge. Rather, the "critical" in "critical dogmatics" is meant in the strictly theological sense of the Holy Spirit, a prosecuting attorney who convicts the world concerning righteousness, sin, and judgment beginning in the household of God! In view of the reckless revisionism that sells a lot of shallow books in academic theology today, one hesitates here, wishing to avoid even the appearance of fashionable superficiality, not to mention of evil. Dogmatic theology that religiously claims immunity from the precedent of Paul's critique of even so venerable an apostle as Peter for not walking true to the gospel is not theology intending true knowledge of true God but human-all-too-human dogmatism, how so ever liberally and indulgently expressed. Here, the weakest form of an argument—the self-privileging appeal to authority (whether it be "the Pope says" or "Luther says")—becomes a pretext to speak majestically *in place of* God rather than *on behalf of* the speaking and promising God, hence in the vulnerable posture of the witness/martyr who knows above all that all claims to speak the word of God are subject to the scrutiny of the divine Speaker.

The fundamental argument for renewing theology as *critical* dogmatics is rather to articulate the apocalyptic ferment, i.e. the originating word of God spoken in the gospel authoring and authorizing the community of faith with its creeds and confessions. This is the *norma normans*. Theology in this light and by this measure proceeds self-critically all along its way. The mere repetition of past formulas of faith from the creeds and confessions in this light can be a defensive shield against that penetrating divine scrutiny. The painful probing of the Holy Spirit asks theologians for contemporary confessing that unleashes the apocalyptic ferment to bring renewed clarity to bear on divine purpose in the fog and friction of our embattled human reality, including in the confused and discouraged churches. To be sure, one must know deeply with the best resources of scholarship in the hard work of theological research just what those past formulas of faith were saying and doing in their time and place if one, under the same Spirit, is to theologize the same apocalyptic outburst for the present time and place, namely, to articulate concretely belief in the self-giving God and thusly inform a generous orthodoxy in word and deed.

The venerable creeds and confessions, then, are not preserved by rote appeal in a defensive posture within a mausoleum posing as the one true church but by appreciative and critical appropriation for the present context of humanly contested reality by the living church of militant grace. Such militancy will work the realignment of the existing, increasingly post-denominational churches to generate a confessing movement within the dark Egypt of this world. To effectuate this realignment in the ruins of Christendom amid the collapsing institutional forms of denominationalism, this militancy may entail reform of doctrine by the reformulation of historic doctrines. Isn't that exactly what happened in the Lutheran Reformation? Reformulating was required by the assertion of the novel, putatively "chief" doctrine when Luther appended the famous exclusive particle, the little modifier, "alone," to the Pauline text asserting "justification by faith." If so, what worst fate could there be for the Lutheran Reformation of doctrine than to be reduced to a fixed idea deployed as a shield against probing divine scrutiny in the present, asking the theologians, "who do you say that I am?" *here and now* in the ruins of Christendom and the collapsing denominationalism? The church that faces that question today in full consciousness of the "not yet" to repent of Christendom triumphalism and to answer instead "Christ crucified, the best of news in the world not yet transformed by it" awakens from nostalgia and temptations to stinginess to break through decaying institutional forms to become the confessing church of the saving Lord Jesus in the blessed conviction *esse Deum dare est*. —PRH

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Guest Editorial

Generous Orthodoxy and Christian Hospitality

Youth Ministry as a Case Study¹

David K. Delaney

Gary Trudeau once commented on George W. Bush's June 1999 attempt at visionary sloganeering, "Compassionate Conservatism," by saying that phrases like that sometimes reveal the weakness of the primary component, which is, in this case, "conservatism" as the leading idea and Bush's perceived need to add "compassionate" because "conservatism" as a term did not (apparently) automatically encompass that descriptive feature.² What has always been funny about this is that Bush (apparently) knew that the accusation was legitimate—conservatives were, at the time, often thought of by the Left and others as bigoted retro-hierarchy-loving bullies, and it was costing conservatives potential votes. The same might be said of the phrase "Generous Orthodoxy," which could easily be read as a concession that orthodoxy³ needs such a qualifier due to its (apparent) lack of inherent generosity, a problem that costs the Church potential adherents.

"Generous Orthodoxy" traces its coinage to the influential post-liberal theologian Hans Frei,⁴ but it was not popularized until the publication of Brian McLaren's

1. The Virginia Synod of the former LCA and current ELCA, along with youth and adult leadership groups at the church-wide level, are the primary contexts in which I have done more than forty years of my extended work with adolescents and young adults and serves as the main source for what I am referring to as a case study.

2. Thanks to Pastor David Drebes for the reminder of Trudeau's comment. It seems that the phrase was actually coined by political strategist Doug Wead in the late 1970s.

3. "Orthodoxy" is being used here and throughout this essay in its broadest sense as a reference to the desire to remain consistent in confession and practice to the Christian faith as historically received from the Church's earliest era. It is not to be identified here with any specific church body. See comments below regarding the inherent problem of the term.

4. Frei himself acknowledges the influence of his teacher at Yale, Robert Calhoun (d. 1983), who was already hinting at this concept alongside the nomenclature of the better-known

2004 book with that phrase as its title and its, shall we say, generous subtitle, “Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.” The phrase seems to have gained further popularity with its podcast treatment by pop-historian Malcolm Gladwell.⁵ Frei proposed the phrase to summarize his advocacy for a “middle voice” between the liberal and conservative poles of both academic and churchly theology in the 20th century, although—because for many readers he leaves the two parts of the phrase insufficiently defined—it is sometimes unclear what he intended. Did he envision a process of practical compromise among churches based on mutual culling of adiaphora until only the common denominators were left, or was he instead pioneering a third way that would (conveniently) feature his own narrative approach to theology and blend, as he put it, the voices of *The Christian Century* with those of *Christianity Today*?

McLaren’s modified approach could be seen as an attempt at transcending that dialectical process by letting the lessons of the apostle Paul’s Corinthian correspondence have their ecclesiological way with us. In sum, each one brings the Spirit-given gift he has, and everything builds up the whole body. Generous Orthodoxy, in McLaren’s view, is not a matter of negotiating away one’s pet practices in exchange for the other side doing the same thing, although at times one might have to do just that for the sake of peace in the larger body. As an ecclesial strategy, much less a thoroughgoing ecclesiology, doing so would not get us to the full measure of the stature of Christ. Can we imagine Jesus presiding with approval at a conference where conflicting factions come together and say “here’s what we’re willing to sacrifice in exchange for” some desire?⁶ Furthermore, the strategy of exploring all points of agreement among all the factions, thus paring the Christian story down to its two or three truly basic claims, would rob Christianity of its wisdom. There are complexities and nuances and uncertainties that are profitably baked into the articulation of the Christian faith because they are necessary to match the parallel complexities, nuances, uncertainties, and inevitable changes that comprise human life. It is *good* that Christian doctrine (even orthodoxy) can be complicated because life is complicated. Rather, for McLaren, the task is not consensus, but a kind of holy learning, a seeking and then recognizing that this very different kind of Christian facing me probably has something I need. Together, then, we move forward. That, from a certain point of view, is orthodoxy.

Neo-Orthodox movement in the mid-20th century in Calhoun’s unpublished lectures on the History of Christian Doctrine. Frei’s first written use of the phrase is in an essay responding to lectures by the evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry in 1987 and he provided additional treatment in various essays (see the posthumous collection *Types of Christian Theology* [1994]).

5. The “Revisionist History” podcast, season 1, episode 9, Aug. 11, 2016.

6. Not that this is what Frei proposed. But the idea of compromise remains the primary mechanism.

Although McLaren does not specifically cite G.K. Chesterton (clearly a stylistic influence) on this particular point, one is reminded of Chesterton's characterization of the development of Christian doctrine.⁷ When a puppy grows into a dog, Chesterton notes, it does not do so by making a series of compromises with a cat. It does so because what the dog was to become was already present in the puppy. In the same way, what was fashionably dismissed by both liberal and conservative Christian thinkers in Chesterton's time as the accrual of philosophical and cultural moss and lichen onto the pure tree of aboriginal Christian truth was, by contrast and in fact, the growth of Christianity into its full stature, organically rather than synthetically.

We might expand on McLaren by saying that in order for the church to get even within *shouting* distance of John 17 or Ephesians 4, we need to practice the kind of generosity that is willing to share *and receive* our Christian love, our various distinctive insights, approaches, discoveries, and gifts with one another across confessional lines and those closely-guarded borders⁸ to grow into the church that we are called to become. To describe this as navigating Scylla and Charybdis falls short of the point because the goal cannot be steering a safe middle path or reducing common witness to whatever gives the least offense around the table. That is simply a continuation of the liberal protestant agenda. For orthodoxy to be both genuine and generous, one must abandon that approach altogether in favor of an ecclesiology that practices a more *expansive* hospitality to the gifts and the physical sinners who bear them of the whole people of God.

If we may return to the Corinthian congregation: despite their reckless approach, they were an extremely instructive and curious bunch. In time, *someone* was going to have to act as pioneer for discovering whether *all* experiences of ecstasy were in fact *divine* experiences of ecstasy, and they unwittingly stepped up to the plate on our behalf. Where would we be if the Corinthians had not been so willing to attempt the outrageous, if only to illustrate that it doesn't really work? As such, they provided the pilot project for welcoming and testing⁹ *all* the gifts of God's people, no matter how weird. To echo Chesterton's language, the tongue-speakers and ecstatic prophets in Corinth were not welcomed by virtue of a series of compromises with those who waited tables. The believers' various gifts were added to one another so that the whole body grew into a singular and magnificent structure *in the Lord* (see Ephesians 2 and 4). This characterization of generous orthodoxy improves on, or at least balances, the assumption that

7. Pace John Cardinal Newman. This image appears in the introduction to Chesterton's biography of Thomas Aquinas.

8. "Confessional" is too specific, but the intent here is to make reference to the almost innumerable distinctive Christian bodies just in North America alone who believe that associating with other Christians who do not share their definitive commitments is tantamount to denying Christ.

9. Cf. 1 John 4:1.

welcoming one another must consist of political negotiations over what might be accepted or conceded.¹⁰

To state the obvious, however, this scheme that hopes to transcend both conflict and compromise is not without its problems. McLaren's book is basically the example of this generous approach working within the life of *one person* (himself), but doing this with a congregation, let alone a denomination or the whole body of believers, will surely be a work in progress until the Lord returns in glory. McLaren is also sometimes accused of advocating a cafeteria-style ecclesiology that may resonate for the arm-chair Christian but may not stand up against the forces that assail us on earth, never mind the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. In addition, the very term "generous orthodoxy" has problems that may be inherent and unavoidable, of which I list just two: first, "orthodoxy" as a term is far too fluid in usage to carry any precise meaning on its own. It gets used for everything from the *regula fidei* of ancient eastern church bodies to the self-authenticating list of fundamentals of every protestant sect under the sun. Second, the very invocation of the term "generous orthodoxy" not only includes the admission that "orthodoxy" as a term tilts toward the exclusive and needs softening, but also implies a critique of other "orthodoxies" that are presumably "not generous," which then risks the very arrogance the term purports to avoid.¹¹

With these and other caveats in mind, we must ask how, in the end, generous orthodoxy as a guiding approach to the furtherance of the Christian mission *a la* Matthew 28:19-20 might actually contribute to our obedience to that dominical command. In *Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren is at his Chesterton-esque best when he offers a self-effacing, disarming, and non-confrontive presentation of his own journey into this realm of discourse. As such, in 2004 he was completely comfortable presenting himself as a one-man clearing house for doing the kind of work that it seems the whole church should be doing while cautioning the reader that he is by

10. Since McLaren's book put "Generous Orthodoxy" in the public domain, there are now dozens of players—too many to list—who hope to associate with the basic vision. But insofar as it seems to have ecumenism as the goal, it must be acknowledged that "ecumenism" seems to carry baggage that the term cannot shake. Among so many of the various contributions, advances and insights still lurks the residue of a view that does not differ in final practice from a don't-ask-don't-tell approach with respect to actual creedal truth claims among the various church bodies. In other words, these days we are, for example, delighted to share in service projects together across denominational lines—thanks be to God!—but we typically do that with an unspoken awareness that we had still better not start swapping details about the boundaries, shibboleths, litmus tests, and argot of our belief systems, because the risk of fracturing those relationships that provide us with a superficial common ground is too great. In the current season, we find that the fault lines are perhaps even more pronounced than ever, with some individuals pressuring their judicatories to avoid even doing service work together because of this-or-that deal-breaker, such as anti-transgender views or lack of racial justice practices on the part of potential partners.

11. McLaren acknowledges this point near the beginning of his book.

no means prescribing this model for everyone. If we grant that Brian McLaren is by his long journey a more mature and wiser Christian than he would have been otherwise, how then does this model play out more than two decades later in the greater Western world where individuals cling to an even more pronounced sense of individual authority and a sense of duty that values personal authenticity over all things?¹² Furthermore, how does it go beyond individual practice to exercise impact on whatever the things are that make a community a community or a church body a church body?

My contention is that this personal journey that McLaren describes, which can be summarized as observing the distinction between seeing the other (individual and tradition) as *imago Dei* and therefore by definition contributing gifts that God intends to employ for the redemption of the world *versus* bringing settled doctrinal and ecclesial commitments to the table for negotiation, can be enacted on the communal level. If we may, however, envision a typical congregation, we know from anecdotal experiences as well as from vast examples of careful research that there are enormous forces, both seen and unseen, at work to counter any such plans and goals. One would need something akin to the ancient Corinthian congregation to run such an experiment in overcoming those forces.

This brings me to the example of judicatory-level ministry with youth as well as ministry with adolescents in general. Here, I offer a few propositions based on what we have experienced and learned over the course of some 45 years of our particular model of ministry with young people in the Virginia Synod ELCA.¹³

If we begin with some of the well-known features of the adolescent trajectory—such as identity formation and individuation, body stewardship and relational curiosity, navigation of autonomy, authority, cooperation, and tribal loyalty—we describe a psychic environment that is rich in possibilities for exploring generosity of all types, including maturing in the life of faith. Furthermore, when adolescents are gathered in a setting where the opportunity for sharing of one's faith and gifts

12. Cf. Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

13. Having already had a long legacy of attention to faith and leadership formation for youth and young adults, once the ULCA's, ALC's and LCA's "Luther League" organization ceased its formal operation in the mid-1960's, a group of leaders in the Virginia Synod of the LCA began the process of constructing a successor to Luther League that would provide the same support for those older goals. Drawing from the existing strength of our outdoor ministry programs and the peripheral but rising influence of the Jesus Movement, a paradigm that centered its energy on building faith-sharing relationships among youth and between youth and adults gave rise to what eventually became a deeply Lutheran "theology-from-below" approach to faith formation, committed to starting with the gifts and needs of youth and taking form in the annual cycle of Synod-wide events that continues to the present day. This meant abandoning the still-common "conference" model of gathering (keynote speaker, workshops, performances, vendors, etc.) in favor of a model that made small groups the centerpiece and invited youth to make their own stories the starting point for faith conversation.

is paired with welcoming of faith and gifts from another at some distance from some of the inertial forces of the local context that might unwittingly suppress such exchange, there is an opportunity for generous orthodoxy at its best to be exercised beyond the individual.

What do our youth experience when they find themselves in such a setting? Our decades of long-term observation and participant feedback show a couple of trends that transcend the so-called “generation-fill-in-the-blank” distinctives: when a small group of (mostly) unacquainted youth begins with honest and caring listening to one another’s stories instead of launching into a topical discussion or lecture that ignores everything that participants bring, the first step has been taken toward a conversation that will include each participant’s faith story and the contribution it might make. Additionally, questions, doubts, and insecurities, as well as joys and strengths in those areas where faith and life most intersect, emerge with surprising honesty.¹⁴ Third, young people realize *not only how rare and distinctive it is to be in a setting where their whole selves are received with love and grace, warranted by none other than the God they already know, but also that it is the explicit articulation of the Christian gospel and the call to commit the entire gathered community to this gospel that makes such a community possible at all.* In the main, this does not happen in their daily lives. Next, this ministry model is scalable. With young people and their skilled adult leaders in small group settings, it does not matter whether we are hosting an event of 25 or 500. The same experience remains available. Fifth, the key to achieving mission goals for our events is applying this generosity model to the planning process as well as to the event structure itself; all content-development processes center the voices of the youth. Finally, this model, when implemented correctly, works across generations and generational stereotypes, functioning just as well among upcoming GenAlpha youth as it did in the 1960s for those who were boomers. With appropriate modifications, it also has broad multicultural applications.

When we then step back to ask what lessons might be learned from this particular case study and venture to articulate some generalities about generous orthodoxy, the following ideas emerge.

1. Genuine generosity might be better expressed as distinctively Christian hospitality, even in contrast to normal human hospitality where a guest comes into someone’s home but remains a guest. The Lord of the Church is this absolutely singular being—somehow simultaneously guest, host, servant, and even vendor¹⁵—and we are called to replicate his actions when others come to us in curiosity. There is, then, a moment of enchantment that happens when young people read Matthew 5 and realize that we are doing what Jesus is saying, relocating outsiders to the center of attention as the core constituency of God’s favor. The poor, mourning,

14. It is astonishing how often teens reveal that they do not share honest thoughts with others, especially church adults, because they believe they will be corrected rather than listened to, much less taken seriously.

15. Mark 6:30-44, et al.

meek and persecuted are no longer even guests, and certainly no longer consumables. They arrive as hopeful members of the household.¹⁶ That enchantment swells when we encourage our youth to see those who are new to faith or new to this particular body not just as fresh meat for the youth program but as people whom God has gifted for carrying out God's mission possessing gifts we have heretofore been missing.

Therefore, generosity being qualified just now as Christianly-distinctive hospitality and the eager but orderly elevation of the outsider to the status of belonging precedes orthodoxy both ontologically and practically. Absent the very distinctive practice of Christian welcome, orthodox faith will scarcely have any chance of arising in the seeker.

2. Absolutely fundamental to the soul of Virginia Synod Ministry with Youth and Young Adults are the triple principles of Christ-centeredness, youth-centeredness, and relationship-centeredness. One belongs to Christ by belonging to Christ's family. This means in practice that generosity (read: hospitality) gets expressed at every level where we are tasked with communicating and creating such belonging, from the specification of the faith we hold to how we teach songs, from how we give directions to the dining facility to how we honor pronoun choices, from the boundaries we protect to how we include questionable prayer requests, and from how we give youth veto power over any thematic plans that are made to how they are charged with managing their own group expectations. With all of that being at least attempted, if not always accomplished, there then comes a moment (again, recall Matthew 5) when young people all up and down the spectrum of conventional beauty, popularity, and talent realize what kind of world they could help co-create if they dropped those artificial standards that rule their culture and instead followed the pattern of Jesus's teaching. This is not simply a strategic choice as obviously any organization that gathers strangers into a new place is going to glean positive reviews if everyone is comfortable and knows where the bathrooms are. It is, rather, that the community's practices are an embodied articulation of the community's identity as the very body of Christ.

Therefore, *orthodoxy must precede generosity both ontologically and practically. We must understand in advance that what we are called to and what we are doing is, in its essence, very different from anything else that is happening in the lives of young people and can only happen in God's church. Why? Because only "there"*¹⁷ *is there a community where Jesus is confessed as Lord (as over against the powerful and baffling norms of adolescence), and the people involved absolutely mean it to the extent of willingness to suffer martyrdom for it.*

16. Cf. the entire thrust of Ephesians 2.

17. Stipulating, of course, that the church is not a spatial phenomenon—and yet—as with the sacraments, it is in the gathering where our Lord has promised to be present in a way that can be fully and reliably trusted when all else seems uncertain (Matt. 18:20).

3. Even the casual reader will have noticed the paradox. We would certainly have no awareness of this species of generosity without having embraced the orthodoxy that has instituted it. However, by *far* the most significant way a young person discovers this loving community gathered around a man who is God in the flesh is by experiencing the way in which this community absolutely dissolves and even demolishes the habits, traditions, and structures of stratification and oppression that form the matrix of their daily lives, an action to be impossible. Suddenly, any middle schooler who has had helpless sympathy for that one kid who just seems like a magnet for bullies has a tool that can provide honest-to-God good news. To put an even finer point on it: if there is a place where bullies are powerless because Jesus is in charge, then there is an alternative to suicide even for those who are too exhausted to invent their own meaning.

Therefore, young people (especially those who are leaders) must have in hand the wise consensus of the body of Christ as to what our claims are about the structure of reality in light of Christ's timely death for the ungodly. In short, we *do* have to get our story straight and hope that it serves as a canon to which the average young person can refer when encountering the (sometimes bizarre) musings of a peer who has been wowed by whatever trend has caught his attention or whose internal monologue or external hopelessness is leading him to one-or-another terrible decision.

4. Generosity is achieved not by carving away at orthodoxy to rid it of all potential offenses but by diving ever deeper and more intensely into it. When done with the full attitude of submission and service to God and neighbor, we continually rediscover orthodoxy's powerful heart, which in turn will (or ought to) generate hospitable behaviors toward the world God loves. The task of catechesis not only comes later but can *only* come later. We will never get to that, though, if those who approach our body with fascination over this strangely loving community are not likewise viewed from the get-go as God's beloved whom God has endowed with gifts and for whom God has prepared a vocation within that body that the individual likely does not even realize yet.

Therefore, in our youth ministry, we find that our creeds and other orthodoxies are not barriers to be downplayed but internally compelling toward a desire for the not-yet-included to find a place for the exercise of their God-given calling. To be sure, they often bring wildly fugitive visions for what truth they are willing to embrace, and those of us who are in it for the long haul have regularly invested decades of patience in helping them right their ships. This is a feature, not a bug. Orthodoxy that finds its expression first in such distinctive hospitality does indeed already include the generosity that some feel needs to be added.

Finally, because generosity is only generosity if it is instantiated in the courage and personal formation of young people who have themselves surrendered whatever conventional aspirations they may have had for social glory and associated themselves with the lowly, the annoying, the dangerous, and the different, this is

joyful but not easy. Generous Orthodoxy does not come into activation if it does not cost or at least risk something.

Is it possible for the Church, its leaders, and its ecclesiologists—generous or otherwise—to learn from this one limited example? One wonders, since, as Brian McLaren would likely say, generous orthodoxy as expressed in this model does not represent an innovation or even a strategy, for that matter. Rather, it seems to be the way the church has operated from the beginning, yet this seems to elude leaders and practitioners across the Christian spectrum.

One of the hallmarks of Virginia Synod Youth Events is the (almost absurd) number of songs we sing, to the delight of some and the tedium of others. If we desire to continue the mission of welcome-to-the-least-the-greatest-and-everyone-in-between we believe has been given to us, our repertoire will eventually need to include more selections that articulate this generative fusion of orthodoxy and generosity that manifests itself in the glee that young people feel and show at the encounter with a child of God who has newly come to us bearing the same *imago Dei* that we all do and at the same time is unique among mortals and will finally discover that they can add their distinctive gifts and stories to Jesus's family with a level of receptivity that they never thought possible. Generosity, it seems, is more about what we are willing to receive than about what we are willing to give.

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Confessional Renewal for Baptists

Daniel E. Harris

ABSTRACT: Baptists in America have, in large part, been seen as an anti-confessional people. However, historically, Baptists of different stripes have held to confessions to ground their faith and practice. Arguing from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this article will examine how his observation of American Christianity as “Protestantism without Reformation” is a distinctly Baptist phenomenon. As such, Baptists have replaced their struggle for confessional unity with autonomy, which has resulted in nationalism on the one hand and liberalism on the other. This article will examine E.Y. Mullins’s particular vision of Baptist autonomy and its implications for Baptist confessionalism through the lens of Bonhoeffer’s assessment of Baptists in America as “Protestantism without Reformation.” For a constructive alternative, this article will assess early Baptist confessions as a way of understanding the role confessionalism has played in the formation of Baptist identity. Particularly, Baptist identity is rooted in the church’s obedience towards Christ, as Baptist freedom is a freedom to obey. Exploring the work of James McClendon and Curtis Freeman, this article will explore the primitive understanding of the Baptist church as well as the implications of Freeman’s understanding of “contesting catholicity” as a way for Baptists to reclaim their catholic and reformational self-understanding.

In 2022, Guidepost Solutions published a report on mishandling of sexual abuse cases in the Southern Baptist Convention. The report found that “survivors and others who reported abuse were ignored, disbelieved, or met with the constant refrain that the SBC could take no action due to its polity regarding church autonomy—even if it meant that convicted molesters continued in ministry with no notice or warning to their current church or congregation.”¹

Baptists in America have often claimed that one of their defining distinctives is the notion of autonomy. Baptists are autonomous in their church polity, claiming independence from the state and ecclesial authorities such as denominational

1. Guidepost Solutions, *Report of the Independent Investigation: The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee’s Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee* (Washington, DC: Guidepost Solutions, May 15, 2022), accessed June 18, 2026, DocumentCloud.

bodies or bishops. Moreover, individuals act as autonomous agents who can freely interpret Scripture for themselves, free from the coercion of priests or the state. The current abuse crisis within the Southern Baptist Convention, however, reveals the limits of autonomy.

The notion of autonomy exists across denominational lines. The website for American Baptist Churches USA states, “While embracing autonomy from the state, American Baptists long have affirmed the principle of interdependence. This recognizes that the Holy Spirit is at work in congregations and other organized bodies and that great things can be done in God’s name through cooperation.”² For American Baptists, “interdependence” is predicated upon autonomy.

Baptists have often been suspicious of creeds and confessions, often claiming such creeds and confessions threaten local church autonomy. The sociologist Max Weber viewed Baptists as a voluntary association of believers. As such, he viewed Baptists “not as a Church, but as a sect.”³ Weber’s indictment largely comes from the way Baptists in America have conceived of themselves ecclesially. Baptist denominational bodies function as loose associations of independent and autonomous churches. Compared to other denominational bodies, Baptists have no centralized authority structures such as bishops or a presbytery. Without such structures, it becomes difficult for Baptists to form any kind of confessional identity.

However, Baptists have not always conceived of themselves in this way. Early on, Baptists sought a unifying confessional identity in order to distinguish themselves from other groups such as Anabaptists. In their own self-understanding, Baptists viewed themselves as *reforming the Reformation*. As the historian David Bebbington has said, “Baptists were the people who took Reformation principles to their ultimate conclusion.”⁴

Baptists: A “Non-Creedal People”

In the early 20th century, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy embroiled denominations across the landscape of American Protestantism. Baptists were no different. For Northern Baptists, ruptures began at the founding of the University of Chicago in 1890, which would become a bastion of German higher criticism and the social gospel. *The Finality of the Christian Religion* by the University of Chicago’s George B. Foster embraced the quest for the historical Jesus and its separation

2. American Baptist Churches USA, “Local Churches: Autonomy and Interdependence,” accessed June 18, 2026, <https://www.abc-usa.org/what-we-believe-local-churches-autonomy-and-interdependence>

3. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, conceived trans. Talcott Parsons, with an introduction by Anthony Giddens, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2001), 93.

4. Bebbington, 23.

of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. Foster maintained, “The church’s theological Christ still supplants the real Jesus of history.”⁵ In response, over 200 churches in southern Illinois would leave to join the Southern Baptist Convention. The so-called “social gospel” would eventually take hold of the Northern Baptist Convention, spearheaded by Walter Rauschenbusch, who taught at Rochester Theological Seminary.

At the Indianapolis Convention of 1922, Fundamentalists proposed that Northern Baptists adopt the New Hampshire Confession as the official confession of the Northern Baptist Convention. Instead, Cornelius Woelfkin proposed an alternative that suggested, “the Northern Baptist Convention affirms that the New Testament is the sufficient ground of our faith and practice and we need no other statement.”⁶ Strikingly, the president of Southern Seminary, E.Y. Mullins, led the prayer at the Indianapolis Convention of 1922. Mullins would be influential in the Southern Baptist Convention, leading the way for the SBC to adopt its own version of the New Hampshire Confession in 1925. His concept of “soul competency” would later pave the way for how Baptists in America would conceive of themselves for the next century. That Mullins was present during this pivotal convention meeting for Northern Baptists in 1922 marks the influence that Mullins would have across both Northern and Southern Baptists.

As the years progressed, the Northern Baptist Convention changed its name to the American Baptist Convention in 1950 and attempted a merger with the Southern Baptist Convention. Northern Baptists would change their name again to American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) in 1972. ABCUSA would restructure in 1972 when the denomination partitioned itself into distinct regions, each with an area minister serving as its representative. To this day, regions largely function as autonomous entities with their own confessional standards and credentials for recognizing ordinations.

The fundamentalist/modernist controversy took on a similar tone in the South to that of their northern siblings in the 20th century. In the early 20th century, there were calls for the Southern Baptist Convention to adopt a confession. There were two primary reasons for doing so: on the one hand, with the founding of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905, Southern Baptists sought to define their faith as an effort toward common fraternal understanding among Baptists around the world. On the other hand, the fundamentalist movement led by J. Frank Norris, pastor of First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, was gaining headway among Southern Baptists.

Norris was an intriguing figure known for his sensationalist, demagogic preaching and for infamously murdering an unarmed man and being acquitted of multiple accounts of arson at his own church. Norris gained popularity and influence through radio programs and his time serving as the editor of *The Baptist Standard*, a newspaper

5. Annual, NBC, 1922, 133.

6. Ibid., 129-130.

published by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Norris cast suspicion on many Southern Baptist seminaries, claiming that many of their professors were teaching evolutionary biology in their classes, contrary to a literal interpretation of scripture.

The Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925 would draw the ire of many Southern Baptists as questions of biblical authority sparked increased suspicion about what was being taught in their seminaries. Southern Baptist leaders saw the fissures of disunity surfacing. A committee was formed to explore what a confession of faith for the Southern Baptist Convention might look like. The committee for the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM) was spearheaded by the former SBC president and then-current president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, E.Y. Mullins.

The 1925 BFM was a modified version of the New Hampshire confession. By and large, the confession was viewed positively by most who were in the SBC, fundamentalist and moderate alike. The *Baptist Faith and Message* would be ratified in 1963 following the publication of Ralph Elliot's *The Message of Genesis*, which leveraged the documentary hypothesis in its reading of Genesis and challenged a purely historical reading of its first eleven chapters. The latest revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* was made in 2000 following what became known as the "conservative resurgence." The *Baptist Faith and Message* in 2000 would clarify the SBC's stance on Biblical inerrancy and social issues related to gender roles, race, and homosexuality, among others.

E.Y. Mullins was a prominent figure in the early 20th century whose influence went well beyond the Southern Baptist Convention. He served as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for nearly thirty years and later served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 1921 to 1924. Aside from his work on the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*, Mullins wrote the book that would define Baptist identity for the next century, *Axioms of Religion*, which was published in 1908.

Axioms of Religion was written as a response to the changing challenges of the 20th century, with the rising of modernism on the one hand and of reactionary fundamentalism on the other. While written before the fundamentalist/modernist controversy took hold of the American religious landscape, *Axioms of Religion* responded to many of the impulses that would give rise to the divisions that would take hold of the American church as a whole.

Mullins proposed a Baptist vision which cuts through six axioms: theological, religious, ecclesiastical, moral, religio-civic, and social. The major innovation that Mullins proposed as an understanding of Baptist identity is that of "soul competency." Mullins maintains,

The Statement of the historical significance of Baptists in this: the competency of the soul in religion. Of course, this means a competency under God, not a competency of human self-sufficiency. There is no reference here to the question of sin and human ability in the moral and theological sense, nor in the sense of independence of the Scriptures. This is not a

creed; Baptists are not a creedal people. To the contrary, it stands as a safeguard against coercion with respect to solidifying one's faith in the form of a written creed. This should not be interpreted to mean that a person can believe anything he chooses and call himself a Baptist. Baptists are identified with truth as taught in the Scriptures, the criterion for the interpretation of which is Jesus Christ. But this competency stands as a flaming sword to protect the individual conscience in matters of faith and its relation to God.⁷

For Mullins, soul competency stood as the bulwark that defined Baptist identity. Not only was soul competency the central guiding principle for Baptists, soul competency was and is the greatest contribution Baptists have given to the world.

Mullins's understanding of soul competency is derived from his understanding of the priesthood of all believers. For Mullins, the priesthood of all believers is "the expression of the soul's competency on the Godward side," so, as such, "no human priest may claim to be mediator between soul and God." Thus, Mullins makes the claim that "the right to private judgment as to the meaning of the Bible is ... another aspect of [the priesthood of all believers]."⁸ Mullins writes further in *Axioms of Religion* that "each priest has the right to do as he is led by the Holy Spirit."⁹

For Mullins, the priesthood of all believers is primarily to be understood through the lens of soul competency. What it means for every baptized believer to be a priest is that every baptized believer has direct access to God, meaning that each individual has the right to interpret Scripture and follow the Holy Spirit as the Spirit leads the conscience.

Baptists have historically sought freedom from coercion of the state and any ecclesial magistrates. Understood through the lens of soul competency, such authorities are not binding on the individual's conscience. Similarly, Baptists do not baptize infants because infants do not yet have the capacity to exercise competency over their soul. Thus, children are baptized only once they can freely choose baptism for themselves. Baptism functions as a means for one to exercise competency over his soul.

For Mullins, the way Baptists are to understand confessions is in light of their understanding of soul competency. Confessions are not binding to one's conscience and do not limit one's freedom to interpret Scripture or exercise rights as part of the priesthood of all believers. The preamble to the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* lists five statements that constitute a "Baptist" understanding of confessions of faith. They are as follows:

7. Edgar Young Mullins and Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1978), 48.

8. Ibid., 50.

9. Ibid., 8.

1. Confessions serve as a “consensus of opinion” for “the general instruction of guidance of our own people.” Thus, they do not “add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament.”
2. Confessions are not “complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility.” Thus, “Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith.”
3. Baptists “have the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of faith.”
4. The Scriptures are the “sole authority for faith.” Thus, “Confessions are only guides in interpretation, *having no authority over the conscience.*”
5. Finally, confessions are “statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper the freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life”¹⁰

The preamble of the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* sits well under Mullin’s understanding of soul competency. Namely, confessions are simply “statements of religious convictions” that are “drawn from the Scriptures.” Such statements are limited in that they are not infallible, are under the authority of Scripture, and do not bind to an individual’s conscience.

Thus, both Northern and Southern Baptists drew their understanding of confessionalism from the fundamentalist/modernist controversies of the 20th century. Northern Baptists rejected confessionalism and restructured around autonomous regional bodies in order to accommodate different confessional standards among different regions. Southern Baptists adopted a qualified confession of faith that sat under E.Y. Mullins’s understanding of soul competency.

One could rightly ask if confessional unity is even viable under E.Y. Mullins’s understanding of soul competency. It is easy to claim that the Southern Baptist Convention breakaway denomination, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), took Mullins’s soul competency to its natural conclusion. In lieu of a unifying confessional statement, CBF adopted Walter B. Shurden’s “four fragile freedoms” as the framework for their denominational identity. Shurden is seen as one of the key leaders in the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which sparked during the crucible of what was called the “conservative resurgence” within the SBC. Shurden’s book *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* is influential among moderate and progressive Baptists as a framework for understanding Baptist identity. Influenced by Mullins, Shurden argues that Baptist identity is built of four fragile freedoms: 1. Soul freedom, wherein each individual has the freedom to relate to God without the coercion of the state or creed; 2. Bible freedom, wherein each Christian has the right to interpret and apply Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; 3. Church freedom, wherein each church is autonomous and free to

10. Mullins, E.Y. et al., “1925 *Baptist Faith and Message*” in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 540.

order leadership, membership, and worship under the Lordship of Christ; and 4. Religious freedom, wherein all religions are free from the coercion of the state.¹¹

Shurden's "four fragile freedoms" sit well under Mullins's soul competency. Thus, under Shurden's understanding of Baptist identity, it is understandable why Max Weber would make the claim that Baptist churches are a sect rather than a church. Baptist denominations become a loose voluntary association of individuals and churches with a tenuous sense of unity outside of mission efforts.

Baptists without Reformation

In 1930, Bonhoeffer would spend his first time in America as a Salon Fellow at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Bonhoeffer's first stay in America left a strong impression on him that would color his view of American Christianity. He had once quipped, "In New York, they preach about virtually everything except ... the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹² His first stay in New York formed his understanding of American Christianity as he witnessed "the sermons coming from American pulpits deal usually with thematic discussions of certain public events or conditions."¹³ Bonhoeffer was equally suspicious about the theology being promoted at Union, once saying, "There is no theology here."¹⁴

However, Bonhoeffer found a few kindred spirits during his time at Union. One of the companions Bonhoeffer became acquainted with was Albert Owen Franklin Fisher, a fellow student at Union. Fisher, an African American student, introduced the young Bonhoeffer to the African American Church. Fisher gave Bonhoeffer the rare opportunity to witness the famous Abyssinian Baptist Church during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Bonhoeffer would become well acquainted with the church, eventually leading a boys' Sunday School class and a women's Wednesday-evening Bible study. Disillusioned from his education at Union and the state of preaching in New York, Bonhoeffer found that the gospel was being proclaimed in the Black church. Bonhoeffer said that, "only among blacks, who were oppressed, could there be any real religion in this country."¹⁵

In 1930, Bonhoeffer took a road trip to Mexico City where he was exposed to the realities of the Jim Crow South. While Bonhoeffer did not write much about his road trip, he kept a few notes, many of them making remarks on the racial

11. Shurden.

12. Bonhoeffer, DBW, vol. 10, 420-21.

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism without Reformation," in *The Bonhoeffer Reader*, ed. Clifford J. Green and Michael P. DeJonge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 583.

14. Bonhoeffer, DBW, vol. 10, 309.

15. Letter to Martin Rumscheidt, December 17, 1986, in the Bonhoeffer Collection, Union Theological Seminary. First published in the Newsletter, International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, no. 39 (October 1988): 3-4.

tensions in the South, of which Bonhoeffer would remark that it was “darker than [a] thousand midnights.”¹⁶

Bonhoeffer’s experience with the African American church would later form his understanding of the American church more broadly. A major part of Bonhoeffer’s critique of the American church is the long history of racism it tolerated. Bonhoeffer writes, “For American Christendom, the racial issue has been a real problem from the beginning.” The issue at hand is that “(b)lack and whites come separately to word and sacrament. They have no common worship.”¹⁷ For Bonhoeffer, the racial issue in America and the Jewish issue in Germany were both related to the question of confessional identity. In Germany, Bonhoeffer was quick to announce a *status confessionis*, which called into question the confessional status of the German churches that adopted the Aryan Paragraph.

Reggie Williams, in his book *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, argues that Bonhoeffer’s encounter with Black Christians in New York gave him the tools to resist Nazi ideology:

The ministries that Bonhoeffer participated in at Abyssinian Baptist Church, coupled with the intellectual interrogation of Jesus within the Harlem Renaissance, provided Bonhoeffer with new resources to filter the nationalism from his Christianity and helped to develop him into an advocate of ecumenism, of peacemaking, and of social justice. As a consequence of that black experience with Jesus, his theology became more than conceptual, his Christology became more prominent, and Bonhoeffer became more serious about his faith.¹⁸

It was Bonhoeffer’s experience with the Black Church in New York that gave him the clarity to claim the Aryan Paragraph as a *status confessionis* before even the theological juggernaut Karl Barth could make the same claim.

Later, in 1939, Bonhoeffer was offered a temporary teaching position at Union Theological Seminary by his American friends who saw the looming threat of Nazi Germany from afar. This second stay in the United States of America was short-lived as Bonhoeffer became more uncomfortable with the idea of leaving his friends, colleagues, and former seminary students behind in an increasingly tenuous situation. By 1937, Bonhoeffer counted that twenty-seven of his former seminary students had been arrested by the Gestapo.

During his short visit, Bonhoeffer spent time reflecting on American Christianity as a whole and penned the essay titled “Protestantism without Reformation.” For Bonhoeffer, the issues that plagued the American church surrounding race were due in large part to the lack of confessional unity. The issues that he saw and named

16. Bonhoeffer, DBW, vol. 10, 269.

17. Ibid., 587.

18. *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*, 107.

during his stay in America were largely brought about by the religious refugees who formed the American colonies, many of whom represented free church traditions. Bonhoeffer maintains, “Just as the German church cannot be understood apart from the Reformation, so likewise American Christianity remains concealed from those who do not know the beginning of the Congregationalists in New England, the Baptists in Rhode Island, or the revival movement led by Jonathan Edwards.”¹⁹ For Bonhoeffer, that America existed as a “Protestantism without Reformation” was a distinct outcome of Baptists in particular and free church traditions more broadly.

The core concern for Bonhoeffer was church unity. Bonhoeffer maintains, “Americans have been less able than any other people on earth to realize the visible unity of God’s church on earth.”²⁰ The lack of church unity is made manifest through the many different denominations in America. As such, “American Christendom has no central organization, no common confession, no common ritual practices, no common church history, no common ethical, social, or political principles.”²¹ Denominations are made up of those who share common historical, political, and social experiences separate from a common confession. Thus, no denomination can “claim the name of the church of Jesus Christ for themselves, because that name seems too big and too dangerous to them.”²²

The churches of the Reformation, by contrast, viewed themselves not as a sect but as Christ’s church, a continuation of the church catholic, the one church of Christ. Bonhoeffer maintains, “The churches of the Reformation start from the assumption of the unity of the church of Christ. There can only be one church on earth. And this one church is alone the true church constituted by Jesus Christ.”²³ As a Lutheran, Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the church was undoubtedly influenced by The Augsburg Confession, which maintains “that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is a congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments are rightly administered.”²⁴ The churches of the Reformation did not seek to become a sect but sought instead to *reform* the church.

Bonhoeffer contrasts the Reformation understanding of the church with that of the way Baptists understand church. They claim “the reign of God is equated with the individual’s freedom to follow only the inner voice and inner light.”²⁵ One can hear echoes of E.Y. Mullins’s understanding of soul competency in Bonhoeffer’s writing. For Bonhoeffer, this rampant individualism is a threat to the unity of the church.

19. Ibid., 570.

20. Bonhoeffer, 570.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 571.

23. Ibid., 573.

24. The Augsburg Confession in *The Book of Concord*, accessed June 17, 2026, BookOfConcord.org: Augsburg Confession.

25. Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism without Reformation” 572.

The origins of this fragmentation of the church in America came from America's founding by religious refugees. While Bonhoeffer does not disparage Christians who have chosen to flee from persecution, he maintains that the Christian refugee "has claimed the right to avoid ultimate suffering in order to serve God in quietness and peace." Thus, "confessional stridency and intolerance must cease for the one who has left intolerant conditions." Because these Christian refugees have chosen to flee, "the Christian refugee has forfeited the right to fight."²⁶ Bonhoeffer is undoubtedly wrestling with his own decision to take up a teaching post at Union Theological Seminary in New York. At the same time, the rest of his friends, family, and former seminary students are left to suffer under the Nazi regime. In Bonhoeffer's understanding, the church in America has abandoned its struggle for confessional unity for the sake of *tolerance*. Born from Christian refugees and as a free church tradition, Baptists in America sought tolerance at the cost of confessional unity. Behind the impulse of soul, competency is the impulse for tolerance.

For Bonhoeffer, this understanding of tolerance leads to a malformed understanding of freedom, which may be defined as "the right of the individual to think, speak, and act independently."²⁷ E.Y. Mullins maintains:

Freedom is self-determination. This does not mean that the will is without bias or that human choices are uninfluenced by external forces, by other human personalities, or by divine influences of grace. It only means that when a person acts, he acts for himself. The choice is his own. He is not compelled but impelled. When all the above-mentioned forces have done their work, a person must retire into the privacy of his own soul and decide the issue. One will search in vain for the slightest hint of a proxy faith in the gospel.²⁸

Freedom, as defined by Christians in America, is a freedom of possibility. It is a freedom from rather than a freedom for. For Baptists in America, this freedom comes to be through notions of autonomy. Autonomy is another way in which tolerance is made manifest.

This understanding of freedom leads Bonhoeffer to a discussion on what is arguably the greatest contribution of Baptists, the separation of church and state. In Bonhoeffer's understanding, the American understanding of the separation of church and state is unique in that "the churches mark the boundary lines of the state."²⁹ Bonhoeffer continues, "From this perspective, the state's religionlessness is not so much a triumph of secular powers over Christianity as it is rather the

26. Letter to Martin Rumscheidt, December 17, 1986, in the Bonhoeffer Collection, Union Theological Seminary. First published in the Newsletter, International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, no. 39 (October 1988), 578.

27. *Ibid.*, 579.

28. Mullins, *Axioms of Religion*, 120.

29. Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism without Reformation," 58.1

victory of the churches over any unlimited claims of the state.”³⁰ The way this plays out is that “the church proclaims the principles of social and political order, while the state merely lends the technical means to achieve these.”³¹ As such, American democracy is seen as a “Christian” form of government wherein the church uses the state as the means to accomplish its ends.

Bonhoeffer claims that this unique way in which the church relates to the state in America ironically blurs the line between the church and the state, as Bonhoeffer maintains, “The life of the state and public life in general are subsumed under the judgment of the church without distinction; hence, there can be no significant public decision in which the church would not raise its voice and issue pronouncements.”³² As such, “a church that is independent of the state is no more protected from secularization than a state church.”³³ The secularization of the American church stems from “the lack of the distinction of the kingdoms and offices of state and church, as well as from the Enthusiast claim that the church is the agent of the universal formation of the world.”³⁴ The irony is that in advocating for a separation of church and state, Baptists in America have flattened the distinction between the two, which increased its secularization.

As a free church, one whose people came to America as religious refugees, Baptists sought independence from the state. This reality bolstered Baptists as champions of religious liberty insofar as they used the state as a vehicle to accomplish that end. The irony is that the greatest invention of Baptists would lead to civil religion on the left and nationalism on the right. What happens when a separatist tradition no longer has a state church to separate itself from? It attaches itself to ideals of freedom and individualism. It abandons confessional unity for the sake of tolerance. Ultimately, it capitulates to the state as it’s the only way it can ensure greater freedom.

A Constructive Response: A Freedom toward Obedience

In his essay, Bonhoeffer outlines a constructive response that is thoroughly Baptist in its fervor while also Reformational in its appeal:

Unity cannot be forced, either through theological discussion or through common action. But we know that God may bring the churches together through both the path of common understanding and common action. Often, common understanding is granted only through common action and common action from common understanding. There are no methods that will lead to the unity of the church.³⁵

30. Ibid., 581.

31. Ibid., 582.

32. Ibid., 583.

33. Ibid., 583.

34. Ibid., 583.

35. Ibid., 576.

Confessional unity is never something that can be forced or coerced. However, for Bonhoeffer, the church's common confession does not originate from the sense of one's individual conscience. Rather, the church's common confession is grounded in *obedience*. Bonhoeffer maintains, "Only total obedience to the Holy Spirit will lead us to common understanding, confession, action, and suffering."³⁶

Obedience is the primary concern of the Baptist theologian James McClendon, who famously began his systematic theology with ethics. McClendon's approach runs contrary to the impulse of many modern theologians whose starting point is a prolegomena outlining the epistemology and methodological approach to their theological programs. Instead, McClendon's approach is grounded in his little "b" baptist vision in which the church's obedience becomes the grounds for its confession. Thus, a theology that is sufficiently "baptist" starts with ethics.

For McClendon, the baptist vision serves as an organizing principle for free church traditions. This vision contains a *primitive* self-understanding of the church following a "this is that" biblical hermeneutic. The primitive understanding of the church comes from Peter's exclamation in Acts 2 after the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost: "*this is that* which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (2:16 KJV).³⁷ For Peter, the words of the prophet Joel are not merely *appropriated* to apply to the present, but the words of Joel are being *reenacted* in the present.

As examples of this baptist vision, McClendon looks to the American restorationists who saw themselves as the New Testament church and Black Baptists who identified their liberation from slavery with the Israelite liberation from Egyptian bondage. This baptist vision is why the Baptist missionary William Carey could say that the Great Commission outlined in Matthew 18 is not merely a command for the apostles but rather the "commission was as extensive as possible, and laid them under obligation to disperse themselves to every country of the habitable globe, and preach to all the inhabitants, without exception or limitation."³⁸

McClendon maintains that "this is not merely a reading strategy by which the church understands scripture; it is a way—for us, it is *the way*—of Christian existence itself."³⁹ As such, McClendon's baptist vision entails "all the awareness of the *biblical* story as our story, but also *liberty* as the duty to obey God without state help or hindrance, of *discipleship* as a life transformed into obedience to Jesus' lordship, of *community* as daily sharing in the vision, and of *mission* as responsibility for costly witness."⁴⁰

36. Ibid., 576.

37. James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 501.

38. Carey, William, "An Enquiry" in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 113.

39. McClendon, *Ethics*, 515.

40. Ibid., 537.

It follows from McClendon's baptist vision that the starting point for constructing a Baptist identity is *obedience*. Obedience is the sign of the "this is that" nature of the primitive church, not merely as an appropriation of scripture but as God's reenactment of scripture and the church's participation in it. It is out of this obedience to the Triune God that Baptists find their common confession. As such, Baptist freedom is not a freedom of possibility. Rather, Baptist freedom is a freedom towards obedience. Baptists seek freedom from the coercion of the state as a freedom to obey. Baptists champion believer's baptism as it is a sign of a new life in Christ and as a sign of obedience produced by faith.

Under James McClendon's baptist vision, theology is contextual, narrative-based, relational, and self-involved. Theology is contextual, responding as "God, having created the varieties we human beings comprise, wants us to theologize in varied ways."⁴¹ However, this isn't a "laissez-faire subjectivism" as Christian theology is rooted in a particular community and encounters other contexts "for mutual witness and critical correction."⁴² Theology is narrative-based such that "the baptist vision sees that the narrative the Bible reflects, the story of Israel, of Jesus, and of the church is intimately related to the narrative we ourselves live."⁴³ Thus, theology must also look back to how the church has participated in this narrative as God's unfolding narrative reverberates into the present context. Theology is relational, which means that theology can and must relate to other disciplines in the sciences and the humanities while "[it] is not required [to accept] a philosophical basis purported to be a more certain foundation than theological certainty itself."⁴⁴ Theology is also relational towards its own "internal organization" such that "the theologian receives the heritage and by transforming it creates new possibilities for reclaiming inherited convictions."⁴⁵ Finally, theology is self-involving. Theology requires the theologian to participate in Scripture's narrative. McClendon maintains that "the theologian's proposals require confirmation by way of his or her participation in the common life."⁴⁶ A Baptist confessionalism, as viewed through the lens of McClendon's baptist vision, has all of these same characteristics. Grounded in the church's obedience towards Christ, Baptist confessionalism is contextual, narrative-based, relational, and self-involving.

Drawing from McClendon's baptist vision, Curtis Freeman argues that there have historically been two different ways of understanding Baptist identity: the "churchly" understanding and the "non-churchly" understanding. Freeman maintains that "one acknowledges the frailty of the individual and need for and the need for

41. McClendon, *Ethics*, 562.

42. *Ibid.*, 562.

43. *Ibid.*, 576.

44. *Ibid.*, 607.

45. *Ibid.*, 618.

46. *Ibid.*, 623.

interdependency. The other affirms the competency of the individual and exhibits confidence in the capacity of each Christian to know the will of God.”⁴⁷

Freeman suggests that early Baptists held to a churchly self-understanding, not as a sectarian group who sought to withdraw from the world but as a radical reform movement that sought to reform the church catholic. If Freeman is correct, it would mean that it is possible for Baptists to claim the broader Reformation as their own. Baptists are a Reformation tradition that seeks to reform the Reformation. Baptists exist to bring a radical critique to the Reformation.

There is a historical precedent for this. The First and Second London Baptist Confessions were largely based on the Westminster Confession, thereby pointing towards a continuity with the broader Protestant church. Early confessions such as Thomas Helwys’ *A Declaration of Faith of English People* written in 1611, viewed the local church in continuity with the one universal church: “That though in respect off CHRIST, the Church bee one, Ephes. 4.4. yet it consisteth off divers particuler congregacions, even so manie as there shall bee in the World, every off which congregacion, though they be but two or three, have CHRIST given them, with all the meanes off their salvacion.”⁴⁸ Moreover, with concern to other Christians, John Smyth’s *Confession of Faith* maintains that “we salute them all with a holie kisse, being hartilie grieved that wee which follow after one faith, and one spirit, one lord, and one God, one bodie, and one baptism, should be rent into so many sects, and schismes: and that only for matter of lesse moment.”⁴⁹

From this historical understanding of Baptist catholicity, Freeman suggests that Baptists are a people who are “contesting catholicity.” In other words, Baptists are primarily a reformational people seeking confessional unity in continuity with the church catholic while seeking to reform it. Baptists who contest catholicity are reformational as they seek to struggle for greater confessional unity.

Under McClendon’s baptist vision, Baptists contest catholicity as they seek to be the primitive church as God reenacts Pentecost each week amidst the local gathered community. Thus, Baptists find freedom grounded in obedience as they continually seek to struggle for confession while remaining within the church catholic.

What radical critique do Baptists have to offer Protestants and Catholics? As a people whose confession is founded on obedience to Christ, Baptists have often criticized infant baptism. The baptism of infants restricts the child’s ability to obey Christ into the waters of baptism freely. There becomes no reason for the child to confess Christ as Lord. Baptism loses its salience as a sign pointing to the faith and

47. Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 333.

48. Helwys, Thomas, “A Short Declaration of Faith of English People” in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 40.

49. John Smyth, *A Confession of Faith*, in *The Works of John Smyth, Fellow of Christ’s College, 1594–1598*, ed. W.T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 69.

confession given freely by the Holy Spirit to the child. Moreover, those who were baptized as infants no longer have their baptism to remember to ground them in their obedience towards Christ. McClendon makes the claim:

The diminution of baptism coincided with the dissolving of Christian faith into culture, the Constantinian compromise. Though from time to time over the centuries individuals and groups rebelled (often at their life's risk), baptism for most became a birth-ceremony, or a safe-conduct badge for the dying, and lost its status as the commissioning of disciples setting out on their faith journey.⁵⁰

In other words, baptism is the first step in a life of obedience. With no memory of the Christian's baptism, Christianity becomes an artifact of culture.

Concerning ecclesiology, Baptists have long held that the ministry of Word and Sacrament applies to all baptized Christians. Baptism is an anointing into the priesthood of all believers. Baptists have carried this Reformational principle to its natural conclusion: if all who are baptized are called to be priests, all are participants in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The priesthood of all believers is not merely the grounds for soul competency. Rather, the priesthood of all believers is an invitation for others to act as priests outwardly towards the world around them. The priesthood of all believers is not a freedom of possibility but rather a freedom towards obedience in a "this is that" and "now is then" understanding of I Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."⁵¹

In the Baptist understanding, there is no longer any distinction between laity and clergy. James McClendon states:

Here, then, is the challenge of radical reformation in ministry: not a set-apart ministry of those who work for God while others work for themselves, and not a flock of secular "callings" (doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief) tended by a shepherd with a religious calling (priest or preacher, pope or pastor), but a *people set apart*, earning their daily bread in honest toil to be sure, but living to become for others the bread of life.⁵²

A radical critique Baptists offer to the Reformation is that the distinction between laity and clergy often limits baptized Christians from fulfilling their priestly functions in obedience towards Christ.

This radical reform applies to the church's relationship with the state. Baptists have long believed that the state does not hold any divine authority over the church.

50. James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 391.

51. NRSV I Peter 2:9.

52. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 369.

When the state holds any kind of divine authority over the church, the confession of the church is often compromised. Religious liberty is not a freedom of possibility but a freedom to confess Jesus as Lord. The separation of church and state is not the privatization of religion; it is the freedom for the church to publicly confess Christ free from the coercion of the state, as “Christ alone is K[ing] of Israel, [and] sits upon Davids Throne, [and] that the K[ing] ought to be subject of his Kingdome.”⁵³

Baptist confessionalism is reformational and catholic while providing reform to both Protestants and Catholics alike. It is grounded in a freedom towards obedience as it contests catholicity, providing a radical critique situated within a primitive reading of Scripture.

Conclusion

The way forward for Baptists to continue to claim to be Christ’s church is to reclaim its confessional and reformational identity. Autonomy and soul competency are weak sources of Baptist identity. As Bonhoeffer articulated, such sources for Baptist identity ultimately lead to a church that is Protestant but lives without the Reformation. Thus, as Baptists in America have proven, there is a reluctance to claim to be the one church of Christ.

Instead, Baptists have historically been confessional on the grounds of their obedience to Christ. Baptist freedom is not a freedom of possibility but a freedom towards obedience. This freedom is a gift to the world as Baptists continue to champion believers’ baptism, the priesthood of all believers, and religious liberty as each person has the freedom to obey Christ.

Baptists are also situated within the larger Reformation tradition as they see themselves as a reformational movement rather than a voluntary association of sectarian believers. As such, Baptists seek to continually reform the church while being situated within the broader church catholic as it seeks to become the primitive New Testament church. Baptists are a people who contest catholicity through a primitive “this is that” and “now is then” reading of Scripture.

Baptists continue to be a free people who are called into obedience as priests at the moment of their baptisms. Upon this freedom to confess Jesus as Lord, all who are baptized are called into a life of obedience and into the ministry of Word and Sacrament and are free to bear witness to the risen Lord.

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53. Helwys, “Mystery of Iniquity,” 71.

The Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict of the 1920s in the Augustana Synod—and Beyond

Thomas E. Jacobson

ABSTRACT: The Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, known more often as the Augustana Synod, was the only enduring Swedish American Lutheran denomination in American history. Despite its institutional unity, the denomination experienced internal struggles, exemplified by the conflict in the 1920s between so-called “Fundamentalists” and “Modernists” for the “soul” of the organization, which can be observed in the course of debates related to educational policy and the ownership of church-related educational institutions. These debates reveal that conservatives, often called “Fundamentalists,” displayed considerable diversity amongst themselves concerning how to articulate biblical and theological authority, which invites contemporary reflection in light of more recent schisms that have resulted in a fragmented Lutheran field in North America.

Unlike their Scandinavian counterparts the Danes and Norwegians, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church,¹ the only enduring Swedish American Lutheran denomination among a broad field of Swedish ethnic denominations in North America,² managed to avoid denominational schism, doctrinal or otherwise, during its existence. Indeed, after the departure of the Norwegians and Danes from the Scandinavian Augustana Synod in 1870, the Swedish-American Lutherans of the Augustana Synod enjoyed a continuous history as a united denomination until their participation in the merger that produced the Lutheran Church

1. The official title of the only enduring Swedish-American Lutheran denomination has changed slightly throughout history, the above title being the most recent. However, for the sake of simplicity, it will henceforth be referred to as “the Augustana Synod” as it typically was and is referred to in everyday conversation. For the purposes of this article, at times it will simply be abbreviated as “the Synod.”

2. Although the Augustana Synod emerged as the only Lutheran denomination among Swedish Americans and was the largest of all Swedish ethnic denominations in the North America, many other Swedes in America embraced the traditions of a variety of denominational heritages, including Baptists, Methodists, Mormons, and others. The largest “rival” to the Augustana Synod among Swedish ethnic denominations was a group that broke from the Augustana Synod in 1885 known as the “Swedish Mission Covenant.” See Olof Olsson’s book *By One Spirit*.

in America (LCA) in 1962.³ Although this institutional unity is noteworthy in light of the often rancorous debates that have produced painful schisms among American Lutherans throughout history, any observation that would assume internal harmony in the Augustana Synod based on this institutional unity would be superficial and misleading. A scouring of synod-related periodicals from a particular point in history, the decade of the 1920s to be exact, reveals deep tensions within the Augustana Synod regarding both doctrine and organization. One encounters these tensions especially in debates about Synod educational policy in three separate periodicals associated with the life of the Augustana Synod: *Augustana Quarterly*, *Bible Banner*,⁴ and *Lutheran Companion*.

What one discovers through this research is that although some of the controversies surrounding education within the Augustana Synod deal with isolated issues of perhaps lesser importance, at least in the sense of the intensity of the debates, two recurring themes stand out among the rest. First, one notices in these periodicals a volatile confrontation between advocates of Modernist and liberal theology and those who advocate for a more conservative doctrinal position, often in the periodicals referring to themselves as “Fundamentalist.” Second, one observes a heated debate concerning the existence and ownership of the Synod’s educational institutions, especially related to the ownership and operation of Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, by the entire Augustana Synod rather than by regional conferences of the Synod. As an extension of this debate, discussion in the 1920s also includes the issue of the relationship of Augustana College to Augustana Seminary, which functioned in the same location.

Although these two major issues appear unrelated, at least some periodical evidence suggests a possible connection between the debates within the Augustana Synod concerning the presence of “Modernism” and the issue of ownership of the educational institutions. While these issues are interesting in themselves and reveal much about the life of this small part of the larger American Lutheran environment at that point in history, historical evaluation of this conflict raises important questions about how contemporary Lutherans and Christians more generally might articulate a notion of biblical and theological authority in a way that avoids both a wooden biblicism in the form of “fundamentalism” as well as dismissal of the content of the Christian faith in the face of perceived challenges posed by the insights of Modernism. How might Christians best “contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints”⁵ in such a way? The Swedish-American Lutherans

3. Richard W. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 190.

4. Although not an official organ of the Augustana Synod, *Bible Banner*, the official publication of the Lutheran Bible Institute movement, was unofficially associated with the life of the Augustana Synod and served as a conservative mouthpiece in debates surrounding modernism and education.

5. Jude 3, RSV.

of the Augustana Synod of the 1920s and the challenges they addressed open the door for such important reflection.

Why focus on educational debates? Few issues are more important for a religious body than the education and training of its young people, certainly including college education, ministerial training, and seminary curriculum, but also including the education of young children in congregational life. As an editorial from *Lutheran Companion* in 1922 points out: “Our schools are founded and supported by the church in the interest of the church. It behooves the church, therefore, to look well to its foundations.”⁶ Since education is how the “soul” of the religious organization is transmitted to younger generations, it is understandable that opinions and debates surrounding educational policy would have the potential to be heated. An examination of the educational debates of the Augustana Synod provides a unique look at the “mind” of the Synod and how it understood its expression of Christianity and how best to relate to wider American society. A look at debates surrounding curriculum naturally provides one with a look at the values of the older generations and how the views of younger generations converged with or diverged from established ideas.

Why periodical research? It is important to remember as a disclaimer that a comprehensive examination of a historical era will necessarily include sources outside of simply periodical research. Such a comprehensive study would include materials such as meeting minutes and unofficial correspondence, among other things. Nevertheless, in the days before the internet, such periodicals served as the primary venue for debate and exchange of ideas in the Augustana Synod and therefore provide a window into the internal issues of the Synod. Therefore, although periodical research cannot provide a complete picture of the topic in question, it nonetheless serves as an important part of a more comprehensive study.

Why focus on the 1920s? For American Lutherans in general, the decade of the 1920s was an important time of “coming of age,” demonstrated by different events. First, the mass emigration from Europe, to which Sweden contributed more than its fair share, came to an end at the beginning of the decade.⁷ Naturally, this led to more focus on the *American* future of these church bodies and less reliance on immigration to bolster their numbers. Second, in the previous decade, significant mergers had taken place among Lutheran church bodies such as those of Norwegian origin in 1917 and the Lutherans of the eastern Muhlenberg tradition in 1918, though the Augustana Synod declined to participate in this latter merger despite its historic ties with the General Synod and the General Council. This reveals that American Lutherans were thinking critically about how to proceed into the future,

6. “The Fundamentalists and the Bible Schools,” *Lutheran Companion* (December 16, 1922): 794.

7. Hugo Söderström, *Confession and Cooperation: The Policy of the Augustana Synod in Confessional Matters and the Synod's Relations with other Churches up to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (CWK Gleerup Bokförlag, 1965), 9.

evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of forming larger church bodies as well as considering the compromises, doctrinal and otherwise, necessary for such mergers to occur. Third, World War I had recently ended as the 1920s began. Due to anti-German sentiment in the United States as a result of the war, which sometimes created hostility toward German-Americans and even toward Americans with roots in other European countries such as Sweden, it is understandable that this new situation would have led many American Lutherans who were the product of recent immigration to consider how best to relate to the rest of the country. Fourth, the 1920s saw very public debates concerning the issue of Darwin's theory of evolution, an issue that raised religious questions related to the nature of biblical authority. The controversy surrounding the concept of evolution was a part of the broader "Modernist" and "Fundamentalist" controversy in American and British Christianity, which reached its climax in the 1920s. Though American Lutherans were at the time still somewhat outside of the "mainstream" of American religion, evidence reveals that American Lutherans of the 1920s were indeed aware of the issues presented by this controversy. Because of all these issues, which at least indirectly affect the topic of education, the decade of the 1920s was a tumultuous period in American Lutheran history and therefore remains worthy of study.

Miscellaneous Issues regarding Education

Before approaching the two major issues that have been identified concerning education in the Augustana Synod in the 1920s, it is important to note the presence of a few other issues presented in the periodicals that reveal tensions within the organization. There is, for example, much to be noted in the area of language transition from Swedish to English, interestingly the *lack* of discussion of the topic, perhaps indicating the ease by which Swedish-American Lutherans embraced the use of English in the post-World War I era.⁸ There is also significant discussion of the relationship between congregational Sunday schools and youth Luther League programs.⁹ Lengthy treatment of these issues lies outside the scope of this article. One issue, however, that warrants some attention here related to the main topic is the issue of sex education.

The inclusion of such a topic as sex education in a synod periodical might well be a surprise for some due to a perception that sex would have been too much of a taboo topic for public discourse in the 1920s. However, the candor with which the article speaks indicates that the 1920s were not as innocent as one might suppose and included many of the same challenges that Christians of today face, including devaluing of marriage, immodesty, pornography, pre-marital sex, sex among teenagers, and the prevalence of venereal diseases.

8. "The Matriculation Committee of Augustana Theological Seminary," *Lutheran Companion* (August 1925): 509.

9. G.A. Fahlund, "Our Sunday-School," *Augustana Quarterly* (1922): 79.

In *Augustana Quarterly* from 1924, I. O. Nothstein approaches the issue of sex education in the Augustana Synod by expressing a longing for former times of greater innocence.¹⁰ It is not possible to know if Nothstein's longing for the past indicates an actual shift in attitude with the advent of the 1920s. However, it is yet another possible indicator that the 1920s indeed saw a shift in American society that impacted the life of Christian churches. His main argument is that young people do indeed need instruction in the area of sex, as indicated by the dangers of disease that stem from irresponsible sexual activity.¹¹ However, he also asserts that instruction in the mechanics of sexual activity will by itself be inadequate, as education alone cannot resolve the problem of sinful human nature. He points out: "Knowledge alone is no safe-guard against temptation, but after all more depends on the religious character of the child."¹² He urges that parents need to be equipped to discuss issues of this nature frankly with their children and also asserts that pastors approach such topics carefully and thoroughly in confirmation instruction on the Sixth Commandment.¹³ He gives no direct indication of opposition to his proposals. Nevertheless, one detects in his article a possible implicit critique of the concurrent debate regarding science and evolution. In his concluding comments, he writes: "He who teaches the bee to scatter the pollen of the rose and the apple blossom, shall He not also teach those who are the crown of His creation?"¹⁴ By making a distinction between humanity and lower animals, Nothstein appears to be critical of attempts to reduce humanity to the level of mere animals, as suggested by at least some proponents of evolution. He therefore advocates for instilling in children "the fear of God"¹⁵ as a way of encouraging young people to express their natural tendencies in ways that are tempered by the responsibility of a Christian calling in the world.

"Modernism" Versus "Fundamentalism"

The debate between what are often termed "Fundamentalists"¹⁶ and "Modernists" is by far the educational issue that receives the most attention in Augustana Synod periodicals of the 1920s. At times, representatives of these movements are respectively called "conservatives" and "liberals" by those involved in the debates

10. I. O. Nothstein, "On the Instruction of Children in Sex Knowledge," *Augustana Quarterly* (1924): 334.

11. Nothstein, "Sex Knowledge," 336.

12. Nothstein, "Sex Knowledge," 337.

13. Nothstein, "Sex Knowledge," 340.

14. Nothstein, "Sex Knowledge," 342.

15. Nothstein, "Sex Knowledge," 341.

16. This word often carries a pejorative connotation in modern usage. However, it appears, based on the use of the word in the periodicals, that the word "Fundamentalist" was actually used positively as a self-descriptive term as a way for Synod conservatives to distinguish themselves from "Modernists."

of the time.¹⁷ In fact, one periodical, *Bible Banner*, devotes most of its content to advocating for the “Fundamentalist” cause. Although other sources would need to be consulted to make a final determination of the overall significance of this debate, the frequency of articles related to this issue suggests that the struggle between such conservatives and liberals for the “soul” of the Synod membership was the primary theological dispute for the Augustana Synod in this decade. Based on articles in the three periodicals, it appears that the debate centered around five foci, each of which will receive some though not an equal amount of consideration: the development of the Lutheran Bible Institute (LBI) movement; the relationship between science and theology, particularly the concept of evolution; disputes regarding doctrine that strike at the heart of one’s understanding of the Christian faith; biblical interpretation; and seminary and seminary-preparatory curriculum. Although all these issues overlap to some degree, they will receive separate consideration.

The early 1920s saw the beginning of an educational movement that sought to represent the conservative “Fundamentalist” ideology within the Augustana Synod. This movement was known as the Lutheran Bible Institute, and its official publication, *Bible Banner*, provides a window into its life. Although it was understood to be an independent movement and therefore open to Lutherans of any synod or fellowship, it was, at least at the beginning, closely associated with the Augustana Synod.¹⁸ The repeated references in *Bible Banner* to individuals and events within the Augustana Synod testify to this.

The introductory issue of *Bible Banner* from January 1, 1920, seeks to demonstrate the need for the LBI movement as well as present its purpose to its constituency: “To establish and maintain a school for intensive Bible study and for training home, foreign, and inner mission workers.”¹⁹ This quote, along with further discussion of the LBI and its curriculum, demonstrates that the LBI was not founded as a four-year college but rather as a one or two year specialized academy.²⁰ However, the LBI did not simply seek to promote “intensive Bible study” for the sake of glorifying the Bible itself, or what might be termed “biblicism.” The introductory issue of *Bible Banner* points out the primary purpose of the LBI: “To glorify the Great Person of the Bible ... God.”²¹ As a side note, Samuel Miller, the dean of the LBI at

17. It is acknowledged that the terms “conservative” and “liberal” are of limited value due both to the relative nature of the terms and the various contexts in which such terms are employed. Yet in the context of the 1920s, such terms are often used interchangeably with “Fundamentalism” and “Modernism,” respectively.

18. “Principals, Purposes, and Plans of the Lutheran Bible Institute,” *Bible Banner* (March, 1920): 1. One of the stated goals of the LBI movement was “To seek no official aid or connection with any church, synod, or conference.”

19. Samuel Miller, “Sermon at the Opening Exercises of the Lutheran Bible Institute, Held Tuesday Evening, Sept. 16th, 1919,” *Bible Banner* (January, 1920): 2.

20. “Three Courses Offered by the Lutheran Bible Institute,” *Bible Banner* (Vol. 1, No. 4, July, 1920): 3.

21. Miller, “Sermon at the Opening,” 2.

its founding, interestingly gives credit for the concept of the development of the LBI to Professor Adolph Hult²² of Augustana Theological Seminary,²³ a point that will become significant later.

However, there is more behind the development of the LBI than simply a desire for increased Bible literacy among mission workers. One can detect a reactionary element in the stated

Principals, [sic] Purposes and Plans of the Lutheran Bible Institute. Principals. The Lutheran Bible Institute stands for: The Bible as the inspired Word of God; The whole body of Doctrine and Principals of Conduct of the Lutheran Church, as contained in the Confessional Writings of said Church, feeling that the *denials of the day* demand an emphasis on the following....²⁴

By reference to the “denials of the day,” it is clear that concern for theological clarity undergirded the development of the LBI. The article goes on to list specific theological issues that the LBI would seek to uphold in its work:

The Deity of the Virgin-born Jesus Christ, Christ’s Vicarious Blood-Atone-ment, Christ’s Bodily Resurrection and Ascension and his Imminent Return in Glory, Justification by faith alone, The Word, Baptism and Lord’s Supper the only means of grace. Good works as fruits of a living faith.²⁵

In this list of theological principles, one notes that the issues toward the top of the list apparently stem from a desire to maintain these central doctrines of the Christian faith in the face of liberal critics calling for their rejection. These issues are interestingly associated with “classical” Fundamentalism.²⁶ The issues toward the bottom of the list are more closely associated with Lutheranism in particular. It could be that the LBI movement was seeking to “sell” itself as an authentically Lutheran institution. Indeed, based on later issues of *Bible Banner*, it is clear that the LBI did receive criticism for not being truly Lutheran in its teaching.²⁷

There are other indications that the LBI received criticism for its activities, but the LBI itself was highly critical of the educational system of the Augustana Synod, even if such criticism is implicit rather than explicit. In 1922, Samuel Miller, dean of the LBI, wrote a lengthy editorial in *Augustana Quarterly* explaining the concept of

22. At times in the periodicals his name is spelled “Adolf” while at others is spelled in Anglicized form as “Adolph.”

23. Miller, “Sermon at the Opening,” I.

24. “Principals, Purposes, and Plans,” I (italics mine).

25. “Principals, Purposes, and Plans,” I.

26. As a reaction against the trends of Modernist, liberal theology, the term “Fundamentalism” originated from a series of pamphlets by American and British authors entitled “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth” published between the years 1910 to 1915.

27. “Are We Lutheran?” *Bible Banner* (July, 1921): 4. In this issue, a lengthy editorial answers criticism that the LBI was not authentically Lutheran in its teaching.

his form of Bible school and defending its existence. He points out the sad state of affairs in the spirituality of the Augustana Synod, with people more concerned with externals rather than “inner spiritual matters.”²⁸ Miller sees that a Bible school such as the LBI can help remedy the situation, since renewal in Church life “can only come through and by means of the Word of God.”²⁹ The implied critique here is that the established educational system is lacking in producing Christian leaders with spiritual conviction. A few pages later, such critique is made explicit:

I have mentioned spiritual leadership as one of the supreme needs of our Church. A movement must have leadership or it will either die out or turn into wrong directions. And the fact is that every activity of the church waits for the right kind of spiritual leadership. The church has provided itself with the professional leadership it requires in the form of the form of the ministry. It has also intended that its schools and colleges should supply the Church with leaders amongst the lay men and women. It has intended and desired that these should be spiritual leaders. But the pressure to turn out leaders to the affairs of the world has been so strong that the spiritual leaders who now come from our schools outside of the ministers are few and far between.³⁰

Miller here advocates for lay spiritual leadership, and though he does not include ordained ministers in his critique of the lacking spiritual leadership in the Synod, it should be considered that he might have been reluctant directly to criticize the Synod's ministerium in a periodical such as *Lutheran Quarterly*.

The LBI movement itself received direct criticism in the writings of Vergilius Ferm, who was at times a controversial figure in the Synod and an advocate for Modernist perspectives. Making reference to the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA) formed in 1918, which the Augustana Synod declined to join, he writes:

A special committee is at work making a thorough study of the entire theological curriculum of their seminaries. And shall we say that all is well within our own borders? The modern issues are not met by the closing of our eyes. The method of isolation is no solution. I for one see at this point the weakness of the Bible school which is now flourishing in our synod. Any depreciation of the spirit of achievement in man, be it in the realm of religious thinking, is not only, in my judgment, against the spirit of Luther, himself one of the most vigorous and independent thinkers of his day; but it is contrary to that liberty which Paul says is found in Christ.³¹

Ferm observed in the LBI movement a tendency toward “isolationism” and “provincialism,” something that impeded the kind of critical thinking necessary for

28. Samuel Miller, “The Need and the Purpose of a Lutheran Bible School,” *Augustana Quarterly* (1922): 233.

29. Miller, “The Need and the Purpose,” 234.

30. Miller, “The Need and the Purpose,” 237.

31. Vergilius Ferm, “Contemporary Chaos,” *Augustana Quarterly* (1926): 118.

Christianity to adapt to the new discoveries being made by scientists and thinkers of other disciplines, much different than a “back to the Bible” message. The periodicals of the Augustana Synod, therefore, reveal Ferm and the LBI movement to represent polar opposites in ideology.

The issues of science and evolution and their relationship to Christian thinking receives a fair amount of discussion in the three periodicals from the 1920s, especially in *Bible Banner* and *Lutheran Companion*. Nearly all the comments made about evolution are negative, though some are more conciliatory than others. As an example of an uncompromising stand, a certain P.A. Mattson states in *Lutheran Companion* from 1922 that one must choose between a belief in divine creation and evolution, for “one is directly antagonistic to the other.”³² He further laments that “our poor children in the public schools of our land are being fed on such trash; and this they call science.”³³ In fairness, Mattson’s critique is more highly-developed than simply making inflammatory comments. He highlights examples of fossil discoveries that have been proven to be hoaxes as well as engages Charles Darwin’s works to demonstrate their incompatibility with Christian teaching. He also rejects any attempt to understand evolution as “God’s *modus operandi*. For if it would have been God would have said so.”³⁴ The reference to public schools indicates that Mattson represents the movement within the Augustana Synod that desired to turn inward, away from corrupting influences of “liberals.” Not surprisingly, Vergilius Ferm includes the issue of evolution in his list of issues that need to be considered in order for the Augustana Synod to be taken seriously by the outside world and for ecumenical relationships to develop.³⁵ Indeed, based on some of his previous comments, it appears that Ferm understood religion itself to be something that evolves, hence his reaction to the LBI movement and other attempts to turn inward at a time when religion might be evolving into something new.

Regarding the matter of doctrine and teaching within the Augustana Synod, it has already been stated that the LBI movement represented the conservative wing of the Synod in its attempt to ground people in certain doctrinal principles. As *Bible Banner* states in 1924, far from simply promoting intensive Bible study, the LBI stood for the “fundamental doctrines of Christianity.”³⁶ They viewed a large part of their ministry as providing a defense against the encroachment of liberal theology. Possibly the best example of this is the reaction of LBI dean Samuel Miller to the visit of Archbishop of Sweden Nathan Söderblöm. His visit to America in 1923 was significant for many in the Augustana Synod, as they were the only Swedish *Lutheran*

32. P.A. Mattson, “Creation or Evolution, Which Shall It Be,” *Lutheran Companion* (November 2, 1922): 767.

33. Mattson, “Creation or Evolution,” 767.

34. Mattson, “Creation or Evolution,” 767.

35. Ferm, “Contemporary Chaos,” 115.

36. “The Doctrinal Position of the Lutheran Bible Institute,” *Bible Banner* (January, 1924): 4.
In this sense, the term “Fundamentalism” was a positive self-designation.

denomination in North America and were therefore considered by some to be the “daughter” of the Church of Sweden, a concept that was contested by many:

America has also during the past weeks been visited by the Archbishop of Sweden... Though the writer is a member of the Augustana Synod, he cannot join in the general chorus of joy and approval that is being expressed by so many in the press of the Synod. We gladly and freely grant that the Archbishop is a great and wonderful man. But his message does not ring true. A sermon on prayer that we heard was full of beautiful generalities but contained nothing positively and specifically Christian... But where was the blood atonement?³⁷

Miller here accuses the Archbishop of essentially promoting a form of Unitarianism, which lifts up Jesus as a model of how to pray and downplays doctrinal assertions. This also explains his condemnation in the same article of that which undergirded much of the ecumenical movement of the time, namely a lack of focus on the core doctrines of Christianity. Miller also uses the occasion of Söderblöm’s visit to “draw a line in the sand.” He writes, “The Archbishop never mentioned such a thing as a distinction between the liberals and the conservatives of today... no true conservative can cooperate with the liberals of today. If he does, he is denying his faith.”³⁸ Thus, already in 1923, the LBI movement understood itself to be engaged in an adversarial relationship with many of the trends in the Augustana Synod.

Specific discussions related to biblical scholarship and how the Bible is taught in the Augustana Synod are surprisingly few and far between in the three periodicals. Of course, related to the above issue of Christian doctrine, one does read of the importance conservatives attached to the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. One also reads about a Christian understanding of creation in debates concerning evolution. These certainly are biblical issues, yet the only issue that receives extended discussion regarding modern scholarly biblical interpretation is interestingly that of the authorship of the book of Isaiah. An Old Testament professor at Augustana Theological Seminary, Carl A. Blomgren, wrote a 1926 article in which he argues against the trend of “progressive scholarship.” “Our enemies deny the unity of the Book of Isaiah... That is the way they have mutilated Isaiah, the greatest prophetic book of the Bible.”³⁹ Such a debate seems odd to modern readers of these older periodicals, as the existence of a first, second, and third Isaiah is something typically taken for granted in mainline seminaries, yet one makes an interesting historical observation about the Augustana Synod of this era from such a debate. It is a concrete example of people within the Synod wrestling with what would come to be known as the “historical-critical method” of biblical interpretation. What one also discovers about a conservative understanding of biblical authority in the Augustana Synod is that not all conservatives shared the same views.

37. “Editorial,” *Bible Banner* (November, 1923): 4.

38. “Editorial,” 4.

39. C.A. Blomgren, “Progressive Scholarship,” *Lutheran Companion* (January 20, 1926): 181.

As noted, an early issue of *Bible Banner* described the Bible as “inspired.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, some other writers in the same periodical used the word “infallible” to describe the Bible.⁴¹ Interestingly, nowhere does one encounter the word “inerrant,” a term often associated with “classical” Fundamentalism. Although Professor Blomgren from Augustana Theological Seminary appears to hold a more “wooden” understanding of biblical authority, not all of the Synod conservatives approached the Bible in that way. Indeed, among contributing writers of *Bible Banner*, there appears to be more flexibility in their understanding of biblical authority and interpreting the Bible in light of historical context. While affirming the divine nature of the Bible, C. J. Södergren also writes in 1920:

Because the Bible is human it can be studied as literature, its “historical development” can be traced, and it can be subjected to critical comparison with the mental productions of the various nations. And so far, so good. There is no harm in such anatomical dissection for its own purposes. But the harm is serious in the extreme if we stop there and say that this is all.⁴²

Therefore, the issue of biblical interpretation is not only an interesting “snapshot” of the Synod’s engagement with what would become an influential movement in biblical scholarship in the future, but it also reveals divisions or at least differences in emphasis among Augustana Synod conservatives.

Finally, discussion related to specific matters of curriculum for college and seminary education in the Synod is also rare in the periodicals. What little discussion can be found in the synod-related periodicals essentially boils down to differences of opinion expressed by Vergilius Ferm on the liberal side and Adolph Hult on the conservative side, along with a counterargument to Ferm by H. E. Sandstedt. Although the discussion is limited, this is yet another telling issue for understanding the internal division of the Augustana Synod in the 1920s.

Perhaps reminiscent of the controversial attempt at Lutheran doctrinal revision in the “Definite Platform” of 1855 by S. S. Schmucker, though with some different emphases, Ferm goes to great lengths to describe the changing situation of the world in the 1920s and essentially communicates a message that the Christian Church and Augustana Synod in particular needs to adapt itself and its message to the surrounding world in order to ensure its survival.

We ... find ourselves living ... in one of the most exciting, fascinating and momentous periods in human history.... The world of the twentieth century will never return to the ways, customs and the ideas of the century which preceded.... The lessons which father and mother had in school in their day are not identical ... with those which their children must now take up.⁴³

40. “Principals, Purposes, and Plans,” I.

41. “The Doctrinal Position,” 4.

42. C. J. Södergren, “The Bible,” *Bible Banner* (July, 1920): I.

43. Ferm, “Contemporary Chaos,” III.

In his opinion, the *status quo* of seminary curriculum is inadequate for producing the kinds of leaders that are needed. He points out that the system in place is devoted to producing “priests” to “administer the *status quo*.”⁴⁴ Rather than “priests,” “prophets” are what is needed for the future, ministers who have the capacity to respond to the changing world. Failure to do this would, in Ferm’s opinion, result in what Ferm describes as “provincialism.” One detects in Ferm’s article an implicit critique that the curriculum in place at Augustana Theological Seminary does not encourage critical thinking. For that reason, Ferm suggests that a solid seminary curriculum would include courses in the following areas: psychology, psychology of religion, philosophy of religion, contemporary thought, and logic. These courses would be in addition to other aspects of seminary curriculum that might be viewed as more standard: American Church history, history of the Lutheran Church in North America, history of Christian doctrine, and comparative religion.⁴⁵

In addition to the types of courses that Ferm includes in his proposed curriculum, what is most interesting is what his proposed curriculum lacks. Here, one notes no references to study of the biblical text or homiletics. In the counterargument by H. E. Sandstedt, which argues that Augustana Theological Seminary does indeed meet the educational needs of the time, he makes note of biblical and homiletic training.⁴⁶ What this reveals is much more than simply a difference in emphasis in the details of curriculum. It reveals a difference in the understanding of the ministerial office. While Sandstedt understands an ordained minister to be a servant of God and an evangelist, that is, someone rooted in the biblical message, Ferm’s emphasis is on the minister as a type of contemporary prophet who is able to synthesize older traditions with new insights, making Christianity relevant for the modern age. This, however, raises questions concerning how exactly Ferm understood the meaning of the Christian gospel, which he never directly addresses in the periodicals. With his focus on “evolutionary religion,”⁴⁷ it would stand to reason that he would not place much importance on the topics of evangelism and proclamation.

Earlier in the decade, Professor Adolph Hult made an impassioned plea in *Lutheran Companion* for the preservation of a seminary curriculum focused on proclamation based on the biblical text. Reading between the lines, one observes in his article that apparently some people within the Synod were advocating for lessening the duration of ministerial training by eliminating much of the seminary curriculum and requiring only a full “College Course.”⁴⁸ The reason for this proposal

44. Vergilius Ferm, “Does Our Seminary Training Meet Present-Day Requirements of the Ministry: Negative,” *Augustana Quarterly* (1928): 203.

45. Ferm, “Seminary Training: Negative,” 205.

46. H. E. Sandstedt, “Does Our Seminary Training Meet Present-Day Requirements of the Ministry: Affirmative,” *Augustana Quarterly* (1928): 199.

47. Ferm, “Contemporary Chaos,” 111.

48. Adolph Hult, “Seminary Preparation?” *Lutheran Companion* (1922), 541.

was the shortage of preachers and the need to fill pulpits in the Synod. Hult, however, argues that if the duration of study needs to be shortened, it would make much more sense to shorten the college curriculum and provide a student with thorough exposure to “Word, doctrine and practice of the Church.”⁴⁹ Although he does not directly mention it, it should be considered that Hult’s article, by its emphasis on learning about the “Word” as essential for ministerial training and his downplaying of other collegiate subjects, was providing a “plug” for the LBI movement. It will be remembered that Samuel Miller once lauded Hult as the inspiration for the LBI.

Property Disputes in the Ownership and Operation Educational Institutions

The final issue to consider regarding educational debates within the Augustana Synod in the 1920s relates to the functioning of the Synod’s colleges and seminary, particularly issues of ownership and governance. A brief overview of these issues is necessary before any attempt can be made to posit a connection between the debates between conservatives and liberals and the issue of ownership and operation of educational institutions. Beginning in 1926, *Lutheran Companion* in particular contains a plethora of articles related to the subject, but the articles referenced here will be those that are representative of different, stated positions on the issue. Although in a different way than debates between “Modernism” and “Liberalism,” this issue also reveals theological divisions within the united denomination of the Augustana Synod.

According to Richard Solberg, the Augustana Synod apparently experienced a type of “college mania” beginning in the late nineteenth century due to a growing “regional self-consciousness.”⁵⁰ Although the Synod as a whole owned and operated Augustana College and Seminary in Rock Island, regional conferences of the Augustana Synod began to develop their own educational institutions that were funded by the local conferences that utilized such educational services. Many of these institutions were “academies” that were understood to be “feeders” to Augustana College and then perhaps the Seminary.⁵¹ However, it is understandable that regional pride might have led to a desire for some within various conferences to own their own colleges and “upgrade” their academies to a collegiate level. This resulted in the formation of Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, Bethany College in Kansas, Upsala College in New Jersey, and Luther College in Nebraska. Naturally, the existence of these colleges detracted from Augustana College as the center of the Synod’s educational needs.⁵²

49. Hult, “Seminary Preparation?” 541.

50. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education*, 201.

51. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education*, 199.

52. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education*, 190.

The struggle within the Augustana Synod over “college mania” was apparently a struggle between proponents of both centralization and decentralization. Should regional conferences have more control over their own affairs, or should the entire Synod pool its resources to maintain a single college? The latter proposal would appear to have financial benefits for the Synod. However, in the end, proponents of decentralization led an effort to “demote” Augustana College from its status as a Synod-wide institution and turn over its operation to the Illinois, Iowa, and Superior conferences. This would have placed Augustana College on the same level as other colleges in the Synod. An editorial from 1926, the year the proposal was released, reports the situation as follows:

But now it appears that there are those in the synod who feel that Augustana College is becoming too much of a burden together with all the other conference schools and hence are willing to separate the college from the seminary, the idea being that the synod shall occupy itself only with post graduate theological education and leave undergraduate work to the conferences... There is no doubt in our mind that these three conferences are physically and otherwise able to support and manage Augustana College, if they find it desirable to accept it. There is sufficient wealth in the Illinois conference alone to do it.⁵³

One article by George M. Stephenson maintains a neutral position and encourages further study on the matter of separation of college from seminary,⁵⁴ but otherwise the articles in *Lutheran Companion* are fairly evenly divided in their perspective on the matter, with some favoring the separation and others longing for Augustana College to remain an institution of the entire Synod.

An anonymous layperson offered his view on the matter, chastising the Synod’s ministers for dominating the debate and pointing out that it would “cost a goodly sum of money to bring about the change.”⁵⁵ A certain C. E. Cesander favored keeping Augustana College as a Synod-wide institution and objected to the obsession of some with decentralization, arguing that conferences that are so concerned with their autonomy ought to secede from the Augustana Synod to form their own separate synods.⁵⁶ Others argued that Augustana College in the same location as Augustana Seminary was hindering the Seminary from achieving its full potential and should therefore be governed as a separate institution.⁵⁷ When the votes were

53. “Will the Offer of the Synod Relative to Augustana College Be Accepted?” *Lutheran Companion* (August 28, 1926): 829.

54. George M. Stephenson, “The Status of Augustana College,” *Lutheran Companion* (1927): 81.

55. “On the School Separation Question,” *Lutheran Companion* (1927): 81.

56. C. E. Cesander, “Are We Centralizing in Our Church Work or Disintegrating?” *Lutheran Companion* (1927): 82.

57. A. L. Lugn, “An Opinion on the Practical Aspect of the Status of Augustana College and Theological Seminary,” *Lutheran Companion* (1927): 202.

cast, however, the three conferences that would have inherited Augustana College from the Synod rejected the proposal, leaving Augustana College connected with Augustana Seminary and in the hands of the entire Synod.⁵⁸

Linking the Debates—A Possible Connection

As has been demonstrated, much ink was spilled in the 1920s Augustana Synod periodicals regarding the conservative and liberal debates as well as regarding the struggle over centralization and decentralization of the Synod's educational institutions. Returning to the question posed at the beginning, is it possible to find a connection between these seemingly unrelated yet concurrent debates? Direct evidence is difficult to come by in the three periodicals, and perhaps other historical documents from this era would provide a more concrete answer. However, it is possible at least to speculate based on the content of one article in particular that there was indeed, at least in the minds of some, a connection between the desire for decentralization and those who were advocates of conservatism within the Synod. Conversely, one might assume that liberal advocates would be in favor of centralization regarding the ownership and operation of Augustana College.

One can best posit such a connection based on an article from *Lutheran Companion* from 1927 during the heart of the debate concerning the fate of Augustana College. An anonymous layperson poses the question: "Does the synod really want Augustana College to be a great institution?"⁵⁹ Here, it is not exactly clear what is meant by "a great institution," but one can infer from the rest of the article the view that dispersing funding for education in the Synod in various directions rather than centralizing the funding prevents Augustana College from becoming a first-rate institution. The author laments the state of affairs that would arise should Augustana College lose the support of the Augustana Synod as a whole:

If Augustana College comes under conf. control, as is proposed, will the conferences support it any better than the synod has in the past? I can see no reasons for hope that they will...Where is Augustana College to get its much needed endowment and buildings? If the synod relinquishes its control and withdraws its support or if it only continues to dole out the minimum amount of money, as in the past the only recourse is for Augustana to follow the same road as the strong colleges have had to travel [sic].⁶⁰

Therefore, while not publicly disparaging the other colleges within the Synod, the author expresses a desire for Augustana College to continue under support from the entire Synod, as it would be best poised to become "a great institution."

58. Oscar N. Olson, "Review of Synodical Activities," *Lutheran Companion* (1927): 593.

59. Lugn, "An Opinion," 202.

60. Lugn, "An Opinion," 202.

It is possible here to imagine a conversation with Vergilius Ferm, as one example, and the anonymous author of the above article. Because of Ferm's repeated calls for the Synod to avoid "provincialism" in matters intellectual, it would seem reasonable that Ferm and those like him would favor the centralization of education, making the curriculum easier to control at one institution while also positioning the institution to become a truly ecumenical institution capable of supporting a top-rate faculty. On the other hand, it also seems reasonable that Synod conservatives would oppose centralization for the same reasons. That the LBI movement was allegedly supported by Adolph Hult, a representative of the conservative mind in the Synod, supports the idea that conservatives would favor a more local "flavor" of education to inoculate students against the perceived dangers of liberal theology.

Grundtvig: A Way Forward

For American Lutherans as well as other denominational families in the once prominent "mainline"⁶¹ church traditions, the previous few decades have witnessed significant conflict, upheaval, and reorganization, resulting in the formation of several breakaway church bodies and associations. As only a few examples, the North American Lutheran Church was formed out of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Anglican Church in North America out of the Episcopal Church, the Global Methodist Church out of the United Methodist Church, and the Alliance of Reformed Churches out of the Reformed Church in America. These realignments have all occurred in the wake of shifting policies regarding sexual conduct among clergy and more generally the increasing acceptance of homosexual conduct as a legitimate Christian lifestyle. Since the issue of sexual conduct appears to be the common thread behind these departures, critics of these new denominations are known to accuse them of being overly and selectively focused on the issue of sex as well as "Fundamentalists" in their reading of Scripture. There can be no question that the move toward growing acceptance of homosexuality figured prominently in the conflicts that led to such divisions among the "mainline," nor can there be any question that disagreements surrounding the biblical texts that address homosexual conduct played an important role in the unfolding conflicts and divisions. At the same time, though sexual revisionism served as the "last straw" for many in their decision to pursue a different future, evaluation of the events of the preceding few decades in these "mainline" traditions reveals that changes in policy concerning sexual conduct were only one part of a broader set of concerns regarding the life and confessional witness of the Church.⁶² Indeed, theological and ecclesial controversies regarding issues such as trinitarian faithfulness, the meaning of Christian

61. Given the sharp decline in both numbers and influence in such church bodies, many now opt for the designation "oldline" rather than "mainline" as a descriptor.

62. Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Fortress Press, 2015), 325.

mission, faithful ecumenism, as well as the overall priorities of such denominations were lively issues far prior to the “last straw” of the issue of human sexuality.⁶³

For those church bodies that have recently formed in response to dissatisfaction with the general atmosphere of the liberal “mainline” traditions, a special challenge lies in comprehensively, clearly, and concisely diagnosing the foundational problem in their now former affiliations. As was the case among the Augustana Synod conservatives described above, those who have founded and joined newly formed church bodies in the recent decades do not express their dissatisfaction uniformly. Just as the Augustana Synod conservatives or “Fundamentalists” who contended against the “Modernists” of the era of the 1920s were not of one mind in how to articulate their concern for preserving the “soul” of the Synod, present-day conservatives demonstrate considerable diversity in terms of both piety, such as those preferring a liturgical versus a more “free form” worship style, and expression of biblical authority, such as those expressing a more “woodenly” literal understanding of the Scriptures versus those locating the authority of the Scriptures in the overall “spirit” of the text. This lack of clarity creates confusion for observers as well as participants in these groups. Why, for example, did those who formed the North American Lutheran Church feel compelled to create a new structure when various alternatives such as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church already existed?

While the North American Lutheran Church, formed out of struggles in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has generally been seen as a conservative reaction for the “soul” of the Christian faith against liberal or “Modernist” trends, it has also been on the receiving end of criticism by Lutherans in groups such as the Missouri or Wisconsin Synods for what is seen as a weak expression of biblical authority, only using the term “inspired” to describe the Scriptures rather than “inerrant.” It is here that those involved in the present situation might take some encouragement from the Augustana Synod struggle of the 1920s. It seems from the periodical evidence above that not all those conservatives in the Augustana Synod understood themselves as “Fundamentalists” in a “classical” sense. Though they were critical of attempts to redefine the nature of the Christian faith as something that “evolves,” they did not necessarily always take every part of the Bible as literal history. Some also seemed to express some openness to responsible use of the historical-critical method of biblical study in a way that preserves the foundational commitments of the Christian faith while at the same time demonstrating engagement with the discoveries and insights of modern science. For such Lutherans then and now, the word “inspired” expresses the authority of the Scriptures in a broad sense, viewing the overall content of the Scriptures as the foundational witness to God’s work of redemption for the world in Christ as communicated through law and gospel. Lutherans in the bodies of the former Synodical Conference traditions such as Missouri and Wisconsin, on the other hand, demonstrate concern for un-

63. Granquist, *Lutherans in America*, 347.

derstanding the authority of the Scriptures to include a literal-historical reading of the text. Groups such as the North American Lutheran Church are simultaneously praised for standing for certain principles and criticized for lack of conviction. As was the case with the Augustana Synod conservatives or “Fundamentalists” in the 1920s, there exists today diversity of expression among those critical of liberal or “Modernist” trends by people such as Vergilius Ferm to redefine the nature of the gospel. Recognizing the lack of unity between conservatives, how can such conservatives in groups such as the North American Lutheran Church best articulate their convictions?

A possible path forward requires moving from Sweden to its southern Scandinavian neighbor of Denmark to engage the contributions of arguably the most famous Dane of all time, Nikolai Frederik Severin Connick (1783-1872). Grundtvig was at times a controversial figure in Danish Lutheran church life and society and in subsequent Lutheran history whose contributions touched the areas of theology, poetry, hymnody, history, and education. Functioning as public commentator in the first half of the nineteenth century, he was known also as an opponent of his contemporary in Denmark, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.⁶⁴ The influence of his tradition soon expanded beyond Denmark and into Norway where representatives of his tradition, such as Wilhelm Andreas Wexels, generated controversy by promoting the possibility of postmortem conversion for those who had no opportunity for conversion to Christ in their lifetimes.⁶⁵ For this and other reasons, Grundtvig’s legacy has been the subject of criticism.

However, as concerns the issue under consideration in this article, Grundtvig can be of help. Curiously, though representatives of the Grundtvigian tradition such as the “Happy Danes” of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church⁶⁶ have often been considered as among the more “liberal” expressions of Lutheranism, Grundtvig himself represented a certain type of conservatism, distinct though it was from other conservative expressions of the time. Perhaps influenced by the growing movement of Romanticism of his era, Grundtvig became an opponent of the Enlightenment Rationalism prevalent in his time and its influence on the life of the Church of Denmark, eroding, as he saw it, the creedal witness to the Christian faith.⁶⁷

Grundtvig’s negative experience with Enlightenment Rationalism’s impact on the Church, however, led him away from a simple biblicism. Though he considered

64. *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, s.v. “Grundtvig, Nikolai Frederik Severin.”

65. Thomas E. Jacobson, “Postmortem Conversion in the Norwegian Grundtvigianism of Wilhelm Andreas Wexels,” *Lutheran Forum* 52:2 (June 2020).

66. *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, s.v. “Lutheran Church in America.” This small Danish American Lutheran church body was generally associated with the tradition stemming from Danish Grundtvigianism and was among the groups that merged to form the Lutheran Church in America in 1962.

67. Johannes Knudsen, ed., *N.F.S. Grundtvig: Selected Writings* (Fortress Press, 1976), 2.

the Scriptures to be an important “means of information,”⁶⁸ because Rationalists themselves used the Scriptures to support their arguments, simple appeals to biblical authority were inadequate for him. He knew that ultimate authority in the Church must rest in a larger, guiding principle, as the Bible itself can be used, perhaps even hijacked, in support of various ideologies. As an alternative, Grundtvig became famous and even infamous for his “churchly” or “sacramental view,” which emphasized the living presence of Christ in the Church through the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.⁶⁹ He believed that this living, sacramental faith of the Church has been encapsulated in the ongoing witness of what is today known as the Apostles’ Creed, otherwise known as the Baptismal Creed. In this conviction, he might have absorbed the view of a late medieval legend, which claimed direct apostolic origin of the Apostles’ Creed, with each apostle contributing one line to the statement of faith. Since such apostolic witness, in this view, preceded the writings of the New Testament, the voice of God as heard from the witness of the Creed stands as a higher authority than the Scriptures themselves. Regardless of the erroneous nature of this legend of the origin of the Apostles’ Creed, his view reflects a movement to locate theological authority in the Church outside of appeals to biblical authority, potentially bypassing some of the difficult debates associated with the “Fundamentalist” and “Modernist” controversy.

One need not fully accept Grundtvig’s “churchly view” to its extreme, reducing the Scriptures to “means of information,” to see the helpfulness of his view for articulating biblical authority in the church. The North American Lutheran Church, for example, confesses that the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, yet one of its four core values is that it as a church body is “traditionally grounded” rather than “biblically grounded.” The Scriptures, as the Word of God, function as the “norming norm” of the faith of the Church from which Christians through the ages have based their witness through various creeds and confessions, which remain as faithful “measuring rods” for the Church of the present day through which Christians and the world continue to hear the voice of the Lord. As with some Augustana Synod conservatives of the 1920s, such conservatives of today in the North American Lutheran Church and similar communions might best locate their understanding of Scriptural authority in the overall sense and “spirit” of the text as a witness to Christ, identified, preserved, and proclaimed in the Church through the ages.

Beyond the Modernist-Fundamentalist Antinomy

The issues surrounding education within the Augustana Synod in the 1920s as seen through the lens of the synod-related periodicals can largely be understood as related to debates between “Modernists” and “Fundamentalists.” As such, the possibility should be considered, for further study, that at least some link existed

68. Knudsen, *N.F.S. Grundtvig*, 80.

69. Knudsen, *N.F.S. Grundtvig*, 80.

between the “Modernist” debates and the issue of centralization and decentralization of educational institutions. Regardless, such periodical research reveals that the Augustana Synod of the 1920s, despite its enduring institutional unity, was no stranger to internal controversy and even flirted with the possibility of schism at least at one point in its history. The issues that arose in the debates between conservatives and liberals in the 1920s are also important for contemporary Lutheranism, as they often mirror current debates. Consideration of these issues reveals the uncomfortable though evident reality that not all theologically conservative Lutherans are of one mind as to how biblical authority is expressed and raises important questions concerning how one might best move beyond a “wooden” Fundamentalism and simultaneously “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”⁷⁰

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Can American Lutheranism Recover Its Confessional Center?

Piepkorn, Catholicity,
and the Augsburg Confession

William S. Wiecher

ABSTRACT: This essay argues that American Lutheranism's present crisis is theological before it is demographical, specifically concerning the functional loss of the Augsburg Confession as its living confessional center. Drawing especially on Arthur Carl Piepkorn, the essay retrieves the Augsburg Confession as the principal symbol of the Church of the Augsburg Confession and as the public, catholic interpretation of Scripture that orders Lutheran doctrine, ministry, sacramental life, and ecclesial identity. Piepkorn's position is presented as a disciplined *quia* subscription that avoids both permissive *quatenus* confessionalism and rigid biblicist or scholastic maximalism. The essay traces how confessional displacement occurs through neglect, selective citation, private interpretive authority, and institutional accommodation, with particular attention to the weakening of doctrinal authority in modern American Lutheran contexts. It also contrasts Piepkorn's confessional realism with late-modern tendencies toward doctrinal dissolution, exemplified by Gianni Vattimo's notion of "weak thought." Against churches that keep confessional language while relativizing its authority, the essay contends that Lutheran renewal requires recovery of the Augsburg Confession as a living norm rather than an honored relic. Piepkorn's third way offers a catholic, evangelical, and historically disciplined path for preserving Lutheran identity and faithful public witness.

Diagnosing Decline

Some observers contend that mainline Protestantism, including American Lutheranism, is not merely experiencing confusion but undergoing a deeper process of theological disintegration. Ola Tjøhom describes the situation in which Protestantism generally, and Lutheranism in particular, found itself during the twentieth century in both Europe and the United States: "At first, the former catholic and ecumenical renewal movement was politicized; then it was denominational—and then Protestant. Today, the large Lutheran churches, at least in Europe but probably

also in North America, often came across as embracing almost everything, and thus having no clear profile whatsoever. Clearly, contemporary ‘liberal-pietism’ is radically shaped by postmodern pluralism. All in all, the Reformation movement finds itself at a vast distance from its roots.”¹ Numerical decline and institutional contraction are real enough, but the more fundamental crisis is theological rather than merely demographic.² In significant respects, American Lutheranism appears to have lost its confessional center. Where a clear, public, and catholic confession once stood in the Augsburg Confession, there now often appears a shifting combination of moral aspiration, therapeutic religiosity, revivalist imitation, and bureaucratic administration. This is often evident within mainline Protestantism, including progressive American Lutheranism, where feeling and experience function as foundational sources of authority rather than the Confessions and Scripture. Phil Secker described this contestation as a “Schism of Authority,”³ the ongoing internal ecclesial struggle over what serves as the ultimate rule of faith within American Lutheranism. The ideological and theological struggle is usually framed as biblicism, be it fundamentalist or progressive, versus confessionalism, with further disagreements within confessionalism concerning the degree of confessional adherence. The question is whether a person, pastor, or church body accepts the historic Lutheran Confessions as contained in the *Book of Concord*, or *quia*, because they agree with Holy Scripture, or *quatenus*. The *quatenus* position implies that the Bible is the ultimate authority and that the Confessions assume a lesser status.

This essay argues that American Lutheranism’s deepest crisis is not demographic decline but the loss of its confessional center, especially the functional displacement of the Augsburg Confession as the Church’s normative public confession. Drawing on Arthur Carl Piepkorn, it contends for a disciplined *quia* subscription that receives the Augsburg Confession as the principal symbol governing the Church’s public interpretation of Scripture while remaining rooted in the broader catholic tradition. His thought proposes a mediate way between a *quatenus* confessionalism and rigid

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1. Ola Tjøhom, *Visible Church: Visible Unity, Ecumenical Ecclesiology and the “Great Tradition of the Church”* (The Liturgical Press, 2004), 10.
 2. Ryan P. Burge, *The Vanishing Church: How the Hollowing Out of Moderate Congregations Is Hurting Democracy, Faith and Us* (Brazos Press, 2026).
 3. Phillip James Secker, *Arthur Carl Piepkorn and “The Schism of Authority in Lutheranism,”* Lecture: The 32nd Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, January 21-23, 2009. Also see: The Arthur Carl Piepkorn Center for Evangelical Catholicity. All quotations are from primary essays by Piepkorn, most of which are conveniently collected in Philip J. Secker, ed., *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, Volume 2 (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007). Piepkorn first issues the phrase “schism of authority” in “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols Today,” Secker, 85. Here, Piepkorn praises the confessional revival of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, under Walther and Pieper, noting that Missouri Lutheranism (Synod) “is a peculiarity of ambivalent combination of Lutheran Orthodoxy and Lutheran Pietism.”

biblicist fundamentalism (which could be disguised as a rigid *quia* subscription). Piepkorn offers a “third way” that preserves Lutheran identity, doctrinal coherence, and ecclesial continuity through faithful adherence to the confessional witness of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. This takes form in pastoral orthopraxis as church’s faithful public ministry, preaching and teaching the Word in its Sacraments. To this end, Piepkorn makes the following summary in “Subscription to the Lutheran Symbols,” stating that “Lutherans subscribe to the *doctrinal content* of the Lutheran Symbols because it correctly reproduces the teaching of the Sacred Scriptures. The Alternate is not really to subscribe to the Lutheran Symbols at all. As theologians have long pointed out, one can just as well subscribe to the *Qu’ran*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, or the collected works of Thomas Paine as far as these reproduce the Sacred Scriptures. Such a commitment really says nothing.”⁴

In light of the present challenge, Arthur Carl Piepkorn’s work reads not as repristinating antiquarian recovery but as a sustained theological intervention. As Robert Kolb notes, “The text of the Lutheran Confessions provided Piepkorn with a firm basis for preparing students for the holy ministry and providing his own church guidance for its public teaching.”⁵ Piepkorn may offer us today an authentic third way between a weak *quatenus* approach, as reflected in ecclesial contexts where formal confessional language is kept while its practical doctrinal authority is ignored, and overreaching forms of *quia* subscription in American Lutheranism. For example, Piepkorn’s third way rests on the conviction that the Augsburg Confession enjoys a fundamental adequacy to divine truth—an *adequation*—as the Church’s principal confessional norm. He articulated this concern in “No New Symbols” in response to the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod’s proposed *Brief Statement of 1956*, a trajectory later developed further in Jacob Preus’ “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles.” Piepkorn’s point was not to deny the usefulness of subsequent doctrinal clarification but to resist elevating such statements to symbolic status. The Church, he argued, “has as its only norms the Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Symbols. Any other doctrinal statement has point and value only as a clarification,” not a “new symbolic norm.”⁶

His position offers a disciplined, historically attentive *quia* commitment to the doctrinal content of the *Book of Concord*, especially to the authority of the Augsburg Confession. Our times may not be unique, as Piepkorn remarked that

4. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Subscription to the Lutheran Symbols” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 203–204.

5. Robert Kolb, Forward in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed., and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), xvi.

6. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “No New Symbols” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 102–105.

“while confessionalism went into eclipse in many parts of the Lutheran Church in the United States under the influences of leaders like Frederick Henry Quitmann (1760-1832),” the eclipse was never total.⁷

The Primacy of the Augsburg Confession

At a general level, the Lutheran Confessions show considerable structural coherence and theological density. Closer attention, however, reveals added dimensions of meaning that clarify their interpretation and illuminate the witness of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. From that vantage point, the primacy of the Augsburg Confession comes into sharper focus. A key to understanding that primacy lies in Piepkorn’s designation of Lutheranism as the Church of the Augsburg Confession.⁸ For Piepkorn, the title is not incidental but theologically determinative. In “The Lutheran Church—A Sacramental Church,” he expressed this continuity: “By its acceptance of the Catholic Creeds and by its identification of its doctrine with that of the historic Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church is, of course, committed to the same positions as that of the ancient Church.”⁹ The Augsburg Confession is not merely one document among others nor simply an historical artifact; rather, it is the living symbolic center through which the Church’s doctrine, identity, and witness are ordered. Scripture gives rise to confession, and confession gives public and normative form to the Church’s proclamation of Christ.¹⁰ Understood in this way, the Augsburg Confession appears not as a secondary appendix to Scripture but as the Church’s authoritative act of doctrinal witness. As Piepkorn illustrates in his “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols”: “The Symbols are precisely intended to be a Catholic interpretation of the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testament.”¹¹ To this end, Piepkorn states.

7. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” in Secker, 153-154. Among Lutherans in America, Frederick Quitman represented the rationalist strain and led one of the earliest assaults on Lutheran confessional standards in general and on sacramental life more specifically through his *Evangelical Catechism*. Quitman’s biblical supernaturalism was more influential in shaping his theological agenda.

8. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Catholicity of the Church of the Augsburg Confession,” in *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, vol. 2 (Harper & Row, 1977), xx, 3-39.

9. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Lutheran Church—A Sacramental Church” in *The Church: The Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, eds. Michael P. Plekon and William S. Wiecher (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 1993), 77.

10. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Inspiration of Scripture: The Position of the Church and Her Symbols,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 14-55; and Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 106-39.

11. Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” 107.

“In the public teaching of a Lutheran clergyman or instructor, he must interpret the Sacred Scriptures according to the Symbols and not vice versa.”¹² Moreover, “This does not mean that he is in any way prevented from considering every possible legitimate interpretation that can be placed upon any given passage or group of passages of the Sacred Scriptures.” Piepkorn then issues a careful warning and offers the following proviso:

If in the process, however, he were to come to a definitive conclusion incompatible with the teaching of the Symbols, he would be bound in conscience and in moral honesty to withdraw from the church which imposes such an obligation upon him. On the other hand, the obligation to interpret the Sacred Scriptures according to the Symbols does not permit an individual to set forth as doctrine a position that merely reflects his understanding of the Symbols.¹³

Further, “The Symbols are to be interpreted as reflecting the unchanging ‘rule of the Christian truth’ or ‘the analogy of the Catholic faith.’” This stands at the center of his resolve concerning the authority of the Symbols, especially and primarily the Augsburg Confession. He affirms that “All Symbols stand in the continuous chain of Catholic witness. The Reformation and post-Reformation periods possess per se no superior authority. We are Catholic Christians first Western Catholics second, Lutherans third.”¹⁴

Claiming and Reframing the Heritage of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

What may surprise both critics and admirers is the degree to which Piepkorn’s epistemological assumptions and theological judgments, especially about the Lutheran Symbols and the Augsburg Confession, draw upon the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s earlier confessional inheritance.¹⁵ His appeals to Walther and to

12. Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” 109.

13. Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” 109; Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 156; Piepkorn, “The Catholicity of the Church of the Augsburg Confession,” in *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, vol. 2 (Harper & Row, 1977), 50.

14. Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” 109.

15. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Inspiration of Scripture: The Position of the Church and Her Symbols,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 14–55. See also Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32, no. 10 (October 1961): 606–20; and C. F. W. Walther, “Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church?” *Concordia Journal* 15, no. 3 (July 1989): 274–84.

other Lutheran theologians within that tradition show that his project is not simply innovative but should be more accurately understood as a deliberate reappropriation of inherited confessional categories for a broader theological purpose. At the same time, Piepkorn does not merely restate earlier formulations but gathers them into a larger account of catholicity and ecclesial identity.¹⁶ Piepkorn praises “our Synodical Fathers; they rescued the Symbols and gave them a status which anticipated the confessional revival in the rest of the Lutheran Church.” He repeats his common argument concerning the Symbols, and in particular the Augsburg Confession, that “they correctly recognized that if the Symbolic Books are to mean anything we must, as public teachers, interpret the Sacred Scriptures according to the Symbols, not vice versa, and said so in just those words.”¹⁷ In particular, Piepkorn emphasizes that “Symbols...are necessary. An appeal to the Sacred Scriptures is not adequate as a confession.... One can appeal to the Sacred Scriptures, and be a Papist, and Enthusiast or a Rationalist as well as an orthodox Lutheran.” In returning to an often-repeated claim, Piepkorn remarked (in a quote of Walther), “The church must insist that her teachers interpret the Sacred Scriptures according to the Symbols and not vice versa. If it did not do so it would be making the personal conviction of each teacher its symbol”¹⁸ For Walther, “the Symbols are confessions of the church’s faith or teaching and were never intended to be either more or less.”¹⁹ The Symbols serve as the Church’s *public* confession of truth, and those who enter or remain within that confessing body are thereby bound in conscience to its doctrinal claim.

Piepkorn’s treatment of catholicity is still distinctive within American Lutheran theology, and his claims about the catholic standing and authority of the Augsburg Confession also resonate with broader nineteenth and twentieth-century discussions of evangelical catholicity as well as the confessional identity of Lutheranism. Furthermore, such claims will hopefully influence the twenty-first century as well. His work should not be read as an isolated departure but as a contribution to

16. A claim can be made that Piepkorn stands in the line of other American Lutheran neo-confessionalists, as they became known. These included Wilhelm Löhe, C. F. W. Walther, Charles Porterfield Krauth, W. J. Mann, and the less well-known Friedrich Conrad Dietrich Wyneken and Paul Henkel. For a full discussion of these confessionalists, see Walter H. Conser Jr., *Church and Confession: Conservative Theologians in Germany, England, and America, 1815–1866* (Mercer University Press, 1984). See also for a comprehensive look at confessional recovery, Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, 152–155. See also Arie J. Giffioen, “Charles Porterfield Krauth and the Synod of Maryland,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (August 1993): 280.

17. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols Today” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 84–85.

18. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 157.

19. Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” 155.

a wider theological conversation concerning confession, catholicity, and ecclesial continuity within the Lutheran communion.

In this light, Piepkorn's central claim is straightforward but far-reaching: the Augsburg Confession is the Lutheran Church's principal symbol. It is not simply one text among many nor a ceremonial relic kept without practical consequence. Rather, it functions as the normative public confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, serving as its theological center and governing doctrinal form. One of Piepkorn's strongest statements to this end are in his "The Council of Chalcedon 451-1951," which commemorated the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon. In the text, he writes concerning the doctrinal stance of the Church of the Augsburg Confession, stating that "her position is not without peril. She is by no means un-influenced by the thinking of contemporary Christendom.... Yet we cannot dispense with the dogmatic definitions, if for no other reason than that we have devised nothing better."²⁰ Where this claim is denied, whether explicitly or through neglect, Lutheran identity gets correspondingly altered. The argument has renewed relevance because in many contemporary Lutheran contexts the Augsburg Confession is still formally kept while its doctrinal and sacramental center no longer appear to consistently shape the Church's operative teaching and practice.

The Confession may remain present in constitutional language, liturgical memory, and institutional self-description yet be displaced in practice by other sources of authority, whether cultural, ethical, bureaucratic, or individual. For this reason, Piepkorn's work merits renewed attention. His insistence on the primacy of the Augsburg Confession is not merely a historical judgment about Lutheran origins but a theological framework for disciplined renewal, a call to recover the Confession as a living norm for doctrine, ministry, sacramental life, and ecclesial identity.

Historically, the Augsburg Confession was never intended as the charter of a sect. Presented in 1530 before Emperor Charles V, it was framed as the reformer's public confession of the faith in agreement with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Its principal author, Philipp Melancthon, writing under Luther's theological influence, did not intend to propose doctrinal novelty but claimed to show their witness to be in continuity with the catholic tradition. The Confession's claim, accordingly, is not innovation but catholicity.²¹

20. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Council of Chalcedon, 451-1951" in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 71.

21. Avery Dulles, "The Catholicity of the Augsburg Confession," *The Journal of Religion* 63, no. 4 (October 1983): 337-40. Dulles surveys several theological movements and figures that shaped modern Lutheranism, including Friedrich Schleiermacher and Adolf von Harnack. He notes Harnack's contention that the Protestant Reformation "rejected all the essentials of Catholicism and restored Christianity to its original essence, namely, the gospel of Jesus accepted in free, personal faith" (340). Against such interpretations, Dulles argues that "there is nothing novel in the idea that the CA is catholic."

Piepkorn returns to this point with characteristic precision, arguing that The Lutheran Confessions function not as sectarian boundary markers but as ecclesial witnesses. In “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutic of the Lutheran Symbols,” he describes the Symbols as a binding summary, basis, and rule because they participate derivatively in the normative character of Scripture by reproducing its doctrinal content. Piepkorn asserts further that “What Lutherans are bound to is the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Symbolical Books, even though in a particular place a doctrinal conclusion (as long as it accords with the analogy of faith) may be based on the same kind of frail and debatable exegetical evidence that goes, alas, into every commentary and every translation at one or the other place.”²²

While Piepkorn views the Augsburg Confession, and the Symbols as a whole, as a witness to Christ Jesus as the Lord of all, his strong affirmations do not render these texts infallible, especially with regard to the Formula of Concord, which responded to specific controversies that arose in later doctrinal development. Piepkorn reminds his students and readers, “Again, we must not equate significance and relevance with infallibility. *The Book of Concord* is not infallible.”²³ Regarding the authors of the texts, he states what is apparent to modern readers: “Its authors were not twentieth century nuclear physicists and they lacked the prescience that might have made it possible for them to foresee the shape of things to come ... the physical world of the *Book of Concord* is a simple one by modern standards.”²⁴ He also identifies shortcomings in the authors and texts with his usual meticulous attention, including the *ad hominem* fallacy, second-hand reports, misquotations, and misattributed citations within the texts themselves, including biblical citations. He also notes, with characteristic irony, that “The Formula of Concord raises no objection to the principle that magnetism can be hindered by rubbing the magnet with garlic juice.”²⁵

Likewise, in “Reflections on the Teaching of Courses in Symbolics,”²⁶ Piepkorn offers thirty theses, several of which are especially important for understanding the lens through which he constructs his *quia* view. For instance, in thesis 10, he writes, “While we are not bound to the metaphysics of the Lutheran symbolic books, our translation of the doctrinal content of the Lutheran symbolic books

22. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Do the Lutheran Symbolical Books Speak Where the Sacred Scriptures Are Silent?” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (1972): 34–35; reprinted in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 273.

23. Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today,” 78–79.

24. Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today,” 79.

25. Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today,” 79. Here, he restates *Solid Declaration* 1.22.

26. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Reflecting on the Teaching of Courses in Symbolics” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 198–202. Note all quotes following are from this article.

into other philosophical idioms must reproduce faithfully the intention of the Lutheran symbolic books.” Thesis 11 adds, “We are not bound to the natural history or to the historical statements and judgements of the Lutheran symbolic books.” Thesis 12 continues, “Where the theological synthesis of the Lutheran symbolic books goes farther than the biblical data warrants, we are obligated to present the views of the Lutheran Symbolic books sympathetically and without ridicule, even though we may feel called upon to dissent from them.” Theses 14 and 15 are also of particular importance:

14. We must regard our courses in symbolics primarily as courses in symbolic exegesis and our courses in dogmatics and ethics as the occasion for their systematic utilization.

15. In our explication of the Lutheran Symbolic books, we must allow them to provide us with the categories that we use rather than force upon them an alien set of categories, say those of 17th, 18th, or 19th century theology, or of a systematized “theology of the Symbols.”

Finally, Piepkorn calls for a contextual reading in thesis 16: “we must respect the historical particularity of the statements of each document and must take rigorous account of the *Sitz im Leben*, the authors, and issues and antitheses.” Taken together, these theses return to his first and foundational claim that “our commitment to the Lutheran symbolic books is to their doctrinal content.”

Piepkorn is fully cognizant of Lessing’s ugly broad ditch that insists that accidental truths of history can never serve as proof for necessary truths of reason. On this account, a sixteenth-century document such as the Augsburg Confession and even the historical events of Jesus’s death and resurrection remain on the historical side of the ditch. The text cannot, however, ground universal religious claims that reason alone would recognize as necessary. Piepkorn’s view of the Symbolical Books thereby undercuts the force of that dichotomy without ignoring historical particularity. For the authors of the Formula of Concord, he insisted, the Scriptures are the supreme and unchallenged norm, yet the Symbolical Books are likewise *norma*—a rule and standard by which the teachers of the past are tested and those of the future are to be guided. The Confessions function as a Catholic interpretation of the prophetic and apostolic writings, a witness to the way the reformers and their spiritual posterity understood Scripture on the points at issue, a classic formulation of the church’s grateful response to divine revelation, and a binding norm for teaching and the administration of the sacraments.

Within this framework, the historical character of the symbolic books is neither dissolved into timeless rational propositions nor reduced to a past opinion with no continuing norming force. Their authority is confessional and ecclesial—the church receives them *quia* because they faithfully set forth the doctrinal content of Scripture, and it binds itself to them as the determinate form in which it continues to confess the same faith. The bridge is not a rational leap from contingent history to necessary reason. Rather, it is the continuous, Spirit-enabled participation of the present church

in the same gospel confession the historical text articulates. Because that gospel is the message of the living Lord, the sixteenth-century document is rendered contemporaneous. The resurrection functions as the determinative form that allows a historically conditioned text to exercise living normative force without claiming the status of a self-evident truth of pure reason. Thus, Piepkorn's understanding does not attempt to fill Lessing's ditch with historical proofs or metaphysical necessities. Instead, he relocates the question of authority within the church's ongoing confession of the risen Christ for which the Confessions provide the concrete, historically given shape. The ditch is still real for pure reason; for faith, it is crossed in the act of confessing with the church the same gospel the Symbols articulate.

This normative character explains why the Augsburg Confession is authoritative for Lutherans. For Piepkorn, "norm" is closely related to "form" in the philosophical sense: the Symbols give theology its shape and discipline its claims. Piepkorn recognizes that the Lutheran Confessions, particularly the Augsburg Confession written by Melancthon, uses scholastic distinctions without placing them above the authority of the Word. The concept of form is central to defining what a thing is, bestowing actuality by providing essence, definition, and true nature to an underlying foundation. The formal cause is not a human creation but a divine reality that defines the essence of a thing, with the Confessions serving as a mark of the church. For example, original sin is viewed as an accidental corruption of human substance rather than an alteration of substance. Additionally, discussions surrounding the form of sacramental words illustrate Piepkorn's stance that philosophy can clarify terms and counter errors, yet the formal principle remains Scriptural alone with the material principle being justification by grace through faith. Another way of expressing Piepkorn's view of Sacred Scripture as the norming norm is expressed by the material principle of justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake. The norm of the Augsburg Confessions gives form toward this end, specifically the Augsburg Confession as a Symbol, shaping the Church's public teaching without replacing Scripture as the source and final standard of doctrine. In this sense, the Augsburg Confession provides doctrinal form to the Church's proclamation, preserving the proper relation among justification, ministry, Word, Sacrament, and ecclesial life.

The Augsburg Confession does not offer an optional criterion that may be set aside whenever alternative preferences or experiences arise. Rather, this confession gives doctrinal form to the Church's proclamation of the Gospel, its account of salvation, and its Christological commitments. In describing what exactly is the norm within the Lutheran Symbols, Piepkorn answered most clearly that it is "the doctrine of the Augsburg Confession: in that in order to enable men to obtain justifying faith God had instated the public ministry and had ordained the Word and Sacraments as instruments by which the Holy Ghosts come to men."²⁷ In that

27. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols Today," in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 85.

respect, confessional form also imposes restraint, calling pastors, theologians, and teachers to intellectual humility in the exercise of public doctrine.

Piepkorn underscores this point by insisting that the Symbols concern spiritual matters and must be approached prayerfully and with dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Their interpretation requires not only intellectual competence but also moral and spiritual seriousness.

Every person who stands committed to the Symbolical Books has an obligation to try to interpret their meaning and their intention as accurately as possible to his hearers.... [H]e needs to help his hearers see that the authors of the Symbolical Books were attempting to express the teaching of the Sacred Scriptures even when in the circumstances they had to use a vocabulary and categories that were not exactly coextensive with the Biblical vocabulary and Biblical categories. But we must be careful not to absolutize these later formulations.²⁸

This distinction moves the argument from historical catholicity to confessional obligation. Piepkorn held a strong but not suffocating *quia* position: the Confessions are binding because their doctrinal content correctly expounds Scripture, they form Lutheran identity, and public teachers must interpret Scripture in accordance with them. Simply put, the Augsburg Confession tests past teachers and guides future ones.

Within the *Book of Concord*, the Augsburg Confession occupies a position of clear primacy. Piepkorn's retrieval of the term *symbolum principale*, or "principal symbol," is therefore decisive. The Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord defend, clarify, and extend its teaching, but they do not supersede it. This ordering is theological. The Augsburg Confession offers the Church a balanced and catholic articulation of the faith, holding together justification, ministry, sacrament, and ecclesial life. Where the Confession is displaced, theology tends to devolve into either moralism or managerialism. Where it is restored, the Church regains a coherent center.

This displacement is seldom announced directly. More often, it occurs through neglect, reinterpretation, or selective citation. Gerhard Forde, in the essay "Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?," describes the situation in the following manner: "Confessionalists, and particularly Lutherans in this country, have had and continue to have considerable difficulty with such questions. Such difficulty arises mainly because of a failure to apply what the confessors confess to the interpretation and use of the confessional documents themselves."²⁹

28. Piepkorn, "Do the Lutheran Symbolical Books Speak Where the Sacred Scriptures Are Silent," 31; reprinted in *Selected Writings*, 265–66. The later formulations of which he speaks are those of the inerrancy and others from the era of Lutheran Orthodoxy.

29. Gerhard O. Forde, "Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?," *Word & World* 11, no. 3 (1991): 316. Forde offers a subtly charitable critique of the ELCA's constitutional confessional language when he notes, "One might well detect in such relatively mild language already some backing off from the tougher language of subscription."

In other words, when the Augsburg Confession is treated as an historical witness rather than a binding norm—an honored inheritance rather than a living authority—it becomes vulnerable to ideological revision. In this manner, it becomes the handmaid to Hegel’s idealism that understands history as the self-unfolding of the Spirit, making the doctrines of the faith into mere representations or pure conceptual knowledge, a “reimagined norm” that is fluid and detached from material history. The result is a church less certain of what it confesses and less capable of sustained theological judgement.

At the heart of this crisis lies a hermeneutical problem. Piepkorn understood the Lutheran Confessions as normative guides for the reading of Scripture, forming the Church’s disciplined way of saying what the Gospel is and how it is to be proclaimed. This confessional form has concrete implications for public teaching. Echoing Walther, Piepkorn consistently distinguishes the binding doctrinal content from non-doctrinal details. In discussing Walther (with approval of the *quia* approach):

An unconditional subscription to the Symbols is the solemn declaration which an individual who wants to serve the church makes to the effect (1) that he accepts the doctrinal content of our Symbolical Books because he recognizes the fact that they are in full agreement with the Sacred Scriptures and do not militate against the Sacred Scriptures at any point, either of major or of minor importance, and (2) that he therefore heartily believes in this divine truth and is determined to preach this doctrine without adulteration. ... The subscriber is not bound as far as matters of human knowledge, history, and criticism are concerned. He is not committed to the Symbols’ exegesis of a particular passage of the Sacred Scriptures, but his subscription is an affirmation that the interpretations in the Symbols are in accordance with the analogy of the faith.³⁰

For Piepkorn, this obligation is not an exercise in anti-intellectualism but an expression of ecclesial responsibility. He rejects any approach that turns the Confessions into a closed system detached from Scripture, yet he also resists reducing them to merely advisory summaries. For the Church’s public teaching, the Symbols serve as an authentic doctrinal norm because they faithfully confess the doctrine of Scripture. As such, Piepkorn treats Scripture as supreme and unrivaled in divine authority while insisting that the Symbolical Books guide the doctors of the past and future in the Church’s teaching office.³¹ This preserves both the primacy of Scripture and

30. Piepkorn, “Walther and the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32, no. 10 (October 1961): 611; reprinted in *Selected Writings*, 155–56.

31. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, quoted in Philip J. Secker, “Arthur Carl Piepkorn and ‘The Schism of Authority’ in Lutheranism,” lecture presented at the 32nd Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN, January 21–23, 2009; see also Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols Today,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 84–87, xxxiii–xxxiv.

the public authority of the Confessions. Piepkorn rejects later scholastic distinctions that treat the Scriptures either as the sole *norma normans* (norming norm) or as a closed confessional system in which new exegetical work is constrained by these sixteenth century formulations. He also conflicts with the *Book of Concord's* own claims about Scripture being the only rule and norm by which all teachers and doctrines must be judged.

This interpretation of the Augsburg Confession as a genuine confessional “norm” simultaneously rejects any biblicism that would prioritize private or contemporary interpretations of Scripture over the Church’s historical confession. Piepkorn characterized a biblicist within the Lutheran tradition as someone who “demands adherence to their personal interpretation of the Bible, even if it lacks support in the Lutheran Symbols.” He argued that such biblicism historically manifested in the Pietist preference for a *quatenus* (“insofar as”) subscription, which effectively allowed individuals to circumvent the Symbols in favor of their direct appeal to Scripture. According to Piepkorn, “it was Spencerian Pietism that paved the way for all kinds of qualified subscriptions to the Lutheran Confessions.”³² However, Piepkorn also acknowledged the distortions of Lutheran Orthodoxy:

As a general rule, the theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy contented themselves with reflecting about the Symbolic Books, and in the course of its development Orthodoxy rapidly argued itself into a position where it circumvented the Lutheran Symbols, which were after all only *norma normata*, and proposed to rest its case directly on the Sacred Scriptures. Pietism introduced its explicitly *quatenus* subscription as the logical expression of a similar Biblicism.³³

In opposition, Piepkorn consistently referred to the Augsburg Confession’s own assertion of catholic continuity: “In these the Lutherans confess the ancient faith of the Catholic Church...and are at pains to prove that on no doctrinal point do they vary from the teaching of Sacred Scriptures, the Catholic Church, or ... the historic Church of the West.”³⁴ For him, the Confession is not a new or sectarian statement but rather the Church’s authoritative testimony to the correct understanding of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. “The twenty-one doctrinal articles we see as the great Lutheran witness to evangelical catholicity ... as a clarion call to the Church to be what she had been for the first eleven centuries and to reaffirm her intention of being what she was in peril of ceasing to be.”³⁵

32. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols Today,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 84.

33. Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols Today,” 84.

34. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “The Augsburg Confession for Our Time,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 177ff.

35. Piepkorn, “The Augsburg Confession for Our Time,” 178.

Piepkorn thus insisted that the Augsburg Confession operates as a “norm” within the Church—shaping instruction, proclamation, and doctrinal evaluation—while Holy Scripture remains the sole source and ultimate standard of all doctrine. He explicitly defended *sola Scriptura* thusly: “All this does not undermine *sola Scriptura*. The Sacred Scriptures continue to be the only source and the ultimate norm of the Church’s teaching, serving as the measure by which every dogma and doctrine must be evaluated.” The Confessions derive their authority from their faithful explication of Scripture; they do not stand beside or above it, yet they cannot be disregarded by any individual or generation claiming a purely biblicist (fundamentalist or progressive) interpretation. In this way, the Augsburg Confession guides the Church’s interpretation of Scripture.³⁶

No New Confessions

Piepkorn treats “inerrancy” as a recent ecclesiastical term, not as a biblical or confessional datum. In “What Does ‘Inerrancy’ Mean?”, Piepkorn notes that the term “does not correspond to any vocable of the Sacred Scriptures” and “does not correspond to any vocable in the Lutheran symbols” and so is “an ecclesiastical term subject to definition by usage.”³⁷ He also warns that outside Lutheran circles, it had become “the shibboleth of sectarians, often of obscurantist sectarians” who associated it with “commitment to certain traditional interpretations which they place on certain Bible passages and which they apparently deem essential to their spiritual security.” Piepkorn concludes that the church is not served “when either we continue formally to reaffirm the inerrancy of Sacred Scriptures or even continue to employ the term.” The sufficient confession remains that “the Sacred Scriptures are the Word of God.”

Additionally, Piepkorn claims that Sacred Scripture’s truthfulness should be judged by the qualities the biblical texts themselves display rather than by modern standards of precision. “The truth of the Sacred Scriptures is something to be evaluated in terms of their own criteria and of the qualities which they themselves exhibit. These qualities do not—speaking generally—include great precision in formulation, stenographic fidelity in reporting exact words, prosaic literalism in interpretation, bibliographically accurate citations of author and title, comprehensive documentation, carefully synchronized chronologies, a modern historiographic sense, [or] harmonistically consistent adjustment of sources to one another.”³⁸ Where

36. Piepkorn, “The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols Today,” 87; cf. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 29, no. 1 (January 1958): 1–24.

37. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “What Does ‘Inerrancy’ Mean?” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip in J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 25–55. All quotes in this section unless noted are from this essay.

38. Piepkorn, “What Does ‘Inerrancy’ Mean?” 39.

such features are absent, this is “a mark of the Holy Spirit’s condescension and accommodation not to error but to humanity.” Piepkorn treats textual tensions as real difficulties, not as problems to be removed by forced harmonization. This supports the claim that Scripture’s authority is weakened when readers impose a theory the texts do not claim for themselves.

Piepkorn makes a related argument in his 1957 review of Robert Preus’ *The Inspiration of Scripture*.³⁹ He uses the seventeenth-century Lutheran dogmaticians to challenge a one-sided account of inspiration. Preus had shown that Orthodox theologians “never use the term ‘verbal inspiration’” and that “monergistic inspiration” is only one aspect of their doctrine. Its complement is accommodation: “The Holy Spirit accommodated Himself to the understanding and natural endowments of the holy writers in order that He might record the mysteries according to the usual mode of speaking.” Piepkorn argues that presenting Lutheran Orthodoxy without this qualification is “a vicious caricature of what the Orthodox theologians actually taught.” Piepkorn’s contribution here is that a mechanical view of inspired inerrancy distorts the Orthodox balance between divine agency and human accommodation.

George Lindbeck’s account of the *regula fidei* clarifies Piepkorn’s claim about the Augsburg Confession’s authority in relation to Scripture. As Lindbeck writes, “The *regula fidei* which developed into the trinitarian and christological affirmations of the early church was needed to make sure that the Bible is not read any old way (as the ancient gnostics and contemporary deconstructionists do) but as testimony to and from the creator God whose Word enfleshed is Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰ For Piepkorn, the absence of the term “inerrancy” from both Scripture and the Symbols is theologically significant, freeing the Church to speak of Scripture’s truthfulness in the language and categories the Confessions themselves use and norm rather than in terms imposed by later controversy.

In this regard, even the important Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel, what Piepkorn calls the “law gospel polarity,”⁴¹ cannot function as the universal key to every doctrinal question. When elevated into a totalizing method, it risks becoming a semantic solvent rather than a theological guide, dissolving doctrinal substance into rhetorical flexibility or even a form of Gnosticism. Such a construal makes plausible the notion that the God of the Gospel is a God of pure, formless

39. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Book Review: The Inspiration of Scripture,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 20–24. All quotes in this section unless noted are from this essay.

40. George Lindbeck, “Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?,” *Word & World* 11, no. 3 (1991): 320.

41. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief: The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, vol. 2 (Harper & Row, 1977), 47. For fuller discussion, see 43–47. For Piepkorn’s discussion of Law and Gospel, see 54, final paragraph, and 98–101.

freedom rather than the God self-identified in the particular history of Jesus Christ. Thereby, even unintentionally, it undermines the doctrinal substance of the Augsburg Confession that Piepkorn's hermeneutic looks to preserve.⁴²

The consequences are visible across segments of American Lutheranism. Doctrinal claims become untethered from confessional grounding, moral pronouncements detach from sacramental life, and preaching oscillates between moralism and sentimentality. When the Augsburg Confession is displaced, justification by grace through faith may remain a slogan, but its content is thinned when severed from the means of grace, the ministry that delivers them, and the sacramental life in which they are embodied.

This confessional pattern also grounds Piepkorn's third way in an orthopraxis. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not symbolic supplements to faith but genuine means of grace through which the promise of Christ is given and received. In Baptism, God grants forgiveness, deliverance, and salvation; in the Supper, Christ's true body and blood are given under bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. Administered according to Christ's institution by those properly called, the sacraments sustain both Lutheran evangelical substance and catholic continuity. Piepkorn's third way preserves the once-for-all character of Christ's sacrifice while maintaining the reality of the sacramental gift.

Moreover, this ecclesial order and vocation receive their shape as a form of confessional adherence, a doctrine embodied in the Church's common life. Augsburg Confession VII names the Church as the assembly in which the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel—order, call, ordination, and oversight serve that reality. Such orthopraxis appears concretely in preaching that distinguishes Law and Gospel, in the celebration of the Eucharist, in Baptismal catechesis that forms Christians, in disciplined admission to the Table, in the call and ordination of ministers, and in pastoral care. It also appears in the laity's vocations, where faith is enacted through mercy, stewardship, intercession, household devotion, and responsible service in one's office, family, parish, and civic life.⁴³ The Eucharist, as Piepkorn states in "One Eucharist for One World," places the Church in relation to the world. In assuming common humanity, Christ "united Himself with all of humankind," and the Christ given in the Eucharist is identified with "the one world of human beings." Communicants are therefore formed for vocation: "Everyone who eats the body and drinks the blood of the Christ through whom and in whom and for whom all things were made can, according to his

42. David S. Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 37–49, especially 38, 40–41. See also Peter J. Leithart, "Law/Gospel and Gnosticism," *First Things*, April 20, 2005.

43. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Sacrament, Sacrifice and Stewardship" in *The Church: The Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, eds. Michael P. Plekon and William S. Wiecher (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 1993), 181–191.

vocation and influence and resources, conscientiously seek to redeem the area of his own influence.”⁴⁴

Another consequence is the church’s teaching becomes incoherent if the Confessions no longer function as binding expositions of Scripture, and subscription becomes performative rather than substantive. As Piepkorn acknowledges in “What the Reformation Was Not,” “the real relevance of the Reformation for the twentieth century lies in its common *doctrinal* emphases.... also makes clear that between immoral man and the holy God there exists a chasm which man cannot bridge. Man’s unaided search for God likewise can lead him only into an endless labyrinth of blind alleys.”⁴⁵

A third consequence is polity becomes increasingly managerial. The Augsburg Confession’s account of ordered ministry and evangelical authority gives way to structures modeled more on corporate or political administration than on ecclesial confession. Piepkorn anticipated this development. When the Confession no longer orders the Church’s life, some other authority will do so, whether culture, ideology, or institutional inertia. None of these can sustain the Church’s theological identity. As Gerhard Forde, states, “The fundamental question is not where we will feel legalistically constrained by the confession, but whether we will actually be so liberated by what they confess that we will dare to be so bold as they, and thus *con-fess*, i.e., speak with one voice together with them.... When one comes to understand the confessions in that light they are a source of strength and comfort for pastoral ministry, and not a straight-jacket or a burden.”⁴⁶

Piepkorn’s warning is relevant precisely at this point. If the principal symbol no longer functions as a doctrinal center, the church may retain confessional language while losing a shared theological grammar for its public witness. Piepkorn states:

The authority of Christ in his Church as he exercises it through his Word and the sacred ministry of his Word is supreme. One can acknowledge no other Lord. The church in the process of any reformation or change must remain the catholic church. The concern of the church’s leaders must be for the conscience of the people. This imposes the obligation of careful instruction with word and sacraments. The sacraments which Christ instituted as channels of grace must retain always their primitive primacy. This would involve an appreciation of baptism, at least the weekly availability

44. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “One Eucharist for One World,” in *The Church: The Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn* (Delhi, NY: ALPB Books, 1993), 163-179. All quotes presented are from this article.

45. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “What the Reformation Was Not,” in *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn: The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, vol. 2, edited and introduced by Philip J. Secker (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 76.

46. Gerhard O. Forde, “Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?” 318.

and the frequent use of this sacrament of the altar, the restoration of the holy absolution to its ancient place. The church needs to repeat not only verbally but also practically the complete creed, and thus to stress a Christian secularity against the false spirituality that disparages God's material creation and the legitimate natural purposes and activities of all human life and human society.⁴⁷

Vattimo on Christian Dissolution

The same pattern can be seen philosophically in the late modern temptation to weaken doctrine into open-ended interpretation. If the internal crisis of American Lutheranism may be described as a loss of confessional center, one intellectual analogue appears in the thought of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. In *After Christianity*, Vattimo argues that Christianity fulfills itself through the weakening of its truth claims—doctrine yields to dialogue, authority to interpretation, and confession to pluralistic charity.⁴⁸ This is not a formal atheism so much as a theological softening, a version of Christianity that persists by relinquishing doctrinal substance. The resonance with contemporary ecclesial life is significant. A church need not formally repudiate its confessions but need only treat them as *provisional*. It need not reject doctrine outright but only *relativize* it. In doing so, it enacts the very weakening that Vattimo describes.

Against this tendency stands the Augsburg Confession for Piepkorn. It is not tentative but declarative, proclaiming the evangelical truth that sinners are justified for Christ's sake, that this justification is delivered through Word and Sacrament, and that the Church is defined by these means. The contrast is substantial. Vattimo's post-doctrinal Christianity depends upon fluidity while the Augsburg Confession assumes doctrinal determinacy. His vision of the Church is interpretively open-ended while the Augsburg Confession defines the Church concretely and sacramentally in history. His account weakens truth claims while the Augsburg Confession insists that charity flows from truth publicly confessed. A church need not cite Vattimo in order to embody this logic but only act as though doctrine were negotiable and confession optional. At that point, the process of dissolution is already underway. The choice before American Lutheranism is, as such, consequential. It can recover the Augsburg Confession as its doctrinal center or it can continue to drift toward a generic Protestant identity insufficiently shaped by confessional form. In Piepkorn's vision, the Augsburg Confession is not a relic but a rule, a living norm that orders doctrine, disciplines teaching, grounds the Church's life, and calls the Church to humility. To reclaim its primacy is not to retreat into the past but to recover fidelity to the Gospel in continuity with the Church catholic.

47. Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, 2:47. For full discussion see 43-47.

48. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (Columbia University Press, 2002).

Piepkorn's Third Way

The present state of the Lutheran Church in North America finally returns to Piepkorn's constructive contribution. His position may be described as an historically disciplined *quia* subscription that seeks to avoid two opposite reductions—a *quatenus* approach that can leave confessional authority underdetermined and a restrictive systematization that can press the Symbols beyond their proper doctrinal claim and scope. Piepkorn's proposal is best understood as a qualified but genuine confessional realism, being unconditional in its commitment to the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Symbols yet careful to read that content according to the Symbols' own historical context, ecclesial purpose, and evangelical center.

From Piepkorn's perspective, a *quatenus* approach is problematic not because it lacks concern for Scripture but because it can leave the Church without a determinate public confession. His critique may be stated more precisely in four related concerns.

- *It can make subscription indeterminate.* If the Confessions are received only "insofar as" they agree with Scripture as interpreted by each individual, community, or historical moment, subscription may no longer constitute a clear commitment to the Church's shared public confession.
- *It can unsettle the order of public doctrinal interpretation.* The Symbols exist to guide the Church's teaching office in disputed interpretations of Scripture. When each generation's preferred exegetical framework becomes the effective judge of the Symbols, their ecclesial function is weakened.
- *It can reduce the Confessions to historical resources rather than ecclesial symbols.* A symbol identifies and publicly marks a confessing communion. If the Symbols become only revisable interpretive aids, their role as a shared doctrinal standard becomes less clear.
- *It can permit gradual doctrinal displacement while retaining confessional language.* A church may continue to affirm Scripture and the Confessions formally while allowing other interpretive authorities and ideologies to become decisive in practice.

George Lindbeck's formulation helps clarify this balance: "subscription to the particular exegetical conclusions of the Confessions is only *quatenus* ("insofar as" they agree with Scripture), while consent to their hermeneutical principles is *quia* ("because" they agree). The Confessions can be both firm and flexible in any age, including this ecumenical age." Lindbeck further observes, "The confessions when properly deployed provide essential guidance in the ecumenical quest for unity; even when poorly used, they can still help protect against apostasy."⁴⁹ Read in this way, confessional subscription need not be either rigid or indeterminate but may instead provide a stable doctrinal grammar for the Church's public teaching while

49. Lindbeck, "Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?" 320.

allowing careful historical judgment about the Confessions' particular arguments, applications, and contexts.

- *Confessional commitment should be doctrinally focused.* Subscription binds the Church to the doctrinal content of the Augsburg Confession because it faithfully expounds the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and witness to the Gospel in all its articles.
- *Confessional authority should remain subordinate to Scripture.* The Symbols possess authority because they faithfully expound Scripture and serve the proclamation of the Gospel; they do not create an independent source of doctrine alongside Scripture.
- *Confessional interpretation should be historically disciplined.* The Confessions are to be read according to the sense their language bore for their sixteenth-century authors and first hearers rather than through later dialectics of controversy or the categories of seventeenth-century scholastic orthodoxy.
- *Confessional fidelity should be ecclesial rather than private.* In the Church's public teaching, Scripture is interpreted according to the Symbols instead of the Symbols according to each teacher's private or contemporary reconstruction of Scripture.
- *Confessional formation should be evangelical and catholic.* The Confessions form the Church in their doctrinal substance and confession of the Gospel, not in every incidental matter of style, historical judgment, exegetical argument, experiential reference, or non-doctrinal detail.
- *Confessional identity should be constitutive.* The Symbols define Lutheran identity as a faithful catholic exposition of the prophetic and apostolic writings; they are not optional secondary witnesses, merely advisory historical documents, or sectarian supplements to Scripture.

This approach allows for a substantive confessional commitment without either dissolving the norm into private judgment or making later theological systems equivalent to the Symbols themselves. Piepkorn's concern was that the Confessions be used pastorally, ecclesially, and doctrinally rather than coercively. According to Piepkorn, "The Symbols must be used and they must be taught so that they bring about a uniformity of conviction, that they create a climate of opinion which neither acts as a restraint upon conscience and reverent inquiry nor encourages an irresponsible nose-thumbing iconoclasm which holds confessional loyalty up to the ridicule or which regards it as a reflection upon the adequacy of the Sacred Scriptures." He also acknowledged the danger of legalistic misuse: "They can serve as a legal club, in order to enforce conformity with their teaching by a clergyman or instructor.... But this is certainly an *opus alienum*." Their proper role is constructive rather than punitive: "proper office includes serving as a *norm* of teaching and administering the Sacraments, to which an individual, solemnly and voluntarily committed to them, strives conscientiously

to conform: as a *symbol*...since they are the constitutive factor of the Lutheran church as a denomination.”⁵⁰

For Piepkorn, the most coherent Lutheran position may be described as a disciplined unconditional *quia* subscription, a full commitment to the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Symbols, carefully limited to that content and interpreted according to their original historical sense. This position neither places the Confessions above Scripture nor treats them as merely provisional historical documents. Rather, it understands them as the Church’s public, catholic, and evangelical form of confessing what Scripture teaches.

Lindbeck captures Piepkorn’s position when he argues that “If the potential of the Confessions is to be full actualized in our day, their authority needs to be understood as tertiary and historically conditioned, yet—if I may risk the phrase—hermeneutically absolute for those who subscribe to them. Their authority is tertiary because the Confessions stand under Scripture and serve the proclamation of the Gospel.” They are historically conditioned because they arose from particular controversies and contain applications shaped by their own time, yet Lindbeck’s point is not that these qualifications weaken the Confessions. On the contrary, “these two points, tertiary status and contextual conditionedness, enhance rather than undermine the hermeneutical authority of the Confessions.” They clarify the source of that authority by directing attention to “the meta-dogmatic trinitarian and Christocentric doctrine of justification by faith” that remains “the criterion of all teaching and practice.”⁵¹

This is the third way Piepkorn practiced and taught—neither confessional minimalism, in which doctrine may become too dependent on changing interpretive contexts, nor confessional maximalism, in which the Symbols may be treated as an ahistorical system. His alternative is catholic, evangelical, and disciplined fidelity to the Church’s public confession. The open question and matter of concern is whether confessional language continues to exercise operative doctrinal authority in public teaching, ministry, sacramental practice, and ecclesial identity. Piepkorn’s work invites a renewed consideration of the Augsburg Confession as a living form of evangelical catholic faith.

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50. Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols,” 106-107.

51. Lindbeck, “Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?”, 320.

When the Church Says What Is So

Dennis Bielfeldt

ABSTRACT: This article argues that Christian creeds and Lutheran confessions are, before anything else, truthful witness. They identify a community and order its teaching, but they do so by making determinate claims about God and God's acts and by binding the church publicly to those claims. Their theological force depends upon their continuing answerability to a reality the church did not create. The argument distinguishes the semantic, performative, and participatory dimensions of confession. It treats historical situatedness without reducing truth to history, locates the Lutheran confessions under Scripture as *norma normans*, and distinguishes the identifying work of creeds from the reforming judgments of confessions. A selective post-Kantian genealogy then traces the movement of theological truth toward consciousness, value, existential appropriation, and communal grammar. The article concludes that confession becomes living witness as the Holy Spirit brings finite ecclesial speech into conformity with the apostolic Word.

From Confessional Identity to Truthful Witness

A congregation has begun the process of calling a pastor. Before the committee discusses candidates, someone says that the congregation must remain “confessional.” Several heads nod, although it soon becomes evident that the word does not mean the same thing to everyone in the room. For one member, being confessional means that the new pastor should preach from Scripture and teach the Small Catechism. For another, it means that the congregation should retain the historic liturgy. A third hears *confessional* as a pledge of loyalty to a denominational inheritance. Someone else hesitates because the word has come to suggest a pastor more interested in guarding boundaries than in proclaiming the gospel.

The committee may well agree that it wants a confessional pastor and still leave the word itself largely undefined. That is part of its usefulness. It can identify a tradition, signal a disposition, evoke a history, and establish boundaries all at once. The harder question comes later—when the church calls itself confessional, is it chiefly saying something about itself, or is it saying something about God?

The question returns each Sunday when the congregation rises and says, “I believe in God, the Father almighty.” Those words certainly carry family memory

and ecclesial identity, and they give worship its familiar form, yet the creed says more. There is a God, this God is the Father of Jesus Christ, Jesus was crucified and raised, and the Holy Spirit gathers and sustains the church through the forgiveness of sins. The congregation is saying what it takes to be the case.

The modern story of Christian confession in the West is not mainly one in which the words disappeared. They are still there. Churches recite the Nicene Creed, synodical bodies subscribe founding documents, and catechumens memorize the catechism. What has weakened is confidence that these words answer to a reality that precedes the church and can judge it. The change concerns the cognitive character of confession: what kind of act it is, what would be lost if the words ceased to be spoken, and, above all, what reality they name.

Confession does several things at once. It identifies a community through texts, liturgies, memories, and institutions by which Lutherans are known as Lutherans and Reformed Christians as Reformed. It regulates teaching by distinguishing faithful doctrine from error. Most importantly, it bears witness by saying what is the case concerning the triune God, the incarnate Word, the justification of the sinner, and the life of the creature before God.

These functions belong together, though truthful witness gives the others their theological point. Historical identity and doctrinal regulation matter because they serve speech about what is true. Grammar, after all, must be the grammar of something. Once confession is reduced to identification and regulation, the community itself becomes the final court of appeal for both its identity and its discourse.

A community can retain recognizably Lutheran texts, liturgies, and institutions while becoming uncertain that their assertions are straightforwardly true. Resurrection, justification, sacrament, and promise can survive mainly as the language of an inherited identity. The confessional writings may continue to regulate preaching and teaching even as confidence fades that this discourse refers truthfully to God's being and acts. At that point the institutional forms remain, but confession is doing increasingly administrative work.

This displacement is rarely announced at a church council. No congregation formally resolves that the creed will henceforth express communal identity rather than speak truthfully about God. It happens more quietly, whenever inherited language is retained while its referential force grows uncertain. The words remain useful for worship, governance, and continuity even after the congregation no longer knows what would have to be the case for them to be true.

George Lindbeck's influential account of doctrine as the grammar of a cultural-linguistic tradition illuminates how such a displacement can occur without being announced.¹ Doctrinal rules, on his account, govern Christian speech from within a

1. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 16–18, 32–41, 80–84.

community's forms of life, but they do not function primarily as truth claims about divine reality. Lindbeck's account captures something important. Doctrine does regulate discourse, and confession is irreducibly embedded in communal practice. Christians do not learn the meaning of "grace," "resurrection," or "Trinity" apart from worship, catechesis, Scripture, and the church's common life.

Here, the limitation of a grammar-centered account becomes visible. Formal continuity can survive the loss of referential continuity. The vocabulary survives, the liturgy survives, and the institutional procedures survive while the subject of the church's speech changes. "Resurrection" can come to mean renewed possibility, "justification" acceptance of identity, and "God" whatever the community regards as ultimate. The sentences still look Christian while the speaking community increasingly supplies their subject matter.

Grammar, practice, and communal identity plainly matter. The trouble begins when they close in upon the community's own life. A church may know perfectly well whether an utterance follows inherited rules and still have no criterion for asking whether those rules continue to direct speech toward the God who gave rise to them. Grammar can discipline reference. It cannot carry the burden of reference by itself.

The church confesses in order to say who God is, what God has done, and what is therefore true of human beings and the world. Its language refers beyond the community. Christian confession receives its referent through Israel, the identity and acts of Jesus Christ, the apostolic testimony, and the Scripture, proclamation, and sacramental life that carry that testimony forward. The church inherits and interprets an identification it did not originate.

Identification and regulation serve this witness. The reality named in confession precedes the church and, once confessed, lays claim upon the church that speaks of it. A confessional church is defined most deeply by its accountability to the God it names.

Confession as Proposition, Witness, and Act

At a confirmation service, the pastor asks those standing before the congregation whether they intend to remain steadfast in the church's confession, suffer all rather than fall away from it, and remain faithful even unto death. Each answers, "I do, and I ask God to help me." Very little is said, yet a great deal happens. The confirmer affirms what is believed to be true, speaks publicly before the church, binds himself or herself to that affirmation, and asks God for the strength to remain faithful. The answer is assertion, witness, promise, and prayer at once.

That moment tells us a great deal about confession. The confirmer is reciting neither a historical inventory of Lutheran beliefs nor a private spiritual experience. Something is asserted, and the speaker places himself or herself beneath its claim.

Even the promise is qualified by “and I ask God to help me.” Confession is an act whose possibility depends upon the God confessed.

The word *confessio* bears several meanings within Christian usage. It can name the acknowledgment of sin, the profession of faith, and the offering of praise. Augustine’s *Confessions* holds these together because truthful speech about oneself before God already entails truthful speech about the God before whom one stands.² One cannot confess what one is without also confessing something about the God who judges, forgives, and sustains.

The theological weight of confession lies in this relation. To confess is to bring one’s speech into accord with what one has received as true, to speak what has been given, and to acknowledge a claim that reaches the speaker before the speaker can make any claim upon it.

The martyrological dimension of early Christian confession makes the point especially clear. The *martys* speaks what has been seen and heard even when such speech may cost the witness his life. He does not speak because a private experience demands expression but because the event witnessed possesses significance beyond the witness. “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). The necessity is not merely psychological. It arises from what has occurred. What God has done in Christ must be spoken because it concerns not simply the inward life of the believer but God’s relation to the world.

Three dimensions of confession need to be kept together. The first is semantic: confession says something. Its utterances have content and can be understood, affirmed, denied, and disputed. “Jesus Christ is risen” says that the Jesus who was crucified is no longer dead because God raised him. An Easter disposition or membership in a community that uses resurrection language is not enough to supply that content.

Truth conditions do not exhaust the meaning of the confession. They do, however, mark the difference between witness and religious evocation. Unless we can say what must be the case for “Jesus Christ is risen” to be true rather than false, the sentence loses its purchase on reality. A confession has to say enough to be true.

The second dimension is participatory. The question here is how the church comes to speak what it confesses. Ecclesiastical authorization, inherited usage, and personal sincerity can establish that recognized words were uttered under recognized conditions. They cannot make those words living witness to God.

The Spirit brings finite human speech into conformity with God’s self-witness. The confession remains fully human, historically situated, and linguistically ordinary. Precisely as creaturely speech, it becomes the church’s answer to a Word that has already addressed it.

Participation is, as such, more than religious intensity added to propositions. The Spirit brings the church to receive the truth it confesses as God’s address.

2. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), I.I and X.I.

Paul's appeal to the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:3 names this dependence. Confession becomes more than verbal correctness when the speaker is brought under the lordship the words themselves confess.

The third dimension is performative and concerns what the church does when it speaks publicly. In confessing, the church asserts that something is the case, binds itself to what it asserts, and bears witness before God and the world. J. L. Austin's analysis of speech acts helps illuminate this dimension because some utterances do more than report an action, they perform one.³ A promise is made in saying, "I promise," and a verdict is rendered in saying, "I find the defendant guilty." Confession likewise does something. It identifies the speaker with what is confessed and places the speaker beneath its claim.

Austin helps us see this performative dimension, though only up to a point. His conditions for successful speech acts are ordinarily social and conventional: the right speaker, the accepted formula, the proper circumstances. Those conditions matter in the church as well. They do not reach the theological ground of the act.

Absolution forgives because Christ has authorized the promise and because the Spirit brings that promise to the hearer. Ecclesiastical convention can identify who is called to speak and which words belong to the act. It cannot make the promise true or supply its power. The theological conditions of absolution exceed the conventions that order its use.

The three dimensions now fall into an order. Confession must first say something definite as otherwise there is nothing to confess. Verbal correctness by itself is still insufficient. A person can repeat orthodox language and remain untouched by its claim. The Spirit brings the speaker to receive what is said as promise, judgment, and gift, and the confession is then spoken publicly as witness.

Much modern theology reverses this order when trust is allowed to determine its own content. Faith becomes a prior subjective orientation that confers religious significance upon doctrinal formulas. The Reformation account begins elsewhere—faith receives its object.

Lutheran *fides* is not an organizing disposition that selects or constructs what will count as gospel. It is receptive trust in an alien Word. This Word comes from outside the hearer, creates the faith by which it is received, and determines what is believed rather than receiving its own determination from the believing subject. Faith does not first exist and then decide what shall become promise. The promise comes first and creates the faith that receives it.⁴

3. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 94–108.

4. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Augsburg Confession V.1–3; Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV.48, 113.

Confession is answer before initiative and reception before achievement. The promise comes from without and overturns the hearer's prior self-understanding. The Reformers could speak so strongly of the efficacy of proclamation because God, independent of the hearer, acts determinately through the promise.

The confirmation candidate's brief answer now looks rather full. It has content, it is public, it binds the speaker, and it acknowledges dependence upon the God whose Word makes the confession possible. The church confesses because it has been addressed by one who is real.

Historical Situatedness without Historicist Reduction

During an adult forum, someone asks why a confession written in 1530 should determine what a congregation teaches in 2026. The Augsburg Confession, after all, was prepared for presentation before an emperor in circumstances far removed from contemporary parish life. Its authors inhabited a world of princes, imperial diets, Latin disputation, and ecclesiastical conflict that no Lutheran congregation now inhabits. Another participant responds that truth does not change and that the church must simply believe what it has always confessed. While both responses contain something important, neither is sufficient. The first may allow historical distance to dissolve theological authority while the second may treat historical words as though they had descended untouched by the contingencies of human life.

The Lutheran confessional writings are historical documents in the fullest sense. The Augsburg Confession was prepared under political pressure for presentation before Emperor Charles V in 1530. The Formula of Concord arose nearly half a century later from controversies that divided Lutheran territories and congregations after Luther's death. The Schmalkald Articles bear Luther's unmistakable rhetorical and theological stamp, being direct, polemical, and largely uninterested in verbal accommodation where he believed the gospel to be at stake. These writings were composed in the German and Latin of the sixteenth century, and they argued with the exegetical, philosophical, and rhetorical resources available to their authors.⁵

Historical situatedness belongs to the form of all creaturely testimony. The Spirit does not lead the church around history but through it. The confessors knew that they were answering particular accusations, rejecting particular errors, and clarifying disputed claims. They believed that in those concrete circumstances they were saying what the apostolic witness required.

Historical situatedness, however, does not entail historical exhaustion. The confessions arose within sixteenth-century controversies, but their historical

5. See the historical introductions to the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord in *The Book of Concord*, 27–30, 481–484.

origin does not by itself limit their claims to those controversies. An account of why a claim arose is not yet an argument that the claim is false, obsolete, or merely local. Genealogy may explain the occasion of an assertion without deciding its truth.⁶

The issue becomes concrete whenever a congregation asks whether an inherited doctrinal judgment still matters. The Reformers debated justification within late medieval arguments about merit, penance, grace, and ecclesiastical authority. Our vocabulary has changed, but the theological question remains recognizable: does God's favor finally rest upon the sinner's moral, spiritual, or religious achievement, or does God justify the ungodly for Christ's sake through faith? A doctrine can arise from one controversy and still name a reality that judges circumstances its first confessors never imagined.

Historical mediation marks the way finite creatures know and speak; it does not set the limits of what is the case. Sixteenth-century Christians formulated justification with sixteenth-century conceptual resources, but they were not merely describing sixteenth-century religious experience. History is the condition under which creaturely truth is spoken.

This gives us a useful distinction: a claim may be historically occasioned without being historically exhausted. The controversy explains why the confession had to be formulated. It does not decide how long the reality named by the confession remains true.

A living tradition does more than assign new meanings to inherited words, and it does more than repeat old words after their force has been forgotten. New circumstances can disclose implications within the reality to which the inherited confession bears witness. Development is faithful when the church is drawn more deeply into that subject matter.

The Christological controversies of the ancient church provide the clearest example. The Nicene confession that the Son is of one substance with the Father did not appear as a timeless formula detached from controversy. It arose because the church had to decide what must be said if the one confessed as Savior is truly God's eternal Son. The word *homoousios* carried philosophical associations, but the doctrinal judgment was not an exercise in philosophical preference. The church judged that if the Son were a creature, however exalted, then the one acting in

6. Philosophers of science often distinguish between the context of discovery—the historical and psychological circumstances in which an idea or claim originates—and the context of justification—the reasons or evidence offered for accepting it. See Hans Reichenbach, *Experience and Prediction: An Analysis of the Foundations and the Structure of Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 6–7. For a later examination of the distinction and its several formulations, see Paul Hoyningen-Huene, “Context of Discovery and Context of Justification,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 18, no. 4 (1987): 501–515.

Christ would not be God's own eternal Word. The confession of salvation would no longer be the confession that God himself had come to save.⁷

Nicaea is authoritative because the church judged that *homousios* preserved the identity of the one to whom Scripture bears witness. Antiquity alone does not confer that authority, nor does the later success of the Nicene party. The judgment remains theological: this formulation guarded the identity of the Son confessed in the gospel. The same measure applies to later confessional development.

Faithful reading of the confessions asks more than what the confessors meant. We certainly need to know why they said what they said. We must also ask whether their claims are true and grounded in Scripture and, if they are, what those claims require of the church now.

Historical interpretation, theological judgment, and contemporary reception belong in one movement. History keeps us from projecting present concerns backward. Theology asks whether the inherited claim is true and scripturally warranted. Reception asks what follows from it now. Each task corrects the others.

New circumstances can expose a narrow reading of an inherited claim or show that an application once defended never followed from the doctrine itself. A church may confess justification and still rank Christians by moral, spiritual, or religious achievement. The remedy in such a case is not less confession but a more exact submission to what the confession says.

No historical method can make this judgment for the church. Historical scholarship cannot establish theological truth, and ecclesiastical office cannot make a false interpretation true. The church must argue from Scripture, reason theologically, dispute publicly, and remain accountable to the confession it has received. Those judgments are fallible because the church is fallible. Fallibility does not make judgment impossible.

The Augsburg Confession does not bind the church merely because it is old, Lutheran, or institutionally authorized, nor does its sixteenth-century origin confine its claims to the sixteenth century. It binds because it bears truthful witness to the God who justifies sinners and because the church has publicly received that witness as faithful to Scripture. Ecclesial reception does not make the confession true but rather acknowledges the truth the confession claims to speak.

The decisive question, then, is not whether the confession belongs to the past. Of course it does. The question is whether the reality to which it bears witness remains what the confession says it is.

7. Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 5–6; see also Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 85–104.

Scripture, Perspicuity, and Derivative Normativity

A congregation is studying the Augsburg Confession when someone raises an apparently simple question: if Scripture alone is the Word of God and the final authority for Christian teaching, why does the church need a confession at all? Why not put the Augsburg Confession aside, open the Bible, and determine anew what Scripture teaches? Another participant adds a second question. If Scripture is sufficiently clear, why have sincere Christians disagreed about Baptism, the Lord's Supper, predestination, ministry, and even justification?

These questions identify a real tension in every confessional church. Scripture alone is confessed as the final authority, yet pastors and teachers are asked to subscribe a definite doctrinal confession. Scripture is called clear enough to accomplish its purpose, but the church's history is full of serious disagreements over what Scripture says. The relation has to be ordered carefully or the confession will either compete with Scripture or lose the power to confess anything definite.

Everything depends upon maintaining an important asymmetry. Scripture and the Lutheran confessional writings are both normative, but they are not normative in the same manner. Scripture is the *norma normans*, the norming norm that is subject to no further ecclesiastical authority in matters of doctrine. The confessions are *norma normata*, normed norms in which authority is derived from and remains answerable to the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures. The Formula of Concord states the distinction directly: "The prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged." The other symbols are received not as judges standing alongside Scripture but as "witnesses and declarations of the faith" that show how Scripture has been understood in the controversies they address.⁸

Derivative authority is still real authority. The church may confess that a pastor's preaching stands beneath Scripture while also recognizing that it has already made public judgments about what Scripture teaches. The confessions preserve those judgments and prevent each new teacher from pretending that Christian interpretation begins with his or her own reading.

This is what is at stake in the traditional distinction between *quatenus* and *quia* subscription. The *quatenus* subscriber receives the confessions insofar as they agree with Scripture while the *quia* subscriber receives them because they agree with Scripture. Both formulas affirm the primacy of Scripture, but they do not make the same ecclesial commitment. The first leaves the subscriber continually free to decide whether and where the confession accords with Scripture. The second makes a definite public judgment that, on the doctrinal matters the confession addresses, Scripture has been heard rightly.

8. *The Book of Concord*, 486.

The principled *quatenus* objection deserves a serious answer. It warns that *quia* subscription may close the question of what Scripture teaches before Scripture has finished speaking. A church bound to a sixteenth-century settlement may become unable to hear correction from Scripture or to recognize implications the confessors themselves did not perceive. The danger is real whenever subscription is treated as protection from theological inquiry rather than as a disciplined form of it.

However, *quia* subscription need not claim that the confessions have exhausted Scripture, anticipated every future question, or expressed each doctrinal judgment in the only language the church may ever use. Its claim is more limited. Concerning the articles the confessions actually address—original sin, justification, ministry, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, law and gospel, and related matters—the church has heard Scripture rightly. A doctrinal judgment formed through exegesis, controversy, and sustained ecclesial testing need not obstruct Scripture's continuing address. It may be one of the forms through which that address has already been heard.

The weakness of *quatenus* subscription becomes evident at the congregational level. Suppose a pastor declares that he accepts the Augsburg Confession only where it agrees with his reading of Scripture. The congregation may reasonably ask which articles he believes agree, which do not, and according to what criterion he makes the distinction. Unless he is required to argue publicly from Scripture, his private judgment remains the operative norm. The confession can correct him only where he has already decided that it is correct. A doctrinal standard that binds only until the individual interpreter disagrees with it possesses little power to discipline interpretation.

Quia subscription carries a corresponding danger that deserves equally serious statement. A church that subscribes because the confessions agree with Scripture can mistake its own historical settlement for Scripture itself, offering as confidence in the Word of God what is finally confidence in its own sect and its own tradition. This overconfidence forecloses the very scriptural accountability that *quia* subscription claims to honor. It treats every inherited formulation, including the historically conditioned philosophical vocabulary through which a doctrinal judgment was first reached, as equally and permanently binding. It uses subscription to protect a party's self-certainty rather than to submit that party continually to Scripture's judgment, and it can harden into a claim to know God with a finality that faith, which is not yet sight, does not possess this side of the eschaton.

Both forms of subscription have characteristic failures. *Quatenus* can quietly make the individual interpreter the final judge; an overconfident *quia* can place the same authority in the confessing community and its inherited judgments. In either case Scripture ceases, in practice, to function as *norma normans*. The test is whether interpreter and church alike remain willing to argue publicly from Scripture and, when necessary, to be corrected by it.

The possibility of *quia* subscription nevertheless presupposes that Scripture is sufficiently determinate to sustain a public doctrinal judgment. The Lutheran

affirmation of the clarity, or perspicuity, of Scripture is sometimes misunderstood as the claim that every biblical passage is equally transparent, that interpretation is unnecessary, or that faithful readers will never disagree. None of this follows. Scripture contains difficult texts, and the church needs teachers, linguistic knowledge, historical inquiry, and theological argument.

The Lutheran claim is more modest—and more theological—than the assumption that every biblical passage must be equally transparent. Scripture is clear enough to do what God gives it to do: the law exposes sin, and the gospel gives Christ to the sinner. Difficult texts remain difficult, but Scripture does not therefore wait helplessly for an authoritative interpreter before it can speak. Luther's strongest assertions of scriptural clarity are directed precisely against the suggestion that Scripture remains mute until an authoritative interpreter gives it voice.⁹

Disagreement does not disprove perspicuity. Christians can hear the same promise and still dispute predestination and human freedom, and churches can confess the same Christ and disagree about his presence in the Supper. These are serious disagreements, but they do not show that Scripture has failed to do what God gives it to do.

Perspicuity is soteriological. Scripture is clear enough to deliver its saving address while the doctrinal implications of that address may require long exegetical and ecclesial labor. Difficult questions still have to be argued beneath a Word with a determinate subject matter and purpose.

The confessions belong precisely here. They are public judgments reached when the church has had to decide what must be said if Scripture's witness is to be preserved. They do not rescue an otherwise mute Scripture from obscurity. They record how the church has heard Scripture in controversy and confess that hearing publicly.

What, then, is actually subscribed? Not every historical observation, rhetorical judgment, or exegetical argument in the confessional writings carries the same doctrinal weight. However, there is no mechanical device for separating binding doctrine from incidental language. The doctrinal judgment comes to us through the distinctions, affirmations, denials, and arguments by which the confession makes its case.

At the same time, subscription does not necessarily bind the church to every philosophical vocabulary employed in reaching a doctrinal judgment. The church confesses that Christ is a single person, both truly divine and truly human. It need not suppose that every inherited account of substance, nature, person, or accident is thereby irreformable. The doctrinal judgment and the conceptual vocabulary through which it is expressed are distinguishable, although they cannot always be neatly separated.

9. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 33, ed. Philip S. Watson and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 25–28; see also *The Book of Concord*, 301–302.

New language can clarify a confession only by continuing to affirm the same truth about the same reality. Once the new vocabulary changes the identity of the subject, clarification has become another confession.

Scripture, confession, and interpretation consequently form a circle, but its center is not the church's self-understanding. Scripture guides the church's reading, the confession disciplines that reading, Scripture judges the confession, and proposed corrections return to both. The circle is hermeneutical because Christ, to whom Scripture bears witness, precedes every act of ecclesial interpretation.

The confessions are neither transparent repetitions of Scripture nor independent doctrinal authorities. They identify, regulate, bind, and exclude. Their authority is derivative because their exposition is answerable to Scripture, and it endures only as that exposition remains true.

The church needs confessions because the church is fallible. It needs a public account of what it has heard so that pastors, teachers, and congregations do not quietly substitute private judgment for common confession. That derivative authority is genuine—Scripture can judge the confession, and the confession can judge those who have publicly subscribed it.

Creeds and Confessions as Different Orders of Ecclesial Speech

During a catechism class, someone asks why Lutherans need both the Nicene Creed and the Augsburg Confession. If both are authoritative summaries of Christian teaching, why not simply use one or the other? The question is reasonable. Congregational life seldom requires Christians to distinguish carefully between a creed and a confession. Both are inherited texts, both shape teaching, and both may be spoken of as standards of faith, yet they do not occupy the same order within the church's speech.

The ecumenical creeds perform the church's primary act of Christian identification. The Apostles', Nicene-Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian Creeds confess the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ; the judgment to come; and the life of the world to come. They do not merely tell the world what Christians value or establish rules for belonging to a religious community but identify the God to whom Christian speech refers and narrate the acts by which this God is known.¹⁰

When the church says that the Son is of one being with the Father, it is saying who the Son is. *Homoousios* excludes Arian speech because Arian speech identifies the subject differently. The Son is no exalted creature within the order of being as He shares fully in the divine reality of the Father.

10. *The Book of Concord*, 21–25.

The creed's account of incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection likewise identifies the acting subject of the gospel. The savior is God's eternal Son in creaturely life, the one who assumed human nature, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was raised from the dead. Creedal language here does more than regulate Christian speech. It tells us whom Christians mean by God and Christ.

The Lutheran confessions stand within this prior creedal identification. They do not introduce another God, another Christ, or another gospel. The Augsburg Confession begins by receiving the catholic doctrine of the triune God and confessing the incarnation of the Son. Only then does it turn to sin, justification, ministry, sacrament, and the ordering of ecclesial life.¹¹

The order matters. Lutheran confession begins inside the catholic identification of God and Christ and asks what follows for sinners, grace, preaching, and sacrament. It is a reforming judgment within the church's prior confession, not the charter of a separate religious world.

The Lutheran confessions do more than repeat the creeds. They judge that the gospel had been obscured in medieval teaching and practice and that the promise to sinners required correction of the church's proclamation. Their distinctive concern is how the God identified in the creeds acts toward sinners and gives Christ through the promise.

This relation becomes visible in preaching. The creed identifies Jesus Christ as the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son. The Augsburg Confession asks what this identity means for the sinner who hears the gospel. It answers that human beings are justified freely for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ.¹² The Lutheran confession does not move beyond the creedal God but says what the acts of this God mean for those who stand accused by the law and addressed by the promise.

Justification is not a denominational supplement to an otherwise complete Christian faith. It concerns the same God whom the creeds identify. The Father sends the Son, the incarnate Son is crucified and raised, and the Spirit creates faith through the external Word. Lutheran confession asks what the acts of this triune God mean for sinners.

This is also the basis of the Lutheran claim to catholicity. The Augsburg Confession presented itself as testimony that its teaching agreed with Scripture and the catholic faith. The form of that appeal proves nothing by itself. Roman Catholic and Reformed confessions made comparable claims. The material question remains: has the gospel been heard and confessed faithfully?

11. *The Book of Concord*, Augsburg Confession I–III, 36–39.

12. *The Book of Concord*, Augsburg Confession IV, 38–41; Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV, 43–60, 125–128.

The ecumenical creeds have a breadth of reception that the Lutheran confessions do not, and that difference matters. Christians across cultures confess Nicaea while the Augsburg Confession belongs to a more particular ecclesial history. Breadth of reception, however, is evidence of a different kind from truth. Wide acceptance does not create a creed's referent, and limited acceptance does not make a confession false.

A sixteenth-century German document can speak truth beyond its place of origin if it faithfully articulates the gospel addressed to sinners everywhere. No culture generates the justification of the ungodly from its own religious resources. The promise comes from beyond every culture, judges every culture, and addresses sinners within each of them.

Cross-cultural reception can expose European assumptions that were mistaken for theological necessities and uncover implications the first confessors did not see. That work matters precisely because the confession claims more than local cultural authority. Its central doctrinal judgment is therefore open to wider reception without being reduced to its first setting.

Creeds and confessions belong together, then, without doing identical work. The creeds identify the triune God and the saving acts by which Christians know him. Lutheran confessions receive that identification and say what it requires for proclamation, sacrament, and the sinner's trust in the promise.

A Post-Kantian Genealogy of Confessional Dissolution

At an Easter Bible study, someone asks what the congregation means when it says that Jesus "rose again on the third day." One participant answers that God acted upon the dead Jesus and raised him. Another says that resurrection names the disciples' discovery that Jesus's message could not be defeated. A third speaks of the new possibilities that arise whenever despair gives way to hope. No one proposes changing the creed. All are prepared to say the same words on Sunday, yet the conditions under which those words would be true have become strikingly different.

This is how confession can dissolve without disappearing. The vocabulary stays in place and the liturgy continues while the truth of what is confessed migrates from God's being and acts to religious experience, moral significance, existential transformation, symbolic power, or communal use. The congregation still says that God raised Jesus while growing uncertain whether the sentence names something God actually did.

The shift was gradual. A series of philosophical restrictions and theological accommodations sought to preserve Christian intelligibility under modern conditions. The genealogy that follows is selective; modern theology did not move in one direction, and Kant did not make anti-realism inevitable. My concern is one

influential trajectory along which Christian truth came increasingly to be located in consciousness, value, existential appropriation, and communal practice.

The genealogy matters because some assumptions that now feel like theological common sense began as contestable philosophical judgments. They can be reconsidered. A theological settlement may survive long after the philosophical restriction that once made it seem necessary has lost its authority.

Kant is indispensable to this history, but he must not be made to say more than he says. *The Critique of Pure Reason* does not demonstrate that God cannot exist independently of human consciousness, arguing instead that the categories of the understanding cannot be extended beyond possible experience to yield constitutive theoretical knowledge of supersensible objects.¹³ Protestant theology consequently inherited an urgent question: how can Christian claims retain cognitive seriousness if God cannot be known as an object of theoretical judgment?

Kant reached theology through the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movements that interpreted him. As objectivity came increasingly to be understood through the conditions of human knowing, theology found ways to preserve the seriousness of religious claims without straightforward reference to an independently existing and acting divine agent. The word objectivity remained, but its center of gravity shifted.

Schleiermacher anticipates this movement by locating religion in immediate self-consciousness, especially the feeling of absolute dependence. Christian doctrines describe the determinations of this God-consciousness within the believing community. Schleiermacher does not claim that consciousness creates God, and his theology should not be reduced to simple subjectivism. Even so, the immediate subject matter of dogmatics becomes Christian consciousness rather than God considered independently of that consciousness.¹⁴ The question whether Christian consciousness corresponds truthfully to God's own being and acts becomes increasingly difficult to pose within the method.

Ritschl redirects theology from metaphysical inquiry toward the practical and historical. Religious judgments are value judgments—they apprehend their objects not through theoretical demonstration but through their significance for salvation and human vocation. The move carries a genuine insight. The Reformation tradition rightly insists that God is known *pro nobis*—in the promise addressed to sinners, not in speculation about the divine nature abstracted from the gospel. In Ritschl, though, the soteriological “for us” acquires an epistemological weight it cannot bear. It no longer identifies the saving relation within which God is known; it begins to

13. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A238/B297–A246/B303.

14. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), §§3–4, 19.

determine the conditions under which God can become a theological object at all. Claims about God remain religiously decisive while their ontological implications are quietly set aside.

The congregational result is easy to recognize. “God justifies the ungodly” can come to mean that believers experience unconditional acceptance while “Christ is present in the Supper” can name the community’s experience of reconciliation around the table. Such experiences may accompany the realities confessed. They are not the realities themselves. Theological language has moved from what God does toward what happens in those who believe.

With Bultmann, the problem shifts from religious value to the event of proclamation. His program of demythologization should not be caricatured as simple theological evisceration. He sought to protect the immediacy and scandal of the kerygmatic address. If faith rested upon a resurrection established by neutral historical demonstration, he feared that it would become the conclusion of an evidential argument rather than the reception of an unconditional promise.¹⁵ The concern is not frivolous. No historical demonstration can create the faith that receives the gospel.

Bultmann’s solution gives proclamation priority over the occurrence to which proclamation bears witness. The risen Christ encounters the hearer in the kerygma, and resurrection is disclosed in the new existence opened there, yet the apostolic claim is more stubbornly particular: the crucified Jesus is no longer dead because God acted. Once the occurrence has no independence from the proclamation through which it becomes meaningful, the promise begins to supply its own referent.

Tillich resists the reduction of theology to subjective consciousness by identifying God as being-itself, the ground and power of finite reality. Religious symbols participate in the power of that which they symbolize and therefore possess genuine ontological depth.¹⁶ Tillich’s symbols are not merely subjective; the difficulty concerns whether his ontology can preserve determinate divine agency.

“God raised Jesus from the dead” says that God acted upon this dead man. Being-itself may ground activity in Tillich’s sense, but the confession requires an agent who chooses, promises, judges, raises, and forgives. Tillich protects God from becoming one object among others. The remaining question is whether being-itself can sustain the divine agency the confession names.

The cultural-linguistic turn moves the immediate focus from individual consciousness to communal grammar. Its insight is substantial: Christians learn to speak

15. Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1953), 1–44.

16. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 235–245.

of God through Scripture, liturgy, doctrine, and communal practice. The remaining question is whether the rules governing that speech can secure reference to the God about whom the community claims to speak.

A community can preserve the Christian lexicon while changing what its central terms denote. “Christ is risen” may remain liturgically untouched and function chiefly as a declaration of communal hope. The language has survived while the theological object has shifted.

Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Bultmann, Tillich, and Lindbeck should not be collapsed into one position. Their projects differ too much for that. Still, a common pressure runs through them: Christian claims draw increasing theological force from what they express, disclose, evoke, or regulate within believing subjects and communities. Under that pressure the older question—what has God actually done?—becomes harder to ask without qualification.

The philosophical situation that made this movement appear necessary has changed. Restrictive interpretations of Kant remain contested, and contemporary philosophy has recovered serious work in metaphysics, modality, causation, reference, grounding, and truthmaking.¹⁷ One need not embrace every development within analytic metaphysics to recognize that theological claims are no longer disqualified merely because they make metaphysical assertions.

The church does not need philosophy’s permission to confess divine action. It does need to notice when its theological habits were formed under philosophical prohibitions that were never demonstrated and no longer command assent. A settlement devised to save Christian meaning after reference to divine agency was declared impossible need not survive the collapse of that declaration.

When the church says that Christ rose from the dead, it should ask what resurrection means for faith, hope, human existence, and communal life. Those consequences matter because of the event. “God raised Jesus from the dead” tells us what is asserted while leaving difficult questions about divine agency, creaturely identity, and resurrection open. The church may inquire indefinitely into those questions without substituting the effects of resurrection faith for the resurrection itself.

The genealogy can explain how confessional words remained while their referential force weakened. Explanation alone cannot restore what has been lost. Theology has to say why the church’s speech is truthful: the God it confesses exists, acts, and gives himself to be known.

17. See Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); and Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Confession as Pneumatological Participation

A congregation rises and recites the Nicene Creed. The words are exact, the liturgical setting is right, and every sentence belongs unmistakably to the historic confession. Even so, correct recitation can still be only recitation. Habit, nostalgia, institutional loyalty, and obedience to the order of worship can all produce the same words. What makes them witness?

The answer is pneumatological. The Holy Spirit brings the church to hear, believe, and speak the Word that comes from beyond it. Pneumatology belongs to the constitution of confession itself because the church creates neither the reality it names nor the faith by which that reality is received.

Appeal to the Spirit cannot rescue confused or false speech. “Jesus is Lord” says something definite about Jesus, and “God raised him from the dead” makes a claim about the crucified Christ. The Spirit brings the church to receive such true speech as the living address of the God who has spoken. Semantic determinacy gives faith an identifiable promise to receive, and the Spirit gives that promise to the hearer as God’s address.

Paul’s statement that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3) already contains the structure. He cannot mean that the syllables require miraculous assistance. The utterance becomes confession when the speaker is brought to acknowledge the lordship the words assert. The Spirit brings the speaker into a truthful relation to the one confessed.

The divine self-witness possesses a trinitarian form. The Son makes the Father known, the Father bears witness to the Son, and the Spirit testifies to the Son and brings to remembrance what the Son has said.¹⁸ The church’s confession is, therefore, answering speech. It does not originate the reality that it names but receives, interprets, and publicly attests what God has first made known. Confession begins in divine self-communication before it becomes an ecclesial act.

The obvious question follows: how does the church distinguish divine self-witness from a projection of its own religious consciousness later named “Spirit?” A congregation can be deeply moved, united, and utterly sincere while speaking falsely of God. Intensity does not certify divine presence, and sincerity does not establish reference.

The apostolic Word supplies the needed externality. The Spirit binds the church to Christ as he is given through Scripture, proclamation, Baptism, and the body and blood bestowed in the Supper. These means address the hearer with a Word that

18. John 5:31–39; 15:26; 16:13–15.

religious consciousness neither generates nor controls. It creates faith and judges the hearer's prior self-understanding.

This alien Word has content the hearer does not control. It accuses where affirmation would be easier, forgives where worthiness cannot be established and promises what no community could produce from its own resources. The Spirit is known through the Son's Word, and the Son's Word is received through the Spirit's work. The center of this relation is Christ who precedes and judges every ecclesial act.

The Lutheran confessions locate the Spirit's work precisely here. The Spirit creates faith "where and when it pleases God" through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.¹⁹ Faith is not an autonomous human response added to an otherwise complete divine act but is itself God's work through the external means by which Christ is given. The church confesses because the same Spirit who delivers the promise also creates the hearing that receives it.

For that reason confession never becomes the church's secure possession. A congregation can recite the creed correctly while resisting the God it names. It can confess justification while making worthiness a condition of belonging, defend ministry while treating office as property, or confess Christ's presence in the Supper while using the sacrament chiefly as an instrument of exclusion. The doctrine remains verbally correct while the enacted confession contradicts its subject.

Correction here requires a deeper submission to determinate confession. The Spirit recalls the church to what its own words say and entail. Pneumatological correction works through doctrinal content and exposes the difference between invoking a doctrine and submitting to its truth.

Pneumatological participation therefore heightens accountability. Spiritual vitality gives the church no license to revise inconvenient claims, and doctrinal correctness provides no shelter from repentance. The Spirit who enables the church to say "Jesus is Lord" also subjects the church to that lordship.

The congregation reciting the creed is thus doing more than preserving a venerable text. By the Spirit, it is drawn into the divine self-witness to which the creed answers. The words remain finite, historically received, and humanly spoken. They become living witness as the church hears in them the Word of the God who has acted and still addresses his people.

Confession is the creaturely act of answering God's prior self-witness under the Spirit. It is truthful speech made accountable to the one of whom it speaks.

19. *The Book of Concord*, Augsburg Confession V.1–3; see also *Small Catechism*, Creed, Third Article, 355–356.

Conclusion: When the Church Says What Is So

A congregation can recite the creed, subscribe its confessional documents, and call itself confessional while remaining unsure what any of these practices finally require. The words can preserve identity, regulate teaching, and sustain institutional continuity after their referential force has weakened. A church may know exactly which sentences belong to its tradition and still hesitate to say that they are true.

The argument has turned on several distinctions: content and performance, historical occasion and historical exhaustion, Scripture's primary normativity and the derivative authority of confession, creedal identification and confessional reforming judgment. They all serve one point. The church's words remain theological as they answer to the God who precedes them.

No theory of religious language can finally carry that burden. The church speaks historically conditioned human words about a reality beyond its own speech. Scripture tests those claims, the creeds identify their subject, and the Spirit makes them living witness. Lose those relations and confession becomes religious expression, historical artifact, institutional regulation, party identity, or the preservation of true sentences no longer spoken as witness.

Confession fails in a recognizable way when the church uses inherited words to secure an identity it already believes itself to possess. Grammar is preserved while the referent is lost; doctrine becomes cultural property; the Spirit or doctrinal correctness is invoked to escape correction. In each case the church places itself above the Word from which its confession receives authority.

There was never a golden confessional age in which every doctrinal question was settled and every church lived faithfully beneath its formulas. The church has always been fallible, capable of misreading Scripture, misusing doctrine, and contradicting in practice what it says in worship. Fidelity requires continuing corrigibility by the reality to which the church's words refer.

Verbal continuity by itself is not enough. The church must keep asking whether inherited terms still name what they were given to confess. Does "resurrection" name God's act upon the dead Jesus? Does "justification" name God's declaration concerning the ungodly for Christ's sake? Does "real presence" name Christ's giving of himself? These questions protect the subject matter without which confessional continuity becomes merely verbal.

Confession can be bold without presumption and humble without surrendering judgment. The church can misuse true doctrine, resist the reality it names, and fail in its witness. Its confidence therefore rests in the Spirit's work through the external Word rather than in ecclesial constancy.

What the church confesses finally concerns God's acts: the Father sent the Son, the crucified Jesus was raised, sinners are justified for Christ's sake, Christ gives himself in the Supper, and, through the promise, the Spirit brings faith into being. Lutheran identity follows from these claims; it does not supply their truth.

When the church says "I believe," it answers a Word that came before it and places itself beneath the truth it confesses. Its task is to bear witness to that truth, confident that the God confessed is real, His acts are true, and His promise stands.

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A Church that Believes, Teaches, and Confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God

Patrick K. Welton

ABSTRACT: This essay retraces the development of the creeds and confessions to understand their continued need in Lutheran theology. It is argued that confession of faith takes place under the duress caused by receiving God's self-revelation. Confession is never merely the preservation of a past statement but germinates within the concrete historical circumstances and intellectual horizon of the day. As such, it provides the necessary grammatical framework to speak the Gospel of the Son sent by the Father and glorified in the Spirit.

Karl Barth writes, “The church ‘possesses’ a confession? No, the church confesses because the confession possesses it.”¹ One might assume that the church decides, creates, and controls the creeds and confessions like businesses control strategic plans, yet Barth claims the church does not originate the confession but rather the confession constitutes the church.

Creedalism and confessionalism bring to mind many images—tests of fellowship for churchmanship, signposts pointing vaguely somewhere, compromise, or mere historical documents that belong to a denomination's history. While these images may contain truth, they do not reflect the primary existence of creeds and confessions. The creeds and confessions are best understood by what it means to confess and, in that light, what they affirmatively say.

While the early church agreed upon the texts of the church's creeds and the Reformers signed their names to the Lutheran confessions, such consensus does not guarantee truth. Many people can be wrong together. As Pannenberg notes, “The content and truth of dogma do not rest, then, on the consensus of the church. Instead, knowledge of the subject matter of scripture produces consensus.”²

1. As cited and translated in Arthur C. Cochrane, “The Act of Confession-Confessing,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 8, no. 4 (1977): 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539394>.

2. On consensus, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1991) 1:12–14.

Christianity is the only major religion that drafts creeds and confessions to encapsulate what it believes.³ At its core, Christianity is not an ethical system or philosophy but faith in God's self-revelation to humanity in history. With this faith, God reveals Himself as the heavenly Father who sends his Son to us that through his Spirit we can receive his love by faith. Faith's work is then to retell God's revelation. Formal creeds deliver the object of belief.

The story of the creeds is the story of God's people trying to faithfully speak the Gospel.

The Bible

New Testament

At the heart of confession stands Jesus's question at Caesarea Philippi. Initially, he asks his disciples who other people say he is, to which the disciples respond with John the Baptist, Elijah, or some other prophet. Jesus then switches to a more personal question, asking, "Who do you say that I am" (Mt 16:15)? This question illustrates the foundational structure of Christian confession and is consistently recorded across the Gospel (Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20; Jn 1:42). Further, this question bids us to formulate our belief. As Sasse writes, "With this question our Lord Himself calls forth the making of creeds and thereby the church's formulation of dogmas."⁴ Jesus does not ask who he is in the abstract as a matter of theological speculation divorced from the hearer; rather, His question demands personal belief. Who is this particular historical person?

Though Simon Peter answered personally, he also speaks for the whole of the disciples since the question was addressed to them all.⁵ He replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." There are two dimensions to confession—one for the person and another for the catholic church. Sasse calls Peter's confession the original confession of the Christian church.⁶ For Luther, this confession is the foundation to Christ's church; in writing about Jesus's reply to Peter, Luther wrote, "Christ's meaning, in sum, is the following proposition: 'My Church is the one that possesses the revelation which you, Peter, are confessing here.'"⁷

3. Frances M. Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, 3rd ed., SCM Classics (SCM Press, 2002), 15.

4. Hermann Sasse, "Church and Confession (1941)," in *We Confess Jesus Christ, We Confess* (Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 1:78.

5. Martin Luther, "Annotations on Matthew, Chapters 1-18," in *Annotations on Matthew, Chapters 1-18; Sermons on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Chapter 18*, American edition, vol. 67, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown, trans. Jon Bruss, *Luther's Works* (Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 272.

6. Hermann Sasse, "Jesus Christ Is Lord (1931)," in *We Confess Jesus Christ, We Confess* (Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 1:9.

7. LW 67:276. For a more fulsome discussion of Luther's reading of Matthew 16:18, see Franz Posset, "'Rock' and 'Recognition,'" in *Ad Fontes Lutheri*, by Timothy Maschke et al. (Marquette University Press, 2001).

Though confession is done personally, it is not from the person but rather external to the person. Peter's confession was not from within himself but from God. Jesus validated Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 16:17). It was only in the Holy Spirit that true confession can be made (1 Cor 12:3; 1 Jn 4:2). Confession supernaturally flows from the heart and mouth of those justified and saved (Mt 10:32; Rom 10:9-10). Confession is faith's response to God's self-revelation and does not stop at Simon, for all disciples are called to confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11; Rom 14:11; 1 Jn 4:15).

Grappling with Jesus's identity plays a major role in the Gospel of John (Jn 1:19). His identity has been described as the "leading question running through the whole Gospel."⁸ John the Baptist opens the Gospel by confessing that he is not the Christ before declaring Him as "the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:20, 29). Through the gospel, people try to answer this question. The disciples begin with "rabbi" and "messiah" while Nicodemus answers that Jesus is "from God" (Jn 3:2). The blind man healed in John 9 traces an arc of escalating Christological clarity. Beginning in ignorance, he progresses through stages of identity-assignment: a man, then a prophet, and, finally, from God. Martha of Bethany answers with three claims: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (Jn 11:27). Thomas represents the culmination of John's confessional progression, saying, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28). The Gospel of John concludes by stating its fundamental confessional purpose: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31). To declare Jesus as Lord confronted the power structures of the ancient world, which declared Caesar as Lord.

Beyond documenting the role of confession of faith, the New Testament includes creedal statements that many scholars think predate the New Testament books.⁹ Among these are the prologue to John, the Philippian hymn, the Colossian hymn, and a number of smaller creedal fragments.¹⁰ Sanders finds eight building-blocks in these creeds: Christ's equality with God, His mediation of creation, His sustaining of creation, coming from heaven, and His death, resurrection, reconciliation, and

8. David Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2021), 4. Yutaka Maekawa, "The Function of Confessions of Faith in the Gospel of John," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 50 (December 2025): 6–31.

9. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (Continuum, 1972), 1–29. Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, De Gruyter Textbook (De Gruyter, 2024), 64–70. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2005), 132–36. For a discussion of their antiquity, see Matthew E. Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns* (IVP Academic, 2018), 21–31.

10. Typical lists of creed-like passages include Jn 1; Col 1:15–20; Phil 2:6–11; 1 Cor 15:3–8; 1 Tm 2:5–6; 3:16. For a careful parsing of Phil 2:6–11, see David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (1994): 154–59.

exaltation.¹¹ Nevertheless, these statements are not formal explanations as seen in the creeds, but like the confession of Peter, they identify the one in whom they have faith, Jesus Christ, with the God revealed through the Old Testament.

Old Testament

The biblical basis for confession begins in the Old Testament. The basic form of this confession is the *Shema*, wherein is stated that “The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Dt 6:4). Some find Old Testament creeds that identify the Lord by His works. Von Rad identified three ancient credos in the first six books of the Old Testament (Dt 6:21-23; 26:5-9; and Jo 24:2-13).¹² These Old Testament credos demonstrate flexibility in describing God by His redemptive story. Boda notes six elements in these creeds: ancestors, exodus, wilderness, conquest, land, and exile.¹³ Using these blocks, this confession is elaborated, expanded, adapted, and rehearsed through the Old Testament.¹⁴ The Lord is confessed both by name and by works in the Old Testament.

Instead of the term ‘confession,’ Brueggemann prefers the term testimony, which works within the image of a law court; he writes, “The testimony of Israel concerning Yahweh is always of two kinds, one to reorder the internal life of the community in ways faithful to Yahweh, the other to invite the world out beyond this community to reorder its life with reference to Yahweh.”¹⁵ Thus, testimony occurs both before the face of God as confession and before the world as witness.

This Old Testament way of confessing God is not independent of the New Testament but is the ground in which the New is planted and allowed to prosper. “What we see then in the foundational canonical witness of the church is a consistent impulse toward summary, re-presentation, and inner-biblical allusion, which represents reflection on the theology of the Bible in whole or in part.”¹⁶ As Hahn notes, “The confession of the one God unites Old and New Testament. Wherever the New Testament speaks of God, it means the God who has created the world, who has elected the people of Israel and instituted a covenant with them, who has

11. Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background*, Society for New Testament Studies 15 (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 24–25.

12. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (Harper & Row, 1962), 1:281.

13. Mark J. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology (Baker Academic, 2017), 36.

14. For an expanded list of passages, see Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, 16.

15. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Fortress Press, 1997), 747. For an interesting take on testimony, see Paul Ricœur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Seymour Mudge (Fortress Press, 1980).

16. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions*, 16.

entrusted his promises to the old covenant community, and who is proclaimed and praised as ruler of the entire world and its history. In view of this shared foundation, Old and New Testament are understood as indissoluble unity.”¹⁷

Confession of the Lord does not end with the Scriptures but rather the God who speaks through them continues to call His church to respond to His revelation by confessing her faith to Him, one another, and the world. The creeds are this story.

Creed

The idea of the creed, per se, developed in the context of baptismal catechesis in which the *regula fidei* was taught. The term *regula fidei*, or rule of faith, is alluded to in Galatians 6:16, though it was used more richly by the Apostolic Fathers such as Irenaeus (ca. 125-202), Tertullian (ca. 160-220), and Clement (ca. 150-215).¹⁸ Though the *regula fidei* was a precursor to formal creeds, it does not contain fixed words or a particular formula but is rather a multivalent tool. Bokedal defines the *regula fidei* as a “normative hermeneutical tool that promotes the textual and theological unity of the Old and New Testament Scriptures.”¹⁹ Bower argues that it is a “narrative construction, [that] set forth the basic ‘dramatic’ structure of a Christian vision of the world posing as an hermeneutical frame of reference for the interpretation of Christian Scripture and Christian experience, and reducing the first principles of Christian theological discourse and of a doctrinal substantiation of Christian faith.”²⁰ Jenson understands the *regula fidei* as “a sort of communal linguistic awareness of the faith delivered to the apostles, which sufficed the church for generations. This gift of the Spirit guided missionary proclamation, shaped instruction, identified heresy, and in general functioned wherever in the church’s life a brief statement of the gospel’s content was needed.”²¹ He continues that it is located in the community’s “communal self-consciousness.”²² Bokedal finds the *regula fidei* “could be equated with Scripture, baptismal confession, or apostolic tradition more broadly” depending upon its need.²³ Before creeds were formalized, the rule of faith guided confession. The rule is neither scripture nor creed but a faithful response to the Word of God that structures the biblical narrative, illuminates the gospel, and leads to the writing of creeds.

17. Ferdinand Hahn, “The Confession of the One God in the New Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2 (December 1980): 69.

18. Tomas Bokedal, “The Rule of Faith: Tracing Its Origins,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7, no. 2 (2013): 236.

19. Tomas Bokedal, “The Early Rule-of-Faith Pattern as Emergent Biblical Theology,” *Theofilos Supplement* 7, no. 1 (2015): 57–75.

20. Paul M. Blowers, “The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 2 (1997): 199–228, <https://doi.org/10.1177/106385129700600207>.

21. Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

22. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 15.

23. Bokedal, “The Early Rule-of-Faith Pattern as Emergent Biblical Theology,” 58.

When creeds were formed, they took trinitarian shape based on the baptismal formula in the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20). Many of these local creeds existed. These precursors to the Apostles' Creed functioned in two ways in the early church. During the actual rite of baptism, the candidate first renounced the devil and then turned to confessing the faith using an interrogative creed. In the weeks leading to baptism, the catechumen would be taught this interrogative creed by baptismal sermons and later by declaratory creeds.²⁴ Interrogative and declaratory creeds were developed using common building blocks linking confession and teaching to the God who reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²⁵ Belief, confession, and teaching unite around baptism in these proto-creeds. There was not one baptismal creed, as they were local creeds which varied upon location. Indeed, while the roots of the Apostles' Creed predate the Nicene Creed, the actual text as we know it post-dates the Nicene Creed.²⁶ These creeds took on new life when trouble arose.

Nicæa

Faced with a crisis of confession, the church was provoked to create a creed to address rising heresy. After his conversion to Christianity, Emperor Constantine discovered that a dispute about the answer to the question "who is Jesus Christ" had broken out in the Eastern Empire.²⁷ Once again, the question was, "in which god do we believe?" The source of this dispute was the teachings of Arius who was trained in the Alexandrian school of thought exemplified by Origen, which tended to Platonism.²⁸ The Arians believed that there was a time when the Son was not; thus, the Son is not one with the Father in being but something subordinate, something lesser. So, the emperor sought to resolve the issue by bringing the church together in 325 AD at Nicæa to clarify her confession of Jesus. This meeting would be known as the First Ecumenical Council at Nicæa.

In addition to addressing other issues, the gathered council of 318 Fathers created the original Nicene Creed that preceded the Nicene-Constantinopolitan

24. For a readable history, see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 30–52. More detailed history is given by Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 120–33, 523–34.

25. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 80–81.

26. For a history of baptismal creeds, the Old Roman Creed, and the Apostles' Creed, see Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 145–212.

27. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1: *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, 2nd edition (HarperOne, 2010), 1:182–92.

28. For full details on the history of Arius, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (1987; Revised, W. B. Eerdmans, 2001). As with most ancient discussions, designating the Arians is difficult; see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 11–30. For an overview of the Arian dispute, see Craig A. Blasing, "Creedal Formation as Hermeneutical Development: A Reexamination of Nicaea," *Pro Ecclesia* 19, no. 4 (2010): 372–81.

Creed used today.²⁹ No official notes or minutes of the council were kept; the only records left are fragmentary letters and reminiscences of participants. This creed followed the three part trinitarian form of many baptismal creeds wherein each article identifies the person inwardly and then outwardly through his ministry and work.³⁰ Since this crisis was about Christology, this new creed stressed the second article referring to the Son by affirming that He is “begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance [*ousia*] of the Father,” “begotten, not made, consubstantial [*homoousios*] with the Father,” and concluded with an anathema stating, “The catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes those who ... claim that the Son of God is from another *hypostasis* or substance [*ousia*], (or created,) or alterable, or mutable.”³¹ The term “*homoousios*” introduced language from outside Scripture to explain the God revealed through Scripture as a novelty. Both terms, *hypostasis* and *ousia*, brought clarity and unclarity simultaneously and would need to be revisited by the church. Further, while the creed addresses the current crisis of Arianism, it left its defenders open to charges of Sabellianism.

While the Nicene position became the prevalent confession, this was not apparent beforehand, nor was it readily accepted. Williams finds Arius represented continuity with earlier theological tradition, particularly 3rd-century Alexandrian theology (Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria). He writes, “Arius was a committed theological conservative; more specifically, a conservative Alexandrian.”³² Likewise, Ayres argues that there were multiple competing schools of thought about how to proceed during the fourth century.³³ Behr notes, “the controversy over Arius was the catalyst that brought two larger traditions of theology into conflict. What was at stake between them is not simply particular points within the same paradigm ... but ..., the way in which theology is approached and, correspondingly, the way in which doctrine is, as Vaggione put it, ‘imagined.’”³⁴ The pro-Nicene position won the day but would face many trials over the coming years. Within six years, Arius would be recalled from exile by the emperor to restore him to communion, and the prime defender of the creed would be exiled³⁵ five times.

29. While we do not have minutes of the council or an original record of its creed, the associated canons are in *The First Ecumenical Council—The First Council of Nice, A.D. 325* (NPNF 2/14:1-53).

30. The terminology of “inner” and “outer” are Luther’s way of discussing the triune persons. Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, Revised, *Studies in Historical & Systematic Theology* (Lexham Press, 2017). Sanders refers to this as the ‘Nicene Line.’ Fred Sanders, “The Nicene Line as Structural Principle for Christian Doctrine,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 27, no. 4 (2025): 464–79. Contemporary theologians speak of economic and immanent relationships. Each of these has slight nuance.

31. Translation found in Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 247–48.

32. Williams, *Arius*, 175.

33. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 78–80.

34. John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 2. I (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 31.

35. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, 1:190–91.

Athanasius defended the Nicene position by expounding upon the deity of the Son while arguing that the Arians do not understand the grammar of the Scriptures.³⁶ The council adopted the term *homoousios*, but it was unclear what this word meant. Athanasius would work to define *homoousios* theologically rather than philosophically, yet this still left the Nicene position open to critique regarding the difference between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. He was unable to adequately defend the theology of the Trinity. As Gwynn writes, “What Athanasius lacked was the clarity of language to express his conception of the Trinity as three in one.”³⁷ That task would be left to the Cappadocian.

The original Nicene Creed ended with anathematizing “those who claim that the Son of God is from another *hypostasis* or *ousia*.” The term *ousia* was fraught with ambiguous philosophical overtures, while the term *hypostasis* was virtually synonymous with it, even in the thoughts of Athanasius.³⁸ The Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—resolved this through establishing more precise definitions for theology. Pelikan writes, “The only way to dispel the confusion was to come up with a definition of *hypostasis* that set it apart from *ousia* and made it a fit instrument for the specification of what was distinctive in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. The *hypostasis*, then, had to be ‘that which is spoken of distinctively, rather than the indefinite notion of the *ousia*.’”³⁹ Understanding these terms in a more theological manner solved the problem Nicæa had created—one could now affirm both the full divinity of the Son and the genuine distinction of the three persons without lapsing into modalism or subordinationism. As such, the church was prepared for another council.

Constantinople

A regional council at Constantinople was called in 381 AD to reaffirm the faith of Nicæa since the church continued to struggle against new forms of Arianism and the Pneumatomachians. In the intervening years, Arians created altered versions of the Nicene creed creating confusion among people about what the Nicene faith was. The Pneumatomachians created confusion on the Gospel by affirming the Nicene position on the Son but denying the divine hypostasis of the Holy Spirit as “Lord and Giver of life.” One of the Cappadocians, Gregory of Nazianzus, presided over most of this council.⁴⁰ The Council of Constantinople is credited with both reaffirming the Nicene Creed and with writing a new creed of the 150 Fathers. The new creed more than confirms the older creed by reinterpreting Nicæa, clarifying it, and giving

36. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 208.

37. David M. Gwynn, “Athanasius of Alexandria,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. Ken Parry (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 114.

38. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: 100-600, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1:219.

39. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 1:220.

40. Brian E. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus, The Early Church Fathers* (Routledge, 2006), 23–24.

it new purpose. The first two articles respectively about the Father and about the Son are very similar to the Nicene Creed but with primarily stylistic adjustments that still reiterate the strong Christological stance. The third article on the Holy Spirit is lengthened and the anathema dropped.⁴¹ This new creed became known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, or simply the Nicene Creed. In 451 at Chalcedon, this regional council and its local creed were adopted as ecumenical in nature, but it would take time for the Creed to be disseminated across the East and the West. Eventually, it would be confessed throughout the world, but in the West, it is used with one difference.

The *Filioque*

A series of issues led the Western church to add one word to the third article of the Latin version of the creed of Constantinople, a word which would contribute to the schism in 1054 between the Eastern and Western church. The word is *filioque*, or “and the Son.” The term exists in the line, “We believe in the Holy Spirit ... who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.” Historians trace the origin of using the *filioque* to the Third Council of Toledo in 587. The Visigoth king, who ruled from Toledo, converted to Nicene Christianity from a version of Arianism known as Homoianism. Kinzig describes this incident thusly: “The principal reason for this addition was no doubt the struggle against Homoianism which also involved denying the Spirit’s divine substance. It was thought that adding the phrase *filioque* would enhance the Spirit’s status, given the fact that the pneumatological section of [the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed] did not contain *homoousios*.”⁴² King Reccared needed to renounce his past heresy by more faithfully proclaiming the faith in this situation. In other words, confession and faithful proclamation required more specificity to confront Arianism, and confronting this heresy was one of the reasons the 318 Fathers had written the creed.

The *filioque* was not a novelty created for Toledo but rather has a longer history.⁴³ Tertullian (c. 155—c. 220 AD) wrote that the “Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son.”⁴⁴ Many of the early fathers in both the East and West use “from” and “through” language. Augustine’s psychological model of the Trinity contributed to the West adopting the *filioque*. More importantly, there was a linguistic difference between the East and the West. The Latin text needed and allowed the *filioque*

41. Kinzig gives a history of the text of the Creed of Constantinople along with a detailed analysis of its textual development. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 355–78.

42. Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 550.

43. For detailed history see: A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford University Press, 2010). Michelle Coetzee, *The Filioque Impasse: Patristic Roots*, with Rodney Moss, *Perspectives on Philosophy and Religious Thought* (Gorgias Press, 2012) and Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds*, 549–70.

44. Siecienski, *The Filioque*, 52.

because of a gap between the Greek *ekporeusis* and Latin *processio*.⁴⁵ In the East, *ekporeusis* means to flow from a source whereas in the West, *processio* emphasizes the going forth and is neutral about the source. Thus, *processio* does not necessarily include the monarchy of the Father whereas *ekporeusis* does.

Even though the East and West faced the same threat, the Nicene truth needed to be articulated differently. The *filioque* and the related controversy demonstrate the difficulty of bridging the linguistic gap necessary to faithfully proclaim the faith.

Confessions

The Reformation put new fervor into confessing the faith. Martin Luther embodied confession standing at the Diet of Worms in 1521. When asked to recount his writings under pressure of the Emperor and the Pope, he reportedly said, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”⁴⁶ Likewise, in his treatise “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” of 1528, he wrote, “I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide by it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷ Luther wrote this confession of faith presuming that he would soon die for his faith. According to Maurer, this treatise is the basis for the Augsburg Confession.⁴⁸ It is at Augsburg that we find the Reformers being asked to give their confessions before the Emperor, the world, and God.

In 1530, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V called a diet at Augsburg to bring unity to the church. At this meeting, he requested an orderly presentation of the Reformers teaching. Prior to this diet, the Reformers had already been drafting articles on doctrine amongst themselves, including the Articles of Schwabach (1529), the Articles of Marburg (1529), and the Articles of Torgau (1529).⁴⁹ Since Luther was unable to travel outside Saxony, Philipp Melancthon took a lead role.

45. See the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, “The Greek and the Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, September 13, 1995. For analysis, see Coetzee, *The Filioque Impasse*, 41–53.

46. Oswald Bayer, “Necessary Transformation?: The Reformation and Modernity in Controversy over Freedom,” *Pro Ecclesia* 22, no. 3 (2013): 297–98. For a discussion on the chreia, see Samuel L. Young, “How Luther Became the Mythical ‘Here I Stand’ Hero,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2022): 53–72.

47. Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper (1528),” in *Word and Sacrament III*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 37, ed. and trans. Robert H. Fischer, *Luther’s Works* (Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 360.

48. Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, trans. H. George Anderson (Fortress Press, 1986), 4, 239.

49. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2001), 83–104.

While Melancthon originally thought he needed to write an apology to defend Evangelical teaching, he eventually decided a new type of document was needed, a confession.⁵⁰ The word “confession” can refer to several distinct concepts. Confession of sin is the sacramental act whereby a penitent admits his sins and receives the pronouncement of absolution. Confession of the faith results from confessing the word of God. Augustine named his spiritual autobiography a confession. Additionally, Melancthon’s new genre was a confession. Interestingly, all are linked. Confession of sin is a mark of faith, and confession of faith and praise results from confession of sin. All lead to a life given to confessing the God who will save His people.

However, what distinguishes a confession from a creed? Duffy notes that the creeds are confessions, but the converse is not true.⁵¹ Likewise Fairbairn notes the difficulty of distinguishing the two. Creeds are from the ancient church unlike confessions. Creeds are shorter and focus on the Trinity whereas confessions are more concerned with the implications of the Trinity.⁵² Kolb gives an extended definition: “A confession of faith may be defined as ‘a formal, usually (though not always) brief, summary of the central principles of a religion, fixed in its wording. Alongside the task of comprehending the essential content of a faith, it has the function of demarcating that faith in relationship to other religions and heretical tendencies within its own adherents.’”⁵³

This new document, the Augsburg Confession, was signed by the princes rather than the priests of the church or theologians such as Melancthon. With this document, they confessed that “we herewith make public witness and appeal. This is our confession and that of our people, article by article, as follows.”⁵⁴ As a result of the Augsburg Confession and the history leading up to it, including the Lutheran Reformation, Lutheran theology would be linked to confessing the faith.

The Augsburg Confession needed to define and defend Evangelical teaching, but it also had to demonstrate that the Reformers’ teaching was not new but actually catholic, grounded in the Biblical witness, and opposed the same heresies the catholic church. This is the way the confession describes itself: “there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers.... The entire dissension concerns a few specific abuses, which have crept into the churches without any proper authority.”⁵⁵

50. Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith* (Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 28.

51. Stephen J. Duffy, “Creeds and Confessions of Faith: From Ages of Belief to an Age of Creedal Malaise,” *Religious Studies Review* (New Haven, CT) 31, nos. 1–2 (2005): 40.

52. Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Baker Academic, 2019), 7.

53. Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 16.

54. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, 2000), 34.

55. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 59.

Even though the Augsburg Confession begins by affirming the ancient creeds, it does not just restate them. As Maurer notes in his history of this confession, “The Augustana does not simply take the texts in which Christianity had stated its faith officially since the Council of Constantinople in 381 and repeat them word for word. It interprets and modifies them. This fact soon makes clear that we are dealing not with a formal repristination but with a theological renewal arising from an inclusive understanding of Reformation theology and, in turn, affecting that theology.”⁵⁶ Key to the reinterpretation is articulating justification by faith alone as the article upon which the Church stands and falls.

In like manner, the Confession demonstrates that even the ancient creeds are based in the Scriptures. As Luther said, “The Church of God has no power to establish any article of faith, just as it has never established any nor will it establish any in perpetuity. . . . All the articles are sufficiently established in the Holy Scriptures, so that there is no need to establish anything further.”⁵⁷ The Confession does not exhaust the content of the Scriptures but rather presents its teaching needed for the current conflict using language suitable for the time and place. To establish common ground with their enemies and properly confess their faith, the Reformers also condemned the historic heresies as well as the teachings of the radical Reformation of the day.

The confessors of the Augsburg Confession continued the example set forth by the council of Nicæa, a realization with which the next generation of heirs of the Reformation agreed. The Preface of the *Book of Concord* states that “many churches and schools professed this confession as the contemporary Symbol of their faith in the chief controversial articles against the papacy and all sorts of factions.”⁵⁸ The Epitome describes it, along with the Apology and the Smalcald Articles, as “our symbol for this time.”⁵⁹ Likewise, the Solid Declaration regards the Augsburg Confession as “our creed for this age” and “a pure, Christian creed, which (after the Word of God) should guide true Christians in this time, just as in earlier times Christian creeds and confessions were formulated in God’s church when major controversies broke out.”⁶⁰ Creed and confession are linked, and a church with no confession is not a church.⁶¹

56. Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, 239.

57. Martin Luther, “Theses Against the Whole Synagogue of Satan and All the Gates of Hell,” in *Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 30.2 (Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883), 420.

58. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 5.

59. At this time, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope was considered a part of the Smalcald Articles. Quote from paragraph 3, Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 487.

60. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 525, 527.

61. From The Confession of Faith of the Protestant Christian Batak Church. Pelikan, *Credo*, 63.

The Necessity of the Creeds and Confessions for Today

Creeds and Confessions remain necessities for theology, particularly Lutheran theology, and such themes require explanations for full understanding.

Believing, Confessing, Teaching, Preaching

The origin of the words ‘creed’ and ‘confession’ are the verbs ‘believe’ and ‘confess,’ which gets to the root of what creeds and confessions are. Though the terms are nouns, we should not lose the verb sense of an action. According to Kolb, the Reformers understood the importance of confessing being a verb; “The Wittenberg reformers understood ‘confession,’ referring to the document, as a kind of ‘verbal noun,’ in which content could not be separated from the action of presenting the content to the world. For them, holding a confession of the faith meant to be speaking it in public, living according to it, and being prepared to die for it.”⁶²

The verbs confess, preach, and teach result from faith. Pelikan discusses them further: “Believing and confessing, then, have always been correlatives: a creed-like confession of the resurrection of Christ in the New Testament is followed by the formula, ‘So we preach and so you believed.’ The correlation becomes clear in the reiterations and permutations of these two terms, believe and confess (often in combination with the third term, teach...) in the language of creeds and confessions throughout Christian history.”⁶³ Kolb captures this dynamic when he writes, “A confession is therefore faith moving into life and speech. The Christian confession of faith in Christ ‘is oral, is public, and is heard’; it praises God publicly, and it is spoken to God in order to honor Him.”⁶⁴ Likewise, historian Kelley notes that “the early Church was from the start a believing, confessing, preaching Church.”⁶⁵

Faith is a gift of God in Christ, given through the Gospel by the Holy Spirit, by which He calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy. Knowledge of Jesus as Christ and Son of God is offered and bestowed on us by the Spirit. Thus, confession of faith is always a charismatic practice, a fruit of the Spirit that allows us to say “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:1-3). Moreover, our confessions of Christ are empty without His confession before the Father (Mt 10:32, 33; Lk 12:8). Moltmann emphasizes Christ’s confession for us: “Christ’s witness is a public witness of liberating truth. The witness of this truth therefore also takes place in public, in order to set men free from public lies and public fear.”⁶⁶ Confessors do not confess what they must believe but confess the belief they have been given. Simply put, God commands

62. Robert Kolb, “Confession of Faith,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Baker Academic, 2017).

63. Quoting 2 Cor 15:3-11. Pelikan, *Credo*, 37.

64. Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 16.

65. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 7.

66. Jürgen Moltmann, “The Confession of Jesus Christ: A Biblical Theological Consideration,” in *An Ecumenical Confession of Faith?* by Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann (Seabury Press, 1979), 18.

confessing Him and His holy name, yet such a good work is only possible by the free gift of the Holy Spirit.

This inbreaking of the Spirit that cuts one off from what was reveals that confession is apocalyptic.⁶⁷ “A true confession has always an eschatological aspect. The confessing Church, as the individual confessor, stands always at the border of time and eternity. . . . To confess Christ is dangerous. It involves a risk of life. Still more dangerous is it to deny Christ.”⁶⁸ Paulson argues that the Lutheran confessors explicitly understood their task as apocalyptic since they were confessed before both God and Emperor.⁶⁹

Confessions do not fall like a tree in a forest with no one hearing but are to be articulated both to God and people. Before God, a confession is doxology, but before men, it is proclamation and teaching. As Kolb notes, “God’s people must continuously confess and teach the faith. For confessing the faith means interpreting and applying the Scriptures to contemporary life. In this sense, confessing the faith is almost synonymous with teaching the faith.”⁷⁰ The Augsburg Confession acknowledges that it is for teaching, for it views itself as a “nearly a complete summary of what is preached and taught in our churches for proper Christian instruction and the comfort of consciences, as well as for the improvement of believers.”⁷¹

Creeds guided the church’s teaching, even before they were formalized; the *regula fidei* described what was taught to catechumens. By the time of the Reformation, catechetical teaching in the West included the Lord’s Prayer, the Decalogue, as well of the Apostles’ Creed.⁷² Luther would follow this model in writing his catechisms, which would be included in the Lutheran confessions. Chemnitz, who authored parts of the Formula of Concord, taught in a manner consistent with the Formula of Concord,⁷³ and it remains so presently. John Webster describes his own experience, “I resolved to structure the content of my teaching in accordance with the intellectual and spiritual logic of the Christian confession as it finds expression in the classical creeds, to allow that structure to stand and to explicate itself, and not to press the material into some other format.”⁷⁴

67. For an interesting exercise in the apocalyptic nature of the Nicene Creed, see Paul R. Hinlicky, “How Apocalyptic Disrupts Theological Tradition,” *Pro Ecclesia* 33, no. 4 (2024): 394–409.

68. Hermann Sasse, “Confession of Faith,” *Springfielder* 28, no. 3 (1964): 8, ATLA0000690357.

69. Steven D. Paulson, “What Kind of Confession Is the Augsburg Confession?: ‘I Will Also Speak of Your Decrees before Kings, and Shall Not Be Put to Shame’ (Psalm 119:46),” *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 56, no. 1 (2014): 12–34.

70. Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 22–23.

71. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 58.

72. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 377.

73. Christian J. Einertson, “Martin Chemnitz’s Christology in Proclamation and Confession,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2022): 23.

74. John Webster, “Discovering Dogmatics,” in *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology*, ed. Darren C. Marks (Ashgate, 2002), 130.

The need to proclaim the freeing Gospel before the world shapes the form of confession. In the hostile conflict between belief and unbelief, the church works out the language of her confession as the intellectual horizon of the present age presses the church to clarify what she confesses and to distinguish faithful confession from the false alternatives. In our increasingly pluralistic, post-Christian world, the word 'god' can refer to many things. God in our time "is probably nearer to pantheism (world is God) or panentheism (world is contained in God) than to classical monotheism" let alone the revealed God of the Holy Scriptures who redeems his people in Christ Jesus.⁷⁵ The task of preaching must therefore state the church's confession by speaking it faithfully and intelligibly into the world in which the church is called to proclaim the Gospel.

The Faith

Just as the act of confessing is important, so too is the faith confessed. The distinction between confessing and confession corresponds to the traditional difference between *fides quae creditur* and *fides qua creditur*, the subjective aspect and the objective aspect that come from outside us. The *quae* and the *qua* belong together. "Form and content ... cannot be separated. One cannot divorce faith as an act of believing from the faith that is believed. A confession is, in fact, that which is being confessed here and now. An act of confessing can, of course, become a past completed event and therefore a confession. Insofar as a past confession remains or becomes again a living, present event, it is the content of an act of confession today."⁷⁶ The object of faith is the one whom Moses encountered at Mount Horeb and whom Peter identified; thus, confession's content is not about the experience of receiving revelation but of revelation's object. "Although historically variable, true confession always, as *homologizein*, is the confession of the one dogma, the single, even if complex, trinitarian content given to the faith."⁷⁷

It has been argued that the creeds and confessions are primarily to act as "boundary markers" or fences.⁷⁸ This is affirmed in distinction from this argument that they are primarily vehicles for the act of confessing. By confessing in a world of confused thought, confession by necessity points to the exclusivity of Jesus Christ and thus defines a boundary, but the desire is to plainly speak the Gospel in turbulent times.

Creeds and confessions are typically written at specific places and particular times to address an issue confronting the faith. The early baptismal creeds were local, and the Creed of Constantine began as a local creed, yet creeds speak for the

75. Charles P. Arand, "Confessing the Trinitarian Gospel," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67, nos. 3–4 (2003): 214.

76. Cochrane, "The Act of Confession-Confessing," 61.

77. Michael Root, "The Development of Doctrine: A Lutheran Understanding and Its Ecumenical Application," *Ecclesiology* 2, no. 1 (2005): 37, ATLAN4400032, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1744136605056577>.

78. Fairbairn and Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 247.

whole church as they are catholic and universal in intent with a surplus of meaning. Lutheran confessions continue in this heritage, such as when The Augsburg Confession describes itself thusly: “there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church, or from the Roman church, insofar as we can tell from its writers. ... The entire dissension concerns a few specific abuses, which have crept into the churches without any proper authority.”⁷⁹ “Each new confession does not abolish its precursors, but incorporates them.”⁸⁰ Not everyone agrees. Barth writes, “A Reformed Creed is the statement, spontaneously and publicly formulated by a Christian community within a geographically limited area, which, until further action, defines its character to outsiders.”⁸¹ There is a difficulty in calling a confession catholic if all do not accept it. This led Jenson to describe the confessions as *proposals* to the church. He writes, “The confessions understand themselves as addresses to the church catholic, making a few allegedly indispensable points about the discourse and life of the church, points that ought always to be observed but must be made explicitly just because they often are not. That is, the confessions are a *proposal of dogma*.”⁸²

The point of the creeds is not their antiquity. If the creeds, or any dogma, were accepted because of tradition, then tradition itself becomes another source of authority competing with the Word of God. Unfortunately, tradition inserts itself into many ecumenical efforts. Sasse cautions us that “one must not read into the New Testament the doctrine of ‘tradition’ as distinct from the written word, which we find with the Fathers since the second century. The Gospel was oral proclamation before it was written. As written word it becomes oral word again in the faithful preaching of the Gospel, as Luther always emphasized.”⁸³ He goes on to note that none of the great Medieval theologians has a doctrine of tradition. For instance, the recent Lutheran-Orthodox joint statement on the *filioque* wherein after acknowledging the continued Arian problem in the West and the needs of translation, the statement recommends not including the *filioque* in translations of the Greek creed because the old age of the text should be valued.⁸⁴ This statement neglects the continued need in the West to distinguish Christian belief from heresies. Tradition

79. Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 59.

80. Ronald R. Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse: Confessionalist and Confessor,” in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker (The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990), 18.

81. Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, with Thomas F. Torrance (SCM Press, 1962), 112.

82. Emphasis in original. Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Fortress Press, 1976), 2–3.

83. Hermann Sasse, “Tradition and Confession,” *Lutheran World* 4, no. 1 (1957): 76. For an analysis of Sasse’s views of tradition see Thomas D. Pietsch, “Hermann Sasse and Jaroslav Pelikan: Confession and Tradition,” *Logia* 26, no. 2 (2017): 31–40, ATLAN4074256.

84. The Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church, “Common Statement on the Filioque,” May 27, 2024.

becomes problematic when it is a source of authority, not when the church uses old forms and words to transmit the faith.

Grammar

The creeds function as the basic framework that governs and integrates the church's teaching, proclamation, and praise, thereby offering a coherent structure for the whole of Christian life rooted in eschatological witness to the crucified and risen Christ and providing a grammar of the scriptural language of faith. The Nicene-Chalcedonian Creed distinguishes the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit both by how the persons relate to one another in themselves and in the work attributed to each toward us. This immanent and economic language prevents the grammar from collapsing in either direction and guards against modalism, subordinationism, platonic abstraction, or other heresies. By narrating the story of the acts of the Son empowered by the Spirit and sent by the Father, this grammar highlights the plot of Holy Scripture, thus enabling prayer, doxology, and theological reasoning without collapse or tritheism. "So the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely the 'summary grammar' of Christian speech and thought concerning God. It is the basic framework governing the whole of the Christian life. Since, as the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, it both distinguishes Father, Son, and Spirit from one another and relates them to one another in a specific way on the basis of the eschatological experience of the one who was crucified and raised, it offers a basic integrating model for all aspects and dimensions of Christian life, experience, thought, and activity."⁸⁵

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85. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Crucified and Resurrected: Restructuring the Grammar of Christology* (Baker Academic, 2015), 210.

A Book Worth Discussing

Duane Larson

*Ubi Deus Dixit. Where God Has Spoken:
The Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms*

Andrew L. Christiansen

Duane Larson's *Ubi Deus Dixit. Where God Has Spoken: The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* from the Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology series is well-worth reading as it is fit for many audiences, including Luther scholars, Lutheran theologians, Christian and ecumenical theologians, and those interested in political theology. It is an ambitious work delving into historical-theology, legal thought, continental philosophy, and biblical interpretation. Additionally, it is a work of public theology engaging with current and relevant state of political and societal affairs.

From the outset of his book, Larson is concerned with the domestication of the "Two Kingdoms" doctrine. He also rightfully laments that there was a neglect of a serious consideration of this teaching after the first-generation of Reformers.¹ The corrective he seeks to offer is a "true reading" of the Two Kingdoms.

Overall, what Larson seeks to do in the book should be commended. Much here is helpful, particularly his recovery of natural law from modernity's marginalization of it and his insistence that Romans 13 and the Two Kingdoms be read within an eschatological and apocalyptic framework. At the same time, there are places where Larson's argument could be strengthened, particularly in his definition and critique of Christian Nationalism and in his treatment of Luther, Stringfellow, and the *theologia crucis*.

In my estimation, one of the strongest parts of Larson's book is his call for a recovery of "Natural Law" as a foundation for civil law. Larson recognizes how natural law has gradually lost the place it once held as a guiding principle for governance. Surveying the history of the concept from Cicero to Luther, Larson importantly notes that in Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, he assumed "natural law's provenance in civil governance."²

Larson then traces the concept after Luther to Locke, to Kant, to its marginalization and disappearance in the Enlightenment, and up to recent trends in legal

1. Duane Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit. Where God Has Spoken: The Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms* (Cascade Books, 2025), xxiii.

2. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 81.

philosophy. Larson also notes that Jeremy Bentham's secularizing philosophy, natural law, or the understanding of a higher law that determines what is good and ill—a philosophy that Larson describes as a “removing” of “all religious mystery from analysis of social good and ill”³—was excised from being the basis for governance.

Once this excision happened, social policy and law were to be evaluated primarily according to their measurable consequences for human welfare rather than their conformity to a transcendent moral order. Through Mills, this “utilitarianism” of Bentham was then married to the concept of self-autonomy, or the idea that moral rights “are derived from the basic fact drawn from observation that individuals can and do think for themselves, claim autonomy, and follow one's reasonable intuition as to the trustworthiness of certain public leaders.”⁴ This essentially led to desires of a people presently deemed sovereign to fill the vacuum left once natural law no longer served as the origin from which earthly governance derived.

Through legal philosophers such as Wendell Holmes and especially H.L.A. Hart, there was a return of a universal principle rather than the will of the people for civil laws, but this principle was “the right of all people to be free from suffering.”⁵ Larson importantly notes how Hart gives no substantive justification for this “right.” This “legal positivism” operates with a vague sense of a higher law but never cares to acknowledge or unpack what it is. This unwillingness to recognize such has led to our current situation (in the U.S. and other Western countries) of “textualism” or “originalism” as our legal approach, which bears the inevitable consequence of distraction from the broader purpose of legislating.

Given Larson's incisive observation and diagnosis of this current problem, his call for the restoration of natural law is convincing. However, it would have been good to see more discussion about what this looks like, practically speaking. In concrete terms, what would a governance in modern (or post-modern) society based on natural law look like? It is true that natural law according to the Christian is not particularly Christian but something universal. Indeed, Larson says, “Religious authority is not to export doctrine or practice from its domain into the temporal domain.”⁶ However, given our current situation, would not ardent secularists cry “theocracy!” at notions of natural law, as much as a Christian may insist it's not a specifically Christian notion? I ask this not as a criticism of anything Larson wrote on this matter but as a curiosity I have that I would be interested in Larson and other likeminded thinkers to address.

Another strength of the book is found in Larson's discussion on eschatology, especially in his chapter “Paul's Eschatological Politics” and his insistence on a “recovery” of Pauline eschatology in turn informs a healthy framing of the Lutheran

3. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 90.

4. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 91.

5. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 93.

6. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 11-12.

doctrine of two kingdoms. An eschatological hermeneutic is necessary to properly understand Paul and the Lutheran Two Kingdoms. Without it, the Two Kingdoms morphs into a kind of dualism where the church and state stay in their respective lanes perpetually and without any relationship, “as if the spiritual kingdom were a private place for faith and piety on the same plane as the temporal kingdom’s place of coordinate public life.”⁷ This eschatological framing puts the doctrine in its rightful place and the relationship and boundaries of authorities in their rightful places to avoid any conjoining of “throne and altar.”⁸

In his section on Paul, Larson asks the important question: “Readers of Paul have questioned him ever since he advised unquestioned obedience and respect (to earthly authorities). Did Paul really mean to be so final and so summary in this preciously concise exhortation?”⁹ On a surface level, one could naturally answer that Paul’s resoluteness regarding submission to authority does not necessarily entail that it trumps allegiance to God. Indeed, Paul’s devotion to the proclamation of the Gospel shows that he was committed to activity of which authorities often disapproved. Larson, though, gets to the real heart of the issue: Paul’s vision is ultimately “sparkingly eschatological” and “counsels Christian patience and endurance of the present government principalities and powers so that we would be ready rightly to welcome the coming kingdom.”¹⁰

Larson’s readings of Paul eschatologically and apocalyptically is the corrective to a reading of Paul in which Christians resign themselves to a life conforming to the temporal state of affairs. As “eschatological people,” Christians relate to the needs in this world by promoting the well-being and *imago Dei* of people in the temporal kingdom because we live in *messianic time*: the “time remaining” “between” the chronological time in which we live (*chronos*) and the eschaton. Drawing on the work of J. Louis Martyn, Larson speaks of the “punctiliar” or invasive sense of the Kingdom of God at work now, fully even if not consummately. Correlatively, we can live *fully* in this Kingdom even while in the temporal kingdom because we are on *messianic time*.

Larson says that the “concept of messianic time derives from a person’s momentary experience of and interpreted meaning of Messiah’s ‘untimely’ presence.”¹¹ It is not Larson’s original term but a term coined from the philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his own 2005 commentary on Romans, *The Time That Remains*, that Larson seeks to promote and advance in theological discourse and discussion of

7. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 5.

8. Larson sees a particular contemporary example of such domestication in the form of Christian Nationalism. He calls this a “conjoining of throne and altar” in our own time (*Ubi Deus Dixit*, xxix). This issue will be treated below.

9. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 149.

10. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 151.

11. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 160.

Christian ethics. This is one of the strong points of Larson's book and a helpful integration of a modern philosophical insight with the classical doctrine of the Parousia.

Another kind of time that Larson discusses in the book is worth mentioning: *kairos* time. *Kairos* time is a term used seemingly interchangeably with *messianic* time by both Agamben and Larson. Agamben illustrates the contrast and relation of this kind of messianic time to *chronos* time:

First, you have secular time, which Paul usually refers to as *chronos*, which spans from creation to the messianic event.... Here time contracts itself and begins to end. But this contracted time, which Paul refers to in the expression *ho nyn kairos*, "the time of now," lasts until the *parousia*, the full presence of the Messiah.¹²

Larson believes Agamben's "refiguration [of the relationship between time and parousia] accords well with what we've learned of Augustine's sense of the 'already' of the heavenly city."¹³ In the messianic time, Larson says there is a "sliver like proximity to the eternal to be grasped,"¹⁴ meaning that the fullness of the presence of the Messiah is *imminent*.

However, it is worth noting a further complication when it comes to Larson's engagement with Agamben and other interpreters of Paul. Larson sees Paul as unaware of this understanding of time's relationship to the parousia—the understanding characterized by Agamben as "messianic time"—until his later years in his Romans writing. The eschatology of Paul, Larson says, develops from the time of his earliest writings like I Thessalonians where Paul had a more "linear" eschatology, with a notion of waiting for *chronos*'s ending and *eschaton*'s beginning but with no concept of a contracted time-remaining by the subsuming of the *chronos* into *kairos*, to a more mature eschatology in Romans where Paul "looks toward no parousia.... He does not even use the word"¹⁵ because the kingdom is now. The irony is that Larson relies heavily on the work of L.L. Welborn, a New Testament scholar whose very work Larson cites is a *critique* of Agamben on the very point of "now time," in this section.

In Welborn's view, Agamben's understanding of *nun kairos* "falls short of the apostle's conception" of it."¹⁶ Welborn understands Paul's now-time as the point at which *kairos* "arrests" *chronos*. He sees Agamben as sometimes approaching this understanding but ultimately failing to account for it adequately in his model. Welborn is dissatisfied with Agamben's concept of a contracted time,¹⁷ arguing that it

12. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford University Press, 2005), 63.

13. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 163.

14. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 164.

15. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 161.

16. L. L. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life: Political Theology and the Coming Awakening* (Columbia University Press, 2015), 16.

17. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life*, 15.

is not sufficiently explained and ultimately leads to a conception of *kairos* defined by our “self-consciousness” that never truly arrives in the way that it does for Paul.

Welborn also sees a fundamental difference between Agamben's and Paul's conceptions of *kairos*: “[I]n Agamben, the *kairos* retains a future orientation: the presence of the *kairos* ‘stretches’ time toward its parousia. But for Paul, the *kairos* is a relationship between a past event and a potentiality in the present (Rom. 13:11-12).”¹⁸ One may quibble over whether this is really an either/or distinction. Nevertheless, this is a point where Larson could have engaged Welborn more fully, especially since this very concept of *kairos* is also informed in Larson's work by someone who sees a fundamental difference between Agamben and Paul.

From the outset of his book, Larson is concerned with the domestication of the two kingdoms doctrine, domestication in the sense of conflating of the two kingdoms in a way that confuses the purpose of the kingdoms so that the kingdom of heaven is seen as nothing more than a social or political human project. Larson sees a particular contemporary example of such domestication in the form of Christian Nationalism. This appears to be a concern that really drives him.

Although Larson states from the outset that this book is neither centrally about Christian Nationalism nor the challenge of it, it would've been helpful for him to give a more precise definition of the term so the reader could know exactly what he means. This is not to deny that there is such a thing as Christian Nationalism (or its other iterations in recent history, like Christian “dominionism”). Christian Nationalism is both always a possibility theoretically while existing concretely. Simultaneously, this term has been abused by both the religious progressives and the secular left—those who use it dismissively and avoid engagement with any ideas to the right of them—as if a kind of cultural conservatism that is at least in part informed by one's faith automatically equates with Christian Nationalism.

Larson doesn't seem to give the same amount of attention to other ideologies that are very real threats to the boundaries the Two Kingdoms teaching seeks to uphold. A recent work that is worth noting, one published a year prior to Larson's text, is N.T. Wright and Michael Bird's book of public theology, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies*.

Admittedly, Wright and Bird's book does not engage at all with Luther's Two Kingdoms teaching, but Wright and Bird share many of Larson's concerns with the present state of affairs. Their ultimate conclusion is that liberal democracy and healthy pluralism, while far from being perfect, are the most ideal settings for Christians to experience flourishing and freedom. Bird and Wright identify three ideological trends in recent times they see as threats to this ideal. One is Christian Nationalism. The other two are Totalitarianism and, interestingly, a third type of threat they call Civic Totalism. This is a form of “soft authoritarianism” they argue

18. Welborn, *Paul's Summons to Messianic Life*, 17.

has emerged among the contemporary left in many Western democracies that uses state and institutional power to impose a narrow vision of the good life, one that reflects the progressive values of what they call a “bohemian bourgeois” segment of the population (very upper middle class, college educated, white) that places an excessive emphasis on identity politics at the expense of the unity-within-diversity essential for liberal democracies to thrive. Wright and Bird argue that this creates a system that suppresses dissent and limits ideological diversity by narrowing the scope of what people can say and discuss. By imposing a singular vision of the good life and tending toward dogmatism, it fills the vacuum left in increasingly post-religious societies and, in turn, comes to see religious voices in the public square as nuisances.¹⁹

Wright and Bird’s treatment of the contemporary landscape is holistic. Although Larson certainly acknowledges at times that there are other very real extremes besides Christian Nationalism, including on the Left, it would have been helpful to see him similarly give these concerns equal treatment and consideration.

Even so, Larson is not solely concerned with a right-wing distortion of the Two Kingdoms. He also recognizes the danger of an intolerant secularism that excludes religious conviction from the public square. He points out that in our contemporary culture war setting, the right is misguided when it blames “postmodernity” as a kind of bogeyman behind a kind of chaotic relativism. Larson aptly points out it is “modernism’s atheistic DNA leftovers in postmodernity”²⁰ of which the right is actually suspicious.

It is worth pointing out that Larson *does* acknowledge the extremes of the Left at times. For instance, Larson speaks of the “Jacobins” who would like to “‘tax the churches whenever spiritual conviction is a stated premise for a proposed (political) resolution’”²¹ while also lamenting that there are Christians who try to “‘connect with today’s Jacobins.’”²² It would’ve been productive for Larson to engage with this other extreme in detail, as this kind of soft-authoritarian, anti-religious moralistic progressivism is arguably as dangerous as any kind of rightist nationalism or theocracy.

Larson’s treatment of Luther captures the essence of certain dimensions of Luther’s concept of the Two Kingdoms. For instance, Larson says, “The specific terms of ‘Two Kingdoms’ for Augustine was about the conflict between Satan and Christ. In no way did Luther mean this; we’ve seen that he transposed two kingdoms into the keys of ‘spiritual’ and ‘temporal.’”²³ The statement proves *partially* true.

19. N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (Zondervan, 2024), 136-139.

20. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 16.

21. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 12.

22. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 24.

23. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 33.

Luther certainly did transpose the Two Kingdoms into these categories, which is one dimension of how he speaks of the Two Kingdoms. However, Luther also very much understands the Two Kingdoms in terms of a conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the Devil. Marcel Nieten points out that Luther's *Temporal Authority* brings these two concepts together, specifically in the concept of opposing eschatological kingdoms composed of Christians and non-Christians respectively with the concept of complementary regiments of Gospel and Sword through which God rules his entire creation (and against the kingdom of the Devil).²⁴

Indeed, a few sentences later Larson seems to acknowledge this when he notes that Christ's reign is "in larger conflict with Satan's reign."²⁵ If Larson is going to refer to the Two Kingdoms teaching as the "Augustinian Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms,"²⁶ then I think there needs to be the acknowledgement of the common thread between Augustine and Luther. This conflict between God and Satan is arguably equally pronounced and certainly axiomatic in both Augustine and Luther—for instance, this appears in Luther's theology of the life of a believer in which the believer is "ridden" by either God or by the Devil.

While Larson rightly sees that eschatology is the "primary frame by which one should interpret Romans,"²⁷ Larson appears to imply that Luther lacked this in his own reading of Romans. Larson devotes a section of his book to William Stringfellow's work *Conscience and Obedience* and its critique of Luther. Larson writes, "It is odd then, to read Rom 13:1-7 as if it only meant [quoting Stringfellow] 'obedience to whatever regime happens to occupy office, much less an obligation of simplistic or automatic obedience to the person of the ruler.'"²⁸ It is not clear whether Larson is directing this at Luther or those who misread Luther, so taking into account that Larson is giving a Stringfellow-informed critique of Luther leading up to this statement, one could easily interpret the above remark as directed at Luther.

This is not an accurate characterization of Luther's views. There is much to be critical of Luther whether that be his harsh words toward peasants or Jews, his disdain of Muslims and "papists" that inform his own kind of apocalypticism, or how consistent he may or may not have been with how he counseled rulers (which included times where he was all too willing to urge violence). However, to say that Luther urged some kind of blind obedience to any authority in all matters

24. See Marcel Nieten's essay "Martin Luthers Zwei-Reiche-Lehre in kontextueller Perspektive" in *Angewandtes Luthertum? Die Zwei-Reiche-Lehre als theologische Konstruktion in politischen Kontexten des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Edited by Jürgen Kampmann & Hans Otte. (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017), 27-52.

25. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 33.

26. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 36.

27. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 69.

28. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 69. Larson quotes William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming* (Word, 1977), 48.

simply does not fit with the positions Luther actually articulates in his key writings on the matter of obedience.

As much as Larson's work is helpful in its deep awareness of the current issues we face as well as in its employment of recent commentators' insights on Paul and eschatology, some of the problems that Larson alleges are to be found in Luther's teachings on the matter of Two Kingdoms hinge on a critique from Stringfellow that is ultimately unconvincing along with overlooking some important areas of Luther's theology.

Larson mentions "the formally unacknowledged role of eschatology and apocalyptic in his two-kingdoms doctrinal construction" and "the evident absence of Luther's *theologica crucis* hermeneutic" in Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.²⁹ Regarding the former, perhaps this is "formally" true, so one may have to go to Paul to have a stronger sense of the apocalyptic (which Larson does through the aid of modern philosophy of time by Agamben). As such, is it fair to say that the latter is absent? Is not Luther's counsel of passive resistance a theology of the cross? Is not subversion through self-giving not repaying evil for evil? Is not Peter exhibiting through his "forbidding" Jesus from the cross and taking the sword to the soldier's ear the same kind of vengeance mentality of those who would not settle for passive resistance? This is one of the places where Larson's criticism could have been aided by a fuller exploration of the fact that Luther had an eschatology of his own. Perhaps Larson is right that the eschatological and apocalyptic dimensions are not always formally articulated in Luther's treatment of the Two Kingdoms, but this does not necessarily mean that they are absent from Luther's theology or from the framework in which Luther understood Christian life and political authority.

Many scholars, such as Ulrich Asendorf, Torsten Bohlin, and Ebbe Thestrup Pedersen, have argued that Luther's eschatology permeates all of his theology. Luther's eschatology is framed in terms of the reality of creation fulfilled alongside tension due to the constant attacks and assaults of the devil on the faithful. This may seem to be a characteristically pre-modern version of eschatology, but it also speaks to the other side, or dark underbelly, of the *time remaining* motif that Agamben and Larson see in optimistic terms of the *klesis* (call to action). Both of these things, the reality of present evil and the imminence (or 'nowness') of the Messiah, are true. When Larson says, "Messianic time makes the law inoperative so that the law can be restored with potentiality to be fulfilled in Christ,"³⁰ this truth must not be malleated (as it so easily can) into an enthusiast (or antinomian) notion that mistakes the absorption of the *chronos* into *kairos* to mean that we are now somehow above or beyond our bodies that still suffer in the state of *chronos* and are still subject to the operation of the law concerning how we live as sinners.

29. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 64.

30. Larson, *Ubi Deus Dixit*, 167.

One can see the “now” and the “not yet” in Luther’s eschatological thought. His eschatology is not without its problems. Much of his outlook on the temporal world, especially in his later years, was admittedly bleak. Of course, this can be explained by the political and social turmoil of the time in which he was often either at the center or about which he was consulted. These things weighed on him, and in many ways, he saw the world “going to hell in a hand-basket.” He saw the days in his own lifetime as the “last days” and often read current events as signs of them.³¹ Such an outlook appears, at least on its surface, to lack the *klesis*, the recognition of the “now moment” wherein one is to be awakened. Perhaps Luther is an important sobering reminder to Christians today that the convergence of “now” and “not yet” is both a celebration and a spiritual battle that always tempts us with the path of glory over the path of the cross.

Nevertheless, Larson’s *Ubi Deus Dixit* is a valuable contribution. Larson is right to recover the Two Kingdoms from its domestications and to insist that it be understood eschatologically rather than as a static division between church and state. His recovery of natural law is particularly helpful, especially in light of the way modernity has marginalized the very concept of a transcendent moral order for civil governance. His engagement with Agamben and the concept of messianic time likewise offers a provocative and fruitful way of thinking about Christian life in the present in light of the parousia.

My critiques are intended to push Larson’s project further. I would like to see a more precise definition of Christian nationalism, a clearer differentiation between theocracy and governance according to natural law, and a more symmetrical treatment of the various ways in which the realms can be confused (including the possibility of what Wright and Bird call “Civic Totalism”). Likewise, I think Larson’s treatment of Luther would benefit from greater attention to Luther’s own eschatology and to the possibility that the *theologia crucis* is not as absent from Luther’s understanding of temporal authority as Larson suggests. Finally, his engagement with Agamben and Welborn deserves further consideration precisely because Welborn’s critique of Agamben complicates the account of *kairos* and messianic time that Larson finds so compelling.

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31. An article that touches on this: Andrew L. Christiansen, “Between Two Testaments: Luther’s Shift in Attitude Toward the Book of Revelation” in *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 32, no. 3 (Holy Trinity, 2023), 35-40.

Symposium

on Gordon Jensen's

*The Call to Discipleship:
Baptism, Vocation, and the Community**

Maria Toomey, Kyle K. Schiefelbein,

Mark D. Tranvik, Allen G. Jorgenson

In its Symposium feature, *Promissio* inculcates appreciative and critical discussion of the theological themes of a significant book worth knowing and discussing. Gordon Jensen's new book on baptism as also the calling to discipleship reflects the narrative of the baptism of Jesus in the Gospels wherein immersion under John the Baptist in the waters of repentance is immediately connected with the descent of the sanctifying Spirit who sends Jesus into battle against Satan and his legion forces. Into this Christological reality and Pneumatological empowerment Christians are baptized, hence called to discipleship.

Maria Toomey carefully exposits Jensen's thesis that baptism is not only the initiating act of the sinner's forensic justification but simultaneously the sanctifying Spirit's effective calling to discipleship. On this exegetical foundation, she works out discipleship as a life lived in following the crucified and risen Lord Jesus into *empathetic encounters*, a notion she richly unpacks with help from Edith Stein. **Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero** similarly brings *Martin Luther's theology of consolation* into conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's account of Christian community in order to identify mutual consolation as a concrete form of discipleship. Mutual consolation is the neighborly form assumed by justification when Christ places the external Word concerning Himself as the one who is radically for us into the mouths of Christians to speak for one another. Luther's accounts of alien and proper righteousness, confession, absolution, suffering, and pastoral care establish the Christological and theological foundations of this ministry of disciples. Bonhoeffer clarifies its communal form through the practices of listening, speaking, forgiving, admonishing, bearing, and serving. Mutual consolation communicates Christ's promise without reducing consolation to therapeutic relief even as it locates

* *Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology* series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2026), 213 pp. \$31.00

pastoral ministry within the common priesthood of the baptized. **Mark D. Tranvik** lauds *Jensen's work for braiding together baptism, vocation, and community* in a way that strengthens each concept. Indeed, he argues, they must be held together because when considered separately, they tend to wobble off course in the many distortions *Jensen's book* describes. Resourcing these comments with a rich exploration of Luther's catechetical teachings, however, **Tranvik** challenges *Jensen's* attempt to assimilate the Lutheran-Roman Catholic convergence in the Joint Declaration on Justification to the important notion (also for *Jensen*!) of *simultaneity* in Luther's account of the sanctified life of the justified sinner whose holiness consists in lived faith, not meritorious works; he raises the question whether the crucial if neuralgic notion of the creature's bound will has been suppressed. **Allen G. Jorgenson** explores the idea that *creation, too, has a vocation that impacts ours*. *Jorgenson* follows *Niels Henrik Gregersen's* proposal that creation is also called, albeit in a manner *sui generis* to it, to argue that we are well served by that calling and perform ours well when we do so in harmony with the cosmos' call. With Luther, *Jorgenson* points to creation's capacity to instruct us in the high calling we share with the whole cosmos in the practice of praise as indispensable in the life of discipleship.

Recently incapacitated and recovering from a serious illness, **Gordon Jensen** will respond to these interlocutors in a future issue of *Promissio*. —PRH

Empathetic Encounters in the Call to Discipleship

Maria Toomey

The paradox of the baptismal event is that it is “both a one-time event and an ongoing way of life.”¹ Stated another way, “baptism, teaching, and experiencing the faith happen at the same time, throughout a person’s lifetime. As a result, baptism is no longer a ‘one-time’ event—rather, it is an ongoing way of living in Christ, while being taught at the same time.”² The Lutheran Church does not need to embrace a Pelagian or semi-Pelagian righteousness works style of methodological morality nor does the Church need to see baptism as a one-time initiation event on the long road of faith development in order to joyfully grasp the paradox of Christians justified and sent into the world to grow in knowledge and faith and to proclaim the love of Christ.³ Refusing to collapse the paradox of passively-justified Christians actively and imperfectly proclaiming the gospel by loving God and serving others, Jensen provides a springboard for such revitalization.

In his *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and Community*, Professor Jensen focuses on the paradoxical nature of discipleship. That discipleship is lived out in the outward-facing vocation of the baptized. If the paradoxical power of and responsibility to the call one received in her baptism is communicated clearly to parents and sponsors of the baptized and to the baptized herself throughout life, this could reinvigorate the Lutheran Church worldwide. It is vital to give pastors language to use in sharing the gospel through teaching, admonishing, and encouraging the baptized, thus enabling parents to better understand the mantle of paradoxical freedom and responsibility they are witnessing God place on their children as He claims them and conforms them to Himself while inspiring individuals to reconsider their own baptismal call to discipleship. This paradox is lived out by the baptized in relation to God’s creation through empathic encounters between created subjects; these empathic encounters allow for both proclamation of the light of the gospel into the darkness of the world and, simultaneously, the shaping and growth of the baptized in their walk as disciples of the triune God.

There is value in Jensen’s treatise concerning baptismal orientation practices and ongoing discipleship education in the Church as theological leaders embrace the paradox that is discipleship, the embodied living of the baptismal promise given by Christ

1. Gordon Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026), 44.

2. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 20.

3. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 17, 25, 172-174.

and received by the baptized who are sent out by the Spirit to encounter creation. The work also emphasizes the importance of understanding this discipleship-learning as that which God intends to be enacted through empathic encounters as the baptized go forth to love Him and serve others, concurrently aware of the sanctifying and shaping power of the Holy Spirit in their inner lives while also holding tightly to their identities in passively-received justification by God and ongoing conformation that Christ has freed them for active, outward-facing empathic encounters of love and service. This conclusion can be examined in relation to empathic encounters as defined by Edith Stein in her doctoral dissertation, "The Problem of Empathy."

Parents or sponsors presenting children or adults preparing for baptism must be taught that baptism is ultimately not a rite of passage or initiation event into a club but is the act of God claiming and recreating His child and enlisting that child into the battle against the foes of Heaven who seek to spread despair and death.⁴ Lutherans usually present infants to receive the baptismal promise and calling; this presentation, prior to the appearance of the fruit of justification and conformity to Christ in their lives, highlights the passivity with which the baptized encounter the promises of God.⁵ In baptismal waters, God not only claims His child, justifying her and continually conforming her to Him, but also sends His child into His world to begin serving the community of others around them.⁶ This service begins immediately and continues to grow and develop throughout the life of the baptized.⁷ Contrary to an understanding of baptism as a response chosen by the baptized when the fruits of faith are sufficiently shown through the agency of the baptized, infant baptism particularly makes clear that any fruit of faith shown comes through the agency of the Holy Spirit working through the baptized members of the Body of Christ. Perhaps it is easier to see service to the community by the aid of organizations that bring food to the grieving and distressed or by volunteers uniting to build houses for those in need instead of seeing the service to the community offered by an infant. However, the service provided by an infant to a community should not be discounted. "God's actions, hidden behind human masks and everyday actions of nurture and support for the neighbor, are important public, visible, proclamations of prophets."⁸ The baptized of all ages and capabilities live out their vocations in these everyday proclamations. With Isaac Watts, we can recognize that "infant voices shall proclaim their early blessings on His name."⁹

Infants' first teachers, their parents or caregivers, deserve a sound foundation from which to instruct and appreciate these tiny humans and their myriad needs

4. Jensen, *Discipleship*, xxii, 5, 57, 59, 122, 146, 157.

5. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 16, 168.

6. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 18, 49.

7. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 181.

8. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 124-125.

9. Isaac Watts, "Jesus Shall Reign," no. 530 in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978).

as well as a framework to see these small charges as fellow servants of the Living God. The Church is uniquely positioned to support, educate, and encourage parents in this. Parents hear voices shouting varieties of parental advice, some even advocating corporal punishment of eight-month-old infants.¹⁰ The Church has a different foundation for relationships, however, in those of service and love through empathic encounters with others, flowing from the baptismal call to live as disciples of Christ proclaiming the gospel.

This is a life-changing foundation, not only for relationships between individuals, families, and couples within and without the Church body but also for internal family relationships between caregivers and children. As children of God walking together in love and service, weary caregivers can be encouraged and freed to reframe their children's 2 a.m. feeding cries as opportunities to serve a fellow Christian enlisted in service to God. Perhaps the contented snuffle-and-sigh of an infant with a full belly becomes that child's service to their caregiver's nervous system.¹¹ The 4 a.m. call to reassure a child waking in terror from a nightmare becomes an opportunity to uplift one's fellow servant, saying, with Luther, "Devil, now I have to sleep, for this is God's command: working by day and sleeping by night."¹² In His design of directing the parent to comfort the fearful child, God effectively reminds both parties of His baptismal promises. Conversations with teens who are insecure and discouraged about their bodies, their grades, their friends, or their futures become opportunities to speak life into these dark places of doubt, to "draw open the curtains that have shut out the revealing light."¹³ However, as the caregiver confidently speaks words to remind the child of her identity as a beloved child of God, God reminds the caregiver that the Devil seeks to lie.¹⁴ These are but a few examples of how the Holy Spirit, though "hidden behind human masks and everyday actions of nurture,"¹⁵ flows through the baptized to proclaim the love of Christ.

The occasions for children and caregivers to love and serve the world together and be served and loved by one another abound; the Church, comprised of individuals, families, and a worldwide community of the Body of Christ, could be reinvigorated for service and life if Professor Jensen's clear encouragement to hold tightly the paradoxical call to the baptized is communicated widely. This can be accomplished while yet continuing to recognize the dependence of revitalization on

10. Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 103, 152.

11. S. Yoshida et al., "Infants Show Physiological Responses Specific to Parental Hugs," *iScience*. 2020 Apr 24;23(4):100996. doi: 10.1016/j.isci.2020.100996. Epub 2020 Apr 6. PMID: 32259479; PMCID: PMC7360522.

12. Martin Luther, "D. Martin Luthers Werke" in *Face to Face*, Robert Kolb (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024), 81.

13. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 163.

14. Martin Luther, "Against Hanswurst," in *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry III*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1966), 186.

15. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 124-125.

the active work of the justifying Holy Spirit's imputing righteousness to the passive, receiving, baptized members of the Body of Christ.

The services offered by caregivers and children to each other and the world are foundationally outward focused and reliant on empathic encounters between created subjects. Therefore, the bedrock of these encounters must be freedom from humanity's curving-inward nature, freedom gifted by God to His children in the waters of baptism. Edith Stein phenomenologically tackled the "problem of empathy" in her 1917 doctoral dissertation. Stein's theory of empathy emerges an important lens through which to view the encounters and experiences to which the baptized are called and through which they are formed in the process of their lifelong discipleship and vocational service. Phenomenologically, empathy is one subject "I" experiencing the experience of a consciousness that is having an experience, the act of the first subject "I" comprehending that other's experience.¹⁶ Empathy can be further understood as involving other-directed intentionality or as intentional experience directed upon the mental or experiential life of the other.¹⁷ This is only possible, though, when one is continually pulled from being curved-in to being outward-facing in the ongoing process of discipleship.¹⁸ Empathic encounters enrich one through the process of going out of oneself and becoming relationally involved with others.¹⁹ Unfortunately, humanity's bondage to sin works to keep people curving inward, resisting the empathic, outward encounters that would be opportunities for selfless service to, love of, and reciprocal love by the other. God provides the remedy to this inward curving and opens the door to empathically encountering others in outward-focused, empathic events via His baptismal promise.²⁰

Stein offers an outline of the basics of these intersubjective encounters. At any age, the living body's "I" is always that which faces the world and communicates with others.²¹ Stein understands that the "I" should necessarily exist pointing toward an external world of "thous."²² The baptismal waters are God's solution to reform

16. Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 3rd ed., trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 6.

17. Magdalene Thomasson, "Beyond Empathy: Love, Person, and Otherness in the Thought of Edith Stein," *Religions*, 15, no. 1117, (2024), 2.; Thomas Szanto and Dermot Moran, "Empathy and Collective Intentionality—The Social Philosophy of Edith Stein," *Introduction to Phenomenology of Sociality: Discovering the We* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 450.

18. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 60, 101, 182.

19. Haddy Bello, "Freedom, Intentionality, and Trinitarian Love in Edith Stein's Thought—The Need for a Phenomenology-Theology Dialogue to Have a Deeper Understanding of It," *Religions*, 14, no. 1377, (2023), 6.; Minna-Kerttu Kekki, "The Perceived Object in Media-Based Empathy: Applying Edith Stein's Concept of *Wortlieb*," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 57, (2024), 165.

20. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 175, 182.

21. Stein, *Empathy*, 5.

22. Daniel Zollinger, "Prayer as Locus and Mode of Being with Edith Stein," *Carmelus*, 68, no. 2 (2021), 440.

the baptized from the curving-inward pull of original sin to a focus on the external world.²³ The baptized are then free to perceive and interpret others' experiences and to be shaped by those experiences.²⁴

Stein does not conceptualize this in a Lutheran way wherein this unity with God takes place in baptism when one is completely and fully justified, claimed, called, and re-created in the baptismal waters prior to any effort or good works on the part of the baptized; rather, she holds to a Scholastic understanding that, although God's role is paramount, "we may be confident that he will not fail to give grace if we faithfully do the little we can do."²⁵ As Professor Jensen points out, "The paradox of God alone working to bring about both justification and sanctification is lost whenever sanctification is seen as a human work that contributes to salvation."²⁶ However, Stein's work can still offer a starting point from which to move to and more fully understand the Lutheran view that one cannot fully be present to the world of other "thous," fully present in outward-facing encounters with the community until one has been gifted the grace of God which recreates the baptized person's image of God, thereby setting her free to serve the world not out of fear of punishment nor desire of reward but in thanksgiving and with gladness. This gifting of grace and call to serve both come in the paradoxical call received in the waters of baptism that free the baptized from the *incurvatus in se* and allows her to look toward and then empathically encounter the outward community.²⁷ With this Lutheran understanding, service to one's neighbor or empathic encountering of the other subject does not end up being "corrupted" with the neighbor becoming an object used in the baptized person's search to please God.²⁸ Instead, the neighbor remains an "other" subject able to be empathically encountered, loved, and served in the name of Christ.

Uniting with God, which Jensen rightly maintains occurs when God claims His children in baptism, does not annihilate the individual. Instead, communion with God allows the baptized to fully be their respective "beings," fulfilling their potentialities to the highest degree possible.²⁹ Professor Jensen explains, "The gift of unmerited salvation re-creates a person to serve the neighbor."³⁰ Personhood becomes most lively, most obtained-in-the-world, when the baptized are claimed

23. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 60.

24. Stein, *Empathy*, 11.

25. Edith Stein, *Self Portrait in Letters*, trans. Josephine Koeppel (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1993), 144-146, quoted in Antony Kavunguvalappil, *Theology of Suffering and Cross in the Life and Works of Blessed Edith Stein*, European University Studies (New York: Lang, 1998), 65.

26. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 34.

27. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 9, 65.

28. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 29, 88.

29. Bello, "Freedom," 11.

30. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 49.

and recreated by the triune God and are then called to interact interpersonally with others. "The incarnation helps people discover their own full humanity, rather than providing an escape from humanity."³¹ According to Stein, when unity with God is present within an individual being, the being can be manifested most fully. In Stein's theological phenomenology, it is through unity with the triune God that the essential potentiality of each human unfolds because that unity with God is what leads the "I" to interpersonal relationships with others.³² Humans are most fully human when justified and continually conformed to Christ in the waters of baptism, an event and an ongoing process taking place within oneself within one's community. Jensen states that "a person's vocation is lived out simultaneously as an individual and as an organic part of a community."³³ God reveals Himself to the baptized as a gift, and the response to this is the fullest unfolding of our personhood.³⁴ This unfolding can and must happen as the baptized love and serve God and His creation. A human being with the image of the trinitarian, loving God restored in her baptism "is a spiritual entity that is cognitively open to itself and others, and that can shape itself and others freely and actively."³⁵

With a phenomenological understanding of empathic encounters, consciousness becomes considered as openness to the world of "thous" around the baptized, the possibility of perceiving and then acting relationally and lovingly.³⁶ The baptized now have the potential for and call to relational experiences of divine love, though this contribution asserts this is never in order for the baptized to attempt to add to their justification but rather for them to express it in the world. It is in these relational, empathic encounters, these genuinely *good* works, where the gospel can be proclaimed and the baptized can learn to, albeit always imperfectly and never to earn grace or merit, share their gifts through the transformative work of the in-breaking, re-creating, renewing Kingdom of God.³⁷ "Death is defeated when the Spirit of God breathes into people."³⁸ This freedom from the crushing power of death leads the baptized to share that same liberating Spirit as they "are called to live for the neighbor in their own home and neighborhood in such a way that society and all creation can learn and experience the gospel of Jesus the Christ."³⁹

31. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 163.

32. Eric McClellan, "Edith Stein: Her Empathic Theology of the Human Person," *Pacifica*, 30, no.1 (2017), 26.

33. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 111.

34. Thomassen, "Beyond Empathy," 6.

35. Bello, "Freedom," 4.

36. Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt to the Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 505.

37. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 121.

38. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 3.

39. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 4.

Stein believed the interpersonal relationship of the immanent Trinity demonstrates how love flows out, in, and among members of a relationship while the relationship simultaneously allows for self-expression of the members as each person obtains existence in the world as the person they are gifted to be.⁴⁰ Though it is not for humans to probe too deeply into the mysteries of the immanent Trinity, the revelation of the economic Trinity in the gospel points to the immanent Trinity as the “God who from eternity to eternity is the love of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.”⁴¹ Each of the three persons of the Trinity “exist in relation to the others by virtue of a distinct role in the divine life-process.”⁴² Perhaps this can cautiously be seen as a model of what Stein meant—intersubjective, empathic encounters in which the baptized freely and lovingly serve and seek to understand one another and the world in ways suited to their own individual personhoods. This view could yield the relational exemplar Stein purported while continuing to respect the mystery of immanent trinitarian personhood and to resist the desire to earn the favor of God. If so, the baptized would benefit from regular reminders that God, in the waters of baptism, justified them and called them to openly and empathically relate to others through the Holy Spirit in ways that bring the gospel to those starving for hope and light and to do so for the community in the particular ways most suited to their very own, individual persons.⁴³ “Discipleship is about living out one’s baptismal vocation in daily life in a way that helps others—specifically neighbors—and sees the unlimited possibilities of God’s inbreaking reign in their own contexts.”⁴⁴ Though Luther’s understanding of vocation within the feudal system could be seen as trapping the baptized in one static context of life, the fluidity available to individuals today means that this service can be repeatedly recontextualized throughout one’s life.⁴⁵ This encouragement and freedom to live out discipleship in one’s own, particular, open-ended context needs to be taught not only to sponsors presenting individuals for baptism but also to the baptized throughout their lives.

The Church, naturally multigenerational, is uniquely positioned to spread this encouragement and freedom for both outward service mediated by Spirit-led, empathic encountering of others and also ongoing internal growth stemming from being incorporated into the Body of Christ and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Luther expounded on something similar to what Stein would come to call empathic encounters, describing the encouragement and growth the baptized can expect to receive from empathically relating to one another,

40. Bello, “Freedom,” 4.

41. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 165.

42. Hinlicky, *Complexity*, 213.

43. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 67.

44. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 2.

45. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 137.

Therefore, when I suffer, I suffer not alone, but Christ and all Christians suffer with me.... Even so others bear my burden, and their strength becomes my own. The Church's faith supports my fearfulness, the chastity of others bears the temptations of my flesh, the fastings of others are my gain, the prayer of another pleads for me. In short, such care have the members one for another, that the comely parts cover, serve, and honor the uncomely.... And so I can truly glory in the blessings of others as though they were my own; and they are truly my own when I find joy and pleasure therein.⁴⁶

Although not all will be interested in detailed, phenomenological work on empathic encounters, it is important for preachers and teachers in the Church to understand the process and value of empathy. If they are to teach the paradox of ongoing, active discipleship in light of the justification by and conformity to Christ received passively in the waters of baptism, it could be helpful for pastoral leaders and teachers to have a solid grasp of what is transpiring as the baptized live in community and why these empathetic encounters within community are so valuable. This contribution argues that God works through these empathic encounters as vehicles for His baptized children to grow both internally in love and obedience to Him and outwardly in service to and love for His creation. Properly understood, vocation flowing from the baptismal promises and call received by the baptized allows them to "experience what it means to be fully human."⁴⁷ This experience of full humanity can flourish in the youngest as well as the oldest members of the Body of Christ.

Professor Jensen's *The Call to Discipleship* provides a much-needed service to the Lutheran Church, offering language useful for explaining the paradoxical call the baptized receive in the sacraments, educating the baptized on both their freedom and responsibility as justified and called members of the Body of Christ living and growing in the world, and encouraging the baptized to understand the baptismal call on even the youngest members of this Body. Perhaps seeing the vocational engagement in the world for which the baptized are freed and called to serve and grow as the empathic encountering of each baptized "I" with other "thous" can be helpful for those directly involved in teaching and encouraging the baptized. "True humanity, as defined and modeled by Christ, is a humanity that is totally open to God and totally open to the neighbor. It is a gift from God."⁴⁸ May the Body of Christ hear Professor Jensen's words and respond in deep, joyful, fully-human, Spirit-led, intentional, empathic encounters.

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46. Martin Luther, "The Fourteen of Consolation: For Such as Labor and Are Heavy Laden," in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. I (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), 165.

47. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 187.

48. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 188.

Mutual Consolation as Answering the Call

Discipleship and Neighbourly Theology
in Luther and Bonhoeffer

Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero

Called to Mutual Consolation

Christian discipleship is frequently separated from the doctrines of justification, baptism, and Christology, or those doctrines that give discipleship theological form. Gordon Jensen's *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community* challenges this separation by locating Christian action within baptismal vocation, worship, and service to the world. His account provides a constructive framework for examining mutual consolation as a practice through which justification assumes a concrete, neighborly form.

This essay expands the argument first presented in “Consolation in Luther’s Neighbourly Theology” at the International Congress for Luther Research in Aarhus, Denmark. It brings Luther’s account of consolation into conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, a reflection on intentional Christian community at Finkenwalde that presents theological formation as an embodied and communal practice.

As Jensen notes, the professionalization of the clergy has created a two-tiered system that has often robbed the laity of the opportunity to live out their calls in ministry.¹ Engaging Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* is intentional as it reminds readers that communal theological education is for all Christians, not just the professionals (ordained or academically-trained theologians). One way in which Christians can “connect doctrine, piety, and one’s sense of calling, with service to the world—and thus, service to God”² is through the ministry of mutual consolation.

Reading Luther alongside Bonhoeffer, this essay argues that mutual consolation is the neighbourly form assumed by justification when Christ places the external Word into the mouths of Christians for one another. As a gospeling, ecclesial, cross-shaped,

1. Gordon A. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2026), 130. This outcome has led to recent critiques of theological education in general; see Ted A. Smith, *The End of Theological Education*, Theological Education between the Times Series (Eerdmans, 2023).

2. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 15.

and embodied practice, mutual consolation enables ordinary Christians to answer the call of discipleship through listening, speaking, forgiving, bearing, and serving.

Neighbourliness and Mutuality

I describe the recurring emphasis in my reading of Luther as “neighbourly theology.”³ This echoes Luther’s description of the Christian life: “Because true Christians live and labor on earth not for themselves alone but for their neighbors, they do by the very nature of their spirit even what they themselves have no need of but is needful and useful to their neighbors.”⁴

Using “neighbourly” as the adjective shifts the emphasis from the one who receives to the one who bestows, which is how Jesus answered the lawyer in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. From a theological perspective, it speaks to the role of the faithful, both individually and communally, who have received the good things of God through Christ. The neighbourly adjective also helps Christians navigate what Jensen describes as the “challenge to keep discipleship and justification together in a paradoxical tension.”⁵ The parable is a reminder that God’s free gift of justifying grace is not at odds with being freed to serve the neighbour fully. Thus, “the gift of unmerited salvation re-creates a person to serve the neighbor.”⁶

The problem with freedom is that it can be misunderstood. Luther’s movement from alien to proper righteousness describes doctrinally what Jensen’s two freedoms of baptism describe vocationally—grace received becomes freedom exercised for the neighbour. In his Exhortation to Confession in the Large Catechism, Luther describes the problem thusly: people did “whatever they please and [taking] advantage of their freedom” did not avail themselves of confession.⁷ In essence, people had treated gospel freedom as release from obligation rather than liberation for

3. “Neighbourly” with the Canadian spelling that includes a “u” is intentional. The earliest Canadian joke I recall hearing was while on a family road trip across northern Montana. We occupied our time by listening to the CBC, which had the strongest radio signal. The scenario described on the show was of an American moving to Canada to play hockey, and the American was learning about Canadian spelling:

American player: “Why is there a ‘u’ in ‘neighbourhood?’”

Canadian friend: “Because we want ‘you’ in our neighbourhood!”

While most people today would groan at that attempt at humor, it has stuck with me for over 30 years and now factors into my theology.

4. Martin Luther, “On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed, 1523,” ed. James M. Estes, in *The Annotated Luther*, 6 vols. Eds. H.J. Hillerbrand, K.I. Stjerna, and T.J. Wengert (Fortress, 2015-17) 5:97-98. (Hereafter cited as TAL.)

5. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 48.

6. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 49.

7. Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” ed. T.J. Wengert, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Eds. R. Kolb and T.J. Wengert (Fortress, 2000) 476.

the neighbour or, to use the language of Luther's earlier writings, had disconnected alien and proper righteousness, becoming a free lord without being a dutiful servant. When gospel freedom is construed solely as release from obligation, its relation to the Body of Christ is obscured. In Jensen's parlance, they focus solely on the "first freedom of baptism [called] justification" and neglect the "second gift of freedom given in baptism," to be "free *for* being people of God in the world" that bears "witness to God's inbreaking reign" in the world by living for the neighbour.⁸

For Luther and subsequently for Bonhoeffer and Jensen, freedom cannot lead the individual into isolation by focusing solely on spiritual practices of holiness that masquerade as discipleship. Lutheran Christology, grounded in Luther's "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness" and "The Freedom of a Christian," requires discipleship that is both personal and communal.⁹ If justification frees the Christian for the neighbour, the resulting question concerns how Christ becomes concretely present in that neighborly relation. Luther's answer is the external Word spoken by one Christian to another.

The Christological Center of Neighbourly Consolation

Neighbourliness belongs at the heart of Luther's theology as the ethical implication of his Christology—the movement from alien to proper righteousness (1519) or from freedom to service (1520). In the "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness," Luther insists that "through faith in Christ, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness" and that this alien righteousness is "the basis, the cause, the source" of the Christian's proper righteousness.¹⁰ That proper righteousness "consists in love of our neighbors" so that the soul "no longer seeks to be righteous in and for itself, but it has Christ as its righteousness and therefore seeks only the welfare of others."¹¹ In the practice of confession, this theological movement becomes audible. The troubled Christian takes "a friend aside," seeks "a word of comfort," and receives it "as if hearing it directly from God."¹² Consolation is therefore not the opposite of discomfort nor merely the easing of distress. It is the neighbourly bestowal of Christ's own Word spoken through human mouths by which burdened consciences are returned to the gospel.

Bonhoeffer's reception of this Reformation logic helps identify its ecclesiological implications. In *Life Together*, he argues that God has placed the saving Word "into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others," and, therefore,

8. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 3-4 (emphasis in original).

9. See Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 100-101.

10. Martin Luther, "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness, 1519," ed. E.M. Wiberg Pedersen, in TAL 2:14-15.

11. Luther, "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness," TAL 2:16-17.

12. Martin Luther, "The *Invocavit* Sermons, 1522," ed. M.J. Lohrmann, in TAL 4:44.

“Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them,” especially when they become “uncertain and disheartened.” His striking conclusion is that “the Christ in their own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians.” Mutual consolation is not simply one beneficial activity undertaken within an already constituted church. The church becomes recognizable as Christian precisely where persons encounter one another “as bringers of the message of salvation.”¹³

Christology cannot remain an abstraction but must take form in the congregation’s practices. “A sensibility where we regard and experience Christology as a *practice* in which our Christological conceptions are ritually and sacramentally enacted would not be tied to the past—not to *remembering* and *being reminded*—but to *participating in the present*.”¹⁴ Pietsch notes that Luther’s theology is grounded in bringing the “comfort of the gospel to the troubled and fearful heart and conscience.”¹⁵ Mutual consolation is not simply an implication drawn from Christological doctrine but is one of the concrete practices in which the congregation participates in Christ’s present action.

This particular understanding of the Incarnation in Lutheran Christology means that Christian theology must be attentive to the physical human condition. This consolation is not meant to be abstract or relegated to verbal exchange; instead, it can include the physical world, including the scientific expressions of modern medicine. The externality of consolation is not only verbal. Because the one who consoles and the one who suffers are embodied creatures, the Christological logic of consolation must include material forms of care. Lutheran Christology has the *communicatio idiomatum* (“communication of attributes”) as its “axle and motor.”¹⁶ This means that whatever can be said of the divine nature of Christ must be said of the human nature and vice versa, as the two natures communicate with one another and cannot be separated. When Christian consolation includes the responsible use of medicine, such material care need not be regarded as external to Christ’s ministry through the neighbour.¹⁷

The External Word and the Mutuality of Consolation

Luther’s own troubled experience of faith shaped his understanding of theology as care for afflicted consciences. “His desire to find peace and consolation for his own

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English 5 (Fortress, 1996), 32.

14. Michael B. Aune, “Practicing a Theopaschite Christology with St. Cyril of Alexandria,” *Lutheran Forum* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 31 (emphasis in original).

15. Stephen Pietsch, “Luther and the Cure of Souls,” *Logia* 30, no. 2 (Eastertide 2021): 37.

16. Johann Anselm Steiger, “The *communicatio idiomatum* as the Axle and Motor of Luther’s Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 127.

17. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, “Consolation and Medicine in Luther’s ‘Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,’” *Dialog* 61, no. 2 (June 2022): 116.

troubled conscience provided the impetus for Luther's initial wrestling with the *cura animarum* [care of souls] of his day."¹⁸ His *Anfechtung* ("spiritual trial or affliction") within the late-medieval penitential system supplied an important occasion for his early critique of indulgences and for the pastoral concerns expressed in his 1519 sermons, especially the sermon on penance.¹⁹

To make the "precious and comforting treasure that the gospel offers" ever-present to people, Luther reminds pastors always to preach, focusing on the verbs exhort, encourage, and persuade.²⁰ This is seen most directly a decade later when Luther compiled his sermons and other texts into his two catechisms. While the Large Catechism is directed at pastors, Luther's exhortation has lay recipients in mind, those to whom the pastors preach. Before describing the theological and ritual revisions to what had been sacramental penance, Luther describes practices that center the neighbourly role in consolation.

Luther distinguishes two neighbourly forms of confession. The first is the mutual confession associated with the Lord's Prayer: "we are to confess our guilt before one another and forgive one another before we come to God and ask for forgiveness."²¹ Luther envisions this being done in public (and probably daily) without fear, acknowledging that no one has behaved the way he ought. This mutuality connects absolution and reconciliation. The second is private confession sought when a particular matter attacks the conscience, especially "when some particular issue weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace to find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith."²² While absolution is ultimately the outcome of this practice, it also provides an opportunity to seek "advice, comfort, and strength."

The ministry of consolation cannot be reduced to a one-way transmission from speaker to hearer, from provider to receiver, or from assured to distressed. This ministry is multifaceted—scripture supplies the external promise, the troubled conscience receives that promise, and the neighbour gives it an audible and interpersonal form.²³ Comfort understood solely as the removal of distress may follow a means-end logic. Christian consolation, by contrast, returns the afflicted conscience to God's promise, whether or not the distress is immediately removed.

These neighbourly practices of consolation and absolution are effective because "Christ himself has placed absolution on the mouths of his Christian community."²⁴

18. Ronald K. Rittgers, "How Luther's Engagement with Pastoral Care Shaped His Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. R. Kolb et al. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 463.

19. See Dirk Lange's introduction to "Sermon on the Sacrament of Penance, 1519," in TAL 1:182.

20. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.7.

21. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.10.

22. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.13.

23. See Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism, 1529," ed. T.J. Wengert, in TAL 4:234.

24. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.14.

The language used here is reminiscent of the core of Luther's neighbourly theology with the believer's mouth having an exchange with Christ's. Luther establishes a direct link between the believer's mouth and the divine Word, which is then communicated to the neighbour. The "exchanges" that take place operate on two levels of "word," the incarnate Word (Jesus) and the spoken word (consolation). Elsewhere, in his commentary on Psalm 110, Luther emphasizes the efficacy of the Word: "Things move along and are accomplished because He Himself preaches and promotes preaching, and also because He Himself does and produces what He preaches."²⁵

Christian neighbourliness is always mediated neighbourliness. "I am a brother or sister to another person through what Jesus Christ has done for me and to me," Bonhoeffer writes, while the other becomes a brother or sister "through what Jesus Christ has done for them and to them." Thus, "we have one another only through Christ."²⁶ The neighbour does not become the source of consolation but rather the concrete location at which Christ's external Word may be heard.

If consolation is an act of the living Word, then it includes both giving and receiving. When describing receiving as listening, Bonhoeffer notes that it is "the first service one owes to others in the community" and argues that "the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them." Listening participates in God's own action because God "not only gives us God's Word, but also lends us God's ear."²⁷ Thus, mutual consolation should not be reduced to the correct performance of an externally valid formula. Its concrete form ordinarily includes listening closely enough that the consoling Word addresses the neighbour's actual affliction rather than the speaker's prior interpretation of it. "We should listen with the ears of God, so that we can speak the Word of God."²⁸

Cross-Shaped Consolation and the Refusal of Therapeutic Ease

Luther's overall theology of suffering means that consolation and comfort do not necessarily have the same outcomes. Because suffering is an ever-present reality, Christians may be called to be disciples in uncomfortable places. Jensen notes that this is so that people in civil society, the church, and the home (the three estates) "can see God's inbreaking realm happening in their own contexts and situations of life."²⁹ One primary component of the theology of the cross is that God shows up where one might not expect a god to be; here, God is present in suffering wherever the person may be.

25. Martin Luther, "Psalm 110," trans. H.R. Klann, in *Luther's Works*, volume 13: *Selected Psalms II*. Ed. J.J. Pelikan (Concordia, 1956) 270. See also Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 115.

26. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 34.

27. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 98.

28. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 99.

29. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 53.

A challenging feature of Luther's account is his claim that *Anfechtungen* can serve a constructive purpose in faith. "Trial and temptation thus serve to bring one closer to God, to establish one firmly in faith, to empty one of all self-righteousness so that one may be filled with the righteousness of Christ and rest wholly in His Word."³⁰ This assertion challenges a theology of glory that identifies divine favor with relief, success, or visible improvement and therefore distances God from suffering. Such a theology of glory is a reality in which divine consolation cannot exist, as distancing God from suffering would mean God is inherently absent.³¹

Mutual consolation addresses the afflicted conscience by giving assurance through the externally spoken promise, which is a byproduct of the promise that is conveyed through the living Word. Bonhoeffer's account helps specify why such assurance is genuinely *extra nos* ("outside ourselves"). The disciple's own heart cannot certify the promise without becoming caught in self-examination. The other believer "breaks the circle of self-deception," and the promise becomes certain when "spoken by another believer as God's command and in God's name."³² The mutuality of consolation, therefore, does not make assurance less divine or less certain. It names the creaturely form in which God chooses to place the promise outside the self and give it back to the self through the neighbour.

This assurance does not mean certainty without doubt, as the word often connotes today. Rather, its certainty lies not in knowing what God will do, but in trusting that God hears, remains present, and acts according to the promise. This can be seen in Luther's consolation addressed to women facing the dangers of childbirth, where he notes that whatever Christians sincerely pray "becomes a great, unbearable cry in God's ears. God must listen." Later he adds, "Know that your prayer is pleasing to God and that God will do everything much better than you can comprehend or desire."³³ The certainty is framed as the conviction that God does not ignore those who cry out and that God will respond as God does. This approach to promise-based certainty permeates Luther's letters of pastoral care. For example: "[Jesus Christ] is so wholeheartedly faithful and good that he cannot forsake us, nor would he wish to do so; only that we desire his help without doubting his promise."³⁴ Luther then points to the Psalms as biblical evidence that God's promises are certain.

Genuine consolation neither excuses sin nor leaves the troubled conscience in despair. In Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Luther's *pecca fortiter* ("sin boldly"),

30. Jane E. Strohl, "Luther and the Word of Consolation," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 27.

31. See Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 165.

32. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 113.

33. Martin Luther, "Consolation for Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well, 1542," ed. K.E. Kvam, in *TAL* 4:424, 427.

34. Martin Luther, "Selected Letters of Pastoral and Spiritual Counsel," ed. J.A. Maxfield, in *TAL* 4:453.

it is “comfort in a time of despair and a call to discipleship,” a grace that “really forgives sins and liberates the sinner.”³⁵ Bonhoeffer characterizes cheap grace as “cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament” and depicts the resulting Christian as “comforted and secure” precisely because no following of Christ is required. “Cheap grace,” he concludes, “is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer thus provides a theological criterion for distinguishing consolation from therapeutic ease—consolation is “gospelling” only when it communicates forgiveness in a form that restores the hearer to Christ and Christ’s call.

Mutual consolation is the costly communication of the promise to one who cannot generate faith or assurance from within. Christians are to be assured of Christ’s true presence amid suffering. Although the claim that “Christ is present” can become a pastoral platitude when offered abstractly, here it arises from the *communicatio idiomatum* rather than from generic reassurance. “Through full participation in Christ’s two natures can one have the certainty that Christ is present in all emergencies.”³⁷ Such an affirmation redirects consolation away from speculation about God as the cause of suffering and toward confidence in Christ’s presence amid it.

Mutual Consolation as Everyday Neighbourliness

Rittgers states that Luther’s pastoral writings “were intended to help pastors minister to the needs of their flocks,” but “in many cases these works were directed to the laity, both to console and exhort them in the Christian life and also to mobilize them for ministry to one another.”³⁸ The everyday character of consolation appears in how these pastoral resources move beyond ordained ministry and mobilize Christians to minister to one another.

A few years after preaching the sacramental sermons of 1519, and upon returning from protective exile in the Wartburg Castle, Luther again speaks of the mutuality of consolation. “For there are many doubtful matters that we cannot resolve or find the answer to by ourselves, and so we take a friend aside and tell them our trouble. What harm is there if we humble ourselves a little before a neighbor,

35. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English 4 (Fortress, 2001), 52-53.

36. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43-44.

37. Sabine Holtz, *Theologie und Alltag: Lehre und Leben in den Predigten der Tübinger Theologen 1550-1750* (Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 115. See also Steiger, “Axle and Motor of Luther’s Theology,” 132.

38. Ronald K. Rittgers, “Martin Luther’s Pastoral Writings,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. John Barton, online edition (Oxford Academic, 2017).

put ourselves to shame, look for a word of comfort, accept it and believe it, as if hearing it directly from God?"³⁹ This focus on mutuality, and thus neighbourliness, was necessary because of the circumstances in Wittenberg that led to his return. Whatever judgment one makes concerning Luther's relation to Karlstadt, the *Invocavit* sermons situate mutual consolation within the task of restoring a community unsettled by contested reforms.⁴⁰

Because Luther understands ministry as the responsibility of all the baptized, pastoral care belongs to the whole community, even when particular persons are set apart to lead its public ministry. In an Easter sermon, Luther interprets Christ's encounter with the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus as a model for how the church is to continue Christ's work into the future:

It is, therefore, his purpose to teach us by this narrative, given for our instruction and consolation, how his work is to be done in the Christian church after his resurrection, namely, that he will not reject nor cast out those who are weak in their faith, yea, not even those who are held in error or ignorance, or who are otherwise weak, fearful, and despairing. They are rather the very persons in whom he will exercise and manifest the power of his resurrection, not only by inviting them to come to him, but also by coming to them, and treating them in the gentlest and kindest way, talking with them, teaching and instructing them, yea, even eating with them, until at length they grow strong and secure in their faith; while their hearts, so sad and sorrowful for a time, are again filled with joy.⁴¹

Just as Christ provides instruction and consolation to the two disciples, so too is the church to continue that in its ministry, including the relational practices of invitation and hospitality. Thus, all Christians share this "duty of comfort" (*Trostamt*).⁴²

Bonhoeffer develops the same conjunction of consolation and instruction by refusing to separate comfort from admonition. The interpersonal ministry of the Word bears witness "regarding all the comfort, the admonition, the kindness, and the firmness of God." Christians speak as persons who share the same need: "We talk to one another about the help we both need. We admonish one another to go the way Christ bids us to go."⁴³ Consolation is mutual not only because Christians exchange the roles of speaker and hearer but because neither approaches the other from a position above the common need for grace.

39. Luther, "Invocavit Sermons," TAL 4:44.

40. See Martin Lohrmann's introduction to the *Invocavit* sermons about the varying interpretations of Luther's response to Karlstadt's reforms while he was at the Wartburg; TAL 4:8-9.

41. Martin Luther, "Second Sermon for Easter Monday (Luke 24:13-35)," in *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols. Ed. and trans. J.N. Lenker (Luther in All Lands, 1904-09) 2:245.

42. Pietsch, "Luther and the Cure of Souls," 39.

43. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 103-104.

Living out Luther's neighbourly theology through consolation is also a call to resist the mindset of scarcity, both in our understanding of God and in our relationships with our neighbours. Luther's reforms make the promise accessible by denying that only the ordained possess the capacity to mediate consolation. "For our God, the God we have, is not so stingy to have left us with only one comfort or strength for our conscience, or only one absolution, but we have many absolutions in the gospel and are richly showered with many absolutions."⁴⁴ The abundance of absolution dismantles a spiritual economy built on scarcity.

The mutuality of this consolation lies in the fact that it is not dependent on the worthiness or status of either the speaker/giver or the hearer/receiver. This is because mutual consolation occurs through alien righteousness. In essence, the believer is the medium through which Christ's consolation is made known. "For, as has been said, love of neighbor is not concerned about its own; it considers not how great or humble, but how useful and needful the works are for neighbor or community."⁴⁵

Thus, everyday consolation takes concrete ecclesial forms: speaking the Word, confessing, absolving, praying, receiving the sacraments, and bearing one another in service. "Those who bear with others know that they themselves are being borne. Only in this strength can they themselves bear with others."⁴⁶ Because suffering can coexist with consolation, Luther's understanding of comfort cannot be reduced to the removal of distress. Consolation addresses *Anfechtung* by returning the afflicted conscience to God's promise, even when suffering persists. As Jensen notes, "The incarnation leads to the cross. Likewise, only when the church is willing to enter into solidarity with those who are suffering—to become incarnate with the people whom Jesus became incarnate among—can it discover its true identity."⁴⁷

Those who suffer are consoled to console others. For Luther, this was one of the duties of the Christian. As he writes in connection to extreme cases, "Now if a deadly epidemic strikes, we should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together ... so that we cannot desert one another or flee from one another."⁴⁸ Here, consolation takes bodily form in remaining, preparing, caring, and refusing abandonment. Thus, just as Christians are called to offer mutual absolution in times of affliction caused by sin, so too are Christians called to offer mutual consolation in times of distress. They are called to *Trost* ("consolation") and to proclaim *Trost*.

Bonhoeffer's constructive reception of this Lutheran tradition clarifies that mutual consolation is at once gospelling, ecclesial, cross-shaped, and embodied. It

44. Luther, "Invocavit Sermons," TAL 4:44.

45. Luther, "On Secular Authority," TAL 5:106-107.

46. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 103.

47. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 159.

48. Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague, 1527," ed. A.M. Johnson, in TAL 4:398.

is gospeling because its content is Christ's promise and assurance of the liberating gospel. It is ecclesial because Christ places that promise into the mouths of Christians for one another, with the Body of Christ acting in an interconnected fashion. It is cross-shaped because it does not necessarily remove suffering but bears suffering and sin through forgiveness under Christ's cross. It is embodied because it involves people inhabiting their entire personhood in concrete enactment. Mutual consolation is, therefore, not simply one pastoral application of justification but is the neighbourly form assumed by justification when alien righteousness creates a people who receive Christ from outside themselves and who then become bearers of Christ's Word to one another.

What Is Jesus Doing?

Near the end of *The Call to Discipleship*, Jensen offers some alternative questions to the traditional "What would Jesus do?" Here are two of those questions:

- Where is the gospel in every situation in which a disciple finds himself as he lives out his vocation, where he works and plays and worships?
- What can the disciple of the living God proclaim and do that will address broken communities with his broken relationships we well as bring about reconciliation and healing?⁴⁹

Mutual consolation answers Jensen's questions by locating discipleship in the ordinary practices through which the baptized speak and embody Christ's promise for one another. It resists cheap grace by joining forgiveness to Christ's call, and it resists clerical exclusivity by returning this ministry to the common priesthood.

Mutual consolation is thus not an optional pastoral application added to justification after the fact. It is the neighbourly form justification assumes when Christ's alien righteousness frees Christians from themselves, gives them to one another, and places the life-giving Word in their mouths. In listening, forgiving, admonishing, bearing, and serving, ordinary Christians receive Christ from outside themselves and become bearers of Christ for the neighbour. Mutual consolation is one concrete answer to the call of discipleship: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

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49. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 186.

Love's Austere and Lonely Offices

Mark D. Tranvik

Gordon Jensen's excellent book, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation and the Community*, is a much-needed tonic for the church today. It draws deeply on Scripture and the theologies of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Mining these sources and others, Jensen injects new life into traditional theological categories, particularly the understanding of discipleship.

In his introduction, Jensen notes the poor English translation of Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge* as *The Cost of Discipleship*. What Bonhoeffer was really getting at was the "call" to discipleship. Modifying the title in this way opens the door for associations with baptism and vocation. While "cost" often gets defined morally and tends to make faith into a weary drudge of obedience, being "called" to discipleship moves Christians into a world where Word and sacrament animate a wholly new way of life that includes a fresh way of seeing creation and the neighbor.¹ Perhaps we should be more precise here and say the Word and baptism as the latter receive much attention in the book. Rejecting the idea that baptism is only an "initiation rite," Jensen stresses the link with vocation and the notion that a believer is continually dying and rising in Christ.

Throughout his book, Jensen also stresses that Jesus is not one-dimensional. Indeed, he underlines that the Christian life often involves paradox and overlap. Lutherans of course know this most famously through the phrase *simul iustus et peccator*—at the same time righteous and sinner. However, Jensen helpfully extends the *simul* to other categories as well. I love the creative way he paired a number of concepts and held them together to make them richer and more meaningful. The instances I found particularly appealing were *simul eventus et modus vivendi* (one-time event and way of life), *simul reflexivus et activus* (at the same time reflective and active), and *simul iustificatus et vocatus* (at the same time justified and called).²

Emphasis on simultaneity is such an important insight. I cannot count the number of times I have been frustrated by discussions of Lutheran theology that get bogged down regarding the proper relationship between justification and sanctification. This often leads to another dark alley involving the third use of the law. So many of these discussions suffer from the categorical error of adopting a theological anthropology that simply refuses to bend to the tensions and paradoxes

1. Gordon A. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation and the Community* (Cascade Books, 2026), xxi-xxiii.

2. *Ibid.*, 211. See Jensen's index for the various ways he employs the *simul*.

embedded in the Lutheran confessional way of seeing the world. Once we move sequentially and see ourselves “en route” from one spiritual station to another, the entire structure begins to wobble and fall apart. When we eliminate simultaneity, the power of the gospel is enervated, stripped of all its vitality.

This also points to one place where Jensen might provide readers with a little more clarity, in his discussion of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ).³ He appears to applaud the document and suggests it maintains the simultaneity of justification and sanctification, with each side emphasizing its traditional concerns—Lutherans with forensic justification and Catholics with the fruits of being justified. This seems, though, a bit evasive. The issue hovering in the background is the bound will. Lutherans affirm it while Catholics do not. This causes the latter to inevitably invite some level of human participation (however qualified by grace) in what becomes a “process” of salvation and a denial or at least muting of the *sola fide*. It seems conceptually difficult to affirm both a simultaneity and a free will. Movement initiated in the self is the enemy of Jensen’s *simul*. As such, I think it would be helpful if he could have provided more clarity on this issue. In fact, discussion of the bound will is missing in general, which is curious as this would seem to complement the book’s emphasis on the *simul*.

As already noted, *The Call to Discipleship* is an appeal to the church to recover a robust understanding of vocation. Rooted in baptism and animated by the gospel, Jensen seeks to enliven the way Christians think about faith without falling into the traps of moralism, experientialism, or quietism. For Luther, the problem was the monastery. What had begun centuries before as a protest against a worldly Christianity had in many places in the West degenerated into something that its founders would have scarcely recognized. Baptism was diminished as monastic vows were given sacramental value.⁴ The ideals of poverty, chastity, and obedience were observed more in the breach than in practice. Moreover, the idea that monks and nuns occupied a higher station in life and were the ones who possessed true vocations was a denial of justification by grace through faith and the priesthood of all believers.

Jensen does a nice job of showing how Luther reoriented “holy orders” in the direction of activity in daily life.⁵ Meriting salvation by entering a monastery or cloister runs contrary to a theology that sees God in Christ *giving* us salvation precisely because God wants it that way. Holy orders still exist, but now they are found in our “stations” in life. In Luther’s time, these stations were the ecclesiastical, domestic and civil realms. This formal terminology is meant to convey that all of life is the arena of vocation. Now, all Christians are called and they are called all

3. Ibid., 35-41.

4. See article XXVII in the Augsburg Confession in *The Book of Concord*, ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Fortress, 2000), 82, note 186, hereafter cited as BC.

5. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 81-86.

the time. Movement in the world does not earn favor with God but rather seeks to discern the best way of loving and serving the neighbor.

I would like to focus moving forward on an aspect of vocation that is often misunderstood or ignored, the daily or even mundane dimension of living out a called life. Jensen is certainly not at fault here. In fact, his book invites readers to reflect on multiple ways that faith intersects with life.⁶ I am simply drilling down a little deeper because our preaching and teaching is sorely missing this crucial part of our faith.

Perhaps the best place to start is with Max Weber's idea of disenchantment. In a world dominated by science and technique, mystery gets moved to the margins or eliminated altogether. Gods and spirits and magic are for religious eccentrics or maybe the "little people" who lack education and, therefore, are unable to see things "as they really are." The ultimate effect on human beings results in what Charles Taylor calls the "buffered self." In other words, we are autonomous and self-enclosed, cut off from external forces.⁷ While we might not have to contend with a realm of fairies and evil spirits seeking to influence and even harm us, this also makes us responsible for our condition. That can be a lonely and arduous task, particularly if we are in the grip of depression or despair. For evidence, consider the number of therapists making a fine living in Manhattan. Though much more could be said about this, the reader gets the general idea. Weber, Taylor, and others have documented the paradigm shift in the way many Western people see themselves and the world. Science and the nexus of cause and effect have become our window unto reality.

Martin Luther's concept of vocation, drenched in the Biblical narrative, is grounded in life as a creation in the hands of benevolent albeit mysterious Creator. Moreover, the God of Israel is deeply involved in creation. He "knows our words before we say them" (Psalm 139:4). He is as close as "the shade at our right hand" (Psalm 121:3). He enters deep into human flesh (Colossians 1:19) and has even numbered the hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30). Luther ate, drank, and slept this story, and that meant for him that the world was anything but disenchanted. Instead, it hums with mystery. It puzzles and confounds as well as awes and overjoys. As the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins says in "God's Grandeur," it is a world "charged with the grandeur of God" where "there lives a dearest freshness deep down things."⁸ Lutherans have expressed this Christologically as *finitum capax infiniti*, or the finite is capable of the infinite.⁹

6. Ibid., 66-75, 142-154.

7. As Taylor makes clear, this is a complicated and multi-layered story that is only hinted at in this paragraph. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 25-41.

8. Gerald Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford University Press, 1986), 128.

9. Most notably, this idea is emphasized by Luther in his debate with Ulrich Zwingli at Marburg in 1529 about the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The actual Latin phrase comes from later in the Lutheran tradition.

As Luther interpreted this world for his people in his catechisms and sermons, he continually underlines the way God is present in daily, ordinary life. As it is sometimes said, he understood how “God is in the details.” Two places in the Small Catechism highlight this teaching. In his explanation to the first article of the creed (Jensen also documents this in the *Haustafel* or Table of Duties), Luther lists approximately seventeen different ways in which the Creator graciously preserves and protects our lives.¹⁰ The level of detail is almost humorous (eyes and ears and shoes) but has a purpose: physical, earthly life is a remarkable gift that, when considered, ushers in a deep sense of gratitude.

Luther is hardly done there, though. He swims against the tide of a catechetical tradition that saw the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer (“Give us this day our daily bread”) as primarily a reference to the eucharist. Instead, the Small Catechism says the prayer for daily bread refers to the necessities of earthly life. Once again, we get a long list, this time some 21 items in total. There is much overlap in the two lists, though the one in the Lord’s Prayer includes money, honor, friendship, and good weather as gifts to be thankful for.¹¹ Luther envisioned the catechism as a teaching tool for his new conception of “holy orders.” He knew how easy it was for Christians to take earthly blessings for granted and to sever them from their source, the gracious Creator. The significant level of detail in these two lists impresses upon both teacher and learner that the world is “charged with grandeur of God.”

All of this flows directly into vocation when we look at the catechism’s Table of Duties, or *Haustafel*. Therein, this gracious God of detail intersects with human callings in a profound way. All three of the stations are represented in the Table of Duties: the civil, ecclesiastical, and domestic. Unsurprisingly, since the catechism is intended for use in the home, the domestic realm gets more attention, but there are at least ten different callings mentioned in the Table: bishops, pastors, government officials, spouses, parents, children, servants, those in charge of servants, widows and young persons.¹²

In our time, the Table of Duties is often ignored because there are understandable objections to it being sexist, hierarchical, and authoritarian. However, this is frustrating. We should not be surprised that Luther’s list and descriptions reflect life in sixteenth century Germany. Surely we have the creative chops to peel away the objectionable overlay and reveal the underlying point: God is the force in, with, and under our various callings. Most importantly, God is in the mundane details of everyday life. As Luther says in one of his early sermons:

How is it possible that you are not called? You are always in some sort of position. You have always been a husband or a wife or a son or a daughter or a servant. Imagine the lowest position—as a husband do you not have enough to do to watch over your spouse, children, workers and property

10. “The Small Catechism” in BC, 354.

11. *Ibid.*, 357.

12. *Ibid.*, 365-367.

so that all might be obedient to God and no harm comes to any of them? Indeed, even if you had four heads and ten hands, you would scarcely have the energy for such a task. And I guarantee you would not be thinking about making a pilgrimage or doing some so-called “saintly” work.¹³

The mundane and everyday are where most of us live most of the time. As Jerry Sittser points out, “God must value routine because much of our life consists of little more.” In a statement close to the spirit of Luther’s catechetical lists, Sittser goes on to note how much of our time is taken up in the tasks of daily life. He says that someone who lives to the age of eighty will spend about 2,000 hours brushing his teeth, 204,000 hours sleeping, and almost 44,000 hours eating.¹⁴

This then raises a larger issue. Why does so much preaching and teaching in mainline churches largely ignore the mundane and everyday aspects of vocation? Evangelicals seem to understand this. Peruse the educational offerings or sermon themes of many mega-churches (assuming here that most are evangelical or neo-Baptist) and you will find classes on marriage, parenting, grandparenting, and the use of money. Admittedly, many of these programs fall into the “third use of the law” category or the belief that Christians have some sort of special insight into how to manage the affairs of the home and the state. There is no question that our Christian tradition can shape how we think about matters, be they domestic or civil, but the idea that this makes us *better* at daily life and therefore enhances our standing with God violates the *simul* highlighted so well by Jensen: we are justified and sinful at the same time. Our living of a Christian life also means we will always recognize our need for forgiveness. In other words, Christians have no monopoly on virtue. We don’t live out the truth better than anyone else. What we can do is point to the one who makes this insight possible and gives us the power to start anew, Jesus.

In coming back to our question, we may ask why the absence of the mundane is in the mainline. Why the continual drumbeat of social justice and the constant call to demonstrate, march, and fill city halls with signs of protest? Why is preaching and teaching so lopsidedly oriented toward redressing ills in the civic realm? Part of it may be the way the current administration in the United States has colonized our minds. There are awful things being done in the areas of immigration and the minimization of poverty, among many other things. We should call attention to these issues and do it with the confidence that comes from proclaiming that Jesus alone is the Lord of life rather than money, our national stature, or the “purity” of our citizenry.¹⁵ The mainline *cognoscenti* (bishops and pastors) need to know that these

13. Martin Luther, “Sermon on John 21:19-24” (1522), in *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Schriften), 10 (I): 308, hereafter cited as WA. Translation mine.

14. Jerry Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life* (Zondervan, 2004), 87-93.

15. At the risk of being awkward, I will offer my own bona fides here. During the recent “invasion” (yes, that is the right word) of Minnesota by immigration authorities, I protested the incursion and drove vulnerable people to work and school. I want to stress that is only one small part of my callings as a Christian.

problems do not occupy the attention of most of our people most of the time. Indeed, most congregants are struggling with forgiving a spouse, worrying about the choices of their teenagers, or are anxious about paying medical bills. Again, most of life is lived in the mundane. Pews will continue to empty if we don't widen the scope of what it means to be claimed and sent by Jesus.

What are some other reasons, besides the concern that we might leave unjust systems intact, that drive this neglect of vocation in the details? Some get back to Jensen's laudable emphasis on the *simul*. The idea that we are truly sinners and not just "good" people who make occasional mistakes has not sunk in. We prefer binaries and this particularly shows up in our politics. In the name of justice and righteousness, we demonize the other side. Of course, the MAGA-right in the U.S. is guilty of this. Even so, at least they are being true to what is in actuality a superficial theology. Those who claim a heritage in the Reformation should know better, particularly those who trace their theology back to Luther and the Lutheran confessions. When we betray the *simul*, the temptation to focus on the political becomes too strong, and then the callings of everyday life get minimized or even lost.

To conclude my call to honor the mundane as part of lifting up Jensen's work, I will return again to the world of poetry. The first African-American poet laureate in the United States, Robert Hayden, wrote a poem that captures this mundane understanding of vocation. It is called "Those Winter Sundays."¹⁶

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house.

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

As his son reflects on it later, the life of his father is not easy. He is a common laborer who works outdoors, but he is deeply devoted to his family, though the house is full of "chronic angers." Rising early and warming the rooms in a cold house, he polishes shoes and then wakes his somewhat thankless son for church. There is

16. Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays," in *Collected Poems: Robert Hayden*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (Norton Publishing, 1985), 41.

nothing very glamorous in any of this. The father is just doing what needed to be done—yet another of “love’s austere and lonely offices.”

Gordon Jensen’s *The Call to Discipleship* is a rich text that gives its readers much to ponder. He has braided together baptism, vocation, and community in a way that strengthens each concept. Indeed, they *must* be held together because when considered separately, they tend to wobble off course. The text is informed by a deep reading of the Christian tradition with a special indebtedness to the theologies of Luther and Bonhoeffer. Indeed, it is nothing less than a call to “re-enchant” the world in a way that honors creation and serves the neighbor. We can only hope it sparks new conversations in Christian communities about the meaning of the call to be a baptized apostle of Jesus.

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Creation's Vocation, and Ours

Allen G. Jorgenson

Gordon Jensen's *The Call to Discipleship* is located at the intersection of the motifs of discipleship, vocation, and baptism. Jensen has masterfully related these in a volume both scholarly and pastoral with a prophetic edge that serves well the mandate of the *Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology* series.

In responding to Jensen's important work, I want to follow the vocational trail most specifically, although recognizing that themes of discipleship and baptism will surface from time to time in relationship to justification. In a way, this seems especially fitting and perhaps a bit predictable because, as Jensen notes, justification "by its very nature, drives the Christian into a vocation of service."¹ Perhaps a little bit less predictable, however, will be the attempt I make in imagining that creation also has a vocation, a claim that I imagine to be paradoxically both common-sensical and curious. Jensen's work is Christologically rich in thinking through discipleship, vocation, and baptism. I see him as an especially apt interlocutor for my venture in that he endeavors to undermine any transactional understanding of vocation.² Key to my work will be Jensen's assertion that "discipleship is the calling of both the baptized individual and of the community—simultaneously an individual and a community (*simul singularitas et communitate*) vocation."³

In what follows, I first consider the third article of the creed and the work of the Spirit in sanctification, a point of considerable import in Jensen's work before considering creation as per the work of *Spiritus Creator*. In a manner analogous to Niels Henrik Gregersen's move in mapping the forensic/effective distinction of justification onto creation, I do the same with sanctification.

In the next section, I make some suggestions regarding how our understanding of vocation might be informed by the suggestion that creation is called, albeit in a manner *sui generis* to it. I want to argue with Jensen for a broader, communal understanding of vocation and also beyond Jensen in imagining that creation, too, is called to serve God, and we are well served by that calling and perform ours well when we do so in harmony with the cosmos's call.

In the final section of the paper, I ponder how creation might impact disciples in its vocation. Here, I point, with Luther, to creation's capacity to instruct us in the high calling we share with the whole cosmos of the practice of praise.

1. Gordon A. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology, ed. Paul R. Hinlicky (Cascade Books, 2026).

2. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, xxi.

3. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 103.

Vocation and Sanctification

Disciples are, of course, called. The call, however, is specific to a community shaped by the Spirit. As Luther notes in the *Small Catechism*, this Spirit calls, enlightens, makes holy, and preserves us.⁴ Jensen notes that “an integral component of vocation is the process of sanctification.”⁵ Consequently, he expends important efforts in working through the nature of sanctification and its relationship to justification. The term *kairos* and its distinction from *chronos* carries significant weight in his exploration. Jensen uses this in a way that correlates with Luther’s distinction between God’s *favor*, or the forensic dimension of justification, from God’s *donum*, the effective dimension. In thinking these through the event of our salvation with students, I have sometimes begun by noting the way in which we find the Greek verb for “save” (*sōzō*) in Pauline literature.

Ephesians 2:4-6: “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

I Corinthians 1:18: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Romans 5:10: “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”

Tellingly, Paul expresses the event of our salvation in past, present, and future tenses. After having my students sit with this curiosity for a bit, I explain to them that as the verb has God as its Subject, it has an eternal origin. Consequently, the event of our salvation is primordially an eternal event that then takes temporal form across time. When eternity touches time, time is touched in its totality rather than in discrete isolated instances even while it also takes on a chronological aspect as the bearer of its eternal character. As such, it makes sense to follow the confessors in separating sanctification as a chronological event from justification in its treatment since sanctification results from justification (SD III.28)⁶ even while recognizing that the work of Spirit is also an eternal event in which justification and sanctification are *simul*. It strikes me that justification and sanctification, as well as creation, have both eternal and chronological expressions relating respectively to *kairos* and *chronos*. Of course, just as justification and sanctification are simultaneously eternal and temporal, so is creation.

4. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, 2000), 355.

5. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 65.

6. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 566.

This eternal and temporal character maps onto Luther's distinction between the forensic and effective understanding of justification as *favor* and *donum*, related in turn to grace and faith. Luther writes:

... for peace and the remission of sins are properly attributed to the grace of God, while healing from corruption is ascribed to faith. Faith is the gift and inward good which purges the sin to which it is opposed....The grace of God, on the other hand, is an outward good, God's favor, the opposite of wrath.⁷

In the same way that justification names an eternal event that is located in time, so too does sanctification such that the "discipleship of the baptized encompasses both kinds of holiness, passive and active."⁸

God looks upon the actions resulting from the Spirit's activity with *favor* as well as ensuring that the *donum* of the Spirit enables growth in discipleship such that "day by day the substance [of sin] is removed so that it may be utterly destroyed."⁹ Egil Grislis notes, however, that

... according to Luther, although faith and justification can be recognized, sanctification remains hidden. This effectively prevents pride from nurturing hypocrisy. Yet for those truly worried about their condition vis-a-vis God, Luther offers a paradoxically profound assurance. "Grace can never forsake him who despairs of himself. (LW 51, 43)."¹⁰

Grislis describes sanctification as a "distinctive dimension experienced in the very midst of justification."¹¹ Jensen notes that Christ holds together the one time and on-going nature of baptism such that the baptized recognize that are able to respond to God's call because they have been freed by the Spirit, so they necessarily respond in humility because their confidence is Christ.¹²

What does this mean for vocation? Jensen notes that "an integral component of vocation is the process of sanctification."¹³ Sanctification as both *favor et donum* means that our calls are circumscribed by confidence and humility. The confidence comes *extra nos* in Christ, so knowing this to be the case renders us humble. Our humility is freeing because it is funded by the realization that our

7. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works – American Edition*, 55 vols. (Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955). Volume 32, 227. Hereafter (LW).

8. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 43. Cf. also "Whatever a godly man does, he does rightly, even if he makes a mistake; for he has a heart that is right, and God looks mainly at this." LW 4, 85.

9. LW 32, 208.

10. Egil Grislis, "Luther on Sanctification: Humility and Courage," *Consensus* 10, no. 1 (1984): 13–14.

11. Grislis, "Luther on Sanctification: Humility and Courage," 3.

12. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 46.

13. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community* 65.

agency is truly a *donum* that is Spirited, and our confidence is grounded in Christ who has rendered us patient on the *favor* of God. Jensen suggests, in an intriguing move, that the law has a vocation, which is our sanctification, that renders us agents who love the neighbor.¹⁴ We might ask, though, to quote an interlocutor of Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” To answer that, I turn to a motif from the first article of the Creed—creation.

Vocation and Creation

As noted at the beginning of this essay, I want to argue that creation has a vocation, realizing that this claim is at the same time both commonsensical and curious. It is commonsensical in that creation is called to render glory to God, as evidenced in Psalm 148.

- ¹ Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
- ² Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
- ³ Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
- ⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

The verb “praise” is used here in the imperative mood, so creation is given a command or a task, as it were. Of course, humans are also created, so we share in this call to praise God as mammals but also as nitrogen, iron, water, oxygen, and potassium. We are both creation and created as humans.

Gregersen claims that the first article of the creed is patterned after the second, so insights germane to Christology hold analogues in the doctrine of creation so that grace is present in creation, albeit in a hidden modality.¹⁵ Consequently, the *favor* and *donum* distinction discussed in Christ’s work applies also to creation such that the Father’s love for the cosmos accords to God’s *favor* and the Father’s presence in the cosmos accords to God’s *donum*. The Father is both *pro nobis* and *in nobis*.¹⁶ Gregersen asserts that, in a way analogous to the hypostatic union, the Father is present to the materiality of creation in a fashion akin to the presence of the Word to humanity in flesh. He notes, “For the blessings of God the Father do not only take place in human sensation and rationality, nor only in the good social government. God’s blessings also pervade the world of physical matter

14. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 64.

15. Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 (2005): 20.

16. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 20.

and biological existence.”¹⁷ He references God’s self-giving presence in Luther’s *Confession*,¹⁸ a point also found in the Large Catechism’s treatment of the First Article: “For here we see how the Father has given to us himself with all creation and has abundantly provided for us in this life, apart from the fact that he has also showered us with inexpressible eternal blessings through his Son and the Holy Spirit, as we shall hear.”¹⁹

Gregersen notes that the proximity of the divine to the everyday constitutes the mystery of this.²⁰ However, to faith, this mystery is revealed in a fashion: “what is revealed to faith is the ‘that’ of creation, but the ‘how’ of divine creativity remains a mystery, not only to human rationality but also to the believer.”²¹ This affirmation of creation is also operative in Luther’s treatment of vocation in his comments on 1 Corinthians 7 wherein he critiques the so-called vocation of monastics. He sees in their understanding the danger of excessive spirituality.²² In his treatment of marriage, he makes a strong claim for the earthly.

But since that is also termed religious (*heist geistlig*) which happens outwardly (*auswendig*) to the body through the spirit of faith (*den geist des glaubens*), let us be very just and precise in our differentiation and understand that the state of marriage (*ehestand*) in all fairness should be termed religious (*geistlich*) and the religious orders secular (*weltig*).²³

Marriage is *geistlig*, as are all vocations in service of God, but they are also bodily, so humankind shares in the materiality of the cosmos. In fact, it is constitutive of our existence, and collectively we are called to praise God in our materiality. Still, the curious nature of the claim that creation has a vocation arises as we recall that Luther’s understanding of vocation is found in a concrete call to a social location. This is noted by Jensen in his critique of those common articulations of vocation, following Frederick Buechner who asserts that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”²⁴ Jensen deftly outlines the danger of this understanding of vocation, which too easily renders it individualistic and subject to the whims of one’s passions and interests.²⁵ He notes that a “vocation always take place in the community and for the sake of a society

17. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 22.

18. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 22.

19. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 433.

20. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 23.

21. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 23.

22. LW 28, 15.

23. LW 28, 17. Cf. Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols., (H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), Band 12, 105, 28–31. Hereafter WA.

24. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

25. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 144.

that God is shaping and guiding.”²⁶ Loy, too, notes the tendency today to link vocation to subjective feelings of fulfillment in service of a sense of significance.²⁷ He states that many today have replaced the Reformation doctrine of vocation with a subjective attention to significance by way of the needs of others such that needs and fulfillment become contemporary markers of a vocation of significance.²⁸ This seems far removed from Luther’s exposition of vocation wherein he notes the need to “differentiate between the freedom existing in your relation to God and the freedom existing in your relation to your neighbor.”²⁹ We are not free in things that are our neighbors. Instead, love attends to “the desire and need of the neighbor.”³⁰ Jensen writes that “vocation always take place in the community and for the sake of a society that God is shaping and guiding.”³¹

All of the above presumes a social context facilitating relationships with neighbors. We might query whether this obtains for creation, too. I will explore the common assertion of some Lutheran eco-theologians who make a case for understanding trees, valleys, and cardinals as our neighbors. I think this in part quells some of the possible outrage at the claim that creation has a vocation. To this, I add the simple observation that there is a *sui generis* character of the created order that is constitutive of its vocation, which differs in a fashion from that vocation nested in the Spirit’s recreative activity of sanctification. That *sui generis* sense of vocation is located in the Spirit’s creative act of creation that we share in. Here, we discover that our vocation is not circumscribed by faith borne love that acts for the neighbor. In creation’s vocation, we are called to be words of God. Consider Luther’s comments on Genesis.

[God] does not speak grammatical words; He speaks true and existent realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God. Thus sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc.—we are all words of God, in fact only one single syllable or letter by comparison with the entire creation.³²

That we are simply being, then, is attested to at the beginning of this section in Psalm 148 wherein we heard the call to be what we are, witnesses to the glory of God. We share this vocation with all of creation *as creatures*. In our vocations *as human beings*, we do so in a social location for the good of all. Gregersen plays this a bit differently in his assertion that because of faith, we can now see the cosmos

26. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 113.

27. David W. Loy, “Luther, Vocation, and the Search for Significance,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2021): 50.

28. Loy, “Luther, Vocation, and the Search for Significance,” 53.

29. LW 28, 46.

30. LW 28, 42.

31. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 113.

32. LW 1, 21.

as sermon.³³ He notes, along with other proponents of Scandinavian Creation Theology, that creation must not thereby be seen romantically or nostalgically.³⁴ The word of God that is the hawk is a hard word to the word of God that is the mouse, yet still we sing “This is my Father’s world.”

At the close of this section, I ask the question “what difference does it make to see creation as having a vocation, and what might we learn from creation’s vocation as we ponder ours?”

Learning from Creation’s Vocation

Lutheran eco-theologians commonly include the created order in identifying neighbors. Heidarzadegan notes that the vocation of loving the neighbor includes the “river, forest, future generation, and endangered species.”³⁵ Simons also notes that the neighbor includes non-humans.³⁶ Further, following what he perceives an important insight from the mystics, he enjoins the faithful to look at the world differently so that “all of creation, and not just the human, must be viewed as embodying the ongoing dynamic spirit of God, helping to challenge the anthropocentrism that has justified wanton abuse and destruction of the creation for human purposes alone.”³⁷ Further, following Bonhoeffer’s lead of expanding the three estates into four mandates, Kiara Jorgenson adds creation as a fifth mandate.³⁸ Jensen notes that for Luther, all three estates involve vocations, a point that Jorgenson concurs with and expands to the end that our relationship to creation is understood vocationally.³⁹ Jorgenson, consequently, notes that the cosmos must be seen as neighbor.⁴⁰

Jensen makes a similar move without using neighbor language when he notes that baptism “also engages the baptized person in the gospel life for the sake of all creation, and not just for the sake of their neighbor.”⁴¹ I am grateful for this move but also want to identify that the cosmos is our neighbor with whom we have relations. The practice of loving the neighbor precludes paternalistic care insofar as

33. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 28.

34. Cf. for instance, Knud E. Løgstrup, *Metaphysics Volume I*, trans. Russel L. Dees (Marquette University Press, 1995), 36.

35. Nazila Heidarzadegan, “Lutheran Ecotheology and the Anthropocene: Posthumanism, Apocalypse, and Hope,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 64, no. 4 (2025): 214.

36. Ernest L. Simons, “Vocation for Planetary Citizenship: Lutheran Liberal Arts Education in the Anthropocene,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 57, no. 2 (2018): 99.

37. Simons, “Vocation for Planetary Citizenship: Lutheran Liberal Arts Education in the Anthropocene,” 102.

38. Kiara Jorgenson, “The Option for Life,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 54, no. 2 (2015): 201.

39. Jorgenson, “The Option for Life,” 201–202.

40. Jorgenson, “The Option for Life,” 202.

41. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 54.

love is predicated on some notion of reciprocity, even in the mode of disappointment. To love someone is to anticipate with this love the birth of a relationship that will become me serving my neighbor who serves me. Furthermore, when creation is my neighbor, not only do I love creation but creation loves me, albeit in a way fitting for the being that is not human being. Of course, we know that humans do not have the corner marketed on love because human love is divine love formed in humanity, so there is no reason not to think that it can be angelic or cosmic in form. The point, finally, is that if the cosmos is my neighbor, I live with it in a relationship of respect, care, and anticipation. Luther fittingly points to this in his comments on 1 Corinthians 15 when he opines about the way that nature illustrates resurrection and shares a fit response by a Christian.

“...This is surely done for our sakes, that we might thereby learn to know Him. He places His work before our eyes to illustrate what he purposes to do with us, for whose sake He created all of this. For since He produces such beautiful new vegetation year after year from a dead kernel and seed, He is much more disposed to do the same with us when we similarly lie buried under the ground and the time comes for an eternal summer to dawn. Then we will come forth far more beautiful and glorious.” Thus Christians hold converse with trees and all else that grows on earth, and the latter, in turn, with them.⁴²

The kind of agency that Luther accords “trees and all else that grows on earth” parallels is in some ways an Indigenous imaginary. A phrase commonly used among people Indigenous to North America is translated from various languages into English as “all my relations.” It points to the interrelated nature of all beings and is used ceremonially in some communities. Further

“All my relations” also acknowledges measures of agency in all created things, and to recognize the power and life in all created things is an important aspect of the ongoing recognition of our interrelationship. Some Indigenous peoples will speak about the spirit of a created thing, whether a bird, a tree, or a rock. This is recognition of creatureliness, of our interrelatedness, and of animacy.⁴³

A kind of symmetry can be seen in Luther’s “convers[ation] with the trees” even while Luther’s understanding of humans as the pinnacle of creation is radically different from an Indigenous perspective.

A common theme among Indigenous stories from across Turtle Island [North America] is just how needy human beings are in comparison to the rest of creation. In many of these stories ... it is humans who rely on

42. LW 28, 180 and WA 36 646, 16 “reden die Christen mit beumen und allem, was aus erden wechst und sie widder mit inen.”

43. T. Christopher Hoklotubbe and Danny Zacharias, *Reading the Bible on Turtle Island: An Invitation to North American Indigenous Interpretation* (IVP Academic, 2025), 31.

the help and mercy of animals and plants to survive. Such stories stress the importance of humans treating animals and plants with respect, appreciation, and reciprocity.⁴⁴

Luther's worldview is different in that humans are the pinnacle of creation. I do note, however, that in setting Luther and this Indigenous worldview in proximity, his assertion that the marvel of creation's renewal "is surely done for our sakes, *that we might thereby learn to know Him*" (emphasis added) comes to the fore. This learning from creation accords with Luther's very Augustinian note that this life is to be engaged in a way "that [Christians] do not sink too deeply into it either with love and desire or suffering and boredom, but should rather behave like guests on earth, *using everything for a short time because of need and not for pleasure.*"⁴⁵ The Augustinian distinction between *uti* (use) and *frui* (pleasure) is the subtext here, with the latter reserved for God alone.⁴⁶ With the former, Luther does not have some kind of objectification in mind but rather a use that accords with the purpose of a thing. Part of the that purpose is to make God known in praise. Of course, the condition for the possibility of this is faith, whereby to "a Christian, therefore, the entire world is holiness, purity, utility, and piety."⁴⁷ Creation's vocation, then, in addition to praising the divine is as a pedagogue to humanity.

Of course, all of the above, within a Christian imaginary, presumes eyes, ears, and indeed all senses shaped by faith, which is the presence of Christ animated by the Spirit. When we visit the first article of the Creed under the tutelage of the second and third, we rediscover in creation the Creator who calls all creation into vocations of praise and loving the neighbor that fit their way of being in the world. Perhaps this, then, is the most pressing lesson gifted Christians reading the three articles in concert: "faith is precisely that which makes you a chick, and Christ a hen."⁴⁸ We find ourselves in a nest under the wings of love.

Conclusion

Marit Trelstad has noted that an epistemological conversion shapes our way of being: new knowledge of God leads to new actions.⁴⁹ When our understanding of vocation, most often read in the arena of the second article of the Creed with its fitting call to see vocation under the tutelage of the cross, moves into the third, we see it shaped by sanctification with the fitting reminder that ours is not an un-

44. Hoklotubbe and Zacharias, *Reading the Bible on Turtle Island*, 32.

45. LW 28, 52 emphasis added

46. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Roberson, Jr. (Prentice Hall, 1958), 18.

47. LW 28, 35.

48. LW 32 236.

49. Marit Trelstad, "The Way of Salvation in Luther's Theology: A Feminist Evaluation," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 45, no. 3 (2006): 244.

bridled freedom but is shaped by the Spirit so that “in everyday life human beings cooperate with God.”⁵⁰ Pöder fittingly notes that this freedom “that is bestowed upon Christians is both sweet and delightful and a tribulation.”⁵¹ The *donum* of our vocation allows us to be both humble and curious as we engage a Spirited freedom under the *favor* of God. As we think vocation through the first article of the creed, we imagine that the community of vocation is cosmic in nature. To be human is to be on a journey in knowing God, facilitated in part by creation that both praises and unveils the Creator to faith. This allows us to see the once familiar world anew and as mysterious as the One who made it and the humans who behold it.

Finally, I note that Kolb observed that although Luther’s treatment of vocation emerged within a worldview with three estates that were rather static, this reframing of vocation admits a contemporary applicability because of the shared phenomena (family, work, etc.) that govern human life.⁵² This observation is helpful because in staying with Luther’s revisioned vocation in the context of the Creed’s three articles, vocation “ceases to be a matter of private calling and becomes the shared work of reshaping institutions, economies, and imaginaries for the flourishing of all creation.”⁵³

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50. Karin Kallas-Pöder, “Freedom as a Matter of Perspective and Perception in Martin Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio*,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 27, no. 1 (2025): 13.

51. Kallas-Pöder, “Freedom as a Matter of Perspective and Perception in Martin Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio*,” 30.

52. Robert Kolb, “Called to Milk Cows and Govern Kingdoms: Martin Luther’s Teaching on Christian Vocations,” *Concordia Journal* 39 (Spring 2013): 139.

53. Heidarzadegan, “Lutheran Ecotheology and the Anthropocene: Posthumanism, Apocalypse, and Hope,” 216.

Opinion outside the Theme

The West Is Christian— The Gospel Is Not Western

The Two Governments and Christian Witness after Christendom¹

Georg Warnecke

The Dentist, the Tractor, and the Wrong Defense of Christianity

A story circulated under the name of Walter J. Hollenweger, the Swiss theologian and pioneer of intercultural mission theology, and was printed in a 1991 ecumenical reader under the title “The Dentist and the Leader of the Women’s Exercise Group in Theological Conversation.” The printed location can now be identified, although the byline and any earlier publication still require verification against the physical volume.²

A pastor finds himself surrounded by people who have not attended church for two years. Their objections to Christianity come by the bucketful. The leader of the village women’s exercise group says that it makes no difference whether someone is Muslim or Christian. The pastor answers with an example about polygamy. A dentist then argues that Christianity has failed. It did not prevent two world wars, cannot solve world hunger, and cannot even persuade the baptized Christians of Europe and America of its truth. Hungry people, he says, need tractors, not tracts.

The pastor replies by asking why dentistry and the manufacture of tractors arose within the sphere of Western Christianity rather than within Buddhism. His point is that religions are not interchangeable. They narrate the world differently and therefore form different practices, expectations, and institutions.

1. Georg Warnecke, “The West Is Christian—The Gospel Is Not Western,” *Physhbournes’s Sundries*, July 2026, <https://physhbournes-sundries.blogspot.com/2026/07/the-west-is-christian-gospel-is-not.html>. The present essay substantially revises and expands that post.

2. “Der Zahnarzt und die Leiterin der Damenriege im theologischen Gespräch,” item 35 in *Vorlesebuch Ökumene: Geschichten vom Glauben und Leben der Christen in aller Welt*, ed. Susanne Beck et al. (Lahr: Kaufmann; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1991). The printed location is verified; the attribution to Walter J. Hollenweger and any earlier publication remain unverified.

The pastor is right about the difference and wrong about the proof.

Religions are not different packaging for the same content. They do not say the same things about the body, suffering, guilt, time, death, forgiveness, hope, or the purpose of human life. This can be said without ranking human beings and without reducing any living tradition to a textbook caricature. The refusal to collapse differences is a condition of serious conversation.

The error begins when Christianity is defended by the achievements of Western civilization. Dentistry is not the gospel, a tractor does not prove the resurrection, nor did modern science and technology emerge within a sealed Christian container. They arose through long histories of inheritance, translation, dispute, borrowing, and exchange involving Greek, Jewish, Islamic, Christian, and other intellectual traditions. What is sometimes presented as the self-generated possession of the Christian West is itself a history of reception.³

The anecdote, therefore, leaves better questions than the one it intended to answer: what is Christianity, and what is merely the West speaking in Christian language?

Contemporary arguments about the “Christian West” often begin where the pastor’s defense begins. They point to hospitals, universities, constitutional government, human rights, scientific inquiry, music, law, or social welfare and offer them as evidence for Christianity. The historical arguments may contain truth. Christian faith, worship, institutions, and disputes have shaped Western societies deeply, yet the theological inference does not follow. Cultural fruit is not proof of saving truth. Historical usefulness is not justification.

A related question runs through Paul R. Hinlicky’s reflection on the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence. Political freedom is not sustained by legal form alone but also depends on habits, loyalties, restraint, and moral formation that law cannot simply manufacture. If some of these goods arose within Christian histories, what happens when Christian memory weakens? The question concerns more than one nation’s anniversary. It reaches across Western societies, though it does not have the same history or the same political form in each of them.

This essay first distinguishes Christian historical formation from theological ownership before turning to Israel, justification, and the Lutheran teaching of the two governments, then finally asks what forms of political responsibility and Christian witness remain possible after the claim of possession has been surrendered.

3. For the Arabic–Latin translation movements and the cross-cultural transmission of learning, see Charles Burnett, “The Coherence of the Arabic-Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century,” *Science in Context* 14, nos. 1–2 (2001): 249–288; and Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society* (London: Routledge, 1998). These sources do not settle the larger debate about the intellectual conditions of modern science; they do prevent a sealed-civilization account.

A Historical Mark, not a Theological Verdict

“The Christian West,” “Christendom,” and “cultural Christianity” name related but different realities. The Christian West is a broad and contested historical description of societies profoundly shaped by Christian texts, practices, institutions, and conflicts. Christendom names arrangements in which ecclesial and political orders understood themselves as parts of an integrated Christian people. Cultural Christianity describes the continued social presence of Christian symbols, habits, festivals, moral vocabularies, and institutional expectations even where personal faith is weak or absent. None of these terms names a single, uninterrupted civilization. None is innocent. None is merely imaginary.

Western societies have been marked by the Bible, Christian worship, churches, calendars, burial practices, moral arguments, public institutions, music, architecture, legal conflicts, and patterns of education and care. Even people who no longer believe may inhabit moral and linguistic worlds formed partly by those histories. The weekly calendar, public holidays, artistic canons, assumptions about the person, and ordinary figures of speech often bear traces of Christian reception long after explicit belief has receded. That mark is real. Denying it would be historically careless. Turning it into a certificate of virtue would be theologically disastrous.

A civilization cannot be baptized because baptism addresses and promises death and new life to concrete human beings gathered into the body of Christ. A culture cannot be justified because justification is God’s verdict on sinners, not an assessment of a civilization’s usefulness. A nation cannot become the body of Christ because the church is created by the gospel and sacraments, not by ancestry, territory, law, or political memory.

Christendom named real arrangements in which rulers, churches, institutions, and peoples understood public order through Christian symbols and claims. The forms differed greatly across periods and regions, yet the ideal of a *corpus christianum*, a Christian people ordered under intertwined spiritual and temporal authorities, exercised enormous historical power. Church and political order were distinguishable, but they were woven together through law, education, legitimacy, ritual, property, coercion, and mutual dependence.

This history generated real goods. It produced liturgies and music that still open human beings to dimensions of reality they might otherwise never hear. Bach is not an embarrassment to the argument. Neither are hospitals, schools, charitable institutions, the preservation and transmission of learning, or the long Christian arguments that helped limit rulers and protect conscience. A received good creates responsibility, not innocence.

The guilt is equally concrete. Jews were restricted, expelled, forcibly converted, and murdered under Christian signs and with Christian theological assistance. Confessional wars made the faith of rulers a matter of life, property, and exile for their subjects. Colonial expansion repeatedly joined commercial and political dom-

ination to missionary language. Christian churches could care for the sick and at the same time teach contempt for Jews, silence dissent, legitimate racial hierarchy, or bless conquest.

History is not an account book in which a cathedral cancels a massacre, a hospital balances a colony, or a cantata outweighs persecution. The law does not ask whether a civilization's final balance appears respectable. It names guilt as guilt.

The gospel does not answer by offering a more favorable calculation. It does not acquit the West because the West also produced art, medicine, constitutions, or schools. It does not justify Christianity by showing that Christians have been useful. The gospel says that God justifies the ungodly.

This verdict comes from outside the sinner. It is not inferred from moral performance, cultural achievement, institutional success, or historical influence. It is not earned by an individual, a church, a people, or a nation. In Jesus, the Christ, God speaks the sinner righteous. The case is decided outside the sinner's performance.⁴

The truth of Christianity, therefore, does not depend on the success of Christian history. The gospel would remain true if Christians had produced no cathedral, university, constitution, or welfare institution. Its truth rests in God's promise, not in the civilizing usefulness of those who confess it. In fact, Christianity makes truthful judgment possible. Christians may receive inherited goods with gratitude, confess inherited guilt without evasion, and work to preserve what serves human life. They need not turn any of those acts into a case for their civilization's righteousness.

Israel and the Origin the West Cannot Possess

The claim that the gospel is not Western does not begin with modern cultural pluralism. It begins with Israel. Jesus is a Jew. His Scriptures are Israel's Scriptures. The promises to which the gospel bears witness were not first entrusted to Europe, a Christian empire, or a later church civilization. Rabbi Paul does not present the nations as replacing Israel. In Romans 9–11, he warns Gentile believers against boasting. They do not support the root; rather, the root supports them. That warning concerns more than personal humility. It judges a whole Christian imagination of possession.

Supersessionism helped make the cultural ownership of Christianity thinkable. Once Israel could be treated as the church's obsolete prehistory, the Gentile church no longer had to understand itself as a recipient grafted into a history that preceded and exceeded it. It could imagine that the former bearer of the promises had fulfilled its role and left the stage. Europe could then present itself not merely as one historical place in which the gospel had been received, translated, loved, distorted, and opposed but as the gospel's mature home and natural guardian.

4. Augsburg Confession IV, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 38–39; Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV, in the same volume, 120–145.

This movement was never only intellectual. It entered preaching, art, law, liturgy, mission, and public memory. The living Jewish people could become a theological remainder whose continued existence was difficult to explain except as judgment, obstinacy, or future conversion. The church's dependence was replaced by succession. Reception became inheritance, and inheritance became ownership.

Recent Pauline scholarship has recovered the extent to which Paul's mission to the nations remains a Jewish eschatological claim rather than a departure from Judaism into a new universal religion. Paula Fredriksen and Mark Nanos, in different ways, force Christian readers to reckon with Paul as a Jew addressing Gentiles without declaring Jewish covenantal life obsolete.⁵ That scholarship is not useful because it supplies a modern Christian argument with a convenient Jewish background. It is useful where it refuses the church's habit of making Israel function only as a stage in its own story.

A Jewish correction must go further. Michael Wyschogrod's insistence on Israel's embodied election resists every Christian attempt to dissolve Israel into an abstract principle of universality.⁶ Israel is not merely an example of the general claim that all truth comes from outside the self. It is a concrete people with a concrete history and promises that the church did not issue and cannot revoke. Christian theology does not honor Israel by turning Jewish particularity into a metaphor for Christian humility. Paul grounds this refusal in God's fidelity: God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29; cf. 11:1–2, 28). Israel's continuing election is therefore not a concession to modern sensibility but a confession that God remains faithful to what God has promised. The church's confidence in the promise spoken in baptism rests on that same fidelity, although Israel's election and baptismal incorporation must not be collapsed into one category.

This distinction does not resolve the church's relation to Israel's embodied election. It marks the point at which Christian theology must stop turning Israel into material for its own self-clarification. The church remains dependent on a history it did not generate and cannot absorb into its own categories without remainder.

Three meanings of "from outside" must therefore be distinguished. First, the gospel comes to Gentiles through a history that is not theirs. It comes through

5. Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), especially 32–130; Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), especially the treatment of Romans 9–11. The two authors differ in significant respects; both resist treating Paul as the founder of a de-Judaized Gentile religion.

6. Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 129; Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). Wyschogrod is used here as a Jewish corrective to Christian abstraction; Jennings helps trace the reattachment of Christian identity to European land, race, and possession.

Israel's Scriptures, Israel's hope, Israel's Messiah, and the apostolic witness. This is a historical and covenantal priority. Israel remains the prior address and living root; it is not simply the first culture from which a universal message escaped.

Second, justification comes *extra nos*, from outside the sinner. This is a forensic and soteriological claim. The sinner does not manufacture the verdict, discover it in an interior depth, or establish it through a successful life. God speaks it in the promise of Jesus, the Christ.

Third, the gospel is always culturally mediated. It is heard in languages, carried by bodies, sung in musical forms, taught through institutions, and received within social worlds. It never appears as a cultureless object hovering above history, yet no cultural form exhausts or owns it. Gentiles receive the gospel through a history they did not generate, and the sinner receives a verdict that cannot be manufactured. These are distinct grounds—the first historical and covenantal, the second forensic and soteriological—but together they prevent cultural reception from becoming possession. The gospel can judge its Western bearers because it is not identical with Western reception. It can also judge every new translation, including those that flatter the receiving culture by removing the offense of Israel, the cross, judgment, promise, baptism, or resurrection.

The criteria of faithful translation are not mere foreignness or disruption. The church is bound to Israel's Scriptures, to Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, to the apostolic witness, to baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to the distinction of law and gospel. Some cultural forms may serve this witness better than others. Literacy, memory, legal protection for dissent, musical traditions, and stable institutions can be real gifts, but a more adequate bearer does not become an owner.

This distinction changes how Christian heritage must be read. Bonhoeffer's language of the Christian West can illuminate a real history but must also be interrupted by the prior question: whose history is absent when Europe narrates itself as the historical subject of Christianity?

Bonhoeffer: Heritage, Dissolution, and Guilty Order

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on the Christian West are indispensable and dangerous. They are indispensable because he understood that inherited order, political responsibility, and Christian confession cannot be separated by slogans. They are dangerous because his language can be recruited for nostalgia and civilizational self-defense.

The textual form matters. Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is not a finished book but a collection of manuscripts written between 1940 and 1943 then later reconstructed by editors. "Heritage and Decay" belongs to this unfinished work. The material on the restraining power, though related, should not be presented as if Bonhoeffer

had delivered one seamless final argument.⁷ In “Heritage and Decay,” Bonhoeffer describes the disintegration of the old European *corpus christianum*. The former Christian people held together under emperor and pope had separated into church and political nation, so the integrated subject of Christendom no longer existed. This observation can illuminate the end of cultural Christianity, provided it is not turned into a lament for lost ecclesial domination.

Bonhoeffer wrote under National Socialist rule when law was being destroyed, truth was subordinated to propaganda, and human beings were stripped of rights and murdered. His language of decay cannot simply be transferred to pluralism, declining church attendance, or the loss of Christian cultural deference. Not every secular citizen is an enemy of Christ, not every social change is lawlessness, and not every criticism of the church is evidence of civilizational collapse.

Bonhoeffer’s account is also a Western European account. It cannot serve as the total map of Christian history. Jewish, Eastern Christian, colonial, and non-European histories do not occupy its center. His martyrdom does not make his historical judgments unassailable as a witness must be read, not canonized.

Still, Bonhoeffer offers an essential limit through his use of the restraining power. The biblical allusion comes from 2 Thessalonians 2 wherein an unnamed force or person holds back lawlessness. Its original referent is uncertain. Bonhoeffer uses the figure briefly but suggestively for ordering forces that restrain destruction within history. He immediately denies them a saving identity: the restrainer is not God and is not without guilt, though God may use it to preserve the world from destruction.⁸

The distinction is severe. Political order may be necessary without being innocent, may protect life without creating life, may limit evil without redeeming the world, and may preserve space for truthful speech while remaining answerable for its own violence, exclusions, and failures.

The application to contemporary institutions is a theological extension rather than a quotation from Bonhoeffer. A judge who restrains arbitrary power, a journalist who exposes a lie, a teacher who refuses racial humiliation, or an official who protects a persecuted family may perform a genuinely preserving service without naming it as such. The office does not become sacred, and the actor does not be-

7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), especially “Heritage and Decay,” 103–133. The German critical edition makes clear that *Ethics* consists of unfinished manuscripts reconstructed in their probable sequence: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 6, ed. Ilse Tödt et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992).

8. 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7. For Bonhoeffer’s statement that the restrainer is neither God nor without guilt, see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 131–133. The contemporary institutional examples in the main text are a constructive application of his limitation, not a claim that Bonhoeffer named those professions as the *katechon*.

come a messiah. The deed must still be judged by what it does, whom it protects, what means it uses, and whether it remains open to correction. The danger begins when a limited task becomes a salvation-historical identity. A nation, party, church, or leader announces that it is the last wall against chaos. Political opponents become bearers of absolute evil. Criticism becomes treason. Limits on power appear as assistance to the enemy. The alleged restrainer must then be preserved without limit because everything supposedly falls if it falls.

The end of Christendom should not be answered by appointing a new protector of Christian civilization. The church does not need a political messiah but rather needs the freedom to distinguish God's promise from every provisional order that may serve the neighbor and still remain guilty.

Bonhoeffer describes what historically comes apart. The Lutheran teaching of the two governments helps clarify why this separation is not merely loss and why distinction must not become withdrawal.

Two Governments: Distinction without Withdrawal

What is commonly called the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms is better understood here as the teaching of God's two ways of governing. The terminology varies, and the history of interpretation is disputed. The point is not to map two sealed territories, one religious and one secular, but to distinguish offices, means, and ends. This grammar is historically located, but its theological claim cannot be reduced to a territorial settlement—it concerns the means by which faith is created as well as the limits of coercion. Coercion cannot create faith, and the gospel cannot be administered as civil law.

Through the gospel, God addresses sinners with promise, creates faith, forgives sins, and gathers the church. Faith cannot be coerced. A government may compel silence, punish conduct, regulate institutions, or demand an outward gesture, but it cannot create trust in God. The church therefore lives through the proclaimed Word, baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, and the calling of ministers to serve these gifts.

Through temporal government, God preserves outward life through law, office, judgment, institutions, work, family, and public responsibility. A hand that strikes may have to be stopped. A contract may have to be enforced. A violent person may have to be restrained. A child, refugee, dissenter, or poor person may need a public authority able to protect a right that cannot be enforced by private strength. The institutional forms of that protection remain historically contestable. The confessions do not specify a tax rate, a welfare system, a constitutional design, or a complete policy program. They do insist that temporal authority is an office for the neighbor rather than a private possession of the ruler.

The Lutheran confessions hold both claims. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession affirms civil government, law, judgment, and public office. Article XXVIII denies

bishops the right to rule civil affairs by ecclesiastical command and denies secular rulers the competence to create faith or govern the church's proclamation.⁹ The distinction protects the state from ecclesial takeover and the church from political definition. No nation succeeds to Israel's election, and no commonwealth becomes the bearer of the gospel by cultural inheritance.

It also judges both sides. The state may regulate the outward affairs of churches where law, property, employment, safeguarding, or public accountability are involved. It may not decide which proclamation is the gospel or which political usefulness makes a church authentic. The church may speak publicly about law, violence, poverty, work, truth, and the treatment of strangers but may not transform the gospel into a coercive legal program and then call resistance to that program resistance to God. This is not political indifference. It is a discipline of jurisdiction and means.

The believer may be moved by faith to defend refugees, oppose a war, or argue about contested questions of law and conscience. Faith may be the deepest reason the believer speaks. It does not by itself settle what every citizen must be compelled to do. The temporal argument must still address shared facts, proportionality, law, foreseeable consequences, competing goods, and the rights of those who do not share the believer's confession.

The old Adam wears a uniform as easily as ordinary clothes. Public office does not make a person morally superior. Its significance lies in accountable authority: law, evidence, procedure, appeal, limitation, and responsibility outside the actor's private judgment. The tradition, therefore, does not command blind obedience. Political authority can betray its office and become a destroyer of those it is meant to protect. The Magdeburg Confession of 1550, written in direct response to the imperial imposition of the Augsburg Interim beginning in 1548, defended resistance by lower magistrates who already bore public responsibility for their subjects. It did not make every private person the final judge of the exception.¹⁰ The point here is narrow but important: even resistance was argued as an exercise of accountable office, not the spiritual coronation of private violence.

The two-governments teaching cannot generate a complete political program from the gospel, though it can expose illegitimate claims. A political movement cannot define "real Christianity" for the church. A church cannot make its moral vision binding by borrowing the state's coercive power and then describe the result as mission. Nor does the distinction create a clean Christian conscience.

9. Augsburg Confession XVI and XXVIII, in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 48–51, 91–102.

10. *Bekennntnis, Unterricht und Verantwortung der Pfarrherrn und anderer Diener der Kirchen zu Magdeburg*, April 13, 1550, in Irene Dingel, ed., *Der Adiaphoristische Streit (1548–1560)*, *Controversia et Confessio* 2, prepared by Jan Martin Lies and Hans-Otto Schneider (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 442–629, especially the second part on resistance; Robert von Friedeburg, "Martin Luther on the Legitimacy of Resisting the Emperor," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 3 (2021): 422–451.

Political action may be necessary, limited, mistaken, and guilty. Inaction may abandon the neighbor. The gospel does not provide a position outside history from which Christians remain pure while others carry responsibility. It does free them from the need to proclaim their own political action righteous before God.

This is a deep political consequence of justification but not a political blueprint. Because the actor does not live from the innocence of the action, the action need not be sanctified. It may be examined, corrected, repented of, and—where possible—repaired.

Hinlicky and Böckenförde: What Sustains Freedom?

Hinlicky's essay begins from a strain within American political freedom that also reaches beyond the United States. Americans, he writes, are "rich with such 'freedom from' but poor in 'freedom for.'" Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession helps him distinguish the temporal protection of outward liberty from the gospel's creation of forgiven and forgiving love. Temporal law can restrain trespass but cannot create the love that fulfills the law.¹¹

Hinlicky's American diagnosis opens a wider conversation. In a European, and especially an eastern German, setting, it is not the same political argument, yet it exposes a recognizable theological pressure point: can political liberty endure when the cultural practices that form people for responsible freedom weaken? Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde formulated the dilemma sharply: the liberal secularized state lives from conditions that it cannot itself guarantee.¹² A free state depends on trust, solidarity, self-restraint, truthful public speech, acceptance of loss, and recognition of opponents as fellow citizens. It can protect these conditions by law, education, and institutions yet cannot simply command them into existence without turning freedom into compulsory virtue.

Placed beside Böckenförde's dictum, Hinlicky's question becomes sharper. If Christian worship, teaching, family practices, congregations, schools, and moral vocabularies helped form the dispositions on which political liberty depends, then the erosion of Christian memory may consume moral capital that secular institutions cannot replenish. The end of Christendom may not only clarify theology but may also weaken the social conditions in which freedom survives.

11. Paul R. Hinlicky, "What Is Freedom? The Declaration of Independence on its 250th Anniversary," *Promissio: A Journal of Confessing Theology* 1, no. 3 (2026): 155–163, at 160. Hinlicky's argument is engaged as a theological account of negative and positive freedom, not as an occasion for commentary on specific American parties or current domestic policy.

12. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "The Rise of the State as a Process of Secularization," in *Religion, Law, and Democracy: Selected Writings*, eds. Mirjam Künkler and Tine Stein, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 152–167, esp. 167. See also Tine Stein, "The Böckenförde Dictum—On the Topicality of a Liberal Formula," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 7, no. 1 (2018): 97–108.

That objection should not be dismissed. The loss of Christian practices can be a real loss. Words for forgiveness, habits of confession, limits on sovereign desire, care for the weak, and an authority before which rulers and citizens alike are answerable do not reproduce themselves automatically. A society may inherit them for a time while forgetting the stories and communities that carried them.

Two qualifications are nevertheless decisive. First, a Christian genealogy does not establish Christian ownership. Even where a public good was formed through Christian arguments and practices, the church does not receive jurisdiction over the state or the conscience of the citizen. Genealogy creates responsibility, not a title deed. The state cannot coerce the religious conditions of its own freedom without betraying freedom. The church cannot guarantee those conditions either. Christian societies have produced courage and servility, resistance and obedience to tyranny, care and exclusion. Christian formation is not a moral machine. The same Bible has been heard as a word against slavery and as a defense of slavery. The same church can teach that every ruler stands under judgment and then bless the ruler's violence.

Second, the sources of democratic ethos need not be monopolized by the church. Families, schools, associations, professions, religious communities, and secular moral traditions can form persons capable of compromise, truthfulness, and public responsibility. Whether these institutions are presently able to sustain such formation is an empirical question, not a theological guarantee. The erosion of Christian memory may coincide with the weakening of other forms of inherited responsibility as well.

This essay therefore makes no promise that political goods will survive the loss of the traditions that helped carry them. Post-Christendom may clarify the church's task while remaining a serious loss for the neighbor. Political liberty can erode. Institutions can hollow out. Citizens can become consumers of rights without accepting responsibility for a common world. Secularization does not guarantee maturity, and Christian decline does not guarantee liberation.

However, the refusal of jurisdiction is not a refusal of institutional responsibility. Christians may sustain schools, hospitals, associations, practices of care, and institutions of public accountability in cooperation with others and under common law. Such work belongs to temporal service, neither proving the gospel nor giving the church title to the state or to the citizen's conscience.

Two claims must therefore remain distinct. The theological claim is firm: even a demonstrably Christian genealogy establishes no ecclesial ownership of the commonwealth. The empirical question remains open—some public goods may weaken when the communities and practices that carried them weaken. Even then, no mandate for restoration follows. The gospel can form freedom for the neighbor, but it is not a civic technology that guarantees the survival of a political order. A church that conscripts it for that purpose corrupts the gospel without securing the state.

The church's contribution is therefore neither withdrawal nor cultural control. It may form people who know that freedom is not sovereign desire; that conscience cannot be leased to a ruler, party, market, or church apparatus; that the neighbor's freedom matters even when the neighbor is wrong; and that forgiveness is neither amnesia nor escape from responsibility. Further, it may cooperate with others who protect law, truth, and the vulnerable without pretending that cooperation creates a Christian state.

Hinlicky's "freedom for" belongs here. The gospel frees the sinner from the endless defense of the self and therefore for the neighbor. This freedom cannot be produced by temporal law. It may nevertheless become socially visible in promise keeping, truth telling, service, patience, courage, and the refusal to make an enemy into an antichrist. The church cannot restore the lost cultural unity of the West but can cultivate practices that serve freedom without claiming ownership of freedom. It can make its public contribution precisely by refusing to become the chaplaincy of a political project.

Eastern Germany: Where the Question Becomes Concrete

The end of Christendom can remain an abstract phrase where churches still possess buildings, schools, public recognition, money, and cultural prestige. Eastern Germany offers a more severe test. It is not a universal model for the West but instead is a place where one possible future has already become ordinary life.

At the 1997 German Protestant Church Congress in Leipzig, West German television crews asked young people whether they were Protestant or Catholic. The young people looked puzzled and answered, in effect, "Nothing. We are normal." Axel Noack later named the deeper condition in the title of a published essay: "They have forgotten that they have forgotten God."¹³

The first sentence describes more than nonmembership. Religion was not being rejected as an enemy. It no longer belonged to the ordinary grammar by which life was described. To be Protestant or Catholic appeared as a special condition, so, as such, normality meant no denomination, no ecclesial belonging, and often no need to account for their absence.

The second sentence goes further. Forgetting may leave a trace. A person may sense that something has been lost. When people have forgotten that they have forgotten, the absence no longer presents itself as an absence. There is no religious wound waiting for the church to heal and no concealed Christian question that only needs the right marketing.

Eastern German secularization cannot be reduced to forty years of socialist state atheism, though those years matter. The landscape also carries the histories of

13. Axel Noack, "Sie haben vergessen, daß sie Gott vergessen haben," *idea*, September 20, 2000. The Leipzig Church Congress exchange is presented as an anecdotal recollection; Noack's published title is the textual attribution used for the deeper diagnosis.

Protestant establishment, war, National Socialism, institutional collapse, migration, demographic change, and the failure of churches to become self-evidently credible after reunification. Scholarship has described this as a form of “forced secularity” while also showing that nonreligion became socially reproduced across generations rather than remaining merely the effect of state pressure.¹⁴

Western explanations often treat the East as an object whose deficit must be diagnosed from outside. That repeats the posture the church must unlearn. Eastern Germany is not a mission field because its people are culturally empty. Rather, it is a world of biographies, loyalties, moral traditions, wounds, skills, and meanings in which Christian language may simply not function as a shared reference. This is a substantial loss. Empty churches are not poetic. Generations growing up without access to Christian language are not merely an exciting opportunity for institutional innovation. Something has disappeared: stories, songs, practices of lament, words for forgiveness, and forms of communal memory. Secularization has not done the church a favor.

The loss should be allowed to stand as loss. It is also an unveiling but not a consolation. It reveals how much of what churches called mission depended on inherited familiarity. The church knew how to accompany baptismal families, confirm adolescents sent by their parents, and provide rites for people who still recognized its language even when they did not believe it strongly. When that background disappears, the church can no longer assume that people understand what sin, grace, resurrection, sacrament, or even God mean.

The patterns differ across the West. In England and Wales, the 2021 census recorded “Christian” below half of the population for the first time while “no religion” rose sharply. In the United States, long-term Christian decline is real, but recent Pew data suggest a period of relative stability rather than an uninterrupted collapse.¹⁵ “The post-Christian West” therefore names no single timetable. Eastern Germany is a stark case, not a prophecy with one date.

The response cannot be to speak more loudly in the old dialect. Nor can it be to replace the gospel with generally approved values in order to regain relevance. A moral pressure group with hymns may receive public attention but has not thereby proclaimed what God does for the ungodly.

14. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Uta Karstein, and Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Forcierte Säkularität: Religiöser Wandel und Generationendynamik im Osten Deutschlands* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009).

15. Office for National Statistics, “Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021,” November 29, 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>; Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study 2023–24* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-landscape-study-religious-identity/>. The census recorded Christian affiliation at 46.2 percent in England and Wales. Pew reported a long-term decline in Christian identification in the United States alongside relative stability from 2019 to 2024. Affiliation, belief, practice, and theological commitment are not identical measures.

The loss of Christian vocabulary requires patient translation. Translation is not simplification but the work of making a word understandable without making it say something else. The church must explain why forgiveness is not mere self-acceptance, why baptism is promise rather than religious decoration, and why the crucified Messiah is not a symbol of civilizational success. Such witness begins with listening, but it does not end there. The church does not merely echo the questions a culture already asks. The gospel also asks questions that neither the culture nor the church would ask of itself.

The Tribunal after God

People in post-Christian societies may no longer ask, “How can I find a gracious God?” It would be a mistake to imagine that they secretly ask Luther’s question in the same form and need only have it uncovered. The following claim is, therefore, not a report about the inner experience of every secular person but a theological interpretation of social practices in which people are evaluated, compared, ranked, rewarded, and required to present an accountable self.

A job application asks for a coherent professional identity. A performance review translates labor into metrics. A social-media profile becomes a public archive of taste, opinion, achievement, and error. A political controversy demands not only a judgment about an act but proof that the speaker belongs to the morally acceptable side. None of these practices is simply evil. Work needs evaluation, public speech has consequences, and responsibility requires reasons, yet together they make visible a world of judgments that never finally close the case. Alain Ehrenberg has described the exhaustion produced by societies in which individuals are increasingly commanded to become autonomous, successful selves. He describes the social demand for autonomous self-construction. The theological interpretation begins where his sociology ends.¹⁶

Christian theology may read these practices as demands for self-justification, even where those who inhabit them do not experience them in religious terms. Such demands appear wherever value must be secured through performance, innocence, belonging, productivity, authenticity, or public recognition. The standards vary and contradict one another. A person may satisfy one tribunal and fail before the next. These judges can measure, rank, reward, shame, and discard. They can close a transaction. However, none can close the case.

A market can reward or reject but cannot forgive. Public opinion can praise or destroy but cannot raise the dead. The self can revise its narrative and still remain

16. Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. Enrico Caouette, Jacob Homel, David Homel, and Don Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010). Ehrenberg’s social diagnosis is not treated as proof of the Lutheran doctrine of justification.

both advocate and judge in its own case. This does not mean that secular people are secretly miserable or that Christians possess an easy psychological cure. It means that Christian theology can read these social practices under the law as places where human beings seek or receive judgments that cannot give the final word they implicitly claim.

The gospel addresses this world not as the religious decoration of a lost culture but as a word no market, nation, institution, church, or self can speak on its own: God justifies the ungodly. That word does not confirm a successful self-construction. It interrupts it. It does not say that the person became valuable enough to deserve love but instead says that the person's life rests in God's address in Jesus, the Christ. This is the *extra nos* of justification: the verdict comes from outside the sinner's performance.

The church stands under the same judgment. An institution anxious about decline can turn mission into a project of self-justification. New members, public relevance, political influence, and numerical growth become evidence that the church deserves to survive. The neighbor then becomes the means by which the institution proves its vitality. Mission cannot be the church's strategy for winning its case.

Mission after Cultural Christianity

Mission begins not with the church's need to survive but with God's sending. The Father sends the Son. The risen Christ sends witnesses. The Spirit creates faith through the external Word and the sacraments where and when it pleases God. The church does not own this mission; rather, it is drawn into what belongs to God.¹⁷ Further, mission is witness, not an advertising agency for Christianity. Advertising begins with a product, a target group, and a result to be produced. Christian witness begins with a promise the church itself receives and cannot control. The church cannot manufacture faith by marketing, technique, demographic targeting, or strategic planning. It can nevertheless make the Word audible or obscure it through language, rooms, schedules, budgets, administration, liturgy, catechesis, and human trust. The person addressed is not a market segment, an institutional resource, or evidence that the congregation has a future.

The end of Christendom removes the fiction of Christian home ground. The West is not a baptized continent that has become delinquent. Its people are not inherited church property who must be returned to their proper institution. The church has no property claim over their consciences, histories, or future. Mission that forgets Israel can repeat supersessionism in a gentler form, treating other peoples as empty ground for Christian expansion.

17. On *missio Dei* and the church as recipient rather than owner of mission, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389–393.

That witness is public. It addresses actual societies and cannot avoid questions of power, truth, law, work, poverty, violence, and the treatment of strangers, yet it does not become public by turning itself into a party platform. It serves the neighbor in temporal affairs and speaks the gospel through the means given to the church. The distinction is not separation but allows cooperation without capture and proclamation without coercion.

A scene from eastern Germany gives this claim a body. In 1991, during my vicariate in Schafstädt, an asylum-seeker hostel was opened in the former agricultural cooperative directly opposite the church. Shortly before the first Sunday in Advent, word spread that a right-wing group intended to come late at night and set the hostel on fire.

The church council and members of the municipal council asked what could be done. Their answer was neither a theological statement nor an armed counterforce. They began Advent outside the hostel. A trumpet and violin accompanied Advent hymns. People held candles and drank mulled wine in the bitter cold. The doctor and mayor both attended. Pensioners, mothers, and grandmothers came, some with their work aprons beneath their coats. A long line of villagers stood between the hostel and those who had announced violence.

Eventually, thirty or forty young men arrived. Many were scarcely more than boys. One stood shivering in an open bomber jacket before an older woman. She did not deliver a political lecture. She called him *Jungchen*—"young man"—asked why he was doing this when the residents had done him no harm and told him to put on something warm because he could have been her grandson. Finally, the group withdrew. Two weeks later the threat returned, and the vigil was repeated. Again the hostel was not attacked.

The story did not end in triumph, however. The pastor and vicar later went to a nearby tavern known as a meeting place for the group. They listened, spoke, and returned several times. The conversations became more human. Then they were warned not to come again. The warning was serious, and they did not return.

No conversion was recorded. No scalable model emerged. No one can know exactly why violence was prevented. Perhaps the number of witnesses mattered. Perhaps the young men were uncertain. Perhaps the presence of their neighbors' mothers and grandmothers made the violence harder to perform. The episode remains unfinished.¹⁸ The story, too, should remain unfinished.

Such an episode shows something the abstract language of mission can hide. The church did not claim the village as Christian territory. It stood with threatened

18. Georg Warnecke, "An Untold Story of Christian Responsibility," *Physhbournes's Sundries*, April 7, 2026, <https://physhbournes-sundries.blogspot.com/2026/04/an-untold-story-of-christian.html>. This is an autobiographical recollection rather than independent historiography. Details that remained uncertain in the original account have been omitted, and the essay makes no claim to establish why the attack did not occur.

strangers, cooperated with public authorities, and prayed in its own language without demanding either control or conversion. It addressed potential attackers as human beings without excusing the intended violence, acting publicly and accepting that the outcome was not in its hands.

This is not the whole of mission. Protection of the neighbor belongs to temporal responsibility and may be performed by Christians and non-Christians alike. Advent hymns do not make a public vigil a sacrament, yet the scene displays distinction without withdrawal. The church's spiritual witness and the community's temporal responsibility met without becoming identical. Mission also has a slower form. People rarely learn faith as they learn a vocabulary list. They encounter trustworthy persons, enter rooms, hear words they do not yet understand, leave, return, object, watch, and sometimes discover that an old word has begun to address them. Research on adult conversion has repeatedly shown the importance of relationships and long processes. Such research cannot explain or produce faith. It can correct the church's fantasy that a campaign, course, or event controls the result.¹⁹

The practical consequences are modest and demanding. A congregation explains its worship without presuming prior knowledge. It creates places where adults can ask questions over time rather than attend one promotional event and teaches baptism as promise, not family decoration. It offers absolution as a word spoken to a sinner, not as general affirmation, as well as serves at funerals, in hospitals, in schools, at kitchen tables, and in public conflicts without turning grief or vulnerability into recruitment opportunities.

Additionally, the congregation examines its structures. A church budget is not the gospel, but it reveals what the church protects. A congregation can speak of mission while spending nearly all its strength on buildings, administration, and inherited expectations. A regional church can praise innovation while cutting the local pastoral presence through which the Word remains audible. Structures do not create faith. They can still preach against the gospel by treating people as costs, obstacles, or instruments.

Mission after Christendom, therefore, begins with confession as much as strategy. Where does the church use the neighbor to justify its existence? Where does it replace Jesus, the Christ, with approved values? Where does it hide the promise behind an insider code? Where does it seek political protection because it no longer trusts the Word to create the church?

The church does not build itself. That sentence does not excuse laziness. It frees work from self-deification. Christians may plan without pretending to create faith, invite without manipulating, preserve buildings without worshiping them,

19. John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992); Johannes Zimmermann and Anna-Konstanze Schröder, eds., *Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben?* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2010). These studies report extended paths of faith, not a technique for producing conversion.

close institutions without declaring Christ defeated, and speak publicly without demanding rule. The church may lose cultural privilege and still have everything necessary for its commission: scripture, proclamation, baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, prayer, the neighbor, and time.

Conclusion: Inheritance without Ownership

Is the West Christian? Historically, yes. Christian Scripture, worship, institutions, conflicts, and moral vocabularies have marked Western societies deeply. That history includes gifts worth receiving and guilt that must not be converted into abstraction. The answer theologically, however, is no. The West is not justified, baptized, elected, or made the body of Christ by its cultural inheritance. The gospel came to the Gentile West through Israel. The Gentile church does not support the root. The root supports it. What the church received cannot become a Western possession without ceasing to be received as gift.

Politically, the answer remains limited. Christian traditions have helped form practices and institutions of freedom. Their erosion may place real goods at risk, but genealogy creates responsibility, not jurisdiction. The church cannot preserve freedom by coercing the faith that freedom requires. The secular state cannot secure all its moral conditions by law. Neither can guarantee the future.

The two governments provide no painless solution. They distinguish the gospel's promise from the state's limited office, the church's witness from political rule, and public responsibility from the fantasy of innocence. They permit Christians to support law, protect the weak, resist tyranny, cooperate with secular institutions, and confess political guilt without turning any order into a savior. The end of Christendom is therefore neither pure liberation nor simple catastrophe. It can expose what was hidden and can destroy memories and practices that cannot easily be recovered. The church is not called to celebrate the loss. It is called to tell the truth within it.

Hinlicky's question about freedom remains. A society rich in "freedom from" may become unable to say what freedom is for. The church cannot solve this by recovering mastery of the culture. It can bear witness to a freedom that law cannot create: the freedom of the sinner whose case has been decided by God and who therefore need not make the neighbor, the enemy, the nation, or the church into an instrument of self-justification.

That freedom does not withdraw from the world but instead keeps promises. It protects the neighbor, tells the truth about inherited goods and inherited guilt, and can stand with refugees outside a hostel, sing Advent hymns, cooperate with a mayor, speak to a frightened young man, and leave the outcome to God.

The West did not create the gospel and cannot own it.

Because it is not ours, it can judge us.

Because it is not ours, it can set us free.

Georg Warnecke is a retired Lutheran pastor and theological blogger in Germany. After many years in parish ministry, mission, and congregational development, he was invited to teach practical theology at the University of Greifswald and worked in pastoral formation and research on missional church and ministry in post-Christian eastern Germany. He later served in interim ministry and church organizational development. His current work focuses on Lutheran theology, mission, ecclesiology, leadership, Christian witness in post-Christian societies, and the theological and ecclesial implications of artificial intelligence.

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