

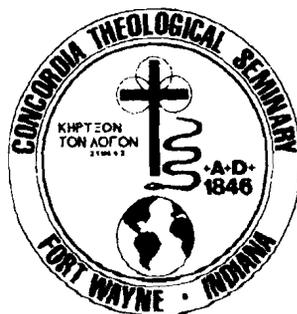
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Can The Lutheran Confessions Have Any Meaning 450 Years Later?

Robert D. Preus

This is a simple question, but momentous and inescapable for every Lutheran today. The answer to the question, directed as it is to the president of a Lutheran seminary, is supposed to be yes. And such an answer is surely expected at a congress which has not merely a scholarly and historical purpose, but a confessional one as well. The question and similar questions have, of course, been asked hundreds of times during the last four centuries. And the resounding answer, from the time of Leonhard Hutter's *Concordia Concors* to Hermann Sasse's **Here We Stand**, has seldom varied. Yes, yes, we wish to remain Lutherans, faithful to our confessional heritage, and we can. Yes, our confessions have meaning also today.

But if the question seems simple, the answer is not. A pietist, a Bultmannian, a synergist, a Barthian, a charismatic, a Marxist, a millennialist, a positivist may all claim to be Lutheran and faithful to the Book of Concord according to their understanding of it. And in some sense they will maintain that our confessions convey meaning also today. I suppose that few subjects are more controverted today among Lutherans than the nature of confessional subscription, the force of our symbols' biblical basis, the hermeneutics of the Lutheran Confessions and their validity, the nature of Lutheranism, and even the truth and relevance and meaning of basic Lutheran doctrine.

Since I cannot in such a short time settle or even clarify any of these problems related to our basic question, may I simply answer our question once more with a resounding yes, and then list some reasons why, also in our secular day when religion and theology have lost their hold on millions who still may call themselves Christian and Lutheran, it is possible and right to affirm that the Lutheran Confessions have meaning today.

1. *The language of the Lutheran Confessions is cognitive and conveys meaning and knowledge about God, man, sin, grace, and salvation.* I make this assertion against all forms of neo-orthodoxy and so-called "biblical theology" which advance the theory that God reveals Himself and man experiences his presence and power through "acts" of history (G. Ernest Wright and Reginald

Fuller) or “encounter” (Emil Brunner) and not at all through the Word of God (Scripture, preaching) and doctrine (teaching) as cognitive discourse. I also reject the claims of linguistic analysts and positivists that biblical language is not in any sense cognitive and bears no meaning, but is only emotive (Herman Randall, Jr.) or merely “metaphysical” (Carnap) or expresses merely man’s thoughts about God — in other words anthropology (Bultmann *et al.*).¹ I cannot refute all these claims on biblical, empirical, or rational grounds here. But suffice it to say, I agree with Sidney Hook,² an atheist, that such theories concerning the nature of theological language in the Bible or in Christian confessions repudiates Christianity in the historic or confessional sense at its very root.

2. *The meaning of the Confessions has remained and will remain constantly the same.* I make this assertion against the curious option of Krister Stendahl and others³ that the meaning of a given biblical pericope and thus also *a fortiori* of all theological language (e.g. in our creeds and confessions), changes through the years — has a history, as it were. The historian, or interpreter, thus must seek the “meaning then” and the “meaning now” of theological assertions, terms, and doctrine found in the Bible and other theological literature of the past. This bizarre, Prometheian attempt to be true to the descriptive tasks of historical criticism and at the same time to apply the text today is based on the assumption that the text as it stands, its *sensus literalis* and *sensus unus*, is either untrue, inapplicable, or irrelevant today. I encountered a classical example of this method of approaching a text not long ago at a LCUSA meeting. A professor quoted I Corinthians 14:34; he granted that Paul’s prohibition concerning women speaking in the church included in his day the forbidding of women to enter the office of the public ministry, but he maintained that today the text teaches and demands that women be ordained into the public ministry. Against such a sophistic hermeneutic our confessions speak of the “unalterable truth of the divine Word,” “the pure, infallible, unalterable Word of God,” and “the infallible truth of the divine Word” (*Introduction to the Book of Concord* 4).

3. *The meaning of our Confessions as they draw their doctrine from Scripture’s divine truth cannot be overthrown, falsified, or mitigated.* By this statement I wish to reject the Barthian presupposition concerning the finitude of language in the sense that it cannot once and for all and infallibly speak the truth about God. And I wish to assert that human language can be and is used by the Holy Spirit in Scripture to express infallibly His will and

mind to human beings. And I also wish to assert that our ecumenical creeds and Lutheran Symbols, as they articulate the articles of faith, adequately express the mind of God Himself, as He has, of course, only partially revealed it, in Scripture. *Theologia ectypos* in our Confessions and drawn from Scripture is identical, as far as it goes, with the *theologia archectypos* in God. By way of illustration, a confessional Lutheran who affirms that the Confessions have meaning today will side with the Jesuit John Courtney Murray who contends for the immutability of the Nicene dogma concerning the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father against Warren Quance, a Lutheran who can only concede, "Our confession of the Nicene Creed is our recognition that given the fourth century situation we stand with Athanasius against Arius on Trinitarian and Christological issues."⁵

4. *After four hundred and fifty years the confessional Lutheran will affirm that the Confessions are today, as then, a correct exposition of Scripture.* The Confessions exhibit a representation of the heavenly doctrine, "the truth of God" (FC-SD, Rule and Norm, 5). We deny exegetical relativism. We also deny that only with the advent of historical-criticism and other methods of approaching Scripture and other ancient documents can we be certain of our historical and exegetical conclusions. I recall an incident years ago where I met for the first time the president of a very large non-denominational seminary. His first words in our mixed theological company were, "There is no passage in the Old or New Testament where modern, theological, and exegetical scholarship has not found deeper meaning than Luther could have found in his day." I replied by asking him to illustrate how this was true in the case of Romans 3:28. I do not recall that he had any answer. To me it is remarkable that the exegetical conclusions of Luther (e.g. concerning the church, justification, faith, grace, the Lord's Supper, baptism, etc.) are not only still tenable and cogent, but supported solidly by the most thorough studies of contemporary exegetes. All this is important when we consider that a Lutheran, although he may not accept every detail of exegesis in the Confessions, does subscribe to the exegetical conclusions (the doctrine) of the Confessions. Today, four hundred and fifty years later, the Lutheran can subscribe the Lutheran Confessions in reference to their cognitive content *because* they agree with Scripture.

5. *The Gospel center of all Christian theology according to the Lutheran Confessions is the article of Christ and His work, which we accept by faith* (LC II; Apol. IV, 2, German text, *passim*; SA II, II, 1). This is so today too as Christians preach, teach, and confess the faith and proclaim the Gospel.

In conclusion, it occurs to me that I may not have understood the intention of the question to which I was requested to address myself. Perhaps the question was not clear and not even meant to be. Are we merely asking whether the sixteenth century Confessions have a cognitive content today? Or are we concerned about the contemporaneity and relevance of the Lutheran Confessions after 450 years? Or is the issue of confessional authority and confessional subscription? If any or all of these concerns constitute the intention of the question, then I submit that all five points I have made are most germane and valid.

In Robert Nisbet's latest book, *Twilight of Authority*, the statement is made, "In most ages of history some one institution — kinship, religion, economy, state — is ascendant in human loyalties. Other institutions, without being necessarily obliterated, retreat to the background in terms of function and authority. History is, basically, the account of the succession of institutional authorities; or rather we should say succession and repetition, for if we look at any given area long enough over a period of time we cannot help but be struck by the fact of recurrence."⁶ I think we must concede that nowhere in western civilization today is religion, much less Lutheranism and Lutheran theology, ascendant in human loyalties, not even in any subculture! If such loyalty, or commitment, to Christ and the Gospel and the evangelical Lutheran confession is ever to recur and gain ascendancy, even in synods or congregations or individuals, the five points I have made will need, I believe, to obtain.

FOOTNOTES

1. John Herman Randall, *The Meaning of Religion for Men* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968). John Herman Randall, *The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958). See Morton White, ed., *The Age of Analysis* (New York: George Braziller, 1957), pp. 209 ff. Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, tr. Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1955), II, p. 239, *passim*.
2. "The Atheism of Paul Tillich," in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), pp. 59-64.
3. Krister Stendahl, "Contemporary Biblical Theology," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Butterick *et al.* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), I, pp. 419 ff.
4. Theodore G. Tappert, tr. and ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), pp. 5, 8, 12.
5. Warren A. Quanbeck, "Some Questions from Lutherans to Roman Catholics" in *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church* (Washington: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1965), p. 9; cf. *passim*.
6. Robert Nisbet, *The Twilight of Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 24.