

CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION TODAY



Paul R. Hinlicky

The theological and also institutional disintegration of the two large North American Lutheran denominations and the formation of new alliances out of these ruins raise afresh a long-standing and neuralgic question: what does it mean today to subscribe to the sixteenth-century Lutheran Confessions? The word “subscription” means literally “undersigning,” as in joining one’s name, thus one’s public person, to those of the original signatories of the confession at Augsburg in 1530 (and the subsequent elaborations of that confession gathered in the 1580 Book of Concord).¹

The sixteenth-century Reformers both claimed the orthodox faith descending from the prophets and apostles as expressed in the three ecumenical creeds and added the apparently innovative evangelical understanding of justification by faith *alone*, the “exclusive particle” in “Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, from the Scriptures alone.”

This very act manifestly includes both appropriation and development of doctrine. Yet historically Lutheranism required a *quia* (“because”) subscription: one adheres to the Lutheran symbols *because* they conform to the word of God given in the Scriptures. In the course of time, however, very real difficulties with this *quia* claim led to an alternative, *quatenus* (“insofar as”): one adheres *insofar as* these writings conform to the word of God. This *quatenus* subscription is “with fingers crossed,” so to speak. It could lead to appealing to the Reformers’ important but subtle distinction between faith as *fidelucia* (trust) and *notitia* (knowledge) in order to relativize, even subvert the letter—a supposedly outmoded or dubious cognitive claim—all in the name of the spirit—say, simple trust in God. After all, the devils have “faith” in the sense of knowledge, and tremble! One does not believe with justifying faith except as one trusts the promise of God! With apparent plausibility, then, the claim of the Confessional writings on public doctrine

may be reduced to a principle of *fidelucia* by the *quatenus* subscription, just as the great historian of dogma Adolph von Harnack argued on behalf of liberal Lutheranism. But what then becomes of the Reformers’ claim to be adding “nothing new” but only restating the faith of the ancient and undivided church? Is anything essential given up in this rather massive reduction? How, on the other hand, could the intention of the *quia* subscription be honored while avoiding the false binding of consciences with untenable and historically outmoded formulations of doctrine?

We will attempt to face this challenge by first exploring more deeply the *quia-quatenus* stand-off (which may be reduced to a principle of *fidelucia* by the *quatenus* subscription, just as the great historian of dogma Adolph von Harnack argued on behalf of liberal Lutheranism. But what then becomes of the Reformers’ claim to be adding “nothing new” but only restating the faith of the ancient and undivided church? Is anything essential given up in this rather massive reduction? How, on the other hand, could the intention of the *quia* subscription be honored while avoiding the false binding of consciences with untenable and historically outmoded formulations of doctrine?)

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We will attempt to face this challenge by first exploring more deeply the *quia-quatenus* stand-off (which may be taken to represent the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America respectively). Next we’ll turn to the little-known collaborative effort of Herman Sasse and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (two theologians who at their best may be taken to represent the LCMS and the ELCA respectively) in the Bethel Confession of 1933. Here we find an approach that moves beyond the *quia-quatenus* impasse. In the third section, we’ll explore the contemporary timeliness of doctrinal theology as a positive implication of so-called historical relativism. At the end we’ll examine a new proposal beyond the *quia* and *quatenus* stand-off: *ut confitemur* (“in order that we may confess”): we subscribe to the trinitarian creeds and the sixteenth-century Confessions *in order that we may confess* the Word of God here and now before God and before the world.

The Quia–Quatenus Problem

The historic position of the LCMS is right about one thing: a *quatenus* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is hardly worth the paper it is written on. The original point of the

subscription at Augsburg was, at risk of life and limb, to acknowledge before God and the world *what* word of God one believes, teaches, and confesses and how *that* word of God is *understood*, especially in relation to controversial alternatives. Applied to the solemn vow of those ordained to the public ministry of word and sacrament in the church of the Augsburg Confession, the sense of a *quatenus* subscription would be: “I pledge myself to the Lutheran Confessions *insofar as* they conform to the word of God.” Such a subscription would be little more than a dodge. A *quatenus* subscription begs the crucial questions that the struggling, suffering church on earth has a right, indeed a duty to ask of its embattled ministers—and this not only on the occasion of ordination, but with perduring force for the public ministry: whether they will be true and accountable coworkers in the gospel as tested by this standard, the “binding summary, basis, rule, and guiding principle how all teaching is to be judged in accord with God’s Word.”² Those so ordained likewise undertake an ethical commitment. Should their understanding and representation of the word of God change, they will acknowledge that change honorably by resigning from the church’s ministry.

To see the point, consider this example: *insofar as* it conforms to the word of God, one could subscribe to *Mein Kampf!* To be sure, that would not be very far at all. At least we today, in hindsight, see the distance between Hitler and Jesus very clearly. But it was not so clear at the time, as we shall see below in some detail. The Nazi Party’s platform of “positive Christianity” attracted lots of latter-day Lutherans in Germany, who held their updated theology to correspond to the “spirit” of Luther,³ even if the verbal contradictions between the sixteenth-century Confessional texts and *Mein Kampf* were in plain sight simply massive.⁴ We may well ponder what could have caused such blindness.

The LCMS is thus right to insist in

principle on a *quia* subscription. *Quia* means “because.” In this case, the sense of the subscription reads: “I subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions *because* they conform to the word of God.” One is actually now answering the questions that qualify one’s public ministry as true to the gospel, which constitutes the church as its creature: the Word of God acknowledged in the Augsburg Confession is the very Son of God, incarnate for us lost and dead in sin, even to death on the cross (AC II, III). This Word of God is Jesus Christ,

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known in the gospel of God as *gift*, distinguishing but not separating Himself from the holy law of the same God that *demand*s. So the Holy Spirit spoke first by the prophets and apostles and preserved their proclamation for us in the Holy Scriptures, whence the Spirit still presents Jesus Christ today as the gift of God with power to save all who believe.

Now to turn to the controversial point in the sixteenth century: we understand this word of divine self-giving in Christ to be valid for sinners, indeed *only* for those sinners who know that they are helpless and thus can only trust in the promise of goodness in Christ, that is to say, it is valid for *contrite* sinners who believe the mercy promised in Christ applies to them, as AC V quite precisely puts it. So it is that they are justified by faith apart from

the works of the law (AC IV). In such doctrinally articulate understanding of the gospel, then, we who freely and joyfully subscribe to the Confession at Augsburg believe, teach, and confess accordingly, and to this standard we may be held accountable. In our pastoral practice, we will not refer troubled sinners to their own pious preparations, exercises, endeavors, or experience but to Christ alone, whose grace suffices where and when it is received by faith. By the same token, we will afflict untroubled sinners with the holy demand of God for the concrete repentance spelled out in the Decalogue as preached by the prophets of Israel and radicalized by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount. For we know the one God’s goal, in the twofold but ordered proclamation of the law and gospel, is that we come to love God above all and all creatures in and under God in lives of new obedience (AC VI). This is the coming of the reign of God.

Such was in essence the Confession at Augsburg in 1530,⁵ which the Epitome of the Formula of Concord in 1580 did not shy away from calling “our symbol for this time.”⁶ The Solid Declaration went on to elaborate: “We regard this confession [at Augsburg] as 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.”⁷ The connection made in this way by the Formula between past and present confession is integral. Along with the Augsburg Confession from fifty years before, the Formulators made their own the ancient creeds: “we confess our adherence... to the three ecumenical creeds, the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian, as the glorious confessions of the faith—succinct, Christian, based upon God’s Word, in which all the heresies that had at that time arisen within the Christian churches were clearly and thoroughly refuted.”⁸

This very connection, however,

indicates that in being appropriated afresh doctrine also develops. It reveals that doctrinal theology is a cumulative process spanning generations. Doctrine develops in decisive and paradigmatic steps as the church is forced by the gospel's history in confrontation with powers and principalities to establish binding articulations of faith that function as rules by which the continuing proclamation of the gospel and the existence of the church as its creature are henceforth to be identified and secured. Or, to put the same point positively: the gospel, in its history, reforms human understanding, and apart from this reform of our thinking, we cannot have the gospel in its own truth and purity.

For example, by thinking through the Johannine gospel of the Word Who became flesh, the Nicene Creed introduced the neologism *homoousios* to say that the divinity of the Father and of the Son are one and the same.

This development overturned the prevailing Platonic metaphysics that had removed God to a realm of unchanging being at some remove from our realm of creaturely becoming. Arians rallied against this development, bitterly complaining that *homoousios* was not to be found in the Bible and that this notion contradicted reason, which distinguishes the divine as unchanging being from all that changes in time here below.⁹ But the biblical text proclaims, "And the Word *became* flesh."¹⁰ So much the worse for Platonic metaphysics. In the same way, by thinking through Paul's gospel of "justification by faith, apart from the works of the law," Luther added the little word *alone*, as we saw reflected in the Augsburg Confession's "exclusive particle." This development cut to the root of the prevailing philosophical anthropology of the so-called modernists (followers of Ockham), which had speculated that, if there is a God, He would be bound by a tacit contract, as it were, to accept the creature who did all that was in her creaturely power to move toward God. Like the ancient Arians, opponents complained that Luther's

word *alone* was not to be found in the Bible and that it contradicted Aristotle (as understood by the modernists), who taught that human beings become just by their own repeated deeds of justice.

Both Athanasius and Luther in their respective times grasped that what was at stake was not the interpretation of this or that passage but the sense of the biblical witness *taken as a canonical whole*, not as the sum of its exegetical parts nor as some canon within the canon. What is biblical in this comprehensive way is *was Christum treiben*, the incarnation of mercy for us who would not and could not go to God, hence for us who need to learn what our antecedent human thinking could never imagine, that God *is* the one Who comes to us, just as we learn to pray in the prayer that the Lord had to teach us to pray.

A New Model: The Bethel Confession

Hence it remains possible, indeed it is to be expected, that in the course of the gospel's further history, new problems bringing new controversies arise that require further development and articulation of the confession of Jesus Christ. Such new development, as just argued, stands in a definite historical line and never begins *de novo* but is always also an act of appropriation of past confession. Thus it continues this historically particular line of orthodox teaching under new circumstances.

In 1933, the year of Hitler's ascendancy to power, Herman Sasse and Dietrich Bonhoeffer went to work to produce the abortive (and hence little known) "Bethel Confession."¹⁰ Theirs was an attempt to bring the sixteenth-century confessions and the trinitarian theology of the ancient creeds to bear against the new challenge of the Nazis' "positive Christianity." The Bethel Confession actually does most of its thinking with copious citations from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, in particular lifting up the Reformation's principle of the *verbum externum* (external word) against the

"enthusiasm" of the German Christians who were welcoming Adolph Hitler as the new thing the Spirit was doing. Thus they answered the questions concretely in their burning situation. *What* word is the word of God? In the climate of German Christian anti-Semitism, Bethel in effect answered: the word that tells of the Son of *David*, the *Yeshu* Jesus, the Christ of *Israel* as the salvation even of us godless Gentiles. *How* do you understand that word of God? In the atmosphere of the liberal Protestant¹¹ hermeneutics (for example, von Harneck), Bethel likewise answered: in the power of the same *Holy Spirit* who first led Jesus to ignominious death for us on the Roman stake. This latter point is repeatedly stressed throughout the Bethel Confession. There is no other *Holy Spirit* than the one Who has us die to sin with Christ and raises us from that death of true repentance to new lives of joyful trust and obedience with Him to the one Whom He called Father. The "enthusiastic" claim of the German Christians to recognize in Adolph Hitler a new dispensation of the Spirit was thus critically and dogmatically refuted.¹²

As the Missouri Synod theologian Lowell C. Green acknowledges, it was the great tragedy of the German Church struggle that the Bethel Confession, as Sasse and Bonhoeffer had composed it, never saw the light of day.¹³ As Guy Carter's careful study showed, it was sabotaged by an ecclesiastical editorial process that wanted to make friendly overtures to the "savior man" rather than full-blown confessional theology; freshly appropriated and developed against the Nazis' anti-Semitism and totalitarianism.¹⁴ Bethel was attacked for being too intellectual, too dense, too theological, too traditionally Lutheran, not open to the historically new. As a result, Bonhoeffer disowned the edited version, which was eventually published; but having lost its cutting edge, the edited text was quickly forgotten and then superseded in the following year by the Barmen Declaration, controversial (in some

Lutheran eyes) on account of Barthian accents—Karl Barth, of course, being its author! The justly famed Barmen Declaration in any case eclipsed the memory of Bethel until Bonhoeffer's biographer, Eberhard Bethge, tracked down the manuscripts and published them in the late 1950s.

In my view, the Bethel Confession is worthy of sustained study and reflection today, particularly at this time in North America when the *quatenus* approach of the ELCA has led to the shipwreck of its Lutheranism¹⁵ and the *quia* approach of the LCMS has hardened into repristination of seventeenth-century Orthodoxy denying and indeed opposing the ongoing development of doctrine that we so desperately need today.¹⁶

It may help in making this claim to clear away a little debris. Barmen's legacy is strangely convoluted among Lutherans. It shouldn't be, even though hasty attempts in the wake of Barmen to turn every act of Christian witness in the social sphere into a *status confessionis* have played a role in souring a lot of us (myself included)¹⁷ on Barmen's important recovery of what is at stake in the development of Christian doctrine. The gospel reforms human understanding and the articulation of this reform is the development of doctrine. Gospel reform of human understanding is what is at stake in a critical approach to dogmatic theology. The unpopular word *dogmatics* designates the study of the beliefs (*noetia*, not just *fiducia*) entailed by faith in the gospel. Here dogma is not and cannot be blind submission to authority. It has to be a knowing surrender of trusting faith in *Jesus Christ* to discover the fuller and deeper sense of what is believed in believing *in Him*. Critical dogmatics subscribes to the Nicene Creed and the Augsburg Confession not only *because* they conform to the word of God but *because* they, under the promised guidance of the Spirit, expand our understanding of the Word incarnate for us in steps that have proved irrevocable for this Word's own continued proclamation

in history. We cannot be orthodox Christians any longer, in other words, without the *homoousios* or the Reformation's exclusive particle. Of course, even that much does not yet guarantee that we today actually are orthodox Christians, since we always have further work to do to meet today's challenges. Holding to past confession is a necessary but not sufficient condition of orthodoxy, which is the Holy Spirit's work in progress, so to speak. In other words, until the day of the Lord, orthodoxy is always something *both* received *and* gained in history by our own Spirit-guided appropriation and

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hence *expansion* of doctrine. For we expand upon the received confession by making it reframe the questions of the day and thus meet the challenges of our own age.

In this latter connection I would quite pointedly say: whatever other problems Lutherans may have with the theology of Karl Barth (myself included), they should appreciate his renewal of dogmatics as a critical discipline. That fact that later "Barthians" turned Barth's insights into a one-sided, almost ideological political

theology is regrettable. Indeed, this development of "Barthianism" does indicate a peculiar weakness in his theology, especially from the Lutheran perspective. But it is also an historically understandable reflection of the exasperation of the post-war Barthians at a resentful if not intellectually dishonest hostility toward the Swiss Reformed theologian who had seen through Hitler far better than did German Lutherans, especially those who claimed to be the "authentic voice" of Lutheranism.¹⁸ I find that most Lutheran railing against Barth is ignorant, mean-spirited, and insufficiently self-critical. All this railing masks that fact that is really remarkable today, namely the collapse of dogmatics altogether in contemporary Lutheranism, as Carl Braaten has noted: "[M]ost mainline Protestant and progressive Catholic theology has landed in the graveyard of dogmatics, which is that mode of thinking George Lindbeck calls 'experiential expressivism.' Individuals and groups vent their own religious experience and call it theology."¹⁹ In other words, they do precisely what the German Christians were doing in the 1930s. One is more likely to find dogmatics, even *critical* dogmatics,²⁰ today among Evangelicals, who, as Gerald McDermott notes, think that "theology is reflection on what comes from outside their experience as the Word of God,"²¹ just as Bonhoeffer and Sasse thought concerning the Reformation's *verbum externum*.

In any case, the Barmen Declaration was right to say the essential thing *at the time*: that in the context of messianic claims being made for Adolph Hitler within the church, Jesus Christ is the *one* Word of God Whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death. Lutherans who on confessionalistic grounds (that there are two words of God, the law and the gospel) refused Barmen's leading formulation were being *under the circumstances* willfully imperceptive. True confession, as we have seen, is not a wooden, verbal repetition of the formulas from the past but their hermeneutical retrieval and

application by which the past confession is contemporized and further developed to engage the present. Substantively, then, as Robert Bertram pointed out,²² the text of Barmen contains a certain contradiction. It affirms Jesus Christ as the one Word of God, as we noted above. But it also affirms that Christians are, in conscientious obedience to the same God, to submit to the governing authorities (who are certainly not Jesus Christ!) of the present age. Of course, as conscientious obedience to God, such submission to governing authorities is not blind obedience to the state but critical obedience that conscientiously objects to unjust policies.²³ The tacit contradiction, Bertram argued, permits a responsible Lutheran interpretation of Barmen, which avoids the pitfalls of later political Barthianism by reasserting the dialectic of law and gospel, with its political-ethical distinction of the two kingdoms. That is true, so far as it goes.

But even better, I propose, would be the rediscovery of the Bethel Confession as a model of what needs to be done for confessional subscription today. While there is a problem with the Bethel Confession's pre-Holocaust reiteration of Christian triumphalism in regard to Judaism, careful study of it would discover these, among other contributions to contemporary discernment: why the Jewishness of Jesus and the canonical adherence to the Scriptures of Israel are essential to the gospel; why it is wrong to reduce Christian belief to mere *falschia* (*falsaria* can be invested in any object, including Adolph Hitler); why Christian belief is essentially eschatological (messianic claims for temporal power result in the false closure that is totalitarianism); how Christian belief entails the ethos of *martyria* (even in solidarity with religious others); how the doctrine of the Trinity with its dialectic of the Word and Spirit grounds the rejection of enthusiasm (by means of Augustine's rule *opera Dei ad extra sunt iudicialia*). In all this, the Bethel Confession shows us how to embrace a substantive sub-

scription to the Nicene Creed and Augsburg Confession without the false move and bad faith of repristationism. Instead, it models the contemporaneous rethinking of the self-same subject matter, the God of the gospel in context with the idols and demons of the age so that we too may confess.

Timely Confessing

Granted that only a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is meaningful, I have been arguing nonetheless that a *quia* subscription does not as such solve the problem of contemporary confession. It only states the problem. How do we today think with the Bible, the Nicene Creed, and the Augsburg Confession to face the challenges of our day? Confessional Lutheranism is in a state of chaos because of the failure on all sides to come to terms with the true problem of *timelessness*. The problem is the well known but not well understood one of so-called "historical relativity."²⁴

How can the language of another time, for example that of the sixteenth century Reformers, so thoroughly stamped by the particular details of their own unique spiritual situation, bind us today, not merely as a historical precedent but as *true* doctrine, indeed true *because* it conforms to the word of God and as such still directs us? We only succeed in making that affirmation of the past insofar as we actively develop it in contemporary confession. Such retrieval of meaning entails a discerning act of appropriation, indeed even in some cases of what I have called hermeneutical violence.²⁴ We cannot today own, for notorious example, Luther's bad faith and want of charity in demonizing theological opponents.²⁵ Rather, we must disown it—against Luther's own self-understanding—precisely in order to claim for ourselves his irrevocable insight into the justification of the ungodly in Christ by grace through faith. Something similar might be said regarding the unsavory episcopal politics of an Athanasius or Cyril of Alexandria—

not to mention, for far less worthy causes, the trash talking of Herman Otten that continues to torture the ICMS²⁶ or the unscrupulous political mobilization, externally funded, which drove the 2009 ELCA decisions on sexuality. All we have is the word of God and the power of clear argument: the self-limitation of *martyria* is a mark of confessional authenticity.

To drive the problem home, consider the following set of difficulties from various points of view that attend any serious attempt to require an ahistorical *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessional writings today. Are we still bound to the judgment that the papacy is Antichrist? Are we bound to the condemnation of the Anabaptists and their heirs the Menonites, even when we find that some of the AC's accusations against them were false?²⁷ Are we bound to the exclusion of the Reformed, as in the Formula's "finally and absolutely distinguishing Lutheranism from Calvinism"?²⁸ Are we bound to the Augsburg Confession and its Apology's teaching that justifying faith is regeneration, or to the Formula of Concord's denial of just that affirmation? Are we bound to Luther's flat identification, "holy communion is the Lord's body and blood, given for us to eat and drink," or rather to Melancthon's almost Calvinist teaching of the bread and wine as efficacious signs? Are we bound to the affirmation of the catholic dogmas of the Trinity, original sin, and the divine personhood of the incarnate Son of God with which the Augsburg Confession starts out? Or can we follow an alleged tendency in the AC to exalt *falschia* over dogma, demythologizing such over-beliefs and reducing them to outmoded expressions of religious feeling? And if we would want to relativize such doctrinal affirmations or tensions within the Confessional writings in light of the chief article on justification, do we really still mean justification *by faith*, where faith is belief as well as trust, the double judgment about Christ's mercy and its application to the sin-

ful self, as the actual words of AC V say? Are we bound to the exegetical details found in the Confessional writings? Are we to read the Book of Concord from front to back, toward the Formula as the achieved statement of pure doctrine resolving fifty years of intra-Lutheran struggle and conflict by working out ambiguities latent in the Augsburg Confession? Or must we read the Book of Concord historically and critically from back to front, recognizing the political necessity of an intra-Lutheran settlement in the Formula but at the cost of obscuring the original theological force of the Augsburg Confession to justify a reform movement within Western Catholicism? Or, even more radically, should we set aside the friendly language of the Augsburg Confession trying to placate the Romanists, let alone the new dogmatism of incipient Orthodoxy in the Formula, and return to the supposedly pure kerygmatic theology of Luther, especially the young Luther? But could such radical Lutheranism still be honestly called *Confessional* Lutheranism when it is appealing precisely to some *real* theology of Luther behind and beyond the Confessional texts?

The above list of difficulties could be indefinitely expanded. It gives the reasons why the *quatenus* subscription developed, indeed had to develop as time moved on, as new challenges arose, exposing hidden fault lines within the Book of Concord. Where the problem thus indicated is not swept under the rug, the usual solution to this set of difficulties by *quatenus* advocates is some version of the “kernel-husk” hermeneutic of nineteenth-century liberal Lutheranism. The “kernel-husk” distinction in a dubious way posits an ahistorical essence of the gospel over against its historically conditioned doctrinal formulations. The problem with this metaphor (which Luther himself used on occasion but in a different sense) is that no one can state the essential gospel apart from historically conditioned doctrinal formulations, the inescap-

able historical relativity of which then subverts even the gospel’s supposed transhistorical authority to make the binding contemporary judgments necessary in a confessional church. As we have seen, consequently, one needs a “development of doctrine” hermeneutic if one wants both to discern and reassert what remains binding from the past and at the same time to disentangle that from historically conditioned detritus in order to think the gospel anew in a timely way. The eschatological reserve, of course, also helps in this connection: the church, even in binding confession, bears witness in fear and trembling, knowing that it is God alone Who confirms.

Yet even more important is the recognition that the constant in the proclamation of the gospel is the living person, Jesus Christ, present to speak and in this way to reign over His people through word and sacrament.²⁹ The constant, in other words, is not a worldview. Worldviews come and go, and in Christian doctrine, as we have seen, they are continually challenged and progressively revised in the reform of human understanding. Nor is the constant a transhistorical Platonic essence (think here of Luther’s christological dispute with Zwingli about the doctrinal sense of the ascension of our Lord) but the Word incarnate Who never ceases to be the man of our human history, Jesus. The one Who is the same, yesterday, today and forever is this person, this living subject Who remains the subject in all our doctrinal objectifications of Him, indeed the divine-human Person Who is free to take on these historically contextual objectifications just because He is alive with the eternal life and love of God and wants to be *here* for us as we actually are, in a *timely* way.

Thus we theologians can follow Him through His history up to us today and dare to identify Him *here and now* in our own act of confessing. In critical dogmatics, we move from the subordinate but real authorities of doctrine in canon, creed, and confession received from the past to the

viva vox evangelii itself. Here it is understood with Luther that the gospel is *not* merely verbal sign indicating something absent. Rather, in the gospel, the one Who speaks and is believed is really present to faith and becomes objective, as it were, in faith’s contemporary confession. We thus trace our way through the formal signs in canon, creed, and confession, in externally authoritative doctrine received from the gospel’s history, to the thing signified, the subject matter, the *viva vox* that we today must hear, trust, and obey.

Admitting to the development of doctrine in this way entails both an act of critical trust in the sacred chain of human witness (beginning in and with the Bible itself) as well as a contemporary commitment to its ongoing elaboration. So we come in conclusion to confessional subscription today, which will be our own act and risk of faith. This is never a reduction that leaves behind past confession but always an expansion that adds to its line of development our contemporaneous confessing. We subscribe to the Augsburg Confession and the Nicene Creed *because* they conform to the word of God, but we *know* this conformity not by mindlessly repeating their formulations but in thinking with these formulations in the contemporary act of critical dogmatics that may, where and when it pleases God, produce further developments in the ongoing development of Christian orthodoxy. As in the parable of the talents, the deposit of the faith delivered once and for all to the apostolic generation is indeed to be held on to. But it is not to be buried; it is to be made fruitful by our theological labors, since Christian orthodoxy is a work in progress that through many trials and tribulations must enter the kingdom of God.

Ubi Confiteamur

So then a proposal: affirming the right intention of the *quia* tradition of subscription but also the truth of the demand for timeliness by the *quatenus*

tradition, let us henceforth subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions *ut confitemur*, “in order that we may confess.” The purpose clause relocates the act of orthodoxy away from a contextless statement about a putatively timeless text to the theological subject who is to confess Christ before the world in the church’s public ministry. The plural number puts this theological subject into solidarity with the church not only of today but of ages past. “I subscribe to the ecumenical creeds and to the Augsburg Confession in order that we may confess the Word of God today as these have attested it in ages past. Whatever I must venture to attest the Word of God in the time and place given to me, these will be rationally articulate and defensible developments of the *homoousios* and the exclusive particle, which I will submit in true humility to the judgment of the church. That is my doctrinal commitment to which my ministry may be held accountable.”

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Notes

1. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC]. It is not a simple problem, however, how the various documents and doctrinal statements within the Book of Concord should be read, as we shall see. I concur with Chapter Two of the Constitution of the ELCA (which to be sure is a matter of lip service in this troubled denomination): “This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.”

2. BC 526.
3. Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy*

Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

4. Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

5. “After presenting the process of justification in ca 4, [the CA] gives its basis in God’s present action through Word and Spirit (ca 5) and its divinely acceptable effect in our good works (ca 6). Although justification forms the thematic core for these three interrelated articles, it is basically part of one event for which God repeatedly makes a new beginning by his spiritual rule in Word and Sacrament, and which continues in the good works of the faithful. In this spiritual continuum the individual phases are clearly separated from one another and yet interrelated.” Wilhelm Mauser, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, trans. H. George Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 290.

6. BC 487:4.

7. BC 525:4.

8. BC 527:4.

9. See further my chapter, “The Failure of Bihlicism,” in *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minnesota: Fortress, 2010), 228–31.

10. I specifically mean the August retranslation of the initial outline by Bonhoeffer and Sasse, which for convenience I call “the Bethel Confession.” The two versions are printed side-by-side in English translation in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Berlin, 1932–1933*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12, ed. Larry Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 374–424. Christine-Ruth Müller, *Bekennnis und Bekennen: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Bethel (1933): Ein Luthertischer Versuch* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1989) provides the German texts of all four versions, 81–193. Guy Christopher Carter, *Confession at Bethel, August 1933—Enduring Witness: The Formation, Reason, and Significance of the First Full Theological Confession of the Evangelical Church Struggle in Nazi Germany*, Ph.D. dissertation (Marquette University, 1987) provides an English translation of all four versions, 304–39.

11. The studies of Bergen and Steigmann-Gall, along with Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), collectively unveil the truth of Karl Barth’s contemporaneous judgment that the ranks of the German Christian party were filled with the children of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism.

12. For the full argument on behalf of this interpretation, see Paul R. Hinlicky, “Verbunm Externum: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Bethel Con-

fession,” in *International Bonhoeffer Interpretations*, ed. R. Wüstenberg (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012).

13. Lowell G. Green, *Lutherans against Hitler: The Unholy Story* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 163.

14. Carter, 114–7.

15. For evidence of this, see my five-part analysis of the ISRO faculty statement regarding the proposed ministry changes in the ELCA and the responses to it, beginning at www.lutheranforum.org/sexuality/critique-of-the-new-istc-faculty-statement-part-one/.

16. See, for example, my exchange with ICMS polemicist Jack Kilcrease at www.blogia.com/entry/?s=hinlicky+klcrease.

17. See Paul R. Hinlicky, “Status Confessionis,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 198–201.

18. Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004).

19. Carl Braaten, “A Harvest of Evangelical Theology,” *First Things* 61 (March 1996): 45–8.

20. Paul R. Hinlicky, “Authority in the Church: A Plea for Critical Dogmatics,” in *New Directions for Lutheranism*, ed. Carl Braaten (Delhi: AFB Books, 2010).

21. *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

22. Robert W. Bertram, “Bonhoeffer’s ‘Battle(s) for Christendom’: His ‘Responsible Interpretation’ of Barmen,” in *A Time for Confessing*, ed. M. Hoy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 65–95.

23. Johannes Heckel, *Lex Charitatis: A Juristic Discussion on Law in the Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Gottfried G. Krodol (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 110–14.

24. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), xvii–xix.

25. *Ibid.*, “Appendix: The Problem of Demonization in Luther’s Apocalyptic Theology,” 379–85.

26. James C. Burke, *Power, Politics, and the Missouri Synod: A Confict That Changed American History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

27. See the discussion in *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*, Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission (Geneva and Strasbourg: Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference, 2010).

28. Friedrich Milidenberger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. E. Luetker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 151.

29. Burke, 354–7.

