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Confessional Subscription: What Does It Mean for Lutherans Today?

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To subscribe to a confession means, literally, to sign one's name to it, to agree confessionally to be identified with it and by it. It means to make the confession one's own, to become a confessor with those who made the original confession.

But, of course, the literal sense of confessional subscription is only the beginning of the problem. We are always faced with the question of how literally we are to take the confessions themselves. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in its constitution declares that it accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession "as a true witness to the Gospel," and the catechisms and other confessions of the Book of Concord as "further and valid interpretations of the faith of the Church." One might will detect in such relatively mild language already some backing off from the tougher language of subscription. But we shall not argue that here.

According to the ordination rite of the ELCA, pastors are to promise to preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions. This seems a little more demanding than the simple acceptance language of the constitution, since it proposes a more normative role for the Confessions for those engaged in official teaching and preaching. And that is appropriate, no doubt, for the exercise of the public office of ministry in the church.

In spite of the nuances of the language in the official documents, I will assume that for the purposes of this exercise, "accept as true witness to the Gospel" and "valid interpretation of the faith," or "preach and teach in accordance with," are to be taken as roughly equivalent to "confessional subscription." What is the language supposed to mean? To what does it commit us?

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. The confessors confess the liberating and life-giving power of the gospel over against all law and demonic power which enslaves and kills—wherever it may be found, even (or perhaps

especially!) if that be in the church itself.

In the first instance, therefore, the question for subscription is not whether one is bound enough to teach and preach in accordance with these confessions, but whether one is actually going to be free enough to do so. The fundamental question is not whether 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. The confession, that is to say, was an act of daring, a declaration of the liberating power of the gospel over against enslavement. To subscribe to the confession cannot be less than that. When one comes to understand the confessions in that light they are a source of strength and comfort for pastoral ministry, and not a strait-jacket or a burden.

Failure to keep this in view is what causes much of the trouble for confessionalism. Subsequent generations forget the liberating confession and take the documents as a kind of legal strait-jacket. Subscription becomes imprisonment. In order to escape, one appeals to the various interpretive devices at hand to relax the harsh servitude—to changes in "historical context" or "thought structures"; to advances in exegesis, linguistic analysis, or various forms of literary criticism; and so on and so on. In the end, escape from the seriousness of subscription is sought via the blandishments of relativism.

To be sure, subscription as con-fessing the liberating gospel with the confessors does commit us to exact historical and exegetical investigation to enable us truly to join them in that confession today. But that is something fundamentally different from using our interpretive tools to escape or relativize such subscription. Such attempts to escape will inevitably result in falling again into just that captivity from which the confessors sought to be freed. We do not really understand even the notorious battles of the confessional era if we do not see them precisely as battles for the liberating power of the gospel. One should be wary of bald pronouncements about differences in context which are used to signal easy departures from what the confessors sought to confess.

I said above that "in the first instance" confessional subscription asks not whether we are bound enough to subscribe, but whether we are freed enough by the confession itself to dare to con-fess the gospel they confessed. But, of course, there is also a second instance. The confession does propose a dividing line, or, to use Luther's image, a plumb line, by which we, the church, its theology, and its pastors, can be measured and judged.

Perhaps one can say that the confession is like a charter of freedom, or a letter declaring the slave a free person. It does have legal status and character. Not only must one tend it and keep it carefully, but one can be excluded by it if one does not "dare" to confess it. Thus, especially those who do not preach and teach in accordance with it can and should be disciplined. Neither should the arts of interpretation be misused to reintroduce the slavery from which the confession aimed to liberate us. On the contemporary scene, particularly in ecumenical discussion, it is just this kind of question that has to be pursued with consummate care. For the confessional battle and the question of subscription is in essence always that stated by St. Paul in Gal 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."