

Is Our Confessional Subscription Important?

By
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The American Association of Lutheran Churches accepts without reservation the symbolic books of the Lutheran Church, not insofar as but because they are the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God and a summary of the faith of the evangelical Lutheran Church.

(TAALC Constitution, Article 3, paragraph 8: Pure Doctrine.)

In The AALC, pastors and their congregations subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions. This is an unqualified, unconditional subscription, a subscription without reservations. Therefore we as a church body confess the same doctrine the historic Lutheran church has always confessed. The Lutheran confessions continually proclaim the various articles of the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures with the formula “We believe, teach and confess,” and in other places “Our churches say with great unanimity.” These formulas expressly reject the idea that confessional subscription is some individualistic or autonomous act. These are the confessions of the church of God on earth.

The confessions are not irrelevant, historically conditioned writings that merely reflect the milieu from which they sprung. Neither can the confessions be reduced to a mere “evangelical witness.” We dare not avoid or reject the idea of confessional subscription, for the doctrine of Holy Scriptures shines forth in and through our Lutheran confessions. The confessions are the doctrine of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church. The symbolic books of the Lutheran Church are the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God and the confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. This is the responsible and public confession of The AALC, a confession which unites us with the one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church.

Since we say this, we must demonstrate that the confessions themselves to be taken that way. A few statements from the Book of Concord will demonstrate this.

Our intention was to have a single, universally accepted certain and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe and from which and according to which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 10).

We have determined not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves nor from the phrases which are found in them, but, the Spirit of God aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of pure doctrine (Preface to the Christian Book of Concord, Trig, p. 23).

We have all (either individually as pastors or corporately as a congregation,) agreed that the Lutheran confessions are a true and faithful exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless, many who claim the Lutheran name have made a different and problematic confessional subscription.

Many of us came to The AALC seeking refuge from Lutheran church bodies that had departed from sound doctrine. This departure first manifested itself in a weak subscription to the Lutheran confessions. Let me demonstrate by using the General Synod, which became part of the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA,) which became part of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA,) which became part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA.)

A leading light in the General Synod was Dr. Samuel S. Schmucker. In his book *The American Lutheran Church* (1851, reprinted 1969,) he proclaims the confessional subscription of the General Synod: “She required unqualified assent to the Bible, and an assent to the Augsburg Confession, as a substantially correct exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of the Bible.” Schmucker then quotes the Constitution of Gettysburg Theological Seminary, the seminary of the General Synod: “Her Constitution. . . explicitly declares, to prepare men to teach, not all the doctrines or aspects of doctrine in the Augsburg Confession, but the ‘*fundamental doctrines.*’” Again, Schmucker writes that the symbolical books of the General synod and the Seminary at Gettysburg are the *Bible*, and the *Augsburg Confession*, as a *substantially correct exhibition of the fundamental truths of the Bible.*”

The subscription so eloquently described is a qualified subscription. The Augsburg Confession is described as being only “substantially correct.” The subscription is not to “all the doctrines or aspects of doctrine, but the ‘*fundamental doctrines.*’” This weak subscription to the confessions actually makes the scriptures the points of contention, as various people begin to debate about what constitute the *fundamental doctrines*. By departing from a clear, unqualified subscription to the confessions, the General Synod made the *fundamental doctrines* of scripture a matter of negotiation, of mediation, of compromise, and eventually of rejection. The weak subscription of the General Synod, despite its pious sounding rationale, was an abandonment of the faith of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church. Today the fruit of the General Synod’s folly is seen in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, a body that has departed from the pure faith.

The AALC continues in its unqualified, unconditional subscription to the doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions, because it is the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God. Our subscription is a demonstration of our commitment to the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. Thanks be to God!