

What is “Normative” in Theology

by
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The Constitution of the AALC describes certain confessional writings as “normative” without ever defining what normative means. This has, in some cases, led to confusions and questions regarding exactly what we believe, teach, and confess, and which of the confessional writings the AALC subscribes to. At its heart is a misunderstanding of the import of the word “normative”, a word which is not part of an ordinary English language vocabulary. We must therefore understand that “normative” is a theological term, part of a standard theological vocabulary. Therefore every pastor, as the preeminent theologian in their particular congregation, must have no doubts regarding what is normative and why it matters.

The term “normative” is derived from the Latin, which for over 1,500 years was the language of theological discourse. The *norma normans*, or “ruling rule”, is the Scripture---for it alone is the absolute norm of faith. Other related terms are *norma primaria* and *norma decisionis*, meaning the primary rule of faith, or the rule that is decisive by its own right. Scripture is therefore the self-authenticating and decisive norm of faith, the rule by which doctrine is judged to be true and right.

When we describe certain confessions as being “normative”, we are not describing them to be the *norma normans*: the “ruling rule”, or the primary rule of faith. Instead, we are describing these confessions as *norma normata*, which means they are a secondary norm, derived from the primary norm. Other related terms are *norma secundum quid*, *norma secundaria*, and *norma discretionis*, all of which mean roughly the same thing: that these confessions are a secondary norm, ruled by the Scriptures: the Scriptures being the *norma normans*, or the primary rule of faith.

The *norma normata*, or secondary norm, is only relatively necessary, meaning it is necessary only insofar as it relates to the primary norm, being the Scriptures. The secondary norm is what decides whether a person has clearly understood the true doctrines of Scripture. Therefore we look to the scriptures as the authority and primary rule of faith, and to the confessions as “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, 03.08).

Every Lutheran theological student learns that the confessions are understood collectively as the *norma normata*, the secondary standard of faith which is dependent upon and derived from the Scriptures. An important derivation of this is that the Scriptures exercise authority within the Church; there is no scriptural authority *extra ecclesia*, or outside the Church (meaning there is no individual or private interpretation). The interpretation of the Scriptures takes place within the Church, by means of the Holy Spirit, and this interpretation is accepted as a subsidiary standard: the *norma normata* of the faith.

This has important implications for our own personal faith. The Apostle Peter writes: “No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Pet 1:20). The resurrected Lord Jesus states: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3: 6, 13, 22). Our Lord repeats this hermeneutical principle seven times, the number of divine perfection, thereby underscoring its importance. We do not determine the truth of scripture for ourselves, but instead we are taught through the church by the Holy Spirit. This is what the Apostle Paul means when he says: “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2).

This is why the fathers spoke of the Church as “the mother who begets and bears the Christian.” By this is meant that the Church is both the site and the means by which the Holy Spirit works in the life of the Christian. The Church through the Holy Spirit begets the Christian, and the Church through the Holy Spirit sustains the Christian in his or her growth “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4: 13). The Church is therefore the tender mother who nurtures us, teaches us, guides us, admonishes us, and protects us. Most importantly, through the sacraments which are her mark, the Church administers to us the forgiveness of sins. As the Large Catechism states: “Outside of this Christian Church, where the Gospel is not, there is no forgiveness [or sins], as also there can be no holiness [sanctification].” (LC 2:56)

The confessions, as secondary standards of faith, are not accepted as authoritative simply due to their age, nor because this is what the Church has always believed, taught, and confessed. Tradition is not authoritative. Instead, each generation makes its own subscription to the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. In doing so, each generation makes its declaration that the Confessions 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.”

Our Presiding Pastor, the Rev. Thomas V. Aadland, recently described what happens at an ordination. First, each pastor vows to “preach and teach the Word of God in accordance with the Confessions of the Church,” and that he will “administer the Holy Sacraments after the ordinance of Christ” [The Occasional Services from the Service Book and Hymnal, Ordination, p. 97]. Moreover, the ordinand normally adds their own signature to the Book of Concord, thereby affirming the entire Book of Concord to be their own statement of faith. At their ordination, each pastor agrees that the confessions of the church are their own confession, and each pastor agrees to teach nothing contrary to the symbolic books of the church.

Therefore, this is what it means when we say the Book of Concord is normative for theology: that each pastor and congregation of the AALC confesses the Scripture to be the *norma normans*, or the rule of faith; that each pastor and congregation of the AALC has confessed the entire Book of Concord to be the *norma normata*, meaning the secondary norm by which the proper understanding of Scripture is determined; that no pastor may teach anything contrary to the doctrine of Holy Scripture, as the *norma normans*; and that no pastor who wishes to remain faithful to their ordination vows may teach any doctrine contrary to the Book of Concord, which is the *norma normata*, the standard of faith, the means by which we determine the proper understanding of scripture.