

Reaction to Benjamin Tomczak's "Hermeneutics and the Confessions"

No other denomination in America stresses its written confessions of faith as much as the Lutheran Church. Reformed groups might subscribe to one or more of the historic Calvinistic/Zwinglian confessions, but there is no collection of confessions that all adhere to. Many groups in America are distinctly non-creedal, rejecting confessions as man-made documents that only serve to separate Christians from each other. Some will even make the rather foolish claim that the Bible is their creed, forgetting that our Savior expects us to confess our faith (Mt 10:32,33; Ro 10:8, 10; 1 Pt 3:15).

Yet even among Lutherans there are many differences in confessional subscription and the use of the confessions. Some pay lip services to the confessions with various forms of a *quatenus* subscription. Lutherans who take the confessions seriously because (*quia*) they teach what the Holy Scriptures teach, also sometimes appear to differ in their use of the confessions or their understanding of the relationship between the Holy Scriptures and the confessions. That raises a question this essay addresses: "How [do] we interpret the Scriptures as a *sola Scriptura* church body that also has a strong connection to formal confessions of faith gathered together in the *Book of Concord*" (p. 2).

Pastor Tomczak focuses on a statement of C.F.W. Walther that has become for some "a shibboleth of sorts" (p. 1). He wisely looks at the context of the statement and reminds us that Walther is talking about confessional subscription and not hermeneutics. Walther is rejecting every kind of *quatenus* subscription. As the question is posed today – "Do we interpret Scripture according to the Lutheran Confessions or the Lutheran Confessions according to Scripture?" – we note a faulty premise. The Bible does not need any other writing to "interpret" it. The Holy Scriptures are clear. They stand on their own. They are self-authenticating. They are sufficient (p. 5). They do not need to be interpreted in the light of anything else. Neither do the Lutheran Confessions need to be interpreted in the light of any other writing. They speak clearly. They stand on their own. They either teach what the Bible teaches or they don't. When we examine them we see that they are summaries of scriptural truth. They teach what the Bible teaches. Therefore, if anyone teaches contrary to the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions he is guilty of false doctrine.

The essay notes that the Lutheran Confessions leave no doubt about the fact that the Holy Scriptures are our only source of doctrine (pp. 7-9, 14). They do not usurp the authority of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, our confessions are not meaningless. "They are a correct exposition of Scripture. They express Scripture, but do not extend the Scriptures or serve as a substitute for the Scriptures. They illumine, but don't determine Scripture. They confess our "Amen" to the Holy Scriptures. They are the voice of the Church. They restate, they repeat, they reproduce in miniature what the Scriptures say. They provide an overview and a snapshot. This is how we go on record. They serve as commentary on Scripture. They affirm Scripture. They are the theological definitions of the church. They serve as chart and compass for our exegetical labors" (p. 6).

In what sense are they a chart and compass for our exegetical study? They summarize and re-state what Scripture says. They teach us to search the Scriptures and submit to the Scriptures

(p. 16). They drive us back to Jesus (p. 19). They don't treat every doctrine of Scripture or address every theological issue we will face. However, "they show us how to wrestle with these questions: under the authority of Scripture; asking what God's Word says or does not say; demanding unity in God's Word where God speaks and peace when things are of men (AC VII). In addition, they teach us to patiently consider our brothers and sisters in Christ and the unity of the Church (cf. AC VII, XV, XXIV, XXVIII and the coinciding articles of the Apology). The Confessions offer us a hermeneutical model of how to deal with and settle questions, because in all things they point us to and drive us to Scripture" (p. 15). They show us the proper approach to the theological task. One can make the case that the hermeneutical approach to the Bible found in the confessions is the same as that practiced among us.¹

The essay also tackles an expression that has been understood in different ways, "interpreting the Scriptures according to the *analogy of faith*." Some have used the expression to claim that the theological task is to make all the doctrines of Scripture fit into a neat logical system that eliminates any apparent contradictions or paradoxes. They have claimed that every doctrine must be interpreted according to the *Schriftganze*, the totality of Scripture. Others have called the doctrine of justification by faith the analogy of faith according to which all teachings of Scripture must conform. But no use of human logic can resolve the apparent paradox of law and gospel or the apparent paradox of God's universal will to save and his particular election of those who will be saved. If two clear passages of Scripture are in apparent contradiction to each other, we must let the contradiction stand and give God credit for being smarter than we are. Tomczak correctly writes, "This is the true analogy of faith, comparing one passage to another. We do this using internal principles, not external principles, not even such good ones as "law-gospel" or "the Gospel" or "*was Christum treibt*" ("what preaches Christ"), or "Is it or is it not in the Confessions?" No, we compare one passage of God's holy Word to another passage of God's holy Word that treats the same topic" (p. 9). This is the method of the Lutheran Confessions.

The confessions serve another important purpose. In a society in which doctrine is a dirty word and personal experience and feelings trump objective truth, the Lutheran Confessions are an anchor and guard against theological anarchy. They are a "standard that gives us a Bible properly confessed, rightly confessed, rightly understood, purely and correctly interpreted . . . They only confess, witness, and testify. They confess the objective teachings of a clearly spoken Scripture that the perversion of sinful minds just cannot and will not keep straight" (p. 15). They are a standard around which the faithful can rally. They guard against "Americanization" in the worst sense of the term.

Pastor Tomczak suggests that since our synod has not gone through the battle for the Bible or other severe doctrinal battles as other synods have, we may have grown complacent in our possession of the truth. Complacency can lead to sloppiness, a failure to ask the right questions, intellectual laziness. A warning against complacency is always in place. Each generation must mine the Holy Scriptures and make the teachings of Scripture its own. That requires hard work. At the same time each generation would be foolish to ignore the wisdom of previous generations.

¹ See Ralph Bohlmann. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983) and "Melancthon's Approach to Scripture in the Apology," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vol 107 #3 (Summer 2010) pp. 201-2017.

It's not an either/or. It's a both/and. We cannot ignore careful exegesis and we would be arrogant to ignore the wisdom of those who have gone before us.

Have the warnings of the Wauwatosa theologians about a theology that simply quotes the fathers and the Wauwatosa emphasis on sound exegesis led to an over-reaction that pays mere lip service to the Lutheran Confessions in a way the Wauwatosa men never would and never did? (p. 13) That's a question which is always worth asking. Human beings tend to go from one extreme to the other. Tomczak is correct when he says, "The Confessions don't distract us from the Scriptures. When they do, they are not being used properly" (p. 17). "Our best defense against viewing the Book of Concord too highly is to know the Book of Concord" (p. 19).

Pastor Tomczak makes some applications, expresses some personal opinions, and asks some questions which I hope will generate some discussion today. Please permit me to try to focus that discussion.

- The Lutheran Confessions clearly teach that the unity of the church is a unity of faith and not of ceremonies. How do we preserve Christian freedom in ceremonies without degenerating into a time of the Judges when everyone does what is right in his own eyes?
- What does it mean that the Lutheran Reformation was a *conservative* Reformation?
- How do the Lutheran Confessions help us as we engage intellectually with contemporary theological trends and opinions?
- Agree/disagree – Using the name *Lutheran* is a confessional statement.

Thank you Pastor Tomczak for your thought-provoking essay. Thank you symposium committee for proposing this timely topic.

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