

PRAISE FOR *Bible and Confessions?*

What it means to be “Lutheran” is accurately defined not culturally but confessionally. Lutheran congregations, pastors, and church workers promise that all of their proclamation and teaching will conform to the Lutheran Confessions *because (quia)* they are in accordance with the Word of God. This excellent anthology includes commentary on confessional subscription and formation from both fathers in the faith and emerging scholars to help readers faithfully live their Lutheran confessional identity.

Joshua Miller

Pastor, Jehovah Lutheran Church, St. Paul, MN

Lutherans are unique among denominations. They are defined by confessions. Lutherans even subscribe to the Book of Concord “because” (not “insofar as”) it agrees with Scripture. How can they claim this about their Confessions? Christians not only know the truth through God’s Word (John 8:31–32), it empowers them to confess that truth as well (1 Pet 3:15). Harrison and Pless should be commended for curating these essays on the reception, history, interpretation, and contemporary application of the Confessions. The more refined one’s confessional theology becomes, the better one will unpack biblical truths and confess the faith today.

Timothy R. Schmeling

Professor of Exegetical and Historical Theology, Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, MN

In a world saturated with a plurality of religious perspectives, the Book of Concord is a GPS that helps us navigate a sure path to Christ as He gives Himself to His own in the Holy Scriptures. *Bible and Confessions?* will equip you to better understand the treasures of the Gospel as faithfully presented in our confessional writings and empower you to faithfully and passionately confess and teach them.

Mark Mattes

Professor of Doctoral Studies, American Lutheran Theological Seminary

Bible and Confessions? underscores the ongoing vitality and relevance of the confessional Lutheran heritage. As our churches around the world are impacted by modern ecumenism, neo-Pentecostal movements, the prosperity gospel, and other manifestations of cultural Christianity, the well-crafted essays in this collection help explain why the Book of Concord remains important. With more than twenty-five years teaching the Lutheran Confessions, I recommend this book to anyone wishing to deepen their Lutheran self-understanding and service. It truly is an outstanding and timely contribution.

Naomichi Masaki

**The Rev. Victor H. and Lydia Dissen Professor of the Lutheran Confessions,
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN**

The Lutheran Reformation gave birth to statements of faith that fostered unity and marked boundaries. In the centuries since, Lutherans have wrestled with how their ministers, laity, and congregations should deal with these confessions. They've also debated the relationship between the Bible and these confessions. This volume provides a wide range of voices engaged in such discussions and reminds readers that while Lutherans confess *sola scriptura*, or Scripture alone, we read and confess Scripture with those who have gone before us. This is a helpful resource for parish pastors and laity hoping to dig deeper.

Wade Johnston

**Associate Professor of History and Theology, Wisconsin Lutheran College,
Wauwatosa, WI**

At a time when bodies carrying the name *Lutheran* claim to be “Confessional” and yet embrace a biblical hermeneutic that is far from that which is faithful to the name, *Bible and Confessions?* reclaims the name in no uncertain terms for the sake of the consciences that would be comforted by the full counsel of God. Harrison and Pless have done a marvelous service to the church in bringing together these significant essays that encourage every pastor to hold fast to “the doctrine and all its articles,” knowing that our confession is not made out of “confessional obstinance,” but rather out of pastoral concern and in view of its eschatological implications. This book belongs in the hands of every pastor who desires to hold fast to his ordination vows.

Matt Anker

President, Lutheran Mission—Australia

BIBLE AND CONFESSIONS?

**Lutheran Perspectives
on Confessing the Faith**

General Editors
Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless



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CONTENTS

Abbreviations	ix
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Introduction	xi
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PART I

Historical Essays from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

1. Answer to the Question “Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, 3
and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings
of Our Church?”
C. F. W. Walther
2. The Confessional Principle of the Conservative Reformation 22
Charles Porterfield Krauth
3. What Are Confessions? 49
Theodore E. Schmauk
4. What Gives the Confession Validity? 55
Theodore E. Schmauk
5. Paul Gerhardt: Confessional Subscription and the Lord’s Supper 72
Gerald Krispin
6. Theodosius Harnack and Confessional Subscription. 97
James Ambrose Lee II
7. Caught Between Norway, Denmark, and Missouri 119
Christian J. Einertson
8. Concerning the Charge of Duties 139
Theodor Kliefoth

PART II

Confessional Hermeneutics

9. Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics 147
Martin H. Franzmann
10. Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions 160
Ralph A. Bohlmann
11. The Confessional Principle of Lutheranism. 190
F. E. Mayer
12. The Relationship Between Scripture and the Confession 234
of the Faith in Luther’s Thought
Robert Kolb

13. The Incompatibility Between Historical-Critical Theology	245
<i>Kurt E. Marquart</i>	
14. The Basis of the Confessions	264
<i>Holsten Fagerberg</i>	
15. Scripture and Confession	289
<i>Edmund Schlink</i>	
16. The <i>Quia</i> Subscription to the Confessions.	300
<i>Erling T. Teigen</i>	

PART III

The Use of the Confessions in the Church Today

17. "I Make These Confessions My Own"	319
<i>Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand</i>	
18. Scripture and Confession: <i>Quia</i> or <i>Quatenus</i> ?	331
<i>Armin Wenz</i>	
19. <i>Magnus Consensus</i>	348
<i>Reinhard Slenczka</i>	
20. Confessional Subscription and Theological Pluralism.	384
<i>Harry A. Huth</i>	
21. The Call to Unity	394
<i>Werner Elert</i>	
22. Commitment to the Lutheran Confession.	398
<i>Peter Brunner</i>	
23. The Confession as Gift and as Task.	408
<i>Ernst Kinder</i>	
24. What Does Lutheran Confessional Allegiance Mean Today?	418
<i>Regin Prenter</i>	
25. Confessional Subscription	425
<i>Robert D. Preus</i>	
26. Can the Lutheran Confessions Have Any Meaning 450 Years Later? . .	441
<i>Robert D. Preus</i>	
27. The Confessions and the Mission of the Church	445
<i>Robert D. Preus</i>	
28. The Confession of the Church.	465
<i>Hermann Sasse</i>	
29. The Confessions and the Unity of the Church	478
<i>Hermann Sasse</i>	

30. <i>Quatenus</i> or <i>Quia</i>	496
<i>Hermann Sasse</i>	
31. Hermann Sasse, Confessional Subscription,	502
and the Postmodern Erasmus	
<i>Berett J. Steffen</i>	
32. <i>Damnamus</i> : An Ecumenical, Confessional,	517
and Catechetical Necessity	
<i>John T. Pless</i>	
33. Confessional Subscription in “A Statement of Scriptural	544
and Confessional Principles”	
<i>Richard J. Serina Jr.</i>	
34. Confessional Subscription: What Does This Mean?	558
<i>Scott R. Murray</i>	
35. Why <i>Concordia</i> Theological Seminary?	562
<i>Jon S. Bruss</i>	
36. Give Me “Book of Concord” Lutheranism.....	569
<i>Matthew C. Harrison</i>	
For Further Reading and Study	573

INTRODUCTION

IN THE RITE OF ORDINATION, the candidate makes a solemn pledge as the question is put to him:

Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? And do you confess that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord—as these are contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith?

The candidate then answers: “Yes, I make these Confessions my own because they are in accord with the Word of God.”¹

This vow is more than a quaint liturgical custom, a mere formality as a man is inducted into the Office of the Holy Ministry. Rather, it is a firm promise made not only to the church but to God and in His presence as He will judge the living and the dead (see 1 Tim. 6:12–16; 2 Tim.4:1–5). In other words, the vows pastors make in ordination are made in light of the judgment seat of Christ. There is confessional accountability here to be certain. The eschatological dimension is repeated several times in the *Book of Concord*, none more bluntly yet more eloquently put than in Luther’s words on Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament quoted in the Formula of Concord:

I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert the Word of God and the Scriptures, what will he not be able to do with my or someone else’s words?²

We offer this book with the conviction that allegiance to the Lutheran Confessions is necessary because they are faithful to the divine Word. But this conviction is something more than a legal necessity. We believe that the Lutheran Confessions are evangelically necessary as they unwaveringly lead us to distinguish between God’s Law and Gospel, keep us centered in Christ Jesus alone, and enable us to praise God together with one mind, heart, and voice in the unity of saving faith. In the words of Ernst Kinder, “The confession is

1 *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 166.

2 FC SD VII 31 (*Concordia*, 568; cf. AE 37:360–61).

the response of the church to God's Word. It is its echo of faith to God's revelation of salvation. The church of the Gospel cannot exist without this echo of faith, and cannot properly carry on its service to the Gospel without it. Only by means of such an echo does the Gospel make fruitful progress."³ There can be no schism between being "confessional" and being "missional." Without the confession of Christ, mission would be empty activity, and without mission, confessional fidelity would be a pointless, intellectual exercise. Lutherans, if they are Lutheran, that is, concerned with doctrine and mission, as was Christ Himself, are Book of Concord Lutherans.

Why is such a book important in our day? In our North American setting, creeds and confessions are often looked upon with suspicion. On one hand, there are those who might be called biblicists, who argue that because we have the Bible, and they rely totally on the Scriptures as the inerrant Word of God, creeds are unnecessary. While they subscribe to none of the historical creeds of the church, they then deduce a list of teachings that their church body holds to, such as six twenty-four-hour days of creation, adult Baptism by immersion, foot washing as a biblical ordinance, a literal thousand-year reign of Christ, and so forth. Even as they claim to be creedless, they are in fact creating their own confessional standards. The Ecumenical Creeds and the Lutheran Confessions give us a specific and concrete summary of what the Scriptures teach us, centered in the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, there are those who reject confessions because they see creeds and confessions as limiting their freedom of expression. In a very helpful discussion of "The Cultural Case Against Creeds and Confessions," Carl R. Trueman says that our culture embraces "expressive individualism" that is antithetical to a creed, which binds adherents to truth found outside of the self.⁴ Such a view was a product of the Enlightenment. It dominated the minds of leading theologians in the classical Liberalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Adolph von Harnack and Albrecht Ritschl. It was against this nondogmatic Christianity that Hermann Sasse reacts in several of the entries in this volume. Unlike Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834),⁵ who understood the creeds and confessions as sublime expressions of religious affection, Lutherans understand the Confessions as normative witnesses to the teaching of the Scriptures. Although he is not a Lutheran, the late British theologian John

3 See below, Kinder, "The Confession as Gift and as Task," 409.

4 See Carl R. Trueman, *Crisis of Confidence: Reclaiming the Historic Faith in a Culture Consumed with Individualism and Identity* (Crossway, 2024), 12.

5 See, e.g., Schleiermacher's sermon on the three-hundredth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in which he proclaims that the Augsburg Confession "is only a human expression of Christian doctrine," and then goes on to exhort his hearers not to fall into "a bondage of the letter and once again become slaves again of men" (cited from a sermon included in *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, ed. Carl S. Meyer [Concordia Publishing House, 1964], 52).

Webster captures this reality: “Confession is attestation, not self-assertion.”⁶ In confessing the faith, we are not asserting our own theological ideologies but attesting to God’s self-revelation through His Word.

At the 450th anniversary of the Formula of Concord in 1977, David Truemper delivered an essay in which he suggested that the Confessions should be used as “feedboxes” for the faithful rather than electric fences against error.⁷ This is a spurious dichotomy. In fact, the Confessions are both. Certainly, the Confessions nurture and invigorate the faith of believers, but they also are lines of clear demarcation of truth from error. They edify the church in the truth of the one Gospel, but they also guard faith as they reject all that would diminish Christ Jesus by the contradiction of His Word. The Lutheran Confessions, rightly understood, are both pastoral and polemical; they both feed God’s sheep and guard them against the enemies of the Word.

The Lutheran Confessions are genuinely ecumenical—that is, catholic—in nature. They eschew every form of sectarianism and serve to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). They serve as the reliable “pattern of the sound words,” literally, “healthy words” (2 Tim. 1:13). As several of the writers in this anthology assert, the Confessions gain their vitality from the Gospel, which they confess in conformity with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, the written Word of God. To confess the writings of the Book of Concord is to confess the scriptural faith of the one, holy, catholic church. To that end, the first confessors pledged not to depart from “the subjects themselves or from the phrases” of the confession.⁸ Neither will we.

The essays in this volume have been drawn from a variety of sources both in European and American Lutheranism. The chapters have been organized under three headings:

1. Historical Essays from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries
2. Confessional Hermeneutics
3. The Use of the Confessions in the Church Today

It is our hope that readers will find in these essays a robust appreciation of our confessional legacy, a renewed confidence in the vitality of the Lutheran Confessions as a true and correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures, and a deeper appreciation of the Book of Concord as it evokes doxology to the triune God and provides consolation for God’s people. Confessions cannot be inherited like a precious family heirloom. There is no guarantee that the faith and confession of the fathers will be that of their descendants. If the Confessions are neglected, taken for granted, or assumed, they will be lost. They must continually be

6 John Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Brazos Press, 2001), 124.

7 David G. Truemper, “Confession and Congregation: An Approach to the Study of the Formula of Concord,” in *Confession and Congregation: Resources for Parish Life and Work* (Valparaiso University Press, 1978), 3.

8 Preface to the Book of Concord 23 (*Concordia*, 11).

reclaimed and embraced anew in every generation. In preparing this volume for the church of the Augsburg Confession not only in North America but also throughout the world, and especially those emerging Lutheran churches that are only now discovering the doctrinal depth and evangelical center of the Book of Concord, we pray that this collection will enhance and strengthen joyful confession of Christ. In the words of the Preface to the Book of Concord: “We should take pains, with the greatest earnestness and our utmost ability, to attend to those matters that promote (a) the extension of God’s name and glory; (b) the spread of His Word (from which alone we hope for salvation); (c) the peace and tranquility of churches and schools; and (d) the instruction and consolation of disturbed consciences” (22). We must do this.

The editors are deeply grateful to Seminarian Justin Chester for his assistance in assembling the documents included here. We are also indebted to Dr. Jacob Corzine, Laura Lane, Dawn Mirly Weinstock, and the dedicated staff at Concordia Publishing House for working with us to bring this book to fruition.

Matthew C. Harrison

John T. Pless

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