

## 6. Subscription to Confessions.

The position accorded the symbols in the Lutheran Church is clearly defined by the Book of Concord itself. According to it Holy Scripture alone is to be regarded as the sole rule and norm by which absolutely all doctrines and teachers are to be judged. The object of the Augustana, as stated in its Preface, was to show “what manner of doctrine has been set forth, in our lands and churches from the Holy Scripture and the pure Word of God.” And in its Conclusion the Lutheran confessors declare: “Nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic,” and “we are ready, God willing, to present ampler information according to the Scriptures.” “Iuxta Scripturam”—such are the closing words of the Augsburg Confession. The Lutheran Church knows of no other principle.

In the *Formula of Concord* we read: “Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.” (777, 2.) In the Conclusion of the Catalog of Testimonies we read: “The true saving faith is to be founded upon no church-teachers, old or new, but only and alone upon God’s Word, which is comprised in the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles, as unquestionable witnesses of divine truth.” (1149.)

The Lutheran symbols, therefore, are not intended to supplant the Scriptures, nor do they do so. They do, however, set forth what has been at all times the unanimous understanding of the pure Christian doctrine adhered to by sincere and loyal Lutherans everywhere; and, at the same time, they show convincingly from the Scriptures that our forefathers did indeed manfully confess nothing but God’s eternal truth, which every Christian is in duty bound to, and consistently always will, believe, teach, and confess.

The manner also in which Lutherans pledge themselves confessionally appears from these symbols. The Augsburg Confession was endorsed by the princes and estates as follows: “The above articles we desire to present in accordance with the edict of Your Imperial Majesty, in order to exhibit our Confession and let men see a summary of the doctrine of our teachers.” (95, 6.) In the preamble to the signatures of 1537 the Lutheran preachers unanimously confess: “We have reread the articles of the Confession presented to the Emperor in the Assembly at Augsburg, and by the favor of God all the preachers who have been present in this Assembly at Smalcald harmoniously declare that they believe and teach in their churches according to the articles of the Confession and Apology.” (529.) John Brenz declares that he had read and reread, time and again, the Confession, the Apology, etc., and judged “that all these agree with Holy Scripture, and with the belief of the true and genuine catholic Church (*haec omnia convenire cum Sacra Scriptura et cum sententia verae καὶ γνησίης catholicae ecclesiae*).” (529.) Another subscription—to the *Smalcald Articles*—reads: “I, Conrad Figenbotz, for the glory of God subscribe that I have thus believed and am still preaching and firmly believing as above.” (503, 13.) Brixius writes in a similar vein: “I ... subscribe to the Articles of the reverend Father Martin Luther, and confess that hitherto I have thus believed and taught, and by the Spirit of Christ I shall continue thus to believe and teach.” (503, 27.)

In the Preface to the Thorough Declaration of the *Formula of Concord* the Lutheran confessors declare: “To this Christian Augsburg Confession, so thoroughly grounded in God’s Word, we herewith pledge ourselves again from our inmost hearts. We abide by its simple, clear, and unadulterated meaning as the words convey it, and regard the said Confession as a pure Christian symbol, with which at the present time true Christians ought to be found next to God’s

Word.... We intend also, by the grace of the Almighty, faithfully to abide until our end by this Christian Confession, mentioned several times, as it was delivered in the year 1530 to the Emperor Charles V; and it is our purpose, neither in this nor in any other writing, to recede in the least from that oft-cited Confession, nor to propose another or new confession.” (847, 4. 5.) Again: “We confess also the First, Unaltered Augsburg Confession as our symbol for this time (not because it was composed by our theologians, but because it has been taken from God’s Word and is founded firmly and well therein), precisely in the form in which it was committed to writing in the year 1530, and presented to the Emperor Charles V at Augsburg.” (851, 5.)

In like manner the remaining Lutheran symbols were adopted. (853. 777.) Other books, the *Formula of Concord* declares, are accounted useful, “as far as (*wofern, quatenus*) they are consistent with” the Scriptures and the symbols. (855, 10.) The symbols, however, are accepted “that we may have a unanimously received, definite, common form of doctrine, which all our Evangelical churches together and in common confess, from and according to which, because (*cum, weil*) it has been derived from God’s Word, all other writings should be judged and adjusted, as to how far (*wiefern, quatenus*) they are to be approved and accepted.” (855, 10.)

After its adoption by the Lutheran electors, princes, and estates, the *Formula of Concord*, and with it the entire Book of Concord, was, as stated, solemnly subscribed by about 8,000 theologians, pastors, and teachers, the pledge reading as follows: “Since now, in the sight of God and of all Christendom, we wish to testify to those now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controverted articles aforementioned and explained, and no other, is our faith, doctrine, and confession in which we are also willing, by God’s grace to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it; and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but, by the help of God’s grace, intend to abide thereby: therefore, after mature deliberation, we have, in God’s fear and with the invocation of His name, attached our signatures with our own hands.” (1103, 40.)

Furthermore, in the Preface to the Book of Concord the princes and estates declare that many churches and schools had received the Augsburg Confession “as a symbol of the present time in regard to the chief articles of faith, especially those involved in controversy with the Romanists and various corruptions of the heavenly doctrine.” (7.) They solemnly protest that it never entered their minds “either to introduce, furnish a cover for, and establish any false doctrine, or in the least even to recede from the Confession presented in the year 1530 at Augsburg.” (15.) They declare: “This Confession also, by the help of God, we will retain to our last breath when we shall go forth from this life to the heavenly fatherland, to appear with joyful and undaunted mind and with a pure conscience before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (15.) “Therefore we also have determined not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves or from the phrases which are found in them (*vel a rebus ipsis vel a phrasibus, quae in illa habentur, discedere*), but, the Spirit of the Lord 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 the pure doctrine.” (23.)

## 7. Pledging of Ministers to the Confessions.

Such being the attitude of the Lutherans towards their symbols, and such their evaluation of pure doctrine, it was self-evident that the public teachers of their churches should be pledged to the confessions. In December 1529, H. Winckel, of Goettingen, drew up a form in which the candidate for ordination declares: "I believe and hold also of the most sacred Sacrament ... as one ought to believe concerning it according to the contents of the Bible, and as Doctor Martin Luther writes and confesses concerning it especially in his Confession" (of the Lord's Supper, 1528). The Goettingen Church Order of 1530, however, did not as yet embody a vow of ordination. The first pledges to the symbols were demanded by the University of Wittenberg in 1533 from candidates for the degree of Doctor of Divinity. In 1535 this pledge was required also of the candidates for ordination. The oath provided that the candidate must faithfully teach the Gospel without corruption, steadfastly defend the Ecumenical Symbols, remain in agreement with the Augsburg Confession, and before deciding difficult controversies consult older teachers of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. Even before 1549 the candidates for philosophical degrees were also pledged by oath to the Augsburg Confession.

In 1535, at the Diet of Smalcald, it was agreed that new members entering the Smalcald League should promise "to provide for such teaching and preaching as was in harmony with the Word of God and the pure teaching of our [Augsburg] Confession." According to the Pomeranian Church Order which Bugenhagen drew up in 1535, pastors were pledged to the Augsburg Confession and the Apology thereof. Capito, Bucer, and all others who took part in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, promised, over their signatures, "to believe and to teach in all articles according to the Confession and the Apology." (*Corpus Reformatorum*, opp. Melanthonis, 3, 76.) In 1540, at Goettingen, John Wigand promised to accept the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, and to abide by them all his life. "And," he continued, "if I should be found to do otherwise or be convicted of teaching and confessing contrary to such Confession and Apology, then let me, by this signature, be condemned and deposed from this divine ministry. This do I swear, so help me God." Also at Goettingen, Veit Pflugmacher vowed, in 1541, that he would preach the Gospel in its truth and purity according to the Augsburg Confession and the contents of the postils of Anton Corvinus. He added: "Should I be found to do otherwise and not living up to what has been set forth above, then shall I by such act have deposed myself from office. This do I swear; so help me God."

In 1550 and 1552, Andrew Osiander attacked the oath of confession which was in vogue at Wittenberg, claiming it to be "an entanglement in oath-bound duties after the manner of the Papists." "What else," said he, "does this oath accomplish than to sever those who swear it from the Holy Scriptures and bind them to Philip's doctrine? Parents may therefore well consider what they do by sending their sons to Wittenberg to become Masters and Doctors. Money is there taken from them, and they are made Masters and Doctors. But while the parents think that their son is an excellent man, well versed in the Scriptures and able to silence enthusiasts and heretics, he is, in reality, a poor captive, entangled and embarrassed by oath-bound duties. For he has abjured the Word of God and has taken an oath on Philip's doctrine." Replying to this fanatical charge in 1553, Melancthon emphasized the fact that the doctrinal pledges demanded at Wittenberg had been introduced chiefly by Luther, for the purpose of "maintaining the true doctrine." "For," said Melancthon, "many enthusiasts were roaming about at that time, each, in turn, spreading new silly nonsense, e.g., the Anabaptists, Servetus, Campanus, Schwenckfeld, and others. And such tormenting spirits are not lacking at any time (*Et non desunt tales furiae ullo tempore*)." A doctrinal pledge, Melancthon furthermore explained, was necessary "in order correctly to acknowledge God and call upon Him to preserve harmony in the Church, and to bridle the audacity of such as invent new doctrines." (*C. R.* 12, 5.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lutheran Church. Missouri Synod. (1997). *Concordia Triglotta - English : The symbolic books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Includes Historical Introductions by F. Bente and indexes of subjects. (electronic ed.) (Pages 7-9). Milwaukee WI: Northwestern Publishing House.