

In the sight of God and of all Christendom, we want to testify to those now living and those who will come after us. This declaration presented here about all the controverted articles mentioned and explained above—and no other—is our faith.

**Do we want to be
Dresden Lutherans?**

By God's grace, with intrepid hearts, we are willing to appear before the judgment seat of Christ with this Confession and give an account of it. We will not speak or write anything contrary to this Confession, either publicly or privately. By the strength of God's grace we intend to abide by it. Therefore, after mature deliberation, we have, in the faith of Christ and by calling on His name, attached our signatures with our own hands.

Rev. Paul A. Rydecki

Intrepid Lutherans Conference
Bethlehem Lutheran Church
Oshkosh, Wisconsin
June 2, 2012

CONCORDIA

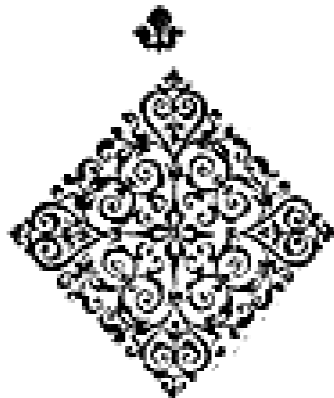
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Schristliche

Widerholete einmütige Bekenntnis
nachbetanter Churfürsten / Fürsten vnd
Stände Augspurgischer Confession / vnd derselben
Theologen Vere vnd glaubens:

Wit angeheffter / in Gottes wort / als der einigen Richt-
schnur / wolgegründter erklerung etlicher Artikel / bey
welchen nach D. Martin Luthers seligen absterben /
Disputation vnd streit vorgefallen.

Aus einhelliger vergleichung vnd
beuehl obgedachter Churfürsten / Fürsten vñ Ständen /
derselben Landen / Kirchen / Schulen vnd Nachkommen /
zum vnderricht vnd warnung in Druck
verfertigt.



Wit Churf. S. zu Sachsen befreihung.
Dresden. M. D. LXXX.

+ *Jesu, Juva* +

It was shortly after the ELCA decided at its August, 2009, convention that it would approve of homosexuality among the members of its clergy. (You remember, that convention of theirs in Minnesota where, at the very time on the agenda when the issue of homosexuality was scheduled to be discussed, a tornado swept in as if from nowhere and hit the convention center where they were meeting and broke off the cross and the steeple on the church they were using across the street.) A dear Lutheran woman called me on the phone, incredulous, and said, “Pastor, this is just shameful! How can the Lutheran Church allow this to happen?”

She envisioned, I think, a grand council of Lutheran overlords sitting around an ancient table somewhere in Germany, presided over by a bishop from Luther’s own bloodline, with authority over everyone everywhere who wears the Lutheran name.

I had to disappoint her. There is no way to force the ELCA to conform to Biblical practice, or to insist that they adhere to a historic definition of what it means to be Lutheran, or to compel them to remove the “L” from their acronym. There is no human institution that can stop the ELCA from doing whatever they want to do, because there is no human institution in today’s world known as “The Lutheran Church.”

Instead, there are millions of people across the globe who call themselves “Lutherans,” most of whom have chosen to align themselves in free association with more or less like-thinking Lutherans. Each association governs itself. There is no Lutheran version of the pope. We had a Reformation over that.

As Lutherans, we know that Christ alone is He who was given *to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all* (Eph. 1:22-23). We acknowledge no other divinely appointed bishop or council or synod as our Head.

But freedom from Rome is not so easy to maintain, because we are sinners, and our flesh still craves an earthly kingdom with an earthly ruler and an earthly structure.

Craving an earthly kingdom

In a way, we can understand the appeal of a pope. The outward unity of the Roman Catholic Church is enviable. The glory of such unity is extremely attractive, especially because it’s so easy to maintain. Do, obey, submit. Acknowledge God’s authority in the pope. Whatever he says, you can just believe, because he’s infallible. He must be; he said so. Look what great institutions he presides over! See how glorious he appears! (No wonder it was so appealing to the Corinthians to latch onto a person, be it Paul or Apollos or Cephas or even Christ as separate from the ministry of his apostles.) It’s easy to follow a pope. You don’t even have to agree with him. How many Catholics don’t you know who will come right out and tell you, “I don’t agree with everything the Church teaches, but, so help me Mary, I’m gonna be a Catholic until the day I die.” Why? Because it’s glorious. Because it’s easy. It’s familiar. And it’s safe. You don’t have to confess anything personally, or even know anything personally. You can just keep on keepin’ on, because, *ex opere operato*, you benefit from the piety and actions and sacrifices of others—as long as you pledge allegiance to them.

Protestantism has its own versions of earthly kingdoms with earthly rulers. We know how the sects go about this earthly kingdom-building. Theirs, like Rome’s, is a theology of glory. They rule through legislation and moral compulsion, and the results are measurable. They submit to charismatic leaders who “cast visions” for their congregations. Their churches are largely directed by their human emotions, their human likes and dislikes, and their human preferences. They seek to build a glorious kingdom for Jesus here on earth and make it their human responsibility to see to

it that it gets built, doing “anything short of sinning” to make it happen. Their tools are human tools. Using the social sciences, they are convinced that if they are real enough, relevant enough and relational enough, they will reach those whom the Holy Spirit is unable to reach in any other way. Their tools are small groups in which faith is fed by human relationships as much as, if not more than, by the Word of God itself. Their tools are catchy signs and billboards. Their tools are carnivals and sports, music and lights, food and drink, programs and the programming of their members to smile a certain way, greet a certain way, dress a certain way, to “ooze” Jesus, as some have said—anything to attract the multitudes to their glorious earthly kingdom. Their tools, in summary, are the Law. They are law-oriented and man-centered to the core. The sects detest everything that smacks of Rome, but they fail to realize that they have already constructed Rome’s replacement.

Freedom from Rome, combined with the carnal craving for an earthly kingdom, has led others, like the ELCA, essentially to declare independence from all rules and norms except what their own human conscience leads them to do. They have thus exalted man’s wisdom and man’s morality as their earthly ruler and they have set up a free-for-all earthly kingdom in which *their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame*. And man replaces Christ again.

Freedom from Rome, combined with the carnal craving for an earthly kingdom, can lead still others, less intentionally but just as fervently, to become enslaved to other human institutions, including political parties, including church programs, including family¹, and including a synod—and in the case of many Lutherans, the latter two institutions are closely tied together.

The earthly kingdom of a synod

To what extent are family ties within a synod a reason for retaining membership in that synod? To that extent one is enslaved to the human institution. To what extent does a grade school, high school or prep school, college or seminary keep one aligned to a given church body or synod? To that extent one is enslaved to the human institution.

This is not to disparage family or school or synod. It is to assert that all of these things can become gods to us. It is to recognize that here apply the words of Christ in a very real and relevant way, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Even family; even school; even synod; even our own life—and livelihood—can hinder us from following Jesus.

Here’s a little test for you. How easily could you write down on a piece of paper or proclaim to your members in a sermon, “I am WELS—for now”? I would suggest that you must very honestly and very readily—even cheerfully—be able to conceive of your synodical membership that way, and encourage all other WELS members to do the same. And to the extent it causes you to squirm, to that extent you are tied— even enslaved— to the institution.

But that sounds so fickle, so changeable. This is a *Church and Continuity* conference, not *Church and Change*. What, you belong to one church body today, but you may change to a different one tomorrow?

Well, yes. Of course! What is a synod but a voluntary arrangement made by a group of people to walk together in a certain direction? A synod is, at least by the definition we typically use, not a static thing, but a moving thing, a group of people walking. Synods do not establish the direction in which we are to walk; they move in a direction. In what direction? That is the question.

¹ The family is, of course, a divine institution, not a human one. But that does not prevent sinners like us from turning a family that is meant to be *under* God into a family in which man takes precedence *over* God. We remember how Adam chose to be loyal to his wife rather than to his Creator.

What the WELS does or does not do, what the WELS says or does not say, does not affect what I believe in the least, because my conviction does not flow from the WELS, nor will I stand before the judgment seat of God with a WELS label to hide behind. The WELS, as an organization of changeable individuals, may change directions, or may have changed already, or may never have had everyone walking in the very same direction in the first place. The moment we view the WELS or our place in it as static, as permanent— the moment we consider the WELS to be infallible, in that moment, we have returned to the worship of man and the establishment of an earthly kingdom. Then we might as well bend the knee before the pope again, because you can't beat his kingdom for earthly splendor.

Something better than an earthly kingdom

What is it, then, that ought to set the direction for us as Lutherans? And how do we come to an agreement to walk together in that direction? Why will I walk together with you in the Church? Why will I submit to your preaching and teaching or admit you to my altar? Why will I work with you to send out missionaries and support the training of pastors? And why will you agree to walk together with me?

We have an answer, and it does not come from Rome. It does not come from Milwaukee or Mequon or Wauwatosa, from Mankato or St. Louis or Ft. Wayne. Our answer comes from Dresden, Germany, where it was printed 431 years, 11 months and 7 days ago today on the fiftieth anniversary of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession. Our answer is the Book of Concord of 1580. This is the direction in which we have agreed to walk. This is the historic Lutheran and catholic faith. This is who we claim to be. No one has forced us to sign it. We signed it voluntarily when our congregations joined the WELS. We signed it voluntarily as pastors when we took our ordination vows. We signed it because we claimed it as our own. Do we claim it still? Do we still claim to walk in this direction? And is our claim honest? Do we want to be Dresden Lutherans? Or do we want to be something else?

The Confessions as compass

From the outset, some will be uncomfortable with this “Dresden” terminology and Book of Concord emphasis. “What do I care about Dresden?!? I believe in the Bible, not the Book of Concord!” And I say, “More power to you!” That’s exactly what my friend at the Church of Christ says. It’s also what my friend at Calvary Chapel says. It’s even what my neighbor says—my Mormon neighbor, as well as the Muslim father of a child on my son’s soccer team. So, you believe in the Bible, do you? Wonderful! So do they.

“Yes, but I believe the *whole* Bible.” But, don’t you see? They do, too. At least, they think they do. They just have a different “interpretation” of what the Bible says.

“Yes, but their interpretation is wrong and my interpretation is the *right* interpretation, because *I* let Scripture interpret Scripture.” Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. What exactly is your interpretation of the Bible? Your answer to that question will be your confession of faith.

We need to get straight what the role of Holy Scripture is and what the role of a confession is. The Bible is God’s Word. The Bible is God’s divinely inspired and inerrant Truth. It is infallible and sufficient for teaching us all we need to know and believe to get us safely to heaven, and it is the efficacious tool of the Holy Spirit for convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. It is the sole Rule and norm for our faith. But the Bible is not at all sufficient as our creed. C.P. Krauth, 19th Century American Lutheran theologian and author of *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, explains the difference:

The Bible is the rule of faith, but not the confession of it; the Creed is not the rule of faith, but is the confession of it.²

The Rule of Faith is God's voice to us; faith is the hearing of that voice, and the Confession, our reply of assent to it. By our faith, we are known to the Lord as his; by our Confession, we are known to each other as His children. Confession of faith, in some form, is imperative. To confess Christ, is to confess what is our faith in him. As the Creed is not, and cannot be the Rule of Faith, but is its Confession merely, so the Bible, because it is the Rule of Faith, is of necessity not its Confession. The Bible can no more be any man's Creed, than the stars can be any man's astronomy.³

The Bible sets the direction for our faith and for our walk together as Christians. It cannot err. It does not change. It is the True North for our compass. But it is not the compass itself. The compass does not create the direction of "North;" it recognizes it. It responds to a magnetic field and points to it. That is what a confession of faith does. It is a person's response to the Word of God. And just as North does not change, so there is no cause for a compass to change the direction in which it is pointing. It points continuously in the same direction.

So, technically, every confession of faith that claims the Bible as its direction-setter should point in exactly the same direction. But we know how the devil has set up artificial magnetic fields all around us (to continue with the analogy), and how false teachers train their hearers to miscalibrate their compasses, so that, even though everyone claims to be following the Bible, not everyone walks together in the same direction.

So what shall we do? Invent our own compass? Will you come up with a home-spun creed knit together in your church office that you and you alone confess? Krauth highlights the foolishness of such an approach:

What shall be our Confession? Are we originating a Church, and must we utter our testimony to a world, in which our faith is a novelty? The reply is easy. As we are not the first who have used, with honest hearts and fervent prayers, the Rule, so are we not the first who have been guided by the Holy Ghost in it to its faith. As men long ago reached its faith, so long ago they confessed it. They confessed it from the beginning.⁴

Besides, how on earth are we supposed to walk together and work together and acknowledge one another as brothers in Christ without knowing each other's confession about the Bible? What do you believe about God, about man, about sin and about justification? What do I believe and how will you know? How will we identify ourselves and others who confess the same thing? For that purpose, we come up with a confession that we are convinced points in exactly the right direction, and we all agree and announce to one another and to the rest of the world, "Yes, that describes me; that describes us. We are walking together in *that* direction."

Neither a German nor an American compass

Another objection might be made: "What do I care about Dresden—*Germany*? The Book of Concord was written by *German* Lutherans in a 16th Century *German* context. It has so much *German* baggage. I'm an *American* Lutheran living in 21st Century *America*." Yes, there was a historical and cultural setting for the Lutheran Reformation. No one can argue with that. But the question is, was the confession of the Book of Concord a response to Biblical truth as contextualized to their 16th Century German culture? Or was it a response to Biblical truth that supersedes culture? Did they calibrate their compass to compensate for a cultural bias which we must now recalibrate to compensate for our cultural bias?

² Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 185.

³ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

Here is their answer:

We have mentioned only those things we thought it was necessary to talk about so that it would be understood that in doctrine and ceremonies we have received nothing contrary to Scripture or the Church universal. It is clear that we have been very careful to make sure no new ungodly doctrine creeps into our churches.⁵

Notice they didn't receive their doctrine or ceremonies from the Church *German*, but from the Church *universal*. They understood very well what the American Krauth also understood:

It is fanaticism to attempt to narrow our great Church into an English sect or a German one. The Lutheran Church is neither English nor German; and though both should cease to be the tongues of living men, **she** cannot pass away.⁶

Secondly, in a country like ours, where we make much of our independence and our freedom to walk –each one— in his own direction; in an age like ours in which good is called evil, East is called West and North is called South, one does not have to be German to recognize the significance of the Lutheran Confessions for the American scene. Because of the sectarianism that drips from American culture, the Confessions and their insistence on catholic continuity *in the same direction* become even more significant:

But are those Confessions, after all, of any value to the American Lutheran preacher? it may be asked...We are placed here in the midst of sectarianism, and it becomes us, not lightly to consent to swell that destructive torrent of separatism which threatens the welfare of pure Christianity on our shores more than all other causes combined. We are surrounded by the children of those Churches, which claim an origin in the Reformation. We sincerely respect and love them; we fervently pray that they may be increased in every labor of love, and may be won more and more to add to that precious truth, which they set forth with such power, those no less precious doctrines which, in the midst of so wide an abandonment of the faith once delivered to the saints, God has, in our Confession, preserved to us. But how shall we make ourselves worthy of their respect, and lift ourselves out of the sphere of that pitiful little sectarianism which is crawling continually over all that is churchly and stable? We must begin by knowing ourselves, and being true to that knowledge. Let us not, with our rich coffers, play the part of beggars, and ask favors where we have every ability to impart them. No Church can maintain her self-respect or inspire respect in others, which is afraid or ashamed of her own history, and which rears a dubious fabric on the ignorance of her ministry and of her members. Whatever flickering of success may play around her, she will yet sink to rise no more, and, worse than this, no honest man will lament her fall; for however such a moral dishonesty may be smoothed over, every reflecting man sees that such a Church is an organized lie, with a ministry, congregations, churches, and societies united to sustain a lie.⁷

If we understand the theological conviction of the Reformers and the relationship outlined above between the Rule and the Confession of the Rule— the North and the compass that points to it— then we will realize that there is very little that is incidental in the Book of Concord. The Book of Concord is not just the Lutheran Church's response to 16th Century error or controversy or culture. Much more than that, it is the Lutheran Church's response to divine Truth. We do not claim to be a new church, or a changing church, but rather a continuous church that has been confessing together, walking together, in the exact same direction, since the beginning.

Permit, if you will, a few more statements from Krauth in praise of the Lutheran Confessions and those godly men who handed them down to us:

The child of our Church will find occasion to exult, not only in those brighter parts of our history and of our doctrines, whose luster fills every eye, but even in those particulars on which ignorance, envy,

⁵ Augsburg Confession:XXIX:5

⁶ Krauth, 211.

⁷ Ibid., 208-209.

and jealousy have based their powerless attacks;—will find, when he reaches a thorough understanding of them, new occasion to utter, with a heart swelling with an honorable pride, “I, too, am a Lutheran.” We are not such gross idolaters, nor so ignorant of the declarations of these great men themselves, as to imagine that they left nothing for their posterity to do. Whether their posterity has done it, and done it well, is, however, a very distinct question. To assume that, merely because we follow them in order of time, we have gone farther than they in truth, is to lay the foundation of a principle more absurd and pernicious than the worst doctrine of the Church of Rome, and is as foolish as to say that, the child of today, four years of age, is a greater astronomer than Newton, because he lives in the century after him. But while we concede that we may and ought to advance, we wish explicitly to say, that we mean by advance, progress in the same direction. We are aware of no particular in which advance demands, or is even compatible with a desertion of the fundamental principles of our fathers.

This much we can safely assert, that those who understand best the theology of the Reformation, have most confidence in it, and the strongest affection for it; to them it seems still to stand in its original glory, firm as the eternal mountains. That which strikes them painfully, as they grow more and more familiar with that stout heart, whose lifeblood is warming us, is that we have not advanced as we should; that though we have the shoulders of these giants of a former world, from which, alas! a flood of infidelity and theological frivolity seems to separate us, on which to stand, there are so many things in which we do not see as far as they. It is because slothfulness or ignorance prevents us from occupying that position to which they would lift us...A simple heart is of more value than mere science in the apprehension of religious truth; and never has there been witnessed such a union of gigantic powers, with such a child-like spirit, as among the theologians of the sixteenth century.

Every doctrine they established by the word of God, and confirmed by the witness of his Church. Every objection which is now urged, was then brought to bear upon the truth. Controversy has added nothing to its stores; they knew perfectly those superficial, miscalled reasons which make men now so confident in saying, that had the Reformers only lived in our time, they would have abandoned much to which they held. They knew them, but they lived and died unchanging in their adherence to what they had taught as truth.⁸

Prescriptive or descriptive?

That leads us to another common misconception of the Book of Concord. Is it “prescriptive” or is it “descriptive”? Does it *prescribe* what we must believe and do as Lutherans? Or does it merely *describe* what the 16th Century Lutherans believed and did, thereby leaving it to our discretion whether to follow suit or not in our place and time? Or is it a mixture of prescriptive/descriptive? Rather than red-lining what we imagine to be prescriptive sections of the Book of Concord and blue-lining what we imagine to be descriptive, I would suggest that we view the Confessions in a completely different light.

The Book of Concord does not claim to be the Rule of faith, and therefore, it cannot claim to prescribe anything to faith. God’s Word prescribes; the Church responds with her confession. The Book of Concord simply describes how its subscribers respond to divine truth—how they read the Bible. Therefore, *everything in the Book of Concord is descriptive*.

Take, for example, the description of traditions and ceremonies in the Confessions: “We cheerfully maintain the old traditions made in the Church...”⁹ “Old customs that can be kept without sin or great inconvenience should be kept.”¹⁰ Why? As a simple matter of preference in 16th Century German culture? No, but in response to Scripture,¹¹ and as a demonstration of their orthodoxy and their continuity with the Church universal (or “catholic”).

⁸ Ibid., 205-207.

⁹ Apology:XV:38

¹⁰ Apology:XV:51

¹¹ E.g., Jude 3-4, Hebrews 13:7-9, Eph. 4:1-6, 1 Cor. 14:40

As another example, take the description of the worship practices of the Lutheran Church outlined especially in Augsburg Confession XXIV and Apology XXIV. Why were they so offended at the charge leveled against them by the papists that they had abolished the Mass? First, because it was a lie. Second, because Dresden Lutherans celebrated the Mass (which always included the Lord's Supper) with the highest reverence, in response to what the Scriptures say about God and man and the means of grace and faith and the essence of worship, which is to receive good gifts from God.

So to argue that the fact that "they" offered the Sacrament every Lord's Day does not mean that "we" *have to* do the same thing completely misses the point and twists the Book of Concord into a rule book instead of the description that it was meant to be.

This is not to say that the descriptive Confessions have no role to play as a prescriptive norm. The Reformers put it this way:

But, the Spirit of the Lord aiding us, we intend 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.¹²

In these matters (as we have mentioned earlier), this has always been our purpose: in our lands, dominions, schools, and churches no other doctrine should be proclaimed and accurately set forth except that which is founded upon God's Word and contained in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology (when properly understood in its genuine sense). Opinions conflicting with these are not allowed. Indeed, this formula of agreement was begun and completed with this purpose.¹³

Besides, this matter is important also for another reason. There are troublesome and contentious people who do not allow themselves to be bound to any formula of the pure doctrine. They may not have the freedom to stir up controversies, according to their good pleasure, that cause grounds for offense, or to publish and fight for extreme opinions. For eventually the result of these things is that the pure doctrine is hidden and lost. Then nothing is passed on to future generations except academic opinions and delays of judgment.¹⁴

Even in the 16th Century there were Lutherans who wanted to teach and practice their own thing, without being "bound to any formula of the pure doctrine," without the burden of bearing a compass. That was unacceptable to the Dresden Lutherans. For the sake of preserving the truth of the Gospel for themselves and for future generations, they described what the doctrine and practice of a Dresden Lutheran was and how they understood the teachings of Scripture; and then they sought harmony, concord, and agreement around that description.

Above all, they sought honesty. Subscription to the Book of Concord has always been voluntary. No one is forced into it or condemned to hell for not subscribing his name to it. But honesty has always been assumed. Where it says, "We believe, teach and confess; we do this, or we do that," it is assumed that, if you sign your name to this book, then "we" includes "you."

Confessional subscription in the WELS: The claim

Now, by this time you might think that I'm just preaching to the choir. After all, officially, the WELS does not need convincing that the Book of Concord should be binding on us or relevant for us. The WELS has assured me, has promised me, has repeated over and over again that we walk together as a synod solely on the basis of the truth of Scripture as confessed in the Book of Concord. Our synod already claims to subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions 100%, and we boast of how we

¹² Preface to the Book of Concord, § 23.

¹³ Preface to the Book of Concord, § 21.

¹⁴ Preface to the Book of Concord, § 22.

are a truly confessional Lutheran church body (one of the few truly, *truly* confessional Lutheran church bodies on the face of the earth, right?). We make much of our “*quia*” subscription.

“*Quia*” and “*Quatenus*” are shorthand Latin words sometimes used to distinguish between churches that subscribe to the Confessions fully or only partially. To claim a “*quia*” subscription is to claim full adherence to the Book of Concord *because* it is a correct exposition of the Bible. To claim a “*quatenus*” subscription is to claim partial adherence to the Book of Concord, that is, *insofar as* it is a correct exposition of the Bible. To return to our analogy from before, “*quia*” means, “Yes, the Confessions are our faithful compass that points due North. That is the direction we are going to walk.” “*Quatenus*” means, “We agree that the Confessions are a compass that points in the general direction of North,” which may include everything from West/Northwest to East/Northeast. It would obviously be impossible to walk together in the same direction with a *quatenus* subscription.

But that’s not what we’re supposed to have in the WELS. From the WELS constitution:

Article II, Section 1: The synod accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testament as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God and submits to this Word of God as the only infallible authority in all matters of doctrine, faith, and life.

Article II, Section 2: The synod also accepts the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church embodied in the *Book of Concord of 1580*, not insofar as, but because they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.

Article III, Section 3: Membership in the synod shall be restricted to congregations, pastors, and male teachers who agree in doctrine and practice with the confession referenced in Article II.

As a synod, we have claimed the Dresden Confessions as our own. We have claimed to know them and to subscribe to them fully. Now the harder questions: To what extent is our confessional claim honest? Are we afraid or ashamed of our own history because it is so radically opposed to modern “wisdom” and the culture in which we live? Are we truly walking together in the same direction according to the compass of the Confessions?

I will give you my humble and honest assessment. I will speak of the WELS, but I sense that the applications reach into the ELS and LCMS as well. I do not intend these answers as blanket or personal accusations. If the shoe fits, wear it. If not, then don’t. But to pretend the shoe does not exist would be delusional.

Confessional subscription in the WELS: The reality

I think it is rather telling how often it happens that even bringing up the Book of Concord or asking for an honest subscription to it stirs up responses of anger, defensiveness and accusations of legalism from within our own confessional Lutheran synod. It seems that we are supposed to assume that everyone who joins the WELS will be walking lockstep in the direction of the Confessions until Christ returns— without actually looking, without actually checking, without actually talking about the Confessions and without questioning anyone’s doctrine or practice.

In reality, in spite of everyone’s claim to a *quia* subscription (and I don’t know of any pastor in the WELS who would claim anything less), if we are willing to be honest with one another, there is actually a broad spectrum of individual confessional subscription in the WELS, ranging from those who dismiss the Book of Concord as entirely irrelevant, to those who embrace the Book of Concord insofar as they believe it to be relevant, to those who embrace the Book of Concord without qualification and insist that all who claim to walk together do the same. I wouldn’t dare venture a guess as to how many fit into each camp. But from the broadening range of accepted practice within our synod, I would have to conclude that the latter group is in the minority.

Let me suggest a name for this phenomenon of a claimed *quia* subscription that still treats some or all of the Confessions as irrelevant. Perhaps the term “Crypto-quetenus” could be applied.¹⁵

Crypto-quetenus Lutherans¹⁶ today include those Lutherans who want to erase the “Lutheran” name from their signs and from our vocabulary. To them, the Book of Concord belongs up on a shelf as an antiquated testimony to unpleasant doctrinal skirmishes of long ago that are better forgotten. They wouldn’t study it in their congregations even if their members begged for it. They choose to remain ignorant of the content of the Book of Concord, even though they have subscribed to it. Their doctrine and practice flow from the Church Growth Movement and from sources like: (1) their own personal interpretation of the Bible; (2) sectarian heretics like Craig Groeschel, Rick Warren, Andy Stanley, Leonard Sweet, Beth Moore, et al.; (3) practical considerations (“whatever works,” “whatever will get people through the door”); (4) or even political considerations (whether the politics be secular or ecclesiastical). They may find a Luther quote that strikes their fancy and use it to impress on others how “Lutheran” they still are, but they do not read Luther to imbibe his spirit. They may quote from seminary professors or from WELS publications (since these aren’t as old and outdated as the Confessions), but they would rather emulate the popular practices of the sects than the Lutheranism described in the Book of Concord.

Crypto-quetenus Lutherans also include those who do love the Book of Concord, but view modern Lutheranism as having surpassed the glory of the Confessions. They may not personally follow the sectarian practices espoused by others, but neither will they condemn them, because they revel in the Christian freedom they find in the Confessions—without recognizing the parameters placed around such freedom by the same Confessions. They consider themselves bound to the doctrine of the Book of Concord, but not necessarily bound to the practice of the Confessors or to the sensibilities of the Confessors when it comes to things like worship or the Lord’s Supper. They praise the Confessions, but assert that our doctrine has evolved beyond them, and that our cultural circumstances are so different from the 16th Century that the liturgical worship model embraced by the Confessors certainly can—and perhaps should—be discarded by their heirs.

Granted, the spectrum of beliefs in the WELS is nowhere near as broad as the spectrum of beliefs in the ELCA. We are quick to demonstrate how different we are from the ELCA. But perhaps that very fact has lulled us into a false sense of security in our confessional subscription. Do we imagine that, because we reject the liberalism of the ELCA sect, we are, therefore, safe to borrow any number of practices, philosophies and methods from the Emergent or Evangelical sects?

Indeed, how could any range of confessional subscription be allowed to flourish within a church body like ours that makes so much of its confessional subscription? Could it be that we have

¹⁵ The “Crypto” (“hidden”) label comes from the 16th Century, but then it was “Crypto-Calvinism” that plagued the Lutheran Church. John Calvin himself had signed the Augsburg Confession, interpreting it in a different sense from its original meaning. And many signed it after him who followed his Calvinistic teachings, but nevertheless, wanted to hold onto the Lutheran name. So they signed the Augsburg Confession, but secretly believed and subtly taught the faith of Calvin in their “Lutheran” churches. Lutheran in name, Calvinist in fact.

The Crypto-Calvinistic controversy lasted a long time—some count it from 1560-1574, although it actually plagued the Lutheran lands for a couple of decades after that. This dishonest Lutheranism even infected the Wittenberg faculty, until they were exposed and driven out by the Elector of Saxony. The Formula of Concord (1577) gave the official Lutheran answer to the controversy, but it didn’t put an end to the dishonesty. It took the efforts of men like Aegidius Hunnius actually to go out and teach and reexamine the pastors of Saxony, and even that was only possible because of Duke Frederick William’s sympathies with Lutheran doctrine.

¹⁶ Please note: I am not equating Crypto-quetenus with “unbeliever.”

changed the role of the Book of Concord from compass to heirloom? Could it be that the surrounding culture has usurped the role of the Book of Concord as our *norma normata*? Could it be that our confession has shifted from “what the Book of Concord says” to “what the synod says”? How will we walk together in the same direction if we’re following conflicting compasses?

It is completely unacceptable for me to say these things out loud, I realize that. But I also believe it is completely unacceptable for us to go on pretending that we stand united on the Book of Concord as a synod if we only mean it mostly or partially or not at all. If you think me disloyal to the synod or to you for saying these things, then remember that I am loyal to the synod through the Book of Concord, not loyal to the Book of Concord through the synod. I have never sworn to uphold the synod, but I have sworn to uphold the Scriptures and the Book of Concord. Just like you.

Allow me to paint a picture (admittedly incomplete) of what the WELS would look like today if we got rid of the Crypto-Quatenus subscriptions, if we wanted to be Dresden Lutherans.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans...

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will teach due reverence and fear of the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We will “enter into His presence with thanksgiving and His courts with praise.” But we will not enter into His presence with popcorn and His courts with a coffee. We will teach people to approach God seriously and reverently, not casually and not with frivolity. We will teach people to worship God with holy fear, to worship God with the faith that receives the benefits offered by God in the Gospel, not to rock out with Jesus.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will teach the depravity and disease of original sin that infects us all and that truly damns all who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit. This means we will not seek to attract the diseased and dying souls of our communities with pretty lights and upbeat music like modern-day Pied Pipers, nor will we try to keep people in our churches by presenting the Church as some kind of self-improvement center, social club, adventure land or amusement park. Instead, we will present the Church as a hospital for the sick, preaching the dead toward repentance and Baptism, and preaching the revived toward repentance and the Lord’s Supper.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will teach justification by faith alone as the chief article of the Christian faith. The justification of the poor sinner before God is presented explicitly and quite exhaustively in the Lutheran Confessions (and by other 16th Century Lutheran theologians) as including four key components, without any of which the poor sinner is not, in any effective¹⁷ sense, justified before God: 1) the grace of God, 2) the merit of Christ, 3) the means of grace, and 4) faith in Christ. The Confessions do not speak of an effective¹⁸ sense in which all sinners have already been justified before God *whether they believe in Christ or not*, nor do I believe the Scriptures to teach such a thing, yet such is commonly heralded among Lutherans today as the “central teaching of the Bible.” I contend that our Dresden forefathers did not miss anything or take anything for granted in this chief article of the Christian faith. *They correctly taught the universal atonement or satisfaction made by Christ for the sins of the whole world, whether a person ever comes to believe it or not. Thus¹⁹, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation were, indeed, won for all people by Christ on the cross, through His merit alone. But no one is forgiven, justified, made alive or saved apart from the means of grace and apart from faith in Christ, which is graciously worked by the Holy Spirit. Dresden Lutherans would never think of qualifying Luther’s

¹⁷ Amended from the original paper that was presented, adding the word “effective” for the sake of clarification.

¹⁸ Amended from the original paper that was presented, adding the word “effective” for the sake of clarification.

¹⁹ Added to the original paper for the sake of clarification (beginning with the asterisk).

battle cry, “Faith alone justifies!”, with “Yes, but, only in a subjective sense, since we know that all people are already justified without faith!”

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will rely solely on the means of grace to create and strengthen this faith. We will not imagine that God needs or expects us to gather Him a crowd. We will reject any notion that personal preference or style or cultural contextualization either helps or hinders the preaching of the Gospel or the administration of the Sacraments. We will not measure a man’s ministry by how his hearers react to the Word. We will not measure a church’s health or success by the numbers. We will proclaim the Word and we will expect the blessed cross always to accompany it. And since we Dresden Lutherans have this treasure in the means of grace, we will not go begging to those who despise this treasure. We will not seek to learn ministry practices from those who reject a Word-and-Sacrament-oriented ministry. We will not seek figs from thorn bushes. We will not sit at the feet of sectarian teachers and learn from sectarian teachings, emulating their worship practices, even using their sermons as models and using their books as study guides for Bible class. On the contrary, we will oppose these fanatical sects and seek to distinguish ourselves from them and warn our members against them.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will teach that good works are necessary (though not for salvation) and follow faith. But we will not make some works better or more godly than others. We will emphasize that everything that flows from faith is good, and we will encourage good works in the context of a person’s vocation rather than in the context of congregational or missional service.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will teach that for the true unity of the Church, human traditions do not need to be the same everywhere. Nevertheless, we will observe them cheerfully and not deviate greatly from what the Church has handed down to us, because Dresden Lutherans view traditions as useful for preserving peace and unity, as fitting and orderly, and as indispensable proofs that nothing new is taught among us; that in doctrine and ceremonies we have received nothing contrary to Scripture or the Church universal. Regardless of what non-Lutherans may or may not do, Dresden Lutherans are decidedly and intentionally traditional, liturgical and catholic. Therefore, we will stop defending the confessional integrity of those who decidedly and intentionally are not.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will baptize our children, and we will condemn those who reject the Baptism of children. And if we condemn them, then this means that we will not parade their books around our churches and pawn them off as Bible study material for our people. We will oppose the sects, including the Evangelicals who deny our own children’s salvation through this means of grace, and we will not borrow their worship practices or their evangelism methods.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will teach the Real Presence of the Lord’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper, not only with words, but with actions that reverently confess God’s presence on the altar, in the pastor’s hand and in the mouths of all who receive it. We will do this all the more in the face of the sectarian culture in which we live that denies the words of Jesus regarding this precious Sacrament.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will teach that private Absolution should be retained in the churches. When our members complain that “going to confession” is Catholic, we will correct them and instruct them that Lutherans highly praise Absolution and the Power of the Keys and even call it a Sacrament, because it has Christ’s command and promise attached to it. We will urge private Confession over many of the social activities and psychological counseling methods being promoted in our day.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will not allow anyone publicly to teach or administer the Sacraments in the Church unless he is rightly called, and by that, we will understand a man who has been tested, approved, and ordained into the Office of the Holy Ministry. We will recognize ordained ministers as divinely appointed ambassadors of Christ, and we will not speak of every Christian being a minister or an ambassador of Christ by virtue of his or her baptism. We will reject even the possibility of a woman stepping into this pastoral office to administer the Lord's Supper, even to other women. We will not have lay ministers or lay preachers in our churches, nor will we set up small groups to be taught by non-pastors. We will be willing to call ordination itself a Sacrament, because God has appointed some men to carry out this ministry of the Word through which he creates and sustains faith. We will honor the ministry of the Word with every kind of praise against fanatical people who imagine that the Holy Spirit is given not through the Word, but through certain preparations of their own. Therefore, our pastors will not "dress down" to make themselves indistinguishable from their hearers, nor will we intentionally abandon the historic vestments of the Church, since they are useful for this purpose, especially in an American culture that exalts individualism and despises authority.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will retain the Mass and not abolish it or replace it with anything. We will celebrate it with the highest reverence and keep the series of lessons, vestments, prayers, etc. We will no longer view Holy Communion as a dispensable or redundant part of our weekly gatherings, because we will again understand that because we always sin, we always need the medicine. Whether or not we use the term "Mass," we will restore the Sacrament of the Altar to its central place in every Divine Service, together with the preaching of the Gospel. We will respond with the historic Church to the instituting words of Jesus, "This do in remembrance of me," by gathering around Word and Sacrament every Lord's Day, and at other times. We will teach our people the value and use of the Sacrament, and we will sharply rebuke those who withhold it from the faithful because they claim it may hinder their ministry to the faithless.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will recognize the Book of Concord as the final word on the doctrines expressed therein. And we will use this norm to judge all the doctrine and practices of those who claim to be walking together with us. And if they refuse to conform to this true norm and declaration, then we will stop claiming to walk together with them, and either exclude them from our fellowship or walk away from them in the direction of Concord.

If we want to be Dresden Lutherans, then we will stand on the truth of Scripture as confessed in the Book of Concord and, with intrepid hearts, confess it openly in the face of the world, in the shadow of the cross, to the peril of our lives and livelihood, to the endangerment of the very human institution that has bound us together for so long. And even though the human institution should crumble around us, we will speak the Truth because we believe it.

A plea for an honest answer

But talk is cheap, as they say. If we are to recognize one another as walking together in the same direction, then don't just show me the acronym behind your name. It means less and less these days. Don't tell me where you went to school or who your professors were. Show me your confession by actions that confess, and I'll do the same for you. Show me your confession by taking every one of those books and Bible studies by Rick Warren, Craig Groeschel sermons, and their ilk and throwing them in the trash, or at very least, stamping them with a seal: "Only to be used for the confrontation of error." Show me your confession by worshiping like the Church catholic rather than the Church sectarian. Show me your confession, your agreement with the Truth confessed in the Book of Concord, by living out and speaking up publicly for the Dresden Lutheranism described in the Book of Concord. Because if you insist on imitating or tolerating the practices of the

MethoBaptiCostals under the guise of Lutheranism, then you shouldn't expect me to recognize you as one who is walking together with me.

But don't do any of this for me. It's not about proving yourself to me. I am no one. I just want you to know in which direction I am walking and intend to walk, what my compass is and where it points. I'm starting at Dresden and heading due North, by the grace of God. No one has forced me to sign the Book of Concord. I have signed it because it is my confession. I have signed it because I share the beliefs of the Dresden Lutherans, their exegesis, their interpretation, their sensibilities, their convictions, their love for sinners, their love for the truth, and their love for the Lord Jesus. Their words are my words from start to finish, including these:

By God's grace, with intrepid hearts, we are willing to appear before the judgment seat of Christ with this Confession and give an account of it. We will not speak or write anything contrary to this Confession, either publicly or privately. By the strength of God's grace we intend to abide by it.²⁰

I would like to know who is and who isn't committed to walking in the same direction with me, and with whom I should walk, arm in arm with the Dresden Lutherans, not by force or for convenience' sake, but by conviction and for the sake of the truth. I want it to be the WELS with whom I walk along that road. Do we want to be Dresden Lutherans? As for me, I am WELS for now; Dresden Lutheran forever. So help me God.

Rev. Paul A. Rydecki

+ *Soli Deo Gloria* +

²⁰ Formula: SD, art. xii, par. 40