Five Types of Lutheran Confessional Theology

Five Types of Lutheran Confessional Theology:

Toward a Method of Lutheran Confessional Theology in America for the Twenty-First Century

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For
James D. Holloway
(1960-2001)
and
Timothy F. Lull
(1943-2003)
Doctors of the Church

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Chapter I: Introduction

David Truemper in an article entitled “Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology” writes that “the Lutheran confessional writings have become problematic for many if not most of the Lutheran churches.”[1] While all of the Lutheran Churches in America have clauses that bind them in terms of doctrine to the Lutheran Confessions, “it is not at all clear just how these writings are supposed to function as constitutional basis for a church’s teaching and practice.” Many Lutheran theologians and historians, including David Truemper,[2] Carl Braaten,[3] E. Clifford Nelson,[4] and Charles Arand,[5] have noted that Lutheran thinking on the Confessions is polarized into two camps—one which views the Confessions as an absolute authority and the last word on all things Lutheran, and another which sees the documents as so historically conditioned as to be hardly applicable to theology and Christian life today.[6]

The history of American Lutheranism in the twentieth century is largely the story of mergers, beginning with mergers among like-minded national and ethnic churches in the first part of the Century, and culminating with the 1988 merger of the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the American Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to form the

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[1] David G. Truemper, “Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology,” in *Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology,* eds. Niels Henrik Gregerson, Bo Holm, Ted Peters, and Peter Widmann, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 131.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Carl Braaten, “The Fundamentals of Dogmatics,” in *Christian Dogmatics,* 2 Vols., eds. Carl E Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:51.

[4] E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America 1914-1970*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 83.

[5] Charles Arand, *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity,* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 16.

[6] These two ways of looking at the Confessions are sometimes generalized into the labels conservative/liberal or modernist/fundamentalist, but these labels do not accurately describe the complexity of the theological debate in American Lutheranism. For discussion of how this can be seen the Lutheran mergers of the middle part of the twentieth century see Mark Granquist, “Lutherans in the United States, 1930-1960: Searching for the ‘Center’,” in *Re-forming the Center : American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present,* eds. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 234-251.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.[7] While the early mergers were due in a large part to shifting views of the confessional documents or the broader recognition of confessional agreement across national and ethnic boundaries, the ELCA merger is in some ways unique because while confessional subscription was an important element in the merger, it was not made explicit exactly what confessional subscription might exactly mean. The ELCA in its constitution accepts the three ecumenical creeds as "true declarations of the faith of this church," the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as "a true witness to the Gospel," and the other writings contained in the Book of Concord as "further valid interpretations of the faith of the church" but gives little instruction as to how ELCA Lutherans are to interpret these confessional documents.[8] Indeed, it appears as if this issue was left consciously unresolved, as an open theological question that need not impede Lutheran unity. The ELCA structure makes room for a rather broad range of interpretations of the Lutheran Confessions, a point which resulted in the absence of groups in the merger such as the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod for which a strict and unified interpretation of the Confessions is a key element for any potential church fellowship, let alone possible merger.

As the ELCA moves into the twenty-first century this lack of doctrinal singularity is beginning to surface in issues such as the ordination of homosexual persons, the role of bishops in the life of the church, and in the ecumenical and full communion agreements that have been reached in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It is beginning to seem as if the unity of the ELCA might again crack along confessional lines. Various groups, whose history and theology inherited from previous church bodies causes them to favor particular methods of understanding and using the confessional documents,

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[7] We should note that for some Lutherans, particularly the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the history of the twentieth century could be described as the story of resistance to such mergers on largely confessional grounds.

[8] "Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as adopted by the Constituting Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (April 30, 1987) and as amended by the First (1989), Second (1991), Third (1993), Fourth (1995), Fifth (1997), Sixth (1999), Seventh (2001), Eighth (2003), and Ninth (2005) Churchwide Assemblies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," 12 November 2005 < http://www.elca.org/secretary/constitutions/ConstitutionsBylawsandContinuingResolutions2005.pdf> (sections 2.04, 2.05, and 2.06), (accessed 1/31/06).

utilize their own approach to the confessional documents on these and other theological issues—and seek agreement among other Lutherans to do the same—but they have little recourse for dialogue with those who approach the Lutheran Confessions differently.

As heirs of a Lutheranism marked by the history of mergers and re-mergers of the twentieth century, we find in the beginning of the twenty-first century an amazingly complex and confusing theological situation. The Lutheran Confessions, far from being a unilateral set of documents with a single clear purpose, have been (and continue to be) used in various ways by various groups in various places and contexts. The goal of this thesis is to present a methodological tool, which I call "the confessional spectrum." This tool is intended to help make sense of the wide variety of ways in which Lutherans interpret and use the confessional documents. The necessity for a tool like the confessional spectrum becomes apparent when one begins to research the use of the Lutheran Confessions by Lutheran theologians in terms of theological method. Very few theologians (outside of what we will call a Type One method) consciously articulate their approach to the Confessions, and nowhere do we find "confessional method" in any systematic theology.[9] Yet, the impact of the theology of the Lutheran Confessions can be seen in the writings of Lutheran theologians. Often, this influence of the Confessions appears indirectly in theological discourse, to which the reader has recourse to determine only to whether the theology "sounds Lutheran" or is compatible with the theology of the Lutheran Confessions according to their own definition and set of standards as to what that might mean. The purpose of the confessional spectrum, therefore, is to help to give some form to the variety of ways in which Lutheran theologians approach the confessional documents and thereby to help to sort out

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[9] A notable exception to this claim can be found in Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology,* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), which puts forth key Lutheran theological principles precisely in confessional terms. Braaten articulates what he calls the "Confessional Principle" both in this work (27-42) and in Christian Dogmatics (Carl Braaten, "The Fundamentals of Dogmatics," in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 Vols., eds. Carl E Braaten and Robert W. Jenson [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 1:51. And yet, Braaten notes the unusualness this sort of approach for him: "[Principles of Lutheran Theology] is the only specifically Lutheran book I have ever attempted to write. The word 'Lutheran' has scarcely ever been used in my other publications. Nevertheless, the confessional criteria have been implicitly operative all along, as many a foe and friendly critic have detected behind the lines." (Braaten, *Principles,* xii.)

the range of confessional methods that they employ. This is done in the hopes that Lutherans, wherever they find themselves on the spectrum, might be better able to understand and dialogue with other Lutherans who might not share the same approach to the Lutheran Confessions.

While the spectrum does in fact seek to broaden what can be meant by "confessional" Lutheran theology, its intention is not thereby to imply that "anything goes" and that all approaches are therefore equally valid. On the contrary, the tool is intended to open up for dialogue the variety of approaches to the Lutheran Confessions that theologians employ precisely to aid in the determination of which method (or methods) might be best employed by Lutheran theologians in the context of the issues that face us as we enter the twenty-first century. Although many Lutheran theologians consider the way in which they approach the sixteenth century confessional documents to be the only authentic approach (or at least a far superior approach), in fact, there exists in Lutheran theology a wide range of approaches to these documents, approaches which need not be mutually exclusive, and cannot be simplistically framed in a liberal/conservative or confessional/non-confessional dichotomy. As theologians in the ELCA are no longer bound to the method inherited by their particular church body, the question shifts from the objective question: "How have the Confessions always been interpreted and used?" to a more interpretive question: "What is the best method for Lutheran theology for the twenty-first century?"

Chapter two begins by looking at the history of the use of the confessional documents, in which we will begin to see the variety of ways these documents have been used and continue to be used—and that a method which represents the single, timeless way of understanding the Confessions does not exist. Drawing on Hans Frei's concept of "types of theology," chapter three outlines a tool for categorizing these various approaches: the "confessional spectrum." Then we shall turn in chapter four to deeper analysis of one of the points on the spectrum—"Type Three"—and look to the theological writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an example of this method. The "Type Three" approach, articulated by Truemper but engaged and utilized by Bonhoeffer, calls for an active engagement of the confessional documents and sees the Confessions as both products of their context and normative for doctrine and theology. In this method, the Confessions provide a theological framework and serve as an interpretive lens for reading Scripture such that, while not predetermining what will be found in Scripture, the Confessions instead draw the theologian into the Scriptural texts and serve as a helpful guide. A theologian of "Type Three" draws on the confessional documents to inform and challenge their theology as well as viewing them as a resource for the Church to aid in preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Out of the method of "Type Three" we shall find a method for doing confessional Lutheran theology that, while clearly not the only legitimate way of doing a theology that may be called both confessional and Lutheran, has a strong potential to be an important approach in the future of Lutheran theology. Given the context of Lutheran theology in the twenty-first century, and the wide range of methods of confessional interpretation that exist side by side in the ELCA, Type Three seems to be best suited for engaging this wide range of interpretations—with the end goal being that of the confessional documents themselves: not determining what is the best way to be Lutheran, but how best to proclaim Christ in this time and place.

Chapter II: Five Centuries of Interpretations and Uses of the Confessional Documents

Lutheran Confessions: Context and Purpose

The Lutheran Confessions are a collection of documents written by Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, and a cadre of other German theologians, academics, and pastors during the sixteenth century. These confessional documents were written between 1529 and 1577 and were ultimately collected into The Book of Concord in 1580. The Lutheran Confessions consist of the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles, Nicene, Athanasian), the Small Catechism (1529), the Large Catechism (1529), the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (1531), the Smalcald Articles (1537), the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537), and the Formula of Concord (1577).[1]

These documents, created over the course of the century, were written for various circumstances and contexts. Some were meant for instruction (e.g. Luther's Small and Large Catechisms). Some developed as a response to requests (or demands) from the Roman Catholic Church and Holy Roman Emperor (e.g. the Augsburg Confession) or as refutations and explanations for objections raised by these two entities (e.g. the Apology to the A.C.). Still others were written in response to a variety of Intra-Lutheran disagreements which developed in the time after Luther's death (e.g. the Formula of Concord).

Although their individual contexts are extremely varied, the Lutheran Confessions share a common historical context: the crisis in church and society (particularly in Northern Germany) which arose in the period of the Reformation—a crisis that develops and changes throughout the sixteenth century. Though this crisis is often presented as simply a major theological breakthrough (starting with Luther's posting of the 95 Theses) that led to the forming of a new Church and

[1] The current standard English version of the Lutheran Confessions is *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). For a series of reviews of the new edition see Ernest Simmons ed., "The New Book of Concord," *Dialog,* Vol. 40 No. 1 (Spring, 2001): 64-75.

the breakdown of the Christendom of the Catholic Church, in fact, the theological developments cannot be separated from a wide variety of historical, political, economic, and social factors of this time period. Issues such as burgeoning nationalism, the growth of humanist scholarship, a growing middle class, and changes in the monarchal political climate throughout Europe (issues which we can hardly explore in any depth in this study) all contributed to the overall historical context of the period in which the Lutheran Confessions were written.[2]

This is not to say, however, that there were not major theological issues at stake. Quite the contrary, the sixteenth century was an intense period of theological reflection, of biblical scholarship, and of strong questioning and rethinking of the core of Christian belief and practice. At the same time these theological issues had social and political consequences, and it is important to realize that the Lutheran confessional documents emerged in a particular historical situation that unavoidably impacted their composition, content, and application. One cannot claim a single particular function for the confessional documents in the sixteenth century, as each of the documents served a certain purpose for which it was written, as well as subsequent uses in other contexts. Indeed, even in their composition we can trace various purposes in the confessional documents, as well as an historical shift in purpose from earlier in the century to the later periods.

Lutheran Confessions in the Sixteenth Century

The earliest documents of the Lutheran confessional writings are the Small and Large Catechisms written by Martin Luther in 1529. Their composition was in response to the lack of Christian education that Luther (and the other Reformers) observed in the various parishes in Germany during the Saxon visitations of 1528 and 1529.[3] Luther

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[2] For an in depth analysis of many of these factors precisely in relationship to the Lutheran Confessions see: Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991). The general political circumstances of the Reformation period are nicely laid out in: Lewis W. Spitz, *The Rise of Modern Europe: The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). For a short summary of the historical and political context of the confessional documents see the first two chapters of: Günther Gassmann and Scott Hendrix, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 1-32.

[3] Gassmann and Hendrix, 42.

described the state of Christian education and what passed as Christian life in the places he visited as “deplorable, wretched deprivation.”[4] Luther's theological work up until this point had been largely focused on pointing out and correcting abuses in the Roman Catholic Church, both in its local and universal expressions. However, as the "Evangelical movement" spread to various parts of Northern Europe and congregations started adopting the Reforms coming from Wittenberg, Luther came to see that the problems of Christianity were not merely issues from on high, but that there were also problems from the ground up. Through a series of visitations, Luther and the other reformers saw that there was a huge lack of religious (and secular) education among not only the laity, but even among the priests. “Dear God, what misery I beheld!” Luther wrote, “The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers…As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom.”[5] Horrified by the lack of instruction in churches and homes as to even the basic elements of Christian teaching such as the creeds and Ten Commandments, Luther wrote a pair of catechisms, which aimed to apply the principles of "Evangelical" (later "Lutheran") theology to the most basic Christian teachings.

The Small Catechism was intended to be learned (indeed memorized) by children, servants, and all those who find themselves in need of Christian instruction. The Large Catechism was written for the instruction of those who were to provide this education. These straightforward explanations of Christian faith became extremely popular across the emerging Evangelical territories and quickly came to be seen as normative for teaching. Their influence on the emerging Evangelical churches was second only to the Augsburg Confession.[6] A large part of their strength was in distilling the theological themes and emphases of the Reformation into a format that could be easily taught and learned by children as well as adults. Their intent was clearly pedagogical and pastoral: to insure that the essentials of Christian teaching were being passed on to future generations.

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[4] “Small Catechism,” *Book of Concord*, 347.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Gassmann and Hendrix, 18.

While the earliest writings had a largely pedagogical purpose for instruction of the faithful, the next document written, the Augsburg Confession, was composed for a different audience and with a different intent. The Augsburg Confession was written by Philipp Melanchthon (working closely with Luther) in response to a request from Emperor Charles V to the Reformers to defend their teaching. The Emperor had become suspicious of what was being taught and preached in the churches of Germany, and called the Wittenberg theologians to an imperial Diet in Augsburg in order to inspect their teachings, and where error was found, to call for corrections and a return to the official Roman Catholic doctrine and practice.[7] Luther himself was not able to appear in Augsburg because he had been excommunicated by the pope and was under imperial ban, and so Melanchthon became the chief spokesman for the Evangelical party.

At this point in history, the Reformers did not see their teachings as an innovation or as falling outside of the apostolic faith or (when certain errors were corrected) outside of orthodoxy of Christian doctrine as held by the Roman Catholic Church (of which they were a part).[8] Rather their purpose was to point out the abuses and errors that had found their way into the Roman Catholic system. Their aim was not schism, but reform, and to present the reasons why the Evangelical princes had disobeyed the Edict of Worms.[9] For this reason, the Augsburg Confession was designed as a document that presented the teachings of the Evangelical movement while taking pains to show the continuity of its teaching with the early church, as well as the way in which these corrections of abuses would bring the whole Catholic Church again into continuity with the Scriptures and the tradition of the church. And yet, even as they criticized the practices and theology of the Pope and the Roman Church, they clearly did not want to separate or distance themselves from the "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church," but instead saw themselves and the Augsburg Confession as a movement for reform within the Roman Catholic Church. This position was forced by the widespread publication of a document in the city of Augsburg in the days immediately preceding the presentation of the Augsburg Confession. This document, entitled “The Four Hundred Four Articles” was written by one of Luther’s main opponents, John Eck, and accused the

[7] “Editors Introduction to the Augsburg Confession,” *Book of Concord*, 27.
[8] Ibid., 28.
[9] Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 28.

Evangelical party of all manner of heresies. Though Eck's document purported to set forth what the Evangelical reformers were actually teaching, the theologians and princes who came to Augsburg were much offended by Eck's misrepresentation of their teaching and were thereby forced to go "beyond the explanation of their measures of reform that they had originally planned to present to the emperor."[10] The Augsburg Confession, as presented in light of Eck's attack, took pains to present the teachings of the Reformers in such a way that it could be seen that they were in fact orthodox: "Wherefore, in most humble obedience to Your Imperial Majesty, we offer and present a confession of our pastors' and preachers' teachings as well as of our faith, setting forth on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture what and in what manner they preach, teach, believe, and give instruction in our lands, principalities, dominions, cities, and territories."[11]

For the Reformers, the Augsburg Confession was originally a theological treatise presented to debate theological disagreements. It soon became clear, however, that the situation was more complicated than a mere theological debate. The open criticism of the Pope and the policies of the Roman Church was not taken lightly. The Roman party at Augsburg presented a Confutation of the Augsburg Confession, which was intended to quiet the criticisms of the Reformers and bring them back into the Roman fold. However, the Roman party would not provide the Reformers with a copy of this Confutation unless the Evangelical party agreed not to respond, and intended to limit further debate so that the situation might be therefore resolved.[12] The German Reformers were to submit to the authority of the Church and the case was to be closed.

However, Melanchthon prepared for the Evangelical camp an Apology (meaning explanation or defense) to the Augsburg Confession, responding to the Roman Confutation (on the basis of the notes which they took while it was being read), and attempting to explain theologically the position of the Reformers, which they felt the Roman party had misunderstood and/or misrepresented. Melanchthon's purpose yet again was to address the concerns raised

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[10] " Introduction" to "John Eck's Four Hundred Four Articles for the Imperial Diet at Augsburg," Robert Rosin, trans., in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 31.
[11] "Preface" to "Augsburg Confession," *Book of Concord,* 32.
[12] "Editors' Introduction to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession," *Book of Concord*, 107.

by the Roman Confutation, to clarify the issues at hand, and again to show that the Reformers were not heretical, but that their evangelical "preaching and teaching" were indeed catholic and apostolic. In the words of the editors of the current edition of the Book of Concord it was “intended, like its predecessors, more as public defense than private polemic.”[13]

By the time of the publication of the next two documents, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (both published in 1537) the political situation had drastically changed, to which the tone and approach of these two documents testify. Already in 1531, following the lack of Imperial acceptance of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology at the Diet of Augsburg, the Evangelical theologians and princes had begun to turn from the goal of reconciliation under the Roman Catholic Church and to organize as their own party. In no small part this change occurred because the theologians of the Reformation saw the rejection of the Augsburg Confession as being a much more political decision, rather than theological one, on the part of the imperial authorities. Agreeing to the theological changes became not only a theological but also a political power struggle in which the Pope and the Roman Authorities were unwilling to allow the theologians of the German Princes to gain ground. Indeed, Emperor Charles V did have political motivations for his actions, though they were not what the Evangelical party thought they were. It was Charles’ willingness to hear the Evangelical party’s side that had been politically motivated: “With the Turks threatening the Empire and the French in League with them, Charles V felt the need to negotiate.”[14] His patience at Augsburg was a brief period of clemency from an emperor who otherwise “never wavered in his hostility to the heretics and considered it his holy duty to win them over, or force them to conform, or destroy them.”[15]

The failure of reconciliation at Augsburg led the Evangelical theologians and princes to form the Smalcald League in 1531. Though Luther had already by this time written much of what would become the Smalcald Articles, the group that met in Smalcald in 1531 used the Augsburg Confession and its Apology as the basis for their agreements, thus forming the first confessional documents of what

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[13] Ibid., 108.
[14] Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation*, 114.
[15] Ibid., 115.

would become the Evangelical Lutheran church.[16] The Smalcald League was clearly not only (or even primarily) a theological association, because a theological split with Rome would have political consequence (as the resulting Smalcald Wars give testimony). Finding little support for Evangelical teachings from the Roman theological and political authorities, German princes sought a network for support in the persecutions which they expected as a result of confessing the teachings of the Augsburg Confession even though they had been rejected by the Roman Authorities.[17]

In 1537 the Evangelical party published Luther's Smalcald Articles as well as Melanchthon's Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. In both of these documents the tone has changed from seeking reconciliation with Roman teaching, to presenting those elements which now are seen as necessitating a break from Rome. For example, the Augsburg Confession wrote of the Evangelical view of the Lord's Supper: "they teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord's Supper. They disapprove of those who teach otherwise."[18] The Smalcald Articles take a much different (and much more polemical) starting place on this issue: "The Mass under the papacy has to be the greatest and most terrible abomination."[19] Indeed, the Smalcald Articles were prepared for a much different context: presentation at a council called by Pope Paul III that was supposed to occur in 1537 in Mantua with the full expectation that the Evangelical teaching which had not been received in Augsburg would be even more harshly judged. As Luther wrote in the Preface to the Smalcald articles: "We on our side had to prepare for the eventuality that, whether summoned to the council or not, we would be condemned."[20] In fact, the council did not meet until 1545 in Trent when the Evangelical theology was indeed condemned.

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[16] "Editors Introduction to the Smalcald Articles," *Book of Concord,* 296.

[17] Spitz., 117. While one might imagine that the theologians would be in support of such a league, initially they were apprehensive. Spitz notes that "the lawyers had to overcome the reluctance of the theologians to sanction armed resistance to the emperor with the theory that the authority of the territorial princedoms had been sanctioned by God and that the emperor's authority was derived from them through the electors." (Spitz, 117)

[18] "Augsburg Confession" (Latin Text), *Book of Concord*, 45.

[19] "Smalcald Articles," *Book of Concord*, 301.

[20] Martin Luther, "The Preface of Doctor Martin Luther," "Smalcald Articles," *Book of Concord,* 297.

Anticipating being cut off from the Roman side, the Evangelical theologians presented those elements which were deemed essential and thereby provided the rationale for their unwillingness to submit to the authority of the Pope and Roman authorities. Luther continued: "I was therefore instructed to compose and assemble articles of our teaching in case it came to negotiations about what and how far we would or could compromise with the papists, and in which things we definitely intended to persist and remain firm."[21] Though separating themselves from the positions of the Roman Church, the Evangelical theologians make clear in these documents that they are not intending to break from the historical Christian Church, but rather seek to be in true continuity with the Apostolic faith. In their view, it is the Roman Church instead that has deviated from the teachings of the Church, a situation that requires the act of confession which the Evangelical churches now united in the Smalcald league have taken up.

Though the documents written by the Evangelical theologians had been intended to show the catholicity and orthodoxy of their teaching in hopes of reconciliation with Rome, in the period following that led up to and followed the Smalcald Wars they began to take on a different use. The teachings of the Reformers, though officially rejected, had been allowed to continue in Germany largely because the Emperor was too entangled in political issues elsewhere to deal with them directly. The Emperor, however, had not intended this arrangement to be a permanent one. He allowed the existence of the Evangelical "Churches of the Augsburg Confession" in order to attend first to the other more pressing concerns of the more radical groups, as well as other pressing concerns in the Empire. By 1546, however, the Emperor had stabilized threats from "Spanish nobles, French kings, Turkish troops and other enemies" to a such a degree that he was able to commence with his original plan of bringing the Evangelical Churches of Northern Europe back into the Roman fold.[22] The Evangelical party, however, had spent the previous fifteen years of relative autonomy building up their own ecclesial and theological rule free of Pope or Emperor. Thus began the "age of confessionalism"[23] in which the Evangelical party which once rallied around the Augsburg Confession in Smalcald for their own defense,

[21] Ibid.
[22] Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 63.
[23] Ibid.

now found themselves a political and theological entity in their own right.

As the grip of the Roman church began to loosen on the territories of Northern Europe, the Emperor and Pope realized that the problems of the "conservative" Evangelical reforms paled in comparison to those brought on the by the Calvinist and Zwinglian reforms in Switzerland, and by the more radical and Anabaptist groups that were beginning to spread through the territory. The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 was an attempt to limit the expansion of new breakaway sects from the Roman Catholic Church (and Holy Roman Empire), for it granted political (and thereby theological) autonomy only to those regions which confessed either the faith of the Roman Catholic Church, or the Evangelical faith as set forth in the Augsburg Confession.[24] This policy, which would later be described as "*cuius regio, eius religio*" (the religion of the ruler is the religion of the territory), was intended to stop the tide of dissention, but inadvertently legitimized the teachings of the Evangelical theologians to certain extent. The only religions that were to be tolerated in the Empire were Catholicism and Lutheranism. Calvinism, Anabaptism, and groups of more "radical" ilk were not allowed and in some places were openly persecuted. In this agreement the Roman church "accepted the religious schism and created the conditions for the future of Lutheranism."[25] The Augsburg Confession quickly became a confessional document to which subscription had great political consequences.

The confession of their theological teachings once intended as a defense against claims of heterodoxy in relation to the Catholic Church, now became the document that defined them and gave them legal status.[26] Similarly, in Geneva and elsewhere, groups breaking away from Rome were writing their own confessions. The confessions which had been "bridges" between the Evangelical churches and Rome, became instead "walls" that separated the Evangelical churches from the Roman Church, and served to differentiate the Evangelical churches from the other emerging Protestant groups. The act of confessing, which had led to the documents, became less important than the documents themselves. Rather than being seen as a tool for discussion of points of concern in

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[24] Gassmann and Hendrix, 3.
[25] Eric W. Gritch, *A History of Lutheranism,* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 67.
[26] Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 38.

doctrine, the documents became the definition of the doctrine of the various groups and a regulating factor as to what was allowed to be taught and preached in Lutheran congregations.[27] The Evangelical Reform, once an intentional movement for reform within the Catholic Church, was now its own entity, and the Augsburg Confession was its constitution.[28]

As occurs with many revolutions, life under the new regime was not without its own problems. The unity in the face of the common Roman foe had begun to weaken. New problems of theology and ecclesial life began to crop up, problems that were not addressed in the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon, ever the conciliatory spirit, began to seek reconciliation not with Rome, but with the Churches of the emerging Reformed Confession, as would elector Frederick III of the Palitinate in 1561.[29] Internal conflicts began to spring up among the Evangelical pastors and theologians, and there were battles over who was presenting the true Evangelical theology.

The entire situation had been made even more complicated with the death of Luther in 1546. Until that point, Luther had served as the chief secondary authority for interpreting the theology of the Evangelical movement. For example, he was brought back from the Wartburg castle to mediate (indeed, to adjudicate) the iconoclastic controversy brought on by Karlstadt and his followers.[30] The Augsburg Confession had been to that point largely interpreted according to Luther's own understanding and guidance, as he was the main "holder" of the Evangelical vision.[31] Upon his death, however, no suitable authoritative replacement was found, and the groups that had begun to develop within the Evangelical camp started to come to the surface. Many had hoped that Philipp Melanchthon would succeed Luther as the chief authority in the Evangelical Church, and many in fact regarded him as such. There were, however, also many who saw Melanchthon as falling away from the original intentions of the Reformation, particularly in his willingness to seek reconciliation

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[27] Ibid., 39.

[28] The concept of the Confessions as analogous to (the U.S) constitution is drawn from L. DeAne Lagerquist, *The Lutherans*, (Westport, Connecticut: Prager, 1999), 3.

[29] Gassmann and Hendrix, 28.

[30] Ibid., 14.

[31] Kolb, *Confessing the Faith*, 40.

with the Reformed churches.[32] This group, the "Gnesio-Lutherans" (true-Lutherans) saw themselves as more loyal to the original teachings of Luther in contrast to the "Philippists" (followers of Philipp Melanchthon) who, they thought, had conceded too much to the Reformed teachings for the sake of unity.[33] This internal battle, no less political than previous conflicts, raged on in Germany, threatening to break down the unity of the Evangelical churches and territories, and the various sides found no authority with which to resolve the disputes. Appealing to the authority of the Augsburg Confession, or even to the Bible itself, did not bring resolution, as each of the various parties found support for their positions in these documents.

It became clear that an authority was needed, not just for the definition of the Evangelical teaching against the Catholic, Reformed, and other teachings, but as an authority within the Evangelical Church itself. It was in this context of internal dispute and the need for inter-Lutheran reconciliation that the Formula of Concord was written. The Formula was intentionally conceived as an interpretation and explanation of the Augsburg Confession, and sought to bring the Evangelical theology to bear on the questions of the day. The Formula was to become the final document in the Book of Concord, a comprehensive collection of the confessional documents of the Evangelical Lutheran church. This collection became the definitive authority (in Germany at least) for teaching and preaching, and came to define the boundaries for Evangelical Lutheran identity—to groups both inside and outside the Evangelical church.[34] The unity achieved in the publication of the Book of Concord, was far from absolute, but was widespread enough that Lutheranism (defined as those churches that subscribed to the Augsburg Confession) was to emerge as one of

[32] The prime example being Melanchthon’s continued modification of the Augsburg Confession, of which the 1540 version (known as the Variata) in particular was seen as presenting a view of the sacraments that went too far towards the teachings of Zwingli for many of the Lutherans. The text of the Variata (in Latin) can be found in Philipp Melanchthon, *Corpus Reformatorum*, Vol. 26, Carolus Gottlieb Bretschneider, ed. (Brunsvigae: C.A. Schwetschke, 1858), 335-413.

[33] Gritch, 80.

[34] Gassmann and Hendrix, 31. Not insignificantly, there were several Lutheran princes and territories that were unwilling to subscribe to the Formula of Concord. Most notably King Frederick II of Denmark (who is said to have thrown the Book of Concord presented to him into the fire), the dukes of Pomerania, and the German territory of Wolfenbüttel. (Gassmann and Hendrix, 31)

the four Confessions (with Roman Catholicism, Calvinism, and Anglicanism) that would be major players in the history of Europe in the next centuries.[35] The purpose of the Book of Concord (and the Formula as well) was "to serve as an authentic interpretation of the Augsburg Confession and to be thus a summary of evangelical teaching that is a true explication of Holy Scripture and that is in continuity with the faith of the church through the ages."[36] It also had the effect of defining the Evangelical church. Whereas the Evangelical church had to that point been a rather loose collection of churches that refused to submit to the authority of Rome and that accepted the Augsburg Confession, Evangelical Lutheran identity from 1580 onward would be tied to subscription to the Book of Concord.

The Use(es) of the Confessional Documents in the Sixteenth Century

Through this historical sketch we have seen the emergence of the confessional documents of the Evangelical Lutheran church in relation to their political and ecclesial contexts. We have seen that it is largely impossible to lump together into a single purpose the way in which the confessional documents were understood even in their original contexts. However, those who use the confessional documents still often try to find a single unified purpose for the documents. The Augsburg Confession is a prime example of this. Though the document was originally a summary of current teachings to be presented to the Roman Catholic imperial authorities, in subsequent decades it also became a document for defining subscription to the Smalcaldic League, and eventually also the touchstone for assessing the orthodoxy of teaching and preaching. Thus the Augsburg Confession, which started as a *descriptive* account of what was being taught and preached in German churches gradually became a *prescriptive* document outlining what could and could not be preached and taught.[37]

[35] Ibid., 32.
[36] Ibid., 37.
[37] Of course the Augsburg Confession contains many prescriptive elements, particularly in citing oppositions to heresies old and new, and was originally viewed as presenting the orthodox *Christian* theology that is being taught and preached.

The Lutheran Confessions after 1580

The composition of the Formula of Concord came at the beginning of the movement towards Lutheran Orthodoxy and the quest for pure doctrine that would dominate the next several centuries.[38] Reading the Formula of Concord one gets the sense that already the disagreements of the Evangelical movement have shifted from without to within. The debate present in the Formula and that would continue for the next several centuries was this: who was to be considered the true heir to the Reformation of the Evangelical movement? A key element in this debate had to do with what was to be the authoritative interpretation of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon's subsequent publication of a revision of the Augsburg Confession (the *Variata*) in 1540 that would be more apt for negotiations with the Reformed churches did not aid in this struggle. In addition, following Luther's death a whole range of theological issues embroiled the Lutherans in Germany.[39] The next several centuries would find them caught up in these arguments, and the Book of Concord (which confessed only the original *unaltered* Augsburg Confession) would be a major player in the dominance of Lutheran Orthodoxy.

During the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy, the Confessions played a much different role than they did in their original contexts. We have already noted the shift in the understanding of the Confessions as primarily descriptive to prescriptive, and in the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy this prescriptive use was taken to the extreme. The Confessions came to be seen as the definitive collection of doctrinal statements, a compendium of what was to be believed. "Lutheran Orthodox theologians tried to defend the doctrinal consensus achieved in the Formula of Concord of 1577."[40] Adherence to the teachings as presented in the Book of Concord became definitive for what it meant to be a true Lutheran. As other Christian teachings were refuted (Catholic and Reformed in particular) adherence to the Book of

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Only later does it come to be seen as presenting criteria for the orthodox *Lutheran* teaching that may be taught and preached.

[38] Gritch, 121.

[39] Gassmann lists six major controversies of this period: "The Antinomian Controversy," "The Adiaphorist Controversy," "The Majoristic Controversy," "The Osiandrian Controversy," "The Crypto-Calvinistic Controversy," "The Synergistic Controversy." (Gassmann and Hendrix, 44-46)

[40] Gritch, 121.

Concord also came to be seen as what it meant to be a true Christian. To believe or teach something outside of the doctrines in the Book of Concord meant being outside of the Lutheran fold, and thereby outside of the true Christian church.

This use of the confessional documents was reinforced by the emerging philosophical influence of the Enlightenment. As the authority of the Roman Catholic Church began to wane in certain areas, and the more "objective" disciplines of science and philosophy began to gain ground, the call came more and more for objective "Truth." Lutheran Orthodoxy was glad to offer the doctrines of the Lutheran faith as presented in the Book of Concord as precisely this sort of objective "Truth" and Pietism was just as glad to reject rationalistic claims on faith.[41] Because of this, the role of the Lutheran confessional documents as presenting the content of faith to be believed was further solidified. Ironically, the movement which began as a reaction to the overly scholastic theology of the Roman Catholic Church developed its own form of scholasticism. Pietism and other movements would emerge to challenge this perspective, but always in contrast to the views of Lutheran Orthodoxy, which continued to have influence despite these other movements.

Thus far, we have looked almost exclusively at the use of the Lutheran confessional documents in Germany. Indeed, this is where the confessional documents have had the most impact. The Scandinavian countries, which also quickly joined the Evangelical movement, have had a slightly different experience with the confessional documents, largely turning their focus to the catechisms and the Augsburg Confession with less interest in the other documents.[42] There are also different experiences with the confessional documents within Germany itself, as the Evangelical movement remained a minority movement in the largely Catholic south of Germany. Further historical complications exist in the movement of the Evangelical church in Prussia into the Union Church which united German Protestants of both "Confessions," Evangelical

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[41] Gritch notes that in the face of the Enlightenment "the majority of Lutherans in Germany and Scandinavia remained loyal to the church by adhering either to Orthodox pure doctrine or by propagating the Pietist experience of personal rebirth." (Gritch, 177)

[42] An excellent history of the Scandinavian encounter with the Lutheran Confessions can be found in Trygve R. Skarsten, "The Reception of the Augsburg Confession in Scandinavia," *Sixteenth Century Journal,* Vol. XI No. 3 (1980): 183-198.

and Reformed. As the range of contexts and time frame grows, the complexity of the range of uses and understandings of the confessional documents grows with it. We shall, however, leave these European concerns to focus on the uses and understandings of the confessional documents as they arrive on American shores (although the remnants of their European past will undoubtedly crop up from time to time).

<u>The Lutheran Confessions come to America</u>

Even more complicated is the situation in America, with Lutheran immigrants coming from various parts of Europe at different times, each bringing with them the understanding of the Confessions of their location and time. The way in which these communities adapted to life in America also played a role in the ways in which they used the Confessions. So complex is this constellation of interpretations, uses, and roles that there exist few sources that explicate the full range of ways in which the Confessions have functioned across the various American contexts. Historical accounts of Lutheranism in the United States do include discussion of the confessional documents and how they are understood and used,[43] and indeed the Confessions have figured greatly in many of the conflicts and in the defining period of Lutheranism in America. The lack of comprehensive analysis of the range of confessional understandings may be due in part to the fact that until the end of the twentieth century, Lutheran church bodies in America each held largely to one method (or a small range of similar methods) of confessional interpretation . It was therefore unlikely that conflicting understandings and uses of the Confessions would exist (at least officially) within the same church body and so it was quite easy to present confessional understandings in terms of “our” (correct) interpretation and “their” (incorrect) interpretation.

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[43] For example, Gritch briefly mentions the confessional conflicts of the nineteenth century in America in Chapter 6 of *A History of Lutheranism*, 179-216 and twentieth century issues of confessional interpretation in a section entitled “Confession and Culture.” (250-256) Lagerquist’s *The Lutherans* mentions confessional issues along side other historical, theological, and political factors of the various periods. Interestingly, though Lutherans do not feature prominently in Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: 2002), the eight pages he devotes to them (which he entitles “Lutheran Confessionalism”) outlines the history of American Lutheranism in terms of the variety of ways the Confessions have been interpreted, which he describes as “a story with several remarkable twists.” (238-245)

A notable exception in this lack of scholarship is a book written by Charles P. Arand entitled *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity.*[44] Arand traces the reception, interpretation, and use of the Lutheran confessional documents by Lutherans in America from the eighteenth through the twentieth century by identifying eight understandings of the confessional documents and their functions. He does this historically, from the earliest Lutherans in this country, through various influxes of European Lutherans, and up to the ecumenical theology of the end of the twentieth century. Arand shows how the understandings of the Lutheran Confessions have not remained static even within their own "camps" but have changed and adapted to historical contexts.

Within this historical timeline, Arand points out two "poles" of interpretation which stand in tension with one another throughout the history of the Confessions in America. On one side is the pole of history: "On the one hand the Confessions are rooted in the history of a particular community and as such possess an unmistakably historical character. As historical documents, specific situations and occasions in the life of the church called forth their formulation."[45] The other is the pole of the Bible: "On the other hand, the Confessions claim to be grounded in and congruent with the Scriptures…Their biblical character and their claim to restate in a summary fashion the message and content of scripture gives them their normative value. To the extent that the Confessions express the truths of Scripture, they claim value and validity for all time."[46] These two "poles" have also been noted by Carl Braaten who terms them the "pole of contemporaneity" and the "pole of continuity."[47] Recognition of this is important for understanding the way in which the Confessions are used and understood in Lutheranism in America because, as Arand states, it is evident "that if Lutherans approach their common confessional heritage from two different starting points, that is from two diametrically opposite views of the nature of confessions, they may well arrive at two diverging views on the meaning of

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[44] Charles P. Arand, *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995).
[45] Ibid., 14.
[46] Ibid., 15.
[47] Carl Braaten, "The Confessional Principle," in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols., eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:51. Qtd in Arand, 16.

subscription and confessional loyalty"—which is exactly what Arand sees as happening in the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries in America.[48]

Arand also notes the lack of in depth scholarship into this phenomenon, noting that the few articles that deal with the variety of approaches to the Confessions "neither fully account for the reason that Lutherans have adopted different attitudes toward their confessional writings nor for the theological and ecclesial implications of those attitudes."[49] Arand's book is an attempt to fill that scholarly gap, and indeed his analysis sheds great light on the wide variety of understandings of the Confessions that continued to exist as the twentieth century drew to a close. His treatment is not exhaustive of all the approaches to the Confessions, nor could it be, but focuses "on representative figures who wrote extensively on the Confessions and developed what might be best called an interpretive model or paradigm with which to consider the meaning and significance of the Confessions within the church."[50] We shall now turn to the history of confessional interpretation as Arand presents it and examine each of his categories in order to illustrate the variety of confessional understandings, interpretations, and applications that have been (and continue to be) operative in the Lutheran Church in the United States.[51]

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[48] Arand, 17.

[49] Ibid., 18.

[50] Ibid., 20. Though Arand notes he has not treated the confessional understanding of the Missouri Synod during the twentieth century, a more notable absence is the confessional understandings of Scandinavian Lutherans, which feature only tangentially in his analysis of Lutherans of mostly German heritage. Nevertheless, those familiar with the ways in which Scandinavian Lutherans have interpreted the Confessions can undoubtedly find connections to the approaches Arand does present, an illustration perhaps that his categories, while historical, are useful in analysis not just in their particular historical context, but as types for analysis in other contexts.

[51] In the following section we will rely heavily on Arand's scholarship in presenting these various historical trends in confessional understanding and application. One could find ample support for Arand's history in the standard historical and theological accounts of Lutheranism (which he also cites frequently) (Such as Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century,_* [New Haven: Yale, 1972]., Theodore Tappert, ed. *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America, 1840-1880* [New York: Oxford, 1972], E. Clifford Nelson, ed. *The Lutherans in North America_*, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975],John Tietjen, *Which Way to Lutheran Unity? A History of Efforts to Unite Lutherans in America* [St Louis: Concordia, 1966]., Eric Gritch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement*

Methods of Confessional Interpretation in the Seventeenth—Twentieth Centuries in America

1) "Confessions as Protestant Consensus"[52]

Though the earliest Lutheran immigrants to the United States brought with them a rather strong tie to their confessional heritage, the context of the United States in the late eighteenth century made maintaining these connections difficult. Both for the Swedes who settled in Delaware in 1638 and for the earliest German Lutheran settlers in Pennsylvania led by Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, national identity quickly began to fade in the New World as the immigrants adapted to the American contexts and especially as they took up the English language.[53] As these congregations and synods became more and more Americanized they "moved steadily towards a more generic 'Protestantism,' which had become equated with an 'American' civil religion."[54] These "American Lutherans" were also impacted by "the rationalistic impulses of the day with its further indifference toward doctrine"[55] leading to suspicion of the "authority" of the confessional documents, and a minimizing of their importance in theology and the life of the church.

Samuel Schmucker, leader of the General Synod (which held the view of the confessions as Protestant consensus) argued that it was "adherence to Lutheran principles, not adherence to Lutheran symbols, that makes one Lutheran,"[56] by which he meant "those doctrines that were held in common by most Protestant denominations."[57] Schmucker's purpose was not to "meld Lutherans into one of the churches he had come to know through his fellow

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and Its Confessional Writings [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976].) as well as the wide variety of primary and secondary sources he draws upon. As Arand's analysis is intended in this thesis to provide historical background to the fact that a range of approaches to the Lutheran Confessions have existed in American Lutheran history we shall let it stand largely on its own rather than seek to back up all of his conclusions with secondary evidence. We will, however, note the original source of quotations when applicable.

52 The headings of this section are the chapter titles in *Testing the Boundaries.*

53 Lagerquist, 29.

54 Arand, 25.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 28.

57 Ibid., 29.

students and teachers at Princeton."[58] Rather, he was after a "distinctive Lutheranism," by which he meant a Lutheranism with a distinctly American Protestant flavor.[59] The value of the confessional documents, then, was the way in which they outlined the fundamental teachings of Protestantism[60] and could function in promoting Protestant unity. Of the confessional documents, it was in fact only the Augsburg Confession that was seen as particularly suited for this task, and even then only in so far as it held to these fundamentals. When it did not, it could be edited or portions rejected (along with the other confessional documents) so as to better represent "protestant consensus."[61] This view led to an edited version of the Augsburg Confession, called the "Definite Synodical Platform,"[62] and made confessional subscription a matter of personal freedom of conscience.[63] At the end of the eighteenth century no rite of ordination in America included any reference to the Confessions and the General Synod when it was founded in 1820 "did not include a confessional basis in its constituting documents" following the lead of the Pennsylvania Ministerium which, in 1792, "quietly dropped all references to the Lutheran Confessions from its constitution."[64] Arand makes clear, however, that "it cannot be truthfully said that Schmucker or any of the leaders of the General Council during the nineteenth century desired to abandon the Confessions and heritage of the Lutheran Church. They wanted to retain their Lutheran identity. However, they sought to modify and improve their Lutheranism in order to adapt it to the American environment."[65]

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[58] Lagerquist, 72.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Schmucker limited these "fundamentals" to "the doctrines of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the depravity of the human race, the atonement, justification by faith, good works, the ministerial office, the means of grace, and the future judgment." (Arand, 29. Drawn from Samuel Simon Schmucker, "Portraiture of Lutheranism," *The American Lutheran Church, Historically, Doctrinally, and Practically Delineated in Several Occasional Discourses* (Philadelphia: E.W. Miller, Ranstead Place, 1852), 51, 52.)
[61] Arand, 31.
[62] *Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinarian, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods; Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod.* (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855). This document was published anonymously but was clearly tied to Schmucker.
[63] Arand, 34.
[64] Ibid., 25.
[65] Ibid., 52.

2) “Confessions as Catechesis and Teaching”

While it appeared as if the Lutherans in America were well on their way to distancing themselves from the Confessions, at the same time a “confessional awakening”[66] was taking place in Germany which “signaled a return to the historic doctrines of the church as its source of vitality.”[67] New waves of immigrants from Europe as well as renewed study of the sixteenth century documents (among other factors) began to bring the seeming settled place of the Lutheran Confessions in the American Church back to the forefront. Charles Porterfield Krauth, who studied under Schmucker at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, later came to question the “American Lutheranism” in which he had been instructed. As a “result of Krauth’s growing conviction of the necessity for the Lutheran Church to build upon its confessional foundation,” the Pennsylvania Ministerium broke with the General Synod in 1865 to form the General Council in 1866.[68]

Krauth’s break with the “theologically lax climate of the General Synod”[69] did not lead to a doctrinal or theological pendulum swing in the other direction. Instead, with a great deal of discussion as to what role the Confessions were to play in the American Church,[70] the General Council sought to reclaim the confessional documents in their entirety (with a particular emphasis on their pastoral value for Christian life)[71] and to “adopt and adapt [the] Lutheran confessional heritage to America without eviscerating it of its content and distinctiveness.”[72] They went after this renewal by translating the Confessions into English so that they could be read by a wider audience of clergy and lay people and also by the thorough study of the history of the confessional documents.[73] The renewed study of the original texts served to correct some historical misconceptions that had been used to dismiss the documents.[74] They called for a renewed interpretation and application of the confessional documents as well,

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[66] Gritch, 179.
[67] Arand, 53.
[68] Ibid., 55.
[69] Ibid., 57.
[70] Gritch, 192.
[71] Arand., 64.
[72] Ibid., 86.
[73] Lagerquist, 74.
[74] Arand, 67-79.

following the "confessional principle," a concept which Krauth was the first to introduce. This "confessional principle" views the documents not as prescriptive truth claims nor as doctrines to be accepted or rejected, but as "the external voice of faith's apprehension of Scripture."[75] The faith was primary, and one must share "the faith of the Confessions before sharing the confession of the faith"[76] meaning that the confessional documents were intended to be an expression of Christian faith rather than determinative of what is to be believed. With this understanding of the Lutheran Confessions, the confessional documents find value in catechesis and teaching because they present the particularity of Lutheran (rather than general Protestant) theology with the purpose of engendering that faith anew, and so "become the medium of instruction, or education, of one generation to the next, in their preservation, transmission and communication through all future ages of the one true faith of the Church."[77] The documents find their true value not as static "confessions" but when they lead the new generation to active "confessions" of faith.

<u>3) "Confessions as Doctrinal Norms"</u>

While Krauth and the General Council sought a middle position to what they saw as the extreme of the General Synod, a stronger reaction against the American Lutherans' view of the Confessions was to come from C.F.W. Walther and the Missouri Synod. Walther's understanding of the Confessions developed not only in response to the American situation, but also from his native Germany where he encountered "doctrinal indifference, unionism, and rationalism" and turned to the Confessions in an attempt to address these problems he saw in the Church.[78] The Enlightenment had spread across Germany and its emphasis on human reason as "the final arbiter…in all areas of life,"[79] including faith, led to a downplaying of the importance of doctrine among all of the Christian "Confessions." On account of this, the Lutheran Confessions, which

[75] Ibid., 58.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Theodore Emanuel Schmauk, *The Confessional Principle and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as Embodying the Evangelical Confession of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911), 71. Qtd. in Arand, 59.
[78] Arand, 88.
[79] Ibid.

had become valued particularly on account of their doctrinal content, lost their place of prominence in the German Lutheran Church. The Prussian Union in 1817 of Reformed and Lutheran churches in Germany was the last straw for Walther and many other Germans who fled Germany on this account (and under persecution for resisting the union) and who would eventually form the Missouri Synod.[80] That the German Lutherans would even consider joining with Reformed Christians was evidence to Walther and the others that the doctrines of the Lutheran Church had been left behind. Walther saw doctrinal purity as the key issue in the life of the Church, and was not willing to limit it to the "fundamental" doctrines or to limit which of the confessional documents were essential.[81]

Walther considered the entirety of the Lutheran Confessions binding "because in them the church has provided for its people an exposition of Scripture."[82] He wrote on the role and purpose of the Confessions (which he refers to as "the symbolical writings") and their relationship to the Bible: "The Bible is, so to say, God's confession to us. The symbolical writings are our confession to God…The Bible is the revealed Word of God itself, but the symbolical writings are the correct understanding of the Word of God as He has given it to the church."[83] For Walther, the Confessions are the Church's confession of the truth of Scripture (that is to say, the objective truth claims the Scripture reveals), and so to depart from the confessional documents is to depart from that biblical truth.

This departure from pure doctrine was, in Walther's opinion, what led to the disintegration of the Lutheran Church in the sixteenth century and was also responsible for the problems of the German church of his day.[84] Arand notes, however, that while they sought "to leave behind them the sad state of religion in Germany" by coming to America "Walther and the Saxons found themselves confronting the very things which they had hoped to escape."[85] The General Council's response to the General Synod did not go far enough in bringing about true doctrine among Lutherans in America as far as the

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[80] Lagerquist, 91.
[81] Arand., 96.
[82] Ibid.
[83] C.F.W. Walther, "Warum sollen wir an den Bekenntnisschriften unserer evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche auch noch jetztunerschütterlich festalten?" *Der Lutheraner* 5 (23 January 1849): 81-84. Qtd in Arand, 96-97.
[84] Arand, 107.
[85] Ibid., 91.

Missouri Synod was concerned, which, "in contrast to the General Council…appears to place the major emphasis upon the objective content of the Confessions (*fides quae creditur*) as opposed to the subjective nature of the Confessions (*fides qua creditur*), the churchly dimension more than the individual dimension."[86]

As Arand notes "Walther's doctrinal approach to the Lutheran Confessions and call for an unconditional subscription in principle and practice led him to criticize all other forms of subscription as limiting the extent to which they defined the Lutheran faith."[87] This led to separation of the Missouri Lutherans from the other Lutheran church bodies in America, because they were unwilling to allow the fate of the German Lutheran Church to happen in America, and they strongly "wanted to preserve Lutheranism from Americanization."[88] This was not merely for the purpose of survival of the structure of the church, but real concern for the individual believer. Since the Missourians understood the doctrines of the Confessions to be the true explication of the doctrines of scripture they were therefore "unwilling to endanger the salvation of individuals by compromising doctrine or risking its corruption."[89] This meant strict adherence to the doctrines of the Lutheran Confessions and an understanding of the confessional documents as chiefly doctrinal norms which defined the Lutheran Church and kept it true to the teachings of Scripture.

4) "Confessions as Historical Decisions"

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Lutherans in America, even in the General Synod, gained a renewed appreciation for the Lutheran Confessions, which led to a desire among Lutheran scholars "both to preserve their distinctively Lutheran identity in examining the history and theology of the Confessions and to encourage critical historical scholarly studies."[90] Out of this emerged an "historical approach" to the Confessions. This approach, which was advocated first by the Iowa Synod and then spread to other Lutheran groups, takes seriously the context in which the confessional documents were written and seeks a better knowledge of that context in order to better understand the Confessions and their meaning for the Church of their

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[86] Ibid., 95.
[87] Ibid., 118.
[88] Gritch, 194.
[89] Arand, 118.
[90] Ibid., 119.

day. [91] The historical approach gave equal value to the entire corpus of the Confessions in the Book of Concord, but did not give equal value to every theological notion contained therein. Rather, the advocates of the historical approach sought to separate the essential doctrines from the non-essential.[92] It was the original historical situation that determined which doctrines were essential, only those doctrines which were put forth to settle the disputes of the sixteenth century were to be considered essential, for they explicated key doctrines in response to error and thus were intended to be authoritative. Other nonessential teachings such as "the perpetual virginity of Mary, Melanchthon's comments regarding the Papacy as the anti-Christ, Traducianism, and the significance of Mary giving birth *utero clauso*"[93] which were mentioned in passing, were seen as products of the historical and theological context—not dealt with in depth or used against false teachings and thus not binding for Lutheran theology. Only those theological disputes which the Reformers intended to fight were essential; other side issues may or may not be significant.

The historical approach sought to maintain the authority of Lutheran doctrine without demanding full doctrinal agreement for Lutheran unity and also left room for open questions.[94] Arand notes: "by viewing the Confessions within the context of a specific historical context and as specific responses to historical questions, the representatives of the historical approach did not intend to depreciate the Confessions or lessen their doctrinal value for the twentieth century."[95] Instead they "viewed it as their task to preserve the unique doctrinal identity bequeathed to the church by the sixteenth century while demonstrating the catholicity of Lutheran theology." They were unwilling to fall into either the extreme of Schmucker and the American Lutherans who "rejected light from the past" or the other extreme of Walther and the Missouri Synod who "denied that

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[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 126. It was the community of the Church, not each individual, that was empowered to make the decision as to what was essential and what was non-essential.
[93] Ibid., 127.
[94] Ibid., 148.
[95] Ibid., 146.

there could be 'new light in later times.'"[96] The key to the historical approach was a thorough understanding of the historical context as well as the doctrinal content of the Confessions such that the true meaning in the original context could be ascertained. Nevertheless, new contexts require new interpretations and applications of Lutheran doctrine.

<u>5) "Confessions as *Dogmengeschichte*—dogmatic history"</u>

The beginning of the twentieth century found Lutherans in America split into a wide variety of geographical, ethnic, and theological groups. Arand characterizes the end of the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century as a period of "confessional revival" culminating in a great deal of attention to the Lutheran Confessions by the end of the century.[97] The twentieth century he classifies as a time of "confessional consolidation and crisis" which led these groups, recognizing the commonality of Lutherans, to a rush of mergers and a seeming resolution of the confessional questions of the previous century.[98] While even the General Synod sought a stronger tie to the Lutheran Confessions, it wanted to ensure that in so doing it did not limit the possibility of theological development or convergence with Protestant concerns of the time (such as the Sunday School Movement).[99] Arand sees this in part due to a desire on the part of the General Synod to "counter the charges of Modernism that a confessional church proclaimed a sixteenth century message that was irrelevant to twentieth century man, a message produced by idle, speculative minds of a bygone era."[100] It sought to engage the confessional documents in such a way that "theology was not settled definitively once and for all, but was dynamic and progressive in its confrontation with contemporary issues and needs."[101]

Juergen Neve, whose writings on the Confessions became largely integrated into the official writings of the General Synod in this period, saw the Confessions as analogous to the creeds in the history of the Church. The Church's understanding of the Word of God was

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[96] Theodore Tappert, "Symbols of the Church," *What Lutherans Are Thinking, a Symposium on Lutheran Faith and Life* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg, 1947), 348. Qtd. in Arand, 147.
[97] Arand, 21.
[98] Ibid., 151-152.
[99] Noll, 239.
[100] Arand, 153.
[101] Ibid.

not static, but developed to a fuller and fuller understanding throughout history. Certain historical periods are marked by doctrinal controversies which God uses to give the Church new experiences of the truth. From these controversies the Church is able to bring these new experiences of truth to expression in creedal and confessional statements in ways previously impossible.[102] Neve saw each Confession and creed as a step forward in the progress of understanding, in fulfillment of God's promise.[103]

The value of the Confessions of the Reformation period was on account of the fact that by then "the church had grown so much that it was now ready to give expression to doctrines of an altogether different kind" than it had during the first 1500 years in which the church dealt with problems of the Trinity and Christology through the ecumenical creeds.[104] Neve contended that with the Augsburg Confession, the Church had finally turned to the soteriological questions that remained unanswered from the time of Augustine through the Middle Ages and was ready to address "the doctrine of sin and grace and of how salvation is appropriated."[105] For Neve, the Church accepts the Lutheran Confessions so as to "recognize the 'great experience' that came to the church of the Reformation and that these Confessions have protected 'the Church's identity in times of confusion and conflict.'"[106] Neve distinguished between the creeds that emerge out of a prophetic age (like the Augsburg Confession) and the subsequent doctrines that emerge from a more didactic age (like the Formula of Concord).[107] The prophetic writings are, therefore, more essential and the other "secondary symbols" regarded as "developments, deductions, and interpretations" of the essential doctrines. An understanding of the Confessions as *Dogmengeschichte* seeks to "avoid the danger of turning the Confessions into eternal laws in order to keep the door open to further insights"[108] which will undoubtedly arise as the Church progresses in history. Arand concludes of this type of approach to the Confessions that "despite moving farther than Schumucker towards a greater appreciation and

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[102] Ibid., 156.
[103] Ibid.,157.
[104] Ibid., 158.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid., 167. Arand quotes Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (Blair, NE: Lutheran Publishing House, 1940), 24.
[107] Arand, 160.
[108] Ibid., 167.

acknowledgement of the entire *corpus* of confessional writings, the confessionalism they adopted reveals much in common with that of Schmucker."[109] Nevertheless, this understanding of the Confessions was enough to bring about a reunion of the General Synod with the General Council and the United General Synod South[110] which would eventually result in the first in a series of mergers in which confessional issues were not entirely resolved.[111]

6) "Confessions as Ancient Heirlooms"

Following the 1918 merger that created the United Lutheran Church in America, the confessional question which had dominated Lutheran discourse in the previous century—to what extent what it means to be Lutheran is defined by the Confessions—began to shift. The new question was "whether or not the Confessions could adequately define Lutheranism and ensure the continuity of its message."[112] The prominence of historical-critical biblical scholarship, and the subsequent application of this method to the confessional documents as well, brought this question into the forefront. No longer could one assume continuity between the sixteenth century and the present day, indeed "it was now asked whether twentieth century scholarship conflicted with sixteenth century conclusions" and many theologians, unlike those of previous generations, in fact saw greater discontinuity than continuity.[113] Historical critical scholarship revealed that much of the theology, doctrine, and style of the Confessions was historically conditioned and as such each is "a child of its time and bears the marks of the historical conditions by which it was occasioned and out if which it has arisen."[114]

This understanding led to a dichotomization of the Lutheran Confessions and a stress not on the Confessions as a document but on the "Confession within the Confessions." "They defined the 'Confession' of the church as that to which the confessional documents witness, that is their message, and the 'Confessions' as

[109] Ibid., 179.
[110] Ibid., 178.
[111] Gritch., 193.
[112] Arand, 181.
[113] Ibid., 183.
[114] Henry F. Offerman, "What is Lutheranism" in *What is Lutheranism? A Symposium in Interpretation,* ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: Macmillan Co., 1930), 47. Qtd. in Arand, 183.

denoting the texts of the historically defined documents embodying that message."[115] It was the "confession" which embodied the faith to which the "Confessions" testify, however historically limited the formulation in the documents may be—a call to the spirit, rather than the letter. The purpose was not to relativize the Confessions entirely, but by recognizing the documents as historically conditioned that "the way for adopting contemporary methodologies and their results" might be kept open.[116] As such, the Confessions were not seen as doctrinally binding "nor laws for religious thought, but witnesses and guides to the truth."[117]

This view required a new concept of what subscription to the Confessions meant, and the concept that emerged was "hypothetical" subscription. It was this understanding of confessional subscription that found its way, for the first time, into the founding documents of the Lutheran Church in America into which the ULCA merged (with other Lutheran bodies) in 1962. To subscribe "hypothetically" meant that one who subscribes recognizes themselves as holders of the same theology of the Reformers such that they can claim that were they (in a hypothetical situation, of course) "faced with the questions which the writers of the Confessions had to meet, we would have answered them as they did."[118] New contexts mean a new grappling with theological questions and a new formulation of the truth of Scripture. Arand notes that "such a subscription, however, implies that were those the issues today, the church would probably give different answers. And so the Confessions are relegated to the past."[119]

<u>7) "Confessions as Catholic and Evangelical Witness"</u>

The increased historical study of the Confessions would also impact the theologians of the Missouri Synod, though their response to the problems of history would be much different than that of the ULCA and the LCA. Even in the face of historical scholarship, the Missouri Synod was unwilling to give up its conviction that the Lutheran Confessions are the true explication of biblical truth. It is in faithfulness to the Lutheran Confessions that Lutherans ensure that

[115] Arand., 183.
[116] Ibid., 195.
[117] Ibid., 196.
[118] Charles M. Jacobs, "Inaugural Address," *The Lutheran Church Review* 47 (1927): 222. Qtd in Arand, 198.
[119] Arand, 199.

they are also 'faithful to the Scriptures and to the message of salvation through the blood of Christ, our Lord."[120] The Missouri Synod therefore interpreted those Lutherans who did not share their approach to the Confessions not only as objecting to the Confessions, but to the very Word of God.[121]

Nevertheless, Arand notes that in the twentieth century there were signs of a subtle shift that one can discern in theologians who still called for an "unconditional acceptance of the Book of Concord" towards a slightly nuanced understanding of what exactly that meant. Herbert Bouman, whom Arand presents as representative of the second generation of twentieth century Missouri theologians, admitted that the particular formulations of the Church's Confession "being human, have not always done full justice to the concrete reality, encumbered, as they often were, by abstract philosophical terminology" and yet "the motivation is unmistakable."[122] Similarly, another Missouri theologian William Arndt, "pointed out that the Confessions were not formulated as a complete dogmatics to deal with every topic of the Christian faith" and yet that "one must say that all the chief teachings of the Lutheran faith are found in the Lutheran confessional writings."[123] In this way of understanding the Confessions, they retain their character as true biblical expositions but not in an absolutist sense. Rather, they maintain the Christian truth by ensuring the "continuity of the church's message by being based on Scripture and being placed within the tradition of the church."[124] As such they continue to correct the two extremes of the sixteenth century which they see as still operative: "Lutheranism defined itself over against those who broke with the past, namely, the Reformed, by asserting its catholicity. Over and against those who claimed catholicity, Lutherans advanced their evangelical insights."[125] As such, the confessional documents function as "catholic and

[120] William Frederick Arndt, "Forward [Loyalty to the Confessions]," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 10 (January 1949): 5. Qtd. in Arand, 210.
[121] Arand, 211.
[122] Herbert J.A. Bouman, "Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription," in *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (New York: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, 1961), 38. Qtd. in Arand, 215.
[123] Arand., 221.
[124] Ibid., 225.
[125] Ibid.

evangelical witnesses" that maintain the true interpretation of Scripture against error on both sides.

8) "Confessions as Ecumenical Proposals"

Historical investigation and increasing contact with the ecumenical movement led some Lutheran theologians to interpret the Confessions in a different sort of "catholic and evangelical" sense. These theologians, of whom Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson are the leading figures, studied the Confessions from an historical standpoint and contended that "these historical writings could still speak to the twentieth century church if only Lutherans would take into account the intention and purpose of the confessions."[126] This meant that the "Confessions cannot be understood as final or definitive restatements of scriptural truth" but rather are "means to an end" and were intended as such. The "end" to which they see the Confessions seeking is the reform of the Church catholic—a task that intends Church unity rather than denominational factions, but will nevertheless not allow the pursuit of unity to impede the proclamation of the Gospel.

Braaten and Jenson intend to reclaim what they see as the original purpose of the Confessions, viewing them as dogmatic proposals to the wider Church. These proposals seek to center the Church's teaching around the doctrine of justification by grace through faith "undergirded by the Christological presuppositions required to carry this burden and rounded off with the soteriological implications that exhibit this meaning."[127] This task, which they see as the original purpose of the Reformers, places contemporary Lutherans in a place of responsibility for participating in ecumenical dialogues as the heirs of this reforming message. If the proposals of the sixteenth century had been accepted, they argue, continued Lutheranism would have no justifiable basis, and would be a sect. Today Lutheranism exists instead as "a confessional movement within the church catholic that continues to offer to the whole church that proposal of dogma which received definitive documentary form in the Augsburg Confession and the other writings collected in the Book of Concord."[128]

[126] Ibid., 238.
[127] Carl Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 28. Qtd in Arand, 239.
[128] [Eric Gritsch and] Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 5. Qtd. in Arand, 242.

In this understanding, the Confessions themselves "supply the tools or instruments that can aid the church in confessing the truth for its day."[129] The confessional documents were not intended to break the Lutherans away from the Catholic Church but rather were intended as a "biblically based, patristically reinforced testimony of faith, to protest the Romanizing and sectarian innovations of late medieval Roman scholasticism."[130] Today they ought to function not as dogmatic restrictions or as limits to what can be considered authentic Lutheran teaching in an absolutist sense but as "hermeneutical proposals"—pointers, treasures, anchors, signposts, compasses—which "intend to provide the theologian with a map for the exegetical exploration of Scripture" and "point beyond themselves to the history of salvation in which one finds the saving acts of God in Christ."[131] Warren Quanbeck, another theologian in this group, believes that "carrying out the hermeneutical program of Luther and the Augsburg Confession remains the unfinished task for Lutheran theology."[132] The Lutheran Confessions provide a hermeneutical key in aiding this task—and these theologians make clear that if "dogmaticans do not use the hermeneutical key provide by the Confessions in biblical exegesis, they will use some other."[133]

The Varied Uses and Purposes of the Lutheran Confessions

We have come though 500 years of the history of the Lutheran Confessions, and it is clear that there is no unilateral use, purpose, or understanding of the Lutheran confessional documents. The Confessions have been interpreted in a wide range of situations by a wide variety of Christians seeking to be faithful to them in their context. The Confessions, from their very inception(s) have been used as teaching tools, as presentations of Lutheran theology and practice for the understanding of other Christian groups, as defining membership in "true" Lutheran groups, as resources for theological language and teaching, as summary of the essential doctrines of

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129 Arand., 242.
130 Ibid., 243.
131 Arand., 251.
132 Warren Quanbeck, "The Confessions and Their Influence upon Biblical Interpretation," in *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics,* ed. John Reumann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 185. Qtd in Arand, 252.
133 Arand., 252.

Lutheranism or Christian faith. They have been used to include and to exclude, to engage in ecumenical dialogue and to refrain from it, to bring Lutheran theology back to its core and to encourage new directions.

What we have seen in this chapter is an amazing variety of approaches to the Lutheran confessional documents. This is not intended to be an exhaustive explanation of where these various viewpoints came from, nor why they have emerged in various contexts. Rather the purpose of this exploration has been to open up for our understanding the wide spectrum of uses of the Lutheran Confessions and to show that there has not been a single, monolithic use or purpose, but that Lutherans have used their Confessions in manifold ways. It is impossible to claim *the* way in which the Lutheran Confessions have been used in all times and all places, for it is clear that such an application does not exist.

As we begin to explore the ways in which we might arrive at a method for confessional Lutheran theology for the twenty-first century, we shall turn from this variety of historical experiences to a tool which can help us to place these theological uses of the Confessions on a spectrum. In this "confessional spectrum" we shall see the variety of ways in which Lutherans at the beginning of the twenty-first century approach the Lutheran Confessions, uses which have roots in historical uses of the Confessions, but become methods for Lutheran theology in new contexts. The purpose of the spectrum is not to show the connections between current Lutheran theologies and their historical heritage (though this can be helpful—and the reader will likely be able to place Arand's historical categories on the spectrum). Instead, the purpose of the spectrum is to give us a tool for comparing the various ways in which the Confessions are used in theology and church life today in a context in which theologians are not beholden to the interpretive method they have inherited from their particular branch of Lutheranism but instead have several methods at their disposal.

Chapter III: Five Types of Lutheran Confessional Theology—The Confessional Spectrum

We saw in the last chapter an overview of the wide variety of ways in which the Lutheran Confessions have been understood, interpreted, and applied throughout the history of the Lutheran Church both in Europe and as it came to America. In this chapter we shall outline the "confessional spectrum," a tool that will aid in discussion of the various methodologies with which Lutherans in the twenty-first century approach the Lutheran confessional documents. First we shall examine the concept of a spectrum as a tool for looking at theological method and then turn to the framework of the "confessional spectrum" with illustrative examples of the five "types" along the spectrum. Our purpose is not exhaustively to describe each of the types, but rather to set forth an outline that can be helpful in looking at approaches to confessional methodology so that in chapter four we can go into one of the "types" in greater depth. We shall see that it is this method of this type (Type Three) which I will argue is the most useful for Lutheran theology for the twenty-first century, but I maintain that the confessional spectrum can be a useful methodological tool regardless of whether one agrees with this conclusion.

The Concept of a Spectrum as a Tool for Understanding Theological Method

The concept of the "confessional spectrum" is greatly indebted to a similar concept developed by Hans Frei.[1] In a book entitled *Types of Christian Theology* (which was compiled and published by Frei's

[1] Frei's concept is clearly indebted to the five types in the classic work of Frei's doctoral advisor H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Both are also indebted to the three types of Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 Volumes, Olive Wyon, trans. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1992; original English edition, London: Allen and Unwin, 1931). I am grateful to GTU doctoral candidate Derek R. Nelson for drawing my attention to this connection.

colleagues and students after his death) the editors present a series of Frei's works that outline a typology he had developed as a tool for organizing a history of Christology in the modern period.[2] Though Frei was not able to complete his project on Christology, the manuscripts present this typology in such a way that it nevertheless provides "a major and original analysis of modern Christian theology."[3] Frei's focus on Christology centers his inquiry on how various theologians interpret Jesus Christ. In the introduction he explains his approach: "Thus, I will for the most part be asking, Just what is Christian theology? How is it related to other things, like, say, historical science? and How does theological reflection bear on the reading of the New Testament texts about Jesus Christ? though notice I am not saying that I will give an exegesis."[4]

Frei's purpose is not a conclusive answer to the single way a Christian is to understand Christology, or a single approach to Christian theology, but rather to outline the range of ways in which Christian theologians have understood (and continue to understand) Christian theology and the impact that has on their Christology. To aid in this he outlines five "types" of Christian theology, which he does not name but numbers one through five. Type One is an understanding of theology as a philosophical discipline and Type Five is an understanding of theology as Christian self-description—with a range of intermediary positions in between. The typology is not, as Frei puts it "very neat" because each type is really a relationship between theology as a philosophical and as a descriptive task, with the middle type being a mix of both understandings. Frei provides a single representative theologian as "typical" for each type and he describes his approach as determining how "a representative of a type relates the two basic views of theology."[5] The representative is not intended to be the exclusive individual proponent of that type of theology, but rather to illustrate the type which might be held by various theologians. Frei admits, for example, that the "greatest representative" of Type Three, Friedrich Schleiermacher, may indeed

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[2] David Kelsey, George Lindbeck, and Gene Outka "Foreword," in Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology,* George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, ed. (New Haven: Yale, 1992), vii.
[3] George Husinger and William C. Placher, "Editorial Introduction," in Frei, x.
[4] Frei, 11.
[5] Frei, 27.

not fit that type exactly, and yet the usefulness of the type remains.[6] Similarly, the types are not absolute or eternal; for example, the editors admit that Frei later in life may well have moved David Tracy (representative of Type Two) into Type Three.[7]

This typology is intended as an aid in understanding, describing, and comparing the variety of approaches to the theological task. To this end, after describing the typology, Frei applies it to a hermeneutical example. He notes that there is a consensus in the theology of the West that "in the interpretation of Scripture, especially the New Testament, the literal sense has priority over other legitimate readings, be they allegorical, moral, or critical [and] a strong interconnection between this priority of the literal sense and its application to the figure of Jesus Christ."[8] Such a consensus seems to provide little fertile ground for analyzing Christology among the various approaches to theology. If all Western theologians are in agreement as to the priority of the literal sense of scripture, then one would expect to find a similar consensus in their Christology. And yet, despite this "consensus," when one views what is meant by the "literal sense" through the lens of Frei's typology, a wide spectrum of meaning appears—each with different implications for Christology.[9] Frei shows in his typology that different approaches to theology lead to different understandings of terms and ways of using sources, and those who employ these various methods often come to very different theological conclusions. The typology is intended to allow comparison in a variety of ways, and on different terms than comparisons are usually done. For example, Frei notes that "the typology cuts right across ordinary lines of liberal and conservative"[10] and in his analysis theologies that seem to be on opposite ends of another spectrum are shown to be more related than one might think—that Schleiermacher and Barth would find themselves in neighboring types is strong evidence to this effect.

Frei's analysis is quite helpful for our purpose in several ways. He shows the usefulness of setting forth a typology of Christian theologies and how one would go about doing so. Frei demonstrates that such a typology, though it recognizes all of the various types as

[6] Ibid., 34.
[7] Ibid., x.
[8] Ibid., 5.
[9] See Frei, 56-69.
[10] Ibid., 24.

authentic Christian theologies, need not be value neutral. For even as he recognizes the various types, Frei is not shy in suggesting that he finds Type Four to be the most constructive for Christian theology in the current context. For example in the description of Type Four he states "I wish to propose that the meaning of the 'literal sense' in biblical reading is more nearly embodied in this kind of procedure or outlook than in the others we have examined."[11] Rather than a typology claiming that all approaches are equally valid, using the typological tool aids in evaluation of the various approaches on their own terms. Frei's method of analysis is helpful because it opens up the categories, laying them out so that their complexities might be seen and their distinctivenesses compared.

Frei's question, however, in "Types of Christian Theology" is quite different from our current question. Frei's spectrum presents one of the chief theological issues of the modern period: the question of the legitimacy of doing theology and its defense (and respectability) in the university. The "poles" of the typology then are academic/philosophical theology on one side and Christian faith/practical theology on the other. Our question is not nearly as broad as Frei's, focusing not on the whole of theological method, but on Lutheran theological approaches to the confessional documents. Nor are our poles the same as Frei's; the confessional spectrum deals with the contexuality of the confessional writings on one end and their doctrinal status on the other.

Thus, Frei's analysis and categories are not meant to lay directly over the five types in the spectrum we will examine. The question (and thus the scale) is different. We shall not attempt simply to apply Frei's conclusions to a related, but altogether different set of types. Rather, we shall borrow Frei's method and some elements for theological analysis. Specifically, we shall set forth the confessional spectrum in five types, each represented by an individual or "school" of Lutheran theology. As with Frei, these representatives may not fit the type exactly, and yet they are useful for illustration. Again similarly to Frei, though the effect of setting forth a spectrum is to include a wide range of approaches to the confessional documents as legitimate "confessional" theologies, this does not exclude the possibility of determining the comparative value of one method

[11] Ibid., 44.

against another. Rather, the tool is intended to make such a comparison easier.

Carl Braaten also identifies five types of confessional theology, but does not discuss them in relationship to one another, nor does he place them on a spectrum. Braaten's types are helpful, but not identical to ours. Indeed, in the confessional spectrum, several of Braaten's types would find themselves together.[12] Also, his types are not very exact when looking at particular examples. For example, the Finns (who will be addressed later in this chapter) seem, in Braaten's categories to fall under what he calls "liberal nonconfessional Lutheranism" of which Braaten writes: "This position leaps backward over the period of seventeenth century orthodoxy and The Book of Concord to the creative years of the young reformer, Martin Luther."[13] But they also partially fit his type called "hypothetical confessional Lutheranism" which commits "us to the confessions only 'insofar as' they are relevant to modern times."[14] In terms of their ecumenical motivations they also fit into "constructive confessional Lutheranism" in which Lutherans "have come out of their confessional ghetto, prepared to reenter the mainstream of the Catholic tradition along with other Christian communities in the ecumenical movement."[15] The main difference between Braaten's types and ours is that while Braaten examines "various attitudes among Lutherans to our confessional heritage,"[16] the confessional spectrum addresses the more tangible ways in which the confessional documents are actually used, not just the attitude held toward them. We shall now turn to the spectrum itself, with a brief description and example of each of the types, followed by, in the next chapter, a deeper analysis of Type Three.

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[12] Braaten, *Principles*, 29-31
[13] Ibid., 30.
[14] Ibid., 31
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 29.

Lutheran Confessional Spectrum

Type 1 Unconditional Doctrinal Authority	**Type 2** Historically Conditioned Authority	**Type 3** Roadmaps to Grace	**Type 4** Primary Theological Source	**Type 5** Historical Source Among Many
Lutheran Confessions literally authoritative as much today and in the same manner as when originally written—Confessions define what is acceptable Lutheran Christian doctrine and theology and what is unacceptable.	Lutheran Confessions normative for doctrine and theology—key elements remain authoritative, other elements deemed to be products of their context and are reinterpreted	Lutheran Confessions both products of their context and normative for doctrine and theology—Confessions provide theological framework and are interpretive lens for reading scripture—confessional theology informs, challenges, and is a resource for preaching, teaching, and pastoral care	Lutheran Confessions helpful insofar as they speak to current situations—when they don't are deemed to be products of their context and are disregarded	Lutheran Confessions as 16th Century documents written for a particular time and place and useful for that context but not ours—confessions have historical but not doctrinal value—may have indirect theological value as historical faith formulations
Robert D. Preus	James A. Nestingen	David Truemper & Dietrich Bonhoeffer	Finnish Lutheran Scholars	Marcus Borg

Type 0: Essentially Irrelevant

Lutheran Confessions outdated and irrelevant for theology or doctrine

non-denominational and cultural Lutheran churches

Five Types of Lutheran Confessional Theology

Type One: Robert D. Preus

The first type on the confessional spectrum is the easiest to define. Theologians of the first type are the most likely of the types to describe themselves as "confessional" Lutheran theologians: "confessional" over and against other Lutheran theologians and "Lutheran" over and against other Christian theologians. They are also the most likely to describe what is meant by "confessional" and to make extensive use of the Lutheran confessional documents throughout their theological writings. To theologians of this type to be "confessional" means to be "truly Lutheran," and being "truly Lutheran" means being "truly Christian." Our example of this type, Robert D. Preus, makes quite clear how he thinks the Confessions are to be understood: "May I remind the reader that, although this book describes what was taught 400 years ago—and I earnestly pray that it may not seem ponderous for this reason or because it is so eminently theological throughout—still, what was taught then is precisely, or ought to be, what is believed and taught and confessed by every Lutheran pastor today."[17]

As a Type One theologian, Preus sees the Lutheran Confessions, the entire canon of the Book of Concord, as having as much claim on Christians today as when originally written because of its unchanging doctrinal content. For Preus, the Confessions have status as truth claims, which he sees as original to the documents themselves:

> The Lutheran Confessions represent the result of more than 50 years of earnest endeavor by Martin Luther and his followers to give Biblical and clear expression to their religious convictions. The important word in that definition is the word 'convictions.' This word reveals the spirit in which the Lutheran Confessions were written, not a spirit of hesitation and doubt but of

[17] Robert D. Preus, *Getting into the Theology of Concord: A Study of the Book of Concord,* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), 9. Though Preus is a theologian of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, his understanding of the Confessions is one that is also found among members of the ELCA, and he serves well to illustrate the method of this type.

> deepest confidence that Lutherans, when they were writing and subscribing the Confessions and creeds, because their content was all drawn from the Word of God, Scripture, were affirming the truth, the saving truth.[18]

In contrast to the "relativism and indifference" of our day,[19] the Confessions understood in this way, set forth the pure doctrine on account of which Christians are able to "be certain of their salvation and can formulate and confess true statements about God and all the articles of Christian faith."[20] Preus sees pure doctrine as important for several reasons: teaching purely gives the best praise and honor to God, doctrinal uniformity is how unity is found within the Church, and doctrine is God's own revelation. In the end, however, "pure Christian doctrine is important for our Lutheran Confessions because it brings eternal salvation."[21]

When this approach to the Confessions is used in theology, the result is chiefly explaining how the doctrines of the Confessions apply to current situations. For example, Preus concludes a section of the separation of church and state with a quote from the Augsburg Confession and comments: "After 450 years, years often of frustration and failure, [the Augsburg Confession] still remains the best formula for the proper relation between church and state, for good and enlightened citizenship, and for effective and intelligent social action by Christians living in a secular society."[22] This method holds for the other theological points he makes on Christology, the centrality of Justification, the work of the Spirit, and the sacraments. The defining characteristic of Type is framing the theological questions in terms of the sixteenth century debates and arguments in the Lutheran Confessions, and in seeing the doctrines of the Confessions as presenting authoritative theological conclusions in the current context. This leads to continued diligence against creeping Reformed or Catholic points of view, and often puts the confessional documents in

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[18] Ibid., 11.
[19] Ibid., 13.
[20] Ibid., 12.
[21] Ibid., 13.
[22] Ibid., 80.

the position to function as an "electric fence" against doctrines and practices that do not reflect "true" Lutheran theology.[23]

Type Two: James A. Nestingen

At first glance, theologians of Type Two look a great deal like Type One. Type Two theologians are also inclined to use the term "confessional" as a descriptor of what sets their theology apart from other forms of Lutheran theology. For example, the WordAlone Network—a Lutheran movement of which our example of Type Two, James A. Nestingen, is a key theological advisor—has as the header of their website "Building an evangelical, confessional Lutheran future in America."[24] In the context of recent decisions relating to the role of bishops in ordination and the ordination of gay and lesbian persons, Nestingen describes the confessional approach of the WordAlone network as "the historic interpretation of the Lutheran Confessions, one still held by other Lutherans throughout the world."[25] He contrasts this to the ELCA's approach to the Confessions through "which a small group of favored theologians opened up a new, unprecedented interpretation of the confessions," an interpretation that was then ratified by the ELCA national assembly to the effect of "practically eliminating the historic interpretation."[26]

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is difficult for any group to claim the single, constant interpretation and use of the Lutheran Confessions. One could, however, trace Nestingen's "historic interpretation" through a particular history, the history of the

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[23] This image of the Confessions as an "electric fence" comes from David Truemper, "Future of Lutheran Theology," 133.

[24] http://www.wordalone.org, (accessed 12/24/05). The history of the WordAlone Network (and its subsequent organizations) can be found in Mark Granquist, "Word Alone and the Future of Lutheran Denominationalism," in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the 21st Century*, Richard Cimino, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 62-80.

[25] James A. Nestingen, "Prospects and Alternatives," delivered April 18, 2005 at the WordAlone National Convention, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, Mahtomedi, MN. http://www.wordalone.org/pdf/nestigen-prospects.pdf, accessed 12/24/05.

[26] Ibid. Though it is possible that Nestingen refers to the "historical interpretation" that was first advocated by the Iowa Synod (see chapter two), the way in which he uses the phrase makes the term "historical" apply not so much to the method of historical investigation, but to the way in which the confessions have been understood "historically" as if to say "the way in which they have always been interpreted" or "are traditionally interpreted" as opposed to what he sees as a novel interpretation in the ELCA.

acceptance of the Augsburg Confessions and catechisms in Scandinavia (specifically in Norway), the emergence of pietism (and its skepticism of what it saw as "dead Orthodoxy" in the Formula of Concord), and the eventual immigration of Norwegian Lutheran Pietists who (through a number of mergers) eventually became a part of the American Lutheran Church (ALC) which later became a part of the ELCA. Nestingen's "historical interpretation" is, in fact, one historical way in which the Confessions have been (and continue to be) interpreted—indeed it is a widely held method for understanding the Confessions—but one cannot thereby claim that it is *the* exclusive way the Confessions have been seen in an unbroken historical chain, or that it represents the only way of viewing the Confessions that can be called historical.[27]

Nestingen himself seems to recognize that his confessional method is influenced by this particular historical interpretation from Scandinavian Lutheranism. In his book *The Faith We Hold: The Living Witness of Luther and the Augsburg Confession*, written before the ALC merged into the ELCA, Nestingen refers to the Formula of Concord as "the tagalong in the Lutheran confessional family," written "50 years after virtually all the other confessions had been written."[28] He comments that "it was drafted to reconcile warring parties of Lutheran theologians" and that "while most German Lutherans accepted it, the Scandinavian Lutherans did not, mainly because they feared the kind of fighting that had developed among Lutherans in Germany."[29] It is this view of the confessional documents inherited from Scandinavian Lutheranism, a view that "gives priority to the [Augsburg Confession] and the Small Catechism and accepts the other confessions—including the Formula—as interpretations of the first two," which Nestingen sees as the one that was held by the ALC and, in more recent writings, the one that ought to be held by the ELCA.

For our discussion it is not important whether a theologian follows the interpretive method inherited from one particular

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[27] This interpretation is indeed verifiably more "historical" than other approaches to the confessions, and Nestingen's claim that theologians in the ELCA have introduced a "new, unprecedented interpretation of the confessions" is not necessarily excluded by recognizing other historical interpretations.

[28] James A. Nestingen, *The Faith We Hold: The Living Witness of Luther and the Augsburg Confessions,* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 16.

[29] Ibid.

geographic/ethnic/immigrant group as opposed to another—we could, for example, make a similar case of a theologian who takes a method for confessional interpretation from another tradition (German, Australian, South African, etc.). The method is not dependant on the conclusions reached, but rather how the theologian understands and uses the confessional documents. Nestingen warns against setting the Confessions over and against the Word of Scripture saying "if the Confessions take over, replacing the living word with routine and repetition, they sap faith of its nourishment."[30] What sets his method apart from Type One is a recognition that the Confessions were written in a particular context and therefore may not be directly applicable today, as evidenced by his claim that the "Confessions are also challenged by experience. A good share of what they have to say is based on their perception of daily life."[31] Nestingen advises that one ask if "changes have put us out of touch with the daily experiences of the writers. If and when that's the case, the Confessions can't simply be reasserted—as if our lives must conform to their way of thinking."[32] A theologian of Type Two, unlike Type One, recognizes that certain elements of the confessional documents are impacted to a large extent by the circumstances in which they were written and cannot simply be equated with doctrinal truth claims. Nestingen writes: "they were written 400 to 450 years ago in a time of dukes and emperors, knights and squires, plagues and pox. They know nothing of democratic government, separation of church and state, or many of our modern ways. If the Confessions' age puts them out of touch, simply repeating their words won't solve the problem."[33]

At the same time, theologians of Type Two are insistent that the Confessions remain doctrinally authoritative. For Nestingen this does not mean disregarding those elements of the confessional documents that are heavily influenced by the contexts of their times (which, we will see, is the approach of Type Four), but rather reinterpreting them in terms of the current context. This can clearly be seen in the way in which Nestingen finds evidence for a strongly congregational polity and a bit of anti-clericalism in the confessional documents. He draws evidence for the local congregation as the basic understanding of the

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[30] Ibid., 94.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 94-95.
[33] Ibid. 94.

church as well as a challenge to the power of pastors from Articles 14, 21, and 28 of the Augsburg Confession saying: "The Augsburg Confession starts where the trouble often does—with pastors."[34] He writes that "Article 14 insists that the ministry belongs to the congregation, not to pastors or bishops"[35] a conclusion that is not the only possible reading of Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession, which reads (in its entirety): "Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper public call."[36] He interprets article 21, originally written in the context of an understanding that praying to the saints of the church gained merit towards salvation, as speaking against another sort of " 'invocation of the saints' such as 'Pastor So-and-So did it this way' or 'But we've always…'."[37] Aside from the phrase "invocation of the saints" this interpretation has little in common with the original purpose of the section, though Nestingen sees it as a valid way to apply it to a contemporary context. Similarly, Nestingen states that "Article 28 tells bishops to do what they're called to do: preach and teach—and to keep their rules and opinions in check."[38] Article 28 does in fact deal with the power of bishops, but is dealing mostly with the claim of bishops in the sixteenth century to political power in the civil sphere. As this situation is no longer applicable, Nestingen interprets this to apply also to bishops wielding power in congregations, though the Article itself stipulates that "churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops, according to the saying [Luke 10:16], "Whoever listens to you listens to me."[39] Article 28 does stipulate that when bishops institute ordinances that burden consciences "by holding that such things are necessary for salvation or by considering it a sin when they are violated without giving offense to others"[40] the church ought to resist for the sake of the Gospel, but Nestingen seems to extend this to all "rules and opinions" that bishops might have.

Thus we see the characteristic interpretation of Type Two still holds the doctrinal validity of the confessional documents. It does

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[34] Ibid., 63.
[35] Ibid., 64.
[36] "The Augsburg Confession" in *The Book of Concord,* 46.
[37] Nestingen, 64.
[38] Ibid., 64.
[39] Augsburg Confession, *Book of Concord,* 93.
[40] Ibid., 100.

this in a different manner than Type One, because it is more aware that one cannot simply transpose the doctrines of the sixteenth century onto situations of a later age because there are places and issues in which the contexts are different enough to impact what the teaching ought to be. However, rather than disregarding the teachings where there is a difference in context (which, we shall see, is characteristic of Type Four) theologians of Type Two tend to read elements of the current context, or of the way in which they have come to understand the teachings of the church, into the confessional documents.

Type Three: David G. Truemper

The method of theologians of Type Three can be seen quite clearly in the sorts of questions they ask of the confessional documents. David G. Truemper, in an article entitled "The Lutheran Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology," poses this question to the confessional documents: "How may we take the Lutheran confessional writings[41] seriously as confessions of faith for their time and place in the sixteenth century, and still—or perhaps precisely thus—find them helpful for our place and time?"[42] Theologians of Type One and Type Two will focus on the second part of this question: How do we find the Confessions helpful (or authoritative) for our place and time? Theologians of Type Four and Type Five will focus on the first part of the question: How do we take the Confessions seriously as confessions of faith for their time and place in the sixteenth century? What sets Type Three apart from the rest of the spectrum is taking up both parts of this question together. Truemper notes that "there is a certain amount of untidiness in this approach and it is hardly a foolproof operation. It assumes an open-ended struggle, not a foregone conclusion. It calls for trust as we wrestle together for ways to witness to the gospel in our world."[43] It is this struggle—the active engagement of the confessional documents both in their original context and the contemporary context— that is the distinguishing feature of the method Type Three.

Truemper sees that methods for approaching the confessional documents have become polarized and that this situation is unacceptable. On one hand, when the Confessions "are taken merely

[41] Truemper abbreviates "Lutheran confessional writings" as LCW, we have replaced the acronym with the full phrase here and throughout.
[42] Truemper, "Future of Lutheran Theology," 133.
[43] Ibid., 134.

as historical curiosities, churches will find it easy to dismiss them as documents of decreasing relevance in the contemporary situation."[44] In this approach, "as our distance in time and culture from the sixteenth century grows, we shall find less and less reason to refer to or draw upon the Lutheran confessional writings as resources for today's church."[45] While this approach abandons the confessional documents (and thereby their theology), Truemper is equally critical of the opposite extreme: "On the other hand, if the Lutheran confessional writings are absolutized as timeless expressions of quintessential Lutheran formulations about doctrine and practice, churches will find it easy to abandon the rigorous demand for constructive theological reflection—in favor of mere repristination of the formulae of the sixteenth century confessors and reformers."[46] Truemper sees this extreme as also leading to an abandoning of the confessional documents, because "even when new problems and questions arise, one will seek to stretch the revered and ancient formulae over ever greater distances of meaning and relevance—until finally the absurdity and irrelevance of the implied logic becomes painfully and embarrassingly evident to all."[47]

Instead of either of these extremes, Truemper advocates a middle way, which he calls a "bifocal approach."[48] By this he means approaching the Confessions with a method "that tries to read the Symbols and the contemporary situation together in such a way that the evangelical witness of the Symbols might be transmitted into the church's present situation as a resource and guide to faithful life and work."[49] In this approach the confessional documents are to be taken seriously, but at the same time "are not an answer book, nor a set of preplanned decisions for 'what to say when…' but are rather evidences of 'how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries,'[50] they can help us really in no other way."[51] Even though Truemper here quotes the Formula of Concord as to the way in which the confessional

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[44] Ibid., 131.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.,133.
[49] Ibid., 133-134.
[50] Truemper is quoting the "Formula of Concord, Epitome" *Book of Concord,* pg 486.
[51] Truemper, 134.

documents see their own purpose, he makes clear that he is not after the theological method of the Confessions themselves but rather "a theological method for the positive use of the confessional writings by today's church and its theologians, pastors, and catechists as they go about the task of making the Lutheran confessional writings into a resource for today's church."[52]

Truemper outlines a method intended "to transcend the polarity of historical relativism and dogmatic absolutism" (not unlike our Types Five and One), a method guided by what he calls a "principle of 'evangelical analogy,'" which has four parts:

> (1) take the Lutheran confessional writings seriously as both confessions of faith and witnesses to the biblical gospel; (2) honor the historical situation in which the particular confession and witness of the Lutheran confessional writing was first made; (3) treat the Lutheran confessional writings as *exemplary* confession and witness; and (4) understand the Lutheran confessional writings as problem-solving literature.[53]

At the most basic level, Truemper finds it important to recognize the Confessions not just as documents, but as living confessions, confessions of faith: "they state faith's confidence in the promise of the gospel and in so doing they share in a confessions most significant attribute, namely, they bear witness to the biblical gospel."[54] This is not to deny that the Confessions can bear doctrine, but they do so, as Truemper notes, "in language that is very much confession of faith."[55] For example he sees the "evident self understanding" of the Augsburg Confession as being "both a confession of faith and a witness to the biblical gospel. Only as such does it function also as a summary of doctrinal points."[56] Doctrine, for Truemper is also not defined as eternal truth claims as such. Rather when the Formula of Concord, for example, claims to be in agreement "in the doctrine and all its

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 143.
[54] Ibid., 135.
[55] Ibid., 136.
[56] Ibid., 137.

articles"[57] Truemper interprets this to mean that "'the doctrine' means as much as 'the gospel as we have come to understand it' and 'all its articles' as meaning as much as 'all the ways one might articulate' our reformatory understanding of the Gospel."[58] In Truemper's understanding, "the doctrine" is the active teaching rather than a set of truth claims, and "all its articles" is the active articulation of the Gospel in particular times and places rather than a claim to absolutizing the confessional documents.

Type Three theology recognizes the contextuality of the confessional documents, but does not seek to dismiss or explain away the differences that emerge when trying to interpret sixteenth century documents in a twenty-first century context. Rather its approach is to hold the differences in tension. Truemper notes that "the confessional writings are every bit the product of their times" and are thus historically conditioned in a way "not unlike the biblical documents to whose gospel they bear witness."[59] Truemper calls for a Lutheran confessional hermeneutic that is similar to the Lutheran biblical hermeneutic: "The emerging principle is that to receive the biblical gospel one needs to be attentive to the original setting so as to retain the kerygmatic edge of the apostolic *paraenesis* for the contemporary situation. Such is the value of minding the historical relativity of the biblical documents. And the same is true of the confessional witness to the biblical gospel."[60] Engagement with the context in which the documents were originally written (or perhaps one should say the situations in which the Confessions were confessed) is of extreme importance. Truemper underlines this by saying: "Far from rendering the Lutheran confessional writings irrelevant to the church of today, minding their historical situatedness in the circumstances of church and state in the sixteenth century provides the only possibility for

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[57] Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, *Book of Concord*, 640. The older Theodore Tappert edition of *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) translates this passage as such (although without the article "the"). The Kolb and Wengert translation renders "doctrine" as "teaching". Truemper himself cites and translates the original German "*in der Lehr und allen seinen Artikeln.*" (Truemper, 135). Both terms "doctrine" and "teaching" are legitimate translations of the German "der Lehr," as is Truemper's inclusion of the article and rendering it "the doctrine."
[58] Truemper, 135.
[59] Ibid., 137.
[60] Ibid., 138.

hearing these documents as confession of faith and as witness to the biblical gospel."[61]

Rather than speaking at length about the doctrinal authority (or lack thereof) of the confessional documents (as is the case with our other types), Truemper is interested in the Confessions as exemplary confession and witness: "For all the historical conditionedness of the confessional writings, and necessary as it is to be mindful of that historicality, we would not care about the questions of the resourcefulness of the Lutheran confessional writings for today's churches if we did not regard their confession of faith and their witness to the biblical gospel as fundamentally *exemplary*."[62] To consider the confessional documents exemplary theology does not mean simply reiterating their theological points, but rather to engage theologically following their example.[63] What this means in terms of doctrine is that the task of confessional theology is not to "add up all the confessional assertions" but rather to "learn from their exemplary gospel-serving how to serve up gospel to the contemporary issues and problems we face in today's church."[64] Viewing the confessional documents as exemplary confession and witness is, then, call for active confession and witness in the contemporary context.

Truemper's proposal for the use of the confessional documents then is not to cling to them as doctrinal summaries intended to test Lutheran orthodoxy, nor to dismiss them as historical artifacts but to engage them as a resource for reflecting theologically on contemporary issues: "The confessional writings are not only confessions of faith and witnesses to the gospel; they are not only historically conditioned and situation-specific; they are not only exemplary or paradigmatic; they are also, like the biblical documents to whose truth and gospel they bear witness, best taken as 'problem solving' literature."[65] It is precisely the method of engagement of Type Three that allows the Confessions to function in this way, to find a way to move beyond the questions posed in the sixteenth century and engage in the same sort of active theological reflection

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[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid. Emphasis original.

[63] This engagement is not intended to deny the validity of the "theological points" or to suggest that only the manner, but not the content is important. Rather, to "engage theologically" in this way implies a continued engagement with the theological positions of the Confessions, not merely to parrot their answers.

[64] Ibid., 139.

[65] Ibid.

that generated the confessional documents in the first place.[66] Says Truemper of his method: "When one takes the Lutheran confessional writings precisely as problem-solving documents, there is in fact positive impetus to engage in the creative and contemporary problem-solving, that is, in evangelically analogous diagnosis and prognosis for today's church and the new and distinctive issues that it faces as it seeks to live and confess and believe "Lutheranly" in the new millennium."[67]

Type Four: The Finnish Lutheran Scholars

The representative for Type Four on our spectrum is not an individual, but rather a group of Finnish scholars out of the University of Helsinki who have together embarked on a new foray into a study of Martin Luther in the context of ecumenical relationships with the (Eastern) Orthodox Church. Tuomo Mannermaa, the chief advocate among these Finnish scholars, was a participant in these early dialogues and he and his students make up the majority of this "Finnish School." Their extensive work in Finnish has come into the American theological circle through the publication in 1998 of a book entitled *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*,[68] which brought into the academic mainstream the over two decades long work of this group of Finnish scholars on Luther's teaching on justification. In contrast with what they see as the dominant Lutheran understanding of justification (shaped more by the Formula of Concord and later Lutheran reformers than by Luther's own teaching) the Finns have sought to go beyond the Lutheran confessional documents and back to what they see as the source, Luther himself, in an attempt to re-frame the understanding of justification in order to better facilitate ecumenical dialogue, particularly with the Eastern Orthodox church.

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66 Examples of Truemper's method in his theological work can be found in David G. Truemper, "The Catholicity of the Augsburg Confession: CA VII and FC X on the Grounds for the Unity of the Church," *Sixteenth Century Journal,* XI No. 3 (1980): 11-23.; David G. Truemper, "Evangelism: Liturgy *versus* Church Growth," *Lutheran Forum,* 24 (Fall, 1990): 30-33.; and a particular fine example of this method at work in David G. Truemper, "The Role and Authority of the Lutheran Confessional Writings: Do Lutherans Really 'Condemn the Anabaptists?'," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76 No. 3 (July 2002): 299-313.

67 Truemper, "Future of Lutheran Theology," 140.

68 Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

The Finns, in seeking a parallel in Lutheran parlance for the Eastern Orthodox concept of *theosis,*[69] found in the writings of Luther frequent mention of “union with Christ” and “indwelling of Christ.” These concepts seemed to them to be equivalent to the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis,* and while they feature strongly in Luther as the Finns understand him, they see these concepts as largely absent from the Lutheran confessional documents and subsequent Lutheranism. The Finns also intended to show that this *theosis* in Luther’s thought was at odds with what had come to be the general Lutheran understanding of justification that is presented in the Lutheran confessional documents. According to the Finns, the later reformers and subsequent Lutheran interpreters failed to take into account the fullness of Luther’s concept of justification which included “union with Christ.” They see at the root of this an emphasis in the Formula of Concord on merely the forensic nature of justification.[70] The concept of *theosis* in Luther then becomes the key to reuniting the forensic and effective aspects of justification in such a way that the ecumenical dialogue might be possible without the baggage of the Formula of Concord.

As theologians of Type Four, the Finnish scholars do not outright dismiss the confessional documents. They do, however, find in the confessional documents (particularly in the Formula of Concord) elements of the particular context in which they were written, elements which distort what they see as the essential elements of Lutheran theology. Mannermaa writes critically of the understanding of justification present in the Lutheran confessional documents: “In presenting the notion that the presence of the Trinity in faith is not the same phenomenon as the “righteousness of faith,” the Formula of Concord draws on the later theology of Lutheranism, upon which practically all subsequent Lutheran theology after Luther relies.”[71] He

[69] “Divinization.” Justo González compares this concept prevalent in the Eastern churches to the Western notion of sanctification. He writes: “Its goal is not the disappearance of all distance between God and the believer, but making the believer more capable of being in the presence of God.” (Justo L. González. *Essential Theological Terms,* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005], 171.)

[70] “Forensic justification” refers to the aspect of justification in Lutheran doctrine in which the human person is seen as righteous in God’s eyes when in fact they remain sinners. The other aspect of justification is “effective justification,” in which the sinner becomes righteous and sin is gradually purged from the person.

[71] Tuomo Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective,” in *Union with Christ*, 28.

then contrasts Luther's theology of justification as divine indwelling which he believes "is, undoubtedly, defined differently from the formulation of the Formula of Concord."[72] What defines the Finns as theologians of Type Four is not their appeal to Luther, but rather the way in which they see contextual elements in the confessional documents which are not relevant to theology today. They see the issue of justification as presented in the Formula of Concord as one such element defined by the context of the time, and they find another authority for their theology on this particular issue, without outright disregarding the Confessions as a whole.

Timothy Wengert, one of the chief editors of the current edition of the Book of Concord, is critical of the Finns appeal to Luther over and above the Lutheran Confessions. He sees their theological position as largely similar to that of Andreas Osiander, a view which was rejected by the Formula of Concord, and therefore he is not surprised that the Finns are not interested in the Formula of Concord, and in effect, also are dismissive of the Augsburg Confession itself. Wengert it also highly critical of the way in which the Finns use the Luther material and their ecumenical bias: "countless times the present reviewer also encountered passages in Luther torn from their historical and ecumenical contexts to serve greater ecumenical ends."[73] His conclusion is that "this book will help readers to know what Finnish theologians think of their own tradition. Here one sees what happens when modern ecumenical agendas and old-fashioned pietism become the chief spectacles through which to view an historical figure."[74]

Regardless of whether one agrees with Wengert's strong rejection of the Finnish scholarship in his critique, his comments help illuminate the method the Finns use in approaching the Lutheran confessional documents. Unlike theologians of Type Two, the Finns have not appealed to the historical interpretation of the Lutheran Confessions, but rather have largely rejected the way in which these documents have been interpreted historically. Thus we can see that theologians of Type Four do not feel the need to reconcile the problematic elements of the confessional documents into a doctrinal whole, but seeing how dependent these elements are on theological questions and positions of the time in which they were written, the

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[72] Ibid.
[73] Timothy J. Wengert, "Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther," *Theology Today*, Vol. 56 No. 3, (October 1999): 432.
[74] Ibid., 434.

problematic elements cease to have any doctrinal authority. What sets the Finns apart from theologians of Type Five is the fact that theologians of Type Four do not dismiss the concept of doctrinal authority in general, however, but in these cases seek it from outside the confessional documents. The Finns look to Luther, Eastern Orthodoxy, and modern ecumenical understandings, though others might look elsewhere.

Type Five: Marcus Borg

While the confessional method of the first four types can be determined based on direct statements as to how the Confessions are to be interpreted, discerning the method of Type Five is a bit more difficult. Rarely do theologians of Type Five directly reflect on how they use the Confessions in their theology. This is due to the fact that theologians of Type Five tend to see the confessional documents as either doctrinal claims that no longer apply to the contemporary context or as theological formulations so tied to the context in which they were written to have little useful theological value in and of themselves. What sets Type Five apart from Type Zero (the anti-type on our spectrum)[75] is that Type Five theologians, though they may not directly use the confessional documents and may even reject their status as doctrinal, reveal some connection to their theological content.

Our task is further complicated by the fact that our example for Type Five, Marcus Borg, is neither a theologian nor a Lutheran. Borg, a professor of "Religion and Culture" and Jesus Scholar, is an Episcopalian and writes books for a popular rather than academic audience claiming to be a "non specialist."[76] Borg's writings, which appear on the surface to be largely personal reflections on religion and theology, reveal, however, an extensive theological bibliography.[77]

[75] Rather than a separate section on Type Zero, which truly falls outside of the Lutheran confessional spectrum, we shall say this: Type Zero is a method of "using" the confessional documents that does not engage the documents as such nor their theological content—and thus, aside from some sort of distant or historical claim to the title "Lutheran" is nearly impossible to discern their theology to be "Lutheran" as such.

[76] Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith,* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), vii.

[77] The index to *The God We Never Knew* cites a wide array of theologians including Karl Barth, Marin Buber, John Hick, Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Paul Tillich just to name a few.

Borg's purpose is to make available to the non-specialist some rather complex theological ideas, and he draws on his own experience to aid this task. The book "The God We Never Knew" is a good example of this, as Borg uses his own journey from a dogmatic understanding of Christianity to what he calls "a more authentic contemporary faith"[78] as a way of illustrating his theological concepts in contrast to the popular understanding of Christianity. For Borg this journey meant a movement from his Lutheran upbringing towards the Episcopal church—representing a theological a movement from a dogmatic understanding of theology (similar to our Type One) towards a "nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic"[79] understanding. Though Borg no longer worships in a Lutheran pew and does not frequently use the confessional documents directly in his theology, his theology—now divorced from the doctrinal absolutism of his Lutheran past—nevertheless retains several distinctive Lutheran elements. Though a better example for Type Five may well need to be found, Borg's theological method does present this type in such a way that its key elements can be seen.

Though Borg does not reference the confessional documents directly in outlining the dogmatic theology he rejects, he does note that his "childhood package has distinctively Lutheran elements in it, especially the emphasis given to faith and to faith as correct belief."[80] Borg describes this understanding of Christianity "of a previous generation,"[81] which he learned "in a Lutheran church in a small town in northeastern North Dakota in the 1940's"[82] as "doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic and oriented toward an afterlife. In its view, being Christian meant believing that a certain set of doctrinal claims were true, and it meant seeking to live in accord with Christianity's ethical teaching. It tended to take the Bible and doctrine literally, unless there were compelling reasons not to."[83] Though Borg does not identify "the doctrine" with the Lutheran confessional documents, there can be little doubt that this is implied. He identifies the key elements of this dogmatic faith as he understood it, and under the element entitled "faith" notes: "Faith meant strong and correct

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[78] The subtitle of *The God We Never Knew.*
[79] Ibid., viii.
[80] Ibid., 19.
[81] Ibid., 19.
[82] Ibid., 13.
[83] Ibid., 2.

belief. It meant believing what God wanted us to believe, as disclosed in the Bible. Faith as *strong* belief meant that doubt was the opposite of faith. Faith as *correct* belief meant believing the right things. For me, that meant believing what we as Lutherans believed."[84] Borg's movement "beyond dogmatic religion" became a moving away from the dogmatic Lutheranism of the Lutheran Confessions (as understood in a Type One manner) presented to him as a child toward a more contemporary "adult" faith.

Borg's presentation of what a "more authentic contemporary faith looks like" is summed up well in his introduction. Borg notes that Christians today must come to terms with the modern worldview that permeates the contemporary context, and that there are several ways in which this occurs. Some become fundamentalists, "insisting on the truthfulness of premodern Christian ways of seeing things in spite of their conflicts with modern knowledge."[85] Others "seek to add the notion of God to the modern worldview" or "give up on the notion of God."[86] Borg suggests another way, which he sees as a middle position between the two: "And still others seek to take seriously what the Christian tradition and other religions say about God or the sacred, even as they also take seriously what we have come to know in the modern period, but without absolutizing it. They seek to integrate Christianity with modern and postmodern perceptions, producing a revisioning of Christianity."[87]

This "revisioned Christianity" has little room in it for doctrinal absolutes or truth claims, though it can recognize in the historical faith formulations elements of truth. Borg, for example, finds conceptual help for understanding God in such varied sources as the Hebrew scriptures, St Augustine, Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu, the poetry of William Butler Yeats, the Hindu poet Rabindrahnath Tagore, French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, and Billy Bray, who was described by William James as "an excellent little illiterate English evangelist."[88] What matters to Borg is not so much the source or its claim to absolute truth, but how any theological or faith formulation helps to articulate faith in the contemporary context: "When tradition is thought to state the way things really are,

[84] Ibid., 18.
[85] Ibid. 6.
[86] Ibid., 6-7.
[87] Ibid., 7.
[88] Ibid., 35-50.

it becomes the director and judge of our lives; we are, in effect, imprisoned by it. On the other hand, tradition can be understood as a pointer to that which is beyond tradition: the sacred. Then it functions not as a prison but as a lens."[89]

Although the Lutheran confessional documents find themselves among this long list of historical and theological formulations, Borg's theology at times reveals his connection to the Lutheran Confessions. For example, he refers to the dynamic of "Law and Gospel" (though without naming it as such). Borg outlines an understanding of a "finger shaking" God of judgment that generates guilt, or reinforces "guilt that is already present for other reasons."[90] He notes that "historically, some Christians have broken through it to an experience of a God of grace behind it…This has been a classic pattern, and because of Martin Luther's own religious experience, it is the classic Lutheran and more broadly Protestant approach."[91] Borg does not see the "Law and Gospel" dynamic (a key element in most concepts of Lutheran theology that draw on the Lutheran confessional documents) as central to Christian faith, but rather based on the historically conditioned context of Martin Luther. Because this theological construct does not speak to the contemporary context as Borg sees it—rather, the "intensification of guilt is a dangerous tiger to ride"—Borg sees no need to address it except in suggesting there are other ways to articulate the concept of God's grace.[92]

Borg also refers to another particularly Lutheran concept: the two kingdoms. Borg notes that "as the story of interaction between the dream of God and the rejection of the dream through what happens in history, the Bible is a tale of two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world."[93] Rather than rejecting this concept (as he did with Law and Gospel) Borg reinterprets the "two kingdoms" dynamic away from its original concept (and context) and uses it in a different manner. Rather than a contrast between political and religious authority, for Borg the two kingdoms represent the class struggle of liberation theology, with the "kingdom of the world" being the individualistic and oppressive way things are now, and the

[89] Ibid., 100.
[90] Ibid., 67.
[91] Ibid., 67.
[92] Ibid., 67.
[93] Ibid., 134.

"kingdom of God" the communal, "inclusive and egalitarian social vision of Jesus."[94]

In his use of a third particularly Lutheran emphasis, "salvation by grace through faith," Borg is much less critical. In seeking to address the questions "How does salvation come about?" and "How do we participate in it?" Borg remarks that his answer "discloses my Lutheran heritage: salvation comes by grace, and we participate in it through faith."[95] Borg calls the Lutheran emphasis on grace "the genius of the Lutheran contribution to Christianity."[96] Though he does not draw on the Lutheran Confessions in his explication of the concepts "grace" and "faith" Borg would have found ample support for his claims that "grace means that salvation comes from God" and that "grace undermines all Christian pretensions to self-righteousness."[97] Similarly in identifying faith not as a 'work' that makes us right with God, Borg's description of faith as "the response to the divine initiative of grace" rather than "believing a particular set of doctrines or biblical statements to be true"[98] could also be widely supported in the confessional documents. It is in relating the concepts of grace and faith that we find what may well be Borg's only direct and documented reference to the Lutheran confessional documents in which he quotes "the spiritual mentor of his childhood, Martin Luther" in whose Small Catechism (a confessional document) Luther writes "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel and enlightened me with His gifts."[99] And yet, even in citing the Lutheran Confessions directly, Borg finds this theological concept valid in contemporary context not because of its doctrinal authority but because, as he says, "it seems to me to speak wisdom."[100] As a Type Five theologian Borg is free to utilize elements of wisdom in the confessional documents, but does not feel tied to their theological constructs, and will use, dismiss, or reinterpret them freely as the contemporary context demands.

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[94] Ibid., 151.
[95] Ibid., 167.
[96] Ibid., 168.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 171. Borg quotes the Tappert edition of *The Book of Concord*, 345.
[100] Ibid., 171.

The distance between the approaches to the Confessions employed by Robert Preus and Marcus Borg seems to be immense. Are they both "Lutheran"? Could you call them both "confessional"? What of the intermediate positions? The purpose of this chapter has been to outline the five types along the confessional spectrum such that the reader has access to them for means of reflection and comparison of confessional method. While this is clearly a sketch, we shall, in the next chapter, turn more closely to one point on the spectrum, Type Three, both to further develop the type as well as to show the confessional spectrum "in action."

Chapter IV: A Further Example of the Confessional Method of Type Three—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In the previous chapter we examined the Lutheran confessional spectrum and the five types of confessional theological method. In this chapter we will look in greater depth at a theology that employs the method of Type Three, moving beyond the question of "How are the confessional documents used in theology?" to "How does the confessional method a theologian employs shape their theology?" This could, of course, be done with theologies across the spectrum (and probably should) so as further to flesh out what the implications are of the various ways of approaching Lutheran theology. For our purposes, however, we shall look at another example of Type Three, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and a particular theological question posed to him.[1] After we show Bonhoeffer's theological method to be Type Three from "A Theological Position Paper on the Question of Baptism" in which he relies heavily on the confessional documents, we shall further trace this method in his *Ethics* in which his use of the confessional documents is much more indirect and yet further reveals the method of Type Three.

Given Dietrich Bonhoeffer's biography, one might quite easily assume that his public activity might have its basis and motivation in liberal theological and political ideologies. His training at the Universities of Berlin and Tübingen, his time at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and his emphasis on ethics as central to the Christian task (seeing publication of his *Ethics* as the culmination of his life's work) all seem to suggest a theologian perfectly in line with

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[1] Though our discussion thus far (since we left Germany at the end of the sixteenth century back in Chapter one) has focused on America, the types on the confessional spectrum are not necessarily limited to Lutheranism in this country. Bonhoeffer (though a twentieth century German) can be an extremely helpful further example of Type Three. The fact that Bonhoeffer does not blindly go along with the "standard" confessional interpretation of his day, but rather seems to consciously choose one method of interpretation among many, makes his use of the Confessions sufficiently comparable to the situation of the ELCA that his method can be of value to this discussion.

the Liberal Protestant theological tradition. Similarly, his activity in outspoken political critique and eventual participation in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler would seem to indicate a pastor who saw his work not chiefly within the church, but more along the lines of the liberal theological ideals and political actions of the Social Gospel and other similar movements.

Because of this, we may assume Bonhoeffer would employ a view of the Confessions reflective of Type Five. However, when one reads Bonhoeffer's theological writings, one gets a quite different picture. Bonhoeffer's theological work would be difficult to classify as "liberal," rather his biblical exegesis, theological method, and approach to the Lutheran Confessions all seem to fall within what we might today consider a "conservative" position. And yet, it was this theology, rooted in a biblical and theological understanding that draws heavily on the Lutheran Confessions, that led Bonhoeffer to strong critique of the "conservative" church of his time, and inspired his ethical understandings that guided his political activity. Clearly the ambiguous labels "liberal" and "conservative" are ineffective in classifying Bonhoeffer's theological and ethical/political positions. Instead, we shall apply the confessional spectrum and see how viewing Bonhoeffer in terms of a Type Three theology helps move beyond these labels.

We shall begin by looking at an example of the way in which Bonhoeffer uses the Lutheran Confessions in his theological work. The issue at hand, infant baptism, deals with a question that the Lutheran confessional documents deal with quite explicitly. The way in which Bonhoeffer's approaches the confessional documents and applies them to this theological question reveals an understanding of the Lutheran Confessions quite in line with Type Three. We shall then see ways in which this confessional theology impacted his ethical/political outlook, compelling him to challenge the "conservative" forces of his day.

Bonhoeffer's Confessional Theology of Baptism

The theological piece we shall examine is a treatise Bonhoeffer wrote in 1942 entitled "A Theological Position Paper on the Question of Baptism." This work came out of a conflict within the Confessing Church over the issue of infant baptism. Earlier that same year a Confessing Church pastor by the name of Arnold Hitzer had written a document entitled "Notes on the Question of Baptism with Particular

Consideration of Infant Baptism" in which he denounced the practice of infant baptism as contrary to the scripture and considered the doctrine of infant baptism as presented in the Lutheran Confessions to be invalid (a Type Four approach to the confessional documents). He called for the church to change its baptismal practice to permit only believer's baptism, with an emphasis on the free choice of baptism an individual makes upon hearing the word, and even called for the re-baptism of both clergy and laity. It is to this conflict that Bonhoeffer is asked to provide a theological position paper, outlining the theological issues, in an attempt to resolve this conflict that has practical as well as theological implications.[2]

The way in which Bonhoeffer approaches this issue is extremely interesting. He does not choose to respond to the position of Hitzer by attacking his writing itself, rather he gleans from what Hitzer had written key biblical, theological, and confessional issues. In a way, Hitzer's position on baptism became for Bonhoeffer a motivation not for simply refuting his arguments (in fact he agrees with some of Hitzer's critiques), but rather for deep theological reflection on the issues this conflict raised. Bonhoeffer's Type Three understanding does not require that Hitzer approach the Confessions in the same way, and though Bonhoeffer will not agree with his conclusions (nor his rationale) he does not attack his theological method, but rather only the way in which Hitzer's approach impacts the proclamation of the Gospel. Bonhoeffer looks at the theological issues in a four fold way: first through exegesis, then by reflecting on the theological issues through biblical themes, next by bringing in the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions, and then finally reflecting on the practical theological consequences.

As he goes about reflecting theologically on the issue of infant baptism, Bonhoeffer first turns to the Bible. He applies his best historical-critical methodologies to the exegetical analysis, looking at passages dealing with infant baptism specifically along with those dealing with children in general, as well as the role children played in

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[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Theological Position Paper on the Question of Baptism," in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment:1940-1945,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works Vol. 16, trans. Lisa Dahill, ed. Mark Brocker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006 [forthcoming]) 563, n.1. I am grateful to Dr. Mark Brocker and Fortress Press for providing early access to these works. I am also extremely grateful for Dr. Brocker's council in shaping my investigation into Bonhoeffer's method of confessional interpretation. Indeed, it was this work on Bonhoeffer that became the starting point for this entire project.

the church-community. Bonhoeffer finds in the biblical texts evidence that children, though not specifically mentioned, were very likely included in baptisms of entire households, and finds in the other examples of baptism nothing that indicated children were necessarily excluded.[3] He also recognizes the high regard for children in the New Testament, in particular Jesus' own eschatological regard for them, while at the same time finding nothing to support an idea that the innate holiness of children makes baptism for them unnecessary.[4] He finds further that "the idea that children born before their parents' conversion needed to be baptized, whereas children born to Christian parents were not baptized, leads to the improbable and groundless conception of baptized and unbaptized persons existing as members of the Christian church-community."[5] Bonhoeffer's exegesis leads him to conclude that "the practice of infant baptism cannot be directly proven in the New Testament (NT), to be sure, but can nevertheless be seen as probable there."[6] Whereas Hitzer saw the lack of specific mention of infant baptism in the New Testament as evidence that it is therefore not to be practiced, for Bonhoeffer the lack of concrete and specific biblical evidence either for or against infant baptism is an occasion for deeper theological reflection.

Bonhoeffer then brings in related theological elements that broaden the discussion beyond whether infant baptism was practiced in the New Testament, and more deeply into the theological foundations of the practice of baptism itself. He asserts that, "in the NT, baptism and faith are indissolubly connected,"[7] and links this faith not merely to the individual, but to the church-community. Yet this faith cannot be merely a personal free decision; instead he emphasizes the action of Christ in both baptism and faith. It is clear in this theological section that Bonhoeffer is greatly influenced by the

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[3] Ibid., 553 ff.
[4] Ibid., 556.
[5] Ibid. The editors of the new edition of Bonhoeffer's works have chosen to render the German term *Gemiende* with the somewhat awkward English "church-community" so as to communicate the sense of the German word which moves beyond ecclesial structure (or building) conveyed in the English "church" to an understanding of the community of faith.
[6] Ibid., 551.
[7] Ibid., 556.

Lutheran Confessions, which describe the church, sacraments, and faith much in the way that Bonhoeffer does here.[8]

In fact it would be quite easy for Bonhoeffer to use the Confessions directly and authoritatively for support on this issue, as he would be likely to if he were operating with a Type One or Type Two understanding. For example, the Augsburg Confession states clearly that "concerning baptism it is taught that it is necessary, that grace is offered through it, and that one should also baptize children, who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become appealing to him. Rejected, therefore, are the Anabaptists who teach that the baptism of children is not right."[9] And yet Bonhoeffer does not rely on this argument, but instead uses the understandings outlined in the Confessions as a tool for going deeper into scripture. Using the confessional themes and emphases as a theological lens, he returns to scripture to address the questions that lie deeper than whether there is attestation for the practice or not. These investigations lead Bonhoeffer to reflect on such things as the passivity of the one being baptized, the nature of faith, the relationship of the faith of the individual to the church-community, and differences in situation and context.[10] He returns to the Bible not only for the exegetical task, but for assistance in the theological reflective task as well, and in this task he is assisted by the confessional understandings of Type Three.

Bonhoeffer's theological reflection on the biblical texts leads him to conclude that "in any case, the *refusal* of infant baptism cannot be grounded in the New Testament; this is true precisely because of the conception of faith in the doctrine of justification."[11] In fact, based on a theological understanding of baptism centered in the doctrine of justification, he sees that there are ways in which the same theological elements of baptism expressed in believer's baptism in the New Testament might also be expressed in a different context through the practice of infant baptism.[12] He began with the question whether the practice is allowable based on biblical exegesis, and then moved into

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[8] For a relatively straightforward example of this, see the explanation of the third article of the Creed from "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, 355. Also the emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit in Baptism in the section on "The Sacrament of Holy Baptism" also in "The Small Catechism," *Book of Concord,* 359.
[9] Augsburg Confession, Article IX, *Book of Concord,* 42.
[10] Bonhoeffer, "Question of Baptism," *DBWE 16*, 556-61.
[11] Ibid., 561. It is clear that the issue of justification, central in the Lutheran Confessions, is also central to Bonhoeffer's thought in this area.
[12] Ibid.

the question of whether it was allowable based on biblical theological reflection (through a confessional lens). In both cases, his conclusion was that it was neither proven necessary nor forbidden. This leads Bonhoeffer beyond the question of whether the practice of infant baptism is permissible into even deeper theological reflection on the question of whether it is theologically useful and appropriate for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Though Bonhoeffer's exegesis and theological reflection have clearly been influenced by the Lutheran Confessions, it is not until this section which Bonhoeffer entitles "On the Teaching of the Lutheran Confessional Writings" that he references the Confessions explicitly. Bonhoeffer agrees with Hitzer that baptism and faith are intimately connected, but Bonhoeffer's Type Three confessional understanding leads him to view faith in a much different sense than he sees Hitzer doing. Rather than mere personal, individual faith as conscious decision and a psychologizing of the act of faith, Bonhoeffer draws from the Lutheran Confessions an understanding of faith that is much more communal and theological.[13] Bonhoeffer's understanding of faith has its roots not in decision, but in trust, and even this trust as a reception of God's grace.[14] On the possibility of an infant having faith, Bonhoeffer looks to the larger theological meaning of faith—that all faith is created not merely by the individual in isolation, but that the faith of the church-community always precedes it.[15] For Bonhoeffer, infant baptism, in which the sponsors and the church-community profess faith on behalf of the infant is not problematic theologically because all faith is "vicarious representative" [*stellvertretend*] faith rooted in the proclamation of the Word through the church-community. And the object of this faith is indeed not baptism nor the church-community (whether it is the faith of the individual or of the church-community). This faith can only be faith in Christ, a Christ revealed to us through the church-community in word and sacrament.[16]

Again, as in his exegetical and biblical theological reflection Bonhoeffer finds in the Confessions not a mandate for infant baptism, but at the same time a strong word that the practice not be forbidden. "The confessional writings rightly resist the fanatics who forbid infant

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[13] Ibid., 561-63.
[14] Ibid., 562.
[15] Ibid., 563.
[16] Ibid., 565.

baptism; rather, on the basis of scripture and its 'key,' the doctrine of justification, they open the way for infant baptism."[17] Though he cites the very argument from Article IX of the Augsburg Confession we quoted above, he does not use it as the final word that infant baptism must be practiced. Rather, for Bonhoeffer, this confessional teaching opens the door once again to a deeper reflection on what baptism is and what it does, calling for the sort of active engagement of the confessional documents and scripture characteristic of Type Three. His argument thus becomes: "The *validity* of baptism rests solely on the command and promise of Jesus Christ. The *benefit* of baptism depends on the faith that receives it. For this reason the opponents of infant baptism may never call into question its validity but at the most its benefit."[18] What Hitzer's condemnation of the practice of infant baptism has done is to not only question the benefit of baptism, but the very validity (in calling for re-baptism). To do what Hitzer has done is, for Bonhoeffer, to disregard what the Lutheran Confessions again and again assert as the central teaching of scripture: justification by grace through faith. Indeed, "all that determines the truth or falsity of infant baptism are the biblical assertions about baptism that are opened by the key of the Holy Scripture, the message of justification by grace and faith alone."[19] This "key" is drawn from Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Bible through the lens of the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions and is not seen as a doctrinal point to be objectively believed, but as a tool to be engaged in the task of theology and proclamation.

Bonhoeffer's conclusions on whether or not to practice infant baptism lie not in whether the thinks the practice itself is right or wrong (based on biblical evidence or otherwise) but whether the practice communicates what it is intended to communicate. Bonhoeffer agrees with Hitzer on the theological problems that the practice of infant baptism can communicate, but his confessional understanding leads him to call for different actions. Indeed, Bonhoeffer sees potential theological problems in the misuse of both infant and adult baptism: "infant baptism always threatens to separate baptism from faith, just as adult baptism always threatens to destroy the baptismal grace founded in Christ's word alone."[20] Both are

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 566.
[20] Ibid.

potentially problematic and must be taught and practiced appropriately. Here we see how differences in confessional interpretation can have implications beyond academic theology but also for practical life in the Church. Bonhoeffer goes on to find further issue with Hitzer's arguments on confessional grounds. He denounces Hitzer's desire to return to the original practice of the church as an inappropriate separation of the church-community from the world.[21] He criticizes the use of "decision for Christ" as an unbiblical and theologically unsupportable understanding that in fact denies faith in its passive capacity and makes the human being the object of focus rather than God.[22] And he refutes Hitzer's argument that infant baptism limits human freedom as based more on idealism and liberal theology than on the Bible.[23] The argument for Bonhoeffer boils down simply to this: "what is required of the Christian church-community today is not the abolition of infant baptism but definitely a correct Protestant baptismal discipline."[24]

What we have seen in the way in which Bonhoeffer addressed this theological concern is a particular understanding and method. Bonhoeffer's confessional understanding leads him to read the scriptures quite differently than Hitzer does. Bonhoeffer, rather than seeing the exegetical task (with the exegete's own—perhaps unidentified—hermeneutical bias) as the final word, he seeks instead to identify the theological issues that can aid in understanding. Similarly, rather than using the confessional teachings as the final word in the argument (which in this case he could easily have done) instead he uses them in such a way that they become the first word in opening up the Bible. Thus Bonhoeffer clearly places himself within Type Three. He uses the confessional teachings—in particular the important concepts of the nature of faith, the centrality of justification as the "key" to scripture, and the nature and purpose of the church-community and the sacraments—as a hermeneutical tool to go deeper into the Bible, beyond the question of whether a particular practice is required or forbidden and into the more difficult theological questions. Rather than asking whether this or that action or practice is right or wrong, Bonhoeffer's Type Three confessional theology helps him to sort out whether a particular action or practice best

[21] Ibid., 568-9.
[22] Ibid., 570.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 571.

communicates the reality of the saving nature of Christ. Importantly, Bonhoeffer's approach also does not require those with whom he dialogues to adopt his method for confessional theology, but allows him to present his best theological arguments into a conversation where not everyone agrees on how the Confessions are to speak to this particular issue.

Bonhoeffer's theology could be classified biblical-exegetical, biblical-theological, confessional, as well as practical—and it is the way in which he uses the Lutheran Confessions (and the 'key' of justification by grace through faith) in his theology that allows it to be all four. His method is conservative—seeking to draw on the tradition and teachings—and yet at the same time does not get bogged down in biblical or confessional absolutism (as it might in Type One), nor is it held captive to inaction. Neither does his method lead to inaction on the opposite end of the spectrum, suggesting that all truth is relative so that no claims can be made (as it might in Type Five). Rather, he is led to look at the actions and practices of the church-community and of Christian people (including himself) and through theological reflection discern whether in fact the Gospel is being rightly proclaimed. It is little wonder that Bonhoeffer's theological reflection leads him to ethical considerations, and little wonder that he sees the publication of *Ethics* as the culmination of his lifelong theological work. Having identified Bonhoeffer's theological and hermetical method, we shall now turn briefly to his *Ethics* to examine how this Type Three approach makes its way into his ethical writing.

Bonhoeffer's Confessional Theology in *Ethics*

We turn to Bonhoeffer's Ethics not to provide further "proof" that Bonhoeffer ought to be considered a theologian of Type Three. Rather, our examination of this document is intended to show how the methodological analysis of the confessional spectrum need not be limited to those places where a theologian directly cites and uses the confessional documents. Having already placed Bonhoeffer in Type Three, the purpose of looking at *Ethics* is to see the ways in which a theologian's confessional method emerges (subtly to be sure) in those places where he or she does not address the confessional documents directly. Although there are only a handful of places in which Bonhoeffer directly references the Lutheran Confessions in his *Ethics,* it is nevertheless quite clear that his theological understanding and approach (including many of the elements we looked at in his treatise on baptism) have been strongly shaped by the Confessions.[25]

The parallels between the way in which Bonhoeffer writes about baptism (using the Confessions) and similar topics in *Ethics* (where he does not directly use the Confessions) helps to make this clear. As in the question of baptism, for Bonhoeffer the task of ethics is not to know what is allowed and what is forbidden. Rather the key to ethical deliberation is to discern (as best as one can) what is the will of God. "Of ultimate importance, then, is not that I become good, or that the condition of the world be improved by my efforts, but that the reality of God show itself everywhere to be the ultimate reality."[26] The centrality of justification is also evident in *Ethics*, for example he says "the Christian ethic can proceed from the reconciliation of the world with God in the human Jesus Christ, in God's acceptance of real human beings."[27] Justification, the confessional "key" to the scriptures, is also the "key" as well as the starting place for Bonhoeffer's ethical understandings. Faith is similarly tied to justification in *Ethics*: "I believe the Lord Jesus Christ who tells me that my life is justified. So there is no way toward the justification of my life other than faith alone."[28] Faith's passivity is evidenced in the statement that "faith is letting something happen, and only therein is it an activity."[29] Bonhoeffer emphasizes the importance of the church-community as the place in which Christ has taken form among humanity[30] and speaks of the concrete ways in which Christ is communicated and takes form in the individual through the church-community in word and sacrament.[31] The vicarious representative [*stellvertretend*] aspect of faith finds a parallel in Bonhoeffer's presentation of Christ as the vicarious representative [*Stellvertreter*]

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[25] One piece in which he does draw heavily and directly on the Lutheran Confessions is "A Theological Position Paper on the *Primus Usus Legis,*" which has appeared in previous versions of *Ethics* now is published in the same volume as "Question of Baptism": *DBWE 16,* 584-601.
[26] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christ, Reality and Good" in *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works vol. 6, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglass W. Stott, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 49.
[27] Ibid., 100.
[28] Bonhoeffer, "Ultimate and Penultimate Things." in *Ethics*, 148.
[29] Ibid. This section dealing with the understanding of faith is one of the few places in *Ethics* that Bonhoeffer references the Lutheran Confessions directly.
[30] Bonhoeffer, "Ethics as Formation," in *Ethics,* 97.
[31] Ibid., 96.

and the call to vicarious representative action [*Stellvertretung*] in relation to or on behalf of others.[32]

Though any one of these examples could be looked at in more detail to further flesh out the impact of the Lutheran Confessions on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, one example show this perhaps the most clearly: the way in which Bonhoeffer addresses the understanding of the doctrine of the two kingdoms. The doctrine of two kingdoms draws on Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession[33] and, in Carl Braaten's wry opinion about how it has been traditionally understood, "allegedly calls for pastors to preach the gospel and leave politics to the government."[34] In this way of understanding the two kingdoms doctrine, there emerges a dualistic separation between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God, though God is somehow present in both spheres. The chief way the doctrine has been used from the sixteenth century onwards is to call for a radical split between the actions of the church (which have to do with preaching the Word and administering the sacraments—purely "spiritual" matters) and those of the world (politics, government, human rights) which are seen as worldly and outside of the church's sphere. Though the Lutheran Church has used this doctrine a number of times throughout history to avoid political or even merely public involvement, it was in the period of the National Socialist regime in Germany that the full implications of this understanding became known. The Lutheran church of Germany, citing the two kingdoms doctrine, not only largely refused to speak out against the Nazi government, but in many cases saw little conflict in showing allegiance to both Hitler and the church, as they existed in two separate kingdoms. The reason for this could be a rigid interpretation of the doctrine in a Type One understanding, or, perhaps more likely, a reinterpretation of the doctrine to a different context in the manner of Type Two. Their strict allegiance to this doctrine paralyzed them from ethical action, and at times even from ethical (and theological) reflection.

Bonhoeffer recognized the inadequacy of the use of the doctrine of two kingdoms in the situation in which the German church found itself in Nazi Germany. This led to the founding of the Confessing Church, which refused to allow the doctrine of two kingdoms to force them into quiet submission. It would be quite reasonable to expect

[32] Bonhoeffer, "History and Good [2]" in *Ethics*, 257.
[33] *Book of Concord*, 289ff.
[34] Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology,* 123.

that Bonhoeffer would seek to throw out this doctrine that clearly did not meet the needs of the proclamation of the Gospel in this situation (Type Four). And yet, this is not what he does. The crisis over the doctrine of two kingdoms leads him into deeper reflection on this doctrine and how it is understood. He recognizes the way this doctrine has been understood and how in the common understanding "reality as a whole splits into two parts and the concern of ethics becomes the right relations of both parts to each other."[35] What happens in this system (the one operating in the church of his day) is "the concern of Christ becomes a partial, provincial affair within the whole of reality. One reckons with realities outside of the reality of Christ."[36]

This understanding of the two kingdoms is unacceptable to Bonhoeffer not merely because it does not meet the needs of the current context, but on account of his theological understandings rooted in the Confessions, he does not see it as an appropriate way to understand this doctrine theologically. Given this dualistic split Bonhoeffer sees only two options, both of which involve "giving up on reality as a whole": "Either we place ourselves in one of the two realms, wanting Christ without the world or the world without Christ—and in both cases we deceive ourselves."[37] And yet, Bonhoeffer is not willing to simply discard the doctrine of two kingdoms, rather (as with baptism) as a theologian of Type Three he seeks a correct evangelical understanding of the doctrine and what it is to communicate. Indeed, the very doctrine that compels his contemporaries towards inaction, is the basis for his own ethical action: "There are not two realities, but *only one reality*, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in Christ we stand at the same time in the reality of God and the reality of the world."[38] This proclamation of the reality of the world as the reality of God, a world justified by God, calls the individual and the church-community to act in the world. "Since the appearance of Christ," says Bonhoeffer, "ethics can be concerned with only one thing: to partake in the reality of the fulfilled will of God."[39]

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[35] Bonhoeffer, "Christ, Reality, and Good" in *Ethics,* 56.
[36] Ibid.,57.
[37] Ibid., 58.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid. 74.

Bonhoeffer’s Type Three Method

Bonhoeffer’s theological and hermeneutical approach rooted in the Lutheran Confessions keep him from two extremes. On the one hand, he is reluctant simply to discard traditional teachings because they do not seem to meet the needs of the present situation. On the other hand, he is unwilling to let biblical or confessional absolutism serve as easy answers or excuses for inaction in the world. Rather, Bonhoeffer draws on his deep biblical, theological, and confessional understandings into deep conversation and reflection with the Bible, theology, and the Lutheran Confessions. He writes:

> Authentic ecclesial renewal will always be distinguished from fanaticism in that it always takes its departure from the central and certain teachings of scripture… Where, however, human thoughts—even the best, purest, and most pious—are made into the point of departure for efforts of ecclesial renewal, there the church’s cause, which rests solely on the clear and certain Word of God, is threatened, especially if human thoughts repudiating the faith of the church pass themselves off as divine truth.[40]

His “conservatism” leads him to fully engage the issues through theological reflection, and calls him not to quietism, but to seek to do the will of God, proclaiming the reality of the world as one reality, that is to say as God’s reality, a task that leads him to sometimes “liberal” political actions.

Throughout all of this Bonhoeffer is guided by the Lutheran Confessions, which serve as a guide and resources, but also a lens. Through the Confessions, particularly the “key” of justification by grace through faith and other key teachings, Bonhoeffer is aided as he navigates the Bible, theology, the Confessions themselves, and ultimately the real world in which ethical decisions must be made. It is in this sort of active engagement that the Type Three approach to the Lutheran confessional documents reveals its power in ethical, social, and theological reflection and action.

[40] Bonhoeffer, “Question of Baptism,” 569.

Chapter V: Toward a Lutheran Confessional Method in America for the Twenty-first Century

Putting the Confessional Spectrum to Use

In the presentation of the Lutheran confessional spectrum and the example of Bonhoeffer we have already begun to see ways in which framing "Lutheran confessional theology" in these terms can be helpful for delving deeper into different methods with which theologians approach the confessional documents. If, for example, Borg's criticism of Lutheranism is based on a rejection of Type One theology, how might his theological conclusions be nuanced in conversation with Types Two, Three, and Four? If Nestingen's "small group of favored theologians who have opened up a new, unprecedented interpretation of the confessions" could be seen to be approaching the confessional documents in terms of the understanding of Type Five, does that leave Type Two as the only "confessional Lutheran" option? Would the German theological and ethical crisis of the early part of the twentieth century have turned out differently if more Lutheran theologians were able to see, as Bonhoeffer did, the impact of their confessional method on the proclamation of the Gospel in that context, in addition to its impact on concrete social and political action? Whatever use might be found for the spectrum, its purpose is not to outline the single valid method for confessional theology—rather its goal is methodological: to put the various theological approaches in relationship to one another so that their method might be seen more clearly.

In the context of the ELCA, then, the question becomes not which way *must* the Lutheran Confessions be interpreted, but which way is best for this time and place. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial."[1] Similarly, the task of Lutheran theologians in the twenty-first century is not discerning which method for confessional theology is the way in which things have always been done, the way they must be done, or which way seems best to fit in the context of American religion in the

[1] 1 Cor. 6:12 (NRSV)

twenty-first century, but rather which method best proclaims Christ in this time and place

<u>Toward a Lutheran Confessional Method for the Twenty-first Century</u>

In my studies I have found that to use the term "toward" in the title of a paper is a highly effective way to hedge one's academic bets. The author is thereby no longer beholden to actually *proving* his or her thesis, but merely to engage in discussion around the topic at hand.[2] While that may well be the case in this current discussion (clearly the topic of confessional method is hardly done justice in one hundred pages), there is another purpose for using the term "toward." In part, it is because this brief survey of confessional method does not delve deeply enough into the complex theologies and approaches that occupy each point on the spectrum. Further analysis of not just a few works by a particular author but their entire corpus (including noting developments throughout a theologian's career) is needed to ensure that a theologian is not overgeneralized or held to a method they no longer employ. It is likely that our five theologians do not fit their type exactly or, on deeper examination, reveal elements of several types (problems Frei encountered in his typing as well) and they will have to be reassigned. Like all conceptual categories, those of the confessional spectrum cannot be absolute but undoubtedly leak into one another.[3] Additionally, there are clearly other theologians to classify, who will likely not fit the neat categories we have presented here—and the confessional spectrum will thereby need to be revised. This is not alien to its purpose, as the confessional spectrum is not meant to be a limiting element or an easy way to dismiss another's method ("Oh, of course you would think that way, you employ a *Type One* method") but a tool that opens up the theological conversation.

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[2] An excellent study of this phenomenon can be found in Franz Bibfeldt, "Accommodation and Equivocation in Theological Discourse: The Art of Saying Nothing Well," in *The Relieved Paradox,* trans. R.H. Clausen, (London: Howard Press, 1950), 91-104. I am indebted to Derek R. Nelson, doctoral candidate at the Graduate Theological Union, for introducing me to this theologian and his work.

[3] This insistence that "all categories leak" is, in fact, the "third law" of Dr. Michael Bjerknes Aune, Professor of Liturgical and Historical Studies at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union.

Further Implications

Another reason to seek "toward" a method is that the question of how American Lutheran theologians understand and apply the Lutheran confessional writings has implications beyond merely how one deals with a set of sixteenth century documents or whether or not they are willing to "subscribe" to them without crossing their fingers. The entire Lutheran theological enterprise is caught in relationship to these texts and to the Gospel they are to help proclaim.[4] This means that the method of confessional interpretation will have an impact on other areas of Lutheran theology and church life—as well as the possibility for impact in political and social realms as well (as the case of Bonhoeffer and the German Christians makes clear). The ramifications of confessional method are too many to expound here, but I will mention three that seem particularly relevant for Lutheran confessional theology at the dawn of the twenty-first century: biblical hermeneutic, ecumenical approach, and relationships with world Lutheran expressions.

Biblical Hermeneutic

In this book I have consciously avoided using the term "hermeneutics"[5] when referring to the Confessions preferring instead variations on "method of understanding and application of the confessional documents." I have done this in order so as not to confuse what might be called "confessional hermeneutics" (i.e. how one reads the confessional documents) with another sort of "confessional hermeneutics" (i.e. how one reads the Bible in light of their method of confessional theology). It is possible, however, that drawing such a sharp division might not be as important as it may seem—or more clearly, that the way one (who is a Lutheran) understands and applies the confessional documents is connected to the way in which they understand and apply the texts of the Bible. A key implication of the confessional spectrum is the possibility of correlating a theologian's Biblical hermeneutic with their confessional

[4] L. DeAne Lagerquist, following Christa R. Klein, suggests that the definition of a Lutheran could be understood as "one who debates about the Confessions." (Lagerquist, 4)

[5] Justo Gonzáles defines "hermeneutics" as "The discipline that studies the rules of interpretation of a text—in the case of theological discourse, this usually refers to biblical interpretation." (*Essential Theological Terms,* 74.)

hermeneutic—though it is not clear which hermeneutical chicken or egg came first.[6]

The connection of a theologian's way of reading the Bible and the Confessions certainly seems to hold true for Types One and Five, but further research and investigation would need to be done to determine the extent to which the Biblical and confessional hermeneutics of the other types correspond—though I suspect a strong correlation could be made in each case. As the question of Scriptural interpretation seems to be central to the theological debates of this point in history (and perhaps always is to some degree)[7] a deeper understanding of how the Confessions are to be understood and used (and if there is one Lutheran biblical hermeneutic or many) could be a valuable contribution to this theological debate.

Ecumenical Approach

From their very inception the Lutheran confessional documents have been engaged with questions of ecumenism. They present their teachings in relationship to the teachings as presented by others Christian groups of their day (sometimes even-handedly, other times polemically) and again and again take up the issue of the apostolic and orthodox Christian faith—and whose presentation and teaching best puts forth the true Gospel message. The ecumenical situation has changed a great deal since the sixteenth century, as territorial churches have lost prominence and since in most parts of the world (even in places where a particular denomination or religion receives

[6] A key foundational work on this very topic is the collection found in John Reumann, ed., *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), particularly the articles in Part II "Confessional Propria as Hermeneutic": Warren A. Quanbeck, "The Confessions and Their Influence upon Biblical Interpretation," 177-188; Ralph A. Bohlmann, "Confessional Biblical Interpretation: Some Basic Principles," 189-214; Horace D. Hummel, "The Influence of Confessional Themes on Biblical Exegesis," 215-232; Foster R. McCurley, "Confessional Propria as Hermeneutic—Old Testament," 233-252; and Joseph A. Burgess, "Confessional Propria in Relation to New Testament Texts," 253-267. While this work contains essays on this topic from theologians who employ a wide variety of confessional methods, it does not put them into conversation with one another. The confessional spectrum could be useful in analyzing precisely such a collection, helping the reader identify and bring into dialogue the various perspectives.

[7] For a contemporary look at some of these questions of Lutheran biblical hermeneutics see the section entitled "How Lutherans Read the Bible" in *Dialog* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 4-54.

state support) an individual is not indissolubly tied to one form of religion.

What is not a foregone conclusion is what the ecumenical task of the heirs to the Lutheran Confessions is to be: some advocate setting the terms of debate in the same forms as they were presented in the sixteenth century and a unity of Christianity on Lutheran terms, others a view of Lutheranism as a reforming movement in the Church catholic whose eventual goal is a return to Rome, still others an understanding of Lutheranism as a particularity of Protestantism that can eventually be merged with other Protestants, and the list goes on and on. In helping to articulate the ways in which these various understandings are connected to particular ways of understanding and using the confessional documents, the confessional spectrum could be used to more deeply explore the possibility that these positions are not simply opinions or based on worship preferences or other factors, but have deep theological underpinnings.[8]

Relationships with World Lutheran Expressions

According to the statistics of the Lutheran World Federation, in 2004 North American Lutherans accounted for just over 11% of Lutherans worldwide.[9] The 5 million member ELCA is dwarfed on the world scene by the 7.4 million Lutherans in Asia and the 14.1

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[8] An example in which this might be helpful is in understanding the recent coming together of theologians from two seemingly opposite reform movements in the ELCA in response to the ELCA's sexuality study passed at the 2005 Churchwide Assembly. Representative theologians from both the "Evangelical Catholics" and "WordAlone" movements signed a joint statement in response to the study. It could be enlightening to determine if a common (or similar) confessional method was employed in bringing about this theological consensus. The text of the agreement be found on both groups' websites: "A Statement of pastoral and theological concern," WordAlone,org, <http://wordalone.org/docs/wa-past-theo.htm> (accessed 1/31/06); Richard Johnson, "Theologians on the Recommendations," Online posting. 3 Mar. 2005. *American Lutheran Publicity Bureau: Forum Blogs* <http://www.alpb.org/cgi-bin/yabb/YaBB.cgi?board=roj@nccn.net;action=display;num=1109786504> (accessed 1/31/06).

[9] "Lutheran World Federation 2004 Membership Figures: Summary," The Lutheran World Federation, *Lutheran World Information*, <http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/LWF-Statistics-01-2004.pdf> (accessed 1/31/06). These totals include Lutheran Churches that are LWF members as well as those that are not. Interestingly, of the 3.6 million Lutherans not affiliated with the LWF nearly 3.1 million are in North America alone (2.5 million representing the Missouri Synod, which is not a member).

million Lutherans in Africa (nearly three times the ELCA!).[10] While European Lutherans remain the largest group at 38.6 million, statistics show declining membership of nearly ¾ of a million in Europe in 2003 (North American membership declined as well) while Africa showed growth of over 1 million.[11] European Lutheran membership grew slightly in 2004, but at the same time another 1 million Lutherans were added in Africa.[12] What these statistics point to is the reality that in the wider community of Lutheran theology, the ELCA is only a minor player among much larger church bodies. While Europe remains a strong force in Lutheranism, all signs point to a shifting of focus from a worldwide Lutheranism centered in Europe and North America (as was largely the case in previous centuries) to one that is increasingly centered in Africa and Asia. The worldwide Lutheran Church at the end of the twenty-first century is likely to look much different from that of the twentieth century.

The new context of worldwide Lutheranism presents many challenges for Lutheran theology in America. While the past 400 years of American Lutheran history has grappled with what is to be the shape of Lutheranism in the United States (and to what extent will it remain close to or separate from its European forbears), there is no guarantee that these questions will be applicable or relevant to an American Lutheranism in conversation with Lutherans from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. What American Lutherans do have in common with Lutherans around the world are the Lutheran confessional documents, though undoubtedly there exists an even greater range of interpretation and application in worldwide Lutheranism—analysis of which would require an expanded confessional spectrum. At the same time, it is important for American Lutherans to understand our own interpretations of the confessional documents so as to better dialogue with Lutherans in cultural and religious contexts extremely different than our own. To further complicate the issue, many of these African, Asian, and Latin American Lutheran Churches have their roots in missionaries from

[10] Ibid.
[11] "Total Number of Lutherans Worldwide Climbs to Nearly 66 Million," 17 February 04, <http://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwi/en/1404.en.html> (accessed 1/31/06).
[12] "Worldwide Increase Puts LWF Membership at 66 Million," 14 February 05, The Lutheran World Federation, *Lutheran World Information*, <http://www.lutheranworld.org/News/LWI/EN/1611.EN.html> (accessed 1/31/06).

various European and American church bodies, whose mark is likely left in some way in their approaches to the Lutheran Confessions. To be able to articulate one's position amidst a range of understandings will be essential if there is to be any theological dialogue on a world wide basis.

One use of the confessional spectrum in a worldwide context would be to invite Lutheran theologians from around the world to work out their own approach to confessional interpretation based on the categories of the confessional spectrum. The result of this would undoubtedly be a widening (and perhaps a total reorganization) of the spectrum and a critique of its categories. We might find that debates which seem to us as essential to Lutheranism in an American context make little sense to the issues and problems facing Lutherans in other parts of the world. How the Confessions speak in different ways in different contexts could be extremely enlightening to our own understandings. What do our church dividing issues look like from the outside? Are we being true to our own (claimed) approaches to the Confessions (or even the Bible)? The confessional spectrum can also be a tool for dialogue with Lutherans around the world. American Lutherans could use it to better formulate our positions in comparison with other ways of seeing things. Lutherans from other places could use the spectrum as an aid in understanding the (probably dizzying) range of ways the Confessions are used among Lutherans in America.

Conclusion

The chief reason, however, for searching "*toward* a Lutheran confessional theology for the twenty-first century" is that I don't believe that a single method for interpreting the Lutheran Confessions has yet been found—nor, given our historical investigations, will it ever be definitively found—and so Lutherans who take up the theological task in the twenty-first century will wrestle with a number of methods to seek which one (or ones) are best for their time and place. This conclusion (based on historical evidence) shifts the task of confessional interpretation away from a purely descriptive historical task toward a constructive, theological task. When the question of confessional interpretation is an open one, and a wide variety of available approaches present themselves as valid (as we have seen seems to be the case in the ELCA), one is free to choose among many valid options. The question then becomes: if all methods are equally possible, are they equally useful, helpful, and constructive for Lutheran confessional theology in the twenty-first century? Into this sea of possibilities, a framework for evaluating various claims can be of extreme help. Perhaps, in the end, the greatest contribution of the confessional spectrum is not in locating the "Type Three" method as a center point between absolutizing and relativizing approaches or advocating this approach as the most helpful for the Church's task of proclamation in the twenty-first century (both of which I believe to be true). Instead what we find is not a *method* for twenty-first century confessional theology, but rather a *methodology*.

Ted Peters notes that "method and methodology are not synonymous; and, although they are often confused, they can be distinguished." He defines "method" as "a way or means for disclosing truth" whereas "methodology is reflection on method…The methodology section of a systematic theology deals with epistemology, with questions such as: How does the theologian know? What is the nature of revelation: What authority does scripture have? What role do faith and reason play? What method should we follow?"[13] While we have been looking at the various methods Lutheran theologians in America use towards the Lutheran Confessions, the confessional spectrum has been our methodological tool, allowing for comparison and classification so as to put the various methods in relationship to one another. Thus our question becomes methodological as well: How can we, in our context, look at the various methods available and adopt one (or several) as best suited for our theological tasks?

In a context such as the ELCA in which a wide variety of methods of confessional interpretation exist side by side, with ardent supporters and detractors all with historical and theological backup, it becomes necessary to move beyond the polemic and seek to engage each method on its own terms. What is needed is a methodology that does not assume its method is so well documented historically, theologically, rationally, emotionally, spiritually, contextually, etc that it is unwilling to engage theologically with those who disagree. The confessional spectrum allows us to see the range of approaches (some which may in fact be particularly suited to particular contexts but not others) without simply saying how someone else's interpretation is insufficient compared to our own. One could claim

[13] Ted Peters, *God—The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era,* second edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 35.

that this is simply a call to "play nice," to give each approach it space to think whatever it wants, to all be Lutheran together and not worry about our differences. That is one approach to Lutheran unity to be sure (and one that has historical precedence) and yet, I think the true value of this methodology is not glossing over differences, but utilizing out different approaches, understandings, and conclusions to engage more fully with the theological task before us. I believe the confessional spectrum will make Lutherans argue more, not less, and yet will help us to frame our arguments constructively and to be able to listen to voices coming from other perspectives. If we in the ELCA, as many believe, are destined to split again along lines of confessional interpretation we will lose the ability to truly engage with one another. If we allow seemingly church dividing issues such as ordination of homosexual persons and church polity to split us into various camps, we will become better versed in our own understandings for sure, and will likely engage in more focused polemics, but we will lose the possibility for constructive theology that emerges when we engage in dialogue with those who disagree with us in the context of Christian community.

. To me, the approach that is best suited for confessional Lutheran theology for the twenty-first century in America is the active engagement of the confessional documents both in their own context and ours that is the method of Type Three. This method is neither exclusive nor inclusive—it offers neither pat answers nor easy outs—but rather demands constant theological reflection and prayerful discernment. At their best, I believe that a similar method was employed by Luther and the other authors of the confessional documents, and has been a method (but clearly not *the* method) with which Lutherans have approached the Confessions ever since. But it is not on historical criteria that this method stands and falls, but rather its ability to proclaim the Triune God, made manifest in the Word made Flesh, in this time and place. Because of this, the conclusions this method draws will undoubtedly change—evidence not of wavering doctrinal confidence nor capitulation to the contemporary context, but of the living proclamation of the Word in a new time and place.

In the end, however, it is not the chosen method that offers the most hope for the future of Lutheran confessional theology in America, but rather the possibility for the variety of perspectives that exist (and likely aren't going to go away) to engage theologically with one another. It is in the conversation—the working out of our confessional Theology with fear and trembling—that the most meaningful theological work can come to the surface. Even Type Three needs the other types to keep it in the center (and to keep it honest to its own method): it needs Type One to constantly remind it of the eternal and unchanging Word, and it needs Type Five to remind it of the Word that becomes incarnate in particular times and places—and together with all the other intermediate and not-yet-classified types to engage it in theological dialogue. The Good News is that Lutheran theology is particularly suited for the task of holding two (or more) seeming contradictions in tension. What is needed for the twenty-first century is a confessional methodology that seeks to do the same.

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Appendix

Roadmaps to Grace:

Five types of Lutheran Confessional Subscription

This article first appeared in
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Abstract: Though all pastors in North American Lutheran Churches are expected to "subscribe" to the Lutheran Confessions, there are many different understandings as to what this means, each of which is tied to a particular understanding of the Lutheran Confessions themselves. Through the use of a methodological tool, the "Confessional Spectrum," five approaches are presented. The author maintains that one of these approaches, "Roadmaps to Grace," is the most helpful method for Lutheran Confessional theology in the 21st Century.

Key Terms: Confessional Spectrum, Confessional subscription, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Book of Concord, Confessional theology

David Truemper in an article entitled "Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology" writes that "the Lutheran Confessional writings have become problematic for many if not most of the Lutheran churches."[1] While the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America binds it in terms of doctrine to the

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[1] David G. Truemper, "Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology," in *Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology,* eds. Niels Henrik Gregerson, Bo Holm, Ted Peters, and Peter Widmann, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 131.

Lutheran Confessions and in the rite of ordination ELCA pastors commit to "preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions"[2] one is hard pressed to find resources for precisely how it is that the Lutheran Confession are to serve as "true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures."[3] Many Lutheran theologians and historians, including Truemper,[4] Carl Braaten,[5] E. Clifford Nelson,[6] and Charles Arand,[7] have noted that Lutheran thinking on the Confessions is polarized into two camps—one which views the Confessions as an absolute authority and the last word on all things Lutheran, and another which sees the documents as so historically conditioned as to be hardly applicable to theology and Christian life today.[8] The question of subscription to the Lutheran Confessions becomes similarly polarized. One either wholeheartedly subscribes with all the dogmatic gusto of the 16th Century reformers, or one subscribes quietly with one's finger's crossed hoping his or her candidacy committee, bishops, and congregation won't notice. In fact, there exists not simply a polarity, but a whole range of understandings of how the Lutheran Confessions are understood and used in the ELCA and so a range of understandings as to just what it means to subscribe to the Confessions.[9] And yet, I believe there is a particular way of

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[2] *Occasional Services, A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1982), 194.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Truemper, 131.
[5] Carl Braaten, "The Fundamentals of Dogmatics," in *Christian Dogmatics,* 2 Vols., eds. Carl E Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:51.
[6] E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America 1914-1970*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 83.
[7] Charles Arand, *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity,* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), 16.
[8] These two ways of looking at the Confessions are sometimes generalized into the labels conservative/liberal or modernist/fundamentalist, but these labels do not accurately describe the complexity of the theological debate in American Lutheranism. For discussion of how this can be seen the Lutheran mergers of the middle part of the 20th Century see Mark Granquist, "Lutherans in the United States, 1930-1960: Searching for the 'Center'," in *Re-forming the Center : American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present,* eds. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 234-251.
[9] In previous generations, and even in the early days of the ELCA, the understanding of the Confessions within a particular Lutheran church body was less of an issue as our American synods and congregations had a rather homogeneous

approaching and subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions that is best for the 21st Century, not to the exclusion of other approaches, but in dialogue with them. I call this approach to the Confessions "Roadmaps to Grace."

The concept of the Lutheran Confessions as a map is not a new one. Carl Braaten employs it to point to the two poles: "[The Confessions] are like a map giving directions on how to find the way through the scripture. The absolute confessionalist is like the one who studies the map but neglects to take the trip. The anticonfessionalist sets off on the trip with no map for guidance, and quickly gets lost on the way."[10] Braaten's argument is that the map has hermeneutical significance because it points to "the central message of the Scriptures as a whole."[11] The last few decades of American scholarship in the Confessions emphasizes this hermeneutical tie of the Confessions to Scripture. Günter Gassmann, Eric W. Gritch, Robert W. Jenson, and Charles Arand all suggest (echoing Vilmos Vajta) that the Confessions are useful particularly in relationship to Scripture and as a resource for the church.[12] And yet, even given this rather widespread agreement as to how the Confessions are to function, it is difficult to nail down precisely what this means for the life of the church, or how it is to function among those who subscribe to the Confessions.

For this reason, I wish to extend the metaphor a bit. If the Confessions are to function as "Roadmaps to Grace," then the Scriptures become "the road." In this metaphor, the Confessions are not "maps for navigating Scripture" per se, because in the end, the map does not point to the "road." Instead, both map and road point to "the Way"—the Confessions, surely, but the Bible also point not to themselves but to Christ. Still, they are not "maps to Christ" as if

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character. Conflicts were largely between "our synod's" (correct) interpretation and "their" (incorrect) interpretation. The formation of the ELCA, however, brought together an incredible range of interpretations into one American church body for the first time. No longer was one beholden to the "way the Confessions have always been understood" but, in this more varied context, one is able to choose from among these understandings (or, perhaps, formulate their own). See Charles Arand, *Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Unity,* for a look at the varied interpretations of Lutherans in American in the 17th through the 20th centuries.

[10] Carl Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:53.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Truemper summarizes nicely the basic approaches of these theologians in *Future of Lutheran Theology,* 132-133.

through them one could find Christ by one's own effort, rather they are intended aid in the proclamation of God's Grace and its appropriation by each troubled conscience. Seeing the Confessions as roadmaps does not deny that the road of Scripture can be navigated without their help. And yet, after 2000 years of travel, there are many well worn paths that lead one astray, and with a good map travelers today need not make they journey as if it has never been done before. Still, one needs to keep alert to new dangers along the way, as well as recognize that some conditions the map describes are not as dangerous as they once were. Following the Lutheran Confessions as a "Roadmap to Grace" means neither blindly following nor ignoring them, but using them as a resource and a means for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this time and place.

Confessional Subscription as a Roadmap to Grace

What does this mean in terms of Confessional subscription? First of all, subscription seen in this way becomes a commitment to engage with the Confessional documents and their theological formulations. This does not mean simply parroting their theology or language, but an honest endeavor to sort out their significance in their own time as well as in ours. It means allowing our theology and practice to be criticized by the Confessions, not so that our pure Lutheran theology can avoid being labeled "Reformed," "Catholic," "Anabaptist," or any "other" in a slanderous sense, but so that we can avoid (and be witness to) theological pitfalls to which our conceptions might lead. Luther and the authors of the Confessions were not critical of Zwingli's understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist because it was "Calvinist," but because of the theological implications it had on the incarnation, the two natures of Christ, the means of Grace, anthropology, and a whole range of theological issues. Confessional subscription does not mean bringing up old theological battles for their own sake, but it does mean keeping aware lest in trying to proclaim the Word, we inadvertently deny Christ. This leads us into ecumenical dialogues with a particular contribution, but also with the ability to listen to what others have to say without fearing some sort of "slippery slope," resorting to finding the least common denominator, or requiring we adopt another's entire conceptual framework.

In the emerging postmodern world, however, one of the greatest implications of Confessional subscription is for us as Lutherans to recognize and confess that our reading of Scripture and our doing of theology are biased by these Confessional formulations. By this I do not mean that we should therefore seek to overcome this bias, but rather that we acknowledge that we see the world, the Bible, and the human condition in terms that draw on the Lutheran Confessions—and claim this as our own. Gone are the days when one can legitimately claim that he or she operates without any hermeneutical bias, and Lutherans in the 21st Century have an advantage in that we have documents which help us give this bias some concrete form. And yet, in this understanding, we continue to take up this bias not because it is some sort of "revealed Truth" or the only legitimate way to frame the teachings of Christianity, but because it is and has been a powerful way that the Gospel has been proclaimed and which the Holy Spirit has used to reveal God to us and for us. Subscribing to the Confessions, then, means allowing them to draw us again and again into Scripture and toward the Word proclaimed for us. It also means continually testing whether this bias helps or hinders the proclamation of the Gospel, and therefore if it is one we wish to claim. At the heart of the matter, subscription to the Lutheran Confessions means taking up again and again the messy and uncertain theological task with which we are charged so that we might best proclaim Christ in this time and place.

Five Types or Models of Confessional Subscription

Understanding Confessional subscription in terms of "Roadmaps to Grace" is not the only way to understand our relationship to the Lutheran Confessions for the 21st Century. Indeed, there are at least 5 different models for understanding what it means to subscribe to the Confessions currently operative in the ELCA, each of which reveals a particular way of understanding and applying the Confessional documents. I have laid these approaches out on a typology I call the "Confessional Spectrum" that describes five "types" or "models" of Lutheran Confessional theology that see and use the Confessional documents in five different ways: 1) as unconditional doctrinal authority, 2) as historically conditioned authority, 3) as roadmaps to Grace, 4) as primary theological source, and 5) as an historical source among many.

When the Confessions are understood as unconditional doctrinal authority, subscription means viewing their formulations as unchangeable presentations of biblical Truth, and agreeing to preach and teach without variance from this Truth. When they are understood as historically conditioned authority, subscription means viewing the Confessions as authoritative on all matters, except when the historical context has changed so as to make such formulations irrelevant. Understood as primary theological source, subscription means looking to the Confessions for theological authority, but not in any absolute sense, and preferring other sources when the context calls for their voice. When understood as an historical source among many, Confessional subscription means drawing on the Confessions when helpful, but not being tied to their theological conceptions. Even in these short descriptions it is clear that there is a wide range ways in which Confessions are understood and therefore what Confessional subscription means. A closer look at the each of the types on the Confessional Spectrum based on how each engages and employs the Confessional documents can be a valuable tool as we seek to discern the future of Lutheran Confessional subscription in the 21st Century.

The Concept of a Spectrum as a Tool for Understanding Theological Models

The concept of the "Confessional Spectrum" is greatly indebted to a similar concept developed by Hans Frei[13] and presented in a book entitled *Types of Christian Theology*.[14] Frei outlines five "types" of Christian theology and provides a single representative theologian as "typical" for each type.[15] Using the typological tool aids Frei in evaluation of the various approaches on their own terms. This does not exclude evaluative analysis (Frei himself prefers one of the types on his spectrum)[16] but rather encourages and deepens such analysis.

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[13] Frei's concept is clearly indebted to the five types in the classic work of Frei's doctoral advisor H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Both are also indebted to three types of Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 Volumes, Olive Wyon, trans. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1992; original English edition, London: Allen and Unwin, 1931). I am grateful to GTU doctoral candidate Derek R. Nelson for drawing my attention to this connection.

[14] Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology,* George Hunsigner and William C. Placher, ed. (New Haven: Yale, 1992). This book was compiled and published by Frei's colleagues and students after his death.

[15] In Frei's typology and ours each "type" is not intended to be the exclusive individual proponent of that type of theology, but rather to illustrate the type which might be held by various theologians.

[16] Ibid., 44.

Frei's question—the question of the legitimacy of doing theology and its defense (and respectability) in the university—is quite different from our current question. Our question is not nearly as broad as Frei's, focusing not on the whole of theological method, but on Lutheran theological approaches to the Confessional documents. Our "poles" and "types" therefore entirely different. We shall borrow only Frei's method and some elements for theological analysis. Specifically, we shall set forth the Confessional Spectrum in five types, each represented by an individual or "school" of Lutheran theology.[17] As with Frei, these representatives may not fit the type exactly, and yet they are useful for illustration. Again similarly to Frei, though the effect of setting forth a spectrum is to include a wide range of approaches to the Confessional documents as legitimate "Confessional" theologies, this does not exclude the possibility of determining the comparative value of one method against another. Rather, the tool is intended to make such a comparison easier.

We shall now turn to the spectrum itself, with a brief description and example of each of the types. Our purpose is not exhaustively to describe each of the types, but rather to set forth an outline that can be helpful in looking at approaches to Confessional methodology.[18] I

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[17] Carl Braaten also identifies five types of Confessional theology, but does not discuss them in relationship to one another, nor does place them on a spectrum. Braaten's types are helpful, but not identical to ours. Indeed, in the Confessional Spectrum, several of Braaten's types would find themselves together. (Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology,* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 29-31). Also, his types are not very exact when looking at particular examples. For example, the Finns (who will be addressed later in this article) seem, in Braaten's categories to fall under what he calls "liberal nonconfessional Lutheranism" of which Braaten writes: "This position leaps backward over the period of 17th Century orthodoxy and The Book of Concord to the creative years of the young reformer, Martin Luther" (*Principles*, 30). But they also partially fit his type called "hypothetical confessional Lutheranism" which commits "us to the confessions only 'insofar as' they are relevant to modern times" (Ibid., 31). In terms of their ecumenical motivations they also fit into "constructive confessional Lutheranism" in which Lutherans "have come out of their confessional ghetto, prepared to reenter the mainstream of the Catholic tradition along with other Christian communities in the ecumenical movement." (Ibid.) The main difference between Braaten's types and ours are that while Braaten examines "various attitudes among Lutherans to our confessional heritage," (Ibid., 29) the Confessional Spectrum addresses the more tangible ways in which the Confessional documents are actually used, not just the attitude held toward them.

[18] A more in-depth look at the Confessional Spectrum can be found in the work from which the typology presented here is condensed: Erik T.R. Samuelson, "Five

believe that Type Three, "Roadmaps to Grace," is the most useful method for Lutheran theology for the 21st Century. Nevertheless, I maintain that the Confessional Spectrum can be a useful methodological tool regardless of whether one agrees with this conclusion.

<u>Type 1: Confessions as Unconditional Doctrinal Authority—Robert D. Preus</u>

The first type on the Confessional spectrum is the easiest to define. Theologians of the first type are the most likely of the types to describe themselves as "Confessional" Lutheran theologians: "Confessional" over and against other Lutheran theologians and "Lutheran" over and against other Christian theologians. They are also the most likely to make extensive use of the Lutheran Confessional documents throughout their theological writings. To theologians of this type to be "Confessional" means to be "truly Lutheran," and being "truly Lutheran" means being "truly Christian." Our example of this type, Robert D. Preus, makes quite clear how he thinks the Confessions are to be understood: "May I remind the reader that, although this book describes what was taught 400 years ago…what was taught then is precisely, or ought to be, what is believed and taught and confessed by every Lutheran pastor today."[19]

As a Type One theologian, Preus sees the Lutheran Confessions as having as much claim on Christians today as when originally written because of its unchanging doctrinal content. For Preus, the Confessions have status as truth claims, which he sees as original to the documents themselves:

> The Lutheran Confessions represent the result of more than 50 years of earnest endeavor by Martin Luther and his followers to give Biblical and clear expression to

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Types of Lutheran Confessional Theology: Toward a Method of Lutheran Confessional Theology in America for the 21st Century," (MA Thesis, Graduate Theological Union, 2006). However, that work as well is intended to outline the Confessional Spectrum as a methodological tool, rather than to be an exhaustive explication of it.

[19] Robert D. Preus, *Getting into the Theology of Concord: A Study of the Book of Concord,* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), 9. Though Preus is a theologian of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, his understanding of the Confessions is one that is also found among members of the ELCA, and he serves well to illustrate the method of this type.

> their religious convictions. The important word in that definition is the word 'convictions.' This word reveals the spirit in which the Lutheran Confessions were written, not a spirit of hesitation and doubt but of deepest confidence that Lutherans, when they were writing and subscribing the Confessions and creeds, because their content was all drawn from the Word of God, Scripture, were affirming the truth, the saving truth.[20]

In contrast to the "relativism and indifference" of our day[21], the Confessions understood in this way, set forth the pure doctrine on account of which Christians are able to "be certain of their salvation and can formulate and confess true statements about God and all the articles of Christian faith."[22] Preus sees pure doctrine as important for several reasons: teaching purely gives the best praise and honor to God, doctrinal uniformity is how unity is found within the Church, doctrine is God's own revelation, but in the end "Pure Christian doctrine is important for our Lutheran Confessions because it brings eternal salvation."[23]

Applied to theology, this approach to the Confessions chiefly sets out to explain how the doctrines of the Confessions apply to current situations. For example, Preus concludes a section of the separation of church and state with a quote from the Augsburg Confession and comments: "After 450 years, years often of frustration and failure, [the Augsburg Confession] still remains the best formula for the proper relation between church and state, for good and enlightened citizenship, and for effective and intelligent social action by Christians living in a secular society."[24] This method holds for the other theological points he makes on Christology, the centrality of Justification, the work of the Spirit, and the sacraments. The defining characteristic of this type is framing the theological questions of today in terms of the 16th Century debates and arguments in the Lutheran Confessions, as well as seeing the doctrines of the Confessions as presenting authoritative theological conclusions in the current context.

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[20] Ibid., 11.
[21] Ibid., 13.
[22] Ibid., 12.
[23] Ibid., 13.
[24] Ibid., 80.

This leads to continued diligence against creeping Reformed or Catholic points of view, and often puts the Confessional documents in the position to function as an "electric fence" against doctrines and practices that do not reflect "true" Lutheran theology.[25]

Type 2: Confessions as Historically Conditioned Authority—James A. Nestingen

Like Type One, Type Two theologians are also inclined to use the term "Confessional" as a descriptor of what sets their theology apart from other forms of Lutheran theology. For example, the WordAlone Network—a Lutheran movement of which our example of Type Two, James A. Nestingen, is a key theological advisor—has as the header of their website "Building an evangelical, confessional Lutheran future in America."[26] While Nestingen intends a strong tie to the Confessional documents, he warns against setting the Confessions over and against the Word of Scripture saying "if the Confessions take over, replacing the living word with routine and repetition, they sap faith of its nourishment."[27]

Type Two recognizes that the Confessions were written in a particular context and therefore may not be directly applicable today, as evidenced by Nestingen's claim that the "Confessions are also challenged by experience. A good share of what they have to say is based on their perception of daily life."[28] He advises that one ask if "changes have put us out of touch with the daily experiences of the writers. If and when that's the case, the Confessions can't simply be reasserted—as if our lives must conform to their way of thinking."[29] Certain elements of the Confessional documents are impacted greatly by the circumstances in which they were written and cannot simply be equated with doctrinal truth claims. Nestingen writes: "they were written 400 to 450 years ago in a time of dukes and emperors, knights

[25] This image of the Confessions as an "electric fence" comes from David Truemper, "Future of Lutheran Theology," 133.
[26] http://www.wordalone.org, (accessed 2/19/06). The history of the WordAlone Network (and its subsequent organizations) can be found in Mark Granquist, "Word Alone and the Future of Lutheran Denominationalism," in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the 21st Century*, Richard Cimino, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 62-80.
[27] James A. Nestingen, *The Faith We Hold: The Living Witness of Luther and the Augsburg Confessions,* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 94.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 94-95.

and squires, plagues and pox. They know nothing of democratic government, separation of church and state, or many of our modern ways. If the Confessions' age puts them out of touch, simply repeating their words won't solve the problem."[30]

At the same time, theologians of Type Two are insistent that the Confessions remain doctrinally authoritative. For Nestingen this does not mean disregarding those elements of the Confessional documents that are heavily influenced by the contexts of their times, but rather reinterpreting them in terms of the current context. This can clearly be seen in the way in which Nestingen finds support for a strongly congregational polity and a bit of anti-clericalism in the Confessional documents. He draws evidence for the local congregation as the basic understanding of the church as well as a challenge to the power of pastors from Articles 14, 21, and 28 of the Augsburg Confession saying: "The Augsburg Confession starts where the trouble often does—with pastors."[31] He writes that "Article 14 insists that the ministry belongs to the congregation, not to pastors or bishops"[32] a conclusion that is not the only possible reading of Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession, which reads (in its entirety): "Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper public call."[33] He interprets Article 21, originally written in the context of an understanding that praying to the saints of the church gained merit towards salvation, as speaking against another sort of " 'invocation of the saints' such as 'Pastor So-and-So did it this way' or 'But we've always…'."[34] Aside from the phrase "invocation of the saints" this interpretation has little in common with the original purpose of the section, though Nestingen sees it as a valid way to apply it to a contemporary context. Similarly, Nestingen states that "Article 28 tells bishops to do what they're called to do: preach and teach—and to keep their rules and opinions in check."[35] Article 28 does in fact deal with the power of bishops, but is dealing mostly with the claim of bishops in the 16th Century to political power in the civil sphere. As

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[30] Ibid. 94.
[31] Ibid., 63.
[32] Ibid., 64.
[33] "The Augsburg Confession" in *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 46.
[34] Nestingen, 64.
[35] Ibid., 64.

this situation is no longer applicable, Nestingen interprets this to apply also to bishops wielding power in congregations, though Article 28 itself stipulates that "churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops, according to the saying [Luke 10:16], "Whoever listens to you listens to me."[36]

Thus we see the characteristic interpretation of Type Two still holds the doctrinal validity of the Confessional documents. It is more aware than Type One that one cannot simply transpose the doctrines of the 16th Century onto situations of a later age because there are places and issues in which the contexts are different enough to impact what the teaching ought to be. However, rather than disregarding the teachings where there is a difference in context (which, we shall see, is characteristic of Type Four) theologians of Type Two tend to reinterpret the Confessions to help them be applicable to the current context.

Type 3: Confessions as Roadmaps to Grace—David G. Truemper and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

David G. Truemper, our example of Type Three, poses this question to the Confessional documents: "How may we take the Lutheran Confessional Writings[37] seriously as confessions of faith for their time and place in the sixteenth century, and still—or perhaps precisely thus—find them helpful for our place and time?"[38] What sets Type Three apart from the rest of the spectrum is that it takes up both parts of this question together. Truemper notes that his method "assumes an open-ended struggle, not a foregone conclusion. It calls for trust as we wrestle together for ways to witness to the gospel in our world."[39] It is this struggle—the active engagement of the Confessional documents both in their original context and the contemporary context— that is the distinguishing feature of the Type Three method.

Truemper approaches Confessions with a method "that tries to read the Symbols and the contemporary situation together in such a way that the evangelical witness of the Symbols might be transmitted into the church's present situation as a resource and guide to faithful

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36 Augsburg Confession, *Book of Concord,* 93.
37 Truemper abbreviates "Lutheran Confessional Writings" as LCW, we have replaced the acronym with the full phrase here and throughout.
38 Truemper, "Future of Lutheran Theology," 133.
39 Ibid., 134.

life and work."[40] Truemper outlines a method guided by what he calls a "principle of 'evangelical analogy,'" which has four parts:

> (1) take the Lutheran Confessional Writings seriously as both confessions of faith and witnesses to the biblical gospel; (2) honor the historical situation in which the particular confession and witness of the Lutheran Confessional Writing was first made; (3) treat the Lutheran Confessional Writings as *exemplary* confession and witness; and (4) understand the Lutheran Confessional Writings as problem-solving literature.[41]

Truemper finds it important to recognize the Confessions not just as documents, but as living confessions, confessions of faith: "They state faith's confidence in the promise of the gospel and in so doing they share in a confessions most significant attribute, namely, they bear witness to the biblical gospel."[42] He does not deny that the Confessions can bear doctrine, but insists they do so, "in language that is very much confession of faith."[43] Type Three theology also recognizes the contextuality of the Confessional documents, but does not seek to dismiss or explain away the differences that emerge when trying to interpret 16th Century documents in a 21st Century context but to hold the differences in tension. Truemper notes that "the confessional writings are every bit the product of their times" and are thus historically conditioned in a way "not unlike the biblical documents to whose gospel they bear witness."[44] Truemper calls for a Lutheran Confessional hermeneutic that is similar to the Lutheran biblical hermeneutic.[45] In this method, engaging with original context is of extreme importance. Indeed, minding the Confessions

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[40] Ibid., 133-134. Truemper makes clear that he is not after the theological method of the Confessions themselves but rather "a theological method for the positive use of the confessional writings by today's church and its theologians, pastors, and catechists as they go about the task of making the Lutheran Confessional Writings into a resource for today's church." (Ibid., 131)
[41] Ibid., 143.
[42] Ibid., 135.
[43] Ibid., 136. For example he sees the "evident self understanding" of the Augsburg Confession as being "both a confession of faith and a witness to the biblical gospel. Only as such does it function also as a summary of doctrinal points." (Ibid., 137)
[44] Ibid., 137.
[45] Ibid., 138.

"historical situatedness in the circumstances of church and state in the 16th Century provides the only possibility for hearing these documents as confession of faith and as witness to the biblical gospel."[46]

Rather than speaking at length about their doctrinal authority or lack thereof (as is the case with our other types), Truemper is interested in the Confessions as exemplary confession and witness: "We would not care about the questions of the resourcefulness of the Lutheran Confessional Writings for today's churches if we did not regard their confession of faith and their witness to the biblical gospel as fundamentally *exemplary*."[47] This does not mean simply reiterating the documents' theological points, but rather to engage theologically following their example.[48] The task of Confessional theology, then, is not to "add up all the confessional assertions" but rather to "learn from their exemplary gospel-serving how to serve up gospel to the contemporary issues and problems we face in today's church."[49] Viewing the Confessional documents as exemplary is a call for active confession and witness in the contemporary context.

In this view the Confessions are not to be clung to as doctrinal summaries intended to test Lutheran orthodoxy, nor dismissed as historical artifacts. Rather they are to be engaged as a resource for reflecting theologically on contemporary issues. The Confessions are, "like the biblical documents to whose truth and gospel they bear witness, best taken as 'problem solving' literature."[50] It is precisely the engagement of Type Three that allows the Confessions to find a way to move beyond the questions posed in the 16th Century and engage in the same sort of active theological reflection that generated the Confessional documents in the first place.[51] When one views the

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid. Emphasis original.
[48] This engagement is not intended to deny the validity of the "theological points" or to suggest that only the manner, but not the content is important. Rather, to "engage theologically" in this way implies a continued engagement with the theological positions of the Confessions, not merely to parrot their answers.
[49] Ibid., 139.
[50] Ibid.
[51] For examples of Truemper's method in his theological work see David G. Truemper, "The Catholicity of the Augsburg Confession: CA VII and FC X on the Grounds for the Unity of the Church," *Sixteenth Century Journal,* XI No. 3 (1980): 11-23.; David G. Truemper, "Evangelism: Liturgy *versus* Church Growth," *Lutheran Forum,* 24 (Fall, 1990): 30-33.; and a particular fine example of this method at work in David G. Truemper, "The Role and Authority of the Lutheran

Confessions as problem-solving literature there is, says Truemper "positive impetus to engage in the creative and contemporary problem-solving, that is, in evangelically analogous diagnosis and prognosis for today's church and the new and distinctive issues that it faces as it seeks to live and confess and believe 'Lutheranly' in the new millennium."[52]

Though Truemper delineates this method, a strong example of this approach to the Confessions can be found in the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.[53] For example, in response to a Confessing Church pastor who was writing against the Lutheran practice of infant baptism, Bonhoeffer wrote "A Theological Position Paper on the Question of Baptism"[54] in which he takes up the theological issues in a four fold way: first through exegesis, then by reflecting on the theological issues through biblical themes, next by bringing in the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions, and then finally reflecting on the practical theological consequences. It is clear in Bonhoeffer's analysis that he is greatly influenced by the Lutheran Confessions, which describe the church, sacraments, and faith much in the way that Bonhoeffer does in this treatise.[55] In fact it would be quite easy for Bonhoeffer to use the Confessions directly and authoritatively for support on this issue, as he would be likely to do if he were operating with a Type One or Type Two understanding. Bonhoeffer instead uses the understandings outlined in the Confessions as a tool for going deeper into scripture.

Confessional Writings: Do Lutherans Really 'Condemn the Anabaptists?'," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76 No. 3 (July 2002): 299-313.

[52] Truemper, "Future of Lutheran Theology," 140.

[53] This discussion of Bonhoeffer is a very brief summary of Chapter IV of "Five Types of Lutheran Confessional Theology." See Samuelson, 81-98, in which I describe in greater depth how Bonhoeffer employs this method not only in the treatise on Baptism presented here but in also in his *Ethics* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works vol. 6, Reinhard Krauss, trans., Charles C. West, and Douglass W. Stott, ed. Clifford J. Green [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005]).

[54] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "A Theological Position Paper on the Question of Baptism," in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment:1940-1945,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works Vol. 16, trans. Lisa Dahill, ed. Mark Brocker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006 [forthcoming]). I am grateful to Dr. Mark Brocker for providing early access to these works and for his council in shaping my investigation into Bonhoeffer's method of Confessional interpretation. Indeed, it was this work on Bonhoeffer that became the starting point for this entire project.

[55] For a relatively straightforward example of this, see the explanation of the third article of the Creed from "The Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, 355. Also the emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit in baptism in the section on "The Sacrament of Holy Baptism" also in "The Small Catechism," *Book of Concord,* 359.

In his exegetical and biblical theological reflection, as well as his investigation into the Confessional documents themselves, Bonhoeffer finds not a mandate for infant baptism, but at the same time a strong word that the practice not be forbidden: "The confessional writings rightly resist the fanatics who forbid infant baptism; rather, on the basis of scripture and its "key," the doctrine of justification, they open the way for infant baptism."[56] Though he cites the very argument from Article IX of the Augsburg Confession, he does not use it to assert that infant baptism must be practiced. Instead it leads him again into deeper reflection on what baptism is and what it does—and whether infant baptism is theologically useful and appropriate for the proclamation of the Gospel—calling for the sort of active engagement of the Confessional documents and scripture characteristic of Type Three.

Bonhoeffer, rather than seeing the exegetical task (with the exegete's own—perhaps unidentified—hermeneutical bias) as the final word, seeks instead to identify the theological issues that can aid in understanding and reflection. Similarly, rather than using the Confessional teachings as the final word in the argument (which in this case he could easily have done) instead he uses them in such a way that they become the first word in opening up the Bible. Bonhoeffer's Type Three Confessional theology helps him to sort out whether a particular action or practice best communicates the reality of the saving nature of Christ. Importantly, Bonhoeffer's approach also does not require those with whom he dialogues to adopt his method for Confessional theology, but allows him to present his best theological arguments into a conversation where not everyone agrees on how the Confessions are to speak to this particular issue.

Type 4: Confessions as Primary Theological Source—The Finnish Lutheran Scholars

The representative for Type Four on our spectrum is not an individual, but a group of Finnish scholars engaged in a renewed study of Martin Luther in the context of ecumenical relationships with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Tuomo Mannermaa and his students make up the majority of this "Finnish School."[57] In contrast with

[56] Bonhoeffer, 1051.
[57] An introduction to the Finnish Lutheran School can be found in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

what they see as the dominant Lutheran understanding of justification (shaped more by the Formula of Concord and later Lutheran reformers than by Luther's own teaching) the Finns have sought to go beyond the Lutheran Confessional documents and back to what they see as the source, Luther himself, in an attempt to re-frame the understanding of justification in order to better facilitate ecumenical dialogue, particularly with the Eastern Orthodox church.

The Finns, in seeking a parallel in Lutheran parlance for the Eastern Orthodox concept of *theosis,*[58] found in the writings of Luther frequent mention of "union with Christ" and "indwelling of Christ," which seemed to them to be equivalent to the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. The Finns see these concepts as prominent in Luther yet largely absent from the Lutheran Confessional documents and subsequent Lutheranism. They also see the concept of *theosis* in Luther's thought as being at odds with what had come to be the general Lutheran understanding of justification that is presented in the Lutheran Confessional documents. According to the Finns, the later reformers and subsequent Lutheran interpreters failed to take into account the fullness of Luther's concept of justification which included "union with Christ." They see at the root of this an emphasis in the Formula of Concord on merely the forensic nature of justification.[59] The concept of *theosis* in Luther then becomes the key to reuniting the forensic and effective aspects of justification in such a way that the ecumenical dialogue might be possible without the baggage of the Formula of Concord.

As theologians of Type Four, the Finnish scholars do not dismiss outright the Confessional documents. They do, however, find in the Confessional documents (particularly in the Formula of Concord) elements of the particular context in which they were written, elements which distort what they see as the essential elements of Lutheran theology. Mannermaa writes critically of the understanding of justification present in the Lutheran Confessional documents: "In

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[58] "Divinization." Justo González compares this concept prevalent in the Eastern churches to the Western notion of sanctification. He writes: "Its goal is not the disappearance of all distance between God and the believer, but making the believer more capable of being in the presence of God." (Justo L. González. *Essential Theological Terms,* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005], 171.)

[59] "Forensic justification" refers to the aspect of justification in Lutheran doctrine in which the human person is seen as righteous in God's eyes when in fact they remain sinners. The other aspect of justification is "effective justification," in which the sinner becomes righteous and sin is gradually purged from the person.

presenting the notion that the presence of the Trinity in faith is not the same phenomenon as the "righteousness of faith," the Formula of Concord draws on the later theology of Lutheranism, upon which practically all subsequent Lutheran theology after Luther relies."[60] He then contrasts Luther's theology of justification as divine indwelling which he believes "is, undoubtedly, defined differently from the formulation of the Formula of Concord."[61] What defines the Finns as theologians of Type Four is not their appeal to Luther, but rather the way in which they see contextual elements in the Confessional documents which are not relevant to theology today. They see the issue of justification as presented in the Formula of Concord as one such element defined by the context of the time, and they find another authority for their theology on this particular issue, without outright disregarding the Confessions as a whole.

Unlike theologians of Type Two, the Finns have not appealed to the historical interpretation of the Lutheran Confessions, but rather have largely rejected the way they have been interpreted historically. Thus we can see that theologians of Type Four do not feel the need to reconcile the problematic elements of the Confessional documents into a doctrinal whole, but seeing how dependent these elements are on theological questions and positions of the time in which they were written, the problematic elements cease to have any doctrinal authority. What sets the Finns apart from theologians of Type Five is the fact that theologians of Type Four do not dismiss the concept of doctrinal authority in general, however, but in these cases seek it from outside the Confessional documents.[62]

<u>Type 5: Confessions as an Historical Source Among Many—Marcus Borg</u>

Theologians of Type Five tend to see the Confessional documents as either doctrinal claims that no longer apply to the contemporary context or as theological formulations so tied to the context in which they were written to have little useful theological value in and of themselves. What sets Type Five apart from Type Zero (the anti-type

[60] Tuomo Mannermaa, "Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," in *Union with Christ*, 28.
[61] Ibid.
[62] The Finns look to Luther, Eastern Orthodoxy, and modern ecumenical understandings for this authority, though others might look elsewhere.

on our spectrum)[63] is that Type Five theologians nevertheless reveal some connection to the theological content of the Confessions. Our example for Type Five, Marcus Borg,[64] in his book *The God We Never Knew* uses his own journey from a doctrinally rigid Lutheran upbringing to the Episcopal church to represent a movement from a dogmatic theology (similar to our Type One) towards a "nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic"[65] theology. Though Borg no longer worships in a Lutheran pew and does not frequently use the Confessional documents directly in his theology, he nevertheless retains several distinctive Lutheran elements.

Borg notes that his "childhood package has distinctively Lutheran elements in it" by which he means it was "doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic and oriented toward an afterlife. In its view, being Christian meant believing that a certain set of doctrinal claims were true, and it meant seeking to live in accord with Christianity's ethical teaching. It tended to take the Bible and doctrine literally, unless there were compelling reasons not to."[66] Though Borg does not identify "the doctrine" with the Lutheran Confessional documents, there can be little doubt that this is implied. Faith "meant strong and correct belief. It meant believing what God wanted us to believe, as disclosed in the Bible…For me, that meant believing what we as Lutherans believed."[67]

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[63] Rather than a separate section on Type Zero, which truly falls outside of the Lutheran Confessional Spectrum, we shall say this: Type Zero is a method of "using" the confessional documents that does not engage the documents as such nor their theological content—and thus, aside from some sort of distant or historical claim to the title "Lutheran" is nearly impossible to discern their theology to be "Lutheran" as such.

[64] Though Marcus Borg, is neither a theologian nor (any longer) a Lutheran, his approach to the Confessions is helpful for our typology as there are many who remain Lutheran's and share Borg's method. Borg, a professor of "Religion and Culture" and Jesus Scholar, is an Episcopalian and writes books for a popular rather than academic audience claiming to be a "non specialist." Borg's approach is to draw on his own experience to make available to the non-specialist some rather complex theological ideas. However, his "reflections" reveal an extensive theological bibliography. The index to *The God We Never Knew* cites a wide array of theologians including Karl Barth, Marin Buber, John Hick, Elizabeth Johnson, Sallie McFague, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Paul Tillich just to name a few.

[65] Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith,* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), viii.

[66] Ibid., 19, 2.

[67] Ibid., 18.

Borg today identifies himself with Christians who “seek to take seriously what the Christian tradition and other religions say about God or the sacred, even as they also take seriously what we have come to know in the modern period, but without absolutizing it.”[68] This “revisioned Christianity” has little room in it for doctrinal absolutes or truth claims, though it can recognize in the historical faith formulations elements of truth. Borg finds conceptual help for understanding God in such varied sources as the Hebrew scriptures, St Augustine, Chinese philosopher Lau-tzu, the poetry of William Butler Yeats, the Hindu poet Rabindrahnath Tagore, French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, and evangelist Billy Bray.[69] What matters to Borg is not so much the source of an insight or its claim to absolute truth, but how any theological or faith formulation helps to articulate faith in the contemporary context.

Although the Confessional documents find themselves among this long list of historical and theological formulations, Borg’s theology at times reveals a connection to the Lutheran Confessions. For example, he refers to the dynamic of “Law and Gospel” (though without naming it as such) but because he does not think this concept speaks to the contemporary context he seeks other ways to articulate the concept of God’s grace. [70] Borg also refers to another particularly Lutheran concept—the two kingdoms—but reinterprets it away from its original concept (and context) to represent the class struggle of liberation theology.[71]

In his use of a third particularly Lutheran emphasis, “salvation by grace through faith,” he is much less critical. Borg remarks that his theology of salvation “discloses my Lutheran heritage: salvation comes by grace, and we participate in it through faith.”[72] Borg calls the Lutheran emphasis on grace “the genius of the Lutheran contribution to Christianity.”[73] Though he does not draw on the Lutheran Confessions in his explication of the concepts “grace” and “faith” Borg would have found ample support for his claims that “grace means that salvation comes from God,” and that faith can be understood as “the response to the divine initiative of grace” rather

[68] Ibid., 7.
[69] Ibid., 35-50.
[70] Ibid., 67.
[71] Ibid., 151.
[72] Ibid., 167.
[73] Ibid., 168.

than "believing a particular set of doctrines or biblical statements to be true"[74] Borg does quote "the spiritual mentor of his childhood," Martin Luther, in whose Small Catechism (a Confessional document) Luther writes "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel and enlightened me with His gifts."[75] And yet, even in citing the Lutheran Confessions directly, Borg finds this theological concept valid in contemporary context not because of its doctrinal authority but because, as he says, "it seems to me to speak wisdom."[76] As a Type Five theologian Borg is free to utilize elements of wisdom in the Confessional documents, but is not particularly tied to them, and will use, dismiss, or reinterpret them freely as the contemporary context demands.

Conclusion

In the context of the ELCA in the 21st Century the question of Confessional subscription becomes not which way *must* the Lutheran Confessions be interpreted, but which way is best for this time and place. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial."[77] Similarly, the task of Lutheran theologians in the 21st Century is not discerning which method for Confessional theology is the way in which things have always been done, the way they must be done, or which way seems best to fit in the context of American religion in the 21st Century, but rather which method best proclaims Christ in this time and place. To me, this seems best accomplished by the active, engagement of the Confessional documents both in their own context and ours that is the method of Type Three. This method is neither exclusive nor inclusive—it offers neither pat answers nor easy outs—but rather demands constant theological reflection and prayerful discernment. At their best, I believe that a similar method was employed by Luther and the other authors of the Confessional documents, and has been a method (but clearly not *the* method) with which Lutherans have approached the Confessions ever since. But it is not on these historical criteria that this method stands and falls, but rather its

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[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 171. Borg quotes the Theodore Tappert edition of *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 345.
[76] Borg, 171.
[77] 1 Cor. 6:12 (NRSV)

ability to proclaim the Triune God, made manifest in the Word made flesh, in this time and place. Because of this, the conclusions this method draws will undoubtedly change—evidence not of wavering doctrinal confidence nor capitulation to the contemporary context, but of the living proclamation of the Word in a new time and place.

In a context such as the ELCA in which a wide variety of methods of Confessional interpretation exist side by side, with ardent supporters and detractors all with historical and theological backup, it becomes necessary to move beyond the polemic and seek to engage each method on its own terms. What is needed is a methodology that does not assume its method is so well documented historically, theologically, rationally, emotionally, spiritually, contextually, etc that it is unwilling to engage theologically with those who disagree. It is in the conversation—the working out of our Confessional Theology with fear and trembling—that the most meaningful theological work can come to the surface. In the end, even "Type Three" (which does employ this methodology) needs the other types to keep it in the center (and to keep it honest to its own method): Type One to constantly remind it of the eternal and unchanging Word and Type Five to remind it of the Word that becomes incarnate in particular times and places—and together with all the other intermediate and not-yet-classified types to engage it in theological dialogue. The Good News is that Lutheran theology is particularly suited for the task of holding two (or more) seeming contradictions in tension. What is needed for the 21st Century is a Confessional methodology and an understanding of Confessional subscription that seek to do the same.