

Introduction

The Book of Concord, a Confessing of the Faith

This volume describes a phenomenon more peculiar than most readers will initially recognize. That phenomenon is the public confession of what a person believes to be the truth, the fundamental description of reality. The universal experience of placing humanity within the larger scheme of things—we call it “religion”—usually attempts in various ways to express a sense of awe and reverence before some Ultimate and Absolute, variously defined by human devices. Such expressions bind life together for adherents of each system. Many base their religion on some other element of what Christians often call a “belief system,” and therefore they do not regard public confession of what they believe important. Unlike most, Lutherans are among those who define their way of life through the public confession of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Historians of religion suggest that all systems for describing ultimate reality and directing human beings to live successfully within that reality share basic elements. Ninian Smart has listed six: (1) doctrine or teaching, (2) narrative, (3) ritual, (4) ethics, (5) community, and (6) the personal faith or sense of awe and reverence that binds the first five together.¹ While every ideological system has some form of each, each religion combines them in different ways, choosing to orient the entire procedure for describing reality from specific starting points. All Christians practice their faith embracing all six elements, but different Christian traditions give different elements differing values and places in their entire practice of the faith. The central point for the orientation of life and for defining the nature and purpose of the church—the form that exercises organizing authority over the other elements—differs from group to group.

Liturgical ritual determines the shape of piety for Eastern Orthodox believers. And for Anglicans *The Book of Common Prayer* has formed the life of the church most decisively. Both the Orthodox and the Anglican faithful also count on their bishops to hold the church together. Roman Catholics are also united by common liturgy and doctrine, to be sure, but the polity based on the bishop of Rome’s vicariate, governing the church militant in Christ’s stead, is the factor upon which being truly Christ’s church stands or falls. Among other English Protestants, forms of community also played a significant role, as churches claimed to be Presbyterian or Congregational in contrast to the Anglican establishment’s “episcopal” form.

Baptists highlight their identity through one specific doctrine and related practices. Reformed and Lutheran believers have defined themselves by a broader focus on Christian teaching and interpretation of the biblical narrative. In the century following 1530, they composed documents they labeled “confessions of the faith” to do so.

In 1530 Emperor Charles V demanded an explanation of their religious policies from the governments of German principalities and towns that were introducing reforms proposed by Martin Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues. Charles wanted to know why their dissent from the Roman obedience was not illegal. Philip Melanchthon led the theologians on the diplomatic team put together by these Evangelical² rulers. Because the Wittenberg theologians regarded God as a God of conversation and community, Melanchthon insisted that the Holy Scripture alone, as God’s Word in authoritative form, served as the ultimate authority for the life of the church, the ultimate definer of its teaching, which was central for that life. But he also recognized that the church had always had secondary authorities to guide and mediate the delivery of the biblical message to the people of God. By the end of the second century, theologians spoke of a rule of faith (*analogia fidei*) that summarized biblical teaching. The writings of the ancient Fathers and decisions of councils and bishops had served as such authorities throughout the Middle Ages.

After 1530 Lutherans gradually came to accept the Augsburg Confession as an interpretation of the ancient creeds, along with several other documents regarded as “repetitions of the Augsburg Confession,” finally gathered into the Book of Concord in 1580 as their secondary authorities. From the mid-seventeenth century on, Lutherans have called these confessional documents *norma normata* (“a normed norm,” a standard set by something else, in this case by Scripture, the *norma normans*, or “norming norm”). At Augsburg Melanchthon and his colleagues established the nature of the Lutheran church as a church that defines itself by its ability to convey God’s Word to the world in its confession of faith. This took place as Melanchthon explained to the emperor and the assembled representatives of the German empire what Luther’s reform meant for the church. He entitled his explanation a “confession.”

If the question, “What does it mean to be a Lutheran?” were posed, most people would probably answer with some mention of Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer whose message spread across Germany and beyond with lightning speed in 1517–1518 and the subsequent years. Somewhat by accident he encountered the invention of Johannes Gutenberg—more than a half-century old at that point but with its potential still unrealized. The ability to print with moveable type contributed mightily to the spread of the Wittenberg call for reform. Indeed, this medium shaped in part the way in which Luther and his colleagues formulated and conveyed their message, the way in which they put their thinking to work.

As important as Luther was and remains for Lutheran identity, however, Lutheran churches have formally defined themselves through documents they label “confessions of faith.” Some of these churches—in the Czech Republic, Poland,

and Slovakia, for example—even call themselves “the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession,” the key statement that has defined Lutheran belief, teaching, and confessing for almost five hundred years.

Melanchthon went to the imperial diet that the emperor, Charles V, had summoned to Augsburg in the spring of 1530 in order to serve his princes and other governments that were introducing reform in the Wittenberg manner.³ Melanchthon expected that the explanation would be delivered orally by Christian Beyer, the vice-chancellor of the government of electoral Saxony, the leader of the Evangelical princes and municipalities. But Melanchthon did not entitle the speech he was composing for Beyer an “Explanation.” In fact, he originally proposed to describe it as an “apology,” that is, a “defense.”⁴ Melanchthon eventually realized that propaganda from the Roman Catholic side changed the situation in which he was writing. Johann Eck, professor in Ingolstadt and perhaps the leading theological opponent of Luther and his colleagues, attempted to demonstrate that the Wittenberg theologians were heretics and therefore had to be excluded from the Christian church and eliminated from Christian society. He did so by publishing a challenge to the Lutherans to enter into a formal disputation that he entitled *Four Hundred Four Articles*—short thetic statements combining quotations from the Wittenberg theologians that fairly presented their views, with inaccurate quotations or quotations out of context attributed to them and with citations of others with whom Luther and Melanchthon disagreed: “Sacramentarians,” “Anabaptists,” and other such groups.⁵ This jumble of truth and falsehood portrayed the Wittenberg Reformation in the worst possible light. Its accusations had to be met. More was needed than a defense of Lutheran reforms. Melanchthon needed to show that Wittenberg teaching was anchored in Scripture and repeated the teaching of the catholic tradition since the time of the ancient church. Melanchthon reshaped his text for Beyer and retitled it “Confession.”

Never before in the church’s history had this term, as a noun, been used to designate a summary of the church’s teaching. The Latin of the Middle Ages designated as *confessores* the monks and priests who heard confession in the sacrament of penance and used the words *confessio* and *confiteri* for the confession of sins or confessions of praise. The recital of the creed could constitute an act of confessing, as could dying for the faith.⁶ But before 1530 the noun “confession” had not served as the technical term for or title of an official statement defining the church or its public teaching and practice. Heinrich Denzinger’s collection of such official statements of Christian belief shows that the most frequently used labels for such statements were *symbola*, *canones*, *decreta*, and *constitutiones*. Popes often issued their formal pronouncements as *epistolae*. However, Denzinger and the editors who have continued his project have reflected the usage that stems from Melanchthon’s choice of titles in 1530 and call such documents “confessions of faith,” in German, *Glaubensbekenntnisse*.⁷ The same usage is not reflected in the English-language equivalent of Denzinger.⁸

That is not to say that the concept of “confessing the faith” had not designated what bishops and councils did in issuing public statements of official teaching. The words for “believe”—*credo/credimus/πιστεύω*—were more frequently employed, but the Iberian regional synods of Toledo in 676 and 693 began their statements of doctrine with the phrase *confitemur et credimus* (or *credimus et confitemur*), equating believing with confessing (and thus implicitly “creed” with “confession”).⁹ Pope Leo II’s epistle confirming decisions of Third Council of Constantinople (681) had affirmed its doctrines with the phrase “[this synod] . . . confessed in complete agreement with us.”¹⁰ This verb “confess,” or its synonym “profess,” occurs very occasionally in subsequent centuries in similar statements of public teaching.¹¹ So *confiteri* did serve as a word to describe the action involved in an official dogmatic decree but not as its title or formal designation. Melanchthon’s way or habit of thinking of God and human creatures—in terms of what God has said to his people and the ways in which they respond in the conversation he has initiated—led him to fashion a new Christian literary genre, a new label for the definition of public teaching and therefore of the church itself.¹²

According to Peter Fraenkel, Melanchthon employed words such as *doctrina*, *traditio*, and *ministerium* as verbal nouns, nouns that have substance in their content but cannot exist without being put into action. *Confessio* reflected this principle. Melanchthon believed that the content of what he wrote in his Augsburg Confession was of vital, life-giving importance because it was God’s tool for forgiving sins and restoring sinners to their humanity as children of God. But he also believed that this content demanded the act of confessing it in public.¹³ Its content has a verbal impulse that explodes rather than lets itself be shut up on a page. That view of language came naturally to Luther with his background in Ockhamistic thinking. That view of printed texts came naturally to Melanchthon, whose use of the printed page often reflected the rules for oral communication that he wrote into the textbooks he composed on dialectic and rhetoric.¹⁴

The Augsburg “Confession” followed by one year a similar act of publicly stating beliefs by the Evangelical princes and municipalities. They had defended their reforms at the time at the diet conducted in Speyer and had labeled it a *protestatio*.¹⁵ *Protestare* served as legal terminology for the act of stating one’s position formally and publicly, not so much a protest but rather a testimony or public affirmation of belief or action, an explanation or rationale for a decision or course of action.¹⁶ At Augsburg these public officials were to justify their policy that had already earned imperial condemnation.

Vice-chancellor Beyer read the text of the confession that Melanchthon had prepared in German to the assembled princes and municipal representatives, along with the emperor, who then received it in both Latin and German. Charles V had prohibited all Evangelical preaching in the city during the diet, but Luther thought that Beyer had more than made up for that: “our confession and defense were presented in most glorious fashion. . . . For the Word of God was placed in evidence

against the opinions of emperor, pope, and the Epicureans. They wanted to smother it, but it arose and strode forth.”¹⁷ But Melancthon’s words resounded well beyond Augsburg’s streets and markets. According to Luther,

the effectiveness and power of God’s Word is such that the more it is persecuted, the more it flourishes and grows. Just think of the diet of Augsburg, where truly the last trumpet before the Last Day was sounded. How the whole world was raging against the Word. We had to pray that Christ himself in heaven would be safe from the papists. But our teaching and our faith went out into the light through confession, so that in a very brief time by imperial mandate it was sent to all kings and princes. There were many minds of leading men in these courts whom this teaching took captive, like a spark and then a roaring fire. Our confession and defense was brought before the world in a wondrous fashion while their confutation wasted away in the darkness.¹⁸

(He probably was referring to the fact that the emperor refused permission to publish the confutation of the Augsburg Confession or to share a manuscript copy with the Evangelicals, whereas the Augsburg Confession appeared the next year in print.) Without specific mention of the Confession itself, Luther reminded the Wittenberg congregation in 1531 that God had triumphed through the Lutherans’ weakness at Augsburg.¹⁹ Indeed, Luther’s friend Georg Spalatin called the Augsburg Confession “the most significant event that has ever taken place on earth,”²⁰ an opinion voiced by several of Luther’s and Melancthon’s students.²¹

After Augsburg in 1530 Anglicans and Reformed believers joined Lutherans in defining the church by confessional document.²² Within days of the presentation of Melancthon’s work, four cities in south Germany had presented their own “confession” to the emperor, the *Confessio Tetrapolitana*.²³ Within a few years others working for the reform of the church had produced confessions, for example, that of the city of Basel in 1534 and that of a group of Swiss churches, the “First Helvetic Confession” of 1536, composed to present the teaching of these churches at the papally called council.²⁴ By the twentieth century, a modern representative of the Anabaptist movement changed the title of the “Schleitheim Articles” of 1528, one of the earliest statements of Anabaptist belief, into the “Schleitheim Confession.”²⁵ In the wake of the recognition of adherence to the Augsburg Confession as a legal, if inferior, political status in the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555, the German term for the distinct churches became *Konfessionen* within the German empire in the nineteenth century. Even Roman Catholics designated the papal church as a *Konfession*, although documents bearing the title *Confessio* never came to replace “canons” and “decrees” in defining the Roman church, its teaching, and its practice.²⁶

The earliest reports on the diet in Augsburg from Lutheran pens regarded the “Augsburg Confession” as the entire effort of presenting their understanding of the faith, an activity that extended over the several months during which Melancthon

and others were working on the text and explaining their confession to Roman Catholic theologians and secular counselors in extended negotiations. Then they came to speak of this “confession” as specifically the act of reading the document as the public confession of seven princes and two city councils before the assembled diet. Finally, gradually, in the 1540s and certainly by the second half of the sixteenth century, the term “Augsburg Confession” began to refer primarily and then exclusively to the document itself.²⁷

The Wittenberg team could not have known how issuing a public confession to define the church would make its stamp on the life of their churches. For within a decade the document assumed the function that bishops and councils had performed as the agency by which ecclesiastical teaching and life were formulated and evaluated. Melancthon and his colleagues at Augsburg intended simply to defend, explain, and justify Lutheran teaching in the Confession’s first twenty-one articles and its plans for church life in its last seven. His test for proper practice arose from Scripture and from proper pastoral care.

Within the following decade the Augsburg Confession became recognized as a secondary authority, a “Binding Summary, Basis, Rule, and Guiding Principle,” and an explanation of “how all teaching is to be judged in accord with God’s Word and how the errors that have arisen are to be explained and decided in Christian fashion” (to use the description of the authors of the Formula of Concord for the function of that document in 1577).²⁸ One proof for that is that the document’s text was not regarded as definitive text, a completed project, but rather as a working manuscript that could be altered to further the purpose for which it was written, justifying the existence of the Lutheran churches in the empire. When his prince, Elector Johann Friedrich the Elder, asked Melancthon to reshape the text for further negotiation with Roman Catholics as the emperor called for a religious colloquy at the end of the 1530s, Melancthon presumed that the Confession, as a policy statement of the princes and not his own work, could be changed to serve the purposes for which it was written at the behest of those princes and city council members who had risked their lives in 1530 by claiming the Confession as their own.

The later attempt of Calvinists to use the “Variata” of the Confession for their own political purposes lay beyond the imagination of anyone in the Wittenberg circle in 1540.²⁹ Melancthon’s right and obligation to revise the text were taken for granted, for the confession belonged neither to him nor to anyone else apart from the princes and municipal governments, those responsible for placing it in the legal record of the imperial diet. They wanted an improved “mission statement” with which to confess the faith in the dialogue with the Roman Catholics. Luther and the others in the Wittenberg circle used the revised text: one always uses the “improved”—the revised—text of a document. In the 1530s the “Augsburg Confession” was still regarded not only as a document but as an ongoing process. Circumstances and exigencies were different by the 1560s, when the debate over the proper text of the Augsburg Confession was sparked by Calvinist appeal to the text of the Variata.

Indeed, the Confession took on other purposes during the late 1530s and 1540s as well. Pastors and princes alike needed a common synopsis of how they were to teach and administer the church. They needed a clear, uniform, and simple standard for the formulation of public teaching, a summary of biblical content that provided a binding rule and norm for defining what the church was about. The Augsburg Confession quickly became that public definition chosen by most German territorial churches, as well as a *symbolon*, that is, a “mission statement,” for the church and a public confession of what was to be proclaimed. Irenaeus had applied the term “the rule of faith” to such a standard, using a secondary authority to encapsulate the essence of Scripture for guiding the public proclamation of the gospel. In the early 1530s the Wittenberg theologians began calling such an *analogia fidei* a “body of doctrine” (*corpus doctrinae*). The Augsburg Confession and then its Apology and other documents, such as Luther’s Smalcald Articles, began serving as the embodiment of this body of biblical teaching within the following decades in at least some Lutheran lands.³⁰

The Religious Peace of Augsburg of 1555 extended the function of the Augsburg Confession.³¹ It became a defining element of imperial law, a vital part of the constitution of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. It became the public—governmental—standard for assessing the qualifications for ministry and public office, an official tool for the evaluation of what was being taught and confessed in the church.

The Augsburg Confession is a brief document. As new situations arose, the Confession required commentary, or as those who wrote such commentaries said later in the sixteenth century, “repetitions.” The first of these commentaries came from the author’s own pen in 1531, in Melancthon’s *Apology*³²; the second in 1550 with the *Magdeburg Confession*; then with several more such “repetitions” in various parts of the empire and beyond in the subsequent two decades³³; and finally—and once again officially for many Lutheran churches—in 1577 with the Formula of Concord.³⁴ By that time a number of churches had also accepted the Smalcald Articles along with the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* and Luther’s catechisms, as similar standards for public teaching. They were being bound together in documents often labeled *corpora doctrinae*, as the overarching definition of the church in specific lands and of the adherents of the Augsburg Confession throughout the entire German Empire and beyond.

Not all followers of Luther have accepted the gathering of all these documents—the Book of Concord—as their definition of the church’s teaching. Some, such as the churches in the kingdom of Denmark at that time (Denmark, Norway, Iceland) have used only the Augsburg Confession itself and Luther’s Small Catechism. But however they have related to the documents gathered in the Book of Concord, Lutherans have continued to confess their faith. They have taken the confessional documents of the ancient church and the sixteenth century as hermeneutical keys to their formulation of God’s Word for their own times and places. They have

striven to deliver the content of Scripture as they have heard it passed on to them in the Lutheran Confessions to their own contemporaries. They have recognized that they are part of a community that has its origins in the Holy Spirit's guidance of the church over two millennia, with special foundations laid by the Spirit's leading the church to the gospel of Jesus Christ through Luther's proclamation. They have sensed that they are part of an ecclesiastical culture with roots and memories that help define and determine how they announce the salvation won by Christ's death and resurrection in new and fresh ways to meet the needs of the people God has called them to serve.

However, nowhere in the world are Lutherans experiencing "business as usual" at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium. The Lutheran confession of faith has lost numerical strength in the homelands of the Lutheran churches in central and northern Europe, in Germany and the Nordic lands. The often persecuted minority Lutheran churches in other parts of Europe, decimated by brutal oppression in the era of the Counter-Reformation, are rebuilding after the most recent dark night of persecution under National Socialist and Communist regimes in the twentieth century. Immigrants from Europe built strong churches in the Americas, Australia, and South Africa, and these churches continue to struggle with their own identity in cultures where Lutherans have often been allied with the "Christian" establishment in the past but never in charge of it. Mission churches, mostly in the Global South or Majority World, are in many respects the most dynamic among the Lutheran communities of the twenty-first century. They, too, however, struggle with questions relating to the proper use of the Lutheran confession of the faith in their situations. In these situations God calls Lutherans to repeat the special insights of the Augsburg Confession for the benefit of the whole church in our day.

Therefore, the question of how these confessions can still benefit the church looms ever larger for Lutherans in every part of the world today. It is a question with implications not only for Lutheran churches but for all other churches that might benefit from the ecumenical witness of Lutherans. The remnants of establishment and its supports are all but gone where they did exist. In the marketplace of religious ideas, Lutheran confessing of the faith is being challenged to express its message afresh and anew. This cannot be done apart from a firm sense of why Lutherans have been Lutherans, apart from the cultural heritage of the Europe of another time. And yet Lutherans cannot determine who they are to be in the twenty-first century as children of God apart from the memory of who they have been in the past. Such witness is our obligation and calling as those to whom God has given responsibility for sharing our heritage and its treasures with the whole household of faith. The memory bank of the Augsburg Confession and the documents designed to echo and reiterate its message gathered into the Book of Concord guide our understanding of the entire framework of biblical teaching as we are called to deliver it to the twenty-first-century world.

Confessing in the Wittenberg manner, following the example of those who composed the documents found in the Book of Concord, means (1) confessing the evangel of Jesus Christ at the center of proclamation and theological reflection, and doing so with (2) eschatological sensitivity, (3) ecumenical commitment, (4) evangelistic passion, and (5) the desire to edify God's people for the comfort of their consciences and for the further confession of their faith in word and deed.

1. One demonstration of the fact that the restoration of human righteousness in God's sight formed the center and governing principle of Melanchthon's confessions lies in two formal "paraphrases" of the Augsburg Confession, which Melanchthon wrote within the next six years. He composed them for the use of the German Evangelical princes in their diplomatic approaches to monarchs outside the German empire. They called upon Melanchthon to formulate a negotiating document that presented their confession of the faith in two critical instances. His proposal for reform in France for King Francis I, the *Consilium ad Gallos* of 1534, and a document of the same sort prepared for King Henry VIII of England, the "Wittenberg Articles" of 1536, did not insist on all the practical reform measures that the Wittenberg reformers had demanded for their own churches. Nonetheless, on the subject of justification by faith in Christ, Melanchthon found little room for maneuvering. That teaching constituted the foundation of his proposals for reform.³⁵

A reading of the text confirms this. Although Wilhelm Maurer, focusing on the practical politics surrounding the Confession, argues that its organizing principle lies in its policy toward the medieval episcopal system, Timothy Wengert is correct in saying that Melanchthon regarded articles I through XXI as the heart and heartbeat of the document.³⁶ At the heart of those articles, quite clearly, is Melanchthon's understanding of the restoration of human righteousness through God's act of justification, accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection and through the Holy Spirit's creation of faith in Christ through the means of grace. The Lutheran Confessions promote the desire to foster the life of repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins, salvation, and genuine human life—as a result of our trust in God's restoration of our righteousness through Christ—to the practice of righteous living in relationship to God's creation. The Book of Concord calls for the confession of the faith that changes our orientation to God's reality completely by placing him at its center. With that change of orientation for life, all aspects of life become different. We trust that we are God's children and live like it.

2. This means that we recognize that the task of confessing the faith is fundamentally eschatological. Believers always are conscious that their witness of Christ's love to other believers and those outside the faith takes place in presence of and though the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, they confront God directly in the consciousness of their own limits and their own end, of God's ultimate and unconditional concern for them and his desire that they be his own and live under his rule.

They recognize the eschatological nature of their confession also because they realize that the struggle between God's truth and Satan's lie continues to the end of time (John 8:44). It never ends because new forms of the lie always are arising to challenge God's truth. The confessional documents continually sharpen the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) for combat with those lies. Luther repeatedly made it clear—for instance, in *On the Councils and the Church*—that God's people stand under attack from false alternatives to the gospel of Christ at every turn.³⁷ The Holy Spirit combats Satan's scams and schemes through the various forms of God's Word, which he uses as his sword. The Augsburg Confession made its positions clear and its place in the tradition of the church unambiguous by condemning ancient diversions from biblical truth. Other confessions followed this practice.

3. The confessors of the sixteenth century confessed for the sake of other believers. Melancthon's task at Augsburg concentrated his attention on the ecumenical audience. He entered into intense, open, honest negotiations and exchange of insights with Roman Catholic theologians there. That remains the task of his heirs to this day, as they listen to fellow believers of other traditions with gentleness and respect and as they confess with clarity and boldness. Melancthon recognized that the true unity of the church is found in proper and faithful use of the God's Word, as conveyed to his people in oral, written, and sacramental forms. That means that we confess with ecumenical honesty: what Dominican theologian Richard Schenk called an ecumenical strategy with "a dual programmatic of affirmation and admonition."³⁸ For such conversations within Christendom seek above all clear confession of the faith and effective pastoral care, and only then organizational benefits.

4. Luther and Melancthon, and their students as well, seldom met an unbaptized person. They had little opportunity for witnessing to their faith to those outside that faith, though the Wittenberg colleagues and at least some of their students exhibited the realization that this was indeed part of God's assignment in this world when it is possible.³⁹ In addition, they did recognize the challenge of bringing baptized people who were living apart from Christ to repentance. God's assignment in the twenty-first century to Lutherans in every corner of the globe involves drawing into the faith those who do not know the only name given among his human creatures by which sinners may be restored to the fullness of their humanity (Acts 4:12). For Luther's and Melancthon's heirs cannot avoid the conviction that, re-created in the image of God, all the baptized are reborn to speak of the wonders of their Savior's love for all.

5. Although it was secondary in Melancthon's task in 1530, edification of those who are making the confession of faith also flows from the act of confessing the faith and from our use of the documents we regard as our symbols and public declarations of what we teach and believe. Especially Luther's catechisms serve as instruments for the church's confession of the faith to itself and to its own. Like those outside the faith, those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior daily need

the call to repentance and the bestowal of the forgiveness of sins that arise out of the confession of the tradition and teaching of those who have gone before. In the Small Catechism Luther confessed his faith before the children of German-speaking lands and continues to do so around the world today. In the Large Catechism he issued his confession for those who teach the infants of God's family. In all confessional documents the church finds texts that serve to build up the faith and life of God's chosen people as they provide a basis for access to Scripture and to the faith as it has been delivered to the saints. Although not primarily intended as textbooks for pastoral care or preaching, these documents reflect the spirit of the Wittenberg theologians as they guide those responsible for conveying the faith— parents, pastors, teachers, Christian friends—in the tasks involved in echoing God's saving Word and his plan for human living.⁴⁰

Lutherans live now on every continent in a wide variety of situations. In the twenty-first century, the Lutheran Confessions do not have the strength of governmental reinforcement behind them, and no Lutheran church uses them to serve as a legal instrument for supporting the public definition of reality in their societies. Now more than ever, the confessional documents still have important functions in our world, as they define what Lutherans mean when they speak of Christ's church and its teaching, as they form the framework and foundation for confessing the Christian faith in the twenty-first century.

This volume intends to be an aid in jogging and vivifying the memory of the documents' origins and original purposes and goals. It follows in the tracks of a long train of historical interpretations of the situations from which the texts of these confessional documents arose and the meaning of the texts themselves. That tradition of historical interpretation goes back to the sixteenth century and debates over the Unaltered and Altered Augsburg Confession. Calvinist interpretations of the Augsburg Confession, its origins and its significance, had to be met by Lutheran critique.⁴¹ In the seventeenth century Lutheran students of theology used the confessional texts in their instruction.⁴² The grand tradition of German theological scholarship produced the extensive and authoritative commentary on the Formula of Concord by Erlangen professor Fr. H. R. Frank.⁴³ In the United States the studies of Henry Eyster Jacobs,⁴⁴ James W. Richards,⁴⁵ Theodore E. Schmauk and C. T. Benze,⁴⁶ George Fritschl,⁴⁷ J. L. Neve,⁴⁸ and Friedrich Bente⁴⁹ accompanied students through much of the twentieth century. Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson wrote a similar historical introduction.⁵⁰ Edmund Schlink's topical survey of the theology of the Lutheran confessional writings remains useful.⁵¹ A twenty-first-century version of his work remains a desideratum. Most recently, Gunther Gassmann and Scott Hendrix have authored a basic introduction to the Lutheran Confessions,⁵² and Gunther Wenz has synthesized current scholarship on these documents in thorough detail.⁵³

In this same tradition of scholarship, this volume is intended to serve an international readership, putting the newer research of the past third of a century at the disposal of English-language readers. Luther's view of history demands that the church's testimony to Jesus Christ be understood in its historical context, for he believed that God works within the ever-changing human scene as he delivers his unchanging Word that conveys and effects his judging and saving will. This volume offers its readers, students of Scripture in general and of the Lutheran tradition in particular, the historical raw materials with which to glean from the past insights for the twenty-first century.