

Concordia Theological Monthly
18 (April 1947) no. 4.242-253.
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Concordia
Theological Monthly

Vol. XVIII

APRIL, 1947

No. 4

Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers
and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally
to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church
Essay delivered at the Western District Convention in 1858
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The Symbols are confessions of faith or of the *doctrine* of the Church and never were intended to be anything more nor less; therefore an *unconditional* subscription to the Symbols can be interpreted in only one way.

I

An unconditional subscription is the solemn declaration which the individual who wants to serve the Church makes under oath 1) that he accepts the *doctrinal content* of our Symbolical Books, because he recognizes the fact that it is in full agreement with Scripture and does not militate against Scripture in any point, whether that point be of major or minor importance; 2) that he therefore heartily believes in this divine truth and is determined to preach this doctrine without adulteration. Whatever position any doctrine may occupy in the doctrinal system of the Symbols, whatever the form may be in which it occurs, whether the subject be dealt with *ex professo* or only incidentally, an unconditional subscription refers to the whole content of the Symbols and does not allow the subscriber to make any mental reservation in any point. Nor will he exclude such does as are discussed incidentally in support of other doctrines, because the fact that they

* Translated and condensed by Alex. Wm. C. Guebert.

are so used stamps them as irrevocable articles of faith and demands their joyful acceptance by everyone who subscribes to the Symbols.

However, since the Symbols are confessions of faith or doctrine, the Church necessarily cannot require a subscription to those matters which do not belong to doctrine. He who subscribes to the Symbols of the Church and accepts them unconditionally as his own does not declare them to be the rule and norm for German or Latin orthography or for a perfect linguistic style, nor does he declare that his subscription refers to some other things which belong in the sphere of human knowledge. For the servant of the Church is not bound by that which falls within the sphere of criticism or of history. The same is true of the interpretation of certain Bible passages. The only criterion of an incontrovertible "prophecy," or interpretation of Scripture, which St. Paul demanded is "Whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith," Rom. 12:6. If, for instance, an exegete does not reach the specific sense of a Bible passage and yet interprets it in such a manner that his interpretation rests on other clear Bible passages, he is indeed mistaken in supposing that a certain teaching is contained in this specific Bible passage, but he is not erring in doctrine. In like manner he who unconditionally subscribes to the symbolical Books declares that the interpretations which are contained in the Symbols are "according to the analogy of faith."

An unconditional subscription does not at all imply that it were impossible to improve on the line of argument employed in the Symbolical Books for arriving at purity of doctrine. The servant of the Church is not bound to follow the form, the method, and the process of proof used in the Symbols and to avoid any other. This judgment agrees with that of the fathers concerning an unconditional subscription to the Symbols. John Conrad Dannhauer, the esteemed orthodox theologian of Strassburg, wrote: "Although the Symbols do not bind us to retain all the circumstances, terms, arguments, and illustrations that have been used, the doctrinal content or the substance of the doctrine must be retained just as it is recorded in Scripture and not in so far as private judgment thinks it may agree with Scripture. In this last sense any man could subscribe to the Koran also." (*Lib. conscientiae apertus*. Ed. 2. Tom. I., p. 258.)

Finally, while an unconditional subscription to the Symbols as confessions of the doctrine of the Church does pertain to the principles and teachings underlying church government and ecclesiastical rites, it does not pertain to such ceremonies as are in the realm of Christian liberty. Therefore neither Luther's *Booklet on Baptism* nor his *Booklet on Marriage* was made an integral part of the Symbols.

II

By a conditional subscription to the Symbols the subscriber does not pledge himself to accept every *doctrine contained* in the Symbols as in full agreement with Scripture and reserves the right to distinguish between the doctrines presented. In the course of time various formulations of a conditional subscription have been advocated.

1. A man may subscribe to the Symbolical Books "if" and "in so far as" they do not militate against Scripture or "if" and "in so far as" they agree with Scripture. The so-called Pietists employed this conditional formula, and later on the Rationalists. However, it should be stated that by using this formula the Pietists did not want to yield the *fundamental* articles of our faith. The Rationalists, on the other hand, did not want to be bound to these articles, even as they accepted Scripture as a rule and norm for their teaching only in so far as the content of Scripture was not contrary to their reason.

2. A man subscribes conditionally if he accepts the Symbols in so far as he believes that they teach the fundamental doctrines of the Bible correctly or teach them in a manner substantially correct.

3. Some want to subscribe to the Symbols with the proviso that they may interpret them according to Scripture or understand them correctly. This was the condition under which the Reformed declared themselves ready to subscribe to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. The Zwinglians were ready to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession if they would be permitted to interpret it according to Scripture. The Calvinist Peter Martyr said that he would be glad to accept the Augsburg Confession "if it is properly and suitably understood." And even Calvin subscribed to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in the sense "in which its author himself interpreted it."

4. Another declares that he is able to subscribe only to that which is confessional in the Symbols and that any other subscription is symbolatry. It is self-evident that such a conditional subscription excludes a considerable portion of the doctrinal content of the Symbols from that which one can confess as his faith, and is a declaration that several doctrines in the Symbols are not pure and therefore are subject to clarification.

5. Some demand the right to subscribe to the Symbols of both the Lutheran Church and of the Reformed Church if and in so far as they agree with each other. Such a subscription not only excludes several of the chief doctrines in the Symbols as non-binding, but also leaves the question undecided as to which doctrines these are.

6. Others have subscribed with the reservation to regard as open questions even those doctrines *which are* clearly set forth and defined in the Symbols, but concerning which points a controversy has arisen, e. g., the question concerning the Church and the Ministry.

7. The Rationalists do not pledge themselves on the letter, but on the so-called spirit of the Symbolical Books.

It is evident that a mere conditional subscription runs counter to the purpose of the Symbols in general as well as to the purpose of the pledge in particular.

III

Since all divisions within Christendom appeal to Scripture, the mere confession that one believes what is in Scripture is not a confession that clearly distinguishes the confessor from the false believer. For, in spite of this confession, no one knows whether one accepts Scripture in the true sense or not or whether one is a Papist, or an enthusiast, or a Rationalist, or an orthodox Christian. Therefore an unconditional subscription is indispensable. For the sake of clarity it is necessary to declare how one understands and interprets Scripture and the articles of faith that are contained in it. It is essential to keep in mind that the purpose of our Symbols is a) that our Church clearly and unequivocally confess its faith and its doctrine before the world; b) that it distinguish itself from all heterodox bodies and sects; c) that it may possess a united, certain, general form and norm of doctrine for all its teachers,

on the basis of which all other writings and teachings can be judged and regulated. But if the Church demands only a conditional acceptance of its Symbols, it virtually retracts the faith and the doctrine which it had set forth in the Symbols. Then the document which the Church had offered as its confession is after all not its real confession, and the charge can be raised that the Church is double-tongued and is deceiving the world with its Symbols. By demanding only a conditional subscription to its Symbols the Church forfeits its distinctively Lutheran characteristics, and by admitting that its Symbols contain errors it places itself on the same level with the heterodox bodies. In this case the Church is without a united, certain, general form and norm of doctrine, on the basis of which each one is able to judge his own teaching as well as all other writings and teachings.

The purpose for which the Church demands a subscription to its Symbols is twofold: a) that the Church may convince itself that its teachers really possess the orthodox understanding of Scripture and the same pure, unadulterated faith as the Church; b) that the Church may bind them with a solemn promise to teach this faith pure and unadulterated or renounce the office of teaching instead of disturbing the Church with their false teaching. This twofold purpose is completely nullified if the servants of the Church are permitted to accept the Symbols of the Church on a conditional basis. For when the Church is satisfied with a conditional subscription, it openly admits to its teachers that its Symbols may contain doctrines which are contrary to Scripture. By making such an admission the Church loses all means of convincing itself what the teacher believes when he subscribes conditionally, and releases him from the obligation of teaching the Word of God pure and unadulterated according to its Symbols, which are the norm for teaching in the Church. Furthermore, when congregations demand that those who want to teach subscribe to their Symbols, they are looking for a guarantee that no teacher with an erring conscience nor an outspoken errorist will come in and teach them all sorts of errors. However, if congregations demand only a conditional subscription to their Symbols, they weaken that guarantee, give the false teacher a weapon against themselves, and rob themselves of the right of deposing a teacher who teaches contrary to their Symbols. Finally,

the purpose of binding the teachers of the Church to its public confessions is to remove the long controversies which have been thoroughly discussed and settled, at least in the orthodox Church. A mere conditional subscription, however, opens the door for a renewal of controversies that have already been settled and paves the way for everlasting discord.

Some say we can accept the Symbolical Books only "in so far as they agree with Scripture, but in so far as men have written them, it is not possible for us to base our faith on them." True, but the question is whether he who wants to enter the office of teaching understands and believes that they do agree with Scripture. The declaration that one accepts the Symbols "in so far" and not "because" they agree with Scripture is not a pledge to teach according to the Symbols, but according to his conscience and opinions.

Again, some say that there can be no better interpretation of the Symbols than that which is according to Scripture. That is a fallacious proposition. Only that can be interpreted according to Scripture which is essentially the same as Scripture. No human writing can therefore be interpreted according to Scripture; this applies only to Scripture. As Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, so every human document must be interpreted according to its own content. If one interprets a man-made document according to Scripture, he equates the two and declares a priori that any dark statement in the Symbols must agree with Scripture, a fact which would be true only of a new immediate revelation. No, a human document must be tested and, if necessary, improved, but not interpreted, according to Scriptures. A subscription to the confession is the Church's assurance that its teachers have recognized the interpretation and understanding of Scripture which is embodied in the Symbols as correct and will therefore interpret Scripture as the Church interprets it. If the Church therefore would permit its teachers to interpret the Symbols according to the Scriptures, and not the Scriptures according to its Symbols, the subscription would be no guarantee that the respective teacher understands and interprets Scripture as the Church does. In fact, the Church would make the personal conviction of each teacher its symbol. Again, some say that a subscription to a doctrinal confession manifestly concerns only the essentials, True; but in

a doctrinal confession everything that belongs to the doctrinal content is essential to the confession, for the essence of a doctrinal confession is doctrine.

Again, some say that one need accept only that in the Symbols which is of a confessional character, since the Symbols are confessions of the truth against specific errors and not a compendium of doctrinal theology. Certainly! But every doctrinal statement in the confessions is confessional. All doctrinal expositions which have been received into the Symbols have thereby been accepted by the Church as part of its confession. If the formula "We believe, teach, and confess" and similar expressions were the criterion on the basis of which we axe to determine what parts of the confessions are our confession, the greatest part of our confessions, yes, even Luther's two Catechisms and the Apology, would have to be excluded.

Again some say: The Symbols must be understood in their historical setting. This is correct, for the historical background sheds the necessary light on "the manner in which men understood and interpreted Scripture at the time when certain articles were in controversy in the Church and the contrary doctrines were rejected and condemned." But the statement is false if it is employed to create the impression that the doctrinal articles contained in the Symbols are not eternal truths, but applicable only for certain times and conditions and therefore subject to revision or even rejection.

Again some say: Ought not those points be considered as open questions on which even the most loyal and most positive Lutherans have differing opinions? This is a *petitio principii*, i.e., begging the question, for loyal, positive Lutherans believe what the Lutheran Church teaches in its confessions. A doctrine does not become an open question when supposedly loyal Lutherans are not in agreement. And whoever permits such doctrines to be treated as open questions surrenders the fortress of the confession of our Church and is in reality no loyal Lutheran.

And, finally, the objection is raised that on the basis of 2 Cor. 3:6 ("The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life") it is contrary to the spirit of a truly evangelical Church to set up laws of faith and to bind consciences to the dead letter of the Symbols. But the demand of an unconditional subscrip-

tion to the Symbols is no more than a request that the teacher make a profession of his faith, so that the Church may judge whether or not it can confer on him the teaching office. If he believes as the Church believes, he cannot look upon this demand as a legal yoke, but will welcome the opportunity to confess the faith of his heart openly and promise solemnly that he will preach this faith and no other until his death. If he does not believe as the Church believes, no man will force him to take the ordination vow; on the contrary, the very purpose of a carefully worded and unconditional subscription is to exclude such from the confessional pledge as do not fully agree with the belief of the Church. A distinction between the spirit and the letter of the Symbol annuls both, for only the letter of the Symbol can convey and reveal its spirit. A subscription to the spirit of the Symbol is meaningless even if one accepts as the spirit of the Symbols the principle that Scripture is the only rule and norm of faith. The point is not, according to which principle the true doctrine is obtained, but what doctrine .the application of this principle will produce.

In conclusion, every qualified subscription to the Symbols which touches the doctrinal content and permits the subscriber to designate certain points to which he does not wish to be pledged opens the way to nullify both the purpose of, and the subscription to, the Symbols.

But what of some honest, upright men who either lack the ability to test the whole Book of Concord according to the Word of God and therefore are not convinced that the Symbols agree with Scripture in every point or who have conscientious scruples about certain points? In either case such are not fit to become teachers in the Church, for a bishop must, above all things, be "apt to teach" and "be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers," 1 Tim. 3: 2; Tit. 1: 9.

But is it not possible that the Symbols of the orthodox Church contain errors in less important points? Yes, but the possibility does not establish reality. Only a skeptic, who is always learning and never coming to the truth, despairs of ever finding the truth and will maintain; Men have written this, and therefore it must contain error. But if error should really be found in our Symbols, we would be the first to pass the death sentence on them. But we defy the whole world

to point out an error in doctrine in our Book of Concord. For the past three hundred years all the enemies of our Church have tried in vain to find an error, but have failed. They have shown, and we admit it, that our Symbols contain points which are contrary to their blind reason; but they have failed to prove that our Symbols contradict Scripture in the smallest point.

IV

It is fully in accord with the spirit of our Symbols to demand an unconditional subscription of the servants of our Church. The Conclusion of the Augsburg Confession reads: "Only those things have been recounted whereof we thought that it was necessary to speak, in order that it might be understood that in doctrine and in ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture or the Church Catholic" (*Trigl.*, p. 95) . The same thought is stated in the Foreword to the Formula of Concord (*Trigl.*, p. 847) . And the words of the Preface to the entire Book of Concord of 1580 bear repetition: "Therefore we are also determined not to depart even a finger's breadth either from the subjects themselves or from the phrases which are found in them, but, the Spirit of the Lord aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of the pure doctrine" (*Trigl.*, p.23). Finally, the Formula of Concord designates all the previous Lutheran Confessions as "a unanimously accepted, definite, common form of doctrine, which all our evangelical churches together and in common confess, from and according to which, because [not in so far] it has been derived from God's Word, all other writings should be judged and adjusted as to how far they are to be approved and accepted" (*Trigl.*, p. 855) . All these quotations clearly show that our Symbols themselves demand an unconditional subscription, and he who wants to subscribe conditionally denies what the Symbols themselves demand.

It is furthermore fully in accord with the practice of our Church to demand an unequivocal subscription from its public teachers. When the Augsburg Confession was presented at Augsburg, the confessors began their confession with the words: "*Ecclesiae magno consensu apud docent*" (*Trigl.*, p. 42) . Before the presentation at Augsburg, Luther was the

only one to whom the Confession had been submitted for suggestions. And Luther was the only one not present at Augsburg to give his wholehearted approval. It was not deemed necessary to submit the Augustana for approval and a formal subscription to other theologians, because it was well known that the Augustana was the record of the faith which lived in the hearts of those who had been aroused, through the mighty voice of the pure Gospel.

The *Nuernberger Religionsfriede* of 1532 granted religious toleration to the adherents of the Augsburg Confession, including such as might in the future accept the same. As a result of this pact a number of men subscribed to the Augsburg Confession, not because they accepted its doctrines unequivocally, but because they hoped to enjoy its advantages. In fact, some of the signers continued to propagate their false teachings in spite of their subscription. As early as 1532 Luther, together with Justus Jonas and Bugenhagen, drew up the regulation that those who wanted to assume the office of teaching and wanted to be ordained "should give the assurance beforehand that they accept the unadulterated doctrine of the Gospel and understand it in the same sense in which it is understood in the Apostolic, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Symbols, and in which it is presented in the Confession which our churches read before Emperor Charles at the Diet of Augsburg in the year 1530, and that they should promise that they would steadfastly continue in this opinion with the grace of God and faithfully perform their work in the Church. Furthermore, if new controversies should arise, they are to consult with older, experienced men of our Church and of those churches affiliated with us" (*Corpus Reformatorum*, XII, 6. 7.).

The Formula of Concord reports that "the chief and most enlightened theologians have subscribed not only to the Augsburg Confession, but also to the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the Large and Small Catechisms of Luther" (*Trigl.*, p.855), and after its adoption the Formula of Concord was included in this subscription (*Trigl.*, Hist. Introductions, pp. 247 ff). Our Church never was satisfied with a mere conditional subscription to its Symbols on the part of its teachers; it always demanded a definite, positive, and unequivocal subscription as an indispensable condition for teaching in our Church.

After the Formula of Concord had been introduced in Saxony, all the servants of those churches and schools since 1602 were asked to take the following oath: "You shall vow and swear that you will continue and remain steadfastly and without guile in the pure, Christian understanding of the Gospel current in this territory as it is recorded in the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, repeated and explained in the Christian Book of Concord, and preserved against all falsifications, and will neither secretly nor openly practice anything against it, but will at once fearlessly reveal anyone who departs from, or practices against, that understanding. If God should decree - May He graciously prevent it! - that you follow the dreams and vagaries of men, depart from this pure doctrine and understanding of God's Word, and turn to the Papists or Calvinists or other sects that are described and rejected in the religious peace because they are not in sympathy with our pure Confession, you shall swear that because of your oath you will without fear immediately report your change of mind to the proper authorities and await further regulations and resolutions. May you do all this faithfully and without deceit!" (Cf. *Abriss der meissnisch-albertinischsaechsischen Kirchengeschichte*. Von Hasse. Leipzig, 1846, II, 75.)

It is a historically established fact that our Church not only demanded an unconditional subscription, but also that it rejected a mere conditional subscription because it was contrary to the purpose of a subscription. In 1539 Duke Henry of Saxony demanded that the theologians of the University of Leipzig accept the Augsburg Confession and the Apology and teach according to these Confessions. But when they declared "they would not oppose the Apology and the Confession in so far as they do not contend against the Gospel and the truth" (cf. C. G. Hoffmann's *Ref.-Hist. der Stadt und Universitaet Leipzig*, p. 405), he rejected this ambiguous declaration.

Andreas Osiander of Koenigsberg was the first Lutheran to protest against the symbolical pledge. When Melancthon in 1553 attacked his mystic interpretation of justification, Osiander countered by a scurrilous attack on the Wittenberg faculty, which required the confessional vow of its graduates. Among other things Osiander said that a graduate of Wittenberg is a poor captive, whose conscience is hemmed in and

confused because of an obligation imposed on him by an oath; that he has foresworn the Word of God and permitted himself to be muzzled in matters of faith; that he is not to come to any conclusions until he has conferred with his elders, with whom he must remain in harmony because of his oath even though Scripture says something else. (Cf. *Erlanger Zeitschrift fuer Protestantismus und Kirche*. Neue Folge, Bd. I, p. 358.) In his reply Melanchthon points out that Osiander's vaunted freedom leads to license and finally to a questioning of all truth. Melanchthon furthermore points out that the symbolical pledge was introduced by this faculty at Wittenberg by Luther, Jonas, and Pomeranus in 1532, for at that time the Anabaptists, Servetus, Campanus, Schwenkfeld, and others were very active in spreading their fanatical ideas. The purpose of the Wittenberg symbolical pledge was two fold: to admonish talented men to observe in humility proper bounds, and to check restless spirits as much as possible. (Cf. *Abriss der meissnisch-albertinisch-saechsischen Kirchengeschichte*. Leipzig, 1846, II, 75.)

Not until the rise of Pietism within the Lutheran Church was a determined effort made to introduce a conditional subscription. The seed for this type of subscription is found in Spener, although he expresses himself very cautiously. He wrote: "If anyone is doctrinally so weak that he does not dare to bind himself beyond a '*quatenus*,' it would be well to respect that man's conscience and. be satisfied with his *quatenus* subscription. However, it must be borne in mind that a person who does not believe that the Symbols agree with the Scriptures can easily hide behind a conditional subscription for selfish interests. Therefore it is advisable not to accept a conditional subscription, but to insist on the clear-cut '*quia*' subscription." (Cf. Spener's *Aufrichtige Uebereinstimmung mit der A.C.*, pp. 91, 92.) It is not possible for us to agree with Spener in his attempt to maintain the hypothetical formula "in so far as" for scrupulous men, since they are not fit for a proper ministration of the office of the ministry. It is far more important for the Church not to jeopardize the priceless treasure of the orthodox confession than to win the service of a man who has an erring conscience.

But when the Rationalists finally arose, they ruthlessly tore down the bulwarks of the Church, which had already been

undermined, and planted the banner of reason and "common sense" on its ruins. If our Church, which is now [1858] lying in the dust shall rise again and not gradually degenerate into a body which is Lutheran in name only, without any characteristics of the Church of the Reformation, then all the fine words about ecclesiastical propriety, about the re-introduction of ancient rites and ceremonies, all attempts to invest the office of the ministry with special glory and authority, all this will be utterly in vain. The only help for resurrecting our Church lies in a renewed acceptance of its old orthodox confessions and in a renewed unconditional subscription to its Symbols.*

* That our Synod in its centennial year still holds high the banner of God's Word and Luther's doctrine pure is due to Walther's indefatigable efforts in the classroom, at pastoral conferences and synodical conventions, and through the printed word to exalt the priceless treasure contained in our Symbolical Books. One way in which we, the heirs of god's grace, can show our gratitude is a renewed study of the Book of Concord.

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