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Werner Klän

This article understands the term ‘confessionalism’ as ‘defining the church by confessional document’ (Arand, Nestingen and Kolb 2012: 5). The authors of the Lutheran Confessions (for the historical and theological background cf. Arand, Nestingen and Kolb 2012) were deliberately conscious of the contemporary character of the confessional writings in the sixteenth century, but at the same time deeply convinced to confess the eternal truth of God’s word (Kolb 1999: 449–466).

Thus, the Lutheran confessions of faith are not simply ‘instruction about’ the gospel, propositions and theory, nor are they merely an ‘introduction to’ the gospel, but rather a guideline for making practical application of the gospel.

In the nineteenth century, confessional Lutheran churches created a new awareness of the Concordia-Lutheran principles of the sixteenth century and gave them renewed ecclesiological reality. In the International Lutheran Council, many of these, or those to follow their objectives, form the International Lutheran Council, committed to determining their decisions solely on the basis of the Word of God, and not on social, cultural or practical considerations.

Lutheran identity, however, is not first and foremost a special identity; it rather lays claim to catholicity. As in the Reformation, to renew the Church means to remain faithful to the One, Holy, Catholic Church. This approach includes an ecumenical dimension as well. Lutherans understand themselves as being at once evangelical, catholic, orthodox, and ecumenical in the best sense of the word.

Keywords: Lutheran Church, Confessionalism, International Lutheran Council, Reformation, Book of Concord, Neo-Confessionalism, Ecclesiology, Church Fellowship

Table of contents

1 Lutheran Confessionalism – Confessional Lutheranism

Theological dictionaries of German origin typically attach a perjorative connotation to the term ‘Konfessionalismus’ (Deuerlein 1961; Fahlbusch 1989; Klueting 2001; Graf 2001; Grosse 2019). Scholars in the English-speaking realm of historiography and theology may restrict it to the ‘age of confessionalism 1500–1648’ (Nischan 1999; Fulbrook 2004) – or rather the era of ‘confessionalization’ (Kolb 1996) – while German-speaking scholars tend to use it for defining theological positions and ecclesial developments of the nineteenth century (Blaschke 2002). In this article, the term ‘confessionalism’ is understood as ‘defining the church by confessional document’ (Arand, Nestingen and Kolb 2012: 5). This holds true, in particular, for the Lutheran church(es) ever since the Augsburg Confession (AC; 1530) ‘became recognized as a secondary authority’ – next to the scriptures – and later on as ‘a defining element of imperial law’ (Gehrt, Hund and Michel 2019).

Lutheran Confessionalism claims that the teaching of the Book of Concord is derived from and congruent with the Holy Scriptures. Thus, the confessions found in the Book of Concord of 1580 are accepted without qualification because (*quia*) they are seen to be in accordance with the teachings of the Bible. Therefore, churches that adhere to Lutheran Confessionalism subscribe unconditionally to all the symbolical books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as true and unadulterated statements and expositions of the Word of God. In this regard, they are authoritative for all pastors, congregations, other church workers, but also for elders and lay delegates of synodical conventions of different denominations.

In contrast, Confessional Lutheranism may consider the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century to be the foundation charter of the Lutheran churches, albeit as historical documents only. In the light of, for example, new exegetical insights, these confessions are regarded as binding merely insofar (*quatenus*) as they are in agreement with the scriptures. Nonetheless, they function as a referential framework to articulate the Lutheran ‘tradition’.

Confessional Lutheranism holds the following convictions: a truly confessional stance does not amount to a retreat to distant historical documents; it derives its positions from scripture and is thus a guideline for the confession of faith. It can be shown that such a guideline is preserved in the Lutheran Confessions themselves, e.g. in Luther’s catechisms (Slenczka 2003: 31). Confessional statements and documents constitute both a scriptural and contemporary guideline for articulating an understanding of Christian existence and Church life (Arand, Nestingen and Kolb 2012: 1–12, 281f.).

In addition, Confessional Lutheranism nourishes certitudes, such as the gospel and the sacraments which, according to AC VII, create and mark the church's existence and unity, are not arbitrary in content; rather, their content is defined and quantifiable, and as such can be used to formulate consensus. On this basis, then, doctrinal decisions are possible, even necessary – and such decisions are carried out already in the *Confessio Augustana* (and the other confessions) in the form of doctrinal condemnations of theological positions or ecclesial practices. It is presupposed that there are clear, plausible, and comprehensible criteria within Holy Scripture for differentiating true from false doctrine; that is, if one follows the convictions of the Lutheran confessions (and, by the way, also the basic assumptions of their opponents!).

It should be noted, at least from a confessional Lutheran point of view (Klän 2011), that, where the authors of the Lutheran Confessions are concerned, Luther is regarded as being the authoritative, hermeneutic frame of reference for the proper understanding of, especially, the *Confessio Augustana* (FC SD VII 41; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 601). They explicitly follow Luther in determining the relation between the Word of God in the Holy Scriptures and the subordinate Confessions of the early Church as well as the Lutheran Reformation, such that Holy Scripture alone is the 'one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated' (FC SD, Binding Summary 3; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 527).

However, Holy Scripture remains exclusively canon, whereas the Confessions assume the function of a witness (FC SD, Binding Summary 12; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 529), admittedly with the claim to truth (FC SD, Binding Summary 12; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 529). By contrast, the theologians of one's own camp are at least on principle not denied the capability of erring (FC SD, Antitheses 19; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 529–531). During the second half of the sixteenth century and with this 'canonisation' of Luther, Melanchthon's scholars, who understood themselves to be Luther's heirs, attempted to reconstitute and safeguard the tension-filled unity and harmony of Lutheran theology and church.

Right from the outset, the Lutherans claimed that they did 'not understand the church to be an external government of certain nations'; rather the true Christians were regarded as 'people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments' (ApolCA VII/VIII, 10; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 175).

In the Lutheran Confessions (Schulz 2009), the Church is defined, according to its Magna Charta in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, as the 'assembly of saints', commissioned to 'purely preach and teach the Gospel and to rightly administer the sacraments', and this Church does not strive for a totalitarian domination of the world:

‘For the Gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness of the heart, not an external, temporal one’, but ‘does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage’ (AC XVI, 4f., Kolb and Wengert 2000: 48f.).

The Lutheran Confessions as included in the Book of Concord of 1580 are not intended to be anything other than a rendering of the scriptural truth, concentrated on the gospel. The actual meaning and significance of the gospel must therefore conform with both the scriptures and the confession of faith of the Lutheran Reformation (Gassmann and Hendrix 1999: 48–84; Bayer 2008: 68–94).

In this regard, one may speak of a ‘hermeneutic circle’: the confession of faith arises from the Word of God in Holy Scripture and the confession of faith, in turn, affects our understanding of the Word of God in Holy Scripture. It is, however, necessary to ensure that the Word of scripture is and remains prior to the Word of the confession. And to this extent one can even say that the confession of faith is constitutive for the Church, albeit only in this derivative sense. But then it must be ensured that the confession of the Church is and remains subject to the judgment of scripture, as has been formulated in a lastingly valid manner by the Binding Summary of the Formula of Concord (Kolb and Wengert 2000: 527). All in all, the confession focuses on the scriptures and within the scriptures on the focal point of the gospel (Kolb 1991: 20–24).

The confessional documents found in the Book of Concord can be and are intended to be an instruction for understanding what Christian faith is, and what Christian life is. Accordingly, the Lutheran confessions of faith are not simply a collection of propositions and theories, but they form a rule for the practical application of the gospel. In this way, the confessional texts constitute a directive even for pastoral care. Thus, the confessions of faith circumscribe and define a sphere, a framework, in which proclamation and worship are ecclesiastically legitimate (Kolb 1991: 38–41). Unlike the Roman Catholic Church (even after the Second Vatican Council), the Lutheran Church does not possess something like a papal magisterium. This means that there are no single authorities that as such have monopolies of interpretation (Bayer 2008: 68–74).

The confession of a Christian is first to give answer to God’s self-revelation, second to give witness to it; all the while, however, this faith is invested in the life-giving power of the Word of God itself, who desires to reach all people (Kolb 2012: 132). Such a confession is meant to be inviting, since it establishes the bridge between God’s Word in the Holy Scriptures and the different situations and cultures, in which God is awaiting our witness (Kolb 1993: 272, 298).

Confessing, in this understanding, is an act of (Christian) faith, which is created by the very Word of God to which faith is related. (Kolb 1991: 22f.). Conversely, this confession

is ‘dependent on’ and ‘initiated by [...] the Word of God’ (Kolb 1991: 17). Nonetheless, it is always contemporary and contextual.

2 Confession – specifying Lutheran identity

Lutheran identity is not first and foremost a special identity; it instead lays claim to catholicity (Johnson and Maxfield 2012). According to the Wittenberg Reformation, to renew the Church meant to remain faithful to the one, holy, catholic church. Notably, it was Nikolaus Selnecker who, in the first edition of the Book of Concord, labelled the early Christian creeds included in it: ‘*Tria Symbola Oecumenica* – The Three Ecumenical Creeds’ (Kolb and Wengert 2000: 19). For this reason, the renewal of the Church during and after the Reformation has repeatedly been accompanied by the recourse to the scriptures.

According to AC VII, the existence and the unity of the Church depend upon the gospel in the form of the proclamation of the Word in accordance with the scripture, as well as the sacraments in the form of administration in conformity with their institution. Herein consists the identity of the Lutheran Church (Klän 2007: 15–28).

Thus, the confessional attitude is a determinative feature of Lutheran faith, theology, and church, and thus an unmistakeable mark of Lutheran identity. This is due to the fact that ‘confession’, in the Lutheran sense of the term, signifies a responsible reaction to God’s faith-creating action through his word, expressing not only a person’s ‘private’ convictions on religious matters, but formulating an agreement on the obligatory features of Christian faith, revealing the accordance of a person’s belief with the scriptures, and thus, with doctrine of the church.

Therefore, the confessions focus on the centre of scripture, namely the gospel, of which Jesus Christ is the quintessence and the living reality.

Given that the confessional documents of the Lutheran Church both embrace and seek to advance the impact of Luther’s reformational insights, it is of great import to reach an understanding, or establish a ‘consensus’, about what the gospel *is*:

> It is enough for the true unity of the Christian Church [singular, cf. the plural in the Latin text: ad veram unitatem ecclesiae] that the Gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and that the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. (AC VII)

Such ‘consensus’ is therefore to be achieved, or reiterated, consistently. It is obligatory as a permanent task in Lutheran theology and church. In addition, we may observe that the

authors of the Lutheran confessions always envision the pastoral dimension of Lutheran identity. In general:

> [C]onfessions of a church describe theological aspects which define the identity of a church. They are marked by the historical context in which they were conceived (particularism) and their claim that they address the nature of Christian faith and of the church (universalism). (Brunn 2014)

Those who adhere to Confessional Lutheranism share the opinion that the sixteenth-century confessional documents as collected in the Book of Concord indeed express the Christian doctrine in a binding way. This means that the Confessions are seen as *norma normata*, 'the ruled rule', i.e. expositions of the doctrine found in the Bible and, as such, authoritative due to their source – Holy Scripture itself, which is *norma normans*, the 'ruling rule'. For this reason, pastors of the Confessional Lutheran churches, on the day of their ordination to the office of the ministry, subscribe to the confessions 'because' (*quia*) they are regarded to be a true exposition of the scriptural doctrine, not merely *quatenus* ('in so far as') these confessions are viewed to be scriptural. In this way the representatives of Confessional Lutheranism seek to 'avoid false concepts of ecclesial unity' and secure and 'protect the church's integrity' (Wenz 2013).

3 The Lutheran confessions from the sixteenth century

The Lutheran 'confessions' (Dingel 2014) are written documents presented to a certain audience in order to explain theological positions held by the Wittenberg reformers in the sixteenth century. For the most part, these confessional documents were produced as 'apologies' or clarifications of the Wittenberg reformers and their second-generation successors had been asked, or had seen themselves urged to submit. These documents include, in the classical compilation in the Book of Concord (1580), Melanchthon's Augsburg Confession (1530) and his Apology to the Augsburg Confession (1531), Luther's Smalcald Articles (1537), Melanchthon's Treatise on the Power and the Primacy of the Pope (1537), and finally the Formula of Concord (1577). An exception to this rule are Martin Luther's *Small and Large Catechisms* (both 1529), which were written for the purpose of elementary Christian instruction after the Saxon visitations in 1527/1528 had brought to light a disastrous ignorance of basic Christian truths even among the clergy (Arand, Nestingen and Kolb 2012: 1–11).

The term 'Confession' was first used in a doctrinal statement by Philipp Melanchthon (Arand, Nestingen and Kolb 2012: 3). His *Confessio Augustana* (Augsburg Confession) was submitted by the Protestant estates to Emperor Charles V on the occasion of the Diet of Augsburg and was read out to the estates of the Holy Empire of the German Nation on

25 June 1530. In its first part, Melanchthon listed twenty-one articles of Christian faith. He thereby follows largely the pattern of the Apostles' Creed beginning with the doctrine of God (AC I; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 36f.) and spanning it to Christ's second coming (AC XVII; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 50f.).

This document consists of two parts, with articles I to XXI expressing the Wittenberg positions on basic articles of faith, such as God, Christ, sin, justification by faith, the means of grace (the Word of God, the sacraments), the office of the ministry, church order, civic affairs, Christ's second coming, free will, the cause of sin, faith and good works, and the cult of saints. The second part deals with what was regarded as abuses, customs and practices like celibacy, the Lord's Supper in two kinds, the Mass, confession, distinction of foods, monastic vows, and the power of bishops.

As a response to the Augsburg Confession, Roman Catholic opponents wrote a 'Confutation' (*Confutatio Augustana*) in order to defend the positions of the papal church (Iserloh 1980; Immenkötter 1981). Melanchthon responded to this by drafting the Apology to the Augsburg Confession which the Emperor refused to accept. Both the Confutation and Melanchthon's Apology were formed upon the pattern of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon continued to work on this Apology. A first version was published together with the final copy of the Augsburg Confession in spring 1531 ('*editio princeps*' [first edition]), with an enlarged version in autumn 1531. The latter found widespread reception in the sixteenth century and thus served as the chief reference text of the Apology in the controversies to follow (Peters 1997).

In 1536, Pope Paul III convened the council the Protestants had been asking for since 1518, including Luther himself. They now were urged to submit their propositions. Elector John the Steadfast of Saxony commissioned Martin Luther to draft a proposal explaining the Saxon positions. Together with Wittenberg colleagues, Luther produced what was later labelled the Smalcald Articles (Bente 1965; Russell 1995; Führer 2009). These covered issues like justification by faith – the 'chief article' – Law and Gospel, the means of grace, and others. Remarkably, Luther identified commonalities with those who agreed to the trinitarian and christological dogmas as confessed in the early Christian creeds. At the same time, he regarded the split between the reformational camp and the papal church to be irreversible. With this 'dialectical approach', he provided a pattern of distinguishing between, but also evaluating, those matters of fundamental consensus and fundamental dissensus that occur at any one time – and specifically during an ecumenical age.

These articles drafted by Luther, however, were not adopted by the Smalcald League – an alliance of Protestant princes and territories – in its 1537 gathering, although a number of theologians present at the meeting signed them. Instead, Melanchthon composed a statement on the rights and role of the papacy entitled 'Treatise on the Power and Primacy

of the Pope'. This document may be seen as an appendix to the Augsburg Confession, in which the issue of the papacy had not been treated due to diplomatic considerations. Melanchthon denied any 'divine right' to be ascribed to the papacy and its Roman hierarchy. He was willing, however, to accept the papacy as a representative of Christian unity, given that the pope would agree to an unhindered proclamation of the gospel as rediscovered by the Reformation. This document, then, became the official proposition of the Smalcald League. The aforesaid council came into existence in 1545 with only a handful of Protestant representatives attending the Council of Trent ('*Tridentinum*'; Jedin 1957; 1961; 1970; 1976; O'Malley 2013).

After the Smalcald League had been defeated by imperial troops in the Smalcald War of 1547, Emperor Charles V imposed rules and regulations of church affairs effective during an intermediary period labelled the 'Augsburg Interim' (1548). The measures laid down in this resolution were severely enforced in the southern parts of Germany. They displayed a cancellation of most of the reformational achievements, with the exception of the marriage of (Lutheran) priests and the celebration of the Lord's Supper in both kinds. Those Lutheran pastors who adhered to their positions were suspended from their parishes and oftentimes forcefully exiled (Schorn-Schütte 2005).

In the northern parts of Germany, however, the 'Interim' could not be executed due to political and religious resistance on the side of Protestant estates and princes. In the newly formed electorate of Saxony, Elector Moritz urged Melanchthon to make suggestions on how to deal with the 'Interim'. Melanchthon's Leipzig Proposal – often falsely named 'Leipzig Interim' (Kolb and Nestingen 2001: 183–196) – sought to secure the Lutheran doctrine while, at the same time, making concessions in matters that he regarded to be *adiaphora*; that is, insignificant matters that might be reverted to former usages without violating the centre of the gospel (Peterson 1974). This proposal was never put into effect. Nonetheless it triggered a great many of controversies that occupied the Lutheran camp for the next two and a half decades, and even caused divisions (Wartenberg 2006).

These controversies revolved around issues that needed further clarification within the Wittenberg camp, but also over against the papal church and Calvinist Reformation.

Several attempts to settle the tensions among the heirs of Luther and Melanchthon failed. It was only in the early 1570s that an initiative taken by the Duke of Württemberg, supported by princes and imperial cities particularly in northern Germany and finally joined by the Saxon electorate, succeeded in re-establishing doctrinal unity among most of the Lutheran estates. The means by which this unity was achieved has become known as the Formula of Concord (Wengert 2006). This document consists of two parts, the 'Epitome' and the 'Solid Declaration', each of them comprising twelve articles. Those dealt with original sin, free will, righteousness of faith, good works, law and

gospel, the Lord's Supper, the person of Christ, Christ's descent into hell, ecclesiastical practices, eternal predestination and election of God, and finally, other factions alien to the Augsburg Confession. Additionally in this context, decisions taken by the Council of Trent or doctrines held in the Reformed camp were criticized and rejected by doctrinal condemnations. Notable exceptions to this rule are Martin Luther's *Small and Large Catechisms* of 1529.

All these documents were included in the Book of Concord published on 25 June 1580, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. In addition, the early Christian creeds – explicitly labelled 'Ecumenical Creeds' – were included in the Book of Concord and claimed catholicity for the truths confessed in it.

4 The era of confessionalization (1555–1648)

This period is commonly defined as between the 'Religious Peace of Augsburg' (1555) and the end of the Thirty Years' War (1648; see Schilling 1985; Rublack 1992; Reinhard and Schilling 1995; Headley and Hillerbrand 2004). The authors of the Lutheran Confessions were, of course, conscious of the contemporary character of the confessional writings of the sixteenth century, but at the same time deeply committed to confessing the eternal truth of God's word (Kolb 1999: 449–466). It is noteworthy, however, that nearly all of the Lutheran Confessions found adherence among princes and other 'secular, or civic' authorities. They were acting on behalf of their territories in defending the evangelical faith, and at the same time, justifying the ongoing reformation process over against the Pope and the German Emperor (Kolb 1991; Estes 2009: 355–380).

Before the Book of Concord was published, various authorities in the territories adhering to the Lutheran Reformations had already promulgated secondary norms labelled *corpora doctrinae* ('body of doctrine') in order to standardize public proclamation and worship in their churches. Thus, wherever the Book of Concord was installed as *corpus doctrinae*, it was meant to function, next to the scriptures, as a secondary norm, or standard for preaching, teaching, worship, and ecclesial practices. In this way, the Lutheran confessions moulded the profile of beliefs, worship, piety, and conduct, at least officially (Preus 1972).

But the Book of Concord was not received everywhere in the estates that supported the impulses arising from the Wittenberg reformation, not even within the realm of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Approximately eighty percent of the Lutheran pastors in Germany subscribed to the Book of Concord, sometimes driven by fear of losing their position. Beyond the boundaries of the Empire, the reception process took varied routes. The king of Denmark, Frederick II, for example, bluntly refused to accept the Book of Concord that his sister Anna, the wife of elector August of Saxony, had sent to him (Lockhart 2004). In Sweden, the Book of Concord was accepted only in 1686. In

Hungary, for instance, the synod of Žilina (Sillein) accepted it as doctrinal norm in 1610, thus establishing the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession as a separate church body (Batka 2021).

5 The ‘Second Confessionalization’ (nineteenth century)

In turning away from enlightenment and rationalism, various church representatives and theologians identified the Lutheran confessions as relevant reference texts for establishing a personal piety and ecclesial identity. This includes Claus Harms who published 95 theses in Kiel in 1817. With Wilhelm Löhe, Saxony with the theological faculty of Leipzig, Theodor Kliefoth in Mecklenburg, and Friedrich Adolf Philippi in Hanover, territorial churches in Bavaria saw a new confessional awakening (Kantzenbach 1968; Hein 1984). In this context, the formation of confessional Lutheran churches must be positioned historically.

5.1 Rediscovering the Church

It took an additional three centuries after the Reformation until the fathers and mothers of the confessional Lutheran churches in the nineteenth century were able to disengage from the state-church system as inherited from the late reformation times (Klän and da Silva 2010).

Hand in hand with their confessional awakening they discovered the church as an organic, institutional and communicative entity, in which a framework for their commitment to God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions could take shape. They recognized that worship, confession, and church constitution are integrally intertwined.

It was no accident that the crucial turning point of the confessional awakening, which ultimately led to the emergence of independent evangelical Lutheran churches, was the Sacrament of the Altar. The concern that forced confessional Lutherans onto ‘solitary paths’ was that of preserving their biblical Lutheran understanding in an ecclesiastically binding form, and of defending its exclusivity against every kind of false compromise.

In this context, the question of church fellowship in the sense of fellowship in Word and sacrament(s), including intercommunion (that is, the admission of Christians belonging to different denominations to receive the Lord’s supper, and the joint administering of the Eucharist by ministers of different denominations), was the foremost concern in the creation of confessional Lutheran churches in the nineteenth century.

It was these churches that created a new awareness of the Concordia-Lutheran principles of the sixteenth century and gave them renewed ecclesiological reality. They wanted to demonstrate Lutheran identity in the ecclesiastical dimension by establishing that

fellowship in public worship, particularly at the altar, has as its unconditional prerequisite a consensus in faith, doctrine, and confession (Klän 2007: 15–28; Harrison and Pless 2017). In this way, clear-cut demarcations were built against rationalism, but also over and against positions that were viewed to be ‘liberal’ or ‘modernist’. This position is typically labelled ‘confessionalism’ or ‘neo-confessionalism’.

Not accidentally, this standpoint tended to be viewed as ‘confessionalistic’ for quite some time in Protestant theology. This standpoint was highly contested in various camps of Protestant theology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ferdinand Christian Baur, Karl von Hase, August Tholuck, Albrecht Ritschl, and Ernst Troeltsch, in spite of their theological differences, regarded Lutheran Confessionalism to be a backward-looking movement, unable to cope with the challenges of modern times. These critics claimed that the religious consciousness of the individual was underestimated in those neo-orthodox positions. Lutheran Confessionalism was seen unable to implement the necessary transformation of Christianity by incorporating various types of piety. Viewed from a later perspective, however, it has to be stated that Lutheran Confessionalism as well as Confessional Lutheranism contributed to the pluralization of types of piety: the claim to exclusivity, however, is a characteristic of Confessional Lutheranism.

5.2 New confessional awareness in academic theology

A notable point of origin of Lutheran neo-confessionalism (Kantzenbach 1968) was the theological faculty at the University of Erlangen/Bavaria (Hein 1984). Coming from Erlangen, Adolph von Harleß influenced the faculty of theology at Leipzig University in a neo-confessional direction. In a time of personal and cultural theological crisis, he had discovered the confessional writings of the Lutheran church indeed supported his own faith. Referring to Luther, Wilhelm Höfling promoted the idea of the priesthood of all believers. Scholars like Karl Friedrich August Kahnis (Stolle 2011), Franz Delitzsch (Rengstorf 1967; Corzine 2018), and Christoph Ernst Luthardt (Rieske-Braun 1993) took up this imprint and shaped the profile of the faculty in the realms of exegesis, church history, systematics, and hermeneutics. Kahnis tried to prove the Lutheran doctrinal positions as logically developing in the course of church history and the history of dogma. Delitzsch became famous for his commentaries on the Old Testament, and missionary activities among the Jews (Stolle 2020a: 93–95). Luthardt was an influential writer and publicist with his *Kompendium der Dogmatik and Apologetische Vorträge*. In Rostock, it was Theodor Kliefoth (Ohst 1992; Kleinig 2002) who established a neo-Lutheran character for both the Evangelical-Lutheran territorial church of Mecklenburg and the Rostock faculty of theology, resulting in long-term effects which were carried far into the twentieth century. He reintroduced church inspections and pursued the restoration of Lutheran state churches. Alongside others like Luthardt, he belongs among the founders of the

‘Allgemeine Evangelisch-Lutherische Konfenrenz’, which meant to serve as a corpus of neo-confessional Lutherans comprising representatives from state churches as well as from ‘free’ churches. Theodosius Harnack (Quill 2002) coined the neo-Lutheran profile at Dorpat University (nowadays Tartu, Estonia), and wrote important contributions to Luther theology, practical theology, and liturgics.

6 The formation of (neo-)confessional Lutheran church bodies in Germany

6.1 Resisting the foundation of unionist churches

In contrast to the unionist concepts as promulgated by the state, the founders of confessional Lutheran churches wanted to demonstrate Lutheran identity in an ecclesiastically binding dimension (Klän 2005b; Klän 2019b). The founders of the Lutheran confessional churches in Europe, including those that emigrated (Iwan 1943; 1995; Gerber 1984; Smith 2009) to Australia, America, or southern Africa, proved to be equal contemporaries of the movement for bourgeois emancipation. This remains true even if we recognize that the theological content, for which they were prepared to bring great sacrifices, were principally conservative, the same holding true for their political convictions. Nonetheless, the claim for religious and ecclesiastical and theological independence in terms of confessional church bodies is an integral part of their common inheritance.

6.1.1 The ‘Old Lutherans’ in Prussia

‘*Altlutheraner*’ (‘Old Lutherans’; rather: ‘confessional Lutherans’) is an umbrella term for a group of movements, congregations and churches that were differentiated between themselves and which first came into existence in Prussia in the nineteenth century. Characteristic for them, at least in most cases, is their connection with the revival movement. It is in virtue of this connection that they received their anti-rationalist imprint. For some of them, this new piety was connected with a confessional (re)discovery. From the piety of ‘sin and grace’ a renewed Lutheran consciousness grew. Confessional Lutheran congregations and churches emerged in Prussia in resistance to the introduction of the unions of Lutheran and Reformed churches in the newly cut territories after the Congress of Vienna (Clark 1996). These ‘Old Lutherans’ were acknowledged as the legitimate continuation of the Lutheran Church in Prussia by the majority of leaders in the Lutheran state churches, after the Prussian Union of Churches had been established (Kampmann and Klän 2014).

On the other hand, theologians such as Carl Immanuel Nitzsch claimed that the symbolical writings of the church were documents of history which had to be understood in the light of the times in which they were written; therefore, he supported the foundation of

the Prussian Union (Drehsen 1990). In contrast, Friedrich Julius Stahl insisted on the perennial importance of the symbols of the Reformation Era and therefore pleaded for the continued existence of separate denominations, albeit within the Prussian Union (Nabrings 1983). The Lutheran confessionalists, however, perceived a foundational weakness in the ecclesiological basis of both attempts (Geck 2014).

6.1.2 The establishment of confessional church bodies in Germany

After the anti-unionist protests in Prussia that brought about the reconstruction of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Prussia (da Silva 2020b: 13–19), confessional movements emerged also in Baden (Brunn 2020: 23–134) and Nassau (Herrmann 2020: 35–42), and later on in the Electorate (da Silva 2020c: 43–50) and Grand Duchy (da Silva 2020d: 51–55) of Hesse. In the last third of the nineteenth century, there were (neo)confessional church formations that resisted the influence of liberal tendencies in theology and church, especially in Saxony. A third variant of confessional Lutheran churches emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a result of the defence against state intervention in traditional church law; for example in Hanover (Grünhagen 2010).

Whereas in most parts of Europe – with the exception of France which since the French Revolution preferred to define the republican constitution as ‘laical’ – in which the state-church system inherited from the Constantinian era prevailed, confessional movements and churches were, at least for some time, persecuted, driven underground, and in the end, if acknowledged by the state, marginalized.

It has to be noted, on the other hand, that these Lutheran movements never succeeded in regaining major influence on the intellectual, spiritual, and religious developments in their respective lands.

6.1.3 Concepts of constitutional reconstruction

Under state-church law, most of the independent Evangelical-Lutheran churches found themselves in a no man’s land at the beginning of their existence. Given the novelty of the situation, it was not clear how a church should be structured. It is no coincidence that it was primarily the questions of church and office of the ministry, church governance and constitution that led to disputes and divisions within and among independent Lutheran churches.

While in Prussia, the constitution of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Prussia combined elements of synodical and consistorial character, the churches in Hesse and – partially – in Hannover pursued a more episcopal structure; in Saxony, as a re-import from the German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States (nowadays Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod), congregational and synodical principles were prevalent. The ways in which these neo-confessional churches formed their reorganization outside the

still state-church-system seemed to be contradictory. Therefore, those ‘free’ churches lacked for a long time a measure of unanimity that would have allowed for closer bonds than they realized historically.

6.2 The Lutheran emigration from Germany: phase I (Silesia and Pomerania)

It was against those ‘unionist’ developments mentioned above that the forebears of confessional Lutheran reassurance protested, only to be marginalized in various German territories like Prussia, Hanover, Baden, Hesse, Saxony. On the other hand, the forebears of the ‘German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other states’ (Forster 1990), and of the Lutheran Church in Australia (Iwan 1995 [first published 1931]), found themselves compelled to leave their home countries for a life of exile (Westerhaus 1989).

Emigration on religious grounds from Prussia in the 1830s and 1840s led to the founding of denominational Lutheran churches in North America (e.g. the Buffalo and Iowa Synods) and Australia. Most of the migrants came from Silesia and Pomerania. Certainly, their decision to migrate was in part religiously motivated, but it was also fostered by economic crises in the first half of the nineteenth century caused by crop failure.

The separations that caused, or accompanied, these church formations affected mission activities outside Germany. Indeed, such separations also led to the emergence of confessional Lutheran churches in Africa and Asia.

6.3 The Lutheran emigration from Germany: phase II (Saxony)

In 1838, 665 Lutherans – followers of Martin Stephan and a number of pastors – emigrated from Saxony. One of the five ships sank during the crossing. In the spring of 1839, they settled in Perry County, Missouri. Stephan was eventually removed from his leadership position. Through the work of C. F. W. Walther (Suelflow 2000), the immigrants overcame the crisis of legitimacy, and the group became established. In 1847, twelve congregations joined together on the basis of the common confessional-Lutheran position to form the ‘German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other states’. Walther was appointed first president of the synod, later also as professor at the newly founded seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. The cultural milieu was German, but the church landscape was certainly diverse, with Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Anglican congregations. Since 1841, Wilhelm Löhe of Neuendettelsau supported the work of Lutheran clergymen, congregations, and synods overseas; in 1842, the first ‘sendlings’ trained by him were sent out in response to Friedrich Wyneken’s cry for help to support the German Lutheran Church in North America (Threinen 1992).

6.4 Lutheran emigration to South America

It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that through European immigrants, Lutheranism arrived on the continent of South America (da Silva 2021). Here we can note a reception of Luther's theology. The German emigration to South America was, for the most part, caused by economic reasons. Over the course of the nineteenth century, approximately 100,000 German (speaking) immigrants arrived in Brazil. They lived there as second-class citizens; up until 1889, their marriages were not acknowledged by the state. The German state churches neglected their former members; pastors were not sent to take care of them. That is why the organization of congregations and churches took place on the initiative of lay people who founded them; only afterwards, they called a gifted person to be their pastor. These pastors, however, lacked a sound theological education. Only in the late nineteenth century did the first synodical associations come into being. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Evangelische Oberkirchenrat* of the Evangelical Church in Prussia was willing to accept the membership of overseas congregations. In 1899, the LCMS (Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod) convention decided to send pastor Christian J. Broders to South Brazil. The foundation of congregations, schools, and a seminary followed, and in 1904, the Brazilian District of the 'German Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States' was founded, which is now the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Brazil (IELB) with some 250,000 congregants, and a member church of the International Lutheran Council.

In other countries, missionary activities of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod resulted in the establishment of new confessional Lutheran churches, such as those in Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, but also in the Philippines.

6.5 Further emergence of confessional Lutheran churches (in Europe)

In the second half of the nineteenth century, confessional Lutheran churches were established in France, Denmark, Norway, and in the course of the twentieth century further churches were founded in England, Poland, and Finland. On the European continent, these confessional Lutheran churches comprised mostly of extremely small groups of Lutheran confessors, whereas in the United States and Australia, the immigrants contributed to the formation of major church bodies. The largest of the confessional Lutheran churches in Europe is the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) in Germany, with 32,000 members. In England, there are 1,500 confessional Lutherans, less than 1,000 in France, and even smaller churches in Belgium, and Denmark (Klän 2019b).

Due to recent developments in the Nordic countries, 'mission provinces' came into existence, including the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, the Mission Province of Sweden, and the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of Norway, followed by the

formation of the Communion of Nordic Lutheran Dioceses in 2015 (for more on this context see Systematic Theology in the Nordic Countries after 1945). These 'ecclesial structures' arose from opposition to the ordination of women, the acceptance of same-sex marriages, and the underlying trends in theology and society. In recent years, they have formed confessional church bodies independently of the former state churches in their respective countries.

The acceptance of these churches into the International Lutheran Council at the 2018 Antwerp conference is the last point in these developments for the time being (International Lutheran Council 2018b; 2021b).

6.6 Confessional endeavours in missionary movements

The history of Confessional Lutheran churches is closely linked to the missionary movement that emerged in the nineteenth century. At its constituent General Synod (1841), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Prussia summarized mission as 'a matter for the church as such' (Stolle 2020a: 73–80). This principle was upheld theologically, albeit not everywhere organizationally. Oftentimes it was still mission societies, instead of whole church bodies, that performed missionary activities, but these were nevertheless guided by a strict ecclesial and confessional consciousness.

Although mission work has changed over time, the basic principle of confessional Lutheran missiology has remained the same ever since it was formulated by the founders of the Lutheran missions in the nineteenth century: the Church is in charge of missionary work, rather than individuals or missionary societies. '*Lutherische Kirche treibt lutherische Mission, und lutherische Mission führt zu lutherischer Kirche*' ('the Lutheran church can pursue only Lutheran mission, and Lutheran mission work must lead to a Lutheran church'; Hopf 1967). Wilhelm Löhe of Neuendettelsaus stated that 'mission is the one Church of God in its movement, the actualization of the one universal, catholic church'; and, in the very same context, claimed the Lutheran Church to be the 'uniting centre of confessions/ denominations' (Löhe 1969: 155).

Missionary activities of Confessional Lutheran churches also had Israelites/Jews in mind from the beginning (Stolle 1993a; Böhmer 2016). This was all the more self-evident since, for example, in Prussia a number of pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church had previously been active in the missionary work with Jews. The number of converts from Judaism to Lutheranism, however, remained small. Missionary endeavours among Muslims have been scarce.

Through the missionary work of the Confessional Lutheran churches in Germany, later on also in Northern America, a number of independent churches came into existence, most notably in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.

Theological conflicts regarding the theology of the scriptures, the office of the ministry, church governance, and church fellowship that led to disruptions within Lutheran state churches and tensions with Lutheran 'free' churches, and even within the camp of those Lutheran free churches also affected the mission organizations. Conflicts that arose in the 'sending' churches were exported. In many cases, divisions in the home country caused conflicts among missionaries as well.

7 Conflicts on core issues of Confessional Lutheran theology

7.1 The scriptures

As the foundational document of the gospel, Holy Scripture serves as the canonical norm and as well as the testimony of the Holy Spirit for the teaching and life of Christianity. However, the Lutheran Church did not hold a numerical definition of the canon in the Lutheran Reformation; the Council of Trent (Roman Catholic Church) and the *Confessio Gallicana* (Reformed Church) took a different route. In Lutheranism, the canon of scripture is to be determined from the centre of the gospel in Jesus Christ.

According to Lutheran Orthodoxy, scriptural 'infallibility' does not mean 'mathematically faultless' but rather affirms the Scriptures to be 'reliable, unconditional', particularly for the assurance of salvation in God's self-communication through the gospel (Koch 2004: 31–41).

Christian faith is grounded in scripture and therefore offers a (fundamental) criterion for the categorical distinction between the Word of God and the word of man. In this respect, Holy Scripture is canonical. In the Concordia-Lutheran view, the unity of the Old and New Testament is to be maintained even if an inner differentiation in scriptures is observed and theologically established (e.g. between law and gospel as two ways of in which God speaks and acts). In any case, the self-assertion and self-interpretation of the Holy Scripture is considered a hermeneutical principle.

The authority of the sacred scriptures was critically questioned throughout eighteenth-century Enlightenment and rationalism (Behrens 2005; Behrens and Salzmann 2016). Traces of the debate on scriptural authority can be found in the context of confessional Lutheran churches (Voelz 1997). It was the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod that insisted on the hermeneutical rule of the inerrancy of Scriptures (Schaum and Collver 2019). It 'intentionally sought to repristinate the doctrinal theology of seventeenth-century Lutheran Orthodoxy on the nature and character of Scripture' (Rast 2019). Nonetheless, this church suffered a major conflict over this very issue in the 1970s, which led to the 'walk-out' of professors and students from Concordia Seminary St. Louis (Missouri) in

1973, and the splitting-off of several congregations from the LCMS (Marquart 1977; Tietjen 1990).

In the wider camp of Lutheran theology, the theologoumenon of scriptural inerrancy was contested by Lutheran theologians such as Werner Elert (1931) and Hermann Sasse (1981). Even if the confessional documents were understood to be expositions of the scriptures, and a summary of all scripture in particular, they are not allowed to dominate scriptural interpretation; their validity is dependent on their conformity with the scriptural doctrine (Schlink 1948).

The International Lutheran Council (ILC) member churches share the belief in the infallibility of the Bible as they 'proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of an unconditional commitment to the Holy Scriptures as the inspired and infallible Word of God and to the Lutheran Confessions contained in the Book of Concord as the true and faithful exposition of the Word of God' (ILC). Nonetheless, 'Lutherans are not bound to the specific interpretation of a particular Biblical text that we may find in the Symbolical Books. What Lutherans are bound to is the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Symbolical Books, even though in a particular place a doctrinal conclusion (as long as it accords with the analogy of faith) may be based on the same kind of frail and debatable exegetical evidence that goes, alas, into every commentary and every translation at one or the other place' (Piepkorn 1972).

7.2 Church and congregation

Due to regional and persistent theological differences, the various confessional Lutheran churches remained independent for a long time, and were often in conflict with one another. The question of the appropriate constitution of the church, which was the most discussed topic among the Lutherans in the nineteenth century, caused disruptions, not only theologically, but also in terms of ecclesial organization, particularly in the new, state-free form of existence (cf. Marquart 1990).

The relationship between the local congregation and the church body as a whole was under dispute as well. In connection with this issue, the question of church governance, its legitimate rights and duties, gave rise to the following questions: who would replace the discharged *summus episcopus* (the title for the prince or king as head of the church) of the state church system? Would it be a consistory-like body, a bishop, or a convention? How would the competencies of such a governing person or institution be appropriately defined (Sasse 1986)?

7.3 The office of the ministry

It was the theological foundation of ecclesiastical ministry and the nature of its relationship to the Christian congregation that was under dispute (Slenczka 2001). A conflict broke out

at the beginning of the 1850s when C. F. W. Walther and Wilhelm Löhe were unable to reach agreement on the issues of church and ministry (Maxfield 2005). It is no coincidence that these questions were the subject of German or German-born Lutheran theologians in the nineteenth century. For it had to be clarified, especially under the conditions of freedom from the state-church regiment, who was rightly in charge of the church. In this debate, Löhe (Hebart 1939), Kliefoth (Kehnscherper 1954), and August Vilmar (Hauptmann 2000) opted for the primacy of the office of the ministry and objected against a participation of the laity in the leadership of the church; Höfling voted instead for the primacy of the priesthood of all believers (Kießig 1991). Meanwhile, Walther held 'a mediating position' because he probably accepted the divine bestowal of the office. At the same time he granted 'the congregations the right to exercise govern the church' (Barnbrock 2003: 95; Nafzger 2017: 961–1019).

7.4 Predestination

By the end of the 1870s, a controversy regarding the doctrine of predestination shook North American Lutheranism, the shockwaves of which also reached Germany. Friedrich Augustus Schmidt, a colleague of C. F. W. Walther, criticized the position of the LCMS as Calvinistic. The chief point of the controversy was the question of resistibility to God's grace. Walther differentiated between God's general will of salvation pertaining to all humankind, and his specific election of a certain group of believers. Schmidt (1897) stressed the idea of God's election '*intuitu fidei*' (with regard to a person's faith) while Walther (2018) and the LCMS, in order to strictly maintain the '*extra nos*' (God's sole efficacy in terms of salvation), insisted on God's predestination to be the pre-condition of faith. This controversy had major and long-lasting consequences for the relationship of the LCMS to other Lutheran churches (Wohlrabe 1981; Nafzger 2017: 1195–1261).

7.5 Eschatology

The Lutheran churches regarded 'chiliasm' as heresy since the early days of the Reformation; that is, the expectation of a better future (Stephenson 1993). Indeed, they followed the lines of article XVII of the Augsburg Confession which rejects the proposition, 'that before the resurrection of the dead the godly will take possession of the kingdom of the world, while the ungodly are suppressed everywhere' (Kolb and Wengert 2000: 51; cf. Nafzger 2017: 1109–1194). However, in the late Reformation period, individual Lutherans placed their hopes in an age of felicity to come (Penman 2019). Later on, Philipp Jacob Spener (Spener 2001; Wallmann 1981: 235–266), the founder of Lutheran Pietism in Germany held this view, as did others in the 'spiritualist' camp of the seventeenth century, including Johann Valentin Andreae, Gottfried Arnold, the Petersen couple, and Johann Albrecht Bengel (Breul and Schnurr 2013).

In certain circles of the confessional Lutheran churches, the era of a state-free existence of the Church was regarded to be of momentous progress in the Church's history (Engelbrecht 1984).

8 Confessional Lutheran churches in the twentieth century

The independent Lutherans gradually learned to correctly assess the significance of the problems where their paths had diverged. They had to recognize that while interpretation and application of individual articles formed a common basis of the Lutheran Confessions, they were formed under different local, temporal, theological, and non-theological conditions, but this did not significantly affect this common confessional ground

8.1 Examples of developments to (re-)unification

8.1.1 Aspects of confessional Lutheran alignments in North America

Even if one only considers the confessional camp, there exists an abundance of different church bodies within northern American Lutheranism (Nelson 1976; Granquist 2015). For some time, they formed coalitions, merged, only to have some groups loosening the bonds to others, leaving the respective alliances, and parts of them breaking away from ecclesial entities they had joined before.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, tendencies towards combining or uniting Lutheran churches across the United States developed (Wolf 1889; Wiederaenders 1998). In striving for confessional identity, some of the Lutheran synods formed the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872, which other synods joined by the beginning of the twentieth century (Schuetze 2000).

Differences in understanding of the theology and practice of church fellowship occurred in the midst of the twentieth century (Granquist 2015). In the meantime, the American Lutheran Church (ALC) had come into existence. In the course of negotiations between the LCMS and the ALC on church fellowship, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod left the Synodical Conference in 1963. They recognized that the confessional basis of altar and pulpit fellowship in the LCMS had been weakened. In contrast, two confessional Lutheran churches merged with the LCMS.

In contrast to the positions taken by the LCMS, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was formed; the ELCA supports women's ordination and same-sex marriages, and is a member church of the Lutheran World Federation (Trexler 1992).

8.1.2 The formation of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK) in Germany

In the beginning of the twentieth century, more than ten different confessional Lutheran churches existed in Germany only. It took intensive negotiations, long processes of rapprochement, and growth in coming to grips with the shared heritage and task with regard to an increasingly non-confessional Lutheranism and a progressively secular age, until those confessional Lutherans saw themselves in the position of forming one church body (Klän 2021).

Among Protestant regional churches, developments continued immediately after the Second World War, but did not amount to a truly new direction due to the outcome of the 'German church struggle': such developments led to the founding of the Protestant Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland), which was unanimously identified by all confessional Lutheran churches as a unionist church (Klän 2014: 317–343).

Various stages of cooperation, such as in the area of missions, theological education, and, since the 1950s, regular meetings of the representatives of the allied Evangelical Lutheran Free Churches, preceded the foundation of the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church (Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche) in Germany in 1972 (Stolle 2020b; Süß 2020; da Silva 2020d; Klän 2020).

This merger brought together the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, and the (old) Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (of 1947). As a prerequisite to this unification, a joint document laid down clarifications on the doctrine of scriptures, the office of the ministry, ecclesiology, and eschatology (Klän and da Silva 2010: 612–617).

The political circumstances – the Second World War resulting in two German states – meant that the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church existing in the territory of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) increasingly emphasized their independence and finally separated themselves organizationally from their fellow West German believers in the early 1970s. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the 'Old Lutheran' church in the former GDR was finally in the position to join SELK in 1990 (da Silva and Süß 2011; Adam 2020).

8.2 New disruptions

The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference in North America dispersed in 1963 with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS, the former Little Norwegian Synod) leaving the conference due to dissatisfaction over topics of doctrine and practice of church fellowship (Herrmann 2020).

In Germany, there were also moments of delay. Thus, the affiliation of St. Anschar's parish of Hamburg with the Hamburg territorial church in 1957 was seen as a 'fatal step

backwards' for the unification of confessional Lutheran churches. In 1965 in a unilateral decision, the Baden diocese (Brunn 2006) of the (old) Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (a merger of Lutheran churches in Hesse, Hannover, and Baden of 1947) left its previous church body to join the United Evangelical church in Germany (VELKD) and the Lutheran World Federation to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baden. The Baden church leaders opted for a broader Lutheran community (Brunn 2006: 147–152).

In 1984, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, previously linked to Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, severed its bonds with the Evangelical Lutheran (Old-Lutheran) Church, and consequently also with the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK).
This decision was brought about a dissatisfaction with the reception of historical-critical approaches to exegesis, and the resistance to ecumenical openness as demonstrated by many partner churches (Herrmann 2020: 35–42).

9 New profiles in the twenty-first century

9.1 Women's ordination

The vast majority of confessional Lutheran churches do not consider the issue of women's ordination as an *adiaphoron* (a matter of discretion) but rather as a doctrinal error that they reject in conformity with Holy Scripture and the historic doctrine and practice of the Church (Harrison and Pless 2012). The appreciation of charismata and spiritual gifts bestowed upon women is thereby not denied; on the contrary, the ministry of deaconesses is greatly appreciated, e.g. in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (Schave 2012). Moreover, it is extraordinarily doubtful whether those Lutheran churches to have introduced the ordination of women have not indeed changed the dogmatic understanding of the office of the ministry. Therefore, the confessional Lutheran churches in the ILC consider their position as being close to that of the Roman Catholic Church – only recently reaffirmed by Pope Francis (2021) – and the Eastern Orthodox churches, where women's ordination is strictly rejected (Limouris 1992). It is widely agreed upon, however, that women have taken an increasingly active role in the church, and the confessional Lutheran churches want to continue to encourage them to do so.

9.2 Same-sex marriages

In his pastoral letter of 2 July 2013 Bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt of the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church (SELK) in Germany, who was also President of the International Lutheran Council at that time, made this statement:

> Jesus – with Him the New Testament and in His followers global Christianity – holds to marriage between one man and one woman with the basic probability of the procreation of children as the plan for life that is desired by God. Along with that there stands celibacy as the other legitimate option. Homosexuality is identified with great clarity by Holy

> Scripture (see, for example, Lev 18:22; Rom 1:26–27) as not being wanted by God and as being a sin. Therefore, the Church may not bless any same-sex couples. It is a fruit and consequence of the winsome love of Christ that applies to all people that the Church can encounter those people with same-sex inclinations with respect and love, and additionally oppose discrimination against them. (Voigt 2011; cf. Voigt 2017)

All the ILC member churches share in this position (International Lutheran Council 2018a).

10 World-wide associations of confessional Lutheran churches

10.1 The International Lutheran Council (ILC)

All the member churches of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) are committed to basing their decisions solely on the Word of God, and not on social, cultural, or practical considerations. It is equally clear that the ILC supports its partner churches and the work done by the confessional Lutheran churches in every appropriate way, and hopes to contribute towards the strengthening of confessional Lutheranism in the world (ILC 2021a).

Of course, there is a real difference between a respectably large Lutheran confessional church in a Christian Western country with freedom of thought and a minority church in a post-Christian context, such as in Europe or in a country with a completely different religious orientation such as Japan, India, or China. It also makes a difference whether other Christian denominations and confessions have had a dominant role for many years or even centuries, like in South America, or whether there is an even balance between, for example, Lutherans and Roman Catholics (Bustamante 2020).

In all these cases there will be certain differences in preaching, teaching, adult education, mission work, social involvement, and the position in the social milieu as seen by the church (and by the outsider), as well as differences in the understanding and description of the resulting responsibilities in the given context (Klän 2019a).

The member churches of the ILC are mostly not member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), except for a few who hold dual membership. In contrast to the LWF, church fellowship is not part and parcel of the ILC constitution. Church fellowship will be established only in bilateral agreements, and increasingly so.

10.2 The Conference of Confessional Lutheran Churches (CELC)

After the break-up of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical conference, WELS, and ELS formed the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC 2021). Some smaller confessional Lutheran churches, including in Europe, like the Evangelical Lutheran Free

Church (ELFK), entered an alliance with WELS and ELS in what became a third world-wide association of Lutherans.

10.3 Ecumenical endeavours

The confessional Lutheran churches confess the unity of Christianity, which is given to the Church by Jesus Christ, its head and Lord. At the same time, they lament the divisions in Christianity; they see these on the one hand as a consequence of the struggle for the truth of faith, teaching and confession, but also as the effect of human error.

Fundamental differences in faith, doctrine, and confession between churches prevent church fellowship; communion at the altar in particular. For according to the confessional Lutheran view, the manifestation of church fellowship, especially altar and pulpit fellowship in the sense of intercommunion, depends on the manifestation of agreement in faith, doctrine, and confession.

Based on these principles, these churches do not consider ecumenical documents of the twentieth century to be compatible with the doctrinal standards of the Book of Concord. This assessment applies to the Barmen Theological Declaration (1934), the Leuenberg Agreement (1973), and the Porvoo Declaration (1992). It cannot be denied, however, that these documents can be characterized as expressing doctrinal convergences, or even concord. Although (for example) the Leuenberg Agreement explicitly denies being a ‘confession’, it, like the others, de facto functions as the doctrinal basis for establishing church fellowship between the respective signatory churches.

The hermeneutic applied here made it possible to relativize the historical confessions of faith of the sixteenth century in their present-day relevance, especially with respect to their doctrinal condemnations. These were relativized inasmuch as fundamental and central importance was accorded only to ‘justifying faith’; as a consequence it alone was viewed as necessary for the establishment of church fellowship, whereas the doctrinal formulation of such faith, for example in the confession of faith of the respective church, was said to belong in the sphere of ‘expression’. This renders it peripheral and unnecessary for the determination of church fellowship.

Nearly all of the major Lutheran churches in Europe (and beyond), including the German Lutheran territorial churches, have subscribed to the ‘Leuenberg Concord’ and on this basis joined the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), including churches of Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Unionist, Methodist, Bohemian, Waldensian origin – all of them agreeing upon being in church (altar and pulpit) fellowship. From the Concordia Lutheran point of view, there are reasons to disagree with the statement that the passages of the Leuenberg Agreement concerning the Holy Communion articulate an ‘agreement in the understanding of the Gospel’.

Nevertheless, even from a Confessional Lutheran perspective, there are commonalities among Christians from different denominations which are not disputed, for example when the confession of the Early Church of the Triune One God, of the divine sonship of Jesus Christ, of his bodily resurrection and ascension to heaven, and of the divinity of the Holy Spirit. In this way, there are possibilities for common Christian witness and practical cooperation, for example, in advocating God's commandments as the standard for human life and human coexistence; that the creatureliness of humans be recognized as the inalienable basis of the dignity of all human life (including that of the unborn or those with disabilities); that in the hope of eternal life every absolutization of this time and world and inner-worldly standards be denied.

The remaining church-dividing differences and the limits set by them cannot simply be ignored; rather, the confessional Lutheran Churches consider themselves obliged to overcome what divides them from other denominations by thorough theological work. This leads to cooperation with other Christians and churches where common Christian witness to the post-Christian world is possible and necessary.

In 2015, the member churches of the ILC positioned themselves against the document 'From Conflict to Communion', issued by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church by asserting:

> We consider it valuable a fact that Lutherans and Catholics regard it necessary to come to terms with the history of their division; in the same way, we appreciate that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the commemoration of the Reformation is realized in ecumenical responsibility. - We affirm that especially confessional Lutherans are obligated to cooperate in overcoming the divisions within Christianity in the spirit of biblical truth and Christian love.

A bilateral working group between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the International Lutheran Council has met within the framework of an 'Informal Dialogue' since 2014. In September 2019, the working group discussed the topics of the normative structures of scripture, tradition, and confessional documents; the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist; the doctrine of justification; and the understanding of the office of the ministry and ordination. The results of the conversations were presented in a common report to both the PCPCU and the ILC (2019).

11 Confession – determining doctrine and liturgy

11.1 Confession – determining doctrine

The Lutheran Church has accepted the early Christian creeds in its confessional documents. The Apostles' Creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Athanasian Creed are valued as a true exposition of the biblical teaching on the Holy Trinity, the Person of Christ, and the nature of human beings. Melanchthon's Augsburg

Confession and its Apology, and Luther's Smalcald Articles, explicitly relate to the doctrines expressed therein. As Werner Elert maintains, one may view this reception not so much as a burden, but rather as liberation (1931: 183).

Luther's Catechisms present the Christian community with an introduction to a life guided by God (Klän 2005b). The Decalogue reveals God's holy immutable will for his creation. The creed confesses God's all-encompassing mercy with the implementation thereof in the reality of Christ's liberation act at its centre. The Lord's Prayer, then, invokes God's irrefutable willingness for mercy itself. Holy Baptism is seen as God's salutary self-communication to the sinner who otherwise would be lost in the eyes of God. The Sacrament of the Altar provides the new human being with constant fortification in his battle against Satan, death, and sin (LC, *Sacrament of the Altar* 39; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 470f.). The christocentric aspect of the Church's existence is a distinctive feature of Christendom and Christianity. All these impulses are taken up in the various confessional documents promulgated since the 1530s.

The core article of Wittenberg – or Lutheran – theology is the doctrine of justification. In the wake of Luther's reformational breakthrough, the Augsburg Confession in its fourth article states that justification takes place 'out of grace', 'for Christ's sake', and 'through faith' (AC IV; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 38–41).

The Wittenberg reformers and their successors see sin – more precisely hereditary or 'original' sin – the foundational rebellion of humans against God since the fall. There is no way of bridging the gap between us and God from our side, or by our own initiative. Luther and his followers deny any power ascribed to the human 'free' will. Instead, it is God who has to take – and has taken – the initiative to rescue the human race from the powers of destruction, referred commonly to as 'sin, death, and devil'. It is God who by his promise evokes (or rather creates) trust in the human being that on the grounds of God's action in salvation history, concentrated in Christ's atoning self-sacrifice on Calvary, they will be saved. Thus, in the Lutheran understanding, faith is a God-created receptivity for grace as established in the act of atonement by Christ on the Cross (Kilcrease 2013).

At the same time, this article constitutes the foundational opposition to the prevalent positions in late medieval church and theology. As a consequence, the article applies to the understanding of soteriology, faith, grace, good works, or ethics, the number and administration of the sacraments, the office of the ministry, the ecclesial hierarchy, the relationship between state and church, fasting, etc.

That is why the Lutheran confessions apply doctrinal condemnations to theological and ecclesial positions in the papal church that are directed against the article of justification. Wherever and whenever traces of self-justification of humans are found or assumed found

in the church's thinking, teaching, or practice, they have to be rejected (Smalcald Articles II 1; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 301).

Law and gospel (Scaer 2008) are understood – regardless of whether by Luther, Melanchthon, or the authors of the Formula of Concord – as God's intrinsic manner of speaking and acting (FC SD V 12; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 583f.) by which God reveals his wrath against sin and his mercy upon repentant sinners. The law, then, may become a guideline for Christian living, although it over and over again reveals human sinfulness, even in reborn Christians. This view is rooted in the Lutheran '*simul iustus ac peccator*' ('sinner and saint at the same time'), the so-called 'sinner-saint-paradigm' (Christe 2014).

The gospel – which at its core is God's salvific self-communication to needy human beings – is distributed in various forms of application. These are: proclamation, baptism, Eucharist, and penance/confession of sins as the 'third sacrament' (LC, *Holy Baptism* 74; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 465). They mould the centre of an encompassing Lutheran understanding of worship (Smalcald Articles III 4, concerning the gospel; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 319). It is here that the office of the ministry has its place. It is instituted by God, or Christ, to serve to the administration of the means of grace (AC V, XIV, XXVIII; Apol XIII, XIV, XXVIII; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 40f., 46, 90–103, 219–223, 289–294). Interestingly, the Lutheran confessions do not take up Luther's idea of the priesthood of all baptized/believers.

The wording of Christ's word of institution in a literal sense is seen as constitutive for the Lord's Supper; that is why the Lutherans rejected any interpretation that would call into question the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist (*Large Catechism*, *The Sacrament of the Altar*, 8–14; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 467f.; Scaer 2008). The universal presence of human nature in the one person of Christ even after his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, in particular the sacramental presence of Christ's sacrifice in the Eucharist, played a crucial role in the formation of the Lutheran profile concerning Eucharistic doctrine and Christology during the disputes between the denominational camps in the sixteenth century (in FC SD VII 92–103; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 609f.; Hund 2006). Therefore, in 1577 the Concordists turned against the crypto-Philippistic deviances relating to the doctrine of the Eucharist as supported by second-generation theologians in Wittenberg and elsewhere (FC SD VIII 41–43; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 623f.), and against the Reformed positions adopted in the Swiss Reformation.

Also, in the second generation of the Reformation, clarifications were necessary regarding the human will (Kolb 2005). In his later days, Melanchthon tended to credit the human will with some, however minimal, ability to cooperate with God's grace towards salvation,

and some of his students expressed this view even more strongly. This met strong opposition by students of Luther, who have traditionally been labelled ‘Gnesio-Lutherans’. In the course of conversion, they insisted on an attitude of ‘mere passivity’ to be the only option on the human side. Only the reborn Christian, their will being guided by the Holy Spirit, might cooperate with God – albeit not to achieve their own salvation, but rather to implement God’s will in love and good works for the benefit of their neighbour.

By distinguishing between the ‘the world’ and clerical paternalism (*Large Catechism*, Fourth Commandment, 150ff; 158ff; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 407f.), the theological facilitation of a distinction between ‘penultimate’ and ‘ultimate’ (Bonhoeffer 1996: 163) became a foundational aspect of the Lutheran worldview, thereby paving the way for the separation of church and state (McMaken 2020)

11.2 Confession – determining liturgy

Divine service is at the centre of church life. The rediscovery of the biblical gospel during the Reformation consequently influenced the rearrangement of the liturgy in the Lutheran churches, and the divine service in particular. The reform of the medieval Mass that was carried out by Martin Luther from 1523 (*Formula Missae et Communionis*, ‘The Reformed Communion Service’) to 1526 (*Deudsche Messe und ordnung Gottes diensts*, ‘The German Mass and Order of Divine Service’) was guided by applying the principle of justification by grace to the restoration of the inherited liturgy (Just 2008; Barnbrock 2013).

In his famous definition of what happens in the divine service, Luther claimed that ‘our dear Lord may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him in prayer and praise’ (*LW*; 1900: 333 [vol. 51]). That is to say, for the Wittenberg Reformer, ‘the liturgy was the means by which God’s Word came to God’s people, thus the people needed to hear this life-giving Word read and preached’ (Just 2008: 250). Together with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, classical Lutheran liturgy is characterized by having two foci – the proclamation of the gospel (in the sermon) and the Sacrament of the Altar.

Melanchthon, in his Augsburg Confession and its Apology, makes use of an extended definition of sacrament (compared to the definition of the early Reformation taken from Augustine and used by Luther in 1520). This definition includes certain rites within the divine service that go back to the mandates of God and are connected to a promise of Grace. In this respect Melanchthon counts baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution as the ‘sacrament of repentance’; as sacraments in their narrower, New Testament sense (ApolCA XIII 3f.; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 219). A characteristic of New Testament ‘signs’ (ApolCA XIII 14; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 221) is their function of being witnesses, as well as providing the means of grace and the forgiveness of sins (AC XIII 1; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 46f.).

Due to a renewed understanding of the God-human relationship, which came to emphasize God's sole efficacy in spiritual matters, any reminiscence of human cooperation towards salvation was eliminated from the liturgy. Thus, the traditional canon of the mass was excised. Nonetheless, the reform of worship resulted in rather conservative forms. In opposition to the Anabaptist movements and radical groups, the Wittenberg Reformers from the earliest confessional document onwards favoured the perpetuation of infant baptism as God's fundamental action by which a human being, captive to original sin, was saved (AC IX; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 42f.). Moreover, confession and absolution were maintained, for the unconditional forgiveness of sins was now seen as the embodiment of the gospel.

Melanchthon's definition of the sacrament in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession has an openness that allows even ordination or the laying on of hands to be called a sacrament (ApolCA XIII 9–11; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 220), as well as prayer, the giving of alms, and the affliction of the believer. For Melanchthon, however, an actual numeration of these sacraments is irrelevant as long as those acts are retained that mediate grace and have the ordinance and promise of God (ApolCA XIII 16f.; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 221). As such, the sacraments certainly aim at faith. The character of promise, which is the salutary self-communication and self-giving of God, is constitutive. Moreover, faith, which is received by believers through the self-communicative and self-giving work of the Holy Spirit, is foundational (ApolCA IV 115; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 139).

Catechetical instruction, as a pedagogical means for shaping Christian existence, found its place in services during the week, or during the time of Lent. By introducing the singing of German hymns, the active participation of God's people in worship was intensified. These hymns oftentimes carry elements of basic instruction for the Christian faith.

This gospel-centred and worship-oriented approach is received by the following generations in the Lutheran churches across Germany and beyond. Thus, it remains undisputed that the Bible and Hymnal, in the way that they became determinants for piety and worship during the Lutheran Reformation, have, 'during the subsequent period, defined Christian culture as a whole, and across all confessional boundaries at that' (Wolff 2014).

In the Lutheran churches belonging to the International Lutheran Council, Sunday services are increasingly celebrated as divine service, focusing on the proclamation of the Word of God and the Lord's supper. Here, impulses coming from the liturgical movement of the twentieth century and a return to reformational principles become manifest.

12 Conclusion: confession – serving the *Una Sancta*

The confessional documents of the sixteenth century can be (and are intended to be) a guideline for understanding what Christian faith is, what Christian life is; in other words: how we can exist and lead our lives in the sight of God. Since the answers that can be found in the condensed form of the confessional documents of the sixteenth century (can) have a high degree of plausibility even for today's contemporaries, they offer at the very least guidance for communicating faith today – the significance of Christian faith for our contemporaries.

The Church's duty to proclaim Law and Gospel to this time and world has already been fulfilled, and was prescribed in the confessional documents in an exemplary manner. But precisely in this manner, confessional statements or documents constitute a guideline for actual confessing, statements that articulate and make possible an understanding of Christian existence and church life that is simultaneously scriptural and contemporary – purely and simply by proclaiming the will of God and by communicating the gospel.

Hence, the spirit and the contents of the theological documents of past times apply to today, particularly the early Christian creeds and those of the sixteenth century (Klän 2015). Indeed, what is necessary is the transfer of the important heritage of the history of Christianity in general, and the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation in particular. This approach includes an ecumenical dimension as well. Lutherans understand themselves as being at once evangelical, catholic, orthodox, and ecumenical in the best sense of the word by professing a church which shall last forever. 'It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church' (AC VII; Kolb and Wengert 2000: 42f.)

In a twenty-first-century context, it is necessary to thoroughly analyse what has rightly been labelled 'a secular age' (Taylor 2007). This concept of 'a secular age' relates to – just to list some examples from a recently published book on 'Church Theory' – to what is called the 'risk society', 'individualization', 'thrill-seeking society', 'media society', 'data religion', theories on 'world relation', 'generations', and 'metamorphosis' (Grethlein 2018: 210). All these phenomena in the so-called 'developed' countries, and to some extent beyond, are characterized by ambivalence: increasing welfare is endangered by technical risks, individualization bears the risk of social isolation, internet technologies threaten human beings to be subdued by algorithms (Grethlein 2018: 227). This approach certainly includes empirical, sociological tools in order to describe the 'reality' of the church(es) in Germany.

The implications of the global changes for Lutheran identity must be reconsidered within our own ranks. At the same time, we need to emphasise that the roots and aspirations of the Lutheran Church are basically ecumenical. The preface and articles I and VII of the Augsburg Confession in articles I and VII, Luther's explanation of the third article of the creed, the first part of the Smalcald Articles, and the Binding Summary of the Formula of

Concord, just to name a few of the relevant basic texts, are a fundamental witness to this. According to this self-understanding, the Lutheran Confessions function as ‘ecumenical witness’ (Arand, Nestingen and Kolb 2012: 8).

This ecumenical responsibility was evident among the church fathers during the formation of the German Lutheran churches in the first half of the nineteenth century. In this sense, it was quite logical for Wilhelm Löhe to describe the Lutheran church as the ‘center which unites the confessions’ (Löhe 1969: 155–167).

Living in a post-Christian environment – such as in Europe, but also North America and Australia, with South America and Africa being increasingly secularized – it will be most necessary for the mission of the confessional Lutheran churches to cling faithfully to their biblical and confessional roots, to dedicate themselves to the task of translating and transferring the biblical-Lutheran heritage into a language understood by contemporary people, supported by authentic ways of living and working together. At least this is the historical experience of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK): God can use small circles of true believers and employ minor groups of determined Christians witnessing faithfully to the gospel, as blessed bases for his mission. Forming the self-identity of Lutherans, confessing the Confession is absolutely necessary. Therefore, ‘each generation [sc. Must] make the Confessions its own’ (Winger 1998: 123–154).

Attributions

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