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

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

David Truemper in an article entitled “Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology” writes that “the Lutheran Confessional writings have become problematic for many if not most of the Lutheran churches.” While the constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America binds it in terms of doctrine to the Lutheran Confessions and in the rite of ordination ELCA pastors commit to “preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions” one is hard pressed to find resources for precisely how it is that the Lutheran Confession are to serve as “true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures.” Many Lutheran theologians and historians, including Truemper, Carl Braaten, E. Clifford Nelson, and Charles Arand, have noted that Lutheran thinking on the Confessions is polarized into two camps—one which views the Confessions as an absolute authority and the last word on all things Lutheran, and another which sees the documents as so historically conditioned as to be hardly applicable to theology and Christian life today. The question of subscription to the Lutheran Confessions becomes similarly polarized. One either wholeheartedly subscribes with all the dogmatic gusto of the 16th century reformers, or one subscribes quietly with one’s finger’s crossed hoping his or her candidacy committee, bishops, and congregation won’t notice. In fact, there exists not simply a polarity, but a whole range of understandings as to just what it means to subscribe to the Confessions. And yet, I believe there is a particular way of approaching and subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions that is best for the 21st Century, not to the exclusion of other approaches, but in dialogue with them. I call this approach to the Confessions “Roadmaps to Grace.”

The concept of the Lutheran Confessions as a map is not a new one. Carl Braaten employs it to point to the two poles: “[The Confessions] are like a map giving directions on how to find the way through the scripture. The absolute confessionalist is like the one who studies the map but neglects to take the trip. The anticonfessionalist sets off on the trip with no map for guidance, and quickly gets lost on the way.” Braaten’s argument is that the map has hermeneutical significance because it points to “the central message of the Scriptures as a whole.”

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The last few decades of American scholarship in the Confessions emphasizes this hermeneutical tie of the Confessions to Scripture. Günter Gassmann, Eric W. Gritch, Robert W. Jenson, and Charles Arand all suggest (echoing Vilmos Vajta) that the Confessions are useful particularly in relationship to Scripture and as a resource for the church. And yet, even given this rather widespread agreement as to how the Confessions are to function, it is difficult to nail down precisely what this means for the life of the church, or how it is to function among those who subscribe to the Confessions.

For this reason, I wish to extend the metaphor a bit. If the Confessions are to function as “Roadmaps to Grace,” then the Scriptures become “the road.” In this metaphor, the Confessions are not “maps for navigating Scripture” per se, because in the end, the map does not point to the “road.” Instead, both map and road point to “the Way”—the Confessions, surely, but the Bible also, point not to themselves but to Christ. Still, they are not “maps to Christ” as if through them one could find Christ by one’s own effort; rather they are intended aid in the proclamation of God’s Grace and its appropriation by each troubled conscience.

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

**Confessional Subscription as a Roadmap to Grace**

What does this mean in terms of Confessional subscription? First of all, subscription seen in this way becomes a commitment to engage with the Confessional documents and their theological formulations. This does not mean simply parroting their theology or language, but an honest endeavor to sort out their significance in their own time as well as in ours. It means allowing our theology and practice to be criticized by the Confessions, not so that our pure Lutheran theology can avoid being labeled “Reformed,” “Catholic,” “Anabaptist,” or any “other” in a slanderous sense, but so that we can avoid (and be witness to) theological pitfalls to which our conceptions might lead.

Luther and the authors of the Confessions were not critical of Zwingli’s understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist because it was “Calvinist,” but because of the theological implications it had on the incarnation, the two natures of Christ, the means of Grace, anthropology, and a whole range of theological issues. Confessional subscription does not mean bringing up old theological battles for their own sake, but it does mean keeping aware lest in trying to proclaim the Word, we inadvertently deny Christ. This leads us into ecumenical dialogues with a particular contribution, but also with the ability to listen to what others have to say without fearing some sort of “slippery slope,” resorting to finding the least common denominator, or requiring we adopt another’s entire conceptual framework.

In the emerging postmodern world, however, one of the greatest implications of Confessional subscription is for us as Lutherans to recognize and confess that our reading of Scripture and our doing of theology are biased by these Confessional formulations. By this I do not mean that we should therefore seek to overcome this bias, but rather that we acknowledge that we see the world, the Bible, and the human condition in terms that draw on the Lutheran Confessions—and claim this as our own. Gone are the days when one can legitimately claim that he or she operates without any hermeneutical bias, and Lutherans in the 21st Century have an advantage in that we have documents which help us give this bias some concrete form. And yet, in this understanding, we continue to take up this bias not because it is some sort of “revealed Truth” or the only legitimate way to frame the teachings of Christianity, but because it is and has been a
powerful way that the gospel has been proclaimed and which the Holy Spirit has used to reveal God to us and for us.

Subscribing to the Confessions, then, means allowing them to draw us again and again into Scripture and toward the Word proclaimed for us. It also means continually testing whether this bias helps or hinders the proclamation of the Gospel, and therefore if it is one we wish to claim. At the heart of the matter, subscription to the Lutheran Confessions means taking up again and again the messy and uncertain theological task with which we are charged so that we might best proclaim Christ in this time and place.

**Five Types or Models of Confessional Subscription**

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

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

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

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

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

We shall now turn to the spectrum itself, with a brief description and example of each of the types. Our purpose is not exhaustively to describe each of the types, but rather to set forth an outline that can be helpful in looking at approaches to Confessional methodology. I believe that Type Three, “Roadmaps to Grace,” is the most useful method for Lutheran theology for the 21st Century. Nevertheless, I maintain that the Confessional Spectrum can be a useful methodological tool regardless of whether one agrees with this conclusion.

Type 1: Confessions as Unconditional Doctrinal Authority—Robert D. Preus

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

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

The Lutheran Confessions represent the result of more than 50 years of earnest endeavor by Martin Luther and his followers to give Biblical and clear expression to their religious convictions. The important word in that definition is the word ’convictions.’ This word reveals the spirit in which the Lutheran Confessions were written, not a spirit of hesitation and doubt but of deepest confidence that Lutherans, when they were writing and subscribing the Confessions and creeds, because their content was all drawn from the Word of God, Scripture, were affirming the truth, the saving truth.

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

Applied to theology, this approach to the Confessions chiefly sets out to explain how the doctrines of the Confessions apply to current situations. For example, Preus concludes a section of the separation of church and state with a quote from the Augsburg Confession and comments: “After 450 years, years often of frustration and failure, [the Augsburg Confession] still remains the best formula for the proper relation between church and state, for good and enlightened citizenship, and for effective and intelligent social action by Christians living in a secular society.” This method holds for the other
theological points he makes on Christology, the centrality of Justification, the work of the Spirit, and the sacraments. The defining characteristic of Type One is framing the theological questions of today in terms of the 16th Century debates and arguments in the Lutheran Confessions, as well as seeing the doctrines of the Confessions as presenting authoritative theological conclusions in the current context. This leads to continued diligence against creeping Reformed or Catholic points of view, and often puts the Confessional documents in the position to function as an “electric fence” against doctrines and practices that do not reflect “true” Lutheran theology.

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

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

Type Two recognizes that the Confessions were written in a particular context and therefore may not be directly applicable today, as evidenced by Nestingen’s claim that the “Confessions are also challenged by experience. A good share of what they have to say is based on their perception of daily life.” He advises that one ask if “changes have put us out of touch with the daily experiences of the writers. If and when that’s the case, the Confessions can’t simply be reasserted—as if our lives must conform to their way of thinking.”

Certain elements of the Confessional documents are impacted greatly by the circumstances in which they were written and cannot simply be equated with doctrinal truth claims. Nestingen writes: “they were written 400 to 450 years ago in a time of dukes and emperors, knights and squires, plagues and pox. They know nothing of democratic government, separation of church and state, or many of our modern ways. If the Confessions’ age puts them out of touch, simply repeating their words won’t solve the problem.”

At the same time, theologians of Type Two are insistent that the Confessions remain doctrinally authoritative. For Nestingen this does not mean disregarding those elements of the Confessional documents that are heavily influenced by the contexts of their times, but rather reinterpreting them in terms of the current context. This can clearly be seen in the way in which Nestingen finds support for a strongly congregational polity and a bit of anti-clericalism in the Confessional documents. He draws evidence for the local congregation as the basic understanding of the church as well as a challenge to the power of pastors from Articles 14, 21, and 28 of the Augsburg Confession saying: “The Augsburg Confession starts where the trouble often does—with pastors.” He writes that “Article 14 insists that the ministry belongs to the congregation, not to pastors or bishops” a conclusion that is not the only possible reading of Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession, which reads (in its entirety): “Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper public call.”

He interprets Article 21, originally written in the context of an understanding that praying to the saints of the church gained merit towards salvation, as speaking against another sort of “‘invocation of the saints’ such as ‘Pastor So-and-So did it this way’ or ‘But we’ve always . . .’.” Aside from the phrase “invocation of the saints” this interpretation has little in common with the original purpose of the section, though Nestingen sees it as a valid way to apply it to a contemporary context.
Similarly, Nestingen states that “Article 28 tells bishops to do what they’re called to do: preach and teach—and to keep their rules and opinions in check.” Article 28 does in fact deal with the power of bishops, but is dealing mostly with the claim of bishops in the 16th Century to political power in the civil sphere. As this situation is no longer applicable, Nestingen interprets this to apply also to bishops wielding power in congregations, though Article 28 itself stipulates that “churches are bound by divine right to be obedient to the bishops, according to the saying [Luke 10:16], “Whoever listens to you listens to me.”

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

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

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

Truemper approaches Confessions with a method “that tries to read the Symbols and the contemporary situation together in such a way that the evangelical witness of the Symbols might be transmitted into the church’s present situation as a resource and guide to faithful life and work.” Truemper outlines a method guided by what he calls a “principle of ‘evangelical analogy,’” which has four parts:

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

Truemper finds it important to recognize the Confessions not just as documents, but as living confessions, confessions of faith: “They state faith’s confidence in the promise of the gospel and in so doing they share in a confessions most significant attribute, namely, they bear witness to the biblical gospel.” He does not deny that the Confessions can bear doctrine, but insists they do so, “in language that is very much confession of faith.”

Type Three theology also recognizes the contextuality of the Confessional documents, but does not seek to dismiss or explain away the differences that emerge when trying to interpret 16th Century documents in a 21st Century context but to hold the differences in tension. Truemper notes that “the confessional writings are every bit the product of their times” and are thus historically conditioned in a way “not unlike the biblical documents to whose gospel they bear witness.”

Truemper calls for a Lutheran Confessional hermeneutic that is similar to the Lutheran biblical hermeneutic. In this method, engaging with original context is of extreme importance. Indeed, minding the Confessions “historical situatedness in the
circumstances of church and state in the 16th Century provides the only possibility for hearing these documents as confession of faith and as witness to the biblical gospel."[46]

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

In this view the Confessions are not to be clung to as doctrinal summaries intended to test Lutheran orthodoxy, nor dismissed as historical artifacts. Rather they are to be engaged as a resource for reflecting theologically on contemporary issues. The Confessions are, “like the biblical documents to whose truth and gospel they bear witness, best taken as ‘problem solving’ literature.”[50] It is precisely the engagement of Type Three that allows the Confessions to find a way to move beyond the questions posed in the 16th Century and engage in the same sort of active theological reflection that generated the Confessional documents in the first place.[51] When one views the Confessions as problem-solving literature there is, says Truemper “positive impetus to engage in the creative and contemporary problem-solving, that is, in evangelically analogous diagnosis and prognosis for today’s church and the new and distinctive issues that it faces as it seeks to live and confess and believe ‘Lutheranly’ in the new millennium.”[52]

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

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

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

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

The representative for Type Four on our spectrum is not an individual, but a group of Finnish scholars engaged in a renewed study of Martin Luther in the context of ecumenical relationships with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Tuomo Mannermaa and his students make up the majority of this “Finnish School.” In contrast with what they see as the dominant Lutheran understanding of justification (shaped more by the Formula of Concord and later Lutheran reformers than by Luther’s own teaching) the Finns have sought to go beyond the Lutheran Confessional documents and back to what they see as the source, Luther himself, in an attempt to reframe the understanding of justification in order to better facilitate ecumenical dialogue, particularly with the Eastern Orthodox Church.

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

As theologians of Type Four, the Finnish scholars do not dismiss outright the Confessional documents. They do, however, find in the Confessional documents (particularly in the Formula of Concord) elements of the particular context in which they were written, elements which distort what they see as the essential elements of Lutheran theology. Mannermaa writes critically of the understanding of justification present in the Lutheran Confessional documents: “In presenting the notion that the presence of the Trinity in faith is not the same phenomenon as the “righteousness of faith,” the Formula of Concord draws on the later theology of Lutheranism, upon which practically all subsequent Lutheran theology after Luther relies.” He then contrasts Luther’s theology of justification as divine indwelling which he believes “is, undoubtedly, defined differently from the formulation of the Formula of Concord.” What defines the Finns as theologians of Type Four is not their appeal to Luther, but rather the way in which they see contextual elements in the Confessional documents which are not relevant to theology today. They see the issue of justification as presented in the Formula of Concord as one such element defined by the context of the time, and they find another authority for their theology on this particular issue, without outright disregarding the Confessions as a whole.

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

**Type 5: Confessions as One Historical Source Among Many—Marcus Borg**

Theologians of Type Five tend to see the Confessional documents as either doctrinal claims that no longer apply to the contemporary context or as theological formulations so tied to the context in which they were written to have little useful theological value in and of themselves. What sets Type Five apart from Type Zero (the anti-type on our spectrum) 62 is that Type Five theologians nevertheless reveal some connection to the theological content of the Confessions. Our example for Type Five, Marcus Borg, 64 in his book *The God We Never Knew* uses his own journey from a doctrinally rigid Lutheran upbringing to the Episcopal church to represent a movement from a dogmatic theology (similar to our Type One) towards a “nonliteralistic and nonexclusivistic” theology. Though Borg no longer worships in a Lutheran pew and does not frequently use the Confessional documents directly in his theology, he nevertheless retains several distinctive Lutheran elements.

Borg notes that his “childhood package has distinctively Lutheran elements in it” by which he means it was “doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic and oriented toward an afterlife. In its view, being Christian meant believing that a certain set of doctrinal claims were true, and it meant seeking to live in accord with Christianity’s ethical teaching. It tended to take the Bible and doctrine literally, unless there were compelling reasons not to.” 65 Though Borg does not identify “the doctrine” with the Lutheran Confessional documents, there can be little doubt that this is implied. Faith “meant strong and correct belief. It meant believing what God wanted us to believe, as disclosed in the Bible . . . For me, that meant believing what we as Lutherans believed.” 67

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

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

In his use of a third particularly Lutheran emphasis, “salvation by grace through faith,” he is much less critical. Borg remarks that his theology of salvation “discloses my Lutheran heritage: salvation comes by grace, and we participate in it through faith.” 72 Borg calls the Lutheran emphasis on grace “the genius of the Lutheran contribution to Christianity.” 73 Though he does not draw on the Lutheran Confessions in his explication of the concepts “grace” and “faith” Borg would have found
ample support for his claims that “grace means that salvation comes from God,” and that faith can be understood as “the response to the divine initiative of grace” rather than “believing a particular set of doctrines or biblical statements to be true.” Borg does quote “the spiritual mentor of his childhood,” Martin Luther, in whose Small Catechism (a Confessional document) Luther writes “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel and enlightened me with His gifts.” And yet, even in citing the Lutheran Confessions directly, Borg finds this theological concept valid in contemporary context not because of its doctrinal authority but because, as he says, “it seems to me to speak wisdom.” As a Type Five theologian Borg is free to utilize elements of wisdom in the Confessional documents, but is not particularly tied to them, and will use, dismiss, or reinterpret them freely as the contemporary context demands.

**Conclusion**

In the context of North American Lutheranism in the 21st Century the question of Confessional subscription becomes not which way must the Lutheran Confessions be interpreted, but which way is best for this time and place. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial.” Similarly, the task of Lutheran theologians in the 21st Century is not discerning which method for Confessional theology is the way in which things have always been done,
the way they must be done, or which way seems best to fit in the context of American religion in the 21st Century, but rather which method best proclaims Christ in this time and place. To me, this seems best accomplished by the active, engagement of the Confessional documents both in their own context and ours that is the method of Type Three. This method is neither exclusive nor inclusive—it offers neither pat answers nor easy outs—but rather demands constant theological reflection and prayerful discernment.

At their best, I believe that a similar method was employed by Luther and the other authors of the Confessional documents, and has been a method (but clearly not the method) with which Lutherans have approached the Confessions ever since. But it is not on these historical criteria that this method stands and falls, but rather its ability to proclaim the Triune God, made manifest in the Word made flesh, in this time and place. Because of this, the conclusions this method draws will undoubtedly change—evidence not of wavering doctrinal confidence nor capitulation to the contemporary context, but of the living proclamation of the Word in a new time and place.

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

Endnotes

3. Ibid.
4. Truemper, 131.
8. These two ways of looking at the Confessions are sometimes generalized into the labels conservative/liberal or modernist/fundamentalist, but these labels do not accurately describe the complexity of the theological debate in American Lutheranism. For discussion of how this can be seen the Lutheran mergers of the middle part of the 20th Century see Mark Granquist, “Lutherans in the United States, 1930–1960: Searching for the “Center,” in Re-forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present, eds. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 234–251.
9. In previous generations, and even in the early days of the ELCA, the understanding of the Confessions within a particular Lutheran church body was less of an issue as our American synods and congregations had a rather homogeneous character. Conflicts were largely between “our synod’s” (correct) interpretation and “their” (incorrect) interpretation. The formation of the ELCA, however, brought together an incredible range of interpretations into one American church body for the first time. No longer was one beholden to the “way the Confessions have always been understood” but, in this more varied context, one is able to choose from among these understandings (or, perhaps, formulate their own). See Charles Arand, Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity, for a look at the varied interpretations of Lutherans in American in the 17th through the 20th centuries.
11. Ibid.
12. Truemper summarizes nicely the basic approaches of these theologians in Future of Lutheran Theology, 132–133.
13. Frei’s concept is clearly indebted to the five types in the classic work of Frei’s doctoral advisor H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Both are also indebted to three types of Ernst Troeltsch, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, 2 Volumes, Olive Wyon, trans. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1992; original


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

16. Ibid., 44.

17. Carl Braaten also identifies five types of Confessional theology, but does not discuss them in relationship to one another, nor does place them on a spectrum. Braaten’s types are helpful, but not identical to ours. Indeed, in the Confessional Spectrum, several of Braaten’s types would find themselves together. (Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 29–31). Also, his types are not very exact when looking at particular examples. For example, the Finns (who will be addressed later in this article) seem, in Braaten’s categories to fall under what he calls “liberal nonconfessional Lutheranism” of which Braaten writes, “This position leaps backward over the period of 17th Century orthodoxy and The Book of Concord to the creative years of the young reformer, Martin Luther” (*Principles*, 30). But they also partially fit his type called “hypothetical confessional Lutheranism” which commits “us to the confessions only ‘insofar as’ they are relevant to modern times” (Ibid., 31).

18. In terms of their ecumenical motivations they also fit into “constructive confessional Lutheranism” in which Lutherans “have come out of their confessional ghetto, prepared to reenter the mainstream of the Catholic tradition along with other Christian communities in the ecumenical movement.” (Ibid.) The main difference between Braaten’s types and ours are that while Braaten examines “various attitudes among Lutherans to our confessional heritage,” (Ibid., 29) the Confessional Spectrum addresses the more tangible ways in which the Confessional documents are actually used, not just the attitude held toward them.

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

20. Ibid., 11.


22. Ibid., 12.

23. Ibid., 13.

24. Ibid., 80.

25. This image of the Confessions as an “electric fence” comes from David Truemper, “Future of Lutheran Theology,” 133.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 94–95.

30. Ibid. 94.

31. Ibid., 63.

32. Ibid., 64.


34. Nestingen, 64.

35. Ibid., 64.


37. Truemper abbreviates “Lutheran Confessional Writings” as LCW, we have replaced the acronym with the full phrase here and throughout.


39. Ibid., 134.

40. Ibid., 133–134. Truemper makes clear that he is not after the theological method of the Confessions themselves but rather “a theological method for the positive use of the confessional writings by today’s church and its theologians, pastors, and catechists as they go about the task of making the Lutheran Confessional Writings into a resource for today’s church.” (Ibid., 131)

41. Ibid., 143.

42. Ibid., 135.

43. Ibid., 136. For example he sees the “evident self understanding” of the Augsburg Confession as being “both a confession of faith and a witness to the biblical gospel. Only as such does it function also as a summary of doctrinal points.” (Ibid., 137)

44. Ibid., 137.

45. Ibid., 138.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid. Emphasis original.

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

49. Ibid., 139.

50. Ibid.


52. Truemper, “Future of Lutheran Theology.” 140.

53. This discussion of Bonhoeffer is a very brief summary of Chapter IV of “Five Types of Lutheran Confessional Theology.” See Samuelson, 81–98, in which I describe in greater depth how Bonhoeffer employs this method not only in the treatise on Baptism presented here but in also in his *Ethics* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works vol. 6, Reinhard Krauss, trans., Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, ed. Clifford J. Green [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005] ).
54. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Theological Position Paper on the Question of Baptism,” in *Conspiracy and Inprisonment: 1940–1945*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works Vol. 16, trans. Lisa Dahill, ed. Mark Brocker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006 [forthcoming]). I am grateful to Dr. Mark Brocker for providing early access to these works and for his council in shaping my investigation into Bonhoeffer’s method of Confessional interpretation. Indeed, it was this work on Bonhoeffer that became the starting point for this entire project.

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

56. Bonhoeffer, 579.


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

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

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

61. Ibid.

62. The Finns look to Luther, Eastern Orthodoxy, and modern ecumenical understandings for this authority, though others might look elsewhere.

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

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


66. Ibid., 19, 2.

67. Ibid., 18.

68. Ibid., 7.

69. Ibid., 35-50.

70. Ibid., 67.

71. Ibid., 151.

72. Ibid., 167.

73. Ibid., 168.

74. Ibid.


76. Borg, 171.

77. 1 Cor. 6:12 (RSV)