

A Reconciliation with Orthodoxy.

by

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In my mid-twenties, for a variety of reasons, I grew increasingly uneasy with and in the fundamentalist/evangelical milieu. I briefly flirted with Eastern Orthodoxy (during which I read about it, but never actually attended a service), but soon rejected it out of hand—for I discovered their veneration of Mary, which I judged to be a Roman Catholic doctrine and therefore contemptible. I had a different but related difficulty with Lutheranism; after my first Lutheran worship service, which I judged to be entirely too Catholic, I vowed never to return. Nevertheless, the pastor dealt with me gently, and almost against my will, I slowly became convinced that the Lutheran understanding of Sacred Scripture was true and faithful to the Word of God. Yet in many ways, I remained firmly fundamentalist. It took me some time to come to grips with sacramental theology; it took me nearly two decades before I rejected dispensationalism as a grievous theological error; and it took longer still to understand and accept infant baptism.

Interestingly, one of the arguments that got me thinking seriously about infant baptism was the witness of the martyrdom of Polycarp, who in his eighty sixth year was asked to recant, and announced: "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" While that alone did not suffice to convince me, it at least was clear that Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, bore witness to his having been a Christian his entire life—which, given the patristic understanding of baptism as salvific, meant that he had been baptized as an infant.

That got me interested in other patristic literature, and I began to explore things like the Didache. This exposed me to a Christianity that was startlingly different from any I'd experienced. I compared it to the Apostolic Traditions and the Apostolic Constitutions, documents separated by centuries of time and from different parts of the Roman Empire, yet they were internally consistent with each other, and nevertheless unlike any Christianity I'd yet experienced. When I raised questions about this, the answer was that we could not re-pristiniate. Interestingly, that was the same argument used to explain all the changes in Lutheran practice and worship from the time of Luther. It also became clear that neither Luther, Melancthon, nor Chemnitz would have been welcome in most Lutheran churches, as they believed, taught, and confessed a different faith than did modern Lutherans.

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi. Not only did Lutherans not worship the same way as the ancient church, they didn't even worship the same way as the Lutheran Reformers. That indicated that they had a different doctrinal understanding than did the Reformers, who had a different doctrinal understanding than did the ancient fathers of the church. It became clear that the argument against re-pristiniation was a tacit admission that the Lutheran faith had changed. About this time I heard about the Augustana Graeca, and began reading *Augsburg and Constantinople* by Mastrantonis. This account of the 16th century theological conversations between the Tübingen theologians and Patriarch Jeremiah II was breathtaking. For the first time I heard patristic arguments, and I didn't know what to do. I compared them with the

Examin, and Chemitz came up wanting. It was about this time that I began to examine the theological importance of the Virgin Mary.

During my more than twenty years as a Lutheran, I maintained my Protestant hostility to Catholicism, most especially in my open hostility to any hint of Mariology. My Protestant background convinced me that the Virgin Mary was nothing more than a bit player, a young Jewish girl who made a cameo appearance in the Christmas pageant, then quickly faded into the background. I argued that Mary was an incidental participant in the incarnation, not much more than an incubator for the Christ; I argued that Mary was perhaps an example of Christian obedience and womanly submission, but no more than that. I could see no evidence in the scriptures to convince me otherwise. Then one Sunday during Advent, my pastor mentioned he had no problem believing in the perpetual virginity of Mary, briefly demonstrating that it was theologically consistent with the Old and New Testaments. He also said he had no problem with a variety of other Marian doctrines. He even produced some historical evidence for the bodily Assumption of Mary (what the Orthodox describe as her Dormition), although he said the evidence was too slight to be dogmatic about it. Given my hostility to Roman Catholic theology, this was disturbing, and began a quest into the scriptural foundations of Mariology.

The evidence surprised me. The scriptural evidence for Mariology—instead of being slight and easily dismissed—turned out to be quite extensive. My own knowledge was so limited that I did not know enough to ask the most interesting Mariological questions; my Protestant background—with its automatic hostility to Catholicism—had ill equipped me for this sort of investigation. Eventually it became clear that the standard Protestant arguments against Mariology were weak at best, showing strong evidence of the logical fallacy called "Begging the Question" where the proposition to be proven is assumed in the premise. Most Protestant exegetes begin with the premise that Mariology cannot be proven in scripture, and then proceed to demonstrate how correct they are by ignoring or explaining away that which they have already chosen not to see.

I began my investigation wanting to know why Catholics (and Eastern Orthodox, along with nearly every non-Western, non-Protestant branch of Christianity) believe what they believe about Mary. I was sure it had little to do with Sacred Scripture, and nearly everything to do with human traditions enforced by some form of non-scriptural and perhaps anti-scriptural authority. I asked myself how Catholics justify their beliefs, and whether they even pretend to have a biblical basis for their doctrines. At first, I confined myself to reading what various Protestants said about Catholicism and Mariology. It quickly became clear that most Protestant authors did not know why Catholics believed as they did; they quoted each other quite extensively and quoted minor or popular Catholic authors, but rarely quoted authoritative Catholic source documents.

Once I went to the Catholic sources, I quickly discovered many of the Protestant apologists were misquoting and sometimes even distorting their sources. If I was to be intellectually honest, if I was going to learn enough to ask the right questions, I was going to have to leave the Protestant milieu and travel through unfamiliar territory. Eventually I began to read the early church fathers, which was quite startling in itself (because most evangelicals—and dispensationalists in particular—do not read the fathers.) I went to a Lutheran seminary and browsed the stacks for information on Mary; I went to a

Catholic bookstore and asked for their more academic books on doctrine and Mariology; I began searching the Internet for various scholarly articles from authors of different denominations and communions.

My investigations startled me. Contrary to what I had been taught, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and others based their Mariology on Sacred Scripture; not only that, but their analysis of the relevant scriptural passages was quite profound. I discovered that at its core, Marian doctrine permeates the Old Testament, providing color and depth to the New. I discovered that even amongst Catholics, Marian doctrine does not stand alone, but is profoundly Christological—and that it had been developed to counter Christological error. Like the blessed apostle, I had the sensation that someone had touched my eyes; when the scales fell from my eyes, I felt I was seeing scripture clearly for the first time. This was not comfortable for me then, and remains a painful process.

My research taught me something else. I realized I had a rather low standard of proof for things I was convinced of, yet required a higher standard of proof for positions that did not agree with mine. I accepted my doctrinal positions because they were consonant with my existing doctrinal structure; I rejected other positions that did not fit within that structure, because to do otherwise put my entire theological structure into doubt. Therefore, for any position that I was unfamiliar with, or that did not fit, I required some form of external proof, while positions that fit into my doctrinal structure were (more or less) accepted solely on that basis. Marian doctrine was one thing that did not fit my existing doctrinal structure, and it took a lot to get me to change my mind. Yet based on Sacred Scripture, I have been forced to accept certain Marian doctrines—doctrines that I had long considered exclusively Catholic, and which ultimately called into question my otherwise internally coherent system of belief.

About this time I had an extended discussion with a Lutheran seminarian who dismissed all evidence from the Lutheran Book of Concord (commonly known as the Confessions, or the Symbolic Books) regarding the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, ultimately stating that if I could prove that was really what the Confessions taught, he would still not believe it because it ran contrary to his own beliefs. This evidenced a faulty and incomplete understanding of the scriptural principle, a rejection of the catholic principle, a misunderstanding of the confessional principle, and a failure to think critically concerning the delimiting principle. It is important to understand exactly what these mean, and how they relate to each other in helping create and define the role of the Lutheran Confessions as the interpretive lens of Sacred Scripture. And this is important because it lays the foundation for an understanding of how the Lutheran Confessions understand themselves, how Lutherans are expected to understand them, and how they guide the Lutheran's interpretation of Sacred Scripture.

Concerning the catholic principle Holsten Fagerberg writes the following: "The Confessions often claim to represent a Biblical theology *in harmony with the earliest church fathers*." (Fagerberg 1972) [Emphasis added.] This is clear from the very first sentence of the Augsburg Confession, which is a statement regarding both the catholic principle and the confessional principle: "*Our churches teach with common consent* [confessional principle] that the *decree of the Council of Nicaea* [catholic principle] about the unity of the divine essence and the three persons is true". [Emphasis added.]

The Preface to the Christian Book of Concord makes it clear that the Confessions were compiled from Scripture (the scriptural principle), and written to describe and defend the faith (the catholic principle and the confessional principle) over and against doctrinal error (the delimiting principle). And so we must now define these four principles.

- ✦ Scriptural Principle: The confessions were compiled from the Sacred Scriptures, and are in perfect agreement with them.
- ✦ Catholic Principle: The confessions are in harmony with the doctrinal interpretations of the church catholic.
- ✦ Confessional Principle: The confessions represent the common consent of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, both now and for all time.
- ✦ Delimiting Principle: The confessions are not a comprehensive summary of Lutheran dogma, but were created to define the faith over and against error.

The content of the Confessions is necessarily delimited by the errors which were extant at the time they were written. The confessions are not, nor were they intended to be, a comprehensive doctrinal statement; nor are they a dogmatics discourse. In the words of Edmund Schlink: "We may therefore designate the theology of the Confessions as the legitimate 'Prolegomena to Dogmatics'". (Schlink 1961, 33) As Prolegomena, "the Confessions are the model of all church doctrine, including all dogmatic endeavor," yet the scriptures remain the norm for dogmatics. Thus the scriptures are termed the primary authority (the *norma normans*), while the confessions are termed the secondary authority (the *norma normata*).

Piepkorn remarks that the Confessions do not contain this distinction between *norma normans* and *norma normata*, between the primary authority and the secondary authority, but instead refer to both Scripture and Confession as norms.

[W]e have learned to speak very glibly of the Sacred Scriptures as a norma normans and of the Symbolical Books as a norma normata. ...The Book of Concord does not know the distinction. To the authors of the Formula the Scriptures are norma, supreme and unchallenged in their divine authority; but to them the Symbolical Books are likewise norma, by which the doctors of the past are to be tested and the doctors of the future are to be guided. Exactly how old this careful differentiation between norma normans and norma normata is, I have not been able to discover. I have not found the terms prior to John William Baier. (Piepkorn 2007, 82-83)

It is also important to note that we moderns use the term norm to mean criteria or standard. The confessors used the term in a manner roughly equivalent to the philosophical term "form".

The norm is in a sense the form which the tangible, palpable matter seeks to express, by which the matter is informed, and to which it is conformed. Thus in the Sacred Scriptures, in the Symbols, and in the concrete expressions of the Church's continuing ministry, we have a material element which changes from language to language, from situation to situation and from generation to generation, and we have a formal element[,] the unalterable Word of God. (Piepkorn 2007, 86)

If we accept that the idea of the Scriptures as the primary norm and the confessions as the secondary norm are not found prior to Baier, then it might be acceptable to argue that this idea is a development of Lutheran scholasticism, and not an essential part of the deposit of the faith. However, Piepkorn's idea that the confessions use norm in a manner consistent with the philosophical term "form", making the Sacred Scriptures formal element and the Sacred Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the "concrete expressions of the Church's continuing ministry" would seem to indicate the expression of tiers of authority may be derived from the Confessions themselves, rather than being a new doctrine.

Just because the Symbolical Books do not make a clear distinction between *norma normans* and *norma normata* does not mean no such distinction exists. Piepkorn refers to both the Sacred Scriptures and the Symbolical Books as the material element, but calls the Word of God the formal element. By "formal element", Piepkorn means something roughly the equivalent of *norma normans*, as we see when Piepkorn calls Sacred Scripture "the perpetual and supreme norm". (Piepkorn 2007, 86) Thus, although the specific terms denoting differing levels of norms are not found in the confessions, it is still possible to make a dogmatic distinction between the authority of the Sacred Scriptures and the Symbolical books.

Thus the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures are the sole rule and norm by which all dogmas and teachers should be estimated and judged. (Book of Concord, Ep 1; SD Rule and Norm, Summary, 1)

When Lutherans speak of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures as the sole rule and norm, they use the term *sola scriptura*, or scripture alone. *Sola scriptura* was originally a Lutheran term, but has come to define Protestantism in general. Yet when most Protestants speak of *sola scriptura*, they are actually talking about *nuda scriptura* — the naked scriptures. There is a substantive difference between using Sacred Scripture as the sole rule and norm, placed in its own context with an attempt to understand not only what the author originally intended, but how the church has historically understood it; and using Sacred Scripture as the sole rule and norm, divorced of its own context and the author's intended meaning, and with no regard for the historic understanding of Sacred Scripture. For Protestants, *nuda scriptura*, the naked scriptures, are the unmediated scriptures. Nothing comes between the individual and his or her own interpretation, supposedly guided by the Holy Spirit. Thus *nuda scriptura* is a prescription for enthusiasms, for an ecstatic, orgasmic, hyperbolic, and individualistic worship of a God made in our own image and to our own likings.

By contrast with some modern Protestants, the church has always required a summary formula and pattern of doctrine, approved by common consent, which forms the basis for a common confession of the faith. (Book of Concord, SD 1) Of this, Schmauk and Benze write: "The fact is that the Scripture is *the word of God extended*; and the Creed is *the word of God condensed*; but condensed in the one way in which we can do it, viz., by a universal, churchly, scholarly, and providential human effort." (Schmauk and Benze 2005, 31) Lutheran theologian Robert Preus describes a threefold tier of authority: scripture, confessions, and other good Christian literature. (Preus 1977, 22) In fact, the rejection of the latter two places the first in jeopardy, as the confession of the Church as community must take precedence over private interpretation.

The act of individual confession is inseparably related to the church's confession. The Scriptures themselves contain fragments of early Christian creeds in circulation before the New Testament scriptures were written. Of this, J.N.D. Kelly writes: "...the early Church was from the start a believing, confessing church." (Kelly 1972, 7) Herman Sasse describes the difference between the rule of faith and the rule of doctrine thusly: "Religion is not doctrine; consequently, doctrine cannot belong to the essence of Christianity; rather it must be a secondary expression of Christianity. **Doctrine belongs to the church** [over against the individual]. As such it is a concretization of Christianity." (Sasse 2001, 101) [Emphasis added.] So how are we to interpret scripture, to make our faith concrete while avoiding the "private interpretation" Peter warns about? (2 Pet 1:20) How are we to build our faith upon the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, upon the rule of faith? Through the Church, and through the confession of the Church—which is the rule of doctrine.

Schmauk and Benze describe the confession of the church as follows:

The use of Confessions, then, is clear: first, They summarize Scripture for us; secondly, They interpret it for the Church; thirdly, They bring us into agreement in the one true interpretation, and thus set up a public standard, which becomes a guard against false doctrine and practice; fourthly, and this is their most important use, They become the medium of instruction, or education, of one generation to the next, in their preservation, transmission and communication through all future ages of the one true faith of the Church. (Schmauk and Benze 2005, 21)

The first part of the Augsburg Confession concludes with these words: "...this teaching is grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures and is not contrary or opposed to that of the universal Christian church, or even of the Roman church (in so far as the latter's teaching is reflected in the writings of the Fathers)..." The Augustana concludes with these words: "...nothing has been received among us, [either] in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or the church catholic." Schlink writes, "A Confession is not the deed of an individual, but an act of consensus—*Tota Scriptura* and *tota ecclesia* belong together in the Confession. ...The Confession is the voice of the whole church." (Schlink 1961, 17) Sasse writes of Christian confession: "Here it is not an individual Christian who speaks, but rather the church of Christ." (Sasse 2001, 103)

The Henkel brothers, in their Historical Introduction to their translation of the German language Book of Concord, write of the necessity of Christian symbols as a defense of the faith over against error.

From the iniquity of man it could not fail that contradictory opinions should arise in the church herself proceed from external controversy to internal disquietude because the church in her temporal condition has false Christians and hypocrites in midst she was soon obliged therefore to establish Symbols for the purpose of giving evidence of her faith, of refuting false accusations, and of pernicious errors, and in accommodation to the progress of time, to new Symbols without rejecting the old, not for the purpose of establishing new doctrines but for the purpose of acknowledging anew the old Symbols,—those truths derived from the Fathers,—and of providing them with new defences against encroaching errors. (Henkel and Henkel 1854, 11)

Sasse writes more expansively on this issue:

Because Christian revelation is historical revelation all confessions look to the past. They point back to the once and there of salvation history ('suffered under Pontius Pilate'). Thus it makes sense that their content is understood not to be new, but rather old, truth. 'The truth has already long since been found' stands invisibly as a preface to all confessions. Thus the [old Roman] baptismal symbol is antedated by the apostles, the 'Constantinopolitanum' by Nicaea and the 'Quicumque' by Athanasius. Thus the Augustana begins with the confirmation of the 'decretum Nicainae synodi' ['the decree of the Council of Nicaea,' AC I 1]. This is one of the most difficult stumbling blocks for modern man. He can only conceive of a confession which looks entirely to the present and, if at all possible, ignores history. (Sasse 2001, 106-107)

Lutherans believe in the church visible and the church invisible, and understand any particular Christian confession to be not the confession of any individual, nor of the visible church, but of the invisible church, made up of the saints in all times and all places. For the Lutherans, a Christian confession must be consistent with that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. The catholic principle says that Lutheran doctrine is not unique, not an innovation, but consistent with the apostolic faith, as delimited by the Vincentian Canon. The natural implication and declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is that the Latins were the ones who had departed from the apostolic faith, and by natural extension that the Papacy, in exalting itself above and opposing Christ, is therefore the true Antichrist.

The supposed catholicity of the Lutheran Confessions is demonstrated not only by the inclusion of the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed in the Book of Concord, but the references to the creeds in the individual confessions. This indicates the Lutheran confessors had no intention of being unique and innovative in matters of faith and practice, but considered themselves to be solidly within the doctrine of the church catholic. The Augustana alone contains numerous references to the Fathers, to canon law, and to church history: Article I declares the truth of the Nicene Creed; Article III references the Apostles' Creed; Articles VI and XX quote St. Ambrose; Articles XVIII and XX quote St. Augustine; Article XXII quotes St. Cyprian, St. Jerome, Pope Gelasius, and even Canon law. Article XXIV quotes St. Ambrose, St. Chrysostom, the records of the Council of Nicaea, and the Tripartite History of Epiphanius Scholasticus; Article XXV quotes St. Chrysostom and canon law; Article XXVI references John Gerson and Augustine, Pope Gregory, and the Tripartite History, and quotes Irenaeus; Article XXVII quotes St. Augustine, going so far as to say "Augustine's authority should not be taken lightly", as well as referencing Gerson; Article XXVIII references Canon Law and quotes St. Augustine. Moreover the Catalogue of Testimonies was appended to the Book of Concord to demonstrate the Lutheran teaching of the two natures in Christ is consistent with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith; it opens by quoting canon law, the decrees of the ecumenical councils, and synodical letters, in addition to numerous citations of the church fathers. Therefore the Lutheran Confessions both imply and depend upon catholicity as evidence of their proper interpretation of scripture.

In the 5th Century, Vincent of Lerins wrote his famous Commonitory with the purpose of providing a rule whereby catholic truth can be distinguished from error. (Schaff 2004, 209) This rule has come down to us as the Vincentian Canon: "*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*" or in English, "What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all". This expression—this summary of the

Commonitory—is something of a tautology: the rule is meant to define orthodoxy, yet the word "all" refers only to those holding fast to orthodox doctrine. (Florovsky 2002) Despite this, the Vincentian Canon remains a useful rule, a means by which we may discern truth from error. As explained Vincent of Lerins, the rule becomes a means of determining the catholicity of a doctrine.

Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense "Catholic," which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors. (Schaff 2004, 214)

In this explanation of the Vincentian Canon, Vincent of Lerins is careful to point out that catholicity means three things: universality, antiquity, and consent. Thus we accept no doctrine on account of its antiquity if it is not likewise accepted everywhere by common consent of the church. Likewise we do not accept innovation in doctrine, no matter how widespread it becomes, if it does not come down to us from antiquity.

It can be said that the modern, Protestant view of Mariology is an innovation. The modern opposition to Mariology is contrary to The Apostles' Creed, as properly understood. Modern protestant theology must dismiss the antiquity of Mariology, and indeed of the Mariology of the reformers. For Lutherans, the opposition to Mariology runs contrary to our Book of Concord, and the sections touching on Mariology must be dismissed or explained away. This becomes a *neo-quetenus* confession, a confession made "in so far as" it agrees with our doctrinal bias. Thus an improper Mariology becomes a door to the dismissal of the deposit of the faith and an acceptance of the private interpretation of scripture. In this manner the individual becomes his or her own authority, the rule by which the orthodoxy of others is measured. In this manner the body of Christ is divided asunder, and Lutherans remove themselves from the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Ultimately I could not shake the sense that these explorations were guiding me toward a fuller expression of Christianity. It was this exploration of Marian doctrine, and the reflexive hostility it engendered, that eventually led me away from the Lutheran communion and into Orthodoxy. I discovered that the more I learned about the Blessed Virgin, the more difficulties I encountered within my own theological communion. Even though I am Orthodox today, I still believe a strong Mariology is compatible with Lutheranism, and with the Protestantism of the reformers (though not most modern-day Protestants).

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