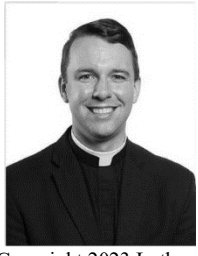
Confessions Contingent on Culture: Exactly How Jesus Wanted Them

Christian J. Einertson

Abstract

While the cultural distance between the confessional writings of the Book of Concord and today's mission contexts is readily apparent, how Lutherans should navigate that cultural distance is less apparent. In this essay, Einertson considers three potential approaches to navigating the cultural differences between the situations of the Lutheran symbols and the situations of today's Lutherans before outlining an approach that is faithful both to the way in which our Lord Jesus has called His Church to continue His mission in the world and to the way in which the confessional writings themselves understand that mission.

However one understands the concept of culture,[1] it is hard to disagree that the Lutheran Church's confessional writings arose within and bear the marks of cultures that differ significantly from the cultures in which twenty-first-century Christians are called to witness to their faith. The cultural distance between the confessional writings and today's mission contexts is readily apparent for missionaries whose task is to articulate the Christian (and yes, Lutheran) faith in lands physically far-removed from Nicaea and Augsburg, and in languages that bear virtually no resemblance to the Indo-European languages of the Book of Concord. Yet even in Germany, the Book of Concord's own native land, the cultural distance between the late-sixteenth-century Germany of its publication and the twenty-first-century Germany in which Lutherans are trying to read it has presented an obstacle for those who want to understand those confessional writings better. This obstacle is apparently significant enough that some Lutheran church bodies have translated the symbolical books into a form that will be more understandable to readers who lack the familiarity with Latin, Greek, and Early



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New High German required to navigate the 1580 editions of these confessional writings.[2]

For clergy and mission organizations who have bound themselves to the Lutheran symbols, this cultural distance necessarily raises the question, how should Lutherans navigate the cultural distance between their confessional writings and the contexts in which the Lord has called them to carry out His mission today? Different Lutherans have attempted various approaches for dealing with this cultural distance, yet not all of them have been faithful or even workable. In this essay, I will examine a few approaches that can be found in the literature on the Lutheran symbols before outlining one that is faithful both to the way in which the Lord Jesus has called His Church to continue His mission in the world and to the way in which the confessional writings themselves understand that mission.

Possible Approaches

Theologians who have written on the Lutheran symbols have indicated a variety of approaches that Lutherans could take as they navigate the cultural difference between their confessional writings and their own situations. While it is admittedly lacking for proponents, one of the possible approaches to negotiating that cultural distance that many authors mention is remarkably straightforward: ignore it. That is to say, one way to approach the cultural distance is to deny that there is one and assume that the people one is addressing come from and inhabit a culture that is—at least fundamentally—the same as those wherein the Lutheran symbols were originally articulated. Such an approach amounts to what Horst Georg Pöhlmann, Torleiv Austad, and Friedhelm Krüger call repristination in their theology of the confessional writings.[3] Gunther Wenz expresses a concern similar to that of Pöhlmann, Austad, and Krüger when he describes Lutherans who want to appropriate the Augustana and the other confessional writings for their own time without any attempt to account for the historical distance between 1530 and today, a move that he calls reactionary. Among the partisans for such a reactionary, repristinating approach, Wenz singles out the Confessional Revival, of which the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is undoubtedly a theological heir.[4]

Wenz's accusations notwithstanding, it would be hard to believe that there are Lutherans today who are trying to follow such a repristinating approach to navigating this cultural distance in a thoroughgoing way. Yet regardless of whether or not this approach is actually used in current Lutheran mission work, it is ultimately bound to fail. The reasons for its necessary demise are many, but perhaps the foremost is that a repristinating approach is willfully ignorant of the specific time and place in which the Lord has called His Church to engage with the people for whom He died. Consequently, it is easy enough to dispense with repristination as a serious strategy.

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Perhaps a more academic approach to navigating the cultural difference between the symbols and today's mission fields would be to reduce the doctrinal content of the confessional writings to an essential core that does not bear the marks of culture—in other words, to find some a-cultural Lutheran doctrine—and then apply that core to the mission context in question. One of the prominent mid-twentieth-century commentators on the Lutheran symbols, Friedrich Brunstäd, attempts something like this when he tries to identify the "doctrinal intention" of the confessional writings, by which he means the "the testimony to the truth of the gospel" that he believes is the main goal of the confessional writings. He distinguishes this "doctrinal intention" from the "doctrinal form," which is "the way in which this testimony is shaped in the religious-historical situation of the time, within its means of thought."[5] Consequently, the goal of Brunstäd's theology of the Lutheran confessional writings is not to promote the explicit doctrinal assertions of the Lutheran symbols in all of their chronological and cultural specificity but rather to arrive at the doctrine *behind* those assertions, a doctrine that is essentially removed from the contingencies of time and culture. Of course, for Brunstäd, the more time-bound—and we could add culturally-bound—a particular confessional writing is, the greater the distance between the confessional writing itself and its "doctrinal intention" and the more work that the theologian must do to arrive at that doctrinal core. In his view, the Formula of Concord is by far the most time-bound document in the Book of Concord since it devotes so much of its efforts to addressing the concrete controversies of mid-sixteenth-century Germany,[6] which is why Brunstäd struggles mightily at times to find the enduring "doctrinal intention" of various articles in the Formula.[7] Yet he claims throughout his book to have located this enduring doctrinal core that is free of much of the confessional writings' inherent cultural and chronological specificity. A similar approach to the confessional writings can be found in the work of Friedrich Mildenberger, whose theological approach boils the doctrinal significance of the confessional writings down to the major decisions that he identifies at their core, not the explicit doctrinal statements that they make.[8]

Such an approach to navigating the cultural distance between confessional writing and mission by finding some a-cultural doctrinal core will necessarily fail since it is not possible to find a doctrinal core to the confessional writings that is in no way culturally contingent. First, the approach must finally collapse under the weight of its own methodology as even Brunstäd recognizes the difficulty of having no other means to access the Book of Concord's "doctrinal intention" than the culturally contingent confessional writings themselves.[9] For their part, mission-minded leaders within the Missouri Synod have long realized that this kind of approach to the confessional writings suffers from a lack of workability. To take a prominent example, C. F. W. Walther opposed this sort of subscription to the Lutheran symbols, which he called a "rationalist" subscription to their "spirit" instead of their letter. After all, he insisted, the only thing capable of conveying the spirit of the symbols is their letter, so any

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attempt to undermine the latter will necessarily impede the reader's access to the former.[10] So any attempt to find an a-cultural doctrinal core to the confessional writings that can then dispense with their culturally conditioned doctrinal assertions is doomed to failure from the outset.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, whenever a person attempts to find a doctrinal core behind the doctrinal statements made in the Book of Concord, he is bound to make those statements more abstract until he reaches something that seems sufficiently removed from the original context as to be no longer contingent on culture. Yet if Lutherans want to follow that approach, they must answer the question, to what level of abstraction can they faithfully abstract confessional doctrine? At a sufficiently high level of abstraction, all Christian confessional writings from the Augsburg Confession to the Westminster Confession of Faith and from the Thirty-Nine Articles to the Schleitheim Confession[11] presumably have the same doctrinal core—or to borrow Brunstäd's expression, doctrinal intention—to confess Jesus Christ faithfully. Yet at that point, the Lutheran confessional writings lose their intended symbolical character entirely,[12] and once someone has begun to abstract the doctrinal content of the confessional writings to find a less contingent doctrinal core, it seems impossible to find a limiting principle that will ensure faithfulness to the confessional writings and prevent him from reaching such a plainly unacceptable level of abstraction. For at least these two reasons, Lutherans should be wary of any attempt to locate an a-cultural doctrinal core behind the confessional writings themselves to which they will then commit themselves.

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Yet another possible way to handle the cultural distance between the confessional writings and contemporary mission contexts has the advantage of being less complicated than the last, though it is unlikely to gain many adherents among the readership of this article. This third approach is quite simply to disregard the doctrinal content of the confessional writings when engaging in mission because the cultural distance between those writings and the mission context in question is sufficiently great to render the confessional doctrine functionally useless. For an example of this sort of approach, one can look to George Tinker, who denies the confessional writings any universal value or validity, especially for those who come from non-European cultures.[13] While he focuses most closely on his own American Indian culture in his article, Tinker writes that he thinks it is difficult enough to impose confessional doctrine on twenty-first-century white Americans who are five centuries removed

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from the confessional writings, not to mention non-white cultures who he believes to be at an even greater cultural distance from the Book of Concord.[14] Unfortunately, this sort of approach is neither faithful nor honest for Lutheran church workers who have pledged to make the confessional writings their own confession,[15] so it can be quickly dispensed with in this forum.

In short, while each of the three approaches outlined above may be attractive to some Lutherans who are tasked with navigating the cultural distance between their confessional writings and the contexts in which they are called to carry on the Lord's mission, none of them is a faithful method for doing so. Yet the distance clearly must be navigated. In the remainder of this essay, I hope to outline a faithful way for Lutherans to do so.

A More Faithful Approach

For both practical and theological reasons, Lutherans must begin the process of navigating the cultural difference between the Lutheran confessional writings and the contexts in which twenty-first-century Lutherans attempt to communicate Lutheran doctrine by acknowledging that the distance exists. On the practical side, this honest appraisal of the cultural situation is necessary for effective communication—a Lutheran pastor in 2023 in Los Angeles who responds to an inquiry about original sin by quoting the first article of the Solid Declaration in German is unlikely to receive much of a hearing.

Beyond mere practicality, however, there are good theological reasons why Lutherans must admit the existence of this cultural distance that begin with the self-understanding of the confessional writings themselves. Upon close examination, it becomes clear that the Lutheran confessional writings are keenly aware of the cultural distance between historical symbols and contemporary confessions of faith. A good example of this awareness is the way in which the Book of Concord handles the ecumenical creeds. To take but one, the Book of Concord's full title for the *Quiqunque vult* is "the Third Confession or the one called the Creed of Athanasius, which he made against the heretics called Arians and which reads as follows."[16] While recent scholarship may be reticent to accept the attribution of this creed to Athanasius's own pen,[17] the compilers of the Book of Concord make it clear in this title that they understand that this earlier confessional text was produced in a certain cultural situation and to oppose theological opponents that were significantly removed from their own.

Moreover, those who assembled this confessional corpus were aware of cultural shifts much less seemingly profound than the thousand years and many hundreds of miles separating the compositions of the Athanasian Creed and the Formula of Concord. The later sixteenth-century confessional writings are even aware of their cultural distance from the symbols produced in the earlier part of that century. This

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much is clear from the preface to the Book of Concord, which states clearly that the Augustana was produced in a situation where the Evangelical position had to be distinguished from the papacy and other factions, while the Formula was produced in a situation where the Evangelicals needed to resolve disputes that had arisen within their own ranks.[18] This betrays a cultural shift that had taken place within the Evangelical estates, a shift that meant that the papacy, for example, was no longer as significant a cultural force in the 1570s as it was in 1530, though its continuing influence in Germany at that point should not be underestimated.[19] Since the later symbols explicitly accept the earlier symbols as authoritative,[20] it is plain that the Book of Concord itself is more than comfortable with the idea of a cultural distance between binding historic confessional writings and situations in which the faith must be articulated anew. As heirs of that confessional corpus, twenty-first-century Lutherans need not feel any less comfortable about this reality.

Once the Lutheran has acknowledged the distance between the cultures of the symbolical books and his own cultural situation, he must abandon any attempt to find a doctrinal content of the confessional writings that is not in any way shaped by or contingent on culture. This is partially because, as was explained above, any attempt to find such an a-cultural expression of doctrine will inevitably fail, yet it is also a reflection of the confessional writings' own self-understanding. The Lutheran symbols frequently and evidently depend on the unique cultures from which they arose to express their doctrinal content. A couple of examples should suffice to make this point. First, at the crux of the Nicene Creed and the debate surrounding its adoption is the confession that Christ is "of one substance with the Father."[21] This assertion of consubstantiality must be understood in light of the Hellenistic cultural context of the Nicene fathers and its longstanding discussions about οὐσία.[22]

Similarly, the sixteenth article of the Augsburg Confession defends Christian involvement with temporal authority by permitting Christians to serve in "just wars,"[23] an expression of approval that is inextricably culturally contingent insofar as the just war tradition to which the Augustana alludes is a product of a particular stream of Western Christian thought with roots extending back to Plato and Aristotle and continuing through Augustine and Aquinas.[24] These two significant examples are proof enough that it is not possible to eliminate culturally contingent expressions of doctrine from the doctrinal content of the confessional writings. The

Consequently, Lutherans must figure out how to reckon with the reality of culturally continent doctrine as they endeavor to bring the Gospel to mission contexts seemingly far removed from the cultures in which that doctrine was articulated.

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ὁμοούσιος and the approbation of just war undeniably belong to the doctrinal content of the Lutheran symbols, even as they are undeniably contingent on the cultures that gave rise to those writings. Consequently, Lutherans must figure out how to reckon with the reality of culturally continent doctrine as they endeavor to bring the Gospel to mission contexts seemingly far removed from the cultures in which that doctrine was articulated.

Given that the symbols to which they bind themselves are self-consciously filled with culturally contingent doctrine, Lutherans should engage with that doctrine with gratitude for the cultures through which God has decided to bring them the Word of God and the culturally contingent doctrinal assertions that arose within them. After all, as Arthur Carl Piepkorn wrote, the adherents of the Augsburg Confession have always recognized the "limitations of space and time, of environment and heredity, of history and of geography."[25] This is to say that conscientious Lutherans are aware that they have received the Word of God because a first-century Semite proclaimed that Word to the people of the Levant and instituted a *Predigtamt*[26] that then spoke that Word to a Hellenistic world. From there the *Predigtamt* delivered that Word to the inhabitants of Rome, and it later brought the Word from there to Germany. As the Lord Jesus instituted it, the *Predigtamt* has unavoidably been taken up by men from those particular cultures with the result that each of those cultures left indelible marks on the Christian faith that modern-day Lutherans have received. Moreover, for some Lutherans, the chain of cultural custody extends even further. Some are Christians today because the *Predigtamt* passed that Word further north to Scandinavia, and others because it brought that Word from Scandinavia to Japan, and so on. By instituting a *Predigtamt* that would only be occupied by particular men who lived in their particular cultures, the Lord demonstrated that the aforementioned process is how he desires for his mission to be done. Lutherans need not be ashamed of this reality. Rather, they can give thanks to God for the way in which the divinely instituted *Predigtamt* goes about its divinely ordained task for the salvation of souls, leaving the cultural imprints of the office-bearers who took it up from generation to generation on the faith that they handed down.

As such, Lutherans realize that the classical Hellenistic world of the Nicene Creed and the early modern Germanic world of the Augustana are contexts in which the Spirit has worked to bring the Word to them, and they acknowledge that they cannot receive the Christian faith without the marks that those cultures made on it. To put a fine point on the topic, it is not possible for a Christian after the Council of Nicaea to receive the faith without reckoning with the Hellenistic thinking inherent in the ὁμοούσιος. After all, the holders of the *Predigtamt* arrived at that exceedingly Hellenistic expression in their formulation of the creed, and ever since that point in history, the ὁμοούσιος is quite simply a bell that cannot be un-rung. In the same way, those who have learned the faith from the heirs of the age of Lutheran confessionalization[27]—in this category one must include the Missouri Synod and her daughter church bodies—cannot pretend

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to discuss questions of Christian liberty as if the Adiaphorist controversy[28] had never taken place, nor can a Norwegian Lutheran in America try to avoid the legacy of the Predestination Controversy and the *Opgjør*'s two forms of the doctrine of election when he talks about how Christians can find certainty in their salvation.[29] These kinds of culturally contingent expressions of doctrine are part of many Christians' doctrinal heritage through which the Holy Spirit has used the *Predigtamt* in particular cultures to bring them to faith, and they are not free to ignore them. Consequently, they may accept them as culturally contingent expressions of doctrine that are in line with the Word of God, they may reject them, or they may try to nuance them, but they must account for them in one way or another. In the case of the faithful Lutheran clergyman or missionary, he has already accepted that the culturally contingent expressions of doctrine found in the Lutheran confessional writings accord with the Word of God, which is to say that the *Predigtamt* acted faithfully in composing them, by virtue of his confessional subscription.

So how does the Lutheran then apply the doctrine of the confessional writings to the context in which the Lord calls him to continue his mission? If he encounters a situation that closely resembles the situation addressed in the confessional writings, he will likely want to respond in much the same way that they did since he has already accepted their response as true. For example, a Lutheran missionary in a predominantly Roman Catholic area may very well be asked the question, "Why do your priests have wives and children?" In such a situation, the cultural distance between his interlocutor and the situation of CA XXIII may well be negligible with regards to the question at hand, and while the text of CA XXIII does make certain true statements with a particular relevance to sixteenth-century German culture,[30] the twenty-first century missionary will likely be able to employ the same lines of reasoning or perhaps even some of the same words as the Augustana to demonstrate the faithfulness of the Lutheran practice of married priests.

Yet one of the natural consequences of the cultural distance between the confessional writings and modern-day missions is that Lutherans are likely to encounter situations that do not so nearly resemble those that the confessional writings were intended to address. For example, a twenty-first-century Lutheran pastor in the United States is unlikely to be asked whether original sin is the substance of human nature or accidental to it as the Formulators were compelled by the Flacian controversy to determine.[31] If someone were to ask him that question, he could respond in much the same terms as the Formula of Concord since he has already determined that the Formula's hamartiology is consistent with the rule of faith. However, the question that the Formula had to answer was in many ways contingent on the Aristotelian metaphysics that dominated the academy of sixteenth-century Germany,[32] a condition that hardly resembles the twenty-first-century American academy, or for that matter the rest of American culture. For his part, the twenty-first-century pastor in the United

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States is far more likely to encounter the following question: "Pastor, I'm not sure what to do about my son. He's told me that he's started dating other men, and I know that that's a sin, but he says he's always felt this way. I think it's just part of who he is. So shouldn't I just accept him for who he is, homosexuality and all?" This question reflects American cultural realities like the sexual revolution[33] that are entirely foreign to the Book of Concord. Yet the doctrinal content of FC I is not unrelated to the question of how Lutherans should address the situation of those who say that they are "born this way." In such situations, the Lutheran should recognize the cultural distance between the relevant confessional text and the present situation, receive the confessional text as a faithful response to an earlier culturally contingent situation, and accept it as the settled foundation upon which to build his own response to a new culturally contingent situation, much as the confessional writings themselves once did with the earlier confessional writings.[34]

How, then, should Lutherans account for the cultural distance between their confessional writings and the situations in which they are called to do mission? Of course, they will need prudence and discernment as they figure out how to respond to the situations that confront them in their own particular cultural contexts, but the approach outlined above should give them a way to do so that is faithful both to the confessional writings themselves and to the way in which the Lord Jesus has ordained that mission should be carried out—by particular men from particular cultures in particular cultures—until he comes again.

Endnotes

[1] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 3–5, 33–37. Geertz demonstrates that the definition of the word "culture" is hardly a settled matter.
[2] Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands, ed., *Unser Glaube: Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 6th ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013).
[3] Horst Georg Pöhlmann, Torleiv Austad, and Friedhelm Krüger, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 9.
[4] Gunther Wenz, *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche: Eine Historische und Systematische Einführung in das Konkordienbuch*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 35; Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 181–187.
[5] Friedrich Brunstäd, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1951), 9.
[6] Brunstäd, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, 13.
[7] See, for example, Brunstäd, 41–47.
[8] Friedrich Mildenberger, *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1983); Friedrich Mildenberger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, trans. Erwin L. Leuker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Rune Söderlund, "Review of *Theologie der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften*, by Friedrich Mildenberger,"

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[10] *The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Philip J. Secker, vol. 2, *Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn* (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 157–58.
[11] John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 192–230, 266–281, 282–292.
[12] For an exemplary explanation of the confessional writings' symbolical character written by a leader in Lutheran mission in Africa, see Nelson Unwene, *Understanding Lutheranism Through Her Augsburg Confession* (Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria: The Lutheran Heritage Foundation West Africa Co-ordinating Office, 2011), esp. 11–14.
[13] George Tinker, "Decolonizing the Language of Lutheran Theology: Confessions, Mission, Indians, and the Globalization of Hybridity," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 2: 193–205. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2011.00603.x.
[14] Tinker, "Decolonizing the Language," 198.
[15] *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 166.
[16] Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000, henceforth BC), 23.
[17] Ian A. McFarland, "Athanasian Creed," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, Karen Kilby, and Iain R. Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 40–41.
[18] BC, 5–9.
[19] Indeed, the papacy continued making inroads into German lands during the Reformation era, largely through the work of Jesuits like Peter Canisius. See, for example, Philipp Überbacher, "Petrus Canisius und sein Beitrag zum Beginn der katholischen Reform im Tirol des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 119, no. 4 (1997): 377–396.
[20] BC, 527–28.
[21] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 102.
[22] For one scholarly attempt to explain some of the relevant cultural context, see Pier Franco Beatrice, "The Word '*Homoousios*' from Hellenism to Christianity," *Church History* 71, no. 2 (June 2002): 243–72.
[23] BC, 48.
[24] Steven P. Lee, *Ethics and War: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 38–50.
[25] Secker, *Sacred Scriptures*, 81.
[26] BC, 40.
[27] Irene Dingel, "Confessional Transformations from the Wittenberg Reformation to Lutheranism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 1–25.
[28] Irene Dingel, ed., *Der Adiaphoristische Streit (1548–1560)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).
[29] Christian Einertson, "Caught Between Norway, Denmark, and Missouri: The Confessional Identity of the Norwegian Synod from 1853 to 1917," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 38–42.
[30] For example, CA XXIII 14 in BC, 64–65.
[31] Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 201–11.

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[32] Norman Kretzmann et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Recovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 1982).
[33] For more on the cultural factors that have given rise to situations like this, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).
[34] For example, BC, 37, 524.

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