

I Believe _____

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: Why and Why Not?

by Mark Hemingway



Dear Issues, Etc. Journal Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In this edition of the *Journal*, I attempt to explain Confessional Subscription in less than 2,500 words. I ended up at 2,109 words. It turns out, confessional subscription is not that complicated. It is as simple as an honest "I believe...."

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from writer and regular guest Mark Hemingway. A former Mormon, now a Lutheran, Mark's answer to the question, "Why are you a Lutheran?" is "Why not?"

You'll also find a list of the many congregations of the **Issues**, **Etc. 300** in the Find a Church section at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy this Journal.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host **Issues, Etc.**



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I Believe

by Todd Wilken

Confessional subscription seems like a very difficult subject. I started writing this article on the topic, then thought better of it and switched to a different subject.

Later, I returned to my half-written attempt and tried again, but it didn't get any easier. I thought, *Maybe I can't explain confessional* subscription in under 2,500 words. So, I stopped again.

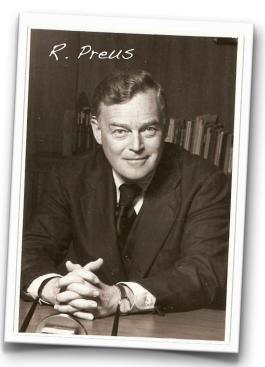
Finally, I did what I should have done at first: I sought the counsel of a better theologian, the sainted Dr. Robert Preus. He famously observed what should still be, but no longer is obvious.

There is... nothing obscure or confused or even complex about the concept of confessional subscription. This is the reason why the notion is not discussed at length but only touched upon by our confessions themselves. The creeds do not bother to explain what is meant and involved by the formula "I believe." ¹

Preus was right. Confessional subscription is simple, as simple as "I believe." With that sage advice, here is my third attempt.

If you have ever said, "I believe _____,"
you have subscribed to a confession. Your
confession might be wrong: "I believe Jesus was
merely a man," or your confession might be
right: "I believe Jesus is God incarnate." Either
way, you have subscribed to a confession.

Really, everyone, even atheists and nihilists, subscribes to a confession of some



kind. The atheist says, "I believe there is no God." The nihilist says, "I believe nothing." But both have just stated their respective confessions, haven't they? Everyone subscribes to a confession.

This explains why a Christian needs a confession. Simply put, you can't be a Christian without one. Confessional subscription is an essentially Christian act. Every Christian subscribes to a confession, right or wrong, written or unwritten, strong or weak. Confessional subscription is unavoidable. If a person doesn't have a confession to which he subscribes, he simply isn't a Christian.

This also explains why it makes no sense for Christians to reject the idea of confessions and creeds. Many do, but it makes no sense for them to do so. Many Christians say, "I have no creed but the Bible." But that statement itself is creed, a confession. Besides, the Bible is full of creeds and confessions:

Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God. (1 Kings 18:39)

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Matthew 16:16)

You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel. (John 1:49)

We have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God. (John 6:69)

My Lord and my God. (John 20:28)

There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:6)

Jesus is Lord. (1 Corinthians 12:3)

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.(1 Timothy 3:16)

Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. (1 John 4:2)

All of these statements are confessions of faith. If the Bible is your only creed, then you subscribe to these statements as your confessions of faith. But, there is no contradiction between believing the Bible and subscribing to a confession of faith. Good confessions of faith do nothing but summarize what the Bible teaches. This means that subscribing to a confession of faith is not only unavoidable, it is also absolutely necessary.

When a Christian says, "I believe what the Bible says," that's good, but it doesn't tell you much, if anything about what that Christian believes. Many Christians say they believe what the Bible says, but can't tell you what the Bible actually says. Others can, but completely disagree about what the Bible actually says. What does the Bible say? If you answer that question (and you must), you are making a confession of faith. Confessional subscription is as simple as "I believe..."

So, what exactly is subscription? It is your agreement with a statement of faith. The word means "to sign at the bottom." If you subscribe to a particular confession of faith, it is as though you are signing that confession, putting your own name on it. You are saying, "this confession is my confession." Again, Robert Preus provides a helpful explanation:

Confessional subscription is a solemn act of confessing in which I willingly and in the fear of God confess my faith and declare to the world what is my belief, teaching and confession. This I do by pledging myself with my whole heart to certain definite, formulated confessions. I do this in complete assurance that these confessions are true and are correct expositions of Scripture. These symbolical writings [confessions] become for me permanent confessions and patterns of doctrine according to which I judge all other writings and teachers.²

There are several things to note about confessional subscription here. First, this isn't a half-hearted agreement. There is a little Latin word for this half-hearted agreement or subscription, *quaterus*. It means "insofar as."

This kind of subscription is agreement with your fingers crossed.

You say, "I believe ______ insofar as..." Insofar as what? Insofar as you think that confession agrees with the Bible, right? Now, at first that sounds good; but it isn't.

Think about it this way. The opening statement of the Apostles' Creed is: "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Someone says, "I agree with that *insofar as* it agrees with the Bible." Do you know whether or not he agrees with that part of the Creed? No, you don't. He has qualified his subscription with his "insofar as." He has told you nothing of what he actually believes about God the Father. In fact, all he has really told you is that he agrees with what the Bible says. But, he hasn't told you what the Bible says, has he? What good is such a subscription? Preus writes that a *quatenus*, insofar as subscription is "a contradiction in terms and no real subscription at all. As John Conrad Dannhauer observed, one could subscribe to the *Koran* in so far as it agreed with Scripture." ³

The problem with a *quatenus* confession is that it doesn't actually confess anything.

A *quatenus* subscription says, "The Bible is the final authority," but refuses tell you what the Bible says. Such a subscription really makes the subscriber the final authority, not the Bible. Another late Lutheran Theodore Tappert said (referring to the Confessions as "the

symbols"),

If the church conceded that its ministers should not be required to interpret the Scriptures according to the symbols but interpret the symbols according to the Scriptures, subscription would not give the church any guarantee that the pledged minister would understand and expound the Scriptures as it does but rather as he himself thinks right. Thus the church would actually set up the changing personal convictions of its ministers as the symbol to which it would obligate them.⁴

Tappert is saying that if the church allows its pastors to make a *quatenus* subscription to its confession of faith, you will never know what your pastors believe, the pastor might change his mind, and the pastor will end up being his own authority, even over the Bible. I've been a pastor for more than twenty years. Believe me, you do not want your pastor to regard himself as the highest authority.

This brings us to the second thing we should notice about confessional subscription. A *quatenus* subscription doesn't tell me what you believe. But there is a kind of subscription that does. It goes by another little Latin word, *quia*. It means "because."

Again, words of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Someone says, "Well, I agree with that *because* it agrees with the Bible." In other words, he is telling you that this statement, this confession *is what he Bible says, and because of that,* he believes it. Now you know what he believes.

Are there still a lot of details to explore about his statement of belief?

Of course. But you aren't left to guess what he thinks the Bible says.

A *quatenus* subscription says, "The Bible is the final authority," but refuses tell you what the Bible says. On the other hand, a *quia* subscription says, "This confession says what the Bible says, and the Bible is the final authority." Such a subscription allows the Bible to remain the final authority and tells you exactly what the subscriber believes. It is a real, honest "I believe..."

That brings us to the third thing we need to know about confessional subscription. Preus says that a confession of faith "become[s] for me permanent confessions and patterns of doctrine according to which I judge all other writings and teachers."

You see, confessional subscription is your "I believe..." Yet another late Lutheran, Charles Porterfield Krauth said of the sixteenth century Lutheran Confessions and the Bible,

Finding that they teach one and the same truth, we heartily acknowledge the Confession as a true exhibition of the faith of the Rule --a true witness to the one, pure, and unchanging faith of the Christian Church, and freely make it our own Confession, as truly as if it had been now first uttered by our lips, or had first gone forth from our hands." ⁵

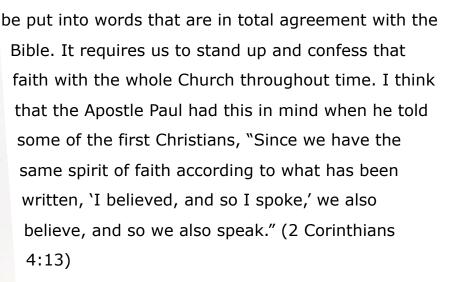
But with that said, confessional subscription isn't only about you, your confession, your beliefs; it is also about the Church. As a Lutheran, when I subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions unconditionally, I am not only saying "This is what I believe," I am also saying, "This is what the Bible says" and, "This is what every Christian should believe," and moreover, "This is what the true Christian Church has always believed." Preus puts it this way,

Confessional subscription is not some sort of individualistic, autonomous act. ...It is a responsible public act of confession, done in

fellowship and union with the Christian church ... The confessions do not belong to me, but to the Church as the unanimously approved pattern of doctrine. They are above me or any individual.⁶

This is a politically incorrect statement. Our postmodern world says we can't know the truth, even the truth of the Bible, much less confess that truth with any certainty. Our postmodern world therefore rejects the possibility of an unconditional confessional subscription.

Unconditional confessional subscription requires us to say that there is such a thing as THE Christian faith. It requires us to say that this faith can



Is there more I could say about confessional subscription? Yes, books have been written on the subject. But, these are the most important things:

Confessional subscription isn't a half-hearted agreement, we don't subscribe *insofar as,* but *because* a confession agrees with the Bible, and it isn't only your confession, but the Church's confession.

So, you really have no choice. You already subscribe to a confession. What is it? What do you believe? Do you believe it because it is what the Bible says? Is it what every Christian should believe? And, is it what the true Christian Church has always believed?

Try this: Read my confession of faith, the 16th century Lutheran Confessions. You can find them here. Read them, and when they start to disagree with the Bible, stop reading. If you're like me, once you start reading them, you won't need to stop.

¹ Robert Preus, "Confessional Subscription," An address to the Lutheran Congress, August 31-September 2, 1970 printed in *Faithful Confessional Life in the Church*, pp. 46 (http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/Confessional%20Subscription.pdf).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 43.

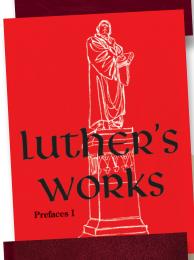
⁴ Theo Tappert, *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America: 1840-1880,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 66.

⁵ C.P. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology,* Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co. 1871, p. 169.

⁶ Preus, "Confessional Subscription."



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Wittenberg Trail: Why and Why Not?

by Mark Hemingway

So maybe you've heard the old saw about the philosophy professor who, in a fit of pique, writes his final exam such that it consists of a single word: "Why?" The students arrive in class that day and are a bit perplexed by the test, but that's not exactly an unfamiliar feeling considering they've spent the last several weeks trying to parse Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and so they open their blue books and attack the test as earnestly as they can. Except for one student. He returns his test to the front of the lecture hall nearly as soon as it landed on his desk and walks out of class. It turns out he simply scrawled "Why not?" on his test and spent the rest of the afternoon ogling babes on the quad while the rest of the class slaved away, trying to impress the professor with their naive ontological and

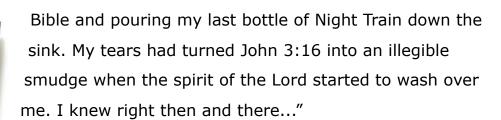
epistemological profundities. The professor, who's honest enough to admit his test was too-clever-by-half, gives the kid the class's only A plus.

Now this is a very postmodern parable, and it must be said that finding answers to really important questions is something that is best not approached cavalierly. But reflecting on my own journey to becoming a Christian, it must be said



that there is a great temptation to over think things. One of the most humbling things about getting older is wrapping your head around the great irony that the more you know, the more you inevitably confront the limits of what can be known. If you want to know why I'm a Christian—well, I submit to you that there are times when "why not?" is a theologically acceptable answer.

Let me explain. I regret to inform you that the only way to do this is to tell my personal story of how I came to be a Christian. We Lutherans don't really do the testimony thing and there are some good reasons for being wary of the approach. There is an entire Christian subculture dedicated to fetishizing one's conversion in the most florid and hyperbolic terms possible. By now, we're all familiar with the oeuvre: "It was 3 a.m. in a dingy hotel on the outskirts of Vegas, and I found myself weeping over a Gideon



And in my particular case, I think I might actually have PTSD—Post Testimony Stress Disorder. I was raised in the Mormon church, and the first Sunday of every month was something called "fast and testimony meeting." Rather than the usual service, it was open mic at the altar. People lined up in the aisles for a shot at telling the congregation about their personal struggles and how

overcoming them reaffirmed their faith. Occasionally, it was inspiring. More often, it was cringe-worthy. Not only that, the public venue encouraged a sort of oneupmanship. The more dramatic the experience recounted, the more deeply it was felt—the more it was evidence of their faith.

To say that I categorically reject this approach to faith would be a gross understatement. I remember vividly the increasingly urgent pleas of my church's youth leaders as I came of age: I needed to pray to learn that

my church is true; God would reveal his truth to me; I would feel it. And if I didn't feel it, well that just meant I needed to pray more. But even as an adolescent, I quickly realized emotionalism isn't proof of anything. In his recent book, *Broken: 7 "Christian" Rules That Every Christian Ought to Break as Often as Possible*, Pastor Jonathan Fisk rather pithily sums up what I came to believe a long time ago: "There is a chasm of difference between believing feelings are a gift from God and believing feelings are God."

But having spelled out the necessary caveats, let me make it clear that I have no desire to pass judgment on the sincerity of other Christians and their heartfelt stories. My hope is to maybe meet them in the middle. Whether we want to or not, we are called upon to defend our faith, to witness, to evangelize— and I think that goes double for those of us who squirm at the thought of doing so. I don't pretend to have any great unique insight into my faith and how it was acquired, but I'll try my best. I'll even preemptively ask your patience and forgiveness. To quote 2 Corinthians, "As you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also." Here's my story. (Sorry, but I still can't yet bring myself to use the T-word in conjunction with a first person pronoun.)

I mentioned before that I was raised Mormon. My dad was an adult convert, who dutifully attended other churches growing up, but as far as I can tell that amounted to going to whatever church was closest to the base where my grandfather was stationed. My mother's side of the family, however, goes back nearly to the founding of the Mormon church. They dragged handcarts across the plains and settled in Idaho. That's a nontrivial detail; Mormonism is as much a culture and heritage as it is a church. That helps explain why I'm not a bitter about my former faith. I was blessed with a decent and hardworking family that tried a lot harder than most to teach

me right from wrong. Participating in their faith was a large part of that. I'm grateful.

But the problems I had with my faith were very real, and worse, they were very rational concerns. Aside from rejecting the emotionalism, the approach to sin was troubling. The church urged good works above nearly all else. Good works are, well, good. But human beings are inherently sinful. If you believe that your salvation is dependent on some cosmic scorecard where your works are measured against your sins, well that's problematic. Many Mormons I know accomplished many impressive and laudable things trying to live up to this impossible task. But many others were led to despair over their personal failings.

I didn't know what I believed—but I didn't believe that I was going to earn my way to heaven. I was always respectful of my parents, but when I left my house I left my church. I spent the next few years adrift, doing a great many things I've had to atone for. Not to diminish my sins, which are copious and damning, but you might be more familiar with what I went through if I referred to this period as "college." If you really want irrefutable proof that I had abandoned God, I majored in journalism.



After I was done with school, for the sake of my long-suffering parents, I tried to grow up. I moved away and got my first real job. At my very first staff meeting a girl in a tailored business suit and heels strolled in slightly late. If my memory serves me correctly, she was walking in slow-motion, staring straight at me, and provocatively tossing her hair. This woman would later become my wife Mollie,

though I believe she might dispute my version of our first encounter as being much more mundane.

In any event, at this point in my life I really had no use for religion. But Mollie was a pastor's daughter who went to church every Sunday. Weirdly, she exhibited none of the false pieties I'd come to associate with religion. Even stranger was that she was quite forthcoming about what she believed and how it shaped her thinking and, more often than not, I found it very hard to disagree with her. So I started going to church with her, even if part of me was still more interested in getting in her good graces rather than the Lord's.

Eventually my interest in Lutheranism began in earnest. But here's where I think my conversion differs from the traditional narrative: I'd never really had problem believing God, Jesus or redemption. I had always been a creatively minded person; my vocation was that of a writer. My avocations were artistic as well, having been a semi-pro musician, among other things. I think I'd always felt that there was little separating those fleeting moments of pure inspiration and experiencing the divine.

You'd think that would have made my conversion an easy sell. However, I'd already been part of a church where the product fell far short of the marketing materials. If I was going to be associated with a particular flavor of God, I wanted a better answer than "you'll feel it's true" or some abstract acceptance that their was a Creator. And on many levels Lutheranism did a fantastic job of addressing my rational concerns. It took a while, but once I started wrapping my head around the Doctrine of Justification and the concept of Law and Gospel, it was a pretty powerful antidote to the legalism I had already rejected.

However, understanding and agreeing with these theological precepts

is not the same thing as desiring forgiveness. My long suffering pastor, who happens to be an extremely intelligent man, met with me every week I was available and dutifully answered all the questions I had. But because I had already accepted the basic doctrines of Lutheranism, you might wonder what we talked about. I wanted an answer for *everything*. I remember spending hours talking about the theological underpinnings of arcane details of church governance. My pastor did a good job of pretending not to be exasperated. But I noticed, and to my eternal shame I didn't much care and kept peppering him with questions. I still had way too much pride bound up in not getting fooled again. Time dragged on.

So what finally pushed me over the edge? As much as I don't want to believe that God reveals himself in a single dramatic moment, the crazy thing is that I can pinpoint the moment where I knew I was becoming a Christian. Was this a revelatory come-to-Jesus moment? Did the spirit wash over me? Well, not in any conventional sense. But for whatever reason, it did the trick. Four months after it happened, I was baptized on *Quasimodo Geniti*, the week after Easter.

It happened this way. Mollie asked if I wanted to take a trip with her to visit her family in Colorado over the holidays. (At this point we were still more than two years away from our eventual marriage.) Even someone such as myself who has the emotional attenuation of a piece of sheetrock could not mistake this as a sign that maybe Mollie was considering taking our relationship to a very serious level. I would have to pass muster with her family.

We flew out there and things went great. I was welcomed with enthusiasm by Mollie's family and I was acing the test, or so I thought. We were staying at her house, her sister Kiki was generous and funny and we'd had great fun playing with the nieces and nephew. One small issue, however,

had yet to come up. Mollie was driving us out to a restaurant, I was sitting in the front seat, and Kiki was in the back. Anyway, Kiki finally got around to asking if I was Lutheran. Mollie said, well, no – but I was taking one-on-one instruction with her pastor. Kiki asked how that was going. I said, I felt really good about it and this was true. Kiki asked how long I'd been taking instruction with my pastor. I thought about it for a second and said, "Oh, about two years."

And then she hit me. Kiki reached right out from behind my seat and smacked me in the back if the head. My sister-in-law is a lovely woman, but I think it's fair to describe what happened next as shrieking. "TWO YEARS? AND YOU HAVEN'T BEEN BAPTIZED?!"

Stunned, I looked to Mollie for some cue on how to handle what just happened. She drove on, looking somewhere between bemused and terrified, which didn't help me much since that's the natural state of our relationship. I could feel the indignation welling up within me. I hadn't been baptized because I still had questions that needed answering! What those questions were was irrelevant. The important thing was that I *felt* comfortable with my level of knowledge about Lutheranism. I turned to face my future sister-in-law and was about to open my mouth and set her straight for so rudely...

But before I could say anything, she looked right at me and asked me the one question I knew I couldn't answer: "Why not?"



Mark Hemingway is a Senior Writer for The Weekly Standard. He lives with his wife Mollie and two daughters in Alexandria, Virginia where he attends Immanuel Lutheran Church.

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