

I Am A Lutheran

The Confessions in the Life of the Lutheran Church Worker

For years, as a youngster, I wore a little medallion on a chain around my neck. The front was a relief of Luther's symbol. On the back it simply said, "I am a Lutheran." I cannot tell you why I wore it. It was a confirmation gift for which I was obligated to be thankful, and it was cool at the time to wear a chain around your neck. That may have had something to do with it. I was also proud of my heritage, good German Lutheran stock throughout the family tree. But I'm not sure I knew what "I am a Lutheran" actually meant. I had a vague sense that Lutherans were different. That was informed mostly by a strenuously anti-Catholic atmosphere in our family. We may not have known what Lutherans were, but we certainly knew what we were not, Catholics. The Catholics worshipped Mary and we did not. The Catholics said the Pope spoke infallibly and we knew he could not.

By the time I confirmed my faith I had read the Bible and studied the Small Catechism but I can't say that the word "Confessions" would have meant anything to me. Unlike Pastor Pullmann, who was born wise, my ignorance of the Confessions extended well into my teen years. My point in telling you all this is to suggest that it is never too late to develop a healthy appreciation for the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. It is these confessions that explain what it means to be a Lutheran.

The Lutheran Confessions are an Exposition of the Scriptures

"I am a Lutheran." You, teachers of the faith, may be questioned as to the appropriateness of making our confession in this way. Why not confess, "I am a Christian." After all, doesn't that take precedence over the denominational affiliation? First, let me dispel the denominational myth. For all its vaunted and interminably studied structure, Lutheranism is not intended to be a denomination. The Book of Concord presents itself as the statement of a confessional movement calling the Church, back to purity of doctrine. It consistently refers to itself as the "Christian creed," "the Christian confession," and the "Christian religion."

*"Subsequently many churches and schools committed themselves to this confession as the contemporary symbol of their faith in the chief articles in controversy over against both the papacy and all sorts of factions. They referred and appealed to it without either controversy or doubt in a Christian and unanimous interpretation thereof. They have held fast and loyally to the doctrine that is contained in it, that is based solidly on the divine Scriptures, and that is also briefly summarized in the approved ancient symbols, recognizing the doctrine as the ancient consensus which the universal and orthodox church of Christ has believed, fought for against many heresies and errors, and repeatedly affirmed."*¹ (Preface to the Book of Concord)

¹Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord: The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* [Preface to the Book of Concord] (0). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

*“In spite of all this we found, not without distress on our part, that little account was taken by our adversaries of this explanation and repetition of our previous Christian confession and that neither we nor our churches were delivered thereby from the calumnies that had been circulated. On the contrary, this well-intended action of ours was again understood and interpreted in such a way by adherents of erroneous opinions which are opposed to us and to our Christian religion as if we were so uncertain of our faith and of the confession of our religion and had altered it so much and so often that neither we nor our theologians knew which version was the true and originally submitted Augsburg Confession.”*² (Preface to the Book of Concord)

In other words, the Reformers saw no difference between the Lutheran confession and the Christian confession.

Granted, such boldness might raise a few eyebrows in the company of Christians of other confessions, but in our company it should not. Our confession is Christian. It is not arrogant to say that we hold to the pure doctrine of the Scriptures. Why would anyone, how could anyone submit to a confession where parts of it were suspected to be incongruent with the Scripture? To say, “I am a Lutheran” is to say, “I am a Christian.” There could be no other reason to be a Lutheran than that its Confessions are pure.

I can certainly conceive of circumstances where for the sake of ignorance or to refrain from giving offense one might not begin with the “I am a Lutheran” part of the confession. In some circles the name Lutheran might not mean anything. In other circles it might be interpreted as schismatic. In these circumstances, for the sake of clarity, one might begin with “I am a Christian.” In our circles, in your classrooms and sanctuaries, the meaning of “I am a Lutheran” should be clear.

You may also be questioned in regard to the relationship between the Scriptures and Confessions. It is extremely important that this relationship is clear in your teaching. There are other confessions of the Christian faith that charge Lutherans with having two sources of authority. They suggest, in ignorance, that we grant the Confessions an inspired status. We do not. Perhaps the Latin poetry by which we clarify the distinction is too much for them. Perhaps you even recall it. We call the Scripture the “*Norma Normans*,” literally the “norming norm.” (It doesn’t sound as good in English.) In other words, the Scripture is the sole authority that norms or governs everything else.

We call the Confessions the “*Norma Normata*,” or the “norm that has been normed.” Here we carefully describe the Confessions as having been normed by the Scripture, and in this way they have a derived authority.

Listen to the language that is used in the Constitution of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, Article II, Confession.

*“The Synod, and every member of the Synod, accepts without reservation:
1. The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice;*

²Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord: The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* [Preface to the Book of Concord] (6). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

2. All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit: the three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord.”
(2007 Handbook of the LCMS p. 11)

It is valuable to note the clarity of language used here. The Scriptures are “the only rule and norm of faith and practice.” (Emphasis mine) The unique nature of the Scriptures as the written Word of God sets them apart from all other writings as the only norm of faith and practice.

The Confessions, on the other hand, are “the true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God.” They have been normed. They are true, but they gain their truth as an exposition of the Scripture. That they are an unadulterated statement of the Scripture means that they rightly put forward the truth of God’s Word.

All rostered Church-workers of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod have pledged their submission to this understanding of the relationship between the Scriptures and the Confessions. The same words are used for ordination, commissioning and installations services.

“Do you believe and confess the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice?”

Yes, I believe and confess the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.”

“Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? And do you confess that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord—as these are contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith?”

Yes, I make these Confessions my own because they are in accord with the Word of God.”

(Lutheran Service Book- Agenda Ordination, Commissioning and Installation Services p. 165 ff.)

This is your confession. You all answered these questions in the affirmative. In this text two new characteristics of the Scriptures are included in your confession that help to clarify the relationship between the Scriptures and Confessions. The Scriptures are “inspired.” That word, “inspired,” could be the basis of another paper so let me summarize in this way. The Scripture is the very breath of God. When God speaks, He breathes out His Word. It is a living, breathing, life-giving Word. The intimacy of God’s connection to us, through the Scripture, as its source, is absolutely unique. No other

Word is like this Word. Since the Scripture is this God-breathed Word and since God cannot lie, the Scripture can also then be called infallible. It cannot lead you astray.

This kind of language is not used of the Confessions. They are understood to be of a derived authority. The Confessions truly expose, or bring to light the teachings of the Holy Scripture. This derived authority is also noted in the response regarding the Confessions. I make them my own, “because they are in accord with the Word of God.”

Today we will be talking about the Confessions. This cannot be understood to be a slight to the Scriptures. We have just discussed the subservient nature of the Confessions. We study the Confessions in order to help us understand the Scripture. We study the Confessions to hone our proclamation of the Gospel. We read the Confessions to exhibit the Scriptures not to replace them.

The Confessions themselves, the Constitution of the Synod and the vows that we have all made enunciate the significance of their use in helping us to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I suspect, however, (without any scientific evidence to back the suspicion), that the Lutheran Confessions play a small role in the daily lives and even in the teaching of most professional Church workers of the LCMS. This saddens me immensely. Not only are our own lives made poorer for the neglect of the Confessions, but our hearers, young and old alike, are deprived of a marvelous resource designed for the health of their souls. Because we do not teach them to use the Confessions they resort to the latest “Christian” best-seller. The bald truth is that most best-sellers, whether they are found in the religious section of Wal-Mart or at the local Bible Book Store contain heresy that hurts the souls of their readers.

What Lutherans Believe

Third, in Acts 10:43, Peter says, “To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” How could he say it any more plainly? We receive the forgiveness of sins, he says, through his name, that is, for his sake: therefore, not for the sake of our merits, our contrition, attrition, love, worship, or works. And he adds, “when we believe in him.” Thus he requires faith. We cannot take hold of the name of Christ except by faith. In addition, he cites the consensus of all the prophets, which is really citing the authority of the church.³ (Apology, Article IV)

In one way Lutherans are really not all that complicated. In a word, we believe in Jesus. In fact, we say, as noted above, that the entire Scripture is about Jesus. Everything in the Bible is designed to point us to faith in Jesus. Jesus is the only Savior of the world. Only in Him can men, who are all lost in sin, find forgiveness and the promise of salvation. This article of doctrine on justification, from which this paragraph is lifted, is named, throughout the Confessions, the chief or main article of the Christian faith.

We are not, in this way reducing everything to the Gospel, as if to say, everything else is incidental and really doesn't matter. We are, rather, constructing everything on the Gospel. That means that no teaching of the truth can exist without being related to

³Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (118). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

the Gospel in the proper manner. Furthermore, we believe that any and all false teaching will ultimately militate against this Gospel of justification in the name of Jesus.

Why an Emphasis on the Confessions is Needed Now

“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day— just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire. Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones.”(Jude 3-8)⁴

I feel very much the way Jude does in the above text. I would enjoy discussing with you the blessings of our common salvation. Yet, I feel compelled to encourage you to contend for the faith. The similarities between the way Jude characterizes his day and the circumstances under which we live are striking. Jude appeals to his listeners to struggle against “certain people” who have perverted the grace of God and denied Jesus. These people are all eventually devoted to destruction, but in the meantime they are pestering the people of God. For this reason Jude finds it necessary to remind the believers that Jesus is both Savior and destroyer of unbelief.

Jude uses three emanations of evil from the past to characterize the evil people of his day. He mentions (1 the unbelievers who came out of Egypt with the Church, (2 the angels who rebelled against God and (3 the sexually immoral of Sodom and Gomorrah who “pursued other flesh.” Using a chiasmic structure, Jude says the people of his day are similarly evil in that they (1 defile the flesh, (2 reject authority, and (3. blaspheme, (don’t believe).

Some may argue that we always have these sins with us. Still, (to double the chiasm), it is true that the number of blasphemers is increasing in the United States. It is true that one of the key characteristics of the post-modern world is the rejection of authority. And it is true that the homosexual pursuit of other flesh is more accepted by our culture and by the “visible church” than at any other time in the history of the world. These similarities lead me to suggest to you that it is time for believers to consider contending for the faith. I submit to you today that the Confessions of the Lutheran Church are an important tool for that struggle.

⁴*The Holy Bible: English standard version.* 2001 (Jud 3-8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

The attacks that your students and members are enduring from satan at the hands of the world are bad enough, but consider what they have to contend with from inside the Church. I will mention only the two errors that I consider most dangerous at this time. I am, without shame, enlisting you to contend against these errors that are alive in the Church right now. I hope to show how you may use the Confessions in this conflict.

Using the Confessions to Contend for the Faith

A couple of weeks ago, while holed up in a motel room, I happened upon Joel Osteen, of television fame, teaching thousands in his erstwhile basketball arena. He was relating one story after another about how God had blessed people with material goods. He upbraided those who did not have the faith to achieve their dreams because they did not believe enough. He sought to convince his listeners that they had everything they needed inside themselves to get what they wanted. He promised that if they just believe hard enough that God would give them the desires of their hearts. He did not speak about sin or forgiveness. He did not tell his listeners that Jesus is the only way of salvation from the certain death of sin.

This heresy is perfect for our age, and it appeals to young and old alike. Like the unbelievers Jude mentions, thousands upon thousands of people are being taught to blaspheme God by turning Him into the Santa Claus of the skies, whose only reason for existence is to give men the desires of their hearts. They may believe they are entering the promised-land, but the promise they are receiving is only for this age, and fleeting at that. The sole purpose of Jesus in this endeavor seems to be that of a cheerleader. He is along for the ride to help people feel better about themselves.

All sinners are inclined to find themselves other gods, and the love of money is the root of all this type of evil. The difficulty in battling this error is in dealing with the concept of a loving God. Even unbelievers are able to recite that God is supposed to be loving. Once that has been established it is a simple step to believing that a loving God gives you the things you want.

Let's spend a few moments, using the Confessions as a guide, discussing how we might contend against such evil teachings.

“You shall have no other gods.”

That is, you shall regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What is to have a god? What is God?

Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which

*your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.*⁵ (Large Catechism, First Commandment)

For Discussion

- 1. What distinguishes a false god from the true God?**
- 2. How can you tell that one of God's good gifts to you has become a false god?**
- 3. Which false god is dominating the headlines today? How do teachers like Joel Osteen play on the fears of people hurt by the financial downturn?**
- 4. How can you teach this to your students/members?**

*It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God.*⁶ (Augsburg Confession, Article II)

For Discussion

- 1. What does this text say about the desires of our hearts?**
- 2. Is God bound to give us the desires of our hearts?**
- 3. How can you teach this to your students/members?**

*Those who keep their eyes on God's will and commandment, however, have the promise that they will be richly rewarded for all they contribute to their temporal and spiritual fathers, and for the honor they render them. Not only shall they have bread, clothing, and money for a year or two, but long life, sustenance, and peace, and afterwards abundance and blessedness forever. Do your duty, then, and leave it to God how he will support you and provide for all your wants. Since he has promised it, and has never yet lied, he will not lie to you either.*⁷ (Large Catechism, Fourth Commandment)

For Discussion

- 1. On what basis do we "leave it to God how He will support" us?**

⁵Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (365). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

⁶Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (29). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

⁷Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (387). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

2. In whom are all the promises of God fulfilled?

3. How can you teach this to your students/members?

They object that it is in accord with God's justice to punish sin. He is certainly punishing it when amid the terrors of contrition he reveals his wrath. David attests to this when he prays (Ps. 6:1), "O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger"; and Jer. 10:24, "Correct me, O Lord, but in just measure; not in thy anger, lest thou bring me to nothing." This certainly speaks of the most bitter punishments. Our opponents admit that contrition can be so great as to make satisfaction unnecessary; thus contrition is a more genuine punishment than is satisfaction. Furthermore, the saints are subject to death and to all the common troubles, as Peter says (1 Pet. 4:17), "For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel?" As a rule, these troubles are punishments for sin. In the godly they have another and better purpose, that is, to exercise them so that in their temptations they may learn to seek God's help and to acknowledge the unbelief in their hearts. So Paul says of himself (2 Cor. 1:9), "We felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."⁸ (Apology, Article XII)

For Discussion

1. God is certainly a loving God, but what tempers God's love?

2. How can God use His justice to teach us "to seek God's help and acknowledge the unbelief in (our) hearts"?

3. How can you teach this to your students/members?

It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary, and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath. The same Christ also descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, that he may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures, that through the Holy Spirit he may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, that he may bestow on them life and every grace and blessing, and that he may protect and defend them against the devil and against sin. The same Lord Christ will return

⁸Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (206). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

*openly to judge the living and the dead, as stated in the Apostles' Creed.*⁹
(Augsburg Confession, Article III)

For Discussion

- 1. For what purpose did Jesus enter this world?**
- 2. Against what enemies does He promise to protect us?**
- 3. How does the “Gospel of Prosperity” contradict the true Gospel?**
- 4. How can you teach this to your students/members?**

A second error that threatens to throttle true believers is in the area of missiology. The temptation here is to move from Biblical and Confessional language to that of the corporate business world. It is all too common in today's religious literature to present the Church as a business with a product to sell. On the basis of this false premise the Church is encouraged to follow the lead of successful companies. The current best-sellers for church leaders are all about the entrepreneurial spirit. The ads read, “Fast growing church seeks twittering Pastor with entrepreneurial drive.” Those who are interested in contending for the faith by presenting pure doctrine are condemned as maintenance oriented. Those who are willing to risk pure doctrine for the sake of reaching the lost are upheld as caring for souls.

One of the catch-phrases that has become popular in this effort is, “Let's keep the main thing, the main thing.” While cute, I suspect that this cliché causes as much controversy in the corporate world as it has in the Church. What, precisely, is the main thing? Those who sell many books are answering that the “mission” is the main thing. They have subtly amended the Ten Commandments with the command to make disciples. It is very difficult to contend against this error without being open to the charge of not caring about souls. However, contend we must because this slight-of-hand switch threatens the chief article of the Christian faith.

The Scripture and Confessions are clear, the main thing is Jesus and His sacrifice to redeem us from our sin. The main message of the Scripture is not something that we do, (else we would all be doomed). The main thing is something God does. Even if we concede that the mission, telling other people about Jesus, is really God's mission, our participation in it is still something we do. And even if we recognize that the good things we do are really God's action in and through us, they are still good works. Like all good works they fall prey to the condemnation of the law. The verdict of the law is that we do not tell people about Jesus like we should. Therefore, we are sinners. We must be crystal clear: this action, this good work, this mission is not the “main thing” of Christian doctrine.

Let's spend a few moments, using the Confessions as a guide, discussing how we might contend against such evil teachings.

⁹Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (29). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

For the chief article of the Gospel must be maintained, namely, that we obtain the grace of God through faith in Christ without our merits; we do not merit it by services of God instituted by men.¹⁰ (Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII)

Since the teaching about faith, which is the chief article in the Christian life, has been neglected so long (as all must admit) while nothing but works was preached everywhere, our people have been instructed as follows:

We begin by teaching that our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace for us, for this happens only through faith, that is, when we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator who reconciles the Father. Whoever imagines that he can accomplish this by works, or that he can merit grace, despises Christ and seeks his own way to God, contrary to the Gospel.¹¹ (Augsburg Confession, Article XX)

For Discussion

1. What happens when the chief article, (the main thing), of the Christian faith is “neglected”?

2. What happens when something we do, (even if it is truly a good work brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit), becomes the center or chief article of our teaching?

3. How can you teach this to your students/members?

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). He alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all” (Isa. 53:6). Moreover, “all have sinned,” and “they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood” (Rom. 3:23-25).

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom. 3:28), and again, “that he [God] himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “And with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it.

¹⁰Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (89). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

¹¹Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (42). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

*Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.*¹² (Smalcald Articles II. Article I)

For Discussion

- 1. Why is justification by God’s grace through faith in Jesus called the chief article of the Christian faith?**
- 2. In what ways may this article be “given up”?**
- 3. In what ways may it be “compromised”?**
- 4. How does everything else we teach rest on the article on justification?**
- 5. How can you teach this to your students/members?**

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.

*Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel.*¹³ (Augsburg Confession, Article V)

{Latin- for clarification}

In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted...

For Discussion

- 1. To whom is this article of justification to be proclaimed? (Please see the Latin. Who is the “we” in that wording?)**
- 2. What means has God provided to bring faith in Jesus before the world?**
- 3. Who has the power to create faith using these means?**
- 4. How might we “give up” the article on justification if we teach that it is our responsibility to grow the Church, (i.e. convert people to faith)?**

¹²Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (292). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

¹³Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (31). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

5. How can you teach this to your students/members?

“I am a Lutheran.” It may not be long before such a confession will be met with outright persecution. Whether it is the two test cases we have examined today or one of a host of other issues confronting the Church, there is plenty of evil to go around. In this manner we find ourselves contending for the faith not only with our lips but with our very lives. Let me remind you then, it is not our responsibility or power to save the Christian faith. Contending for the faith, as enjoined by Jude, has nothing to do with the continued existence of the Church. We do not contend for the faith in order to protect or save the Good News of the Gospel. That responsibility belongs to God alone. The Church will endure by His grace and His power.

We make the good confession, “I am a Lutheran” from obedience to His Word. He tells us to make the good confession. God is able to use that confession for our own sake. By it He strengthens the faith that He has given us. He is also able to use it for the unbelieving world. By it He may bring about faith when and where He chooses.

God gives His people many good gifts. He has given us His Word, in written form, so that we might believe. *“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”* (Romans 15:4) He has also given us the wisdom of other believers for the sake of our faith. God bless you as you continue to use the Lutheran Confessions as a means of clarifying and emboldening your faith.

S.D.G.

Terry Forke
Pastor/Teacher Conference
October 15, 2009
Kalispell, Montana

Appendices

I have appended to this paper, brief summaries of the statements of faith contained in The Book of Concord. These may be helpful tools in your continued use of the Confessions as you contend for the faith.

- I. Articles of Doctrine Treated in the Lutheran Confessions
- II. The Three Ecumenical Creeds
- III. The Augsburg Confession and The Apology to the Augsburg Confession
- IV. The Smalcald Articles
- V. The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope
- VI. The Small and Large Catechisms
- VII. The Formula of Concord

I. Articles of Doctrine Treated in the Lutheran Confessions

Augsburg Confession

- 1 God
- 2 Original Sin
- 3 Son of God
- 4 Justification
- 5 Office of Ministry
- 6 The New Obedience
- 7 The Church
- 8 What the Church is
- 9 Baptism
- 10 The Holy Supper of the Lord
- 11 Confession
- 12 Repentance
- 13 The Use of the Sacraments
- 14 Order in the Church
- 15 Church Usages
- 16 Civil Government
- 17 The Return of Christ to Judgment
- 18 Freedom of the Will
- 19 The Cause of Sin
- 20 Faith and Good Works
- 21 The Cult of Saints
- What has been changed
- 22 Both Kinds in the Sacrament
- 23 The Marriage of Priests
- 24 The Mass
- 25 Confession
- 26 The Distinction of Foods
- 27 Monastic Vows
- 28 The Power of the Bishops

Apology

- God
- Original Sin
- Christ
- Justification
-
- The Church
-
- Baptism
- The Holy Supper
- Confession
- Penitence
- Number and Use of Sacraments
- Ecclesiastical Order
- Human Traditions in the Church
- Political Order
- Christ's Return to Judgment
- Free Will
- The Cause of Sin
- Good Works
- The Invocation of the Saints
- The Lord's Supper under both Kinds
- The Marriage of Priest
- The Mass
-
- Monastic Vows
- Ecclesiastical Power

Smalcald Articles

- Part I Divine Majesty
- Trinity/Incarnation
- Part II
- 1 Christ and Faith
- 2 The Mass
- 3 Monasteries
- 4 Papacy
- Part III
- 1 Sin
- 2 The Law
3. Repentance
- 4 Gospel
- 5 Baptism
- 6 Sacrament of Altar
- 7 The Keys
- 8 Confession
- 9 Excommunication
- 10 Ordination & Vocation
- 11 Marriage of Priests
- 12 The Church
- 13 Justification/Good works
- 14 Monastic Vows
- 15 Human Traditions

Treatise Power/Primacy

- Papal Authority

Small Catechism

- Ten Commandments
- Creed
- Lord's Prayer
- Baptism
- Confession/Absolution
- Sacrament of the Altar

Large Catechism

- Ten Commandments
- Creed
- Lord's Prayer
- Baptism
- Confession/Absolution
- Sacrament of the Altar

Formula of Concord

- Original Sin
- Free Will
- Righteousness of faith
- Good Works
- Law and Gospel
- Third function of the law
- Holy Supper
- Person of Christ
- Descent into Hell
- Adiaphora
- Election
- Other Factions

II. The Three Ecumenical Creeds

The first section in the The Book of Concord is entitled, “The Three Chief Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith which are Commonly Used in the Church”.

In this section are contained the ancient creeds of the Church, the Apostle’s, the Nicene, and the Athanasian.

The word “creed” is from the Latin for “I believe”. When you join with other believers in reciting one of these creeds you are joining your voice in confession of the Christian faith. You are publicly stating, “This is what I believe.”

The use of the creeds is a very important aspect of the life of faith. Such confession accomplishes a number of significant functions. When you confess your faith in the form of the creed you should be aware of at least four simultaneous audiences: 1) You speak these words in your own hearing. You are reminding yourself of what you believe. 2) You speak these words in the hearing of other believers. You are reminding other believers of the contents of faith and in so doing are strengthening one another. 3) You speak these words before the world. You are telling the world what you believe. {Though few unbelievers may ever hear this confession during the worship service, your membership in a congregation that makes this confession, is a public proclamation of the faith.} 4) You speak these words in the hearing of God. You are confessing your faith to God. It is in your heart and on your lips because He put it there.

The creeds also help the Church to maintain the unity of the faith. Satan is constantly attacking the Church with the intent of perverting its message. The world is a seductive voice, whispering words contrary to the Gospel. Even our own flesh conjures up a “religion” more palatable to our ears than that which is given us in the Scriptures. One of the tools the Church has used to keep the Gospel pure and uniform throughout the Church is the creeds. Believers around the world recite the creeds, declaring that they believe the same thing.

Imagine what would happen if your congregation did not recite the Creed during worship. No other part of the liturgy tells the story of the Gospel in such a thorough manner. The truth is that most of the members in attendance would have no other opportunity to review the truths of the Christian faith. The creeds help to keep not only the Church at large in uniformity, but also individual congregations.

Thirdly, the creeds are an excellent instrument to assist you in sharing your faith. You may not have the entire Bible memorized. You do have the creed memorized. You may not have an answer to every question that someone might ask, but knowing the creeds gives you many of the answers.

God reminds us to “...hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” The Lutheran Confessions give us the creeds to assist us in that task.

III. The Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the Augsburg Confession.

By 1530 the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Charles V, decided he finally had the time to attempt a resolution to the religious controversy emanating from Germany. (The 1521 declaration that Luther was a heretic had not put an end to the movement as he had hoped.) Charles also needed the help of every ruler available to resist the incursions of the Turks on his eastern front. So on January 21, 1530 he invited the leaders of the free cities in his empire to Augsburg to work on restoring unity.

John, the elector of Saxony, equally anxious to settle matters, asked the Lutheran theologians to prepare a statement of faith. They decided to use an existing document called the Schwabach Articles and prepared an additional document, the Torgau Articles, to outline the changes in practice the Lutherans had instituted. These documents basically focused on changes.

When the Lutherans arrived in Augsburg they found that John Eck, a powerful enemy of Luther's, had written an inflammatory book in which he misquoted the Lutherans to make them look like terrible heretics. The Lutherans decided that they needed to rework what they would present to the Emperor to assure him that their beliefs were clearly within the realm of historic Christianity. Since Luther could not enter Augsburg, (he was still under the ban as an outlaw of the faith), the responsibility for the work fell mostly to his friend and colleague, Philip Melancthon.

That document was presented to the Emperor on June 25, 1530. The Augsburg Confession, as it came to be known, is, for the most part, a serene statement of faith. In fact, it is represented as a statement of the Christian faith. In other words, the Lutherans were saying that they had not left the faith, but rather were making a clear confession of what all Christians should believe. The Confession steers clear of many harsh accusations of the Roman Catholics. Its focus is on the presentation of the Gospel. It puts forward justification by grace through faith in Jesus as the chief doctrine of Christianity. It was a bold attempt to state the Christian faith and see if the Roman Catholic theologians would dare to argue.

They did! By August 3, 1530 they had produced a document which came to be known as the "Confutation." In this work they purported to have refuted the Augsburg Confession. The Emperor demanded that the Lutherans submit.

The Lutherans were, of course, German. They refused to submit, and went to work on an answer to the "Confutation." Again the work fell mostly to Melancthon. On September 22, 1530 he submitted what came to be known as, "The Apology of the Augsburg Confession." It was refused by the emperor.

The Apology is not an expression of regret or a request for pardon. The word "apology" meant a defense. So the Apology is a defense of the Augsburg Confession. It is not quite as peaceful as the Augsburg Confession. As one might imagine, since it is answering the "Confutation" the Apology more clearly points out where Roman Catholic doctrine is in error. The Apology is more than twice as long as the Augsburg. It defends both doctrine and practice of the Lutherans. It demonstrates that Lutherans are Gospel centered Christians rely solely on God's work through Jesus for their salvation.

IV. The Smalcald Articles

These articles were written by Martin Luther in 1536 in response to a summons of Pope Paul III for a Church Council in the following year. The intent of the articles was to present for discussion at a free Church Council, (theologians of all persuasions coming together to discuss theology), what the Lutherans confessed. In this aspect the Smalcald Articles are similar to the Augsburg Confession.

These articles are even briefer than the Augsburg. They are only about 26 pages. I encourage you to read them. Since they are written by Luther they are much bolder. Luther writes with a blunt edged instrument. They are more personal. Luther writes in the introduction his concerns about personal attacks on his faith. He seems to despair that his confession will ever be heard in a free Church Council.

On the other hand Luther writes with a confidence in God's good gifts like no one else. He writes in the introduction, "Not that we ourselves need such a council, for by God's grace our churches have now been so enlightened and supplied with the pure Word and the right use of the sacraments, with an understanding of the various calling of life, and the true works, that we do not ask for a council for our own sake." In his view the council should be held for the sake of the rest of the Church which is desolate due to poor theology.

The articles are broken into three parts. The first part deals with articles of doctrine that are not in dispute. Here you will find the basics almost in creedal form.

The second part deals with the chief article of the Christian faith, Jesus and his gift of justification by grace. This is the core of the dispute with Rome. Luther is confident that the controversy will continue. He writes, "In these four articles they will have enough to condemn in the council, for they neither can nor will concede to us even the smallest fraction of these articles.

The third part deals with articles of the faith that may be discussed by "learned and sensible men". Here he presents some articles seen in the Augsburg, (the sacraments, confession, the Church, human traditions), as well as some new ones, (Gospel, ordination and vocation).

Luther concludes this confession with a very personal note reminiscent of his stand at Worms. "These are the articles on which I must stand and on which I will stand, God willing, until my death. I do not know how I can change or concede anything in them. If anybody wishes to make some concessions, let him do so at the peril of his own conscience."

V. The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

This short work is too often overlooked because of the potential of embarrassment. We rarely talk with the forthrightness of this document in today's politically correct world.

Composed in Smalcald in 1537 the "Treatise" outlines the history and nature of the Papacy as an office opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Although often considered a part of the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise was actually intended to be a supplement to the Augsburg Confession. A reference to the offense of the office of the papacy was likely omitted when the Augsburg was presented to make its acceptance more likely. The Smalcald Articles were not adopted in 1537 when first presented, but the Treatise was.

These early "Lutherans" boldly proclaimed that the Papacy was the office of the Anti-Christ. This charge is supported by outlining three outrageous claims made by the Papacy that could only be made by someone opposed to the Gospel. First, the Pope claims that God has given him authority over all other Pastors. Secondly, the Pope claims that God has given him both spiritual and temporal, (political) authority. Thirdly, the Pope claims it is necessary for salvation for all believers to submit to him as the vicar, (substitute), of Christ on earth.

These claims are exposed and refuted using Scripture and the testimony of the fathers of the Church. Believers are sternly warned not to fall under the Pope's sway, nor to be associated with him. This does not mean, of course, that we cannot have Roman Catholic friends and love them. It does not mean that all Roman Catholics are lost, for wherever the Word is read there the Holy Spirit may do His work. It does mean that the office of the Papacy is dangerous to the Gospel because it causes people to look to a man and not to Jesus.

In conveying what is wrong with this understanding of what a servant of the Lord is to be, much is also said about the proper understanding of how Pastors serve. It would be beneficial for you to read this short Treatise to be reminded of the gift God has given to the Church in the office of the public ministry.

VI. The Small and Large Catechisms

Martin Luther wrote both catechisms late 1528 through the spring of 1529. The need for the catechisms was impressed upon Luther when, in the fall of 1528, he spent some time visiting congregations in Saxony. He writes in the preface to the Small Catechism:

The deplorable conditions which I recently encountered when I was a visitor constrained me to prepare this brief and simple catechism...Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as if they were pigs and irrational beasts.

The Small Catechism addresses the need to put something into the hands of parents to help them teach their children the Christian faith. The Small Catechism presents the faith through the use of Six Chief Parts: The Ten Commandments, The Creed, The Lord's Prayer, The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Confession and Absolution, and The Sacrament of the Altar. Through the use of a question and answer format Luther provides a tool for children, (and parents) to memorize the meanings of these chief parts of the Christian faith. The Small Catechism is still a primary tool in the teaching of the Christian faith to young and old alike as they enter into communicant membership in the Lutheran Church.

The Large Catechism was addressed to Pastors. Pastors were also found wanting when Luther visited. "...and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching," he wrote again in the preface to the Small Catechism.

Whereas the Small Catechism is clearly written as a teaching tool, the Large Catechism is for the teacher. It is considerably longer, prosaic, polemical and meditative. It covers the same parts except that it refers to five chief parts and relegates Confession to a brief exhortation at the end of the work.

Hopefully, you are quite familiar with the Small Catechism through your confirmation instruction. It would be a benefit to review what you may have memorized a long time ago. I would also encourage you to take up the Large Catechism as a way of examining your faith more deeply.

VII. The Formula of Concord

The history of the production of the Formula of Concord is a complicated swirl of conflict. Yet, as its name implies, it is an example of the power of God's Word to heal and bring peace to the Church. As such it provides hope for the Church in times of theological confusion, distrust and disunity.

Following the Emperor's refusal to accept the Apology of the Augsburg Confession in September, 1530 and his demand that the reformers submit to the Confutation by April 15, 1531 under veiled threat, the Lutherans resorted to a military mindset. They established the Smalcald League in February 1531, and committed themselves to help defend one another. Since the Emperor was preoccupied with his own threats from France and the Turks he did not act against the Lutherans until 1547. At that time a strange series of events created an opportunity and the Smalcald League was defeated.

There is little doubt that military defeat, the death of Luther and the vacillations of Melancthon created a "perfect storm" which produced any number of theological errors within the ranks of Lutheranism. As God would have it, the political advantages of the Emperor were reversed and the military threats of the empire against the Lutherans virtually dissolved in the Peace of Augsburg, 1555. The theological controversies, however, continued.

These controversies covered a lot of theological territory. The Antinomian controversy began when some began to teach that the law of God has no authority over Christians. The Adiaphoristic controversy erupted when a prince tried to force certain Roman Catholic rites, which had been declared adiaphora, (i.e. neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture), on Lutherans. The Majoristic controversy was initiated by a professor who declared that good works are necessary to salvation. The Crypto-Calvinistic controversy started when strict Lutherans began to realize that some wording in doctrinal statements that were assumed to be Lutheran were ambiguous enough to be interpreted as Calvinistic. Later a number of professors in Saxony were found to be followers of Calvin and only pretending to be Lutheran. They were dismissed. There were other problems but these are enough to demonstrate that Lutheranism was in trouble.

Faithful Lutherans, committed to the Scripture, and, notably to the Augsburg Confession kept up the pressure to settle these controversies according to the Word of God. It wasn't until 1573 that real progress was made. In that year Jacob Andreae published "Six Sermons on the Controversies with the Lutheran Church from 1548-73". Andreae, Martin Chemnitz and David Chytraeus worked tirelessly to produce materials stating the Scriptural answers to the controversies. Finally, in 1577, in Bergen, a document was approved that did just that. It became known as the Solid Declaration. Since it was thought to be too long a summary was also approved that came to be known as the Epitome. Together these works comprise what is today known as the Formula of Concord. The Formula was Scripturally precise enough to calm most of the controversies. A number of teachers simply had to leave the ranks of Lutheranism because they were found to be false teachers.

On June 25, 1580, thirty years to the day after the reading of the Augsburg Confession the Book of Concord was published. It contains all the statements of faith known as the Lutheran Confessions. Professional Church workers in the LCMS subscribe to these works, promising to teach according to them. It is this book that defines what it means to be a Lutheran.