

What the World Needs Now:  
Do the Lutheran Confessions Speak to the World Today?  
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We who call ourselves confessional Lutherans do so not in service to a church-political cause, but because we believe that to be a Lutheran means to confess what was confessed in the Book of Concord of 1580. Is this what the world needs now? Do the Lutheran Confessions speak to the world today? If they do, when we speak to the world about the Christian faith, we will do so in harmony with what our fathers in the faith confessed in the Book of Concord four and a half centuries ago.

But we are immediately confronted with a problem. The spirit of the Confessions is not the prevailing spirit among most nominal Lutherans today. What this means is that if we are to be Lutherans we must stand in opposition to most Lutherans.

The spirit of the Confessions is dogmatic when it comes to divine doctrine. The spirit among nominal Lutherans is tentative. The spirit of the Confessions is polemical. The gospel is fighting words. God's first gospel promise was in the form of a declaration of war against the devil who by lying brought the human race into captivity to sin. To confess is to fight the fight of the faith. The good confession is made in imitation of Jesus who made the good confession before Pilate when he said that he came to testify to the truth. Pilate cynically dismissed his claim with his response, "What is truth?" Jesus nevertheless confessed the truth, died confessing, and in dying fought and won the cosmic battle of good against evil, of truth against lies. The truth brings conflict. The polemical spirit of the Lutheran Confessions is integral to them. The spirit among most nominal Lutherans today runs away from conflict over matters of Christian doctrine, seeking peace above doctrinal purity.

The Confessions join together the didactic, the devotional, and the polemical. Consider what we confess in the Small Catechism. "What does this mean?" is didactic. "That I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity" is devotional. "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ" is polemical. Our confessions cannot teach without identifying and condemning error.

This didn't arise in the 16th century with the Lutherans. Every time we confess the Nicene Creed we blast Arius, Arianism, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and assorted heretics. As we confess, we call on our pastor to preach according to this Creed! We Lutherans cannot worship without teaching. We cannot teach without condemning error. We cannot condemn error except in service to the care and nurture of souls.

The Lutheran confessors could not envision any other way to confess than the way they confessed. This is why they had no qualms about binding their posterity to what they

confessed. We are their posterity. The purpose of writing the Augsburg Confession was “to secure our posterity in the future against all doctrine that is impure, false, and contrary to the word of God.”<sup>1</sup> The Formula of Concord was written, “so that no adulterated doctrine might in the future be hidden thereunder and that a pure declaration of the truth might be transmitted to our posterity as well.”<sup>2</sup> As they thought of their posterity, they remembered from their own recent history how confessions of faith can be altered and the pure doctrine corrupted. They rejected any emendation of the original Augsburg Confession to make it more palatable politically. They wrote,

[I]n order that our contemporaries as well as our beloved posterity may be clearly and thoroughly informed and possess final certainty as to which Christian confession it is that we and the churches and schools of our lands have hitherto at all times adhered and appealed to, we have in what follows purposed to commit ourselves exclusively and only, in accordance with the pure, infallible, and unalterable Word of God to that Augsburg Confession which was submitted to Emperor Charles V at the great imperial assembly in Augsburg in the year 1530. (Preface to the Book of Concord)<sup>3</sup>

They did not hesitate to bind their posterity to their confession. They were not only speaking on behalf of their posterity. They were confessing what they would confess on Judgment Day. Near the close of the Formula of Concord, the last of the Lutheran Confessions, we read:

Therefore, in the presence of God and of all Christendom among both our contemporaries and our posterity, we wish to have testified that the present explanation of all the foregoing controverted articles here explained, and none other, is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God’s grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account. Nor shall we speak or write anything, privately or publicly, contrary to this confession, but we intend through God’s grace to abide by it. In view of this we have advisedly, in the fear and invocation of God, subscribed our signatures with our own hands. (FC SD XII paragraph 40)<sup>4</sup>

The eternal implications of their confession are acknowledged also in the Preface to the Book of Concord where we read:

By the help of God’s grace we, too, intend to persist in this confession until our blessed end and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ with joyful and fearless hearts and consciences.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959, page 5.

<sup>2</sup> Tappert, page 7

<sup>3</sup> Tappert, page 8

<sup>4</sup> Tappert, page 636

<sup>5</sup> Tappert, page 9

How could they be so bold as to bind their posterity to their confession and promise to stand on it when appearing before Jesus Christ on Judgment Day? They were simply confessing as truth what God had already revealed to be true. The sole authority of the Lutheran Confessions is the authority of the Holy Scriptures, the written Word of God. This is what we confess in the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Rule and Norm:

We pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated.<sup>6</sup>

Since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule and norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated, and since the Lutheran Confessions derive their normative authority from the Scriptures, we Lutherans bind ourselves to the Confessions. We do so because they agree with the Holy Scriptures. We promise in the Preface to the Book of Concord:

We are minded by the grace of the Holy Spirit to abide and remain unanimously in this confession of faith and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it.<sup>7</sup>

The dogmatic certainty of the Lutheran Confessions is in sharp contrast to the ecumenical spirit of our day. The Confessions are polemically charged. From the Augsburg Confession to the Formula of Concord, the substance of the faithful confession is stated in thetical and antithetical form. In the Augsburg Confession, “our churches teach” and “our churches condemn.” In the Formula of Concord, “we believe, teach, and confess,” and “we reject and condemn.” We cannot believe, teach, and confess if we don’t condemn. So we condemn.

The ecumenical spirit seeks to overcome the divisions reflected in and perpetuated by polemically charged confessional language of the past. Those seeking to overcome divisions propose a common way of speaking. They say, in effect, “We have disagreed and we do not wish to paper over our disagreements, but when revisiting divisive issues of yesteryear, we must find what unites us instead of accentuating what divides us. We must find common ground. We must find consensus. We Christians have no choice. Consider what is happening right before our eyes! Churches of every confession and description are declining in number and influence. The millennial generation is abandoning the Christian religion. The demographic evidence is irrefutable. We, who confess Christ, must get together, stand together, speak together, and provide a united front against the enemies of Christendom.” Are they not right?

Not if the Lutheran Confessions speak to the world today. Not if we want to be faithful to the letter and the spirit of the Lutheran Confessions. Put bluntly: we do not need to

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<sup>6</sup> Tappert, pages 503-504.

<sup>7</sup> Tappert, page 14

provide a united front with members of heterodox churches. Why not? Because the Lutheran Confessions speak to the world today! There is such a thing as divinely revealed truth and the Lutheran Confessions confess it. What the Lutheran Confessions confess was, is, and will always be that truth upon which the eternity destiny of everyone in the world depends. The errors the Lutheran Confessions refute are perennial, recurring in every generation, and always requiring clear and convincing rebuttal.

Any concern about pure doctrine is vanity if the pure doctrine of which we speak is not taught by God himself. God speaks clearly and authoritatively. God has revealed his truth in his written Word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the canonical writings of the prophets and apostles. Because God is truth, his word is truth.

The gospel is the truth on which our salvation depends. There can be no certain knowledge of the gospel, Jesus, justification, faith, or any other topic of theology apart from the truthfulness of the Bible. If, on the one hand, we were to ask what a Christian must know, we would put knowledge of Christology and soteriology above knowledge of the normative authority of the Bible. We trust in and worship the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin, death, and hell. We do not place our Bible on the family altar and bow down to it, crying out words of praise. The Bible did not die for us. Jesus did. One can be a Christian without having read the Bible. One need not be able to read to be a Christian. But there is no Christian who doesn't trust in the gospel of Christ.

On the other hand, there is no Jesus and there is no gospel except the Jesus and the gospel taught in the Bible. The efficacy of the word that we hear, the word that brings us to faith and sustains us in it, is contingent on it being God's word. What is God's word? Whether written, spoken, or sung, it is not God's word if it is not taken from and in accordance with what is written in the Holy Scriptures. To confuse the normative authority of the Bible, that is, the Bible as judge of all teachings and teachers in the church, with the power of the gospel – a confusion that seems to beset many preachers these days – results in a gospel stripped of its substance, set free from any mooring, and hostage to fickle human enthusiasms, in short: no gospel at all. That there is such a thing as divinely revealed truth that can be confessed in words that will remain true half a millennium after they are written down requires a clear and infallible standard of truth. The Bible is that standard.

When we lose confidence in the clarity and truthfulness of the Holy Scriptures, we can no longer rely on the Bible as the sole rule and norm of Christian doctrine. We can no longer subscribe unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions. And if we, who call ourselves Lutheran, cannot subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions, how can we imagine that they speak to the world today except, perhaps, as an example of how people confessed in a more polemical and less ecumenical age?

This afternoon, I would like to illustrate what happens to the Lutheran confession when the polemical spirit of the Lutheran Confessions is overcome by the desire to engage in

a common way of speaking with proponents of heterodox confessions. I direct your attention to “A Reforming Catholic Confession,” subtitled, “A ‘Mere Protestant’ Confession of Faith,” written by Keven J. Vanhoozer, to “mark the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.” A Reforming Catholic Confession has two parts. The first part is a brief summary of twelve topics of Christian doctrine titled, in this order: Triune God, Holy Scripture, Human Beings, Fallenness, Jesus Christ, The Atoning Work of Christ, The Gospel, The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit, The Church, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Holy Living, and Last Things. The second part is headed “Explanation: A Historical & Theological Perspective – Why we say what we say.” A series of twenty five numbered paragraphs follows.

The initial publication of this confession had about 150 signatures. Most of the original signatories were Reformed theologians of various stripes, both Calvinists and Arminians, including Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals, and perhaps a half a dozen Lutherans, including two faculty members of Concordia Seminary, in St. Louis, Missouri.

A Reforming Catholic Confession states its desire to unite as “mere Protestants,” borrowing the language of C. S. Lewis in his popular, Mere Christianity. While expressing respect for their respective churches’ “distinctive emphases,”<sup>8</sup> the confession downplays the significance of the doctrinal divisions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the introduction to the confession, we read that

. . . a number of leaders from across the Protestant spectrum have come together to honor the original vision of the Reformers by demonstrating that, despite our genuine differences, there is a significant and substantial doctrinal consensus that unites us as “mere Protestants.”

In the introduction to the Explanation we read that,

Not every denominational or doctrinal difference is a division, certainly not an insurmountable one.<sup>9</sup>

Difference in doctrine is not necessarily divisive. Again, from the Explanation,

We acknowledge that Protestants have not always handled doctrinal and interpretive differences in a spirit of charity and humility, but in making common confession, as we here do, we challenge the idea that every difference or denominational distinction necessarily leads to division.<sup>10</sup>

The insistence that one has the pure doctrine is called “prideful insistence on their right opinions.”<sup>11</sup> In regard specifically to the divide among the Protestants in the 16<sup>th</sup> century on Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the Explanation writes:

<sup>8</sup> “A Reforming Catholic Confession,” (ARCC) Explanation: A Historical & Theological Perspective,” paragraph 21

<sup>9</sup> Explanation, paragraph 2

<sup>10</sup> Explanation, paragraph 10

<sup>11</sup> Explanation, paragraph 22

Several attempts were made to reconcile differences over interpretations of Scripture, for instance regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper. In response to the Pauline injunction, and in the spirit of the Protestant Reformers at their best, then, we humbly set forth our reforming catholic confession: reforming, because we do not pretend to have captured all biblical truth.<sup>12</sup>

The slogan popular among the Reformed, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, that is, the church must always be reformed, is repeatedly alluded to throughout the Explanation.

The attempt to make a "mere Protestant" confession requires very careful crafting of language. A synthesizing of Calvinism, Arminianism along with their various spawn in such a way as to gain the signatures of Lutherans as well is no mean feat. The Reformed bias is evident throughout, however.

The first article of this confession, Triune God, lists as an attribute of God his "sovereign love." The word sovereign appears once in the Lutheran Confessions and does not refer to God. The doctrine of election is confessed in this article on the Triune God without reference to God's grace, justification, or Jesus.

The second article, Holy Scripture, identifies Scripture as

[T]he only infallible and sufficiently clear rule and authority for Christian faith, thought, and life (*sola scriptura*).

The Formula of Concord confesses the Scripture as

[T]he only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged. (FC Epitome, Rule and Norm, paragraph 1)<sup>13</sup>

In the Formula of Concord, the Scriptures are the only rule and norm period. In A Reforming Catholic Confession it is left to the reader to discern whether there are other norms for doctrine that are not infallible or sufficiently clear.

The third article of the confession, Human Beings, states that all men, women, and children have been graciously bestowed with inherent dignity and then, in parentheses, rights. This politically charged language returns under The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit where the regenerate have "hearts oriented to the light and life of the kingdom of God and to peace and justice on earth," and again under Holy Living where the "sacrificial service to the world" includes, "justice for the oppressed."

The article headed Fallenness deals with original sin, but says nothing about inherited sin or about the total depravity of man. It defines sin as disorder.

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<sup>12</sup> Explanation, paragraph 17

<sup>13</sup> Tappert, page 464

The article, Jesus Christ, confesses that Jesus is truly God and truly man. It goes on to say:

He lived a fully human life, having entered into the disorder and brokenness of fallen existence, yet without sin, and in his words, deeds, attitude, and suffering embodied the free and loving communication of God's own light (truth) and life (salvation).

The next article, The Atoning Work of Christ, speaks of Christ dying in our stead and "removing our guilt, vanquishing the powers that held us captive, and reconciling us to God." It says nothing about propitiation or turning away the wrath of God. While it speaks of "gracious provision for human wrongdoing," it does not teach a universal atonement.

The article, The Gospel, teaches that "Christ died in the place of sinners, absorbing the wages of sin," but does not teach that he died for all. It mentions justification, but does not teach that Christ's obedience is reckoned as righteousness.

The article, The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit, who is identified as "the unseen yet active personal presence of God in the world," does not mention the preaching of the gospel, baptism, or the Lord's Supper, indeed, it does not mention the word of God in any form at all. It says that the Holy Spirit "indwells" believers and "conforms them to the image of Christ." It says nothing about how he does this. The means of grace are not mentioned.

In the article, The Church, no mention is made of faith or of justification through faith. The church is defined as

[T]he whole company of the redeemed through the ages, of which Christ is Lord and head.

The confession says that the church exists

. . . visibly everywhere two or three gather in his name to proclaim and spread the gospel in word and works of love, and by obeying the Lord's command to baptize disciples (Matt. 28:19) and celebrate the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19).

Note the command to baptize disciples, not to make disciples by means of baptizing them and teaching them as Jesus' words in St. Matthew's Gospel say.

The article, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, speaks of two ordinances, "which some among us call 'sacraments,'" that are "places where recipients encounter the Word again." There is no mention of baptismal regeneration. There is no mention of infant baptism. There is nothing to suggest that the sacramental bread and wine are the body and blood of Jesus.

The next article, Holy Living, begins with the words:

That through participating in baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as prayer, the ministry of the Word, and other forms of corporate worship, we grow into our new reality as God's people, a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9, 10), called to put on Christ through his indwelling Spirit.

No distinction is made between prayer and the means of grace. This article on Holy Living says nothing about justification. It does not ground sanctification in justification.

The last article, Last Things, neither rejects nor affirms millennialism. It does not use the word "hell" or speak of eternal punishment, but does say:

He will judge the world, consigning any who persist in unbelief to an everlasting fate apart from him, where his life and light are no more.

The people of God will enjoy eternal and joyful fellowship with their Lord and reign with him, "forever rapt in wonder, love, and praise." No mention is made of the forgiveness of sins, the removal of sin's curse, or the absence of sorrow and death.

Let us contrast one way of confessing with another way of confessing. There is the way of confessing of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. There is the way of confessing of 21<sup>st</sup> century Lutherans who sign confessions in concert with the heterodox who will not confess that everyone is born spiritually dead and helpless, at enmity against God and under his wrath; who won't say that Christ propitiated God, removing his wrath against the entire world of sinners; who won't confess that baptism is a means of salvation that bestows forgiveness of sins and new life even to little babies; and who cannot find the words to say that the sacramental bread and wine are the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins, and given to us Christians to eat and to drink.

A Reforming Catholic Confession is unworthy of the signature of a confessional Lutheran. It is troubling that men who are responsible for the theological training of future pastors of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod would sign this document. The Lutheran Confessions speak the gospel credibly and clearly to the world today. A Reforming Catholic Confession does not.

A Reforming Catholic Confession is devoted to the same ecumenical spirit that produced, between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The purpose of such documents is political. The world must know that we Christians are not as divided as we appear to be. There is strength in numbers. There is strength in presenting a façade of unity to the world. If we can get together with those from whom we have been divided by doctrinal differences and figure out a way to say the same things about the same topics, we will show the world that we are not as small, as insignificant, as isolated, and as irrelevant as we appear to be.

It's about how we appear to the world. It's not about teaching and contending for the pure doctrine of Christ. Do congregations receive instruction from their pastors on the doctrine of justification from the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification? How many of the signatories of A Reforming Catholic Confession will use this document to teach Christian doctrine? Such documents are not intended to teach anybody anything and they're not designed to confess the faith, either, unless by confessing the faith we mean coming up with a united front from which we can claim to the world that the church is not as divided as she appears to be.

But it is not about us! It is not how we appear to the world. It's about Christ! What we say about Christ is too important to be couched in words acceptable to the heterodox.

Orthodoxy is giving to Christ the right glory. We glorify our Lord Jesus Christ by teaching every topic of his doctrine in its truth and purity. We cannot speak of the election of grace without talking about God's grace. We cannot speak of grace without talking about Jesus. We cannot talk about Jesus without talking about his righteousness that alone avails before God. To teach election as this confession teaches it is to dishonor Christ, not to glorify him. What do we care about a "sovereign love" of which the Holy Scriptures are silent? May God graciously preserve us from "sovereign love" and grant to us instead fatherly love located in the crucifixion of Jesus and bestowed in the sacrament of his true body and blood!

The Lutheran Confessions speak to the world today because they spoke to the world when they were written. They were written to confess clearly. The catholic character of the Augsburg Confession is displayed especially in the condemnations, as it rejects the heresies and heretics that the church catholic rejects. A Reforming Catholic Confession, while calling itself catholic, features no antitheses and condemns no one. The refusal to condemn ensures ambiguity throughout.

To illustrate the difference between how A Reforming Catholic Confession confesses and how the Lutheran Confessions confess, let us consider their respective treatments of original sin. Here is what A Reforming Catholic Confession confesses on original sin:

That the original goodness of creation and the human creature has been corrupted by sin, namely, the self-defeating choice of the first human beings to deny the Creator and the created order by going their own way, breaking God's law for life (Rom. 3:23). Through disobedience to the law-giver, Adam and Eve incurred disorder instead of order (Rom. 8:20-21), divine condemnation instead of approval, and death instead of life for themselves and their descendants (Psa. 51:5; Rom. 5:12-20).

While this confession says that human beings have been corrupted by sin, it does not explain in what this corruption consists. There is no mention of being spiritually dead and helpless and at enmity against God. Contrast this confession to what we Lutherans confess in the Formula of Concord:

That original sin in human nature is not only a total lack of good in spiritual, divine things, but that at the same time it replaces the lost image of God in man with a deep, wicked, abominable, bottomless, inscrutable, and inexpressible corruption of his entire nature in all its powers, especially of the highest and foremost powers of the soul in mind, heart, and will. As a result, since the Fall man inherits an inborn wicked stamp, an interior uncleanness of the heart and evil desires and inclinations. By nature every one of us inherits from Adam a heart, sensation, and mind-set which, in its highest powers and the light of reason, is by nature diametrically opposed to God and his highest commands and is actually enmity against God, especially in divine and spiritual matters. (FC SD I paragraph 11)<sup>14</sup>

What does the world need to hear? A current theological issue among Lutherans and others is the denial of the third use of the law and the attendant antinomianism and denial of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. Every actual sin displays the radical ferment of the soul and evokes the anger of God. God is angry with sinners. He is not joking when he threatens to punish them. We cannot refute antinomianism until we understand that the source of specific sins is the spiritual condition of fallen humanity. We must speak clearly about natural man's total spiritual depravity. A faithful Christian confession requires it. This is what the world needs to hear.

A Reforming Catholic Confession does teach justification by faith alone, but does not explain the relationship between justification and faith, the purely receptive role of faith in justification, or the gospel as the object and source of faith. Contrast this to what we Lutherans confess in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

Since Christ is set forth to be the propitiator, through whom the Father is reconciled to us, we cannot appease God's wrath by setting forth our own works. For it is only by faith that Christ is accepted as the mediator. By faith alone, therefore, we obtain the forgiveness of sins when we comfort our hearts with trust in the mercy promised for Christ's sake. (Apology IV paragraph 80)<sup>15</sup>

Or this, again from the Apology:

Faith alone justifies because we receive the forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit by faith alone. (Apology IV paragraph 86)<sup>16</sup>

Listen to how clearly the Formula of Concord explains the relationship between justification, faith, and the gospel:

For faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God-pleasing a virtue, but because it lays hold on and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel. (FC SD III paragraph 13)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tappert, page 510

<sup>15</sup> Tappert, page 118

<sup>16</sup> Tappert, page 119

A Reforming Catholic Confession, in a paragraph of one hundred forty six words on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, says nothing about justification, the gospel, or the sacraments. To speak of the Holy Spirit's indwelling and the growth of the Christian in "knowledge, wisdom, and love into mature sainthood," without saying anything at all about the forgiveness of sins or how the Holy Spirit does what he does is to confess a different Holy Spirit than the Holy Spirit we Lutherans confess. Luther's familiar words from the Smalcald Articles on enthusiasm are pertinent here:

Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil. (SA III VIII paragraph 10)<sup>18</sup>

Does A Reforming Catholic Confession teach false doctrine? Not really. Does it confess God's truth clearly? No, it does not. As we have seen, it does not teach the total depravity of man, the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus, baptism as a means of grace, baptismal regeneration, infant baptism, the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, or that the Holy Spirit works always and only through the means of grace. But then, if we wish to identify publicly as "mere Protestants," we will be unable to confess these things. This raises the question: Can we speak as "mere Protestants" on one hand, and as Lutherans who subscribe unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions on the other? Can we make a "mere Protestant" confession simultaneously with the good confession we make in the Lutheran Confessions?

Do the Lutheran Confessions speak to the world today? Yes! Today! Especially today! It is precisely when the spirit of unionism prevails that the "we believe, teach, and confess" and "we reject and condemn" of the Formula of Concord needs to be emphasized, for if we are willing to be silent and not to confess the whole truth in one topic of Christian doctrine, we can hardly claim loyalty to the whole truth on any topic of Christian doctrine.

In speaking of "the enemies of the sacrament," the Formula of Concord appeals to what Luther said about the Lord's Supper:

Dr. Luther, who understood the true intention of the Augsburg Confession better than anyone else, remained by it steadfastly and defended it constantly until he died. Shortly before his death, in his last confession, he repeated his faith in this article with great fervor and wrote as follows: "I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receives orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints.

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<sup>17</sup> Tappert, page 541

<sup>18</sup> Tappert, 313

Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final.” (SD FC VII paragraph 33)<sup>19</sup>

One must ask whether Luther’s words here, to which all of us Lutheran pastors subscribe unconditionally, can be made to agree with paragraph 11 of the Explanation of “A Reforming Catholic Confession” that reads:

It is a fallacy to argue that the divisions that followed from the Reformation were its inevitable consequences. The accidental truths of European history should never become necessary conclusions about the spirit of Protestantism. Nevertheless, it is particularly to be regretted that the early Protestant Reformers were unable to achieve an altogether common mind, in particular as concerns the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. We believe these divisive doctrinal disagreements stemmed not from the fundamental principles of the Reformation, but from their imperfect application due to human finitude, fallibility, and the vagaries of historical and political circumstance. Nor can we deny that they sometimes succumbed to the ever-present temptations of pride, prejudice, and impatience.<sup>20</sup>

So then, did Luther, when he said, “Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final,” succumb “to the ever-present temptations of pride, prejudice, and impatience?” Or is the fellowship of which Luther spoke only the fellowship at the altar, while joining together to make a common confession of the chief parts of the Christian religion and announcing to the world that “there is a significant and substantial doctrinal consensus that unites us” is not an expression of fellowship with others who are making that common Christian confession with us?

As a fourth year seminarian, in October, 1978, it was my privilege to attend the meeting of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy where the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was adopted. I was one of the signers of the document, along with Harold Bultinck, David Dissen, Horace Hummel, Robert Preus, Klemet Preus, George Wollenburg, Dean Wenhe, and a few other Missouri Synod Lutherans. My M. Div. thesis was written on this conference, focusing on the participation of Lutherans. The consensus between the various Protestant participants, mostly Reformed, and the conservative Lutherans on the topic of biblical inspiration and inerrancy was remarkable. At no point did the Lutherans have to acquiesce to language that did not clearly, with theses and antitheses, state the truth about the inerrancy and authority of the Holy Scriptures. My father, Robert Preus, was one of the men who helped to craft the document. On only one point was my father’s counsel rejected. He suggested that they invite Roman Catholics to participate. They didn’t.

But neither was there an ecumenical agenda. The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy was not written to express “a significant and substantial doctrinal consensus”

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<sup>19</sup> Tappert, page 575

<sup>20</sup> Explanation, paragraph 11

that united the participants. It was written to defend biblical inerrancy. There was no effort to overcome historic differences between Lutherans and the Reformed. There was no equivocation wherein the same words were used to express different teachings. It was an honest and straightforward piece of work.

It has become fashionable in some circles to argue that the conservatives in the Missouri Synod who fought the Battle for the Bible in the sixties and seventies adopted Reformed notions about the Bible. This is not true. The Lutheran participants at the Chicago Conference were well aware of differences between us and the Reformed on the topic of the Bible as a means of grace. This topic was beyond the purview of the conference and was therefore not addressed.

I bring up the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy to point out that not every kind of cooperation with men who belong to heterodox church bodies is religious unionism. The question we must always consider is: What are we saying to the world by what we are doing? In the case of A Reforming Catholic Confession, let this confession speak for itself. We read in the Explanation:

We recall and commend John Wesley's plea that Protestants display a catholic spirit, a call for right-hearted believers to give up their prideful insistence on their right opinions in order to establish right relations with others whose hearts and minds are set on following Jesus according to the Scriptures. We resolve to rededicate ourselves to dialogue in, with, and for the communion of saints, and not to settle for thinking and doing things separately that we can in good conscience think and do together, for the sake of our common witness to the one church of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

No such agenda can be found in the Chicago Statement. I invite you all to obtain and read both the Chicago Statement of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy of 1978 and A Reforming Catholic Confession of 2017. See for yourselves the difference between contending for the truth for the sake of the truth and displaying a façade of unity where genuine unity does not exist.

This brings me to my conclusion and the point of my presentation to you this afternoon. If you want to make a faithful confession, you may never craft the language to accommodate error. The Lutheran Confessions speak to the world today as they spoke to the world when they were written precisely because of the honesty and clarity with which they were written. The Lutheran confessors were not worried about offending the sensibilities of errorists within the Protestant camp. They were intent on refuting their errors. That's the only way to confess. The raw honesty of our Confessions touches the heart of any sincere person who seeks the truth. Here is an honest claim for the truth. Is it true? Read on and see for yourself.

The Lutheran Confessions teach what they teach clearly because they affirm and deny. They confess and condemn. Every topic of Christian doctrine that they address they

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<sup>21</sup> Explanation, paragraph 22

address clearly, not by a forced exegesis of biblical texts, but by an appeal to the clear sense of the words of the Holy Scriptures. Christ and his righteousness, freely given in God's word and sacraments to faith, are at the heart of our Lutheran Confessions. They give Christ glory and provide comfort and consolation to the conscience burdened by sin. They proclaim, not a truncated gospel, but the full gospel: the purely preached doctrine in all its articles and the right administration of the sacraments of Christ. They speak to the world today. No clearer or more relevant Christian confession can be found than what is contained in the Book of Concord of 1580.

This is why we who call ourselves confessional Lutherans will never make a confession crafted to secure the approval of Sacramentarians and synergists whose false teachings are condemned by our Lutheran Confessions. Rather, as we preach and confess the pure and saving gospel, we will preach and confess the entire body of Christian doctrine, with all its topics, and with our Lutheran forefathers, bind ourselves and our posterity to what we preach and confess and take our stand on it before the judgment seat of Christ, our Savior.