

BEING A CONFSSIONAL LUTHERAN TODAY AND BEYOND

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INTRO: *Confessional verses Conservative*

It has been a privilege and a blessing to spend most of my ministry in WELS home missions. It should go without saying that a call into the home mission field means a significant portion of your ministry time is dedicated to seeking out, meeting and sharing the gospel in your community. It means reaching out to those people who have either for one reason or another withdrawn from being associated with any church or who have never heard the gospel. Somewhere along the line as I share the good news of our Savior, the person will ask something like: “So you are a conservative church?” And that is when I cringe a little.

While I understand that the term conservative can be an accurate description of our church body, let me tell you why I cringe a little when I hear it. First of all, I believe the term conservative often throws the conversation for most prospects into the political realm. In America today with its many news outlets and polls the term conservative and church are linked together as something political. Often I come across people who view church as a stepchild of politics. What I mean by that is that while technically they are not the same, they still believe that they share a special and close relationship. In American media, conservative Christians are largely from what we would label as the Reformed branch of Christianity. Lutherans are not the heirs of Zwingli, Knox or Calvin. With the tag of “conservative” in America I believe come teachings that we do not hold to, such as decision and prosperity theologies to name just a couple.

The other reason that I cringe when asked if we are conservative is that the term is too open-ended. Let me illustrate. A classmate of mine was once approached by a pastor from another denomination. This pastor talked on and on about being a conservative pastor too. My friend simply said, “Ma’am, I don’t think we have the same definition of conservative.” The point is that the term conservative can be ambiguous and subjective in today’s shifting society. What one person thinks is being a conservative Lutheran is another person’s liberal Lutheran.

So how do I answer, “Are you conservative Christian?” My usual response has been and will be, “No, I am a Christian who is a confessional Lutheran?” I fully understand that when I make this statement, they have no idea what the term “confessional Lutheran” means. And that is alright. I purposely bring it up in our discussions so that I can explain why our Lutheran church is different from every other church that says that they are “a conservative bible-believing church.” I can communicate how a confessional Lutheran emphasizes and centers on Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone and the Scriptures alone. That is what Confessional Lutherans do – they proclaim, that is confess, the gospel of Christ Jesus. As our district and its congregations gear up to observe the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in 2017, I have been asked to review what it means to be and to rejoice in being a confessional Lutheran today and beyond.

WELS – A Confessional Church

It doesn’t take much to see that the Lutheran Confessions play a significant role in our church body. When a WELS pastor, teacher or staff minister is installed, they are asked:

M: Do you solemnly promise that all your teaching (and your administration of the Sacraments*) will conform to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions?

R: I do.

*("and your administration of the Sacraments" is only asked of pastors)
(*Christian Worship: Occasional Services – NPH, Milwaukee, WI 2004 – pages 248 & 253; see also 265 & 270*)

When children in our synod are confirmed in the faith in which they were baptized, they are asked:

M: “Do you believe that the teaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as you have learned to know it from Luther’s Small Catechism, is faithful and true to the Word of God?

R: I do

(*ibid page 18*)

All our synod’s called worker training schools speak of the Lutheran Confessions in describing their ministries. The mission statement of the place we have gathered today for our convention states:

The mission of Martin Luther College is to train a corps of Christian witnesses who are qualified to meet the ministry needs of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and who are competent to proclaim the Word of God faithfully and in accord with the Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord.

(<https://mlc-wels.edu/about/mission-statement>)

Our synod’s constitution states:

Article II CONFESSION OF FAITH

Section 2. The synod also accepts the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church embodied in the Book of Concord of 1580, not insofar as, but because they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.

Article III MEMBERSHIP

Section 3. Membership in the synod shall be restricted to congregations, pastors, and male teachers who agree in doctrine and practice with the confession referenced in Article II.

(CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS OF THE WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD AND THE CONSTITUTION FOR THE DISTRICTS Published by The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Waukesha, WI Issued by The WELS Committee on Constitutional Matters Adopted July, 1997 Amended July, 1999, August 2001, August 2003, August 2005, August 2007, August 2009, July 2011 and August 2013)

When it comes to the Lutheran Confessions, we have already heard the reference to the Book of Concord of 1580. 1580 was the 50th anniversary year of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg. In the approximately 34 years since Luther’s death, conflict and controversy had arisen in Lutheran cities, lands and territories. Under the authority and with the encouragement of Lutheran princes, a group of theologians led by Jakob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz compiled the confessions. There are nine confessions contained in the Book of Concord that our called workers take an oath to have their “teaching and practice to conform to them.” (*Christian Worship: Occasional Services – NPH, Milwaukee, WI 2004 – pages 248 & 253; see also 265 & 270*) All congregations, according to our synod’s constitution, “accepts the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church embodied in the Book of Concord of 1580.” (*WELS Constitution, Article II Section 2*)

Each of the nine confessions in the Book of Concord could be a paper/presentation in of itself – indeed you can find papers and articles on each one of these confessions. For our purposes let us briefly review each one.

1. **The Apostles Creed** is a brief statement of gospel truths taught by the apostles. It was not formulated by theologians, but out of the needs of the Christian church. Christians used it to tell others what they believed and also to confess their faith with one another as they met for worship.
2. **The Nicene Creed** was written around A.D. 325 in defense of the true Christian faith. The Council at Nicea developed it, expanding on the deity of Christ, in order to safeguard the apostles' teaching.
3. **The Athanasian Creed** is named after St. Athanasius, a staunch defender of the Christian faith in the fourth century. It was prepared to assist the Church in combating two errors that undermined Bible teaching. One error denied that God's Son and the Holy Spirit are of one being or Godhead with the Father. The other error denied that Jesus Christ is true God and true man in one person. The Athanasian Creed continues to serve the Christian Church as a standard of the truth. It declares that whoever rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ is without the saving faith.

(<http://wels.net/about-wels/what-we-believe/creeds>)

4. **The Small Catechism** (1529 A.D) - Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism as a brief summary of the basic truths of the Christian faith. It was primarily intended to educate the laity and was designed as a tool that parents could use to teach their children. It provides summaries or explanations of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Sacrament of Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar (Holy Communion), and the Ministry of the Keys and Confession.
5. **The Large Catechism** (1529 A.D) - Covering in greater depth the same doctrines and subjects as the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism was really a series of edited sermons of Martin Luther. It was intended primarily as a tool that could be used by pastors and teachers to broaden their knowledge of the teachings of the Bible.
6. **The Augsburg Confession** (1530 A.D.) - Written by Luther's colleague Philip Melancthon, this statement of faith is often viewed as the chief Lutheran confession. It was presented by the followers of Luther to Emperor Charles V at the imperial diet (assembly) meeting in Augsburg, Germany. It was intended to be a summary of the chief articles of the Christian faith as understood and taught by Lutherans in contrast to the errors that were being taught by the Roman Catholic church.
7. **The Apology (Defense) of the Augsburg Confession** (1531 A.D.) - After the Roman theologians had condemned many of the teachings of the Augsburg Confession, Philip Melancthon authored this lengthy defense of the Augsburg Confession.
8. **Smalcald Articles** (1536 A.D.) were written by Luther in late 1536 for presentation and discussion at a church council that had been planned by Pope Paul III. . On June 4, 1536, Pope Paul III announced that a council would be held to deal with the concerns of the Protestants. In these articles Luther indicated on which points Lutherans would not compromise. Lutherans at once recognized their value as a statement of pure evangelical and biblical doctrine.

9. **The Formula of Concord** (1577 A.D.) - In the years following Luther's death, Lutherans had become divided over a number of doctrinal issues. Written primarily by Jacob Andreae, Martin Chemnitz, and David Chytraeus, the Formula of Concord (or "agreement") was a detailed restatement of many of the truths contained in the Augsburg Confession and was intended to be a statement that all genuine Lutherans could adopt. It was signed by over 8,100 pastors and theologians, as well as by over 50 governmental leaders. The Solid Declaration is the unabridged version. The Epitome is an abridged version intended for congregations to study.

(From <http://wels.net/about-wels/what-we-believe/lutheran-confessions>)

One of the common threads that run through these nine confessions of the Book of Concord of 1580 is that they were born in conflict. The need for confessions comes from the attacks on specific teachings of Scripture. Dr. John Brug wrote:

The two greatest eras of confessional writing in the history of the church were the time surrounding the Christological controversies of the 4th century, (*especially the work of the ecumenical councils at Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon*) which produced the three ecumenical creeds as a testimony against the Arian threat to the person of Christ, and the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, which produced the Lutheran confessions in response to the teachings of Rome and the Reformed, which threatened to undermine the work of Christ. These two sets of confessions, gathered into the Book of Concord, are still relevant and important to the church today.

(*Why Bible-Believing Lutherans Subscribe to the Book of Concord* by John F. Brug; Assembled for discussion in Riga, Latvia in July 2001)

Why do we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions?

Answer: "because"

The Lutheran Confessions are not a replacement for the Scriptures. Instead, they are born out of our belief in what the Scriptures truly are and what they say. It is for that reason that we hold fervently to the truths that the Confessions declare. To understand this point, let's do the Latin.

Every WELS pastor has a number of Latin terms that are drilled into their memories. Here are some of those words that are important for us to remember in our subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.

Norma Normans

A confessional Lutheran is one who holds the Scriptures to be the *norma normans*. *Norma normans* means standard – the norm – that is used to determine what we believe and teach. The Confessions are not what we use as the standard to determine what believe and teach. So the Confessions are not the *norma normans*. The Confessions are instead what we call *norma normata*. What *norma normata* means is that the Confessions are controlled by another standard and that standard is of course, the Scriptures.

Confessional Lutherans hold that only the Bible is the holy inspired and inerrant Word of God. The subscribers to the Formula of Concord understood the role of Scripture and the meaning of making a confessional subscription.

Epitome of the Formula of Concord

Comprehensive Summary, Rule and Norm According to which all dogmas should be judged, and the erroneous teachings [controversies] that have occurred should be decided and explained in a Christian way.

1. We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119:105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal. 1:8.

2] Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.

7] In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and the Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.

8] But the other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned [by what arguments the dogmas conflicting with the Holy Scripture were rejected and condemned].
(*Formula of Concord, Epitome, Introduction, I, 2, 7 & 8*)

Luther wrote: The Word of God—and no one else, not even an angel—should establish articles of faith.
(*Smalcald Articles II, II, 15.*)

Citing the preceding references from the Confessions, Prof. David J. Valleskey states:

Practically speaking, this means that you don't start with the Confessions and use the Scriptures to prove what the Confessions say. You start with the Scriptures and then look to the Confessions as a valid, trustworthy testimony to what the Scriptures teach. ...

Confessional Lutherans study the Confessions as *norma normata*, the norm, the standard, that is ruled by the Scriptures, which are the *norma normans*. The rally cry of confessional Lutherans is not, "To the Confessions! To the Confessions!" but "To the Scriptures! To the Scriptures!"

(*What Does It Mean To Be A Confessional Lutheran? - with application to ministry on the home mission field - David J. Valleskey - Evangelical Lutheran Mission Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 1, 2012.*)

Scripture and Scripture alone is the standard which establishes the teachings of the Church. We are convinced in our hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel of Christ that the Holy Scriptures are God's infallible, inerrant word in everything they say. When the Scriptures make a statement – on anything – it is the truth. We believe that the creation of the universe was done in six 24 hour days, that there was a worldwide flood, that there were indeed ten plagues in Egypt not because modern science confirmed it but because the Bible says so. Whatever the Bible says on any subject is true because it is the word of God. Prof. Hermann Sasse put it this way:

We are faithful to this church, not because it is the church of our Fathers, but because it is the church of the Gospel; not because it is the church of Luther, but because it is the

church of Jesus Christ. If it became something else, if its teaching were something else than a correct exposition of the plain Word of God, it would no longer be our church. It is not the Lutheran liturgy that matters. The church can get along without it if it must. It is not the Symbolic books that count. If it should ever be demonstrated that their exposition of the Gospel is false, that they contain errors, we would be the first ones to cast them into the fire; for our norma normans, the standard by which we judge doctrines, is the Bible alone ... Since this is the character of Lutheran Confessionalism, it is in harmony with the breath of genuine ecumenical feeling. We are confident that the Evangelical Lutheran Church which is faithful to its Confessions is truly the church of Jesus Christ. (Herman Sasse, *Here We Stand* – St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997, p. 172)

Prof. Francis Pieper writes that C.F.W. Walther wrote in his *Pastoraltheologie*, page 52:

"The minister who is called by a congregation must obligate himself to teach according to God's Word and the Church's Confession; he owes this to the congregation as a guaranty that he will not dispense his own wisdom, but will preach publicly and privately the pure Christian doctrine and not attempt to be master of their faith."

(Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I*, page 354).

Quia

How do we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions? Once again we have a Latin word that states our answer: "quia." Quia means "because." This usage of "because" is a very important point for the Confessional Lutheran to make. We subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions as set forth in the Book of Concord of 1580 "because" the Confessions teach what the Word of God teaches. We subscribe to the Confessions "because" they agree with the doctrine brought forth from the Word of God. Professor Lyle Lange in his book *God So Loved The World: A Study of Christian Doctrine* puts it nicely:

The relation of the Lutheran Confessions to the Bible is that of the moon to the sun. The moon reflects the light of the sun. The primary light is the sun. The confessions are a secondary light as is the moon. In the same way the Bible is the primary light. The confessions are a secondary light, reflecting the true teachings from the Bible. Then we will cite the confessions as an accurate reflection of what the Bible teaches.

(Lange, Lyle; *God So Loved The World: A Study of Christian Doctrine*; NPH, Milwaukee; ©2005; page 96)

So it would seem from what I stated that the Lutheran Confessions covers every topic that would confront us as a church body and they have no limitations. We can take every confession on a whole like the Scriptures to be accurate in every category. Or do we? Adolf Hoenecke in the very first volume of the Quarterly stated:

When we bind ourselves to the confessions of our church, we bind ourselves to all articles of faith contained therein, but not to all historical, archaeological, and literary remarks, not even to every exegesis, and just as little to a certain exegetical method employed, nor do we always consider every passage as proof in the very way in which it is carried out in the confession

(Adolph Hoenecke, *Quartalschrift, Vol. I*, p113)

We readily admit that when we are subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions, we are not claiming that every statement about history or science is accurate and therefore infallibly true. We have examples where the historical references are off. Dr. John Brug points to a few examples:

There are, for example, historical errors. Ambrose is listed as the author of a quotation in Article VI of the Augsburg Confession (*Triglotta*, p 47). The quotation, however, was taken from a document called the *Ambrosiaster*, which according to modern historians was not written by Ambrose. We do not subscribe to this historical error, but to the doctrine asserted in the quotation, “It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving remission of sins, without works, by faith alone.” The Apology’s interpretation of the words “the communion of saints” in the Apostles Creed as a description of the Holy Christian Church may not be a historically correct interpretation of the original meaning of the creed, which may have referred to the sharing of holy things, that is, to the means of grace (Ap. IV, *Triglotta*, p 229).

(*Dr. John Brug: Why Bible-Believing Lutherans Subscribe to the Book of Concord Without Reservation: 2003*)

We also do not claim that the Confessions are scientifically accurate. For example in the Formula of Concord, Article I it states: “When a magnet is smeared with garlic-juice, its natural power is not thereby removed, but only impeded.” (*Epitome of the Formula Concord: Article I Original Sin*) It was part of a false statement made by a theologian name Victorinus Strigel which our confessors were rejecting. Our subscription is to their rejection of Strigel’s heresy that “original sin is only an external impediment to the good spiritual powers, and not a despoliation of the same.” (*Epitome of the Formula Concord: Article I Original Sin*) We are not subscribing to the science of the day that is included in the confessions but to the Scriptural doctrine declared.

Nor does our subscription mean that we accept every point of exegesis. One of the examples that Dr. Brug gives is:

In 2 Timothy 2:15 the word *orthotomein* does not refer directly to “correctly dividing” law from gospel as the confessions suggest (Ap. III, *Triglotta*, p 173), but to “correctly handling” the Word. Distinguishing law and gospel is, of course, a prime example of correctly handling the Word of truth. (*Dr. John Brug: Why Bible-Believing Lutherans Subscribe to the Book of Concord Without Reservation: 2003*)

We do not use the same terms today as did the writers of the Confessions used such as “the mass.” Nor do we hold ourselves to follow every rite and custom exactly as our forefathers.

There are more limitations that one can touch on. The Lutheran Confessions do not address every heresy that has since arisen. For example all held that the Scriptures were verbally inspired so there was no need to address this teaching in the Bible at the time. We can add to the list of controversies that Lutheran Confessions does not specifically address such as the role of men and women, church fellowship, and predestination to name of few of the many controversies which the Lutheran Church has had to face since the Book of Concord in 1580.

Our synod saw the need to make doctrinal statements based on the Scriptures because the Lutheran Confessions did not specifically address certain controversies before our church body. In the introduction to the “Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod” we read the following:

“Why then has the Wisconsin Synod formulated these particular doctrinal statements? A reader will notice that many of the statements deal with subjects not fully or explicitly addressed in the Lutheran Confessions. So to a degree we felt the need to supplement what the forefathers wrote.”

(*Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod – Introduction, page 4 - Prepared by the Inter-Church Relations of the WELS, 1997*)

Today the Doctrinal Statements of the WELS lists:

- Statement on Scripture
- Statement on the Antichrist
- Theses on Church Fellowship
- Theses on Church and Ministry
- Resolution on Abortion
- Statement on the Lord's Supper
- Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles

Despite The Confessions Limitations It Still Is Quia and not Quatenus

Now having listed some examples of the Confessions' limitations, it would be easy for one to think that the proper response in subscribing to the Lutheran Confessions is "insofar as" (*Latin is quatenus*) as they agree with the Scriptures. As people who hold that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, it would appear to be the right and pious position to take since the confessions are not inspired but manmade. And since the Confessions are manmade, they must contain errors and so one can only subscribe to them "insofar as." Now while this sounds all very pious and proper, it is in fact a milquetoast stand or no real stance at all.

We have previously stated that the Scriptures are the *norma normans*, that is, the sole standard by which we base the teachings of our Christian faith. However, today the Scriptures themselves are approached and held in varying degrees. The term "insofar as" is the key for many to subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions with differing views on the Scriptures.

Today in the WELS we take a grammatical-historical approach to interpreting the Scriptures. That means that when it comes to the Bible we hold it as God's holy and inerrant word. When the Scriptures talk about a historical event such as when Moses was inspired to give details of the creation of the universe, it was a true historical event. God did create the universe in six twenty-four days. ... *And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. (Genesis 1:5b)* When Moses gave an account of the events in the Garden of Eden, – Adam, Eve, the devil, the serpent, the fall into sin, banished from the garden – we accept them all as true historical persons and events. Likewise the parting of the Red Sea, we believe that the LORD parted the Red Sea and it happened just as Moses was inspired to record the event. The kings, cities, nations and battles in the Old Testament are all historically correct. Jesus' conception, birth, life, miracles, teachings, death, resurrection and ascension did historically happen as the inspired evangelists penned. We regard all the books of the canon to be historically true.

We also interpret the Scriptures as they are given grammatically. We look at both the immediate context – what is being said in the sentence – and the wider context – what is happening in the chapter or the whole writing? We will look at the syntax. What kind of word is it – noun, verb, adjective, etc....? What type of speech is it – simile, hyperbole, personification, metaphor, etc. ...? What is its position in the sentence? What is the way the word or phrase is used in other parts of the Bible? We also take into account the various types of literature found in the Scriptures – historic narrative, prophecy, poetry, epistle and apocalypse. So that in the end, looking at the grammar and historical usage, we take the simplest literal meaning that the text calls for.

What does this all have to do with the Lutheran Confessions? Today, our church body seems to be one of the few heirs of the Reformation who take such a stand on interpreting the Scriptures. We can note the various styles of interpretations found at the time of the Reformation that differed from the grammatical-historical view Luther himself held. Professor Lyle Lange writes:

The Lutheran Reformation stressed the principle that Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*) can establish doctrine. The Roman Catholic Church repudiated that belief in the Council of Trent

(1545-1563), which was its answer to the Lutheran Reformation. Rome condemned the teaching of “Scripture alone” and reasserted that doctrine can be established by Scripture and the Roman Church. The Reformed, following the lead of Ulrich Zwingli (d.1531) and John Calvin (d.1564), set up reason as a judge over Scripture. When the simple meaning of the words of Scripture was deemed unreasonable, the words of Scripture were subjected to reason (such as when the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper was denied.)

(Lange, Lyle; God So Loved The World: A Study of Christian Doctrine; NPH, Milwaukee; ©2005; page 85)

Since the time of the Reformation, various attacks on the authority and clarity of Scripture have mounted. Today sweeping through all denominations is the historical-critical method of interpretation. The historical-critical method without going into great detail fits well into the post-modern era worldview of today that there is no absolute truth. To put it simply, historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible instead of saying “the Bible IS the Word of God,” would say “the Bible CONTAINS the Word of God.” What is or isn’t the actual God-given truth is up to each person to decide on their own. What might be truth to you, is not necessarily truth to me. Professor Lange explains the terrible result of interpreting the Scriptures in such a manner. He writes:

“The historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation is a method of doubt and uncertainty. Since, by that method there is no way that that anyone can ever be certain of what transpired in the Bible, people are left to try to sift out little tidbits of religious information from the Bible which can help them try to make their way through this life. This method offers no forgiveness, so people must constantly try to find ways to deal with the guilt that oppresses them. It offers no assurance of God’s love and leaves a person with a nagging awareness of impeding judgment. It offers no Savior, for it has turned Jesus into either a reformer, a radical, a martyr, a man out of touch with reality, or a good example. It gives no assurance of God’s love, but rather depicts the God of the Bible as a bloodthirsty deity out to get revenge. Finally, it leaves no hope whatever, for it has no assurance of eternal life. The best you can hope for is that your memory lives on in the minds of those who live after you.”

(Lange, Lyle; God So Loved The World: A Study of Christian Doctrine; NPH, Milwaukee; ©2005; pages 91-92)

Having viewed the way our world today holds the Scriptures, the warning the Apostle Paul gave comes to mind. **“For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”** (2 Timothy 4:3 – NIV 11) Jesus also gave a similar warning to his Church, **“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”** (Matthew 7:15 – NIV 11) Also knowing how a person or church body treats the Word of God is directly related to how a person or church body subscribes to the Confessions.

Taking into account the various methods of interpretation of the Scriptures, a person who takes an “insofar as” (quatenus) subscription could mean just about anything. You and I could subscribe to just about any document with an “insofar as” subscription. “I subscribe to the Book of Mormon insofar as it holds to Scripture. I subscribe to the teachings of Buddha insofar as they agree with scripture.” A quatenus subscription is a hollow and empty subscription. For example Calvin himself subscribed to the unaltered Augsburg confession in order to gain a teaching position in Strasbourg. But he did so with this clever qualification: “I have gladly and willingly subscribed for some time *as* the author himself has interpreted it.” (C. F. W. Walther, *“Confessional Subscription” Essays for the Church, Vol. I, St. Louis: Concordia, ©1992, page 22*)

Prof. Armin Schuetze explains the weakness of a “quatenus” subscription.

A person, for example, may subscribe to the statement that “Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary” insofar as this statement

agrees with Scripture. He hasn't told you whether he considers all, or only part, or none of it to be scriptural. If you say to him, "I see you believe that Jesus was born of a virgin," he might respond, "No, I do not believe this, for I do not find that taught in the Bible." If you say, "But you believe that Jesus is true God," he might say, "No, that too I do not believe is really taught in the Bible." He might believe only that Jesus Christ is a true man, the son of Mary and Joseph, and still subscribe to the above statement from Luther's Catechism "insofar as" it agrees in his thinking with Scripture. Such a confession is meaningless. (*Schuetze, Armin, "Subscribing to the Book of Concord" Our Great Heritage, Vol. I. Milwaukee, NPH, ©1991; page 431*)

An example of something sounding pious and good but actually being a smokescreen for the possibility of a different teaching all together is the largest American Lutheran church body's subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. In their constitution the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America states:

This church accepts the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds as true declarations of the faith of this church. Confession of Faith - Chapter 2.04

This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all the churches that likewise accept (its) teachings. Confession of Faith - Chapter 2.05

This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church. Confession of Faith - Chapter 2.06

*(CONSTITUTIONS, BYLAWS, AND CONTINUING RESOLUTIONS
of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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Commenting on ELCA's subscription in to the Confessions in their constitution, Dr. Brug writes:

Anyone who knows how flagrantly this fine sounding confession is disregarded by ELCA theologians will not be impressed by this paper pledge. But even the wording of the ELCA's confession contains adequate clues as to its emptiness.

The ecumenical creeds are accepted as "true declarations of the faith," but not as the only true teachings, which are binding on all members in a literal sense. The Augsburg Confession is elevated above the other Lutheran confessions as the only confession necessary to establish church fellowship. This elevation of the Augsburg Confession is intended to minimize or even to exclude the precise affirmations and the strict rejections of the Formula of Concord. The Augsburg Confession is endorsed as "a true witness to the Gospel."

Such an affirmation does not require acceptance of all its teachings, only of its gospel message. It also permits other "true witnesses" to be accepted as alternative interpretations of the faith as in the recent agreement on justification with Rome and the joint Communion with Reformed churches. In a similar way the other Lutheran confessions are accepted as "valid interpretations of the faith," but not as doctrinal statements which are binding on all teachers of the church in all their teachings.

(Dr. John Brug: Why Bible-Believing Lutherans Subscribe to the Book of Concord Without Reservation: 2003)

Again, we as a synod subscribe to the confessions not "insofar as" (quatenus) but "because" (quia) they are a correct presentation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God." (*Constitution and Bylaws of the WELS, 5*) This statement means that we believe the Scriptures to be the clear voice of our saving God. Yes, we live at a time when people will twist and distort the Word to fit what their itching ears want to hear. Yet, the doctrines set forth in Scripture are the clear testimony of God. And so we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions because (quia) they teach the doctrines of the Bible, and not of men.

Deeds Not Creeds – Another Good Sounding Lie

Creeds, the need for creeds and other formula statements of Christian faith are being challenged outside our Lutheran circles as well. In America today it seems we hear the popular cry once again of “deeds not creeds.” The followers of these non-creedal churches say, “Our only confession is the Bible.” Once again on first hearing, it sounds so true and good. Yet, again we have to look behind the curtain to see what they are really confessing, if confessing anything at all.

“Deeds not creeds” is an American born movement. It is part of what is called the Restoration Movement which in and of itself is the combining of a number of different movements beginning in the late 1700’s to early 1800’s. This was also the time of the Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) in America. In the Second Great Awakening we see the rise of the Methodist and Baptist preachers and churches in America. It also influenced the men of the Restoration Movement to action. The Restoration Movement was at the outset a movement to simply get back to the basics of the church of the Apostles in the first century. The founding fathers of the movement were upset with denominational divisions and wanted to restore unity and biblical authority back to the church. So they attempted to remove any denominational hierarchy and tradition. They looked on any confession made after the first century as divisive and corrupt. Remove all bonds to these creeds and they thought the church would be unified. It is interesting to note, that the movement’s history is filled with many times of debate and disunity.

While the Restoration Movement is a coming together of many similar movements of the time, there are two main movements that set its standards.¹ The first was the Stone Movement. It was led by Barton W. Stone who stressed Christian freedom and so rejected all the historical creeds. The other was the Campbell Movement. Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander were influenced by the Second Great Awakening but also by the Enlightenment Movement, which placed an emphasis on human reason. They reasoned that it was the creeds of the churches that caused division and should be rejected. The two movements merged together on January 1, 1832. Today the churches who trace their beginning to the movement number about four million members.²

Why bring up the topic of Campbellites & Restoration Movement in our look at Lutheran Confessions? In American Christianity, the churches from this Restoration Movement do have influence.

¹The Restoration Movement has been characterized by several key principles:

- Christianity should not be divided, Christ intended the creation of *one* church.
- Creeds divide, but Christians should be able to find agreement by standing on the Bible itself (from which they believe all creeds are but human expansions or constrictions)
- Ecclesiastical traditions divide, but Christians should be able to find common ground by following the practice (as best as it can be determined) of the early church.
- Names of human origin divide, but Christians should be able to find common ground by using biblical names for the church (i.e., "Christian Church", "Church of God" or "Church of Christ" as opposed to "Methodist" or "Lutheran", etc.). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration_Movement)

² Today we have church bodies that directly trace their “ancestry” through this movement. Included, but not limited to would be

Relative Size of Restoration Movement Groups in 2000		
	Congregations	Members
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	3,625	785,776
Unaffiliated Christian Church/Church of Christ congregations	5,293	1,453,160
Churches of Christ	12,584	1,584,162
International Churches of Christ	450	120 000

(*"The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), Year 2000 Report"*. ARDA. 2000. Retrieved November 26, 2013. Churches were asked for their membership numbers.)

There are 48 educational institutions affiliated with the United Church of Christ, including academies, colleges, universities, and seminaries, including Pepperdine University. The famous Christian author Max Lucado came from a Churches of Christ background but he and his church, Oak Hill, dropped their affiliation in 2003. Another popular Christian author drew attention relatively recently to “creeds not deeds” though he is from a Baptist background. The Washington Post reported:

Rick Warren, a megachurch pastor and philanthropist who is courted by political leaders worldwide, says he thinks Christianity needs a "second Reformation" that would steer the church away from divisive politics and be "about deeds, not creeds."

(Michelle Boorstein, Washington Post "Megachurch Pastor Warren Calls for a Second Reformation; Tuesday, February 5, 2008)

The nice sounding mantra is being heard by Lutherans today as they grab some of the latest bestselling Christian authors or listen to them speak on Christian radio. The emphasis of “deeds not creeds” makes the individual’s emotions and actions the primary importance to being a Christian. It seems to me that often implied is that you are not happy in your faith because you are bogged down with doctrine. How you “live” is placed above in what you “believe.”

Now we know that deeds as a fruit of our sanctified lives are important. The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 2:10, ***“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*** (NIV 11) But our deeds are a result God’s saving grace working faith into our hearts through the gospel and not what we do on our own. We cannot forget the verses before where Paul tells us the consequences of our sinful state, ***“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins”*** and our new-self given to us by grace through Christ, ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** (Eph 2:1, 8, & 9 NIV11)

I truly believe that the followers of the Restoration Movement in their zeal to get “back to the Bible, back to basics” or “deeds not creeds” or “I don’t need theology, I just love people!” and the other mantras show that they lack in understanding and appreciation for the central purpose of all of Scripture that we are saved by grace alone in Christ alone. The Light is Jesus. We are mere reflectors of God’s grace in our sanctified lives. Deeds without creeds is saying that you and your behavior are more important than God and His Word. It is really saying that what you do is more important than what you believe. “Deeds Not Creeds” may sound good, but it is a poisonous snake that is out and amongst us.

“What Does This Mean?”

What does it mean to be a confessional Lutheran in the 21st Century? In many ways it is the same as being a confessional Lutheran in the 16th Century. Our Reformation forefathers held on and held out the truth of Scriptures in the face of personal and public struggles of faith. I would like to highlight a few of the characteristics of a confessional Lutheran.

Saved

A confessional Lutheran is saved. It sounds too basic to say it but it is a point that we need to begin with if we are going to understand what a confessional Lutheran is today. We are saved in and by Jesus Christ alone. Apart from Jesus there is no other Savior and therefore salvation. We rejoice that through the Means of Grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacraments – the Holy Spirit called us to saving faith. God took us who were nothing due to the curse of sin and by his grace alone made us something, that is, his dearly loved and saved children. Being a confessional Lutheran is acknowledging through Spirit-given faith that one’s salvation is complete in Christ. It means confessing that God the Holy Spirit does work through the Word and Sacrament making us into new creations in Christ. As the Apostle Paul states,

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17 – NIV 11). We confess along with Luther that

I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

(Explanation of the Third Article - Luther's Small Catechism)

We echo the joy of what Luther felt when reading in the Epistle to the Romans, ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’*** (1:16-17 NIV11).³ Upon understanding that he was saved through faith in Christ, Luther felt as though he was taken to the very gates of paradise. So is our joy and confidence in knowing that we are completely and fully saved through our Lord Jesus.

Humble

A confessional Lutheran is one who is humble. When we call ourselves confessional Lutherans it is not a badge of pride as if we come from a long line of kings.⁴ Confessional Lutherans do not look to boost or elevate who they are or what they have done. Instead confessional Lutherans look first to hold out and up who Jesus is and what he has done. They do not want in any way to give the impression that having the gospel is due to their vigil, guard or work in any sort of way. Instead they echo the words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, ***“Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’*** (1 Cor. 1:31- NIV11). Or as he was inspired to tell the Galatians, ***“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”*** (6:14- NIV11)

Gospel Centered

A confessional Lutheran is gospel centered. We have the word evangelical in our synod and churches’ official names. It means gospel centered. It is the name that Luther gave to the church. I know its

³At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, and “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word “righteousness of God.” Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.

(Martin Luther, Luther's Works, Vol. 34 Philadelphia: Fortress Press, ©1999, pages 337-338)

⁴ It is not being like that obnoxious Packer fan who constantly boasts about their team and is rarely seen without a large “G” emblazoned somewhere on his/her person.

meaning is bumped and bruised these days. Evangelical today brings up the thought of Reformed leaning televangelists. Or of the liberal Lutheran church body Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Still, in its simple meaning of gospel centered, evangelicals are who by God's grace confessional Lutherans are. When I was a student at our seminary more than once we were told to read and reread Walther's Law & Gospel throughout our ministry. In Law & Gospel Walther says in his last thesis,

“The Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.”

(C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, CPH, St. Louis, p. 403)

After quoting 1 Corinthians 15:3, “I delivered unto you FIRST OF ALL [emphasis in original] that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,” Walther says,

He [Paul] regarded all other matters as subordinate to his primary subject for preaching, namely, the gospel concerning Christ. Now, do not merely listen to this statement of the apostle, but think of the time when you will be the pastor of a congregation and make a vow to God that you will adopt the apostle's method, that you will not stand in your pulpits sad-faced, as if you were bidding men to come to a funeral, but like men that go wooing a bride or announcing a wedding. If you do not mingle law with the gospel you will always mount your pulpit with joy.... It is not sufficient for you to be conscious of your orthodoxy and your ability to present the pure doctrine correctly. These are, indeed, important matters; however, no one will be benefited by them if you confound law and gospel. The very finest form of confounding both occurs when the gospel is preached *along with* [emphasis in original] the law, but is not the predominating element in the sermon.

(C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, CPH, St. Louis, p. 406)

Professor David Valleskey commenting on this quote from Law & Gospel says,

“It is not sufficient for you to be conscious of your orthodoxy and your ability to present the pure doctrine correctly.” That's a strong statement, isn't it, coming from the lips of a pillar of Lutheran orthodoxy. An orthodox Lutheran pastor is not a truly confessional Lutheran pastor unless first of all he is an evangelical justification-treasuring, gospel-centered, gospel-proclaiming pastor.

(*What Does It Mean To Be A Confessional Lutheran?*- with application to ministry on the home mission field - David J. Valleskey - Evangelical Lutheran Mission Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 1, 2012. Page 8)

When we are saying that we are gospel-centered, we are not denying the rest of the Word. We do not hold to a so called gospel reductionism. In gospel reductionism a person tries to elevate the gospel over the other teachings of the Scriptures in attempt to deny or banish certain doctrines from the Christian's life.⁴

⁴ Confessional Lutherans reject so-called gospel reductionism, which elevates the gospel above the Scriptures. Carl Braaten champions this approach in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness—the “canon within the canon.” Biblicism holds to an infallible Bible that can be the absolute authority in matters of belief and morals....

Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel.

(Carl Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:61, 74f., as quoted in the dogmatics notes of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.)

While we agree that there are some doctrines that are necessary for salvation and some that are not, we hold that every doctrine in the Scriptures is important. Gospel centered Lutherans strive to teach and preach all the teachings of the Scripture with a heart changed by and motivated by the gospel.

Sharing

A confessional Lutheran is one who is willing and motivated to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Formula of Concord concludes with these courageous words:

It is our intent to give witness before God and all Christendom, among those who are alive today and those who will come after us, that the explanation here set forth regarding all the controversial articles of faith which we have addressed and explained—and no other explanation—is our teaching, faith, and confession. In it we shall appear before the judgment throne of Jesus Christ, by God's grace, with fearless hearts and thus give account of our faith, and we will neither secretly nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it. Instead, on the strength of God's grace we intend to abide by this confession. Thus, after careful consideration and in the fear and invocation of God, we have subscribed our signatures to this document with our own hands.

(Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XII, 40)

The life of a confessional Lutheran is holding firmly to the saving truth of the holy and inerrant Word of God given to us and at the same time handing it out to a dying world in need of its cure. Confessional Lutherans rejoice that they are those jars of clay that the Apostle speaks of in his Epistle to the Corinthians. ***For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*** (2 Cor. 4:5-7 NIV11)

Studios

A confessional Lutheran is one who first and foremost is a student of the Word. A confessional Lutheran hears the Savior's words, ***"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me"*** (John 5:39 NIV 11). A confessional Lutheran seeks time to do personal study of the Word and takes hold of opportunities to do so with his brothers and sisters in the faith. At the same time a confessional Lutheran studies the Confessions because (quia) they accurately hold to the teachings of the Scriptures.

I hope we can all agree that studying the Confessions is needed by our called workers – both pastors and teachers. And I hope we agree it is important for our lay men and women, especially those called into leadership roles to also study the Lutheran Confessions alongside the Bible.⁵

⁵ I remember Prof. Edward C Fredrich telling our seminary class that we should see that each of our members have their own copy of a Bible, a Lutheran hymnal and Luther's Small Catechism. Something I still share with my classes.

The importance of the laity studying the confessions was impressed upon me in the 6th grade by my teacher at St. Matthews Lutheran School in Winona, MN. We were in the school basement watching the old black and white Luther movie. I remember my teacher talking about the signing of Augsburg Confession and how it was the lay leaders of what we now call the Lutheran Church that did the signing.⁶ He talked about how to their great personal danger, they each signed the confession. And in the old Luther movie, you see them kneel and literally offer their necks. It sits with me today, how my teacher emphasized first how blessed we are for the courage God gave them. And how we blessed we are that we still have these confessions for us to study and appreciate. And so I make the appeal especially to our lay leaders gathered here today that along with the Word that they would also take opportunity to study and use our Lutheran Confessions.

In his introduction to the Concordia Triglotta, Dr. F. Bente makes the observation:

Wherever the Lutheran Church ignored her symbols or rejected all or some of them, there she always fell an easy prey to her enemies. But wherever she held fast to her God-given crown, esteemed and studied her confessions, and actually made them a norm and standard of her entire life and practice, there the Lutheran Church flourished and confounded all her enemies.

(Concordia Triglotta; Historic Introduction; St. Louis CPH 1917; page IV)

Conclusion

When I tell a prospect that I am Christian who is a Confessional Lutheran, I do not hand them the Book of Concord and say, “Read this and call me in the morning.” What I do is talk about a church that isn’t shy to talk about what we believe, teach and practice on basis of the Scriptures. I talk about what it means that we are saved in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone as revealed in the Scripture alone. By God’s grace this is what our Lutheran forefathers held to and by that same grace we hold to as well. I use the opportunity to invite the prospect to attend our classes to study the Scriptures. It is through the study of the Word that a person is able to know why a person is a confessional Lutheran today and beyond.

Soli Deo Gloria

⁶By affixing their names to this document, these princes knew well enough that they might be involved in a war which might rob them of all their possessions, if not life itself. Yet they did not flinch when the moment came. Elector John the Constant of Saxony said as he took up the pen: *“I desire to confess the Lord. My electoral hat and my ermine are not so precious to me as the Cross of Jesus. I shall leave on earth these marks of my greatness; but my Master’s Cross will accompany me to heaven.”* When the noble prince Wolfgang of Anhalt took the pen in his turn, he said: *“I have fought more than once to please others; I am ready to saddle my horse, to leave my goods and life behind, and rush into eternity, towards an evening crown.”*

(Graebner, Theo; A Brief Story of the Augsburg Confession, St. Louis, MO; CPH @ 1930; page 23)