



Commentary on the Common Confession

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CC1) The Lord Jesus Christ

We are people who believe and confess our faith in the Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We trust and believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

We posit this first declaration of the Common Confession *first* precisely because all other exclamations of faith and faithful living flow from this core revelation: God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, three Persons; and the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, reigns as our Savior and Lord.

In recent years the masculine pronoun for God has come under attack that it renders God sexual and diminishes the worth of females. But excising the masculine, biblical pronoun proves disastrous to orthodox, confessional faith. First, using only “God” or worse, “Godself,” to name the Trinity undermines the scriptural template that God is a Person, thus eliminating the revelation of God’s Personhood and personal relationship with us. Second, the Bible tells us that we know the Father only through the Son—and together they send God the Holy Spirit. So we don’t know anything about any god but the God who has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Moreover, “Father,” “Son,” and, “Holy Spirit,” are not simply metaphorical expressions but literal names—proper nouns—of the Deity who is the Triune. We cannot thus remove the inherent masculine gender of God without being left with a god quite different from the divine reality of Jesus Christ.

This does not mean, however, that God is male. The masculine pronoun does not emphasize sexual identity but relational reality and revelation. Lapsing into descriptive nouns for God—usually rendered “Creator,” “Redeemer,” and, “Sanctifier”—is to fall into the ancient heresy of Modalism.

Faithfully following God’s biblical revelation of Himself also corrects distorted understandings of fatherhood and sonship. Men who abuse women have perverted such understandings. Eliminating then the Trinitarian language deprives the Church of its primary models for correcting such distortion.

In terms of confessing, “Jesus is Lord,” such expression represents the highest point of faith in the New Testament (John 20:28) and the most basic of creedal statements (Romans 10:9). Rather than being militaristic or hierarchical, holding to Jesus as our Savior and Lord simply acknowledges how Jesus has won the right to be addressed. By His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promise to come again, He has proven His Lordship and has opened the way of salvation to all who confess Him Lord, that is, the One in whom they place their whole lives. The blood of the martyrs covers this profession of Jesus’ saving Lordship, and any church body that seeks to dismiss or shun such profession in effect isolates itself from the historic Church catholic.

Finally, confessing Jesus our Savior and Lord honors Jesus’ explicit and exclusive claim to be the only “way, truth, and life” to the Father and hence to eternal life (John 14:6). All other proposed ways to salvation are therefore exposed as false.

by Pastor Mark Graham, Roanoke, VA.

CC2) The Gospel of Salvation

We believe and confess that all human beings are sinners, and that sinners are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God alone justifies human beings by faith in Christ — a faith that God creates through the message of the Gospel. As ambassadors for Christ, God uses us to speak his Word and build his kingdom.

Where one starts makes all the difference for where one ends. It is no accident in the Augsburg Confession that Article II on “Sin” precedes and informs the succeeding Articles on “The Son of God” (III), “Justification” (IV), and “The Office of Ministry” (V). Without some awareness of the danger from which the Gospel saves—the sickness for which the Gospel is the cure—the proclamation of salvation is unintelligible. In identifying this necessary presupposition for the coherent proclamation of the Gospel, CC2 (above) is refreshingly unoriginal. The divine prescription of the Gospel is preceded by the Biblical diagnosis that “all human beings are sinners,” recalling Pogo’s wry observation: “We have met the enemy and they is us!”

This verdict is personally unsettling and direct. To find sinners we need only glimpse ourselves in the mirror. To find sin’s dark hiding place, the infected source from which comes the wrong we do and our failure to do the good, we need look no further than our own hearts. To begin to realize the price exacted by our sin, we need look no further than what our sin cost God to redeem us: “the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” This judgment, of course, is an affront to our own self-estimate; not surprisingly we reject this starting point for the Gospel and choose one more to our liking, one that relocates or redefines the “problem.” Also unsurprisingly, this relocation or redefinition results in a gospel much different than that revealed by God’s Word.

The Biblical diagnosis of “sin” as the catastrophic infection affecting every human being—and requiring nothing less than the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of God the Son as the cure—is ever more frequently disparaged as the naive piety of an unsophisticated era. “Sin” and “sinner” are regarded as anachronisms inimical with “modern” (and “post-modern”) perceptions that the “real” problems are imperfect and unjust social-political systems and structures or judgmental and exclusive concepts that impede the individual’s search for self. Consequently the orthodox Gospel of salvation in Christ (and its Biblical presuppositions regarding “sin” and “sinners”) is excised in favor of a diverse range of “gospels” of social liberation on the one side and individual self-actualization on the other.

Similarly, Jesus, the Savior and Redeemer of two millennia of Christian faith and teaching, is replaced with Jesus the sage and exemplar of social transformation, and the guru of acceptance and inclusivity. This is quite amenable to the sensitivities of those discomfited by “blood and people hanging on crosses,” who see in Jesus’ crucifixion the deed of a divine child-abuser. Jesus’ death and resurrection, when not simply ignored as an historical or theological embarrassment, are reduced to metaphors: on the one side for the necessity of sacrifice for the cause of social justice, and on the other side, for the inward journey to self-discovery and self-affirmation. Jesus’ moral teachings, extracted and distilled from the crudities of the canonical Gospels, are then selectively edited to serve as vehicles for philosophies of social transformation and/or self-authentication.

The role of the church and Christians in the unfolding of these alternative gospels is the self-congratulatory function of serving as “change agents” against unjust social structures and systems, and repressive and exclusive ideologies (e.g. the historic Christian Church and faith), while providing a “safe” and “inclusive” place for the process of personal growth, discovery, and affirmation. “Justification” becomes the “un-sinning” of sins—except for the “sin” of questioning “change.” The “word” now spoken under the thrall of these “gospels” is a call to the “church” to “change” and “be transformed for the sake of the world,” not the proclamation of a crucified and risen Lord for the salvation of sinners.

What is at stake in all this are, first, sinners for whom Christ died and rose; no other gospel saves and justifies. Second, the church body to which we belong, the ELCA, is at risk. It is the “preaching of the Gospel in its purity” which both creates and defines the church. While the “one holy Christian church will be and remain forever” there are no such guarantees for particular institutions in which the Gospel of Salvation is diluted or replaced by a “different” gospel, no matter how “just” or “personally healing” such gospels may be. CC2’s orthodox reiteration of classical Christian teaching on salvation including the right starting point is precisely what our Church needs to hear, confess, and uphold.

by Pastor Kenneth Kimball, Waukon, IA

CC3) The Authority of Scripture

We believe and confess that the Bible is God's revealed Word to us, spoken in Law and Gospel. The Bible is the final authority for us in all matters of our faith and life.

A central conviction of the Lutheran Reformation was that the sole and final authority for all Christian teaching is the Bible, summed up in the catch phrase *sola scriptura*. The Epitome of the Formula of Concord states it more fully. "We believe, teach and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone."¹

This principle did not embrace a woodenly literal reading of the Bible, but rather expressed the Reformers' belief that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit...it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12) Through the words of Scripture, God speaks the justifying Word of salvation through faith in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Therefore, no other teaching, insight or knowledge can bear greater weight than the Bible, nor can any teaching that is contrary to it be accepted as Christian truth. As the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord declares, "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments...(are) the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated."²

The Lutheran reformers further maintained that God's Word addresses us in two distinct, but related voices, Law and Gospel. The Law is the accusation of God that exposes our sin, destroys all our pretensions of self-righteousness and drives us in despair to cling to the cross. The Gospel is the astounding declaration that, for Jesus' sake, God forgives us and rescues us from death and condemnation. The Word functions on all people in both these ways and must do so in order for God's work to be done in our life. To hear one voice without the other distorts God's Word.

Some people today claim that the Bible alone cannot serve as the source and norm of our faith, because interpretations of it diverge too widely. They appeal to reason, experience, tradition or other means to insure right interpretation. Others have asserted that new scientific or historical knowledge counterbalances or simply outweighs the Bible's witness in different areas, while still others claim that contradictory ways of reading the Bible are equally valid. Complex interpretations are said to overturn the accepted meaning of certain texts.

In the face of all such efforts, confessional Lutherans insist that the Bible, precisely because it is God's Word to us, interprets itself and needs no other authority to buttress it. Those passages which most clearly proclaim our sinful condition and God's salvation in Jesus Christ help to clarify more obscure ones, and the overall message of God's salvation, culminating in the cross and empty tomb, is the context in which every text must be read and understood. Through the words of the Bible, God addresses us, in Law and Gospel, putting us to death in our sin and raising us to new life in Christ. In that way, the Bible is not subject to any other claim of authority, but is the standard by which all other authorities and truth-claims are judged.

by Pastor Scott Grorud, Hutchinson, MN

¹ Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 486.

² *Ibid.*, p. 527.



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CC4) A Common Confession

We accept and uphold that the Lutheran Confessions reliably guide us as faithful interpretations of Scripture, and that we share a unity and fellowship in faith with others among whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the Gospel.

Even as we confess that the Bible is God's revealed Word for us and the final authority in all matters of our faith and life, we recognize our need for guidance in rightly interpreting and applying the Holy Scriptures. From the time of the Reformation Lutherans have valued and sought the guidance of the whole church, beginning with the apostles and continuing through the witness of the faithful in every time and place, in order to receive both encouragement and correction in understanding the Scriptures.

The Lutheran Confessions is a collection of writings which, over time, has been accepted as a faithful guide to interpreting the Bible. From the time of Martin Luther on, Lutherans have not claimed to be doing anything new in regards to our understanding of Scripture or doctrine, but that our teachings are in continuity with the teachings of the ancient church. The Confessions, contained in the Book of Concord, begin with the three creeds of the Christian church: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian. Then, starting with the Augsburg Confession and continuing through the Formula of Concord, the Lutheran reformers of the 16th century make their case for how Scripture is to be interpreted. While one of the writings in the Confessions, the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, is well known to Lutherans, others (such as the Smalcald Articles) are much less familiar. Four of the writings are by Luther; two were written by Luther's colleague, Phillip Melancthon; and the last, the Formula of Concord, was written after Luther's death. It is on the basis of this book that Lutherans describe themselves as a "Confessional" church, clearly explaining both what is accepted and rejected on the basis of Holy Scripture.

Even though these confessional writings are nearly 500 years old, they remain living documents that guide the faith and life of Lutherans no matter which Lutheran denomination one might belong to or on which continent one lives. The first of these documents, the Augsburg Confession, is often considered to be a guide in understanding all of the rest. Divided into 28 articles, which deal with the reformers' understanding of the Christian faith, this document continues to function today as a solid

foundation and clear guide for Lutheran faith and church practice. Its definition of the church in article seven is especially central for Lutherans, and is the inspiration for the wording of this statement in the Common Confession. Article seven states, "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word." The heart of the Gospel is described in articles three, four, and five (the Son of God, Justification, and the Office of the Ministry, respectively), while the teaching on the sacraments comes in articles eight through thirteen.

Of course, preaching the Gospel in its purity and administering the sacraments in accordance with it is easier said than done. Its attainment is the goal after a lifetime of humble service, rather than something we can take pride in having achieved. However, the Confessions remind us that our unity and fellowship are found not in what we do, but in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, made known to us through the Holy Spirit who works faith in those who hear this good news. It is that good news, that Gospel, that defines the Church, not any good works of justice or mercy.

We trust that the same Holy Spirit who guided Luther and others in the writing of the Lutheran Confessions continues to call, enlighten, and correct subsequent generations who turn to them as trustworthy guides to the Scriptures. Whether one is a child learning the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, or an adult struggling with the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, the Lutheran Confessions point us to Jesus Christ as revealed in the Word of Scripture. This is done in order, as it states in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, that "Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which, as the only touchstone, all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong."

by Pastor Erma Wolf, Brandon, SD

CC5) The Priesthood of All Believers

We believe and confess that the Holy Spirit makes all who believe in Jesus Christ to be priests for service to others in Jesus' name, and that God desires to make use of the spiritual gifts he has given through the priesthood of all believers.

Martin Luther appealed to the idea of the priesthood of the baptized to call on the laity to take leadership in the reform of church and society. That reform included both emphasizing that the proper role of ordained pastors is to preach the word publicly and administer the sacraments and recognizing the spiritual value of lay vocations in the world.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is crippled in its mission by a perverse confusion regarding the roles of both ordained and non-ordained ministers.

Clergy are afflicted by what Joseph Sittler once referred to as "the maceration of the minister," as they are pulled apart by demands from every direction. When lay people use their gifts to carry out the various ministries of the congregation, pastors are freed to devote their time and effort to equipping the saints for the work of ministry by preaching, teaching, leading the congregation in prayer and worship, and caring for souls. (Eph. 4:12)

Laity, on the other hand, often are uncomfortable exercising their priesthood either in the congregation or the community by fear of "doing something wrong" or encroaching in areas supposedly reserved to the ordained. Often pastors are too busy "running" the church to train and equip the saints for mission, or they are threatened by the realization that for many tasks some laity may be more competent than the clergy.

An egregious example of this is the so-called "public church" emphasis of the ELCA, in which a legitimate ministry of the saints in the world is co-opted by church officials, under the mistaken notion that their ecclesiastical office somehow qualifies them to speak for the church as they advocate particular solutions for complex issues in the political realm.

A critical mistake is to see leadership in the church as an exercise of power instead of an opportunity to serve (Mark 10:43-44). All God's baptized saints, ordained or not, are called to serve one another in love as Christ has loved us. Any discussions of ministry in the church are derailed when the essential nature of Christian ministry as servanthood is subverted by struggles for power and control.

Congregations that agree to the Common Confession commit themselves to seeking to discern the proper spheres of both the ordained and non-ordained in the one spiritual office that exists — that of the baptized saints of God. This does not mean that their tasks are interchangeable. Congregations and individuals who agree to the Common Confession will differ regarding what this "priesthood of all believers" means for liturgical roles. However, they are of one mind that offices in the church, as the Apostle writes in Ephesians, exist to equip the saints so that the Body of Christ can be built up in love as the People of God go into the world to serve their neighbors.

A church that takes seriously the common priesthood of the baptized will be a community devoted to servanthood within and outside the congregation. Leaders and officers in such a church will see it as their function to equip the saints to be witnesses for Christ in word and deed, and the laity will use their varied gifts to administer the life of the congregation and to serve God by serving their neighbors.

by Pastor W. Steven Shipman, Watsontown, PA



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CC6) Marriage and Family

We believe and confess that the marriage of male and female is an institution created and blessed by God. From marriage, God forms families to serve as the building blocks of all human civilization and community. We teach and practice that sexual activity belongs exclusively within the biblical boundaries of a faithful marriage between one man and one woman.

The Common Confession speaks of marriage as an institution. In so doing, it echoes the Lutheran understanding of marriage as a vocation. In marriage a man and a woman are joined, so that each may support the other in love, and in that same love, give birth to children and nurture them toward adulthood.

It says in the order for marriage, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, that "God in his goodness created us male and female" and he "established marriage." Marriage is an order of creation, an integral part of God's creative will for his creatures.

A critically important biblical text for marriage comes from the creation account in Genesis. "Male and female he created them" (1:27). The creation account is equally clear as to the purpose of marriage from God's perspective. These are companionship (2:18) and procreation (1:28). In marriage a man and woman leave their own parents, cling to each other, and become one flesh (2:24).

In the Gospels Jesus quotes approvingly and virtually verbatim the words of Genesis (Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-8). In this way Jesus reinforces the divine origin of marriage and enjoins it on those who follow him. The Common Confession says it very succinctly, "From marriage God forms families."

This understanding of marriage has been the standard within the Christian community throughout the ages.

To be sure, Christians have not always practiced the teaching about marriage as a union of man and woman. The Scriptures themselves record occasions when God's people failed to live within the boundaries God had set. Nevertheless, the standard has remained: marriage is a union of one man and one woman. Other patterns of sexual behavior between men and women have been understood as contrary to the will of God.

Today this teaching and behavior regarding marriage and sexuality have been seriously challenged. The sharpest challenge has come from those who advocate a gay and lesbian life style. The ongoing debate within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America indicates how divisive this issue has become within the Christian community.

Through it all, however, the Word of God continues to speak with power and grace. The Word directs us to a behavior that God the Creator intends for his people. That Word calls for fidelity in marriage and loyalty to his command. It is a Word that graciously forgives and leads to a new obedience for his children. As the order for marriage indicates, God "continues still to bless it [marriage] with his abundant and ever-present support." These words assure us that "we can be sustained in our weariness and have our joy restored."

by Pastor Paull Spring, State College, PA



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CC7) The Mission and Ministry of the Congregation

We believe and confess that the church is the assembly of believers called and gathered by God around Word and Sacrament, and that the mission and ministry of the church is carried out within the context of individual congregations, which are able to work together locally and globally.

American Lutheran churches have always lived in the dialectic between congregational and central authority. At one extreme or the other congregations have not functioned optimally. Between ecclesiastical authority and local autonomy...there has been life and mission at its Lutheran best.

We seek to live in-between with the positive tensions that this dialectic creates. Attempts have often been many to push to one extreme or the other. American Lutheran history is full of such stories and their less-than-missional results.

Many of the Lutheran bodies now united in the ELCA have differing ecclesiastical histories. We have come from both extremes. This is why we have such diversity among ourselves as we try to live together.

Independent Lutheran is an oxymoron. It is the nature of faith and thus of the church to connect, believer-to-believer, congregation-to-congregation. There is a basic congregational priority we seek to assert, however. We believe it is in the best missional interest of the ELCA to keep congregational authority solidly in its functional place. We believe this is where most Lutheran believers live best, too.

At the same time the ELCA is at its best with the dialectic firmly and intentionally in place. People on both ends of the issue will do well to listen to each other and find the other point of view for themselves, too.

People join congregations, not synods and surely not churchwide expressions. It is important for the ELCA's future to keep this reality clearly in view.

Increasingly people come to ELCA congregations with no Lutheran background at all. In time they may develop loyalty and faithfulness to larger entities. They will not do so by the imposition of authority top down, nor will they easily understand. They will learn to love the ELCA if they find it worthy of their affection and trust.

Congregations will continue to need each other, connected in both official and other relationships. This will be true in both rural and urban/suburban settings, in large and small congregations. It will also increasingly be true of Lutheran congregations linking with members of other ecumenical partners, too.

We believe that any attempts to diminish or challenge congregational authority are counter-missional. It is a relational priority that believers discover the gospel first in the congregational setting and then come to experience the larger reality of the denominational church.

This is probably most certainly true of the future ELCA than ever of any of the past. It is mission that asserts this dialectic that we support and affirm together.

by Pastor Paul Urling, Columbus, OH