

The Lutheran Confessions – the Model for Christian Confessing Confessional Prolegomena and their Application to Christian Worship

The title of this lecture¹ raises three questions: What is confessing? What is the relationship between what is Lutheran and what is Christian? And: How are the Lutheran Confessions – the writings contained in the 1580 Book of Concord – not just *one* model for Christian confessing among many, but actually the normative model for such an act? I will address these three introductory questions that belong to the confessional prolegomena – the basic framework for understanding the Lutheran Confessions – and then apply the findings to the contemporary issue of worship.

What is confessing?

Going back to Augustine’s book, *Confessions*, one can distinguish between the confession of faith, the confession of sin, and the confession of praise.² Our English word “confession” or “to confess” comes from the Latin verb *confiteri*. According to the Lewis-Short dictionary of the Latin language,³ this verb means primarily “to acknowledge, confess, own, avow (an error, mistake, or a fact previously denied or doubted, etc., implying a sacrifice of will or a change of conviction...).” It is distinguished from the prefix-less *fateri*, which “expresses a simple acknowledgment,” and *profiteri*, which means “a voluntary avowal.” In English we could emulate this by saying that a child’s confession of his or her sin is certainly more genuine than when he or she is simply “fessing up.” And a professor does voluntarily what a confessor does against his former conviction.

Given these findings, it is easy to see why the translators of the Latin bible, the Vulgate, and Latin-speaking Christian authors after the Vulgate, such as Augustine, chose this particular word when speaking about a confession of sin or a confession of faith or even a confession of praise. In each case something or someone is now acknowledged and owned that was once denied or doubted, be it one’s sin, be it the Christian faith centered in Jesus Christ, or be it the praise withheld from the triune God who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

Of course, this is Latin, not the original language of the Scriptures, that is, Greek or Hebrew. Yet, let us not forget that the Lutheran Church is also part of Latin or Western Christendom, that Latin was also the teaching language of the Lutheran fathers in Europe all the way into the 18th century and of the Missouri Synod in the US in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

¹ I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Rev. Paul Strawn, Spring Lake Park, MN. In our countless conversations on the issues discussed in this presentation he proved to be extremely knowledgeable, stimulating, and helpful to me.

² Cf. R. Slenczka, *Ziel und Ende: Einweisung in die christliche Endzeiterwartung: “Der Herr ist nahe”* (Neuendettlesau: Freimund, 2008), 338.

³ *A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary Revised, Enlarged, and in Great Part Rewritten* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879).

It is, however, good to review the usage of the word family of confessing in the Bible. Here the abovementioned Latin word translates the Hebrew *ydh*, which in its *hif'il* and *hitpa'el binyanim* means: to give thanks, praise, confess; and the Greek *homologein* or *exhomologein*, the meaning of which ranges from agreeing and consenting to confessing, acknowledging, praising and thanking. This, again, fits nicely with the three objects of Christian confessing: one's sin, one's faith, and one's praise and thanksgiving to the one true God.

If we had to locate such activity in the order of the Catechism, one would certainly have to place it under the Second Commandment which commands the right use of God's name. Already at this point we can make the important observation that praising and thanking God goes hand in hand with confessing one's sin and confessing the faith. A reason for praising God has to be given; and the most profound reason for praising God is the sin that is confessed and forgiven (cf. Ps. 32). Furthermore, the God who is praised in a particular situation has to be clearly identified and distinguished from the many idols, which is the function of the Creed which, specifying the First Commandment, presents the triune God to us as the One who gives us all good things for this life and the life of the world to come. To him alone we are, therefore, to look for these things.

Since the Ten Commandments have explained that we are to have no more than one God, it may be asked: "What kind of being is God? What does he do? How can we praise or portray or describe him in such a way as to make him known?" This is taught here and in the following articles. Thus the Creed is nothing else than a response and confession of Christians based on the First Commandment. (LC II, 10)⁴

The Creed [sets] forth all that we must expect and receive from God; in brief, it teaches us to know him perfectly. (LC II, 1)

Here in the Creed you have the entire essence of God, his will, and his work exquisitely depicted in very short but rich words. In them consists all our wisdom, which surpasses all the wisdom, understanding, and reason of men. Although the whole world has sought painstakingly to learn what God is and what he thinks and does, yet it has never succeeded in the least. But here you have everything in richest measure. In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.

These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews,

⁴ The quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. and ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).

or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God,⁵ nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Now you see that the Creed is a very different teaching from the Ten Commandments. The latter teach us what we ought to do; the Creed tells us what God does for us and gives to us. The Ten Commandments, moreover, are inscribed in the hearts of all men. No human wisdom can comprehend the Creed; it must be taught by the Holy Spirit alone. Therefore the Ten Commandments do not by themselves make us Christians, for God's wrath and displeasure still remain on us because we cannot fulfill his demands. But the Creed brings pure grace and makes us upright and pleasing to God. Through this knowledge we come to love and delight in all the commandments of God because we see that God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and his power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts. (LC II, 63-69)

What is to have a god? What is God? Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God. (LC I, 1-3)

While we are, therefore, commanded to confess, thank, and praise God, we are unable to do so without having first heard the confession of faith, the confession of the gospel. Only it can bestow on us the Holy Spirit who brings Christ and all his gifts with him, so as to change our hearts and minds to acknowledge by the Spirit what we deny by nature: that we are lost and condemned sinners; that Christ is our Savior, that the Father is our Creator, that the Spirit is our Sanctifier who alone is worthy of our confession of praise forever and ever.

Moreover, the Greek verb, *homologeïn*, highlights that such confessing is a communal activity, a speaking together, not a solitary act of some isolated religious genius that all by himself has found the truth and is keeping it to himself. Christian confessing takes place within a community, even if at any given time or place the confessor might find himself in isolation, as this was often experienced by the biblical prophets. By taking up the Christian confession of sin, faith, and praise, the individual joins a specific community whose confession is not the alterable creed of some human organization or club, but the unchanging biblical Word of the prophets and apostles themselves. Their word and confession centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ is the word and confession of the church of all ages and places to the end of the age. It is critical to be in agreement with, and to join, this confession and consensus of the church.

⁵ Cf. E. Engelbrecht, *One True God: Understanding Large Catechism II*, 66 (St. Louis: CPH, 2007).

Our opponents cry out that they are the church and follow the consensus of the church. But here Peter cites the consensus of the church in support of our position: “To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name,” etc. Surely the consensus of the prophets should be interpreted as the consensus of the universal church. Neither to the pope nor to the church do we grant the authority to issue decrees contrary to this consensus of the prophets. ... Let them know that this is what the saints in the church have believed since the beginning of the world. Peter clearly cites the consensus of the prophets; the writings of the apostles attest that they believed the same thing; nor are testimonies of the Fathers lacking. (Ap. XII, 66, 73)

It is thus a good thing that the Lutheran Confessions of faith do not start their confessing from scratch, as if these 16th-century Germans were the first Christians that walked the earth after the days of the apostles. They reference and join the older confessions of the faith: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, all of which are still used in our worship services today. The opening sentence of the chief Lutheran confession, the Augsburg Confession of 1530 accordingly reads thus:

We unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea, that there is one divine essence, which is called and which is truly God, and that there are three persons in this one divine essence, equal in power and alike eternal: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. (AC I, 1-2)

The formulation “we believe, teach, and confess” is the impressive refrain that is heard throughout both the Epitome and the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, the last of the 16th-century Lutheran Confessions of faith (Ep. RN 1; I, 2, 3, 8; II, 3; III, 3-7, 9-11; IV, 7, 8, 11, 15; V, 2, 3, 6, 7; VI, 2, 3, 5; VII, 6-9, 15, 16, 18-20; VIII, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15; X, 3, 4, 6, 7; SD III, 9, 56; VI, 4; VIII, 6, 23, 71, 72; X, 8-10). It elaborates:

Since in ancient times the true Christian doctrine as it was correctly and soundly understood was drawn together out of God’s Word in brief articles or chapters against the aberrations of heretics, we further pledge allegiance to the three general Creeds, the Apostles’; the Nicene, and the Athanasian, as the glorious confessions of the faith — succinct, Christian, and based upon the Word of God — in which all those heresies which at that time had arisen within the Christian church are clearly and solidly refuted. (SD RN 4).

In other words, drawing up creeds or confessions of faith based on God’s biblical Word is a practice as old as the church itself. This practice serves the unity and concord of the church in the faith. For scriptural creeds facilitate the teaching of the faith and the refutation of doctrinal errors for the sake of preserving the unity of the church in the faith of the prophets and apostles.

The primary requirement for basic and permanent concord within the church is a summary formula and pattern, unanimously approved, in which the summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God. For this same purpose the ancient church always had its dependable symbols. (SD RN 1)

In order to preserve the pure doctrine and to maintain a thorough, lasting, and God-pleasing concord within the church, it is essential not only to present the true and wholesome doctrine correctly, but also to accuse the adversaries who teach otherwise (1 Tim. 3:9; Titus 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:24; 3:16). “Faithful shepherds,” as Luther states, “must both pasture or feed the lambs and guard against wolves so that they will flee from strange voices and separate the precious from the vile” (John 10:12-16, 27; Jer. 15:19). (SD RN 14)

The unanimous “we believe” goes hand in hand with the unanimous “we condemn” (Ep. I, 11, 19; II, 7, 13; III, 12; IV, 16, 17, 19; VI, 8; VII, 21, 42; VIII, 19; X, 8; XII, 30; SD RN 17, 18; I, 16, 17, 20, and so forth). *Lehre und Wehre*, Doctrine and Defense, was the name of the first theological journal of the Missouri Synod. It fully reflects these statements of the Solid Declaration. The titles of its successor journals – *Concordia Theological Monthly*, *Concordia Journal*, *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, but also *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* (ELS) and *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (WELS) – are much more generic in nature and do not easily confess a specific theological program that is rooted in the Lutheran Confessions.

What is the relationship between what is Lutheran and what is Christian?

Some among you might be familiar with C. S. Lewis’ book *Mere Christianity*. According to a 2006 survey by the magazine *Christianity Today*,⁶ it is the third most influential book among Evangelicals after 1945. In the preface to the book, Lewis, an adult convert to the Anglican Church, describes the relationship between Christian essentials that are shared by all Christian confessions and confessional specialties in the simile of a shared hall and individual rooms.⁷ Some beliefs are held by all; other beliefs are held by individual confessions only. Of course, Lewis still knew that only in the rooms are the chairs, meals, and fires, that is, the real thing. Yet it seems that, under the name of denominationalism, a similar notion has taken root in the hearts of many sincere Christians: What is really important about the Christian faith must be held by all (Protestant) denominations. What is held by one denomination alone is not really all that critical.

According to this thinking, Lutheranism is, at best, a subcategory of Christianity, a “movement” within the larger Church.⁸ What is Christian about Lutheranism are those beliefs held also by

⁶ Its results were published in the October 2006 issue. The two leading books on this list were: R. Rinker, *Prayer: Conversing with God*, and D. A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*.

⁷ *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), XVf.

⁸ Cf. the statement “the Evangelical Lutheran Church is chiefly a confessional movement within the total body of Christ rather than a denomination emphasizing institutional barriers of separation” that is part of the *Mission Affirmations*, adopted by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at its 1965 Detroit convention. According to this document, the Lutheran Confessions were primarily framed “to confess Christ and His Gospel boldly and lovingly to all Christians. While the Confessions seek to repel all attacks against the Gospel, they are not intended to be a kind of Berlin wall to stop communication with other Christians.” Being ecumenically minded and against Communism went hand in hand: Love – yes; excommunication – no. Cf. the 1974 document issued by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations *The Mission of the Christian Church in the World: A Review of the 1965 Mission Affirmations*. It reprints the *Mission Affirmations* and offers some corrections. It is available online <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/ctcrmissionofthechristianchurch.pdf>.

other Protestant denominations – and these beliefs are ultimately condensed to some doctrinally unspecific “gospel.” The rest – such as baptismal regeneration, confession and absolution, and the true presence of Christ’s body in the bread and of his blood in the wine of his Supper, but also the ordained ministry and the communication of divine attributes to the human nature of Christ – is strictly Lutheran and, if push comes to shove, cannot seriously be required of believers from other denominations, should they decide to join a Lutheran congregation or partake of communion at a Lutheran altar.

And if this is the case, it also cannot seriously be required of “life-long” members of Lutheran congregations or, for that matter, Lutheran pastors. At the end of this process stands the dissolving of Lutheranism in the vast sea of Protestantism or even religion in general. Luther’s Catechisms, e.g., then are just that – *Luther’s* Catechisms, not *our* Catechisms, not the *holy Christian church’s* Catechisms, certainly not “the layman’s bible” (Ep. RN 5). They are his personal opinion, at best a testament to what he believed back in his day, not witness to, and confession of, the prophetic and apostolic faith of all times and places.

The so-called Lutheran Confessions, however, are not about affirming the individual beliefs of a group gathered around a charismatic leader by the name of Martin Luther; they are also not the founding documents of an ever-changing, continuously evolving intellectual-religious reform “movement.” Just as the predecessors from the time of the early church that are referenced and reprinted in the Lutheran Confessions, they are about reaffirming the correct teachings of God’s Word that had become controversial at the time and remain controversial to this day. And because of this, they are the confessions of “the Church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).⁹

We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments. This church is properly called “the pillar of truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), for it retains the pure Gospel and what Paul calls the “foundation” (1 Cor. 3:12), that is, the true knowledge of Christ and faith. (Ap. VII/VIII, 20)

The holy Christian church ... is neither a reed nor a counter. No, it does not waver or give way, like the devil’s whore—the papal church—who, like an adulteress, thinks she need not remain faithful to her husband, but may waver, yield, and submit to the will of the whoremonger. It is (as St. Paul says) a pillar and bulwark of the truth [I Tim. 3:15]. It stands firm (he says) and is a bulwark and sure foundation. It is not a bulwark of falsehood and lies, but a bulwark of truth, neither lying nor deceiving; it has no truck with lies. But whatever wavers or doubts cannot be truth; and what would be the use or

⁹ On this verse cf. AE 28:302-303, esp.: “Not all who call themselves the church are the church [cf. Rom. 9:6-8]. It is one thing to be the church; another, to be called the church. If the Word of God is present in its purity and is active, the church is there.” – Luther’s works are quoted according to the following edition, unless otherwise noted: *Luther’s Works* (American Edition, AE), ed. J. Pelikan, H. Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1976), 55 vols.

need of a church of God in the world if it wanted to waver or be uncertain in its words, or wanted to say something new every day, now asserting this, now rejecting that? Moreover, of what use would a God like this be, who wanted to teach us to waver and to doubt—just as the theology of the papists teaches that one must doubt grace?(AE 41:212-213)

It is, of course, quite true that if judged by its way of life, the holy church is not without sin, as it confesses in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses"; and John writes [I John 1:8, 10], "If we say we have no sin, we lie and make God a liar, who calls us all sinners"—also Romans 3 [:23], Psalm 14 [:3] and 51 [:7]. But doctrine should not be sinful or reproachable. It does not belong to the Lord's Prayer and its petition, "Forgive us our trespasses," because it is not something we do, but is God's own word, which cannot sin or do wrong. A preacher should neither pray the Lord's Prayer nor ask for forgiveness of sins when he has preached (if he is a true preacher), but should say and boast with Jeremiah, "Lord thou knowest that which came out of my lips is true and pleasing to thee" [Jer. 17:16]; indeed, with St. Paul and all the apostles and prophets, he should say firmly, Haec dixit dominus, "God himself has said this" [I Cor. 1:10]. And again, "In this sermon I have been an apostle and a prophet of Jesus Christ" [I Thess. 4:15]. Here it is unnecessary, even bad, to pray for forgiveness of sins, as if one had not taught truly, for it is God's word and not my word, and God ought not and cannot forgive it, but only confine, praise, and crown it, saying, "You have taught truly, for I have spoken through you and the word is mine." Whoever cannot boast like that about his preaching, let him give up preaching, for he truly lies and slanders God. (AE 41:216)

This claim is made clear already in the original title of the 1580 Book of Concord. This title is not "The Lutheran Confessions" or "The Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church." Of course, in a sense this would not be wrong: the churches that have officially adopted these documents as the normative expression of what they believe, teach, and confess are known as Lutheran churches, tracing their origins back to the biblical rediscoveries of Martin Luther. Yet the title "Lutheran Confessions" would be totally misunderstood if it were interpreted along the lines of a modest denominationalism: "Well, this is where we come from; this is our faith tradition; we don't want to take yours away." This would make the Lutheran Church into a sect whose parochial beliefs are not to be followed by others claiming to be Christians because they have no other foundation than the personal views of one Martin Luther.

As has been said, the original title of the Book of Concord speaks an entirely different language. Here it is in all its length and splendor:

CONCORDIA

*Christian, Reiterated, and Unanimous Confession
of the Doctrine and Faith of the undersigned
Electors, Princes, and Estates
who Embrace the Augsburg Confession
and of their Theologians,
Together with an Appended Declaration,*

*Firmly Founded on the Word of God as the Only Norm,
of Several Articles about which Disputation and Strife Arose
after the blessed Death of Martin Luther,
Prepared for Publication by the Unanimous Agreement and Order
of the aforementioned Electors, Princes, and Estates
for the Instruction and Admonition
of their Lands, Churches, Schools, and Descendants*

The Book of Concord is a Christian confession that is founded, not on Luther's opinions, but on "the Word of God as the only norm." In fact, this is what makes the Book of Concord a Christian confession: that it is "firmly founded on the Word of God as the only norm." In other words, the Lutheran confessions, because they teach God's Word, speak for the whole Christian Church and guide all Christians on a proper way to true concord and unity in the truth of God's Word, the bible.

Let's support this with a few more quotes from this Christian Book of Concord. There is first of all a quote from the 1537 Smalcald Articles:

It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy Fathers' words or works. Otherwise what they ate, how they dressed, and what kind of houses they lived in would have to become articles of faith — as has happened in the case of relics. This means that the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel [cf. Gal. 1:8]. (SA II, II, 15)

In other words, the Word of God, the bible, is not only the only norm for what is to be believed in the church; it is also its only source.¹⁰ This is also indicated when the 1577 Formula of Concord calls the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament the "pure and clear fountain of Israel" (SD RN 3), which is a reference to Ps. 68:26.¹¹ Source and fountain are synonyms, that is, these two words mean the same thing.

Another quote from the confessions, this time in reference to the Augsburg Confession, answers the question as to why it should be embraced and believed:

By a special grace our merciful God has in these last days brought to light the truth of his Word amid the abominable darkness of the papacy through the faithful ministry of that illustrious man of God, Dr. Luther. This doctrine, drawn from and conformed to the Word of God, is summarized in the articles and chapters of the Augsburg Confession

¹⁰ J. Fenton, in his 2004 essay "What Options Do the Confessions Give Us? An Exploratory Essay Concerning the LCMS Crisis as It Relates to Those Who Hold to the 1580 Book of Concord" (it is available online at <http://bellsouthpwp.net/r/o/roseal4/WODTCGU.pdf>), p. 6, claimed: "our confessional principle is that we hold to those doctrines and practices that have been handed down to us *unless* they clearly contradict Scriptures." Scripture, for him, is, therefore, the only norm, but not also the only source of both doctrine and practice. He faults J. Gerhard for introducing "source"-language into the Lutheran church, but he might as well have faulted already Luther and the Formula of Concord for this, all of whom claim that Scripture is both the only norm and the only source for doctrine and practice. This is clearly the Lutheran position, and Fenton, realizing this, is no longer a member of the Lutheran Church.

¹¹ Cf. Luther's comments on this verse in AE 10:344-345, esp.: "any word of the Scripture of God is a fountain, because it gushes forth inexhaustible waters for all who thirst for the saving doctrine;" see also AE 13:27.

against the aberrations of the papacy and of other sects. We therefore declare our adherence to the first, unaltered Augsburg Confession (in the form in which it was set down in writing in the year 1530 and submitted to Emperor Charles V at Augsburg by a number of Christian electors, princes, and estates of the Roman Empire as the common confession of the reformed churches) as our symbol in this epoch, not because this confession was prepared by our theologians but because it is taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein. This symbol distinguishes our reformed churches from the papacy and from other condemned sects and heresies. We appeal to it just as in the ancient church it was traditional and customary for later synods and Christian bishops and teachers to appeal and confess adherence to the Nicene Creed. (SD RN 5)

Similar statements are then made on the other writings contained in the Christian Book of Concord: they are embraced and confessed, not because they were written by the theologians of one's own party, but because they are "taken from the Word of God and solidly and well grounded therein." Luther plays an important, albeit ministerial role, in this process: his biblical teaching is summarized in the Augsburg Confession (and the other confessions). The characteristic of being grounded in God's Word the 16th-century confessions share with the three ancient creeds mentioned above: they too are to this day confessed and appealed to because they are "based upon the Word of God" (SD RN 4).

This thought is then summarized (SD RN 9-10):

The pure churches and schools have everywhere recognized these publicly and generally accepted documents as the sum and pattern of the doctrine which Dr. Luther of blessed memory clearly set forth in his writings on the basis of God's Word and conclusively established against the papacy and other sects. We also wish to be regarded as appealing to further extensive statements in his doctrinal and polemical writings, but in the necessary and Christian terms and manner in which he himself refers to them in the Preface to the Latin edition of his collected works. Here he expressly asserts by way of distinction that the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and that no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subjected to it.

This, of course, does not mean that other good, useful, and pure books, such as interpretations of the Holy Scriptures, refutations of errors, and expositions of doctrinal articles, should be rejected. If they are in accord with the aforementioned pattern of doctrine they are to be accepted and used as helpful expositions and explanations. Our intention was only to have a single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe and from which and according to which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated.

In other words, because the writings contained in the Christian Book of Concord are "drawn from the Word of God" as from a well or source, all other human books – including Luther's "further extensive statements in his doctrinal and polemical writings" – are to be judged by this

“sum and pattern of the doctrine which Dr. Luther of blessed memory clearly set forth in his writings on the basis of God’s Word.”

At the same time, the Solid Declaration also asserts (VII, 41):

Since Dr. Luther is rightly to be regarded as the most eminent teacher of the churches which adhere to the Augsburg Confession and as the person whose entire doctrine in sum and content was comprehended in the articles of the aforementioned Augsburg Confession and delivered to Emperor Charles V, therefore the true meaning and intention of the Augsburg Confession cannot be derived more correctly or better from any other source than from Dr. Luther’s doctrinal and polemical writings.

There is, therefore, an interesting hermeneutical dynamic going on between the Scriptures, on the one hand, and the writings of Luther and the Confessions on the other hand. It needs to be repeated today: Martin Luther is the chief teacher of the church bearing his name. This does not mean that he’s always right. However, it is certainly a questionable practice when his teachings are today often casually and ignorantly brushed aside “because they’re not the bible,” while other teachers – e.g., Rick Warren, Max Lucado, Gregory Palamas, Gregory Dix, Karl Barth, and, for an earlier generation, Billy Graham – are uncritically followed even though they are clearly not the chief teacher of our church but are revered and at home in other, non-Lutheran church bodies.

To say the least, it is certainly beneficial to study Luther’s writings in bible classes even today instead of working oneself through some bible study produced by a person who clearly does not know the first thing about the Small Catechism. For someone who neither knows nor agrees with the “layman’s bible,” will he know or agree with the full bible? Studying Luther more, for one, would give the trusty old Catechism its much needed context back; otherwise, the Catechism, due to its brevity, can easily become a Trojan Horse for all sorts of theories that have no foundation in Luther or the Scriptures. The same, by the way, is true for so-called bible studies that betray more of the personal opinions and novel ideas of the person leading them than of the genuine meaning of God’s unchanging Word of the bible.¹²

In other words, there is, in our church, a hierarchy of human teachers. At the top of that hierarchy is Martin Luther as he expressed himself in his “doctrinal and polemical writings” because these are “based on God’s Word.” Other teachers, therefore, do well to study carefully what Luther has to say lest they become something other than Christian.

Some in the Protestant world, no doubt, will object to this: isn’t this the very same thing Luther fought against – the replacement of God’s infallible Word by the words of fallible men? They

¹² Even in Lutheran churches which are not officially part of the modern ecumenical movement, such doctrinally underdeveloped, home-spun bible studies can create a sort of grass-roots ecumenicism when a Lutheran pastor borrows his bible studies from Pentecostal, Baptist, non-denominational, or Catholic authors. No wonder when, after a while, all churches are believed to believe basically the same thing so that the practice of closed communion becomes totally incomprehensible.

say this and boast – with Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth¹³ – in not subscribing permanently to any human statements of faith. They just claim to believe in the bible. This somehow makes sense and even seems pious and humble, but it also raises the important question: does the bible have a permanent, unchanging meaning if we as humans cannot know that meaning or express it in our own words? What is the basis for our certainty of faith if we really cannot know and say what the bible really means? Our moral lifestyle, our financial success, our warm feeling in the heart, or perhaps the statistical success of our pastor’s sermons?

Lutherans believe that humans can speak God’s Word truthfully and faithfully, even when they are not directly quoting the bible. For, as we know from Christ’s temptation in the desert (Matth. 4:1-11), even a direct quote from the bible can be the word of the devil who gives God’s Word a twisted, false meaning. The right words, therefore, must not be separated from the right meaning. For heresy, as Luther noted, is in the meaning of the words.¹⁴ Setting forth this meaning correctly in human words is a gift of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Lutherans are those who believe that the human words of the Lutheran Confessions – including the Small Catechism and its persistent question: “What does this mean?” – teach the *right* meaning of God’s Word.

The Lutheran Confessions assert that by God’s grace humans rightly understand and teach God’s Word. This is claimed not only, as seen, in view of the church’s statements of faith; this is also

¹³ See e.g., his 1923 lecture *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, tr. D. L. and J. J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), esp. 1-37, where he outlines his view of the differences of the Lutheran and Reformed understandings of what a confession is and is not. Many things could be said here; a few remarks must suffice: For Barth, humans cannot give a permanent confession of God’s Word. One could say: the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. What the Reformed otherwise apply to Christ’s human body can also be applied to human words. This is also why human confessions must always be open to change, pending new or better insight into God’s Word, which ultimately is, not the bible, but Jesus Christ himself. This, obviously, does not yield the kind of certainty the Lutheran confessions speak about and offer based on God’s Word. Barth finds such certainty only in himself, not in the external Word of God. Barth’s stance explains why many in the Confessing Church in the German Church Struggle of the 1930s and 1940s – including D. Bonhoeffer, but not H. Sasse – were quite interested in the *activity* of confessing but not so much in the historic confessional *writings* of the Church. As an aside, contrary to Barth’s claim that the Book of Concord only assigns creedal status only to the Augsburg Confession (2), it actually assigns such status to all the writings contained therein because all are equally seen as being founded on God’s Word: In addition to the Book’s title (see above), see only SD RN 2, 5-8. Historically, one should not forget that, at the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, only the adherents of the Augsburg Confession had won political toleration in the Holy Roman Empire. All sorts of false, Reformed interpreters had, therefore, attached themselves to this document that now also had legal standing in the empire, claiming protection and toleration as “Lutherans.” Here the Book of Concord pulls away the cover, providing the correct interpretation of the correct Augsburg Confession, cf. Pref. of the Book of Concord 16, 18, 23; SD RN 2, 5-7, 11-13.

¹⁴ See WA 39/II:96.

¹⁵ Cf. Luther’s remarks on Christ’s word in John 16:12 (“I still have many things to say to you”): “For the Christian church and the Holy Spirit himself remain exclusively with what Christ said and commanded. To be sure, the Church and the Spirit make them more, that is, they expound them in great detail, but do not change them. For this ‘saying much’ means that one article is taught in many ways, yet without changing the thing. . . . This is what it means to preach much and to say more than Christ does with these few words, while at the same time saying the same thing and not something else. For this is what makes a good preacher, that he can take up a matter and comprehend and conclude it with two or three words and then, if need be, expand on it and explain it with sayings and examples, making a whole meadow out of one flower” (Martin Luther, *Convicted by the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2009), 88-89).

claimed, when the confessions teach the pastoral ministry and its duties of teaching the truth and condemning error, baptizing, binding and loosing, communing and excommunicating. Here, the pastor as representative of Christ speaks the very words of Christ from heaven, even when he, as in a sermon, elaborates on Christ's Word. But he does so only when, and only as long as, his words agree with Christ's Word. Consider the following quotes:

According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God's Word alone. On this account parish ministers and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, "He who hears you hears me." On the other hand, if they teach, introduce, or institute anything contrary to the Gospel, we have God's command not to be obedient in such cases, for Christ says in Matt. 7:15, "Beware of false prophets." (AC XXVIII, 21-23)

When the sacraments are administered by unworthy men, this does not rob them of their efficacy. For they do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church's call, as Christ testifies (Luke 10:16), "He who hears you hears me." When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they do so in Christ's place and stead. Christ's statement teaches us this in order that we may not be offended by the unworthiness of ministers. (Ap. VII/VIII, 28)

They have approved the entire eighth article. There we confess that hypocrites and evil men have been mingled with the church and that the sacraments are efficacious even when evil men administer them, for ministers act in Christ's stead and do not represent their own persons, according to the word (Luke 10:16), "He who hears you hears me." We should forsake wicked teachers because they no longer function in the place of Christ, but are antichrists. Christ says (Matt. 7:15), "Beware of false prophets"; Paul says (Gal 1:9), "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." (Ap. VII/VIII, 47-48)

Because God truly quickens through the Word, the keys truly forgive sin before him, according to the statement (Luke 10:16), "He who hears you, hears me." Therefore we must believe the voice of the one absolving no less than we would believe a voice coming from heaven. Absolution may properly be called a sacrament of penitence, as even the more learned of the scholastics say. Meanwhile this faith is nourished in many ways, amid temptations, through the proclamation of the Gospel and the use of the sacraments. These are signs of the new testament, that is, signs of the forgiveness of sins. Therefore they offer the forgiveness of sins, as the words in the Lord's Supper clearly state, "This is my body which is given for you. This cup is the new testament" (Luke 22:19, 20). So faith is conceived and confirmed through absolution, through the hearing of the Gospel, so that it may not succumb in its struggles against the terrors of sin and death. (Ap. XII, 40-42)

Certainly the statement, “He who hears you hears me” (Luke 10:16), is not referring to traditions but is rather directed against traditions. It is not what they call a “commandment with unlimited authority,” but rather a “caution about something prescribed,” about a special commandment. It is a testimony given to the apostles so that we may believe them on the basis of another’s Word rather than on the basis of their own. For Christ wants to assure us, as was necessary, that the Word is efficacious when it is delivered by men and that we should not look for another word from heaven. “He who hears you, hears me” cannot be applied to traditions For Christ requires them to teach in such a way that he might be heard, because he says, “hears me.” Therefore he wants his voice, His Word to be heard, not human traditions. Thus these asses take a statement that supports our position and contains the deepest kind of comfort and teaching, and they misapply it to these trifles, distinction of foods and clothing and the like. (Ap. XXVIII, 18-19)

The holiness of the word and the purity of doctrine are powerful and sure, so that even if Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate, the pope, Harry,¹⁶ or the devil himself preached it, or baptized truly (purely, without addition), they would still receive the lame, pure word and the true, holy baptism, for there must always be hypocrites and false Christians in the church and a Judas among the apostles. Again, the impurity of doctrine that is not or is without God’s word is such a poisonous evil that even if St. Peter, indeed, an angel from heaven, were to preach it, he would nevertheless be accursed, Galatians I [:8]. Therefore those who teach, baptize, or distribute the sacrament falsely cannot be or remain in the church, as Psalm 1 [:5] says. For they act not only against the life the church must endure—particularly when it is hidden—but also against the doctrine that must gleam and shine in public to be a guide for life. This has been taught from the beginning, as St. John says, “They went out from us, but they were not of us” [I John 2:19], and, “They are in the church but not of the church”; or, “In number but not in merit,” and the like. Accordingly, we draw this distinction: not all are Christians who pretend to be Christians. But when there is disagreement in doctrine, it becomes quite evident who the true Christians are, namely, those who have God’s word in purity and refinement. (AE 41:218-219)

In other words, the confessions reassure us, based on God’s Word, especially Luke 10:16, that when we hear a minister speak to us according to God’s Word and command in law and gospel, we can be certain that here we hear God’s voice from heaven. We need not fear that it will be superseded by some surprising new word. Like the confessions, it is permanent because it is God’s eternal judgment pronounced in the here and now.¹⁷ Here too we thus see that men can speak correctly about God and, in fact, *in God’s place* in their own words.

A fine analogy of this reality is the fact that the divine nature of Christ can be “contained” in his human nature (Col. 2:9) which in this personal union also received divine authority and attributes

¹⁶ A reference to duke Henry of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, to whose 1540 writing attacking Luther’s elector Luther responds in this 1541 writing, *Against Hanswurst*, cf. AE 41:181-184.

¹⁷ This gives the Christian worship service, where these final words are spoken, its eschatological character without confusing it with the worship of heaven where the means of grace will be obsolete, cf. Slenczka, *Ziel und Ende*, 60-66, 515.

(*genus maiestaticum*, cf. SD VIII, 14ff., 48ff.). Calvinists have traditionally denied this fact and claimed that the divine person of the Word of God would also be outside the human nature of Christ (*finitum non capax infiniti*) because divine attributes are imparted, not to the human nature in Christ, but only to the divine-human person of Christ.¹⁸ Therefore, their understanding of human statements of faith, and of human proclamation of God's Word in general, corresponds to their deficient Christology.

Accordingly, many are the churches that do not want to go there because that seems to give a lot of authority to fallible men, but, as the confessions state again and again, it actually takes all authority away from men, since their authority is now limited to the extent of God's Word. They are no more than messengers, without any authority to alter the message; and yet, they are trustworthy messengers nonetheless.

Some might say: "Good thing the quotes you just gave are chiefly from the Augsburg Confession and its Apology; so we don't have to teach this stuff to our kids, right?" Sure, some are always looking for wiggle room when it comes to the gospel. Yet consider this quote from your favorite book, the Small Catechism (IV, 16):

What is confession? Answer: Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the confessor as from God himself, by no means doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

The voice of the absolver is the voice of God's eternal judgment spoken in time. Only in this way can we be certain and believe firmly "that our sins are forgiven before God in heaven" – not just right now, but forever. And if we do not want to fall back into a situation where human consciences are plagued by the monster of uncertainty, never knowing for sure whether they are in heaven or in hell; if we do not want to teach people to find out God's opinion about them by rationally considering their situation, by prayer, or by listening for God's voice in their hearts – if we don't want this, then I humbly suggest we teach also this doctrine of the Small Catechism to our kids and to ourselves. It is God's own Word that teaches this (Luke 10:16): "He who hears you, hears me." And, from the historic gospel reading of the First Sunday after Easter (John 20:23): "If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

How are the Lutheran Confessions the Models for Christian Confessing?

The previous paragraphs already contain the answer to this third and last question posed by the title of this lecture. That is why I can be brief here. The Lutheran Confessions are the models for Christian Confessing simply because they teach God's Word and distinguish it clearly from the

¹⁸ Cf. H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, Foreword by Karl Barth, rev. and ed. by E. Bizer, tr. G. T. Thomson, 2nd reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House Books, 1984), 418-419, 432, 439-445.

teachings and traditions of men. They are not a complete restatement of God's Word. As the long title of the Book of Concord indicates, they address certain questions that had become controversial at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, such as the doctrines of repentance and justification, the nature and power of the sacraments and church authority, and the person and work of Christ. These teachings have remained controversial ever since. Things that are, or might become, controversial today or in the future are not necessarily covered by them. However, this is not to say that the confessions might not provide an excellent starting point for any confessing that we or our descendants might have to do in our time. Just as the 16th-century writings built on the writings from the early church, so we today do well in confidently building on what is already there – because what is already there is firmly founded upon God's unchanging Word of Holy Scripture.

Even today, we join these words from the Preface of the Book of Concord (25):

*We are not minded to manufacture anything new by this work of [concord] or to depart in any way at all, **either in content or formulation** (weder in rebus noch phrasibus), from the divine truth that our pious forebears and we have acknowledged and confessed in the past, for our agreement is based on the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and is comprehended in the three Creeds as well as in the Augsburg Confession, submitted in the year 1530 to Emperor Charles V, of kindest memory, in the Apology that followed it, and in the Smalcald Articles and the Large and Small Catechism of that highly enlightened man, Dr. Luther. On the contrary, 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.*

In light of ongoing attempts to “say the old truth in a new language” in order to reach new people, these words call us to caution in this endeavor. Confessional formulations (“Formula of Concord”) used to restate the teachings of God's Word must not be given up or changed just because they seem difficult today. In fact, they are always “difficult,” whether one lives in the first, in the 16th, or in our century. For the flesh, the old Adam, does not know the things of the Spirit and even rejects what he does not understand. These things are understood only by the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2), while human nature, when given free rein, may choose to preserve an appearance of truth by closely following the formulations containing the truth without fully embracing them.¹⁹

Some Sacramentarians diligently endeavor to employ terminology which is as close as possible to the formulas and speech-patterns of the Augsburg Confession and of our churches and confess that in the Holy Supper the body of Christ is truly received by

¹⁹ Cf. Slenczka, *Ziel und Ende*, esp. 361ff., where he discusses the heresies that arise when the bible's theocentric understanding of time and space is pressed into a geocentric understanding of these creatures, when, in other words, changes in time and space are given magisterial weight in the understanding of God's Word in order to accommodate “modern man” and the church in synch with society. Analogous things can be said about making the passing of time (from the 16th to the 21st century) or the change of location (e.g., from Germany to America) decisive criteria in the interpretation of the Lutheran Confessions.

believers. Yet when we press them to set forth their meaning clearly, honestly, and explicitly, they all declare unanimously that the true, essential body and blood of Christ are as far distant from the blessed bread and wine in the Supper as the highest heaven is distant from the earth. (SD VII, 2)

It seems counter-intuitive but it is true: the old words of Scripture and the Confessions give birth to the new man in us, while the new words of man at best only nurture the old man in us. For those old words are filled with the new testament and Spirit of Christ's forgiveness, life, and salvation, while these new words are filled with the drudgery of the old testament, the condemning letter of the law (cf. 2 Cor. 3; Ap. IV, 133-135; SD V, 10, 24-26).

As the confessional "content and formulation" conform to God's Word of Holy Scripture, they encapsulate the saving truth of God's Word in a certain, reliable form themselves. The truth of God's Word, therefore, is not without form; it cannot be transformed into just about any form. Its own forms need to be repeated in catechesis and confession so that we might be conformed more and more to it, and less and less to the world (cf. Rom.12:2). This is what reformation is all about: eliminating deformations due to sin by the unchanging forms of God's Word.²⁰

Luther includes these basic insights in the Preface of his Small Catechism:

In the first place, the preacher should take the utmost care to avoid changes or variations in the text and wording of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments, etc. On the contrary, he should adopt one form, adhere to it, and use it repeatedly year after year. Young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform, fixed text and form. They are easily confused if a teacher employs one form now and another form — perhaps with the intention of making improvements — later on. In this way all the time and labor will be lost.

This was well understood by our good fathers, who were accustomed to use the same form in teaching the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. We, too, should teach these things to the young and unlearned in such a way that we do not alter a single syllable or recite the catechism differently from year to year. Choose the form that pleases you, therefore, and adhere to it henceforth. When you preach to intelligent and educated people, you are at liberty to exhibit your learning and to discuss these topics from different angles and in such a variety of ways as you may be capable of. But when you are teaching the young, adhere to a fixed and unchanging form and method. Begin by teaching them the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, etc., following the text word for word so that the young may repeat these things after you and retain them in their memory. (SC, Longer Pref., 7-10)

In the second place, after the people have become familiar with the text, teach them what it means. For this purpose, take the explanations in this booklet, or choose any other brief and fixed explanations which you may prefer, and adhere to them without changing a single syllable, as stated above with reference to the text. Moreover, allow yourself

²⁰ Cf. R. Slenczka, *Apostasy from the Foundations of Christian Fellowship in Protestantism* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, forthcoming).

ample time, for it is not necessary to take up all the parts at once. They can be presented one at a time. When the learners have a proper understanding of the First Commandment, proceed to the Second Commandment, and so on. Otherwise they will be so overwhelmed that they will hardly remember anything at all.

In the third place, after you have thus taught this brief catechism, take up a large catechism so that the people may have a richer and fuller understanding. Expound every commandment, petition, and part, pointing out their respective obligations, benefits, dangers, advantages, and disadvantages, as you will find all of this treated at length in the many books written for this purpose. (SC, Longer Pref., 14-17)

Repetition is the mother of all learning. This is true also when it comes to the Christian faith. For it to shape and reform the hearts and minds of those new to the faith, its chief parts need to be put into a simple form. This form must not be changed constantly. This form must be diligently inculcated. Like in any language, we first learn the words, then the meaning of these words, digging deeper and deeper as we mature in the faith, but never mastering it in this life (cf. LC Pref., 16). In this ongoing process of reformation, the Confessions remain our life-long masters and the true models for our confessing because they conform to God's Word of Holy Scripture.

The Application: The Lutheran Confessions on Christian Worship

God's Word has a form. The gospel has a form. In fact, due to the superabundance of God's grace (SA III, IV), the gospel has various forms that are established by Christ. This is why these basic forms are unchanging. These forms are called the means of grace: the Word, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. These form the basis of Christian worship, not only in that they create faith which the Lutheran confessions rightly call the highest, but by no means the only worship.²¹ They – along with the divinely instituted office that publicly administers these means of grace – also form the basis of Christian worship in that they are the basic forms, rites, and ceremonies of the public, external Christian worship.²² If we are to be and remain the Church of Jesus Christ, it is precisely these forms and ceremonies instituted by Christ that must be and remain unchanged and central to our public worship. They must form and shape everything that takes place when Christians come together to hear God's Word and pray,²³ if we desire to avoid self-contradiction in worship, and that is: if we desire to remain the Church of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel in the means of grace, along with the preaching office, has concrete forms. These forms, because they have been established by Christ, must not be subjected to human change or choice. This simple insight is preserved neither in the Roman Catholic understanding of worship

²¹ Cf. Ap. IV, 49, 59, 155, 228, 310; Ap. XXIV, 26-27, 71.

²² For a detailed discussion of this issue see H. Sonntag, *The Unchanging Forms of the Gospel: A Response to Eight Theses on Worship* (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2010).

²³ Cf. Luther's 1544 sermon preached at the consecration of the Torgau castle church (AE 51:333): "nothing else may ever happen in [this house] except that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and we respond to him through prayer and praise." This is why he also posits that Christians should not gather for "worship" without prayer and the preaching of God's Word, cf. AE 53:11.

nor in the modernist understanding of worship. In both modes of thinking, the ideas of inspired people or inspired institutions trump the immutable institutions of the Holy One.

But see what religious men our opponents are! They require uniform human ceremonies for the unity of the church while they themselves have changed the ordinance of Christ in the use of the Lord's Supper, which certainly was previously a universal ordinance. But if universal ordinances are necessary, why do they change the ordinance of Christ's Supper, which is not human but divine? (Ap. VII/VIII, 46)

[The papists] demand greater strictness in the observance of their traditions than of the Gospel. (Ap. XXVIII, 3)

[The pope] arrogates to himself the authority to make laws concerning worship, concerning changes in the sacraments, and concerning doctrine. He wishes his articles, his decrees, and his laws to be regarded as articles of faith or commandments of God, binding on the consciences of men, because he holds that his power is by divine right and is even to be preferred to the commandments of God. What is even more horrible is that he adds that it is necessary to salvation to believe all these things. (Tr. 6)

Only presumptuous and stupid persons draw the conclusion that where there is no true faith, there also can be no true Baptism. Likewise I might argue, "If I have no faith, then Christ is nothing." Or again, "If I am not obedient, then father, mother, and magistrates are nothing." Is it correct to conclude that when anybody does not do what he should, the thing that he misuses has no existence or no value? My friend, rather invert the argument and conclude, Precisely because Baptism has been wrongly received, it has existence and value. The saying goes, "Abusus non tollit, sed confirmat substantiam," that is, "Misuse does not destroy the substance, but confirms its existence." Gold remains no less gold if a harlot wears it in sin and shame. (LC IV, 58-59)

"In the same way I also say and confess that in the Sacrament of the Altar the body and blood of Christ are truly eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, though the priests who distribute them or those who receive them do not believe or otherwise misuse the sacrament. It does not rest on man's faith or unbelief but on the Word and ordinance of God — unless they first change God's Word and ordinance and misinterpret them, as the enemies of the sacrament do at the present time. They, indeed have only bread and wine, for they do not also have the Word and instituted ordinance of God but have perverted and changed it according to their own imagination." (SD VII, 32, cf. AE 37:367)

According to Luther's timely diagnosis, both Catholicism and modern religious individualism are forms of the one enthusiasm inherent in man's sinful nature which sets God's Word aside for the sake of man's own religious imaginations and regulations (cf. SA III, VIII, 3-6) and which, at the expense of love and concord in the Church, defends one's own particular set of human regulations more fiercely than God's Word and institution (cf. AE 35:80). What distinguishes these two approaches is merely the extent to which traditions of the past are incorporated; the degree to which the trans-congregational nature of the church is expressed by liturgical

uniformity; and the pace in which sweeping change that affects *all the component parts* of the order of worship and the ministry – both their divine and human parts – is enacted.²⁴

This simple insight also seems to have eluded the authors of the eight *Theses on Worship*, adopted in September 2009 by the Council of Presidents of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).²⁵ Thesis II of this document boldly asserts that when it comes to the external “forms, rites, and ceremonies” of public Christian worship, the church has “considerable freedom in choosing those forms, rites, and ceremonies that aid the worship of God” because “neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions prescribe forms, rites, or ceremonies for worship.”

The two shortcomings of the *Eight Theses* I want to discuss in the remainder of this presentation are, first, that the document lacks the critical distinction between the “forms, rites, and ceremonies” established by God and those established by men (1.); and second, that it does not fully reaffirm the benefits assigned to uniform human ceremonies in the Lutheran Confessions

²⁴ Cf. A. Reid, *The Organic Development of the Liturgy: The Principles of Liturgical Reform and Their Relation to the Twentieth-Century Liturgical Movement Prior to the Second Vatican Council*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 303: “It is clear that the Catholic Liturgy is by no means a subjective expression of the faith that can be altered at will according to contemporary fashions or desires. Rather, Catholic Liturgy is a singularly privileged and an objective constituent element of Christian Tradition. The liturgical rites and formulas themselves share in this objectivity. Their faithful transmission ensures continuity and orthodoxy of belief and practice. Their development – which at times is both necessary and desirable – can only be legitimate by ensuring substantial continuity with received Tradition.” According to Reid, a Benedictine monk, the key principle in this development is its organic nature, as it “holds openness to growth (prompted by pastoral needs) and continuity with Tradition in due proportion. It listens to scholarly desiderata and considers anew the value of practices lost in the passage of time, drawing upon them to improve liturgical Tradition gradually, only if and when this is truly necessary. Ecclesiastical authority supervises this growth, at times making prudential judgments about what is appropriate in the light of the needs of different ages, but always taking care that liturgical Tradition is never impoverished and that what is handed on is truly that precious heritage from our fathers, perhaps judiciously pruned and carefully augmented (but not wholly reconstructed), according to the circumstances of the Church in each age, ensuring continuity of belief and practice” (308).

Reid’s key point of “organic development” was enunciated by the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, sect. 23. His position is basically that of the current pope, Benedict XVI, as seen from the foreword he provided for Reid’s book and from the remarks of G. Marini, the pope’s master of liturgical ceremonies on January 6, 2010 (<http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2010/01/clergy-conference-in-rome-address-of.html>). – There are those in the Catholic Church today who reject the post-Tridentine developments of the liturgy out of hand, e.g., German author M. Mosebach in his book *The Heresy of Formlessness: The Roman Liturgy and Its Enemy*, tr. G. Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006). The pope has rejected this view in his 2007 apostolic letter, *Summorum Pontificum*, in which he, while allowing a widespread use of the old, “Tridentine” liturgy as the extraordinary form of the Roman liturgy, reaffirmed the new mass of Paul VI as the ordinary and primary form of that liturgy and required those who wish to use the mass of Trent to use the mass of Vatican II as well.

Given the major deformations affecting the unchanging forms of the gospel that are found in either form of the Roman liturgy and that are well documented in the Lutheran Confessions (e.g., AC XXIV; XXVII, 11-14; XXVIII; Ap. XIII, 7-10; XXIV; XXVII, 20; SA II, II; III, V; III, XIV; III, XV, 4; SD VII, 87), one can concede a gradual development, but not an organic one that preserves the substance of the liturgy intact over the centuries. At some point, the gospel-substance of this form of worship was lost and has not been recovered in the Roman Church ever since.

²⁵ Cf. <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/Worship/Theses%20on%20Worship.pdf>. This insight also played no discernible role in the papers presented at the January 2010 Model Theological Conference on Worship, sponsored by the LCMS’ Commission on Worship and Commission on Theology and Church Relations. See <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=16698> for papers and recordings from this event.

by omitting their importance for fending off heresies and thus for the preservation of the crucial spiritual unity in the faith (2.).

1. As to *the first issue*, the lacking distinction between divinely and humanly established ceremonies, it is clear that if one desires to know what the Lutheran Confessions actually teach in this matter, one does well to begin, not with blanket statements that are in line with contemporary worship trends, but with the careful distinctions which the confessions themselves teach and which are grounded in God's Word. The opening paragraph of the tenth article of the Solid Declaration states:

There has also been a controversy among some theologians of the Augsburg Confession concerning ceremonies and church rites which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God but which have been introduced into the church with good intentions for the sake of good order and decorum or else to preserve Christian discipline.

Accordingly, we distinguish between “ceremonies and church rites” that are commanded or prescribed in God's Word; “ceremonies and church rites” that are forbidden in God's Word; and finally “ceremonies and church rites ... which have been introduced into the church with good intentions” by men. In other words, Lutherans do not teach and believe that all ceremonies are subject to human freedom of choice. Only humanly instituted “ceremonies and church rites” not forbidden in God's Word are what is known as adiaphora or indifferent things; only regarding these there is some freedom for our forming, omitting, and adding.

The Lutheran Confessions distinguish so carefully and precisely between God's institution and man's institution that they number among the changeable humanly instituted ceremonies even those instituted by the apostles themselves that are recorded in God's Word, e.g., the prohibition to eat blood (Acts 15:29), gathering for worship on Sundays (Acts 20:7), and the command that women cover their head in worship (1 Cor. 11:3-16).²⁶

For even the apostles ordained many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed. For they did not contradict their own writings, in which they worked hard to free the church from the idea that human rites are necessary acts of worship. (Ap. XXVIII, 17; cf. AC XXVIII, 53-66; Ap. VII/VIII, 38-41)

These findings are confirmed by the fact that the Lutheran confessions call the sacraments of the Lord²⁷ “ceremonies” and “rites” commanded by God in his Word.

²⁶ On 1 Cor. 7:6-13 see Luther, AE 28:31, 33.

²⁷ Note the Apology's definition of a sacrament in the following quote from Ap. XIII: “rites which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added” (see also Ap. XXIV, 18). This allows this particular confession to include absolution or penitence and ordination, the latter here taken synecdochically for the divinely ordained act of setting apart men for the preaching office, not for the humanly instituted rite of the laying on of hands (cf. Ap. XIV, 1, 5). This definition comes close to the definition of the means of grace in general. A narrower definition of a sacrament is Augustine's definition found in SA III, V, 1; LC IV, 18; V, 10: “the Word is

In Article XIII our opponents approve the statement that the sacraments are no mere marks of profession among men, as some imagine, but are rather signs and testimonies of God's will toward us, through which he moves men's hearts to believe. But they insist that we enumerate seven sacraments. We believe we have the duty not to neglect any of the rites and ceremonies instituted in Scripture, whatever their number. We do not think it makes much difference if, for purposes of teaching, the enumeration varies, provided what is handed down in Scripture is preserved. For that matter, the Fathers did not always use the same enumeration.

If we define sacraments as "rites which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added," we can easily determine which are sacraments in the strict sense. By this definition, rites instituted by men are not sacraments in the strict sense since men do not have the authority to promise grace. Hence signs instituted without God's command are not sure signs of grace, even though they may instruct or admonish the simple folk. The genuine sacraments, therefore, are Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution (which is the sacrament of penitence), for these rites have the commandment of God and the promise of grace, which is the heart of the New Testament. (Ap. XIII, 1-4)

If ordination is interpreted in relation to the ministry of the Word, we have no [objection] to calling ordination a sacrament. The ministry of the Word has God's command and glorious promises: "The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom. 1:16), again, "My word that goes forth from my mouth shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). If ordination is interpreted this way, we shall not object either to calling the laying on of hands a sacrament. The church has the command to appoint ministers; to this we must subscribe wholeheartedly, for we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it. It is good to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise in opposition to the fanatics who dream that the Holy Spirit does not come through the Word but because of their own preparations. They sit in a dark corner doing and saying nothing, but only waiting for illumination, as the enthusiasts taught formerly and the Anabaptists teach now. (Ap. XIII, 11-13)

God's Word and water are joined to form the ceremony of *baptism*: According to Christ's institution, the "holy water" is not used for all sorts of consecratory activities devised by men (SA III, XV, 4) but is applied to sinners of any and every age to deliver to them individually the saving benefits of Christ which he won on the cross for the whole world.

It is not the water that produces these effects, but the Word of God connected with the water, and our faith which relies on the Word of God connected with the water. For without the Word of God the water is merely water and no Baptism. But when connected with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit. (SC IV, 10)

added to the (visible) element and it becomes a sacrament." The Large Catechism, following the narrower definition, teaches two sacraments (baptism and the sacrament of the altar, LC IV, 1; V, 1) and, following the wider definition, three sacraments, but subsumes penance under baptism, thus, again arriving at two sacraments (LC IV, 74, cf. also AE 36:18, 57-58, 124).

Finally, there remains the pope's bag of magic tricks which contains silly and childish articles, such as the consecration of churches, the baptism of bells, the baptism of altar stones, the invitation to such ceremonies of sponsors who might make gifts, etc. Such baptizing is a ridicule and mockery of holy Baptism which should not be tolerated. (SA III, XV, 4)

They approve the ninth article where we confess that Baptism is necessary for salvation; children are to be baptized; the Baptism of children is not useless but is necessary and efficacious for salvation. Among us, the Gospel is taught purely and diligently. We have therefore received this fruit from it, by God's favor, that no Anabaptists have arisen in our churches since our people have been armed by God's Word against the wicked and seditious faction of these robbers. Among the many errors of the Anabaptists that we condemn is also their assertion that the Baptism of children is useless. It is most certain that the promise of salvation also applies to little children. It does not apply to those who are outside of Christ's church, where there is neither Word nor sacrament, because Christ regenerates through Word and sacrament. Therefore it is necessary to baptize children, so that the promise of salvation might be applied to them according to Christ's command (Matt. 28:19), "Baptize all nations." Just as there salvation is offered to all, so Baptism is offered to all — men, women, children, and infants. Therefore it clearly follows that infants should be baptized because salvation is offered with Baptism. (Ap. IX, 1-2)

Similarly, God's Word and bread and wine are joined to form the ceremony of *the sacrament of the altar*: According to Christ's institution, Christ's true body and blood are not made present by the faith of the recipient, or the inherent spiritual power of the minister, but by God's Word. They are not offered as an unbloody sacrifice to God, locked away, or paraded about, but are distributed to recipients who are not temporally or spatially separated from the act of consecration but have presently heard the consecratory and proclamatory words of institution.²⁸

No man's word or work, be it the merit or the speaking of the minister, be it the eating and drinking or the faith of the communicants, can effect the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper. This is to be ascribed only to the almighty power of God and the Word, institution, and ordinance of our Lord Jesus Christ. (SD VII, 74)

To maintain this true Christian doctrine concerning the Holy Supper and to obviate and eliminate many kinds of idolatrous misuse and perversion of this testament, the following

²⁸ A "reservation" of the consecrated elements for later use (e.g., to give them to the sick or home-bound members of the congregation or to bridge the absence of an ordained minister from the congregation) is out of the question for the Lutheran Confessions. The words of institution not only consecrate the elements but also "consecrate" the recipients by awakening and strengthening faith in the essence and benefits of this sacrament in their hearts. The words, the elements, and the recipients always belong together according to the specific form, rite, and ceremony of this means of grace given to it by Christ's institution (cf. SD VIII, 79-84). Cf. R. Ziegler's study "Should Lutherans Reserve the Consecrated Elements for the Communion of the Sick?," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67 (2003): 131-147, in which he examines recent textbooks on pastoral theology, reformation-era church orders, and the private writings of Martin Chemnitz. In agreement with the Lutheran Confessions, Ziegler arrives at a negative answer to the question posed in the title of his article.

useful rule and norm has been derived from the words of institution: Nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ, or apart from the divinely instituted action (that is, if one does not observe Christ's institution as he ordained it, it is no sacrament). This rule dare not in any way be rejected, but it can and should be profitably urged and retained in the church of God.

In this context "use" or "action" does not primarily mean faith, or the oral eating alone, but the entire external and visible action of the Supper as ordained by Christ: the consecration or words of institution, the distribution and reception, or the oral eating of the blessed bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. Apart from this use it is not to be deemed a sacrament, as when in the papistic Mass the bread is not distributed but is offered up, or locked up, or carried about, or exposed for adoration, just as the baptismal water is no sacrament or Baptism if it should be used to consecrate bells, or to cure leprosy, or is otherwise exposed for adoration. It was against such papistic abuses that this rule was first formulated and explained by Dr. Luther.

We must, however, also point out that the Sacramentarians dishonestly and maliciously pervert this useful and necessary rule and interpret it as referring only to the spiritual and internal use of faith in order to deny the true, essential presence and the oral eating of the body of Christ, in which here on earth both the worthy and the unworthy alike participate. This implies that for the unworthy it is no sacrament, and that the reception of the body of Christ takes place only spiritually through faith, or that faith effects the presence of Christ's body in the Holy Supper and that therefore the unworthy and unbelieving hypocrites do not receive the body of Christ because it is not present to them. It is not our faith which makes the sacrament, but solely the Word and institution of our almighty God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, which always remain efficacious in Christendom and which are neither abrogated nor rendered impotent by either the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister or the unbelief of him who receives the sacrament. Just as the Gospel is and remains the true Gospel even when godless hearers do not believe it (except that in them it does not effect salvation), so whether those who receive the sacrament believe or do not believe, Christ nonetheless remains truthful in his words when he says, "Take eat, this is my body." This he effects not through our faith, but solely through his omnipotence. (SD VII, 85-89)

If this institution is not preserved intact, the consecratory words lose their power since they are not magical incantations but tied to the institution of Christ himself. Ministers "presiding" over such an altered rite then no longer represent Christ or the holy Christian Church. Because they have made themselves masters instead of ministers (servants, 1 Cor. 4:1ff.), they represent, at best, their particular religious organization which, however, has no power to institute new, efficacious means of grace (see Ap. XIII, 1-4 quoted above).

For the truthful and almighty words of Jesus Christ which he spoke in the first institution were not only efficacious in the first Supper but they still retain their validity and efficacious power in all places where the Supper is observed according to Christ's institution and where his words are used, and the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed, and received by the virtue and potency of the same words which Christ spoke in the first Supper. For wherever we observe his institution and speak his words over the bread and cup and distribute the blessed bread and cup, Christ himself is

still active through the spoken words by the virtue of the first institution, which he wants to be repeated. (SD VII, 75)

Finally, in the public services of the Church, God's Word is preached and is distributed with the elements of water, bread, and wine by those men²⁹ who, according to Christ's institution and order, have been called and appointed to this *ministry of word and sacraments* by the Church. As already noted, these men no longer speak for themselves; their authority is not based on their shaky authenticity, faith, or holiness of life. Faithfully speaking God's Word and administering his sacraments, they now represent Christ who instituted these very forms of the gospel to create the justifying faith that alone saves (AC V). As seen above, their faithful proclamation and administration is Christ's own speaking and doing. Christ's unshakable institution and word give pastors their authority, but they also limit their authority.

Again, although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, "The Pharisees sit on Moses' seat" (Matt. 23:2). (AC VIII, 1-2)

When the sacraments are administered by unworthy men, this does not rob them of their efficacy. For they do not represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the church's call, as Christ testifies (Luke 10:16), "He who hears you hears me." When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they do so in Christ's place and stead. Christ's statement teaches us this in order that we may not be offended by the unworthiness of ministers. (Ap. VII/VIII, 28)

Certainly the statement, "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16), is not referring to traditions but is rather directed against traditions. It is not what they call a "commandment with unlimited authority," but rather a "caution about something prescribed," about a special commandment. It is a testimony given to the apostles so that we may believe them on the basis of another's Word rather than on the basis of their own. For Christ wants to assure us, as was necessary, that the Word is efficacious when it is delivered by men and that we should not look for another word from heaven. "He who hears you hears me" cannot be applied to traditions. For Christ requires them to

²⁹ "Men" here means being part of the male sex. While the Lutheran Confessions do not address this matter directly – as stated above, they do not offer a complete summary of God's Word, but address only those issues that were controversial at the time of their writing (and women's ordination was not controversial in the 16th century) – this should not mislead people to thinking that the sex of the minister is a mere adiaphoron, an indifferent, humanly instituted church custom that may be changed at will by the church today. For the Lutheran Confessions, to say the least, do offer strong indicators that this is, in fact, not so. Cf. A. Wenz, "The Argument over Women's Ordination as a Paradigmatic Conflict of Dogma," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007): 319-346, who points out, e.g., that those favoring women's ordination often deny the divine institution of the preaching office as a representation of the Son of God made man in his relation to his bride, the Church. One deformation of Christ's institution leads to the next. For Luther himself, who did address this question directly, cf. only AE 28:276-279; 41:154. He speaks here of divine law and the Holy Spirit, not human customs.

teach in such a way that he might be heard, because he says, "hears me." Therefore he wants his voice, His Word to be heard, not human traditions. (Ap. XXVIII, 18-19)

Part of the divine institution of the preaching office is the duty to administer the sacrament of the altar in a faithful and responsible manner, to the point of imposing the minor ban or excommunication.³⁰ This is to say that the recipients of the Lord's Supper ought not to be unknown strangers or random visitors. Instead, they are those whose manner of life is known to the Church in the person of the local pastor – he is the Church's called representative and servant – and who, after careful instruction in the chief articles of the faith (Catechism!) and thereby also in the meaning and benefits of this sacrament, have publicly forsaken their former beliefs and, instead, have come to embrace the Catechism's confession of faith as being "most certainly true." They can therefore also join in the Church's Amen throughout the service. Luther, for one, practiced "closed communion" because of his "heart for missions," because he wanted to make those without faith or with a wrong faith into genuine Christians (cf. Matth. 28:19-20).³¹

³⁰ Closed communion – the giving of the Lord's body and blood only to those who know and agree with the Lord's doctrine (summarized, e.g., in the *Small Catechism*) and whose life does not suggest the absence of repentant faith because unworthy consumption leads to divine condemnation – is not merely a humanly established church custom that could be altered or omitted at will. It is, thus, not just "practice;" it is doctrine. Even though it is typically discussed in connection with the Lord's Supper, it is, properly speaking, part of the Lord's institution of the preaching office (1 Cor. 4:1; Matth. 7:6, cf. AE 21:225-226 on this verse), while the corresponding foundational call for individual self-examination is part of the institution of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27). The former assesses the external worthiness of communicants, i.e., the fruits of faith in words and deeds (*coram hominibus*); the latter is the self-assessment of one's internal worthiness, faith itself (*coram Deo*). As is to be expected, the *Small Catechism*, as a manual for the laity, explicitly teaches only the latter (SC VI, 9-10); the *Large Catechism* teaches both. While faith and its fruit must be carefully *distinguished*, faith cannot be *separated* from its fruit (cf. SD III, 39-41). Therefore, careful self-examination cannot be played off against the pastor's duty to examine prospective communicants and to exclude (excommunicate) those that are unworthy *coram hominibus*. – The concrete administration of the doctrine of closed communion is a matter of human customs that may change so long as the Lord's purpose is accomplished. One may think here, e.g., of individual registration, individual examination and absolution prior to communing by the pastor and the head of the household, weekly, yearly, or once in a lifetime (see AC XXV, 1; Ap. XV, 40; XXIV, 1, 49; SA III, VIII, 1-2; LC Shorter Pref., 4-5; AE 53:32-33). In this, closed communion is similar to calling men into the preaching office: by divine command, men must be appointed to this office by the church (cf. Ap. XIII, 12); how this is done is spelled out in church customs that are in conformity to this divinely established form (Ap. XIV, 1, 5; Tr. 70-71).

³¹ A fine, basic exposition of Luther's stance on "closed communion" is provided in his 1534 sermon on 1 Cor. 11:23-26 (cf. *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. E. F. A. Klug (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 6:44-46). His main points are: "Christendom ought to be united: of one mind, faith, and doctrine [1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:4-5]. ... although the gospel keeps Christians together and makes them of one mind, the Lord's Supper does more: ... [here] every Christian confesses publicly and to himself, what he believes. ... Those who will not be of the same faith, doctrine and life are said to be *excommunicatos* (excommunicated), as *those who differ in doctrine, words, mind, and life, and therefore should not be allowed to remain with the few who are of one mind, lest they divide [the Sacrament] and make it sectarian. Christ uses this Sacrament to keep the people together.*" For as the bread is made one out of many different kernels and the wine is made one out of many different berries (cf. 1 Cor. 10:17), so "there is one faith, one confession, love, and hope; ... so the Christians should be also." The devil, however, seeks to divide the Church: "So he attacks first one, then another, with misbelief, with despair, with errant thoughts which men wrongly believe *about the Sacrament and other articles*, to cause a division." This cannot be averted "except there be uniformity in doctrine." – The faith confessed at the altar by the communicant's participation in the sacrament of the altar is, therefore, clearly more than what may be contained in some isolated, diluted, or even flawed bulletin statement about the Lord's Supper, baptism, and / or "repentant faith." Instead,

Thus the Mass is preserved among us in its proper use, the use which was formerly observed in the church and which can be proved by St. Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 11:20ff. and by many statements of the Fathers. For Chrysostom reports how the priest stood every day, inviting some to Communion and forbidding others to approach. (AC XXIV, 35-36)

Our teachers assert that according to the Gospel the power of keys or the power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

This power of keys or of bishops is used and exercised only by teaching and preaching the Word of God and by administering the sacraments (to many persons or to individuals, depending on one's calling). In this way are imparted no bodily but eternal things and gifts, namely, eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. (AC XXVIII, 5-8)

According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God's Word alone. (AC XXVIII, 21)

The openly wicked and the despisers of the sacraments are excommunicated. We do this according to both the Gospel and the ancient canons. (Ap. XI, 4)

We like the old division of power into the power of the order and the power of jurisdiction. Therefore a bishop has the power of the order, namely, the ministry of Word and sacraments. He also has the power of jurisdiction, namely, the authority to excommunicate those who are guilty of public offenses or to absolve them if they are converted and ask for absolution. (Ap. XXVIII, 13)

We consider the greater excommunication, as the pope calls it, to be merely a civil penalty which does not concern us ministers of the church. However, the lesser (that is, the truly Christian) excommunication excludes those who are manifest and impenitent sinners from the sacrament and other fellowship in the church until they mend their ways and avoid sin. Preachers should not mingle civil punishments with this spiritual penalty or excommunication. (SA III, IX)

The Gospel requires of those who preside over the churches that they preach the Gospel, remit sins, administer the sacraments, and, in addition, exercise jurisdiction, that is, excommunicate those who are guilty of notorious crimes and absolve those who repent.

something like the Catechism as the "layman's bible," properly contextualized by the other writings in the Book of Concord, comes to mind. Communion fellowship is based on church fellowship. And fellowship in the church is based on agreement in the whole doctrine Christ taught his apostles (Matt. 28:19-20). Or, to put it differently, the body of the Lord in his Supper cannot be had without membership in the body which is his Church; and this cannot be had without embracing the body of his doctrine in all its articles (*articulus* means member).

By the confession of all, even our adversaries, it is evident that this power belongs by divine right to all who preside over the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops. (Tr. 60-61)

We do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come. (LC V, 2)

For this reason we must make a distinction among men. Those who are shameless and unruly must be told to stay away, for they are not fit to receive the forgiveness of sins since they do not desire it and do not want to be good. The others, who are not so callous and dissolute but would like to be good, should not absent themselves, even though in other respects they are weak and frail. (LC V, 58-59, cf. AE 53:32-33)

Yet since we intend to raise and leave behind us Christians and since we administer Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, we do not want to, nor can we, give the sacrament to anyone but to him who is previously examined as to what he has learned from the catechism, and whether he wants to abstain from sins done against it. For we do not wish to turn Christ's church into a pig's pen and to let anyone rush to the sacrament without examination like a sow to the trough. And this we have received from the beginning of Christianity. For there we see and realize that the [Creed], Our Father, Ten Commandments are comprehended in a short form and teaching for the youth and simple people. And it was also called catechism from the beginning. For catechism, the Greeks say, means a teaching one asks and examines like a teacher teaches his students to repeat their lesson to see whether they know it or not. In the same way one ought to examine the simple people and have them repeat it to see whether they know the parts of the catechism and whether they realize the sin done against it and whether they are willing to learn more and amend their lives; otherwise, they are not to be admitted to the sacrament. For since a pastor ought to be a faithful servant of Christ, he must not, as much as he can, throw the sacrament to the sows and dogs, but hear who the people are. If they deceive and do not tell the truth, he is excused; they have deceived themselves. (WA 30.3:567)

In summary, it is not enough to say that the gospel in the means of grace is necessary for worship; that the humanly devised rites, forms and ceremonies of the service should somehow support the gospel and be in general agreement with God's Word in general or with certain specific theological viewpoints or practices one gleans from the writings of the New Testament;³² that these ceremonies should remain within the broader tradition of worship in Western Christianity or "The Liturgy;" or that the Christian service is fundamentally one of "word and sacrament." And a justification for a particular shape of the liturgy should not be based on the perceived "ritual needs" or "devotion" of (fallen) man, as is done in liturgical theology (cf. Ap. IV, 206-207; XXIV, 23).³³ What can and must be said, based on the Lutheran

³² Cf., e.g., G. Aulén, *Reformation and Catholicity*, tr. E. H. Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 159f.

³³ An early representative of this thinking was G. Tyrrell, and adult convert from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism and later defrocked modernist Jesuit, who claimed a primacy of the *lex orandi* over the *lex credendi*,

Confessions, is that the humanly established and thus variable ceremonies must conform to the divinely established and thus invariable forms of the service just described: word, baptism, sacrament of the altar, and the ordained ministry.³⁴ The gospel in the means of grace is, therefore, concrete practice.³⁵ This is the specific way in which the correct doctrine of justification functions as the chief liturgical criterion.³⁶ In the means of grace, our confession of faith is simultaneously our confession of praise.³⁷

A particularly striking example of how Luther himself evaluated the historical “development” of Christian worship is found in his 1523 *Formula Missae*. Such development – adding humanly devised ceremonies to the sacrament of the altar instituted once for all by Christ himself – was fine so long as it was in conformity with the unchanging “rite” of the gospel Christ observed and

e.g., in his *Through Scylla and Charybdis: The Old Theology and the New* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), 103-105. Elsewhere, this argument takes the form of the Calvinistic claim that finite words are not capable to express supernatural experiences, cf. *Lex Orandi, or, Prayer and Creed* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903), 206-207.

³⁴ As the external human rites in worship conform to the divine rites, so the appropriate human gestures (bowing, standing, kneeling, etc.) flow from the faith created by the divine rites. These outward gestures may be employed to express the attitude of the heart just as external, visible works in general show the inward, invisible spiritual state of the heart (cf. Matt. 12:33 and AE 36:290-297). However, just as the external human rites of the service, the external human gestures are not matters of biblical mandate. Just as the former, the latter have to be evaluated under the aspects of faith and love: while not matters of divine command, they should nonetheless be in conformity to the divine rites themselves that create and sustain the faith that is here outwardly expressed (see above), and they should be as uniform as possible for the sake of the neighbor (see below). This, again, sets the Lutheran understanding apart from the Catholic understanding, as enunciated, e.g., by the current pope who, when dealing with such bodily liturgical postures and gestures, offers many a helpful insight, but then again falls prey to the absence of the proper distinction of divine mandate and human tradition, cf. his *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, tr. J. Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 184ff. Yet this approach is also different from that taken by other, Protestant churches who, in their quest to establish a purely “biblical” worship service, equally fail to distinguish what the Lord instituted for the rest of time from what his apostles (or prophets!) instituted for their respective times.

³⁵ Understanding the means of grace as concrete “ceremonies” or “rites,” as “actions,” established by God, as done in the Lutheran Confessions, has the great advantage of overcoming the tempting *separation* of “doctrine and practice” that these days is used to repackage doctrinal disagreements as really being merely about the “practical application of our doctrinal principles” (G. B. Kieschnick, *Waking the Sleeping Giant: The Birth, Growth, Decline, and Rebirth of an American Church* (St. Louis: CPH 2009), 41). The gospel cannot be reduced to a set of abstract, merely theoretical principles. It is practice; it exists in the ceremonies of the means of grace instituted by Christ. Accordingly, “worship is the practice of doctrine,” as R. Preus, “Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 60 (1996): 201, has rightly said. In the same article, he helpfully distinguishes doctrine and practice, on the one hand, from life, on the other hand (199-200). – I owe these stimulating insights to a March 2010 entry by Scott Diekmann, Puyallup, WA, on his *Stand Firm* blog (cf. <http://www.soundwitness.org/misc/waking.pdf>).

³⁶ Cf. K. Marquart, “Liturgy and Dogmatics,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67 (2003): 175-190, esp. 183. In this fine article, Marquart shows that those promoting “liturgical theology” and its allegedly ancient primacy of ambiguous ritual over unambiguous dogmatics are actually quite often quite modern people with a typical modern anti-doctrinal bias. However, Marquart’s emphasis on pure doctrine as the sole criterion for worship (188), while most certainly true, lacks a critical form itself, the divinely instituted form of the gospel in the concrete rites of the means of grace. This is the “liturgical theology” of the Lord himself which is, of course, quite clear doctrinally.

³⁷ Cf. M. Mikoteit, *Theologie und Gebet bei Luther: Untersuchungen zur Psalmenvorlesung 1532-1535* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), esp. 117, 252, 296, 301. According to this study, the means of grace, and the confession of sins, are automatically also the Christian’s means of praising the one true God, cf. Ap. XXIV, 25-26. Teaching the faith rightly is the preeminent way of praising God – *orthodoxia*. The reverse is not true automatically: Praise is not necessarily a means of grace, and the presence (or absence) of incense or guitars is not the determining factor.

instituted in the night when he was betrayed. Once this rite was fundamentally changed from God's gift to man (sacrament) into man's gift to God (sacrifice), the "organic development of the liturgy" came to an end; something substantially different was created.³⁸ A reformation of the forms of gospel as presented in the worship service had become necessary. For the catholicity of the Church consists in the purity of the divinely instituted forms of the means of grace, which are the decisive marks of the Church,³⁹ not in the age of, and continuity with, a particular configuration of human and divine rites in a particular order or type of service.

We therefore first assert: It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use. We cannot deny that the mass, i.e., the communion of bread and wine, is a rite divinely instituted by Christ himself and that it was observed first by Christ and then by the apostles, quite simply and evangelically without any additions. But in the course of time so many human inventions were added to it that nothing except the names of the mass and communion has come down to us.

Now the additions of the early fathers who, it is reported, softly prayed one or two Psalms before blessing the bread and wine are commendable. Athanasius and Cyprian are supposed to be some of these. Those who added the Kyrie eleison also did well. We read that under Basil the Great, the Kyrie eleison was in common use by all the people. The reading of the Epistles and Gospels is necessary, too. Only it is wrong to read them in a language the common people do not understand. Later, when chanting began, the Psalms were changed into the introit; the Angelic Hymn Gloria in Excelsis: et in terra pax, the graduals, the alleluias, the Nicene Creed, the Sanctus, the Agnus Dei, and the

³⁸ J. Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), in his abovementioned book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, discusses the relationship between Christian worship and the services of synagogue and temple (48-50). He is correct in rejecting a mono-causal derivation of the former from the synagogue, as it also "fulfills" the temple (Hebr. 7-10). However, he does not offer the kind of careful distinction the Lutheran Confessions teach concerning propitiatory and eucharistic sacrifices, on the one hand, and sacraments, on the other hand (cf. esp. Ap. XXIV, 16-40, where also the importance of faith in the gospel for true sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise – all the good works of the Christian, including his participation in the sacrament of the altar (33) – is reiterated) but, instead, offers a "synthesis" in that he sees the worship service as man (the Church) approaching God by joining the prayer and sacrifice offered by the man Jesus. One can easily see from here how, in the Catholic understanding of worship, the sacrament of the altar is chiefly man's gift to God. This fact alone establishes the discontinuity of this type of worship in relation to genuine Christian worship that is faithful to the Lord's institution on the night when he was betrayed. *This* institution is the concrete historical "once for all" that results in the "always" of the gospel's forms till the end of this age (cf. Ratzinger, *Spirit*, 163f.). The liturgical rite is, therefore, not tied to the living subject "Church," as Catholics believe, but to the living Lord and his unchanging institutions of the gospel taught in the Scriptures that, as God's Word, do not need to be made complete and alive by the Church's traditions (cf. *ibid.*, 166-169). Cf. also J. Pless, "Can We Participate Liturgically in the Atonement?" *Logia* XIX, 2 (Easter 2010), esp. 45-47.

³⁹ Ap. VII/VIII, 5. Cf. AE 41:148-166 where Luther lists seven principal marks of the Church: God's Word, baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the public exercise of the office of the keys, the ordained ministry, public worship in agreement with God's Word, and the holy cross in the life of the Christians. See, furthermore, AE 41:194-197 where the claim of the Roman Church that the Lutherans are innovators and not legitimate heirs of the ancient, pure church is refuted primarily by pointing to the purity of the means of grace among Lutherans which is, in a second step, contrasted with the corruption of the means of grace among the papists who thereby show themselves to be the "synagogue of Satan" mentioned in Rev. 2:9 among whom only very few true Christians have been preserved in a miraculous manner (cf. *ibid.*, 199ff.). This is in agreement with the clear teaching of the Lutheran Confessions: "We do not concede to the papists that they are the church, for they are not" (SA III, XII, 1).

communio were added. All of these are unobjectionable, especially the ones that are sung de tempore or on Sundays. For these days by themselves testify to ancient purity, the canon [of the mass] excepted.

But when everyone felt free to add or change at will and when the tyranny of priestly greed and pride entered in, then our wicked kings, i.e., the bishops and pastors, began to erect those altars to the images of Baal and all gods in the Lord's temple. Then it was that wicked King Ahaz removed the brazen altar and erected another copied from one in Damascus. What I am speaking of is the canon, that abominable concoction drawn from everyone's sewer and cesspool. The mass became a sacrifice. (AE 53:20-21, cf. AE 35:80-82)

The reformation of worship, carried out by Luther and his associates after carefully instructing their congregations in the gospel,⁴⁰ therefore, eliminated the – at times quite pompous (e.g., Corpus Christi processions), at times quite mystical (e.g., silent recitation of the words of institution; Latin language of the liturgy) – human deformations from the means of grace and the pastoral office that had obscured the gospel, even to the point of extinguishing the Spirit's light of salvation (cf. LC II, 43-45). Now the gospel could again shine purely in the forms Christ himself had instituted in his Word, the additions from the “holy fathers” being again nothing other than aids for the “reverent and fitting administration of the sacrament” (AE 35:97).⁴¹

What is more, the humble ceremonies and outward forms of the means of grace – instituted already by Christ himself – were consistently defended and extolled by Luther and his fellow reformers against those who saw in them nothing spiritual at all but just mere created stuff, as they, in their exceeding human wisdom, sought God and Christ above and beyond the created means of grace. For the forms of the gospel instituted by Christ, including the appearance of his ministers, conform to the lowly human form of God in which he walked the earth. They are part and parcel of the foolishness of the cross and incarnation of God who precisely by his human nature – despised by man, but endowed with divine attributes and powers by God in the personal

⁴⁰ At the time, this instructing took about six years (from 1517 to 1523), not six decades. This needs to be kept in mind today, both as a call to patience as every congregation – and every member – will find itself at a different stage of doctrinal and liturgical health, and as a call to action as patience is not indefinite and needs to be filled with consistent, prudent teaching that promotes doctrinal and liturgical healing. This action, the action of preaching and teaching his Word, is the only power and authority given to the Church by God (cf. AC XXVIII, 5 etc.); he has reserved for himself the power of converting men by means of his Word; after man's work is done, there is time for a good beer while God does his work (cf. AE 51:77f. and his 1523 sermon on John 20:19-31 in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. J. N. Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 1.2:362). – While nowadays much public attention is given to outward-bound evangelism campaigns, maybe more official emphasis should be given to the tough work of re-evangelizing existing congregations and their members (Matth. 10:6; 15:24). This shift of emphasis requires the sober admission that such is needed. The kind of institutional talk that calls people to forget about doctrine – e.g., with the justification that all's well on the doctrinal front (when self-righteously compared to others, cf. Luke 18:11!); divisions are due only to differences of opinion regarding the practical application of doctrine – and to roll up their sleeves by taking pride in a human organization in order to get busy with missions and prevail against competitors is more popular (cf. Kieschnick, *Waking the Sleeping Giant*).

⁴¹ In this sense, it is true what Marquart, “Liturgy and Dogmatics,” 189, quotes from Luther: the pulpit must preserve baptism and the Lord's Supper (cf. AE 28:62). God's Word rightly preached preserves also the concrete forms of the gospel Christ instituted in the Word.

union of Christ's divine and human natures (cf. SD VIII, 48ff.) – won our eternal salvation (cf. Gen. 3:15; Is. 42:2; Matth. 12:19; 1 Cor. 1:17ff.).⁴²

Therefore, we constantly teach that the sacraments and all the external things ordained and instituted by God should be regarded not according to the gross, external mask (as we see the shell of a nut) but as that in which God's Word is enclosed. (LC IV, 19)

Now God is the sort of person who likes to do what is foolish and useless in the eyes of the world, as Paul says in I Cor. 1[:23]: "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles." And again: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe in him" [I Cor. 1:21]. Well then, if anyone does not believe this, let him believe accordingly that it is mere bread, or a batch of bread. Anyone who has failed to grasp the faith may thenceforth believe whatever he likes, it makes no difference. Just as when someone is on the point of drowning, whether he drowns in a brook or in the middle of a stream, he is drowned just the same. So I say of these fanatics: if they let go of the word, let them believe whatever they like and squabble as long as they like. (AE 36:336-337)

Although they contain and convey the spiritual power of the greatest magnitude, the outwardly humble means of grace, unlike the various humanly devised rites of Pagan religions, thus do not glitter attractively in the natural eye of sinful man, dazzling his senses either by their contagious vitality or by their profound mystical depth.⁴³ Instead, they shine brightly, powerfully, *and comfortingly* for those who know and believe God's Word concerning and in them, as it is taught and confessed in the Small Catechism and the other writings of the Christian Book of Concord.

The *Eight Theses* rightly affirm the importance of the gospel in the means of grace for the highest worship, which is faith (Thesis I.D.). Yet, first of all, the ordained ministry is not mentioned in this document on public worship services at all. And second of all, because the gospel does not have an unchanging form of its own, according to the *Eight Theses*, the gospel in the means of grace cannot shape anything else. It cannot properly function as a criterion for evaluating which human ceremonies are in conformity with the gospel. Instead, it – along with the ordained ministry – is left open to being subjected to freely chosen humanly established "forms, rites, and ceremonies." In the process, the means of grace and the ministry will be

⁴² Cf. esp. AE 1:193, 196; 15:318 in addition to SD VII, 23-27, 51, 56-59.

⁴³ Such quest for outward liturgical glory in the Christian worship represents a neo-pagan understanding of worship. Cf. Marquart, "Liturgy and Dogmatics," 187, where he quotes A. Schmemmann's comments on the pre-4th century liturgy, still devoid of the splendors of the Byzantine court ritual: "Christian worship had been 'profoundly solemn with an inner solemnity, and devoid of external solemnity,' whilst 'the pagan cults were shot through with this external solemnity and Christians regarded this style of worship as *pompa diabola*.'" Cf. Luther's comments on episcopal ordinations in SA III, X, 1: "If the bishops were true bishops and were concerned about the church and the Gospel, they might be permitted (for the sake of love and unity, but not of necessity) to ordain and confirm us and our preachers, provided this could be done without pretense, humbug, and unchristian ostentation (*ut seponerentur omnes larvae, prestigiae, deliramenta et spectra pompae ethnicae*)." See also Luther's comments on the ostentatious and divisive rituals devised by men when the humble, simple forms of the gospel of the Lord's Supper are no longer at the center of the worship and life of the church in AE 35:80-82.

deformed, and that is: they will be destroyed, and the work of the reformation in the 16th century will be undone. However, without the means of grace in the form first instituted by Christ, there is no gospel and no justifying faith (AC V, cf. AE 35:97). Without such faith, there is no salvation and no Church (AC IV; VII). The issue of rightly distinguishing between divine and human ceremonies is, therefore, of the highest importance for the very existence of the Church.

2. As to *the second important topic* missing in the *Eight Theses*, the spiritual importance of uniformity in human ceremonies, it is important to reiterate that Luther's reformation of worship did not abolish human additions to what Christ had instituted. These were, in fact, retained in order to preserve external peace, but also – and this aspect is not found in the *Eight Theses* – to preserve the unity of the faith itself.⁴⁴

The reformers knew from their study of church history and from experience at their own time that differences in human rites of worship can easily deepen into differences in the divine rites of the gospel. While confessing clearly that an agreement in the humanly instituted ceremonies of worship is not necessary for salvation and for unity in the faith which rested on the agreement in the divinely instituted ceremonies also known as the “marks of the Church,” they hastened to add that this liberty should be used only with moderation, the strong thus bearing with the weak, lest the bond of love between Christians of the same confession be undermined, something that would endanger also the unity in the faith among them.⁴⁵

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. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. (AC VII, 2-3)

This subject of traditions involves many difficult and controversial questions, and we know from actual experience that traditions are real snares for consciences. When they are required as necessary, they bring exquisite torture to a conscience that has omitted some observance. On the other hand, their abrogation involves its own difficulties and problems. ... Here Paul is our constant champion; everywhere he insists that these observances neither justify nor are necessary over and above the righteousness of faith.

⁴⁴ Cf. the connection made by Paul in Eph. 4:2-3: if the “unity of the Spirit” is by faith in the gospel and the “bond of peace” is love that is humble and patiently bears with the neighbor, then the unity in love preserves the unity in faith (Luther translated verse 3: “seid fleissig, zu halten die Einigkeit im Geist durch [by] das Band des Friedens”). Cf. Luther's sermon on Eph. 4:1-6 (*The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. J. N. Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 4.2:288-291).

⁴⁵ This was still well known to the founders of the LCMS, cf., e.g., C. F. W. Walther's 1863 *The Form of a Christian Congregation* (St. Louis, CPH, 1963), where he, in section 53, quotes, not only the Preface of the Book of Concord, section 25 (see above), but also from Lutheran theologian F. Balduin's exposition of 1 Cor. 1:10: “There are two nurseries of true unity: to speak the same thing and to believe the same thing. ... We should therefore seek to preserve agreement in expressions and thoughts, in endeavors *and customs*; thus we may easily be kept from divisions” (165f., emphasis added, HS). While the *Eight Theses* complain about, and condemn, “divisions” in the church (Thesis VIII, where 1 Cor. 1:10 is even quoted!), they do not scale back their justification for *disagreement* “in expressions and thoughts, in endeavors and customs.”

Nevertheless, liberty in these matters should be used moderately, lest the weak be offended and become more hostile to the true teaching of the Gospel because of an abuse of liberty. Nothing should be changed in the accustomed rites without good reason, and to foster harmony those ancient customs should be kept which can be kept without sin or without great disadvantage. This is what we teach. ... the greatest possible public harmony, without offense to consciences, should be preferred to all other advantages ... (Ap. XV, 49-52)

[In Col. 3:14, Paul] is talking not about personal perfection but about fellowship in the church. He says that love is a bond and unbroken chain linking the many members of the church with one another. Similarly, in all families and communities harmony should be nurtured by mutual aid, for it is not possible to preserve tranquility unless men cover and forgive certain mistakes in their midst. In the same way Paul commands that there be love in the church to preserve harmony, to bear, if need be, with the crude behavior of the brethren, to cover up minor mistakes, lest the church disintegrate into various schisms and the hatreds, factions, and heresies that arise from such schisms. For harmony will inevitably disintegrate if bishops impose heavy burdens⁴⁶ on the people or have no regard for their weakness. Dissensions also arise when the people judge their clergy's behavior too strictly or despise them because of some minor fault and then seek after some other kinds of doctrine and other clergy. On the other hand, perfection (that is, the integrity of the church) is preserved when the strong bear with the weak, when the people put the best construction on the faults of their clergy, when the bishops take into account the weakness of the people. (Ap. IV, 232-234)

For where it can be done without sinning and endangering the conscience or without giving offense, it is indeed fine for the churches to agree in external matters, which are in any case voluntary, even as they agree with one another in the Spirit, in the faith, in the word, and in the sacrament; for such agreement makes a fine impression and pleases everyone.

Agreement is also good because such dissimilarity, since it is unnecessary, looks very much like a schism or disunion and discord. For from the time the church first began, ceremonies have caused much offense in the churches; so, for example, the dispute about the Easter festival caused such a commotion that few churches were in agreement with one another about the matter. ... For St. Paul faithfully teaches us everywhere that we should be diligent to teach and to live in unity and harmony with one another and to be on our guard against discord or differences wherever we are able to do so: Romans 12 [:16], "Live in harmony with one another"; and I Corinthians 1 [:10], "I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree that there be no dissensions among you." (AE 38:317, 319, cf. AE 35:80-81)

As Luther had pointed out as early as 1520 – three years before he began to reform the worship service – and based on texts such as Rom. 14:22, we relate to God by faith, but to the neighbor we relate by love. And out of loving concern for the neighbor, pastors and congregations need to

⁴⁶ The "heavy burden" referred to here is, very likely, not simply a general reference to humanly established ceremonies that are physically difficult to observe, but, specifically, criticizes making those human ceremonies spiritually burdensome by teaching their necessity for salvation, cf. only AC XV, 2; XXVIII, 65, 71-72.

curb the exercise of their freedom also when it comes to changing, adding, or abolishing human ceremonies, lest the neighbor be confused and their unity in the faith be destroyed. In other words, we need to set aside our personal likes and dislikes and come together with those who share our confession of faith so that our confession of praise might also be like theirs (cf. Rom. 15:5-6). This is why conferences of ministers and church councils, bringing together all the congregations in one area, are the places where joint changes of humanly established ceremonies should be decided (cf. AE 41:130-131; 53:47-48).⁴⁷

The Lutheran reformation of worship was thus not primarily “conservative,” but essentially pastoral in nature: Ancient ceremonies were retained, not for the sake of some archaeological interest in some hypothetical “golden age of church and liturgy,” but because they were in accordance with the forms of the gospel (and hence taught it as well) and were familiar to the members of the congregation. This pastoral concern also prevented this reformation from sliding into the biblicist abyss of iconoclasm which, eliminating from the Church’s worship everything not expressly mandated in the bible as idolatry (by force, if necessary), sought to return to some pristine form of worship untainted by human additions. Here the abovementioned notion that man can ultimately not speak and act in God’s stead when using his own words finds its liturgical expression. The ground cleared by iconoclasm easily lends itself to building the at times impressive edifices of liturgical subjectivism and home-spun parochialism.

As has been stated, this social aspect of the human ceremonies within the church, which is also highly theological, is totally absent from the *Eight Theses*. Here, one gets the impression that “freely choosing” ceremonies for the public service of the church is just about God’s Word, the local congregation, and its immediate geographical community. The individualist attitude that “Christianity is just about God and me” here finds its counterpart and expression in liturgical congregationalism. Also, liturgical antinomianism rears its ugly head, claiming that because uniformity in humanly established ceremonies does not contribute to man’s salvation, it can be eliminated altogether from the Church without any damage to the Church’s being.⁴⁸

This explains certainly why so much is said in favor of being sensitive to the needs of non-members and “seekers” when it comes to “planning” worship on a weekly basis. Yet it also explains why so little is said about being sensitive to those who are already members of the household of the faith when it comes to maintaining cross-generational continuity in worship. In this way, the bible is turned on its head. For Paul, in Gal. 6:10, urges us to love fellow members of the Church *above all*.

⁴⁷ Cf. H. Sonntag, “‘Freedom Shall Be and Remain a Servant of Love:’ Distinguishing Faith and Love as a Criterion for Liturgical Practice in Luther’s Theology,” *Logia* 18, 1 (Epiphany 2009): 37ff.

⁴⁸ The analogous argument concerning the law, presented by the original Wittenberg Antinomians of the late 1530s, is refuted by Luther in his Antinomian theses and disputations, cf. *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and tr. H. Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), esp. 25, 175-181, 185, 237.

Summary

The Lutheran Confessions gathered in the Christian Book of Concord are the models for Christian confessing today because they are firmly founded on God's Word. This is seen, e.g., when it comes to the public worship of the Church. Clearly distinguishing between what is and what is not commanded in God's Word, they provide us with clear criteria not only for the reformation of worship, but also with the scriptural path to the reestablishment and preservation of lasting peace and doctrinal unity within the Lutheran Church. They show us that the Church's confession of sin and faith is also its confession of praise of the triune God. Its orthodoxy of doctrine is its orthodoxy of praise.

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