



Lutherans Passionately Confessing Christ

A Case in Point

Why do we Lutherans have a specific confession?

The Scriptures Speak

Matthew 10:24-33 – Drive out the fear of man
With the fear of God

1 Timothy 4:1-16 – How does doctrine save?

Titus 1:9 – Sound Teaching

1 Peter 3:12-18 – Hope from the
Resurrection

What is distinctive about the Lutheran Church?

The Purpose of the Lutheran Confessions

The purpose of the Lutheran Confessions is to keep the Gospel at the center and to bring the maximum comfort to penitent sinners. Check out this list of basic Lutheran teachings from the [Augsburg Confession](#) to see how each article of Lutheran teaching focuses our attention on the Gospel's comfort for sinners, how each one brings Christ to sinners for the forgiveness of sins.

The Trinity

We confess one God in three persons, not only to be faithful to the Biblical revelation but also to comfort one another with the promise that this one God created us, redeemed us and now by His Word dwells within us so that we might believe. It's all His, the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for us. In a world of uncertainty, nothing is more sure than the name of the Blessed Trinity, the only name that saves. What is even more comforting, He puts this name on US in our Baptism!

Original Sin

If the problem we face with sin and death is something small and we only need a little help to overcome it ourselves, then our Savior is also quite small. But that's not how we experience life! None of us can stop sinning. None of us can decide not to die! That's because we are conceived and born in sin and cannot free ourselves. We need a Savior who has taken all our sins and conquered death for us! "Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Paul writes (Romans 7:24-25).

The Person of Christ

Jesus Christ unites in one person everything it takes to be God plus everything it takes to be human. This is the confession of the Church since the earliest days (see Colossians 2:9). At one and the same time fully God and fully human, in His death and resurrection Christ has done all for our salvation. It's all His work, not ours. If in our teaching we "fudge" on the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ, we lose the comfort. A less than divine Jesus cannot save. A less than human Christ cannot take our place in death. In Jesus, God Himself takes on flesh (John 1:14) to die and rise so that we might be His forever.

Justification

What could be more comforting than justification, the “article by which the Church stands or falls”? There is no better way to say it than: “... we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight...”¹ Therefore, we always seek to proclaim a clear message of Law and Gospel, so that sinners are convicted by the Law and take comfort only in Christ and His work for us.

The Means of Grace and the Ministry

The Holy Spirit does not jump on us in a dark alley somewhere, but comes through means. So that we might have this faith that justifies, God instituted the preaching office to bring the Word and Sacrament to people. We don’t have to wonder where to find the grace of God. It’s here in the Word and Sacrament. These not only remind us of Jesus, by the Spirit’s power they convey Jesus to us. There is no wordless Spirit and no spiritless Word of God. And the Word of God directs sinners to look, not to themselves, but to Christ alone for life.

The New Obedience

We are not saved by our good works. We are saved by the good works of Christ for us, received through faith in Him. But this faith, if it is alive, is always working, always doing things to serve God and the neighbor. Of course, God never needs our good works, but our neighbor always does. Whatever is done in faith is a good work. Though always tainted by sin here in this life, God sees us through the cross of Jesus. God sees that we are justified in Christ.

The Church

The holy Christian Church is found wherever there are believers in Christ. What is necessary for the true unity of the Church is not the right structure, not the Pope in Rome, but the Gospel purely taught and the Sacraments rightly done. This is a great comfort to the person distressed by all the mistakes and sins of churches and church leaders. It is the Word of Christ that saves, not the character of the preacher. The Gospel and the Sacraments gather the Church – all the more reason to be sure we hold to and proclaim the pure Gospel!

Baptism

God works in Baptism to bring the person (even an infant!) into His grace and unites the one baptized with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:1ff). There is no clearer illustration of salvation by grace alone than infant Baptism. Were you baptized? Then you can always claim the promises of God and know they apply to you! This is not license to sin but freedom to live each day for Christ, daily repenting of sin and daily rising to new life in Christ.

Confession and Absolution (and Repentance)

Our churches retain Confession and Absolution for the sake of the Absolution (both public and private), which is Christ Himself speaking through His called pastors to proclaim individually and personally the forgiveness of sins. Like all of the promises, this blessing also is received through faith. Regarding repentance, we say, “... true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace.”² Every Christian is called to speak the same forgiveness within the vocations to which God has called him (e.g. fathers and mothers to their children, teachers for their students, employers and employees, etc.)

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is the true Body and Blood of Christ given in, with and under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. The Body and Blood are given because Jesus promised to give them and are received by all who eat and drink. It is not our faith that makes Christ’s Body and Blood present in the bread and wine, but the Word and promise of

¹ Augsburg Confession IV, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), p. 38ff.

² Augsburg Confession XII, Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, p. 44.

Christ. Those who receive them in faith receive the blessings offered. Those who receive the Body and Blood apart from faith receive judgment, hence our careful practice of the Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:17ff).

The Use of the Sacraments

Some teach that the Sacraments bring benefit whether or not you believe the promise. Others teach that the Sacraments are simply ordinances we are commanded to follow in order to do the will of God. However, we teach that the Sacraments are gifts of God’s grace, that God is at work through them to bring the blessings of life and salvation and the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, the proper use of the Sacraments is to receive them in faith, trusting the promise of Christ to raise us to life and to feed us with His Body and Blood. What could be more comforting than this?

Confession or Outreach? Doctrine or Mission?

Law and Gospel. Maximum comfort in Christ crucified for the penitent sinner – that’s what our confession is all about. No more, no less. We are not just concerned for “getting it right” but we want our people to be comforted in Christ, and we want more people to come to know Christ and receive salvation in His name.

This is the heart and core of our confession! What we just did with the first 13 articles of the Augsburg Confession, you can also do with the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord as well. Read them again with an eye toward answering this question: How will this help me bring the greatest possible Gospel comfort to the penitent sinners in my congregation?

What is more, this is not something to keep to ourselves, but **is meant to be broadcast**, to be **confessed before the world**. To set doctrine and mission, confession or outreach against each other is to misunderstand both at a fundamental level. Both are equally essential. Indeed, one is not possible without the other.

So to those who are interested in outreach, we say, that’s good! It is our Lord’s command to take the Gospel to all creation. Now please **be sure** of what you are proclaiming by living faithfully in your confession.

And to those who claim to be “confessional,” we say, that’s good! “You shall know the truth,” Jesus said, “and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32). Now don’t keep that to yourself, but **get out there** in the world and **confess this truth** for as many as will hear you! Scatter the Lord’s good seed (His Word) wherever and whenever you can!

The world is full of people (so is your community!) who need to hear the Law of God which convicts of sin and then need to hear over and over again the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Christ, the same Gospel that is explained from so many different directions in our confession.

One hot summer day years ago brought for me the 4th funeral in the space of a week. I was tired of death and tired of dealing with death. It hit me again as I looked into the anxious faces of the mourners around the grave: they don’t care what YOU think, Mr. Pastor. They want to hear what God is thinking. Your opinion counts for absolutely nothing right about now. But this is what counts – God’s Word – and through my tears I began to read Jesus’ promise, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26).

This is what it comes to. We confess the truth of God in Jesus because, in the end, we live by that truth alone. Jesus alone gives life – also to pastors! Jesus alone carries us through death to a glorious resurrection to eternal life.

Priorities for Small Town/Rural Ministry

How does our confession make a difference in small town/rural ministry? There are a number of crucial areas in which confession and outreach, doctrine and mission, are equally essential. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but something suggestive for you.

1) Visitation

Constant, never ending, visitation. It’s all about building relationships with members and non-members alike, developing the right to inquire in some way: “How is it with you and the Lord Jesus?” Then listen, listen, listen, so that you will know how to apply the Word of God.

2) Funerals

Funerals are often community events. Above all else, you are there to bring maximum comfort in Christ to penitent sinners. You have the opportunity to bring clear Gospel into terrible situations – and the whole community may be listening in on the conversation!

3) Teaching

If you have a school, God be praised! It’s worth it. Set about helping the school to be Christ-centered. If you do not have a school, a good mid-week program centered in Bible and catechism is essential. But most of all, whatever the situation, **your adult instruction class** is a top priority. Start one three times a year, at least. Don’t wait until you have people, but announce the start 6-8 weeks ahead of time. If you are building relationships, there will be people who will come. The Gospel presented in a winsome way is the center. Show how each distinctive teaching of the Lutheran Church is centered in the forgiveness of sins.

4) Preaching and Worship

People need to know you care before they will really listen. Preaching is part of your relationship with them. Relational preaching, yes, but always centered in the Gospel. Don’t just talk about the Gospel, deliver the goods! “The Gospel Assumed Is the Gospel Denied.” See www.sidlcms.org/downloads next week!

5) Reading and Reflecting

Read and reflect on Scripture and the confessions – your own devotional reading – reflect on Christ at the center of everything. Then read and reflect on the lives of your people – reflect and record what you see God doing. All of this will help you to be prepared to “give a reason for the hope that is within you.” (1 Peter 3:15).

6) Your own confessor

You must have your own confessor who will help you discern and deal with (by repentance and forgiveness) the sinful motivations of your own heart. You cannot be involved in the “cure of souls” if you are not yourself under the care of a pastor. It simply cannot be done, in my opinion. You will become full of pride,

even unapproachable, or else too fearful to be of any good, unless you deal with your own sin in God’s way – repentance and forgiveness.

7) Everything comes back to the forgiveness of sins.

Everything about your ministry comes back to this – the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ. Remember – maximum comfort to the penitent sinner.

The Scriptures Speak Again

2 Timothy 1:8-15

Galatians 1:1-10

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

2 Timothy 4:1-5

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Words from the Wise Regarding the Purpose of Our Confession

- The Apology of the Augsburg Confession on the nature of justifying faith:

Therefore, whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice [propitiation]. The promise is received by faith; the word “free” excludes our merits and means that the blessing is offered only through mercy; the merits of Christ are the payment because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins. Scripture contains frequent pleas for mercy, and the holy Fathers often teach that we are saved through mercy. Therefore, every time mercy is mentioned, we must bear in mind that faith is also required, for it receives the promised mercy. Conversely, every time we speak about faith, we want the object [of faith] to be understood as well, namely, the promised mercy. For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy.³

- The Preface to the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord explains the approach of the 16th century confessors to the Augsburg Confession. Ought not our desire to be to take the same approach?

Herewith we again whole-heartedly subscribe this Christian and thoroughly scriptural Augsburg Confession, and we abide by the plain, clear, and pure meaning of its words. We consider this Confession a genuinely Christian symbol which all true Christians ought to accept next to the Word of God, just as in ancient times Christian symbols and confessions were formulated in the church of God when great controversies broke out, and orthodox teachers and hearers pledged themselves to these symbols with heart and mouth. Similarly we are determined by the grace of the Almighty to abide until our end by this repeatedly cited Christian Confession as it was delivered to Emperor Charles in 1530. And

³Apology IV.53ff, Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, p. 128f.

*we do not intend, either in this or in subsequent doctrinal statements, to depart from the aforementioned Confession or to set up a different and new confession.*⁴

We live only by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. And as members of the body of Christ we also live and serve for the sake of this Gospel in Word and Sacrament. As Paul writes, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

The grace of God in Jesus Christ – received by faith – this is our passion. This is our life. There is no better news than this. It's what we have to share with the world – with passion!

"Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the Word of the Lord may speed on and triumph, as it did among you ... The Lord is faithful; He will strengthen you and guard you from evil ... May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ"
(2 Thessalonians 3:1,3,5).

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⁴Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church* (The Formula of Concord: 2, 4-5). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p. 502.



The Augsburg Confession

I. [GOD]

¹ We unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the decree of the Council of Nicaea,^{3 2} 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.³ All three are one divine essence, eternal, without division, without end, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, one creator and preserver of all things visible and invisible.⁴ The word “person” is to be understood as the Fathers employed the term in this connection, not as a part or a property of another but as that which exists of itself⁴

⁵ Therefore all the heresies which are contrary to this article are rejected. Among these are the heresy of the Manichaeans,⁵ who assert that there are two gods, one good and one evil; also that of the Valentinians,⁶ Arians,⁷ Eunomians,⁸ Mohammedans,⁹ and others like them; ⁶ also that of the Samosatenes,¹ old and new, who hold that there is only one person and sophistically assert that the other two, the Word and the Holy Spirit, are not necessarily distinct persons but that the Word signifies a physical word or voice and that the Holy Spirit is a movement induced in creatures.¹¹

II. [ORIGINAL SIN]

¹ It is also taught among us that since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God.² Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin² is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.⁶

^(tr-45) ³ Rejected in this connection are the Pelagians³ and others who deny that original sin is sin, for they hold that natural man is made righteous by his own powers, thus disparaging the sufferings and merit of Christ⁵

III. [THE SON OF GOD]

¹ It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary,² and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died,³ and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God’s wrath.⁴ The same Christ also descended into hell, truly rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, that he may eternally rule and have dominion over all creatures, that through the Holy Spirit he may sanctify, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him,⁵ that he may bestow on them life and every grace and blessing, and that he may protect and defend them against the devil and against sin.⁶ The same Lord Christ will return openly to judge the living and the dead, as stated in the Apostles’ Creed.

IV. [JUSTIFICATION]

¹ It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith,² when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.³ For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.

V. [THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTRY]⁴

¹ To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments.² Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.³ And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.

⁴ Condemned are the Anabaptists and others⁵ who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel.

VI. [THE NEW OBEDIENCE]

¹ It is also taught among us that such faith should produce good fruits and good works and that we must do all such good works as God has commanded,⁶ but we should do them for God’s sake and not place our trust in them as if thereby to merit favor before God. ² For we receive forgiveness of sin and righteousness through faith in Christ, as ^(tr-47) Christ himself says, “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants’” (Luke 17:10). ³ The Fathers also teach thus, for Ambrose says, “It is ordained of God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved, and he shall have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit.”⁷

VII. [THE CHURCH]

¹ It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among who the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. ² For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. ³ It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. ⁴ It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4, 5, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

VIII. [WHAT THE CHURCH IS]

¹ 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).

³ Accordingly the Donatists⁸ and all others who hold contrary views are condemned.

IX. BAPTISM

¹ It is taught among us that Baptism is necessary and that grace is offered through it. ² Children, too, should be baptized, for in Baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to him.

³ On this account the Anabaptists who teach that infant Baptism is not right are rejected.

X. THE HOLY SUPPER OF OUR LORD

¹ It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received. ² The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected.

XI. CONFESSION

¹ It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained and not allowed to fall into disuse. However, in confession it is not necessary to enumerate all trespasses and sins,^{9 2} for this is impossible. Ps. 19:12, “Who can discern his errors?”^(tr-49)

XII. REPENTANCE

¹ It is taught among us that those who sin after Baptism receive forgiveness of sin whenever they come to repentance, ² and absolution should not be denied them by the church. ³ Properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of ⁵ sin, and yet at the same time to believe the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ), and this faith will comfort the heart and again set it at rest.¹⁶ Amendment of life and the forsaking of sin would then follow, for these must be the fruits of repentance, as John says, “Bear fruit that befits repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

⁷ Rejected here are those who teach that persons who have once become godly cannot fall again.²

⁹ Condemned on the other hand are the Novatians³ who denied absolution to such as had sinned after Baptism.

¹⁰ Rejected also are those who teach that forgiveness of sin is not obtained through faith but through the satisfactions made by man.

XIII. THE USE OF THE SACRAMENTS

¹ It is taught among us that the sacraments were instituted not only to be signs by which people might be identified outwardly as Christians, but that they are signs and testimonies of God’s will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith. ² For this reason they require faith, and they are rightly used when they are received in faith and for the purpose of strengthening faith.⁵

⁵Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The book of concord : The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran church* (The Confession of Faith: 2, I-XX, 39). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.



Lutherans Passionately Confessing Christ

A Case in Point

"You can't let them do this to you!" she insisted. "Let them do what?" I asked. Two weeks before my ordination I had shared a draft of my ordination vows with my mother-in-law.⁶ At the time she thought the LC-MS was way too conservative, and so she responded, "These promises are far too restrictive. Why are 'they' making you do this?"

"No one is 'making me' take this vow," I said, "but this is a promise I am making freely and willingly." I was pointing to the words by which I would assure the congregation calling me that all my preaching and teaching would conform to Scripture and our Lutheran confessions because Scripture is the Word of God and the confessions are a correct exposition of Scripture. "Well, then, why do you want to limit yourself so much? Isn't there more of God than what you find in the Bible? What if you find something new?" she asked me. "Yes, I am limiting myself freely and willingly, both because I believe this is the truth and for the sake of the people I will serve. I am convinced the Bible is the Word of God and that Jesus is the only way to life," I explained, "and our Lutheran confessions help me keep the Gospel of Jesus at the center of my ministry. Everything I say and do as a pastor needs to point people to Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from the dead. We are saved by God's grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, and we receive it through faith alone."

Here is the reason we insist the pastor repeat his ordination vow in front of the people he will serve. He needs to be firmly grounded in what he will preach and teach. The people need to know what they should expect – nothing but God's Word of Law and Gospel, centered in the cross of Jesus. Nothing less than faithful practice directing people to Jesus and His promises.

Why do we Lutherans have a specific confession?

Yes, pastors are called to be faithful confessors of the truth, both within the congregation and before the world. Christ is the content of our confession. Scripture and the Lutheran Symbols form and shape our ministry. We belong to a Synod with a definite doctrinal position drawn from Scripture and our confession, and to all of that we are committed by our ordination vow. But what if the people aren't looking for that, or don't know what it is? What's the best way to approach the situation should the pastor find that his new parish is weak in some area of doctrine or practice? How would you respond if...

1. You find that the previous pastor had been practicing "open communion."
2. You believe the worship practices of your new parish need to be changed.

⁶ This is a summary of an actual conversation that took place between my mother-in-law, now deceased, and myself about two weeks before my ordination in 1979. See also the quote below from Eugene Peterson, [Working the Angles](#), regarding the ordination vow.

3. The Baptismal Font is off in the corner somewhere where no one can see it.
4. Those who plan the contemporary service in your new parish consistently leave out the Creed and Lord's Prayer.
5. Your congregation is a closed circle with little or no interest in outreach.

What are the first three things you would do in these situations? How do we confess the truth in each case? There is, of course, a “ditch” on either side of the road. One school of thought would tell you – make your changes right away. Just do it and ask questions later. Present them with a *fait accompli*. Certainly, the Baptismal Font belongs front and center, so just move it! On the other side, pastors have been known to say, “Whatever the people want... It's their church. I just have to live with the decision, even if it's wrong. I'll go along to get along.”

Discuss together the Scriptural and confessional issues in the above cases. How does the pastor committed to Scripture and the confessions proceed? Here are some ideas to discuss:

1. Start on your knees in prayer. Ask good questions and then listen carefully. Find out what has been happening. What is the history? Did the problem develop because the people didn't know any different and just went along with a previous pastor because they liked him? Discovering the reason why something happened will help you determine your best approach to resolving it under the Word of God.
2. Develop a plan and share that plan with your District President for his help and support.
3. Always teach, teach, and teach some more, ever patient and gentle, yet firm in the Word, before changes are made – even good ones! Otherwise, when you leave, they'll just go back to what they were doing before. Remember, be patient. God's Word works on God's time-table, not ours. Not every problem is solved in two weeks.
4. Make sure your people understand the reason for the change. Much more can be accomplished when your people are with you in the change.
5. In every case, lead with the Word of God.

The Scriptures Speak

1. Jesus gives several warnings and also some promises for confessors in Matthew 10:24-33.

How do you take heed of the warnings?

Of what comfort are Jesus' promises? (In your discussion connect this Scripture to your own ordination vows.)

2. Read through 1 Timothy 4:1-16 together, taking special note of 6-7, 9-11, 14-16. How does being part of a confessional synod help you fulfill these instructions to pastors?

The issue always is salvation (4:16). How does faithful teaching save?

3. Examine the qualities required of a pastor in Titus 1:5-9. Where do they come from? Verse 9 explains that a pastor “must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may

be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it” (1:9). How does your ordination vow and your training in Scripture and the confessions help you “hold firm” and “give instruction”?

What is the purpose of “sound teaching” anyway?

4. Galatians 6:1-2 gives both a command and a warning to all who have spiritual responsibility for others. Discuss how this applies to the pastor faced with situations similar to those detailed above.
5. The Apostle Peter gives more instruction to pastors and to all Christians – for all believers are witnesses of what Christ has done. What are the admonitions and the promises in 1 Peter 3:13-18?

How are confessing pastors to live with their people according to 1 Peter 5:2-5?

What does such faithful humility look like? From where does it come?

6. Of all the issues raised in these Scriptures, which is the most urgent for you?

The Purpose of the Lutheran Confessions

“We don’t want Lutheran theology. We want Biblical theology!” one of the regular Bible class members insisted. The pastor leading the class was new to his parish, having just accepted the call a few months before.⁷ He had been aware that the congregation needed to be drawn toward a greater understanding of our confession and practice. In fact, this was one of the reasons he accepted the call – precisely because of this challenge.

Now the new pastor was teaching the Sunday morning class on the Book of Revelation because that’s what the class had asked for several weeks before. It was an enjoyable class with lots of give and take. Pastor thought this group of members was beginning to develop a level of personal trust, but there still seemed to be something of a “disconnect” at times. He had just explained how in Lutheran theology we understand the Book of Revelation to include the whole time between Pentecost and the Second Coming of Christ.

“Pastor, we don’t want Lutheran theology. We want Biblical theology!” she said. “There’s the reason we sometimes have a hard time understanding one other,” thought the pastor. And so he responded, “For me, Lutheran theology and Biblical theology are one and the same. In fact, my commitment to our Lutheran confessions means that everything I believe and teach must be drawn from the Bible. Our Lutheran theology helps me preach and teach the Bible faithfully.”

⁷ This story is also a summary of an actual conversation that took place in the Bible Class of one of the parishes served by the author.

“I’m a passionate Lutheran,” the pastor continued, “not by accident but by conviction, because Lutheran theology does the best job of keeping the Gospel central. The purpose of Lutheran teaching is always to point to Jesus, crucified and risen for us. Every article of Lutheran doctrine drawn from the Bible is designed to give the maximum comfort to the penitent sinner.”

Once they finished Revelation, this new pastor spent nearly two years with his Sunday morning class discussing “Distinctive Features of Lutheranism.” One week the people would pick the topic. When they were finished (often it was a question of life and sanctification), the pastor would pick a topic. Over the course of a couple of years, he worked through the articles of the Augsburg Confession one by one, seeking to illustrate how each article of Lutheran doctrine brings the greatest possible comfort to penitent sinners.

Such a thesis, of course, begs for demonstration. Here take out your copy of the Book of Concord and refer to the Augsburg Confession for a basic list of Lutheran teachings.

The Trinity

We confess one God in three persons, not only to be faithful to the Biblical revelation but also to comfort one another with the promise that this one God created us, redeemed us and now by His Word dwells within us so that we might believe. It’s all His, the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit for us. In a world of uncertainty, nothing is more sure than the name of the Blessed Trinity, the only name that saves. What is even more comforting, He puts this name on US in our Baptism!

Original Sin

If the problem we face with sin and death is something small and we only need a little help to overcome it ourselves, then our Savior is also quite small. But that’s not how we experience life! None of us can stop sinning. None of us can decide not to die! That’s because we are conceived and born in sin and cannot free ourselves. We need a Savior who has taken all our sins and conquered death for us! “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Paul writes (Romans 7:24-25).

The Person of Christ

Jesus Christ unites in one person everything it takes to be God plus everything it takes to be human. This is the confession of the Church since the earliest days (see Colossians 2:9). At one and the same time fully God and fully human, in His death and resurrection Christ has done all for our salvation. It’s all His work, not ours. If in our teaching we “fudge” on the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ, we lose the comfort. A less than divine Jesus cannot save. A less than human Christ cannot take our place in death. In Jesus, God Himself takes on flesh (John 1:14) to die and rise so that we might be His forever.

Justification

What could be more comforting than justification, the “article by which the Church stands or falls”? There is no better way to say it than: “... we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight...”⁸ Therefore, we always seek to proclaim a clear message of Law and Gospel, so that sinners are convicted by the Law and take comfort only in Christ and His work for us.

The Means of Grace and the Ministry

The Holy Spirit does not jump on us in a dark alley somewhere, but comes through means. So that we might have this faith that justifies, God instituted the preaching office to bring the Word and Sacrament to people. We don’t have to wonder where to find the grace of God. It’s here in the Word and Sacrament. These not only remind us of Jesus, by the Spirit’s power they convey Jesus to us.

⁸ Augsburg Confession IV, The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), p. 38ff.

There is no wordless Spirit and no spiritless Word of God. And the Word of God directs sinners to look, not to themselves, but to Christ alone for life.

The New Obedience

We are not saved by our good works. We are saved by the good works of Christ for us, received through faith in Him. But this faith, if it is alive, is always working, always doing things to serve God and the neighbor. Of course, God never needs our good works, but our neighbor always does. Whatever is done in faith is a good work. Though always tainted by sin here in this life, God sees us through the cross of Jesus. God sees that we are justified in Christ.

The Church

The holy Christian Church is found wherever there are believers in Christ. What is necessary for the true unity of the Church is not the right structure, not the Pope in Rome, but the Gospel purely taught and the Sacraments rightly done. This is a great comfort to the person distressed by all the mistakes and sins of churches and church leaders. It is the Word of Christ that saves, not the character of the preacher. The Gospel and the Sacraments gather the Church – all the more reason to be sure we hold to and proclaim the pure Gospel!

Baptism

God works in Baptism to bring the person (even an infant!) into His grace and unites the one baptized with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:1ff). There is no clearer illustration of salvation by grace alone than infant Baptism. Were you baptized? Then you can always claim the promises of God and know they apply to you! This is not license to sin but freedom to live each day for Christ, daily repenting of sin and daily rising to new life in Christ.

Confession and Absolution (and Repentance)

Our churches retain Confession and Absolution for the sake of the Absolution (both public and private), which is Christ Himself speaking through His called pastors to proclaim individually and personally the forgiveness of sins. Like all of the promises, this blessing also is received through faith. Regarding repentance, we say, “... true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace.”⁹ Every Christian is called to speak the same forgiveness within the vocations to which God has called him (e.g. fathers and mothers to their children, teachers for their students, employers and employees, etc.)

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is the true Body and Blood of Christ given in, with and under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins. The Body and Blood are given because Jesus promised to give them and are received by all who eat and drink. It is not our faith that makes Christ’s Body and Blood present in the bread and wine, but the Word and promise of Christ. Those who receive them in faith receive the blessings offered. Those who receive the Body and Blood apart from faith receive judgment, hence our careful practice of the Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:17ff).

The Use of the Sacraments

Some teach that the Sacraments bring benefit whether or not you believe the promise. Others teach that the Sacraments are simply ordinances we are commanded to follow in order to do the will of God. However, we teach that the Sacraments are gifts of God’s grace, that God is at work through them to bring the blessings of life and salvation and the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, the proper use of the Sacraments is to receive them in faith, trusting the promise of Christ to raise us to life and to feed us with His Body and Blood. What could be more comforting than this?

Do you see how each article of Lutheran teaching focuses our attention on the Gospel’s comfort for sinners?

⁹ Augsburg Confession XII, Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, p. 44.

Confession or Outreach? Doctrine or Mission?

Law and Gospel. Maximum comfort in Christ crucified for the penitent sinner – that’s what our confession is all about. No more, no less. We are not just concerned for “getting it right” but we want our people to be comforted in Christ, and we want more people to come to know Christ and receive salvation in His name.

This is the heart and core of our confession! What we just did with the first 13 articles of the Augsburg Confession, you can also do with the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord as well. Read them again with an eye toward answering this question: How will this help me bring the greatest possible Gospel comfort to the penitent sinners in my congregation?

What is more, this is not something to keep to ourselves, but **is meant to be broadcast**, to be **confessed before the world**. To set doctrine and mission, confession or outreach against each other is to misunderstand both at a fundamental level. Both are equally essential. Indeed, one is not possible without the other.

So to those who are interested in outreach, we say, that’s good! It is our Lord’s command to take the Gospel to all creation. Now please **be sure** of what you are proclaiming by living faithfully in your confession.

And to those who claim to be “confessional,” we say, that’s good! “You shall know the truth,” Jesus said, “and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32). Now don’t keep that to yourself, but **get out there** in the world and **confess this truth** for as many as will hear you! Scatter the Lord’s good seed (His Word) wherever and whenever you can!

The world is full of people (so is your community!) who need to hear the Law of God which convicts of sin and then need to hear over and over again the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Christ, the same Gospel that is explained from so many different directions in our confession.

One hot summer day years ago brought for me the 4th funeral in the space of a week. I was tired of death and tired of dealing with death. It hit me again as I looked into the anxious faces of the mourners around the grave: they don’t care what YOU think, Mr. Pastor. They want to hear what God is thinking. Your opinion counts for absolutely nothing right about now. But this is what counts – God’s Word – and through my tears I began to read Jesus’ promise, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26).

This is what it comes to. We confess the truth of God in Jesus because, in the end, we live by that truth alone. Jesus alone gives life – also to pastors! Jesus alone carries us through death to a glorious resurrection to eternal life.

Priorities for Small Town/Rural Ministry

How does our confession make a difference in small town/rural ministry? There are a number of crucial areas in which confession and outreach, doctrine and mission, are equally essential. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but something suggestive for you.

1) Visitation

Constant, never ending, visitation. It’s all about building relationships with members and non-members alike, developing the right to inquire in some way:

“How is it with you and the Lord Jesus?” Then listen, listen, listen, so that you will know how to apply the Word of God.

2) Funerals

Funerals are often community events. Above all else, you are there to bring maximum comfort in Christ to penitent sinners. You have the opportunity to bring clear Gospel into terrible situations – and the whole community may be listening in on the conversation!

3) Teaching

If you have a school, God be praised! It’s worth it. Set about helping the school to be Christ-centered. If you do not have a school, a good mid-week program centered in Bible and catechism is essential. But most of all, whatever, the situation, **your adult instruction class** is a top priority. Start one three times a year, at least. Don’t wait until you have people, but announce the start 6-8 weeks ahead of time. If you are building relationships, there will be people who will come. The Gospel presented in a winsome way is the center. Show how each distinctive teaching of the Lutheran Church is centered in the forgiveness of sins.

4) Preaching and Worship

People need to know you care before they will really listen. Preaching is part of your relationship with them. Relational preaching, yes, but always centered in the Gospel. Don’t just talk about the Gospel, deliver the goods! “The Gospel Assumed Is the Gospel Denied.” See www.sidlcms.org/downloads next week!

5) Reading and Reflecting

Read and reflect on Scripture and the confessions – your own devotional reading – reflect on Christ at the center of everything. Then read and reflect on the lives of your people – reflect and record what you see God doing. All of this will help you to be prepared to “give a reason for the hope that is within you.” (1 Peter 3:15).

6) Your own confessor

You must have your own confessor who will help you discern and deal with (by repentance and forgiveness) the sinful motivations of your own heart. You cannot be involved in the “cure of souls” if you are not yourself under the care of a pastor. It simply cannot be done, in my opinion. You will become full of pride, even unapproachable, or else too fearful to be of any good, unless you deal with your own sin in God’s way – repentance and forgiveness.

7) Everything comes back to the forgiveness of sins.

Everything about your ministry comes back to this – the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ. Remember – maximum comfort to the penitent sinner.

The Scriptures Speak Again

1. We have made much in recent years of Paul's charge to Timothy (2 Timothy 1:6-7) that he "fan into flame the gift of God." Check out also the corollaries that follow in 2 Timothy 1:8-14. List them here:

Verse 8 –

Verse 9 –

Verse 10 (especially appropriate as we confess the resurrection by the grave side) –

Verse 11 –

Verse 12 –

What do you hear in the admonitions of 13-14?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-4. What comforts you? What motivates you and "gets you going"?

In 2 Corinthians 4:5-6 Christ is the center of our proclamation. How do our Lutheran Confessions help us keep Him at the center?

3. What does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5?

How is this done in your ministry?

How do our confessions help you in this regard?

4. It is, after all, a matter of life and death. Nothing is more urgent than confessing Christ clearly before the world. If you have any doubts about that, look at Galatians 1:6-12. What got Paul so "worked up" here?

Which do you think Paul would be more angry about? Someone who got the confession wrong or someone who failed to reach out with it in as many ways as possible?¹⁰

5. Our confession is not a sectarian screed, but our confession is "catholic" in the best sense of the term. We confess the heart of what the church has always believed and taught. How does Ephesians 4:1-6 form and shape this aspect of our confession?

¹⁰ Unfair question! Wouldn't he be equally angry at both?

6. 2 Timothy 4:1-5 is familiar to us since these verses are part of nearly every ordination/installation service among us. Talk about this together. How do you take to heart Paul’s charge: “As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (4:5).

7. Are there other Scriptures to which you can point that inform our confession as Pastors? Talk about one of your favorites with your group.

Words from the Wise Regarding the Purpose of Our Confession

- The Smalcald Articles on the various forms of the Gospel because, again, it’s all about the Gospel:

We now want to return to the Gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sin is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the Gospel); second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matt. 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered,” etc.¹¹

- The Apology of the Augsburg Confession on the nature of justifying faith:

Therefore, whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice [propitiation]. The promise is received by faith; the word “free” excludes our merits and means that the blessing is offered only through mercy; the merits of Christ are the payment because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins. Scripture contains frequent pleas for mercy, and the holy Fathers often teach that we are saved through mercy. Therefore, every time mercy is mentioned, we must bear in mind that faith is also required, for it receives the promised mercy. Conversely, every time we speak about faith, we want the object [of faith] to be understood as well, namely, the promised mercy. For faith does not justify or save because it is a worthy work in and of itself, but only because it receives the promised mercy.¹²

- The Preface to the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord explains the approach of the 16th century confessors to the Augsburg Confession. Ought not our desire to be to take the same approach?

Herewith we again whole-heartedly subscribe this Christian and thoroughly scriptural Augsburg Confession, and we abide by the plain, clear, and pure

¹¹Smalcald Articles III.4, Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, p. 319.

¹²Apology IV.53ff, Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, p. 128f.

meaning of its words. We consider this Confession a genuinely Christian symbol which all true Christians ought to accept next to the Word of God, just as in ancient times Christian symbols and confessions were formulated in the church of God when great controversies broke out, and orthodox teachers and hearers pledged themselves to these symbols with heart and mouth. Similarly we are determined by the grace of the Almighty to abide until our end by this repeatedly cited Christian Confession as it was delivered to Emperor Charles in 1530. And we do not intend, either in this or in subsequent doctrinal statements, to depart from the aforementioned Confession or to set up a different and new confession.¹³

- This is our church’s confession. It shows us how to read Scripture and it identifies what we believe about Scripture. It’s purpose is to help us keep the Gospel clear. That’s why we, also in these last days, desire to stand in the same line of faithful confessors and fathers in the faith who prepared this confession. As confessing pastors, we also “pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated.”¹⁴ The Leaders’ Guide includes another reference explaining the role of the Augsburg Confession.
- C.F.W. Walther insists on a quia subscription to the confessions because any other approach will rob the church of its symbolical books:

For if those who pledge themselves to the confessions still retain the freedom to choose what they like, then there is no point in saying, “yes, I profess the same faith you do.” For I still have no idea what he is professing, if he does not say, “from its first sentence to its last one, the Lutheran Confession is my confession.”¹⁵

He explains that our Synod requires our pastors to swear to the confessions and testify:

“I have checked them against Scripture and have found that they are in perfect agreement with Scripture, that they do not claim a single doctrine that is not taken directly from Holy Scripture.” Such a person need not, because of conscience scruples have to swear [to the confessions] “in so far as,” because you see, He himself has determined that they are in full agreement. Therefore he vows, “Because they are in perfect agreement with Holy Scripture.”¹⁶

- Eugene Peterson is a Presbyterian pastor, but I believe he’s got it right in this passage from Working the Angles on why we take a vow at ordination, and is worth quoting at length (a more complete version of this quote is found in the Leaders Guide):

... “We need help in keeping our beliefs sharp and accurate and intact. We don’t trust ourselves – our emotions seduce us into infidelities. We know that we are launched on a difficult and dangerous act of faith, and that there are strong influences intent on diluting or destroying it. We want you to help us: be our

¹³Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church* (The Formula of Concord: 2, 4-5). Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p. 502.

¹⁴Tappert, pp. 503f.

¹⁵ C.F.W. Walther, On the Primary Duties Incumbent on a Synod that Wants Rightly to Be Considered an Evangelical Lutheran Synod, a doctrinal essay presented to the constituting convention of the Iowa District of the Missouri Synod in 1879, in Essays for the Church, Volume 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), p. 10.

¹⁶ Walther, On the Primary Duties, p. 18.

pastor, a minister of word and sacrament, in the middle of this world’s life. Minister with word and sacrament to us in all the different parts and stages of our lives – in our work and play, with our children and our parents, at birth and death, in our celebrations and sorrows, on those days when morning breaks over us in a wash of sunshine, and those other days that are all drizzle. This isn’t the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task. We will find someone else to do the other important and essential tasks. *This* is yours: word and sacrament.

“One more thing: we are going to ordain you to this ministry and we want your vow that you will stick to it. This is not a temporary job assignment but a way of life that we need lived out in our community. We know that you are launched on the same difficult belief venture in the same dangerous world as we are. We know your emotions are as fickle as ours, and that your mind can play the same tricks on you as ours. That is why we are going to *ordain* you and why we are going to extract a vow from you. We know that there are going to be days and months, maybe even years, when we won’t feel like believing anything and won’t want to hear it from you. And we know that there will be days and weeks and maybe even years when you won’t feel like saying it. It doesn’t matter. Do it. You are ordained to this ministry. Vowed to it. There may be times when we come to you as a committee or delegation and demand that you tell us something else than what we are telling you now. Promise right now that you won’t give in to what we demand of you. You are not the minister of our changing desires, or our time-conditioned understanding of our needs, or our secularized hopes for something better. With these vows of ordination we are lashing you fast to the mast of word and sacrament so that you will be unable to respond to the siren voices. There are a lot of other things to be done in this wrecked world and we are going to be doing at least some of them, but if we don’t know the basic terms with which we are working, the foundational realities with which we are dealing – God, kingdom, gospel – we are going to end up living futile, fantasy lives. Your task is to keep telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, speaking the biblical words of command and promise and invitation.”

That, or something very much like that, is what I understand the church to say to the people whom it ordains to be its pastors.¹⁷

We live only by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. And as pastors we also live and serve for the sake of this Gospel in Word and Sacrament. As Paul writes, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Conversation (Groups of 3-4)

1. Share with one another. Why are you a Lutheran pastor? How did you come to this conviction? What ignites your passion?
2. One homiletics professor told his seminary class that pastors should re-read Apology IV every six weeks. This may be a bit of hyperbole, but do you see value in regular reading of the confessions as part of your study program? How would you begin?
3. Talk about the false dichotomy between “confession” and “outreach.” How does our confession form, shape and motivate our outreach?

¹⁷ Eugene H. Peterson, Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 23-25.

4. Above all else, the Augsburg Confession is concerned for the comfort of sinners. How does that help you in your preaching and pastoral care?
5. Respond to the Eugene Peterson quote. How well does this reflect your understanding of your own ordination vows?
6. Our Synod has experienced division in several areas of teaching and practice. What are the issues you struggle with in your circuit? In light of Walther’s comments, how might an honest look at our confession help resolve some of these?
7. Living in our confession, how would you approach as pastor a parish that you believe is deficient in its doctrine or practice?
8. Living in our confession, how do you and your people reach out with the Gospel faithfully? How do you think our confession can help your congregation live and serve more consciously as a “mission outpost”? See also the Apology quote above.
9. Run through the basic list of Lutheran doctrines. Discuss again how each one is designed to bring maximum comfort to penitent sinners. How about more difficult teachings such as “predestination”? (See Ephesians 1:3ff).
10. What keeps us from reaching out with this confession more than we do now?¹⁸
11. What will you do differently as a result of this study?
12. Be sure to lift up one another in prayer. Seek to hold each other accountable in your circuit to your decisions as a result of #10.

*“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the Word of the Lord may speed on and triumph, as it did among you ... The Lord is faithful; He will strengthen you and guard you from evil ... May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ”
(2 Thessalonians 3:1,3,5).*

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¹⁸ If you think the question unfair, ask why some seem to “water down” the confession and others seem to “hide it” in some way – or are these both caricatures?