

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CONFSSIONAL LUTHERAN?

- with application to ministry on the home mission field -¹

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In the name of Jesus. Amen.

In asking me to give this presentation, the program committee included some explanatory notes: “There seems to be a subtle movement. Our churches used to be known as *evangelical* Lutheran, and prided themselves on that. Now, the greater emphasis seems to be that we're *confessional* Lutheran. These two cannot be pitted against one another, for ultimately, they are the same thing. The heart of the Confessions is a correct testimony of Christ's Gospel—which is the *euangelion*. What can be done, perhaps, is to define what it means to be a church that is committed to Gospel outreach and to the Confessions. What role do the Confessions play in our mission work? They state our doctrine. Do they also shape our practice? If so, to what degree?”

Is the perceived recent change from emphasis on “We are *evangelical* Lutherans” to “We are *confessional* Lutherans” evidence of a move in the direction of *preserving* the truth at the expense of *proclaiming* it? If so, then we are no longer truly confessional Lutherans. The thesis of this paper is that a truly *confessional*, *gospel-preserving*, Lutheran will also always be an *evangelical*, *gospel-proclaiming*, Lutheran. A confessional Lutheran is a confessing Lutheran. A look at some of the identifying marks of a confessional Lutheran will demonstrate that fact.

Norma Normans

A confessional Lutheran is a *norma normans* Lutheran. Lutheran pastors are well acquainted with that term. For the sake of lay people who may be present, I'll explain it briefly. It has to do with the norm, or standard, that is used to determine what is taught in our churches. The Confessions are not the *norma normans*, that is, they are not the ruling standard. You don't look first to the Confessions to determine what the church should teach.

The Holy Scriptures are the *norma normans*, the ruling norm. The Confessions are the *norma normata*, the norm that is ruled by the Scriptures. The Confessions themselves are very clear on this:

We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone.

Other writings of ancient or contemporary teachers, whatever their names may be, shall not be regarded as equal to Holy Scriptures, but all of them together shall be subjected to it, and not be accepted in any other way, or with any further authority, than as witnesses of how and where the teaching of the prophets and apostles was preserved after the time of the apostles.

The Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge, rule, and guiding principle, according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are

1 This essay was presented at the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 1, 2012. The conference was organized and conducted by the home mission boards of the WELS South Atlantic and South Central Districts.

good or evil, correct or incorrect.²

The Word of God—and no one else, not even an angel—should establish articles of faith.³

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

Confessional Lutherans, who are committed to the Scriptures as the *norma normans*, will not say *more* than the Scriptures say. A number of years back, when I was serving on the WELS Commission on Inter-church Relations, we had many discussions with the ELS Doctrine Committee on the question of the “moment of presence” in the Lord's Supper. The question: Exactly when do the body and blood of Jesus become present in the Sacrament? These discussions between brothers were cordial and beneficial. In my opinion, however, they took longer than they should have because too much weight was given to the writings of the Lutheran Church fathers, although it was certainly a blessing to study them, especially Martin Luther's *Great Confession* (1528) on the Lord's Supper.

A careful study of the pertinent Scripture passages would have led fairly quickly to the conclusion that, though Christ's body and blood are really present in the Sacrament, one cannot set a precise moment when the real presence begins. To say that Christ's body and blood are present only at the point of reception of the bread and wine is to say more than the Scriptures say. Likewise, to say that the body and blood of Jesus are present as soon as the words of institution are spoken is to go beyond the clear teaching of the Scriptures. We simply don't know when the real presence begins. What we do know is that what is consecrated (with the words of institution), distributed, and received is the true body and true blood of Jesus. Since Scripture is the *norma normans*, that is what confessional Lutherans will believe.

Confessional Lutherans, in their zeal to uphold the Confessions, also will be careful not to make the Word say something *different* from what it actually says. For example, confessional Lutherans are Word and Sacrament Lutherans. They value highly, not just the Word, but the Sacraments. Some, in their eagerness to put the spotlight on the Sacrament of the Altar, maintain that the Bread of Life discourse of Jesus in John 6 is referring to the Lord's Supper. Such is hardly the case, since Jesus specifically says in this discourse, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn 6:53). A careful study of the context indicates that Jesus here is simply repeating in a picturesque way what he had just said, “He who believes in me has everlasting life” (Jn 6:47). To say that Jesus is referring to the need for the Lord's Supper would be to say that more than faith in Jesus is necessary for everlasting life.

Confessional Lutherans study the Confessions as *norma normata*, the norm, the standard, that is ruled by the Scriptures, which are the *norma normans*. The rally cry of confessional Lutherans is not, “To the Confessions! To the Confessions!” but “To the Scriptures! To the Scriptures!”⁴

Quia

A confessional Lutheran is a *quia* Lutheran. Again, just a quick word of explanation. *Quia* is a Latin word that means “because.” Another Latin word, *quatenus*, means “insofar as.” Confessional Lutheran pastors accept the Lutheran Confessions and pledge that their preaching and teaching will be in accord with them *quia*, **because**, the Confessions teach what the Word of God teaches. That was certainly the

2 Formula of Concord, Epitome, Introduction, 1, 2, 7. All quotations from the Confessions are from the Kolb-Wengert translation (Augsburg Fortress 2000).

3 Smalcald Articles II, II, 15.

4 The same principle applies with regard to a current issue in the WELS: choosing a Bible translation. The first question to ask is not, “Does the translation agree with our doctrine?” The first question is, “Does the translation accurately and clearly convey what God says in his Word?” The Scriptures are *norma normans*.

conviction of the authors of the Confessions. There was no *quatenus* subscription on their part!⁵

Genuinely confessional Lutheran pastors today likewise do not merely accept the Confessions *quatenus*, **insofar as**, they agree with the Scriptures (which would be similar to saying of the Scriptures, “I believe that the Bible *contains* the Word of God”).

Confessional Lutheran pastors take the Confessions seriously because they are convinced that what they teach is an accurate testimony to what the Scriptures themselves teach. I graduated from the Seminary 50 years ago. There is still etched in my memory, probably indelibly, the afternoon toward the close of my senior year that I sat face-to-face with Pres. Carl Lawrenz. The three most important questions he asked me that day were something to this effect: “Do you accept all of the Scriptures as the inspired, inerrant Word of God?” “Do you accept all the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, not *quatenus*, insofar as, but *quia*, because, they are a clear testimony to the truths of the Scripture?” And, “Do you pledge that all your preaching and teaching will be in harmony with the Scriptures and Confessions?” I assume that you pastors who are present here today have a similar recollection of that day near the end of your Seminary days.

Some churches pride themselves on being non-creedal. “Our only confession,” they say, “is the Bible.” That sounds good, of course, but it is inadequate. That works only if everyone who says, “We teach only what the Bible teaches,” believes and teaches the same thing. A Jehovah's Witness who comes to your door will assert, “We are strictly a Bible church.” There is more than a little difference between the doctrine of a Jehovah's Witness and that of a Lutheran.

Confessions were born out of controversy. In the early church it was Christology. Who is Christ? How is he related to the Father and the Holy Spirit? The early confessions of the church (the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian creeds), to which confessional Lutherans subscribe, gave the Bible's answer to that question. At the time of the Reformation, it was above all the doctrine of justification. How does a sinner get right in the eyes of God? That question and others related to it were answered in the six Lutheran Confessions: the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Apology (1531), the Smalcald Articles (1537), the Small and Large Catechisms (1529), and the Formula of Concord (1580).

The Confessions define who we are. Ideally, it would be sufficient to say, “We are Christians. We are Lutherans.” But the name “Lutheran” isn't copyrighted and many who go by the name of Lutheran, e.g., the ELCA, give only a token subscription to the Confessions.

To call ourselves “*confessional* Lutherans” identifies us as those who are fully committed to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. It is a title that can be worn as a badge of honor. In my opinion, however, it is not a particularly helpful way to identify ourselves on a home mission field, since the terminology does not readily convey meaning to the unchurched, whom we wish to reach with the gospel. Rather than saying, “We are confessional Lutherans,” preach and teach the Word in accordance with the Confessions. That is the mark of a confessional Lutheran pastor.

Objective Justification

A confessional Lutheran is an objective (or universal) justification Lutheran. Mankind's primary problem is universal. “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins” (Eccl. 7:20). “The wages of sin is death” (Ro 6:23).

God's solution to mankind's problem is likewise universal. “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us *all*” (Is 53:6). “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole *world*” (1 Jn 2:2).

St. Paul puts the two (universal sin and universal justification) together: “Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that

5 For a statement from the Confessions themselves, cf. the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XII, 40. This reference is printed out on page 14 of this essay.

brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many [i.e., all] were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many [i.e., all] will be made righteous” (Ro 5:18-19).

In view of the tremendous implications of objective, universal justification, it seems a bit surprising that the Confessions don't have a separate article on this subject, though they do deal extensively with subjective, personal justification. There is probably a simple reason for this. That Christ made atonement for the sins of the whole world was not the point of contention between the Roman Catholics and the followers of Luther. The issue was: How does the sinner receive the benefit of Christ's redemptive work? Hence, the emphasis is not so much on *universal* justification as on *individual* justification.

Yet, though there is not a separate article in the Confessions on universal justification, it is certainly assumed (just as, for example, the historicity of the Genesis 1-3 account is assumed, though it is not specifically dealt with). A few examples:

Through the law sin is recognized, but its guilt is not relieved. The law was shown to be harmful since *all* are made sinners, but when the Lord Jesus came, he forgave the sin for *everyone*.... For after the *entire world* was placed in subjection, he took away the sin of the *entire world*.⁶

Here is the first and chief article: That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4); and he alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1); and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53); furthermore, “All have sinned,” and “they [the “all” of the previous phrase] are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...by his blood” (Rom. 3).⁷

If we want to consider our eternal election to salvation profitably, we must always firmly and rigidly insist that, like the proclamation of repentance, so the promise of the gospel is *universalis*, that is, it pertains to all people (Luke 24).... “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” for it (John 3). Christ has taken away the sins of the world (John 1); his flesh was given “for the life of the world” (John 6); his blood is “the atoning sacrifice for...the whole world (1 John 1).⁸

The doctrine of objective justification, as taught in the Scriptures and testified to in the Confessions, is a special treasure of the Lutheran Church. It assures us that we can't go wrong when we establish missions. Yes, limited manpower, limited resources, and limited time will make it necessary to limit the places to which we will be able to go with the gospel. And we will agonize over where to go and when to leave one field for another. But wherever we go, every single person, regardless of color, class, or culture, is numbered among those whom God in Christ has declared just, righteous in his eyes. The world, and every person in it, is our mission field. If all have been justified, all have the right to hear about it.

Subjective Justification

A confessional Lutheran is a subjective justification Lutheran. St. Paul speaks of what confessional Lutherans call subjective, or individual, justification in these familiar words: “We maintain that a man is

6 Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, 103 (emphasis added).

7 Smalcald Articles, II, 1-3.

8 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI: Election, 28. Contrast this with the assertion of Calvinist counselor Jay Adams that “counselors must not tell any unsaved counselee that Christ died for him, for they cannot say that. No man knows except Christ himself who are his elect for whom he died” (Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, Baker Book House, 1970, p. 69).

justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Ro 3:28). Justification, God's act of declaring the sinner righteous in his eyes, not by works, but by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ's vicarious atonement alone, that is the heart and center of confessional Lutheran theology.

The Formula of Concord emphatically states:

This article on justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the “most important of all Christian teachings,” “without which no poor conscience can have lasting comfort or recognize properly the riches of Christ's grace.” As Dr. Luther wrote, “If this one teaching stands in its purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated;...but where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to ward off any error or sectarian spirit.”⁹

The Apology puts it this way:

By faith alone we obtain the forgiveness of sins on account of Christ and by faith alone we are justified, that is, out of unrighteous people we are made righteous or are regenerated.... This alone brings a sure and firm consolation to godly minds. Moreover, there needs to be a teaching in the church from which the faithful may receive the certain hope of salvation.... How will their people, who have heard nothing about this faith and who assume that they must doubt whether or not they obtained the forgiveness of sins, sustain themselves when dying?¹⁰

Confessional Lutherans have a story to tell, the story of a God who loved the world so deeply that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Our story is not, “It's all yours, if...” It is, “It's all yours, period.”

The quotation from the Apology I just cited reminds me of one of my experiences in sharing the message of God's love in Christ. I would imagine that many, if not all, of you here today have a similar story you could tell. She was dying of cancer, a middle-age woman. She was dying, and she knew it. She had been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church. She was a graduate of a Roman Catholic elementary school, high school, and college. But she was a lapsed Catholic. Her friend, a member of the church where I was serving, asked the woman if she would be willing to have me visit her. She agreed.

It didn't take long for the conversation to turn to issues of life and death. The woman knew that her impending death wouldn't be the end of things. But she didn't know where she was going to spend eternity. I spent close to an hour with her, an unusually long hospital visit.

I knew that Christ had died for her (objective justification). And I knew that through faith (subjective justification) the benefits of Christ's death—forgiveness of sins and eternal life—would be hers. In the course of our conversation I heard many a “yes, but...” response to my assurance that Jesus had done it all for her and that her salvation was totally a gift, received by faith. Steeped in the theology that Luther and the other Reformers had come out of, the woman could not accept the fact that there was nothing she *had* to do, nothing she *could* do, to have the assurance of eternal life. More than once, after I quoted and explained a Bible passage (such as Romans 3:28), she would respond, “That's just your interpretation.” She simply couldn't believe that salvation was totally a gift.

I was running out of things to say, and in addition I had been there nearly an hour. It was time to leave. I told her, “I think I need to be on my way. But before I go, I want to leave you with one last verse from the Bible. I'm not going to explain it. I'm not going to try to interpret it, so you can know that I'm not putting my own spin on it. I'm simply going to read it to you. Here it is:

9 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III: Righteousness, 6.

10 Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: Justification, 117-119.

‘It is by grace you have been saved, through faith
—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—
not by works, so that no one can boast’”(Eph 2:8-9).

She lay there in silence for a time. Then she turned her head toward me and asked, “That's it?” I responded, “That's it.”

Though God alone can look into the heart, I am confident that she died a believer and right now is with her Savior in heaven.

All doctrine is practical. It applies to people's lives. Confessional Lutherans treasure the doctrine of subjective justification, salvation by grace alone through faith alone. When this article is not hidden away as a priceless heirloom but is openly displayed, it gives people, as the *Apology* puts it, the “certain hope of salvation.”

There is no other way to such certainty. That is why justification has properly been called *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*—the article on which the church stands and falls.

Those who call themselves confessional Lutherans will want to take care not to obscure the beauty and majesty and centrality of the doctrine of justification. Rightly so, confessional Lutherans take seriously everything the Scriptures teach. At various times, circumstances in the church bring certain doctrines into the foreground, in recent years doctrines such as church and ministry, church fellowship, and the role of man and woman in God's world. But every doctrine needs to be approached and applied in the light of the central doctrine of the Scriptures: justification.

I believe that was one of the reasons, humanly speaking, for the success of Luther's efforts at reforming the church. Unlike previous attempts at reform, which tended to look at errors in the church in isolation, Luther would show how a particular error affected the article of justification. Confessional Lutherans today need to take care to do the same when doctrinal controversies arise. We uphold doctrine so as not to obscure in any way *the* doctrine through which God gives sinners the certain hope of salvation.

Closely connected with the doctrine of justification is the doctrine of the means of grace, which is God's justification delivery system.

Means of Grace

A confessional Lutheran is a means of grace Lutheran. Confessional Lutherans subscribe without reservation to the Formula of Concord, which states:

God wants to call human beings to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, to convert them, to give them new birth, and to sanctify them through these means, and in no other way than through his holy Word (which people hear proclaimed or read) and through the Sacraments (which they use according to his Word)... All who want to be saved should listen to this proclamation. For the proclamation and the hearing of God's Word are the Holy Spirit's tools in, with, and through which he wills to work effectively and convert people to God.¹¹

The Word works. It is powerful, “sharper than any double-edged sword” (He 4:12). The Sacraments work. They are powerful, creating and strengthening faith. I remember Harold¹² from the early days of my ministry. Dragged along by his wife to a Bible information class, in the first several weeks he made no secret of his boredom and disinterest in what was being taught. About halfway through the course, one of the men in the class expressed his disagreement with something that I had said. All of a sudden Harold of

11 Formula of Concord, Article II: Free Will, 50, 52.

12 Name changed.

all people, Harold, who had been a silent non-participant up to that point, spoke up. “How can you say that?” he asked the man. “Don't you see that's what the Word of God says?”

After class, Harold came up to me and said, “Pastor, something changed!” To which I responded, “Harold, something, no, *someone*, changed *you*—the Holy Spirit working through the Word.” The Word is “living and active” (He 4:12). It works. Forty-six years later Harold remains a Christian and a member of the congregation where I confirmed him.

There was the single woman who told me when I invited her to attend a BIC, “I'm willing to come; but I want you to know that I can never join your church. I will never accept what you teach about the role of women.” There was the man with a heavy background in science. Hearing about a six-day creation near the beginning of the BIC, he told me, “There's no way that I can ever accept such a teaching.” To both I said, as you also would say, “Are you willing to continue to listen to the Word?” They were. And in time the Holy Spirit, through the message of law and gospel, broke down their resistance to God's truth. The means of grace are powerful and effective.

So, all I need to do is to utilize the Spirit's tools: preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. Right? Right!

But---it should not come as a surprise to us that Satan will twist wondrous truths that confessional Lutherans treasure and turn them to suit his own purposes. The woman troubled with our position on women in the church? She loves music. She visited a special Nine Lessons and Carols Christmas-time church service that we had advertised in the community. She was the only person who came as a result of the advertising. One soul. A great return! The man who had questions about creation and evolution? His wife brought him to a BIC, where he could hear the Word. Harold? He and his wife had started to attend church after I had almost camped at their door, visiting them multiple times, until they finally attended a service, “just to get you off our backs,” as Harold's wife put it to me.

“All I need to do is preach the Word and administer the Sacraments.” Yes, but for that to happen, people need to be brought into contact with the Word. A wife brings her husband to church. Publicity in a community draws someone to God's house. A preacher gets out of his study and hits the streets. All with the same result: people are connected with the Word.

Often the way to make that connection will be through so-called “felt needs.” A felt needs approach to evangelism has been criticized as pandering to people, giving them what they *want* rather than what they *need*. Such criticism is often justified. A crass example would be the health and wealth “gospel” that comes from preachers such as Joel Osteen.

But properly used, there is much to be said in support of a felt needs evangelism approach. You cannot expect an unbeliever, in whose heart the Spirit is not dwelling, to have proper spiritual motives for coming to hear the Word. People need the Spirit for fruits of the Spirit (including a desire to feast on the Bread of Life) to blossom in their lives. Felt needs are the symptoms, the things people recognize, the things they feel. Sin, as taught in the Word, is the real problem. God's grace in Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures, is the solution. Approaching people by addressing their *felt* needs can provide opportunities to introduce them to their *real* need: God's revealed message of sin and grace.

The Holy Spirit works only through Word and Sacraments. That truth will lead confessional Lutherans to study people and their community to determine how best to arouse people's interest in what only the Word and Sacraments can provide.

Evangelical

A confessional Lutheran is an *evangelical* Lutheran. It's sad that this beautiful word is being so badly misused in our time so as perhaps to have lost some of its luster. We have the ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which can hardly be described as evangelical. We have the Evangelicals who don't understand and therefore don't apply properly the distinction between law and gospel, and

consequently are not truly evangelical.¹³

But we won't want to surrender this beautiful word. A confessional Lutheran is an *evangelical* Lutheran. Those of you who were students in classes I taught at the Seminary, particularly the Pastoral Epistles and Pastoral Theology, may recall that I would define an evangelical Lutheran as one who is neither lax nor legalistic, but gospel-centered.

A confessional Lutheran is an evangelical Lutheran. An evangelical Lutheran is a gospel-centered Lutheran. How can it be otherwise? For what is the gospel? It is the message of justification, that God declares the sinner to be righteous by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. If justification is the *doctrine* on which the church stands and falls, then the gospel is the *message* on which the church stands and falls.

My guess is that every generation of students at our Seminary receives the encouragement that I received when I was a student there, encouragement that I also passed on to my students: read and re-read Walther's *Law and Gospel*. In his 25th, and final, thesis Walther says, "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching."¹⁴

He writes, "The ultimate aim in our preaching of the law must be to preach the gospel." He goes so far as to say, "The Lord never makes mention of hell except for the purpose of bringing men to heaven."¹⁵

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

He [Paul] regarded all other matters as subordinate to his primary subject for preaching, namely, the gospel concerning Christ. Now, do not merely listen to this statement of the apostle, but think of the time when you will be the pastor of a congregation and make a vow to God that you will adopt the apostle's method, that you will not stand in your pulpits sad-faced, as if you were bidding men to come to a funeral, but like men that go wooing a bride or announcing a wedding. If you do not mingle law with the gospel you will always mount your pulpit with joy.... It is not sufficient for you to be conscious of your orthodoxy and your ability to present the pure doctrine correctly. These are, indeed, important matters; however, no one will be benefited by them if you confound law and gospel. The very finest form of confounding both occurs when the gospel is preached *along with* [emphasis in original] the law, but is not the predominating element in the sermon.¹⁶

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

This is not to imply that an evangelical Lutheran will be lax in doctrine. Confessional Lutherans reject so-called gospel reductionism, which elevates the gospel above the Scriptures. Carl Braaten champions

13 Some Evangelicals, such as Michael Horton, lament this deficiency. Cf., for example, his article written in 1996, "The Law and the Gospel," at <http://www.whitehorseinn.org/free-articles/the-law-the-gospel-by-michael-horton.html>.

14 C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. By W. H. T. Dau, Concordia: St. Louis, n.d., p. 403.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 404.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 406. An elderly woman in the congregation I served before I accepted the call to the Seminary told me as she was leaving church on an Easter Sunday morning, "I always love it when you preach on Easter. You smile so much." Though I appreciated her comment, it also made me wonder, What am I doing the rest of the Sundays?

this approach in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

The ultimate authority of Christian theology is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness—the “canon within the canon.” Biblicism holds to an infallible Bible that can be the absolute authority in matters of belief and morals. . . . Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel.¹⁷

Yes, there are fundamental doctrines in the Scripture, doctrines that are necessary for salvation, and non-fundamental doctrines, doctrines that are not as critical for salvation. But since the Scripture, all of it, is the Word of God, every doctrine in it is important. Look at what happened in the Lutheran church in our country when certain scriptural doctrines were turned into so-called “open questions,” not divisive of fellowship, with which one was free to agree or disagree.¹⁸ The number of doctrines for which agreement is necessary for fellowship has continued to dwindle over the years, one of the results being the formation of the ELCA.

Confessional Lutherans will not be lax: we won't succumb to the pressure to conform to the changing ways of the world, not if those changes run contrary to God's clear Word.¹⁹ We won't water down the content of our Bible information classes in the hope of gaining more members.

At the same time, confessional Lutherans will not be legalistic. This is always a major danger for a church body, such as the WELS, which is intent (and properly so) on conserving the truth. J. P. Koehler drives home this point forcefully in his essay, *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns* (“Legalism in Our Midst”).²⁰ In my opinion, as with Walther's *Law and Gospel*, the message of this essay should be read and taken to heart by every new generation of confessional Lutherans.

Though *Law and Gospel* and *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns* are dissimilar in many ways, they have this in common: they emphasize the need for proper use of law and gospel. Koehler's main thesis is that “*Gesetzlich Wesen* [Legalism] among Christians consists in their taking the motivation and the forms of their actions from the law instead of letting them flow freely out of the gospel” (p. 1)²¹ He writes:

The Christian lets the threatenings of the law move him to obedience, so that selfishness in the form of desire for reward remains a driving force in his actions. The Christian lets the curses of the law drive him, so that fear lies at the roots of his activities. And this he does not only where he uses the law as the point of departure for his own actions, but also where he tries to force it on others as the source of their obedience (p. 5).

Legalism ignores the only truly real fountain of Christian life, and turns to the law which never was intended by God as a fountain of new life. On the one hand it puts the law in the place of the

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

18 Cf. the Iowa Synod's four Open Questions (1859): the doctrines of church and ministry, Sunday as sabbath, the Antichrist, and millennialism.

19 E.g., living together apart from marriage.

20 Koehler's essay was published in the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, October 1914-July 1915. Quotations are from the English translation in the Proceedings of the Thirty-fifth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, August 5-12, 1959. The essay can be accessed from the essay file of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

21 Page references are from the PDF format of the essay in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file.

gospel and on the other it confuses both law and the gospel so that neither law nor the gospel remains. It turns law into opposite, to a means for creating life. The result is that not only the life flowing the reform does not achieve the righteousness before God, but also the intended effect of the law, the quenching and destroying of the old Adam, is not realized (pp. 5-6).

Koehler decries as legalism what he calls “harping on orthodoxy,” by which he means “the insistence on the 'right faith' where the emphasis has shifted from 'faith' to 'right'” (p. 7). He writes:

It goes without saying that the gospel must be kept pure; for without the truth of the gospel...one cannot have faith, one cannot come to faith. But to keep the gospel pure is not of immediate interest to the heralding of the gospel, that is of secondary interest.... Evangelical proclamation primarily aims for faith. Faith is what it wishes to bring about. But that concerns the inner emotions. To the heart the appeal is made. The words then become a heralding of the wonderful, evangelical truths, a heralding of the evangel, a wooing with the words of truth. Only secondarily then the evangelical proclamation presses for purity of the gospel when the message has been misapprehended (p. 8).

We are the church of the *pure* gospel. *We* are *orthodox* Lutherans. Statements like that have always left me with an uneasy feeling. Koehler helps me to understand why. He would call such statements legalism, an improper mingling of law and gospel. Although it perhaps can be understood in the right way, to trumpet that *we* are the church of the *pure* gospel gives the impression that this is something I have accomplished by my doing. It runs contrary to the words of the Apostle Paul, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ga 6:14). And again, “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31).

Confessional Lutherans don't particularly relish the word “ecumenical,” since it reminds them of the so-called ecumenical movement, which pushes for external unity at the expense of sound doctrine. But Koehler reminds us that there is such a thing as a proper ecumenical spirit, which consists in the grateful acknowledgment of the existence of the Holy Christian Church:

It consists in my rejoicing that another, whether from Jerusalem or Samaria, on the road to Damascus or at Athens, has come to faith in the Lord Jesus.... If I at any time meet up with someone that believes on the Lord Jesus, then the very fact of his faith and that, through his faith, he has become a child of God, member of the body of Christ, becomes the main thing and warms the very heart. To this I will give expression by emphasizing those things that unite us in faith, and not open up with reproach and criticism on those things that still divide us.... It goes without saying, however, that evangelical sense does not sacrifice truthfulness. Therefore, criticism will not be ruled out, but it will be colored by the Gospel (p. 13).

Do confessional Lutherans need to be reminded at times to rejoice that through the power of the gospel there are Christians outside of their church?

Koehler warns against making “the confessional writings, or even the writings of the fathers the effective norm,” thus replacing the Scriptures as the *norma normans*. He also warns against “traditionalism”:

Traditionalism is the way of thinking where tradition, the form of teaching inherited from the fathers, is decisive. This way of thinking obtains not only among Catholics, where tradition often runs counter to Scripture, but also among Lutherans. This expression is not meant to describe the falsity of the tradition, but the tendency to trust human teachers and their interpretations rather than Scripture, immediately and without reservation (p. 15).

“The last trait, which accompanies all legalism,” Koehler writes, is “self-righteousness,” as seen in those who set up standards which are not based on “the word of God, nor yet his law, rather the scruples of conscience of him who makes the demands” (p. 23).

To set up the own conscience as the standard for others takes more than a measure of conceit, even if excessive mouthings of humility occasionally flow in an unending stream. So it was with the Pharisees; so it was with all legalistic utterances in the Roman church; so it was with Calvinism and its friends; so it was with the Lutheran pietists of old. So it is with the sectarians. So it is developing within the Lutheran church in our midst even today (p. 23).

Strong words! To bind people's consciences to anything beyond the clear teachings of the Scriptures and Confessions is legalism.²² When Koehler talks about setting up one's “own conscience as the standard for others,” he reminds me of what our sainted Arizona-California District president, E. Arnold Sitz,²³ used to say: “Legalists are always choosy.” They set up their own rules for the game. They don't understand or they simply ignore two things, the first being what the Scriptures teach about adiaphora.

As we all undoubtedly know, adiaphora (from a Greek word that means, “It makes no difference”) are actions or practices which are neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture. That covers a lot of ground. Confessional Lutherans aren't bound by a rabbinical code or a book of canon law that tells us exactly what to do in every situation. Our Lord in his Word treats New Testament Christians as adults, giving us a huge amount of latitude. Instead of telling us precisely *what* to eat and drink, as he told believers in Old Testament times, the Lord simply counsels us, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

Instead of telling us precisely *how* to worship him, as he instructed believers under the Old Covenant, our Lord simply tells us to worship him.

On the one hand, the Formula of Concord asserts:

We should not regard as free and indifferent, but rather as things forbidden by God that are to be avoided, the kind of things presented under the name and appearance of external, indifferent things that are nevertheless fundamentally opposed to God's Word (even if they are painted another color). Moreover, we must not include among the truly free adiaphora or indifferent matters ceremonies that give the appearance of or...are designed to give the impression that our religion does not differ greatly from the papist religion or that their religion were not completely contrary to ours. Nor are such ceremonies matters of indifference when they are intended to create the illusion..., as if such action brought the two contradictory religions into agreement and made them one body.²⁴

On the other hand, the Formula says:

The community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices [i.e., adiaphora, truly indifferent matters] according to

22 This is not to say that anything not specifically taught in the Confessions is an open question. The Confessions were written at a specific point in history and dealt in particular with doctrines in contention at that time. Present day confessions, such as *This We Believe*, though they do not carry the weight of the Lutheran Confessions, are also valid and useful, especially when they treat issues not under discussion in the 16th century, e.g., creation and evolution and social issues such as abortion and homosexuality.

23 Sitz, whom I admired as an outstanding example of an evangelical Lutheran, was a son-in-law of J. P. Koehler.

24 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article X: Ecclesiastical Practices, 5.

circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.²⁵

The Epitome of the Formula of Concord puts it this way:

Ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship.... The community of God in every place and at every time has the authority to alter such ceremonies according to its own situation, as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God.... No church should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy Sacraments.²⁶

Luther writes (note his evangelical, gospel-centered approach):

We observe the Lord's Day, Christmas, Easter, and similar holidays in a way that is completely free. We do not burden consciences with these observances.... Their purpose is that everything be done in the church in an orderly way and without confusion, so that external harmony may not be disturbed.... Most of all, however, we observe such holidays to preserve the ministry of the Word, so that the people may gather on certain days and at certain seasons to hear the Word, to learn to know God, to have Communion, to pray together for every need, and to thank God for his spiritual and temporal blessings. And I believe that this was the chief reason why the fathers instituted the Lord's Day, Easter, Pentecost, etc.²⁷

I love our "traditional" worship. I find great joy and comfort in worshiping the way our Lutheran fathers, and Christians long before that, have worshiped. I love the Lutheran chorales. I love the sound of the organ. And I am also grateful for much of the new worship material emanating from our Commission on Worship, material that, without disrupting the continuity of the so-called "Western rite," provides wholesome variety to our "traditional" worship.²⁸

Nevertheless, I will vigorously defend those pastors and congregations that choose to use other worship formats as long as they properly proclaim the gospel and do not militate against the Word and the Confessions. An evangelical Lutheran will not make rules where the Word does not make them.

Secondly, and closely related, legalism results when one ignores the distinction between *doctrine and practice* on the one hand and *application* of doctrine on the other. As I mentioned above, the program committee asked me to address such questions as, "What role do the confessions play in our mission work? They state our doctrine. Do they also shape our practice? If so, to what degree?" Those questions are not difficult to answer. Yes, the Confessions (as well as more recent confessions such as *This We Believe*) state our doctrine. Yes, the Confessions shape (or at least should shape) our practice. The two go together. Doctrines that are not practiced are just pious-sounding words.

Application has to do with *how* a particular doctrine is put into practice. That is where we have to be

25 *Ibid.*, 9.

26 Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article X: Ecclesiastical Practices, 3, 4, 7.

27 From his lectures on Galatians, American Edition, 26:411-412.

28 For more on this, cf. my keynote address, "What Does It Mean to be Evangelical Lutheran in Worship?", which I presented at the inaugural WELS Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts," held at Carthage College, Kenosha, WI, July 22, 1996. It can be accessed from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file.

very careful. “The way we've always done it” may not be the best way to do it in a particular time and place. The way I do it may not always be the best way for my brother to do it. And the way I apply a doctrine in one situation may not always be the way I should apply it in another.

Our WELS mission in Central Africa was blessed with two mature leaders in its early days: E. H. Wendland, head of the seminary, and Theodore Sauer, superintendent of the mission. Both were confessional Lutherans, fully committed to teaching all of the truths of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. But both also realized that they were working in a culture different in many ways from that of Wisconsin USA. This meant that, in the interest of the gospel, the application of doctrines in Central Africa and in Wisconsin might not in every case be identical. Almost 40 years ago, in 1974, at a WELS World Mission Seminary Conference in Tsuchiura, Japan, Sauer wrestled with that issue in a paper entitled, “Our Lutheran Forms and Customs: What Essentials Must We Teach Our Seminary Students?”²⁹ Wendland does the same in several of his books, e.g., *To Africa with Love*.

Also here in the USA one size doesn't necessarily fit all. Our doctrine, drawn solely from the Scriptures, cannot change. And our subscription to the Scriptures and Confessions must be more than mere words. What we believe must be put into practice. But different times and different circumstances, as well as differences in cultures, dictate that the way a particular doctrine is applied may not and at times should not be identical in every situation. Applications aren't always “cookie cutter.” There is no rule book, except for the law of love—love for God and his Word and love for God's people.

We look to another of our WELS church fathers, August Pieper, as a good example of a willingness even to sacrifice a personal preference for the sake of the gospel. Pieper was brought up with the German language. He taught in the German language. He loved the German language. He considered the German language to be superior to English.³⁰

Nevertheless, for the sake of proclaiming the gospel beyond the borders of German-speaking Lutherans, he urges a transition to English:

The current situation in America has laid a greater assignment upon the orthodox Lutheran church as it becomes English-speaking, one which cannot be deferred or delayed. That assignment is: *by means of the English language to carry the Lutheran gospel to the English-speaking American people who are still outside of our church* [italics in original].... By packaging our message in the German language we have neglected to share our gospel with the Americans at our doorstep, the very people among whom we live. Our concept of ministry is deficient. The awareness that every pastor, in addition to his parish work, has been called by God to be a missionary to his neighborhood, to use every opportunity to preach the gospel publicly and privately to "every creature" in the world immediately surrounding him - this awareness needs to be aroused in our pastors.... The way we conduct our public ministry almost makes it seem as though God has forbidden us to preach beyond the borders of our church body and parish.... Two-thirds of America's 110 millions do not hold membership in any church. Even if only half of America's population were unchurched, the work of evangelizing them is so great that we could "not finish...before the Son of Man comes." As congregations and as a synod we have failed to proclaim the gospel to these unchurched millions - almost as though, because they live next door to us, they are not included in "all nations."³¹

29 Available from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file.

30 He writes in the essay, “Our Transition into English,” “It is stupid and thoughtless to say that one language is as good as another to define and transmit the gospel. Luther's German is a better vehicle of the gospel than any other modern language” (p. 5), especially, he brings out, as compared with the King James Version and its at times literalistic translation. This essay appeared originally in 1918-19 in the *Theologische Quartalschrift*. It was translated by John Jeske and is available from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Confessional Lutherans are evangelical Lutherans, neither lax nor legalistic, but gospel-centered. In the interest of the gospel, they will say with the Apostle Paul, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22, NIV2011).

The above quotes from Pieper's essay provide a good lead-in to our final point:

Confessing

A confessional Lutheran is a confessing Lutheran. On May 14, 1796, an English country doctor by the name of Edward Jenner removed from a milk maid the fluid from a lesion caused by cowpox, a disease like smallpox, but milder. He used the fluid to inoculate an eight-year-old boy. The boy soon came down with cowpox. Six weeks later Jenner inoculated the boy with fluid from a smallpox lesion. The boy remained healthy. Dr. Jenner never told another person about what had happened.

I'm being facetious, of course. Though he met with much scorn and ridicule, Jenner energetically spread the news of the success of his “vaccine” (from the Latin *vacca* for cow). Within 18 months, after 12,000 people were vaccinated, the number of deaths from smallpox (which killed one in three infected by it) dropped by two-thirds in England. And in 1980, the World Health Organization declared smallpox eradicated.

The application is obvious.

Can we whose souls are lighted with wisdom from on high,
Can we to those benighted the lamp of life deny?

This little gospel light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.
Hide it under a bushel, No! I'm gonna let it shine.

The authors of the Confessions were courageous confessors, beginning with Luther and the posting of his 95 Theses and his “Hier stehe Ich!” (“Here I stand!”) at Worms. The authors of the Formula of Concord concluded the final confession of the Lutheran Church with these bold words:

It is our intent to give witness before God and all Christendom, among those who are alive today and those who will come after us, that the explanation here set forth regarding all the controversial articles of faith which we have addressed and explained—and no other explanation—is our teaching, faith, and confession. In it we shall appear before the judgment throne of Jesus Christ, by God's grace, with fearless hearts and thus give account of our faith, and we will neither secretly nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it. Instead, on the strength of God's grace we intend to abide by this confession. Thus, after careful consideration and in the fear and invocation of God, we have subscribed our signatures to this document with our own hands.³²

A confessional Lutheran is a confessing Lutheran. Such has been the case, not just with Luther and the other Reformation-era reformers, but throughout the history of the Lutheran Church.³³ Confessional

32 Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XII, 40.

33 Cf. the essay by Robert Kolb, “Is the Great Commission Still Valid for Lutherans?” at http://www.crossings.org/conference/papers/2010/Is_Great_Commission_Still_Valid.pdf. The purpose of his essay, Kolb writes, was “to demonstrate that concern for spreading the gospel among those outside the faith

Lutherans will not permit preserving the truth to trump proclaiming the truth, just as they will not permit proclaiming the truth to trump preserving the truth. The “narrow Lutheran middle,” as Daniel Deutschlander put it in a recent book, is not to let either get the upper hand.

In my opinion, in a conservative church body such as the WELS, which is concerned, and rightly so, with purity of doctrine, there is more of a danger in the former, i.e., defending the truth while not actively extending it to others, than the latter, although Satan can use both to his advantage. In our zeal to maintain purity of doctrine, have we perhaps been retreating from engagement with the world, battenning down the hatches, so to speak, circling the wagons? I've even heard talk like the following from men in our fellowship: “We don't have to worry about evangelism. God's going to get his elect into heaven.”

That's true, of course. God is going to bring his elect home. Jesus tells us, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mt 24:14). The gospel will be preached. Not *must* be preached. *Will* be preached (khruxqhsontai is an indicative verb). Through the world-wide preaching, heralding, of the gospel, God will gather in all his elect. This is going to happen. God will make it happen with us or without us.

At the same time, however, using a form of the same verb, but in this instance an imperative (khrucate to euaggelion, Preach, be a herald of, the gospel, Mk 16:15), our Lord invites us to join him in the splendid task of calling people through the gospel out of darkness into his marvelous light.

What else can we do? The heart filled with the gospel is the heart of the shepherds, who, having seen their Savior, “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child” (Lke 2:17). The heart filled with the gospel is the heart of an Apostle Paul exclaiming, “I am compelled to preach”—to tell the good news about Jesus. The heart filled with the gospel is the heart of a Martin Luther and his jubilant, “My heart for very joy doth leap. My lips no more can silence keep.”

The heart filled with the gospel is my heart, and yours, as with Luther and the other Confessors we fearlessly and joyfully step out into the world with the one message that changes lives—forever.

I don't know what you think about Tim Tebow, and none of us know if the Tebow phenomenon will continue into the next NFL football season. But I don't think I have watched a more exciting ending to a football game than the overtime playoff win of the Denver Broncos over the Pittsburgh Steelers. Tebow could have played it safe. He could have elected to stay on the ground and grind out the yards. But he heeded the advice of his boss, Broncos' executive and former quarterback John Elway, to “pull the trigger.” He did. He let loose with an 80-yard touchdown pass on the very first play in overtime. And that was the game. He didn't know if it would work; but he went for broke.

We can go for broke with a lot more confidence than Tim Tebow, since we *know* it will work. The gospel is the dunamiv, the power of God. Confessional Lutherans will confess that gospel.

There was joy in Denver that night after Tebow's touchdown pass. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who comes to repentance. There is joy in the heart of that sinner. And there is joy in our hearts. To be used by our Lord in his gracious work of gathering in his elect through the gospel. What a privilege!

Last year I served an extended vacancy at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Norfolk, Nebraska. It is a relatively large congregation. There was a lot to do and it was supposed to be a part-time retirement call. I debated, “Should I go through all the work of gathering a Bible information class and then teaching that class?” I decided to do it, and how happy I am that I made that decision. It was my greatest joy of those joy-filled months: to bring the gospel to people who didn't know Jesus.

Confessional Lutherans have the greatest message in the world to bring to people. Confessional Lutherans are confessing Lutherans.

formed an integral part of Lutheran visions of the life of the church throughout the past five centuries, and therefore that Lutherans cannot be true to our heritage without being actively involved in carrying out our Lord's command to make disciples, to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins among all nations. For Lutherans define the church by its confessions, and *Luther and Melancthon thought that you cannot define yourself by the content of what you confess unless you are confessing it* (italics added).

Soli Deo Gloria