

# Development of our Lutheran Confessions

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In the introductory remarks to the book *Studies in the Augsburg-Confession*, by Professor John Meyer, we read, "It is the nature of a Christian to confess. Faith, being as it is a vital force that regenerates a person and makes a new creature out of him, cannot be hidden away in the heart. A faith that does not express itself in word and deed is dead. The psalmist sings: 'I believed, therefore have I spoken.' (Ps. 116:10) 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh,' are words of our Savior Himself: (Mt. 12:34) St. Paul links faith and confession very closely together when he says in Rom. 10:9,10: 'If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.'"

Jesus clearly calls for His disciples to confess Him before men. "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven." (Mt. 10:32,33) "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in 'the glory of Father and of the holy angels.'" (Luke 9:26) "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked His disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?' They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'" (Mt. 16:13-16)

In the account of Philip and the Ethiopian we have a verse which does not have the support of the best manuscripts, but at least shows the requirement of the early church that a person confess his faith. When the eunuch said to Philip, "Look, here is water, Why shouldn't I be baptized?" Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The official answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (Acts 8:36-37)

Again, quoting from the Introduction to the Augsburg Confession Professor John Meyer, "But while a common confession binds the confessors together, it at the same time separates them from unbelievers and heretics. Jesus warns us against false prophets. (Mt. 7:15) Paul asks us to mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, and to avoid them; (Rom. 16:17) because there can be no fellowship of righteousness and unrighteousness, no communion between light and darkness, no concord between Christ and Belial. (2 Cor. 6:14f) A compromise would be a denial.

When we trace the history of the early Christian Church we see that they felt a need for confessions. The Apostles' Creed was developed as a confession of faith before baptism. This creed had the positive effect of uniting the new convert with the Christians. At the same time it had the effect of dividing the new convert from the pagan religions of the world.

When the Arian heresy was spreading through the early Christian Church, the true believers again felt the need to confess their faith in clear terms. The Nicene Creed was written to reject the false teachings of Arius and thus to separate the true believers from the heretics.

Little is known about the origin of the Athanasian Creed. From the content of the creed we can see that it must have been necessary to set forth a clear teaching on the Trinity, and to reaffirm the teaching of the Nicene Creed on the person of Jesus Christ.

So we can see that at the time of the Reformation, there was already a history of and for Confessional Christianity for these reasons:

1. It is the nature of a person to confess that he believes and thus it is the nature of a Christian to confess faith in Christ.
2. Jesus Christ calls for a public confession of faith in Him.
3. Confessions serve the purpose of uniting Christians together in the true teaching of the Bible.
4. It is necessary to confess Christ over against the false teachings of heretics and thus confessions separate the true Christians from false teachings and teachers.

That Luther and his followers were only carrying out the above four points becomes clear as we look at the Development of Our Lutheran Confessions in history.

When Luther learned the truth of the Gospel, it became a part of his nature to confess the faith in his heart. In his teaching and in his writings Luther taught and confessed the truth of Scripture, especially the saving work of Jesus. Since Luther's faith was not in agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, his writings and teachings showed that there was a division in the Church. Luther did not desire to separate himself and his followers from the Church, but rather to unite the people on the truth of Scripture. But since it is also the nature of a confession to be divisive, Luther's writings very quickly brought about a division. Once the division took place, there was a need to clearly set forth the teachings of the Bible in a defense of the truth and to point out error. It was because of a need and not a personal desire that the confessions of our Lutheran Church were written.

Let us now look at the specific history which called forth each of our Lutheran Confessions and see the need, purpose, and special characteristics of each of them. We shall look at them in the order in which they appear in the Book of Concord.

The first specifically Lutheran confession is the Augsburg Confession. The occasion which brought about the Augsburg Confession is indicated on the title page "Submitted to His Imperial Majesty Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg," which is then followed by the appropriate quote from Scripture, Psalm 119:46, "I will speak of Thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed." It was because of a command from King Charles V, a Roman Catholic believer at the height of his power, that the Augsburg Confession was written. Charles V had called the meeting at Augsburg to try to settle the differences between the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans so that he could present a united front against the heathen Turks who were threatening to invade the country. When it became evident to Luther and his followers that the brief statement of differences between them and the Roman Catholics would not be sufficient to settle the false accusations of the Roman Catholic Church against them, Melancthon prepared a summary of the main teachings of the Lutheran Church and abuses which had been corrected. The whole purpose and tone of the Augsburg Confession can best be described as conciliatory, but in no way can the Augsburg Confession be described as wishy-washy. It is firm in its stand on Scripture as the sole rule and guide for faith. It breathes the spirit of a living faith within the heart.

The importance of the Augsburg Confession cannot be underestimated. It sets forth a clear tone and principle which is followed through all of the Lutheran Confessions. It is best summarized in the words of Article IV- Justification: "It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness 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, 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." This is the tone and principle which is clearly set forth in the Bible. It is the tone and principle which sets Confessional Lutheranism over against all false teachings.

Only after it was clear that the differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church could not be resolved, did Luther and his followers proceed to confessional writings which may be

termed polemical. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession was written by Melanchthon when it was clear that Charles V and the Roman Catholic Church were not going to yield to the teachings of Scripture. Thus we find in the Apology a very capable defense of the Augsburg Confession. Melanchthon quotes freely from Scripture and from the early church fathers to show that the Lutheran teachings were not those of heretics, but those of the Bible and the true Christian Church.

Published about a year after the Augsburg Confession, it gives a contemporary interpretation of the Augsburg Confession by the author, Philip Melanchthon. The Apology became an official church confession when it was adopted by the Lutherans assembled in Smalcald for presentation to the church council called by Pope Paul III.

When Pope Paul III called for a church council to settle the “protestant heresies” it appeared necessary to write another confession of what was believed and taught by the Lutherans. Luther was instructed to write such a statement and present it at a meeting of the Smalcald League meeting in Smalcald. When the political leaders decided that they could not attend the church council called for by Pope Paul III, the articles written by Luther were not officially adopted, though the church leaders did express their adherence to the faith expressed by the articles. The Smalcald Articles are the most polemical of all the Lutheran Confessions. They are of special value, because they set forth the faith of a mature Luther. They reveal that Luther had not changed his beliefs, but remained firm in them on the basis of Scripture.

An article on the Pope was to be attached to the Augsburg Confession, but because of a fear of offending the Pope, it was omitted. The “Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope” was written and adopted at the time of the Smalcald meetings, and thus has been attached to the Smalcald Articles. It too is polemical in nature, but at the time of the meeting in Smalcald offending the Pope was no longer feared by the Lutheran theologians.

Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms are inserted, at this point in the Book of Concord because they are such a clear witness to the truth of Scripture. They were not written for the purpose of confessing faith, but rather for the purpose of providing instruction material for parents to teach their children, and for the teachers of God’s Word, so that they could set forth the truth of the Bible for their people. When Luther’s Small Catechism is described as the “Layman’s Bible,” the importance of it as a confession can be seen. This is a clear statement of beliefs for anyone to use as a witness to the truth of the Word of God or in defense of the truth.

The Formula of Concord is the last of the confessions contained in the Book of Concord. The Formula of Concord was written to settle the differences which had arisen among the followers of Luther after his death. These controversies are well presented in the *Historical Introduction to the Symbolic Books* by F. Bente. With affirmative theses and antitheses the various controversies clearly defined, the truth set forth, and the false teachings condemned. In many cases it is a definition of terms which reveal the true faith held by the true Lutherans over against those who would pretend to be Lutherans. The words “We believe, teach, and confess” show the verifying feature of the Formula of Concord. The words, “We reject and condemn” show the divisive nature of this confession.

So much for the Development of our Lutheran Confessions in history. Now how about the Development of our Lutheran Confessions in our World Seminaries? Is there a need for teaching them? How should the Lutheran Confessions be taught in our World Seminaries? What is the effect of teaching the Lutheran Confessions in our Seminaries? Finally, is there a need for developing other confessions adapted to the places where we have our Seminaries?

In looking at the need for teaching the Lutheran Confessions in our World Seminaries, I will have to speak mainly of what I have experienced in teaching them. The needs may vary in the other fields. I have found that the students in our Bible Institute look at the name Lutheran as though it is just a name of another church body. In some cases they have experienced the teachings of other churches and are convinced that the truth is taught in our church. I would be happy if this were the case with all of them. Many have the idea that there really isn’t much difference between the churches; and they see little or no need for studying the confessions of our church. They seem to look at the name Lutheran as being more of a divisive name than a name that stands for the truth of God’s Word. Sad to say, I am afraid that many of our students look at the Lutheran Church as being the best employment or furtherance of education that they are able to come up with.

Thus our first need is to instill in the students the concept that confessions are important. It is the confessions of a church which show if it is a true church or not. Confessions must show the truth of Scripture. The study of the confessions along with the other disciplines convince them that they are in the right place. They are a part of the true visible church.

Our Lutheran Confessions are the link which unites them with the true believers of all times and makes them aware of their position in the church of Jesus Christ. This sense of union with true believers is important in an environment which often causes them to stand very much alone.

Very closely connected to this need for a sense unity is the need for a positive confession of the truth to win others for Christ. Because our Lutheran Confessions have Article IV of the Augsburg Confession as the unifying principle, the clear witness to this central doctrine of the Scriptures can be set in the minds of our students. When they need to have a clear confession of the truth of salvation, the Book of Concord can and does set forth that truth.

There always will be a need for our students and graduates to defend the truth of God's Word over against the many false teachings of other churches. The number of false churches continues to multiply. The names of the churches are different perhaps than those listed in the Book of Concord; yet the false teachings remain very much the same. In order to guard our men from false teachings and give them a systematic way of defending the truth, the Lutheran Confessions are important.

The confessions are also important to the Church as it ordains men into the ministry. We need to know that our men will follow the truth of Scripture in their ministries. We receive that assurance when the men take their ordination vows and promise to uphold the teachings of the Book of Concord. Our national pastors are expected to uphold the teachings of the Book of Concord. Our national pastors are expected to subscribe to the Book of Concord "*quia*" and not "*quatenus*." We need to know that the men we send out as pastors of the Lutheran Church know the Lutheran Confessions and are truly Confessional Lutherans.

If the above mentioned needs for teaching the Lutheran Confessions are accepted, it then becomes a very important matter of how we are going to teach the Lutheran Confessions. Right at the outset it becomes clear that we must teach all of the Confessions. Our Confessions must be seen as a unit if we are going to fulfill our needs for a Confessional Church with confessional national pastors. To teach only the Augsburg Confession would give national pastors a very slanted view of confessional Lutheranism. The same would be true in selecting any other one or a limited combination of the Confessions.

If we are to fulfill the needs of our national pastors, then we must also teach the Lutheran Confessions as historical documents. They must know the background of a particular Confession to see the need which that Confession filled. The historical nature of the Confessions will aid the national worker in seeing how he is to use the Confession in his own ministry. The quoting of a Confession to back up some point of doctrine if it is taken out of context, can be very misleading.

Our Confessions must be taught at a practical level. If our students feel that the Lutheran Confessions are only a necessary book for study and learned discussion, then we have failed. The Lutheran Confessions breathe a spirit of faith in Christ for salvation. They are an expression of inner conviction. They must become a matter of "we believe, teach, and practice" and not something "intellectual, academic, and dogmatic." This is perhaps the most difficult part of trying to teach the Confessions to our national workers.

Since our Confessions are systematic, it is important that we make it clear to our students what that system is based on. Here again it is Article IV-Justification, of the Augsburg Confession, that should stand out. This is the center of the Bible, and it is the center of our Confessions. When the thought of justification is used as a unifying theme for the Confessions, the practical use of the Confessions becomes more evident to our students.

Our Confessions should also be taught so as to learn careful exegesis. The false churches also quote Scripture and quote it quite freely. The difference in true and false exegesis should be noted as the Confessions are taught. *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* by Ralph A. Bohlmann is helpful here.

Two new books on the Formula of Concord are now available, but I have not had an opportunity to study them. These books seem like they should help us in our teaching of this Confession. They are *Getting into the Formula of Concord: a History and Digest of the Formula* by Eugene F. Klug and Otto F. Stahlke and *Formulators of the Formula of Concord: Four Architects of Lutheran Unity* by Theodore R. Jungkuntz.

The effect of a careful teaching of the Lutheran Confessions will be evident. Our national pastors will know why they are Lutheran. They will use the Scriptures correctly. They will have a guide in determining what is true and what is false in other churches. They will be bold confessors of the truth in a world which is greatly in need of the truth.

Our Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod has felt it necessary to prepare another short form of confession to meet its needs in a changing religious scene. The statement of beliefs "This We Believe" is also a very important confession for our World Seminaries. I went through this statement of beliefs with the last class in our Seminary in a very brief way. We have been studying this confession in our Pastoral Conference. It is a part of our Confessional Lutheran Church.

Perhaps as our World Mission Fields grow and become more independent, they will also have to write some form of confession to meet their needs. I feel that such confessions will develop as the need in the various fields demands.

May the graduates of our World Seminaries be able to join us as we join the writers of the Preface to the Book of Concord in stating: "By the help of God's grace we, too, intend to persist in this confession until our blessed end and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ with joyful and fearless hearts and consciences."

### **BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PRESENT COURSE OF SYMBOLICS IN THE LCCA**

Bible Institute I - "Our Lutheran Confessions," by E. H. Wendland. This is a brief introduction to confessions of faith and a brief introduction to each of our Lutheran Confessions. One hour a week.

Institute II - The Augsburg Confession is read and discussed: Some Bible passages are looked up, especially where there are questions. Luther's Large Catechism is introduced and a workbook given to the students so that they can continue their study of this book when they are Evangelists. Two hours a week.

Pre- Seminary - The Lutheran Confessions are not taught.

Seminary I - The Ecumenical Creeds and The Augsburg Confession are studied very carefully and the Bible passages on the various topics are studied. The outline which I use is one which I believe President Toppe developed. I would like to develop a new outline using President Toppe's outline, and Professor John Meyer's book, Studies in the Augsburg Confession as the basis. Two hours a week.

Seminary II - The Apology and the Smalcald Articles are read and discussed. Two hours a week.

Seminary III - The Formula of Concord is read and discussed. Two hours a week.