

A Reaction to Professor Arnold Koelpin's "The Book of Concord: Sources and Story"

Thank you, Prof. Koelpin, for providing us with a masterful summary of the background and story of the confessions included in the Book of Concord of 1580. The symposium committee gave you the daunting task of supplying in twenty-some pages an overview of material that could fill large volumes. The careful reader will gain much insight from your essay and will find a wealth of information in your notes and appendices. I pray that this essay will encourage us all to treasure the confessional heritage that has been bequeathed to us and to make those confessions our own.

The kind of rejection of creeds and confessions mouthed by the minister in the postscript of this essay is not only a contemporary phenomenon, but it also has a long history in America. The churches of the Restoration Movement beginning in the early nineteenth century rejected creeds as historical accretions that were divisive and a hindrance to the unity of the Christian Church. Prof. Koelpin rightly points out the foolishness of such non-creedalism. "No church has ever formed without stating what it believes (*credo*) and confesses (*confessio*)" (page 2). By publicly rejecting creeds a church body has in reality made a creedal statement.

The raising of religious experience over Christian dogma is a characteristic not only of liberalism in America but also of much of conservative Evangelicalism. The spiritual heirs of pietism and revivalism demand deeds not creeds and show that they don't really understand the relationship between faith and good works and between confessing God's truth and living the Christian life. Prof. Koelpin's concluding paragraphs are right on the mark.

The ecumenical and evangelical confessions in the Book of Concord strike a different note, more joyous and comforting. They rely on God's Word for guidance and on God's promises for aid. They reflect the entire work of the triune God as confessed in the creeds and reject what obscures and denies his full and faithful revelation. They believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both Lord and Savior. They do not presume to strip the creed naked like Christ on the cross, but look to the cross with repentant grieving. There in the death of God's Son on the cross, *God strips us* bare-naked. There we can no longer hide our shame and sinfulness from view for a simple reason. "The suffering and death of Christ, the Son of God, is an earnest and terrifying preaching and advertisement of God's wrath" (Ep V, 9). Christ on the cross exposes our sin.

A whole world of God's love lies behind this central act of Christ crucified [1 Co 1:22]. This alien work of Christ Jesus—his suffering on the cross—masks God's eternal love for us. He made his Son to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him [1 co 5:21]. The cross is God's way of bringing us to sorrow over our waywardness and sin and simultaneously to faith in what he has done for us in Christ. The cross, in short, is God's way—the way "by which Christ comes to his proper office—namely to preach grace, comfort, to make alive. And this is the preaching of the Gospel, strictly speaking" [Ep VI:10]. The demonstration of God's love in Christ brings us to repentance, a whole new attitude toward God and life. In the final analysis, this is what Christians believe, teach and confess—and so we serve (*credo et servo*). [p. 23]*

The so-called ecumenical creeds focus on the Trinity and focus on Christ. They are *theocentric* rather than *anthropocentric*. It was not an accident that they were placed into the Book of Concord. Their inclusion testifies to the fact that the Lutheran Church is in historic continuity with the ancient church. Indeed, "the root of the reformation is Luther's return to the theology of the early Christian church" (p. 8).

The Augsburg Confession contains "insights into the Gospel that led Luther to challenge Rome's understanding and practice of the Christian faith" (p. 10). The sources Melancthon used for writing the

* Note that after reformatting Koelpin's paper for the WLS Library Online Essay file, the cited paragraphs are on page 16. [WLS Library Staff]

confession came mainly from Luther's hand. The theology of the Augustana is Luther's. The style is Melancthon's. But the confession was presented at the Imperial Diet by the princes. Those faithful laymen knew what they believed and why they believed it. They were willing to risk everything they had—even their very lives—rather than compromise the gospel or shirk their responsibility to testify to God's truth. Luther had stood alone at Worms, but the gospel had taken root among the people. At Augsburg many stood in his place to confess the truth that he had brought back to light.

Melancthon's Apology serves as a defense of the Augsburg Confession, a demonstration that the Roman Confutation had not refuted the Augustana, and a further explanation of what had been presented at Augsburg. Melancthon's tone is sharper in the Apology than in the Augustana because he recognized after the Diet that there was little hope of reconciliation with the papal party. Unfortunately, the Apology seems to be the least studied of the Lutheran Confessions. Perhaps its length and the fact that it is really a theological treatise rather than a simple statement of faith have caused busy pastors to neglect it. Perhaps the woodenness of the translation contained in the *Concordia Triglotta* has limited its appeal. Yet the truth remains that no one can call himself a theologian in the Lutheran Church who has not diligently and repeatedly read the Apology or familiarized himself with it. We hope that the new translations of the Book of Concord that have been made available in the last several years will prompt more of our pastors to undertake this study.

Luther's two catechisms stand in a class by themselves when compared with the catechisms produced in any other denomination. As Prof. Koelpin aptly points out, "To accentuate the essentials of the Christian faith without fragmenting the message calls for the skill of a master. The failure of others to produce a work of equal quality and durability as the Small and Large catechisms demonstrates the Reformer's God-given ability, experience, understanding, and maturity in expressing the Christian Gospel. The inclusion of these two manuals in the Book of Concord was in itself a confession to the Gospel content" (p. 16).

One will not exhaust the profound truths taught so simply in Luther's catechisms but will gain more every time he studies them. Luther himself never tired of returning to the catechism. As he states in his preface to the Large Catechism,

But I say this for myself: I am also a doctor and preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them that are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly (LC, Preface, 7-8).

Prof. Koelpin's description of the Smalcald Articles as "the battleship" of the Lutheran reform "to defend the gospel" is a fitting one. "Luther-like, the Smalcald Articles are forthright and direct; its three parts intentionally to the point and ready for debate" (p. 18). The essayist's explanation of the progression of thought in this confession is quite helpful. The observation that the Smalcald Articles "caused Rome to harden its doctrine at Trent, to damn the gospel of justification by faith alone, and to enshrine traditional canon law as the rule of faith" (p. 19) is worthy of note. Clear confession of the truth has the effect of forcing the errorist to come out of hiding and making his error more obvious and clear.

Prof. Koelpin's conclusion to his overview of the Formula of Concord and the gathering of the Book of Concord reveals the spirit and the value of our Lutheran Confessions.

The rediscovery of the scriptural truth of a sinner's justification by grace alone, through faith alone, for the sake of Christ alone, is nothing but the light of the Gospel. If this truth is forgotten, neglected, lost or obscured, the Gospel must be re-interpreted as a moral system or a theory of religious truth. Consequently, justification by faith permeated the Book of Concord. It constitutes a reformation of the church because it reveals with clarity and certainty the truth by which the church lives. For the church

does not live by morals, by the knowledge and observance of God's law. Nor does the church live by religion, by lofty experiences of the divine. The church lives solely by the forgiveness of sins (p. 23).^{**}

Please permit me to offer one minor clarification. The last paragraph on page 14 seems to combine information on the Augsburg Confession and the Apology in a way that might be confusing. The Augsburg Confession was never a private document even though Melancthon treated it as though it were his own personal property. The Augsburg Confession was the public confession of those who affixed their signatures to it and presented it to the emperor. On the other hand, the Apology was a private document because it had not been commissioned by anyone. It bears Melancthon's signature alone. However, already at Schweinfurt in 1532 the Lutherans appealed to it as well as the Augustana, giving it official recognition. At Smalcald in 1537 the Apology and the Augustana were subscribed by the theologians present, giving the Apology confessional status. It was very naturally included in the Book of Concord as a confession of the Lutheran Church in 1580.

Prof. Koelpin began his essay with a number of pointed questions. The answers to the questions can be found in the body of his essay. Each question is worthy of consideration in the discussion of this essay in the remaining time allotted.

It has been said that the Lutheran Confessions are often more praised than read. If that is true in our circles, we are the poorer for it. You cannot study the Lutheran Confessions honestly without being led into Scripture and without gaining increased appreciation for the gospel and understanding of the central truth of Scripture. Reformation anniversaries have sometimes produced a resurgence of confessional Lutheranism as Lutherans have re-examined their roots and discovered the theological treasures that have been bequeathed to them. May this anniversary and the essays presented at this symposium serve that purpose.

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^{**} p. 15 (see previous footnote – WLS Library Staff)