

UNITY AMONG US?

THREE THESES ON CHURCH UNITY: A HERMANN SASSE-INSPIRED PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I intend to posit three theses on the pursuit of inter-church unity, commonly known as ecumenism. Drawing extensively on letters and essays by Hermann Sasse, I seek to distill several ideas from what he wrote about ecumenism and apply them to the twenty-first-century church, specifically the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The following theses do not argue solely for an outward and visible unity among Christians, as ecumenical movements often do, but rather a scriptural (and invisible) church unity based on agreement over doctrine. Moreover, if doctrinal unity is achieved through this pursuit, the blessings of outward unity or church fellowship may result. More often, the pursuit of unity will not produce church fellowship but remains valuable, even necessary, and will bless Christ's kingdom. Lord willing, what I argue for will generate discussion and inspire ecumenical initiatives among Confessional Lutheran pastors.

INTRODUCTION

After George Weasley took Harry Potter aside, he handed him the Marauder's Map. This map allowed Harry to explore Hogwarts castle freely, without being spotted. With the map, Harry could find information he was not supposed to find and go places he was prohibited from going. It allowed him to accomplish a not insignificant amount of mischief. Yet, with the map, he could also spot the information *he needed* to solve his mystery. "Who was Peter Pettigrew?" On the outside, the map looked like blank paper, but as its owner uttered a secret incantation, the map's lines appeared. So, as needed, Harry would take out his new map and speak: "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good." Throughout the semester, Harry was able to use his new tool to search for things without being noticed.¹

For a young Confessional Lutheran, exploring a biblical theology of ecumenism feels like sneaking around a castle while not wanting to get caught. Before I started, I sensed that ecumenism was a bad word among Lutherans; anecdotally, this remains true. For example, I have never heard a WELS pastor speak of ecumenism without first qualifying it. Instead, I hear pastors say things like: "Ecumenical, in a good sense," and "There is a good kind of ecumenism." Perhaps ecumenism is a "bad word" among WELS pastors, and maybe for good reason.

1. This scene comes from J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, chapter 10.

With the twentieth century came the rise of a worldwide ecumenical movement. Christians all over the world started to pursue institutional unity without first uniting on doctrine. But this type of ecumenism, or unionism, contradicts the Lord's instructions in the Scriptures. Even so, the twentieth-century's ecumenical movement succeeded in achieving a large measure of outward unity, or unity between visible church bodies. This unity was established although the beliefs of participating churches did not align. A menu of teachings was permitted as long as participating parties were willing to accept the validity of other doctrinal positions. The unionistic actions of many churches gave ecumenism its "bad name." It is not without reason that WELS pastors cringe when people talk about it.

But does ecumenism need to remain "a bad word" forever? Hermann Sasse did not think so. As he saw church bodies throughout Europe throw aside the doctrines they once confessed for outward unity, he was compelled to write about ecumenism. However, he did not support the improper ecumenism he saw around him. Instead, he sharply criticized it and championed proper ecumenism, that is, an ecumenism based on unity in doctrine.

While he wrote on many theological topics, he made a case for proper ecumenism regularly. Publishing sixty-two "Letters to Lutheran Pastors", Sasse touched on matters of church unity in nearly one-third of them. His letters and essays made a splash. Some brought praise, others brought criticism. Indeed, Sasse was up to something; according to some, he was *up to no good*. Even so, he continued to plead with pastors that they might be united in name (Lutheran) and confession. He argued tirelessly against the formation of a new German church with unionistic tendencies, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKiD). Left with nowhere to worship according to his conscience, he took a call out of Germany to the Lutheran seminary in North

Adelaide, Australia. Even after he left his homeland, he continued to argue for doctrinal unity among those in Europe and America who were focused on Christian unity.

The impact of Sasse’s “Letters to Lutheran Pastors” can be seen by how often they have been published. More than a dozen of them were published in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*;² notably, they continued to publish his letters even after his controversial *Fourteenth letter to Lutheran pastors*.³ Sasse remains one of the most-published authors in the *Quarterly* who is not directly affiliated with WELS. However, Sasse was renowned in more than one Confessional Lutheran church body. Led by Matthew Harrison, a team of pastors (mostly from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, or LCMS) not only translated all of his Letters to Lutheran Pastors into English, Concordia Publishing House released them in a three-volume series. Concordia also published a two-volume collection of Sasse’s essays, *The Lonely Way*.

From being hosted by the faculties at St. Louis, Mankato, and Thiensville, to his regular contact with Roman Catholic Cardinal August Bea, Sasse had the respect of many theologians worldwide. He even received a call to Concordia Seminary St. Louis, which he returned because he had accepted the call to Adelaide several hours earlier. Sasse was a formidable theologian. If a Confessional Lutheran would search for a theology of ecumenism, he would be hard-pressed to find someone who wrote on the subject more than Sasse. One can find a truly Lutheran theology of ecumenism by studying Sasse’s writings. Through an investigation of Sasse’s writings, I intend to find and develop biblical principles for practicing ecumenism. I also intend to

2. These letters were translated by professors Peters, Reim, and Gawrisch.

3. In his *Fourteenth letter to Lutheran pastors*, “On the Doctrine *De Scriptura Sacra*,” Sasse began to work out his thoughts on the inerrancy of Scripture. Much of Sasse’s training was influenced by Neo-Orthodoxy; not surprisingly, this influenced Sasse’s thinking. After receiving some backlash and admonition from fellow Lutheran theologians, Sasse publicly retracted Letter Fourteen. This paper does not address Sasse’s views on inspiration or inerrancy. That discussion, though fruitful, has little bearing on the arguments that I have evaluated.

normalize conversations about ecumenism so that Lutheran pastors may consider it without having to *solemnly swear that they are up to no good*.

DEFINITIONS

Proper Ecumenism

As I use the phrase *proper ecumenism*, I am attempting to capture ecumenism as Sasse intended it. Proper ecumenism is marked by a striving to have visible churches unite over agreement in doctrine and a desire to win erring Christians over to the truth. Expressions of proper ecumenism may also be unrelated, or only indirectly related, to seeking a declaration of fellowship between visible churches. For example, engaging the heterodox in conversation may never lead to a declaration of fellowship. But it may lead a heterodox shepherd to an accurate understanding of a single point of doctrine, thereby bringing Christians closer together without establishing fellowship. By proper ecumenism, I mean to represent biblical ecumenism. When St. Paul saw the division in his congregation in Corinth, he desired that they unite in their thinking. He wrote: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought (1 Cor 1:10).” By speaking of being wholly united, Paul exhorts them to be one in attitude, mission, and belief. In the rest of the letter, he addresses not only the quarrels among them but also matters of doctrine. Biblical ecumenism would speak to the attitude of Christians about each other and assert that they are to desire unity.

Improper Ecumenism and Unionism

By improper ecumenism, I am summarizing the spirit of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. Improper ecumenism is not concerned with agreement on doctrine but with outward unity. Improper ecumenism does not take differences in doctrine seriously. It is not concerned with biblical church fellowship. The practice of open communion between the United Methodist Church (UMC) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) exemplifies improper ecumenism. Improper ecumenism is concerned that Christians show outward unity and charity, as one would at the Lord's table. As it is fitting, unionism will be used synonymously with improper ecumenism. To practice unionism (as I am using the term) would be to pursue improper ecumenism.

True/False Ecumenism versus Proper/Improper Ecumenism

To use the phrases "the practice of true ecumenism" and "to practice false ecumenism" connote meaning that I will call a "categorically correct" and "categorically incorrect" perspective. When someone claims to practice true ecumenism, it may sound like they claim that everything they do is automatically correct, moral, and righteous. On the contrary, false ecumenism may sound completely wrong, immoral, and wicked. I do not want to communicate with such broad implications. Instead, by speaking of proper ecumenism, I mean to say that the one practicing proper ecumenism is oriented toward the Bible's teaching on church unity. Someone practicing proper ecumenism is attempting to strive for biblical unity, that is, unity based on complete agreement on the doctrines of Scripture. To be sure, even with righteous intent, a Christian will not practice proper ecumenism perfectly. It should be noted that Christians may work toward unity over doctrine, even if their understanding of the Scriptures is imperfect.

Someone practicing improper ecumenism is attempting to pursue an unbiblical unity, where doctrines and differences between faith traditions are whitewashed and disregarded. This could also be done from a position of Christian love, albeit poorly informed. When this is the case, the issue would not be in the Christian's desire for unity among believers. The issue would be whether or not they are uniting over doctrinal truths. To put it another way, "deeds, not creeds" may contain honest Christian love. People may feel the godly desire to connect with others without understanding the severity of ignoring doctrinal positions. To make it concrete, while the doctrine of the Trinity is something that unites all Christians in faith, being in an organized church body may not, the Creeds matter.

Christianity's World Stage

When I am talking about Christianity's world stage, I am pointing to the influence of a church body or faith tradition. When an individual or group has the attention of a significant portion of the Christian world, they have a position on the world stage. For example, whoever holds the office of the papacy has a primary position on Christianity's world stage. Billy Graham held a prominent position on the world stage. Martin Luther and the Reformers held much attention in the Christian world and held positions on the world stage. Karl Barth and Hermann Sasse had far-reaching influence through their writing, giving them positions on the world stage.

Being highly published, cited, or talked about is a sign that a theologian has a position on the world stage. Having relationships with prominent figures outside one's church body may also indicate having a more prominent position on Christianity's world stage. For example, Sasse's wide publication decades after his death is evidence of his broad influence. Often, the number of people within a faith tradition impacts how much influence it may have on the rest of

Christianity. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention has a more prominent position on the world stage than WELS.⁴

4. Individuals, like their institutions, may have different positions on the world stage. WELS President Mark Schroeder has a larger position on the world stage than the average WELS Pastor. Yet President Mark Schroeder does not have as prominent a position on the world stage as Pope Francis.

THESIS ONE—PROPER ECUMENISM PRACTICED BY CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS
WILL HAVE TO BE INITIATED FROM A MARGINALIZED POSITION IN THE
CHRISTIAN CHURCH

**A Formidable Challenge to pursuing Church Unity Rests in the Tragic Fact That
Lutherans Have Lost Their Central Position on Christianity's World Stage**

The Lutheran Church had its moment moment. The Lutheran church once sat at the center of the Christian world. In 1517, Martin Luther shook up Christendom. His works took the West by storm; his writing struck more than one chord. Papal bulls, disputations, and diets would follow him. The Church's attention was taken up with the Lutheran cause. *Was Scripture alone enough?* Would these "new" ideas last? Not many were sure, but God knew. But one thing was certain before the question of Luther's lasting impact was settled: he believed what he confessed. Luther and his followers could not be threatened into submission. For Luther, going against the Word of God carried a more significant threat than any pike, stake, or gallows. His conviction would live on even after he passed on to glory.

After Luther's death, the men leading the Reformation were willing to go to war over what they confessed. When confusion and controversy arose, they diligently worked with and even against each other to hammer out a clear confession. They did not create another 95 Theses, but a Formula made for peace, a collection of truths that accurately reflected the Scriptures. These they were willing to risk eternal life on. Eventually, they would ratify the Formula of Concord and unite some of the visible churches in Germany. Using the Book of Concord, they

could effectively correct, train, and confess clearly before the world what God's Word said. The moment God gave the Reformers came with some success. By their confession, many lived a new life free from Rome and united to Christ.

To be Lutheran is to reform, but Sasse feared that the days when Lutherans stood for reformation were waning. Sasse saw the significant damage many unionists, recently under the influence of Karl Barth, had done to Confessional Lutherans. Many Lutheran pastors no longer stood with the conviction of the Reformers. Instead, they stood alongside the Unionists, invalidating the Lutheran Confessions. Sasse writes:

The conception of the Confession of the Church, as we find it unequivocally expressed in Luther's Great Confession of 1528, in his Smalcald Articles, and in the Formula of Concord, and as it was also presupposed in the *Augustana*, is now quite impossible. What Karl Barth calls the "pious and free relativism" of the Reformed Confession has now taken place of that definiteness with which the Lutheran Confession regards its doctrinal content as the doctrinal content of the Holy Scriptures, from which one "cannot depart or give way in anything" [SA III XV 3] and with which Luther and the confessors of the Formula of Concord wanted "to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it" [FC SD XII 40]. The *quia* ["because"] of the confessional oath has given way to the nonobligatory *quatenus* ["insofar as"].⁵

In the wake of far too many *quatenus* subscriptions to the Book of Concord, he saw an attitude of improper ecumenism among Lutherans throughout the European church. Specifically, as he observed the confession of many Lutheran pastors, Sasse did not mince words: "To put it very frankly: The present-day theologians no longer believe what they say and no longer say what they believe."⁶ In other words, either Lutheran pastors did not believe in the Lutheran Confessions, or what they believed about the Lutheran Confessions did not take the *Confessions*

5. Hermann Sasse, *Letters to Lutheran Pastors* translated by Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 10.

6. Sasse, Letter one, "Concerning the Status of the Lutheran Churches in the World," 13.

on their terms. A quatenus subscription not only harms the content of belief but calls into question the conviction that points of doctrine are true all.

Since Lutheran pastors throughout Europe had altered and quieted their confessions, they no longer held the theological authority they once did. As a result of their weak confession, Sasse claimed that Lutheran churches in Germany were merely tolerated, and too often, they were not allowed to exist. Lutheranism was reduced to a mere school of thought within twentieth-century Christianity. Worse yet, the remaining Lutherans who protested unionism were not taken seriously. Treated more like malcontents and pessimists, the remaining Confessional Lutherans of his day were largely ignored; the Lutheran church lost its ability to champion pure doctrine among other church bodies. This was their fault.⁷ How seriously could any Lutheran be taken while many who confessed to be Lutheran could not prove it by standing on their confession? As the Lutheran church found itself in a disastrous position, Sasse contended that his readers must act and become *confessional*⁸ Lutherans again.

By *Confessional* Lutherans, Sasse asserted that his readers ought to have a firm (quia) subscription to the Lutheran Confessions and the action that comes with it.

We must know, however, how those can be assembled from the midst of that poor, stricken, and feeble Lutheranism for whom the Lutheran Confessions is not a mere pretense, but as it was for Luther and the signatories of the Confessions, a matter of life and death, of eternal life and eternal death, because it is a matter of the everlasting truth of the Holy Scriptures, which concerns all peoples and all churches of Christendom. Indeed, we are not called to think and act ecumenically, looking upon the confessions as something relative, reducing them to the lowest level, and practically doing away with them. We are, like Luther, to search for the one truth of the one Gospel for the one

7. The culpability of the unionistic churches in Germany for undermining their own authority may be broader than the fault that lies within Confessional Lutheran churches in America. It is not the fault of the confessional church bodies that many believe the Lutheran Church in America to be quite liberal. That fault would lie primarily with the liberal church bodies themselves.

8. Sasse, Letter one, 15.

church. Let us again become *confessional Lutherans* for the sake of the unity of the Church.⁹

had the faith of the Reformation gone? Was the Bible no longer clear? What would have happened to the ancient Church had it dealt with heresy so limply?¹⁰ With questions like these, Sasse pleaded that his audience would grapple with doctrine. He warned his readers that claiming the doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions *and not acting upon them* may be worse than denying them altogether.¹¹

Seeing his beloved church's situation as it was, Sasse appealed to his audience. He desired that all Lutheran pastors return to the Scriptures and the Confessions, that they study them anew to enliven their faith. Finally, he added that for Lutherans to begin to work towards greater unity within the visible church, great faith in the gospel is paramount. It would require faith, like when Lutherans had *their moment* on the world stage. Ending his comments on the position of the Lutheran church with a prayer, he had a fervent desire for revival brought about by the Holy Spirit:¹² "May God in His grace eradicate this unbelief and strengthen this weak faith in our souls and renew us through the great faith of the New Testament and the Reformation."¹³ With such faith, his readers could address their position in the church and begin to work towards unity no matter their position. The Church had seen difficult times before, and she would see them again. Yet difficult times do not imply that things cannot improve.

9. Sasse, Letter one, 15.

10. Sasse, Letter one, 14.

11. Sasse, Letter one, 15.

12. While some Christians more naturally pray for reformation than they do for revival, they often desire the same things. For a Lutheran pastor, a local revival may not be a natural setting. However, it may be a perfect opportunity to teach and confess the truth. In 2023, the Asbury Revival had plenty of critics. But how many critics went down to confess the truth there?

13. Sasse, Letter two, "Concerning the Nature of Confession in the Church," 26.

Luther was not always on the world stage, yet his conviction, confession, and constant publication put him there. Can the Lutheran church participate again in the dialogues of the Church at large? They must. Without orthodox Christianity guiding the Church, false doctrine will continue to wreak havoc.¹⁴ To contend for *true unity*, pure doctrine must be asserted. For the Church to show the world that they believe in the truth, they must confess it. This was Sasse's plea in 1948, and it remains relevant to this day.¹⁵

The Unity of the Church Faces Great Challenges in Today's Unionistic Climate

One wonders how much louder Sasse would make his plea today. He might well beg Christians all around the globe *to assert* doctrine. Yet, Some explanation about what is meant here by "assert doctrine" is needed. I intend to capture Sasse's desire that churches take doctrinal stances, even if they are not entirely scriptural. For Sasse, there is more honesty between two traditions with different convictions about the Scriptures than between church bodies who believe that differences are not of consequence. Instead, it would be better for different faith traditions to engage in polemics with each other than to pretend that differences in doctrine do not matter. As Sasse bemoaned the unionistic attitude that many Lutheran and Reformed churches had adopted, he points out that contending for the faith is far better than not:

Thus both churches, the Lutheran and the Reformed, suffered significant losses. They have not learned that which they can and should learn. Today, they are farther from the unity of the Church and [from] their fathers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who knew the doctrine of the other church not only in its caricature but also its reality. The confessional churches of that time wrestled with each other. They resorted to

14. St. Paul would call it gangrene (2 Tim. 1:17).

15. Sasse's first Letter to Lutheran Pastors was released in 1948.

polemics against each other. But in that very thing, they were nearer to the eternal truth of God than their successors today.¹⁶

Here, Sasse intends to say that pure doctrine is of such importance that it is worth bearing the pain of outward disunity. It is worth disagreeing about doctrine. Moreover, Sasse contends that striving for pure doctrine is the Church's most precious work. Christians must make assertions according to their convictions, even if assertions are divisive and painful. Thus, Sasse concludes his essay against unionism, *Union and Confession*:

Since the Reformation raised the great question of the pure doctrine of the Gospel for all of Christianity, the church exists only in, with, and under the form of confessional churches. No one can belong to the church, and no one can desire the church unless he affirms a confession—be it old or new. That these confessions contradict each other, that we, from our understanding of Scripture, out of the deep conviction of faith, must consider another view of Scripture as mistaken, that is the cross which the church must bear as the church militant. But if one is tempted to doubt the correctness of the proposition that full church fellowship presupposes the full fellowship of faith, doctrine, and confession, let him study the unspeakable and deplorable plight of the churches of the Reformation, seen in their deepest humiliation in the history of the modern unions. This history can teach us what the church's confession is, and what the struggle for God's truth in the church militant means for a world which faces the threat of being drowned by the lie.¹⁷

It is better to quarrel over points of doctrine than to allow a unionistic lie, which suggests that many doctrines of the Bible do not matter, to live unchallenged.¹⁸

But much of the Church has not listened to Sasse; the Christian Church worldwide seems to be asserting less doctrine as of late. Today, the Seven Sisters denominations work together as one unionistic medusa rather than seven church bodies. The ELCA shares open communion with the UMC, Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, and The Episcopal Church. The

16. Sasse, Letter three, "On the Problem of the Relation between the Reformed and Lutheran Church," 51.

17. Hermann Sasse, "Union and Confession," trans. Matthew Harrison (Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, n.d.), 51, <https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/322DB8E9-6F48-4E99-A44D-AA624F6F32DB>. "Union and Confession" may also be found in "The Lonely Way," Vol. 1.

18. To put it another way, erroneous charges made against Johannes Brenz and other Lutherans for teaching *the ubiquity of Christ's body* are in some sense closer to the truth than the common American Protestant adage "deeds, not creeds."

most prominent assertion among these American mainline denominations is that these churches believe the same things. They have traded their own *historic assertions* about points of doctrine for the false and *unionistic assertion* that most dogma matters very little. Whatever doctrinal conviction the clergy in the ELCA once had, it continues to fade, at least on a synodical level.¹⁹ Their current ability to influence Christianity is not much like the Lutheranism Sasse promoted. Sadly, when the Lutheran church makes worldwide Christian news, it's not for anything *Lutheran*.²⁰ Yet, voices for Confessional Lutheranism certainly remain. The pertinent question is not whether these voices exist but if they can be heard.

The current voice of Confessional Lutheranism comes from more than one church body. Even so, the Lutheran voice in the world is not what it once was. In Europe, Confessional Lutheran voices that lead Christian culture hardly exist today. Sasse may have been the last.²¹ Although they used to carry more influence, Confessional Lutherans were never at the epicenter of Christianity in America. America's religion was, if anything, a generic Arminian Protestantism. Worldwide, the Confessional Lutheran voice is not a prominent one.

To have a voice that champions proper ecumenism at the scope and scale that Sasse did would be quite a task. In many parts of the world, members of the Christian Church do not even

19. Evidence that the ELCA has abandoned some of its own confessions lies within grassroots "confessional" movements within its own synod. The organization L CORE (Lutheran Coalition for Renewal) is a group of Lutherans within the ELCA, which is dedicated to traditional views held by members of the ELCA. They advocate a common and clear confession of fundamental scriptural truths that the ELCA seems to wish to wash out. "Home," *Lutheran Coalition for Renewal (CORE)*, n.d., <https://www.lutherancore.website/>.

20. For example, the Lutheran World Federation's acceptance of the Joint Declaration on Justification with the Roman Catholic Church. It can be accessed here: <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Joint%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Doctrine%20of%20Justification.pdf> - Moreover, a quick survey of articles written about Lutheranism in Christianity Today (one of the largest Christian media groups) paints a bleak picture of the remaining impact Lutheranism has on the "World Stage."

21. Sasse was the last widely published and well-known Confessional Lutheran theologian from Europe. Confessional Lutheranism has not had a voice as broadly influential since Sasse. Rev. Dr. Robert Kolb may be the best example of someone whose current scholarship carries some measure of broader influence and publication. Rev. Dr. Jordan Cooper may be the contemporary Lutheran theologian with the largest online influence and audience.

know what Confessional Lutherans are. Our position is even more marginalized now than when Sasse explained the difficult position of the Lutheran church in his first letter to Lutheran pastors. As Sasse said, some of the fault lies with the Lutherans. Their abdication from the world stage is something Lutherans might repent for collectively, even if today's Lutherans are not so personally responsible.²²

Yet all Christians, and especially Lutherans, must remember that the Church lives continually as a product of God's grace. If Lutheran voices could greatly impact the Church once, they could do it again. The same Holy Spirit that brought about much unity among the church in 1517 has the same power to do so again. Hope for broader church unity is by no means lost. Even if Lutherans have a small position on the world stage, they hold an ideal position to enact local change within their respective communities.

A voice for proper ecumenism can live in each town with a Confessional Lutheran parish. The fact that Lutherans are not so well-known in scholarship, publications, or media does not hinder their ability to become locally known. Rather, the fact that nobody knows about Confessional Lutheranism may grant them a hearing.²³ Perhaps time has washed away the reputation of those who, in Sasse's day, were ignored or rejected for standing up against the twentieth-century ecumenical movement.²⁴

But how might Confessional Lutherans gain some ground to forward the ideas they hold so dear? They start like Luther by taking their moment if God should grant it. They confess what

22. For a biblical example of "corporate and historic confession," see Ezra's public repentance for generations of sin in Neh. 9.

23. To be sure, in some parts of the Midwest, Confessional Lutheranism remains quite visible.

24. Also, if it is true that WELS pastors have poor reputations in their communities for being exclusive or curmogony, what better way to address this than to try and foster positive relationships with other clergymen with open dialogue about the Bible?

they teach, not only in writing but *with action*.²⁵ Many might object, “I do believe what I confess! My parish holds to the Confessions. We confess the Creeds each Sunday. Our statement of belief is on our website.” But is the confession of the Lutheran church bold enough to maintain their unity and promote true unity among the Church at large? Can they have their moment back? Perhaps if the Lutheran church can manage a bold confession of the truth, God may grant an ecumenical movement yet again.

25. Hermann Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 26 translated by Matthew C Harrison “Where is the definite confession of the “Confessing Church” of the present? For the ‘confessing attitude’ is not enough. There is no real confession which cannot be confessed *in actu*.”.

THESIS TWO—BOLD CONFESSION OF THE TRUTH PRODUCES PROPER ECUMENISM

The Historic Confession of the Lutheran Church Was Powerful and Effective

Each Sunday, our congregations stand and recite: “I believe in God the Father Almighty.... I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.... I believe in the Holy Spirit.” The moment passes by rather quickly. Before long, the pastor returns to the altar, the service continues, and the church’s prayer ensues.

But do we mean it? One could argue that we certainly do. The offense is palpable if a church replaces the historic creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, Athanasian) with a radically different statement of belief. The shocking introduction of the blasphemous “Sparkle Creed”²⁶ stirred up vehement reactions throughout the Christian community. The Sunday following was, for many Christians, a day in which our Creeds *meant something more*. Exposure to that false creed underscored the beauty and importance of the historic creeds. Christians believe in the one true and eternal God, not a cluster of sacrilegious talking points. With brightened conviction, many Christians recited the historic creeds the following Sundays. These Creeds confess something of eternal significance. The feeling many experienced while confessing the Apostles' creed in opposition to the Sparkle Creed is the revived spirit with which Hermann Sasse wished Christians to embrace their confessions.

26. A transcript of the “Sparkle Creed” can be found here: “The ‘Sparkle Creed,’” *ALPB Forum Online*, 13 December 2023, <https://www.alpb.org/Forum/index.php?topic=8473.0>. <https://www.alpb.org/Forum/index.php?topic=8473.0> A transcript can also be read in Appendix 3.

Sasse saw firsthand the temptation to recite familiar confessions of faith with little energy. As stated before, many Lutherans stopped confessing the truths of the Lutheran Confessions for the sake of *outward unity*. The formation of the EKID provided an institutional union but no united confession, and to Sasse's dismay, this was nothing new.²⁷ Throughout his life, the Lutheran churches in Germany continued to water down their confession. The Lutheran faith existed as a shell of what it once was. Their spirit of external unity dominated the spirit of the twentieth-century ecumenical movement. Institutional unity does not necessitate unity in belief; this time, outward unity destroyed it. Where lies live, the Spirit does not.²⁸

A faith that is quick to shy away from confessing truths will not produce unity. On the contrary, when Christians stop confessing their differences, they depart further from the truth. Rather, when Christians acknowledge their differences in humility, they can search the Scriptures to find what they say. Through what better method could parties within Christendom come to a consensus? God works through his Word to change hearts.²⁹ Is it anything but the Scriptures that will produce unity within our churches? Thus, every visible church must *confess* what they believe. Without confession, it is impossible to establish a unity of the Spirit. Avoiding bold confessions of the truth may produce a phony unity but it will not produce a genuinely ecumenical spirit nor foster Christian unity.

27. John T. Pless, "Hermann Sasse (1895–1976)," *Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (2011): 303.

28. Sasse, "Union and Confession," 9.

29. How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees (Ps 119:9–12).

Lutherans know that the Lutheran Confessions are a testimony containing an excellent confession of faith, a faith that was to be active, vocal, and willing to assert itself.³⁰ Just as a Christian does not hide his faith but lets it shine, so also Lutherans will want to confess their faith according to what has been handed down to them in the Lutheran Confessions. The Book of Concord was written to be a confession *in motion*. The Reformers believed winning over those who had not yet joined their cause was possible. At the start of the Reformation, there was only one Lutheran!

The authors wrote their Confessions to demonstrate what Scripture teaches, not only for those who believe the content already but for those who do not. Suppose it is going to be the goal of Confessional Lutheran pastors to use the Confessions for proper ecumenism. In that case, they must boldly assert the truths within the Confessions with the confidence of the original authors. And how bold was that? The conviction of the Reformers was so firm that they maintained that no other doctrine be taught within their domains: “All teachings should conform to these directives, as outlined above. Whatever is contrary to them should be rejected and condemned as opposed to the unanimous explanation of our faith.”³¹ What conviction they have! They not only believed these truths, but they called on Christians preach and confess them. Their goal is that everyone become Lutheran.³² The Reformers certainly believed that people could be won over to the truth. They trusted that as they presented the truth in love, God the Holy Spirit would work through that truth to unite hearts.

30. Ap Preface 18-19, 111. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

31. FC Ep 6, 487.

32. How well are Lutherans pursuing that goal with heterodox churches today?

The Lutheran Confessions are themselves an ecumenical work—a book made for unity and peace, *concord* as it were.³³ The clarity and boldness of their Confession drove unity among Christians throughout Germany. In doing so, the Reformers practiced proper ecumenism. The Lutheran church exists for the express purpose of preaching the *pure* Word of God, a Word that fosters Christian unity by its own qualities. At the end of his letter to the Romans, St. Paul presumes that the study of the Scriptures produces one heart and mind among believers.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 15:4-6).

The teaching of the Bible for the purpose of church unity is in the very DNA of the Lutheran heritage. More importantly, it's the practice of St. Paul.

In his day, Sasse saw a church that desired the opposite. In the wake of the “Confessing Church,”³⁴ he saw disunity, not concord. Where the word of God was not being confessed boldly, false doctrine arose and created more disunity. Eventually, a false doctrine may drive such separation from the truth that it drives souls from Christ’s Church. Could there be a more tragic form of disunity?³⁵ Yet, Sasse was not the only Lutheran clergyman to understand that a bold confession of the truth produces unity and peace. Although he was never able to rally most

33. [And that we may] “consider how we may act concerning the dissension in the holy faith and Christian religion and to hear, understand, and consider with love and graciousness everyone’s judgment, opinion, and beliefs among us, to unite the same in agreement on one Christian truth” (AC Preface 2–3). Brackets are my own.

34. Like today’s Seven Sisters, Karl Barth’s unionistic “Confessing Church” was sidelining doctrines that were vital to the health of the Church.

35. “Thus the foolish and simplistic hope must be given up that the false doctrine, which has been acknowledged in modern church government as equally legitimate with pure doctrine, will finally disappear of itself. But where a church has made its pact with false doctrine and laid down the weapons with which it can and must fight heresy humanly speaking, there remains only the one last possibility for separating the church from heresy: the separation of the orthodox church from an image, which only bears the name ‘church,’ but in reality has nothing to do with the church of Christ” Sasse, (“Union and Confession,” 6).

German Lutherans to the truth, it had been done previously by other confessional men in the Americas.

At a time when the WELS was not yet united in its confession, Pastor Gottlieb Reim pursued proper ecumenism his synod convention essay in 1861. Reim saw the issue of his synod's disunity for what it was. The ministerium had not demanded a strong and united confession from all its pastors. Without the ability to supply pastors from Lutheran seminaries in the United States, they received pastors from several German mission societies. These mission societies provided pastors with various levels of training in (and convictions about) the Lutheran Confessions. For Reim, that lack of consistency regarding WELS's confession created disunity.³⁶ So that the WELS might turn from its errors and better serve God's people, he proposed that each pastor make a clear confession of the truths in the Book of Concord.

In the synod's subsequent years, the bold confession of pastors like Johannes Bading, Philipp Koehler, and Adolph Hoenecke confessionalized the synod.³⁷ By confessionalizing it, they united it.³⁸ To put it plainly, the confessional movement within the early years of the WELS was a proper ecumenical movement. Moreover, it was driven by men who confessed boldly the truths they believed. And by their bold confession, they achieved much unity among the synod's

36. Gottlieb Reim "Confessional Position of the Ev. Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin 1861 Proceedings, translated by Arnold Lehmann, Page 14," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 14.1. 1, (2004) 5–6.

37. By 1866, if not earlier, the synod's Committee 10 made clear that the synod should represent itself to other church bodies on the basis of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. For further reading, see WELS, "Proceedings of the Sixteenth Convention of the German Evangel. Luth. Synod of Wisconsin and Other States Held in the German Evangelical-Lutheran Congregation in Fond Du Lac, Wis. from June 7 to 13, 1866," *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 19.1 (2003), 15.

38. The election of President Johannes Bading at the 1861 convention is evidence for the confessionalization of the synod. (The WELS Historical Institute Journal, Volume 21) As president, he continued to foster proper ecumenism by promoting pure doctrine throughout the synod. In 1869, he exhorted the convention to consider carefully its position related to the General Council on the basis of doctrine. In the same address, he encouraged the synod to pursue a relationship with the Missouri Synod, knowing that this unity would produce immeasurable blessings. An excerpt of Bading's presidential report of 1869 can be found in Appendix A. The full text can be found in: "Proceedings of the 19. Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Wisconsin and Other States," translated by Arnold Lhemann, *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 22.1 (2004), 8.

pastors and congregants.³⁹ Significantly, these men believed certain brother pastors who were not yet Confessional Lutherans could be persuaded. Thus, they attempted to win them over. By boldly expressing the truth to them, they brought the WELS ministerium to a more confessional and, therefore, more united position.

A Bold Confession is Advantageous in the Unionistic Twenty-First-Century Christian Climate.

God has granted much church unity through the bold confession of Lutherans in the past. All Confessional Lutherans today benefit from the Reformers' proper ecumenism. Many others have been blessed by the similar ecumenical endeavors made by Sasse and Reim. God has been rich in his mercy! But can he do it again?

Truly, it would be a Lutheran thing to believe again that it is time for a reformation. Yet it is not 1517 anymore; Christianity's landscape is quite different from Luther's day. At his time, Christian authority was centralized. In the West, there was one authority, the papacy. Today, the American Christian scene is quite decentralized. Although Pew Research reports that 20.8% of American Christians are Catholic, no other denomination holds more than 6% of the Christian population. Moreover, people who report as non-denominational report a *total* of 4.9% of the Christian population. American Christianity is a denominational blend, as is their confession.⁴⁰

39. And eventually, fellowship with the LCMS.

40. The assumption that people in any denomination are united in doctrine is also questionable. As stated before, the doctrines most recently asserted by Mainline American Christian denominations consist primarily of differing degrees of pluralism. 1615 L. St NW, Suite 800 Washington, and DC 20036 USA 202-419-4300 | Main202-857-8562 | Fax202-419-4372 | Media Inquiries, "Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, n.d., <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>.

Thus, the shape of any reformation efforts would look quite different today. A direct critique of the papacy may have some place among Lutheran parishes.⁴¹ Still, by and large, that opportunity has been sidelined along with the Lutheran church's position on the world stage. However, where there are Confessional Lutheran churches, there can be voices for grassroots ecumenism. The current American Christian landscape is a ripe harvest field for a bold confession of Biblical truths, especially among churches that do not have a well-defined (and professed) confession.

While he wrote, Sasse considered the lion's share of European churches to have departed from their historic confessions: “One can say this still today only about a disappearing minority in these once-Lutheran peoples and tribes. One must see this reality to understand the hopeless struggle of German Lutheranism against the union.”⁴² The twentieth-century ecumenical movement was a champion for pluralism and seems to have gained in strength.⁴³ But a lack of confessionalism (Lutheran, Westminster, The Baptist Confession of Faith, etc.) within American Christianity allows Confessional Lutherans to be voices for proper ecumenism. Christians who do not have certainty or clarity about their church's doctrine may yearn for it. The Lord's flock desires to listen to his voice. In fact, his sheep are the only ones that listen to him (John 10:27). Unfortunately, false teachers confuse people, and preach mixed and false “gospels” along side the message of truth. Sasse observed a desire for biblical truth among Protestants in England:

But for the humans at the end of the twentieth-century, tired of the secular dogmas of the prominent political systems, yearning for the Christian dogma and for firm Christian doctrine, nothing would be left *faute de mieux*, [for want of a better alternative] except

41. For example: The Papacy's recent encyclical “Consideration Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons” may instigate comment or critique from WELS pastors.

42. Sasse, Letter 25, Concerning the Unity of the Church, 128.

43. Note the full communion of the Seven Sister Synods found on page 13.

for the road to Rome. Consider why in England, but not only there, so many educated people are going this way!⁴⁴

Christians who were earnest for clear doctrine received teachings, though not pure, preferring well defined instruction to Christianity *without* many biblical assertions. As unattractive as converting to Catholicism may sound to Confessional Lutheran ears, the Catholic church may continue to offer many answers to confused Christians who live within a pluralistic Christian culture today.⁴⁵ The trend in Sasse's day also seems to be a fad now.⁴⁶ Can Lutherans offer a better way than Rome—a truly better alternative? This is most certainly true!

Every Lutheran pastor has the gift to confess before other clergymen. Lutheran pastors are armed with the same Word of God as Luther at the start of the Reformation. They are armed with the same Book of Concord as the early WELS Lutherans. Confessional Lutheran pastors have the same commitment to pure doctrine that Sasse did. Surely, with the power of the word, attempts to win over other clergymen to the truth will not return empty (Isa 55:11–13).⁴⁷

Who knows how God may bless regular conversations about the Word of God between Lutheran pastors and other clergymen?⁴⁸ It is doubtful that many have ever heard a bold and clear confession of Lutheran teachings. Moreover, some pastors may not have strong convictions about any number of vital points of Christian doctrine. Most have not had the training Confessional Lutheran pastors have had. Importantly, thousands of pastors (if not tens of

44. Sasse, Letter 25, 129. The bracketed information is my own.

45. Unlike so many churches, the Roman Catholic Church asserts a clear and comprehensive set of doctrines in its catechism. In the Roman Church, people know what they are supposed to believe.

46. Notably, Pastor Keith Nestor is the author of “A Convert’s Guide to Catholicism.” cf. Cameron Bertuzzi of the YouTube channel “Capturing Christianity.” There are whole Catholic media groups dedicated to helping Christians “come home.” Access one such site here: <https://chnetwork.org/>.

47. In chapter 55, Isaiah testifies not only to the power of God’s word but also to the blessed results of proclaiming the Lord’s salvation.

48. Clergymen, specifically, are worth devoting time to. They have parishioners beneath them whom they care for spiritually.

thousands) have never seriously interacted with Confessional Lutheranism. That means that some Christians have only been taught about the Scriptures in an adulterated way. To some extent, they have not dealt with the truth of the Bible in its purity. Many have only studied while carrying false presuppositions that harm their study. The Scriptures are clear and sufficient for salvation, yet as false doctrine remains unaddressed; it damages and confuses the faith of God's people. "A little yeast runs through the whole batch of dough." (Gal. 5:9).⁴⁹ God can and will defend his Church from false doctrine, but he has decided to use preaching and teaching. He will continue to unite his Church when and wherever the gospel is preached purely by those willing to *confess*.

The Lack of Assertions among Some Christians Gives Lutherans Opportunities to Assert the Truth

As church bodies struggle to handle matters of doctrine by their unwillingness to assert historic Christian truths, their confession weakens, and lies are bred. For the UMC, this unassertiveness has led to a schism. In 2023, about one-fifth of their churches voted to remove themselves from their conference.⁵⁰ The current doctrinal strife of the UMC is nothing to celebrate. However, their 2023 split has caused much confusion, division, and sadness among their congregants and clergy. By practicing proper ecumenism among them, Lutherans can provide many confused souls with

49. Perhaps also Rom 10:10, "How can they believe if they have not heard?" How many Christians have *never heard* the word taught without false doctrine mixed in?

50. "United Methodists Lose One-Fifth of U.S. Churches in Schism over LGBTQ Rights | PBS NewsHour," n.d., <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/united-methodists-lose-one-fifth-of-u-s-churches-in-schism-over-lgbtq-rights>.

comfort, aid, and clarity.⁵¹ Even if not completely consciously, doctrinal errors will bother Christians. All who pray Ps 119 ask that God inform them about the sin they do not yet see. “Be good to your servant while I live, that I may obey your word. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me. My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times” (Ps 119:17-20). In settings where doctrinal strife has recently produced confusion or division, that hunger may be even stronger.⁵²

An opportunity for proper ecumenism may also be found at hurting congregations not affiliated with a larger church body. In places where doctrinal strife or scandal has been an unfortunate part of the parish’s past, the parish may need a shepherd. Could a Lutheran pastor offer himself as a shepherd for these people?

To be clear, a Lutheran pastor could offer to only serve those people on Scripture’s terms and according to biblical fellowship principles. One would not immediately preside and preach at another church’s service. But he could offer to instruct (catechize) the congregation with the goal of one day walking together as shepherd and sheep. The law of love suggests that a pastor not ignore Christians in his community who need a shepherd. Truth and love are commanded by God not only among those who don’t know Christ but among those who do. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul placed special emphasis on the love Christians show fellow believers. “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give

51. It should be noted that these hurting people live in the backyard of many WELS parishes. Over 40 UMC Churches have filed to split from their fellowship in Wisconsin. For further reading: <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/local/2023/06/08/43-wisconsin-churches-ask-to-disaffiliate-from-united-methodist-church/70297279007/>

52. Although not expressly referring to false teachers, it’s safe to assume that David’s request that God defend him from liars may also be the request of a parishioner who is suffering because of false teaching. “I call on the Lord in my distress, and he answers me. Save me, Lord, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues. What will he do to you, and what more besides, you deceitful tongue? He will punish you with a warrior’s sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom bush. Woe to me that I dwell in Meshek, that I live among the tents of Kedar! Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war” (Ps. 120).

up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal 6:9–10). Considering Paul’s exhortation to do a special measure of good to believers, might clergymen who see sheep without a shepherd consider offering to feed them?

To be sure, in cases where a parishioner receives regular care from a heterodox pastor, a Confessional Lutheran pastor’s orthodoxy does not invalidate the call of another minister. When a congregation has a pastor, ecumenical efforts are best practiced within avenues that remain respectful and loving to the other called ministers and focused on fellow clergymen. (After all, Sasse’s focus was pastors too.) Even so, a pastor may need to assess the truthfulness of another local shepherd. For example, suppose the UMC pastor in town does not recite the historic creeds on Sunday but rather the Sparkle Creed. In that case, it is necessary to consider carefully if that pastor is yet a Christian. Suppose it can be determined that a clergyman is not a Christian according to his confession; winning over their parishioners does not violate the doctrine of the divine call. Rather it would be an attempt to rescue Christians from false prophets.⁵³ Where and when God allows a pastor to confess the truth, he ought to take it. Consider the last line of the *diploma of vocation* regularly used by WELS congregations, “To devote your time, strength and ability to the general advancement of the kingdom of Christ and to the gathering in of his harvest.”⁵⁴ A pastor who teaches local Christians who are not in his parish is acting within the scope of his divine call for the good of Christ’s kingdom.

Bringing a Christian who once believed many false things into the Lutheran faith not only adds blessing to the family of believers but also defends a soul from great danger. Of course,

53. One may think of the “pastor” in that congregation as they would a “pastor” at a congregation of Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons.

54. A full-text preview of this document can be previewed at <https://online.nph.net/pastor-call-form.html>.

people looking for a new church are precisely those whom Lutheran pastors would want to confess to.⁵⁵

As mentioned before, when Sasse finished the First Letter to Lutheran pastors, he reflected on what his readers might do about the decline in faith and *clear confession* within the Lutheran church. He suggested that bold proclamation of the truth is necessary. For Sasse, Lutherans must double down on their confession if they will impact the Church at large. He wrote:

The Lutheran Confession is not a mere pretense but, as it was for Luther and the signatories of the Confessions, a matter of life and death, of eternal life and eternal death, because it is a matter of the everlasting truth of the Holy Scriptures, which concerns all peoples and all Christendom.⁵⁶

For Sasse, establishing true unity through proper ecumenism was no trivial matter but an issue of the highest stakes. He called for Lutherans in his day to confess boldly; twenty-first-century circumstances demand a strong confession all the more. Through a right confession the gospel is preached. By a clear confession, souls are saved.

As far as Sasse, Luther, and Reim were concerned, not acting in the face of false doctrine would be wrong. To expect an outpouring of the Spirit from places where the Word is obscured would be un-Lutheran.⁵⁷ God has always blessed the confession of Christians and will continue to do so.⁵⁸ Between the Lutheran Church's history of great confession and the doctrinal strife the Church finds itself in today, Lutherans have every reason to confess boldly for the sake of unity.

55. This is, admittedly, something that is already done broadly among many Lutheran pastors.

56. Letter 1, 15.

57. Letter 1, 15.

58. Jesus gave an incredible promise after Peter's bold confession in Matthew 16:17–20. "Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father

in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” For further evidence of God blessing the confession of his servants, see Acts 5:29-32.

THESIS THREE—PROPER ECUMENISM DEVELOPS FROM BELIEF IN THE INVISIBLE CHURCH

Belief in the Invisible Church Motivates a Christian to Treat All Christians with Sincerity and Humility

In Sasse's day, genuine church unity seemed rather elusive; the Ecumenical Movement of the twentieth century was evidence of that. Many theologians from around the globe came together to form the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in search of outward unity based on something other than full agreement on the teachings of Scripture. The function of this organization was largely to articulate beliefs in a way that would be agreeable to groups that held different doctrinal positions. In doing so, they questioned which points of doctrine were absolutely and undeniably true and which posited something merely plausible. The LWF successfully united outwardly but in doing so, damaged the unity of faith among many of its members.

They set aside Scripture's clarity by claiming that a large portion of the Bible's content was up for debate. They even allowed matters once decided by the ecumenical councils to be murky again. These claims continued to propagate spiritual disunity under the guise of an outward union.

Alongside the pious and dogmatic lies, there stands an especially dangerous form of lie, which can be called the *institutional lie*. By this we mean a lie which works itself out in the institutions of the church, in her government and her organization. It is so dangerous because it legalizes the other lies in the church and makes them impossible to remove. Such a lie exists, for instance, where the governance of the church grants to those who confess and those who deny the Trinity and the two natures in Christ the same rights in the church; where the preaching of the Gospel according to the understanding of the

Reformation enjoys the same right as the proclamation of a dogma-less Enlightenment religion, so long as the latter appeals only to the Bible; where it is the rule that at a church with two pastoral positions one must be filled with a pastor of the “free” bent, so the “liberals” in the congregation do not have to go to an “orthodox” pastor.

Through movements like the one described above, Christians are torn from believing many clear truths and driven to believe a mix of half-truths. Bits of doctrine get apprehended by many, but few digest pure teachings. For Sasse’s part, it is nothing short of a lie when a body of Christians claims that many doctrines which are readily accepted as truth be taught along side doctrines that are considered false by some within the church body.⁵⁹ This *lie* does not only damage people’s faith in God’s Word, but it also hinders Christian unity.

This sort of “agreement upon words” was not true unity for Sasse. True unity never exists in obscuring what the Scriptures say but in confessing clearly what they did indeed say. Moreover, the Scriptures confess that some measure of unity (of the Spirit) exists even where unity in all doctrine does not. At the beginning of Eph 4, St. Paul exhorts the congregation to unity, telling them to “make every effort” to be united. Then, in verse four, he explains one of the reasons they ought to work for unity: the Church is one. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4–6). This description remains true, even as people are divided outwardly and/or divided by belief;⁶⁰ he doesn’t qualify their unity. All who believe in Christ as their Savior from sin have an invisible unity with all

59. Sasse, “Union and Confession,”.

60. This assumes that any false doctrine that someone believes has not destroyed their faith and turned them from God.

believers. As Christians worldwide confess: “I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,”⁶¹ they are united.

Such invisible unity must be confessed while a proper ecumenism is pursued. God has established one Church, over which he is the shepherd, even as the visible churches live out their walk without outward unity. Since a true unity of the Spirit exists within the Christian Church, greater outward unity is also possible. *All Christians* possess the same Spirit that motivates and encourages each who attempts to practice proper ecumenism. Pressure to find (false) outward unity results from forgetting that the invisible Church *exists*. When Christians who are not in agreement understand that they are together in Spirit, they can bear the cross of remaining separate for the sake of the truth. But as they remain separate, Christians ought to express their hidden unity by treating one another with sincerity and humility.

Sincerity

As Paul expresses what a living, committed Christian love looks like, he highlights sincerity. “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Rom 12:9). Christian sincerity carries with it an evaluation of things *as they are*. It bears no pretense, no boasting, just truth for the neighbor’s sake. Sincerity is genuine in that it cares about each harm that befalls a neighbor, false doctrine included. Pointing out twisted beliefs is not fun, but having the love to do so is sincere.

Lutherans have often been sincere in pointing out the need for their neighbors to know and believe the clear truths of God’s Word; it is the Lutheran church’s ethos. It was with

61. Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*. The Three Ecumenical Creeds, 22, 7—8.

sincerity that Luther made his stand. It was with sincerity that the Reformers wrote the Book of Concord, and Martin Chemnitz wrote his *Examination*. It was with sincerity that generation after generation of Lutheran dogmaticians wrote their texts to explain carefully the truth. All this was done for the good of the people they served. Members of the Lutheran church have benefitted greatly from this. Through this truth-telling sincerity, the Lord strengthens faith and comforts consciences. In these truths, eternal life is given. The Lutheran church's eagerness to preach the truth bears good fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. They have many reasons to make their confession sincerely. But as Christians do so, they must also confess with humility.

Humility

In 1 Corinthians, Paul reminded God's people why they ought not boast about the knowledge they had received. "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Cor 4:7). This sentiment is familiar in Lutheran theology. "I believe that by my own understanding or strength, I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him."⁶² It is by the Spirit's power that we have become Christians. Christians have no reason to be proud God saved us! Yet Sasse observed some pride among clergymen he wrote to. To combat this in his second letter, he penned, "[For] a true understanding of Scripture is also achieved only by the help of the Holy Spirit."⁶³ Sasse's insight is sobering for the prideful Christian. It is true that the Lutheran church is a product of the Reformation, a heritage worth celebrating. At the same time, not only the

62. SC 6.

63. Sasse, Letter two, 27.

initial “Reformation spark” but the constant preservation of the Lutheran church is a product of God’s grace. Pride over orthodoxy is still pride. It quickly forgets that it is by the Spirit that *anyone* understands the Scriptures. Through his gifts alone the Lutheran church possesses the doctrine they continue to uphold.

Therefore, Lutherans ought not look down on Christians who have been afflicted by Satan’s lies. They ought not boast about their orthodoxy.⁶⁴ Moreover, Lutherans ought not callously leave erring Christians and churches to get what they deserve. To do so would forget the humble position from which each individual Christians is born, unbelief. Instead, Christians would rather have solidarity with their mistaken brothers in Christ, remembering that even with pure doctrine, all sin daily. It may be right to insist that an erring church gets what it deserves for its false doctrine. But what if the Lutheran church got what it deserved?⁶⁵ To view the battle against false doctrine as “us Lutherans” and “those other Christians” would be like a recovering (false doctrine) addict who does not let anyone else to come to rehab.

The Recognition of False Doctrine Ought to Produce Ecumenical Dialogue between Brothers in Christ

64. Here, the author recalls the warning Former Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor J. P. Koehler made in “Legalism Among Us.” According to Koehler, bragging about orthodoxy does not help the proclamation of the gospel but hinders it. For further reading, cf. “Legalism among us,” in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, 2:239–41.

65. Dr. Adam Koontz, in his podcast “A Brief History of Power,” offered that thought. “BHoP#161 The Exit from History Part 1 - From Mainline to Mainstream - A Brief History of Power | Podcast on Spotify,” n.d., <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5lytIoX5MdnGTPZXKTgN4?si=f6e42c11763d4ece&nd=1&dlsi=abcdbefc6a7d4e69>.

With sincerity, Sasse insisted that Lutherans have a responsibility toward the Roman Catholic Church. The body of Christ cares about the well-being of all its members. This is accomplished in part by being invested in what heterodox churches teach. In his thirteenth letter, “Is the Pope Really Still the Antichrist?”, he expresses his attitude on the subject.

In order not to be misunderstood, we affirm that we know ourselves to be so bound up with Christ’s church, which despite everything still also exists in the papal church. We also know ourselves to share a responsibility for the Christian people in other communions. We affirm the necessity of in-depth theological and churchly conversations between Lutherans and Catholics, and we participate in them whenever possible. Would that the churches really get to know each other so that they might learn again to speak with each other as they were able to do in those centuries when doctrine was still taken seriously.

Sasse pointed out that Christians owe it to each other to confess the truth to one another. For him, talking about doctrine is of high importance. If these conversations are not had, doctrine may not be taken seriously. Sasse’s posture is biblical; it calls to mind Paul’s description of ministry at the beginning of the letter to the Colossians. “He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. 29 To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me” (Col. 1:28-29). St. Paul points out that it is his duty to educate the congregation wholly for maturity. They must know everything Christ commanded. No pastor is called to admonish the whole world; each man has a vocation and a limit. However, upon observing a Christian living in dangerous error, the pastor should humbly point out his sin that he might not fall from it, aiming to guide him to Christian maturity.

With this sentiment in mind, Sasse conveyed an ecumenical solidarity for the Church at large. He was thankful to God for his orthodoxy while being concerned with the damage false doctrine had done to believers around him. One reason Sasse brought up the Antichrist in letter thirteen was to heighten his readers’ sense that those in heterodox churches, especially the

Roman Catholic Church, were continually being exposed to deadly error. But what might this solidarity with the members of the hidden church look like? How might the unity among Christians *that already exists* among all believers drive Lutherans to promote proper ecumenism?

One of the Lutheran pastors can begin by treating people according to who they are, brothers in Christ by recognizing the severity of their situation. reasons Confessional Lutherans treat doctrine so seriously is because false doctrine is incredibly dangerous. Sasse, following the Scriptures, asserted what Peter did. False doctrine is a matter of eternal life and eternal death.

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. (2 Pet 2:1–3)

According to St. Peter, false doctrine will always terrorize the church. It will be a threat until the Last Day. The Lutheran Fathers have always acknowledged this.⁶⁶ Notice how vehemently Rev. Dr. Francis Pieper, former president of the Missouri Synod and author of *Christian Dogmatics*, speaks about the dangers of false doctrines concerning justification: “Faith and the denial of justification by faith cannot exist in the same heart. Errors in some doctrines, for instance, in the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, may be due to weakness and do not necessarily lead to the loss of faith. But error with regard to justification is in every case fatal.”⁶⁷ Since, for example, understanding the doctrine of justification is so vital, can Christians see a brother or sister in error and not act?⁶⁸ Certainly not.

66. One might say combating false doctrine for the sake of the gospel’s purity is the reason the Lutheran church exists.

67. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 2:518.

68. Although there are many dangerous “branches” of false doctrine in Catholicism, Mainline Protestantism, and American Evangelicalism, a large number of them can be traced back to the “trunk” of

To make matters worse, many heterodox Christians live with church bodies where certain lies have become *institutional*. Deep-seated lies are, in fact, especially dangerous and hard to return from. Sasse regretted that a return to orthodoxy is quite difficult for those within the aforementioned church bodies—church bodies who officially claim things that are not found in Scripture. As quoted on page 30, in his opening to “Union and Confession”, he explained what he calls the *institutional lie*.

Among the lies that destroy the church, there is one we have not yet mentioned. Alongside the pious and dogmatic lies, there stands an especially dangerous form of lie, which can be called the *institutional lie*. By this we mean a lie which works itself out in the institution of the church, in her government and her organization. It is so dangerous because it legalizes the other lies in the church and makes them impossible to remove.⁶⁹

Throughout all heterodox churches, deadly institutional lies exist. These lies demand the attention of those who know the truth. Why is it, then, that sometimes Christians (including WELS Christians) do not warn their brothers and sisters in Christ of the institutional lies they are entangled with?

Regrettably, sometimes orthodox Christians do nothing to warn other Christians because they are not acting according to their belief in the Holy Christian Church. This impropriety is not the *institutional lie* Sasse spoke about. Alternatively, sometimes the issue arises from the assumption that possessing the truth leads to behaving in accordance with *orthodoxy*. This problematic line of thinking may go as follows: Because the WELS correctly teaches that “persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship,”⁷⁰

justification. This could be expressed through the misuse of confession among members at a Catholic parish, the yoke of Christian perfectionism in a Methodist church, or decision theology at a Southern Baptist congregation. To be sure, many Christians will be saved even if they have an error in their conception of justification. Christians are saved through faith alone by grace alone, even if they cannot articulate it correctly.

69. Sasse, “Union and Confession,” 3.

70. WELS, Theses on Church Fellowship. “Church Fellowship,” WELS, n.d., <https://WELS.net/about-WELS/what-we-believe/doctrinal-statements/church-fellowship/>.

then WELS members and clergymen are absolved from any responsibility to dialogue, warn, admonish, and love Christians of other denominations.

But where does this false assumption come from? In part, it stems from a misapplication about how to deal with Christians who are entrapped by false doctrine. This misapplication is not on account of what WELS authors have written about the issue but perhaps by a misapplication of what their authors have rightly penned. In his book *Church Fellowship*, which is published by WELS publisher NPH. Dr. Brug addresses how Lutherans might live around heterodox Christians throughout the whole book; in particular, he highlights the necessity of staying away from false teachers.

Who are the people the Romans are to keep away from? They are described as people who “are causing divisions and setting up traps which cause people to fall into sin, contrary to the teaching you have learned” (literal translation). The Greek verb rendered “are causing divisions” describes an action that is continuous and habitual. The people to be avoided are not teachers who inadvertently misspeak. They are not naïve or uninformed victims who unknowingly follow false doctrine. They are teachers who persist in their false doctrine and their sinful conduct in spite of warnings against it. They are serving “their own appetites”; that is, they are not serving Christ, but their own egos, desires, lusts, intellect, and reason. They may look like servants of Christ to the casual observer, but no one ever serves Christ by any false teaching. Since their man-made teachings appeal to human reason and to sinful desires, the false teachers find willing followers who join in their sin. Both the teachers and their supporters are to be avoided.⁷¹

Within Dr. Brug’s commentary, there are several things worth highlighting about *those whom we are to keep away from*. First, he notes that those who are to be avoided “persist in their false doctrine and their sinful conduct in spite of warnings against it.” These false teachers are dangerous. Christians must separate from someone who will not be corrected but desires to maintain his error. Uniting with them would allow false doctrine to spread and bring disaster to God’s flock.

71. John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, The People’s Bible Teachings (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), 51.

However, sometimes Lutherans assume that “keep away from them” means something like “ignore them.” However, when Dr. Brug is talking about “avoiding” or “keeping away” from false teachers, it’s within the context of an entire book about church fellowship. He means that Lutherans should not worship with them or allow false teachers to become their shepherds. Dr. Brug does not say that Christians ought to ignore or never dialogue with other Christians. Instead, he points out that one of the things that makes these teachers most dangerous is that they refuse to listen *after* being warned about their falsehoods. They are ardent in spreading their error. Moreover, when Paul warns the congregation in Rom 16, he is focused on false teachers and how this flock might deal with them. They must not listen to or worship with the men who are teaching falsehood and deceiving “the minds of naïve people.”⁷² Ensuring that Christians do not unite with these teachers is of utmost importance. But again, the “keeping away from” is focused on church fellowship, not mere contact.

That said, Brug’s description of how Lutherans are to deal with heterodox Christians raises several important questions: Has the average American Protestant clergyman been warned of the false things he has learned? Is it likely he dealt with the Lutheran Confessions in his education? If the answer to both those questions is “No,” then Lutherans may have a responsibility to act. In some sense, someone cannot be persistent in their error unless they are told their error.⁷³ To be sure, Lutherans should not unite with heterodox Christians because they have not yet had a chance to correct them. On the contrary, Lutherans would do well to warn the

72. I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I rejoice because of you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. (Romans 16:17-19)

73. If someone does not know they are in error, can a pastor be sure they are not open to correction or instruction about the false doctrine they believe?

false teachers they meet without uniting with them in fellowship. They ought to uphold fellowship principles without assuming that “keeping away from them” gives a Lutheran license to ignore false doctrine. In other words, when Lutherans ignore Christians in error (especially those who have never been warned of their error) they may not necessarily be acting with orthopraxy. Rather, might they be avoiding the cross that admonishing or instructing brothers in Christ brings?

But to be fair, Confessional Lutheran authors have made the case that a break in fellowship is a *constant warning* to heterodox Christians, which does serve as an admonishment. This “constant warning” claim is made in NPH’s *What’s Going on Among the Lutherans?* While Dr. Franz Pieper (who is not the author but quoted for support) is talking about why orthodox Christians must not associate with heterodox Christians, he asserts that staying away from heterodox Christians is a benevolent warning, claiming that heterodox Christians notice when Lutherans do not worship with them. He writes:

It is also for the benefit of the children of God among the heterodox that we refuse church fellowship to these churches. Therefore, we are constantly reminding them that they are in the wrong camp. According to God’s Word, Christians do not belong in the company of those who openly contradict some doctrines of Christ. For this reason, many people also step out of the wrong camp into the right one.⁷⁴

This claim holds water but should be weighed carefully. It may have been true in 1889 that separation was a constant warning. Is it still true heterodox Christians notice this silent admonition by WELS churches?

That said, it is worth asking if members of heterodox churches are as aware of the silent admonition as they were in 1889. The dominance of improper ecumenism and non-

74. Patsy A. Leppien and J. Kincaid Smith, *What’s Going on among the Lutherans? A Comparison of Beliefs*, Impact Series (Milwaukee, Northwestern, 1992). 376. I mention Pieper’s quotation within a secondary source because this section of the essay is focused on the WELS.

denominationalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is evidence that churchgoers are less concerned with historic confessions of faith than they used to be. As mentioned in “Thesis Two,” many of the *Seven Sisters* denominations now practice full communion. All this is to say that although the breaking of fellowship is a valid (and silent) admonition, it does not follow that every Christian is well informed on the dangers of their doctrinal misbeliefs because WELS people won’t worship with them.⁷⁵

In fact, Pieper admits that many Christians would leave a heterodox congregation if they were informed of the truth.

Moreover, we do not even separate ourselves from the children of God among the sects but from the sects as such. Rather, the sects separate these dear children of God from us. They hold those who belong to us—for children of God are determined to accept the whole Word of God—captive among themselves. So these believers must outwardly support the wicked cause of the sects while in their hearts they belong to us. These children of God would at once come over to an orthodox congregation if they were better informed.⁷⁶

He understands that all Christians belong to Christ, but many, although they desire the truth, lead lives deceived by false teachers. Since that is the case, would we not be encouraged when given the opportunity to, by the Spirit’s power, free someone from the deception they have been subject to? While silent admonition is an act of love, given the pluralistic nature of American Christianity, it would also be loving to make use of every opportunity to confess the truth. Silent admonition is not reason on its own to stay away⁷⁷ from heterodox Christians or not care about their souls.

75. This, of course, assumes people know what Confessional Lutheranism is at all.

76. Leppien and Smith, *What’s Going on among the Lutherans?*, 376.

77. To be sure, I am not arguing for joint worship or ministry with the heterodox. Instead, my aim is that those who desire to act ecumenically do not give heterodox Christians the silent treatment.

As Lutherans remember and rejoice in the Holy Christian Church, they should think prayerfully about how they might promote unity. The primary goal of the Lutheran church is that souls would be won for Christ. The second purpose is keeping the message pure.⁷⁸ Those things go hand in hand, which is precisely why working for unity among all Christians is so important. Fellowship principles are a key part of preserving Christian unity; yet Lutherans ought not forget that not practicing fellowship is not the same thing as having zero contact with someone.

To consider how one might act as he considers heterodox parishes, the following question may be clarifying. Do those within the Lutheran church desire that either the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) or the ELCA grow in membership?⁷⁹ If the answer to that question is “yes,” then Lutherans ought to be concerned with the orthodoxy of heterodox parishes. If the answer to that question is “no,” then Lutherans no longer consider their parishes unchristian, and consequently must be greatly concerned with the souls therein. Either way, proper ecumenism is driven by acknowledging that false doctrine is dangerous, but witnessing to the truth is soul-saving. Even if by a pastor’s faithful witness fellowship is never established, it would be a victory for the kingdom if a heterodox pastor was won over to the truth on a particular doctrine. For example, if he were to preach divine monergism in justification, he would give great comfort and assurance to the sheep under his care. In many ways, a pastor’s newfound orthodoxy will carry many blessings to God’s people. While the threat of false doctrine continues to bother Christ’s church, Lutherans bear a responsibility to guard all Christians in truth where and when God gives them an opportunity.

78. J. P. Koehler, “Legalism Among Us,” 2:239–240.

79. The OPC is an example of a conservative church body, while the ELCA is an example of the opposite.

CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS FOR CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
BODIES AND PASTORS

Confession

So now what? How might Confessional Lutheran pastors practice proper ecumenism? What might ecumenical care for the whole Christian Church look like for a WELS pastor? Ecumenical action begins with confession. It starts with something that pastors already do—confessing with joy that Jesus is their Lord and Savior. This confession is lived each day by pastors as they preach, teach, and counsel their flocks. But it need not end with their flocks alone. Just as a pastor would gladly take every opportunity to confess to someone who does not know Christ, he may also take the opportunities he has to confess to Christians who believe in false doctrine. However, to avoid causing offense to a brother or sister in Christ and to respect the divine call a heterodox pastor holds, setting out to steal members away from other churches should usually be avoided. That said, looking to confess the truth to clergy from another faith tradition should be encouraged.

It would be loving and right to confess the truth, confidently but humbly to heterodox clergymen. It is the posture of a Christian to desire to be corrected of his falsehood. Each clergy member is responsible for the souls God has placed under their care. He does not want to lead his congregation into error. Certainly, it would be rude to barge into someone's office and merely announce that they believe in lies. But just as a pastor may work with any prospective member, he may work with another clergyman. Lutheran clergy might get to know him, show him love, or place a Bible between the two of them. Through the word, the Spirit can weed out false beliefs in

a person's heart. By teaching the truth in love, God may grant not only increased doctrinal unity between them, but also a tangible and blessed brotherhood. And again, even if fellowship is never reached, God may foster mutual encouragement, blessing, and respect for each party. Iron sharpens iron, even if the two blades disagree over the nature of the Eucharist. Therefore, as they are able, pastors have good reason seek to dialogue with pastors they consider heterodox.

Some pastors may object, saying that an ecumenical endeavor sounds great in theory, but that he has enough work caring for his current flock. Perhaps some even think they are already unable to adequately care for the large number of people under their care. There is truth to be acknowledged in this objection.

The first priority of any pastor is to care for the sheep God has already given him. Also a parish pastor ought to be greatly concerned with giving the soul-saving message of Christ to the lost. It may be true that a pastor has too much work on his plate as it is; adding more work may be untenable. If that's the case, he may confess the truth as God gives him an opportunity. But is it true that every pastor has *no time* to work to win over a brother caught in the snares of false doctrine? Moreover, the health of the Church is directly related to the mission to save lost souls.

Furthermore, some Christian parishes are more liberal than others. The further a church is from the truth, the more danger it is in. As a pastor observes a local parish harboring particularly dangerous beliefs, his efforts to correct them become a higher priority. A pastor or "pastrix" confessing the "Sparkle Creed" is the kind of person a WELS pastor will want to spend time with. It would be very good for a Lutheran shepherd to find out if, in fact, such a pastor is an erring brother or an unbeliever. If the clergyman is not a Christian, he does not carry a call from God. A parish pastor who warns and witnesses to people being shepherded by an unbeliever is

expressing Christian love for their soul, much like a pastor may work with someone who belongs to a congregation of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Publication

Print media allows an individual to speak beyond himself. What is written in a magazine or book may reach thousands more in a week than an individual could meet in a lifetime. This is why many church bodies and institutions of higher education have their own publications. These publications allow their authors to communicate what they believe and confess.

These however, are not the only entities to have publications. Groups of like-minded Christians have, for a long time, taken the opportunity to confess through media. At 1517.org, for example, the authors share a mission: "to declare and defend the Good News that you are forgiven and free on account of Christ alone."⁸⁰ Media groups provide an excellent avenue for Christians to share what they believe with Christians throughout the world. Might Lutherans write for an ecumenical publication or make a Confessional Lutheran case for proper ecumenism in some other Christian journal?⁸¹ Importantly, publications that are not exclusively Lutheran provide a unique opportunity for Lutherans to get their voice into the ears of other Christians.

It may be noted that in the past, the WELS has reviewed the work of the Lutheran Heritage Foundation, which is a pro-Lutheran publishing group. The Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR) did not recommend the synod work closely with them, for the CICR was uneasy about participating in Heritage Foundation's work since they moved beyond

80. "1517 | About Us," n.d., <https://www.1517.org/about>.

81. *Touchstone* Magazine is a conservative Christian magazine that promotes historic Christian teaching, and provides an example of a magazine Lutherans may strive to be published in. "About Touchstone," n.d., <https://www.touchstonemag.com/nav/about.php>.

publication to mission work with the Missouri Synod.⁸² Since 2001, the CICR has not reported on any further investigations into the synod's work to promote a Lutheran voice through written publications outside our fellowship. Perhaps another investigation into opportunities to confess as a synod would be beneficial.

It should also be noted that in 2001, the CICR reported that it offered WELS publications to Lutheran seminaries throughout the country. Whether the CICR continues this work today has also not been made clear or public. The dissemination of WELS publications to other seminaries has not been reported in the Book of Reports and Memorials (BORAM) since 2001. For any pastors interested in ecumenical work, it would be useful to know what WELS is doing. An organized and intentional effort to offer publications like the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* to institutions around the country may be a cost-effective way to expand the voice of Confessional Lutheranism in America. Currently, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary participates in the Atla Religion Database. That is one example of WELS taking an opportunity to "spread the word" elsewhere. Might there be other opportunities?

Free Conferences

In 2013, the CICR reported its support of several free conferences,⁸³ two of which were held at Martin Luther College. A free conference is a useful opportunity to build relationships with other

82. "Report of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations" in *Book of Reports and Memorials* (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2001), 126.

83. A free conference is a theological conference that takes place outside the framework of fellowship. Free conferences may have different purposes, ecumenical dialogue among them. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary sends several students to a free conference at Bethany Lutheran College each year. Not all presenters are in fellowship with the WELS and ELS.

Christians and confess what one believes. In 2015, the CICR did not make a report in the BORAM on free conferences. No further reports have been made on them to this day. Could the WELS, whether as a church body or as individual pastors, look for opportunities to be a voice for Confessional Lutheranism at free conferences?

YouTube

According to Statista,⁸⁴ a global business intelligence platform that performs data work in over 170 corporate industries, there were 210 million YouTube viewers in the United States in 2022. The American YouTube audience is massive. If one counts only viewers who have subscribed to Christian YouTube channels, the number is in the millions.⁸⁵ The Christian YouTube community is probably the next nexus of Christianity's world stage. At the very least, it is competing for center stage with print media and televangelism.⁸⁶

On the Christian YouTube scene, the opportunities for Lutherans to confess are almost endless. Occasionally, WELS pastors may show up "on the scene," but it's quite difficult to find. There are no stats on when and where WELS pastors show up on YouTube, yet in 2023, I think it's safe to say that the voice of the WELS is a small one. But just because a voice is small, it

84. "U.S. YouTube Audience 2022," *Statista*, n.d., <https://www.statista.com/statistics/469152/number-youtube-viewers-united-states/>.

85. The number of individual viewers a channel has is much lower than its subscriber count. Several Christian YouTube channels have over one million subscribers. The Bible Project has nearly four million subscribers in December 2023. To my knowledge the argest Confessional Lutheran YouTube channel is Chris Rosebrough's "Fighting for the Faith", at just north of 90 thousand subscribers and 18 million views, as of December 2023. However, if measured by views, not subscribers, Time of Grace finds itself larger than "Fighting for the Faith," with 89,000 subscribers and 43 million views.

86. Compare, *Christianity Today*, the largest English magazine that produces Christian content, has a readership of 110,000 readers (subscriptions), and a digital reach of about two million monthly. *Christianity Today* publishes its own reach statistics: "Digital/Audio Specs," *CT Advertising*, n.d., <https://www.christianitytodayads.com/digital-specs>.

need not remain so.⁸⁷ It is difficult to measure precisely how much impact Confessional Lutherans have had on YouTube, but it is safe to assume that they have not exhausted their opportunities to confess the truth. Breaking into the world of Christian YouTube ought to be considered as Lutheran pastors give thought to how they may best reach people with the truths they hold so dear.

Operation Reconquista

Taking place primarily online, Operation Reconquista is a modern and decentralized ecumenical movement. With an epicenter within the internet, it may be the first of its kind. Created by Richard Ackerman, Operation Reconquista has become a bit of a news story.⁸⁸ Known as Gen Z's Martin Luther, Ackerman, "Redeemed Zoomer,"⁸⁹ runs his ecumenical movement primarily through the internet.⁹⁰ By coordinating with fans and like-minded activists, his YouTube community managed to send 95 Theses to every PCUSA church in 2023. The content of these theses was doctrinal in nature. Ackerman is attempting to reunite historic mainline churches around doctrine, specifically the historic confessions of each denomination. Although he is not a

87. One example of a Lutheran pastor who took a highly visible opportunity to confess the Lutheran faith can be found in Matt Whitman's interview with Rev. Will Weedon (LCMS). *An Outsider Visits a Lutheran Church*, n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99fmOmlcF0c>.

88. "Meet the Zoomers' Martin Luther | Christianity Today," n.d., <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/november-web-only/meet-zoomers-martin-luther-mainline-reformation-project-onl.html>.

89. It may be helpful to note that Zoomer is internet slang for a person who belongs to Gen Z.

90. Specifically, his website: "Operation Reconquista," *Redeemed Zoomer*, n.d., https://redeemedzoomer.com/?page_id=143 and his YouTube Channel: "Redeemed Zoomer - YouTube," n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/@redeemedzoomer6053>. His name may sound strange, even childish to some. His subscriber count is, however, worth taking seriously. He has over 250 thousand subscribers as of December 2023.

Confessional Lutheran, his approach to ecumenism is largely correct. His target is one Lutherans can get behind— theological liberalism in the Seven Sister denominations.

Although in their infancy, two Lutheran organizations developed from Ackerman’s Reconquista movement, the Society of Orthodox Lutheran Advocates (SOLA) and Cross Bearer. Each plans to enact confessional movements within their respective church bodies. (SOLA is an organization of ELCA members and pastors, while Cross Bearer works within several European Lutheran Churches.) Surprisingly, SOLA created its own set of 95 Theses for the parishes of the ELCA.⁹¹

Engaging WELS clergy in the Redeemed Zoomer community would allow WELS pastors to interact with thousands of Christians daily.⁹² Much of the community is quite young, zealous, and without theological training. A pastoral perspective would certainly be helpful. Operation Reconquista in specific is primarily for members of mainline denominations. However, these groups would certainly benefit from Confessional Lutheran encouragement, education and resources.

Prayer

Not everyone has the time to participate in an ecumenical movement, but one thing all Christians can do is pray. Christians certainly do not need to be in doctrinal agreement to pray for one another. In

91. “Society of Orthodox Lutheran Advocates (SOLA),” *Society of Orthodox Lutheran Advocates (SOLA)*, n.d., <https://www.solaelca.org>.

92. Most of the interaction within the community comes through participation in the Redeemed Zoomer Discord server.

Jesus' high priestly prayer, he prayed for all believers of all time, asking that they be one.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

The Father granted his request. All Christians, united in faith with Christ, anticipate the day when he will gather his bride, ushering her into heaven to dwell in perfect unity forever. In the meantime, the Church lives under trial; the Body has been injured. Even so, Christians can pray that the Holy Spirit enlivens their hearts and minds, reminding them of their unity in Christ. Moreover, they can pray that the Spirit would inspire Christians to work towards doctrinal unity, to love each other even as they bear their differences, and to eagerly await their ultimate union and heaven. Modeling this, Sasse often included prayers and blessings for his “brothers in office” in his letters. Each pastor can model him by not only working for church unity but praying fervently for heterodox clergy.

Conclusion

I wonder if the disunity of the church is in part a result of the fact that so many in the church no longer desire a true unity of the Spirit, let alone believe it is possible. Unity is normal; it is the way the Church is supposed to be. Sasse believed it was to be pursued no matter the results. Thus, he confessed, proclaimed, and attempted to unite Christians when and where he could. The battle for church unity may be uphill. It was uphill in Sasse's day. It was uphill in Luther's day, too. But the Spirit is used to working uphill; he turns unwilling and ardent sinners into tender-hearted God-fearers. Lutherans can begin asking the Spirit to bless their efforts, not worrying

about how difficult or unlikely it is to succeed. Even as they begin to practice ecumenism, Lutherans will not have the world's attention overnight, but they can keep asking for it; God may again grant us a position on the stage. We could have our moment again. Who knows how God may bless our efforts? Ecumenical movements are not a new thing. Successful ecumenical efforts are not unattainable. Ecumenical efforts *are* a Lutheran endeavor. God may give us what we ask for. As brothers in office, Lutherans can and must persist in their quest for unity—praying for it, actively striving towards it, and *solemnly swearing* that by doing so they will accomplish *some good*.

APPENDIX A—AN EXCERPT FROM PRESIDENT BADING’S 1869 WELS CONVENTION

ADDRESS

Let us see to it that secular concerns, church politics, or fear-scaring tactics not influence our discussions nor play a part in our resolutions. We have the Word of God which should dictate our procedure. We make confession to the doctrines and practices of the Lutheran Church, wherein lies the direction in which we as Christians and Lutherans should conduct our business. Whoever places his stance on God's word has the promise that God is satisfied with his actions and that his ways will receive the Lord's blessings. And he who is sincerely committed to our Confessions, can only wish that the same will have a good and complete effect in the pulpit, in life, in public worship, and in general. If the synod sees it in the discussion of its relationship with the General Council that true unity and spiritual matters and in life, in doctrine and practice is not the bond that binds together both parties, then it will fall back and openly and honorably declare its withdrawal. It is better to stand alongside the Council, to bear witness for the truth and against perversion of the same and to rejoice in the victory of the truth than to have the witnessing disappear within the organization as a drop of water disappears in the ocean. And if in the course of our discussions it develops that a better union and spiritual relationship between us and Missouri is in evidence, than [then] one would encourage the bond of association, of trust and love with the same. Steps in this direction could bring about immeasurably blessed results.⁹³

93. "Proceedings of the 19. Convention of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Wisconsin and Other States", *WELS Historical Institute Journal* 22.1 (2004), 8.

APPENDIX B—SPARKLE CREED

I invite you to rise in body or spirit and let us confess our faith today in the words of the sparkle creed. I believe in the non-binary god, whose pronouns are plural. I believe in Jesus Christ, their child, who wore a fabulous tunic and had two dads and saw everyone as a sibling child of God. I believe in the rainbow spirit, which shatters our image of one white light and refracts it into a rainbow of gorgeous diversity. I believe in the church of everyday saints as numerous, creative and resilient as patches on the AIDS quilt, whose feet are grounded in mud and whose eyes gaze at the stars and wonder. I believe in the calling to each of us that love is love is love, so beloved, let us love. I believe, glorious God; help my unbelief, amen.

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