



Commentary on the Common Confession

www.commonconfession.net

CC4) A Common Confession

We accept and uphold that the Lutheran Confessions reliably guide us as faithful interpretations of Scripture, and that we share a unity and fellowship in faith with others among whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the Gospel.

Even as we confess that the Bible is God's revealed Word for us and the final authority in all matters of our faith and life, we recognize our need for guidance in rightly interpreting and applying the Holy Scriptures. From the time of the Reformation Lutherans have valued and sought the guidance of the whole church, beginning with the apostles and continuing through the witness of the faithful in every time and place, in order to receive both encouragement and correction in understanding the Scriptures.

The Lutheran Confessions is a collection of writings which, over time, has been accepted as a faithful guide to interpreting the Bible. From the time of Martin Luther on, Lutherans have not claimed to be doing anything new in regards to our understanding of Scripture or doctrine, but that our teachings are in continuity with the teachings of the ancient church. The Confessions, contained in the Book of Concord, begin with the three creeds of the Christian church: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian. Then, starting with the Augsburg Confession and continuing through the Formula of Concord, the Lutheran reformers of the 16th century make their case for how Scripture is to be interpreted. While one of the writings in the Confessions, the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, is well known to Lutherans, others (such as the Smalcald Articles) are much less familiar. Four of the writings are by Luther; two were written by Luther's colleague, Phillip Melancthon; and the last, the Formula of Concord, was written after Luther's death. It is on the basis of this book that Lutherans describe themselves as a "Confessional" church, clearly explaining both what is accepted and rejected on the basis of Holy Scripture.

Even though these confessional writings are nearly 500 years old, they remain living documents that guide the faith and life of Lutherans no matter which Lutheran denomination one might belong to or on which continent one lives. The first of these documents, the Augsburg Confession, is often considered to be a guide in understanding all of the rest. Divided into 28 articles, which deal with the reformers' understanding of the Christian faith, this document continues to function today as a solid

foundation and clear guide for Lutheran faith and church practice. Its definition of the church in article seven is especially central for Lutherans, and is the inspiration for the wording of this statement in the Common Confession. Article seven states, "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word." The heart of the Gospel is described in articles three, four, and five (the Son of God, Justification, and the Office of the Ministry, respectively), while the teaching on the sacraments comes in articles eight through thirteen.

Of course, preaching the Gospel in its purity and administering the sacraments in accordance with it is easier said than done. Its attainment is the goal after a lifetime of humble service, rather than something we can take pride in having achieved. However, the Confessions remind us that our unity and fellowship are found not in what we do, but in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, made known to us through the Holy Spirit who works faith in those who hear this good news. It is that good news, that Gospel, that defines the Church, not any good works of justice or mercy. We trust that the same Holy Spirit who guided Luther and others in the writing of the Lutheran Confessions continues to call, enlighten, and correct subsequent generations who turn to them as trustworthy guides to the Scriptures. Whether one is a child learning the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, or an adult struggling with the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, the Lutheran Confessions point us to Jesus Christ as revealed in the Word of Scripture. This is done in order, as it states in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, that "Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which, as the only touchstone, all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong."

by Pastor Erma Wolf, Brandon, SD