

LUTHERANS :: THE CONFESSING CHURCH

Our Second Reading for today and last Sunday came from Hebrews, and spoke of faith. We confess our faith in Christ; that is, we actively give reasons for the hope of Christ in us. Evidence of this is clearly seen with the Book of Concord which spans fifty years and displays the profound seriousness Luther and our fathers took in putting clear Biblical expressions of our faith down on paper to be read by all and especially by any who would dare make these expressions their own confession of faith.

Of course, written expressions of what one believes, teaches, and confesses was not something invented by Lutherans. Perhaps the earliest Christian expression of the faith was given by the Apostle Peter and as recorded by Matthew, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Here Peter is repeating back to our Lord what He has already revealed to him. When Peter confesses the truth, he is making it his own. As the Church taught its new converts and encountered errors, or was otherwise put into a position to “make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope” (1 Peter 3:15), it has expressed the true doctrine of Christ in the form of written confessions, or creeds. The Book of Concord is one gigantic creed expressing what the Lutheran confessors describe as with-out a doubt their teaching and belief. In other words, the Book of Concord is a confession where Lutherans make the teachings expressed in it ‘our own.’ Read what our confessors say in the Formula of Concord concerning the entirety of our Lutheran symbols: “Since now, in the sight of God and of all Christendom [the entire Church of Christ], we wish to testify to those now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controverted articles aforementioned and explained, and no other, is our faith, doctrine, and confession, in which we are also willing, by God’s grace, to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it; and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but, by the help of God’s grace, intend to abide thereby: therefore, after mature deliberation, we have, in God’s fear and with the invocation of His name, attached our signatures with our own hands,” (FC SD XII, 40).

The Lutheran Confessions are not merely a set of condemnations of false doctrines existing at the time of their writing. The Confessions also contain positive statements which are also a true exposition of the Holy Scriptures; they are a solemn declaration of what Lutherans believe, teach and confess is the Christian faith today. Our Lutheran fathers unhesitatingly pronounced in the preface to the Book of Concord: “Therefore we also have determined not to depart even a finger’s breadth either from the subjects themselves, or from the phrases which are found in them, but, the Spirit of the Lord aiding us, to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony, in this godly agreement, and we intend to examine all controversies according to this true norm and declaration of the pure doctrine.”

The confessors could determine “not to depart even a finger’s breadth” from our Lutheran confession of faith, because they had set forth their answer to the question repeatedly found in the Small Catechism, “What does this mean?” and the answers given are explicit statements, given under oath, as to what is accepted by all Lutherans as the divine truth found in the Holy Scriptures. Here conditions are not set, these declarations and their acceptance are unconditional. They are either accepted as true expressions of the Holy Scriptures, or they are rejected. To depart from them is to lose the pure doctrine from heaven, Godly unity and harmony.

Today it is not surprising to find some attending Lutheran congregations who have never heard of the Book of Concord. Sadly, the Small Catechism is the only exposure some have with our Lutheran symbols and heritage. It is little wonder why there is so much confusion amongst us as to what it means to be a Lutheran Christian. Indeed, it is this confusion which serves as a breeding ground for false doctrine. Some identifying as Lutheran are comfortable in approving the teachings of Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, and Beth Moore, just to name some of the more popular false teachers exercising influence among Lutherans. I suspect much of this has to do with a common misconception that the laity must only pledge to believe and confess the contents of Luther’s Small Catechism and the rest of the doctrines expressed in the Book of Concord are somehow optional. Such a view,

however, is misplaced. Luther writes in his short preface to the Large Catechism: “So a person who does not know this catechism could not be counted as a Christian or be admitted to any Sacrament, just as a mechanic who does not understand the rules and customs of his trade is expelled and considered incapable. Therefore, we must have the young learn well and fluently the parts of the catechism or instruction for children, diligently exercise themselves in them, and keep them busy with these parts.”

The Small Catechism is intended to be a brief introduction to a greater arena of life long study in the doctrines of the Church. Luther writes in the longer preface to the Large Catechism: “Therefore, I again beg all Christians - especially pastors and preachers - not to think of themselves as doctors too soon and imagine that they know everything. (For imagination, like unshrunk cloth, will fall far short of the measure.) Instead, they should daily exercise themselves well in these studies and constantly use them.”

Luther begs “all Christians... not to think of themselves as doctors too soon...” We don’t want to minimize the standard through which we enjoy understanding of our common confession of faith as Lutherans. Our confessional forbears believed it was necessary to confess each and every article of the faith given to us in the Book of Concord.

Pure doctrine is necessary for avoiding errors and confessing such doctrine, as they did, preserves the pure teaching for future generations. If our teachings are not read, taught, and confessed, then they are lost to us and our posterity, being gradually replaced with error. Importantly, too, we lose the unity gained by our agreement, or concord, found in the Lutheran confessions. Or, as stated in the Formula of Concord: “Since for thorough, permanent unity in the Church it is, above all things, necessary that we have a comprehensive, unanimously approved summary and form wherein is brought together from God’s Word the common doctrine, reduced to a brief compass, which the churches that are of the true Christian religion confess, just as the ancient Church always had for this use its fixed symbols,” (FC SD, Rule and Norm).

The Evangelical Lutheran Church is truly a confessing church.