

The Lutheran Confessions and the Holy Gospel

The Lutheran Confessions were not written in a vacuum or out of any party spirit. The Lutheran Reformation was not a "revolt," as Roman Catholic historians used to call it, much less a heresy. What motivated the Reformation and the Confessions, which were its most significant fruits and its permanent legacy to us who wish to be called Lutherans today? What was the central backdrop for our Confessions, the context for these different documents which were finally incorporated in the Book of Concord? A reading of our Confessions will reveal that they all sprang from an urgent need to give articulation to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to teach and give witness to this Gospel. And what is this Gospel which incited the most blessed and significant spiritual awakening since the days of the apostles?

In our Confessions (FC SD¹, V, 20) we read:

“The Gospel, however, is that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God, since man has failed to keep the law of God and has transgressed it, his corrupted nature, thoughts, words, and deeds war against the law, and he is therefore subject to the wrath of God and to death... The content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, himself assumed and bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through him alone we reenter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally.”

This statement may well be considered one of the most important and formative statements in our Lutheran Confessions. Why? Because it is the most complete and beautiful definition of the Gospel to be found in them. And that is what our Confessions are all about—the Gospel! Our great Lutheran Confessions were written for the sake of the Gospel. The Augsburg Confession, Luther's catechisms, the Formula of Concord were not written just to blast or correct abuses in the Roman Church, or to defend Lutheran theology against the attacks of papists, or to perpetuate party spirit. These Confessions were all prompted by a faith in the Gospel, a love for it, and a determination to teach and confess it according to the Scriptures.

In this respect our Confessions resemble the New Testament itself. Paul and the other apostles. Preach, admonish, and say everything for the sake of the Gospel (1 Cor. 2:2; 9:16; John 20:31; 1 Peter 5:12; 1 John 5:13). That was their commission from Christ (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15).

It is remarkable how consistently our Confessions emphasize this central theme of the Gospel, how all their discussions support and lead to this theme of salvation by free grace through faith in Christ. Melancthon in the Augsburg Confession clusters all the articles of faith around the redemptive work of Christ and justification through faith in Him. When the writers of our Formula of Concord at a later date try to settle certain controversies over original sin, the spiritual powers of man's will before conversion, the third use of the Law (as a pattern to regulate our lives), or even church usages, they make it crystal clear that their concern for the right doctrine on these matters is to enhance the Gospel and its comfort to poor sinners. When Melancthon speaks out so strongly and at such length against the legalism and work-righteousness of the Roman Church of his day, it is only because "the Gospel (that is, the

promise that sins are forgiven freely for Christ's sake) must be retained in the church" (Ap, IV, 120). And when he insists so vehemently that a sinner is justified by faith in Christ, it is because to deny or undermine this great fact "completely destroys the Gospel" (ibid.).

Martin Luther in the Smalcald Articles structures all of Christian doctrine around the simple doctrine of the Gospel, the doctrine of Christ and faith in Him. Here is what he says (SA², II, i):

“The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). He alone is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29)... Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law" (Rom. 3:28), and again, "that he [God] himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed.... On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it....”

This is the spirit of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. This is why our Confessions, like Scripture itself, are always contemporary and useful. If we share this Gospel spirit, we will see how helpful and exciting our Confessions are and we will read them with avidity and profit.

Source:

Getting into The Theology of Concord by Robert D. Preus
(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), pgs. 7-29.

To find the above article and to learn more about the Book of Concord which contains the Lutheran Confessions see:

<http://www.bookofconcord.org>

¹ *The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*: one of the confessional documents in the Book of Concord.

² *The Smalcald Articles*: another one of the confessional documents in the Book of Concord.