

Walking Together:

“Public Displays of Affection” or “Just Holding Hands?”
Balancing Augustana VII with Augustana XV



- Part I: Is complete unity in doctrine and practice necessary?**
Part II: Is complete unity in doctrine and practice possible?
Part III: How can we demonstrate complete unity in doctrine and practice?

*Pastoral Meeting of the Gadsden Conference
Arizona-California District, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
February 8-9, 2010*

David Jay Webber
The Feast of St. Ansgar
February 3, 2010

Introduction

In the presentation that I am privileged to be making before you today, I have been asked to answer one basic question, by means of answering three more specific questions that are understood to flow out of the basic one. That original, fundamental question is whether the “walking together” that defines a synodical relationship in the church militant is a matter of “public displays of affection” or a matter of “just holding hands.” But we are supposed to get at the essence of this question by actually responding to three less metaphorical queries: “Is complete unity in doctrine and practice necessary?”; “Is complete unity in doctrine and practice possible?”; and “How can we demonstrate complete unity in doctrine and practice?” In view of the subtitle that has also been proposed, we gather furthermore that our answers are expected to narrow in on the specific concerns that are articulated in articles seven and fifteen of the Augsburg Confession. So, with this understanding of what has been asked of us, let us begin.

I. “Is complete unity in doctrine and practice necessary?”

We do need to start with certain assumptions. The first assumption is that a question like this, posed in a context such as ours, presupposes that we are talking about what is necessary according to *God’s* will. In the Christian church, whenever we talk about what is “necessary,” we should always intend to be talking about what *God* thinks is necessary. If God thinks that it is necessary for those in his church on earth to be completely united in doctrine and practice, then it *is* necessary. If God does *not* think that this is necessary, then it is *not*.

Christians of all stripes can be expected to agree with this in principle. But how can we know what God thinks *is* necessary – in regard to this matter or any other? That is where professing Christians will diverge. And the point of divergence will be the point of considering how God makes his will known to people.

All of us have already become persuaded that in the church “the Word of God – and no one else, not even an angel – should establish articles of faith.”¹ This statement from the Smalcald Articles represents one of the convictions to which we testify, formally and publicly, by means of our Confessional subscription. By the same means we elaborate on this point by declaring, in the words of the Formula of Concord, that “only on the basis of God’s Word can judgments on articles of faith be made.”² When our Confessions speak of “God’s Word” in these contexts, they mean, of course, the Sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Formula of Concord, for example, unselfconsciously jumps back and forth between references to “Scripture,” and a reference to what “has been written for us in God’s Word,” in such a way as to show without any

¹Smalcald Articles II, II:15, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 304. Hereafter cited as “Kolb/Wengert.”

²Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration II:8, Kolb Wengert p. 545.

doubt that one and the same thing is being described by both expressions.³

It is from the Scriptures, therefore, that we know what God's will for us is. When the Scriptures declare something to be necessary, it is necessary. Because this is our conviction, we do not agree with those who believe or assume that God speaks authoritatively and infallibly either through external papal pronouncements, or through internal enthusiast sensations. And when we say this, we need to make sure that we really mean it.

A nascent *papal* spirit can very well be subliminally present when there is a *de facto* assumption that the position of a particular synod, or of its theological spokesmen, is necessarily correct. But we cannot ultimately rest our minds and hearts in the sentiment that we will just continue to believe what we were raised to believe, or what we were taught to believe in school, college, or seminary. God's Word alone must establish – in the church, and in *each Christian conscience* – all articles of faith: not an angel; not a venerated and well-established church body; not a revered and gifted professor.

A nascent *enthusiast* spirit can very well be subliminally present when there is a *de facto* assumption that what seems reasonable, and compatible with our expectations and previous experience, is necessarily correct. We cannot make ultimate judgments about the soundness or validity of a form of teaching or practice on the basis of whether or not we like it. We need a higher criterion, by which our likes and dislikes can themselves be judged as proper or improper. The human heart is, after all, “deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)⁴

Does God, in Holy Scripture, reveal a divine wish – or a divine command – that there be complete unity in doctrine and practice? Well, it depends on what the phrase “complete unity” is taken to mean. In regard to matters of doctrine, “complete unity” does not mean that the same terminology or mode of conceptualization must slavishly be followed by everyone, or that there cannot be differences in emphasis or in logical presentation among people who still recognize among themselves the kind of unity that God requires. A comparison between the epistles of St. Paul and the epistles of St. John or St. Peter – not to mention the epistle of St. James! – will quickly reveal many examples of these sorts of variations, even in the inspired Scriptures. Indeed,

Complete uniformity in the use of doctrinal terminology is not necessary for church fellowship. We should not battle about mere words (2 Timothy 2:14-26). In 2 Thessalonians 2:3, Paul warns against a false teacher called the “man of sin” (KJV) or the “man of lawlessness” (NIV). In 1 John 4:3, John calls this same false teacher the “Antichrist.” Even though they used different names for this false teacher, Paul and John

³“Because ‘all Scripture is inspired by God,’ to serve not as a basis for security and impenitence but rather ‘for reproof, for correction, for improvement’ (2 Tim. 3[:16]), and because all that has been written for us in God's Word was written not that it might drive us into despair but rather ‘that by patience and by the encouragement of Scripture we might have hope’ (Rom. 15[:4]), there can be no doubt whatsoever that the proper understanding or correct use of the teaching of the eternal foreknowledge of God produces or supports neither impenitence nor despair” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI:12, Kolb/Wengert p. 643).

⁴Here and elsewhere in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles (a division of Good News Publishers).

agreed on the doctrine concerning his coming. It, therefore, would not be right to deny fellowship to someone who had the same teaching that we have, but who used different words to express it.⁵

In the context of theological discussions in 1973 with the newly-organized Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church, in Germany, the Commission on Doctrinal Matters of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod informed the representatives of that church body that “we do not expect church bodies in fellowship with us to formulate their position on church fellowship according to our approach or in line with our terminology, but only that our position be acknowledged as being in harmony with the Scriptures.”⁶

None of this should be taken, though, as an endorsement of the sentiment that has typically been expressed over the centuries in unionist or ecumenical circles, that unity in the church is necessary only in regard to the “fundamental” articles of faith, and not in regard to all articles of faith. According to this view, if such a degree of unity “in fundamentals” is perceived to exist, everyone should be satisfied, and should consider their own distinctive beliefs on the lesser questions of Christian doctrine to be in the realm of non-binding religious opinions. Quite a few high profile figures in church history can be enlisted as supporters of this basic viewpoint: Ulrich Zwingli, George Calixtus, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Samuel Simon Schmucker, and Karl Barth are just a few.

But God himself is not on this list, because God does in fact require a comprehensive doctrinal unity in his church. And at an even more basic level, we would recognize that the unity he *requires* is also the unity he *gives*. As God works in the hearts and minds of his people through the means of grace, he himself *creates* and *bestows* the unity in faith and confession that he wills to be preserved among us. It is only by the working of the Holy Spirit that we can believe and say – collectively and individually – that “Jesus is Lord” (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3). And so, when Christians seek with God’s help “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3), they know in faith that this unity is not ultimately a product of their own intellectual efforts or consensus-building skills. It is rooted instead in the Trinitarian reality of “one body and *one Spirit* – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – *one Lord*, one faith, one baptism, *one God and Father* of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). When the gospel supernaturally draws us into a union with the Holy Trinity, it also at the same time draws us into a unity of faith and confession with each other.

God speaks clearly and intelligibly in the Scriptures, by means of ordinary human language, and he expects human beings like us to believe that what he says is true. This is still God’s expectation, even when that means accepting as simultaneously true certain paradoxical mysteries in Scripture that cannot be rationally harmonized with each other. When people do believe what God says, and when these same people confess together what they believe together – or when they recognize in each other’s confession a fundamental oneness in meaning, even if

⁵John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), pp. 36-37.

⁶Statement from the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters to the Representatives of the SELK (1973), *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Oct. 1973), pp. 276-77.

there is no absolute oneness in terminology or logical construction – they are thereby bearing witness to that unity.

Another person who is not on that list is Martin Luther. Luther, in God's name, defends the honor of God's revealed will regarding what is necessary for Christians to believe and teach, when he defends the sacrament of Christ's true body and blood over against those who would deny or distort the Lord's sacred institution of this Supper:

Our adversary says that mere bread and wine are present, not the body and blood of the Lord. If they believe and teach wrongly here, then they blaspheme God and are giving the lie to the Holy Spirit, betray Christ, and seduce the world. One side must be of the devil, and God's enemy. *There is no middle ground.* Now let every faithful Christian see whether this is a minor matter, as they say, or whether God's Word is to be trifled with. ... These fanatics demonstrate forthrightly that they regard the words and works of Christ as nothing but human prattle, like the opinions of academic hairsplitters, which ought fairly to yield to love and unity. But a faithful Christian knows clearly that God's Word concerns God's glory, the Spirit, Christ, grace, everlasting life, death, sin, and all things. These, however, are not minor matters! ... Neither does it help them to assert that at all other points they have a high and noble regard for God's words and the entire gospel, except in this matter. My friend, God's Word is God's Word; this point does not require much haggling! When one blasphemously gives the lie to God in a single word, or says it is a minor matter if God is blasphemed or called a liar, one blasphemes the entire God and makes light of all blasphemy. *There is only one God, who does not permit himself to be divided, praised at one place and chided at another, glorified in one word and scorned in another.* ... For Christian unity consists in the Spirit, when we are of one faith, one mind, one heart, Ephesians 4[:3 ff.]. This, however, we will gladly do: in civil matters we are glad to be one with them, i.e. to maintain outward, temporal peace. But in spiritual matters, as long as we have breath, we intend to shun, condemn, and censure them, as idolaters, corrupters of God's Word, blasphemers, and liars; and meanwhile, to endure from them, as from enemies, their persecution and schism as far and as long as God endures them; and to pray for them, and admonish them to stop. But to acquiesce in, keep silence over, or approve their blaspheming, this we shall not and cannot do.⁷

The modern tendency to confuse and blur together a Christian's obligation to believe and confess the truth of God, and a Christian's obligation to show forth in his life the love of God, is not just a modern problem. Luther, too, had to address this confusion and blurring in his ongoing battle with the Sacramentarians. His disentangling of these related but distinct obligations, on the basis of God's Word, can still be of great help to us:

...we reply [to the sectarians] with Paul: "A little yeast leavens the whole lump" [1 Cor. 5:6]. In philosophy a tiny error in the beginning is very great at the end. Thus in theology *a tiny error overthrows the whole teaching.* Therefore doctrine and life should be distinguished as sharply as possible. Doctrine belongs to God, not to us; and we are called

⁷Martin Luther, "That These Words of Christ, 'This is my Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 37 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 26-27. Emphases added.

only as its ministers. Therefore we cannot give up or change even one dot of it (Matt. 5:18). Life belongs to us; therefore when it comes to this, there is nothing that the Sacramentarians can demand of us that we are not willing and obliged to undertake, condone, and tolerate, with the exception of doctrine and faith, about which we always say what Paul says: “A little yeast, etc.” On this score we cannot yield even a hairbreadth. *For doctrine...cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition.* On the other hand, life...can always be divided and can always yield something. ... We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield... If they believed that it is the Word of God, they would not play around with it this way. No, they would treat it with the utmost respect; they would put their faith in it without any disputing or doubting; and they would know *that one Word of God is all and that all are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond.* ... Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but the Word and faith cannot. It belongs to love to bear everything and to yield to everyone. On the other hand, it belongs to faith to bear nothing whatever and to yield to no one. Love yields freely, believes, condones, and tolerates everything. Therefore it is often deceived. ... In the issue of salvation, on the other hand, when fanatics teach lies and errors under the guise of truth and make an impression on many, their love is certainly not to be exercised, and error is not to be approved. For what is lost here is not merely a good deed done for someone who is unthankful, but the Word, faith, Christ, and eternal life. *Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith.*⁸

These convictions on the part of the great Reformer were not inspired by his own stubbornness or arrogance. They were engendered instead by passages of Scripture like these, which are incompatible with the attitudes of indifference and presumption that inhabited the theological systems that Luther was here stoutly opposing:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

Those who accepted his message were baptized... *They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles* and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42)⁹

⁸Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” [1535], *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 27 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 37-39. Emphases added.

⁹*New American Bible (with Revised Psalms and Revised New Testament)*, copyright 1986, 1991, by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. (Romans 16:16-18)

When Luther read passages like this – which require submission and adherence to all revealed truth – he did so from within his baptism, and with the kind of child-like and receptive faith that God bestows in and through Baptism. He did not approach Scripture from the vantage point of skepticism or idle curiosity, but with a confident yet humble prayer for divine illumination and guidance. Luther summarized his basic hermeneutic in these ways:

In matters of faith, which affect the nature and will of God and our salvation, we must close our eyes, ears, and other senses and listen solely and intently to what and how scripture speaks about these things. We must wrap ourselves simply in God's Word and be directed by it. We may not attempt to follow our own insights or measure scripture by them.¹⁰

The knowledge of lawyers and poets comes from reason and may, in turn, be understood and grasped by reason. But what Moses and the prophets teach does not stem from reason and the wisdom of men. Therefore he who presumes to comprehend Moses and the prophets with his reason and to measure and evaluate Scripture according to its agreement with reason will get away from the Bible entirely. From the very beginning all heretics owed their rise to the notion that what they had read in Scripture they were at liberty to explain according to the teachings of reason.¹¹

But even the best of the theologians in the Reformed tradition – John Calvin – could not bring himself to speak in such terms, or with such an attitude. In contrast to Luther's profound submission of his human reason to the plain sense of the sacred text, Calvin had a very different attitude toward those things that he imagined God would expect people to believe and accept. In his *Genevan Catechism* he asserted that "the Lord has instituted nothing that is at variance with reason."¹² This unwarranted and dangerous assumption militated against the divine declaration:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Calvin's rationalism naturally and predictably led him to take a position on the Lord's

¹⁰Martin Luther, WA 54, 158; quoted in Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 229.

¹¹Martin Luther, Sermon on Luke 2:21; quoted in *What Luther Says* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 1165.

¹²John Calvin, "Genevan Catechism," *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 26.

Supper that was substantially different from the view of Luther and of those who shared Luther's humility before the Lord's true and certain Word. A mocking and belittling attitude toward the Lutheran teaching, on the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood in the blessed bread and wine of the sacrament, is clearly evident in the *Consensus Tigurinus*. Calvin was the chief author of this confessional statement, to which he and other prominent Reformed theologians of the sixteenth century were signatories. It says:

We repudiate as preposterous interpreters those who in the solemn words of the Supper, "This is My body, this is My blood," urge a precisely literal sense, as they say. For we hold it to be indisputable that these words are to be accepted figuratively, so that bread and wine are called that which they signify.¹³

Nevertheless, even with such a seeming smugness and feeling of superiority over against the Lutherans and their beliefs, the Reformed have often been willing to embrace the Lutherans in church fellowship – albeit while holding their noses. The various opinions that might be held concerning Christ's "mode of presence" in the Supper do not, it has been claimed, represent divisive differences. This dispute supposedly does not pertain to a "fundamental" article of faith.

Yet what Calvin and his Reformed co-laborers dismissed out of hand as a "preposterous" interpretation is, for genuine Lutherans, a mystery of divine grace and condescending love of such profound importance to us – impacting us at such a deep level of devotion and reverence – that we can barely find the words to describe it. But Charles Porterfield Krauth makes one of the best attempts to do so:

Men have talked and written as if the doctrine of our Church, on this point, were a stupid blunder, forced upon it by the self-will and obstinacy of one man. The truth is, that this doctrine – clearly revealed in the New Testament, clearly confessed by the early Church – lies at the very heart of the Evangelical system. Christ is the center of the system, and in the Supper is the center of Christ's revelation of Himself. The glory and mystery of the incarnation combine there as they combine nowhere else. Communion with Christ is that by which we live, and the Supper is "*the* Communion." Had Luther abandoned this vital doctrine, the Evangelical [Lutheran] Church would have abandoned him. He did not make this doctrine – next in its immeasurable importance to that of justification by faith, with which it indissolubly coheres. The doctrine made him. The doctrine of the Lord's Supper is the most vital and practical in the whole range of the profoundest Christian life – the doctrine which, beyond all others, conditions and vitalizes that life, for in it the character of faith is determined, invigorated, and purified as it is nowhere else. It is not only a fundamental doctrine, but is among the most fundamental of fundamentals.¹⁴

¹³*Consensus Tigurinus*, Article XXII; quoted in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), Vol. III, p. 295. Another translation of this section of the *Consensus*, by Reformed scholar Henry Beveridge, reads as follows: "Those who insist that the formal words of the Supper, 'This is my body; this is my blood,' are to be taken in what they call the precisely literal sense, we repudiate as preposterous interpreters. For we hold it out of controversy that they are to be taken figuratively, the bread and wine receiving the name of that which they signify" (www.bookofconcord.org/consensus-tigurinus.php).

¹⁴Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1871), p. 655. Emphasis in original. Punctuation slightly revised.

But as we noted earlier, the unity among Christians and churches that God's Word demands, and that God's Word gives when that Word is mutually received in faith, is not, and need not be, an *absolute sameness* in every single respect. As Confessional Lutherans, we do not accept the human presumption that Christians need to be united only in the so-called "fundamental" articles of faith. Everything that is revealed in Scripture, for our salvation, is an article of faith, and God, through Scripture, teaches that unity in all of these articles of faith is necessary. And yet, as C. F. W. Walther wisely notes, "The church militant must indeed aim at and strive for complete unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one."¹⁵

So, while our unity is to be in *all* the articles of faith, and not only in the "fundamental" ones, what we should seek to recognize among our brothers and sisters in Christ is a *fundamental* unity in those articles of faith, and not necessarily an *absolute* unity. John P. Meyer elaborates on this evangelical principle:

Those are in fundamental agreement who, without any reservation, submit to the Word of God. When the Word of God has spoken in any matter, that matter is settled. There may be things that some men have not yet found in their study of the Bible; there may be matters with reference to which they have accustomed themselves to an inadequate mode of expression; yet, no matter what their deficiency may be, they are determined to accept the Bible doctrine. Where such is the case, there is fundamental agreement. ... A fundamental agreement is all the church can ever hope to attain here on earth. We are not all equally gifted; one has a much clearer and a much more comprehensive insight into God's doctrines than another. We all strive to grow daily in understanding. Besides, when once we have accustomed ourselves to a faulty or an inadequate expression, it is not only difficult to unlearn the particular phrase and to acquire a proper one, but the inadequate term may tend also to warp our views on other points. Yet, in spite of all such differences, where there is an unconditional willingness to hear what God has to say in his Word, there is fundamental agreement.¹⁶

Luther, too, with all of his insistence that every Biblically-revealed article of faith must be believed and confessed, also embraced the evangelical principle regarding "fundamental unity" that Walther and Meyer later embraced – although he did not, in the sixteenth century, describe this principle in exactly the same way that they later described it. (In other words, Walther and Meyer were only in *fundamental* unity with Luther on the principle of "fundamental unity!")

In 1536, Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues were involved in doctrinal discussions with representatives of the Church of England. Based on how well these discussions seemed to have gone, there was a genuine hope on the part of many that a God-pleasing agreement could be reached, and church fellowship established. A tentative document, known as the "Wittenberg Articles," had been prepared, largely under Luther's influence, as a part of these discussions. After the English delegation had returned to England, where those articles were now under

¹⁵C. F. W. Walther, Thesis V., "Theses on Open Questions" (1868).

¹⁶John P. Meyer, "Unionism," *Essays on Church Fellowship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), pp. 63-64.

discussion, and where King Henry VIII was now also examining them, Luther penned a letter concerning this document – and this whole process – to Francis Burchart (the Vice-Chancellor of Electoral Saxony). Luther was very balanced and even-handed in the approach that he took in this letter. It reflected both his unswerving commitment to the revealed truth of God’s Word – to which the “Wittenberg Articles” had testified – and his humble recognition of the fact that there may very well be more than one acceptable (or tolerable) way of expressing that truth. He wrote:

Since my Most Gracious Lord [the Elector] has requested an answer to the question of how far one could go in making concessions to the King of England regarding the articles, it is my judgment, dear Mr. Vice-Chancellor, that in this matter we are unable to concede anything beyond what has been already conceded. If one wishes to talk about the issues or to formulate the results in different words it suits me fine (so that we do not appear to be contemptuous of the ability of other people). Yet it is impossible that the articles and the central points be believed or taught differently. ... Of course it is true that one must patiently realize that in England not everything can be abruptly put into practice according to the teaching (just as among us it also did not go swiftly). Nevertheless the central points must not be changed or abandoned.¹⁷

A commitment to unity in all revealed articles of faith does not require undue contentiousness regarding specific human formulations and modes of presentation of Biblical doctrine, as long as “the articles and the central points be believed or taught” accurately, in some way, shape, or fashion. And when there is a perceived incompleteness on the part of certain brethren in fully grasping, fully expressing, or fully implementing some aspect of a doctrinal point, gentle and patient efforts will be undertaken to guide them into a more comprehensive understanding of the Scriptures.

In regard to the matter of practice, and unity of practice in the church, we would begin by noting that many areas of churchly practice are actually matters of doctrine. For example, when Jesus commands the church and its ministers to go and make disciples of all nations, he also lays out the specific practical actions – the baptizing with water and the giving of instruction – that are fundamentally constitutive of what Christian disciple-making is. We have no *doctrine* of discipleship that is not also a *practice* of discipleship. A pastorally-responsible practice of closed Communion is likewise intimately linked to an orthodox doctrine of Communion as an article of faith. The Supper as Jesus instituted it is not only a matter of “this is,” but it is also a matter of “this do.” If the Lord’s Supper really is what we confess it to be, there are certain things that we simply will and will not do in conjunction with our pastoral stewardship of this Holy Mystery. Our pastoral and sacramental actions are an enactment of our pastoral and sacramental beliefs and teachings. Because of how thoroughly *practical* the threefold sacramental action of consecration, distribution, and reception is, it cannot be seen in any other way.

In those arenas of the life of the church where God’s Word has not spoken directly and explicitly regarding how we must proceed, and what methods we must use, we do, of course, acknowledge the principle of Christian freedom. But this freedom must not be abused in a spirit

¹⁷Martin Luther, Letter to Francis Burchart [1536], *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 50 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 140-41.

of pride and arrogance. It must also not be re-defined on the basis of the idolatrous notion of the “autonomy of the will” that has been elevated to an article of faith by post-Enlightenment man, in his sinful distortion of what freedom under God is supposed to mean. In these matters, the freedom we have is the freedom to seek out and find the best and most faithful way to warn our neighbor against error; the best and most faithful way to confess and apply the gospel to our neighbor; and the best and most faithful way to serve our neighbor in love. We do not have the freedom to hide the severity of God’s law under a veil of compromise; to obscure the purity of God’s gospel with a smokescreen of evasion; or to manipulate our neighbor into serving *us* and *our* carnal agendas. St. Paul warns us:

“Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible” – but not everything is constructive. (1 Corinthians 10:23-24)¹⁸

And so, while there may not be a divine requirement for unity in everything that is actually done, in all places and circumstances, there *is* a divine requirement for unity in *purpose* and *motive* in what is actually done. Whatever we do in the Lord’s name, and ostensibly for the advancement of his kingdom, we must be doing for the right reasons, as God in Scripture defines those reasons. And what that usually means – when the doctrine that is intended to be expressed through the practice is the same doctrine – is that the practice more often than not usually turns out to be pretty similar from place to place too. In most areas of practical church activity, what will most naturally emerge among those who have a fundamental unity in their confession of faith, is a fundamental unity in practice as well: not an *absolute sameness* in every respect, but a *fundamental* unity. And the closer people are to each other in fraternal cooperation and shared effort, geographically and culturally, the closer will be the similarity in practice. Or at least this is what we would predict, when the “law of love” is operative in such relationships among churches, pastors, and Christians in general. More will be said about such areas of church practice in Part III of this paper.

II: Is complete unity in doctrine and practice possible?

In Part I of this paper we discussed the fact that complete unity in doctrine and practice – understood more precisely as a fundamental unity in all revealed articles of faith – is necessary according to God’s Word. And what is *necessary* according to God’s Word is also *possible* according to God’s Word. There may perhaps be more than one conceivable mechanism whereby this necessary and possible unity could in fact be experienced in the church on earth. But by the guidance of divine providence, in all the ups and downs of ecclesiastical history throughout the centuries, one specific mechanism for preserving and confessing the unchanging truth of Scripture has actually worked.

The Formula of Concord testifies to the presence and functionality of this mechanism among its orthodox Lutheran signatories when it says that “Fundamental, enduring unity in the church requires above all else a clear and binding summary and form in which a general summary of teaching is drawn together from God’s Word, to which the churches that hold the true Christian

¹⁸*The Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

religion confess their adherence.”¹⁹ The “binding summary and form” of which the Formula here speaks refers to the official Symbolical Books of the church. The Formula goes on to describe the “reliable creeds” of the ancient church, and “the publicly recognized writings that have been regarded and used as creeds or common confessions in all the churches of the Augsburg Confession at all times.”²⁰ According to the Formula, “These writings, accepted officially and universally among us, have always been regarded in churches and schools that teach purely as the summary and model of the teaching that Dr. Luther of blessed memory had thoroughly set forth in his writings, on the basis of God’s Word, against the papacy and other sects.”²¹

The Symbolical Books as contained in our Book of Concord were not written by bored ivory-tower theologians with too much time on their hands. They emerged from within the vocations of gifted pastors and teachers in the church at times when the very heart of the church’s faith in Jesus Christ was under severe attack. The Fathers of the ancient church, as they composed and promulgated the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Reformers of the sixteenth century, as they composed and promulgated the distinctly Lutheran Confessions, were acutely aware of the fact that almighty God had called them to defend and proclaim the truth of Christ as it is revealed in Holy Scripture. In the crises of faith and confession that the church on earth faced in their respective eras, the Fathers and Reformers were compelled in their conscience to fulfill their calling by faithfully teaching God’s Word to the church, and by boldly confessing the gospel of Christ to the world.

In many respects the gospel of Jesus Christ was more fundamentally threatened during these two creed-making epochs of church history than at other times – although there have obviously been threats to the church’s faith in every generation. But in these two eras – the fourth and fifth centuries, and the sixteenth century – the very “name” of Jesus was uniquely threatened. As we know, “Jesus” means “Yahweh is Salvation.” Arianism redefined who Yahweh is in a profoundly heretical way, so as to negate absolutely the mystery of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. And Nestorianism redefined the connection between Yahweh and the man Jesus in such a way as to deny the true incarnation of Yahweh. If Arianism and Nestorianism had succeeded, and had robbed the church of its belief in the true divinity and true incarnation of Christ, all would have been lost. This was a time, then, when God providentially raised up the great Fathers whose preaching and writing led to the formulation and promulgation of the Creeds that are still with us today – teaching us the faith and guiding us in a correct confession of the faith.²²

¹⁹Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm: 1, Kolb/Wengert p. 526.

²⁰Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm: 2, Kolb/Wengert p. 526.

²¹Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm: 9, Kolb/Wengert p. 528.

²²We feel compelled at this point to express our disappointment with the English translation of the Nicene Creed that is employed in the hymnal of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. The original Greek version of the Creed, and the historic Latin translation, both affirm explicitly that the Son of God became incarnate for the sake of *humanity’s* salvation. The Creed’s testimony to the Lord’s incarnation is framed in this way: “For *us human beings*...he became a *human being*” (Nicene Creed, Kolb/Wengert p. 23. Emphases added). This wording was deliberately included in the Creed to counteract the elitist Gnostic belief that the ministry and teaching of Christ was intended only for the benefit of a certain segment of humanity, which was uniquely capable of divine enlightenment, and not for the benefit of humanity as a whole. This wording also counteracted the Origenist view that God intends to save the fallen angels as well as fallen man. Today this creedal

Of course, there are differences in form and structure among these Creeds. The logic of the Nicene Creed, for example, is developed in a typically “Greek” way. The divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is acknowledged on the basis of the eternal *derivation* of these Persons from the Divine Father, who is the *source* or *fountainhead* of the Godhead.²³ So, as the Nicene Creed lays it out, the Father is confessed at the beginning of the Creed as the First Person of the Holy Trinity, who does not derive his deity from any other person. The Creed goes on to affirm that the Son is divine because he is “begotten from the Father before all the ages.” And the Holy Spirit is confessed as divine because he eternally “proceeds” from the Father, and (as those in the Western tradition would add) from the Son of the Father.²⁴

By comparison, the Athanasian Creed is constructed in a typically “Latin” way, with a different form of logical development. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all recognized to be equally divine because they all partake equally in the defining attributes of deity. All three Persons are uncreated, unlimited, eternal, and almighty. All three Persons are accordingly God

affirmation would help us to avoid the error of Calvinism’s “limited atonement” doctrine, which teaches that the Son of God became a human being only for the elect, and for their salvation, and not for human beings in general. And it would help us to resist the influence of any modern heterodox notion that Jesus is a Savior for all creatures on earth, and not only for Adam’s descendants. But the translation of the Nicene Creed that appears in *Christian Worship* lops off a very significant word, so that this important point about the incarnation and its range of salvific intent is obscured. God’s Son was not incarnate “for us human beings,” but simply “for us.” Does this mean for us earth creatures – dogs and cats included? Does this mean for us Christians and for us predestined people – but not for unbelievers and the reprobate? The Creed was originally worded in the way it was for a reason. But the intended point of that wording is now lost on those who have access to the Creed only by means of the *Christian Worship* rendering. We would hope, therefore, that in a future successor hymnal to *Christian Worship*, the Nicene Creed would be translated more carefully and more accurately, so that it would once again convey to worshipers everything that it is supposed to convey.

²³Martin Luther writes: “The distinction of the Father...is this, that He derived His deity from no one, but gave it from eternity, through the eternal birth, to the Son. Therefore the Son is God and Creator, just like the Father, but the Son derived all of this from the Father, and not, in turn, the Father from the Son. The Father does not owe the fact that He is God and Creator to the Son, but the Son owes the fact that He is God and Creator to the Father. And the fact that Father and Son are God and Creator they do not owe to the Holy Spirit; but the Holy Spirit owes the fact that He is God and Creator to the Father and the Son. Thus the words ‘God Almighty, Creator’ are found [in the Creed] as attributes of the Father and not of the Son and of the Holy Spirit to mark the distinction of the Father from the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Godhead, again, the distinction of the Son from the Father and the Holy Spirit, and the distinction of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son; namely, that the Father is the source, or the fountainhead (if we may use that term as the fathers do) of the Godhead, that the Son derives it from Him and that the Holy Spirit derives it from Him and the Son, and not vice versa” (“Treatise on the Last Words of David,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 15 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972], pp. 309-10).

²⁴Nicene Creed, Kolb/Wengert pp. 22-23. Martin Chemnitz observes that among the ancient Fathers, both the Greeks and the Latins “confessed that the Spirit is of the Son as well as of the Father; but the Greeks said He is ‘from the Father through the Son,’ and the Latins said ‘from the Father and the Son.’ They each had reasons for speaking the way they did. Gregory of Nazianzus, on the basis of Romans 11, says that the prepositions *ek*, *dia*, and *eis* express the properties of [the three persons in] one unconfused essence. Therefore, the Greeks said that the Holy Spirit proceeds from (*ek*, *ex*) the Father through (*dia*) the Son, so that the property of each nature [or person] is preserved. Nor did the Latins take offense at this formula for describing the matter. For Jerome and Augustine both say that the Holy Spirit properly and principally proceeds from the Father, and they explain this by saying that the Son in being begotten of the Father receives that which proceeds from the Father, namely, the Holy Spirit; but the Father receives from none, but has everything from Himself...” (*Loci Theologici* [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989], Vol. I, p. 143)

and Lord. Yet there are not three separate beings who are uncreated, unlimited, eternal, and almighty, but there is only one God and Lord. This is why “we worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity.”²⁵

But these differences in structure, logical development, and emphasis do not represent a dogmatic divergence. The Creeds are in fundamental agreement with each other. They are important constitutive parts of the harmonious symphony of teaching and confession that has always characterized how God’s truth is faithfully expressed and joyfully embraced by God’s people. The diversity of styles that we see among the various apostolic authors of the New Testament testifies to the fact that God’s Biblical revelation does not come to us in an uninteresting monotone form. The Greek and Latin Fathers likewise mutually enrich each other, and together they enrich the whole church, not *in spite of* their diversity of expression, but precisely *in and through* that diversity of expression. And when we come to a consideration of the distinctly Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century, we see the same thing.

The sixteenth century was another time when the very *name* of Jesus – “Yahweh is Salvation” – was under Satanic attack. This time the church’s grasp on the second half of that definition, pertaining to humanity’s salvation, was profoundly threatened by the false doctrine concerning indulgences – and by the whole medieval penitential system that lay behind that more specific error. Luther summed up the situation very succinctly and bluntly in a defense and explanation of his “Ninety-Five Theses” that he penned in 1518: “Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.”²⁶ The Christian’s genuine and Biblically-based hope for salvation in Christ, by comparison, is wonderfully described by Luther in the Smalcald Articles:

Here is the first and chief article: That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4[:25]); and he alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1[:29]); and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53[:6]); furthermore, “All have sinned,” and “they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...by his blood” (Rom. 3[:23-25]). Now because this must be believed and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:28,26]: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”; and also, “that God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.” Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. As St. Peter says in Acts 4[:12]: “There is no other name...given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53[:5]). On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise everything is lost, and the

²⁵Athanasian Creed, Kolb/Wengert pp. 23-25.

²⁶Martin Luther, “Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses or Explanations of the Disputation Concerning the Value of Indulgences,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 179.

pope and the devil and whatever opposes us will gain victory and be proved right.²⁷

Quite obviously, there was a lot at stake here. Luther and his colleagues among the pastors and teachers of the church knew this. As God guided them by means of their sacred vocation, and according to the desperate need of God's people to hear a clear and accurate presentation of the gospel, the Lutheran Confessions as we have them today emerged from their teaching ministry.

And it was, of course, not only the papal errors regarding indulgences and works righteousness that needed to be addressed and corrected. Many false alternatives to Rome also presented themselves to an under-instructed and confused Christendom in this tumultuous time. And so the task before the Lutheran Reformers, to teach the truth over against the Roman clerics, and also over against the Enthusiasts and the Sacramentarians, was indeed a daunting one. But God was providentially with them. And he was and is providentially with the Confessions that were produced and promulgated in this context.

Luther was, self-evidently, the leader of the sixteenth-century "Lutheran" Reformation movement. But he in his person and personality was not that movement. Others in Europe were concerned about the same things that he, as a pastor, was concerned about. And when Luther led the way in speaking out on these concerns, they immediately began to join their voices to his. Luther's students at Wittenberg University, and others who were instructed in the revitalized evangelical teaching at other Lutheran universities, also came to embrace these convictions as their own. Often at the risk of life and limb, they fanned out across the continent, to serve God's people with the pure means of grace, and to comfort them with the genuine gospel of their salvation in Christ. Luther's colleagues, and the students of Luther and his colleagues, also employed their pens in spreading the message of God's Word to Europe and the world. And in a few cases – again, by divine providence – they became contributors to the enduring testimony of the Reformation faith that remains officially with us in the Book of Concord.

The multiplicity of authorship that characterizes the writings contained in the Lutheran Book of Concord has quite naturally resulted in very recognizable differences in style, and in form of presentation, among the various confessional documents – similar to the differences we have noted in the flow and format of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. But as Hermann Sasse points out, these non-dogmatic differences are not a weakness, but are a strength, for our church. He writes that

in every living church there must be room for a variety of theological thinkers, provided they are in agreement as to the dogma of the church. Thus, a difference of interest in, or emphasis on, certain points of doctrine, and even a difference of expression, could well be tolerated. Luther always felt that he and his learned friend [Melanchthon] supplemented each other. As Melanchthon had learned from him, so he had learned from Melanchthon. It has great significance for the Lutheran church that its Confessions were not written by Luther alone. As Melanchthon's *Augsburg Confession*, *Apology*, and *Tractatus* are happily supplemented by Luther's *Smalcald Articles* and *Catechisms*, so even the *Formula of Concord* was written by disciples of Melanchthon and of Luther. This variety in

²⁷Smalcald Articles II, I:1-5, Kolb/Wengert p. 301.

expression of one and the same truth gave the Lutheran Confessions a richness which the confessions of other churches do not possess. Nothing is more significant for the Lutheran church's independence of human authority than the fact that Luther approved of the Augsburg Confession although he clearly stated that he would have written it in a totally different way. It is the doctrine of the Gospel that matters, and not human theology.²⁸

We do indeed need to maintain a distinction between the revealed doctrine of Scripture as such, which is binding on all consciences and from which we may never retreat; and what Sasse calls "human theology" – that is, a favored way of explaining some doctrinal point, or a preferred form of theological expression. Differences in these areas – if that is all they are – should not be made the object of controversy.²⁹ The Formula of Concord operates with this distinction too, and

²⁸Hermann Sasse, *This is my body* (revised edition) (Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), p. 253.

²⁹On the matter of what Hermann Sasse calls "human theology" in the church, it is inevitable that identifiable theological traditions will develop within certain synods, in certain seminaries, or around certain high-profile theological personalities. These parochial traditions can sometimes have the effect, among their heirs, of constricting the capacities for self-criticism and outward-looking catholicity that should ideally always characterize the theological life of a healthy church. It is commonly perceived, for example, that C. F. W. Walther was such an overarching personality in the Missouri Synod, and such an obviously gifted and insightful theologian, that something akin to a "Walther cult" developed in that synod in the generation that followed him. Walther's word on something was considered, for all practical purposes, to be the last word on that subject. His way of explaining things was assumed to be the best way. His terminology was seen as the most correct terminology. And when Walther may not have actually dealt with a certain topic that might later come under consideration, there was a tendency to "shoe-horn" into the contemporary discussion some quotations from his writings that seemed most closely to address the new matter, and to be satisfied that Walther had indeed already addressed, and solved, the new problem. The so-called "Wauwatosa theologians" of the Wisconsin Synod reacted against this tendency in the Missouri Synod in the early twentieth century, and criticized it. But their reaction to the "Walther cult," with its stifling effect on theology, was in some ways an over-correction, which set in motion yet another theological tradition of a similar character in the Wisconsin Synod. This is perhaps more noticeable to those who are able to look with a measure of objectivity and detachment at the theological methods and conclusions of these "Wauwatosa theologians," and at the reverberations of their work that continue to be felt in the Wisconsin Synod of today. According to Gottfried Herrmann (of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Germany), there were, for example, some remarks made by the "Wauwatosa theologians" on the topic of church and ministry "that we might consider over-stated and even polemic. We will want to read these remarks with caution" ("The Path of the Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche (ELFK) into the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) and the Doctrine of Church and Ministry," www.wlsessays.net/node/803). Elsewhere, however, Herrmann has observed that "the sometimes provocatively presented original position of the Wauwatosa theology is not identical in all points with the present-day positions of the WELS. There are throughout contemporary presentations more precise expressions and warnings against imprecisions in concepts conditioned by the English language, e.g., when the term 'public ministry' is involved" ("The Theological Development of the WELS With Particular Reference to Its Doctrine of the Ministry," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 96, No. 2 [Spring 1999], p. 113). Still, the reputation of John Philip Koehler – and by extension the "Wauwatosa theology" tradition that he helped to found – has never been able to overcome the suspicion created among other Lutherans by the endorsement of Johann Hoefling's teaching on church and ministry that Koehler gave in his 1917 *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* (p. 659): "In the first years after 1848, a controversy existed over the teaching of Church and Ministry. Kliefoth, Vilmar, Muenchmeyer and Loehe had a High-Church view of the pastor's office and the church, similar to that of Grabau in America. Most Lutherans of other circles stood against it, especially the Erlangen faculty. Very freely and correctly – according to Scripture – stood only Hoefling with some of his colleagues" (quoted in Peter M. Prange, "The Wauwatosa Gospel and the Synodical Conference: A Generation of Pelting Rain," jerusalem.lutheran.org/home/140003837/140003896/files/WauwatosaGospel.pdf). Sasse himself offers some helpful advice to Lutherans from different theological traditions who are attempting to come to an accurate understanding of each other, and together to come to an accurate

would accordingly guide us in maintaining this distinction in our own teaching and ministry. On the first point, it declares:

From this our explanation, friend and foe may clearly deduce that we have no intention of giving up anything of the eternal, unchangeable truth of God (which we also do not have the power to do) for the sake of temporal peace, tranquillity, and outward unity. Such peace and unity, which is intended to contradict the truth and suppress it, would not last. It makes even less sense to whitewash and cover up falsifications of pure teaching and publicly condemned errors. Rather we have a deep yearning and desire for true unity and on our part have set our hearts and desires on promoting this kind of unity to our utmost ability. This unity keeps God's honor intact, does not abandon the divine truth of the holy gospel, and concedes nothing to the slightest error. Instead, it leads poor sinners to true, proper repentance, raises them up through faith, strengthens them in new obedience, and thus justifies and saves them eternally, solely through the merit of Christ.³⁰

And on the second point, it says:

Thus, we have come to fundamental, clear agreement that we must steadfastly maintain the distinction between unnecessary, useless quarrels and disputes that are necessary. The former should not be permitted to confuse the church since they tear down rather than edify. The latter, when they occur, concern the articles of faith or the chief parts of Christian teaching; to preserve the truth, false teaching, which is contrary to these articles, must be repudiated.³¹

All of this is in the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:14-15, where St. Paul writes:

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

We would be well-advised to remind ourselves of the importance of the Book of Concord,

understanding of the Scriptures and the Confessions: "...in the moment we set up a doctrine which the Scripture does not actually proclaim we have crossed the dividing line between theology and philosophy, and have left the *sola Scriptura* (the Scripture alone). That is the danger which all Bible-believing and confessionally faithful theology must again and again guard against. And for that reason we must always again and again inspect the trains of thought also of such theologians of whose orthodoxy we have no doubt. ... We all suffer from the fact that we cannot devote more time to this important task. For success depends after all on this, that we on all sides think these problems through anew and not just repeat the old formulae and slogans. ... We must all try to read the statements of the Scripture, on which we must make our decisions, afresh, and not always only in the pattern of our theological traditions. It is naturally easiest and the most comfortable thing to do: to stay with what we have always said and wait until the other party says the same thing. But that can be the correct method only if we actually are championing only God's Word and not, in addition, our own theological tradition's opinion" (Letter to Frederick Noack [1 Nov. 1951], *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse* [Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1995], pp. 172-73).

³⁰Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI:94-96, Kolb/Wengert pp. 655-56.

³¹Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule & Norm: 15, Kolb/Wengert p. 530.

not just as a collection of interesting old documents with some historical significance, but as a contemporary and highly relevant testimony to God's unchanging truth for the church also of our time. Three significant quotations to this effect follow:

The Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord clarify, as precisely as human language allows, what the Bible teaches about God, sin, Christ, justification, church and ministry, repentance, the sacraments, free will, good works, and other articles of faith. They identify abuses in doctrine and practice, and most clearly state what Lutherans do not believe, teach, and confess. They are declarations of belief, making clear that Lutherans have convictions which are not open to question. The confessions clarify the Lutheran concern that only the Word be taught. Soon after its initial publication, the Book of Concord became the standard in doctrinal confrontations with Roman Catholics and with Calvinists. Where a Lutheran position seemed unclear or uncertain, the Book of Concord became a reference point for the authentic Lutheran view. Whereas the writings of Luther, as notable as they are, reveal the insights of one man, the Book of Concord expresses the theology of the whole Lutheran movement.³²

The Symbols of the orthodox Church of Christ are the matured fruits of the deepest devotion, experience and learning of its greatest and wisest members in its most trying ages; and as we may practically learn much from the biographies of the good, so we may learn much more from the Spirit-moved biography of the Church and the principles and testimonies which mark her life of faith. They are the sign-posts set up by the faithful along the King's highway of salvation to designate the places of danger to those who come after them, to warn and admonish us where we would otherwise be liable to err and miss the goal of our high calling in Christ Jesus. They are not laws to rule our faith, for the Word of God alone is such a Rule; but they are helps and tokens to enable us the more surely to find the true import of the Rule, that we may be all the more thoroughly and sincerely conformed to that Rule. They are the human tracks which the best of the saints have left, by which we may the better detect the way which God has laid out and opened for the fallen and sinful children of men to travel, that they may fill their Christian vocation and come to everlasting life.³³

...the Confessions are a correct exposition, or interpretation, of the Bible, and it is in our Confessions where we as a Lutheran Church publicly confess our faith before the world and confidently declare: "This we believe, teach, and confess." They are also the banner under which we march and by which we identify one another as brethren. I believe that it is fair to say that if it were not for our Confessions the Lutheran Reformation would not have gotten off the ground and, consequently, there would be no Lutheran Church today. It

³²James F. Korthals, "Publication of the Book of Concord – 425th Anniversary," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 225-26. In the printed text, the last line of this quotation says that "the Book of Concord expresses of the theology for the whole Lutheran movement." We have assumed that this awkward reading represents an intended but only partially-completed stylistic correction in the author's manuscript, and have taken the liberty of correcting the text accordingly in our citation of it.

³³Joseph A. Seiss, "Our Confessions in English," *Lutheran Church Review*, Vol. I, No. 3 (July 1882), p. 216.

is also fair to say that if we depart from our Confessions, as many have, the time may come when there will be no true Lutheran Church.³⁴

A few clarifications of what we are talking about can serve us at this point. First, while we would recognize that the Creeds and Confessions were produced at crucially important times in church history under the guidance of divine *providence*, we do *not* believe that they were produced by divine *inspiration*. They are always under Scripture, as the servants of Scripture. Their light is, as it were, a reflected light. But this does not mean that they can be dismissed or ignored, in an arrogant or sectarian spirit, without danger to the faith of those who might bear such an unappreciative attitude toward them. The light of the Symbolical Books may indeed be a reflected light, but the light they reflect is the light of God's Word! Our subscription to the Book of Concord is one of the ways in which we obey this Scriptural injunction:

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings... (Hebrews 13:7-9a)³⁵

And by the use of our Confessions in public and private teaching, we fulfill, in large measure, the obligation we have under Christ always to be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15), and "to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

The apostles and prophets, in their writing of the Sacred Scriptures by divine inspiration, were and are infallible. The divinely-called pastors and teachers of the church, including the Fathers and Reformers who wrote our Creeds and Confessions, were and are *not* infallible. We would all agree with what Luther says in the Large Catechism: "My neighbor and I – in short, all people – may deceive and mislead, but God's Word cannot deceive."³⁶

But that begs the question of whether the Creeds and Confessions are in fact a faithful and correct witness to the truth of God's infallible Word, hammered out in crucibles of ecclesiastical controversy and pastoral need,³⁷ for the enduring benefit of God's people. As Charles Porterfield

³⁴Wilhelm W. Petersen, "Pastor, I Have A Question," *Lutheran Sentinel*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Feb. 1985), p. 4.

³⁵*New American Standard Bible*, copyright 1995 by the Lockman Foundation.

³⁶Large Catechism IV:57, Kolb/Wengert p. 464.

³⁷Thomas Aquinas gives expression to the "pastoral need" motivation for the preparation of creeds and confessions in his *Summa Theologica* (Second Part of the Second Part, Question 1, Article 9): "*Objection*: It would seem that it is unsuitable for the articles of faith to be embodied in a creed. Because Holy Writ is the rule of faith, to which no addition or subtraction can lawfully be made, since it is written (Deut. 4:2): 'You shall not add to the word that I speak to you, neither shall you take away from it.' Therefore it was unlawful to make a creed as a rule of faith, after Holy Writ had once been published. *Reply*: The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ, diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice, which are unattainable by all those who require to know the truth of faith, many of whom have no time for study, being busy with other affairs. And so it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something gathered from it" (geneva.rutgers.edu/src/faq/sola-scriptura.txt).

Krauth points out,

We do not claim that our Confessors were infallible. We do not say they could not fail. We only claim that they did not fail.³⁸

Krauth also explains “that correct human explanations of Scripture doctrine are Scripture doctrine, for they are simply the statement of the same truth in different words.”³⁹ And the Symbolical Books of our Church are indeed “correct human explanations of Scripture doctrine.”

In regard to the Scriptures as the only infallible rule of the faith, and in regard to the Confessions as a true testimony to the faith *of* that rule, Krauth again writes: “We do not interpret God’s word by the Creed, neither do we interpret the Creed by God’s word, but interpreting both independently, by the laws of language, and finding that they teach one and the same truth, we heartily acknowledge the Confession as a true exhibition of the faith of the Rule – a true witness to the one, pure, and unchanging faith of the Christian Church – and freely make it our own Confession, as truly as if it had been now first uttered by our lips, or had now first gone forth from our hands.”⁴⁰

At various times in Christian history, when heretics have hijacked the terminology of the Bible, and have distorted the meaning of the Biblical words so as to make them say something they do not say, the reaction of the responsible teachers of the church has been to devise *new* terminology – not for the sake of introducing new *doctrine*, but for the sake of preserving the *old* doctrine by means of the new, more precise terms. In the history of the church’s ongoing struggle with heresy, we do not, therefore, see a development of *doctrine*, but we *do* see a development of *terminology*.

Sometimes these struggles have produced certain key terms – such as *homoousios* and *Theotokos* – that have come to serve as universally-recognized shibboleths of orthodoxy. The historical prominence of these special terms is such that those in later generations, who agree in their conscience with the theological point that the term represents, will most properly want to use the term themselves. Thereby they will be identifying themselves at the present with those in the past who also used the term, and by means of the term, correctly taught the doctrine for which it stands. If contemporary Christians avoid or ignore these key historical terms, they will thereby be giving a clear impression to knowledgeable people around them that they *disagree* with the underlying theological point. And this would be making an uncertain or even a false confession, when a clear and faithful confession is what is called for.

Christians in this world cannot escape from the church’s history, or from the issues that have been raised and settled as a part of that history. History in these ways has helped to sharpen the question that Jesus poses to each generation of those who profess to be his followers: “Whom

³⁸Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1899), p. 186.

³⁹p. 184.

⁴⁰p. 169.

do you say that I am?” And history in these ways had helped to equip us for a faithful and truthful answer to this answer – spoken before the world and all of Christendom.

We who believe that in their struggle with the Arians, Athanasius and the Cappadocians were correct, and who believe that in their struggle with the Nestorians, Cyril of Alexandria and Leo the Great were correct, should not hesitate formally and unreservedly to subscribe the Ecumenical Creeds. If we do hesitate, or if we decline an opportunity to join our confession of faith to the confession of faith of these orthodox Fathers, in substance and in form, we will be marking ourselves – at least in the perception of those who are watching and listening – as heterodox. We will be declaring, in effect if not in intent, that these Creeds did not, and do not, give expression to God’s truth. We will be giving the impression that the heretical opponents of these catholic Fathers, on these issues, were actually the ones who were speaking for the true church and for God. And this we are not allowed to do.

Again, we cannot escape our history. We cannot pretend that history has not shaped the issues in a certain way, which requires that we respond and act and teach in a certain way today, and thereby “make the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12), as St. Paul told St. Timothy to do.

Paul also told Timothy to “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13). In view of the history that has transpired since the time of the apostles, the “pattern of the sound words” that are to be a part of our working theological vocabulary today includes not only the *divine* words of Scripture – which always occupy the place of primacy in the preaching and teaching of the church – but also those *ecclesiastical* words that have become firmly associated with the truths of Scripture through their inclusion in the public Creeds and Confessions of the church.

Because of this history, and because of the formal standing that the Symbolical Books have in the church as a “normed norm” of our teaching, we should not be concerned only to satisfy ourselves that we are teaching the truth according to the meaning that *we* place into the words that we use. We also have an obligation to the church at large to make sure we are understood *by others* to be teaching the truth, by using words that have a well-established and clear meaning among our ecclesiastical peers. In that way people who speak the same essential “theological language” will be able to communicate with each other, and be assured of each other’s soundness in faith.

This is a part of what Joseph Stump is getting at when he writes that

Confessions or symbols are official formulations of the common faith of the Church. They are public testimonies as to the manner in which the Church apprehends and teaches the doctrines of the Holy Scriptures. ... They serve the twofold purpose of exhibiting what the Church believes and teaches, and of guarding against error and heresy. ... They are useful also as criteria by which those who hold the same faith may know one another and join together in one organization.⁴¹

⁴¹Joseph Stump, *The Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1942), p. 24.

This is also why Philip Melanchthon says in the Apology that he “thought it worthwhile” to cite the correct views of the holy Fathers on the doctrine of original sin “in customary and familiar phrases,”⁴² which presumably would be understood correctly by everyone. And this is why the Lutheran princes make the following declaration in the Preface to the Book of Concord:

...we are minded not to manufacture anything new through this work of concord nor to depart in either substance *or expression* to the smallest degree from the divine truth, acknowledged and professed at one time by our blessed predecessors and us, as based upon the prophetic and apostolic Scripture and comprehended in the three Creeds, in the Augsburg Confession..., in the Apology that followed it, and in the Smalcald Articles and the Large and Small Catechisms of that highly enlightened man, Dr. Luther. On the contrary, by the grace of the Holy Spirit we intend to persist and remain unanimously in this truth and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it.⁴³

The Symbolical Books serve, then, as tools for facilitating, and giving expression to, the fundamental unity in doctrine and practice that the church needs to have, and that true churchmen want it to have. They are tools that divine providence has passed down to us through the centuries, so that we are able to join together consciously and confidently in an informed confession of a shared faith. And, in terms of the Confessional subscription that the visible church requires of its called public ministers, they are tools that the believing and confessing church on earth has placed into our hands, and directed us to use.⁴⁴ Stump speaks to this too:

Bona-fide subscription to these Confessions is required of Lutheran ministers, because the Church must see to it that those who go forth in her name preach only the pure doctrines of the Gospel as she holds them. No one is compelled to subscribe. But if any minister refuses to do so, he thereby testifies that he is not in harmony with the doctrinal position of the Lutheran Church, and has no right to preach in her name. On the other hand, if he is a Lutheran in his convictions, he will be glad to subscribe to the Confessions and to preach the doctrines set forth in them.⁴⁵

The Lutheran Symbolical Books, by virtue of the precise and careful ways in which they are worded, and by virtue of their universal recognition in the Confessional Lutheran Church as a whole, are able to function as an important norm and standard for the *commonly-recognized* dogmatic terminology of the church. They are, as it were, a working “lexicon” for meaningful Lutheran theological discourse. And in view of the fact that the Ecumenical Creeds are

⁴²Apology of the Augsburg Confession II:51, Kolb/Wengert p. 120.

⁴³Preface to the Book of Concord, 23, Kolb/Wengert p. 15. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴The *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932) affirms that the Book of Concord is “a confession of the doctrines of Scripture over against those who deny these doctrines” (section 45). It goes on to explain that the Lutheran Church’s confessional obligation “does not extend to historical statements, ‘purely exegetical questions,’ and other matters not belonging to the doctrinal content of the symbols,” but that this obligation does require us to recognize that “All *doctrines* of the Symbols are based on clear statements of Scripture” (section 48. Emphasis in original).

⁴⁵Joseph Stump, *The Christian Faith*, pp. 24-25.

ecumenical creeds, and also in view of the fact that the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century draw extensively on earlier patristic and conciliar sources, the Lutheran Symbolical Books are a working “lexicon” for meaningful theological discourse with the rest of Christendom as well.

If certain questions of doctrine and practice that the Confessions simply do not address in one way or the other might arise in the church of our time, then obviously we will not be able to get much specific guidance in dealing with those new questions from the Confessions. But in truth there are very few questions like this. Those who suppose that the Lutheran Confessions have little bearing on the theological controversies of our time either do not know what is really going on in modern Christendom, or they do not know what is really contained in the Book of Concord, or both.

The era of the Reformation, in particular, gave witness to a virtual cauldron of almost every imaginable religious idea, stirred up and swirling around in every direction. Since the sixteenth century, there have been very few new heresies introduced into the church that were not already present, at least in a nascent form, in the time of Luther and the Reformers, and that were not at least to some degree addressed in the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century. And even if a case can be made that a completely new issue has in fact been raised in the church of our time, the Biblical principles that are articulated in the Confessions, and the examples of how such matters are properly to be dealt with that the Confessions provide, will inevitably be of help to us also in dealing with the new problem.⁴⁶

Although the Book of Concord was published over 400 years ago, its teachings and explanations are demonstrably applicable to many doctrinal and practical issues that are all too contemporary. The Confessions faithfully proclaimed and applied God’s Word to the historical circumstances in and for which they were written. But since neither human nature nor the gospel of Christ have changed since then, it should not surprise us that the Confessions faithfully proclaim and apply God’s Word to the circumstances of our day as well. The Book of Concord not only *was*, but it *is* – very definitely – the public confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The Book of Concord points us always to Scripture, as it reverently unfolds and carefully expounds the message of Scripture. Through our common recognition and mutual use of the Book of Concord – in this way and for this purpose – the kind of unity in the church that Scripture requires and creates can indeed be experienced and strengthened among us. This is why the delegates from the Norwegian Synod who had been sent out to investigate the various Lutheran bodies of America – after getting acquainted with the pastors and institutions of the Missouri Synod of that time – issued this report to their church body in 1857:

It is a real joy to be able to say, in gratitude to God, that we have invariably got the impression that they are all possessed of the same spirit...: a heartfelt trust in God, a sincere love for the symbols and the doctrines of the fathers, and a belief that in them His

⁴⁶A particularly helpful modern guide in this respect is a book by Ralph A. Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (revised edition) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983).

holy Word is rightly explained and interpreted; and therefore a sacrificial, burning zeal to apply these old-Lutheran principles of doctrine and order. May the Lord graciously revive this spirit throughout the entire Lutheran church, *so that those who call themselves Lutherans may no longer wrangle over questions settled by the Lutheran Confessions*. May they rather show their true Lutheranism by truly believing that God's Word is taught rightly and without error in the Lutheran Confessions. Otherwise, the Lutheran name is but duplicity and hypocrisy.⁴⁷

III: How can we demonstrate complete unity in doctrine and practice?

We are now ready to launch out into the realm of practical, contemporary applications of what we have been discussing in a somewhat theoretical way in the first two parts of the paper. We do not have the time or the space to delve into all the possible ways in which these principles can indeed be applied among us here and now. But we will concentrate on those questions that are perhaps more pressing for us than most, in our desire to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, within the particular synod or church body to which we belong, and within the larger fellowship of sister churches to which we belong.

Indeed, much of what we will be saying will apply also to the obligation we have to reach out beyond the circle of fellowship that we currently recognize, in order to extend that circle in a God-pleasing way: by means of an expansive teaching and sharing with others of the fullness of God's truth; or, as the case may present itself, by means of a discovery and recognition of previously-unknown ecclesial entities that may already exist, where the fullness of God's truth is already confessed.⁴⁸ As genuine evangelical and catholic churchmen, we would want to be animated by the kind of conviction and confidence that animated Luther when he wrote:

We must confess that the doctrine which was declared and submitted at Augsburg is the true and pure Word of God, and that all who believe and keep it are children of God and will be saved, whether they already believe it or will be illuminated later. For this Confession will endure to the end of the world on Judgment Day. It is indeed written that whosoever believeth on Him and shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom. 10:11,13). And we must take note not only of those who will be added in the future, but also of the Christian church, which preaches the Word, and of our own people, according to the word: "As many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and

⁴⁷Jakob Aall Ottesen and Nils O. Brandt, "Indberetning fra Pastorerne Ottesen og Brandt om deres Reise til St. Louis, Missouri; Columbus, Ohio; og Buffalo, New York" (1857); in Carl S. Meyer, *Pioneers Find Friends* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1963), p. 63. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸In the Smalcald Articles there is an interesting Confessional witness to the doctrine and practice of church fellowship, especially as it presupposes and pertains to the true unity of the church in the revealed truth of Christ, and especially as it relates to the unique responsibility of the church's bishops and pastors to oversee and implement the various expressions of fellowship that take place among orthodox churches and Christians: "...in order that the unity of Christendom might be preserved against the sects and heretics, ...the church cannot be better ruled and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops are equal according to the office – although they may be unequal in their gifts – holding diligently together one unanimous doctrine, creed, sacraments, prayers, and performing works of love, etc." (Schmalkald Articles II, IV:7, 9; in William R. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], pp. 129-30)

upon the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16), which passage excludes none; therefore all who believe and live according to the teaching of the [Augsburg] Confession and its Apology are our brethren, and their peril concerns us as much as does our own. As members of the true church we dare not forsake them, regardless of when they join us, whether they do so secretly or openly, whether they live among us or in the diaspora. This we say and confess.⁴⁹

Lutheran theology, as it is articulated in the Lutheran Confessions, is fundamentally a *liturgical* theology. This means two things. First, it means that the worship life of the church, and what goes on in the church’s worship, is an important focus for us in discerning what the overall theology of the church actually is. And second, it means that those aspects of theology that are not directly a part of the church’s practice of worship still need to be seen according to their connection to worship, and to what goes in worship.

When we speak in such a way of the church’s *liturgy* and of its *liturgical* life, we are *not* talking merely about the *rites* and *ceremonies* of the church’s worship. We are using the term “liturgy” according to the deeper theological meaning that is attached to it in the Apology, where the position of the Lutherans on what properly constitutes the Christian “liturgy” is explained:

But let us speak about the term “liturgy.” This word does not properly mean a sacrifice but rather public service. Thus, it agrees quite well with our position, namely, that the one minister who consecrates gives the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as a minister who preaches sets forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says [1 Cor. 4:1], “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries,” that is, of the gospel and the sacraments. And 2 Corinthians 5:20, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ...” Thus the term “liturgy” fits well with the ministry.⁵⁰

What we see here is a remarkable and enlightening convergence of several topics that might otherwise be discussed separately: the purpose and character of the church’s gatherings for worship; the purpose and character of the church’s public ministry; and the purpose and character of the church’s marks – that is, the means of grace. And all of these things are touched on under the overarching category of the “liturgy.”

So, while we do need to maintain the kind of distinctions between these various *loci* that the Scriptures maintain, and while we do perhaps need to tease them apart from each other logically when we systematically explain what each one is, we still must always remember that they cannot properly be considered in isolation from each other, as if they were not theologically and practically connected. They belong together. And that theological “togetherness” of worship, ministry, and means of grace is, quite simply, the *liturgical* theology of our church.

In the Augsburg Confession we declare, together with Confessional Lutherans of all times,

⁴⁹Martin Luther, “Opinion on the Recess of the Imperial Diet”; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *The True Visible Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 44.

⁵⁰Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV:79-81, Kolb/Wengert p. 272.

that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5,6]: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...”⁵¹

The point of comparison is between a pure and orthodox teaching of the gospel and a right administration of the evangelical sacraments, on the one hand, and human traditions on the other. The point of comparison is *not* (as ecumenically-minded Lutherans often imagine) between the gospel minimalistically defined and the sacraments on the one hand, and other less important articles of faith on the other. This modern attempt to smuggle into the Book of Concord a demand for unity only in fundamental doctrines, rather than fundamental unity in all doctrines, is both misguided and anachronistic. This is made clear by the elaborations and clarifications on this matter that are made by the Formula of Concord, which says that

the churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching and in *all the articles of the faith* as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments.⁵²

But again, the articles of faith in which the churches are in this way to be united, are the articles of faith that are actively to be *taught* in the churches. We are not speaking here of an officially-adopted but seldom-read doctrinal statement, collecting dust on a Lutheran parish library shelf. We are speaking instead of the substantial doctrinal preaching, permeated with the proper distinction and application of law and gospel, that is to be heard regularly from a Lutheran parish pulpit. On the basis of God’s Word, we recognize that

in his immeasurable goodness and mercy God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and of the wondrous counsel of our redemption, the holy gospel of his eternal Son, our only Savior Jesus Christ, which alone can save. By means of this proclamation he gathers an everlasting church from humankind, and he effects in human hearts true repentance and knowledge of sin and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. God wants to call human beings to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, to convert them, to give them new birth, and to sanctify them through these means, and in no other way than through his holy Word (which people hear proclaimed or [which they] read) and through the sacraments (which they use according to his Word).⁵³

Law-gospel preaching is not, of course, simply preaching about the doctrine of the law and the doctrine of the gospel *as such*. Rather, we are to preach about *everything* that we preach about, in a *law-gospel* way. We do not draw a distinction between law-gospel preaching and doctrinal

⁵¹Augsburg Confession [Latin] VII:1-4, Kolb/Wengert p. 43.

⁵²Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X:31, Kolb/Wengert p. 640. Emphasis added.

⁵³Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration II:50, Kolb/Wengert p. 553.

preaching, and we do not draw a distinction between law-gospel preaching and practical preaching. Our homiletical catechesis is to be presented in the framework of law and gospel, and our practical exhortations are likewise to be presented in the framework of law and gospel. This keeps our preaching evangelical, so that it will serve the salvific purposes for which God has instituted Christian preaching. And it prevents our preaching from becoming either pedantic or moralistic.

Proper Lutheran preaching – simultaneously evangelical, doctrinal, and practical in its character – is described in the Apology, where a comparison is made between a typical Sunday in a sixteenth-century Romanist parish, and a typical Sunday in a sixteenth-century Lutheran parish:

Among the opponents there are many regions where no sermons are delivered during the entire year except during Lent. And yet the chief worship of God is to preach the gospel. And when the opponents do preach, they talk about human traditions, about the devotion to the saints and similar trifles. ... A few of the better ones have begun now to speak about good works, but they still say nothing about the righteousness of faith, about faith in Christ, and about the consolation of consciences. Indeed they rail against this most salutary part of the gospel in their polemics. On the contrary, in our churches all the sermons deal with topics like these: repentance, fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, consolation of consciences through faith, the exercise of faith, prayer (what it should be like and that everyone may be completely certain that it is efficacious and is heard), the cross, respect for the magistrates and all civil orders, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ (the spiritual kingdom) and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, chastity, and all the works of love. From this description of the state of our churches it is possible to determine that we diligently maintain churchly discipline, godly ceremonies, and good ecclesiastical customs.⁵⁴

Let us note the important statement that “the chief worship of God is to preach the gospel,” and that “the righteousness of faith,” “faith in Christ,” and “the consolation of consciences” are identified with this gospel. Sermons that are devoid of such content are not Lutheran sermons. They are not genuinely Christian sermons. But in the same breath, the Apology lists an array of doctrinal and ethical topics that are to be covered in Lutheran sermons. These two emphases can and should guide us and our homiletical practice.

Pastors can assure their brother pastors that they are one in doctrine with them, by preaching publicly the doctrine in which they *are* one. And when they preach that doctrine – that doctrine of the gospel – the righteousness of Christ is thereby preached *upon* their listeners, and the indwelling Christ is thereby preached *into* their listeners. In Christ’s justification *of* his people, and in Christ’s mystical union *with* his people, the church is built up in faith and life, and the true unity of the Church, in Christ its Lord and head, is strengthened.

There does not need to be a lock-step uniformity in terminology, with memorized formulas or clichés being repeated unimaginationally by everyone. Again, what we have the right to

⁵⁴Apology of the Augsburg Confession XV:42-44, Kolb/Wengert p. 229.

expect from each other is a *fundamental* unity in doctrine and practice, not an absolute and rigid conformity in every form of expression that is used. But a fundamental *unity* is what we *do* expect.

Therapeutic sermons that soft-pedal or ignore the articles of faith that Scripture teaches, and that, in form and content, take their cues instead from the realm of popular self-help psychology, are unacceptable. Sermons that are governed and shaped by the law, in which the gospel does not predominate, are unacceptable. Sermons that are filled with almost nothing but jokes and funny stories, and that say very little if anything about God and salvation, are unacceptable.

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:28).

And of course, it is not just the *preaching* and *teaching* of the church to which we should pay close attention, in our desire to remain united in Christ and his Word. The *administration of the sacraments*, too, is to be done with a proper conformity to the institution of Christ; with a proper appreciation for the “pastoral care” dimension of sacramental administration; and with a proper concern for the public confession that is made in conjunction with the sacramental ministrations of the church.

Unvarying use of the instituting words of Jesus is not optional.⁵⁵ We agree with this in principle. But are we as careful as we should be, to make sure that we do not give a different impression to people who see and hear us at font and altar? Do we, for example, add our own flourishes to the words of Jesus when we baptize, perhaps by saying something like “in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit”?

If we do not know the reason why Jesus told us to speak certain exact words, that does not mean that he had no reason. He is and remains the Lord of the church, and the Lord of the sacrament. He gets to tell us what to say and do. We get to listen, and to obey. We should never create a situation where doubt in the validity or efficacy of the sacrament is caused by our failure to say exactly what we are supposed to say, or to do exactly what we are supposed to do.

This is an especially sensitive matter in regard to the Lord’s Supper, where there have been so many debates and controversies over the years, not only between Lutherans and others, but also among Lutherans. If we are serious about maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we need to stay away from speculations about what we might be able to “get away with” in terms of an unusual way of administering this Supper. For the sake of the faith and certainty of those we are called to serve, we also need to avoid unsettling experimentations with something as profoundly holy as the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood.

The Formula of Concord, in its minutely careful exegesis of what Jesus said and did, and of what Jesus wills his presiding ministers to say and do, should be the final word for us in regard

⁵⁵cf. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VII:79, Kolb/Wengert p. 607.

to many of these questions and disputes. Let us pay close attention to what the Formula teaches us:

...no human words or works create the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Supper, whether it be the merit or the speaking of the minister or the eating and drinking or the faith of the communicants. Instead, all this should be ascribed solely to the almighty power of God, and to the words, institution, and arrangement of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ, which he spoke in the first institution of the Supper, were not only effective in the first Supper; they remain so. They retain their validity and power and are still effective, so that in all places in which the Supper is observed according to Christ's institution and *his words are used*, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed and received on the basis of the power and might of the very same words that Christ spoke in the first Supper. For wherever what Christ instituted is observed and *his words are spoken over the bread and cup* and wherever the *consecrated* bread and cup are distributed, Christ himself exercises his power *through the spoken words*, which are still his Word, by virtue of the power of the first institution. ...Luther says: "This command and institution of his have the power to accomplish this, that we do not distribute and receive simply bread and wine but his body and blood, as his words indicate: 'This is my body, this is my blood.' So it is not our work or speaking but the command and ordinance of Christ that make the bread the body and the wine the blood, beginning with the first Lord's Supper and continuing to the end of the world, and it is administered daily *through our ministry or office*." Likewise, "Here, too, if I were to say over all the bread there is, 'This is the body of Christ,' nothing would happen, but when we follow his institution and command in the Supper and say, 'This is my body,' then it is his body, not because of our speaking or our declarative word, but because of his command in which he has told us to speak and to do and has *attached his own command and deed to our speaking*."⁵⁶

The doctrine of the public ministry is another area where there have been many disputes over the years, not only between Lutherans and others, but also among Lutherans. We are firmly persuaded that many of these disputes could be amicably settled if greater attention would be paid to what the Confessions of our church actually say already on this topic.⁵⁷ And at the very least, Lutherans who sincerely and thoughtfully subscribe to the Confessions can be expected to admit that what the Confessions do say regarding the ministry is a part of what they, as Lutherans, believe and teach.

Preaching and teaching "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) and the Word of God in all of its articles, and exercising general spiritual oversight in the church, require a level of pastoral competence that is lacking in most Christians. "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). Officiating at the administration of the sacraments, in the way that God wants this to be done, also

⁵⁶Formula of Concord SD VII:74-75, 77-78 Kolb/Wengert pp. 606-07. Emphases added.

⁵⁷The occasion of this paper does not afford us the opportunity to go into this matter in any great detail, but those who are interested in pursuing this further are invited to consult the materials on "The Lutheran Doctrine of the Ministry" that we have made available online: tinyurl.com/LutheranMinistry

involves more than simply performing the mechanics of the rite – which almost any Christian could conceivably master.

An examination of the faith of adult baptizands, or of the faith of the parents and sponsors of those who are baptized in infancy, is, in ordinary circumstances, an important and necessary preparation for the proper administration of Baptism – in view of the fact that Jesus links the administration of this sacrament with the duty to teach all that he has commanded. This is an aspect of the spiritual care of souls, to which not everyone is called, and for which not everyone is qualified.

And this kind of soul-care and spiritual oversight is particularly necessary also for the proper administration of the Lord's Supper, with which is associated an explicit apostolic warning of potential harmful consequences – spiritual and temporal – for communicants who partake of this sacrament in an unworthy manner (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:27-32). Admitting communicants to the altar, or declining to admit them, is a serious matter. It is an exercising of pastoral authority over those communicants.

And when a communicant senses a need for confidential spiritual counsel and private confession and absolution before his participation in the sacrament, he has the right to expect that the minister with whom he meets will know what he is doing: in exercising spiritual discernment; in showing pastoral sensitivity to the burdens that weight heavily on his conscience; and in providing pertinent and focused law-gospel instruction and comfort. Regular pastors are trained to do this, and they are tested and examined by reliable authorities on behalf of the church at large before they are authorized to do this.

In something as important as the faithful and orderly administration of the means of grace – which is itself a matter of New Testament doctrine – a Biblically-based unity and consensus in practice is of the highest necessity. We all have the right to be assured that God's Word is being properly taught and applied among those whom we count as brothers and sisters in the faith. As the Treatise draws together many of the strands of Biblical teaching that pertain to the question of spiritual care and oversight in the church, it says some things that apply very directly to the question of which men and ministers are in fact called and authorized to preach and teach in the gathered assembly, and to oversee, and officiate at, the administration of the sacraments. We read:

The *gospel* bestows upon those who *preside over the churches* the commission to proclaim the gospel, forgive sins, and administer the sacraments. In addition, it bestows legal authority, that is, the charge to excommunicate those whose crimes are public knowledge and to absolve those who repent. It is universally acknowledged, even by our opponents, that this power is shared *by divine right* by all who preside in the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops. For that reason Jerome plainly teaches that in the apostolic letters all who preside over churches are both bishops and presbyters. He quotes Titus [1:5-6]: “I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should...appoint presbyters in every town,” which then continues, “It is necessary for a bishop to be the husband of one wife” [v. 6]. Again, Peter and John call themselves presbyters [1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1]. Jerome goes on to say: “One person was chosen thereafter to oversee the rest as a remedy for schism, lest some individuals draw a following around themselves and divide the church of Christ. For in Alexandria, from the

time of Mark the evangelist until that of bishops Esdras [Heracles] and Dionysius, the presbyters always chose one of their number, elevated him to a higher status, and called him bishop. Moreover, in the same way that an army provides a commander for itself, the deacons may choose one of their own, whom they know to be diligent, and name him archdeacon. What, after all, does a bishop do, with the exception of ordaining, that a presbyter does not?” Jerome, then, teaches that the distinctions of degree between bishop and presbyter or pastor are established by human authority. That is clear from the way it works, for, as I stated above, the power is the same.⁵⁸

When the Treatise says here that “the gospel” bestows the commission and the authority that are entrusted to these “presiding” ministers, we know from the context that what it is saying is that *the New Testament revelation* bestows this commission and authority on them.⁵⁹ This is not done, then, only according to a human arrangement for the sake of expediency, or only as a matter of historical development. It is, as the Treatise says, a matter of “divine right” that such men are called to such work among God’s people.⁶⁰

⁵⁸Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 60-63, Kolb/Wengert p. 340. Emphases added.

⁵⁹Earlier in the Treatise, we read: “...let us show from the gospel that the Roman bishop is not superior by divine right to other bishops and pastors” (Treatise 7, Kolb/Wengert p. 331). This statement is then followed by an exegetical discussion of several passages from the Gospels and Epistles (Treatise 8-11, Kolb/Wengert pp. 331-32). The “gospel” in its narrower meaning, as a reference to the message of God’s grace in Christ, bestows the forgiveness of sins, and does not bestow “legal authority.”

⁶⁰When the Treatise speaks of those who “preside” in or over the churches, it is not talking about anyone and everyone who holds any kind of public office in the church. All who serve in a position of “presiding” and pastoral leadership are, of course, serving in a spiritual and ecclesiastical office, but not all who serve in a spiritual and ecclesiastical office are serving in a position of “presiding” and pastoral leadership. Every pastor is a minister or servant of the church, but not every minister or servant of the church is a pastor, or is qualified to do what pastors are called to do. The Treatise, by means of its quotation from St. Jerome, includes a reference to the deacons (and archdeacons) of the ancient church. But these deacons are not included by the Treatise among those who “preside” in or over the churches. The deacons of Jerome’s time served as assistants to the bishops and presbyters in certain areas of church life, but they did not exercise the distinctive duties of the pastoral ministry. The full ministry of Word and sacrament, and the pastoral oversight of souls, was the responsibility of the bishops and presbyters. In this way the ministry of these early deacons was different from the ministry of those Reformation-era *Lutheran* “deacons” who *were* called to the full ministry of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments – albeit under the supervision (by human right) of a parish rector or senior pastor. The deacons of the ancient church served as liturgical assistants in public worship, and also often assisted in the *distribution* of the Lord’s Supper, but they were not authorized to *officiate* at the administration of the sacrament. Note, too, that while the Treatise does say that the distinction between presbyters and bishops is by human right, it does *not* say that the distinction between presbyters/bishops and *deacons* is by human right. In its official statement on “The Public Ministry of the Word,” the Evangelical Lutheran Synod declares – concerning “the pastoral office in its various manifestations” – that “The church is commanded to appoint ministers who will preside over the churches (2 Timothy 2:2, Titus 1:5, Ap XIII, 12), who must have the scriptural qualifications for a full use of the keys... (Treatise 60-61). God commands that properly called men publicly preach, teach, administer the sacraments, forgive and retain sins, and have oversight of doctrine in the name of Christ and the church (1 Timothy 2:11-12). Therefore a presiding office, whether it is called that of pastor, shepherd, bishop, presbyter, elder or by any other name, is indispensable for the church (Luke 10:16, 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, Matthew 28:18-20, Hebrews 13:17, Acts 20:28, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 5:1-2). We reject any teaching that denies the exercise of spiritual oversight by the pastoral office.” In regard to the “limited offices” that “the church, in her freedom, may establish” – which would include an office like that of the deacons of the early church – the ELS statement also says: “Authorization to exercise a limited part of the Public Ministry of the Word does not imply authorization to exercise all or other parts of it. ... We reject any teaching that makes the office of the

The various *outward configurations* of the church's pastoral ministry have indeed developed and changed over time. So, we are not talking about a rigid adherence to the details of the "parish pastorate" with which we are familiar today, or to the kind of external arrangement of bishops and presbyters that was in place in Jerome's day, or to any other specific configuration of pastoral ministry – as if there were only one way through which the pastoral care of Christians may be carried out, or as if there were only one divinely-instituted manifestation or office of pastoral ministry in the church.⁶¹ But the *essence* of the pastoral ministry *more generally considered* – that is, the oversight and care of souls in Word and sacrament, by men who have been properly trained for this work and properly called to this work – is willed and mandated by God for the church of all times and places.⁶² These are the "spiritual fathers" and "preachers,"

Lutheran elementary school teacher, Sunday school teacher or any other limited office in the church equivalent to the pastoral office."

⁶¹We are not dredging up the old "Missouri vs. Wisconsin" debate on church and ministry from the first half of the twentieth century. We (and the Treatise) are speaking of something more basic than what was argued about back then. The ELS statement on "The Public Ministry of the Word" affirms that "The church is free to divide the labors of the pastoral office among qualified men (1 Corinthians 1:17, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6). While every incumbent of this office must be qualified for a full use of the keys, not every incumbent must be responsible for full use of the keys. Missionary, assistant pastor, professor of theology, synod president (who supervises doctrine in the church), and chaplain are some examples of this. We reject the teaching that the Public Ministry of the Word is limited to the ministry of a parish pastor." The ELS statement also notes that "The term 'pastoral office' has been used historically according to a more restrictive meaning (referring only to those men who are called to the pastorate of a local congregation), and according to a less restrictive meaning (referring to all those men who are called to a ministry of pastoral oversight in local congregations, as well as in other specialized fields of labor). In this document the term is being used according to its less restrictive meaning." A well-known Missouri Synod pastor and author from the last century writes that "the words of the Apostle Paul, 2 Tim. 4, 1-5, ...were originally addressed to Timothy, the faithful companion and assistant of the apostle. But as such, Timothy had the same duties as our pastors and teachers [1 Tim. 4, 12-16], missionaries [Acts 19, 22], visitors [1 Cor. 4, 17], synodical presidents [1 Tim. 1, 3], and professors [2 Tim 2, 2]. Hence these words are addressed to *all* faithful and righteous servants of the Word, yes, to *all faithful and righteous* servants of the Word who would be like Timothy. ... All these – pastors, teachers, missionaries, visitors, synodical presidents, professors – are 'servants of the *Word*.' They are to do their heaven-appointed work by means of the *Word of God*. They are '*stewards of God*' [Titus 1, 7]. ... According to Scripture their duties are the following: They are to teach the Word of God [1 Tim. 5, 17], to feed the Church of God with the Word of God [Acts 20, 28], and to take care of the Church with it [1 Tim. 3, 5]. As teachers they are to speak the Word of God [Heb. 13, 7], with it watch for the souls entrusted to their care [Heb. 13, 17], exhort and rule them [Rom. 12, 8], with it labor among them, be over them, and admonish them [1 Thess. 5, 12], with it edify the 'body of Christ' [Eph. 4, 11-12]. Thus God, 'according to His dispensation,' wants the stewardship administered [Col. 1, 25]. Then, and then alone, are they truly stewards of God: 'ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God' [1 Cor. 4, 1]" (Carl Manthey Zorn, *A Last Apostolic Word To All Faithful and Righteous Servants of the Word* [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1925], pp. 7-8. Emphases in original).

⁶²The Apology teaches: "The opponents do not consider the priesthood as a ministry of the Word and of the sacraments administered to others. Instead, they consider it as a sacrificial office... We teach that the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross was sufficient for the sins of the entire world and that there is no need for additional sacrifices... Thus priests are not called to offer sacrifices for the people as in Old Testament law so that through them they might merit the forgiveness of sins for the people; instead *they are called to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments to the people*. We do not have another priesthood like the Levitical priesthood – as the Epistle to the Hebrews [chaps. 7-9] more than sufficiently teaches. But if ordination is understood with reference to the ministry of the Word, we have no objection to calling ordination a sacrament. For the ministry of the Word has the command of God and has magnificent promises like Romans 1[:16]: the gospel 'is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.' Likewise, Isaiah 55[:11], '...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose. ...' If ordination is understood in this way, we

who “govern and guide us by the Word of God” and who “watch over” our souls, about whom Luther speaks in his Large Catechism explanation of the Fourth Commandment.⁶³

As far as the pastoral competency of those who are called to a presiding ministry in the church is concerned, the Small Catechism – drawing directly from St. Paul’s pastoral epistles – lays out the God-given requirements for “Bishops, Pastors,⁶⁴ and Preachers” in these words:

A bishop is to be above reproach, *the husband of one wife*, temperate, virtuous, moderate, hospitable, *an apt teacher*, not a drunkard, not vicious, not involved in dishonorable work, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not stingy, one who manages his own household well, who has obedient and honest children, not a recent convert, *who holds to the Word that is certain and can teach, so that he may be strong enough to admonish with saving teaching and to refute those who contradict it.*” From 1 Timothy 3[:2-4,6a; Titus 1:9].⁶⁵

Ability or aptness for teaching, and a level of knowledge necessary for admonition and refutation of error, are required. Also, the oversight ministry of bishops, pastors, and preachers is not intended only for a certain segment of the church – as would be the case with the calling of a parish school teacher, for example. Their ministry of spiritual oversight in Word and sacrament is basically intended for “the church” as a whole.⁶⁶ And any natural and normal manifestation of “the church” includes both men and women. Therefore, another requirement for an ecclesiastical “presiding” minister is that he be “the husband of one wife.” In other words, he must be a male, so

will not object to calling the laying on of hands a sacrament. For *the church has the mandate to appoint ministers*, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it. Indeed, it is worthwhile to extol the ministry of the Word with every possible kind of praise against fanatics who imagine that the Holy Spirit is not given through the Word but is given on account of certain preparations of their own...” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession XIII:7-13, Kolb/Wengert p. 220. Emphases added)

⁶³Large Catechism I:158-63, Kolb/Wengert p. 408.

⁶⁴More precisely, Parish Rectors.

⁶⁵Small Catechism, Table of Duties: 2, Kolb/Wengert p. 365. Emphases added.

⁶⁶The *ordinary* ministry of the apostles – which they share with all who are mediately called to the public ministry of Word and sacrament – was shaped by their vocational authority to “govern the church” by the Word of God. The Treatise declares: “As to the passages ‘Feed my sheep’ [John 21:17] and ‘Do you love me more than these?’ [John 21:15], they do not support the conclusion that a special superiority has been given to Peter. Christ orders him to feed the flock, that is, to preach the Word or govern the church by the Word – something Peter holds in common with other apostles. ...Christ gave to his apostles only spiritual authority, that is, the command to preach the gospel, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, to administer the sacraments, and to excommunicate the ungodly without the use of physical force. He did not give them the power of the sword or the right to establish, take possession [of], or dispose of the kingdoms of the world. Indeed, Christ said, ‘Go, ...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you’ [Matt. 28:19-20]. Again, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ [John 20:21]” (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 30-31, Kolb/Wengert p. 335). As stated above, the authority of those who govern the *church* by the Word includes “the command...to administer the sacraments.” Through the sacrament of baptism “we are initially received into the Christian community” (Large Catechism IV:2, Kolb/Wengert p. 456). The Lord’s Supper is “the common sacrament of the church,” which is not to be played with “apart from God’s Word and outside the church community” (Smalcald Articles II, II:9, Kolb/Wengert p. 303). Indeed, “the whole gospel and the article of the Creed, ‘I believe in one holy Christian church...the forgiveness of sins,’ are embodied in this sacrament and offered to us through the Word” (Large Catechism V:32, Kolb/Wengert p. 470).

that he can exercise pastoral authority over the women *and the men* of the church without violating the order of creation and the principle of male headship.⁶⁷ A bishop, pastor, or preacher in the church must be someone who either is, or is able to be, married to a woman. A presiding minister may not ordinarily be someone who either is, or is able to be, married to a man.⁶⁸

When the important duty of publicly preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments is entrusted to properly-trained men whose qualifications and credentials are recognized by the church at large (by means of their “clergy roster” status, or their “ordained minister” status), this contributes significantly to the unity in doctrine and practice that God wants his church to have. Most fundamentally, it is more likely that God’s Word will be preached accurately, and with the proper division of law and gospel, when men who have been carefully trained to preach God’s Word accurately, and properly to divide law and gospel, are the ones who are doing the preaching! But it also contributes toward the preservation of trust among brother pastors and sister congregations, and reflects a proper respect for the covenant of fraternal order to which the pastors and congregations of a synod are pledged, when the provisions of that fraternal

⁶⁷In a document entitled “Women in the Public Ministry,” prepared in 2001 by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Doctrine Committee, it is noted that “Women participated in the work of the New Testament church (Romans 16). Some form of the deaconess office seems to be present already in the lifetime of St. Paul. Phoebe is called a *diakonos* in Romans 16:1. Concerning the ‘older women’ who were probably teaching deaconesses, St. Paul writes, ‘The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to wine, *teachers of good things*’ (Titus 2:3). I Timothy 3:11 may also speak of the qualifications of such teaching deaconesses.” It is, however, also noted in this Doctrine Committee document that women ‘are not to be in the pastoral office, because here they would be in a teaching position in which they would have authority over men. Also, when St. Paul refers to the one who officiates at the Word and Sacrament liturgy, he speaks in male terms. He is to be the husband of one wife (I Timothy 3:2). Women will not read the lessons in the liturgy, preach the sermon in worship services, or distribute Communion, either publicly or privately, for these things are intimately related to the pastoral office (I Corinthians 14:34-35; I Timothy 2:11-15; I Timothy 3:1-2; LW 30:55; LW 40:390-391).”

⁶⁸Martin Luther – the author of the Small Catechism – did understand St. Paul’s directive that a bishop is to be the husband of one wife as a gender-based restriction for episcopal ministry. He wrote in his treatise “On the Councils and the Church”: “The keys are the pope’s as little as Baptism, the Sacrament [of the Altar], and the Word of God are, for they belong to the people of Christ and are called ‘the church’s keys’ not ‘the pope’s keys.’ Fifth, the church is recognized externally by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices that it is to administer. There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who *publicly and privately* give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul states in Ephesians 4[:8], ‘He received gifts among men...’ – his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some teachers and governors, etc. The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person. Otherwise, what would happen if everyone wanted to speak or administer, and no one wanted to give way to the other? It must be entrusted to one person, and he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments. The others should be content with this arrangement and agree to it. ... It is, however, true that *the Holy Spirit has excepted women, children, and incompetent people from this function*, but chooses (except in emergencies) only competent males to fill this office, as one reads here and there in the epistles of St. Paul [I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6] that a bishop must be pious, able to teach, and *the husband of one wife* – and in I Corinthians 14[:34] he says, ‘The women should keep silence in the churches.’ In summary, it must be a competent and chosen man. Children, women, and other persons are not qualified for this office, even though they are able to hear God’s Word, to receive Baptism, the Sacrament, absolution, and are also true, holy Christians, as St. Peter says [I Pet. 3:7]. Even nature and God’s creation makes this distinction, implying that women (much less children or fools) cannot and shall not occupy positions of sovereignty, as experience also suggests and as Moses says in Genesis 3[:16], ‘You shall be subject to man.’ The Gospel, however, does not abrogate this natural law, but confirms it as the ordinance and creation of God” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966], pp. 154-55. Emphases added).

covenant are consistently followed.

Lutherans have, of course, always recognized that in the case of an emergency or extraordinary circumstance, “the order yields to the need.”⁶⁹ But Lutherans should also make sure that it is a case of genuine need that prompts any departure from the normal order.⁷⁰ For example, we should have as much regard for an arbitrarily set-up “laity Sunday” in church as we would have for the idea of occasionally having untrained laymen give legal advice and try cases in a lawyer’s office or courtroom, or for the idea of occasionally having untrained laymen treat patients and perform surgery in a physician’s office or hospital.

We have already noted that, according to the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran Church teaches that “It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.” At the same time, in the fifteenth article of the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran Church teaches that those “church rites...should be observed that can be observed without sin and that contribute to peace and good order in the church, for example, certain holy days, festivals, and the like. However, people are reminded not to burden consciences, as if such worship were necessary for salvation.”⁷¹

These two complementary points are repeated, and expanded on, later in the Augustana – at the point of transition between the first and second parts of that confession:

...the canons are not so severe as to demand that rites should be the same everywhere, nor have the rites of all churches ever been the same. Nevertheless, the ancient rites are, for the most part, diligently observed among us. For the accusation is false that all ceremonies and ancient ordinances are abolished in our churches. Truth is, there has been a public outcry that certain abuses have become fused to the common rites. Because such abuses could not be approved with a good conscience, they have been corrected to some extent. ...the churches among us do not dissent from the catholic church in any article of faith but only set aside a few abuses that are new and were accepted because of corruption over time contrary to the intention of the canons... However, it can easily be judged that nothing

⁶⁹Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici*; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *Church and Ministry* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), p. 285.

⁷⁰When an extraordinary circumstance would legitimately call for a departure from the usual order, a person who steps in to perform a needed pastoral act becomes an *emergency pastor* for the duration of the time of the extraordinary need, and is not, strictly speaking, acting simply as a layman. That is why the Treatise says that “where the true church is, there must also be the right of choosing and ordaining ministers, just as in an emergency even a layperson grants absolution and *becomes the minister or pastor of another*. So Augustine tells the story of two Christians in a boat, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen) and then the latter, having been baptized, absolved the former” (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 67, Kolb/Wengert p. 341. Emphasis added). A call to do the distinctive work of a pastor is, quite simply, a pastoral call. If a man is called to perform pastoral duties (such as officiating at services of Holy Communion), then he is thereby called to be a “pastor,” whether or not that specific nomenclature is used, and whether or not that pastoral call was issued in a proper and fraternal manner. The question, then, is if a certain person has the ecclesiastically-recognized qualifications and eligibility to be issued such a call, according to the established order and standards of the church. If he does not have these qualifications and this eligibility, then in ordinary circumstances he should not be called to such work.

⁷¹Augsburg Confession [Latin] XV:1-2, Kolb/Wengert p. 49.

contributes more to preserving the dignity of ceremonies and to cultivating reverence and piety among the people than conducting ceremonies properly in the churches.⁷²

The Apology likewise repeats and further explains these points:

...just as the different lengths of day and night do not undermine the unity of the church, so we maintain that different rites instituted by human beings do not undermine the true unity of the church, although it pleases us when universal rites are kept for the sake of tranquillity. Thus, in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's day, and other more important festival days. With a very grateful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline by which it is profitable to educate and teach [the] common folk and [the] ignorant.⁷³

The teaching of the Formula of Concord on the topic of *adiaphora* is also often introduced into this discussion. There we read that

We should not regard as free and indifferent, but rather as things forbidden by God that are to be avoided, the kind of things presented under the name and appearance of external, indifferent things that are nevertheless fundamentally opposed to God's Word (even if they are painted another color). Moreover, we must not include among the truly free *adiaphora* or indifferent matters ceremonies that give the appearance or (in order to avoid persecution) are designed to give the impression that our religion does not differ greatly from the papist religion or that their religion were not completely contrary to ours. Nor are such ceremonies matters of indifference when they are intended to create the illusion (or are demanded or accepted with that intention), as if such action brought the two contradictory religions into agreement and made them one body or as if a return to the papacy and a deviation from the pure teaching of the gospel and from the true religion had taken place or could gradually result from these actions. ... In the same way, useless, foolish spectacles, which are not beneficial for good order, Christian discipline, or evangelical decorum in the church, are not true *adiaphora* or indifferent things. ... Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.⁷⁴

⁷²Augsburg Confession [Latin], Conclusion of Part One: 2-5, Kolb/Wengert p. 59; Introduction of Part Two: 1, 6, Kolb/Wengert p. 61.

⁷³Apology of the Augsburg Confession VII/VIII:33, Kolb/Wengert p. 180.

⁷⁴Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X:5,7,9, Kolb/Wengert pp. 636-37. Let us take note, by the way, that this excerpt from the Formula represents the Lutheran *doctrine* of *adiaphora*. While the *adiaphora* themselves are not matters of doctrine *per se*, we *do* have a doctrine of when, and for what purposes, *adiaphora* are to be used; and a doctrine of how, and on what basis, *adiaphora* are to be evaluated. So, when a certain practice is identified as an *adiaphoron*, this does not bring the theological discussion of that practice to an end. In some ways that is when the conversation begins. Our Biblical and Confessional *doctrine* of *adiaphora* – embodied especially in Article X of the Formula of Concord – can then be brought to bear on our discussion of the practice in question.

What we see in all these Confessional excerpts is a comprehensive, balanced, and well-thought-through position on the matter of how the church properly evaluates and understands those ecclesiastical practices – especially in the arena of public worship – that are in themselves neither commanded nor forbidden by God. The first thing we should notice is that decisions about whether or not a certain practice like this will be retained or introduced are not to be made whimsically, arbitrarily, or independently, apart from careful reflection and fraternal consultation, by elitist-minded individuals who presumptuously think that they know what is best for others. Such decisions are decisions of “the community of God.” And as the larger church does consider such matters, by means of its various mechanisms of fraternal deliberation, it is to do so with a clear and informed perception of the *purpose* of such practices. If an under-educated individual does not understand the reason for a certain practice, this does not mean that there is no reason, and this does not mean that the church would not be harmed or hindered in its mission by the removal of the practice.

We can appreciate the systematic presentation of the Formula of Concord in particular regarding the matter of *adiaphora*, as a guide for our own consideration of these matters. An *adiaphoron* is, in principle, acceptable and desirable for use among God’s people when it is beneficial for “good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.” But before we go any further in applying these criteria to the ceremonial and liturgical issues of our day, we need to make sure that we accurately grasp how the Formula actually intends its use of the term “adiaphora” to be understood. The Concordists themselves do not apply the concept of “adiaphora” as broadly as we often do. Martin Chemnitz provides us with the larger sixteenth-century lexical context for the Formula’s use of this specific term in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*:

The ceremonies of the Mass are not all of one kind. For some have a divine command and examples of Scripture that they should be done at the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, being as it were essential, e.g., to take bread and the cup in the public assembly, to bless, distribute, eat, drink, proclaim the death of the Lord. Some indeed do not have an express command of God, that they must of necessity be done thus in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, nevertheless they are in their nature good and godly if they are used rightly for edification, such as psalms, readings from Scripture, godly prayers and giving of thanks, confession of the Creed, etc. Some are *per se* superstitious and ungodly, for instance the sacrifice of the Mass for the living and the dead, invocation of the saints, satisfaction for the souls in purgatory, the private Mass, consecration of salt, blessing of water, etc. Some ceremonies indeed are adiaphora, such as vestments, vessels, ornaments, words, rites, and things which are not against the Word of God. Things which are of the first kind must of necessity be observed, for they belong to the substance of the Lord’s Supper. Of the things that belong to the second and fourth kind, many which make for the edification of people are observed in our churches without infringing on Christian liberty. The third kind, however, being superstitious and godless, has deservedly, rightly, and of necessity been abrogated and done away with.⁷⁵

⁷⁵Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), pp. 524-25.

A “ceremony” is a purposeful physical action. Chemnitz divides the various kinds of religious “ceremonies” into four distinct categories. His first category pertains to those ceremonies that are commanded by God, and that therefore cannot be dispensed with. Christian worship is not a matter of Quaker-like mysticism. Jesus has told us physically to *do* certain things in the administration of the means of grace, and this sacramental *doing* is a matter of sacred *ceremony* – that is, outward actions that accompany the spoken Word, according to the Lord’s institution and command. Chemnitz’s third category pertains to those ceremonies that are inherently wrong, and that therefore must not be used. Such ceremonies enact, or invariably testify to, things that God’s Word forbids. But there are also *two remaining categories*, and not just one.

Chemnitz’s second category pertains to certain historic usages that admittedly are not, in themselves, commanded by God. But these usages are so well established in the church, and are so widely recognized as serving inherently good and godly purposes in worship, that there would be hardly any conceivable reason why anyone would want to do away with them – at least if that person’s goal and desire would still be to have a worship service that edifies the church with the Word of God and according to the Word of God. The ceremonies of this category are universally understood as testimonies to God’s truth, and to a proper liturgical theology. Hence the inevitable impression that would be left by a removal of these ceremonies would be that those who are removing them are thereby *rejecting* the truth and the proper theology that everyone understands these ceremonies to represent. And so, even though the Bible does not explicitly command the use of an order of service that employs “psalms, readings from Scripture, godly prayers and giving of thanks, [and] confession of the Creed,” this basic liturgical tradition has become, for all practical purposes, virtually “untouchable” in an orthodox church.

In Chemnitz’s *Examination*, the concept of *adiaphora* does not come into view until his fourth category. This category pertains to the kind of ceremonies that can with little fanfare be adjusted or revised, diminished or increased, according to the needs and circumstances of the church. Ceremonial changes of this nature, if they are implemented in an orderly and pastorally-responsibly way and with the right motives, will not be a cause of scandal or offense, or give a testimony of heterodoxy to those who witness such changes.

According to this category of genuine *adiaphora*, a pastor can either chant or speak his parts of the service. As he conducts the service, he can wear a white alb, a black talar, or a colored chasuble. He can administer the Lord’s Supper with vessels of silver or gold, of glass or porcelain. Communicants can kneel or stand. They can make the sign of the cross and bow when they are dismissed and depart, or not. The service can be comprised of plainsong canticles, or of metered hymns, or of a combination of both.⁷⁶

⁷⁶We will not pass up an opportunity to share our considered opinion that a full liturgical service, which preserves the intended flow and rhythm of the liturgy, and which is accompanied by a somewhat rich ceremonial ornamentation, does recommend itself to the church as a better instrument for congregational worship, *and for outreach*, than a more “low-church” option. We would have to admit that in some corners of conservative Lutheranism in America, a way of conducting the service has developed that can fairly be called “boring.” Ministers plod through the texts of the printed order with little sense of the grandeur and “pageantry” of the liturgy, or of the organic and logical flow and connection of all the parts of the service. The flow of the service is also broken up by the frequent insertion of wordy rubrical announcements about what is coming next, what page things are on, and so forth. Many today have proposed that this “boring” way of conducting the service be replaced by an “entertaining” way of conducting it – either by replacing the church’s liturgy with a different locally-produced concoction every

However, Chemnitz would not have considered it to be a proper application of the principle of *adiaphora* and evangelical freedom to revamp totally the whole concept and framework of Christian worship; to get rid of an historically-based order of service that accentuates and underscores the means of grace; and to replace it with a format that arises from and reflects the entertainment and variety-show culture, the restaurant and coffee-shop culture, the talk-show and psycho-therapy culture, or the big-business and corporate culture. One of the important points that is made by the Formula is that “useless and foolish spectacles” are not to be counted among the *adiaphora*. They are inherently contrary to the requirement for “evangelical decorum” that applies to any Lutheran worship service. Frivolous gimmicks that are introduced into the worship services of a church, for the deliberate purpose of creating an irreverent and casual atmosphere, are beyond the pale of what is acceptable. They offend the pious, and disrupt the larger unity of the church.

It is often thought that such things should be done by a church that is interested in outreach, so that any unbelievers who might be present would not be made to feel uncomfortable in worship. But unbelievers *should* actually feel a little bit uncomfortable – initially, at any rate – in a gathering that honors the First Commandment, and that is comprised of worshipers who humbly recognize the holiness of the God whom they are therein enjoined to *fear, love, and trust* above all things.

The Epistle to the Hebrews gives us this instruction: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence

week, or by “jazzing up” or “enlivening” the service with a stronger intrusion of the pastor’s personality into the conducting of the service. We would propose that this “boring” way of conducting the service be replaced instead by an “intriguing” way of conducting it – that is, a way of leading God’s people in the worship of almighty God that testifies to the fact that something special and other-worldly is taking place when the church is gathered around God’s Word. The unchurched who may be present for such a sacred gathering should not be expected to be able to grasp everything that is going on. A desire to change the liturgy so as to make it immediately understandable in all respects to a first-time visitor is a misguided desire. But a first-time visitor, even if he is an unbeliever, can indeed be *intrigued* by a *well-done* liturgy that he does not immediately understand in all particulars. He can tell that something special and other-worldly is taking place, and this can draw him back again, to learn more. An example of how a well-done liturgy can indeed make a salutary impact on those who witness it is reflected in the reminiscences of J. A. O. Stub, as he recalls the experiences of his early childhood in services conducted by his grandfather (a well-known nineteenth-century Norwegian Synod pastor): “My sainted grandfather, Jacob Aall Ottesen, always celebrated the Communion, robed in the colorful, and, as it seemed to me, beautiful vestments of the Lutheran Church. On ordinary Sundays he wore the narrow-sleeved cassock, with its long satin stole, and the white ‘ruff,’ or collar. But on ‘Communion days’ and on all festival days he also wore the white surplice or cotta. As he stood reverentially before the altar with its lighted candles and gleaming silver, the old deacon, or verger, placed over his shoulders the scarlet, gold embroidered, silk chasuble. This ancient Communion vestment was shaped somewhat like a shield. As it was double, one side covered his back and the other his chest. Upon the side, which faced the congregation when he turned to the altar, was a large cross in gold embroidery; upon the other was a chalice of similar materials. As a child I instinctively knew that the most sacred of all observances of the church was about to be witnessed. As grandfather turned to the altar and intoned the Lord’s Prayer and the words of consecration, with the elevation of the host and the chalice, I felt as if God was near. The congregation standing reverentially about those kneeling before the altar, made me think of Him who, though unseen, was in our midst. I forgot the old, cold church, with its bare walls, its home-made pews, and its plain glass windows. I early came to know some words of that service, such as: ‘This is the true body, the true blood of Christ’; ‘Forgiveness of sins’; ‘Eternal life.’ I venture that all who, like me, early received such impressions of the Lord’s Supper, will approach the altar or the Communion with a reverence that time will but slowly efface” (*Vestments and Liturgies* [n.d.], pp. 3-4).

and awe” (Hebrews 12:28).⁷⁷ In the New Testament era, God does not prescribe for his people a detailed ritual – such as he did for the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. But even in the New Testament era, there still is such a thing as “acceptable” worship. And this means that there is *also* such a thing as *unacceptable* worship. Worship that is irreverent is unacceptable. Also unacceptable is worship that is not permeated by sound Biblical doctrine, and that does not convey sound Biblical doctrine, in its songs and texts, to those who are present.

Christians do not gather chiefly for the purpose of telling God what they think or how they feel, but for the purpose of listening in faith to what God has to tell them, and for the purpose of learning from God how to respond to his Word in prayers of petition, praise, and thanksgiving that have been molded and shaped by that Word. As St. Paul writes: “Let *the word of Christ* dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16).⁷⁸ In keeping with this emphasis on the centrality of Christ’s word in worship – and in the ceremonial and hymnic forms that are used in worship – the Apology affirms that

Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies.⁷⁹

Furthermore, we gladly keep the ancient traditions set up in the church because they are useful and promote tranquillity... We can claim that the public liturgy in the church is more dignified among us than among the opponents. ... Many among us celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s day after they are instructed, examined, and absolved. The children chant the Psalms in order to learn them; the people also sing in order either to learn or to pray.⁸⁰

None of this should be taken to mean that there is one and only one order of service that every Lutheran church or church body must follow. There is more than one way to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. The Confessors of our church knew this, not only as a matter of Scriptural doctrine, but also by their own experience.

Luther and Melanchthon – who authored several of our Confessional documents – were, of course, members of the church in Wittenberg, in Electoral Saxony. In its public worship, the church of Wittenberg employed an order of service that was based on the ancient and medieval Latin Mass. This description of a Sunday service in Wittenberg – written by an unsympathetic observer – comes from the year 1536:

At the seventh hour we returned to the city church and observed by which rite they

⁷⁷*New International Version*

⁷⁸*New International Version*

⁷⁹Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV:3, Kolb/Wengert p. 258.

⁸⁰Apology of the Augsburg Confession XV:38-40, Kolb/Wengert p. 229.

celebrated the Liturgy; namely thus: First, the Introit was played on the organ, accompanied by the choir in Latin, as in the mass offering. Indeed, the minister meanwhile proceeded from the sacristy dressed sacrificially [i.e. in traditional mass vestments] and, kneeling before the altar, made his confession together with the assisting sacristan. After the confession he ascended to the altar to the book that was located on the right side, according to papist custom. After the Introit the organ was played and the *Kyrie eleison* sung in alternation by the boys. When it was done the minister sang *Gloria in excelsis*, which song was completed in alternation by the organ and choir. Thereafter the minister at the altar sang “Dominus vobiscum,” the choir responding “Et cum spiritu tuo.” The Collect for that day followed in Latin, then he sang the Epistle in Latin, after which the organ was played, the choir following with *Herr Gott Vater, wohn uns bei*. When it was done the Gospel for that Sunday was sung by the minister in Latin on the left side of the altar, as is the custom of the adherents of the pope. After this the organ played, and the choir followed with *Wir glauben all an einen Gott*. After this song came the sermon, ...delivered on the Gospel for that Sunday... After the sermon the choir sang *Da pacem domine*, followed by the prayer for peace by the minister at the altar, this in Latin as well.

The Communion followed, which the minister began with the Lord’s Prayer sung in German. Then he sang the words of the Supper, and these in German with his back turned toward the people, first those of the bread, which, when the words had been offered, he then elevated to the sounding of bells; likewise with the chalice, which he also elevated to the sounding of bells. Immediately communion was held. ... During the communion the *Agnus Dei* was sung in Latin. The minister served the bread in common dress [in a cassock?] but [he served] the chalice dressed sacrificially [i.e. in mass vestments]. They followed the singing of the *Agnus Dei* with a German song: *Jesus Christus [unser Heiland]* and *Gott sei gelobet*. After the sermon the majority of the people departed. ... The minister ended the Communion with a certain thanksgiving sung in German. He followed this, facing the people, with the Benediction, singing “The Lord make his face to shine on you, etc.” And thus was the mass ended.⁸¹

Jacob Andreae, a coauthor of the Formula of Concord, was from Tübingen, in the Duchy of Württemberg. The church of Württemberg did not use an order of service that was based on the Latin Mass. But it also did not use a “made-up” service that was invented out of the heads of the Reformers of that region, without historical roots. Rather, the Württembergers used an order of service that was based on the medieval Preaching Service. Andreae himself, together with colleagues from the theological faculty at Tübingen, described this service in their 1577 correspondence with the Patriarch of Constantinople:

The All-Holy Communion is celebrated among us today with a minimum of ceremonial. The church assembles at an appointed time. Hymns are sung. Sermons are preached concerning the benefits of Christ for mankind. Again, hymns are sung. An awesome exhortation is read, which in part explains the words of institution of the Most-Holy Supper, and in part demands that each person should prepare for a worthy communion. A general but sincere confession of sins is made. Forgiveness is publicly pronounced. With

⁸¹Excerpt from the travel diary of Wolfgang Musculus; in Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 195-96.

devout prayers we ask the Lord to make us partakers of the heavenly gifts and benefits. The Words of Institution of the sacrament are read, after which the congregation approaches with reverence and receives (offered by the holy minister) the body and the blood of Christ. Again we give thanks to God in prescribed words for the heavenly gifts. Finally, the holy minister of God says the blessing over the assembled congregation, and all are dismissed to go to their homes.⁸²

These two orders of service were certainly different from each other. In the sixteenth century and later, most Lutherans followed an order of service similar to that of Wittenberg, based on the historic Latin Mass. The “Common Service,” familiar in American Lutheran history, is an heir of this “majority” tradition. But some Lutherans in the sixteenth century and later followed an order of service similar to that of Württemberg, based on the historic Preaching Service. Wittenberg used a fuller and more elaborate ritual, with a richer ceremonial. Württemberg used a more streamlined and simplified ritual, with a minimized ceremonial.

But, what these orders of service had *in common* was that they were both rooted in the earlier tradition of the church’s worship, and therefore testified to Lutheranism’s continuity with the church of all ages; they both focused the attention of the worshipers on the means of grace, and faithfully conveyed the means of grace to the people; and they were both serious and dignified in spirit, without any frivolous or irreverent elements. There was, then, a *fundamental* agreement between them in form and presentation, even as they reflected – in what they each taught and confessed – a fundamental agreement also in the underlying doctrine and practice of the churches that worshiped by means of these orders.⁸³

Among the articles of faith that are to be taught in and through the liturgy and its ceremonies is the essential point of Lutheran ecclesiology “that one holy church will remain forever” – to quote again from the Augsburg Confession. This is why the Reformers are so adamant in demonstrating and defending their unity with the church of the apostles and ancient Fathers, and their adherence to the evangelical teachings of the apostles and the Fathers.

Some Lutherans, in their anti-Roman polemics, actually end up sounding like Mormons in their seeming willingness to agree with the Romanist accusation that the Lutheran Reformers established a “new” church that was not in continuity with the church of pre-Reformation times. But this is heresy! We should absolutely refuse to be tarred by this. In our desire to preserve and confess the doctrinal unity on this point that God wants us to have, we will do what we can – in the testimony that we give with our lips, and in the testimony that we give *with our ceremonies* – to refute this accusation, and to show forth in word and deed that it is not true.

⁸²Correspondence from Lucas Osiander, Jacob Andreae, and Martin Crucius, to the Patriarch of Constantinople [1577]; in George Mastrantonis, *Augsburg and Constantinople* (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982), p. 144.

⁸³Since 1933, world Lutheranism has been able to claim for itself yet another type of historic liturgical service. The Ukrainian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, which then existed in the Galicia region of Poland (now Ukraine), published in that year an order of the Divine Liturgy that was based on the historic Byzantine Rite of Eastern Christendom. This rite is used now in the Ukrainian Lutheran Church, which preserves the legacy of the former Ukrainian Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession.

If there would be a weighing and an evaluating of *old* ceremonies, and of potential *new* ceremonies, Lutherans would be expected to embrace a “preferential option” for the *old* ceremonies. An old ceremony and a new ceremony may each be able, with equal effectiveness, to teach and reenforce a certain Scriptural truth. But the old ceremony, by its very *oldness*, is also able to teach and reenforce the fact that this Scriptural truth is what faithful Christians of all times have believed. The *newness* of a new ceremony severely diminishes the ability of such a new ceremony to impress upon people a sense of the *oldness* of the doctrine that it is devised to symbolize.

There is indeed a catholic and historic spirit in true Lutheranism which is lacking in Calvinism, and in the various Protestant sects within Christendom that Calvinism has spawned over the centuries. Sasse reminds us that

Lutheran theology differs from Reformed theology in that it lays great emphasis on the fact that the evangelical church is none other than the medieval Catholic Church purged of certain heresies and abuses. The Lutheran theologian acknowledges that he belongs to the same visible church to which Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux, Augustine and Tertullian, Athanasius and Ireneaus once belonged. The orthodox *evangelical* church is the legitimate continuation of the medieval Catholic Church, *not* the church of the Council of Trent and the [First] Vatican Council, which renounced evangelical truth when it rejected the Reformation. For the orthodox evangelical church is really identical with the orthodox catholic church of all times. And just as the very nature of the Reformed Church emphasizes its strong opposition to the medieval church, so the very nature of the Lutheran Church requires it to go to the farthest possible limit in its insistence on its solidarity and identity with the Catholic Church. It was no mere ecclesiastico-political diplomacy which dictated the emphatic assertion in the Augsburg Confession that the teachings of the Evangelicals were identical with those of the orthodox catholic church of all ages, and no more was it romanticism or false conservatism which made our church anxious to retain as much of the old canonical law as possible, and to cling tenaciously to the old forms of worship.⁸⁴

It does not surprise us, then, that there is a noticeable convergence between some of the outward forms of the Lutheran Church, and some of the outward forms of the Catholic Church – and indeed of any other church (Anglican or Orthodox) that, like ours, deliberately cultivates an identity of “connectedness” to the historic church of past centuries. We do have an obligation to confess the pure and whole truth, and thereby to cultivate our unity with other Lutherans who with us confess this truth. And this means that in our ceremonial usages, we will not employ customs and practices that testify to, and teach, the *distinctive errors* of “the papist religion.” Neither will we employ customs and practices that testify to, and teach, the distinctive errors of Protestant sectarianism, and that would make people feel in our worship services as if they were in a typical Baptist or Evangelical church and not in a Lutheran church.

But returning to the matter at hand, not everything that is *in* Rome is *of* Rome. We need not refrain from ceremonially accentuating those articles of faith that we actually do to some

⁸⁴Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), pp. 102-03. Emphases added.

degree still share with Rome.⁸⁵ In fact, since the Protestant Evangelical movement poses much more of a threat to our existence in America than does the church of Rome at this time in history, we should probably accentuate even more than in the past those sacramental and incarnational distinctives of our confession that set us apart from the enthusiasm and rationalism of American Evangelicalism. At the very least, we certainly would not deliberately try to make ourselves look and sound like the Evangelicals, by adopting the distinctive usages and ceremonies of the Evangelicals. Such a way of proceeding would directly threaten the unity in doctrine that God wants the orthodox to maintain among themselves, and together to confess and show forth to the world.

In part (ostensibly) for the sake of outreach and evangelism, and in part also to overcome their own feeling of being foreign misfits in the New World, this tactic was tried in the past by many American Lutherans, in the first half of the nineteenth century. And it was an unmitigated disaster. Over time the Confessional convictions of these Lutherans had been diminished and weakened through the internal influence of Pietism and Rationalism. And under the external influence of Puritanism and Revivalism, they finally sought to reshape themselves into the image of what was then the popular piety and spirituality of American Evangelical Protestantism. All the while, of course, they thought that they were still Lutherans. But in the sense in which the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church define what Lutheranism is, they were not. William Julius Mann recounted this sad history in 1855:

Gradually a desire manifested itself to gain popularity for the Lutheran Church in this country. The hard dogmatical knots of the old Lutheran oak were to give way under the Puritan plane. The body was deprived of its bones and its heart, and the empty skin might be filled with whatever was most pleasing, if only the Lutheran name was retained! The statement of the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession, that “unto the true unity of the Church it is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by men, should be everywhere alike,” was most extensively used, and in the desire to make the Lutheran Church as much as possible like others, her leaders were much more ready to adopt foreign elements than to retain her own distinctive features. Thus the Liturgy, the ancient lessons of the Gospels and Epistles, the festivals of the Church Year, the gown, and other usages were given up, in order that as little as possible might be seen of these

⁸⁵In his treatise *Von der Wiedertaufe*, Martin Luther writes: “It is our confession that in the papacy there are the right Holy Scriptures, the right Baptism, the right Sacrament of the Altar, the right keys for forgiveness of sins, the right preaching office, the right catechism – such as the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed. ... Now if Christianity exists under the pope, it must be Christ’s true body and members. If it is His body, then it has the right Spirit, Gospel, Creed, Baptism, Sacrament, keys, preaching office, prayer, Holy Scriptures, and everything that Christianity should have. Therefore we do not rave like the ‘enthusiasts’ that we reject everything in the papacy” (quoted in Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions* [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972], pp. 49-50). In addressing those who are still in the Roman Church, Luther also says: “It is true, I admit, that the church in which you sit derives from the ancient church as well as we, and that you have the same baptism, the sacraments, the keys, and the text of the Bible and gospels. I will praise you even further and admit that we have received everything from the church *before* you (not *from* you). ... We do not regard you as Turks and Jews (as was said above) who are outside the church. But we say you do not remain in it but become the erring, apostate, whorelike church (as the prophets used to call it), which does not remain in the church, where it was born and brought up. You run away from this church and from your true husband and bridegroom (as Hosea says of the people of Israel [Hos. 1:2]) to the devil Baal, to Molech and Astaroth” (“Against Hanswurst,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966], p. 207. Emphases added.).

Lutheran peculiarities. Hoping to gain others, they lost themselves. The Lutheran Church had given away her own spirit, her own original life and character.⁸⁶

August L. Graebner wanted to make sure that the more recently-arrived Lutheran immigrants, in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, would learn the lessons of this tragic history, so that it would not be repeated among them and their descendants. On the occasion of the publication of a new Lutheran Agenda in the English language in 1881, he therefore said:

...it appears to be our duty to aid in spreading a knowledge of the rich treasures of our Lutheran church among those in our country who are unacquainted with German. ... A good liturgy, the beautiful Lutheran service form part of those treasures. Church usages, except in the case when the confession of a divine truth is required, are indeed *adiaphora*. But they are nevertheless not without an importance of their own. Congregations that adopt the church usages of the sects that surround them, will be apt to conform to their doctrines also, more easily and quickly than those that retain their Lutheran ceremonies. We should in Lutheran services, also when held in the English language, as much as possible use the old Lutheran forms, though they be said to be antiquated and not suiting this country. We will mention here the words of a pious Lutheran duchess, Elisabeth Magdalena of Brunswick-Luneburg. Her court-chaplain [Hieronymus] Prunner relates as follows: “Although her ladyship well knew that the ceremonies and purposes of this chapter (at which Prunner officiated) must have the appearance and repute of popery with some people, she still remembered the instructions which that dear and venerable man, Luther, had once given to her father [Joachim II, Elector of Brandenburg] concerning such ceremonies. I remember in particular that her ladyship several times told me that she did not desire at these present times to begin discontinuing any of those church usages, since she hoped that so long as such ceremonies continued, *Calvinistic temerity would be held back from the public office of the church.*”⁸⁷

In the midst of all the discouragements that surround us in our increasingly post-Christian society, a Lutheran pastor can be greatly tempted to turn away from that which is pure and true, and to embrace instead that which seems to work more quickly and effectively in filling the pews (or the folding chairs) of a church. But the kingdom of God – the spiritual kingdom of faith and forgiveness – is not enduringly built by such compromises and evasions. We can remind each other of this. In our fraternal love for each other, we *should* remind each other of this. And in so doing, as we sustain each other in our weakness, we will, by God’s grace, be endeavoring thereby to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We can also derive at least some comfort from the knowledge that these temptations are not new, and that they have been endured by our brother pastors in America and elsewhere, under the cross, for many generations. George Henry Gerberding penned these still relevant words over a century ago:

⁸⁶William Julius Mann, “Blaetter aus dem Wanderbuche,” *Der Deutsche Kirchenfreund*, Vol. VIII (1855), pp. 386 ff.; quoted in Adolph Spaeth, *Charles Porterfield Krauth*, Vol. I (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1898), pp. 354-55.

⁸⁷August L. Graebner, book review of *Church Liturgy for Evangelical Lutheran Congregations of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, *The St. Louis Theological Monthly*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (August 1881), pp. 77-78. Emphasis in original.

...in almost every community there are distractions and vexations from those who claim to have a superior grade of piety. Because of the skepticism that permeates our atmosphere; because faith in Christ, in His Word, His church, and His means of grace, has been so utterly weakened, if not lost; because faith in man, in self, in one's own ability to make himself acceptable to God, has grown to such colossal proportions, therefore extremes meet and fanaticism joins hands with rationalism. Immersionists, revivalists, sanctificationists, Adventists, and healers of every hue, name, and grade, are abroad in the land. They invade the school-house, the barn, and the woods. They spread their tents on the common and on the vacant lot in village, town, and city. Each one offers a new way of salvation. All cry: "Lo, here is Christ," or, "Lo, there." They all claim that the church which teaches the old doctrines and walks in the old ways is a failure. They unsettle the minds of the uninformed and the unreflecting. They bring heartache and sorrow to the earnest pastor. All this skepticism, uncertainty, and experimenting has unfortunately unsettled only too many pastors in the churches around us. These pastors themselves have lost faith, more or less, in the divinely ordained means of grace. They are casting about for new means and methods by which to reach and hold men. They are experimenting with all sorts of novelties and attractions. Their churches and services are becoming more and more places of entertainment. They try to outbid and outdo each other in sensations calculated to draw. And so the church, like Samson of old, is shorn of her locks, and is degraded to make sport for the Philistines of the world. No true Lutheran pastor can stoop to such prostitution of his office and of his church. But he suffers from the misdeeds of others. His people are influenced by their surroundings. Some are drawn away from him, others make trouble in his own church. And so he is caused to grieve for the hurt of Joseph, and sighs, "for the hurt of my people am I hurt" (Jer. viii. 21).⁸⁸

Lutherans should, of course, be concerned about outreach to the lost. But a commitment to preserve pure doctrine through the use of pure worship forms is not in any way incompatible with this concern. In fact, it is more compatible with this concern than are those shortsighted pragmatic tactics that would seek to lure unbelievers into the church by worldly tricks and psychological manipulation.

The advice and encouragement that we need, to reach out to a fallen world *as Lutherans – which is what we are!* – is also not new. It is the same advice that has been given for many generations to pastors who wish to remain faithful to their Lord and to their calling. Again, over a century ago, John Schaller wrote:

The first care...of all who work in the field of English Mission, pastors and laymen alike, ought ever to be that they steadfastly adhere to the biblical doctrine in all its parts. Lutheran hymns, Lutheran liturgies, Lutheran prayers, above all Lutheran sermons ought to be heard wherever our missionary work is carried on. True Lutheranism need not fear any criticism. It has stood the test of centuries, and no modern weapon of offence will subvert it. It is an impregnable fortress. Be not afraid, then, to show its beauties to all who come to hear. They expect to be treated to something new in our churches, and they ought not be disappointed. To follow the example set by sectarian clergymen, to sermonize on

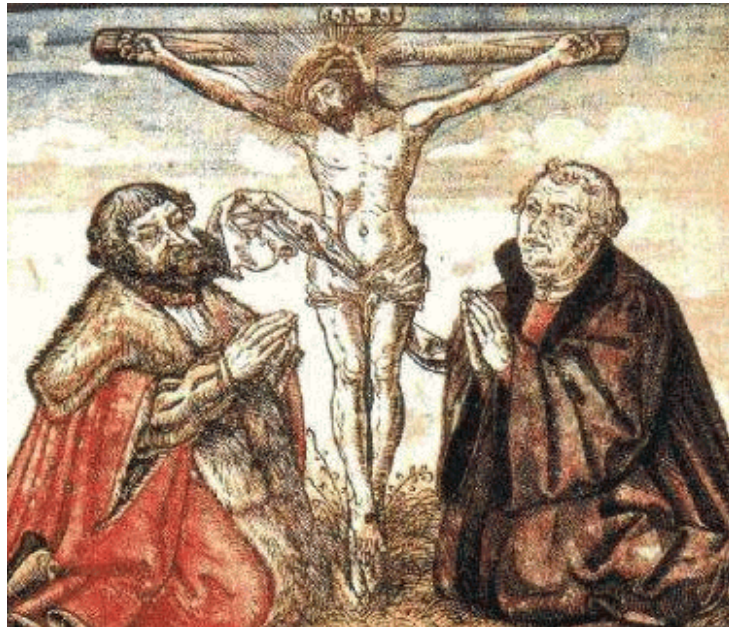
⁸⁸G. H. Gerberding, *The Lutheran Pastor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1902), pp. 123-24.

anything else rather than upon questions of doctrine, or to fill the hearers' ears with weak generalizations and pasture them on fine, poetic language alone, would be worse than folly. To make a good impression, to effect some real, living good, solid meat must be offered, which alone can satisfy the soul's desires. Emphasize doctrine, if you would accomplish your aim. Else why should we expend money and labor, only to do what others may do as well? ... Having laid a good foundation, we may hope to build up congregations [that are] really Lutheran. Having sown good, living seed, we may look forward to a rich harvest. We shall reap the first-fruits; they will ripen before our eyes. Our English congregations will give proof of spiritual life. In the great battle against worldliness we shall find them fighting shoulder to shoulder with their elder German sisters. From them, streams of living waters will flow, and their influence will be widespread. For is not this promised as a certain effect of the Word?⁸⁹

Conclusion

For whatever things were written before were written for *our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of *the Scriptures* might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be *like-minded* toward one another, *according to Christ Jesus*, that you may with *one mind* and *one mouth* glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:4-6)⁹⁰

Soli Deo Gloria



⁸⁹John Schaller, "Danger Ahead!", *Lutheran Witness*, Vol. 10, No. 8 (Sept. 21, 1891), pp. 57-58.

⁹⁰*The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.