

The Presentation of the Augsburg Confession (transferred)
St. John 15:1-11

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The sainted Dr. Hermann Sasse, a Lutheran theologian from Germany by way of Australia, posed a question to the LCMS about 60 years ago. He had written a series of letters to Lutheran pastors in the Missouri Synod, and in letter 20 he wrote,

The real life-and-death question for the Missouri Synod, as for every other Lutheran Church, is not about the strength of the external organization, the constitution, the growth of the congregation, or the school system. Nor is it about the position of the Confession as the basis for the message and work of the church. Rather it has to do with the strength of the Lutheran faith; that is, the genuine deep faith of the heart in the saving Gospel, which the Holy Spirit alone can give. It is the question whether, and to what extent, this strongest confessional church of Lutheranism is a truly confessing church, a church in which the Lutheran Confession is not merely held in honor as the confession of the fathers and therefore in force and untouchable. It is the question whether the Confession is the confession of a living faith of the congregation, and therefore the formative life-principle of the church. It is the question which Missouri, even as every other church, must ask herself in humility and must answer before the face of God: *Are we still Lutheran?* (emphasis mine)

60 years ago, the question was asked. I wonder if there is yet an affirmative answer to it. Certainly, there are LCMS congregations, adorned with “the-cross-that-doesn’t” symbol of the Synod, that in practice bear a closer resemblance to what you might find in a mega non-denominational congregation. If you were to step into one of those places, you might wonder if you’ll hear the preaching of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ who was crucified for the propitiation for the sins of the world, or if you’ll get the non-denom Jesus-as-great-example sermon, if you get Jesus at all.

- These congregations bear the mark of the strongest confessional church of Lutheranism, but are they a truly confessing church, such that the Lutheran Confessions are not merely held in honor, but are they in force and untouchable?
- Are the Confessions the confession of a living faith there—the formative life-principle of the congregation, her members, and her pastor—or merely a book that sits on a shelf gathering dust?

Are we still Lutheran?

There’s an old Latin saying: *Lex orandi, lex credandi*. Literally, it translates to, “The law of praying is the law of believing.” What it means is that as you pray, as you worship, as you sing—those things you do that define your practice of worship—so you also believe and confess. As you teach and worship, so you believe and confess. Quite frankly, it probably means that of those Lutheran churches where the worship service looks and sounds like something mega non-denom, the answer to the question, “Are we still Lutheran?” is “NO!”

Lex orandi, lex credandi is why in Lutheran circles, it is often said, “We believe, teach, and confess...” when it comes to doctrine and practice. Doctrine informs practice. Practice is derived from doctrine. Doctrine and practice are inseparable—you cannot have one without the other. And so, “we believe, teach, and confess” everything that we believe and do. If practice and doctrine do not mesh, then something is askew. Often, the old axiom, “Actions speak louder than words,” comes into play. So, one may claim to confess and hold to a certain theology and doctrine, but if their practice says otherwise, then they must not believe what they claim to confess; by their actions—by their practice—one must conclude that what they truly confess is contrary to the confession that they make with their mouths.

It could be so dangerous as to call into question their salvation. If their practice—what they teach and sing—espouses a heresy, even if their confession is different from this practice, then they could be confessing a damnable teaching. For instance, they could sing a song that denies that Jesus rose bodily from His grave and the humanity of the ascended Jesus Christ, or pray a prayer that speaks of Jesus being merely a mode of operation of the one God (a heresy you may recall from last week called Modalism), and you would be left to wonder if the God they confess by their song and prayer is the same God revealed in the Scriptures. This is why St. Paul encouraged the young pastor Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Timothy 4:16)

Since practice is informed by doctrine, it stands to reason that in order to continue in sound practice that you must be informed in sound doctrine. Now, I’m looking at you, dear hearers. Many of you, I see only once a week, ordinarily, and that for only an hour or two. I might not know what your spiritual life is like outside of the Divine Service. Only a few come to the Bible Studies on Sunday morning and Friday evening. Only a few come to study the Lutheran Confession on Wednesday evening. Are you able to make it but choose not to come? Are you still Lutheran? What does your *orandi* say of your *credandi*?

What is a Lutheran? A Lutheran is one who believes, teaches, and confesses what the Scriptures teach about God—who is one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—and the righteousness He gives us in the person and work of the Son, who assumed human flesh and blood, and died on the cross, spilling His blood as your propitiation, having taken your sins into His flesh, that you might become the righteousness of God in Him, which same teaching is confirmed and expounded on in the Lutheran Confessions, collected in the Book of Concord, which contains the Three Ecumenical Creeds, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Power and Primacy of the Pope, the Small and Large Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord, both Epitome and Solid Declaration.

So, dear hearers, are you still Lutheran? If I were to ask you what you believe, teach, and confess regarding free will, would you be able to answer? How about the cause of sin? Do you know what it is Lutherans believe, teach, and confess about the Mass?

- “Our churches teach that a person’s will has some freedom to choose civil righteousness and to do thing subject to reason. It has no power, without the Holy Spirit, to work the righteousness of God, that is, spiritual righteousness. For the ‘natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God’ (1 Corinthians 2:14). This righteousness is worked in the heart when the Holy Spirit is received through the Word,” Augsburg Confession, article XVIII. So, we believe, teach, and confess that man does not have free will in all things.
- “Our churches teach that although God creates and preserves nature, the cause of sin is located in the will of the wicked, that is, the devil and ungodly people. Without God’s help, this will turns itself away from God, as Christ says, ‘When he lies, he speaks out of his own character’ (John 8:44),” Augsburg Confession, article XIX. So, we believe, teach, and confess that the source of sin rest solely with the devil and fallen man, not with God.
- “Our churches are falsely accused of abolishing the Mass. The Mass is held among us and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, except that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns. These have been added to teach the people. For ceremonies are needed for this reason alone, that the uneducated by taught what they need to know about Christ,” Augsburg Confession, article XXIV. So, we believe, teach, and confess that we still celebrate the Mass—the Divine Service—with all due reverence in a language understood by the people, as St. Paul encourages. (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:2, 9)

The documents in the Book of Concord were not written for use only by trained theologians. These are your confession, dear Lutherans. These express what you believe, teach, and confess—or what you should be believing, teaching, and confessing. On June 25, 1530, at a diet, or general assembly of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire, in Augsburg, men who would be called Lutherans presented this Confession to Emperor Charles V. Printed on the Confession before everything else was the antiphon for today’s introit, “I will speak also of thy testimonies before kings, and shall not be put

to shame.” (Psalm 119:46) Who will speak of these testimonies? The Lutherans who stood before Charles V—princes and electors, pastors and priests...laymen and clergy. As they concluded the greetings and introduction, they read, “This is our confession and that of our associates, and it is specifically stated, article by article, in what follows.” “This is our confession,” they said—laymen and clergy. This is what they believed, taught, and confessed, written by them and for them, no matter their vocation. Therefore, it can rightly be said that it is your Confession, too, dear Lutheran, not only that of the man in the pulpit.

The Gospel reading appointed for today is Jesus calling Himself the Vine. Jesus is the One upon whom Christians—the branches—are grafted. From Him flow the sacramental juices of everlasting life. So, it was rightly said by Paul, “[I]n Him we live and move and have our being...” (Acts 17:28)

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Jesus, the Word of God, bids His hearers to abide in Him, and He in them. A branch cannot bear fruit unless it stays on the vine; likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you abide in Christ. Which fruit is that? It is fruit in keeping with repentance, your good works, that which expresses what you believe and confess. One who claims to be Christian, but who does not bear this fruit, is cut off from the Vine and cast into the fire. So, it is appropriate that Paul warned Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers,” for even Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32)

Abide in Jesus’ word, in His teaching, in His doctrine, and you will bear fruit, for you are abiding on the Vine. How does this look? You study His Word. You study the Confessions which rightly expound His Word. You come to the Mass, Augsburg XXIV, whereat you receive Him and the gifts He comes to give. And as is confessed regarding free will in Augsburg XVIII, none of this is of your doing, but of the Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies you by the Gospel, which proclaims to you Jesus Christ crucified for you, that you are spared the death you deserve for your sins—you abide in Jesus the Word only by the work of the Holy Spirit. Your lack of fruit—of being and abiding in Jesus the Word—is all your doing, as is confessed in Augsburg XIX. How does it all look? It looks like being given to for the sake of Jesus Christ; “This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” (Psalm 118:23)

This is exactly why Jesus Christ was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man. God would not have the sinner die—would not have you die—but sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that they might receive the adoption as sons, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (cf. Galatians 4:4-5; John 3:16) Jesus Christ was incarnate, born, died, risen again, and is now ascended for you, dear hearers!

And you are here now, at the Mass, receiving those Sacramental juices as branches grafted in the vine as you hear His Word and receive the body and blood of the Word-made-flesh in, with, and under the bread and wine. You are here to receive from the Fatherly, providential hand of God the merits that Jesus, the Son of God, won for you on the cross. And you come again and again, by the power of the Holy Ghost, to get your fill again and again, so that your cup runs over. (cf. Psalm 23:5b) From Jesus flows to you life—these are your lifeblood; He is your life—in Him you live and move and have your being. These give you what God is come to give you, that you would bear fruit. By the grace of God, this is what you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth (cf. Romans 10:9-10)—what you believe, teach, and confess. Dear hearers, this is the work of God the Holy Ghost for you, who has brought you to Jesus and Jesus to you; therefore, you are forgiven for all of your sins. “And where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation.”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.