

Calov Conference
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Session Three: Confessional Fellowship

Faith and confession go together. Faith alone makes us Christians, but confession alone marks us as Christians. Faith confesses. St. Paul writes in Romans 10:8-10,

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

Faith is in the heart. This is unseen. The righteousness of faith is unseen. It is the righteousness of Christ who has gone to the Father where we cannot see him. Only God can see faith and the righteousness imputed to it. But the whole world can hear the confession that flows from faith. Confession, public confession, faithful confession is the sign of salvation.

Jesus says,

Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32-33)

To confess Jesus is to confess what he says. “If you continue in my word, you are my disciples indeed.” Confession articulates the truth that God reveals to faith. Confession is an individual matter because faith is personal and individual. To join in saying words with others without heartfelt confidence in the truth of those words is to make no confession at all. Confession is confession of faith.

The word for confess in the New Testament, ὁμολογέω, is by definition a corporate activity. We pray corporately: “Our Father.” We confess corporately: “We believe, teach, and confess.” Confessing the faith isn’t confessing one’s own personal experience. The so called “testimonial” popular among Evangelicals is not the same as confession. “This is what happened to me” is not the same as the confession we make in the Creed or in Luther’s explanation of it in the Small Catechism.

Since we are confessing the faith, we are confessing the gospel. Since we are confessing the gospel, we are confessing what God’s Word teaches. Our Lutheran Confessions are not only symbols identifying us as Lutherans, but they are also the confession of the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church.

In one sense the term confessional Lutheran is a redundancy. Like a feline cat or a born again Christian. What other kind of Lutheran is there? We Lutherans do not identify ourselves by our polity, liturgy, history, or culture. We identify ourselves by our confession. Our confession is stated in the creeds and confessional writings contained in the Book of Concord of 1580: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Smalcald Articles, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, and the Formula of Concord. We subscribe to the doctrine of these writings unconditionally because they are in complete agreement with the Holy Scriptures which are the only rule and norm by which all teachings and teachers in the church are to be judged. Our confessional subscription is wedded to our devotion to the sola Scriptura principle. It is because we accept the Bible as the only standard of doctrine for the church that we accept the Lutheran Confessions. We do not accept the Confessions out of loyalty to the church. We accept them out of devotion to the Bible. It is true that the Confessions constitute churchly authority, but they do not obtain that authority from the church, but from the Bible, for it is from the Bible, God's Word, that the Confessions are taken.

The Confessions are not normative in matters not pertaining to the Scriptures or doctrine. Observations or comments on extrabiblical topics are not binding on those who subscribe. There is a bit of confusion about this, so let me illustrate it with a couple of examples. The Confessions are binding when they teach that the pastoral office is the ordinary continuation of the extraordinary apostolic office. That this is denied by some Lutherans who call themselves confessional doesn't change the fact that the Treatise teaches it, and its teaching is based on the Bible. On the other hand, the Confessions are not binding when they call Mary "ever virgin" because this title was not assigned to her to teach her perpetual virginity but rather as a matter of respect and custom. The original German doesn't have it. On the other hand, the Confessions are binding when they teach that the eating and drinking of Christ's flesh and blood in John 6 is not the oral eating and drinking of the sacramental elements but the spiritual eating and drinking of faith. This assertion of the Formula, citing Luther, is grounded in the Lord's plain language recorded in John 6.

I bring up these issues because there has been some confusion about them, specifically regarding their normative authority for us Lutherans. Our position is very simple. If the Bible teaches it, we confess it. If the Bible doesn't teach it, it remains a matter of opinion, not doctrine. When we Lutherans present our position to the world and to those Christians who are not Lutheran, we must appeal to the Scriptures. In speaking to fellow Lutherans, we can appeal to the Lutheran Confessions. Thus, in arguing with various innovators and errorists among us who promote such abuses as infant Communion, we can appeal to the Lutheran Confessions and show that since infants cannot be examined and absolved, we do not commune them. Or toddlers. Or anyone else who is incapable of confessing the faith according to the pattern set down in Luther's Small Catechism. The norm of the Confessions is the Bible.

It is popular these days to appeal to history as a norm. But historians are notorious for cherry picking citations from the fathers to prove whatever they want to prove. No! The Scriptures alone are the judge of our doctrine. We do not subscribe to the Confessions

because they present the teaching of the ancient church. They do. And we Lutherans are bold to claim that our doctrine is the doctrine of the Catholic Church. But our Confessions don't obtain their authority from their agreement with the ancient church. There is no churchly authority but the Holy Scriptures.

Concerning the teaching of the fathers, having read the church fathers and the Lutheran fathers, I would recommend the latter. I suspect that much of the confusion we are facing today on biblical hermeneutics and biblical authority as well as concerning the clarity and sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures comes from pastors who delve into the church fathers without first becoming solidly grounded in the teaching of the Lutheran fathers. There is no excuse for this today, as more of the great dogmatical works of the great Lutheran theologians have recently been translated into English. You'll get a better education reading Martin Chemnitz and John Gerhardt than reading John Chrysostom. Better yet, read Luther. He's the best theologian of them all!

Confessional fellowship does not confine our agreement in doctrine to what the Confessions explicitly cover. Many issues we face today were not issues in the early church or in the 16th century. When we confess in the Formula of Concord that the Scriptures alone are the standard by which all teachings are to be judged, we thereby assert that we as Lutherans will abide by whatever the Bible teaches. This means that the confessional Lutheran position forbids women pastors because the Bible does so. Same sex "marriage" and all the other perversions of the LGBTQ movement are contrary to Lutheran teaching because they are contrary to the Bible and whatever the Bible says is the Lutheran teaching.

Within the past fifty years, the term "confessional Lutheran" has become a church-political designation. If you are for this candidate for office, you're missional. If you're for that candidate, you're confessional. The politicization of a theological term muddies the waters a bit. So, for the sake of clarity, let me say that I have no dog in any synodical fight. I gave up on church politics a long time ago. I'm not criticizing those who engage in synodical politics in service to the pure confession. I would offer a word of caution, however. Trust not in princes.

As we have seen, Christian fellowship, church fellowship is a feature of the gospel. The gospel creates this fellowship by eliciting the faith that we share with fellow Christians. The gospel strengthens it and sustains it. It is not achieved by the imposition of the law. It is established by the gospel.

The gospel calls for a voluntary consent. We teach with the Scriptures the bondage of the will. This doctrine does not suggest that faith is coerced against our will. God makes the unwilling willing. We assent voluntarily to what God says. If confessional means biblical, that is, if our confession is the faithful articulation of the truth that God has revealed to us, confessional subscription must be voluntary. That our church order requires confessional subscription as a precondition to serve in the public ministry of the Word might appear to make confessional subscription a legal requirement. If you don't subscribe you don't get called and ordained. This is true, but the necessity of confessional subscription for ordination in no way suggests that confessional subscription is not voluntary. It must be. It

must be the sincere intent of the heart to confess that truth that God has taught us in His Word. The notion that one can subscribe with reservations for the sake of admission to the ministerium of the church is a thoroughly dishonest distortion of genuine confessional subscription. It is a confession of faith, and faith is always voluntary and personal.

I personally believe the doctrine confessed in the Book of Concord. You who personally believe this same doctrine, believing that it is doctrine from heaven, revealed by God Himself, are in fellowship with me. God has established this fellowship by establishing faith in our hearts and enabling us to confess this faith faithfully according to His Word. Confessional fellowship is not our creation. It is God's. It is God's doctrine. It is the "one faith" to which St. Paul refers in Ephesians 4:5. The faith that we confess in the confessional writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the faith once delivered to the saints. It is not a Lutheran version of the Christian faith. It is the Christian faith.

Now this is a bold claim, but I would suggest it is necessary to make if we are to avoid falling into a sectarian trap. For if our confession is not God's divine truth, but only our spin on it, our interpretation of it, our Lutheran perspective on it, then who do we think we are withholding the hand of Christian fellowship from those who won't confess it with us? Who are we that we should determine the standard by which the faith of Christians is to be judged? And who are we to exclude fellow Christians from our fellowship?

A few years before being elected president of the Missouri Synod, Dr. Ralph Bohlmann, in an essay commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Formula of Concord, made the distinction between the unity of the church and fellowship in the church. By his reckoning, article seven of the Augsburg Confession dealt with the unity of the church while article ten of the Formula of Concord dealt with fellowship in the church. This distinction between unity and fellowship was designed to resolve the problem we have with the fact that we acknowledge as Christians those with whom we refuse to express fellowship. It seemed like a rather neat and tidy way of affirming both the unity of the invisible church while establishing the proper boundaries for fellowship in the visible church. Later, after becoming president, he launched a "levels of fellowship" trial balloon that turned out to be made of lead and was quickly rechristened "levels of relationships." This much agreement is necessary for this kind of relationship and that much agreement is necessary for that kind of relationship. Rather confusing. As we all know, the Missouri Synod has struggled quite a bit over the years with her teaching on church fellowship and how to apply it. We don't want to exclude Rev. Billy Bob Baptist from the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church, but at the same time we don't want to worship with him or invite him to preach in our pulpits.

Bohlmann's distinction between the unity of the church and fellowship in the church has caused a bit of confusion among us. First, it's bogus. Unity and fellowship are the same thing. And the church we confess in AC VII is no more or less invisible than the churches we mention in FC X. Let me cite from each. In AC VII we read:

Our churches also teach that one holy church is to continue forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are

administered rightly. For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere. It is as Paul says, "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all," etc. (Eph. 4:5, 6).

In the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, article ten, paragraph 31 we read,

Thus [According to this doctrine] the churches will not condemn one another because of dissimilarity of ceremonies when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them, provided they are otherwise agreed with one another in the doctrine and all its articles, also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in the faith."

Is the "teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments" of the Augsburg Confession the same as "the doctrine and all its articles, also in the right use of the holy Sacraments" of the Formula? In a word, yes. The gospel of AC VII is "taught purely." The pure gospel is the same thing as the doctrine and all its articles.

In defense of Bohlmann, it should be noted that unionists in Missouri had been arguing for years for a minimal agreement necessary for expressing fellowship with other churches. They appealed to AC VII and insisted that the preaching of the gospel referred to the gospel in the narrow sense, thus permitting fellowship with those with whom we did not share complete doctrinal agreement. This was the position of Dr. David Preus, former president of the American Lutheran Church. It was held by many in Missouri. Bohlmann's argument was that the Augsburg Confession was not written as a basis for establishing fellowship, but to establish that the Lutherans belonged to the historic Catholic church. The Formula of Concord, on the other hand, as its name suggests, was written to establish a common basis for the recognition of fellowship. While that may be so, it doesn't change the fact that FC X is referring to the same thing as AC VII, clearly mimicking the very terminology used. Unity and fellowship are the same thing.

This leaves us with the problem. How can we refuse fellowship to fellow Christians? To which I reply: How can we express fellowship with error? So then, are we saying that all doctrinal error excludes one from the fellowship of the Holy Christian Church? No, we are not God, and we don't presume to judge how much of the divine truth one can reject before rejecting the divine truth. I suppose we could make distinctions between primary and secondary, fundamental and non-fundamental teaching, but surely these distinctions are misused if they are used to permit the denial of anything God says. The fellowship of the Holy Christian Church is not and cannot be fellowship with false doctrine.

The reductionist game is a real loser. Reduce the gospel to whatever it is that will find agreement among . . . whom? Roman Catholics? Eastern Orthodox? Baptists? Pentecostals? Presbyterians? Methodists? What can we all agree on? This approach to fellowship denigrates God's Word and relies on human ingenuity to establish fellowship.

God establishes fellowship. We can only acknowledge it. And we can acknowledge it by no other standard than the Word of God.

Let us make a distinction that might help us deal with the problem of excluding Christians from our fellowship. There is a difference between establishing fellowship and declaring it. God establishes it. The church is, by definition, the communion or fellowship of saints. I am using the words communion and fellowship to refer to the same thing. In Greek it is *κοινωνία*. We confess the fellowship God has established as an article of faith. Faith doesn't need to figure it out. It believes whatever God says. Faith does not have the task of figuring out Francis Pieper's felicitous inconsistency. It need not explain how one can embrace false doctrine that is opposed to the pure gospel and is poison to the soul and yet still hold onto the true faith. Faith doesn't know who all is in the church, for the church, as faith itself, is hidden from sight. We can only see the marks of the church and know the church is there by her marks. False doctrine is not a mark of the church. God establishes fellowship. We don't.

We declare fellowship. We say that we have it. On what basis? On the basis of the truth. What truth is that? The truth of the Holy Scriptures as confessed in the Book of Concord. The truth precedes the faithful confession of it. God establishes fellowship before we declare it. But whereas God can see the heart and judge who has faith, we cannot. We can only see the confession of the faith and judge accordingly.

Confessional fellowship is the acknowledgment that we who share the same confession of the gospel are in fellowship with one another. We cannot judge by one's experience, pious life, or self-identification. Our confession is what identifies us as Christians. Confessional fellowship does not require agreement on matters neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word. It does not require political, cultural, ethnic, racial, or social unity. It requires unity in doctrine, God's doctrine, the pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.

To preach the gospel and to preach God's Word mean the same thing. The central topic of God's Word is justification through faith alone, and there is no topic of God's word that does not relate to this central topic. Deny the authority of the Holy Scriptures and you lose the substance of the gospel. What is the gospel if not what the Bible says it is? Deny God's law and you lose its power to condemn, which is essential to the subsequent preaching of the gospel. You also lose its authority to guide and direct, which belongs to the article of sanctification which is the necessary result of justification. Promote prayer as a means of grace, and you turn faith into man's own achievement, militating against justification through faith alone. Deny the efficacy of the sacraments and you turn the gospel into an unreal abstraction and not something that is personally experienced, or which is just as bad, you turn an unbridled and uninformed religious experience into a means of grace, thus grounding faith in fickle feelings. Promote Millennialism and you lose the centrality of the gospel in your proclamation and rob the church of her identity as the Israel of God. Teach a hierarchical doctrine of the ministry and you turn the ministry into a legal, rather than an evangelical, activity. And the list goes on. There is no such thing as the gospel in the narrow sense except as a theological construct to contrast it to the law. The gospel always

brings with it the fullness of God's Word, as Jesus said, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

The last of the Lutheran Confessions, the Formula of Concord, was written in 1577 and the Book of Concord was first published in 1580. There has been much theological controversy since then. The rise of Rationalism and the widespread abandonment of the Scripture alone principle devastated the Lutheran church in Europe, and its effects remain today. Unionism triumphed over confessionalism in Germany. Today, the Lutheran churches in Germany and Scandinavia have apostatized, embracing the utterly godless LGBTQ agenda. Evolutionism, women pastors and its attendant feminist ideology, the social gospel, the widespread denial of the vicarious atonement among supposedly "conservative" Lutheran theologians, antinomianism, and of course the constant siren song sung by the church of the antichrist, luring Lutherans away from Scripture alone and the centrality of the doctrine of justification through faith alone. While we identify our Christian confession with the Book of Concord, Lutherans today cannot afford to confine their confession to what is explicit within our Confessions. We must be the Bible church as we were when the Confessions were adopted.

You are familiar with the common criticisms of conservative confessional Lutherans leveled against us by various kinds of errorists. They are not always wrong. In the last session we addressed the problem of dead orthodoxy among us. It is a sham orthodoxy with no love for the Christian brother. That doctrinal errorists make this accusation against conservatives does not make it false. If the shoe fits, wear it. Now I would like to address another common criticism of us conservatives that has direct bearing on our subject. It is that we use our claim to orthodoxy as a way of making us better than others. We elevate ourselves by our claims to pure doctrine. Our self-identification as confessional Lutherans is a boast by which we achieve status in the church. Well, that's not true! But what if it is?

Pure doctrine is not a human achievement. It is God's gracious gift. It is nothing more nor less than God's Word. As Jesus said, "They shall all be taught by God." (John 6:45) Our lives are not free from sin, but our doctrine is free from error. To concede out of false humility the possibility of error in our doctrine is to concede that it's our doctrine and not God's doctrine. We live at a time when claims to the truth are held in suspicion. Jesus said that those who continue in his Word will know the truth. The world doesn't believe Jesus and it doesn't believe those who confess Jesus's Word.

But while it is true that our claim to know God's truth and to confess it faithfully is not pride but humble submission to the Word of God, it is also true that we are proud men who need to be humbled. There is a bravado of orthodoxy, a boastful air, a self-congratulatory posture of smug rightness that seeks to capture our affections and often succeeds. We confess the truth, doggonit, and that makes us right!

But we're wrong. All wrong. As we confess in the Confessional Service, "But if we thus examine ourselves, we shall find nothing in us but sin and death, from which we can in no wise set ourselves free." (TLH, page 47) It is from confessing our sins to God, from the posture of the penitent who is absolved by Christ, that we are bold to confess the truth

about Christ that God has revealed to us. Confessing sins and confessing faith go together, especially when the faith we confess is centered in the forgiveness of sins. While our doctrine is free from error, we are not free from sin, and even when we speak the truth, we remain a people of unclean lips.

This brings us to the organic connection between confessing the faith and worshipping God. When you consider what is lost when Lutherans abandon the liturgy for the new measures currently popular among the Methobapticostals, what comes to mind? Sound preaching? Well, it's possible to have sound preaching in a contemporary service. Good hymns? Most likely, but it's at least theoretically possible to have good hymns in a contemporary service. What is absent? The creedal structure of the liturgy is what is lost. Not just the Creed itself, which may be retained, but those portions of the liturgy that are essentially creedal. The *Gloria in Excelsis* is a perfect example. It confesses the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension to glory of Jesus Christ our Savior. It is confessional! Liturgical means confessional. Consider Matins, the daily service. The *Te Deum Laudamus* is a creed. Confessing the faith is worshipping God. Worshipping God is confessing the faith.

The Confessions are a norm for our doctrine. We call them the norm that is normed. They are normed by the Holy Scriptures which are the norm that norms. To the extent that the liturgy is creedal, it is normative. It blends orthodox confession and orthodox worship into one. Orthodox literally means the right glory or the right worship. The evangelical character of worship and the evangelical substance of the creeds uphold our corporate confession of the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic faith.

It is not only the formal worship that is confessional in nature. Private prayer is as well. We confess to God his promises to us and from the foundation of his Word make our petitions. While the Christian life does not communicate verbally and strictly speaking cannot be considered a confession, it expresses the love that is at the heart of the faith we confess. We confess the faith into which we were baptized. Every time we confess the faith we confess that we are children of God who have put on Christ in baptism. And of course, it is at the altar that the most intimate fellowship between God and us and we with one another takes place. As Jesus gives us to eat and to drink the body and the blood by which we were reconciled to God and to one another, we are one loaf, one body, in union, fellowship with one another both here on earth and with the church in heaven as well.

Confessional fellowship and public worship are joined. There are some practical considerations that were part of the conversations on fellowship between the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod nearly a century ago. Both Missouri and Wisconsin believed that doctrinal agreement was necessary for fellowship at the altar and pulpit. It was on the matter of prayer where they diverged. Wisconsin advocated for the unit concept of fellowship that put all expressions of fellowship on the same level. Communion at the altar during the Divine Service and communion in prayer prayed in the home are both expressions of the same fellowship, and both require the same full doctrinal agreement, for we may not express fellowship with false doctrine.

There is an internal consistency about the Wisconsin position that makes it attractive. It avoids the absurdity of the levels of fellowship concept. But I think it may seek a legal solution to what is a matter of gospel confession. As far as joint prayer is concerned, we should ask ourselves the question: What are we saying by doing what we are doing? What are we confessing? When my wife and I joined in the table prayer at her Christian Reformed relatives in McBain Michigan, were we expressing agreement with the doctrine of the Christian Reformed Church? Of course not! We intended no such thing and Uncle Bill and Aunt Clara certainly didn't interpret it that way. They knew that on Sunday we were driving to Cadillac to attend the closest Missouri Synod congregation. They expected it.

On the other hand, when I attended funerals for Roman Catholics or members of the ELCA who were married to my parishioners, I never participated in the service. I did not open my mouth. I stood when they stood and sat when they sat out of respect, but I did not join with them in their prayers, even the Lord's Prayer, as it would have been a false confession. I don't think we need a list of rules for this. We need a love for the gospel and a desire to confess it faithfully.

Let me conclude with a personal note. I had hinted to my father more than once that maybe the ELS would be the place for me to go. He knew I had little hope that the Missouri Synod would ever become a truly orthodox synod. One day Dad told me that I should not expect that pastors in the ELS would care more about doctrine than pastors in the Missouri Synod did. His comment came back to my mind many times during my years in the ELS, especially as we discussed the doctrine of the ministry. The synodical leadership wanted us to adopt the WELS position as our own, and we conservatives wanted to leave well enough alone. I learned that opposing unionism is not necessarily animated by a love for the pure doctrine. It is being an orthodox synod that matters. The substance of the orthodox confession is secondary. If you think this is a cynical observation, please stay around and listen to the fourth part of my presentation: The Orthodox Synod and the Orthodox Confession.