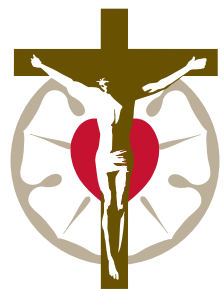




STANDING IN THE FOOTPRINTS OF A BOLD CONFSSION

LEADER'S GUIDE



HERE I STAND SUNDAY
IT'S *STILL* ALL ABOUT
Jesus

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT:

He was threatened with ex-communication. He should've been locked up and his books burned. If he and his countrymen did not get in line, it was said that they would perish in a bloodbath. This was the potential fate of Martin Luther.

On April 18, 1521, Martin Luther stood before Emperor Charles V to give his final reply at a formal deliberative assembly called the Diet of Worms. The task was rather simple. Luther was supposed to recant — to take it all back. The only way out of the mess was to say that he didn't mean it. If Luther recanted his so-called heretical preaching and teaching, peace would be laid before him. But if Luther chose not to recant, his future — and the future of his fellow Germans — was uncertain.

That day, before the Holy Roman emperor and a host of theologians and spectators, a once no-name monk from a tiny, insignificant German town stood and confessed,

"I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen" (LW 32:112–13).

Martin Luther confessed; he did not recant. It is not possible to recant when one has a bold confession.

Consider the following questions regarding the idea of confessing boldly:

1) Luther said that it was not right to go against conscience. And earlier, he said, "I am bound by the Scriptures ... my conscience is captive to the Word of God." What did Luther mean by his "conscience," and how is it important to understand that one's conscience must be captive to the Word of God?

Conversation starters for leaders:

Consider the conscience. What is it?
Consider the importance of having a conscience bound to the Word.

Church theologians have often understood the conscience as a person's voice that either accuses or excuses in what one thinks, says or does. The

conscience also has been compared to a moral compass. Considering this, it is very important to understand that the Christian does not shape his or her conscience. But instead, the conscience must be captive and shaped by the Word of God. When this does not happen, consciences are often shaped and formed by a whole host of other things. For example, Paul talks about individuals in Philippians 3:19 who have their guts as their god and their minds set on earthly things. To the point of the question, though, it is important to note that Luther's conscience was not attached to his feelings, governed by his desires or influenced by the popular opinions of those around him. His conscience was bound to the Word of God.

2) Consider for a moment the idea of “confessing.” What does it mean to confess? When individuals in the Bible confessed, were they sharing their own opinions, feelings or desires, or were they speaking freely of something else?

- a. See John the Baptist’s confession: John 1:29–34.
- b. See the apostle Peter’s confession: Acts 4:1–22.
- c. See the apostle Paul’s confession: Acts 24:10–16.

Conversation starters for leaders:

Develop a correct definition of the word “confession.” What are misconceptions regarding the word “confession”?

It is important to understand what it means to confess. When the Bible speaks of testimonies, it isn’t a person sharing personal/emotional/mystical experiences or their own opinions on a subject. A testimony is not the same as a theory, idea or concept. But instead, a testimony, according to the Bible, is a person witnessing to the truth. Like a witness on the stand in a courtroom who gives a testimony of a particular event and circumstance, when the Bible speaks of a witness, it is simply someone reporting and sharing what they saw and heard with their own eyes and ears. To give a testimony or to be a witness is to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And so, to be a witness or to give testimony is nothing more than speaking what is — to state the way things are according to reality. This is all very similar to the word “confess.” To confess is to declare, to speak openly and to speak freely. To confess is to say the same thing as someone else. To confess is to openly speak the truth with a free tongue about what has been witnessed.

In the cases of John the Baptist, the apostle Peter and the apostle Paul, they were not making up anything new. They were simply speaking what their conscience was bound to: the reality of Christ.

3) Because Luther’s conscience was bound to the Word of God, he could not recant. So, if Luther recanted, he would not only have gone against his conscience, but he would have also gone against what? (See **MATT. 10:32–33**.) To follow up, consider Romans 10:8–17 to see how our audible confessions are directly linked to what we believe and what is revealed in the Word.

Conversation starters for leaders:

How is our confession linked to what we believe? What happens when our confession is not the same as what we believe or what is stated in God’s Word?

The Word of God shapes our conscience. And from the basis of the Word and a good conscience, we confess the reality of the Word. To recant or speak contrary to the Word of God not only grieves the conscience but goes against the Word of God — goes against Christ.

4) Luther was obviously being challenged at the Diet of Worms. However, was Luther above the emperor and the Roman Catholic theologians? Was Luther somehow infallible and more authoritative? Consider Luther’s following comment: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ... I cannot and I will not retract anything.” In other words, how should our confession and conscience be challenged if need be? On what basis should we recant, if needed? (See **2 TIM. 3:16**.)

Conversation starters for leaders:

It is important to note that we often capitulate to the sentiments of mankind when we should not. Conversely, it is easy to sweep God’s Word away to avoid having to admit our errors.

For Luther, authority was not located in popes, councils or general consensus. Authority, for Luther, was in the Word of God. And so, while Luther confessed boldly to the truth of God’s Word, he was also open to rebuke and correction on the basis of clear reason and the Word of God. If the Word shapes and forms the conscience, only the Word has the authority to rebuke a misinformed conscience.

5) Since confessing is tied directly to speaking the truth of God’s Word with a clear conscience, is the Christian church able to not confess? Is there such a thing as a silent church? (Consider **ACTS 4:20** once again.)

Conversation starters for leaders:

Why is it that the church cannot remain silent concerning the Word of God?
Why is silence for the church equal to denial?

Thankfully, our nation has enjoyed a rich heritage of free speech. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech.” But why is this First Amendment so important to us as Christians? The answer is because we live our lives captive to “words” — the Word of God. Thus, to silence the church is not only a violation of the First Amendment but something that is not possible with Christianity. Christianity cannot be muzzled (ACTS 4:20). And so, as Christians, we do not solely support the freedom of speech from a political perspective. We support freedom of speech because we cannot keep from speaking. As we hear in Acts 5, it is better for us to obey God than man — to speak the Gospel even when charged not to.

6) In considering Luther’s “I cannot do otherwise, here I stand” moment, we sense this to be a bold confession. What does it look like to be bold in our confession — to stand in the footprints of Luther in the 21st century?

Conversation starters for leaders:

How is boldness connected to simply confessing?
Why is boldness needed in confession?

Perhaps Acts 4:23–31 would be a good way to consider this question. After the religious leaders’ confrontation in Acts 4:1–22, Peter and John went to their friends and reported what had happened. Together with their friends, they prayed. As they prayed, they asked that God would look upon them. However, take note of what they did not pray. They did not ask God to punish the religious leaders. They did not ask God to erase the threats of the religious leaders, either. They did not even ask for protection against the threats. All they prayed for was for God to look over them and to give them the gift of boldness! Indeed, their reaction to the religious leaders’ command “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” is to pray for boldness in speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus.

7) How is boldness different from arrogance and aggression? What does a bold confession sound like? And finally, what does a bold confession speak of? (See also 1 COR. 2:1–2.)

Conversation starters for leaders:

It may be helpful to contrast godly boldness with worldly arrogance.

Boldness is not arrogance. To be bold is also not to be rude or to be a jerk. Boldness is not being all worked up in a triggered frenzy with anger, tears or drama. Too often, Christians go the way of boldness, but they do so in the way of arrogance.

So, what is this boldness that we Christians can pray for? Boldness in confession is to speak frankly, freely, confidently and plainly with assurance and cheer. A Christian’s boldness is to not speak politics, opinions or cultural ideas but namely the Word of God.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL PRAYER

It is important to understand that the bold confession of Luther before tremendous adversity was so essential because the Gospel itself is essential for all to hear. To not confess is to grieve the conscience. To not confess is to silence the Word. Jesus will not and cannot be silenced. Death did not eliminate truth. The grave could not imprison Christ. Jesus is alive, and so is the Word of God. Therefore, we confess boldly.

Lord, may we continue to walk in the footsteps of a bold confession from our Lutheran forefathers. May we, as a Lutheran church, confess You, O Lord, with a plain, confident, clear and cheerful voice. Lord, here we stand; we can do nothing else! Lord, in Your mercy, help us and hear our prayer. Amen.