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# Confession

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World  
2016–17 LCMS Circuit Bible Studies

## **PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE**

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## FOCUS OF THE STUDY

When Jesus said, “Whoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven,” (Matt. 10:32 NKJV) He was not issuing an ultimatum. He was not saying, “Confess me — or else.” Rather He was describing the nature of faith; He was describing the attitude of the Christian. And He was attaching a beautiful promise to His description, a promise bringing great comfort to the one who confesses Him.

As we approach the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we rejoice in the multitude of opportunities God has given to us in the Lutheran church to confess His name over this last half millennium. During these 500 years Lutherans have confessed in their hymns, their sermons, their speech, their lives and their symbols. In this Bible study we will look at four different aspects of what it means to be a confessing Christian:

1. The meaning of the word for “confess” in Matt. 10:32 and other places in Scripture.
2. The corporate confession of the Church. The individual confession of the Christian.
3. The Lutheran Confessions, i.e. the *Book of Concord*.
4. The promise to the confessing Christian.

In addition, throughout our study we will look at the Christocentric nature of the Christian confession. Jesus does not say in Matthew 10, “Whoever makes a confession ...” Rather, he says, “Whoever confesses Me ...”

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

When Jesus says, “Whoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven,” the Greek word translated “confess” is the word ὁμολογέω. Literally, it means to speak the same word. It could be translated, “to speak together,” “to speak the same language,” “to agree.” The translation I favor most frequently translates the word “confess.” The English Standard Version (ESV) translates the word ὁμολογέω as “acknowledge,” which is a particularly weak translation that does not render well the actual meaning of the word. However ὁμολογέω is translated, it should be remembered that the Greek word ὁμολογέω begins with the prefix ὁμο which is short for ὁμοίος, which means “same” or “together.” The confessing we do is the confession of the same thing, the same doctrine, the same faith, the same Lord, and we do it together. The English word “confess” comes from the Latin, “con fateor” which closely reflects the Greek. It means “to confess together.” Together we confess the same faith the Church has always confessed since, in Adam and Eve, God established the first congregation of believers when He gave them the promise of the Savior, created faith in their hearts, and founded the Church.

There are a number of other passages in which the word ὁμολογέω is used. Discuss the significance of its use in each of these passages and what the meaning is for the Christian’s life of confession: John 9:22; 12:42; Rom. 10:9-10; Heb. 3:1; 4:14; 1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7.

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

Lutherans are particularly aware of the truth that the life of a Christian is a life of confession. The Lutheran church today celebrates the Festival of the Reformation on October 31, the day on which Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg in 1517. Luther's response to the false teaching of his day was confession. It started with the very first of the 95 theses and has continued for 500 years. The Lutheran church began as a confessing church. And as you know well, Martin Luther was not the only confessor.

On June 25, 1530 the *Augsburg Confession* was presented to Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. This was the first public confession produced by the Lutherans and subscribed by all Lutheran congregations. It was written by Philip Melancthon who had depended extensively on the writings of Martin Luther for its content. It was written to demonstrate that the Lutheran teaching was, simply put, the teaching of the Bible and of historic Christianity. And although it was a confession embraced only by the Lutherans at that time, it was nevertheless a confession for all Christians; in all its teachings, in everything it says, it is in complete agreement with the Scriptures, and it faithfully teaches the pure Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The *Augsburg Confession* was in many parts rejected by the Church of Rome. This rejection led to another confession, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*. The *Apology* expanded upon the teachings of the *Augsburg Confession*, laying out at great length and with extreme clarity the scriptural teaching of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. These two initial confessions were followed by the *Smalcald Articles*, further clarifying the Lutheran teaching of salvation by grace over against the false teachings of the Roman Church. Eventually, the *Formula of Concord* was written to clear up disagreements that arose among Lutherans after the death of Luther. These confessions, together with Luther's two catechisms and the three ecumenical creeds, were gathered together in 1580 into what we call the *Book of Concord*.

Every congregation of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, every pastor and every commissioned minister subscribes to this *Book of Concord*. Every called church worker says on the day of ordination or installation, "This is my confession." What a wondrous treasure we have in this unity of confession!

And this treasure is even greater than at first might be imagined. In the LCMS we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions in a very specific way. There are two ways in which one can state support for these Lutheran Confes-

sions. We have historically described these ways with two Latin words, *quia* and *quatenus*. *Quia* means because; *quatenus* means insofar as. Over the years there have been liberal Lutherans who have claimed that they subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions insofar as they agree with the Scriptures. At first glance this statement might sound pious. After all, we certainly would not want to confess anything as true that is in disagreement with the Scriptures. Unfortunately, this approach strongly implies that there are statements, maybe many statements, in the Lutheran Confessions that are not in agreement with the Bible. To these statements a person with a so-called *quatenus* subscription would not want to agree. But a *quatenus* subscription is really no subscription at all. After all, I can subscribe to the *Book of Mormon* insofar as it agrees with the Scriptures. I can subscribe to the Yellow Pages insofar as they agree with the Scriptures. I suppose I could even subscribe to the *Quran* insofar as it agrees with the Scriptures! To say, "I subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions insofar as they agree with the Scriptures" is actually to say, "I do not subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions."

In all faithful Lutheran churches a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions has always been the practice. The Service of Ordination in our *Lutheran Service Book: Agenda* exemplifies a faithful Lutheran subscription to the *Book of Concord*. The question of subscription is not the only question asked of the man who is seeking ordination as a pastor. It follows immediately after questions about the pastor's commitment to the Scriptures and the Ecumenical Creeds. Here is the important question:

Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true exposition of Holy Scripture and a correct exhibition of the doctrine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church? And do you confess that 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—as these are contained in the Book of Concord—are also in agreement with this one scriptural faith?

The answer: "Yes, I make these Confessions my own **because** they are in accord with the Word of God."

What a wonderful gift the Holy Spirit has given us in the unity of our confession! We are in agreement on the scriptural teaching of the Trinity. We are in agreement on the two natures in Christ, the human and the divine. We are in agreement on infant baptism and on the blessings that baptism brings, namely the gift of the Holy Spirit and the

forgiveness of sins. We are in agreement on our teaching on the Lord's Supper, namely that the bread and the wine are the body and blood of Jesus, the Son of God, that with them we receive the forgiveness of sins, and that where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. And we are in agreement that salvation is a gift of God received through faith in Jesus Christ without any merit or worthiness on our part. What a gift we have in this unity and in many other teachings contained in our Lutheran Confessions to which all our pastors, church workers and congregations subscribe. We do not subscribe to these confessions because their teachings happen to coincide with ours. We subscribe to them because their teachings are the teachings of the Bible. It was with this sentiment that the signers of the *Augsburg Confession* stated in the preface,

The desire was also expressed for deliberation on what might be done about the dissension concerning our holy faith and the Christian religion, and to this end it was proposed to employ all diligence amicable and charitable to hear, understand, and weigh the judgments, opinions, and beliefs of the several parties among us, to **unite the same in agreement on one Christian truth**, to put aside whatever may not have been rightly interpreted or treated by either side, **to have all of us embrace and**

**adhere to a single, true religion** and life together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This Lutheran confessing began 500 years ago with the nailing of a document to the door of a church in Wittenberg. That's half a millennium of confessing. And in this confessing, our Lutheran forebears followed the example of the martyrs and saints who went before them, men and women who confessed the truth — often in the face of severe persecution and even death. At times their confession was a bold and powerful one, at times it was rather quiet. But in one way or another they gave an answer concerning the hope that was in them. This hope centers in the person of Jesus — who He is and what He has done. He is the eternal Son of God who became incarnate for sinners, suffered and gave His life for them, and rose from death to conquer death, that all who believe in Him might be saved eternally.

1 *The Book of Concord*, Theodore Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 25. Subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated, Tappert.

## TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE TERMS

The corporate confession of the church and the individual confession of the Christian.

### THE CORPORATE CONFESSION OF THE CHURCH.

Discuss the role of the Divine Service as it pertains to confession, particularly in regard to confessing together or confessing the same thing. What role do the creeds play? The Propers? Does anything happen to the church's confession when uniformity in worship no longer prevails? Divine Service settings 1-5 in *Lutheran Service Book* are all extremely Christocentric in their emphasis and proclamation. If you have time, go through one of them and note the centrality of the person of Jesus and the second article of the Apostles' Creed, and therefore how central the article of justification is, which according to our Lutheran Confessions is the chief article of the Christian faith. Do you find this same emphasis on the Gospel of forgiveness through

faith in Jesus in all worship that calls itself Christian today? What happens to our confession if the focus is not on the person of Jesus and the Gospel message about Him (John 5:23; 14:6)? Luther says, "For if the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost."<sup>2</sup> Again Luther says, "if we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose everything."<sup>3</sup> If Luther is correct, shouldn't we all be concerned with the entire worship of the church, namely the liturgy, the hymns, the preaching, the prayers etc.?

### THE INDIVIDUAL'S CONFESSION OF THE FAITH.

It is important that each individual Christian confess the faith. The Holy Spirit through the Word breathes into that which is by nature dead, you and me, and creates life. It is only natural that that which was dead but is now alive should breathe out that which was breathed into it, namely

2 *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1963), 26:9.

3 *Ibid*, 26.



the life-giving confession of Christ, the Son of the living God. It is this Word that has brought us to life; it is therefore this Word we who now live wish to utter. Therefore, in both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed, each confessor declares, "I believe ..." At the same time, when these creeds are recited in the divine service, in a family devotion, or by any group of Christians, the corporate nature of the church is made clear. Just as there is an intimate connection between faith in Jesus as Savior and salvation, so there is also an intimate connection between faith in Jesus and the confession of the faith (Rom. 10:9-10). But the faith confessed is always the confession of the church catholic, never simply the individual believer's feelings or opinions.

Thus, an individual Christian's confession is at the same time uniquely his own and that of the entire Church. Matthew 16:13-19 provides a powerful example of the essential concord between the confession of an individual Christian and that of the Church. Jesus asks His disciples who they say that He is. Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Undoubtedly, this was Peter's individual and very personal confession. Yet, Jesus describes this confession of Peter as the rock on which He would build His church. Peter's individual confession and the confession of the Church coincide. The individual's and the Church's confession are to be the same.

Thus, as soon as a person's confession differs from that of the Church catholic, it is no longer a Christian confession. In this age of selfies, entitlement, individualism and increasing narcissism, it is essential for Christians to understand the corporate nature of the Christian faith. This emphasis on the corporate nature of the Christian faith reveals that the content of the faith is the same for everyone and never changes. As Christians, we do not exult in the variety of beliefs among us. Rather, we rejoice in the unity of belief that we have, a unity in doctrine and in confession. Thus Paul writes, "There is 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" (Eph. 4:4-6). Contrary to what many believe today, we are not each entitled to his own "truth." Jesus says, "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). Although an individual Christian may confess something false, the degree to which his confession departs from Scripture is to the same degree a departure from Christianity and from Christianity's common confession. Unity in the faith is not a unity of emotion, alleged togetherness, common values or heritage. It is a unity in the truths of Scripture. And regardless of a person's sincerity, a departure from Scripture is a departure from the common confession of the faith.

This unity in faith that all Christians share, a unity that results in a common confession, does not in any way diminish the value of the individual's faith. It is about the faith of an individual that Luther writes when he declares,

Faith, however, is a divine work within us. It transforms us and gives us a new birth wrought by God (John 1:13). It slays the old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Spirit. Oh, a living, energetic, active, mighty thing is this faith. It is impossible for it not to do good incessantly. Nor does it ask whether good works are to be done; but before the question is put it has already done them and is forever doing them. He, however, who does not perform such works is a man without faith, who gropes and looks about for faith and good works and knows neither what faith is nor what good works are, although he prates and prattles much about faith and good works.

Faith is a living, daring confidence in the grace of God. It is so certain that a man would die for it a thousand times over. This confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes a person happy, bold and of high spirits in his relation to God and all His creatures.<sup>4</sup>

The faith in every individual Christian is a powerful and precious work of God — and will it not produce a confession from everyone who possesses such faith? The confession may be a quiet one; it may not be eloquent; it may be verbal or a confession in deed; it may be joining in the Apostles' Creed with the rest of God's people; it may be sung with the congregation in one of our hymns; it may be standing up to the temptations of peers; it may be encouraging a co-worker who is going through difficulties; it may be teaching one's own children; it may be teaching the children of others. The form of our confession may depend on our vocation. Mothers, fathers, teachers, doctors, farmers, executives, no matter what vocations we have, the light cannot be placed under a basket but on a lampstand (Matt. 5:15). And we who are Christians will confess in a variety of ways and into a variety of circumstances. After all, we have been built on the rock and we know that none of the winds or storms of this life can cause us to fall (Matt. 7:24-27). Thus, no matter when or where we live, we confess. The grace of God leads us to confess. As Friedrich Wynekken said in his 1857 Synod Address, "May our gracious and merciful God in these sorrowful times so fill us with His grace that under threats and persecutions — indeed, in the face of death itself — we may joyfully cry out, 'We cannot but speak what we have seen and heard.'"<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *What Luther Says*, Ewald M. Plass, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 498.

<sup>5</sup> *At Home in the House of My Fathers*, Matthew Harrison, ed. (St. Louis:

May God give us also wisdom, faithfulness and courage to confess in an age and a country desperately in need of a clear proclamation of God's grace in Christ the Savior of all the world.

## CHRIST'S PROMISE TO THE CONFESSING CHRISTIAN.

Jesus says, "Whoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in heaven." "Him will I confess." As I was preparing a sermon a number of months ago, I was read these words of Jesus and they hit me with great impact. "Him will I confess." One day I will stand before the judgment seat of God and my Savior Jesus is going to confess me before the Father! He is going to point to me and say, "Father, this is one of Your dear children. He confessed me before men; I confess him now before You. Receive him into the kingdom which You prepared for him before the world began." And the Father will look at me and He will say, "Come. I cannot refuse him whom my Son confesses. So, come, enter the place my Son has prepared for you. Come, receive your inheritance." This is what you and I look forward to as the Last Day approaches. It will be the day on which Jesus confesses you and me to the Father.

What joy to know, when life is past,

The Lord we love is first and last,

The end and the beginning!

He will one day, oh, glorious grace,

Transport us to that happy place

Beyond all tears and sinning!

Amen! Amen!

Come Lord Jesus!

Crown of gladness!

We are yearning

For the day of your returning!<sup>6</sup>

And on that day He will confess you before the Father.

Luther writes about this text in Matthew,

Who would not be afire and for joy desire not only to confess but even to die confessing Christ? These things which Christ here speaks to comfort His own are priceless, for He knows our infirmity and the intensity

of persecution in the world from our flesh and from the devil. Against this distress, therefore, He sets Himself in all his majesty and boasts that He Himself is the one who preaches us, that His Father and the angels are the audience, and that heaven is the place, or church, where He preaches.<sup>7</sup>

What a marvelous explanation of the text Luther provides. We preach Jesus to everyone on earth and He preaches us to everyone in Heaven. On the last day Jesus will confess you and me to the Father in Heaven and to the angels. But He confesses us even now. He is a mediator. This is what He does. "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He pleads from the cross for those who have sinned against Him. He pleads for us also, for us who have sinned against Him. The book of Hebrews says, "he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). See also Rom. 8:26-27, 34.

At times people depict the act of confession as an obligation. When it comes to the confession of our sins, this is certainly true. See 1 John 1:8-10. But when it comes to confessing our Savior, it is more of a privilege and a joy than it is an obligation. When we see what a great salvation our Savior has worked for us, how greatly He has suffered, how much He has forgiven, how powerfully He has conquered our enemies, how completely He has loved us, we join together with Peter and John and exclaim, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). And together we pray to our God of grace:

Give us lips to sing Thy glory,

Tongues Thy mercy to proclaim,

Throats that shout the hope that fills us,

Mouths to speak Thy holy name.

Alleluia, alleluia!

May the light which Thou dost send

Fill our songs with alleluias,

Alleluias without end!<sup>8</sup> Amen.

Concordia, 2009), 416.

<sup>6</sup> *Lutheran Service Book*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 395:6. Subsequent references to this work will be abbreviated, *LSB*.

<sup>7</sup> *Luther's Works*, Christopher Boyd Brown, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 67:110.

<sup>8</sup> *LSB*, 578:5.

## DISCUSSION

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1. Is the confession of the faith natural to the Christian? Consider Rom. 7:19-25. Also Matt. 5:13-16. Do all Christians confess the faith?
2. Do all Christians make the same confession? See 1 Cor. 1:10. Also Phil. 1:27. If so, how do we account for differences in teaching among Christian denominations? Are these differences simply a matter of interpretation?
3. The Lutheran Confessions (*The Book of Concord*) are relevant to the church's confession today. Can we still say, as the Lutheran confessors did in 1580, "...We are minded by the grace of the Holy Spirit to abide and remain unanimously in this confession of faith and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it."<sup>9</sup>
4. When Jesus says He will confess us before His Father who is in Heaven, how is this promise a proclamation of the Gospel?

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<sup>9</sup> Tappert, 14.