

THE FORMULA OF CONCORD

A Yearlong Reading Plan

By the Rev. Brady Finner



A RESOURCE FROM *THE LUTHERAN WITNESS*

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Introduction

A pastor once told me, “Interpreting the Bible through the *Book of Concord* is like the first time you put glasses on as a child: Oh, I didn’t see that before!” Lutherans affirm the *Book of Concord* because it is in accord with the Word of God. It helps us to see the fullness of God’s grace in Christ throughout Scripture with clarity.

The last document in the *Book of Concord*, the Formula of Concord, is a treasure for us as Lutherans. After Luther’s death in 1546, the Lutheran reformers began infighting about theological topics like conversion, the real presence in the Sacrament, the necessity of good works and the third use of the Law. Yet the Lord worked through these controversies, by His Word, to help the church bring clarity to God’s people.

We invite you to join us in reading through the Formula of Concord (and related writings) in the coming year — just a few pages a week! This booklet will provide an introduction to each of the month’s readings.

A note on readings: There are two parts to the Formula of Concord. We will be primarily reading the Epitome (“Ep”), the first and shorter part. Page numbers refer to the *Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (CPH 2006), but you can use the section and line numbers to follow along in any edition.

Abbreviations

Ep — Epitome of the Formula of Concord

SD — Solid Declaration of the Formula
of Concord

AC — Augsburg Confession

Ap — Apology of the Augsburg Confession

SA — Smalcald Articles

LC — Large Catechism

SC — Small Catechism

January

ORIGINAL SIN

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep "Summary" 1–8 (p. 473–474)

Ep I 1 (p. 474)

AC II (p. 31–32)

WEEK 2: Ep I 2–10 (p. 474–475)

Ap II (p. 76–81)

WEEK 3: SA I (p. 270–271)

SD 133–49 (p. 515–517)

WEEK 4: Ep I 11–25 (p. 475–477)

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This month, we kick off our yearlong walk through the Formula of Concord and related documents from the Lutheran Confessions.

In January's readings, the reformers clarify two important questions: What is our problem, and where do we find the solution?

What is our problem? That we are by nature sinful and unclean, dead in sin (**EPH. 2:1–3**). This corruption is not a minor one where we have a sliver of a chance to save ourselves, but a corruption that needs a resurrection (**ROM. 6:11**). Yet we must be careful not to say that the Lord is the author of sin. In the 1560s, a man named Matthias Flacius maintained that original sin was not an accident, but the very substance of humankind. This is like saying that if I wear a Minnesota Vikings jersey, I am now a jersey myself! No — I am still a human being, who is wearing a jersey. We are God's creation (**PSALM 100:3; ACTS 17:28**). God is not the author of sin, yet we are corrupt from conception (**PSALM 51:5**) and need a Savior.

Where do we find the solution? In the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament (**2 TIM. 3:15–17**). The Epitome grounds its confession in the Word of God (**HEB. 4:12**): Our only solution is the Word made flesh (**JOHN 1:14**), Christ, who received our human nature, but without sin, so that just as He was raised from the dead, we look forward to our final resurrection (**1 COR. 15:51–57**), where there will be no more corruption.

O Holy Spirit, keep us ever mindful of Your Word. Amen.

February

FREE WILL

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep II 1 (p. 477)

AC XVIII (p. 40–41)

WEEK 2: Ep II 2–6 (p. 477–478)

Ap XVIII (p. 197–198)

WEEK 3: SD II 48–73 (p. 529–533)

WEEK 4: Ep II 7–19 (p. 478–479)

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This month, we forge ahead in our reading of the Lutheran Confessions. Our February readings take up the topic of free will.

“When did you decide to become a Christian?” A Baptist friend asked me this while we were working at a Lutheran summer camp. I was terribly confused by the question because I had never been asked. He was frustrated because he had asked several of us Lutherans the same question and our response was all the same, “We didn’t decide. God chose us.” Although we were not able to provide a robust theological dissertation, we made a clear confession that our will was bound, and our gracious God saves only by grace through faith in Christ alone.

There was a group in the 1550s that held a “synergistic” view of conversion — that we can cooperate with God in our salvation. We hear this teaching still today in words like “I accepted Jesus into my heart” or “I decided to follow Christ.” Scripture is very clear, however, that we are not only dead in our sin (**EPH. 2:1–3**), but enemies of God (**ROM. 8:7**). We don’t even have a shot to participate in conversion: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God” (**1 COR. 2:14**). Therefore, we need God to do all the work. We give thanks that He graciously works through the Word (**ROM. 10:17**) to give us the Holy Spirit (**1 COR. 12:3**) to receive this salvation for Christ’s sake.

In a world full of to-do lists, enjoy this scriptural and comforting truth proclaimed throughout the Confessions: It is all DONE in Christ’s death and resurrection!

Heavenly Father, thank You for choosing us and making us Yours. Amen.

March

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH BEFORE GOD

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep III 1-2 (p. 479-480)

AC IV (p. 32-33)

WEEK 2: Ep III 3-11 (p. 480-481)

Ap IV 1-47 (p. 82-88)

WEEK 3: SA Part III, Article XIII (p. 283)

SD III 6-17 (p. 536-539)

WEEK 4: Ep III 12-23 (p. 481-482)

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“You want a piece of me?” a pastor confidently said to another pastor during a skit at a youth retreat. The other pastor beat his chest and said, “I don’t want a piece. ... I want the **WHOLE** thing!”

In order to be righteous before God, we need the *whole* Jesus, God and man (**2 COR. 5:21**).

Soon after Luther’s death, certain theologians claimed that men are saved due to Christ’s divine nature dwelling in their heart (Andreas Osiander) or by His human nature making residence inside them (Francesco Stancaro). Both are errors: The *whole* Jesus did the full work of salvation on the cross to make us righteous. We receive the benefit of Christ’s death on the cross as both God and man: the forgiveness of sins (**COL. 1:14**), through faith (**EPH. 2:8-9**), which the Holy Spirit works in us through His Means of Grace, Word and Sacrament.

Still today, we often hear the phrase “I have Jesus in my heart.” Although we know that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (**GAL. 2:20**), we must be careful to not separate the two natures of Christ. It is the whole Christ who has suffered for your salvation, descended into hell, risen again on the third day from the dead and ascended into heaven for your sake (Athanasian Creed). Confusing the two natures of Christ calls into question the full sufficiency of His work and burdens consciences with unneeded questions about their salvation. We want the whole Jesus for the sake of the whole world (**JOHN 3:16**). I once heard a pastor lovingly address someone trying to maintain that they had Jesus in their heart by saying, “Take Jesus out of the heart and make sure He is on the cross where we need Him.”

O Holy Spirit, give us wisdom to faithfully confess Christ. Amen.

April

GOOD WORKS

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep IV 1–4 (p. 482)

AC XX (p. 41–44)

WEEK 2: Ep IV 5–15 (p. 483)

Ap V 257–279 (p. 140–143)

WEEK 3: Ap XX (p. 199–201)

SD IV 6–13 (p. 546–548)

WEEK 4: Ep IV 16–19 (p. 483–484)

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Good works are necessary for the Christian (**EPH. 2:10**). Good works are a fruit of faith in the good work of Christ (**MATT. 7:17**). I have never met a Lutheran who says, “We do not believe in good works.” Why? As believers in the inerrant Word of God, we know the Scriptures clearly proclaim that we are obligated to serve our neighbor (**TITUS 3:8**) as our Lord serves us (**MARK 10:45**). These good works are not in any way connected to our salvation. They are done for the benefit of our neighbor (**GAL. 6:9–10**).

A decade-long controversy arose in the 1550s surrounding the place of good works in the Christian life. Some were saying that good works were necessary for salvation (George Major) while others were saying that good works were harmful to the Christian (Nicholas von Amsdorf). Both understandings are unbiblical and lead people to a false hope in our works or a lack of compassion for others.

The authors of the Lutheran Confessions were careful to exhort Christians to serve the neighbor (**HEB. 13:16**) while still clinging to the full sufficiency of Christ alone for our salvation (**JOHN 14:6**). This distinction can be tricky but is vital for a good conscience for all who hear the Word. Notice Melancthon’s well-crafted teaching on good works in Article XX of both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology: He spends the majority of his time teaching on salvation in Christ alone so that we Christians stay grounded in our Savior above ourselves.

Lord, help us to mercifully serve others as You already serve us. Amen.

May

LAW & GOSPEL

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep V1 (p. 484)
SA Part III, Article II (p. 271–272)

WEEK 2: Ep V 2–10 (p. 484–485)
SA Part III, Article IV (p. 278)

WEEK 3: SD V (p. 552–557)

WEEK 4: Ep V11 (p. 485)

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“The Gospel assumed is the Gospel denied,” one of my homiletics professors would emphasize. The Gospel is the good news that God has provided salvation for the world due to the work of Christ’s cross and empty tomb. This is the most important teaching and central focus of the whole Bible. To preach the Gospel is hard work! As C.F.W. Walther reminds us, “Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and highest art of Christians.”¹ The Gospel fights against our human instinct that we need to do something to earn favor.

I recently heard a pastor say, “The Law denied is salvation withheld.” Although the Gospel is the central truth of the Scriptures, the Law is not abolished (**MATT. 5:17**). During the Reformation, some people called Antinomians argued that there was no longer need for the Law. Certainly not (**GAL. 3:21**)! The Law is given by the Lord (**EX. 20:1–17**) to accuse us of our sin and reveal God’s will for our lives so that we would cling to Christ and His Gospel promises, and by God’s grace seek to live in accordance with His will.

We need both Law and Gospel. The authors of the Lutheran Confessions take great care to rightly divide Law and Gospel: to confuse them is to burden consciences, turning them from hope in Christ to themselves or, even worse, to other gods. If we make the Gospel our work, we will be unsure if we have ever done enough. If we throw out the Law, the Gospel loses its sweetness, and we ignore the depth of our own sin (**ROM. 3:23**).

O Holy Spirit, help us faithfully proclaim the truth. Amen.

¹ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, Thesis III.

June

THE THIRD USE OF THE LAW

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep VI1 (p. 485–486)
SC Table of Duties (p. 346–348)

WEEK 2: Ep VI 2–7 (p. 486–487)
Gal. 5:1–26

WEEK 3: SD VI (p. 557–561)

WEEK 4: Ep VI 8 (p. 487)

Abbreviations

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SC — Small Catechism

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of Concord

We know the Law is good (**ROM. 7:12**) and that God works through the Law for our good (**1 TIM. 1:18**). We believe that the Lord has given us the Law for three uses: 1) Curb, to keep us from greater sins; 2) Mirror, to reveal our sin; and 3) Rule, to show us, by the Holy Spirit, how God would have us live. Major controversies have arisen since the Reformation around the role of this third use of the Law, over the question: Do regenerate Christians still need the Law?

Christians still need the Law, as even Adam and Eve did prior to the fall (**GEN. 1:26–28; 2:16–17; 3:3**). As the old Adam continues to cling to us, we will continue to need the Law for guidance until Christ returns. Although the Gospel must predominate, God's redeemed children need guidance with the help of the Holy Spirit to follow His will. Without His Law, we are susceptible to follow our own desires as we try to determine for ourselves what is pleasing to the Lord (**2 TIM. 4:2–3**).

As you read the Formula of Concord concerning the third use of the Law, consider how Luther taught the Ten Commandments. Christians need guidance to trust in God above all things (1st), call upon Him in all situations (2nd), be in the Word (3rd), help and support our neighbor (5th), live a sexually pure life (6th), explain everything in the kindest way (8th), give thanks for all that He gives (9th & 10th), etc. Following God's way is not only good for the Christian, as he lives a holy life, but also for the world, as it sees these good works and gives God glory (**MATT. 5:16**).

O Holy Spirit, help us live according to Your will. Amen.

July

THE LORD'S SUPPER

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep VII 1–5 (p. 487–488)

AC X (p. 35)

AC XXII (p. 45–46)

WEEK 2: Ep VII 6–20 (p. 488–489)

Ap X (p. 153–155)

Ap XXII (p. 208–210)

WEEK 3: SD VII 91–128 (p. 576–581)

WEEK 4: Ep VII 21–42 (p. 489–491)

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“Let me see,” a 3-year-old boy would ask his mother in the Divine Service during the distribution of the Lord’s Supper. His mother would slowly lower her hands to show him the bread, and he would exclaim every week, “That’s Jesus’ body!” What a joy to know that a 3-year-old can boldly confess the truth of Christ’s gifts.

We believe that the Lord graciously comes to us through His true body and blood, through the bread, and wine, for the forgiveness of our sins. The church strives to be faithful to these clear words of Scripture (**MATT. 26:26–28**), and we receive the benefits of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation in Christ only by faith in His promises (**1 COR. 11:27–29**). We literally receive a foretaste of the heavenly feast to come (**REV. 19:9**) and proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes again (**1 COR. 11:26**).

Many serious controversies arose over Christ’s presence in the Sacrament, which are still prevalent today. Is He present spiritually or in a symbolic way (Zwingli and Calvin)? Do we need to explain how the essence and substance change (Roman Catholicism)? Does “is” mean “is”? Unfortunately, there were sometimes compromises among Lutherans to try to make it appear that the differences between these teachings are slight. Yet, the writers of the Lutheran Confessions were steadfast in clinging to this precious gift of Christ with the same childlike faith of a 3-year-old.

Let me find favor in Your eyes to receive this holy Sacrament in faith for the salvation of my soul and to the glory of Your holy name. Amen.

August

THE PERSON OF CHRIST

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep VIII 1–3 (p. 491)

AC III (p. 32)

WEEK 2: Ep VIII 4–18 (p. 492–493)

Ap III (p. 82)

WEEK 3: LC Part II, Article II (p. 401–402)

SD VIII 1–15 (p. 581–583)

WEEK 4: Ep VIII 19–39 (p. 493–495)

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The two natures of Christ can be best summarized by this simple math equation: 100% God + 100% Man = 100% Jesus. Bad math, but great biblical theology. We understand that Jesus was fully human and at the same time fully God (**LUKE 1:35** and **ROM. 9:5**). He was perfect, almighty, eternal, all-knowing and infinite. He had flesh and blood, hungered, thirsted, had feelings, suffered and died. His two natures are personally united. He is not mingled together like ingredients mixed together to make cookies. Neither is He separated like two boards glued together. Instead, His two natures, as the authors of the Confessions put it, are more like fire and a hot iron, or a drink made of honey and water completely incorporated (SD VIII 19). This reality is a mystery, much like the Trinity and the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament, but it is vital to understand for the sake of our salvation (**1 TIM. 4:16**).

The writers of the Lutheran Confessions clarified the biblical understanding of Christ's two natures against a laundry list of old heresies: Nestorianism (God and man are not one person); Marcionism (Christ did not have a human nature); Arianism (Christ was not God); the Sacramentarians (Christ's two natures are separated from one another). These views were not only scripturally problematic but created confusion over the fullness of salvation. If Christ was not fully God, then His blood could not atone for the world (**HEB. 10:10–18**). If Christ was not fully man, He could not die and sympathize with our weaknesses (**HEB. 4:14–16**). If Jesus' natures were completely separated, how could we know which nature saves us? Thanks be to God that we know that the full Christ died for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (**ROM. 4:25**).

“Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity!

Pleased as Man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel!” (LSB 380).

September

CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO HELL

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep IX 1–4 (p. 495)

SA Part I (p. 262)

SC Part II, Article II (p. 329)

WEEK 2: LC Part II, Article II (p. 401–402)

WEEK 3: SD IX (p. 596–597)

WEEK 4: 1 Peter 3:18–22; Heb. 10:10–13;

Psalms 16

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“Why did Jesus descend to hell?” one of my friends asked the Pastor of the Week at camp during Q&A time. I perked up, because it was quite confusing to my 12-year-old mind when we confessed the Apostles’ Creed. I thought to myself, “Wasn’t Jesus in the tomb?” “Was Jesus wrestling with a scary, red-colored fellow with a trident?” “Would Jesus win the match?” Before my imagination went too wild, the pastor replied with joy, “It was Jesus’ victory parade.”

Many questions have arisen concerning Christ’s descent into hell. Some have argued that His descent was part of His suffering for our atonement, while others have theorized about how His body could still be in the tomb while proclaiming to the spirits in prison (1 PETER 3:18–22). The writers of the Lutheran Confessions emphasized that when Christ said on the cross, “It is finished,” He truly meant finished (JOHN 19:30). Christ descended to proclaim His victory over the devil, and the devil will never overcome His kingdom (MATT. 16:18). This truth provides us with comfort that He has had the victory, and His victory is ours (1 COR. 15:57). In faith, we leave the other questions at His feet.

“He lives — oh, the bliss of this glorious thought;

My sin, not in part, but the whole,

Is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!” (LSB 763).

October

CHURCH PRACTICES

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep X 1-2 (p. 496)
AC XIV (p. 38-39)
AC XV (p. 39)

WEEK 2: Ep X 3-7 (p. 496-497)
Ap XIV (p. 186-187)
Ap XV (p. 187-194)

WEEK 3: SD X (p. 597-602)

WEEK 4: Ep X 8-12 (p. 497)

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The church uses the term “adiaphora” to refer to a practice neither commanded nor forbidden by God’s Word — such as worship times or the way candles are lit. Such practices, while not required, can be useful to the church for the sake of good order and an opportunity to bear with one another in love for the sake of the Gospel (EPH. 4:2).

I visited a sanctuary that had redone their lights so that the most lit area was the pulpit, altar and baptismal font. It made their focus immediately clear. A professor of mine at seminary would tell us, “Not all adiaphora are created equal.” The writers of the Lutheran Confessions were committed to providing assurance to every baptized believer that they might have a clear conscience in Christ. No church should institute practices that cause offense to the weak in faith (1 COR. 8:9) or hinder the clear proclamation of Christ’s forgiveness, life and salvation. The church has freedom to have various kinds of lights in the building, but as a Christian congregation all that we do should lead people to Christ and His gifts.

As you read about adiaphora in the *Book of Concord*, pay attention to when the authors say there are no longer matters of adiaphora: times of persecution. When the church is being asked to change on essential matters, we even more boldly confess the whole counsel of God (ACTS 20:27), refusing to change even on non-essential matters.

O Holy Spirit, grant us boldness to confess Christ in truth and purity. Amen.

November

ELECTION

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep XI 1 (p. 497–498)

SD XI 1–12 (p. 602–604)

WEEK 2: Ep XI 2–15 (p. 498–499)

SD XI 13–32 (p. 604–607)

WEEK 3: SD XI 33–49 (p. 607–609)

WEEK 4: Ep XI 16–23 (p. 499–500)

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“But what about Predestination?” a member asked in our midweek Bible study. Suddenly a hurricane of unanswerable questions led only to more questions. I struggled to find ways to bring comfort, until one of the longtime members raised her hand and said, “I am greatly confused about why some believe and others do not; I am just thankful that Jesus died for me!”

The doctrine of election, according to Scripture, is a great source of comfort. God knew you before the foundation of the world (**EPH. 1:4**). He knows your thoughts, sin and unholy desires, but He still sent His Son to die for you (**ROM. 5:8**). Salvation won for us on the cross is founded so firmly that even the gates of hell cannot overcome it (**MATT. 16:18**). God desires all people to come to repentance and believe in Christ’s cross and empty tomb for their salvation (**2 PETER 3:9**; **1 JOHN 2:2**). The devil, the world and our sinful flesh fight against this truth (**LUKE 16:29–31**), which does not nullify the grace of God, but throws us back to Him. He placed our salvation in the hands of our Savior, from which no one can snatch us (**JOHN 10:28**). He hands this salvation to us through bread, wine and water today.

As you read the articles on election, follow Luther’s advice by also reading the Book of Romans. Paul provides proper spiritual care for this doctrine by carefully teaching our need to repent (**ROM. 1–2**), the depth of our sin (**ROM. 3:1–20**), the assurance of Christ’s salvation (**ROM. 3:21–5:21**), instructions for holy living in Christ (**ROM. 6–8**), and the mystery of His election (**ROM. 9–11**). Inwardly digest these hope-filled words so that you never overlook this comforting truth: “Jesus died for me!”

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Your Son to die for me, that I might rest secure in Your salvation. Amen.

December

OTHER FACTIONS & SECTS

THIS MONTH'S READING

WEEK 1: Ep XII 1–11 (p. 500–501)

SD XII 1–27 (p. 616–617)

WEEK 2: Ep XII 12–19 (p. 501–502)

SD XII 28–36 (p. 617–618)

WEEK 3: Ep XII 20–31 (p. 502)

SD XII 37–40 (p. 618–619)

WEEK 4: Off for Christmas!

Abbreviations

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A member once came into my office and told me of two people who came to her door to share some “good news.” They had a nice conversation until the visitors proclaimed that the Trinity was not biblical and Jesus was not God. In shock, the member asked me, “Pastor, is this some kind of new teaching?”

We know that there is nothing new under the sun (**ECCL. 1:9**), and heresy is no exception. Erroneous teachings in and around the church are like a Rocky movie — same story, different era. There were various groups during the Reformation, like today, who taught doctrines that are not to be tolerated in the church: The Anabaptists believed that the true church had no sinners. The Schwenkfeldians advocated that one can come to faith outside of God’s Means of Grace. The New Arians did not see Jesus as fully God. Others explained the Trinity in ways that contradicted the Athanasian Creed. The authors of the Lutheran Confessions were committed to persevering in the one true faith, knowing that heresies would continue until Christ returns.

As you read this last article in the Formula of Concord, keep fighting the good fight (**1 TIM. 6:12**). Remember your confirmation vows to stay steadfast in this confession even to the point of death. Stay strong in the Lord and the power of His might, so that, even when itching ears want to hear a different message, you will faithfully proclaim the clear Word of God.

O Holy Spirit, keep us ever faithful to Your Word. Amen.

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