

The Lutheran Confession as a Norm for Faith and Fellowship: The Formula of Concord Speaks to the Church Today

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In an impassioned speech a churchman recently appealed that Christians seriously consider disregarding creeds and instead accept only the early Christian belief that “Jesus is Lord.” “My plea,” he explained, “is that we may liberate ourselves from all our excess baggage—all the weight of doctrine that Christ never asked his people to bear—that we may strip our creed stark naked like Christ upon the cross—strip it down to the barest elements of belief, and embrace the one belief that counts, ‘Jesus is Lord.’”

There is something attractive about an appeal to abide by the church’s central confession alone, especially for battle-weary Christians in our day. But the Lord of the church expects more than token confessions of His name. The One who commands our allegiance as Lord gave specific instruction that we should teach his followers “to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20). The important question then for the Lord is not the extent of the confession, but whether it is true to his Word. Creeds that measure up to that standard will always remain unchanging landmarks for a world of change.

As we survey the scene of Christendom today in the light of the past, the results are not encouraging. Times have changed radically and, as a Lutheran theologian informs us, the present circumstances hardly hold promise for a joyful future. In a lengthy analysis, Herbert Boumann explains the crisis of the church by saying:

No amount of nostalgia about the good old days of Christianity, or of the Reformation, and about their massive influence on...the culture of much of Europe and America can recreate those halcyon days or re-establish the church’s authority. Organized Christianity appears to be in a bad way, certainly in Europe and in America. Not only are Asian and African religions and philosophic systems making new appeals and registering numerous converts in so-called “Christian” countries, but the church and the churches in these lands have so thoroughly lost their former hold and their prophetic function in the community, that this age has been dubbed the “Post-Christian Era.”

An overstatement? Perhaps. Yet the seeming irrelevance of organized Christendom for the religious, ethical, cultural, economic, and political dislocations of our time compels one to recognize the large amount of truth in the characterization. As the church’s message appears to become less convinced and convincing on the local level, as stout commitment to formulated creeds becomes rarer and rarer, as long-standing denominational distinctions vanish, as the core of non-negotiable Christian truths is progressively eroded, the churches seem to direct increasingly more attention and energy to global affairs, attempting to cover their theological feebleness with [public pronouncements] in areas in which they have little mandate and less competence.ⁱ

No matter how we agree with this assessment, we are driven by its cheerless tone to ask: What then is the value of confessional Lutheranism in our day? Specifically, as our example, does the Formula of Concord have anything to say to us? Does this once honored confession remain a standard by which Christian folk of the 20th century can fight the good fight of faith? Do its formulations mark the end of a bygone era? Or is its message so basic that the church, always needing to be recalled to its foundations, can make a new beginning each time it listens to and follows the truths the Formula confesses?

These questions have been asked before. Lutherans who felt they had outgrown all church dogma, suddenly, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, regained an understanding of what the Confessions of our church teach about the depths of sin, the greatness of God’s grace, and the power of God’s Word. In 1827, at a time when Lutheran confessional consciousness was reawakening in Germany, young Adolph von Harless

exclaimed, “After I had learned from Scriptures what saving truth is, I turned to the Symbolical Books of my church. I cannot describe how surprised and how moved I was to discover that their content conformed with the convictions I had gained from Scripture.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What is particularly interesting in Harless’ reaction is not his surprised joy in finding the lost heritage of the fathers, but his discovery that the confessions measured up to God’s Word. Scripture and confession must go hand in hand, as bride is wed to bridegroom, if the church’s witness to the world is worthy of the name. In this respect the Formula of Concord stands like a strong tower in the midst of prevailing winds of doctrine. And we do well to mount that tower if we do not wish to be “blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14).

Once we have ascended the heights, we can observe wherein the strength of the Concord lies and rejoice together with young Harless. Why? Because we too will come to know that the Formula of Concord, like the Augsburg Confession which it embraces, speaks to the church today, as it presumes to speak to the church in every age, with integrity, with authority, with clarity and with certainty.

I. The Formula of Concord Speaks with Integrity

From the outset the authors of the Formula of Concord were alertly aware that their work was not being done in a corner, in isolation from the rest of Christendom. They were stung by the Roman charge that Lutheranism was a sect. Ever since Luther first raised the banner of church reform, Lutherans continued to be viewed as innovators in doctrine and practice, accused of all sorts of heresies previously condemned by church councils, and vilified as blasphemers of God’s name. After Luther’s death, inner Lutheran squabbling and bickering over doctrine only seemed to reinforce the truth of these accusations.

The degenerating situation in Lutheran lands called for churchmen who were able to rise above party prejudices. The two commissions which formulated the articles of Concord grasped the need to speak with that sort of integrity which concerned itself with the whole Christian church. As a consequence, they felt the responsibility to submit their confession to the scrutiny of all Christians everywhere and, above all, to the judgment of the church’s Lord. This eschatological motive is expressed with undisguised boldness: “Therefore in the presence of God and of all Christendom we wish to have testified that the present explanation...is our teaching, belief, and confession in which by God’s grace we shall appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and for which we shall give an account” (FC:SD XII,40).

This genuinely ecumenical attitude worked in two directions. On the one hand, the confessors sought to avoid the pitfalls of a rigid confessionalism that has lost its prophetic mission to speak the truth in love and say, “Thus says the Lord.” They indicated that they desired only “such harmony as will not violate God’s honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him for ever through the sole merit of Christ” (FC:SD XI,96). In this way these ministers of God called on all who witnessed with them to take on themselves the full responsibility of speaking for the church. Nothing else was worthy of the name witness.

Their sense of responsibility, on the other hand, led the Concordians to demonstrate the continuity of the Formula with the early Christian church. Not wanting to be cast as innovators and sectarians, the Lutherans called on the fathers, where necessary and possible, to witness to the truth. Respect for the living tradition of the Gospel moved them not only to use the Bible as a basis for testimony, but also joyfully to record their agreement with the fathers who transmitted its truths down through the ages.

Carefully, however, they distinguished between the well-spring and the waters drawn from it. The Holy Scriptures were the sole source of doctrine and no other writings. Yet we should not be surprised to read in the Formula’s witness such expressions as: “This has been the unanimous teaching of the leading Church Fathers, such as Chrysostom, Cyprian, Leo I, Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine” (FC:Ep VII,15). But these men in the

tradition were honored, cited, and received “no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times” (FC:Ep Summary,2).

The church in the 20th century needs to reclaim the vision, responsibility, and mission to speak for the church with integrity. Where the sense of wholeness is lost and continuity with the past forgotten, church members experience the feeling of isolation, frustration, and fragmentation instead. A sect, by definition, takes a truth away from the mother church, isolates it, and builds its existence around it. Needed today are churchmen who believe, teach, and confess the whole counsel of God on the bases of the Scriptures, unburdened by sectarian notions.

Here past creeds and confessions, as the Formula of Concord, can serve as landmarks. Much to the embarrassment of anti-creedal sects, true creeds are not barriers to faith, sterile formulations of the past, or museum pieces of bygone days. True creeds are expressions of faith which instill an appreciation for the one holy Christian church and do so by tearing down all barriers which obstruct the Gospel. As summaries of Christian doctrine, true creeds and confessions have always served a threefold purpose in the church. They are used catechetically, to instruct members in the faith, apologetically, to defend the church against error, and liturgically, to worship God.

In our congregations, by God’s grace, we will accomplish stability in the midst of a transient world by pursuing these objectives responsibly. “This calls for a certain modesty!” Luther once counseled, a modesty that bows in holy awe before the Lord, our God, and boldly dares on his authority to speak his Word with all due reverence. The Formula of Concord does just that. It makes bold to speak to us today with integrity because it speaks with authority.

II. The Formula of Concord Speaks with Authority

In an age of relativism which honors paradigm, models, and strategies as avenues to the truth, to speak with authority is dangerous, to say the least. We have all been trained to accept only that as authoritative which has been verified by scientific research. Accordingly, in spiritual matters and moral behavior the real data bank for observation is man himself. There truths are measured by “me”, and “my reactions”—whether these responses are conditioned or unconditioned.

This anthropocentric mode of thinking does not belong to the modern age alone. Relating divine truth to my perception of it is innate to mankind since the fall of Adam and results in one of two basic philosophies: Either we must be able to explain what happens in life, or we shuck the responsibility and relegate everything in the last analysis to blind fate. Jesus met these attitudes in his day. Jewish leaders argued life’s problems from the Torah with great sophistication. And when Jesus addressed them on his own authority as One sent from God and said, “Truly I say to you,” the authorities were angered—and the people were amazed” (Mk 1:22).

Following our Lord, the Formula of Concord likewise challenges those who approach spiritual matters with such scientific attitudes. The Formula makes assertions, not from experience nor from scientific research, but simply on the authority of revealed truth. It leaves the nagging questions of “why” and “how” to remain hidden with God himself and is content to proclaim God’s truth from the Scriptures alone to clear the air in the midst of controversy.

We can illustrate its method by reviewing briefly the controversy on the nature of man (FC:Ep I & II). The 16th century debate on anthropology centered on the basic question: What does it mean to be a sinner? One party refused to say that sin has made us totally powerless to fear and love God because such an opinion would dehumanize us. The other party took the opposite stance, maintaining that, as sinners, we are completely dead to God because our very being, our essence, is sin.

In response, the writers of the confession rejected both positions. They cautioned the church to be wary of saying too much, over and beyond what God has revealed in his Word. The person who taught that sin was our essence had confused God’s work with Satan’s work. He correctly taught that we are totally sinful because

Satan has corrupted all mankind in Adam's fall. But to say that sin has become our essence resulted in a dualism that equates God and Satan. In effect, such teaching gives the Devil the power to create a substance.

If the Devil were to possess the capability to create, they affirmed, we would be robbing God of his honor and ourselves of the comfort that we are creatures of God. The Devil did not create us; God did. So it is important to know that "even after the fall our nature is and remains a creature of God," (FC:Ep 1,2), as Job declares: "Your hands shaped me and made me" (Job 10:8). In this way we honor God by distinguishing God's work of creation from Satan's work of corruption.

Is it safe to assume then that the Devil has not completely robbed us of the potential to fear and love God? Since God has given us our humanity, is Satan's corruption of it merely an external covering which has left our better self underneath intact? God's Word gives no warrant for such conclusions, the confession insists. On the contrary, Scripture testifies that our sinfulness is "so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man's body or soul, in his inward or outward powers" (FC:Ep 1:8).

Our total depravity before God is described in clear terms. Genesis 8:21 states the case pointedly: "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." Likewise Paul instructs us on the depths of our corruption: "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot" (Rm 8:7). The result? Blinded by our own sinfulness, we are unable to recognize the depth of the damage "by a rational process, but only from God's Word" (FC:Ep 1:9).

In our day the old confession can serve us well because it speaks with the authority of God's Word. Following the Formula, we need to recall Scripture's teaching on the root sin as we face today's human potential movements in many guises. Pagan education does not have a corner on spreading the gospel of the human potential in spiritual matters. Despite all disclaimers, much that passes under the name of Christian or evangelical attempts in some way or other to draw on our inner strengths and spiritual potential to come to God on our own.

The Roman Catholic theologian and mystic, Thomas Merton, does just that. He describes our earthly plight as a journey with a false start:

If we were to return to God, and find ourselves in Him, we must reverse Adam's journey, we must go back by the way he came. The path lies through the center of our soul. Adam withdrew into himself from God and then passed through himself and went forth into creation. We must withdraw ourselves (in the right and Christian sense) from exterior things, and pass through the center of our souls to find God. We must recover possession of our true selves by liberation from anxiety and fear and inordinate desire. And when we have gained possession of our souls, we must learn to "go out" of ourselves to God and to others by supernatural charity.ⁱⁱⁱ

Merton's words compare favorably with many eastern religions and the ways of transcendental meditation. But he mistakenly tries to superimpose them, as written, on Christian truth.

More subtle is the synergistic approach of many so-called evangelists. With fervid conviction they proclaim a catalog of modern-day sins and point to Christ crucified as the way to salvation. But, at the same time, overlooking the original condition of man, they call on the spiritually dead to muster up strength with God's help to come to God.

"You've got to take the pencil," a sectarian preacher recently stated as he stood on the doorstep. "God offers us salvation, just as I am offering you this pencil. But you've got to take it to be born again." The illustration was as striking as it was appealing. But on the strength of God's Word, it must be turned aside. We have neither the power nor the strength by nature to take God's salvation, nor the will to be reborn. We are dead to God, dead in trespasses and sins. "As little as a corpse can quicken itself to bodily, earthly life, so little can man who through sin is spiritually dead raise himself to spiritual life, as it is written, 'When we were dead through our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ'" (FC:Ep 11,3).

The doorstep conversation called for a response. "Sir, you suggest that I can assist in my rebirth by accepting God's offer. But that is impossible. Let me explain. Here you are standing before me as big as life. But you did not will to be; you did not will your first birth. Your father and your mother gave you life because

of God's command and promise concerning reproduction. Like your first birth, you cannot will your rebirth. Like your first birth, it is a gift of God through his Word and promise. By baptism God raises us from death to life, as Paul says to the Romans, 'We are buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too should live a new life.' This is our first resurrection, of which St. John tells us in the Revelation."

The encounter on the doorstep is reminiscent of similar experiences that Christians have in witnessing to the faith. When we do so, we need to remember that we are not speaking off the top of our heads, but under the authority of God's Word. And we will continue to keep on the right path if we look to those unchanging landmarks of God's Word, so concisely summarized in the church's confessions because of similar challenges. For these confessions, themselves forged and refined in the fires of trial, ring not only true, as we have heard, but also clear.

III. The Formula of Concord Speaks with Clarity

When the framers of the Formula of Concord set about their task, they faced formidable difficulties. Ever since the death of Luther, whose clarity and precision in the understanding of divine truth had guided all efforts at church reform, second generation Lutherans floundered under pressure. Pope and Emperor in unharmonious concert persisted in a policy to force the German nation and all the church's European precincts back into the fold by bloodshed and heavy-handed politicking. In response, theologians and princes attended meeting after meeting to formulate a set confessional stance to meet the challenge in a united front and with a united church.

What resulted? The proposed solutions generated so many positions and variations of positions that the real issues got lost under a barrage of charges and countercharges. "A sellout to the Papacy!" "Calvinists in disguise!" "Un-Lutheran teaching!" These accusations were leveled at one another in a vain scramble to preserve the Christian heritage. In some cases, debaters on both sides talked past one another; in most cases, the differences were real and deep-seated. To their credit, the authors of the Formula of Concord cut through the tangle of opinion and went directly to the heart of the matter.

To gain clarity, they adopted a method that:

- 1) precisely identified the point in contention and the principle positions taken with regard to it;
- 2) carefully formulated an answer in accord with Scripture and previously accepted confessional writings; and
- 3) expressly delineated the true Scripture in each case from false teachings.

"We wanted to set forth and explain our faith and confession unequivocally, clearly, and distinctly in theses and antitheses, opposing the true doctrine to the false doctrine," they stated, "so that the foundation of divine truth might be made apparent in every article and that every incorrect, dubious, suspicious, and condemned doctrine might be exposed" (FC:SD Summary 19).

The church today can learn from their method an external precision in thought and expression. If we take the time to sit and listen, meditate and mull over the formulations in the context of the controversies that provoked them, we will find to our joy that the Formula of Concord handles with remarkable clarity basic issues that continue to plague Christians today.

But there is another kind of clarity which the Formula presents, an internal clarity, that is even more important for the church today to hear and heed. This clarity St. Paul calls "the wisdom of God made known in the cross through the foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor 1). It is a wisdom which knows and believes that God works in the world contrary to appearances, that God's strength is made perfect in weakness, that victory is gained by death, that the living are dead, that by dying we live, that lords are slaves.

At the very heart of this foolishness of God is a mystery so great that we can know it only because God has revealed it to us in Christ. For Christ is that great mystery, St. Paul tells us: "Beyond all question, the

mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (I Tim 3:16).

The clarity of God’s revelation of himself in the incarnate Christ stands in contrast to all human wisdom! According to human conceptions, to reveal something is to take the covering off. What is hidden under the veil is then laid bare for us to see. But God does not wish to come to us uncovered, in his unveiled majesty, because sinful people cannot stand the sight of God nude. God is holy; we are unholy. God is righteous; we are sinners. If we were to see God face to face as he is, we would all die (Ex 33:20).

Therefore, contrary to human wisdom and experience, God revealed himself to us by covering his glory, by clothing himself in flesh and blood. The real mystery of God’s work among men lies in Christ’s incarnation. There God graciously revealed himself by hiding himself. He worked his work through suffering, shame and death. It was not a pretty sight—and we hid, as it were, our faces from him (Is 53). But God’s apparent weakness is his strength, for God’s strength was perfected in weakness. What human eyes missed, God’s Word made clear and the resurrection confirmed: in Jesus’ death, the world is redeemed.

The wisdom of the cross pervades all the articles of the Formula of Concord. Time and again the writers oppose all expressions which seek to twist God’s ways to fit human conceptions. Without hesitation, the confessors present Scripture truths as God’s realities in opposition to all appearances. They never tire of speaking for the inner clarity of Scripture, even though it seems foolish and contrary to all our senses.

When humanistic teaching stealthily invaded the Lutheran church, the battle over the mystery intensified. From the very beginning the Reformed movement in Switzerland refused to accept the mystery of Christ’s real presence in the sacrament. Sacramentarians were offended to think that Jesus should be bodily present in earthly elements when in reality the ascended Lord was locally confined to the right hand of God in heaven. It made no sense to claim that a simple piece of bread could be sacramentally united with the infinite God, much less with Christ’s body. Because a body occupies a space, our ascended Lord could not be on earth and in heaven. Therefore the bread of communion merely identified the absent body of Christ in heaven.

With Luther, the Formula of Concord steadfastly upheld the reality of the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament. In the second generation, however, the battleground had widened. The debate focused on the question whether Christ’s body and blood were also received orally, in the mouth, by all who partook of the sacrament, that is, by believers and unbelievers alike.

The shift in emphasis occurred because the followers of Calvin claimed to believe the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. But, under the guise of agreement, they continued to undermine the fundamental mystery of the Lord’s Supper by explaining, the real presence in terms compatible with human reason, contrary to the clear Scriptures. They continued to object to Christ’s bodily presence in bread and wine. What actually happened in the Supper, they insisted, is that we receive Christ’s absent body spiritually by faith. When we eat the bread with our mouths, our faith, as it were, ascends into heaven and there, not in the bread, partakes of Christ’s body. Christ is really present in faith.

The Concordians sensed the fundamental issue here involved. In an effort to make the explanation of the Lord’s Supper plausible, the Calvinists had gone beyond what Scripture clearly teaches about receiving Christ’s body and blood. And, in the process, they were dividing Christ.

In a painstaking, almost labored, way, the Formula sought to correct and instruct the church lest its faith be undercut and Christians end up with a Christ of their own making. To accomplish their task, the Concordians called on the inner clarity of Scripture, known only by the Spirit’s work. The preaching of the cross demonstrates how God works among us contrary to appearances. The Lord works under the veil of flesh. He really and truly became man—and his divinity really and truly shared in his suffering and death, even as now his humanity really and truly shares in his exalted majesty. Therefore we dare not divide Christ, one Christ who works in heaven and another who works on earth. Where his divinity is, there his humanity is, one person indivisible.

If, therefore, one asks how Christ is able to be really present in the Lord’s Supper and how his body is really received by our mouths, the answer is as simple as it is profound. Christ is really present and his body

really received by us because his humanity really and truly shares in his divine presence. As his divinity is everywhere where he wills to be according to his Word and promise, his humanity is there also. We can say no more. In this mystery of Christ's work among us in the sacrament lies the foundation of faith. Destroy this foundation and you destroy faith itself.

What wonder that the framers of the Concord closed the entire discussion on Christ and his Supper with the solid confession drawn from the ancient church: "Christ is, and remains to all eternity, God and man in one indivisible person. Next to the holy Trinity this is the highest mystery as the apostle testifies, and the sole foundation of our comfort, life, and salvation" (FC:Ep VIII,18).

The church which lives under the cross needs to speak with equal clarity to this generation if we are to be found faithful stewards of the mysteries of God. Sectarian Christianity has little, if any, appreciation of the mysteries of God, for the work of Christ on earth nor for his Supper. Much modern thinking follows the reasoning which recently appeared in a church paper:

Not only must we rethink Christian faith; we must become open to all truths of all faiths, that with honesty and creative wrestling, we may find together the religion for one world. No divisive all-or-none religion will do, nor will any smooth or glib syncretism. But as people of one world, one humanity under God, we must work out what faith will most fully unite us all to seek a common will and to live a life of creative cooperation.^{iv}

In an age characterized by indifference to doctrine, the Christless plea for one humanity under God is as appealing as this article's closing caricature: "So-called orthodoxy is always man's meanest and most dangerous heresy," the writer states baldly. "Instead of following the pillar of fire by night and the cooling cloud by day of the God of the onward march, the so-called orthodox sit motionless in front of static creeds."

This humanistic bent is further reflected in the answer the Luther biographer, Roland Bainton, gave to the question, "How do you regard Jesus?" He replied, "The Quakers have an expression, 'There is that of God in every man.' They don't make a sharp distinction that you have Christ as a deity and man as totally distant. God and man are not so far apart that they can't exist in the same individual. It's a little like the discovery of America by Columbus—since he's done it, millions have been able to cross the ocean and do it faster, but they're not in the position of Columbus. So one might say that Christ has made it possible for others to enter into a God relation by virtue of Jesus' relation to God, which doesn't put them in the unique position of Christ."

When Christian folk are served such spiritual food that appeals to our own worth and creativity in reaching God, rather than to honoring God's Word and work among us, we should not be surprised that there exists little more regard for the Lord's Supper than as a churchly rite. Then the celebration of the holy Supper of our Lord becomes, as it has in many churches, a get-together meal, a spiritual pot-luck, in which the elements are unimportant. Then we can substitute coke and hamburgers, as has been done, to make the meal more meaningful and relevant to our day and age.

Take Christ from the Supper, take Christ from the Scriptures and what is left! We are robbed of the wisdom of the cross in the foolishness of preaching, we are robbed of Christ's real presence in our midst under the bread and wine as he promised. We have hit the glory road of our own philosophies and vain imaginations instead. It is a wide road with a dead end.

May God graciously keep us from such a fate! Here the Formula can assist us. It stands as a strong tower in the midst of contrary winds, because its confession, drawn from the Scripture, speaks to the church today with the clarity of God's Word. Reading and digesting the Formula of Concord is not always an easy effort, nor for that matter is the reading of St. Paul's letters or the simple language of St. John. All of them present us with truths so profound that St. Paul himself can exult:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
 How unsearchable his judgments,
 and his paths beyond tracing out!
 Who has known the mind of our Lord?
 Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God,
 that God should repay him?
 For from him and through him and to him are all things,
 To him be the glory forever! Amen (Rm. 11:33)

But in all cases Scripture and the confession drawn from it, the presentation of God's unsearchable ways are marked by that clarity and precision of which the old adage reminds us: "He teaches well who distinguishes well." Caretakers of God's mysteries will do so faithfully. For clarity in teaching God's will and ways will lead to certainty.

IV. The Formula of Concord Speaks with Certainty

Even the casual reader of the Formula of Concord can sense that its writers were not merely concerned about correct teaching and pure doctrine. They knew that creeds and confessions are not ends in themselves. Nor did they wish its subscribers to "sit motionless in front of static creeds," like navel-gazers contemplating their origins. Their testimonies had a higher purpose: namely, to "lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him for ever through the sole merit of Christ" (FC:SD XI,96).

One senses this pastoral motif throughout the production. Reflecting Luther's emphasis on certainty in matters of faith, the formulators aimed to comfort people's consciences and they handled each article of faith with this goal in mind. The Reformation itself had started with Luther's quest for certainty under the Roman system of work-righteousness. Only when Luther was drawn away from himself to the righteousness of Christ did he find peace of conscience in the certainty of the Gospel. That Gospel proclaimed a peace of mind to be found, not in ourselves and in our life of faith, but outside of ourselves in Christ and his work.

The message was not lost on the authors of the Formula. They likewise expressed the same definite convictions for the sake of conscience. With Luther, they believed that "nothing is more familiar and characteristic among Christians than assertion. Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given to Christians from heaven in order that He may glorify Christ and in them confess Him unto death—and is this not assertion, to die for what you confess and assert?" (LW 33,21)

Now we can understand why the confessors had little time for "restless, contentious individuals, who do not want to be bound by any certain formula of pure doctrine" but "defend monstrous errors." The only outcome of such instability was that "finally correct doctrine will be entirely obscured and lost and nothing beyond uncertain opinions and dubious...views will be transmitted to subsequent generations" (BoC: General Preface, p. 13).

These same concerns were shared by the princes who were responsible for the church in their territories. They undersigned the Concord by stating:

We are accordingly mindful of the obligations that we have...over against the temporal and eternal welfare of our own selves and of the subjects that belong to us, to do and to continue to do everything that is useful and profitable to the increase and expansion of God's praise and glory, to the propagation of that Word of his that alone brings salvation, to the tranquility and peace of Christian schools and churches and to the needed consolation of poor, misguided consciences. (BoC: General Preface, p. 13)

The twin goals of certainty and stability in the churches could only be truly achieved by a preaching which clearly distinguished the Law and the Gospel. The writers of the Formula highlighted this distinction as an "especially brilliant light" by which, through the Law, we come to know our sin and, through the Gospel, learn to know our Savior. (FC V) Confusing the two is disastrous to faith. If Christ's work alone does not rescue us, we are thrown back upon our own strength and will thrash about in a sea of uncertainties. There is little comfort in such a prospect.

How easily that confusion can happen, subtly, without our noticing it. All preaching of experience-based gospel does just that. It shifts the foundation of faith from Christ to our inner perception of him. Such a gospel

is founded on the experience of Christ in our lives rather than on Christ as preached to us in his Word. In effect we are basing faith on faith itself. What a shaky foundation in the hour of trial!

A classic case of this type was the preaching of Andrew Osiander. Out of concern for the Christian's life of faith, Osiander insisted that the righteousness of faith was something within us. By devious reasoning, he rejected the teaching that justification is an act of God whereby he declares the sinner free on account of Christ's righteousness. Such a doctrine, he felt, is so impersonal that it strikes one as colder than ice. Teaching the indwelling Christ was far more personal. According to his way of thinking, we are made righteous by the inner presence of Christ who renews our life. This indwelling Christ alone constitutes our righteousness.

Concerned that Osiander was confusing what Christ has done for us with what he accomplishes in us, equally concerned that this confusion would obscure the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of comfort in the holy Gospel, the Formula takes pains to distinguish justifying faith from the life of faith that follows.

There was no question about God dwelling in us: We live in Christ and he is us, we are the Spirit's holy temple, as Jesus and Paul testify. But we cannot build faith on the indwelling Christ. Then we would be building faith on faith itself. Such introspective faith fails in the time of trial. Certainty does not lie in our holiness, but in Christ's righteousness. Certainty does not lie in our life of faith, but in Christ and his work on our behalf.

"Accordingly, we believe, teach, and confess that our righteousness before God consists in this, that God forgives us our sins purely by his grace without any preceding, present, or subsequent work, merit, or worthiness, and reckons to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which we are accepted by God into grace and are regarded as righteous (FC:Ep III,4). On Christ the solid Rock faith stands; all other ground is sinking sand.

The church in our day dare never tire of preaching that our certainty rests on Christ's work in opposition to all experience based gospels. Much of what passes for evangelism today deserves the criticism of the cynic who made light of the subjectivity of such gospels. The example is admittedly extreme. "Fundamentalists are a tricky lot," the writer begins, and then continues with a description of his experience:

Between the ages of 6 and 12 I probably gave my life to Christ about two or three hundred times in the fundamentalist church in New Orleans that I was combed and bow-tied off to every Sunday morning. 'Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? Do you recognize yourself as a miserable sinner wretched in God's sight? Are you ready to get down on your knees and accept Jesus into your heart as your personal Savior? All those ready to make the decision for Christ, just step up to the front of the church and praise' deedum, deedum, deede. Sunday morning was bringing in the sheaves, ...followed by Bible study with Dixie cups of punch and cookies, followed by Sunday evening Saved for Christ Scoreboard... After Bible study at the local church, the commune regathered for a sort of community encounter with each other. One wide-eyed young man confessed that, when he thought of the things he had done wrong that very day, it was like going up and hitting God right in the mouth, WHAMMM. A very pregnant girl offered that, since she had become a Christian, she couldn't associate with her friends—they are "so steeped in sin," as she had been. Oliver told the group: "If you think I'm a phoney, if you think I'm dishonest, if you think I'm not like Jesus, tell me now." Everyone beamed.^v

Sad but true that scene is not an isolated instance. Its theology and method are normative for many Christian denominations.

The Lutheran confession follows a different norm and that is what makes its teaching one of the important events in the history of the Christian church. Not the Lutheran return to the Scriptures in itself is important, but the peculiar kind of return to the Bible. The Lutheran confession in its essential nature is nothing else than a rediscovery of the Gospel. Not since the days of the New Testament was the understanding of the Gospel preached with such integrity, authority, clarity, and certainty.

Just as the ancient church, after struggling hard to understand the New Testament correctly during the first century, had come to an understanding of the Trinity and of the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus

Christ—a faith which was handed down to the church of all ages in the great creeds of the ancient church—so a clear spiritual insight was given to the church of the Reformation. After western Christendom had wrestled for a thousand years with understanding the statement in the early creed concerning the Son of God, “Who, for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven...and was crucified for us,” Luther provided the answer. It was an answer to the question of what salvation is. It was an answer to the question of what the Gospel means as a message of salvation.

“This answer of the Lutheran confession is the doctrine of Justification, as the central treasure of the Scriptures. The Lutheran church asserts that this doctrine is the correct exposition of what the Holy Scriptures say about our appropriation of salvation. The rediscovery of the Scriptural truth concerning the sinner’s justification by grace alone, through faith alone, is nothing else than a rediscovery of the Gospel. If this truth is forgotten or obscured, the Gospel is turned into something else. It must be interpreted as a system of morals or a theory of religious truth. For this reason, this rediscovery constitutes the reformation of the church because it revealed once again that truth by which the church lives.

The church does not live by morals, by the knowledge and observance of God’s law. Nor does the church live by religion, by lofty experiences of the divine. The church LIVES solely by the forgiveness of sins through Christ the Crucified.”^{vi} This, in summary, is the message of the Formula of Concord to the church today! May the Lord of the church keep us in this faith until our end.

ⁱ Herbert J. A. Bouman, “Retrospect and Prospect: Some Unscientific Reflections on the Fourhundredth Anniversary of the Formula of Concord,” in the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, VIII, No. 4, 1977, p. 100f.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Herman Sasse, *Here We Stand* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946) p. 171f.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, “Spirit in Bondage,” found in Needleman/Bierman/Gould, *Religion for a New Generation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 316.

^{iv} From the bulletin of the Religious News Service, August, 1946.

^v James Nolan, “The Jesus Freaks,” found in Neeleman/Bierman/Gould work cited, pp. 35 and 39.

^{vi} From Hermann Sasse, work cited, p. 58f.