

The Spirit of the Formula of Concord

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On May 29, 1577, Jacob Andreae, Nicholas Selnecker, Andrew Musculus, Christopher Cornerus, David Chytraeus, and Martin Chemnitz attached their signatures to the Epitome and the Thorough Declaration, the two documents that comprise the Formula of Concord. This was an act of faith, and they meant it to be that. This is evident from the words with which they closed the Formula: "Since now, in the sight of God and of all Christendom, we wish to testify to those now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controverted articles aforementioned and explained, and no other, is our faith, doctrine, and confession, in which we are also willing, by God's grace, to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it; and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but, by the help of God's grace, intend to abide thereby: therefore, after mature deliberation, we have, in God's fear and with the invocation of His name, attached our signatures with our own hands." (1103:40)

They were not the only ones willing to take this step of faith. They were followed by the electors of Saxony, Brandenburg, and the Palatinate, 20 dukes and princes, 24 counts, four barons, 35 imperial cities, and last, but by no means least, some 8,000 pastors and teachers. Two-thirds of all Lutherans in Germany took their stand on the Formula.

On June 6, 1978, or 401 years later, 20 adults in the town of Avaldsnes on the island of Karmøy in Norway organized a congregation, affiliated with the Confessional Lutheran Church in Sweden, and accepted the Formula of Concord. This final act, too, was a step of faith, for the state Church of Norway, to which they formerly belonged, had never accepted the Formula and today teaches many things contrary to the Formula.

Between the two dates - 1577 and 1978 - unnumbered persons and groups have walked in the spiritual footsteps of those first signers. We as pastors and teachers have also taken that step. The congregations we serve accept the Formula as their confession. Our Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod has pledged to uphold it. All of us feel at home with the Formula. We accept what it teaches because we are convinced that its teachings agree with the written Word of God.

But is a study of the Formula worth taking the time of this convention? After all, it may not remain the final word, even though Dr. F. Bente in the historical introduction to the Triglotta (p. 254) states: "The Formula of Concord fully supplied the dire need created by the controversies after Luther's death; and, despite many subsequent controversies, also in America, down to the present day, no further confessional deliverances have been necessary, and most likely such will not be needed in the future either." So said Bente on July 4, 1921.

The subsequent history of Lutheranism, especially in America, does not bear out his quasi-prediction. Since then, the Missouri Synod wrote a *Brief Statement* in 1932, compromised it, reaffirmed it, and finally buried it. The fifties and sixties saw any number of joint confessions of faith among Lutherans with none of them fully upholding the teachings of Scripture. The Wisconsin Synod adopted its *This We Believe* in 1967 and has clarified it a number of times to avoid misunderstanding, the most recent change being called to your attention on page 130 of the Report to the Ten Districts: May, 1978. *Christian News* is repeatedly urging the writing of a new Formula. And it may well be, that the time may come when a new Formula must be written to speak out clearly on the matters troubling Lutheranism in our day: the Inspiration and Clarity of the Holy Scripture, the Charismatic Movement, the doctrine of Church Fellowship. But doesn't the 1577 Formula treat these matters? Yes, it does, but not in specific articles, and for some Lutherans this seems to make a difference. It is clear that they have not really imbibed the spirit of the Formula.

There are various ways of studying the Formula. A study of the history of the various controversies is important in order to understand the Formula. A biographical sketch of its authors is fascinating. They turn out to be real human beings, struggling with the same fears and problems we face as Lutheran Christians. Or we may study the Formula article by article, doctrine by doctrine. Such studies, as you know, have been appearing in *The Northwestern Lutheran*. This time, however, I would like to subject the Formula to a testing on the basis of the three Reformation SOLA's - SOLA SCRIPTURA, SOLA GRATIA, SOLA FIDE. This will help us to taste and imbibe

THE SPIRIT OF THE FORMULA OF CONCORD

We shall learn that:

- I. Scripture is its Base.
- II. Christ is its Center.
- III. God's People are its Concern.

We shall find that though our age may call for a new Formula, it dare not come up with something that in any way violates the spirit of the 1577 confession. That would not be Lutheran, nor would it be Christian.

I. THE SCRIPTURE - ITS BASE

That fact jumps out at you from the moment you begin reading the Formula. Just out of curiosity I kept a list of the various ways in which the Formula refers to doctrines as being based on the Scripture. Here is it: "grounded in God's Word," "collected from God's Word," "founded upon God's Word," "taken from God's Word," "explained from God's Word," "deduced from God's Word," "derived from God's Word," "confirmed and substantiated by God's Word," "taught from God's Word," "established from God's Word," "bound by God's Word." And then: "according to God's Word," "according to the guidance of God's Word," "by means of God's Word," "in conformity with God's Word," "clear from God's Word," "on the basis of God's Word." Or: "God's Word teaches," "Scripture compares," "Scripture ascribes," "Scripture testifies."

The six men who authored it must have had a good Thesaurus. At any rate, there's no escaping the conviction that the Formula is based on the Scripture. The number of passages cited is also astounding. Take just one of the articles, for example, Article II: Of Free Will, or Human Powers, in the Thorough Declaration; it cites 101 passages.

But just quoting Bible passages by the dozen or stating time and again that something is Scriptural does not make it so. The Charismatics, the Millennialists, the Jehovah's Witnesses are good at that too, and we know what a mess they make of the Scripture. So we need to test the spirit of the Formula.

In confessing ourselves to the Scripture today, we would immediately turn to the passages that teach the inspiration of Scripture. By the time *This We Believe* gets to pages 4 and 5 (of 24) it is already emphasizing the doctrine of inspiration and quoting II Peter 1:21, I Corinthians 2:13, and II Timothy 3:16. The Formula doesn't quote II Peter 1:21 and I Corinthians 2:13 at all, and uses II Timothy 3:16 only three times (pages 855, 967, and 1067). And what is especially striking, it does not employ II Timothy 3:16 to support the fact that Scripture is inspired but that Scripture is to be used for reproof, correction, and instruction. The other Lutheran confessions do not even cite the II Timothy passage. How come? Does that mean the Formula and the other confessions had a lower view of Scripture than we have, that they would support the position of those Lutherans with whom we are not in fellowship?

Not at all! The inspiration of the Scripture was not in dispute at that time, as it is today. The Formula simply takes it for granted. This is clear from the way in which it quotes II Timothy 3:16 in the article on

Election (page 1067), stating: “Since all Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is to serve, not for cherishing security and impenitence, but for reproof,...” There is no question that the Formula accepts the Scripture as inspired of God.

The Scripture Is God’s Word

The Formula, therefore, has the same lofty opinion of God’s Word that we have, and the same spirit breathes in its statements as breathes in ours. This is clear from the position the Formula ascribes to the Word in determining doctrine.

The first paragraph in the introduction to the Epitome immediately lays it on the line: “We believe, teach and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with all teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written in Psalm 119:105: ‘Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.’ And St Paul: ‘Though an angel from heaven preach any other Gospel unto you, let him be accursed,’ Galatians 1:8.” (778:1) The opening section of the Thorough Declaration puts it this way: “First, then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged.” (851:3) Note the spirit of the Formula: it looks upon the Scripture as “the sole rule and standard,” “the only true standard.” It states that all doctrines and all teachers are to be judged by whether they agree with that Word or do not. Note, too, that the Formula accepts both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Though the Formula distinguishes between Law and Gospel, and the Old Testament Church and the New Testament Church, yet for the Formula the Old Testament and New Testament are both God’s Word, the one not inferior to the other. The whole Bible is the standard.

But the spirit of a document often reveals itself more clearly in the incidental statements of a document than in its direct statements. Lutherans have been known to speak loftily of the inspiration of Scripture, and then promptly undermine their words by tearing the Scripture apart with the tools of the higher criticism. In the case of the Formula the incidental remarks fully uphold the explicit statements with which both the Epitome and the Thorough Declaration open.

Let the truths of the following statements move you to trust what the Formula has to say. “God’s Word is not false, and does not deceive.” (811:13) “God’s Word is not false, nor does it lie.” (1005:96) “The matchless authority of God’s Word.” (847:4) “We lay down God’s Word, the eternal truth, as the foundation.” (855:13) “The true, firm ground of the holy divine Scriptures.” (857:17) “When the Word of God is preached purely and truly, ... God is certainly present.” (903:55) Though the Formula sharply distinguishes between the Law and the Gospel, yet it recognizes both as God’s Word: “We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence as an especially brilliant light, by which, according to the admonition of St. Paul, the Word of God is rightly divided.” (801:2) If one takes to heart the incidental statements of the Formula, there can be no room for Gospel reductionism or antinomianism or for making the Scripture the norm only in matters of faith and life, but not in every thing that it states, incidentally or otherwise, historical or geographical. The Formula talks the same language we Wisconsin Synod Lutherans do, even though it was originally written in Germany in 1577.

The Scripture’s Relation to the Confessions

That Scripture is the Formula’s base also becomes clear when we ask what the Formula teaches about the relation between the Scripture and the confessional writings. At times it almost seems as though the Formula places them on the same level. If that were the case, then everything we have said so far would be suspect. Speaking of the doctrines proposed by various factions and sects, the Formula reminds the reader: “These and like articles, one and all, with what pertains to them and follows from them, we reject and condemn as wrong, false, heretical, and contrary to the Word of God, the three Creeds, the Augsburg Confession and Apology, the

Smalcald Articles, and the Catechisms of Luther. Of these articles all godly Christians should and ought to beware, as much as the welfare and salvation of their souls is dear to them.” (1103:39) Why? Because the confessions say so? Or, because the confessions and the Scriptures say so? Then, we would indeed be placing the confessions on par with Scripture. This, however, would be a misinterpretation of the Formula.

With regard to this the Formula clearly states its position in its opening words: “Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, which are to show in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.” (777:2) Enlarging on this the Epitome continues: “The other symbols and writings cited are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and by what arguments the dogmas conflicting with the Holy Scripture were rejected and condemned.” (779:8)

That’s also why we are not bound to accept every single statement in the confessions or every single exegesis it offers. Scripture is the judge, the confessions are witnesses. Accepting them does not force us to accept and defend a statement such as the following in Article I: Of Original Sin: “As when a magnet is smeared with garlic juice, its natural power is not thereby removed, but only impeded.” (783:15; 865:22) As a comparison the statement is fine, but as a fact it lacks credibility.

What About Luther?

The Formula also quotes writings outside the confessions, especially the writings of Luther. I’m sure Luther, if he had been around to read it, would have blushed and used a red pencil when the Formula said about him: “Dr. Luther, the hero illumined with unparalleled and most excellent gifts of the Holy Ghost.” (981:28) By comparison, the statement on page 853:9 would have pleased him a great deal more: “In the manner and as far as Dr. Luther himself in the Latin preface to his published works has given necessary and Christian admonition concerning his writings, and has expressly drawn this distinction, namely, that the Word of God alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything should be subjected.” He would approve what the authors of the Formula did when on pages 783:20, 791:18, and 915:89 they clarified some of his statements and told the readers what he really meant.

The confessions and Luther may be used as witnesses, but the Scripture is decisive. That’s the spirit of the Formula.

How the Formula Employs the Scripture

We can also learn a great deal from the Formula for our ministry and congregational work, when we observe how it employs and uses the Scripture. The Formula is aware of the fact that Scripture at times does use symbolic language. However, the principle that it follows is to take the words of Scripture as they stand, unless the passage itself indicates that it is to be understood symbolically. This principle becomes particularly evident when the Formula treats the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. There it states: “We believe, teach, and confess that the words of the testament of Christ are not to be understood otherwise than as they read, according to the letter,...” (811:7) The authors of the Formula came to this conviction not because that is how they personally preferred to look at the texts treating of the Lord’s Supper, but because Scripture compelled them to do so. Listen to their words: “Now, all the circumstances of the institution of the Holy Supper testify that these words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which in themselves are simple, plain, clear, firm and indubitable, cannot and must not be understood otherwise than in their usual, proper, and common signification. For since Christ gives this command at the table and at supper, there is indeed no doubt that He speaks of real, natural bread and of natural wine, also of oral eating and drinking, so that there can be no metaphor, that is, a change of meaning,

in the word bread, as though the body of Christ were a spiritual bread or a spiritual food of souls. Likewise, also Christ Himself takes care that there be no metonymy either, that is, that in the same manner there be no change of meaning in the word body, and that He does not speak concerning a sign of His body, or concerning an emblem (a symbol) or figurative body, or concerning the virtue of His body and the benefits which He has earned by the sacrifice of His body (for us), but of His true essential body, which He delivered into death for us, and of His true, essential blood, which He shed for us on the tree of the cross for the remission of sins.... He uses not allegorical, but entirely proper, simple, indubitable, and clear words; and in order that no misunderstanding can occur, He explains them more clearly with the words: Given for you, shed for you.” (989:48,49; 991:50) The principle is clear: take the words of Scripture as they stand, unless the context requires otherwise.

The Formula also does not settle for what we might call the general impression that Scripture gives on a cursory reading. It insists on examining it in detail, and is then guided by what those details say. This becomes particularly evident in its treatment of the article on the Righteousness of Faith. “This is the meaning of the Apostle Paul when in this article he urges so diligently and zealously the *particulas exclusivas*, that is, the words, by which works are excluded from the article of justification: by grace, without merit, without works, not of works. These *exclusivae* are all comprised in the expression: By faith alone in Christ we are justified before God and saved.” (927:36) The spirit of the Formula is to take a close look at each and every word; there is nothing insignificant in the Scripture.

In employing Scripture as standard and norm, the Formula also has Scripture define the theological words which it employs. This is particularly necessary in settling controversies, and in this the Formula is a marvelous example. This is true exegesis. Thus, concerning the word “justify,” the Formula indicates how it arrived at the proper meaning when it states: “We believe, teach, and confess that according to the use of Holy Scripture the word *justify* means in this article, to absolve, that is to declare free from sins. Proverbs 17:18: He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the righteous, even they both are abomination to the Lord. Also Romans 8:33: Who shall say anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. “ (793:7)

The Formula examines the Scripture very closely to determine just how a word is used. Thus, it recognizes that the word “Gospel” is used in two different senses in the Scripture. “Now, when we consider this dissent (concerning Law and Gospel) aright, it has been caused chiefly by this, that the term Gospel is not always employed and understood in one and the same sense, but in two ways, in the Holy Scriptures, as also by ancient and modern church teachers. For sometimes it is employed so that there is understood by it the entire doctrine of Christ, our Lord, which He proclaimed in His ministry upon earth, and commanded to be proclaimed in the New Testament, and hence comprised in it the explanation of the Law and the proclamation of the favor and grace of God, His heavenly Father, as it is written in Mark 1:1: The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And shortly afterwards the chief heads are stated: repentance and forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, the term Gospel is employed in another, namely, in its proper sense, by which it comprises not the preaching of repentance, but only the preaching of the grace of God, as follows directly afterwards, Mark 1:15, where Christ says: Repent, and believe the Gospel.” (953:3,4,6) On the same page the Formula also calls attention to the fact that the word “repentance” is also used in a double sense in Scripture. (953:7) It is evident on every page that the Formula is concerned about remaining true to Scripture in every detail.

No More Than What Scripture Says

Perhaps nowhere does this become quite as apparent as when the Formula treats the doctrine of Election. The Formula repeats exactly what Scripture states, and is not willing to go a step beyond. Reason and philosophy are totally ruled out.

We quote: “For the doctrine concerning this article, if taught from, and according to, the pattern of the divine Word, neither can nor should be regarded as useless or unnecessary, much less as offensive or injurious, because the Holy Scriptures not only in but one place and incidentally, but in many places, thoroughly treat and urge (explain) the same.” (1063:2) Enlarging on this, the Formula turns to Luther: “With this revealed will of

God we should concern our selves, follow and be diligently engaged upon it, because through the Word, whereby He calls us, the Holy Ghost bestows grace, power, and ability to this end, and should not attempt to sound the abyss of God's hidden predestination, as it is written in Luke 13:24, where one asks: Lord, are there few that be saved? and Christ answers: Strive to enter in at the strait gate. Accordingly, Luther says in the Preface to the Epistle to the Romans: Follow the Epistle to the Romans in its order, concern yourself first with Christ and His Gospel, that you may recognize your sins and His grace; next, that you contend with sin, as Paul teaches from the first to the eighth. chapter; then, when in the eighth chapter you mitt come into (will have been exercised by) temptation under the cross and afflictions, this will teach you in the sixth, tenth, and eleventh chapters how consolatory predestination is, etc." (1073:33) The Formula does not advocate a piecemeal use of the Scripture, but suggests that, in addition to examining it minutely word by word, we also follow the Scripture in the way it develops and presents the doctrine. The more we read the Formula the more amazed we become at its full grasp of, and dedication to, Scripture and realize more and more that being truly Lutheran means being truly Scriptural.

Before we turn from a consideration of the Formula and its relation to Scripture, we want to emphasize once more that the Formula is silent where Scripture is silent. Again we turn to the article on Election: "But a distinction must be observed with especial care between that which is expressly revealed concerning it in God's Word, and what is not revealed. For, in addition to what has been revealed in Christ concerning this, of which we have hitherto spoken, God has still kept secret and concealed much concerning this mystery, and reserved it for His wisdom and knowledge alone, which we should not investigate, nor should we indulge our thoughts in this matter, nor draw conclusions, nor inquire curiously, but should adhere entirely to the revealed Word. This admonition is most urgently needed." (1081:52) We agree.

Today the Word is downgraded in many quarters, not only in that it is not accepted as God's inspired Word, but in the sense that men seek to get along without the Word and claim that the Spirit of God will come to man directly. Though the Formula does not mention the Charismatics by name, the following words are certainly applicable: "Also, we reject and condemn the error of the Enthusiasts, who imagine that God without means, without the hearing of God's Word, also without the use of the holy Sacraments, draws men to Himself, and enlightens, justifies, and saves them. Enthusiasts we call those who expect the heavenly illumination of the Spirit without the preaching of God's Word." (789:13) If written today, the Formula would speak out even more strongly. The revealed Word is committed to us in the Holy Scripture. We expect no further revelation until the coming of the Son of Man.

To summarize this section, we turn again to the introduction to the Epitome. With the authors of the Formula we hold: "The Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule, and standard, according to which, as the only test-stone, all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong." (779:7)

The concern of the Formula with the Scripture, however, is far from being a pedantic, intellectual exercise. If this were all, it would leave us untouched and unsaved. A true understanding of the Formula and an appreciation of it can only be achieved if we note that: Christ is its center. That's the SOLA GRATIA.

II. CHRIST - ITS CENTER

Both the Old Testament and the New center in Christ our Savior. The Epistle to the Hebrews makes Christ the true revelation of God, stating: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." This does not set the Scripture aside, for Christ said to His apostles: "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." And again: "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of Me." For the Formula to reflect the Scripture faithfully, it must begin and end with Jesus Christ.

Our age needs this kind of testimony, for it attacks not only the Scripture, but particularly attacks Christ, of whom the Scripture testifies. The historical-critical method, when carried to its logical conclusion, denies the deity of Christ, the virgin birth of Christ, the redemption through Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the ruling of Christ, and the coming again of Christ, and quietly states that Jesus' bones still lie in some nameless grave. It looks upon the accounts of the New Testament as pure speculation on the part of the Early Church. The two - Scripture and Christ - will intimately bound together, and the Formula as a true confession to the truth keeps them together.

The following articles deal totally with Christ: Article VII: Of the Holy Supper, Article VIII: Of the Person of Christ, Article IX: Of Christ's Descent to Hell. Christ is also the core of every one of the other articles.

Article I: Of Original Sin is intimately connected with Christ in two ways. The Formula states: "This hereditary evil is so great and horrible that only for the sake of the Lord Christ it can be covered and forgiven before God in the baptized and believing." (863:14) The doctrine of Original Sin teaches that we need Christ. Furthermore, original sin and the nature of man dare not be confused or presented as being identical, for this would be contrary to everything that Scripture reveals about Christ. The Formula: "Now, if there were no distinction between the nature or essence of corrupt man and original sin, it must follow that Christ either did not assume our nature, because He did not assume sin, or that, because He assumed our nature, He also assumed sin; both of which ideas are contrary to the Scriptures." (873:44) Keeping Christ at the very center of Scripture, our teaching on original sin will also be Scriptural and will direct us to our salvation.

Article II: Of Free Will teaches that we can in no way contribute anything to our salvation or be active in choosing Christ, despite the preaching of today's Evangelicals. After citing all the former confessions on this point, the Formula summarizes them, saying: "These testimonies state that by our own powers we cannot come to Christ, but God must give us His Holy Ghost, by whom we are enlightened, sanctified, and thus brought to Christ through faith, and kept with Him; and no mention is made either of our will or cooperation." (897:42) False, unscriptural teaching concerning man's will undermines both what Scripture teaches concerning the Holy Spirit and what it teaches concerning Christ. Again, by teaching correctly concerning our human will the Formula glorifies Christ Jesus. It is Christ centered.

If we took Christ out of Article III: Righteousness of Faith Before God, there would be nothing left of the article, and we would forever be children of wrath. We need quote only one paragraph: "Against both the errors just recounted, we unanimously believe, teach, and confess that Christ is our righteousness neither according to the divine nature alone nor according to the human nature alone, but that it is the entire Christ according to both natures, in His obedience alone, which as God and man He rendered to the Father even unto death, and hereby merited for us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life as it is written: As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous, Romans 5:19." (793:3)

Article IV: Of Good Works discusses two opposing views that became current in the church, namely, that "good works are necessary for salvation," or that "it is impossible to be saved without good works," and the other, that "good works are injurious to salvation." The authors of the Formula did not consider the answering of this question as being just a fight about words and their meaning, but felt compelled to present the Scripture answer "in order that the merit of Christ, our Savior, be not diminished, and the promise of salvation may be and remain firm and certain to believers." (939:2) Again the Formula is centered on Christ Jesus and the salvation we have through Him alone.

The same must be said of Article V: Of the Law and the Gospel, that is, concerning the proper distinction between the two. Listen as the Formula states: "Accordingly we reject and regard as incorrect and injurious the dogma that the Gospel is properly a preaching of repentance or reproof, and not alone a preaching of grace; for thereby the Gospel is again converted into a doctrine of the Law, the merit of Christ and Holy Scripture are obscured, Christians robbed of true consolation, and the door is opened again to the errors and superstitions of the Papacy." (805:11)

Article VI: Of the Third Use of God's Law gave the authors of the Formula a wonderful opportunity to nail down the Scripture truth that "the truly believing and truly converted to God and justified Christians are liberated and made free from the curse of tike Law" and that "the Law cannot burden with its curse those who have been reconciled to God through Christ." (963:4,5) Yet the Christian, too, needs the preaching of the Law because his old Adam clings to him and because, converted by the Spirit, he wishes to live "according to the immutable will of God comprised in the Law." (967:17) He can do the latter only because he is in Christ.

The longer the Lutheran Church lived apart from Roman Catholicism, the more ceremonies and rites were laid aside. When Roman Catholic Charles V temporarily gained power over the Lutherans, the Interims insisted that certain, if not all, rites that had been set aside be reinstated. When Melancthon and others were ready to go along, this became a matter of dispute. Was it really something to get hot and bothered about? Christ was involved. The Formula put it this way: "For here it is no longer a question concerning external matters of indifference, which in their nature and essence are and remain of themselves free, and accordingly can admit of no command or prohibition that they be employed or omitted; but it is a question, in the first place, concerning the eminent article of our Christian faith, as the apostle testifies, that the truth of the Gospel might continue, which is obscured and perverted by such compulsion or command, because such adiaphora are then either publicly required for the sanction of false doctrine, superstition, and idolatry, and for the suppression of pure doctrine and Christian liberty, or at least are abused for this purpose by the adversaries, and are thus viewed." (1057:14)

Predestination is often looked upon as an autocratic decision and choice of God, having nothing to do with Christ. The opposite is true. Christ is the key to our rejoicing in our election, as Article XI: Of God's Eternal Election points out: "A Christian should occupy himself in meditation with the article concerning the eternal election of God, as it has been revealed in God's Word, which presents to us Christ as the Book of Life, which He opens and reveals to us by the preaching of the holy Gospel, as it is written in Romans 8:30: Whom He did predestinate, them He also called. In Him we are to seek the eternal election of the Father, who has determined in His eternal divine counsel that He would save no one except those who know His Son Christ and truly believe on Him." (835:13) Also: "The eternal election of God, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps, and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto." (1065:8) The Formula is Christ-centered in its approach, just as the Scripture is.

The final article of the Formula, Article XII: Of Other Factions and Sects, in treating the errors of the Anabaptists, Schwenkfeldians, New Arians, and Anti-Trinitarians, speaks of Christ in practically every paragraph. We must do the same when we write about the Mormons, the Moonies, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the many other cults on the present scene. Their target is always Jesus Christ. If we learn to recognize that, we have learned a great deal from the Formula.

Sola Gratia - Christ - is the only answer to our spiritual need, our only assurance of life everlasting.

I said "our." Yes, it involves my salvation and the salvation of every other pastor and teacher present here. But it also involves the salvation of every lay member present at this convention and belonging to our churches. That brings us to the third section, demonstrating that the Formula is not merely a document meant for the pastor's office. It is meant for the dining room table and offers all pastors, professors, teachers, and laymen a veritable feast. The Reformation SOLA FIDE was the faith in Christ worked in the hearts of the believers by the Holy Spirit of God. Imbued with this, the Formula soon convinces us that God's people are its concern.

III. GOD'S PEOPLE - ITS CONCERN

Perhaps you're thinking that the writers of the Formula certainly didn't have you in mind. This is 1978. That was 1577. You're right and you're wrong. They didn't know you personally, but they were concerned about you. Listen to their words: "In order that the truth may be preserved the more distinctly and clearly, and be distinguished from all errors, and that nothing be hidden and concealed under ordinary terms (that is, general

words and phrases), we have clearly and expressly declared ourselves to one another concerning the chief and most important articles, taken one by one, which at the present time have come into controversy, so that there might be a public, definite testimony, not only for those now living, but also for our posterity, what is and should remain the unanimous understanding and judgment of our churches in reference to the articles in controversy.” (857:16)

They were concerned not only about the pastors and theologians, but especially about the laity. Here’s how they put it: “Such matters concern also the laity and the salvation of their souls.” (777:5) Reading the Formula, we soon realize that the writers constantly had the members of their churches in mind. Here’s a sample: “To explain this controversy, and by God’s grace finally to settle it, we present to the Christian reader this simple statement regarding the matter in conformity with the Word of God.” (1053:4) Such concern sets this confession apart from all the others.

Pastors

Concern for God’s people in the congregations also shows itself in some words directed expressly to the pastors in their calling, something all of us must take to heart, also editors. Pastors are reminded of their responsibility when the Formula states: “We believe, teach, and confess also that when a confession of the heavenly truth is required, when the enemies of God’s Word desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire congregation of God, yea, every Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word, as the leaders of the congregation of God, are bound by God’s Word to confess freely and openly the godly doctrine, and what belongs to the whole of pure religion, not only in words, but also in works and with deeds.” (1055:10) Thorough study of the Scripture is part of their responsibility to God’s people, as the authors of the Formula point out: “For this reason, too, the Church of God will never be helped to permanent peace in this controversy, but the dissension will rather be strengthened and kept up, if the ministers of the Church remain in doubt as to whether original sin is a substance or an *accidens*, and whether it is rightly and properly named thus.” (879:58) They are also to instruct their churches: “Hence, if the churches and schools are to be thoroughly relieved of this scandalous and very mischievous controversy, it is necessary that each and ever one be properly instructed concerning this matter.” (879:59) And then, what seems to me to be a good bit of advise even in our day, a day of compulsory education: “But as to the Latin terms, *substantia* and *accidens*, because they are not words of Holy Scripture, and besides unknown to the ordinary man, they should not be used in sermons before ordinary, uninstructed people, but simple people should be spared them.” (785:23) Amen!

God’s People

Laymen, pastors, and teachers reading the Formula will soon learn to know a great deal about themselves. They will learn that though they are burdened with original sin they are still creatures of God. Though the Formula nowhere discusses the theory of evolution, yet it gives the proper answer when it states that “man’s nature ... even after the Fall is and remains a creature of God.” (779:2)

At the same time the Formula points out man’s great need in the article on original sin: “It is true that Christians should regard and recognize as sin not only the actual transgressions of God’s commandments; but also that the horrible, dreadful hereditary malady by which the entire nature is corrupted should above all things be regarded and recognized as sin indeed, yes, as the chief sin, which is a root and fountainhead of all actual sins.” (861:5) Man can do nothing to save himself; that’s the message of Scripture and of the Formula.

But neither the Scripture nor the Formula stop there. It directs man to Christ. Speaking of the obedience of Christ, the Formula states: “Therefore the righteousness which is imputed to faith or to the believer out of pure grace is the obedience, suffering, and resurrection of Christ, since He has made satisfaction for us to the Law, and paid for our sins. For since Christ is not man alone, but God and man in one undivided person, He was as little subject to the Law, because He is the Lord of the Law, as He had to suffer and die as far as His person is concerned. For this reason, then, His obedience, not only in suffering and dying, but also in this, that He in our

stead was voluntarily made under the Law, and fulfilled it by this obedience, is imputed to us for righteousness, so that, on account of this complete obedience, which He rendered His heavenly Father for us, by doing and suffering, in living and dying, God forgives our sins, regards us as godly and righteous, and eternally saves us. This righteousness is offered us by the Holy Ghost through the Gospel and in the Sacraments, and is applied, appropriated, and received through faith, whence believers have reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, the grace of God, sonship, and heirship of eternal life.” (919:14,15,16) This is what the Formula emphasizes and thereby displays its concern for God’s people and their eternal future, and not only for peace and concord on earth.

The Response of God’s People

The Formula therefore repeatedly encourages God’s people to hear and read the Word and to receive the Sacraments. It says: “And after God through the Holy Ghost in Baptism has kindled and effected a beginning of the true knowledge of God and faith, we should pray Him without ceasing that through the same Spirit and His grace, by means of the daily exercise of reading and practicing God’s Word, He would preserve in us faith and His heavenly gifts, strengthen us from day to day, and keep us to the end. For unless God Himself be our schoolmaster, we can study and learn nothing that is acceptable to Him and salutary to ourselves and others.” (887:16) And again: “Now, all who wish to be saved ought to hear this preaching of God’s Word. For the preaching and hearing of God’s Word are instruments of the Holy Ghost, by, with, and through which He desires to work efficaciously, and to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to do.” (901:52)

God’s people will also be careful to read, study, and discuss confessions such as the Formula. To protect themselves and their loved ones from false doctrine, they must be in a position to make valid judgments. This is why the Formula was written. “Necessity, therefore, requires us to explain these controverted articles according to God’s Word and approved writings, so that every one who has Christian understanding can notice which opinion concerning the matters in controversy accords with God’s Word and the Christian Augsburg Confession, and which does not. And sincere Christians who have the truth at heart may guard and protect themselves against the errors and corruptions that have arisen.” (849:10) If this was necessary then, it is even more necessary today. Christians “must for their salvation distinguish between pure and false doctrine.” (853:8) Putting it another way, the Formula reminds pastors that “faithful shepherds, as Luther says, should do both, namely, feed or nourish the lambs and resist the wolves, so that the sheep may flee from strange voices, John 10:12....” (856:14)

The Formula is also totally conscious of the rights of God’s people, something that church organizations at times are liable to forget. In Article X: Of Church Rites, the Formula states: “We believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change... ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God. Nevertheless, that herein all frivolity and offense should be avoided, and especial care should be taken to exercise forbearance towards the weak in faith, I Corinthians 8:9; Romans 14:13.” (829:4,5) And the Formula rejects as wrong and contrary to God’s Word, “When ... ceremonies, ordinances, and institutions are violently forced upon the congregation of God as necessary, contrary to its Christian liberty which it has in external things.” (831:10) It is remarkable how people-conscious the Formula is.

CONCLUSION

When you have finished your daily Bible reading, there is perhaps no better document to read - slowly, not rapidly - than the Formula of Concord. It will lead you into the Scripture; it will bring you to the feet of your Lord Jesus; it will unite you with men and women who are concerned about your faith and salvation even as they are concerned about their own. Though it does not specifically mention all the errors we face in our own day, it does give us the wherewithall to meet and overcome these errors as it directs us to the Scriptures and to Christ.

Studying it will give us a good basis on which to decide and practice our church fellowship. It will teach us to distinguish between that which must be taken into consideration and that which can safely be ignored. For example, it states: “Thus... churches will not condemn one another because of dissimilarity of ceremonies, when, in Christian liberty, one has less or more of them, provided they are otherwise agreed with one another in the doctrine and all its articles, also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: ‘Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in the faith.’” (1063:31)

The Formula will unite us with those who accept the doctrines of God’s Word as set forth there. But it will also separate us from those who do not. The Formula recognizes this when it states: “It is a grave matter wanting to separate one’s self from so many lands and nations, and to profess a separate doctrine; but here stands God’s command, that every one should beware and not agree with those who maintain false doctrine, or who think of supporting it by means of cruelty.” (1061:23) This the Formula quoted from the Smalcald Articles.

We close with the prayer with which the Epitome closes: “May Almighty God and the Father of our Lord Jesus grant the grace of His Holy Ghost that we all may be one in Him, and constantly abide in this Christian unity, which is well pleasing to Him! Amen!” (837:23)