

Appreciate the Confessions! A Sermon Study on 2 Timothy 1:13

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[This is the first in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

“We believe, teach, and confess.” With these words, used at the beginning of and throughout the Formula of Concord, the post-Reformation fathers introduced the positive presentations of the doctrines treated in the various articles of this Lutheran symbol. The articles of the Augsburg Confession use the simple formula “they teach,” the “they” referring to “Our churches,” spoken of in the first article. In both confessions the *Affirmativa* are followed by the *Negativa*, introduced in the Augsburg Confession with “they condemn” and in the Formula of Concord with “we condemn.”

A superficial reader of these words might get the impression that what is stated in the various articles of these confessions is nothing more than the faith and conviction of their authors and thus has no more weight and authority than what is similarly asserted by people other than Lutherans.

This can, however, only be the conclusion drawn by a careless, superficial reader and is certainly not supported, but clearly refuted by what the authors of these and the other Lutheran confessions themselves say. The Introduction to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord has the superscription: “Of the Summary, Content, Rule, and Standard, according to which all dogmas should be judged, and the erroneous teachings (controversies) that have occurred should be decided and explained in a Christian way” (*Concordia Triglotta* [St. Louis, 1921] p 777). That with this statement and the entire confession that follows they had not the least intention of binding consciences to the words and opinions of men, is clear from its very first words: “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 New Testament alone” (*Trig.*, p 777,1). The Formula adds the significant remark: “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” (*Trig.*, p 777,2). The same point is made even more emphatically farther on in this introduction to the Epitome: “In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved, and 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” (*Trig.*, p 779,7).

Yet, saying this, the authors of the Formula of Concord by no means wanted it to be inferred that what is contained in this and the other Lutheran confessions is a take-it-or-leave-it matter. Rather is their position with regard to these confessions what they state in the Introduction to the Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord: “But what has thus far been said concerning the summary of our Christian doctrine is intended to mean only this, that we should have a unanimously accepted, definite, common form of doctrine, which all our evangelical churches together and in common confess, from and according to which, *because it has been derived from God's Word* (italics ours), all other writings should be judged and adjusted as to how far they are to be approved and accepted” (*Trig.*, p 855,10). A similar statement occurs in the Preface (to the Emperor Charles V) of the Augsburg Confession: “We offer, in this matter of religion, the Confession of our preachers and of ourselves, showing what manner of *doctrine from the Holy Scriptures and the pure Word of God* (italics ours) has been up to this time set forth in our lands, dukedoms, and cities, and taught in our churches” (*Trig.*, p 39,8).

Such teaching puts our Lutheran Confessions into proper perspective. It points up the urgent need and importance, yes, binding nature of the confessions in the life of the church, but properly places them under the

Scriptures, the inspired Word of God, and the real norm according to which all that is taught and preached in the church must be evaluated and judged. And is not this how the Scriptures themselves instruct us? Our text, for the first of a series of sermon studies in observance of the four hundredth anniversary of the Formula of Concord, is a good example of this: “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus,” 2 Timothy 1:13.

Second Timothy is the last epistle of the Apostle Paul that we know of. At the time of its writing he was experiencing his second Roman imprisonment, this time, unlike the first, not with freedom of movement, but as a prisoner in chains (2 Tm 1:8, 16). What is more, while during the former imprisonment he was looking forward to being acquitted, he now looks forward to his death. “For,” he writes, “I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand” (2 Tm 4:6). Rightly, therefore, has this letter to Timothy been called the testament of the dying apostle to his spiritual son and the entire church. And so, while it contains some pastoral and doctrinal sections, it is largely personal.

Timothy of Lystra in Lycaonia, son of a Greek father, who had learned the Holy Scriptures in his childhood from his pious Jewish mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois (2 Tm 1:5; 3:15), seems to have been converted to Christianity by Paul during his first visit in Galatia. When on his second missionary journey Paul returned to Lystra and heard such good reports about this young man from the brethren there, he chose Timothy to join him in his missionary work (Ac 16:2f). From that time on Timothy was practically a constant companion of Paul and one of his most intimate friends, and thus addressed by Paul as “my dearly beloved son” (2 Tm 1:2).

While the letter reveals other, also personal, reasons for its being written, among them Paul’s need of “the cloak I left at Troas,” which Paul requested Timothy to bring when he came (2 Tm 4:13), there is evident in the letter a special concern for the young pastor, confronted as he was by the false teachers of the day, some of whom Paul even mentions by name (2 Tm 1:16; 2:17). Thus it comes as no surprise that Paul early in the letter writes the words which make up our text: “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus” (NIV).

We notice that there is in this injunction no connective linking it with what precedes. Yet it is by no means an unrelated thought. Recalling in verse 5, also for Timothy’s benefit, the genuine (*ἀνυποκρίτου*, unhypocritical) faith with which Timothy like his grandmother and mother has been blessed, Paul reminds him to “fan into flame” (NIV) the gift of God’s grace (*χάρισμα*). Here Paul no doubt was not only thinking of Timothy’s faith, but of all his rich God-given endowments for the ministry of the Word: his knowledge of the Scriptures (2 Tm 3:15), his ability and willingness to teach, his ability also for administering the pastoral office, which had been entrusted to him by the laying on of hands. Like Paul, Timothy had also received from God “not...the spirit of fear; but of power, of love, and of a sound mind” (v 7) for a fearless, love-motivated, confident proclamation of the gospel, yes, of the whole counsel of God.

Was Timothy, confronted as he was with false teachers and outright opponents of the truth and its witnesses, showing signs of becoming discouraged and of yielding to the pressure, at least to the extent of not using his gifts and abilities to the full? At any rate, Paul felt the need to encourage and admonish his young understudy and so continues, tying this up by means of “therefore” (*οὖν*) with what preceded: “be not thou, therefore, ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, and of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God” (v 8). Taking off from this last phrase Paul presents the only God-pleasing and certainly effective incentive for doing what he had just urged upon Timothy: the grace of God who saved us and called us in Christ Jesus before the world began. Now follows the continuation of the admonition of verse 8, in the verse of our text.

Not only is Timothy not to be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, he is also to hold fast to it. The word *ἔχε* (pres. imp. of *ἔχω*) offers no difficulty. It is most commonly used in the sense of holding or possessing something or someone, and this is certainly also included in its use in our text. Timothy really had that about which the apostle is speaking. Obviously, however, the *ἔχε* here has the added meaning of keeping (NIV “keep”), preserving or holding so as not to lose (KJV “hold fast”). Significant is also the present tense which serves to strengthen the idea of keeping and preserving.

We next look at the words *ὑγιαίνοντων λόγων*, translated simply “sound words” by the KJV, RSV, NASB, “sound teaching” by NEB and NIV. Considering the great variety of ways *λόγος* is used, the context in each case determining the precise meaning, and Paul’s use of it elsewhere, it here no doubt refers to the content of the “words,” the teaching or doctrine. Paul’s concern is that this teaching or doctrine ever be *ὑγιαίνων*. *ὑγιαίνω* means “to be in good health, healthy” or “sound” in body. In this sense it is used only twice in the New Testament. Paul in his pastoral epistles uses it with reference to Christian teaching. In fact, in all other places he uses it with the word *διδασκαλία* (1 Tm 1:10; 2 Tm 4:3; Tt 1:9; 2:1). The idea, however, is not that such teaching makes whole, or has as its goal the health of the soul. Rather does it describe teaching that is sound or correct. In the same way Paul uses also the adjective *ὑγιής* (Tt 2:8). Paul had every reason to be concerned about this, finding it necessary not only in this letter and the other pastoral letters, but in all his epistles to warn against false doctrine and the adulteration of the truth. Unique in this connection is in our passage the word *ὑποτύπωσιν*, preceding and obviously modifying *ὑγιαίνοντων λόγων*. This word, placed here at the head of the sentence for emphasis, is used in the New Testament only by Paul, and that only two times, besides our passage also 1 Timothy 1:16. A compound made up of the preposition *ὑπό* and the noun *τύπος*, it can mean “an example” or “pattern” placed before or over one, under which one belongs, to which he is to submit or with which he is to comply. Thus Paul pictures himself (1 Tm 1:16) as an example or pattern of God for all times, a pattern of God’s gracious way of dealing with sinners, “to show by the example of my conversion that the same grace which I had obtained would not be wanting also to those who should hereafter believe” (Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p 645). As to its specific meaning in our text, opinions differ. A number of lexicons opt for the meaning “sketch” or “outline” (Kittel, Moulton and Milligan, Liddell and Scott). Cremer-Koegel (*Biblisch-theologisches Woerterbuch der Neutestamentlichen Graezitaet*, Gotha, 1911, p 1079) says its use here is as “Bild, und zwar nicht eigentlich Vorbild...sondern Abbild” (not “type” but “copy”). Thayer suggests “standard.” Paul E. Kretzmann (*Popular Commentary of the Bible*, New Testament, Vol. II, [St. Louis] p 402) writes: “It seems that he had reference to some summary or outline of the Gospel-truth which he has transmitted to his pupil, a teaching of wholesome words, entirely free from the morbid outgrowth which the errorists showed.” Calvin may well have come closest to Paul’s intended meaning when he says: “I had rather think that Paul commands Timothy to hold fast the doctrine which he had learned, not only as to substance, but as to the very form of expression...not that we ought to be very scrupulous about the words, but because to misrepresent doctrine, even in the smallest degree, is exceedingly injurious” (Calvin, *ad loc.*). Similarly Lenski understands Paul to say that Timothy should “not only cling to the substance but also to use the very form of expression, not slavishly, in parrot fashion, but using it as a safe model” (Lenski, *ad loc.*). One thing ought to be very clear, Paul is by no means intending to tone down, but rather to sharpen his injunction to Timothy to hold fast to, keep, preserve sound Christian teaching.

Applying this to doctrinal statements or confessions of faith, it certainly means that, while truths may be expressed in more than one way, the way of expressing them, down to the very words, must not leave room for error to creep in or insinuate itself. It must in fact even include express refutation of and rejection of error. In short, it must state the truth in unmistakably clear and correct form. Alas, many a doctrinal presentation, also such intended to be the basis for establishing church fellowship, has fallen far short of this—with disastrous results. This, however, is one of the many things in which our Lutheran Confessions excel, so also the Formula of Concord, a reason in itself why we ought to appreciate them highly.

When Paul now continues “which thou hast heard of me,” he is not referring to himself as an example of that which he is asking Timothy to do. In this case he would have said “which you see in me.” Besides, the relative *ὃν* cannot have as antecedent *ὑποτύπωσιν*, but points back to the “sound words.” The genitive can be explained either by the fact that *ἀκούω* at times takes its object in that case, or that its case is arrived at by attraction to the genitive *λόγων*. Paul no doubt had used every available opportunity to instruct and indoctrinate his understudies and associates, thus also Timothy. Moreover, he could without being presumptuous point to and speak of his teachings as sound and correct. For, contrary to the apparent charge of the Judaizers that he had not received his doctrine or gospel directly from Christ as the other apostles, he could say: “For also I did not

receive it from men, neither was I taught it, but (I received it) by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Ga 1:11). Timothy also had learned to recognize and accept Paul’s teaching as divinely authoritative and true.

Our text concludes: “In faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” These words are taken by some to belong to verse 14, a variant punctuation having no mark at the end of verse 13. Others supply a word before this phrase, so NEB “living by the faith and love which are ours in Christ Jesus.” Others understand it as modifying ἡκουσας. It seems best, however, to tie these words up with ἔχε, thus designating the manner in which this holding fast or keeping is to be done, at the same time presenting the motive for doing it. Timothy was asked to hold fast to the form of sound words with the conviction of faith that what he had learned from the Scriptures and had been taught by Paul was the very truth, for which he like Paul ought to be ready to suffer and if need be lay down his life, faith also, that this truth alone, without any adulteration whatever, would serve the purpose of his calling and ministry, the saving of souls. In this Timothy, too, was to be motivated by love, love for Christ, who had saved and called him, who had also privileged him to join Paul in the glorious task of gathering in the Lord’s harvest of souls, a love for Christ, which would also cause him even to dread the thought of grieving his Savior by defecting from or giving up any part of the truth. “Which is in Christ Jesus” very likely is to be taken with both πίστει and ἀγάπῃ, since the two are treated as a unit with one preposition. Both, Timothy’s faith and love, were tied up with Christ, were in fact grounded in Him and completely dependent on Him. The motivation and the strength for holding fast to the form of sound words are derived from Christ who said, “Without me ye can do nothing” (Jn 15:5), and concerning whom Paul said, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Php 4:13).

Homiletical Hints

This being the first in a series of sermons on the Formula of Concord, the preacher will want to call his hearers’ attention to the 400th anniversary of this Lutheran confession being observed this year in Lutheran circles. Points that might be touched upon in the introduction: what led up to and made necessary the writing of this confession; that it is only one of a number of recognized Lutheran confessions; that our pastors during their training for the ministry study and thus are made well acquainted with them; that pastors in their ordination vow bind themselves to them, not with a *quatenus* but with a *quia* subscription; that also our children are at least in a limited way made acquainted with them in their confirmation instruction.

The transition to the theme might be: Because there is today generally so little regard for absolute truth and also our Lutheran confessions are taken less and less seriously, we ourselves need the reminder suggested by our text:

Appreciate the Confessions!

I. They are needed. II. They are to be heeded.

- I. The confessions are needed.
 - A. Because of the danger of apostasy.
 1. Paul was earnestly concerned about this.
 - a) Reminded Timothy of the afflictions that commonly go with the preaching of the gospel (v 8b).
 - b) Was himself experiencing them to a high degree (v 8a, 12a, 2 Cor 11:23ff).
 - c) How easily a young Christian as Timothy might out of fear of the consequences be led to be ashamed of and give up some of the truth.
 2. This danger was especially great in the days of the Reformation.
 - a) Think alone of the threat of death hanging over Luther.
 - b) Following his death there was the added affliction of losing the good will and friendship of fellow Lutherans.
 - c) Some were swayed to give in and compromise the truth.

3. The danger is as great as ever today.
 - a) Those for whom the truths of Scripture are absolutes are not only unpopular, but are actually made the butt of ridicule.
 - b) Thus it becomes increasingly more difficult to stand fast and hold fast.

Transition: If this was so, as no doubt it was, one reason for the writing of the confessions, one purpose for their existence surely is

B. To help prevent apostasy.

1. Paul reminds Timothy of such apostasy in his day (v 15).
 - a) He had mentioned others in his first letter (1:19f).
 - b) He predicted the appearance of others to come (1 Tm 4:1; 2 Th 2:3ff) (Antichrist).
2. Apostasy certainly was running rampant in the days of the Reformation. (NB the antithesis in the various articles of the confessions)
3. Apostasy is great as ever today.
 - a) False teaching more and more permeates even heretofore confessionally sound churches.
 - b) More and more voices are being heard questioning whether there is such a thing as an absolute truth.
 - c) This kind of reasoning is ever more frequently used over against the Scriptures.
 - d) Even the very heart of the gospel (justification) is made the target of skeptics and perverters of the truth.
4. Paul in our text presents the effective antidote to apostasy: “The form of sound words.”
 - a) “Sound words” are correct, unadulterated teaching of Bible truths.
 - aa) This applies to teaching of law and gospel (v 9, 10).
 - bb) This includes all Scripture truths (text & 2:2).
 - b) “The *form* of sound words.”
 - aa) Paul is certainly not advocating adherence merely to the letters, as was done by the scribes and Pharisees.
 - bb) His meaning rather is, to hold to the substance and the proper, uncompromising presentation of it.
 - c) The best weapon against error is soundness in doctrine, just as the best weapon against disease is a sound or healthy body.

C. This then is also the reason the Lutheran Confessions play so important a role in the teaching and life in the church.

1. They are the “form of sound words,” the formal, systematic presentation of Scripture truths.
2. They are the means by which those agreed on the teachings of the Scriptures express their agreement.
3. They help the inquiring to learn whether the teachings of the Lutheran Church are in harmony and agreement with the Scriptures.
4. They can well help to establish bonds of fellowship with others.
5. Their ultimate purpose is, as expressed at the end of Article XI of the Thorough Declaration (Trig., p 1095,96), that “poor sinners are brought to true, genuine repentance, raised up by faith, confirmed in new obedience, and thus justified and eternally saved alone through the sole merit of Christ.”

But, if for these various reasons the confessions are valuable, precious, and needed, then by the same token also:

II. The confessions ought to be heeded.

- A. Paul asked Timothy to “hold fast to the form of sound words.”
1. This assumes that Timothy had what he is asked to hold fast to.
 - a) He had early in his life received training in the Scriptures from his mother and grandmother (2 Tm 1:5; 3:15).
 - b) He had been firmly grounded in them by Paul (“which thou hast heard from me”).
 - c) They were, however, not Paul’s but God’s, as Paul frequently asserted (2 Tm 3:16; 1 Cor 2:13).
 2. Holding fast to them meant for Timothy to keep them uncontaminated by error.
 - a) They were “committed” (entrusted, v 14) to him.
 - b) He was not to betray this trust by careless and indifferent use of them.
- B. Paul also pointed Timothy to the only proper, God-pleasing motive for holding fast: “in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.”
1. “In faith” (which is in Christ Jesus), that is, with the conviction of faith that the words (which included chiefly the gospel) taught by Paul were the truth, from which by virtue of that same faith in Christ he would not let himself become apostate.
 2. “In love which is in Christ Jesus.”
 - a) Love for Christ who loved him, a damned sinner, unto death.
 - b) Love grounded in Christ and his incomprehensible love.
 - c) Love that would not want him to grieve Christ.
 - d) Love also for those entrusted to his care.
 3. To this Paul adds in verse 14 “by the Holy Spirit which dwells in you.”
 - a) Timothy, left to himself, would never be able to do what is asked. (Both faith and love were not of his doing.)
 - b) This was possible only through the help and strength supplied by the Holy Spirit who had brought him to faith and shed abroad the love of God in his heart.
- C. Paul’s words to Timothy teach us how to use our Lutheran Confessions aright.
1. Take them seriously since they involve God’s truth.
 2. Keep ourselves well acquainted with them.
 3. Give them the proper place in our teaching: not over but under the Scriptures, as their authors clearly stated it.
 4. Zealously guard them against being corrupted or watered down.
 5. Remember that they do not touch on all the doctrines of the Scriptures, to which, however, we are no less bound than to those which the Confessions cover.
 6. Be ready to take the consequences of holding fast to them and defending them.

Let us do this, the Holy Spirit granting us His help and strength, “in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus,” whom we therefore implore:

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| Abide, O dearest Jesus, | Abide, O dear Redeemer, |
| Among us with Thy grace | Among us with Thy Word |
| That Satan may not harm us | And thus now and hereafter |
| Nor we to sin give place. | True peace and joy afford. Amen. |