

# Major Emphases of the Lutheran Confessions Applied to Our Teaching and Preaching Ministry

By Armin W. Schuetze

[This paper was presented to a pastor-teacher conference at Lake Mills, Wisconsin, on May 5, 1980.]

There is no need to tell you that the theme you chose for presentation here is most appropriate. We are very close to the day on which we commemorate the 400th anniversary of the official publication of the Book of Concord in Dresden, Saxony, on June 25, 1580. The appearance of the Book of Concord is not merely an event that has historical interest for us. The extent to which it is important in a direct, practical way becomes evident in the Article of Faith that appears in the constitutions of our congregations. It reads as follows in the model constitution published by our Synod and is found in similar wording in the constitutions of all our congregations.

This congregation accepts and confesses these symbolical books without reservation, not insofar as, but because they are the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God and a summary of the faith held by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Hence, no doctrine shall be taught or tolerated in this congregation which is in any way at variance with these symbolical books and the Holy Scriptures.

This applies very directly to those of us assembled here. We are the preachers and teachers, and we are bound by the congregations who have called us not to teach or tolerate anything that does not agree with the Confessions contained in the Book of Concord. This we promise at the time of our installation. Our Confessions, because they are an exposition of the truth of Holy Scripture, are as timeless as the Scriptures themselves. The truth in our Confessions has not changed, and so we are ready to be bound by it in our teaching and preaching.

Your topic gives evidence of this. We are ready to apply the Confessions to our work also now. It should, however, be noted that in speaking of major emphases, this is not to be understood as though lesser doctrines, or emphases, are expendable. It merely is a limitation for this essay. Possibly it would be even better to speak of "important emphases" in our topic. In presenting what I do in this paper I would not want to be understood as though I have infallibly selected major emphases, and that what is not taken up in this paper is of lesser importance, is something minor. I also would not say that our time will allow us to take up all the important emphases. I have made a selection. This is to some extent subjective. Some of you might have chosen others. There is so much that is important; nothing really is unimportant. There is so much that can be applied to our teaching and preaching. It is good for us to remain students of the Confessions all our lives, learning, applying, not in the sense of replacing our study and application of Scripture, but to supplement it with Confessions that can serve as a *norma normata* (a rule founded on Scripture) lest we begin to go our own ways, that is, the ways of our reason, in our study and application of Scripture.

One further preliminary: This presentation is based on the Confessions. We have not attempted to adduce Scripture in support of what the Confessions say. The assignment was to apply the Confessions' major emphases. That they are Scriptural is assumed and to verify that is not the purpose of this paper. So to our topic: The major, or important, emphases of the Lutheran Confessions applied to our teaching and preaching ministry.

The major emphasis in our Confessions is on sin and grace. This is central to the Confessions and it must be central in our teaching and preaching. We cannot then in treating our topic go to lesser subjects and omit these, obvious as they may appear. At the risk of saying much that may seem self-evident and commonplace among us, we shall first of all consider these two. They are too important to pass over even if they are so well known among us.

## Sin

First, then, sin.

This is not a pleasant emphasis. But it is a major one and must be so in our teaching. “The knowledge of original sin is necessary,” writes Melancthon in the Apology. “For the magnitude of the grace of Christ cannot be understood unless our diseases be recognized” (113, 33).<sup>1</sup>

Note that Melancthon mentions original sin, not simply sin. In the Augsburg Confession (AC) the Second Article takes up, not sin as such, but original sin. And the Apology stresses that not actual sin, as Rome claimed, was spoken of in the article but the sin of origin. Luther in the Smalcald Articles gives an article the title: “Of Sin.” But what he first describes is original sin. Then, after noting that the fruits of this sin are evil deeds and describing some of them, he in the next paragraph again comes back to “hereditary sin.” The Formula of Concord (FC) too has an article on Original Sin. This is not to say that actual sins are not spoken of specifically at some length in our Confessions. But there is a considerable emphasis on the former.

The reason, at least the main reason, for this emphasis is the magnitude of this corruption, greater than the actual sins that we can see would lead us to realize. The FC writes: “Christians should regard and recognize as sin not only the actual transgression 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, yea, as the chief sin, which is a root and fountainhead of all actual sins” (861, 5). When you speak of actual sins you are looking at the symptoms. Original sin is the inherent sickness.

In the AC Melancthon defines original sin as consisting of a positive and negative factor. The negative factor (*sine*) consists in being born “without the fear of God, without trust in God” (43, II,1), or rather, as the German text shows, without the *ability* to fear and trust God. As Melancthon also points out in the Apology: “We deny to those propagated according to carnal nature not only the acts, but also the power or gifts of producing fear and trust in God” (105, 3). The FC puts it this way: “The definition of original sin takes away from the unrenewed nature the gifts, the power, and all activity for beginning and effecting anything in spiritual things” (863, 10). How totally man is removed from God by this lack!

But there is more to original sin. Something that ought not be there is present (*cum*) as a positive factor, namely, concupiscence. This isn’t merely “a corruption of the qualities of the body” (111, 25), with strong emphasis on sexual passion, “but also, in the higher powers, a vicious turning to carnal things,” as Melancthon reminds us in the Apology (111, 25). The FC is more explicit: “It is...a deep, wicked, horrible, fathomless, inscrutable, and unspeakable corruption of the entire nature and all its powers, especially of the highest, principal powers of the soul in the understanding, heart, and will...an inborn wicked disposition and inward impurity of heart, evil lust and propensity” (863, 11, 12).

Rome, and also Zwingli, did not consider original sin damning; it was only the occasion for sin, not sin of itself. Our Confessions stress that original sin in and of itself damns. Regarding this the AC confesses: “This disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death” (43, II, 3). The FC again goes into more detail: “The punishment and penalty of original sin...are death, eternal damnation, also other bodily and spiritual, temporal and eternal miseries, and the tyranny and dominion of the devil” (863, 13).

What all of this means is that if in our teaching and preaching we stop short, in speaking of sin, with actual sins, we are only touching the surface. Certainly, the law will reveal and expose and must expose actual sins of men. But somehow we must get to the root of the problem. We must not fail to see the depths of man’s depravity by nature and its fearful consequences.

This is not recognized by people because they by nature are still capable of a degree of civic righteousness. The AC says that man “has some liberty to choose civil righteousness, and to work things subject to reason” (51, VIII, 1). The result is that “they (the philosophers) could not see the inner uncleanness of the nature of man” (109, 12). Since man sees only what is external, original sin escapes his observation. He fails to recognize the depth of his problem.

<sup>1</sup> All quotations of the Lutheran Confessions are taken from the *Concordia Triglotta*. The reference lists the page and section of the quotation.

In fact, Luther correctly states that “this hereditary sin is so deep and horrible a corruption of nature that no reason can understand it, but it must be learned and believed from the revelation of Scripture” (477, 3). This means that unless we teach this doctrine clearly from Scripture, people will not recognize their true sinfulness.

When we consider it properly, it is when original sin is clearly taught that man loses every self-righteous avenue of escape from God’s condemnation. When we describe and condemn the vicious sins that we see about us in the world, that is, actual sins, this surely tells us something about man. But for many people it may tell them something only about other people, at least so they think. “After all, I’m not one of the million that aborted a child. I’m not one of the number who are unfaithful to their spouses, or who live together outside marriage, or who are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or who do the millions of dollars worth of shoplifting. And even if I am, it’s somehow different in my case. There are extenuating circumstances. And even if I did commit certain individual sins, there is also much good left in me, good acts which my reason led me to.”

But you cannot escape original sin and its consequences when God reveals it as He does. First of all, it is universal. “Since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin” (43, II, 1). And even though it is not a part of the very essence of man, for then Jesus never could have taken on a true human nature, yet it is not “a slight, but so deep a corruption of human nature that nothing healthy or uncorrupt has remained in man’s body or soul, in his inner or outward powers” (781, 8). This is God’s description of me, even though I may have a high degree of civic righteousness, even though I never stole, or killed, or committed acts of fornication, or lied to my neighbor. So when we speak of these gross and less gross sins that people do, we need to recognize, and let our people recognize, that they show what is really wrong with mankind. The million abortions a year in our country not only show what actual sins a million people and all their accomplices are guilty of, but they show the deep depravity that is part of human nature, also of me and you, of all without exception. When it comes to original sin one is not a greater or lesser sinner than another. Here we all stand equally condemned and equally guilty before God. No one can say, “That does not describe me.” So while speaking only about actual sins in our condemnation of sin we could lead people to self-righteous judgments, getting back to original sin allows for no such self-righteous escape. It pronounces all men guilty and damned. This is an important, a major emphasis in our Confessions. We need to emulate our Confession in this.

One further comment, however. We will preach and teach original sin not merely by citing the usual passages and letting it go at that. Simply to say, we are all conceived and born in sin, may by its frequent repetition leave the hearer insensitive to its full import. Our Confessions describe what this means. We cited some of those descriptions. We need to present this truth in vivid, fresh, convicting ways so that no one may find a way to excuse himself, so that we are driven by the terrors of conscience which the knowledge of sin effects to cry out: God be merciful to me a sinner. We do not simply teach and preach about original sin. We are to convict people of it. We need to show them how even the good which they are doing, or rather think they are doing, is infected with sinful motives, thoughts, feelings, emotions, with inherent wickedness. True teaching and preaching of sin makes each one feel that the finger is pointed at him with the words: “Thou art the man.” This drives out thoughts of work-righteousness.

### **Justification by Grace through Faith**

While sin represents an important emphasis for reasons indicated, the prime emphasis in the Confession is on God’s grace, and central in this is the doctrine of the justification of the sinner before God.

The Confessions consider this the most important doctrine of Holy Scripture. Melancthon in the Apology refers to it as the “chief topic of Christian doctrine.” The reasons are that this doctrine “understood aright, illumines and amplifies the honor of Christ (which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door of the entire Bible), and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences” (121, 2). Referring to the Apology, the Formula of Concord likewise says that “justification by faith is the chief article in the entire Christian doctrine” and quotes Luther to the effect that

“if it does not remain pure, it is not possible that any error or fanatical spirit can be resisted” (917, 6). Lutherans have properly called it the doctrine by which the church stands and falls.

It would take us too far afield for this paper to look at all aspects of this doctrine and its application to our teaching and preaching ministry. But we can look at some aspects of it that bear emphasis and have practical consequences in our teaching and preaching. We direct our attention to two of them that are essential if the *sola gratia* is to be retained, is to be taught, and preached, and believed.

One is the emphasis that justification is an objective fact, finished, universal in scope. The other is the emphasis of the *sola fide*, that no one receives the benefits of this gift except by faith. These two points are vital to a proper understanding and faithful teaching and preaching of the sinner’s justification before God. If the objective fact is not fully understood, the function of faith will be distorted. If faith is given a role which it does not have in justification, the whole doctrine is perverted.

Justification is this that the holy, righteous God declares the sinner to be righteous, holy in his sight. But how is that possible? God himself says that “he who justifies the wicked” is “an abomination to the Lord” (Pr 17:15). That is why it is important to note that according to the AC this justifying happens “for Christ’s sake, who, by his death, has made satisfaction for our sins” (45, IV, 2). This is the objective basis for justification. In Article III, where the work of the Son of God is the subject, we confess that the Son of God assumed the human nature and humbled himself “that he might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men” (45, III, 3). The objective basis Jesus established is explicated more fully in FC, Article III, “Of the Righteousness of Faith Before God.” There the *propter Christum* is defined as follows: “Because of the sole merit, complete obedience, bitter suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience, is reckoned to us for righteousness” (919, 9). It is expressed even more explicitly in these words: “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” (919f, 15).

The *propter Christum* then consists in both the active and passive obedience of Christ. Jesus was made under the law and fulfilled it in the stead of the whole of mankind. Jesus assumed the sin of the world and paid the ransom price for the sins of all men. This has happened and so is a completed, finished fact. And it has taken place for the whole world, for all of mankind. Later the Formula makes the point that since this is the obedience of the entire person and not of only one nature, in other words, of the God-man, “it is a complete satisfaction and expiation for the human race, by which the eternal, immutable righteousness of God, revealed in the Law, has been satisfied, and is thus our righteousness, which avails before God and is revealed in the Gospel” (935, 57). What this confesses is that the gospel is a message that reveals, proclaims something that has happened. What has happened is that Christ has completely satisfied the demands of the law for all of mankind, so that the immutable righteousness of God is satisfied. Christ has made atonement for all sins of all men. They are removed, forgiven. This has happened for all men, and the gospel reveals it to mankind. Only if the objectivity and universality and completeness of the *propter Christum* is recognized will the doctrine of justification remain pure, will the *sola gratia* be fully recognized and will faith be seen in its proper role.

It is to be noted, however, that our Confessions in speaking of justification inevitably speak of justification *by faith*. Unless this is done, we will find ourselves in the camp of the universalists. In an objective sense all mankind is justified in Christ, forgiven, redeemed. But Scripture does not teach, and neither do our Confessions teach, universal salvation. The AC in Article IV, “Of Justification,” says: “We are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith.” Article III of the FC we note is entitled “Of the Righteousness of Faith Before God.” Mention of faith in connection with justification is so prominent because a gift does not benefit unless it is received, a promise is vain unless one trusts it, the gospel remains a hidden treasure unless it is proclaimed and believed. We are saved by faith. But only when we see clearly what the gospel is, what the *propter Christum* is, can we recognize the role of faith in justification and salvation.

In the Apology Melancthon writes: “But the Gospel freely offers...reconciliation, which is received, not by works, but by faith alone” (133, 44). He speaks of Christ the Propitiator and says: “This Propitiator thus benefits us, when by faith we apprehend the mercy promised in Him” (145, 82). We receive remission of sins through the name of Christ. But “we cannot apprehend the name of Christ except by faith” (145, 83). Remission of sins is something promised for Christ’s sake. “Therefore it cannot be received except by faith alone” (145, 84). Faith receives, apprehends the gospel, forgiveness, the promise, the name of Christ. In fact, all of these can be received only by faith. How else do you get hold of a promise? Thus the Formula of Concord says: “These treasures are offered us by the Holy Ghost in the promise of the holy Gospel; and faith alone is the only means by which we lay hold upon, accept, and apply, and appropriate them to ourselves” (919, 10).

Our Confessions are careful to define and describe this faith. They show what this faith is and what it is not, what it does and what it does not do. This is important again lest it be given a false role in justification.

Melancthon complains in the Apology because the “adversaries feign that faith is only a knowledge of the history” (135, 48). He says: “For we do not speak of idle knowledge, such as devils have” (191, 128).

Faith also isn’t merely “that which, in a general way, believes that God exists, that punishments have been threatened to the wicked” (267, 60). He goes on to say: “In addition to this faith we require that each one believe that his sins are remitted to him.” Again: “It is to assent to the promise of God, in which, for Christ’s sake, the remission of sins and justification are freely offered” (135, 48). Again: “It is the certainty or the certain trust in the heart, when, with my whole heart, I regard the promises of God as certain and true, through which there are offered me, without my merit, the forgiveness of sins, grace, and all salvation.” A few lines later: “Faith is that my whole heart takes to itself this treasure.” It is the means of receiving God’s priceless gift of justification.

The Confessions, however, also guard against seeing faith as a contribution on man’s part toward his justification. Melancthon says that faith justifies, “not because it is a work that is in itself worthy” (147, 86). The FC again is somewhat more explicit: “For faith justifies, not for this cause and reason that it is so good a work and so fair a virtue, but because it lays hold of and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel” (919, 13). Thus faith is the opposite of works. Again and again in the Confessions when faith is spoken of it is made clear that they are speaking of faith that believes that sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. The only faith that saves is the one that has Christ as its object, and it saves because it simply receives the completed atonement, redemption, forgiveness, justification that Christ has fully and completely gained for the whole world. The more we recognize the reality of that gift, that it is there complete for all, the more we recognize the very limited role of faith in justification, that it merely appropriates subjectively what already exists objectively.

In addition, our Confessions are concerned that we also recognize how we obtain this faith. That too is not man’s doing. Article V of the AC reads: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacrament as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel” (45, 1.2). More on this later in another connection. Keeping all this in mind, we cannot but recognize that *sola fide* is a corollary of *sola gratia*. The two go hand in hand.

If we keep this clear, the objective forgiveness Christ effected for all of mankind and the receiving function of faith, this will guide us as we teach and preach of them, and guard us against giving false impressions as we do so.

1. We will not hedge or hold back in proclaiming full remission of sins. Our natural reason wants to hold back. We are fearful that people will abuse it if we proclaim too free a forgiveness, to perfect a cleansing. We will avoid giving the impression that God’s full forgiveness is still dependent on and still needs completing by something we do. We will never say, “God forgives you *if*.” An “if” only restricts the gift. We will say, “God has forgiven you, *therefore*....” Forgiveness leads to fruit, but the fruit is not a condition of the forgiveness.

2. We will not think about forgiveness as something that is still in the making on the part of God. Only the application to and appropriation by the individual is still in progress. In that sense any proclamation of forgiveness must be understood. When the pastor pronounces the absolution, “I forgive you your sins,” this does not produce forgiveness but rather applies it and invites the hearer to receive it, appropriate it by faith.

3. We will avoid speaking about faith in vague terms. There is too much loose talk in the world about faith. “All you need is faith,” you can hear people say. When faith is stressed apart from Christ, or in place of Christ, its object, then people are being led to have faith in faith, and that is a false faith.

4. We will avoid expressions that too often find their way into student papers and sermons, expressions such as these: “All we still need to do is believe.” Or, “If we believe, God will forgive us.” Faith is not a condition of forgiveness, but the means of receiving it. Rather say: “Christ died for your sins, believe this.” That is an invitation to accept Christ. Faith is not a condition, the one work we still need to do after God has done all the rest. Then *by faith alone* no longer is a corollary of *by grace alone* but rather destroys the latter.

5. We will avoid giving the impression that faith is something the hearer can produce. There is a difference between asking someone to decide right now to believe, telling him to make up his mind now to accept Christ, and inviting faith with the gospel imperative: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,” as Paul did at Philippi, or saying as Paul did to the Corinthians: “We beseech you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled.” We invite faith, but we do not tell people to produce it by their own power and decision.

6. We will not fail to see our people and pupils as saints even though what is visible before us are sinners. They are clothed in Christ’s righteousness by faith in him. We can tell them of the clothing they have on, Christ’s righteousness, as well as of the passion and death that paid for their wickedness. Both together will be powerful motivation to become more saintly in their lives, even as they already are saints by virtue of Christ’s imputed righteousness.

Indeed, a proper understanding of justification, its objectivity and universality, and of its subjective appropriation by faith is essential to a proper teaching and preaching of the riches of God’s grace.

### **The Means of Grace**

Another important emphasis we find in our Confessions, one that in some respects is uniquely Lutheran, is that of stressing the function of the means of grace, or we could say, the function of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace. This is an emphasis of importance for us again today, as it was for the reformers, who were confronted by the enthusiasts, the Anabaptists.

Our Confessions are quite explicit on the function of the Holy Spirit, his important role in our salvation. The AC V says that it is the Holy Ghost “who works faith” (45, 2). In the Large Catechism Luther says that he (the Holy Ghost) “opens hearts,” so that people “are converted alone through the grace and power of the Holy Ghost, whose work alone the conversion of man is” (787, 4f). He “works in the hearts of men true repentance and knowledge of sins, and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ” (901, 50), as the Thorough Declaration has it. It could hardly be summed up better than Luther does in the Small Catechism: I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called, enlightened, sanctified, and keeps me.

But how does the Holy Ghost come to us? How does he accomplish these things in the hearts and lives of people?

The AC is quite simple and explicit. “For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel” (45, V, 2). Through Word and sacraments the Holy Ghost is given, gains access to the hearts of men. Through those same means he works faith. Note how this is repeated when he says that he does this “in them that hear the Gospel.” The Epitome says that “with this Word the Holy Ghost is present, and opens hearts.” Again the Word is the means by which he is present, or comes, and the means by which he works. The Thorough Declaration of the FC sees the Word and sacrament as the exclusive means by which the Holy Spirit comes and works. “By this means, and in no other way, namely, through his holy Word, when men hear it preached or read it, and the holy Sacraments when they are used according to his Word, God desires to call men to eternal salvation, draw them to Himself, and convert, regenerate, and sanctify them” (901, 50).

In this quotation from the FC we also see what is meant by this Word and how it is to be used. The reference to reading points directly to the written Scriptures. But repeatedly preaching and hearing are

mentioned. The “oral word” is another expression used (901, 48). Certainly this is not in opposition to what is written, or instead of what is written. The point is that the Holy Spirit does not come and work through the written word in the Scriptures when it is not used. When the Word and the sacraments are used, communicated, then the Holy Spirit is active, comes and works.

The Anabaptists of Luther’s days thought “that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.” In the Smalcald Articles Luther scores the enthusiasts “who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure” (495, 3ff). He says that they condemn “the outward Word,” and yet “they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but through their writings and words he must come” (495, 3ff).

Melanchthon in the Apology points to the way the enthusiasts expected the Holy Ghost to come. He says they “dream that the Holy Ghost is given not through the Word, but because of certain preparations of their own, if they sit unoccupied and silent in obscure places, waiting for illumination” (311, 13). Zwingli shared with the Anabaptists this disparagement of the outward Word as the means used by the Holy Spirit. He applied this especially to the sacraments. “I believe, yes, I know, that all sacraments not merely do not distribute or convey grace, but not even bring or administer it...for the Spirit no guide or vessel is required, for it is itself Power and Conveyor by which all things are borne, and it does not require itself to be borne.”<sup>2</sup> Calvin admits that God usually converts by means of the Word; but God can convert in a different manner, and “this other method he undoubtedly employed in the calling of many people to whom he, only through inward illumination, without the means of preaching, gave true understanding.”<sup>3</sup> The Reformed have an ambiguous position in regard to the means of grace and separate the working of the Spirit from these means, at least to some degree. To the extent that is done, they are enthusiasts. Luther in the Smalcald Articles (SA) refers even to the Papacy as “sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands within his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken word” (495, 3ff). The Spirit and the Word must be kept together.

We find two extremes today in reference to the Holy Spirit. The view has been expressed that the Holy Spirit is the neglected person in the Holy Trinity. The Father and the Son are spoken of more often and their role in our salvation is quite directly recognized. But the Holy Spirit is somewhat forgotten. So it is claimed. On the other hand, there are those who see us living in the era of the Holy Spirit. The emphasis on the Spirit is paramount in pentecostalism, neopentecostalism, among the charismatics, who have in some form infiltrated many of the mainline Christian denominations. The emphasis among the charismatics does not point to the chief and primary function of the Holy Spirit in the way of salvation. There is much mysticism and enthusiasm present that disregards the written Word, adds to it, misinterprets it, and in effect separates the Holy Spirit, his presence in the individual, from the Word.

Certainly the importance of the Holy Spirit must be recognized. Our Confessions recognize and confess what Scripture says of the Spirit’s important function in Christianity. They stress the connection Scripture makes between the Spirit and the Word and sacraments. But they also avoid the kind of false emphasis which today is made by the charismatics. We will do well in our teaching and preaching to follow the confessions in their scripturally faithful presentation.

1. With our Confessions we will properly stress the Spirit’s power in converting the sinner, in his sanctification, in his preservation. On the other hand, the Confessions make no mention of tongues, spirit baptism, physical healing, or of any visible, manifest evidence of the Spirit’s indwelling. In fact, the opposite is said. “For concerning the presence, operation, and gifts of the Holy Ghost we should not and cannot always judge *ex sensu* (from feeling), as to how and when they are experienced in the heart,” the Formula of Concord tells us, and then continues, “We should be certain from, and according to, the promise, that the Word of God preached and heard is an office and work of the Holy Ghost, by which he is certainly efficacious and works in

<sup>2</sup> Engelder, Th, et al. *Popular Symbolics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934), p 215.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin’s Inst. IV, 16, 19, as quoted in *Popular Symbolics*, p 216.

our hearts, 2 Cor. 2:14ff; 3:5ff” (903, 56). To inject emotions into the Holy Spirit’s working as well as manifest signs and gifts can only do great harm. That is not the way of our Confessions.

2. It is interesting that our Confessions speak so often of the oral word, preaching, teaching, hearing as the means by which the Spirit comes and works. Thus it does not see the Word of God merely in the form which it has in Holy Scripture. When the content of Scripture is spoken by a pastor or teacher, that is the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit comes and works. It is a comfort and reassurance to us in our work that when we in our own words speak the truth of Scripture, not only when we verbatim quote a word directly from Scripture, the Spirit is active.

3. Stressing that he comes through the Word does mean that what we say must be the truth of Scripture, if we are to expect that he will be effective. Whatever we say that does not relate to Scripture and its truth can hardly hope for the presence of the Spirit. And we will be guarded against trying to explain Scripture where it is seemingly against reason.

4. The word we speak must truly *communicate* the truth of God’s Word. It must reach the mind and heart. It must be understood. That calls for clear, simple preaching and teaching. That calls for carefully prepared sermons and lessons. That calls for our best efforts to understand Scripture ourselves and then to speak in such a way that the hearer will understand what Scripture itself says. The oral word includes more than a mere recitation by rote of Bible passages. While we will not claim anything for ourselves in putting forth the best efforts to understand and to communicate, we also will not fail to be totally faithful to the task.

5. Knowing what we do about the Spirit and the means of grace, our great concern will be to keep people, not simply with the church in any way at all, but in contact with the means of grace. That is why church attendance is so important. That is why the memorization of Scripture is important. They carry the means of grace about with them. While learners think about what they have memorized the Holy Spirit works. The *sola Scriptura* takes on full meaning when we remember the work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Good Works**

With the emphasis in our Confessions on the centrality of justification by faith, without the works of the law, we must not think that our Confessions are silent about good works. They are taught, and taught with considerable emphasis. We cannot back away from teaching and preaching good works. But we can learn from our Confessions; they are a true exposition of Bible doctrine also in this area.

The AC says clearly: “It is necessary to do good works.” But in saying this, the works are immediately put in the right perspective: “This faith is bound to bring forth good fruits” (45, VI, 1). Good works are seen as fruit of faith. They do not precede faith; they grow out of faith.

Thus good works are necessary, not as a matter of fulfilling the law. The law has been fulfilled. Christ has done that for us already, completely, and so has freed us from the demands of the law. Good works thus are not done by the Christian as a result of the Law’s coercion. The FC writes: “When this word necessary is employed, it should be understood not of coercion, but only of the ordinance of the immutable will of God” (943, 17). The Christian has the same necessity to produce good works that the good fruit tree has of bearing good fruit. Luther is quoted in the FC in regard to this: “Oh, it is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing. Nor does it ask whether good works are to be done; but before the question is asked, it has wrought them, and is always engaged in doing them” (941, 10). The reason this is true, as Luther writes, is that “faith is a divine work in us, that changes us and regenerates us of God, and puts to death the old Adam, makes us entirely different men in heart, spirit, mind, and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Ghost.” And so Luther says in the SA: “We say, besides, that if good works do not follow, faith is false and not true” (499, 4). Yes, good works are necessary.

At the same time the Confessions are explicit in rejecting the statement: “Good works are necessary to salvation” (801, 16). To say that is to misplace works in the articles of justification and sanctification. Good works have no place in the article of justification. They are part and parcel of the article of sanctification. To inject them into the article of justification is to destroy it.



For us as pastors and teachers two expressions can be practical guides as we teach and encourage good works. They are the terms “fruits” and “to salvation.” Do I give the impression in the way I am speaking that good works are necessary to salvation? Am I implying that? Then I am on dangerous ground. I will confuse people. Fruit presupposes a good tree, a justified person. Do I make it clear that good works are fruit, necessary fruit indeed, yet fruit that is there only because we already have a good tree? Always remember the sequence we have in fruit. The good tree must be there first. But when the good tree is there, fruit must follow.

We made mention of the law and said that we are free from the demands of the law, for Christ has fulfilled them for us. However, this is not to be understood as though we can live outside the law. The FC says: “It is false and must be censured, when it is asserted and taught as though good works were free to believers in the sense that it were optional with them to do or to omit them, or that they might or could act contrary to the Law of God” (945, 20). The AC speaks of good works as such that are “commanded by God” (45, 1). This refers to the form which good works will take. They are not, as the FC points out, works that man devises, but they correspond to the immutable will of God of which the Commandments are a revelation. We will here not go into detail on the third use of the law, but that is what is involved. The law will be a guide to inform me whether what I do is truly pleasing to God. To disobey his commandment can never be considered a good work.

Thus teaching good works involves two things. We proclaim the gospel to make good trees. We instruct the Christian in the law so that he may not become confused about what the will of God truly is, in other words, as to the shape or form which good works will take. This is sorely needed in our time of flexible standards, when it is denied that there is a valid immutable will of God that is our standard. The Christian, because of the kind of world in which he lives, a world that can easily deceive the Christian, and because he still finds in himself an old Adam who wants to satisfy the flesh and consider that perfectly normal and proper, needs instruction, careful instruction in the law. Thus in teaching and preaching sanctification, or good works, there needs to be a proper blending of gospel and law so that there may be proper motivation moving the Christian in the right direction.

Another point about our good works which the Confessions make pertains to the reason they are called good. Melancthon in the Apology (171, 51) quotes Augustine with approval when he says: “All the commandments of God are fulfilled when whatever is not done, is forgiven.” So he says that “works are not of themselves worthy and pleasing.” It is rather that “for Christ’s sake we please God.” Similarly Luther in the SA in speaking of good works says: “And what there is still sinful or imperfect also in them shall not be accounted as sin or defect, even for Christ’s sake; but the entire man, both as to his person and his works, is to be called and to be righteous and holy from pure grace and mercy, shed upon us and spread over us in Christ” (499, 2). The FC makes the same point in various places (941, 8; 696, 22, 23).

We can take a cue from this when we speak of the good works of Christians. Aren’t we sometimes inclined to look at the good work by itself and see it as good by itself? We may speak of what a beautiful and good thing someone did. But it is beautiful and good only in Christ. Apart from this it is still filled with corruption and selfishness. Keeping this in mind will prevent self-righteousness from forcing itself into our thinking and speaking. To stress the goodness of the work as such can lead to the conclusion: And what a good person that is. But it is the other way around. What a good person you are through faith in Christ. And therefore I see your works as good. We can never get far away from the Cross.

On this point too we have just scratched the surface in looking at what our Confessions say. But what has been noted will keep good works in their proper perspective. This will keep Christ central. And it will avoid work-righteousness.

### **Concern for Truth for the Sake of People**

One final emphasis I should like to draw attention to. This does not pertain to any specific doctrine and its particular application. This pertains to something that runs through the Confessions and is evident in connection with various doctrines and doctrinal concerns. That is the repeated and deep concern for people. While our Confessions certainly recognize the importance of holding to the truth because it is God’s truth, yet

there is the refrain through the Confessions that doctrine is important because otherwise people will despair, will be robbed of their comfort.

About “our doctrine” Melancthon says that it “brings godly and salutary consolation to terrified consciences” (205, 182). This is true of many doctrines, but particularly of justification which “brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences” (121, 2). The adversaries abolish such consolations “when they extenuate and disparage faith” (137, 60). The word “consolation” appears again and again as they speak of forgiveness, the gospel, righteousness of faith. But this also happens as other doctrines are spoken of. The doctrine of election “affords glorious consolation under the cross and amid temptations” (1079, 48). Absolution and the power of the Keys is “an aid and consolation against sin and a bad conscience” (493, VIII, 1). Baptism is profitable for strengthening and comforting ourselves (743, 44). The sacrament is administered to them that have need of consolation, it cheers and comforts the anxious conscience (67, 30). Even the language used in the mass had the people in mind. Latin was used on account of those who are learned, and German for the sake of the people, that they may learn something. Truly, concern for people, their consolation, their hope, freeing them from the terrors of sin, giving them life and salvation runs as a mighty emphasis throughout the Confessions. It was because of the misery Luther saw during his visits to churches that he wrote the Catechism. He implores the pastors and teachers “to have pity on the people who are entrusted to you” (533, 6).

The Confessions lead us to be concerned about truth in our teaching and preaching. But it is concern that does not stop with truth as it is in and of itself. It is concern for truth for the sake of people.

So we can ask: Do we teach people that the Bible is inspired and inerrant only for the sake of doctrinal correctness or is it because we are concerned that the children, that our people may find Scripture-based security in a world filled with change and decay? Do we warn the children against joining the Boy Scouts and their parents against the Masons because we want to have clean congregations or because we don’t want people hurt by the deceptive appeal of error? Do we find greater pleasure in the excellence of a lesson plan or a sermon because it is a masterpiece according to good pedagogical and homiletical theory than in reaching the hearers, the children and adults, with a simple clear message?

What we present here as alternatives are not alternatives at all. We want good lesson plans and sermons. We are for upholding the doctrine of inspiration and avoiding unionism. But if the concern for people is missing in it all, we are like sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. The heart is missing. Our Confessions have it: the combination of concern for the truth and concern for people. Our teaching and preaching will be well done when we follow this emphasis of our Confessions: concern to free consciences from the bondage of Satan and the terrors of sin and guilt and to bring them consolation in Christ; concern to feed Jesus’ lambs and sheep well until they reach the green pastures in heaven.

Our confessions testify to the truth, the ageless truth of Scripture. They call for application, application that God’s people may continue in his Word and through it be free. God grant that we may find our Confessions an inspiration to us as we serve as teachers and preachers in the Lord’s church!