

“Keeping Our Faith in Difficult Times”

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Let me begin with an assumption. David Neff writes in “It’s Not About the Past,” “Both the new Anglican [AMIA or ACNA] and the new Lutheran movements [Lutheran CORE] need to nurture their brand-new *us* to keep it from degenerating into *us vs. them*.” ... “When we create a new *us*, it is important to articulate a clear vision and to keep that vision clear. The leaders of the new Anglican movements are certain that their identity is not bound up with being ‘ex-Episcopalians.’ ‘It’s not about the past,” announced ACNA archbishop Robert Duncan. “That’s all done.’ Leaders of Lutheran CORE gave me a similar impression. They don’t define their existence over and against the ELCA. They just hope not to repeat ELCA’s mistakes.”¹

Here is my assumption. Our gathering today is not about the past—where you come from or where I come from. Although history is history and it is never irrelevant, it also isn’t destiny. What we *are* and what *God intends us to be*—those are the things that matter. So, while I will refer to the past, including the recent ELCA Assembly actions, my goal is to “think out loud” and consider with you the whole business of who we are and what we seek to be.

I should also note that I’m well aware that there’s a bit of uncertainty in that “we,” since we come from many different directions and we will inevitably have differences and disparities in current perspectives and future directions. Nevertheless, I’ll use that pronoun, “we,” intentionally because I both assume and believe a great measure of unity here. We are Lutherans, but not merely by way of label nor of heritage, but with intentionality and purpose. You asked me to come and talk about keeping “our” faith in difficult times, and it was clear that the

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/march/26.57.html> .

pronoun was indicating not a generically Christian understanding of faith, but a specifically *Lutheran* one. So...

I. Being “Lutheran” Today

A. The identity crisis in American Lutheran churches (“Does it really matter?”)

I take it as a given that we wouldn’t be here at all if there weren’t a very real crisis in Lutheran circles. We could define the crisis in various ways, but I see it as a crisis of identity. Who are we Lutherans? What does that adjective, “Lutheran,” mean? When Lutherans cannot agree on something as fundamentally important as the doctrine of holy marriage and the purpose and right use of the gift of sexuality, there’s an identity issue.

It’s hard to know what the word “Lutheran” means when you see radically different understandings between those who use the same label. Plus, when you can’t define a word clearly, it loses meaning and, in this case, we shouldn’t be surprised that significant numbers of people have decided that if “Lutheran” doesn’t mean much, they’ll either abandon our churches and any others, or go looking for some other church that does know what it’s all about. Church statistics are pretty important in their right place and membership losses in both the ELCA and LCMS over recent decades indicate that this identity problem is a pretty big deal.²

That leads to the question we’d better face: Does it really matter whether we’re Lutheran, or is that just a label for a historical moment that has come and gone? I’m here because I’m convinced the word “Lutheran” actually does mean something.... But, what does it mean?

² Based on statistics from the National Council of Churches (Feb 12, 2010): <http://www.nccusa.org/news/100204yearbook2010.html>.

B. Vague and idiosyncratic definitions of “Lutheran”

We could debate it until the cows come home (I live in the Midwest now, alright?) if we want to say that the meaning of “Lutheran” is just a matter of opinion. Go down that road and you end up in curious places.

1. *The sexuality study’s “distinctly Lutheran” novelties*

At the heart of the recent ELCA study, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, was the contention (or opinion) that there was something “distinctly Lutheran” in its reasoning.³ What was that “distinctly Lutheran” idea? The notion of a “bound conscience.” Now, I realize that I’m not an authority on Lutheran history, but that seems like an odd thing to call “distinctly Lutheran.” It strikes me as a nothing short of novel to say that “bound conscience” is definitional for what it means to be Lutheran. Authority of Scripture? Okay! That Luther and the confessions continually emphasize. Justification by grace through faith?... Absolutely! The centrality of Christ for all of Christian faith and life?... Certainly! The freedom of the Christian, the doctrine of vocation, the priesthood of all believers, the bondage of the will, the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Supper, baptismal regeneration... and other ideas certainly have a very real claim as important Lutheran ideas.

But where did this “bound conscience” thing slip in? Ultimately, what or is not characterized as “*distinctly Lutheran*” will require us to be clear, first, about what the word “*Lutheran*” means.

2. *The growth of sectarian perspectives (MO has to take its share of the blame)*

³ *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, p. 1. The statement commended that since individual consciences are “bound” by different understandings, the church ought to accept such different views despite their contradictions: “On the basis of conscience-bound belief, some are convinced that the scriptural witness does not address the context of sexual orientation and lifelong loving and committed relationships that we experience today” (p. 20). <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality.aspx>.

The unfortunate, if not just plain ugly, side of the Reformation is church division—sectarianism. Once Rome excommunicated Luther, sectarianism became inevitable. Now, we shouldn't assume that sectarianism first saw the light of day in the Reformation, since it existed already in the NT (read the letters to Corinth!) and it was never lacking even in the east or even within western Catholic history prior to the Reformation. Nevertheless, it became cancerous after the Reformation and worsens with each new day.

Like a wart virus that exists either in dormancy or in full-fledged eruption, it exists in us all—in every group of Christians and within our individual souls. So I'm pointing no fingers here. Missouri Lutherans are often poster children for the sectarian spirit, with more warts than you can count.

In opposition to the sectarian virus stands a great truth: the unity and catholicity of the Church. We'll talk more about that later, but for now, let's just acknowledge that the virus among Lutherans is in full-scale eruption. When Missouri behaves as if we are the only real Christians or, at least, the only real Lutherans—that's sectarianism in full ugliness. When the ELCA takes a position on human sexuality that places it in opposition to the whole Christian tradition and a current consensus that includes both the evangelical and RC/Orthodox wings of Christianity—that's a pretty clear example of sectarianism, too. Such sectarianism leads to nothing less than an undermining of meaning of the very concept of "Christianity," and makes the notion of "Lutheran" downright unintelligible.

3. A consequence: "non-denominationalism" and more fragmentation

So we shouldn't be surprised at the growth of so-called "non-denominationalism" among Christians. When the churches with names don't know what their names mean, then "un-named" (AKA, "non-denominated") churches will arise. And, of course, sectarianism is only furthered.

C. Toward clarity (addressing the why of Lutheran identity)

Something worse than sectarianism happens, however as a result of our Lutheran identity crisis. When someone is nurtured in a church and then finds that church has lost its identity, he or she will be tempted to decide that Christianity itself is pretty much meaningless—after all, what the person knows of Christianity was learned in a specific church. So for every person who leaves our churches to join a different denomination, there are others who leave *the Church*, period, and never come back.

This is a real problem—and not just because Lutheran churches have been shrinking. It's a real problem because those who are leaving may go just about anywhere, including, in some cases—to hell.

1. Because truth matters (danger of ideology and politicization)

All this is the reason I want to urge us to take Lutheran identity seriously. If we're Lutheran, it ought to mean something simply for the sake of truth. I believe, moreover, that a clear identity as genuine Lutherans matters because the underlying confusion in Christianity is an indication of how little truth has come to matter for Christians. Rather than the Christian faith being understood from the standpoint of truthful teaching, many have come to see Christianity from the standpoint of ideology. Both the religious right and the religious left, by their politicization of Christianity, have opened this door.

In many cases, political ideology, not Christian beliefs, are the determinative factor for groups of Christians. One group is far more united around Democratic, socially liberal policies and opinions than they are about theology. The other group finds its unity in Republican, socially conservative agendas. In both cases, ideology, not theology, is the driving force. Not truth, but practices and policies determine affiliations.

2. Because the church matters (confusion drives people from Church and faith)

That's a political club, not the church. If the church matters, then the theological identity of the Church has to matter above all else. Doctrine, dogma, teaching, absolute truths—those terms and the ideas behind them turn off many in our world, but without them, there is no Christianity... no Church. The Church doesn't live by its politics, it lives by its teaching—dogma, doctrine, truth!—that Jesus Christ is God's Son, the Savior of the world, whose death has atoned for the sins of the world and whose bodily resurrection promises the resurrection to eternal life to all who believe in Him! That's the truth that matters and it matters deeply that the Christian Church proclaims that truth rather than passing ideologies.

3. Because people matter

Lastly, this matters deeply because people matter. In a world of uncertainty about the deepest truth, humanity itself is trivialized and dangerously susceptible to anomie and despair. When there is no eternal truth, there is no ultimate meaning to life—there really isn't any point! Can we honestly say we're surprised by surging rates of suicide among youth, when they are coming of age in a world where they so often are told that there is—in the end—no eternal purpose to life? No ultimate meaning?

D. Toward identity

Enough of that, then. I hope that you share with me this conviction: being Lutheran matters when being Lutheran is a matter of convictions and core beliefs that are thoroughly Christian. Being Lutheran matters when it's a way of saying that I take the Christian faith seriously enough to believe it, speak it, share it, and live it in a way that has specificity and clarity.

1. Being Lutheran is being Confessional

If so, then we have to realize that we don't get to decide what it means to be a Lutheran. Instead, there's a book that defines it. Yes, the Bible always is definitive for the Christian faith, but Lutheran Christians have identified themselves for over four centuries in light of the understanding of Holy Scripture found in the *Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. To be Lutheran is not a wax nose—with mine being rather round and stoutly German while yours is thin and aquiline. It's not a local church's favorite tastes—Minneapolis *lutefisk* dinners versus St. Louis *sauerbraten*. Being Lutheran is being confessional, whether in Texas or Tanzania, Missouri, Minnesota, or Madagascar!

2. Being confessional is being catholic (creedal) and evangelical

And, being confessional is being both catholic and evangelical—at the same time. What sets the Lutheran confessions apart from most other ways of explaining the Christian faith is just that strange combination of what many consider to be opposites. The confessions are thoroughly catholic—that is, they begin with the three catholic, ecumenical creeds and again and again declare that what is being confessed is not some new faith, but the same *catholic* faith that Christianity has confessed in its creeds throughout its history. And, the Lutheran confession is just as thoroughly evangelical as it is catholic. It is a faith anchored in the Gospel—the *evangel*, the good news of Christ's gracious forgiveness received by faith alone. The evangelical Lutheran church gets this bold evangelical assurance from only one place—not from tradition, even though we value traditions highly (because church tradition do sometimes leads us astray)—but from the Holy Scriptures, the written Word of God.

Do you see why, whatever we call it, this way of being Christian, these teachings that uphold both the evangelical and the catholic character of the Christian faith are so necessary?

Well, if so, then we should realize that this is the reason it's important to be authentically Lutheran, because being authentically Lutheran is being *both catholic and evangelical*.

3. *Being missional—evangelistic*

And, if you're both evangelical and catholic, then you have to be missional (evangelistic)—because God wants all the whole world to know His grace and truth in Christ Jesus. There's no way to be Christian without sharing the Gospel message with those who do not know Christ or have left His Church—and there's no other way to be Lutheran either.

II. Fundamentally Lutheran A. Core values for Lutherans (fundamentals)

So what is fundamental for Lutherans? I suppose I chose this title precisely because I don't want to be called a *fundamentalist*. Those Christians who are most often identified as the hardest of the hard religious right are not Lutherans simply because we're *both-and* people, not mono-focal ideologues, religious or otherwise. But, let's not let fear of *fundamentalism* blind us to the importance of hanging on to the *fundamentals* of our convictions. If “fundamental” is a word you just can't manage, then we could instead talk about core values. That's even a little trendy. Let me suggest five of them:

A. The BIBLE is our final authority.

I don't want to be called a fundamentalist, but I'm okay if you call me an evangelical. Why, because together with Evangelicals, Lutherans accept the full authority of the Bible as the deciding vote in every question of what Christians should believe and practice (2 Tim 3:16). Or, even more strongly: the Bible is the infallible rule for Christian faith in the Lutheran Confessions.

The very first distinctly Lutheran confession is the Augsburg Confession (AC), written by Philip Melanchthon in 1530. Charles V had summoned the troublesome princes who were defending and sheltering Martin Luther, the troublesome monk who since 1517 had been comparing Holy Scripture to the traditions of the medieval Roman church—and had found the traditions wanting in the comparison. While Luther was sheltered from Imperial might, Melanchthon was given the task of telling the assembly what the churches in Germany believed. In his preface to the AC (or, Augustana), Melanchthon said: “in most humble obedience to Your Imperial Majesty, we offer and present a confession of our pastors’ and preachers’ teachings as well as of our faith, setting forth on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture what and in what manner they preach, teach, believe, and give instruction in our lands, principalities, dominions, cities, and territories.”⁴ Please note: everything that these first “Lutheran” churches preached, taught, believed, and shared was set forth on one, single basis: “on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture.”

In defense of the Augustana, Melanchthon’s Apology (AAC) declares that monastic vows ought not to be required by the church. His objection is based on the Roman respondents’ misuse of Scripture. Instead, he argues that “examples ought to be interpreted according to the rule [of faith], that is, according to sure and clear passages of Scripture, not contrary to the rule or the passages.”⁵ Notice, he defines “the rule of faith” with “sure and clear passages of Scripture.”

I could lay out many more confessional assertions regarding the singular authority of Holy Scripture and literally hundreds of examples of the Confessions establishing a teaching by referring to the Bible. But, for brevity’s sake, I’ll just skip to the final confessional writing, the

⁴Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J., *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2000, p. 32 §8, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as AC Pref. 8, KW 32.

⁵AAC XXVII, 60, KW 287, emphasis added.

Formula of Concord, for a final example. The Formula also begins with an unambiguous, take-no-prisoners affirmation of the necessity of scriptural authority.

We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle⁶ according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone, as it is written, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119[105]), and Saint Paul: “If . . . an angel from heaven should proclaim to you something contrary, . . . let that one be accursed!” (Gal. 1[:8]).

Other writings of ancient or contemporary teachers, whatever their names may be, shall not be regarded as equal to Holy Scripture, but all of them together shall be subjected to it, and not be accepted in any other way, or with any further authority, than as witnesses of how and where the teaching of the prophets and apostles was preserved after the time of the apostles.⁷

Let’s pause and pull together a couple of conclusions. The first is that, as the Confessions show, the Lutheran Reformation began with a belief that Rome shared: the Bible is the Word of God. Both Rome and Wittenberg argued from the basis of Holy Scripture as authority. This was the traditional belief of the entire Church catholic, and it was a good tradition that the Reformation preserved because there is no other sure way to know Christ than by listening to the same Old Testament Scriptures He read, to His voice in the Gospels, and to His apostolic witnesses.

The Lutheran fathers, however, went beyond Rome in their belief about Scripture, because they believed Scripture had *singular* authority—it has final authority over any human teaching or tradition if there is a conflict between the two. Each of the examples I’ve given as well as the entirety of the *Book of Concord* illustrate these two ideas: the authority of Scripture as Word of God and its singular authority over every other human teaching, ancient or modern.

B. The GOSPEL gets the last word.

Evangelical, you know, literally means “according to the Gospel.” The Gospel is "Good News" and it refers, specifically, to the fact that God came to us in Jesus Christ, to bring life,

⁶ In the Tappert edition of *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), the term is “norm,” which more clearly implies authority and certainly reflects the original.

⁷ FCEp, Summary, 1, KW 486.

salvation, and hope to humanity (Rom 1:16). Even though the Bible has lots to say about lots of things—the best thing (the last word) is the message of Jesus Christ. This is also a central emphasis in much of classical Evangelical Christianity.

The Lutheran confessional focus on Scripture includes an emphasis on the proper distinction between God’s Law and His saving Gospel. The Confessions show that having a right understanding of the Scriptures means not only accepting some version of scriptural authority, something Rome endorsed, or even the singular authority of Scripture as normative above tradition, something other reformers accepted, but also rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel messages of God’s Word. The Formula of Concord says it best: “we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law.”⁸ Speaking very carefully, the Formula goes on to say that the Gospel may be used to refer to the entire teaching of Christ, but, most precisely, the Gospel (“Good News”) refers to “a proclamation of the grace and favor of God because of Christ.”⁹ Quoting Luther, the Formula adds: “Everything that proclaims something about our sin and God’s wrath is the proclamation of the law, however and whenever it may take place. On the other hand, the gospel is the kind of proclamation that points to and bestows nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ...”¹⁰

This means the Gospel has a finality that the Law does not have. The Gospel is the Word that declares repentant sinners to be justified for Christ’s sake—their sins fully and freely forgiven, period. To fail to see that is to see a hopelessly confused message in Scripture regarding salvation and to be led into a personal crisis either of Pharisaical rationalizing of sins or of utter despair over them. The Gospel’s absolution alone is the key to heaven’s door.

⁸ FC SD V 1, KW 581.

⁹ FC SD V 2, KW 582.

¹⁰FC SD V 12, KW 583.

We dare not forget the importance of properly distinguishing Law and Gospel and the pastoral responsibility to speak appropriately these divine messages. Nor can we ignore the vital truth that only the good news of Christ's gracious life, death, and resurrection can assure the fulfillment of humanity's ultimate hopes. The Gospel must have pride of place, "the last word."

However, the distinction of Law and Gospel is not a distinction between what is God's Word and what is not God's Word. Neither is this a distinction between what still applies to human beings and what does not, nor is it a distinction between something bad and something good. Law and Gospel are not simply two words of God, one of which we give only a passing notice after which we can freely ignore it in the name of the other. Finally, while the Gospel is a "last word" of sorts, it can never be spoken absent the Law, nor does it preclude the necessity of the Law's continuing voice with the Gospel as a word of guidance for holy living. In such ways our Lutheran world has confused Law and Gospel, thinking that since our salvation is totally dependent upon the Good News (Gospel) of what God has done, that all of God's commands are somehow outdated, irrelevant, or inapplicable today. Law and Gospel are to be distinguished, but dare never be divorced!¹¹

The Gospel of undeserved grace and favor in Christ is the most astounding truth of the Scriptures and is something that human reason could never have discovered. It is known only because God sent His Son into our world, the Word made flesh, whose death and resurrection are the very message of forgiveness—Gospel! But the Scripture's other great truth, the Law is His kind and loving Word of truth and guidance for our lives. Both Law and Gospel are words for our people today.

¹¹ The classic explication of these principles is C. F. W. Walther's *The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: CPH,).

C. Only FAITH in Christ saves.

The Bible's Gospel message is a call to faith. God promises to save those who believe. Only faith saves because faith means trusting in the Savior, Jesus (Eph. 2:8-9). While we emphasize good works as part of Christian responsibility, a person's salvation is not based on what he or she has done, but on faith in what Jesus has done. That's another mark of Evangelical Christianity at its best. But that evangelical mark starts with the Lutheran reformers. Listen to Melancthon:

Now although untested people despise this teaching completely, it is nevertheless the case that it is very comforting and beneficial for timid and terrified consciences. For the conscience cannot find rest and peace through works but by faith alone, when it concludes on its own with certainty that it has a gracious God for Christ's sake, as Paul says (Rom. 5[:1]): "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God."¹²

This is evangelical doctrine to its core and, as a matter of fact, the right understanding of faith is more evangelical than the Evangelicals themselves sometimes realize. Listen to Luther correct some of the Evangelicals of his day:

Our know-it-alls, the new spirits, claim that faith alone saves and that works and external things add nothing to it. We answer: It is true, nothing that is in us [saves] but faith, as we shall hear later on. But these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe—something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand.¹³

D. BAPTISM means belonging.

Unlike Evangelicals, and just like Roman Catholics, Lutherans emphasize Sacraments, starting with Baptism. Baptism is our promise from God that we belong to him (Acts 2:38-39; Gal 3:27)). When Jesus gave His command to make disciples, He said the first thing that has to happen is to baptize (Matt 28:19). Let me continue the quote from Luther which I just used in

¹² KW 54:15.

¹³ KW, 460:28-29.

talking about the necessity of faith. After Luther reminded the Evangelicals of his day that faith never stands alone but also has an object—something that it believes—he went on to say this:

Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be baptism, in which there is sheer salvation and life, not through the water, as we have sufficiently stated, but through its incorporation with God's Word and ordinance and the joining of his name to it. When I believe this, what else is it but believing in God as the one who has bestowed and implanted his Word in baptism and has offered us this external thing within which we can grasp this treasure?¹⁴

E. COMMUNION is necessary nourishment.

Again, unlike Evangelicals and like Catholics, Lutherans believe the regular reception of the Lord's Supper is an essential part of Christian life. We believe Communion really is just what Jesus says it is: His body and blood, for forgiveness and nourishment in faith (John 6:53-54; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:24-26). Let me repeat: “we *believe* Communion really is just what Jesus says it is.” Notice, this sacramental realism—this sacramental focus which in so many ways connects us with Roman Catholic brothers and sisters—is by no means *unevangelical*. Rather, it is focused on the evangelical theme of faith. Listen to Luther again:

Why, for instance, do we try to explain how I am born anew in Baptism, how three Persons can dwell in one Godhead, or how Christ can be present in bread and wine in Holy Communion? Here faith alone is in order. Truly, we should be crowned with Scotch thistles for our foolishness in succumbing so easily to the devil's old query: “Why?” We cannot understand the functions of life around us. A mother cannot explain the conception of a child in her body. She cannot explain how she nourishes the child from her heart and how it grows from the drops of her blood, nor how she gets milk in her breasts. Nevertheless she carries the child and brings it into the world. Thus there are many things which we perceive with our five senses and yet do not understand. Should I not do God the honor of saying: “O God, why should I not believe Thee? I cannot even explain how I was created. Therefore I will believe that Thou canst do more than I can see or understand.”¹⁵

So what does this mean? It means that Lutherans are evangelical-catholic Christians. We share core beliefs of both of the two great groups of Christians without rejecting either group as

¹⁴KW, 460:29.

¹⁵AE 22:297.

our brothers and sisters. We're kind of stuck in the middle, but we're there by conviction. By being in the middle, I don't mean being compromising or lukewarm or indecisive or mediocre. I mean the way a father and mother join to create new life, our church joins Word and Sacrament together through God's grace to create a church where new life through Baptism, Communion and the preaching of God's Word gives life in Christ and sustains it.

"Here we stand!" Joyfully! Humbly! Confidently!

III. How to keep our faith in difficult times

Finally I get to the point! Let me suggest four things about how to keep our faith in difficult times: preservation, proclamation, practice, persuasion.

A. Preservation (that is, maintaining the Confessions)

1. Catechesis for the laity

It is significant that the *Book of Concord*, which consists of documents written by theologians from the Church fathers to Luther and Melancthon to the six authors of the Formula of Concord, actually came about because of the efforts of *laity*. Laity facilitated the assembly of these documents and laity held their pastors accountable to these writings. Now there's a stunner. Look at what happens when you equip the laity!

And I'm not talking about sending the laity off to a university. I'm talking about laity who are empowered with the simple confidence of those brief confessions of faith that we call creeds and that beautiful little booklet called the *Small Catechism*. These confessions are solidly anchored in the Scriptures which, starting with Luther's translation, went from being the clergy's book to a book for all believers.

Preserving Lutheran faith convictions requires us to get serious again about equipping the laity, encouraging the study of the Scriptures not to prove our creativity, but to learn its truth. It

means confessing and teaching the creeds, which is to say, it means *catechesis*. Catechesis is the teaching of basic Christian convictions, particularly the “six chief parts of Christian doctrine” to use the term Lutherans have preferred.

The laity are powerful preservers of the faith when they are encouraged to hold clergy accountable for the chief teachings of Christianity: God’s Commandments, the creedal confession of God’s triune identity and work, the prayer which teaches us to pray, the Sacraments. These are the basics of the faith which have been taught to all Christians for millennia. Their very universality is what makes them so important.

First, the commandments are that simple, yet profound way to summarize the Bible’s answer to the question: What is right and what is wrong—and who is to judge, anyway? They tell us what whole-hearted love for God and our neighbor looks like. They remind us that life and love require structure, standards, truth about what is and is not permissible. What a rich gift in a morally confused world!

The creeds simply, yet profoundly answer the question, Who is God? and How do we know who God is? There, in the second part of the Catechism, we see, in three brief sections that the eternal origin and almighty Force of the universe is Love Himself—for God was in Christ, in Mary’s womb, living in our flesh, teaching, healing, accepting the despised, suffering innocently, dying to forgive, buried to break open hell, and risen to affirm a victory for all the world. This God is real, and no longer unknown for His very Spirit inhabits His holy people, Christ’s Body the Church, which despite its fallibility makes Him truly known to the nations. Astounding!

Third, there is the prayer that Jesus gives, and in giving replies to the disciple’s plea: Teach us to pray. So we learn from him both the bold freedom to come to our Father with every care, no matter how small, but also learn the discipline of praying about those specific things that

Jesus puts on our lips in the Lord's Prayer and puts into our practice as we pray the psalms with Him. We are welcomed to the very throne of heaven!

Fourth is Baptism, which is taught to us in four Bible verses, briefly explained. Baptism is the water commanded by Christ and used according to His promises (Matt 28:19). It is our very assurance of salvation (Mark 16:16). It is our new birth as God's children (Titus 3:5-8). And it is our new identity as a holy people of God (Rom 6:4). How simple. How beautiful. How true!

In that new life we stumble and fall, so, fifth, we also are reminded of the gift of confession—that God preserves us from the silly game of our first parents, trying to hide from Him. Instead we learn to confess our sins, and not only in prayers to Him, but “one to another” (Jam 5:16) knowing “He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). We know because He has assured us that when Christ's called and ordained servants proclaim our forgiveness, they speak for Christ Himself who said: “Whatever sins you forgive, they are forgiven” (John 20:22). So we confess, and so we believe, and so we are forgiven!

And sixth, there is that beautiful explanation of the Sacrament of the Altar, which is nothing less than Christ's very body and blood. Not a symbol, not a wish, not a philosophical conundrum—Christ declares His bread and cup to be His very Body and Blood, given and shed for our forgiveness—given to assure us and encourage us in the life of faith—given to show forth, again and again, Christ's death until He comes again. Amen? Yes, yes! It is so.

2. Concordia for the clergy

For the laity to be rightly instructed, the ordained must be grounded again in our calling. We are not called to be academic intellectuals, although God demands that we love Him fully with our minds. We receive no orders as cultural warriors of right or left, but holy orders to

speak His Word in its fullness and truth. We are not social workers, but “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). To be faithful Lutheran ministers requires that we hold one another accountable for the Concordia—the unified agreement—that we find in the Lutheran Confessions.

3. Confession over denominational labels

Speaking only for myself, I hope this means that we do this with all those who genuinely desire to be faithful to their vows of ordination into the ministry in Lutheran churches. That is, I hope that labels like LCMS, LCMC, WordAlone, LutheranCore, or, for that matter, ELCA or WELS, do not prevent us from encouraging one another in faithful, confessional, biblical ministry. It is exciting to see that, despite the tragedies of the apostasy of last year, there are open doorways now that did not exist before. Next month confessional Lutherans from various places, including various different ecclesial groups, national and international, will gather at a Confessional Leadership Conference for several days to consider the new possibilities for encouraging one another in faithful ministry.

4. A new ecumenism

Moreover, this even goes beyond the Lutheran label. The LCMS will soon begin doctrinal dialogues and mutual study with the Anglican Church in North America. Despite our very different heritages, they approached us and said, in effect, we identify with the priority you are giving to Holy Scripture and your confessional heritage. They urged us to support one another insofar as we are able. To that there is but one answer: a resounding, Yes! May Jesus Christ be praised!

It is a new ecumenical day, in which the old ecumenism of seeking church union on the basis of minimalistic agreements is being challenged by a new ecumenism which is focused on

firm biblical teaching and confessional convictions. Evangelicals and Catholics Together have set a pattern and a standard for this, talking both about shared convictions and priorities, and also about hard topics that divide them. Their conversations are not based on a goal of intercommunion, but on the far more realistic recognition that despite the differences, there is far more which draws them together.

We should seriously consider all the reasons that groups such as the LCMS and the various groups of Lutherans who are re-examining their relationship with the ELCA ought to embark joyfully on such a course together, seeking every way to affirm common ground above all else. Who knows what might come of that? Additionally, let this new ecumenism not only be a North American thing. It is vitally important that we recognize that those Lutherans who are in the southern hemisphere, particularly in Africa, fully share a desire to uphold a Lutheran identity that is unswervingly biblical.

Again, to take a slight detour, let me mention three things. First, the LCMS has recently signed a partnership with the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia, to encourage biblical and confessional scholarship and confession in that rapidly growing church. Second, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania issued a public rebuke of the ELCA's decisions last summer and the decision of the Church of Sweden to ordain a lesbian bishop. In that same period, leaders of the church in Tanzania and the LCMS have met to discuss the possibility of a partnership agreement similar to the one signed with Mekane Yesus. Third, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Madagascar and LCMS missions personnel are considering a partnership. Please, note that each one of these three churches is larger than the ELCA or LCMS, and each is growing rapidly. Their concern is to be biblically and confessionally faithful and their

disappointment with North American and Swedish LWF leadership has them considering new ecumenical directions for the sake of preserving the purity of the Gospel and the Scriptures.

B. Proclamation

You don't preserve the light by hiding it, so preservation requires proclamation. This message is the very Gospel of life and salvation in Christ, the Savior of the world. No faithful disciple can ignore His command: "Go and make disciples of all nations!"

1. Preaching that is devout and dynamic

Nothing less is called for but solidly scriptural preaching that breathes the reality that eternal life depends on the living Word. I am ashamed of how many times I have preached with less conviction than a minimum wage store clerk. Life and salvation are given in Christ—and not just heaven by-and-by, but life that begins today, in our daily life together. It is ordered, joyful, holy and happy! But who would know that from so much of our preaching?

Devout and dynamic! Devout because God in Christ has devoted Himself to us and our lives. Devout because only the life devoted to God is lived with real hope and genuine joy. Devout life is life lived in the Word, in daily reading and faithful prayer. All believers are called to such devotion, but Scripture demands it in particular ways of those in apostolic ministry. Acts 6:3—"Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty." ⁴ But we [the pastors] will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Laity, you must encourage us in this—with insistence!

Devout and dynamic. Dynamic because the Gospel is "the power [*dynamis*] of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16). To preach dynamically is to declare the Gospel—the whole counsel of God—with such fervent conviction. It is to preach it without apology, without fear, and without qualification. It is the power—let that power be known through us.

2. Renewed scriptural and sacramental teaching

For this, conviction is essential. For conviction, we must be anchored in the Word and the Sacraments. Scripture is the basis for all our proclamation and the Word includes the sacramental commands and promises.

Our preaching must be biblical—thoroughly and consistently. We are not called to creative exercises of fanciful imagination, but to proclamation of the Word of truth. Of course that includes using whatever creative and expressive ability God has given to preachers, but all of that is so much fluff if we are not proclaiming the Word of truth.

Our preaching must also be sacramental, for when we do not proclaim God’s sacramental promises, we are not proclaiming the Gospel in all its richness. To evangelize includes calling people to the Font. To challenge and chastise is also a call to confession and Holy Absolution. To comfort and console means also to call the sorrowing to the Altar with its nourishment.

C. Practices

In addition to preserving the Confessions of our church and proclaiming the Good News of Christ in faithfulness to the Scriptures, we must also examine our practices.

1. Re-establishing the “conservative reformation” principle

The Lutheran reformers were noteworthy among the rest of the Reformation movement because of their “conservative” approach to reform. We’re not talking politics or ideology here, but the caution with which Luther and Melancthon made changes in customs. Where they saw no necessity to make changes for the sake of scriptural truth, their tendency was always to maintain traditional practices. Even when Scripture demanded a change, for instance in the giving of the chalice to the laity, they moved slowly and carefully so as not to confuse people or be viewed as radicals who made changes simply for the sake of shaking someone up.

2. Evaluating the church's practices

We live in a world that has become naïve about change, viewing it as inevitably good. How silly is that, yet we all fall victim to the attitude. Moving slowly, especially with regard to church customs, continues to be a wise course in most cases. Our goal must be clear, the change that is needed most is for the human heart to be changed from its inherent stoniness into a beating heart of faith. Too often our desire to change something or other distracts us from what is most necessary.

Moreover, when something changes, something is lost. Often we focus on what we hope to achieve, but forget to notice what is lost. On the one hand, while I find some liturgical change, for example, to be refreshing and clarifying, I've more often found myself mourning some vital element of faith and life that was forgotten as changes took place. On the other hand, now that I visit many churches, it is disappointing to see how often congregations are stuck in ruts regarding their practice—how often their worship is cold, lifeless, uninviting, and uninspiring. Because the practices of the church are the field in which individuals encounter the Word and presence of God, it is vital that we seriously consider our practices, neither changing for the sake of change, nor refusing necessary change. What is important is that our church practices, especially in worship, are consistent with our confessions and theology.

3. Vigorous mercy efforts

Last, we should not ignore the importance of the church's practical efforts to serve the poor and others in need. Too much time and money has gone into "social ministry" that is really a matter of political advocacy. Instead, it is high time for us to recapture the Lutheran tradition of diaconal ministries that served the widow, the orphan, the poor, the deaf, the blind, the sick, and the dying.

Such “mercy ministries” are the very thing the “average” Christian knows to be necessary expressions of the love of God in Christ. Therefore, they become ways that bind believers together, rather than separating them from one another. They are visible signs of Christ’s own ministry and so they also enable us to see His truth in action. These are things that, given the principal of cooperation in externals, we should engage in together as soon as possible.

D. Persuasion

Did any of this ring true? I hope so... no, I pray that it did! I am personally convinced, yes, convicted of how important it is for there to be an authentic Lutheran expression of the Christian faith—a church that insists on being both evangelical and catholic. I’m absolutely convicted that God does not want all of Christianity to run off to Evangelicalism, as much as I appreciate and am thankful for Evangelical Christianity and its evangelistic fervor and its biblical commitment! I’m just as convinced that God does not want all of Christianity to go to Rome and affirm everything the papacy requires, as much as I am thankful that there is a RCC and as much as I agree with so much that recent popes have said!

In other words, I’m convinced that God wants there to be a church that stands in the middle based on firm convictions, seeking to declare evangelical and catholic truth exactly as our Confessions do. I hope that isn’t arrogant, because I don’t mean it to be so—indeed, it scares me, because it means that it is necessary for us to promote these convictions.

If any of this makes any sense and elicits any sense of agreement on your part, then let me suggest a final point: persuasive outreach.

1. The need to develop the art of apologetics

We have a message the world must hear and we can’t be shy about engaging our communities and our culture in winsome and thoughtful conversation. The Reformation was won

by the printing press, you know, with the reformers out-publishing their Roman Catholic opponents many times over. But the church has let itself be relegated to corners of bookstores and, with a few exceptions, stays out of public debate.

I wish I had a silver bullet. Obviously, I don't. But I do know that no matter who controls the major media outlets, in a world of cable and satellite TV and the internet, there is more that can be done. Once again, it's something where pooled resources would be critical.

2. Mission—local and beyond!

With that goes vigorous mission efforts. Too many of our congregations are attempting to survive by waiting for people to come to us. We're called to "go" to the nations. Learning about outreach from both Evangelicalism and Rome here in the US is important, but we also have to build from our strengths as Lutherans, as a church of paradox and contrast: keeping left and right hand kingdoms straight, preaching law and Gospel, emphasizing Word and Sacraments.

The necessity of allowing ourselves the freedom to express a passionate love for Lutheran teachings and life—a passionate love—is not an obnoxious or arrogant thing. If we're genuinely excited about the message we bear, that will be contagious. God's Spirit is at work among us, as much as the Lutheran churches have suffered in recent decades.

What's needed? To teach the basics in our congregations: fundamentals of the faith like the Commandments, the Creeds, our Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments. Let's pray together with zeal and confidence. God works in frail people with a strength that is not our own.

We need partnerships and networks between congregations and between church bodies like the LCMS and the emerging Lutheran organizations. Let us pray together and encourage one another constantly, and studying the Word and Confessions with one another. Those are mighty things that can be done in the congregation and beyond. No matter how significant are the issues

that challenge us, the strength of shared confidence in the authority of God's Word and recognition of the truth of our Confessions is greater.

To God be the glory!