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The Gospel Needs Protection

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It is almost commonplace to observe that the genius of the Lutheran Confessions lies in their ineluctable emphasis on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What is often not fully appreciated is their pastorally protective attitude on behalf of that Gospel against any claim or practice within the church that tends to "obscure," "insult," "abrogate," "deny," "detract from," or "add to" the gracious and sufficient work of God in Christ. A greater measure of the true spirit of the Confessions could be recovered by renewing that protective attitude toward the Gospel in 1971 rather than merely adding to the shrill cacophony of voices that hail the Confessions as some kind of exhaustive authoritative repository for every conceivable matter of ecclesiastical significance.

There are reasons aplenty for saying this, the most obvious of which is a common but very un-Lutheran assumption that the Confessions share equal authority with the Scriptures in determining the doctrine and life of God's people. To give the Confessions such undue homage is, ironically, to make them serve *against* the very purpose for which they were written, that is, use them in such a way that they are made to "obscure" or "detract from" the fullness of the Gospel of Christ. It is no part of the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Confessions (which alone is binding) *that they are to be used today as a rule and norm for Christian faith and life*. To say they are is to confuse their historical use as witnesses to the truth of God against 16th-century abuses with their role today as true witnesses to the Gospel and the defining characteristic of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

In exaggerating the role of the Confessions we also do violence to the explicit statements of the Confessions themselves that insist that the "Holy Scripture remains the *only* judge, rule, and norm according to which as the *only* touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong" (my emphasis; FC, Epitome, Rule and Norm, 3). Elsewhere the Confessions insist that the Holy Scriptures "are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged . . ."; that they are "the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated"; that "no human being's writings dare to be put on a par with it [the Scriptures], but that everything must be subjected to it"; and that the symbols of the church and other writings are

“merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries.” (Respectively: FC, Epitome, Rule and Norm, 1; Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 1; *ibid.*, 6; and Epitome, Rule and Norm, 3)

It is true, of course, that inasmuch as the doctrinal content of the Confessions correctly witnesses to God’s truth as that was discerned in Scripture, the confessors and all true Lutherans accord their Confessions a derivative authority. But this does not imply that the whole truth of the Scriptures is exhausted in the Confessions. Even the confessors did not think so. Nor does it imply that the Book of Concord is always adequate to every doctrinal question that arises in ages after its composition. Derivative authority, in a word, can never be complete and supreme authority. To make these inferences constitutes not only faulty logic but an abuse of the Confessions and a threat to the uniqueness of God’s Word and the Gospel.

There is another useful application of Confessional protectionism. The intent to defend the Gospel against real and potential rivals should also be used in our age against the demand that subconfessional statements and the declarations of some Lutheran denominational church bodies be made normative and binding on the life and teaching of the Lutheran Church. The temptation to make them so is made to seem plausible by citing the fact to which we have just made reference, namely the inability to extract from the Confessions alone answers to every theological question. But to add to the Confessions in this way is to depart from evangelical Lutheranism as the Confessions define it and to substitute a spirit of sectarianism for the spirit of freedom under the Gospel that the Confessions themselves seek to enhance. Twenty-five years ago a group of prophetic churchmen of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod deplored “a tendency in our Synod to substitute human judgments, synodical resolutions, or other sources of authority for the supreme authority of Scripture.” There is more reason to heed that admonition today than there was 25 years ago. For today many are attempting to avoid or disparage the results of devout Biblical study by taking refuge in organizational slogans and dicta that seem to accord Biblical teaching no importance or effect. But if, indeed, God’s truth still addresses us in Scripture, then it is a threat to that Word to create synodical confessional substitutes for it that hinder the Spirit in His universal mission of making men wise unto salvation. Statements that limit the authority of Scripture terrorize consciences, dishonor the Gospel, and inhibit its free course, and are therefore a menace to the very life and growth that is the church’s mission to promote.

In 1971 we advocate a renewed study of the Lutheran Confessions and a whole-hearted rebirth of their protective spirit toward the Gospel among Lutherans. One more way in which the Gospel can flourish and rule among us as a living witness to God’s love in Christ will be evident in the way we guard it from the folly of our own restrictive pronouncements. That kind of witness has a genuinely Lutheran ring.

Why Missouri?

OLIVER R. HARMS

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Though strife makes news, it is not new to the life of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Similarly, controversy has marked the history of the Christian church since earliest New Testament days. To recall this history is not to offer excuses or sanctions. Rather, the purpose is to learn to distinguish what is truly significant in the life of the Christian church and how Christians are to handle difficulties in their midst.

It is significant that the continuing contention in the life of the church is over nothing less than the Gospel itself. In special ways this was the focus of attention in the beginning of the New Testament church. It was the crucial issue in the Reformation. It surfaced also in the origins of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1839.

Doctrinal controversy prompted the apostles to call the first convention of the church. That convention set the standard for all church conventions: All teaching and practice must give preeminence to the Gospel. Human traditions dare not compromise the work of Christ nor disrupt the unity of the church. Significantly, too, the apostles did not call a halt for housecleaning or for setting things straight; the church must proclaim the Gospel to the world even while contending for its primacy in the church.

Under God, Luther succeeded in the Reformation because he disentangled the Gospel from legal and human bonds so that God's grace might reign supreme. A personal struggle was involved for Luther and for those who followed him. Out of this struggle came the Augsburg Confession, a document that is unique precisely because it separates the doctrine of the Gospel from all else. It lets the work of Christ pervade all Christian doctrine and life. Christians are beggars before God, Luther said, but they are not cripples, for they walk as sons who trust the Father's grace.

It was through search and struggle that the Saxon forefathers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod discovered the nature of the Gospel and of the church. C. F. W. Walther became the first and clearest Lutheran voice in the Synod after he grasped what the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions were saying. No one has articulated the spirit of the evangelical confession better than did Walther in his *Law and Gospel*. Werner Elert recognized this when he wrote: "Even among the Luther interpreters of the last century, only a few, such as Theodosius Harnack and the American Lutheran, C. F. W. Walther, broke through to the Pauline-Lutheran understanding of the divergence" (between Law and Gospel).¹ It was this understanding of the Lutheran

¹ Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, trans. Edward H. Schroeder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 2.

confession that propelled Walther in his drive for staunch confessional Lutheranism and for Lutheran unity.

Walther's understanding and spirit show up in significant places in the life of the Synod. For instance, the Synod's constitution in Article II requires for membership nothing less and nothing more than accepting "without reservation the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice; all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God."² Provisions for discipline reflect the confidence that the Word of God, both Law and Gospel, achieve God's purposes when Christian brothers deal with one another according to Matthew 18. The original constitution of the Lutheran Synodical Conference shows the influence of Walther in the commitment to seek "the consolidation of all Lutheran Synods of America into a single, faithful, devout American Lutheran Church."³

Official records of the Synod show how efforts were made to weaken or undermine Walther's position. These efforts were directed primarily to three areas of church life. There have always been those in the Synod who have sought to impose tests that go beyond the Lutheran Confessions as a condition for Lutheran fellowship and unity. At times, it seems, other Lutherans have been placed in the same category as the heterodox. There have also been those who have betrayed their trust in the Gospel by the way they have insisted on law and order for achieving discipline in the church. Finally, the last half century has seen a growing insistence by some that the Synod insist on imposing a doctrine of Scripture that goes beyond what the Scriptures, Luther, or the Lutheran Confessions allow.

It was only a quarter century ago, as the November 1970 issue of the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* reminded us, that the tension in the Synod again broke into the open. Proponents of "A Statement" in 1945 were trying to say how deeply they were concerned about the Gospel. By their statement they called the Synod to be consistent with its evangelical confession. They sensed a growing gap between what was being preached and what was being done, a gap between the Synod's earlier position and its later declarations, a widening area in which the Gospel and law and human opinion were being mingled. Looking back over the Synod's history particularly since World War I, Dr. Lawrence B. Meyer, prominent church leader, called "A Statement" the "turning point" in the Synod's history.

In essence it is the same battle that is now being waged in the Synod. A decision must be made, and apparently there is no way to make it without agonizing reappraisal, repentance, and recommitment. Time after time the decision has been put off or the real issue has been evaded. Other Lutheran churches in America through association and merger have spent the past century in learning together what it means to be Lutheran in confession and practice. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has spent much of this time talking to itself. The Synod readily adopted its "Theology of Fel-

² Constitution of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, Article II.

³ 1871 Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference, Article III.

lowship," but the test really came when the Synod was asked to establish altar and pulpit fellowship with The American Lutheran Church. For many members of the Synod this was the first time they learned what Lutheran unity is all about according to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession.

In times of emergency, especially under the pressures of war, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has worked with other Lutherans to bring spiritual and physical ministries to those in need. Now a world that is crying and dying asks if its desperate condition is not a time of emergency. Unity is what the Scriptures and Confessions require, not uniformity. There is no place for suspicion or for isolation among those who call themselves brothers in Christ and heirs of the Reformation.

Within the last decade The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has set forth its understanding of the church's mission. The Synod's Mission Affirmations are a statement of purpose and a statement of commitment to ministry. Now the Synod must decide whether it wants to be excused by the Lord of the church from this mandate to follow another mandate first to conduct a loyalty check. The Synod must decide whether its proclamation is more than Law and Gospel, whether its ministry is more than that of servant to announce God's judgment and to bring His grace by word and deed.

The decision ahead is whether the Synod is ready to take its stand on nothing more and nothing less than Jesus Christ, the one given us by the faithful Father to be Savior and Lord. This is where Luther and the Lutheran confessors took their stand. This is the place to which Lutherans have come to find their unity and strength. This is where the church is, because the Word and Sacraments are here. This is the place from which Christians have gone in their ministry to all men.

The decision for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is whether it sees the work of God in its own history and in its unique achievements. Setting aside its particular fears and weaknesses, the Synod is asked to show its trust by a willingness to enter on new ways and new associations. This is a calling that cannot be ignored, because it comes from the Lord Himself. It comes with a promise that He will lead and that He will sustain His people.

The decision is made difficult by various circumstances. Publications, personalities, and politics have intruded to becloud and confuse the issue. Some speak as though the church belongs to men, not to the God who alone creates and sustains faith and love. In their arrogance some talk about giving the church body away, about dividing it up, or about distributing pieces of it here and there. In their pride some pass judgment on the motives and hearts of others even as they impose their own standards for faith and love. In their callousness some violate the faith and the fear of innocent believers. In their disregard some give offense other than the scandal of the cross to those who are within and without the church.

The real decision may depend most of all on the way in which the struggle is pursued. Those who participate proclaim what they stand for by what they do and by the way in which they do it. Partisan propaganda and political ploys reveal how vain men are and how little they trust God to manage His affairs by His Word. By that

Word He speaks to every man. By that Word He asks men to take the risk of trusting Him to keep His promises.

Under God, Missouri has had a fine history. Millions now treasure the blessings Missouri has given as it shared the mysteries of grace and gave opportunities for service. For almost 125 years God has done good things through Missouri. But the call to Missouri is no different from God's call to all His children. Missouri will have a future by any name as long as Missouri is taken captive by God's great grace. Missouri can serve no higher purpose than to let its confession and life be in Christ: *Soli Deo Gloria*.