



# Proclaiming the Confessions

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**A**t the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly as part of the *en bloc* memorials, there were memorials from the Allegheny and Southeastern Synods to return to the *Augsburg Confession*—the first document of the *Book of Concord*, which defines the Lutheran denominational family—as we get ready for the five-hundredth anniversary of its presentation in 2030. I would like to introduce Lutherans to something I started in 2014 that brings not just the *Augsburg Confession* but the entire *Book of Concord* into the proclamation of the gospel through word and deed. For readers who are not Lutheran, I offer this as an example and as encouragement to delve into the foundational documents of your own denominational family.

I begin with the story of what I have been doing. Then I offer an example of how this has come to life in congregational life; this section includes a historical excursion to see how the Lutheran confessional writings provide a center for theological discussion. Finally, I will show how clergy and laity can return to these founding documents for the sake of proclaiming the gospel through many aspects of congregational life.

## AN UNRECOGNIZED GIFT

I stumbled across one of God's unrecognized gifts to the church—and to Lutheranism, in particular—while working on my PhD at Luther Seminary. At the back

*Many Lutheran pastors have the Book of Concord sitting on the shelf in their office, but do not find many occasions to crack it open. But, as the author shows, a creative use of this volume (and its scriptural indexes) can provide a renewed Lutheran theology and proclamation, as the author show here through an example of how the confessional documents might be used today.*

of the Kolb and Wengert edition of the *Book of Concord* is a scriptural index.<sup>1</sup> This index is a real treat for any preacher looking for a way to incorporate Lutheran theology into preaching, and a great way for those listening to be reminded of what it means to listen with Lutheran ears. As I was finishing my doctoral work, I had the chance to get back into the rhythm of regular preaching and brought this gift to the congregations where I have been graced to be in the pulpit.

I have made turning to the “Index of Biblical References” in the *Book of Concord* a regular and early part of my homiletical process. This simple step drove me back into its various parts, and not just for confirmation classes or adult forums. Refreshing my understanding of the complex history that led to the formation of each of the documents inspired connections in my thinking, sermons, teaching, and pastoral care. These connections might not have always resulted in direct quotes, but the refinement of my thought process renewed my preaching and gave me a strong grounding for dealing with those theological questions that come up on a regular basis in congregational life.

Five years ago, after having already worked through much of Year B from the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) in my journal, I realized that this unrecognized gift needed some recognition. I already had a blog for occasional reflection on my doctoral work, so it was a natural transition to start posting the work of bringing together the weekly readings of the RCL and the Lutheran theological heritage. In one sense, all I am doing is finding the citations, but always with an eye to how these ideas can be preached and how they can help leaders in congregations. Some weeks offer better insights than others—for example, the citations for Lectionary 23 B are rather disappointing—but returning to the *Book of Concord* has proved helpful.

One of the key insights I have found is that we are still asking the same questions. It may not always be for the same reasons, but the central questions of how we can be sure we are right with God, what role our deeds play, and how the church relates to itself and the world are all questions that keep coming up in congregational life. What follows is one possible example.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 661–675.

The *Left Behind* book series and movie series keep coming up in Bible studies, conversations, hospital rooms, and the lectionary readings. Lutherans actually have a confessional stance on the topic of the series; it is in a part of the *Book of Concord* that is often overlooked—the *Formula of Concord*. I know some Lutherans consider the *Formula* an exclusively German conversation, but there were significant theological developments after Luther died that we only get insight into through this document. One of those topics is what the *Left Behind* series is all about—predestination. Article 11 of the *Epitome* and of the *Solid Declaration* are on predestination, and it comes up quite frequently in RCL citations.

### A HISTORICAL GERMAN CONVERSATION FOR TODAY

The *Formula of Concord* is the set of documents that were created after Luther's death, by the German Evangelical groups that followed him. It should be no surprise that shortly after Luther died, various factions arose around differing interpretations of what he meant. The *Formula* is the record of decisions and discussions that came out of the meetings around the *Augsburg Confession* and Luther's substantial body of writing. The group that gathered also talked about new theological developments since Luther's death, including predestination. The various German factions found a measure of agreement and created a new confessional document, the *Formula of Concord*. The *Formula* has two parts, the *Epitome* and the *Solid Declaration*. The *Epitome* summarizes the points of agreement in a set of affirmative theses and the boundaries of each topic in a set of negative theses. The *Solid Declaration* offers more insight into the conversations that took place around each topic. Each part has twelve articles, each on a different topic, and both parts follow the same order.

Predestination is one of the questions that developed after Luther's death in 1546. The question of predestination had come through the works of John Calvin and began being debated in earnest in the 1550s. The two prevalent thoughts were Calvin's idea of dual predestination—that God knows who will get into heaven and who will go to hell—and the other idea that the whole thought was balderdash. The Lutheran confessional theologians spent time reflecting thereon to develop a different take on the question—single predestination. Article 11 of the *Formula* develops this thought based on articles of the *Augsburg Confession*.

#### *Predestined Lectionary Topic*

As we move from Cycle A to Cycle B, Christ the King Sunday A, Advent 1 B, and Advent 2 B all have passages from their respective second readings that are cited in the *Formula of Concord*, *Solid Declaration*, Article 11: Predestination. In 2020, these dates are November 22 and 29 and December 6. This presents an opportunity to explore the idea of single predestination and to hear these readings with ears informed by the Lutheran confessions.

### *The Promise of the End*

Christ the King Sunday's second reading is Ephesians 1:15–23. Verse 15 and following are cited as an example of one of the proper teachings on predestination: “to encourage godliness.”<sup>2</sup> The Lutheran confessional theologians decided that the idea of predestination should not simply be jettisoned, but they were concerned that any teaching on predestination build up faith rather than give people nightmares and make them doubt God's promises.

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Pulling from about half of the undisputed articles in the *Augsburg Confession*, the theologians developed a theology of single predestination.<sup>3</sup> God certainly knows who will be saved and had their place ready before time began. This is not because God has chosen from before time to condemn people, but simply because God knows everything.<sup>4</sup> They went on to argue that any time spent trying to figure out who is saved is time spent trying to read the mind of God, and so is not worthwhile. What is worthwhile, however, is focusing on what Scripture makes clear. Paul's opening from Ephesians tells us that God wants to enlighten our lives with the hope of salvation. This encourages godliness by reminding us of God's trustworthy promises and could provide a different way of approaching Christ the King Sunday.

### *Hope from the End to the Beginning*

Advent 1 B includes a reading of 1 Corinthians 1:3–9. Verse 8 is cited in a list of several verse citations as one of God's promises of grace: “[God] will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8). This is part of what the Lutheran confessional theologians called “the revealed will of God,”<sup>5</sup> which is a faithful focus because the idea of double predestination leads into theological and lived-out, sin-filled cul-du-sacs.

The promises of God center us on God's desire for us by reminding us that God is at work in our lives. When it comes to predestination, the theologians look to 1 Corinthians 1:8 as an example. Since God has been preparing a place for the saved since “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4), then God will not give

<sup>2</sup> BC, 643; FC, SD 11:12.

<sup>3</sup> See AC II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, XVIII, XX.

<sup>4</sup> BC, 641–42; FC, SD 11:5.

<sup>5</sup> BC, 646; FC, SD 11:33.

up on us, even to the day when “he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:27). Stepping into the idea of single predestination as presented by the Lutheran confessional theologians unpacks the gospel reading for Advent 1 B. There is hope here in God’s promise to be with us until Jesus returns, strengthening our faith in the promise of forgiveness.

### *What God Wants*

The second reading for Advent 2 B is 2 Peter 3:8–15a. Verse 9 is cited four times in Article 11, so it’s worth quoting here: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The last half of this verse is the key to the understanding of predestination as developed by the Lutheran confessional theologians and is a central idea therein.

The first two citations of 2 Peter 3:9 are part of an argument that spells out the difference between what God wants to happen and what actually happens. The first is from a paragraph that strives to make clear that “the promise of the gospel . . . pertains to all people.”<sup>6</sup> God wants all people to be saved and wants Christians to proclaim the good news of God in Christ to all.

The promise in God’s desire is emphasized with the second citation of this verse, which is in the same list as the 1 Corinthians reading above. God wants all people to be saved, has promised grace to make this possible, and calls the church to proclaim this good news.

On the second Sunday of Advent in cycle B of the RCL we have the will of God clearly and directly stated. Yes, in an epistle that many overlook. Yes, in a part of the Lutheran confessions many Lutherans overlook. With this little epistle and near the end of the *Formula*, the Lutheran confessional theologians provide a response to the questions of predestination and the *Left Behind* series: God does not want anyone to die.

The third and fourth citations of 2 Peter 3:9 are from an argument that God is not the cause of sin, which is the topic of Article 19 of the *Augsburg Confession*. The third citation comes from a paragraph that beautifully declares God’s love: “Just as God does not will sin, so he does not will the death of the sinner and has no pleasure in his or her condemnation.”<sup>7</sup>

Those theologians then moved to the *Augsburg Confession*, Article 3: The Son of God, which must be the primary place in any discussion of predestination, followed quickly by Articles 5 through 8—The Office of Preaching, The New Obedience, The Church, and What the Church Is. Their concern was the proper teaching about the topic of predestination, so they encourage others to start with evangelizing with God’s revealed will. This approach quickly moves conversations

<sup>6</sup> BC, 645; FC, SD 11:28.

<sup>7</sup> BC, 653; FC, SD 11:81.

about predestination to the *Augsburg Confession*, Article 18: Free Will, which the theologians themselves next discuss.

Second Peter 3:9 shows that God wants no one to perish but for all to repent. This idea becomes central in a case study of Pharaoh and why God hardened Pharaoh's heart.<sup>8</sup> The last citation of verse 9 centers the interpretation of Pharaoh's story on God's love and grace. God offered Pharaoh opportunity after opportunity to repent, but "Pharaoh arrogantly rebelled against every admonition and warning," so "God withdrew his hand from him. In this way Pharaoh's heart became hardened and obdurate, and God made him an example of divine judgment."<sup>9</sup>

The topic of predestination always turns to the issue of free will. Either our decisions matter or they make no difference. The double-predestination approach leads people to believe that their decisions make no difference. Seeing predestination as balderdash leads people to believe that every decision they make determines their salvation. The Lutheran confessional theologians take issue with both of these approaches to teaching about predestination.

*Augsburg Confession*, Article 4: Justification makes it clear that we cannot choose to be saved. God made that choice in Jesus. Article 18: Free Will, however, states that our choices do matter—not that we can choose to be saved, but that our daily choices matter as a faithful expression of our reason. The Lutheran confessional theologians see Pharaoh in the place where these two articles meet.

Pharaoh had at least twelve opportunities to let the Israelites go. Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites simply because of their number. God gave him the opportunity to end the oppression without any threat of reprisal through Moses. As God's judgment came on Pharaoh and all of Egypt, Pharaoh had ten other opportunities to repent and let the Israelites go. Not until the final plague did Pharaoh in his grief condescend to let them go—but then he changed his mind and decided to seek his revenge.

So, did God want Pharaoh to die? Was it not God who hardened Pharaoh's heart? Pharaoh had no real choice here, right? This is where a single-predestination theology helps, but we have to start with the topic in primary place. God does not want anyone to die, but all to repent and be saved.

God did not want Pharaoh to die. Indeed, God sent Moses to Pharaoh telling him exactly what God wanted Pharaoh to do. God knew that Pharaoh would reject every call to repentance but still gave him every opportunity to repent. Pharaoh insisted on his own righteousness and—in an admittedly Christian reading—rejected the Holy Spirit every time. Pharaoh's choices mattered because the choice to reject the Holy Spirit is a choice we can make and was a choice he consistently made. Knowing all of this, God still gave Pharaoh every opportunity to repent while also judging him in the harshest way possible—God let Pharaoh have his own way. And doing so grieved God.

<sup>8</sup> BC, 654; FC, SD 11:84–86.

<sup>9</sup> BC, 654; FC, SD 11:85.

It's almost like this should be preached with a text about being called to confess our sins. Like the gospel reading for Advent 2 B, Mark 1:1–8.

#### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND CONFSSIONAL PROCLAMATION

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The Lutheran confessional theologians went back to Scripture, the *Augsburg Confession*, Luther's writings, and the writings of some of those taking part in the discussion who had already engaged in the new theological debates. They found common ground, even if the common ground was sometimes agreeing that it was faithful to disagree on some topics. They described what they believed and who they were and then described how that was different from other theologies. Then they agreed on a record of the debate and an executive summary of the ideas. And finally, they distributed the information through sermons, teaching, and social media—such as it was in the sixteenth century.

The value of returning to the foundational documents of your branch of Christianity cannot be overstated, regardless of which branch that is. Taking the time to focus again on Scripture and those documents will help in conversations with other Christians. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran World Federation have found cause for corporate confession in Luther's writings and where the *Book of Concord* attacks other theological understandings.<sup>10</sup> Outside of ecumenical and interfaith conversations, though, spending time in Scripture, the creeds, and other foundational documents shapes Christians to faithfully answer question old and new.

The old topics have not gone away. The topic of predestination lives in the minds of many. Congregational response to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that questions about communion are still very present, and not just among clergy

<sup>10</sup> *Declaration of ELCA to Jewish Community* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1994), <https://tinyurl.com/yyjg6bj8>; *A Shift in Jewish-Lutheran Relations* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2003), <https://tinyurl.com/y5dzo8yb>; *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2010), <https://tinyurl.com/y2v8x6dk>.



or in ecumenical conversations. Questions about baptism abound, especially when one spouse believes in infant baptism and the other in believer's baptism. Foundational documents of denominational families will not answer these ongoing questions, but they do provide the theology of differing views, which can help ecumenical relationships in the same household find a faithful resolution rather than one based on emotion or fear.

Connecting the foundational documents to the regular task of preaching provides several opportunities for faith formation. In the sermon itself, the preacher has an opportunity to show how the scripture readings are formative in denominational theology and can help people faithfully deal with these topics today. Lectionary studies provide an opportunity to go in-depth on particular theological insights that come up in the readings. When this is done consistently in sermons and faith formation times, the questions that come up in pastoral care moments can be grounded in faithful theology.

New topics also benefit from a return to founding documents. Rather than making up answers to new topics that had arisen, the Lutheran confessional theologians, as mentioned above, reflected with the foundational documents to see the value and the limits in the new lines of thought. As we come out of a time of pandemic, we will be in a place where something new has happened in our lifetimes, and we will have to reflect on our own faithfulness through that time. Rather than make up some new theology based on feeling good about what we did, we have the opportunity to focus on key topics in the identity of the Christian community. What does it mean to gather? What are the boundaries on communion distribution? What counts as visiting another? What new ways do we have to proclaim the gospel?

Returning to our foundational documents will help us reflect on what we have done and recognize potential concerns, and will give us framing for what to do going forward. Because these questions are answered differently by different denominations, we also have a chance to highlight what faithfulness means in each denomination and to show the various ways God empowers the church to be a diverse proclamation of the gospel to the world.

This year, congregations—clergy and laity together—have had to learn new ways of being church. Grounding ourselves in the Scriptures, creeds, and founding documents helps us see God in the midst of overwhelming change. New things have happened before, and God's faithful people have learned to stay faithful through them. We can learn how they did this and renew our own faith in the process.

Returning to the *Book of Concord* has pushed my faith, preaching, leadership, and pastoral care in directions I never expected. Learning faithful answers to real questions, seeing the reasonable arguments and why they make sense, and renewing my own sense of joy in being a leader of God's church all came from time spent checking citations.

Due to the realities of life and call, I have not finished every set of readings in the RCL; the fixed festivals, both major and minor, that have assigned



readings are still on the to-do list, and the formatting is not consistent. Despite all of that, this ongoing project is mostly done. Feel free to have a look at <http://theothru.net> and see how the Spirit moves you when you go back to the *Book of Concord* or your denominational family's founding documents as part of your gospel proclamation. ☩

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