

DARE TO READ

# The Book of Concord

## The Lutheran Confessions



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All quotations are from Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord, 2nd Edition, © 2006 Concordia Publishing House.

Special Thanks to Pastor Paul T. McCain, who authored and retains copyright on the following:

Why Read Them? | What About the Bible? | What's in the Book?

Special Thanks, also, to Pastor James A. Douthwaite for his end run analogy of how it could be that our sins are as far from us as the east is from the west.

~M.B. Adams

# DARE TO READ

## The Book of Concord



A pastor, during a home visit, casually set down a copy of the **Book of Concord** on the table next to me and mentioned that I might like to read it. Granted, I am a reader. Granted, I am a Christian. However, I was not a Lutheran and basically thought they were a bit loony.

I had been attending his Bible study for years, however, having first gone with a friend who wanted to check it out and was too chicken to go alone. She left; I stayed. I stayed because the pastor taught the Bible, *really* taught the Bible. And he was resolute in his beliefs. Hard beliefs, at times, to be sure. I hungered to learn more.

Curious as to what it was about for he did not tell me, I opened the Book of Concord, started reading at the Augsburg Confession, and didn't really get much sleep over the next few days as I raced through it. So much of what I believed—out of place in the Protestant Church—was spilled across the pages! Some, though I had never heard one word, resonated Truth immediately. Some, I understood the bits but failed to wrap my mind around the whole. But what I did know is that I had come home to a place I never knew existed.

Much to my dismay, I have discovered many of my new Lutheran brothers and sisters do not read it, study it, savor it. They hold to the Confessions, but aside from “Word and Sacrament,” they do not really know them, see them as something to have ready at hand to read.

Do you? If not, I **DARE** you to pick it up, lay aside whatever thoughts or fears or questions or worries you might have about doing so, and just start reading.



# WHY READ THEM?

## THEY ARE PASTORAL

The constant drum beat throughout them is the goal of comforting and caring for souls. The Lutheran Confessions are not theological speculations or abstractions.

The times in which it was written called for pastoral care on a scale that could only be compared to a national emergency. Souls bruised and bullied by legalisms and demands placed on them outside of and beyond the Sacred Scriptures were healed by the healing and life-giving Gospel.

Persons who had not been given the comforting promises of the Holy Gospel, the free and full forgiveness of all salvation through Christ, received the love of God as they heard of the Savior who loved them and died and rose for them.

The Lutheran Confessions speak to us today because they speak of the most important issues any of us ever face in our life.

HOW DO I KNOW GOD?

AM I LOVED?

HOW CAN I BE SURE?

WHAT IS LIFE'S MEANING?

WHAT AM I TO DO  
WITH MY LIFE?

WHO AM I?

# THEY ARE PRACTICAL

They go right to the heart of the key issues and, even in spite of the length of some articles in them, never wander off on side paths. It is a book on a mission and that is to deliver the Gospel: purely, cleanly, correctly, and practically, again, for the care of souls.

They are not journal articles indulging in scholarly pursuits or the pet interests of their authors in the pursuit of standing and respect in the academic community. The Confessions are practical resources for people's faith and life, as they live and, especially, as they die.

Why?

Because the golden thread running throughout them is the chief and most important teaching of the Christian faith: justification by God's grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, the teaching drawn from Scripture alone: the Gospel.



If, therefore, you are heavy laden and feel your weakness, then go joyfully to this Sacrament [the Lord's Supper] and receive refreshment, comfort, and strength (LC, V, 72).

Let me tell you this, even though you know God's Word perfectly and are already a master in all things: you are daily in the devil's kingdom. He ceases neither day nor night to sneak up on you and to kindle in your heart unbelief and wicked thoughts against these three commandments and all the commandments. Therefore, you must always have God's Word in your heart, upon your lips, and in your ears (LC, I, 100).

For he [the devil] has a serpent's head. If it finds an opening into which it can slip, the whole body will follow without stopping. But prayer can prevent him and drive him back (LC, III, 111).



# THEY ARE PERSONAL

The Book of Concord was written by people who had deep and long first-hand experience with the various theological ills they are decrying and had first-hand knowledge of just how powerfully comforting and consoling the Gospel is.

Therefore, for example, when you read about monasticism in this book, always behind these discussions stands the man who spent well over a decade of his life in this lifestyle, tortured and tormented no end by the lack of Gospel: Martin Luther.

The book could almost be said to be a spiritual autobiography of all those who contributed to it. They are not dispassionate scientific essays. They are not mystical and obscure texts. They are personal statements of faith expressed on behalf of the Church, and for the Church, in order to gather more and more into the Church.



So when our sins and conscience oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort and say, “Nevertheless, I am baptized. And if I am baptized, it is promised to me that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body.” For

that is the reason why these two things are done in Baptism: the body—which can grasp nothing but water—is sprinkled and, in addition, the Word is spoken for the soul to grasp (LC, IV, 45-46).

In order to retain the Gospel among people, He openly sets the confession of saints against the kingdom of the devil and, in our weakness, declares His power [AP, V (III), 69].

For here we see how the Father has given Himself to us, together with all creatures, and has most richly provided for us in this life. We see that He has overwhelmed us with unspeakable, eternal treasures by His Son and the Holy Spirit, as we shall hear... We see how He has completely poured forth Himself and withheld nothing from us (LC, II, 24, 26).



# BUT WHAT ABOUT THE BIBLE?

## THE BIBLE

We confess that, “The Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 9). What the Bible asserts, God asserts. What the Bible commands, God commands. The authority of the Scriptures is complete, certain, and final.

The Scriptures are accepted by the Lutheran Confessions as the actual Word of God. The Lutheran Confessions urge us to believe the Scriptures for “they will not lie to you” (LC, V, 76) and cannot be “false and deceitful” (FC SD, VII, 96).

The Bible is God’s “pure, infallible, and unalterable Word” (Preface to the BOC).



## THE CONFESSIONS

The Lutheran Confessions are the “basis, rule, and norm indicating how all doctrines should be judged in conformity with the Word of God” (FC SD RN).

Because the Confessions are in complete doctrinal agreement with the written Word of God, they serve as the standard in the Lutheran Church to determine what is faithful Biblical teaching, insofar as that teaching is addressed in the Confessions.

# WHAT'S IN THE BOOK?

## THE ECUMENICAL CREEDS

The three ecumenical creeds in the Book of Concord are the **Apostles' Creed**, the **Nicene Creed**, and the **Athanasian Creed**. They are described as “ecumenical” [universal] because they are accepted by Christians worldwide as correct expressions of what God’s Word teaches.

## THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION APOLOGY OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION

In the year 1530, the Lutherans were required to present their confession of faith before the emperor in Augsburg, Germany. Philip Melancthon wrote the **Augsburg Confession** and it was read before the imperial court on June 30, 1530. One year later, the Lutherans presented their **defense of the Augsburg Confession**, which is what “apology” here means. It, too, was written by Philip Melancthon. The largest document in the Book of Concord, its longest chapter, is devoted to the most important truth of the Christian faith: the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

## THE SMALL AND LARGE CATECHISMS

Martin Luther realized early on how desperately ignorant the laity and clergy of his day were when it came to even the most basic truths of the Christian faith. Around 1530, he produced two small handbooks to help pastors and the heads of families teach the faith.

The **Small Catechism** and the **Large Catechism** are organized around six topics: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar. So universally accepted were these magnificent doctrinal summaries by Luther, they were included as part of the Book of Concord.

## THE SMALCALD ARTICLES THE TREATISE ON THE POWER AND PRIMACY OF THE POPE

In 1537, Martin Luther was asked to prepare a statement of Lutheran belief for use at a church council, if it was called. Luther's bold and vigorous **confession of faith** was later incorporated into the Book of Concord. It was presented to a group of Lutheran rulers meeting in the town of **Smalcald**. Philip Melancthon was asked to expand on the subject of **the Roman pope** and did so in his treatise, which also was included in the Book of Concord.

## THE FORMULA OF CONCORD

After Luther's death in 1546, significant controversies broke out in the Lutheran Church. After much debate and struggle, the Formula of Concord in 1577 put an end to these doctrinal controversies and the Lutheran Church was able to move ahead united in what it believed, taught, and confessed. In 1580, all the confessional writings mentioned here were gathered into a single volume, the Book of Concord. Concord is a word that means "harmony." **The Formula of Concord** was summarized in a version known as the "**Epitome**" of the **Formula of Concord**. This document, too, is included in the Book of Concord.



# HOW DO I START?

## OPEN THE BOOK

- Start reading, but read it aloud, even if only to yourself. If you have a partner, read to him, have her read to you. Let the pure teaching fall upon your ears so that the Spirit can work the Word deep within.
- Use a highlighter; a dry highlighter works best. Use a pen or pencil. Use sticky notes on the edges. Make it your own copy.
- Keep a notebook or journal or word document program handy to note the things you observe and your questions.
- Have the Bible at hand to look up references so you can have the message reinforced, clarified, extended.
- Tell your pastor you are reading the Book of Concord and let him know that you will be checking in from time to time.
- Email him your questions and ask him to show you how what you are reading fits with what he is preaching.
- Share bits and pieces with those around you, as a way to reinforce what you are learning and spread the wealth.

## NEVER FORGET THE GOSPEL



I confess that as an ex-Protestant who spent 26 years learning works-based theology, I struggle with seeing Law where none was intended. In so much as the heart of Lutheran Doctrine is the proper division of Law and Gospel, you will encounter Law as you read through the Book of Concord.

And, when you do so, our wily, relentless enemy can take that moment to leap in your mind and start whispering his lies, holding before you all your sins, telling you that you are worthless, wretched.

So, the key to delving into the Book of Concord is to never forget the heart of the Gospel: There are no end runs to God!

As sinners, we cannot approach God except through the cross. As redeemed Saints, God does not see us except through the cross. Yes, when you read that your doubt outrages God, your heart will wilt in shame and sorrow. But, in that moment, remember Christ's final word to us as He hung on the cross: It is finished! The outrage is *there*, nailed to the cross.

Even as you stumble and fall short *today*, your sin is covered *then*. Allow the Law to serve its purpose to act as a curb, a guide, and a mirror—the latter often an uncomfortable reflection necessary to help us always keep our eyes where they belong: on Christ.

## A LAYMAN'S PREFERENCE OF ORDER

If you are in a liturgical church, the good news is that you already know three pieces of the Book of Concord, the **Creeds**. So, you are already ahead of the game! As you study the Confessions, periodically review all three, considering how what you are learning is reflected in them.

I recommend beginning with the **Large Catechism**, even though convention seems to be the Small Catechism. I advise diving in, reading from Part I to Part V. Take each Commandment separately, each article of the Creed, each petition of the Lord's Prayer. Where there are no divisions, read the Part as a whole. As you do, use the **Small Catechism** as a review tool for what you are reading.

Once you have finished, read through the **Augsburg Confession**. Follow that with the **Smalcald Articles**. Next read, first, the **Epitome of the Formula of Concord** and, then, the **Solid Declaration**. Afterward tackle the **Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope**, remembering that the Fathers were arguing against the office of the papacy, not any one man.

Leave the **Apology** for the last, even though it is a natural fit with the Augsburg Confession. I believe it is the densest portion of the Book of Concord, steeped in riches you will mine your whole life, but not the easiest read. However, it is very much worth the effort!

# ONLINE RESOURCES

<http://www.cph.org/concordia>

<http://www.bookofconcord.org>

<http://bookofconcord.blogspot.com>