

ROOTS OF OUR FAITH

A six-session course
on Lutheran teaching

ROOTS OF OUR FAITH

A six-session course
on Lutheran teaching

by James A. Nestingen

Usage guide
by Mary Mergenthal

Augsburg Publishing House □ Minneapolis

*A usage guide begins on page 71
as an aid to those people who will be
leading group study of this book.*

ROOTS OF OUR FAITH

A Six-Session Course on Lutheran Teaching

Prepared under the auspices of
the American Lutheran Church Women
and the Board of Publication of the American Lutheran Church.

Rolf Aaseng, editor
Judy Swanson, artist

Scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are from
Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1946-71 by
Division of Christian Education, National Council of Churches,
and are used by permission.

Copyright © 1979 Augsburg Publishing House
All rights reserved

Manufactured in U.S.A.

1 WHAT ARE THE CONFESSIONS?



Like a power behind the scenes, the Lutheran confessions have great influence in our church without getting much publicity. The designation *confession* puzzles some people. It simply means a statement or declaration in the same sense as the recital of the Creed in the Sunday service is a “confession of faith.” The Lutheran confessions are documents which declare the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith.

These confessions have shaped much of the way of life as Lutherans—the way Lutherans are baptized and confirmed, the way they work together with others in their congregation, the kind of preaching they hear. And yet if you are like most Lutherans, you probably haven’t heard much about the confessions. You may not even know they exist.

In a way, that is how it should be. The confessions are publicity shy—they want to direct you to Christ and the Scripture rather than to themselves.

At the same time, it is helpful for Lutherans to know these documents. For 450 years, the confessional writings have borne witness to Christ and helped new generations in their witness. Throughout this period the confessions have also shaped the beliefs and practices of the Lutheran church.

The purpose of this course is to help you hear and understand the witness of our Lutheran ancestors and see what has shaped our church. It is hoped this will help you to bear the same witness as you take your place in the chain of Christian generations.

In the beginning

The story of the Lutheran confessions begins with the Reformation, and specifically with Martin Luther's part in it.

When he feared for his life during a storm, Luther vowed to become a monk. In the monastery, he experienced a terrible conflict within himself. Luther had been taught that the gospel is a conditional promise. He was told God saves those *who really want to be saved* and who *show it* in their lives.

To begin with, Luther was sure that he wanted to be saved. But then he began to wonder about it. "Maybe I only think I want to be saved," he worried. "Maybe what I really want is to avoid punishment—and don't really love God at all."

Luther also worried about whether his life showed his sincerity. He was fiercely faithful to the requirements of the monastery—so much so that his supervisors were afraid he was going too far. But still he wondered, "Do I do good things because I really want to or am I just putting on a show? When can I be certain that I've done enough?"

Wrestling with such questions, Luther became more and more uncertain and depressed. But in his struggle, Luther continued to read the Scripture. And as he did, he began to hear the gospel in a new way. Whereas he had heard his teachers say, "God saves those who really want to be saved," Luther now heard Scripture say, "God saves those *he* wants to save." Luther's teachers said, "God saves those who really show their faith," but the Bible says, "God shows his love through the lives of those he saves, making new people of them."

As he read, Luther realized that the gospel is not conditional but is an unconditional promise which God makes to his people. This realization turned his world upside down. He told others what he learned—preaching, teaching, writing it to anyone who would listen.

Many believed Luther heard the Scriptures correctly. But many others challenged him—particularly among the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. They argued that the Scripture needs to be interpreted, and that the pope alone controls the final interpretation of Scripture. Luther was ordered to stop teaching his new understanding of the gospel. When Luther refused to be silenced, he was excommunicated from the church and declared to be an outlaw—a man who could be killed on sight.

But Luther's supporters protected him, and the movement that had begun was too large to be stopped. Luther continued to proclaim the gospel as God's unconditional promise. He believed that the pope was misinformed and that a meeting or council of all the bishops would clarify the issue.

He and his followers did everything they could to close the split that had been opened between them and the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. Nothing worked.

The final split between Lutherans and Roman Catholics came in the 1550s, when Lutheran princes won a decisive victory in what is called the Peace of Augsburg. By this time, Luther was dead. But the faith he confessed was now confessed by people throughout Germany and other European countries as well. Though they preferred to be called “evangelicals,” they were stuck with a name their enemies had given them in contempt—“Lutherans.”

Writings for reconciliation

Most of the Lutheran confessions were written in attempts to reconcile differences with the church of Rome. They do not try to spell out only Lutheran teachings. Their purpose is to proclaim the gospel as it is given in Scripture. “We are minded to manufacture nothing new,” one of the confessions says.

The oldest confession is also the best known: Luther’s Small Catechism. When Luther was teaching at Wittenberg University, he discovered many church members didn’t know the Ten Commandments, the Creed, or the Lord’s Prayer; superstitious practices were widespread, and immorality abounded.

To remedy this situation and to help the common people understand God’s unconditional promise of grace, Luther set to work on a catechism, a summary of religious teachings in question and answer form. This catechism was published in 1529, in pamphlets and on charts people could hang in their houses.

While working on the Small Catechism for families to use with their children. Luther also wrote a catechism for preachers and teachers because many of them were ignorant or ill-informed. He wrote the Large Catechism—a longer discussion of each part of the Small Catechism. It was published in the spring of 1529.



Most influential

The most influential of the Lutheran confessions was not written by Luther, but by one of his closest friends and colleagues, Philip Melancthon. Melancthon became the diplomat of the Lutheran Reformation. His major work of diplomacy was the Augsburg Confession, also called the Augustana. It gets its name from the town in Germany where it was presented by Lutheran rulers to the emperor.

In 1530 the chief ruler of Europe—the holy Roman emperor—commanded the Lutherans to meet him in Augsburg to present their case. Since Luther was still banned, he could not go to the meeting safely. It was decided that Melancthon and some

others would go in his stead. In Augsburg, Melanchthon found some enemies had apparently convinced the emperor that Lutherans were revolutionaries. It looked as if they would be condemned before they had a hearing.

To offset the slanders, Melanchthon revised the documents he had brought with him for the emperor, toning down the differences between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics. The result is the Augsburg Confession—a softly-worded writing which holds to the unconditional promise of God but plays down other problems.

The Augsburg Confession made a strong impression on many. The bishop of Augsburg, a devout Catholic, is said to have called it “the pure truth.” But apparently it didn’t impress the emperor—he fell sound asleep when it was being presented to him. And it certainly didn’t impress the Roman Catholic bureaucrats present—although they accepted 18 of the 28 articles, they raised an unholy fuss about the other 10. The emperor, after lengthy negotiations, eventually ruled that the Lutherans had been refuted and ordered them to cease their activity.

Because of its conciliatory tone, the Augsburg Confession had a strong influence throughout northern Europe and England. And it quickly became the definition of Lutheranism. But it also laid the foundation for later trouble. For in this concern to be diplomatic, Melanchthon had passed over some issues that needed stronger words.

Melanchthon was disappointed when his efforts at reconciliation in Augsburg failed. Riding back to Wittenberg in an oxcart, he started work on still another Lutheran confession—the Apology to the Augsburg Confession. Published in the spring of 1531, the Apology is Melanchthon’s defense of the confession presented in Augsburg.

The Apology is helpful in understanding the Augsburg Confession, but it has never been very influential by itself. In writing it, Melanchthon followed a complicated formula for debates used in the schools in the Middle Ages. Thus, the Apology makes difficult reading.

After the meeting at Augsburg, the emperor had his hands full with other political problems again so he couldn't deal with the Lutherans. But six years later he had a chance. After all the appeals the Lutherans had made for a council, the emperor felt that matters couldn't be settled without one. So he forced the pope to call a council of bishops. The pope went along, but in the invitation he said the purpose was the "utter extirpation of the poisonous and pestilential Lutheran heresy."

The Lutheran leaders weren't sure how to respond. After years of asking for a council, they could hardly turn the invitation down. But they could hardly get excited about being invited to their own funeral, either. So they scheduled a meeting to discuss things—in the German town of Smalcald in February 1537.

For this meeting, Luther was asked to write a new confession. While he was writing it, he had a severe attack of kidney stones so that he had to dictate it. When he finished, a group of theologians went over the document with him.

When February arrived, Luther was well enough to go to Smalcald but too sick to attend the meetings. In some hallway intrigue, Philip Melanchthon and Prince Philip of Hesse prevented the confession from being formally presented. They were afraid it would cause too much political trouble.

So this confession, known as the Smalcald Articles, wasn't formally adopted at that time. When

Luther later published it on his own, it became very popular and was eventually officially accepted.

The Smalcald Articles aren't as well known as the Small Catechism or the Augsburg Confession. But they present a clear and bold witness to the gospel, strengthening points passed over lightly at Augsburg.

The princes and theologians at Smalcald decided there should be a special statement about the office of the pope. Melanchthon was asked to write it. It is the shortest of the Lutheran confessions—the Treatise on the Power and the Primacy of the Pope.

A formula for harmony

Melanchthon and Luther had been close friends from the beginning. They disagreed on some things, even some important matters, but Luther was willing to overlook the differences because of his confidence in Melanchthon.

But the students of Luther and Melanchthon didn't get along as well as their teachers. And Melanchthon added fuel to the fire with his compromising approach to conflicting issues. So there came to be two parties of Lutherans who were soon at each other's throats. This threatened to destroy the Lutheran church.

Finally, in the 1560s a group of moderate Lutherans began work which led to a settlement. It took more than 10 years of negotiating before the settlement could be put on paper. But in 1577, a new confession brought agreement from all sides. It was called the Formula of Concord—the formula of agreement.

The Formula of Concord is another of the lesser known confessions. It deals with some questions left unclear in other confessions, though, and is helpful for that reason.

The people who drafted the Formula of Concord—a good-sized committee—were concerned that the confessions be readily available to the whole Lutheran church. So in 1580 they published all the confessions in a volume called the *Book of Concord*.

When the Formula of Concord was drafted and the Book of Concord published, some Lutherans were not involved, namely, the Scandinavians. It wasn't that they objected to the statements; they just didn't want to be a part of the arguing that had gone on in Germany. Since then, Scandinavian Lutherans and their descendants have given preference to the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession and used the other confessions to interpret the first two.

The constitution of the American Lutheran Church follows the lead set by the Scandinavians—particularly the Danes and the Norwegians. Pastors and members of the ALC are expected to accept the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession as the most important confessions, and to accept the others as interpretations of the first two.

Confession and confessing

Why are confessions necessary? Is there something wrong with the Bible that we have to have these additional writings? What good are they to us now, 400 to 450 years after they were written?

Of course, there is nothing wrong with the Bible—Luther and the others who wrote the Lutheran confessions were convinced that the Bible can and does speak for itself, and speak clearly.

But we do need the witness of our neighbors in faith. If you think about what has made you a Christian, you will think about other people. Your parents, neighbors, or a pastor spoke God's Word to you and brought you to be baptized. Through these people, you have been helped and strengthened in faith.

But your neighbors aren't just people who are alive and in your community right now. Your great-grandmother might be long dead, but without her you wouldn't be alive. By the same token, without forefathers and mothers in faith, we wouldn't believe. Without the witness of those who lived before us, the gospel message wouldn't have been passed along to us. So the book of Hebrews speaks of being surrounded by a "cloud of witnesses"—not only those now living, but those who have gone before us.

Lutherans have some brothers and sisters whose confession was made long ago but still comes to help in the faith: Martin and Katie Luther, Philip Melancthon, Jacob Andreae, Martin Chemnitz, and others.

But their confession isn't just for you. It is a confession for confessing—a confession spoken to you so that you, too, might confess and become a part of the cloud of witnesses surrounding others.

The Scriptures are the original witness. No confession can take their place. But there are other witnesses that help us in our witness.

The Lutheran church believes that the Lutheran confessions bear an accurate and faithful witness to the message of Scripture in Christ. Lutherans throughout the world are agreed in this. And so the Lutheran church has asked that each member listen to the witness of the confessions.

In the following chapters, we are going to do just that—listen to the confessions as they make their witness. Each chapter is organized around one part of the Small Catechism because this is the confession that you are most familiar with.

Along the way, this Catechism will be asked to introduce its friends among the other confessions. That way, you'll get some assistance in reading the other confessions as well.

2 THE TEN COMMANDMENTS



For your reading

- Explanation of the Commandments in the Small and Large Catechisms
- Articles 2, 18, and 19 in the Augsburg Confession

The Commandments

“You shall. . . .” “You shall not. . . .” If the Commandments had fingers, there isn’t much doubt about where they would point: they would single out each one of us.

Yet, one commandment in this parade of shalls and shall nots is different from all the rest. It sticks out like a rose among thorns: “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.”

The pronouns, those little words identifying people, are what make the First Commandment so rosy. Whereas the others begin with the pronoun “You,”

this one begins with “I,” and the speaker is God. What is more, before the “you” in the second sentence is spoken, there is a “your.” “Your” is a possessive word indicating that something belongs to you.

Do you see the significance of the words: “*I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods*”? They are the unconditional promise of the gospel. God promises to be our God—with no strings attached.

This is the promise of the First Commandment—that God will be our God. As our God, he will give us all that he has to give, including life, forgiveness, and resurrection from the grave. As Luther says in the Large Catechism, it is as if God says, “Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, come and cling to me. I am the one who will satisfy you and help you out of every need. Only let your heart cling to me and no one else.”

It is the clinging that is the problem. For there is something in each of us that doesn’t want to believe this promise. In fact, we can’t believe it. So instead of taking God at his word—fearing, loving, and trusting him above all things—we turn to ourselves, to other people or other things in the hope that somehow we can take care of ourselves.

Attaching conditions

Because we can’t believe this promise, we try continually to attach conditions to it. We interpret the First Commandment like this: “I will be the Lord your God *if* you give your life to me,” or “I will be your God *if* you allow me to be.”

Then what happens? Soon everything focuses on the condition we have added. Either pride or despair follows. Some people are sure they have fulfilled the condition they’ve attached to the promise—they have

made the decision, given their lives, or allowed God to take over. Other people have Luther's experience. No matter how hard they try, no matter how many times they decide, no matter how much they allow, they never feel satisfied. They despair, and conclude they'll never be able to get by the *if* that has been hung on the promise.

Either way, whether in pride or despair, we do not take God at his word. In pride, we fear, love, and trust ourselves to fulfill the condition we've attached to the promise. In despair, we fear, love, or trust no one, sure that the condition can't be fulfilled.

But a person has to have something to rely on for the needs of life. So, to use one of Luther's examples, a person begins to depend on money. Such a person reflects, "This talk of God is very nice, but God doesn't pay my bills. It takes hard cash to get by in this world, and if I don't make it, nobody else will give it to me." If the question arises as to the worth of one's life, such a person says, "Look at what I've done; I started with next to nothing, and although I'm not rich, I can take care of myself and my own." If illness threatens or the kids get into trouble, the answer is to reach for the pocketbook. Such a person fears, loves, and trusts money, relying on it to make life important and to take care of all problems.

Another example might be a person who makes an idol out of a house, or a garden. "It may not be the best in the world, but I keep it up better than most people." Life revolves around this possession. It makes life worthwhile. If the kids disturb it, they are disciplined. This person fears, loves, and trusts a particular possession.

Another example might be a child who is addicted to television. Every day is organized around what is on TV. Asked about homework, the child says, "After the next show." Asked to memorize the Cate-

chism, the child says, "I can't—we never have to do that in school," and proceeds to recite the weekly television schedule from beginning to end. Told that the family is going out for the evening, the child wonders if there will be a television set there. Everything focuses on TV—the child relies on it to make the day interesting or fun.

These examples can be multiplied by the thousands. Left to ourselves, we are incurable idolators. We do not worship statues or the sun and moon. But we have our gods, and we worship them faithfully—things like houses, stereos, televisions, cars; people like parents, husbands, wives, children, friends; ways of living, like the American way of life, financial well-being, popularity. In addition, there are political parties, social movements, boats and cabins, pastors, churches, and all sorts of things.

The problem is not with the people or the things or the ways of life which we worship. All of them may be good. Money, for example, is a gift God gives us so we can both obtain the things we need and help others. Houses provide shelter, cars give transportation, friends are a special gift of God. In fact, God is at work through all these things and people to make sure that we have what we need to live and serve him and our neighbors.

The problem is with us. We "exchange the worship of the Creator for the worship of the creature," as Paul says in Romans 1. Instead of fearing, loving, and trusting the giver of every gift, we fear, love, and trust the gifts.

Then the trouble starts. For when we worship other people and other things, we get into conflict with them. Someone who fears, loves, and trusts money worries that someone will take it away. A person who fears, loves, and trusts a house or hobby is always worried that someone else's is better. And

then God's good earth, which we are to take care of, becomes a treasure house full of things we try to grab—instead of taking care of it.

To make matters worse, there is no way out for us on our own. We do not choose to become idolators—we *are* idolators, moving from one god to the other. And we cannot choose not to be idolators. For if we try to change ourselves, we are fearing, loving, and trusting our own abilities—assuming that we can take care of ourselves apart from God. We are trapped in idolatry.

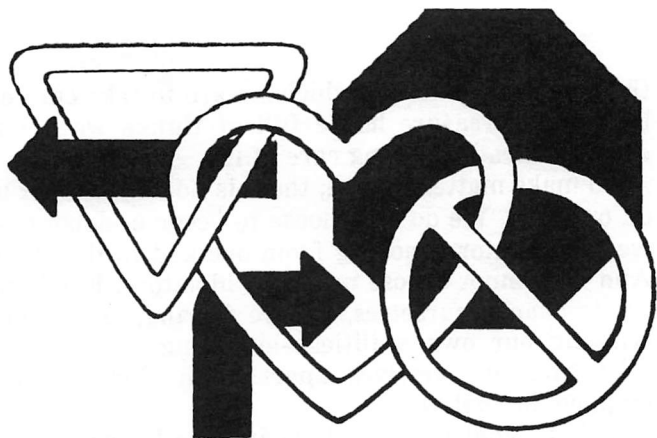
This is what the Scripture and the Lutheran confessions call sin. There are sins—bad things that we do, such as gossiping or not saying anything when we get too much change. But behind the sins there is *sin*; a power that grips and holds us, making it impossible for us, on our own, to be anything but idolators. *Sins* are the things we do or fail to do; *sin* is the condition in which we live apart from Christ. For centuries, Lutherans have confessed each Sunday, "We believe that we are by nature sinful and unclean"—that is, that we are idolators living in the condition of sin.

This is why the unconditional promise of the gospel is so desperately important. It is bad enough that we have *sins*—what is truly horrible is that we are under the power of sin. If God had tied conditions to the gospel, there would be no way out for us.

But he doesn't. In Christ he says to each of us, "I am the Lord *your* God"—no strings attached. And with this word, he promises to deliver us from sin—to make new people out of us and to raise us from the dead.

The commanding command

But now haven't we skipped something? Take another look at the First Commandment. In the first



phrase, God has the action—"I am the Lord your God," he says. But in the second phrase, doesn't he put the burden on us: "*You* shall have no other gods"? And what about the other commandments? All of them say "you shall" or "you shall not."

Doesn't that mean that we are supposed to do something about the way we live? If God is going to do all of this for us, why does he tell us to do or not to do these things?

As the confessions understand it, God is doing with the Commandments something similar to what you do with commanding words. If you saw a child running into the street in front of a car, why would you yell, "Look out"? It wouldn't be because you wanted to give the child a way of demonstrating that he or she loved you. No, you would yell "look out" because you wanted to protect the child.

In the same way, if you have children at home, you give them some commands. "Make your bed." "Clean your room." "Be home by 4:15." But if your children say, "We'll do these things if you'll love us," you would probably be very hurt.

"Don't my children understand that I really do love them? Do they think they've got to do these things before I'll love them?"

You don't speak commands around the house or to friends to give them ways of showing that they love you. You speak commands because you love them and want to help them.

That is God's purpose as well, or one of them. He doesn't say, "Do this and don't do that so that I'll know that you love me," but rather, "Do this and don't do that because I love you." So in each of the Commandments, he is looking out for us, protecting us.

In the First Commandment, then, he is not saying, "I will be your God if you have no others," but "Because I am the Lord your God, you shall have no others." He knows what idolatry does to us—how it makes us despise him; how it puts us in conflict with our neighbors. So with these words, "You shall have no other gods," he says, "Stop it," to drive us away from our idolatry.

In the Second Commandment, God is concerned about his name. If you know someone's name, you have access to that person. You can make a phone call or find a street address. When you know God's name, you can call on him. He has given us his name for this purpose. So when he says, "Stop it," to every false use of his name he clears the channels for us to reach him.

Through the Third Commandment, God wants to give us some rest so that we can hear his word. He knows that if we are left to ourselves we either don't rest at all or use our free time for all kinds of running around. So he commands us to take time off—a day each week when we can hear his promises for us and for his creation. He says "Stop it" to our endless chasing, our restlessness, because he wants to give us some genuine refreshment in body and spirit.

The first three commandments all speak of our relationship with God. As the Lutheran confessions

read them, the First Commandment is by far the most important. In it God makes the promise that, in Christ, begins a new relationship with him. Having made us his, he wants to make sure that we know his name and hear his word.

Relationships

The remaining commandments all speak of our relationship with other people. In each of them, God protects something essential.

In the Fourth Commandment, God begins where life begins—in our homes. He knows that sin turns families into battlefields. So he says “Stop it” to all the strife, insisting that children honor their parents and that parents love their children. And along with parents, he also protects others in authority—political leaders, teachers, pastors, police officers, and all who have a part in taking care of his creation. He wants to make sure that there is peace and order so that we can live long lives, with justice for all.

Having protected life where it begins, in the Fifth Commandment God protects it where much of it is lived—in our neighborhoods. He knows that as far as sin in us is concerned, life is cheap—that if we aren’t protected, there will be no end to murder. Furthermore, sin will try to find a way to get the job done without actually killing. So he says “Stop it” to everything that might harm us or our neighbors in any way.

In the Sixth Commandment, God protects what is nearest and dearest to life—namely, our companionship. Above all, he wants to give us a companion with whom we can share everything—a husband or wife. Because sin and the devil attack this companionship with such terrible force, God says a loud and resounding no to anything that disrupts companionship and marriage.

In the Seventh Commandment, God protects our property. He knows that we have to have some things we can call our own—food to eat, a place to sleep, some tools, some things we can use to serve our neighbors. He knows too that in sin, we always think our neighbors get the better end of the bargain. If he doesn't watch us, we'll try to set matters right according to our own reckoning and help ourselves to what they have. So, to protect us from our neighbors and our neighbors from us, he says "Stop it" to any kind of stealing. He wants to make sure that each of us gets a fair deal.

Having protected his own name in the Second Commandment, God protects *our* names in the Eighth Commandment. He knows that a good name is priceless. If we have good names we can move about freely and confidently, expecting our neighbors to respect us. If we have bad reputations, we can't get across the street without someone watching. So he wants to make sure that our tongues don't rattle in our heads, spilling out gossip, rumors, half truths, or even truths that are told just to hurt someone else. He says "Stop it" to this kind of talk so that we can enjoy our names and the names of our neighbors freely.

In the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, God protects our communities. We are always looking for ways to keep a good appearance while at the same time getting what we want. So, for example, a man who looks women over top to bottom says, "I am only looking." Or a neighbor who is forever studying someone else's possessions says, "There is nothing wrong with admiring things." But God knows that as long as there is sin in us, we will always be looking for loopholes so that we can get what is our neighbor's. And if we are all looking at what be-

longs to others in such a way, we can't trust one another. The community begins to fall apart.

So God says no to the trouble where it begins, in the longing glances we throw at what God has given to our neighbors.

Just as the first three commandments protect our relationship with God, the last seven protect our relationship with our neighbors. God didn't give any of the commandments as a way for us to demonstrate that we love him. He gave all of them because he loves us and wishes to bring some peace, order, and justice to daily life.

Another purpose

But God has another purpose for the Commandments, too. While he uses them to keep order so that we can hear his promise, he also uses them to drive us to his promise. Luther often spoke of this as God's "strange use" of the law, in which he holds the commandment up like a mirror to show us our true condition of sin.

Perhaps you have had to use commands in the same way around your house. A child, for example, often does things without realizing the consequences. So mother or father says, in disciplining the child, "Do you realize what you did? What will happen if all the kids ignore their parents and stay out until 1:00 in the morning? Then there would be so much noise that no one would be able to sleep. And when you don't get enough sleep, it is bad for your health and hard on your studies." In this way, a parent brings the law to bear like a mirror.

God uses the Commandments on us in this way because sin in us is so sneaky. As Luther pointed out, we're often unaware of how wrong something is until after it has happened. God uses the Commandments to show us our true situation.

But God doesn't do this to torture or punish us. He does it to drive us to his promise, so that seeing our awful predicament, we will cry out to him for help.

The Scripture is full of examples of this. When Israel became fat and sassy, full of confidence that it could take care of itself, God raised up enemies to drive them back to himself. When Peter got cocky while walking on the water, he started to sink and had to cry out to Jesus for help. When Paul was confident of his own righteousness, God struck him down on the road to Damascus, filling his eyes with scales until he saw the Christ.

The Commandments expose our sins against God and our neighbors and the earth. At the same time, they expose the power and bondage of sin—so that God's promise will come home to us as the word of the only one we can finally rely on.

The bondage of the will

In this chapter, we have discussed one of the most controversial characteristics of the Lutheran confessions—their conviction that we cannot free ourselves from sin or decide for God by the power of our own will. This troubles many people, especially since some churches hold that we do have a “free will.” Article XVIII of the Augsburg Confession may clarify the issue. It says that while we do have a free will in things “below us,” that is, concerning this world, we do not have a free will in relation to God.

For example, you can make choices about many things: what kind of clothes to wear, what food to eat, what to read in the newspaper, which programs to watch, what to do in the evening. All of these things are “below you,” to use the words of the confessions—you have some control over them and make your own decisions about them.

But there are also many things about which you don't have a choice. You didn't choose when you were born, or what kind of parents you had. You can have all kinds of feelings about what your boss or your spouse's boss does, but you can't control them.

The confessions say that we have "free will in what reason can comprehend." That is, we have some choice in matters that we can understand and control. But we do not have any choice about God. He is above us—he does the choosing, not us. And as he chooses us, he goes to work on us so we will come to fear, love, and trust him.

Fifteen centuries ago, one of the great teachers of the church, St. Augustine, said that the best way to understand this is to talk to someone who is in love. People who are in love don't talk about how they "decided" to be in love or about how hard they worked to love the beloved. They say that they "fell in love." So you hear something like this, "I didn't intend to love her but one day I woke up and realized I loved her." Or, "I don't know what has come over me—I can't live without him."

Faith is like love in that way. It is not something we decide to do, as the confessions understand it, or something that we work ourselves up to. We fall into faith, somewhat as we fall in love. Only it is not an accident. What looks to us like a fall is actually God at work, making believers out of us.

That is the wonderful surprise the confessions wish to proclaim. They insist that we are unable to choose God or make ourselves worthy of him. They take this stand because they are equally sure of the promise of the gospel—that while we can't choose him, he chooses us; that while we are unworthy, he makes us worthy. As Paul says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

3 THE CREED



For your reading

- The Small and Large Catechisms' explanations of the three articles of the Creed
- The three creeds
- Articles 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the Augsburg Confession

God makes himself known

Often the Creed is regarded as if it were a continuation of the Commandments: as the Commandments tell us what to do, so the Creed tells us what to believe. Then the Creed, too, gets a long and pointed finger and begins to stare accusingly at us.

The Creed, however, doesn't point or stare—it smiles, laughs, and sings. It is filled up, pressed down, and running over with good news—the good news of what God does for us.

The Apostles' Creed is one of the oldest writings in the church. Most of it had been put together from various sources by the second century. It took its final form in the seventh century.

The two other creeds which Lutherans accept—the Nicene and the Athanasian—are younger brothers or sisters of the Apostles' Creed. The Nicene is 1600 years old; the Athanasian, which is seldom used, is only 1300 years old.

All three creeds serve the same purpose: they sum up and declare the good news of the gospel in such a way that we can hear and confess it. The Apostles' Creed is especially well suited for this purpose. Luther remarked that it was as if bees had flown to the most beautiful flowers in Scripture to take the best pollen from each, using them to make pure honey in the Apostles' Creed. He believed that each Christian should recite the creed upon rising and before going to bed at night.

Good news

This good news begins right away, in the First Article: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth."

It doesn't say, "I believe in God, the first cause, the omnipotent, omniscient, unmoved mover." It says "I believe in God the *Father* Almighty. . . ." Nor does the First Article go on to say "who wound up the earth like a clock and let it go," or "who started a long chain of causes and effects that finally resulted in people," but it says, "Creator of heaven and earth."

That's the good news—that God has chosen to be our father. He is the one who has given us life and all that goes with it. Luther explains it this way: "I believe that God has created me and all that exists, that he has given and still preserves my body

and soul and all their powers, that he provides me with food and clothing, home and family and everything I need from day to day . . . guarding . . . protecting . . . so that we should surely thank, praise, serve, and obey him."

You are not an accident—someone who just happened along because two people fell in love. You have a maker—the one who created all things—and he is your Father. Moreover, the gifts you have—whether they are special abilities or your house or your knickknacks on the shelf—are all gifts of the one who created you. What's more, he is watching over you right now, making sure that you have what you need in order to live and serve him.

But don't you have to work to put food on your table and a roof over your head? Doesn't the bread you eat have to be baked or paid for at the supermarket? Then how can it be called a gift of God?

The answer will appear if you can see the miracle in that loaf of bread on your table. It began in some seeds that were planted in a ground full of nutrients—ground that no man or woman made—and nurtured by sunshine and rain that come from no human hand. A farmer and his family, after planting and harvesting the wheat, sold it to a grain company. It was ground into flour and sold to a baker or directly to you. Mixed with yeast, it was kneaded, raised, baked, and finally taken out to be sold to you or placed on your table.

As common as it might be, there is a miracle in every slice of bread—the miracle of fertile soil, of decent weather, of the hands of men and women, of water and yeast all coming together. Even if it's store-bought white bread containing as much air as flour, how could anyone ever pay for all the gift in it?

As you look around, you will see gifts all over. You did not pay for your life, your talents, or abilities.

You did not make the cotton or wool or even the polyester that clothes you; the wood, concrete, or steel that houses you; the rubber in the tires you ride on. Your life is flooded with gifts.

God gives all these gifts. He gives them through people: life through parents, bread through farmers, millers, and bakers; wool through sheep and shepherds and spinners and weavers; polyester through oil wells and refineries, and so on.

We pay each other for gifts God gives, not because we have earned payment, but because through our money God makes sure that each of us gets some service for service rendered. The farm family that serves the city family by raising wheat or running a dairy, doing chores night and day, needs service in return so that they can continue serving. And the city family needs the service of the farm so they can continue serving. As we work together, God provides for us all.

Good news continued

God was not content to preside over his creation like some distant corporation president letting the little people do all the work. Nor was he willing to live with a creation full of self-serving people. He has continued to be involved in the lives of his creatures, so they can fill their intended roles. So we go on to say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord."

It is important to know that Jesus is both true God and true man. It is just as important to know what he did to redeem us. Melancthon said, "To know Christ is to know his benefits": we know him from the gifts he gives us. His gift is that he has become our Lord. So, for the confessions, the whole Second Article is concentrated in one phrase: Jesus

Christ has become my Lord. The most important words here are *my* and *Lord*.

Little words like *my* can pack an awful lot of weight. If you watch what happens in a quarrel, you'll notice how this word marks out the fight. When neighbors or brothers and sisters get into a scrap, they don't say "my" about each other any more. Instead of being "my neighbor," the person being fought with becomes "the person next door" or "that one who lives up the street." And "my brother" becomes "that dirty so-and-so."

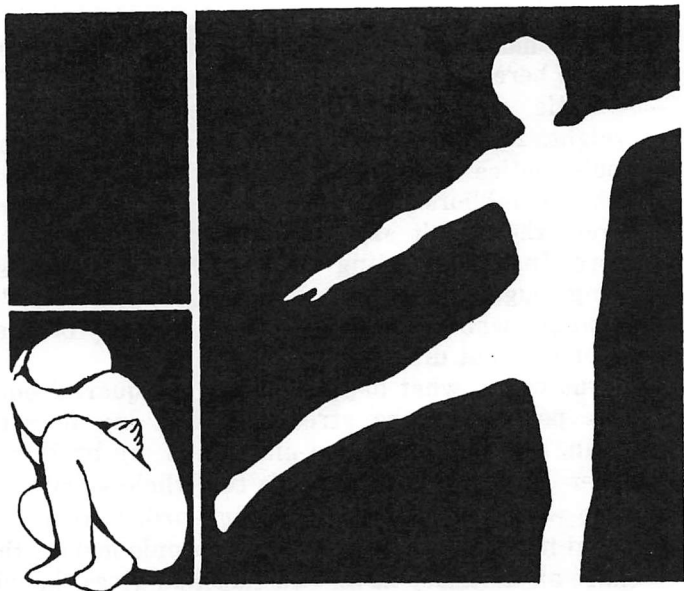
But watch what happens when the quarrel ends: that person up the street becomes *my* neighbor again, and that "dirty so and so" is *my* brother or sister or friend. The *my* tells the whole story.

So we say, Jesus Christ is *my* Lord. Luther compared it to a wedding. When two people marry, they share all that they have—the husband gives the wife what is his and the wife gives the husband what is hers.

In the same way, as Jesus Christ becomes our Lord, he gives us himself and what is his—his life, his victory over sin, death, and the devil. And we in turn give him ourselves and what is ours—our sin, our guilt, our bondage. Of us, he says, "They are mine." And of him we say, "He is ours; he is mine; I am his." All that separated us from him has been overcome.

More than a name

He is my *Lord*. The way we use the word *Lord* in our language, it is another name for God. But in the Scripture it is more than a name. A person's lord is that person's protector, employer, boss, and caretaker—the one who looks after the person and shapes his or her life.



Some lords really “lord it over” people. There are bosses, for example, who lay down the law arbitrarily, expecting their employees to give their all without getting much in return. They care only for what they can get out of people.

Other lords rule in a sneaky sort of way. They make people feel they really are free and can do what they please, while all the time they are manipulating, pulling, driving to get what they want.

Alcohol is this kind of a lord. When it begins to rule a person’s life, the person will swear up and down that he or she is in control and can quit any time. But for an alcoholic, it is the alcohol that really rules.

That is how sin rules, lording it over us. It takes over quietly, so that we imagine we are still in charge. So, for example, an alcoholic will say, “I’m

going to quit drinking." But then something frightening happens and the alcoholic says, "I'll just take one drink to make myself feel better," and the battle is lost.

Or a teenager on a date will say, "I know this might be wrong, but I really love her" or "I really love him." Or a person who trusts money might say, "I know God has promised to take care of me, but the good Lord helps those who help themselves—if I can just get another quarter section of land or some more stocks, I'll be set for life."

That is what makes sin such a rotten lord. It makes us feel free, happy, and secure, and all the while it is lording it over us and destroying us. The devil is "the master of a thousand arts," as Luther said—he is full of trickery, cunning, and deceit.

But Christ is an entirely different kind of Lord. He isn't a boss who only looks out for himself—he looks out for us. He works quietly, making all kinds of things happen in us without our ever being aware of it, but he never lies or deceives. As he becomes our Lord, he releases us from the dominion of sin, death, and the devil and places us under his protection so he can rule over us and take care of us in love.

The New Testament is full of examples of how he rules. When sick people came to Jesus, he didn't bawl them out for their illnesses. Neither did he say, "I will make you well *if* you really have enough faith." He said, "Rise, take your pallet and go home." He freed people from their diseases so they could serve.

When Peter denied that he knew him, Jesus didn't tell Peter after the resurrection, "You let me down and now you're going to have to prove yourself before I trust you again." Rather, he found Peter and

the rest of the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"—empowering them to serve him.

St. Augustine, whom the Lutheran confessors particularly admired, caught this idea in a beautifully simple little prayer: "Give what thou commandest and command what thou wilt." As our Lord, Jesus gives what he commands. He doesn't just command us to believe—he gives us faith. He doesn't just tell us to love—he creates love in our hearts.

Again, it is like a lover. If a woman who was interested in a man showed up on the first date and said, like a boss, "You'd better love me," the man would probably wonder if she were crazy. Or if a man tried to trick a woman into loving him, his tricks might succeed but he could never be sure that she really did love him—he would have to live with the fact that he had deceived her.

But what do lovers do? They go out together and get better acquainted. They share themselves with one another—telling each other about their families, their studies or their work, their hobbies, their likes and dislikes, and so forth. Through their giving of themselves love is born.

In the same way, Jesus becomes our Lord. He gives himself for us, forgiving us, freeing us from our bondage. He goes to work in us to make believers out of us, so that we will take him at his word. He makes lovers of us, so that we can love our neighbors. And he makes stewards out of us, so that we can take care of his creation and his gifts.

This doesn't happen all at once, obviously. Sin and death aren't just going to surrender territory they've enjoyed ruling—they put up a terrible fight in us. But Christ has already won the decisive battle with these enemies in his death and resurrection.

How is it done?

How does Christ do all of this? The answer is in the Third Article of the Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

Luther opens his explanation of the Third Article with the most suprising words in all of the Lutheran confessions: "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." In these words we confess that no matter how hard we think, no matter how much we try, we cannot become believers on our own. Nor can we become lovers or stewards by ourselves.

As hard as this confession is to make, it rings true to daily life. When a child is sick, when a parent dies, when a marriage is troubled, when everything turns out wrong, the questions that show our unbelief are flushed out: Why does God do this to me? How can he be my Lord when things like this happen to me?

If these questions fail to trap us, there are other snares that open: we become secure in ourselves, trusting our own faith rather than the promise of the gospel; or we become hardhearted, unable to feel the sorrow of repentance or the joy of release. And then, no matter how it happens, unbelief has us by the throat.

The fact that we can't believe, or take God at his word, is our sin. And it shows our bondage. If God had stopped work after the first Easter, if he had announced the promise to us and said, "Now just believe it," we would be in a terribly bad way. For we wouldn't be able to accept it, nor can we.

"But," Luther continues in his explanation, "the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me

in true faith." Though we cannot believe, the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of the risen Christ—not only *can* but *does* make believers out of us. How does the Spirit do this? To answer this question, you can look at your own experience: How is it that you believe? Someone around you knew the story of the gospel and told you.

That telling has been the work of the Holy Spirit. For the "Spirit calls through the gospel"—he tells us about Jesus through the word spoken to us by other people.

With the word, the Holy Spirit also uses the sacraments. In them, he puts the word together with something earthy, something we can touch and feel like water and bread and wine, to assure us that Christ's promise and gifts are unconditionally meant for each of us.

The Holy Spirit never leaves us alone. He keeps on coming to us, through word and sacrament, to nourish our faith. As he does this, he keeps gathering us together with other Christians. He knows that we are always weakest when we are alone. So the Spirit makes sure that we always have neighbors in faith—whether it is a family or a congregation or one person.

This is why the Creed calls the church the "communion of saints." The word communion could just as well be spelled *community*, for that is what the church is: a gathering, a community of people assembled to hear the word of God, to receive the sacraments, to help and take care of one another.

As the confessions understand the Scripture, there is no such thing as a Christian alone. A person who claims to be a Christian but who ignores the neighbors given to him or to her in faith is not going to last long. For as the Spirit calls, he also gathers us into a community of faith. He uses the words and



kindnesses of our neighbors to help us and our words and kindnesses to help our neighbors.

Around the world

But the Spirit of the risen Christ has more in mind than a few small communities. He gathers people around the world into communities, knitting all his communities of faith into a worldwide community of believers—the church. So we have brothers and sisters not only across the ages but across the world.

Dr. Paul Hansen, a secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, has told about his trips to visit Lutherans in Russia. The first time Dr. Hansen was able to visit these congregations, he told them how Lutherans in other parts of the world had been praying for them. The people were practically overwhelmed by this, he said, because they were sure

that nobody else knew they existed. But then they told Dr. Hansen, "You tell the others that we are praying for them, too."

Similar stories can be told about churches in South America, New Guinea, Hong Kong, Madagascar, and Namibia. As we pray for them, they are also praying for us. The church is a worldwide community, knit together by the Spirit across international borders and denominational lines.

Local, national, and worldwide, this community is a community of saints. It may not always seem that way. We don't always get along with each other. And the bigger the community gets, the more trouble there seems to be. Then how can we be a community of saints?

Again the Creed answers: through the forgiveness of sins. The Spirit brings us forgiveness so that in spite of our bondage to sin, in spite of all of our particular sins, we stand before God as saints. And as he forgives us, he goes to work in our hearts to make us saints in our behavior as well—to strengthen and keep us in faith, to help us love our neighbors, to help us take care of the earth.

Of course the Spirit's job in us isn't done yet. While we are saints, we are still at the same time sinners—caught in the midst of that wrestling match between Christ and the powers of evil. Every day the Spirit of Christ comes to win that match anew in us.

But one day, the battle will end. We believe in the "resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Then all the wrestling will be over—we will no longer be saints and sinners at the same time. The old sinner in us will be put to death completely when we die. And the new saint, on whom the Spirit has been working in us since we were baptized, will come forth.

Take a close look at the words of the Creed: "the resurrection of the *body*." These words were carefully chosen when the Creed was put together because of some who despised the body. They believed that the soul is good and the body evil, and that at the resurrection our bodies will be shucked off from our souls. But the Scripture says otherwise. It says that sin rules our souls as well as our bodies, and that the Spirit wants not only our souls but our bodies as well.

Does that mean this exact body, with this particular nose and these ears, arms, and legs? We don't know what shape the body of immortality will have. But no matter what shape it takes, we know this: Christ is not going to just raise part of you—he's going to raise you, the person you are, and finish the work begun in you in this life.

That is really the best news of all. Death and the end of the world are not events we have to fear. They will not come without tears, without pain, without some horrendous struggle perhaps. But we know who is waiting on the other side—the one who formed us in our mother's womb and who day after day has looked after us and protected us; the one who went to the cross and death to win us from bondage to sin, the one who has spoken to us through the words we heard from our parents, family, and friends, who has gathered a community around us and who has strengthened and kept us in faith. To be with him—absolutely nothing is more worth waiting for, looking forward to, counting on.

4 THE LORD'S PRAYER



For your reading

- Explanation of the Lord's Prayer in the Catechism
- Article 21 of the Augsburg Confession

The problem of prayer

It seems strange that prayer should be a problem for Christians. And yet, because it is so desperately important to living in faith, the devil attacks prayer with a special vengeance. And he does it in such a subtle way that before we know it, prayer is destroyed.

For example, it is easy for prayer to become mechanical. Most of us have known the Lord's Prayer since childhood. It has made such a well-worn groove

in our minds that we can repeat it without ever thinking about what we are saying. We may consciously try to keep our minds on the words. But before we know it, another thought occurs to us while we are praying. This frustrates us, makes us feel guilty about praying, and may finally stop us from praying altogether.

Usually the devil is much more clever. When he sees a person who is worried about how he or she prays, he says to that person, "I know your problem—it's a hard thing to pray rightly, but if you'll just listen to me, I'll help you out." Then he makes some suggestions—"put more feeling in your voice," or "stop after each part of the prayer and think about your attitude" or "you have to really be earnest and sincere when you pray." And then he springs the trap, for when people are thinking about how they sound or about their attitudes or their dedication, they aren't thinking about the prayer or God's promise, but about themselves.

If these diabolical attacks on prayer fail, the devil tries other ways. For example, he may whisper, "So you think you can pray, do you? Aren't you the one who woke up grumpy, yelled at the kids, watched TV when you should have been working, gossiped on the phone, and then complained about your hard day when the family got home? You phony—do you expect God to listen to you?"

With such an opening, the devil often doubles the attack—"Yes," he leads such a person to think, "I did all that today, but now I realize it and I'm sorry for it. Therefore God most certainly wants to listen to me." So first of all we feel we are unworthy to pray; then we pat ourselves on the back as though our very unworthiness glorifies us.

If this fails, the devil, that master of all lies, tries another approach. "What incredible arrogance," he

says. "There are billions of people on earth, and you think God should listen to you? God has better things to do than listen to you complain about your kids and your family or your aches and pains." The devil may then make us feel guilty for having thoughts like this, using the guilt to drive us even further away from prayer.

As many different tricks and traps as there are, though, they all have the same spring. In every one of them, we think about ourselves. That's like quicksand. As we become absorbed in ourselves, we sink deeper and deeper until finally it is impossible to call out to God without thinking about how we're doing it, why we're doing it, or if we're doing it right. And then prayer becomes dead for us. How are we ever going to find solid ground? How can we pray? The confessions give three answers: we can pray because God has commanded us to pray; we can pray because God promises to hear our prayers; and we can pray because Jesus teaches us how to pray.

God's command

All prayer is rooted in God's command. When God commands us not to take his name in vain, at the same time he is commanding us to use his name rightly—to "call upon him in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving." Just as a friend gives us a phone number so we can call, God gives us his name so we can speak to him. And like a friend, only far dearer, he says, "Now you call me. I want to hear from you. Tell me what's on your mind, what you need. I insist on it."

Time and again, the Scriptures come back to this command. In Psalm 50, for example, God says, "Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver



you." He doesn't say, "Call upon me if you feel like it." He says, "Call upon me—that's an order."

In the same way, when Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you," he is giving an order. He absolutely insists that we seek, knock, and ask.

God sets this command against all of the wicked taunts, tricks, and questions that the devil uses to drive us away from prayer. So when you want to pray and that voice says, "You always pray mechanically, and mechanical prayers don't mean anything," you can reply, "That may be true—I have prayed mechanically, but God has commanded me to pray and if I don't, I'll be even worse off." Or when there is a crisis and you are driven to prayer and that

same voice says, "You only pray when you're in trouble—that doesn't show much love for God"; you can reply, "Maybe I don't pray as often as I should, but it is precisely in times of trouble that God has commanded me to pray and so I'm going to."

God knows that if he just invited us to pray to him, we would become mired down in the sand again—worried about whether or not we could accept the offer. So he takes away the option. "You must pray," he says in a stern voice that is still full of love and tenderness, "for you are mine and I want to hear from you."

God's promise

God doesn't command us to pray simply to give us some kind of spiritual exercise. He insists that we pray because he wants to answer our prayers. And so, secondly, we can pray because he promises to hear us. The promises are in the same verses that he uses to command us to pray: "Call upon me in the day of trouble and *I will deliver you*," "Ask, and *it will be given* to you; seek, and *you will find*; knock, and *it will be opened* to you."

This promise is full of encouragement. There are no strings attached. He does not say, "I will answer you if you don't pray mechanically, if you are sincere and have faith," but "*I will answer you*." It is an unconditional promise.

What about those times that we pray for something and nothing happens? Take another look at the promise: God doesn't say that he is going to be a Sears catalog, answering prayers like an order filler, but that he will answer us. As a loving mother or father gives children what they need, so God also gives us what we need—but not always what we want. For he knows what is best.

To drive this point home, Luther told the story of a king who told a beggar to ask anything he wanted of the king. The beggar asked only for some beggar's broth—a weak soup. Instead of being pleased with the beggar's modest request, the king got angry. He had promised anything and the beggar didn't take him at his word, but asked for something he could have gotten anywhere.

In the same way, God commands us to ask for everything we need. He may decide that we don't need it, that we've got too much already, or that we'd be better off with something else. But he still wants us to ask. For as we ask, we take him at his word—believing his promise to hear us.

Jesus' teaching

Thirdly, we can pray because Jesus has taught us to pray. Apparently the disciples had some of the same difficulties with prayer that we do. They finally said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." Jesus answered their request by teaching them the Lord's Prayer.

The one who listens to our prayers and answers them is showing us how to ask. We can be sure that this prayer is pleasing to God because, in Christ, he is the one who taught it to us.

This doesn't mean that the Lord's Prayer is the only one we can pray with any confidence. The command to pray and God's promise to hear extend to all prayers—whether they are simple requests, intercessions for others, or the Lord's Prayer itself. For it is his willingness to hear our prayers that makes prayer effective, not the forms we use or attitudes we take in praying.

Like the Commandments, the Lord's Prayer can be divided into two parts. In the first part, we pray for ourselves in relation to God. In the introduction,

"Our Father who art in heaven," we name the one we are speaking to. But it is more than the kind of address we put on an envelope. For here we are naming the name that is above every name, calling out to God as "Our Father" who rules all things.

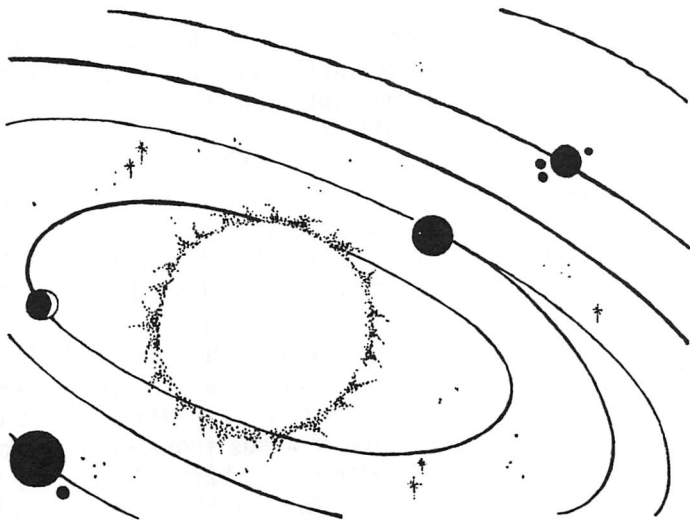
In the First Petition, we say "hallowed be thy name." It is through God's name that we are enabled to call out to him, speak with him, and keep in touch with him, just as it is through his word that he speaks to us and makes us the kind of people he wants us to be.

So if his name and his word are taught or used wrongly, it causes all kinds of trouble. If, for example, someone teaches that a person has to have just the right attitude in order to pray, many people become worried about their attitudes and are discouraged from praying.

When we pray, "hallowed be thy name," we are asking God to protect us from these abuses of his name and his word. And we further ask that we ourselves will be enabled to use his name rightly and speak his word truthfully. The First Petition, then, is a prayer to clear the channels. In it, we ask God to cut off all the interference that might interrupt our speaking to him and his speaking to us.

In the Second Petition, we pray that God's kingdom will come. A kingdom is where a lord rules. So in this petition we are asking that God will establish his rule over us, that his Spirit will continue to work in us so that we can believe his word and live accordingly.

But, as usual, we're not just asking for this for ourselves. When we say, "thy kingdom come," we're asking that God will establish his rule over us and over his whole creation. We are praying for the end of the world, when the powers of evil are finally defeated and God's kingdom has come in all its



power. So this petition is for both the present and the future, that God will make believers of us now and believers of the whole creation in the future.

The Third Petition is a summary of the first part of the prayer. It has a sharp point, aimed directly at the three enemies of God: sin, death, and the devil. When we say, "thy will be done," we are asking God to "hinder and defeat" these enemies—to do what he wants, so that the enemies don't get what they want. It is a prayer that he will expose all the taunts, tricks, and traps set for us by his enemies, preserving us in faith and godliness.

Our relations to others

In the second part of the Lord's Prayer, we pray for ourselves in relation to our neighbors. This part begins with the most pressing need of each day: "Give us this day our daily bread."

Daily bread includes everything we need in order to live each day. Maybe you memorized the long list

of things that Luther includes in his explanation of this petition in the Small Catechism—he includes not only food and shelter but such things as good government and favorable weather.

Because we have so much, it is easy to forget the basics—how important bread, meat, and potatoes really are, or how necessary it is to have a good government, and how important the weather is. But God doesn't forget these things, even if we do. He provides us with everything we need.

God provides daily. You notice how carefully Jesus attaches that word, "enough bread for today." This is not a petition for squirrels and others intent on hoarding, like the farmer Jesus spoke of who worried only about the size of his barns. God gives us what we need each day. Any surplus is meant to be shared so that through us he can answer the prayer of others who are asking for enough for their day.

In the Fifth Petition we say, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness is our most basic need in relation to both God and our neighbors. For as long as sin, death, and the devil have any power at all, there are going to be divisions among people. And just as going without food makes a person hungry, living with divisions makes a person empty—it cuts us off from the confident joy of living in the promise of the gospel and from the joy of being neighbors.

So we pray that God will destroy the walls and divisions that cut us off from him and from one another. We ask this not because God has to be convinced that he should forgive us—he has already promised that he will—but because we need to recognize the forgiveness he gives in daily life.

At the same time we pray, "as we forgive those who trespass against us." This is the hard part. For as much as we want to be forgiven, we are not

always so eager to forgive our neighbors. In fact, sometimes we like to hold on to our neighbor's trespasses—to show that they aren't so much better than we are.

But when Jesus destroys the walls that separate us from him, he wants also to destroy the walls that separate us from our neighbors. And because he knows how difficult this can be for us, he teaches us to ask him for help so that we can forgive as we are forgiven. His forgiveness then flows through us to our neighbors so we can live with them in peace.

Having asked for daily bread and forgiveness, we ask that God will not lead us into temptation. As Luther says in the explanation, "God indeed tempts no one to sin." But there are plenty of other sources of difficulty for us. No matter how devout, Christians are abused by their employers, have children who get into trouble, run into tension with marriage partners, having troublesome neighbors, and so on.

Behind the temptations that arise in situations like these, there are some more difficult ones. Left to ourselves, we can easily be overwhelmed by worry—imagining all kinds of horrible things. In the same way, we can be drowned by despair, coming to the point where we cry out with Job that it would have been better if we hadn't been born.

These temptations bear all the trademarks of the archenemy. We don't always recognize them as temptations or as "great and shameful sins," as Luther labels them. We accept worry and despair as normal. And this makes such temptations extremely powerful. Before a person knows it, he or she has been so overcome by worries that all the assurance Christ gives means nothing.

So we pray, "Lead us not into temptation." Here Christ says far more than "don't worry" or "you'll" feel better tomorrow." He says, "Look to me with

your worries—I'll take care of things." He takes hold of us in the midst of the temptations that afflict us, holding us firm, so that we are strengthened and enabled to stand and serve. And when we fall, he is there to pick us up again.

Finally, in the last petition, we pray, "Deliver us from evil." This, too, is a summary petition. It includes everything that we have been praying for, expressing our final hope that God will take us to himself so that we might be with him.

We can be sure that God hears this request. He is going to put an end to all the blasphemy of his name, all the faithlessness of the world, all the striving to upset his will, all the hoarding of the things people need to live, all the hatred and grudge-bearing and lack of forgiveness, all of the temptation. To put an end to it, he has called out his people and is reshaping us to live as he made us to live. And one day, Christ will return again in glory.

In the meantime, we can be sure that God is at work to deliver us from evil. He is shaping every day to protect and care for us, and when our time comes, he will take us to himself. We can be sure of it because he has promised.

So the Lord's Prayer encompasses all our hopes. In a few short phrases, it spells out what we need in relation to God and in relation to our neighbors.

But we can still pray other prayers as well—more personal ones, expressing a particular need or concern for our own families or our neighbors, whether they be across the street or across the world. And whether we pray the Lord's Prayer or a more personal one, we can be sure against all the attacks besetting prayer that God is listening. For he has promised to be our God, commanded us to pray, and assured us that he will hear our call, no matter how feeble or stumble-tongued it might be.

5 BAPTISM



For your reading

- Explanations of Baptism in the Catechisms
- Articles 5, 9, 12, and 13 in the Augsburg Confession

The making of faith

In the Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, you have the Lutheran confessions in a nutshell. All of the key themes are sounded in these three parts.

But there is one theme, found in the Third Article, that the Catechisms and the rest of the confessions talk about in greater detail. It is the answer to the question, "How does the Holy Spirit create faith in us?" From the earlier chapters, you already know the answer: The Spirit works faith through the

preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments.

But the confessions want to be more specific. So, in the Catechisms and the other confessions there are explanations of Baptism, confession, and the Lord's Supper. Article V of the Augsburg Confession stands as a summary: "To obtain such faith, God has instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, he works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel."

How, exactly, does the Spirit make faith through the word? If you look back at your own life in faith, all along the way you see people who have spoken to you about Jesus—parents, relatives, friends, pastors, Sunday school teachers, and others. Through this word you first heard of Jesus and through this word you've been brought to the point where you want to believe it.

But how does the word work in this way? You can get a picture of how the confessions answer that question by considering a phrase that we often use. If one is a good conversationalist, we say that person expresses himself or herself well.

According to the literal meaning of the word, when you *express* something you push it out. So in the morning you express toothpaste onto the brush and when you have a hot dog, you express the mustard. When we express ourselves, we push ourselves out in such a way that other people can see and hear what we're concerned about.

God expresses himself to us through his word. He doesn't just talk about himself—he gives himself, putting himself out in the open so that we can hear what he has in mind for us.

In Christ, God went beyond words. He expressed himself in the flesh and blood of his Son, putting himself out in such a way that people could learn what kind of God he is, what he does, what he wants and doesn't want. So John's gospel says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:1, 14). In a beautiful phrase of Luther's, Christ is the "mirror of God's fatherly heart."

The word of Scripture

As he once expressed himself to us in the person of Christ, God now expresses himself to us through the word of Christ. Thus, as Christ is the word of God, the Scripture is also called the word of God. It is the word because it witnesses to, tells the story of, bears the good news given in Christ. If a person wants to know anything about the kind of God we have, that person must go to the Bible. "Christ is the heart of Scripture," Luther said. "Take Christ out of it and what do you have left?"

God wants his word to come home to us in a living way. He always makes sure that there are other witnesses, people who know how he has expressed himself in Christ and who tell about it. The word of God's witnesses, whether they are professional preachers or people who tell the story in their homes and on their jobs, is also the word of God. God expresses himself through them.

God always uses some means to express himself to us. He doesn't appear to us directly. For example, when he spoke to Moses he didn't stand in front of him but spoke to him through a burning bush.

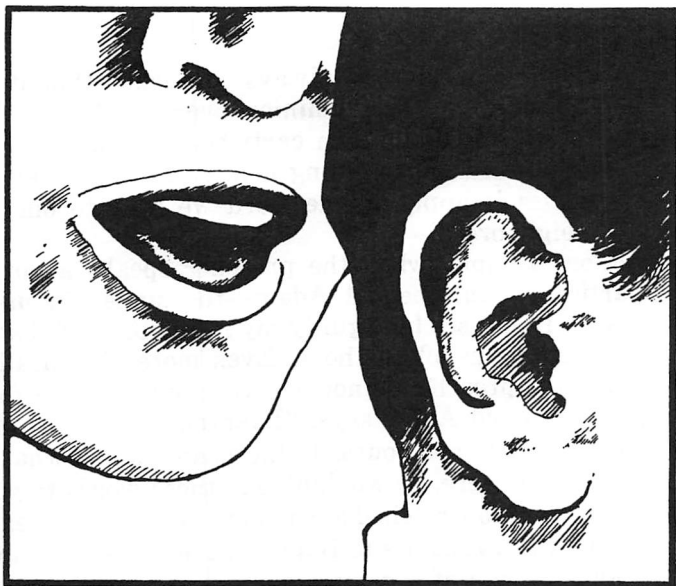
The means God uses to speak to us is the word he puts on the lips of his witnesses—ordinary people. In church we hear this word from a preacher—a person who has been called to study the Scripture so that he or she can speak the word to us. The word that evokes faith from us is often from the lips of a person who is even more familiar to us than the preacher—members of our own families, or friends.

No matter how ordinary the people who speak it to us may seem, God's word is always full of power. Hearing the word of God does something to us. It causes us to react. It is like hearing someone say, "I love you." This makes something happen in us, causing us to want to believe it and to respond.

But the word of God can't be programmed, like a computer. Nor is it a magical, hocus-pocus word that will do whatever we want it to. Article V of the Augsburg Confession says the Spirit makes faith through the word "when and where he pleases." That is, the Spirit is in charge of the word. He is the one who makes it work, and it may work in different ways for different people.

How can we explain the person who hears the word but doesn't believe it? That question isn't answered in Scripture, so we can't be sure. We do know that the powers of sin, death, and the devil attack the hearing of the word, trying to plug our ears to it. We also know that God can and does defeat these powers. All we can do when people who hear the word don't believe it is to keep speaking it to them, in the hope that at some point the Spirit will break through and give them the faith to believe it.

That is our calling as God's people—to speak the word, to be "urgent in season and out of season," as Paul told Timothy. This calling begins at home, with our families. From there it extends to our neighborhoods, whether at home or at work. And from there



it extends around the world. As the Holy Spirit makes faith in us through the word that we hear, he will also make faith in others through the word we speak, "when and where he pleases."

The washing word

If the word does all these things, why is there so much emphasis on sacraments?

The answer to this question is in God's grace. Because he knows our faith is under constant attack from the powers of evil, God wants to express himself to us in the most concrete, down-to-earth, and personal way possible. So he takes his word and puts it together with something that we can see, feel, and touch to let us know that he is giving himself specifically and personally for us.

Our ears are a playground for the old Adam, that is, our sinful nature. Knowing the power of the

word, the old Adam is always concerned that it is going to destroy his dominion over us. And so he does everything but turn cartwheels trying to prevent the word from coming home. One of his favorite games is applying the word we hear to one of our neighbors.

For example, when the preacher speaks about a particular sin, the old Adam—the sinner in us—says, “There, see how guilty my neighbor is of that,” thus letting us off the hook. Even more diabolically, when the preacher announces that our sins are forgiven, the old Adam says, “Everyone else’s sins are forgiven, but not yours. If the pastor knew what a sinner you were, he wouldn’t say those words to you—you are too wretched a person to ever be forgiven.”

But when it comes to Baptism, the old Adam can’t play this kind of a game any more. For in Baptism, God puts his word together with the water in such a way that we know it is meant for each one of us. When you were baptized, the pastor said your name and washed your head with the water so that you would know that God’s gifts are meant specifically for you.

Moreover, to make sure that you would know this in the most personal way, Christ put the church under a command to baptize. It is not an option we can choose, as we choose whether to have a straight stick or an automatic transmission on a car. Baptism is necessary—Christ has ordered us to baptize in his name so that through this means, he can express himself to each of us.

As Christ expresses himself to us in this washing with the word, he gives his gifts. “In Baptism,” as the Small Catechism says, “God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what he has promised.”

Familiar as these words are, they carry a powerful surprise. "In Baptism God *delivers* . . . and *gives*" It doesn't say "will deliver" or "promises to give," but "delivers" and "gives" right now. What God delivers and gives is freedom from sin, death, and the power of the devil and the gift of everlasting salvation. These gifts were delivered and given to you in your Baptism.

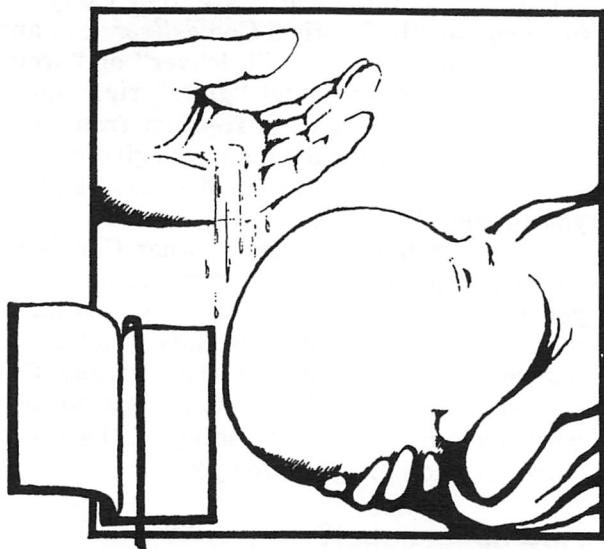
You don't have to wonder what God is going to do with you when the judgment comes—he judged you in your Baptism, delivering you from his enemies. You don't have to wonder what is going to happen when you die—God has already given you everlasting salvation! And he has sealed these gifts with his word and the washing of the water to be sure you know they are for you.

How about belief?

But now wait a minute. Isn't there a condition attached? Doesn't Luther say that these gifts are given "to all who believe what he has promised"? It does say that, and it is a condition, in a way. Since God wants believers, he's not going to throw his gifts away on people who don't want them. We have to believe.

But if this is a condition, it is a condition unlike any condition you've ever heard of. For God is the one who is going to keep it. In fact, that is what he is doing in Baptism—going to work to make sure that we do believe his promise.

Can we reject God's gifts? That's really not the question to ask. Rather we should ask, why would anyone in his or her right mind ever want to reject them? And isn't that just what God is promising here? That he will deliver us from those powers that make us want to reject his gifts?



Under the power and dominion of sin, we want to reject not only Baptism but the gifts that God gives through it and God himself. If that's what we want, God will probably let us have what we want—he may let us reject him. But he's not going to give up on us without a fight. For having given us these gifts, he's going to do everything possible to prevent us from rejecting him and his gifts.

Another question is: How can a simple ceremony like Baptism accomplish all this? How can we be so sure that these gifts are given in Baptism when it is simply an outward ritual that has become for many just a customary social practice? As with other questions, the answer is in the word. It is not the ceremony that makes Baptism work any more than it is the pastor or the congregation or the water itself. God makes Baptism work, for he is the one who put his word together with the water to express himself to us in this way.

Some people wonder how we can baptize infants, who don't even know what's going on. But if we believe that faith is something God creates in us, this should give us no problem. If God can create faith in a rebellious adult, he surely can create it in a child.

The old Adam is forever making it appear that Baptism is something that we do or something that the church does. He points to all sorts of people who, according to him, don't take their Baptism very seriously. And he points to all kinds of churches where Baptism is as automatic as taking up an offering. Then, he says, "Now how can Baptism mean anything at all?"

The truth is that if Baptism depended on us—on our reaching a certain age, or baptizing in a certain way, or having a certain attitude about Baptism—it wouldn't mean anything at all. But it depends on God, and so it means everything that God says it does. If someone who has been baptized ignores it or appears to take it lightly, our calling isn't to sit in judgment over that person—in fact, we have been forbidden to judge. Our task is to go and tell that person the word again, in a loving way, so that through the word he or she may be restored to faith.

Daily significance

The last question on Baptism in the Small Catechism is by far the most important one: What does Baptism mean for daily living? The answer is, "It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever."

Here we see one of the biggest differences between God and the old Adam. The old Adam always plays

for small stakes. To destroy the comfort and consolation of Baptism, he tacks a condition on to it. "You have to do this before your Baptism means anything," he says. But he doesn't want to make the condition too big, because if it gets too big he can't convince us that we've fulfilled it. So he makes small requirements, like giving up a few bad habits, or doing a few good deeds.

But God isn't content with a small commitment. He wants all of us, the whole person; he wants to make a completely new person out of each of us. He demands that the sinner in us die so that we can be wholly and completely new, to live with him.

That is what repentance is about. It is not just feeling sorry once in a while for some particular bad thing that we've done. That is the old Adam's repentance—he feels bad because he's been caught. Genuine repentance goes far beyond that. It is sorrow over our condition—the way we struggle and fight against God and our neighbors, doubting, worrying, hoarding what God has given us, being at odds with those around us. Repentance is hating the dominion of sin over us and resolving, with God's help, to get free of it.

To illustrate this: A young girl might see a boy whom she dearly loves. She thinks about this fellow day in and day out, and looks forward to a time when their relationship can be permanent. But then the relationship ends for some reason and a new relationship begins with another person who becomes her husband. As she looks back at her old relationship, she can't imagine whatever led her to think that the first fellow was anything at all. And as she sees what was wrong with the first relationship, she also sees everything right about the new relationship that has come. So she clings even more closely to the new relationship that has been given.

As God pledges himself to us in Baptism, giving us his gifts, he begins this process in us so that we regret the old relationship in which we were under the dominion of sin, and instead cling to him in faith. But sin is not an old boyfriend or girl friend that gives up. It keeps trying to get us back. And often it does entrap us once more so we have to be freed from its clutches again and again by God's grace. For this reason, repentance doesn't keep from one day to the next—it can't be canned and stored. It's something that happens to us every day. Each day God drives us away from the old Adam's clutches and each day he draws us to himself, so that we cling to him in newness of life.

Luther once called death the end of our Baptism. When we finally die, the sinful self—the old Adam, the unbelieving sinner in us—will finally be dead forever. And the new self in us—the believing self, shaped after the image of Christ—will finally come forth, once and for all, to live with God in righteousness and purity. After that, when we are raised from the dead, there will be no more repentance. But until then, repentance marks every day.

Thus, in another of Luther's phrases, "The Christian life is nothing but Baptism, once begun and ever continued." Each day we can take the deepest comfort in the fact that we have been baptized. It is the surest defense we have against all the wiles and ways of those powers that would drive us to despair with worry and fear. And each day, while regretting everything in us that pulls us away, we can cling to the gifts of God given in word and sacrament. And we can cling because it is God who enables us to hold by holding us fast.

6 CONFESSION AND THE LORD'S SUPPER



For your reading

- Explanations of confession and the Lord's Supper in the Catechisms
- Articles 10, 11, 22, 24, and 25 of the Augsburg Confession

Confession retained

As you read the portions of the Catechisms and the Augsburg Confession for this session, you're in for another surprise. Not once, or even twice, but *several* times the confessions talk about private confession. And rather than attacking it they defend it. In fact, Luther even suggests in the Large Catechism that people who don't make use of private confession should be considered pigs!

Isn't private confession a Roman Catholic practice? Why would the reformers want to retain private confession?

Private confession was a regular practice of the Roman Catholic church in Luther's day, just as it is today. It was considered one of the sacraments of the church—people were required to make confession regularly and were expected to admit all their sins.

The Lutherans reacted against this understanding of private confession, mainly because confession was made a condition for the promise of the gospel. And they objected strongly to the notion that a person had to confess every sin. Who can remember them all? And besides, doesn't this miss the point? If we talk about sins all the time, making lists of bad things done and good things left undone, don't we wind up thinking of sin as acts rather than as a power which grips and holds us?

Confessing this way is like trying to cure a terrible disease by making a list of all the places it hurts—it is painful to make the list and when you're finished, it doesn't do any good anyway. After reading the list, all the doctor can say is, "Yes, now we know that you are sick."

The power of evil

But as hard as the early Lutherans fought against the Roman Catholic practice of confession, they still thought very highly of private confession itself. Luther and Melancthon believed that private confession should be retained because of the wily ways of the powers of evil in us. We not only are tempted to do bad things but once we have done them, the temptation often increases, driving us to despair.

Perhaps you have had to fight with this kind of a temptation. Or you know somebody who has been trapped in it. Suppose, for instance, that you have a friend who once committed adultery. It was years ago, in a passing relationship which soon ended.

It was the tempter who led your friend into the adultery. But now the tempter—the devil or the old Adam—doesn't want to take the credit. Instead, he has begun to throw this old adultery in your friend's face. "Here you are, happily married," he whispers, "but your spouse wouldn't be so happy if he or she knew about this." Then your friend will begin to worry that his or her spouse may find out about it.

When the devil or the old Adam gets something like this going, the stakes keep going up. Pretty soon your friend can't think about anything else—worrying constantly about someone finding out; feeling like a phoney because the truth hasn't been told; convinced that he or she is a lousy mother or father because this happened; sure that every friend would abandon him or her if they knew about it. Finally, your friend is driven to despair—unable to appreciate anything good about his or her life now, certain that there is no hope in the gospel or anywhere else.

It is one of the tempter's favorite ploys, and he works it over and over again, ruining people's joy and happiness with guilt and finally their ability to live and get along. And he fuels the whole thing with secrecy, spelling out all kinds of terrible consequences that could possibly come if someone else were to find out.

Temptations and troubles like this are one of the main reasons why the Lutheran confessions are so convinced that private confession should be retained. For when private confession is available, a person under this kind of a temptation knows that there is someone he or she can tell without fear. Pastors who hear confessions are sworn to secrecy; their oath of secrecy is even recognized by the courts.

Just telling such a secret may be all that is needed to break the tempter's power. For when someone else

knows what has happened, the tempter can't keep throwing up all sorts of imaginary consequences. People often comment how good it feels to get something off their chest.

The temptation doesn't have to be so deep or severe before private confession is helpful. In fact, it is a good thing to deal with sins before the tempter can take hold of them and start the vicious circle—just as it is good to see a doctor early rather than waiting until the disease has had time to get a good hold.

The value of absolution

There is an even more important reason why the confessions take such a strong stand on private confession: the absolution, the declaration of God's forgiveness.

A person can go to a friend, a doctor, or a psychologist to get something off his or her chest, and get some help. But a Christian friend or a pastor can give more help than just a listening ear. God has promised that as his people pronounce the word of forgiveness to one another, he himself is also there to forgive. You can find the passages containing this promise in your Catechism, under the Office of the Keys: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." With this promise, God binds himself to the words of forgiveness we say in his name.

For this reason, Melancthon sometimes called private confession by a better name—"private absolution." Absolution is the heart of private confession. As you hear the words of forgiveness spoken privately and personally to you, you can be sure that there is not only another person who understands you but that God himself has heard and forgiven.

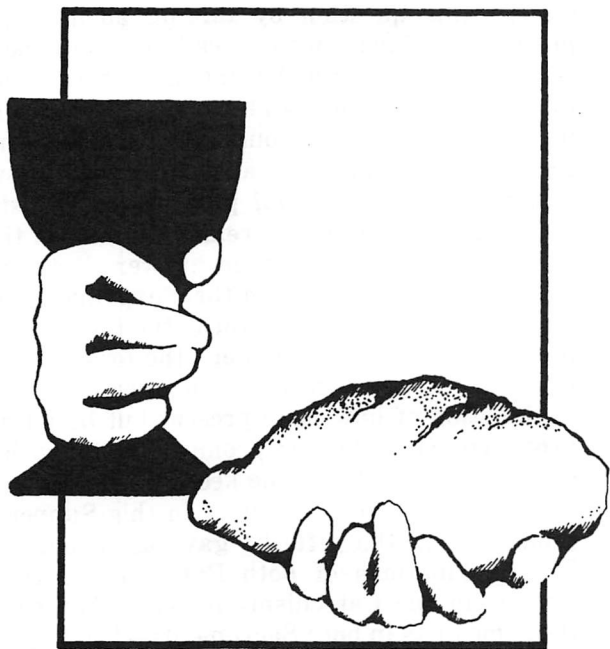
You can be sure, too, that the absolution spoken is meant specifically for you.

Why doesn't our church make a more regular practice of private confession then? That is a good question. Instead of requiring it, the confessions make private confession voluntary. And for a couple of centuries, it continued in the Lutheran church. But then it was abused in some ways and in a time of deep hatred for Roman Catholicism, it was set aside as being "too Catholic." Some of you may remember the last remnants of private confession in our church—the custom in many congregations to have people register on Friday or Saturday before a communion service. That provided a time for people to talk to the pastor and confess their sins if they wished.

What can you do if your congregation doesn't use private confession? A couple of things: First, if you would like to have private confession, you can speak to your pastor about it. Most pastors will gladly make arrangements for it. Secondly, you can speak to a trustworthy friend who is also a Christian and knows about confession. The office of the keys isn't limited to pastors, though often pastors are better prepared for this kind of thing. *Lutheran Book of Worship* provides an order for individual confession.

Private confession has long been connected with the second great sacrament of the church: the Lord's Supper.

As Baptism is the sacrament of birth, the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of renewal. After they are born, babies need to be fed. So Christians who have been born of water and the Spirit need to be renewed in the gifts God gives. This renewal comes through the word as it is preached and as it is put together with the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper.



During the Reformation, Luther had a meeting with Ulrich Zwingli, a man he was arguing with concerning the proper understanding of the Lord's Supper. After a long discussion, Luther took a knife and carved the words, "This is my body," into a table, underlining the word *is* twice. For him and for the Lutheran confessions, this little word *is* carries all the weight. It is Christ's promise to be with us. He is really present, joining us in the eating and drinking to give himself to us.

How can it be?

How is he present? Different answers were suggested at the time of the Reformation, and they led to much debate. The Roman Catholic teachers an-

swered this question by talking about a *physical* presence of Christ in the bread and the wine. Christ is present, they said, by changing bread and wine into his actual body and blood. Other theologians, including Zwingli and founders of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, answered the question by talking about a *spiritual* presence of Christ. He is present, they said, as we remember him in the meal.

Luther didn't like either answer. Both, he said, put too much emphasis on their explanation and not enough emphasis on the words themselves. Christ is present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine—he comes to be with us not because we have some explanation of how he is present but because he has promised. Since he has promised to be with us, we can be sure that he is—he keeps his word.

As he comes to be with us in this Supper, Christ renews us in the gifts he gave us in our Baptism. The explanations of both Baptism and the Lord's Supper in the Catechisms indicate that we receive the same gifts in both Sacraments—"In Baptism God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation. . . ." "In Holy Communion we receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation." In his Supper, Christ does not add anything to what we received in Baptism or to what we receive in the word. But he renews these gifts in us.

The powers of evil do not give up once we are baptized. They continue to fight, seeking to regain what they lost. As a result we continue to sin. But Christ does not take away the gifts of our Baptism on this account. Instead, he comes in the Supper to assure us that these gifts are still ours—that he is ours, forgives us, and will raise us from the dead. That is *re-renewal*, being made new again.

But while he takes us back to our Baptism in his supper, Christ also takes us ahead to the future—

giving us a foretaste of things to come. Kent Knutson, the late president of the American Lutheran Church, used to compare it to getting a pinch of dough during Saturday baking. The dough is a foretaste of the bread or cookies to come.

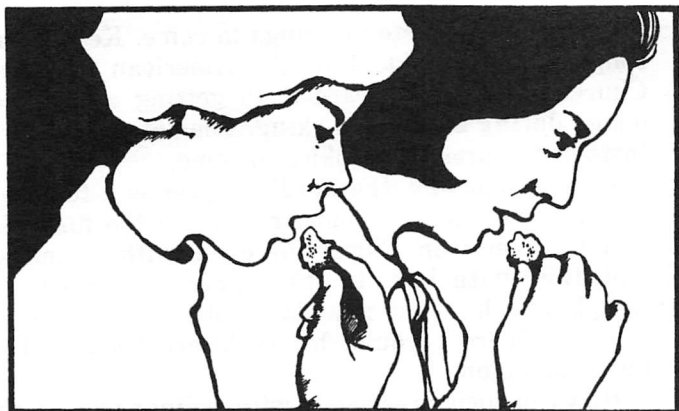
In the same way, the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of the communion to come. For when the final victory has been won, Christ will dwell with us and we will dwell with him. In the supper now, we get a sample of what that new day will be, as groups of people gathered around his table are brought into his communion.

How can such a ceremony with ordinary bread and wine give such gifts? This is a question of the old Adam. There is hardly anything he loves better than dressing up in a Sunday suit and pretending to be so spiritual that he can't stand such ordinary things.

"Bread!" he says, "Do you call those silly white wafers or that crumbly stuff Christ's body? If you want to be a decent Christian, you've got to work at it, make yourself holy, and forget such silly games. And wine—people get drunk on wine. Don't give me this hocus-pocus about Christ being present in a little tiny sip of something that the pastor or one of the deacons bought in a liquor store."

Just as it isn't the water that makes Baptism, it's not the eating and drinking or the bread and wine that makes this meal the Lord's Supper. Rather, it is Christ's word and promise that he will be with us, in the eating and drinking.

This promise, along with the eating and drinking, is the main thing in the sacrament. As in Baptism, Christ wants to make sure that his promise comes to us in the most personal and intimate way. So he not only speaks the word—"This is my body, which is given for you"; "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you and for many for the



remission of sins”—but he gives us something that we can see, feel, touch, taste, roll around on our tongues and swallow. We can know for sure that he has each of us in mind.

Luther used the word *testament* in this connection—the best translation of the word that is sometimes translated “covenant.” A testament is a will—“the last will and testament”—in which a person arranges for the distribution of his or her belongings after death. Christ’s last will and testament for us, “the new testament in his blood,” is that we are to receive his forgiveness, life, and salvation and to receive it freely and personally, just as the beneficiary of a will receives the bequest without payment or price.

Proper preparation

In the last question in the Small Catechism’s explanation of the Lord’s Supper, Luther takes up a question that bothers many people: “When is a person rightly prepared to receive this sacrament?” Answer: “Fasting and other outward preparations serve a good purpose. However, that person is well prepared and worthy who believes these words, ‘given and shed for you for the remission of sins.’”

But anyone who does not believe these words, or doubts them, is neither prepared nor worthy, for the words 'for you' require simply a believing heart."

In the past, many Lutheran congregations stressed proper preparation for the Lord's Supper. Many people didn't dare to participate because they feared they were participating unworthily. When this happens, the devil has won a horrible victory. For then we are cut off from the very source of strength and comfort.

In more recent years, the tempter has sprung another trap. Pointing to all those people he caught with the first one, the tempter pushes us into the second trap by saying, "Don't worry about participating worthily—just go to the supper and forget about it." When this trap shuts, people may go to Communion once a year, once a month, or every other day, but it means next to nothing.

Now how to avoid these traps? Isn't it the same problem that we have with prayer, that if we get worried about our attitudes we can hardly pray anymore?

"Fasting and other outward preparations serve a good purpose," Luther says. Speaking to your pastor about things that are troublesome to you, reading through the explanation of Holy Communion, studying the stories of the Lord's Supper in Scripture, and perhaps even going without food in the morning until you've communed are all good ways to be reminded of what a great gift the Lord's Supper is. They can serve a good purpose when they are done as such a reminder.

But these preparations are optional, valuable only if they help you with the sacrament in some way. What matters above all is hearing the words "given and shed for you" and taking them to heart. For everything in the sacrament is at stake in these

words—they tell you what is being done for you in the sacrament.

What if you're not sure that you believe the words? This is where the going gets tough. The tempter fights with both hands, on the one hand trying to convince us that we can be sure of our own faith so that we become proud and self-secure, on the other trying to convince us that we are faithless so that we despair.

Like the father who cried out to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief," we can never be sure of our own faith. We can't rely on our own faith, trusting ourselves to believe. If we try that, the tempter will get us, with one hand or the other, driving us away from the sacrament.

But we can, as the Spirit takes hold of us, rely on the word and promise of Christ. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful," Paul wrote to Timothy. God is reliable to the end, and always keeps his word. So, when questions about our own faith or lack of it come up, all we can do is cry out to him, asking that he will drive away our unbelief and hold us fast in faith, going to the sacrament in hope that he will drive away the doubts and fears that perplex us.

This is the witness that the Lutheran confessions want more than anything else to bring. They know the power of sin—how it grips and holds and binds us, driving us this way and that with all kinds of tricks and wiles and subtle arts. But they also know, from the Scripture, the power of the gospel: that out of his grace, God has expressed himself in the death and resurrection of Christ to deliver us from evil and make us new people. And so, from beginning to end, they ring with the words that have marked their witness: God's word alone, God's grace alone, the faith given by the Spirit alone.

USAGE GUIDE

Roots of Our Faith is a summary of the confessions of the Lutheran church and an explanation of the main parts of the Augsburg Confession. It has been written to help lay people better understand their Lutheran heritage.

The book can be used in meetings of organizations, adult or youth classes, instruction classes for new members, private devotions, and in many other ways. Here are some usage suggestions which apply to specific groups.

Women's organizations or other groups

1. Try turning six general meetings into study sessions. Rather than calling in a speaker or developing a special program, distribute copies of the book to all members and ask each participant to read one chapter for each meeting. Be sure to publicize clearly what you will be doing and which chapter is assigned for each meeting. Have extra copies of the book available for visitors.

Assign one member (or a different person each meeting) to serve as study leader for the entire group. The leader's task is to initiate and give direction for discussion on the chapter assigned.

If a large group is expected, the leader may wish to summarize the chapter and then divide the group, with a discussion leader assigned to each section.

2. Use the book for a study resource during the Lenten season. Using the same format as above, set a regular time (during the day or evening, Sunday or weekday, depending on your congregational schedule) and publicize it to all in the congregation. You may wish to have people register in advance or purchase the book themselves in order to get an idea of the number who are interested and lead them to greater commitment.

3. In addition to their monthly Bible study, circles could add a meeting each month for six months to study the material on the confessions.

Adult or youth classes

1. Use the book for classes on Sunday morning or at other times. If less than an hour is available, you may wish to allow two weeks for each chapter. Use a leader and small group leaders if necessary) as above.

2. Schedule study sessions following Lenten services. While the material is not seasonal, people are often interested in participating in a study group during Lent, and Lenten services bring them to church, so it's convenient to combine the two. The material focuses largely on Jesus, and ends with a discussion of the Lord's Supper, which could be tied into the Lenten observance. Handle as in Suggestion 2, above.

3. Use for home study groups. Interested persons could meet in homes, rotating the meeting place and leadership among the group. People who indicate interest could be assigned to a group, or key people could invite others to their home to form a group. One system for rotating responsibility and keeping up group interest and attendance might be to have an individual or couple lead discussion the time after they are hosts.

4. Use for training Sunday school teachers. The book could be used as the basis for a series of teacher training meetings.

5. Use in book discussion group or reading circle. The book could be the subject of study and discussion in one meeting or in a series.

Instruction classes for new members

The pastor may wish to use this material in a study course for prospective members. All members could be invited to participate as a review.

Private devotions

Use the book and appropriate parts of the Small and Large Catechisms and the Augsburg Confession at your own pace for private educational and devotional reading.

When the book is studied in a group

1. Begin with Chapter 1 at the first meeting. Don't waste a meeting distributing books and giving general introduction. Dig right in!

2. Study suggestions are given at the end of this book. Discussion without information becomes a pooling of ignorance. Insist that participants read at least the chapter indicated for the session. Encourage them to read additional material (mentioned at the start of each chapter) as well. Chapters are too long for in-class reading although you may wish to allow a few minutes for review.

3. Be sure to keep publicity going in church newsletter, bulletins, and bulletin boards to maintain interest throughout the course. Have copies available so people can join midway if necessary and read material already covered on their own.

4. Don't judge success by numbers. If a few people dig into God's Word and the teachings of the church they will be blessed and will become a blessing to the congregation. Even if only a few are interested or able to come, continue to meet.

More ideas

1. Ask the pastor to attend as a resource person but try to get a lay person to serve as leader. Whoever leads a group should be thought of as a facilitator of discussion rather than a dispenser of information. Be sure your publicity makes clear that these will not be lectures but that comments and questions of group members will set the agenda.

2. Check your church library for other books on the confessions. Add books you are missing.

Suggestions for additional reading

Faith and Freedom, by Charles Anderson, Augsburg. A study guide is also available.

Free to Be: A Handbook to Luther's Small Catechism, by James A. Nestingen and Gerhard O. Forde, Augsburg.

Book of Concord, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, Fortress.

The Augsburg Confession: A Contemporary Commentary, by George Forell, Augsburg.

The Classic Christian Faith, by Edgar Carlson, Augsburg.

By Word and Prayer, by G. Kraus, Concordia.

Faith for Today, by William Streng, Augsburg.

Bulletin board possibilities

Make a bulletin board to publicize the course. Change it before each session. Some ideas follow on the next two pages.

General suggestions for bulletin boards

1. Use bright colors and large letters and shapes.
2. Unless you have lots of time, don't waste time cutting out individual letters. Use large sheets of construction paper and print letters with a marker. Then tack the sheet in place. Or put the entire design on a large sheet of poster board.
3. Add actual items for interest. Tack up a copy of the Augsburg Confession for Session 1; Small Catechism, and an open paperback Bible (or duplicate an appropriate page) for Session 2; Small Catechism, Large Catechism, and Augsburg Confession for Session 3; picture of praying hands (see bulletin covers, old Christmas cards, or the Sunday school picture file), someone praying (Polaroid picture of your congregation or a Sunday school class praying would be superb) for Session 4; paperback or small Bible, picture or drawing of your baptismal font, water drops cut from aluminum foil for Session 5; large invitation from construction paper (perhaps using gilt ink, or asking someone who knows calligraphy to print the words on the invitation) for Session 6.

LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS?



P.S. And read Chapter I in "Roots of our Faith" before you come

CREEDS

can smile ☺

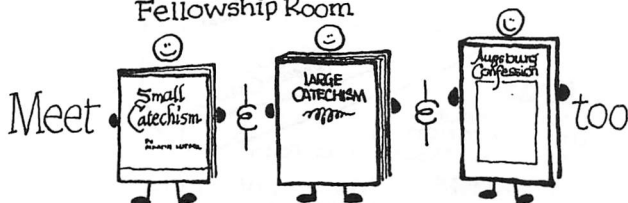
and laugh ☺

and sing ☺

How great!

Praise God!

Find out more
on February 11
at 7 PM in the
Fellowship Room



READ CHAPTER 3 IN "ROOTS OF OUR FAITH"

H₂O



+

God's Word



=

God's Gift of Baptism



AT 7 PM ON FEBRUARY 23RD
COME TO FELLOWSHIP ROOM
TO DISCOVER MORE ABOUT
THE WASHING WORD



P.s. Read Chapter 5

AN
INVITATION
FOR
YOU

you are invited to
WHAT Supper
WHEN anytime my
friends gather
about my Word
WHY to recall
Baptism and
look ahead to
Life with God
forever

HOST

The Lord
Jesus Christ

READ

more about
the invitation in
Chapter 6, "Roots of our Faith"

and **COME** on March 6, at 7 PM to the
Fellowship Room to meet others who are invited

Chapter 1 study suggestions

1. How might this study help you get at your roots as a Lutheran? What value could this have for you?

2. Do you think people today, like Luther, wonder if they really want to be saved or worry about showing their penitence? Have such thoughts ever bothered you?

3. The title "Lutheran" was once a label of contempt. What does the term mean to people today? Is it dangerous or contemptible anywhere today to be a Lutheran?

4. Be sure to review the definition of "confess" as it relates to the documents we call the confessions.

5. When you talk about the cloud of witnesses, distribute 8½" x 11" sheets of paper and felt markers to participants. Ask people to write the name of a "saint" who has inspired them—perhaps a relative, Sunday school teacher, or pastor. Tape the sheets at random to the wall. Use all sides of the room if possible. Add many more sheets for names of well-known people who are our brothers and sisters in the faith such as Abraham, Ruth, St. Anselm, Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Schweitzer, Corrie ten Boom, etc. Read Heb. 12:1-2 together as you consider the variety of names in the "cloud" around you. Look back to Hebrews 11 for another list to consider.

6. We're part of the cloud of witnesses. We too witness to our faith like the people whose names you've listed. We too are saints—believers in Jesus Christ. To bring home that point, introduce each person to the group saying, "Meet St. Harriet," "Welcome, St. John," etc. Sing "For All the Saints" (LBW 174).

Chapter 2 study suggestions

1. How are the Commandments taught in your congregation?

2. How is the Catechism used in the homes of your congregation? Luther intended the Small Catechism for home use.

3. Consider using the Catechism in reverse of the way it has traditionally been used: let children ask the question, "What does this mean?" with parents or teachers explaining meanings rather than always using the questions to test children's knowledge. This reflects the old

Hebrew catechetical style. Read Josh. 4:19-24. Joshua wanted people to be ready to answer the child's question, "What does this mean?" How can we encourage children to ask us questions about faith? What do we have to correspond to the stones of Josh. 4:21?

4. The Commandments as originally given are not so much negative commands as statements of how God assumes his people will live with one another. "You are my people, therefore you will not kill, lie, covet, etc." A comparison might be a parent saying, "In this family, we don't do thus and so" or "We're a family and we care about each other so we don't act that way." Talk about how this brings a different light to negative commands.

5. Talk about the conditions we try to attach to the First Commandment. Which ones seem to be most common? Read the First Commandment together emphasizing the verb *am*: "I *am* the Lord your God. . . ." Then read it again emphasizing the pronoun *your*: "I am the Lord *your* God. . . ."

6. How do Baptism and the Lord's Supper help you understand the Commandments?

Chapter 3 study suggestions

1. Talk about what God does for us and why. Think of your own parents and friends and the things they have done for you "though you have not deserved it." Now consider how much more God has done and continues to do and how much less deserving you are compared to his goodness. That's a real *gift* isn't it? What do you understand by the word *grace*?

2. What or who tries to be a lord in your life? What does it mean for your life to claim *Jesus* as Lord?

3. Look at the action verbs used to tell about Jesus in the explanation of the Second Article: *save, redeem, free*. What other verbs describe what Jesus does for us?

4. How does your congregation remind its members that they are part of the community of saints? Do you think members feel they are part of a family or community? Explain. What more could you do to help others feel welcome, needed, and wanted? What could you do to feel more involved in your community of saints?

5. Talk about the image of the Spirit knitting us together. What do differences among members add to the church? Consider how new colors—new believers—are constantly being added to make the piece more colorful. What gives us, though different, a unity?

6. Look at what Luther says the Holy Spirit does for the church—calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies. How does the Spirit work in those four areas in your congregation?

7. The Nicene Creed talks about four marks of the church—one, holy, catholic, apostolic. What do they mean? How does the Christian church today—worldwide—reflect those marks? Where are we missing the mark?

8. Compare what you read in this book with the emphasis in religious TV programs.

Chapter 4 study suggestions

1. How does your congregation use the Lord's Prayer? Is it often a signal to open or close meetings? How could you make changes to add more meaning to this prayer in congregational usage?

2. Have you heard or said, "Let's say the Lord's Prayer" rather than "Let's *pray* it?" What's the difference? Is it important?

3. Talk about the temptations that the devil uses to frustrate your prayer life.

4. In some churches a bell is rung to begin and end the service and also during the Lord's Prayer. Why do you suppose that is done?

5. As a sign of how the Lord's Prayer spans the world, see if anyone can pray the prayer in another language. Pray together using more than one language at the same time.

Chapter 5 study suggestions

1. Picture a nursing mother expressing milk to give life to a newborn child. She gives of herself for the baby. Compare that to the way God expresses his love for us through Christ.

2. Think of how many words have been spoken to you by Sunday school teachers, parents, or pastors in order

that you might hear the Word of God. Do your words to others reflect God's Word?

3. Read John 1:1-3 and 14. Talk about how the Word is both a person, Jesus, and the witness to that person in Scripture.

4. God's Word is always full of power but we don't always see its effect. Consider Isa. 55:10-11 as you talk about your congregation's teaching and preaching ministry.

5. How does your congregation celebrate the importance of Baptism? Does the person baptized receive a towel, a candle, or a banner? Is there a special banner or hymn used repeatedly for Baptism? Have you thought of recognizing baptismal birthdays in some way?

6. Who acts in Baptism? Are parents of children or others desiring Baptism reminded before the service of God's activity on our behalf in the sacrament? How might this be done? God is active in Baptism; we are passive receivers of his grace!

Chapter 6 study suggestions

1. Do you think there should be a place for private confession in the life of your congregation? Give reasons. If so, how or when might it be done?

2. When might you help a friend by speaking words of private absolution? Have you experienced this?

3. How often do you think the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper should be available in your congregation? Why?

4. The Lord's Supper takes us back to the gifts of Baptism and gives us a look ahead for a foretaste of the communion to come. The past and future are there. What present gifts are ours as well in the sacrament?

5. Some speak of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper as being both vertical (relating to our personal relationship with God) and horizontal (reminding us of our relationship to all other Christians). What do you think? Does your congregation's practice reflect one emphasis more than the other?

ISBN 0-8066-1195-2



9 780806 611952



90000

AUGSBURG PUBLISHING HOUSE

15-9235

