

Confessing truth today

David D. Sellnow

Toward the end of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche announced: "There are no eternal facts, nor are there any absolute truths." He also famously declared, "God is dead." What were outlandish assertions then have become mainstream thoughts today. Barna Research found that just two out of 10 American adults believe in the existence of absolute moral truth. University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom summarized the cultural relativism of our age: "The point is not to correct mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all."

When contemporary society values tolerance more than truth, can we teach truth without being intolerant? Can a confessional church survive in these times?

Confessing must continue

Yes, confessionalism can survive. Indeed, confessing Christ is the rock on which Christ builds his church. Human institutions rise and fall. Church bodies, including WELS, have no guarantee that they will endure. But the communion of those who confess Christ cannot be overcome, not even by the powers of hell (Matthew 16:18). So we will and we must remain confessional Christians. Our aim is to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and to answer everyone with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:16).

Confession centers on Christ, not ourselves

Our confession centers on Christ. Being confessional means we proclaim Jesus as the Savior, not a particular church as the location of salvation. This focus was a catalyst for Lutheran confessors in the 16th century. Rome's religious establishment had declared there was no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church. Confessors of the gospel responded that the church is not "an external government" but "consists rather of people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions" (Ap VII/VIII, 10).

To be true to the Lutheran confessions, we dare never give the impression that our particular church, WELS, or any other human organization, is the only place where God's Spirit can be found. We confess that the Spirit does work through his Word also in other denominations, despite the fact that they obscure the truth with unbiblical ideas. "Even though there are among these people many weak ones who build . . . structures of stubble that will perish (that is to say, certain useless opinions), nevertheless, because they do not overthrow the foundation [Christ], these things are to be both forgiven and also corrected" (Ap VII/VIII, 20).

Confession counters error

Affirming the universal, invisible character of the church does not mean we can ignore errors taught in various churches—including our own. We are careful to correct each other within WELS, safeguarding our own confession. Likewise, we passionately call on Christians in other denominations to follow all that Christ says. We point out teachings that “overthrow faith” (Ap VII/VIII, 21). We warn that “ungodly teachers must be avoided, because they no longer act in the person of Christ” (Ap VII/VIII, 48).

We assert that the marks of the true church are “the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel” (Ap VII/VIII, 5). If we didn’t care about other Christians or about non-Christians, we’d leave everyone to believe whatever they wanted.

Confession is proclamation

Confessing is proclaiming. We do not stay to ourselves and say to others, “Look at how blessed we are!” We go into all the world to tell good news to everyone (cf. Mark 16:16).

Sometimes our confessional stance has looked a little like a bird that puffs up its chest and preens to show off its feathers. “We are the church that has the pure gospel!” we declare. True as that may be, a better way to promote our confession would be to sing it from the treetops for all to hear. Confessors are songbirds, sounding a clear call to the world with the gospel.

Confession does not aim at isolation

Perhaps your neighbors perceive Lutheranism as limiting. When we are confessional and practice fellowship accordingly, some separating will occur between us and other visible churches. But love does not aim at isolation. Gospel confessors do not avoid their neighbors from other churches or those without a church. How will others know the truth if they are not told? How will they know our confession if we keep it to ourselves?

We are the light of the world; let’s not seclude ourselves from those in the dark or abandon those whose light is weak (cf. Matthew 5:14ff). Christ’s church consists of believing people “scattered through the entire world” (Ap VII/VIII, 20)—not of people who have removed themselves from the world to huddle together. Don’t be afraid to venture outside the safe circles of your church friends and Lutheran schoolmates. God will go with you, and you will go with the confession of his name on your lips.

Confession’s attraction

When speaking for Christ, be open and engaging. Don’t aim to prove others wrong, but to point them to the truth. For example, a campus ministry announced a study comparing Mormonism to traditional Christianity. Advertisements invited Latter Day Saints (LDS) to an exchange of dialogue. A number of LDS students attended. They

were asked to explain their faith. The Lutheran students, in turn, gave the reason for the hope that they had. When it was done, the LDS students commented, “Usually Christians just attack us; thanks for talking with us.” One girl, who had been questioning her commitment to Mormonism, was drawn to follow the positive, powerful confession that the Lutheran students had displayed. She noted that the Mormon students had focused on what they liked about their churches and the people in them, whereas the Lutheran students repeatedly appealed to the Bible in expressing their beliefs.

Confession remains controversial

Still, confessionalism remains controversial. Even if you are friendly in offering your confession, some will attack or reject it. Jesus warned his disciples, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18). Our confession challenges others with truths they aren’t eager to hear; yet confessing is vital work. “We are not engaging in a mere war over words. We are arguing about an important matter. . . . Unless a conscience sorts this out, it cannot have firm and certain consolation” (Ap IV, 358). Confessional Lutheranism was born at a time when accepted dogma dictated one way of belief—a way at odds with the truth of the gospel. Today, we find ourselves confessing evangelical truth amid a culture that accords equal status to all beliefs, without declaring any way truer than another. The times have changed, but the need for confessionalism remains as critical as ever. God help us to witness clearly, confidently, and lovingly, pointing to Christ in everything we say and do.

David Sellnow, a professor at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, is a member at St. Paul, New Ulm.

In 1531, the Lutheran church published a defense of its confession in a document known as The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, penned by Philip Melancthon, a colleague of Martin Luther. Four hundred seventy-five years later, confessional Lutheranism continues, but faces much criticism. In this article, we consider our present stance as confession Lutherans, calling to mind some thoughts concerning the church from Melancthon’s Apology. Quotations from the Apology are based on the September 1531 edition and are referenced according to article and paragraph numbers, using the Fortress Press edition of The Book of Concord (R. Kolb, T. Wengert, editors, © 2000).

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