

“THE GOOD CONFESSION”

A SERMON TO COMMEMORATE THE PRESENTATION OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION.

“So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,” ... - Matthew 10:32

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.

-Augsburg Confession, Article 4

In the name of Jesus, dear Christian friends:

Martin Luther was made an outlaw by edict of the Emperor after the Diet of Worms 1521. But that edict was vague and gave each German prince the latitude of enforcing it according to his own conscience. This allowed Luther to enjoy the protection of princes who were sympathetic to his reforms of the church. In 1529, however, the Emperor drew up a new edict that was less ambiguous and more specifically called for a halt of any “Lutheran” reform. This was met with a formal appeal of the princes who supported the reform, which was a “*protestatio*” – a statement of protest. So, in a way, we Lutherans were responsible for the term, “Protestant”.

On the other hand, those that wanted to reform the church also wanted to show that they were catholic. Not “Roman Catholic” – the proper name for a type of church, but catholic, the adjective that describes the universality of the faith – belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So, when the Emperor again called for a defense of this faith, it was Philip Melancthon and seven German princes who went to Augsburg and on June 25, 1530, they present to the emperor their confession. It was hoped that a clear confession of their faith would make it clear the reasons for the reforms they were making.

Today is the anniversary of that Presentation of the Augsburg Confession. It consists of two parts. The first part the princes and Melancthon presented was simply to say what is the faith. Their objective was to say clearly who is God? What has God done through Jesus Christ? How did God establish the Ministry to bring people to this faith? What works mark the church and the people of God as a result of their faith? After re-establishing the Biblical

and catholic (again, universal) faith, the Confession then goes into the “disputed matters” – the kinds of reforms that they felt were necessary to confess the faith clearly. There were many church practices at that time that obscured the true faith and were leading people to doubt and confusion.

For instance, a lot of the practices that the Protestant princes and clergy wanted to reform were tied to the false notion that one could do certain works and earn heavenly reward, like paying off a debt to God. In the first section of the Augsburg Confession, the reformers make it clear that “we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake”. Once that Biblical truth is clearly confessed, then that truth is applied in the second section. There was reform of the Mass (Holy Communion), so that a mass would not be spoken with the understanding that saying the mass takes away your sin because of your action nor does it give anyone who is dead time off of purgatory. If your sins are forgiven in Christ by grace, then doing something cannot earn that grace. The same with taking monastic vows, or doing penance for a sin, or fasting from eating meat on Fridays. None of this sort of thing can make satisfaction. The only thing that can give us salvation is the blood of Jesus Christ. We are given that salvation because of God’s grace alone. We believe it by faith alone. We can reform our church practices on the basis of whether or not they are in Scripture alone.

Dear friends, there is an important Biblical distinction being made here between what one work gives us salvation and the many works in our lives that are the result of that one work of Christ. Any church practice that blurs that line must be reformed so that Christ alone receives all the glory.

But now we come to an important question. What does this mean? Specifically, what does this mean for us today? Jesus said that if we acknowledge Him here on earth, He will acknowledge us in heaven. Why is it important to acknowledge Him here on earth? We live in a time where spiritual knowledge and spirituality is readily available to anyone with an internet connection. There are many truths out there. There is only one that we know of that can bring salvation. There is no other that has the specific understanding of God’s grace and God’s love as we have it through Jesus Christ. Our faith is all about God’s love and how that love is shared among us.

So, what does it look like in the church today when we firmly believe *that Christ has suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us...*? How will people know that is our confession? Are we called to stand before the Emperor? Are we writing down our words to be preserved for all generations? I’m not even sure that Philip Melancthon or the seven princes were even aware that their confession was going to be preserved and held up by the Lutheran Church

some five centuries on. Yet, here we are! But it isn't just because of what this confession of Jesus Christ does for us, intellectually. When a church knows the suffering of Christ and the forgiveness we receive, we are no longer merely protesting.

There was an amusing article in the Onion a few years back. The Onion is a satirical newspaper meant to poke fun at politics, culture and just about everything. I remember reading about a made up journey of protestors who were just angry... at everything! Holding up random signs of protest like "Down with problems!!" and "Something about taxes" they marched through Washington State eventually finding a statue in Olympia, Washington to hold their protest, perhaps thinking they were converging on the District of Columbia.

Dear friends, we are not just aimless protestors. Those who protested the practices of the church in 1530 did so by re-stating and living out the faith given by the Holy Spirit. And today, we need to do much more than protest. The church today needs to confess.

Now, that could be taken in two ways. I think there are always things we can look at where we have not been as faithful as we could, or taken that confession of Jesus Christ seriously in our lives or in the life of the church. But then we need to remember that we are saved by grace, and today our world needs to hear us acknowledge Jesus.

When we show our love for God by assembling here for worship; when we love our neighbor by looking out for the most vulnerable around us; when we care for the little ones that God sends our way in Preschool and Sunday School – are we not acknowledging Jesus Christ by sharing His love? Are we not acknowledging Jesus this very hour in our songs and prayers and in our confession of faith?

Opponents of the Augsburg Confession quoted the book of James (Faith without works is dead) and challenged that the confession that we cannot obtain righteousness before God by our own merit or works. So, Melancthon clarified and wrote: the subject matter itself shows that the works spoken of here are those that follow faith and show that faith is not dead but living and active in the heart. James, therefore, did not think that we merit the forgiveness of sins and grace through good works. After all, he is talking about the works of those who have been justified, who have already been reconciled and accepted, and who have obtained the forgiveness of sins."

Dear friends, this little confession that happened in 1530 is no less important today. How often do we forget the importance of Christ getting all the credit for our salvation? How often do we forget that faith is meant to be living and active in our lives? How often do we forget that we acknowledge God, not just by confessing in front of Emperors, but by showing His love to all people?

Knowing and acknowledging His love for us, we can be filled with the Holy Spirit and boldly confess our Savior in this world. Let us consider every action and every word we speak when we leave here, today. With the world watching us, let us remember that through the church, our confession based on Scripture Alone, that we are saved by Christ Alone and because of His grace alone continues through you and me.

In Jesus' name, Amen.