

Association of Confessing Evangelical Lutheran Congregations

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

LESSON 3 – PURE DOCTRINE

(All citations of Holy Scripture are from the English Standard Version.)

THE PROBLEM IN OUR SYNOD

In the ears of most 21st century Christians, the idea that doctrine (Christian teaching) can be pure and that agreement in pure doctrine—in all of its articles—among Christians is realistically achievable on this earth is tantamount to the consideration of unrealistic fantasy. The unity of the Christian faith has been shattered by false teaching and false teachers to the extent that today's multitude of denominations, synods and "churches" nearly boggles the mind.

Christian theologians, even within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, have not been immune to this kind of worldly thinking, and many have readily capitulated to the sacrifice of doctrine for the sake of Christian "love" and "peace." In order to preserve "peace" and "unity" between Christians, many denominations (including Lutheran church bodies) have simply determined that certain doctrinal differences between them and other Christians are just not divisive or that such error advances an accommodation of Christian doctrine to prevailing cultural views thus making the church more acceptable to the world. As a result, they routinely welcome to their altars those who view the Lord's Supper differently, thus inviting them into Church Fellowship. (Much more about this in the coming study on the Lord's Supper.)

THE TRUE UNITY OF THE ONE TRUE FAITH



In the three Ecumenical Creeds, (The Apostles' Creed, The Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed) the unity of the one true faith God has revealed to His Church uses a special word to describe His Church's commonly held doctrine: "catholic." It is an unfortunate twist in the history of the Church that this term in the creedal text was changed to "Christian" by some of the pre-Reformation Church Fathers.

Following the Reformation some justified the change; they wanted to be clearly distinguished from the Roman Catholic faith. Even in our own church body this change was included in the most recent LCMS hymnal (2006), *Lutheran Service Book*. Only the Athanasian Creed escaped this unfortunate change.

Why the lamentation over the disuse of the term "catholic"? Because "catholic" refers to the content of the entire Christian faith which the Church confesses throughout the world. Or at least, it's supposed to. Simply put, in the creedal context, the word "catholic" means the universally held doctrine of the Church confessed with one voice throughout the world. While the term "catholic" may leave non-Roman Catholics uncomfortable, it is a concept worth teaching to God's people and was used by the early Church Fathers for a very good reason.

In stark contrast to the world's view (and that of many Christians) that doctrinal unity is unachievable; consider our Lord's words in the Gospel of John:

²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:20-26)

QUESTIONS

1. Jesus is saying in the above passage (vv. 21 & 22) that the same unity enjoyed among the persons of the Holy Trinity should be evident also between Christians. Is God demanding of His Church something that cannot be achieved?
2. What tells the unbelieving world that Christ's Church is very different from the rest of the world? (vv. 21b & 23)
3. Could this catholic (universal) unity be something that is the very antithesis of the world's many, many divisions?
4. How could it be acceptable that God's Church does not look like God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Himself?
5. Does pure doctrine in every article of faith reflect the nature of the very God we worship?

FAITH VS FAITH

One of the things that confuse discussions about Christian unity is a misunderstanding about the two different kinds of faith that come to us as Christians.

Theologians have traditionally used Latin terms to differentiate between these different kinds of faith:

fides qua creditur: The faith by which we believe.

The faith **by which** we believe is the free gift of God to all who believe in Christ's merits and sacrifice alone for salvation. This faith is and must be held by all Christians.

fides quae creditur: The faith in which we believe.

The faith **in which** we believe is the full doctrine of Christ that He taught us through Holy Scripture. This is the content of our faith.

Some have tried to establish that Christian unity is based on the ***fides qua creditur*** and not the ***fides quae creditur***. In insisting on this understanding, many have made doctrine of less importance than simply having the faith **by which** we believe, since this kind of faith crosses denominational/synodical lines.

The reasoning goes like this: "Since all Christians have the faith **by which** we believe in common, then we should be in fellowship with all Christians." This, of course, makes the matter of the faith **in which** we believe (Christian doctrine) unimportant. Thus, doctrine may be considered non-divisive in consideration of Church fellowship.

Frequently, discussion about what kind of faith is necessary for Church fellowship (commonly called Pulpit and Altar Fellowship), ends up with someone saying: "So, you think only Lutherans are going to be in heaven?" The answer to this question is: Absolutely not! This is where we rejoice in the ***fides qua creditur*** (the faith by which we believe.) God indeed does save souls from eternal death despite the fact that some hold to some doctrinal error. That is God's grace and forgiveness, but this gracious action on God's part does not bless the error such people hold! Such grace and forgiveness does not mean that God doesn't care about adherence to His doctrine! Indeed, this would be a violation of God's person if He didn't care about the truth!

QUESTIONS

1. When St. Paul writes:

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." (I Corinthians 1:10)

Is Paul appealing to the *fides qua* or the *fides quae*?

2. When the Augsburg Confession says:

"This meeting is to consider disagreements in our holy religion, the Christian faith, by hearing everyone's position and judgments in each other's presence. They are to be considered and evaluated among ourselves in mutual charity, mercy, and kindness. After removal and correction of things that either side has understood differently, these matters may be settled and brought back to one simple truth and concord. Then we may embrace and maintain the future of one pure and true religion under one Christ, doing battle under Him [Psalm 24:8], living in unity and concord in the one Christian Church." (*Concordia The Lutheran Confessions*, Augsburg Confession Preface, 2-3)

Are our Lutheran fathers asking that fellowship be based on the faith by which we believe, or the faith in which we believe?

REV. DR. ROBERT PREUS ON UNITY

The Rev. Dr. Robert Preus (former president of the Fort Wayne Seminary and renowned 20th century Lutheran theologian) wrote of the language in the Formula of Concord:

"The primary requirement for basic and permanent concord within the church is a summary formula and pattern, unanimously approved, in which the summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the churches of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God. ..." (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm, 1)

What a remarkable statement! Here is not the cynical despairing of the possibility of doctrinal unity, so common to our relativistic age! Not the sneering rejection of doctrinal unanimity as something inimical to man's freedom and autonomy. No, here is a statement of confidence in the unifying power of the Word and Spirit of God. These old Lutherans were convinced that doctrinal controversies were an offense and doctrinal aberrations pernicious to believers and unbelievers alike. "The opinions of the erring party cannot be tolerated in the church of God," they said, "much less be excused and defended" (Formula of Concord Solid Declaration, Intro., 9) But at the same time they maintained with Paul-like optimism that unity in doctrine and all its articles was not a remote possibility, not an impossible goal at the end of a rainbow, but a wonderful blessing that could be achieved by the church which would bow to the Word of God and allow the Spirit to rule in all its life. (*Getting into the Theology of Concord*, by Robert D. Preus, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977, p. 29.)



MARTIN LUTHER ON THE WHOLE WORD OF GOD

Martin Luther wrote:

“It does no good to say: I will gladly confess Christ and His Word in all articles except one or two which my tyrannical masters will not tolerate...but he who denies Christ in one article or word has in this one article denied the same Christ who would be denied in all articles...” (W-Br 3, 81f - E53, 171 f - SL 10, 2213 f)

LOVE VS DOCTRINE

Sometimes Christian love is said to take preeminence over pure doctrine. In other words, some would have us believe that to insist on pure doctrine is to be loveless toward our fellow Christians. Usually, such folks rush to I Corinthians 13:13, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." However, such selective use of the passage forgets verse six, which says that love "...rejoices with the truth."

QUESTIONS

1. Is it ever necessary to pit love against the truth as if the two are mutually exclusive?
2. Since we know from Holy Scripture that God is love and that He is also truth, how can love and truth be mutually exclusive?
3. Why do some Lutherans view pure Christian doctrine as an embarrassment?
4. Is the Lutheran faith (as confessed in the Book of Concord) the full expression of the Christian faith on earth?

CONCLUSION

Pure doctrine is the only kind of doctrine our righteous, holy and perfect God can give. Nothing He has taught us is unimportant or unnecessary. God cannot speak in multiple choice truth and He does not deal with subjective truth. His truth is true for all people of all times regardless of whether or not anyone believes it.

Rather than dividing the Church, pure doctrine unites His Church. As C.F.W. Walther (First President of the LCMS) wrote:

"When a theologian is asked to yield and make concessions so that peace may at last be established in the Church, yet if he refuses to budge on even a single point of doctrine - to human reason this looks like excessive stubbornness, even like downright evil intent. This is why such theologians are rarely loved or praised during their lifetime. On the contrary, they are scolded as disturbers of the peace or even as destroyers of the kingdom of God. They are regarded as men worthy of contempt. But at the end of the day it becomes clear that the very determined, unflinching tenacity of these theologians as they cling to the pure teaching of the divine Word by no means tears down the Church. On the contrary, it is this very attitude that - even amid the greatest dissension - builds up the Church and ultimately brings about genuine peace. Therefore, woe to the Church if it has no men of this stripe - men who would stand watch on the ramparts of Zion, sounding the alarm whenever a foe threatens to rush the walls, men who would rally to the banner of Jesus Christ, ready for a holy war! Let us then, my friends, likewise hold fast the treasure of pure doctrine. Do not consider it strange if on that account you must bear reproach just as they did. (*Law & Gospel: How To Read and Apply the Bible*, p. 33-35, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 2010)

