Word & Sacrament

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

ISSUE 04 | WINTER 2024

GENEROUS CONFESSIONALISM

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NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Dear Friends of the NALS,

This is the last time I'll be writing to you as the president of the North American Lutheran Seminary. Therefore, it's particularly important for me to express my thanks to all of you who have supported the seminary with your prayers and generous gifts. It's been an honor to serve in this capacity. The call to the NALS came as a surprise. Becoming the second president of the NALS was not on my radar. In my heart I was, and still am, a pastor. The call to Word and Sacrament ministry was nearly irresistible for me.

Perhaps this is one reason why the Holy Spirit called me to the seminary. I didn't know much about being a seminary president, but I did know a lot about being a parish pastor. This means that I knew firsthand the joys and challenges of ministry. Therefore, everything we've done at the seminary has been laser-focused on preparing future pastors, deacons, and lay leaders to meet these challenges. This preparation requires deep and rigorous theological education and pastoral formation. I made many mistakes in my ministry, but I would have made *many* more if I'd not had the time to mature both theologically and personally. This also means that preparation for ministry is a *long obedience in the same direction.* Three or four years in seminary is a start, but not the finish.

Another primary goal for the seminary was to provide opportunities for our seminarians to grow *together as future members of the NALC Ministerium.* Again, ministry is challenging and we need the support and prayers of friends and colleagues. In our hyper-individualistic culture the "Lone Ranger" model of ministry is a temptation that must be resisted. This is why we have incentivized residential education and formation. Of course we will continue to provide distance learning for students. In addition to fully online degrees available through "spoke" seminaries, we now offer an online Master of Divinity degree through the "hub" in Ambridge which only requires five residential classes (all of which can be fulfilled through one-week intensives). A lot of formation can happen even in just five weeks. Students develop friendships and experience the rhythms of daily prayer and weekly Eucharist. With the addition of the Bonhoeffer House our students have even greater opportunities to foster community.

As *the* seminary network of the NALC, we have also intentionally built our core values into the curriculum. Every NALS student will be challenged to think critically about these values. How do they influence congregational ministry, preaching, teaching, and pastoral care? In other words, our students have opportunities to be formed within and for the ethos of the NALC. No other seminary does this. This is why all of our students will receive at least some of their theological education through the seminary center in Ambridge. The hub-and-spokes model provides flexibility, but we strive to make certain that our students understand the distinctive witness of the Lutheran tradition, especially as it is taken up in the NALC.

Finally, since the NALS is *the* seminary of the NALC, it is a confessional seminary. What exactly does that mean? In some Christian communities, the confessional is a place a person goes to confess sin and hear the word of absolution. The Lutheran Reformers encouraged this practice, but over the course of time fewer and fewer people sensed the need. "Why should I confess my sins to a pastor? I'll go directly to God." Something very important was lost when this happened.

Perhaps the idea of "going to confession" or "entering the confessional" can help us better understand what it means today for us to be a confessional seminary serving a confessional denomination. When someone goes to confession, they *hopefully* go with a desire to speak from their heart what they truly know to be sin. There can be no waffling in the confessional. No one goes to confession to pepper the priest/pastor with excuses. A good confession requires honesty, transparency, and contrition. The person making a confession bears her soul before another sinner. She dares to speak the dark truth before another human being. The secret shames are exposed. The gospel absolution is given.

In a similar way, to be a confessional Christian (or Lutheran) is to speak unashamedly before the world what we truly believe about God's promises in Christ. There is no waffling. The confessional Christian will bear his or her soul before the world and confess with humility and boldness: "Jesus Christ is the crucified and risen Lord and there is no other." Our absolution and our hope are in that confession.

I had a New Testament professor who on several occasions would ask us, "What would you go to the stake for?" In other words, what is the center of your faith for which, God willing, you would dare to die? That is our confession.

This North American Lutheran Seminary serves the church of Jesus Christ—particularly the small, but vibrant part of the church called the North American Lutheran Church. We will always confess, and teach our students to think deeply about what it means to confess:

Jesus Christ is the crucified and risen Lord and there is no other.

Here we stand *together*,

The Rev. Dr. Eric M. Riesen
President,
North American Lutheran Seminary

FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR

This fourth issue of *Word & Sacrament* focuses upon the theme of what it means and what it looks like for us to be confessional Lutherans. As Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson argue in their prominent 1976 book, *Lutheranism*, "the confessions are a *proposal of dogma*"[1] by which they mean,

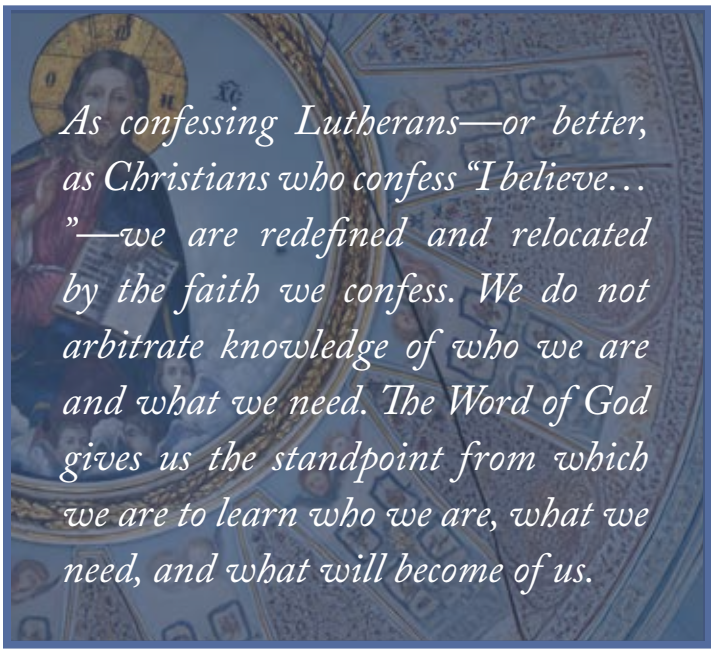
Lutheranism is a *confessional movement* within the church catholic that continues to offer to the whole church that proposal of dogma which received definitive documentary form in the Augsburg Confession and the other writings collected in the Book of Concord.[2]

Our concern here in this issue is not with granular questions relating to the confessions or with technical debates among confessional Lutherans as to the precise meaning of confessional subscription (as important as these issues are). The goal is rather to reflect in a broader and more fundamental manner upon what it means for us theologically, spiritually, and pastorally to identify with, and to walk in continuity with, the original witness of the Wittenberg Reformation.

Going on in the same way as the Wittenberg Reformation does not require us to ignore or to deny the fact that the Lutheran reformation belongs to a specific historical context which in some ways no longer applies to us. And yet, while it is quite true that we no longer live in the 16th century, to be a confessional Lutheran is to recognize and to affirm the Reformation as a special work to which we remain indebted, even as modern people. It is to embrace with gratitude certain theological and spiritual insights which are permanently vital to the well-being of the church.

We receive our confessions as historically conditioned, but still authoritative, for among other things they keep us mindful of that criterion by which all teaching and practice is rightly judged: i.e., the joyful doctrine of justification by faith. For precisely this reason, despite the wisdom of our modern age telling us that we confess what we choose as autonomous individuals, confession in the Christian sense is not a taking hold or grasping of truth to believe but rather what David Yeago calls "a rearrangement of self-understanding in light of a reality which has laid hold of us."[3] In other words, we do not take the seat of judgment but rather we ourselves are located and bound by the Word of God.

As confessing Lutherans—or better, as Christians who confess "I believe…"—we are redefined and relocated by the faith we confess. We do not arbitrate knowledge of who we are and what we need. The Word of God gives us the standpoint from which we are to learn who we are, what we need, and what will become of us. Rooted in our baptism, when we confess the faith, we confess the church's faith in the midst of worldly conflict as the proper apostolic response in repentance and worship to the work of God putting things to rights for us.



While certain theological commitments are clearly non-negotiable for us, the North American Lutheran Church is also a young church body, and it follows from this that we are still in the early stages of cultivating certain aspects of our theological identity and culture. It is my hope that spending some time thinking about what it means to confess our faith together as Lutherans will spur us to greater self-awareness regarding the riches of our spiritual and theological heritage. Along these lines, this issue of *Word & Sacrament* is intentionally designed to help us to prepare for the NALC clergy retreat in January 2025, which will be focused on "generous confessionalism."

Gritsch and Jenson were aware of how fickle confessional Lutheranism can be, but "whether Lutheranism's proposal of dogma will ever be ecumenically accepted may remain a mystery this side of the eschaton. But as long as some Christians band together by subscription to the Lutheran confessions (in one way or another), they are committed to keep trying."[4] This is

1 Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), 3.

2 Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 6.

3 This language is borrowed David Yeago's unpublished lecture notes, from which I borrow freely in what follows.

4 Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 206.

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at least a major part of the task to which we, as confessional Lutherans, are committed. As George Lindbeck submits, "confessions of faith, as long as they are taken seriously, also affect everything a church is and does, including the shape of its ecumenism. As Lutherans, we are particularly aware of this fact. More than any other major Christian communion, our identity and unity are dependent on our Confessions."[5]

As we consider what it means to be confessional Lutherans, looking back to the sixteenth century, we must also look back in order to look forward. "Where have we been?" is the question of a historian until we turn to ask ourselves "what does it look like for us to go on in the same way?" It is in the creative interplay between Scripture, the creeds, the confessions that define our tradition, and the questions that animate our times that we discern what it means to be Lutheran here and now.

I want to conclude this letter by expressing my sincere appreciation for NALS President Eric Riesen, and for his commitment to serving the confessionally Lutheran mission of the NALC. As Eric wraps up his time serving as the NALS President, we have much for which to be thankful. During his time in leadership, Eric has truly pastored the NALS community with a keen reflex to prayer, the seasoned experience of a pastor, and readiness to provide pastoral care to students, staff, and faculty alike. Eric has my deepest gratitude for bringing me aboard and caring for me and my family even before I accepted the offer to become a member of the NALS faculty. Of course, I look forward to future opportunities to express my gratitude more formally, but since this is the last issue under Eric's presidency, I would be remiss to leave my gratitude unexpressed.

Dr. Alexander H. Pierce

Assistant Professor of Historical Theology
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5 George A. Lindbeck, "Confessional Faithfulness and the Ecumenical Future: The J.L. Neve Memorial Lecture," *Trinity Seminary Review* (1990): 59–66, here 61.

TO BE CONFESSIONAL IS TO RECIEVE AND GUARD THE "ONE THING NECESSARY"

The Rev. Dr. Nathan H. Yoder

Director of Lutheran Studies Program
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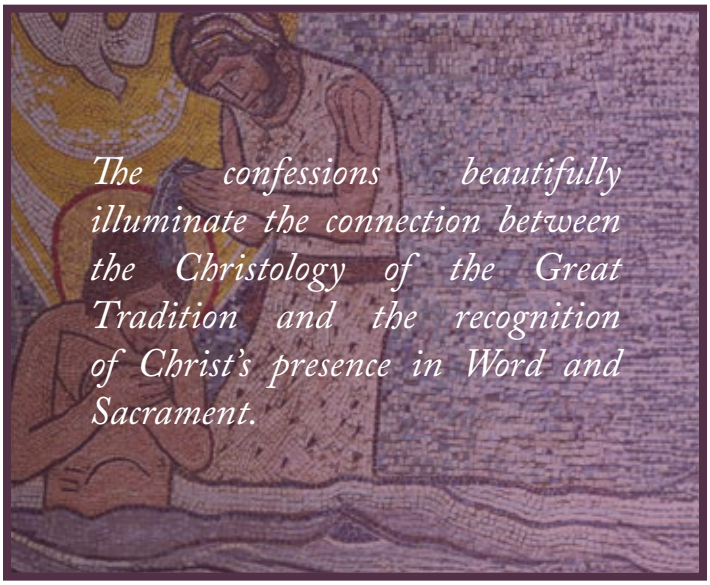
In Luke 10:38–42, Jesus addresses Martha of Bethany's offended outburst concerning her sister Mary's supposed laziness. Whereas Martha is busy with "much serving" of her houseguests and is "anxious and troubled about many things," Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him teach. Jesus lovingly admonishes Martha that her sister has chosen "the one thing [that] is necessary … the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (ESV). This *one thing*, this *good portion*, is none other than Christ himself. For as he tells the rich young man in Mark 10, "no one is *good* except God alone" (emphasis mine); and to follow him is the "one thing" necessary *for*, and constitutive *of*, eternal life in his kingdom.

The Lutheran confessions lift up the gospel as the "one thing necessary" *because it gives us Christ*. The apostolic witness is not just testimony *for* or information *about* Jesus; otherwise, we would have to look for God and his saving grace somewhere else other than the gospel proclaimed, as the late medieval church professed prior to the Reformation.[1] Rather, the risen Lord himself is present in the speaking of his gospel for our salvation. It is through God's Word, Luther teaches, that the Holy Spirit brings us to Christ and Christ to us, "withholding nothing."[2] Likewise, the Formula of Concord professes that the gospel creates that faith "by which we *lay hold of Christ* and, thus, in Christ lay hold of this 'righteousness which avails before God.' "[3]



The confessions beautifully illuminate the connection between the Christology of the Great Tradition and the recognition of Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament. Since "the whole fullness of deity" is in Christ (Colossians 2:9), and the Word is Christ (John 1:1), it follows that when we hear the word, the Holy Spirit ushers us to sit at Jesus' feet as Mary did. In the event of the church, the risen and ascended Lord continually pours himself out in the Spirit (Romans 5:5; cf. Christ's giving of the Spirit to the disciples in John 20:22) to take away our sin and to fill us with his righteousness. *And he does this through the gospel*, which, as Luther explains, he has chosen to make available "in more than one way":

1 Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 102. For an excellent overview of the sacramental nature of the gospel, see Philip Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel that Gives Us Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019).

2 Large Catechism 2:26, 38–39, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,* ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) [hereafter cited as BC], 434.

3 Formula of Concord, Epitome 3:5, in BC, 495.

First, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world … second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys [confession and absolution] and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matthew 18[:20]: "Where two or three are gathered..."[4]

There are two things to note about these various forms of the gospel: 1) they are all scriptural—i.e., Jesus specified them *himself*; and 2) they are all communications that come from the *outside* ("faith comes by *hearing*," Romans 10:17). While the Holy Spirit abides in the hearts of the faithful, it is through the *external word* that he creates and continually sustains those clean hearts. As Bonhoeffer put it: "The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth … The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."[5]

This ongoing holy conversation—the last form of the gospel on Luther's list—is the mutual ministry the church practices together as the priesthood of all believers. As Bonhoeffer's description intimates, this ministry occurs in the *personal relationships* of our various callings in common adherence to the Great Commission to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19–20) and the New Commandment to "love one another" (John 13:34).

Loving one another, of course, involved works of *service*—and it is here that we sinners fall victim to Martha's error. The world and the devil (desperate in the knowledge that he is beaten and on borrowed time) will perpetually tempt us to turn inward and magnify ourselves by our own works, possessions, or projects.[6] This garden-variety idolatry embraces the sunk cost fallacy of trusting the "things of man" rather than the "things of God" that Christ alone provides (Matthew 16:23); and as with Martha, the yield is false hope and crippling anxiety.

To guard the integrity of the gospel's "good deposit" (2 Timothy 1:14) and feed his sheep (John 21:17), Christ instituted the "office of preaching."[7] As Gerhard Forde put it, like the various forms of the gospel, this ministry "is God's idea, not ours".[8] While the common ministry of the church is *personal* (one life to another), the pastoral office holds the *public* obligation to proclaim the external word *to* and *over-against* the church, in preaching and the sacraments.[9] In law and gospel, the Spirit uncovers false hope and bestows Christ, instead. As "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1), pastors are accordingly charged with the particular responsibility of gospel *oversight*: to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:12) by teaching and distributing the "good portion" of the Lord.

The responsibility of oversight is not simply unidirectional from pastor to congregation, however; it is reciprocal and overarching across the church catholic. When pastors neglect the gift that is in them (1 Timothy 4:14) and abandon their obligation to safeguard and to proclaim the gospel, the church as a whole must call them to account, according to the norms of Holy Scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran confessions.[10] Through the gospel, Christ justifies sinners by his own reigning presence and continually clothes them with his righteousness. This "one thing necessary" is the *sine qua non* of the church, and we alone are tasked with bearing the "good portion"—the Lord Himself—to the world.

4 Smalcald Articles 3:4, in BC, 319.

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 22–23.

6 Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978), 200.

7 See Augsburg Confession V, in BC, 40.

8 Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 158.

9 See Jenson, *Visible Words*, 200; Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 111-112; and Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 183-184.

10 See Mark E. Chapman, "Ordination as Rite and Responsibility," *Lutheran Forum* 19, no. 1 (Lent 1987): 20.

HOW TO BE CONFESSIONALLY LUTHERAN IN ETHIOPIA

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This brief essay will provide an overview of the history of Ethiopian Christianity and a concise examination of how the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) is a confessionally Lutheran church which both articulates and practices its confessionalism intentionally within the context of local churches and in relation to the concrete lives of their congregants.

Early Ethiopian Christianity

Although scholars continue to debate the particulars, it is clear that the remote origins of the church in Ethiopian are quite ancient, tracing at least to the 4th century, and possibly as far back as the middle of the first century.[1] The biblical account of Christianity coming to Ethiopia appears in Acts 8:26–39. There we read about the visit to Jerusalem and subsequent conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch who introduced Christianity to Ethiopians upon his return to the country.[2] Furthermore, even before this account, there are clearly Judaic influences within Ethiopian culture. Apart from biblical attestation of this reality, there is additional historical evidence of the fact that certain Jewish laws and practices had reached Ethiopia long before the introduction of Christianity.[3]

The ancient Christian heritage of Ethiopia played a significant role in the formation of a sense of national identity for Ethiopians. This can partly be perceived in the broadly Orthodox religious orientation which characterizes Ethiopian society. The EOTC is one of the most ancient Orthodox Churches and the only black, indigenous Christian Church in Sub-Saharan Africa. This means Ethiopia has a longstanding familiarity with Christianity.

The Arrival of Missionaries and the Establishment of the EECMY

When missionaries first came to Ethiopia, the central aim was not to establish a new church but instead to revive and work with the already existing church, the EOTC, and to facilitate renewed proclamation of the gospel message. German Lutheran missionaries arrived in Ethiopia to begin evangelical work in the EOCT in the 17th century. Much of that early work failed as a consequence of strong resistance from the EOCT. Still, Lutheran and other missionaries from Europe and America returned to Ethiopia in the following years, often with a specific goal of reaching out to the 'Oromo' people.[4]

According to Gustave Aren, it was principally through the efforts of these missionary labors that a foundation of evangelical Christianity was laid in Ethiopia. Lutheran missionaries joined Ethiopian Christians who had converted to the faith after evangelical churches were formed. They helped to establish Lutheran congregations throughout different parts of Ethiopia,

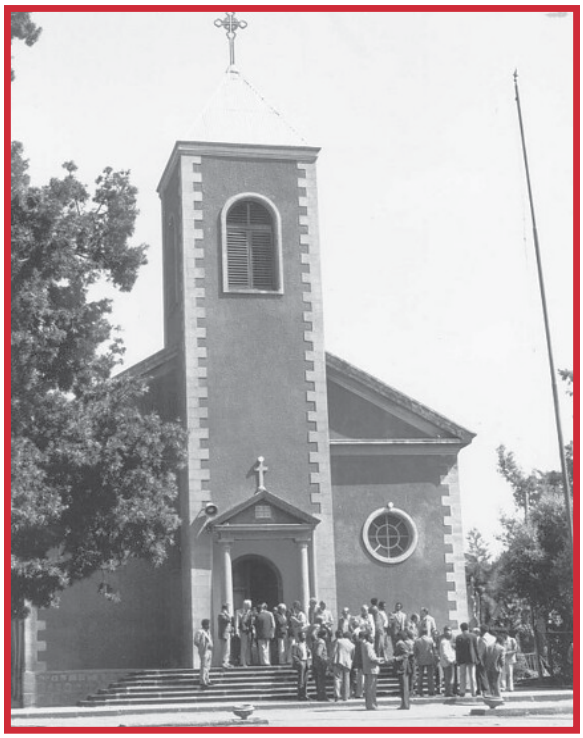
1 Keon-Sang An, *An Ethiopian Reading of the Bible: Biblical Interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 86

2 Giday Belai, *Ethiopian Civilization* (Addis Ababa: B. Giday, 1992), 93.

3 Historians have explored the pre-Christian ancient empire of Aksum and its relationship to certain Old Testament rituals and holiness code, which came to Ethiopia by means of of Queen Sheba. C.F. Rey, *The Real Abyssinia* (London, Seeley, Service & Co. 1935), 184–186; see also Gerald Hausman, *The Kebra Nagast: The Lost Bible of Rastafarian Wisdom and Faith from Ethiopia and Jamaica* (New York: St. Martin, 1997), both sources are cited in the unpublished PhD dissertation of Rev. Dr. Tibebu Teklu Senbetu, 2022.

4 Gustav Aren, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia:* Origins of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (Stockholm: Epsforlaget, 1978), 29-42

and contributed a great deal to the eventual formation of the EECMY. At that time, following a series of consultations and meetings among the leaders of indigenous evangelical believers who had been converted from the EOTC to a Lutheran expression of Christianity, a consensus was reached to form an Ethiopian Protestant national church. That consensus led to the successful establishment of a national Lutheran church.[5] The draft of a constitution was composed and a general assembly was called for the formation of the new church. Eventually, delegates representing the twenty thousand Lutherans in Ethiopia gathered and approved the draft constitution, founding the national Lutheran church known as the EECMY on January 21, 1959.



Today, the EECMY is the largest Lutheran church bodies in the world. It was formed by the missionary efforts of the Lutheran church, with the efforts of indigenous people, and through the collaboration of a variety of mission organizations with Lutheran backgrounds from its early inception in Ethiopia until today.

EECMY as Confessional Lutheran

The specific mission organizations which played significant roles in the formation of EECMY as confessional Lutheran include the Sweden Evangelical Mission (SEM), the German Hermansburg Mission (GHM), the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM), the Danish Evangelical Mission (DEM), and the American Lutheran Mission (ALM). Despite these many Lutheran influences, the EECMY adopted its approach to church leadership from the Presbyterian Church.

All of these missionaries contributed to the early history of the EECMY, and it is important to notice that they represent diverse theological traditions. Even so, the EECMY rightly fundamentally to identify herself as a confessional Lutheran church body on Ethiopian soil which seeks to integrate the Lutheran confessions faithfully within the specific challenges and opportunities for ministry and witness comprised within that context. Over time, the EECMY has become a strong confessional Lutheran church body which has proclaimed the gospel in across many different parts of Ethiopia. In addition to its roots and ongoing identification with confessional Lutheranism, the EECMY also incorporates aspects of charismatic evangelical identity such as its lively acceptance of, and openness to the active work of the Holy Spirit in its ministry. Therefore, while EECMY is characteristically Lutheran with respect to its doctrine it likewise practices and elevates charismatic gifts as a way of affirming other aspects of its distinctive theological and cultural history. From the perspective of the church in Ethiopia, being charismatic does not means ceasing to be confessional Lutheran.

Today, after 70 years, the EECMY is considered to be the fastest growing Lutheran church globally, with the current combined membership of its 38 synods exceeding 12 million souls.[6] That the EECMY remains a confessional Lutheran church body is evidenced by the fact that the official constitution formally

5 Gustav Aren, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia, 19-23*

6 EECMY, *Church Constitution* (Addis Ababa, 2005), 7

affirms the Lutheran confessions as a faithful exposition of the Holy Scripture, and the theological understanding set forth within the confessions as critical aspect of its ecclesial identity. [7] The EECMY likewise accepts and practices traditional Lutheran liturgical worship, uses Lutheran hymns in its native context, and upholds the historical Lutheran understanding that the heart of gathered assembly consists in the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Concrete Practices of Ministry within the EECMY: Confessional, Missional, and Contextual

In continuity with the Lutheran reformers, the EECMY affirms all of the so-called "solas of the reformation," regards the Word of God as the only true source and infallible norm of all the church's doctrines and practices.[8] Like other orthodox Lutheran churches, the EECMY believes that the Bible to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God and the only divine revelation of right beliefs and practice.[9] Because of this, EECMY churches generally emphasize the importance of a Bible-centered Christian life, and work to make opportunities for Bible study available to all church members. Often this involves pastors and other full-time ministers preparing Bible study guides and helping lay leaders first to study the Bible for themselves, and then to help others study the Bible as well. The 'Mesalemeya' congregation of the EECMY is representative of this focus. Among the 465 church members there are 45-47 ongoing Bible study groups. Each group takes this one-day-per-week Bible study so that they are able to cover 52 chapters per year from the Bible in accord with the prepared Bible study lesson.

Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper are both understood by the EECMY as sacraments in the sense that they are physical things to which God has attached His Word and promise. The sacraments are God's gifts and promises. They demand nothing from us, and do not threaten us on the basis of our unworthiness. They are God's work for us, not our work for God. The physical elements (water, bread, wine) are not magically changed or filled with special spiritual power. These physical things do God's work when God connects His command and promise to them because God does His work through His Word. God makes Himself available to us in these sacraments.

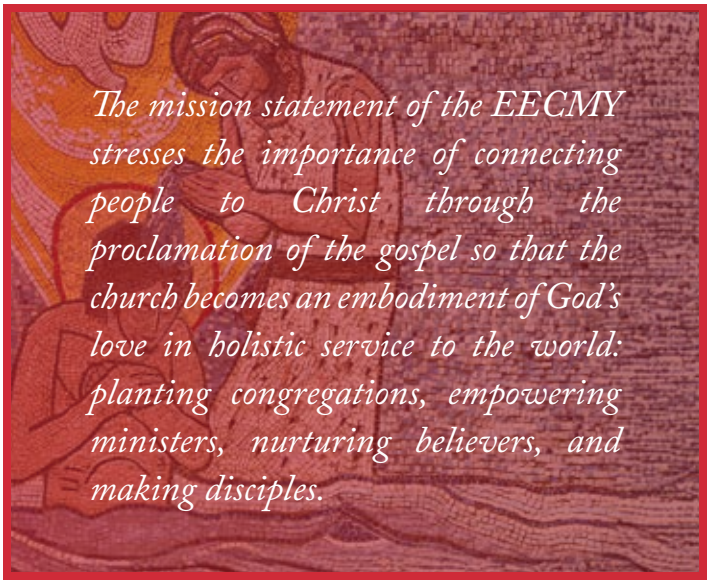
The administration of the Holy Communion is primarily reserved for ordained priests due to the EECMY's commitment to the Augsburg Confession. However, due to the significant disparity between the number of clergy and the very large Christian population, certain laypersons are permitted to administer the sacrament in community settings after receiving appropriate training. This practice shows the church's commitment to accessibility and pastoral care, allowing for the spiritual nourishment of believers even in the absence of ordained leadership.

In the EECMY, contemporary worship practices are designed around a contextualized liturgy which reflects the cultural and social realities of its congregants. This approach allows the church to maintain its theological integrity while engaging meaningful worship with the local community. It is important to remember here that Ethiopia has more than 85 ethnic groups with their own different and distinct tradition, culture, and context.

7 EECMY, *Church Constitution* (Addis Ababa, 1999), 5 & 15 2. American Presbyterian :- does not take part in the formation of confessional Lutheran EECMY

8 Ibid.

9 Dama Isayas, *Identity Crisis: The Case of Moyale Mekane Yesus congregation*, BTh paper (Hawassa, Tabor Evangelical college, 2016), 13.



Clergy in the EECMY utilize the lectionary to guide their selection of Scripture readings and biblical passages during worship services. This structured approach ensures that the teachings are consistent with the church's doctrinal commitments while providing a rhythm to the worship experience that aligns with the liturgical calendar.

The EECMY is a confessional church that is also missional, for the church is fundamentally called to be evangelical in its orientation. The mission statement of the EECMY stresses the importance of connecting people to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel so that the church becomes an embodiment of God's love in holistic service to the world: planting congregations, empowering ministers, nurturing believers, and making disciples. Various evangelistic and church growth efforts throughout the EECMY in recent years have given special attention to the place of "spiritual gifts" in the life and growth of the church and have sought to help people to identify and to use such gifts.

Conclusion

The EECMY is a confessionally Lutheran church body, affirming its agreement with the doctrine of the Bible as set out in the Book of Concord, articulating and practicing the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. It is also Lutheran in its liturgical worship and remains committed to being missional. Other Lutheran churches in different parts of the world may be able to learn from the EECMY when it comes to the complex question of how to integrate diverse identity markers important to the life and history of a particular worshipping community. In the case of the EECMY in particular, this involves integrating confessional Lutheranism with aspects of charismatic evangelicalism, worshiping in Lutheran liturgy, but nevertheless in a manner richly informed by the contextual considerations raised by Ethiopian culture, and cooperating with the powerful work of the Holy Spirit as the church seeks to confess and proclaim the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. To be a confessional Lutheran in Ethiopia is ultimately to embrace all of these diverse sources of enrichment as complementary rather than contradictory.

[34] And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" [35] Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

– Acts 2:34–35 ESV

SCRIPTURE AND THE CONFESSIONAL LUTHERAN

HOW DO YOU READ?

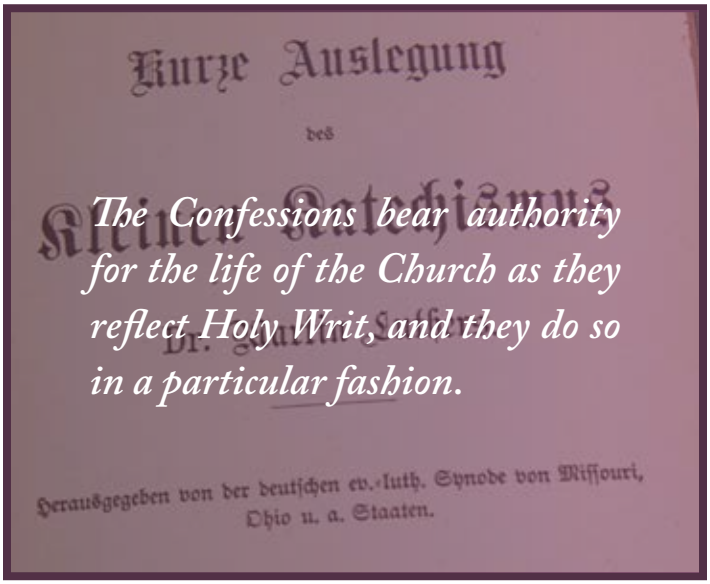
The Rev. Dr. Roy A. Harrisville III

It was a lawyer's question in the previous verse that prompted Jesus's question and his famous parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer had read the words of Scripture, but perhaps he did not understand them, or more deeply, was not affected by them.

It is the ability to affect hearts and minds that constitutes the authority of Scripture. Its authority does not stem from grand pronouncements of infallibility or inerrancy. Neither does its supposed irrelevance come from any cultural conditioning. Both external pronouncements, either to proclaim the authority of the Word or deny it, come to nothing in the face of what Scripture can actually do to a person. External judgments upon Scripture cannot have an effect on Scripture itself. They cannot make it more or less powerful. The inspiration of Scripture by the Holy Spirit actually inspires. It inspires faith. Scripture's ability to inspire is entailed by the Spirit's inspiration.

When Martin Luther studied Scripture, he was indeed interested in what it meant but more so in what it did to the person who read it. For him, it impacted the hearer or reader on a deeply personal level. Having come from a legalistic, condemnatory system he was led to ask where he could find a gracious God. It was not until he read Scripture in a certain way that he discovered its marvelous message of grace and redemption. That is exactly where, when, and why the Reformation started—with the reading of Scripture.

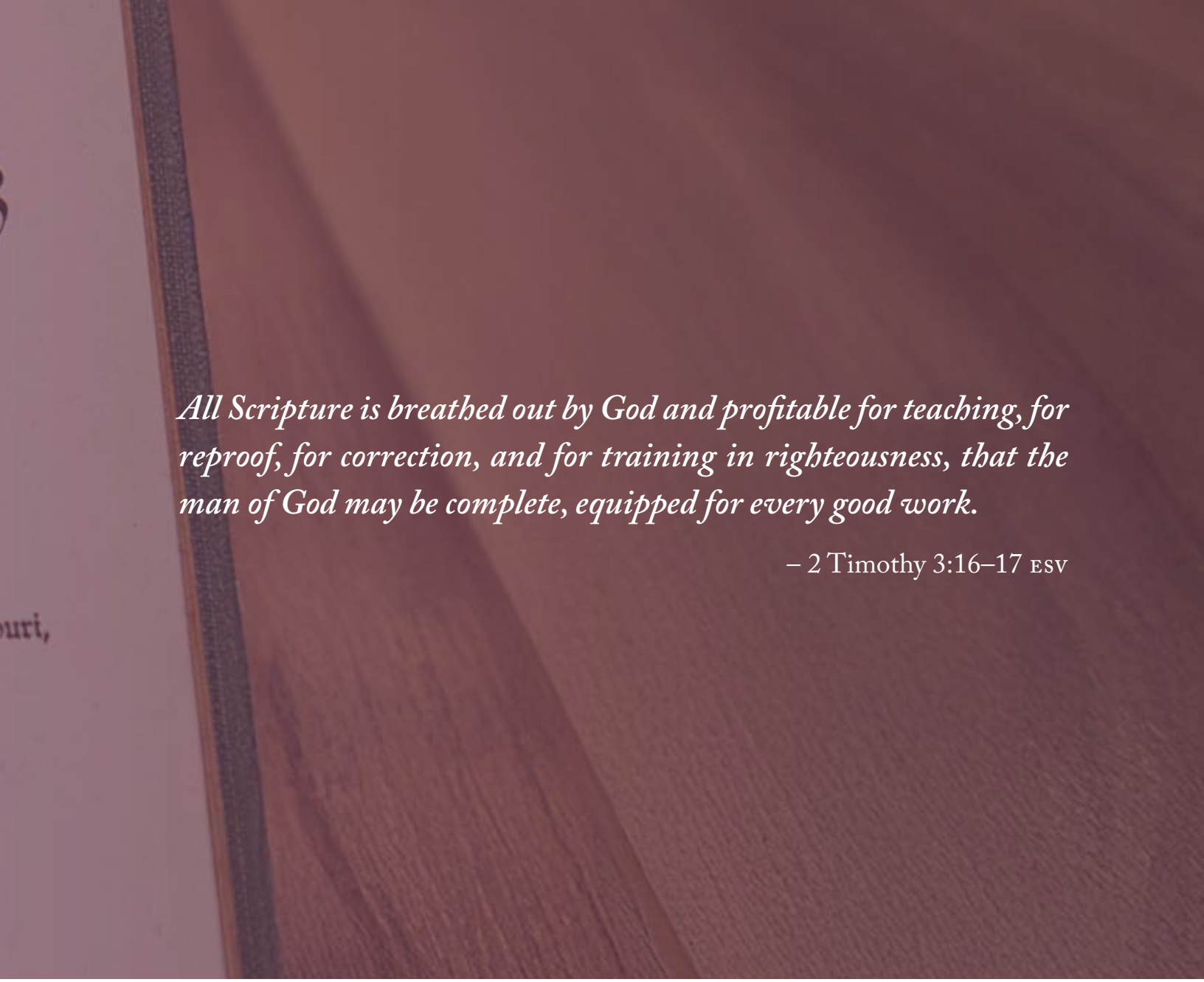
The Lutheran Confessions hold Scripture in high regard as "the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged."[1] This is not a mere pronouncement upon Scripture but a recipe for its use. The Confessions place Scripture (*sans* the Old Testament Apocrypha) as the highest philosophical and spiritual judge. The Confessions themselves and the whole of the Reformation movement must also be judged by the same means. The Confessions bear authority for the life of the church as they reflect Holy Writ, and they do so in a particular fashion.



The Confessions bear authority for the life of the Church as they reflect Holy Writ, and they do so in a particular fashion.

The Confessions represent a manner of reading Scripture, and they supply a vocabulary by which one may safely expound upon it. The Lutheran hermeneutic of law/gospel is a profound expression of what Scripture itself presents to the listener and the hearer. It is the mode in which the heart of the reader is affected. When Scripture says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," (Exodus 20:16) the hearer is confronted

1 Formula of Concord, Epitome, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 486.



All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

– 2 Timothy 3:16–17 ESV

with an immutable standard that convicts the youngest child and the oldest politician. Who may escape its judgment? Yet, when Scripture says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus," (wans 8:1) the listener's heart melts in gratitude for having been redeemed from one's own crimes. Scripture is able to do both, sometimes simultaneously, because it has within it the ability not simply to be read by the reader but to read the reader before the reader ever glances at the page.

Though Luther had a "canon within the canon" in the specific sense that he preferred some books above others, he used Scripture to judge itself, by its own lights, and not by the use of what we now call "presentism" (judging the past by current standards). Rather, he used the Word to interpret the Word because he understood the nature of it to both address and capture the reader in a way that other literature cannot.

The only witness we have now to the story of Jesus is the New Testament, and the Old Testament that bears witness to him as well. Extra-biblical sources like Tacitus and Flavius Josephus may bear partial witness but they cannot bear witness to the gospel of Christ: the center of Scripture. We are therefore left with a few thousand manuscripts and scraps that came down to us and the Reformers by which we may come to know and appreciate the creator and redeemer of the universe. As outlandish as that may seem, it is a witness to the power of this incarnational Scripture that some have come to believe merely by reading it, for it contains a nobility of truth that can and has changed countless hearts down through the ages. This is what Martin Luther and the Confessions understood and why it was necessary to recapture that understanding and put into plain words how to read the Word.

"How do you read?"

APOCALYPTIC NOW?

The Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee

Pastor and NALS Adjunct Professor
Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

A Lutheran confessionalism that is *generous*—as opposed to snarlingly bad-tempered, intellectually desperate, or hollowed out by capitulation to the secular culture—has several non-negotiable characteristics.

A generous confessionalism:

> (1) expounds, defends, and abides in God's truth for the truth's own sake, as the way things really are—not in order to be newsworthy, market-savvy, or youth-relevant, especially in their current degraded social-media-driven senses;
>
> (2) reads, preaches, and is shaped by the holy scriptures as "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), "the pure, clear fountain of Israel"[1]—not as a spiritual ATM dispensing a few convenient verses, or as the plaything of dominant ideologies;
>
> (3) regards the traditions of Christian thought and liturgy as treasures to be gratefully received, with theological discernment and historical awareness—not as bad habits to be scornfully discarded, or as unchangeable, unchallengeable foxholes in which to hide; and
>
> (4) places its sharpest focus and its heaviest emphasis always on the one who is confessed: Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of his Father, anointed by their Spirit—not on the act of confessing, the texts serving the confessing, or the believers undertaking the confessing, however God may use all of those (and he does!) to the praise of his glorious grace.[2]

I want to argue that these "marks" not only are fundamentally compatible with, but even in an important way demand, the addition of a further descriptor: a generous confessionalism is *apocalyptic*.[3]

This might seem, at first glance, strange, not to mention monumentally implausible. In our time, the label *apocalyptic* (with its cognates) has often been associated with quasi-religious movements which are (1) aggressively self-promoting, boasting of their own distinctiveness; (2) hermeneutically idiosyncratic, relying on bizarre proof-texting; (3) given to violent ruptures and revolts against tradition; and (4) obsessed with disputable puzzles such as rapture, tribulation, and antichrist, rather than with Jesus: in other words, exactly the opposite of what I'm portraying as a generous confessionalism. Even more commonly now, the referent of the label *apocalyptic* has nothing to do with religion in any form.

But the implausibility is superficial, because *biblical* and *Christian* apocalypticism — the kind which *should* be providing the cue for our usage of the language of "apocalyptic" — is not defined by the cataclysm-of-the-world-as-we-know-it (and we-can-

1 Formula of Concord, Solid Definition, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 527.

2 This list is not intended to be exhaustive. (The same goes for all the lists I put forth in this article.) But I do claim that the specified four are essential features of the thing being described. Nor am I deliberately trying to coordinate these characteristics with the NALC's four "core values"; but there is at least a broad sympathy of substance between the two sets of properties.

3 Here is a rough-and-ready way to understand the term "apocalyptic": an apocalyptic work "communicates a disclosure of a transcendent perspective on this world… It enables its readers to see their situation with prophetic insight into God's purpose [by taking them] out of this world in order to see it differently" (Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 7).

figure-out-when-it'll-happen) speculations which seem to have taken over the meaning of the word in our secularized age.

Biblical and Christian apocalypticism is identified, instead, by the recognitions (1) that reality, the truth of things, is deeper and stranger than anything we humans could ever make, measure, or manipulate; (2) that this hidden dimension of reality can therefore be opened to and understood by us only through divine revelation (*apokalupsis*); (3) that the historic traditions of God's people Israel—i.e., the Old Testament—provide the artistic "palette" for the images and figures by which God's revelation is communicated[4]; and (4) that the central, comprehensive meaning of that revelation emerges uniquely in Jesus Christ, the one who is and who was and who is to come (Revelation 1:4), who died but, behold, is alive forevermore (Revelation 1:18), and in whom all things are being made new (Revelation 21:5).

It is on the basis of these recognitions that believers formed by biblical and Christian apocalypticism take the posture summarized in the letter to the Hebrews:

They confessed [*homologēsantes*] that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland … they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13–14, 16 NRSV)

The *confessing* indicated here, attributed both to the God-worshippers of old Israel and to the Christ-followers of the new covenant, signifies "a public profession of faith",[5] with the appropriate behavioral consequences, not a mere private opinion (perhaps dressed up as "my truth"). The faith thus confessed points apocalyptically to the divinely ordained and indeed already inaugurated destiny, the *telos*, of the entire universe: "the ending of the old age and the onset of the new, the overthrow of the 'god of this age' by the God who is God."[6] Such a destiny may be hoped for, not because of anything of which we are capable, but exclusively because of what God has done and will do— "he has prepared a city"—in Jesus Christ.

To be Lutheran now—precisely with the help of the sixteenth-century confessions, attending to the example of the sixteenth-century confessors, forwarding the ecumenical dogmatic proposal of the sixteenth-century confessional Reformation[7]—is to proclaim, to teach, and to live this apocalyptic vision as the true unfolding of the two-testament scriptural narrative, recounted by the church's traditions through the ages, and saying, in all its depth, diversity, and polyphony: "Jesus who was crucified is risen and returning, and—by the will of his Father and the pouring-out of their Spirit—he is Lord of all."

And it is in gathering around Word and Sacrament—which is to say, as the church is the church[8]—that such truth-seeking, scripture-formed, tradition-honoring, Christ-centered, and therefore apocalyptic confessionalism comes to definitive, and generous, public expression. Academic theology, social service, cross-cultural mission, the education of children, and witness in the face of persecution, to mention only a few other important activities, are indispensable roles to be played in the drama of faithful Christian confession in our time. But those roles have their place and significance within God's worshipping church, "a theater of the strange new world of the gospel—a theater not of ethics or entertainment but of edification and eschatology."[9]

> *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*
>
> – Ephesians 3:20–21 NRSV

4 "Revelation alludes to or echoes to virtually every book of the OT. It is the NT's 'OTest' book. … John paints an apocalypse, and the OT is his palette" (Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 1–11* [International Theological Commentary; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018], 4–5).

5 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (Word Biblical Commentary, volume 47B; Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 357.

6 Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 27–28.

7 Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), ch. 1.

8 Augsburg Confession, art. 7, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 42–43.

9 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 457.

THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS AND SPIRITUAL MENDICANCY

Dr. David Luy

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The Lutheran confessions convey an urgency of spiritual disposition largely alien to the cultural sensibilities of the modern west. In the 16th century—as in most previous eras of human history—it did not require much imagination for human beings to see themselves as vulnerable, needy, and desperate creatures. In a world without penicillin—where a toothache on Monday could very well mean a funeral on Friday—the urgency of spiritual concerns was likewise intuitive to an extent that is probably difficult for modern people fully to appreciate.[1]

Like Christianity in general, Lutheranism emerged and took shape in a context innately alert to the exigency of religious concerns. It is not without reason that indulgence preachers in the 16th century could more or less presume upon crowds of people who would be motivated by tender consciences to respond favorably to their message. The specifics can be debated, of course, but contemporary western societies clearly confront the church with an alternative state of affairs. As the great German theologian August Tholuck (1799-1877) once wryly observed, an indulgence preacher set loose in modern Germany is likely to solicit a very different kind of response; not the clinking of coins into chests, but yawns momentarily preceded by scowls.[2]

Tholuck's somewhat bizarre thought-experiment raises an interesting paradox for confessional Lutherans to contemplate. Lutherans, of course, are not likely to lament the decline of a religious practice denounced by Luther himself as misguided and spiritually dangerous. But, of course, Tholuck's point is not really about indulgences *per se*. He is concerned with a much broader shift, and this is the widespread collapse of a spiritually sensitized culture altogether under the aegis of modernity. Under the conditions of that collapse, it can seem inevitable that religious practices of all kinds (good or bad) will either be marginalized, or effectively drained of spiritual urgency. It needs to be asked: what happens to the Lutheran theological witness in a context like that?

It will always be a temptation for the church within such an environment to accommodate its message by behaving as if urgency of spiritual outlook is not really intrinsic to the Christian faith. This occurs, for example, when the church refashions its message primarily in terms of sentimentality. Christianity is thus no longer regarded as a matter of cosmic truth where the gate is narrow and stakes unthinkably high, but instead as a means to the private construction of personal meaning. For similar reasons, modern churches may feel a certain pressure to salvage the reputation of Christianity by emphasizing the instrumental value of religion in relation to goods more intuitively meaningful to modern people. The risk with these and other strategies is that the church gradually loses track of its own story over time. The gospel is no longer proclaimed and regarded as a matter of life and death, and, because of this, the urgency of spiritual concerns ebbs away like an answer without a question, or perhaps like a medicine without a disease.

Such an outcome is problematic—modern sensibilities notwithstanding—because urgency of spiritual disposition is not dispensable for Christianity but is instead a necessary aspect of the human creature's proper relation to God, and this is because the spiritual status of human beings before God really *is* desperate. For the broadly catholic tradition, a human being simply does not know herself truly so long as she fails to

1 For more on this theme, see Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); and Ephraim Radner, *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the Shape of a Human Life* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

2 August Tholuck, *Gewissens-, Glaubens- und Gelegenheitspredigten* (Berlin, Wiegandt & Grieben, 1860): 20; referenced in Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, translated by Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962.

17 And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

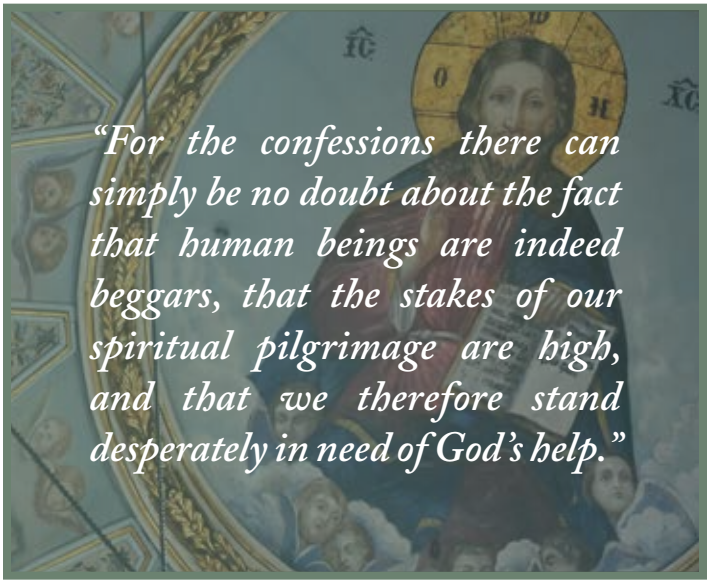
– Mark 2:17 ESV

recognize herself as needy and indeed bankrupt *coram Deo*. In this sense, to be a Christian is at a fundamental level to be a spiritual mendicant—i.e., a *beggar* before God.[3]

Anselm of Canterbury beautifully captures the heart of "spiritual mendicancy" in the opening sections of his *Proslogion*, where he plaintively invokes God's help. Anselm writes:

Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show Yourself to us. Give Yourself to us so that it may be well with us, for without You it goes so ill for us. Have pity upon our efforts and our strivings towards You, for we can avail nothing without You. You call to us, "so help us" [Psalm 78:9]. I beseech You, Lord, let me not go sighing hopelessly, but make me breathe hopefully again. My heart is made bitter by its desolations, I beseech You, Lord, sweeten it by Your consolation. I set out happy to look for you; I beseech You, Lord, do not let me depart from You fasting. I came to You as one famished; do not let me go without food. Poor, I Have come to one who is rich. Unfortunate, I have come to one who is merciful. Do not let me return scorned and empty-handed.[4]

The urgency of Anselm's tone is likely to be somewhat jarring for many modern readers, and perhaps even offensive. And yet, this aspect of Anselm's theological style is not anomalous, but broadly representative of the great cloud of witnesses scattered across space and time. The Lutheran theological tradition offers no exception to this general rule. Martin Luther frequently stressed the "beggarliness" of human existence before God. To hope in God, for Luther, is precisely to despair of oneself, and thus to sigh desperately for divine grace.[5]



As for the Lutheran confessions, the urgency of spiritual matters is sometimes expressed overtly, as in the Athanasian Creed's sober warning as to the prospect of eternal damnation,[6] or in Luther's vivid characterization of the Christian life as the continued crawl of weary Christian viators back to the reality of their baptism,[7] or in Melanchthon's repeated emphasis upon terror of conscience throughout the Apology,[8] or in the Formula's detailed exposition of the catastrophic effects of original sin upon the human person, and the power of free will. Beyond these overt articulations, the reality of spiritual

3 Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms, 99-120, edited by Boniface Ramsey, translated by Maria Boulding, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, volume 19 (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2003): 49.

4 Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 86.

5 See, for example, Luther's explanation of thesis 11 of his Heidelberg Disputation in TAL I, 94.

6 The Athanasian Creed (Kolb/Wengert, 23-5).

7 The Large Catechism (Kolb/ Wengert, 382; 461-2).

8 Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Kolb/Wengert, 142, 192, 198). Solid Declaration (Kolb/Wengert, 531-62).

mendicancy is likewise ingredient to what we might refer to as the "deep logic" of the confessions. The confessions have much to say about the law and the sacraments, for example, but it is quite impossible rightly to understand any of this material so long as one fails to discern the more basic fact that human beings are regarded by the confessions as living their lives in the midst of an overwhelming spiritual struggle, and as creatures who depend radically upon the grace of God at every juncture of their journey.[9] In short, for the confessions there can simply be no doubt about the fact that human beings are indeed beggars, that the stakes of our spiritual pilgrimage are high, and that we therefore stand desperately in need of God's help.

It might profitably be asked, by way of conclusion: what becomes of Lutheran confessionalism when the quickening disposition of spiritual mendicancy fades within our churches? Inevitably, the result will be a monstrosity of one kind or another. That monstrosity may take the form of an excessively quarrelsome sectarianism far less inclined to worship than to argue, or perhaps it will lead to a transformation of the radical and beautiful message of Christianity into something altogether innocuous and dull. In either case, though, a church altogether devoid of spiritual mendicancy is ultimately a church that does not adequately confess the gospel itself, for Christ came to save the desperate (Mark 2:17).

In the face of such monstrosities, some conclude that confessionalism itself is the problem, and insist that creeds and confessions ought to be jettisoned for the sake of saving the church, and in order to restore true Christian piety. This reaction is understandable, but it sprouts from a misdiagnosis of the basic root of the problem. The monstrosities mentioned in the previous paragraph do not arise from *excessive* confessionalism, but rather from *disordered* confessionalism. The solution is not for churches to abandon their confessions, but rather for them to return once again to the *soul* of the confessions, and thus to embrace a posture of spiritual mendicancy which is in keeping with the gospel itself. At its core, confessionalism in this more fundamental sense is nothing other than a sober heeding of that ancient invitation to repentance issued by the Lord our God through the prophet Joel:

> *12 "Yet even now," declares the LORD,*
> *return to me with all your heart,*
> *with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;*
> *13 and rend your hearts and not your garments."*
> *Return to the LORD your God,*
> *for he is gracious and merciful,*
> *slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;*
> *and he relents over disaster.*
>
> – Joel 2:12–13 ESV

9 For a specific example of this, see, for example, Luther's emphasis upon our desperate need for the sacraments in the Small Catechism (Kolb/Wengert, 350). I am indebted for this broader insight to Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000); and Günther Gassmann and Scott Hendrix, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

"The solution is not for churches to abandon their confessions, but rather for them to return once again to the soul of the confessions, and thus to embrace a posture of spiritual mendicancy which is in keeping with the gospel itself."

THEOLOGICAL CONVERSATIONS FOR THE ENRICHMENT OF PASTORAL MINISTRY

Cardigan & Collar is the podcast of the North American Lutheran Seminary which seeks to enrich pastoral ministry by engaging theological topics that matter to the life of the church. Hosted by Dr. David Luy and the Rev. Dr. Maurice Lee, *Cardigan & Collar* features conversations with scholars, theologians and pastors with the overarching purpose of narrowing the gap between church and academy, celebrating a theological vision of the pastoral office, and reclaiming the ecclesial identity of theological reflection in service to the church. Learn about the first sesason on Catechesis and listen today!

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HOW DO WE BECOME A MISSION DRIVEN CHURCH AND MISSION DRIVEN PEOPLE?

The Rev. Carol Fryer

Director of Missions
North American Lutheran Church (NALC)

We know what the church *is*. The Augsburg Confession puts it this way:

> It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. (AC VII, Kolb/Wengert)

Our Lord's Great Commission teaches us what the church *does*: it turns toward the world, seeking that all should become Christ's people. Here are Jesus's words:

> All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18–20)

When Jesus gave the Great Commission to the disciples, he was basically telling us that we must be generous—that we cannot rest content with our sacred assemblies, but must turn outward, seeking to save souls.

This is the essence of a mission driven church, a church that is faithfully fulfilling the mission it has been given by the Lord of all. If the church is not striving to fulfill this mission, it is failing to be the church. Rather, it has become something else, something inferior. It is no longer truly the church of Christ.

A mission driven church is one that knows full well that Jesus came to save the whole world and is driven to share this amazing news until every person in every nation has heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and has been given the opportunity to know his love and rest their hope in him.

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 was presented to the church catholic by the reformers to make the claim that they, the reformers, believed what the church believes. As we know, the main issue for the reformers was to correct an error that was common in the understanding of how we are saved – not by works, but by faith (Article IV, Concerning Justification). But besides that, the confessions clarified that the Wittenberg reformers did not depart from traditional church teaching:

> Since, then, this teaching is clearly grounded in Holy Scripture and is, moreover, neither against nor contrary to the universal Christian church—or even the Roman church—so far as can be observed in the writings of the Fathers, we think that our opponents cannot disagree with us in the articles set forth above. (Augsburg Confession, Conclusion of Part One, Kolb/Wengert)

The hope was that the confessions would be welcomed as catholic consensus going forward.

Essentially, Luther and his fellow reformers wanted to prove that they were "good Catholics" and that they did not intend to foment division in the church. Their interest was in calling the church to its divinely given identity—helping the church to become more faithful to Jesus and to the Bible.

The confessions still carry that intention—to make sure that the church remains true to its mission—the mission given to it by the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ.

And so, truly to be the church, we must embrace the mission that our Lord Jesus gave us: we are to make disciples of all nations; we are to baptize in the triune name of God, and we are to teach all the baptized to observe all that Jesus commanded.

We must never be satisfied as long as there are people in this world who are "unreached"—that is, who have never heard the gospel and know nothing about the one who is their Lord and Savior.

We do not need to go far away to reach those who do not know Jesus. The mission field is as close to us as our own families and communities. Our children need to be discipled from an early age with family devotions, Bible stories, and full participation in the life of the church, including robust classes for first communion and confirmation. Our neighbors and co-workers need to be able to "see" Christ in us as we live a life of faithful obedience to Jesus's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. Seeing our peace and joy, perhaps they will turn to us in times of discouragement and despair so that we can share with them the consolation and hope we have in Christ.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he writes:

> Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11)

This is the goal of the Great Commission: that every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that God be glorified. We who have this good news, must be not only willing but energized and inspired to share it so that all may be invited to live a life of hope and joy and peace, knowing that they are truly beloved by Jesus, the Lord and savior of all.

One of the core values of the NALC is "Mission Driven," which is described in these words:

> We believe that the mission of the Church is to preach the Gospel and to make disciples for Christ. We believe that making disciples—in our congregations, in our communities and nations, and around the world—must be a priority of the Church in the present age.[1]

The time of Christendom has passed. We can no longer assume that our neighbors have been raised in the church or know anything about Jesus. There was a day in which the students in public schools in the U.S. would recite the pledge of allegiance— "one nation, under God." Everyone knew and sang "God Bless America," and passages of Scripture were read over the loudspeaker. That day has passed!

The churches created mission societies that would raise money and send missionaries overseas to places like Africa and India. The work of missions was relegated only to the "professionals" while the faith of people in the pews became essentially a private matter.

Now we need to learn how to share our faith with our neighbors. We need to be able to carry out our baptismal commitment to our Lord to let our light so shine that others may be drawn to that light, so that we can tell them about Jesus and the hope we have in him. Our neighbors believe in all sorts of idols, but none of them will be able to satisfy their deepest desires and longings. Only Jesus can do that.

In 1 Peter we read:

> Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence… (1 Peter 3:15 RSV)

By following the ways of Jesus wherever we are, not just in church but also in our communities and our places of work, our neighbors and colleagues might become curious about us and want to know more. They will come to know us as people who can be trusted to listen and to respond with care and love. We are called to be living examples of faith in a God who loves us and is full of compassion and mercy.

We don't need to stand on street corners proclaiming the gospel to passers-by, hoping that someone will hear and "be saved." There is an important place for gospel proclamation in this world, but the work of making disciples is relational. I would not advocate for bringing our global workers home. But it is worth pointing out that the trend in foreign missions has moved toward training indigenous evangelists. Indeed, most of our current NALC global workers are serving in their native countries. We have the privilege of supporting them as they proclaim the gospel to their own people and in their own language.

When we live our lives according to what we believe and truly meet every person as someone worthy of our care and love, we build the sort of relationships that might naturally lead to conversations about Jesus and our faith. In baptism we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit for the sake of carrying out the Great Commission, that all people everywhere might know the life-giving love of Jesus our Lord and Savior and give glory to our Father in heaven.

1 https://www.thenalc.org, accessed 12/11/2024

CONFESSIONALLY PNEUMATOLOGICAL

Piotr J. Małysz

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What it means to be a confessional Lutheran is, among other things, to be properly *pneumatological*. I am deliberately using here the Greek-based term, not only because it designates a specific doctrine—the church's teachings on the Holy Spirit—but also because the Latin-based equivalent, *spiritual*, bears all kinds of unwelcome connotations today. In fact, the term 'spiritual' may even mean the exact opposite of proper Christian pneumatology.

One of Martin Luther's many protracted struggles, beginning already in the early 1520s, was with reformers who saw private revelations, in the form of visions and dreams, as the mark of authentic Christianity. Thomas Müntzer, one of the leaders of the Peasants' Uprising in 1524, claimed the authority of such visions for his theocratic program of social upheaval.[1] This worried Luther in part because claims of private revelations could never quite prove that their origin was unambiguously with the Holy Spirit, and instead often elevated the claimant's suffering as a criterion of authenticity. What also made Luther concerned was that such claims were hardly used to buttress or illuminate the gospel. More often than not, they were made to justify crude society-remaking programs on the basis of Mosaic Law, or some outlandish, self-devised and self-serving ideas. It was this urgent concern that led Luther, quite unforgettably, to accuse even his erstwhile colleague on the Wittenberg University faculty, Andreas Karlstadt, of having "devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all."[2]

A more commonplace danger, for Luther, lay in the natural propensity of the human heart "to contemplate great things rather than lowly ones" and to take pride in clever speculation on heavenly and divine things.[3] This intellectualized spirituality had its ethical counterpart too. In fact, Luther's spirited critique of this ethical dimension was what prompted his early reformatory protest, eventually giving rise to Lutheranism as a reform movement. Just as the intellect naturally leads us away from mundane objects toward abiding concepts and enduring truths and eventually, or so it seems, toward God himself; so also our ethical posturing convinces us that the world as we find it is beneath us and that our feats of world-negating righteousness surely deserve some eternal reward. Luther sees a grave spiritual danger in this, because this self-justifying posture runs the risk of no less than denying God as God is in his very being. Luther spells this out by contrasting the assumptions behind divine love and human love.

Human love, to be sure, requires an attractive object to draw it out. But God's love is dramatically different, insofar as it "does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it," as Luther memorably puts in the Heidelberg Disputation.[4] God's love does not need to be enticed out of the Godhead. It has already reached beyond of its own accord. Spiritual, world-renouncing feats, when they become objects of our pride, blind us to the fact that God loves us not on the basis of how lovely, otherworldly, or spiritual we have made ourselves but solely on the basis of who he is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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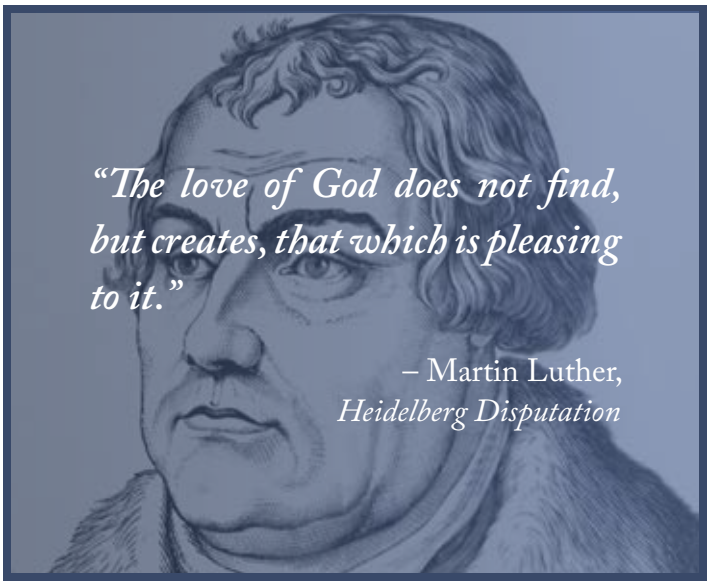
1 See Müntzer's astonishing "Sermon before the Princes," to be found in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George H. Williams and Angel M. Margal (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 49–70.

2 Martin Luther, Against the Heavenly Prophets (1525); *Luther's Works*, vol. 40, ed. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 83.

3 Martin Luther, Scholia in librum Genesios (1520); *M. Luthers Werke* [Weimarer Ausgabe] 9: 406 (my translation).

4 In *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 41 and 57.

There is a spirituality—both speculative and ethical—that all too quickly becomes self-involved rather than being attentive to God.[5] Proper spirituality, by contrast, takes us out of ourselves and, in spite of our natural propensities, places us before God. Not God, as we imagine God to be with our thoughts or postulate him with our actions—but God as he speaks for himself with his own actions wherever he has determined to meet us. In this task, the Holy Spirit plays a fundamental role. And our response to the Sprit's witness consists, again, not in scaling divine heights with our thinking or doing, but precisely in confessing the work of the triune God—for us and for our salvation—in the midst of the world.



Luther's tightly-packed explanation of the creed's third article ("I believe in the Holy Spirit…"), which in itself also is a confession, highlights all this and then goes on to emphasize the various aspects of the Spirit's actions: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith."[6]

Two things are worth dwelling on further in this multifaceted description of the Spirit's work. The Spirit unambiguously leads us to God-in-Christ; the Spirit is, in fact, "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:19; Romans 8:9). Moreover, the Spirit's work is not simply individual enlightenment but instead the creation of the body of Christ in the world, the church, out of those who believe in him. Though Luther's description may give the impression that the Spirit leaves us passive, the opposite is actually the case. What has changed is that our thinking and our doing are no longer simply our own thinking and doing. Their reality is larger than us, and we are caught up in it. As such, we are transformed from mere thinkers and doers into confessors, and that with our whole being.

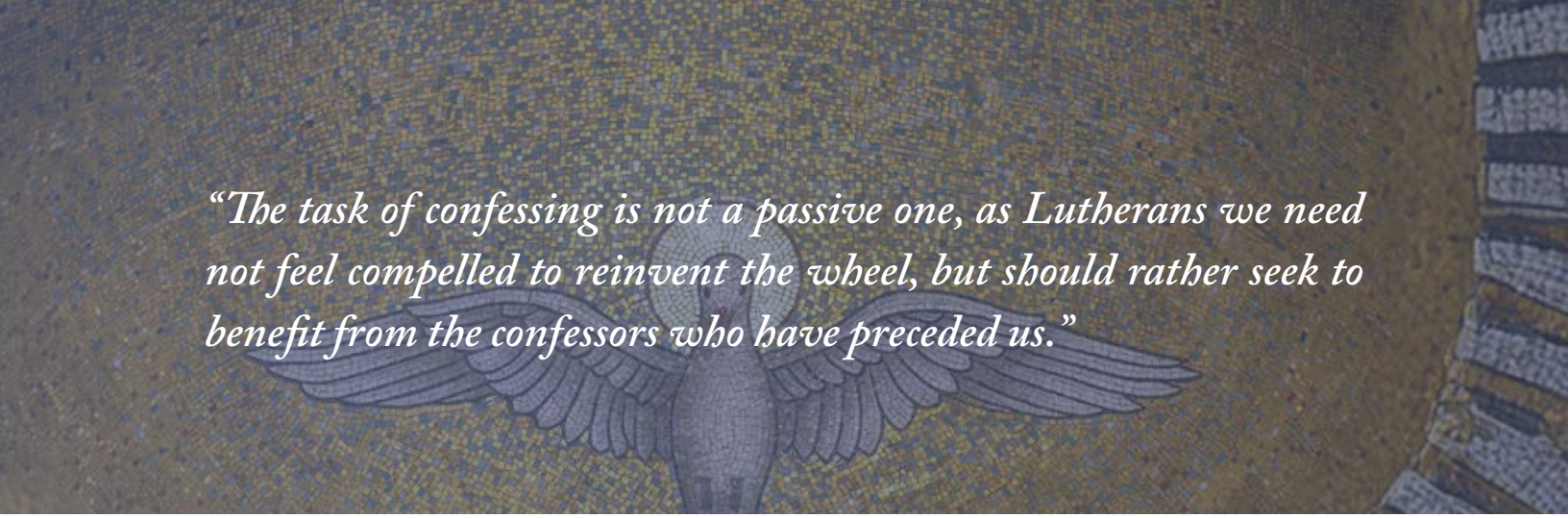
The First Epistle of John interprets these two dimensions of the Spirit's work—placing Christ at the center and forming the church as Christ's body—explicitly in their confessional character. "By this you know the Spirit of God," says John, "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1 John 4:2). In the Holy Spirit, we come to bear witness not to an idea of God, however sublime, but to the depth of God's concrete love and God's love alone. The love of God is shown in the fact that it embraced our very flesh, our flesh as it is, vulnerable and death-ridden—in order to remake it and grace it, rather than rescuing us from it into some spectral beyond. To believe by the power of the Spirit is thus to witness to the flesh of Christ and in this way to confess with our whole being, body and soul, that God is love.

John then goes on to draw out the transformative power of this confession: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (vv. 11–12). The believing community is summoned to embody God's own love, to bear witness to its creative power—all this in a world where love is in short supply and must be won through all kinds of feats. This is hardly passivity but a summons, a task, a tall order that only God can, in the end, accomplish in us.

The last thing to mention is that these two dimensions find their connection at the Lord's Table. In the Supper, we are confronted again and again with the depth of God's love, manifested with particular poignancy "on the night when he was betrayed…" The body and blood of Christ, once given and shed and now eaten and drunk, demand that we believe that God does not give up on his love. (As if he could! —For what kind of love would it be then, retreating from itself, as if scared of its radical character?) In response, the Spirit leads us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" indeed (Psalm 34:8). And then, right from the feast, we are led by the Spirit into the parched valleys of the world. Here we do not just observe God's love and God's Spirit

5 I explore this further in two articles, "Luther and His Opponents at the Threshold of Modernity," *Lutheran Forum* 51:3 (Fall 2017), 11-17, and "Justified for Good: Luther's Message for Late Modern Times," *Word and World* 37:4 (Fall 2017), 360-371.

6 Luther's *Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 355–356.



"The task of confessing is not a passive one, as Lutherans we need not feel compelled to reinvent the wheel, but should rather seek to benefit from the confessors who have preceded us."

at work, as the prophet Ezekiel did (Ch. 37). Rather, we become this love's very flesh-upon-bone, as it were, testifying to "the Lord and giver of life" before a whole valley of dry bones, and confessing that, in calling a people to himself, the Spirit is in fact recreating the world. In Luther's words, "we are children of the blessing not only passively, because we ourselves are blessed, but also by blessing others,"[7] thus multiplying our blessing.

What this means, specifically, is perhaps illustrated by the Apostolic Council in Acts 15. Here again we see that the conjunction of confession of God in the depth of our humanity and the love for fellow humans does not leave us passive—also in the realm of thinking, not just doing. The apostles gather together to reflect on what it means to embrace the gentiles. Answers do not simply fall down from the sky and Scripture verses do not present themselves like fortune-cookie fortunes. Confession is not antithetical to deliberation—in part because confession never presumes to grasp God. It is only witness to God's own work. The council's pronouncement is thus significant, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…" (Acts 15:28).

I will conclude with the following observation: because the task of confessing is not a passive one, as Lutherans we need not feel compelled to reinvent the wheel but should rather seek to benefit from the confessors who have preceded us. We should engage their confession even as we reflect on the parched valleys of today's world. Luther holds a special place in that cloud of witnesses. And the lesson from him which is still ours to learn and relearn is that there is little that is spiritual about our confession—because our confession is unabashedly pneumatological. And that means faithful to Jesus Christ, following in his footsteps, even in the dark places of this world, where God's life-giving Spirit does not leave us destitute.

7 Martin Luther, Lectures on Genesis (1545); *Luther's Works*, vol. 8, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 183.

Piotr Małysz is an Associate Professor of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama, and an ordained Lutheran pastor. He is the author of *Trinity, Freedom, and Love: An Engagement with Eberhard Jüngel* (T&T Clark, 2012), as well as many articles on Luther and the Lutheran tradition.

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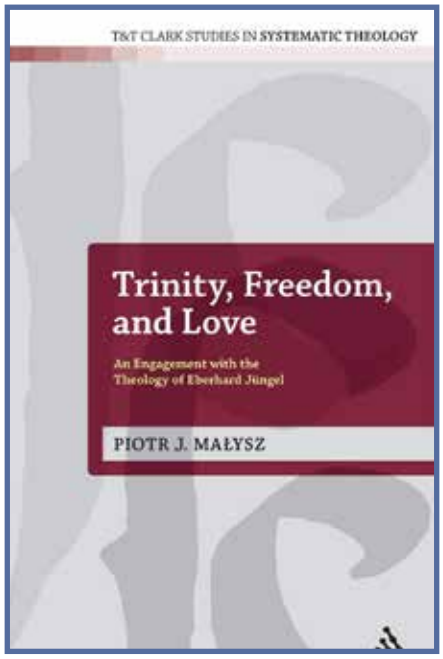

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HOW TO BE CONFESSIONAL

IN THE CHINESE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF HONOLULU

The Rev. Ray Zhu, M.Div. '19

Pastor
Chinese Lutheran Church of Honolulu

While I was a seminarian at NALS, an elder at Pittsburgh Chinese Church (Oakland) finally asked me "How come you are a Lutheran?" after he got to know me for about a year. As you can tell from his simple question, to be a Lutheran is very unusual among Chinese churches in America, because most of them are non-denominational or interdenominational. In the past six years, I've been serving at the Chinese Lutheran Church of Honolulu, which is not a whole lot different than many other Chinese churches in America.

On one hand, we intentionally create a church environment that isn't too different from other Chinese churches so that it is easier for the newcomers to adapt to it. The traditional Lutheran churches spread across the contiguous United States are too foreign, too formal, and too Catholic for most Chinese Christians, who almost never have any denominational affiliation when they walk into our church. On the other hand, we intentionally make our church more Lutheran by introducing our Lutheran confessions in various ways to this particular body of Christ, formed on this little tropical island where the East meets the West.

Every person who is going to be baptized, confirmed, or transferred to our church must go through a Sunday school class designed for beginners as well as newcomers. It is called "Basics of Christianity," which takes 17 Sundays to accomplish. The content of this class largely reflects the corresponding content in the Luther's catechisms, especially the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Communion, and Baptism. Plus, the Apostles' Creed will be proclaimed during the baptism, confirmation, and membership transfer ceremonies.

In addition, among all Chinese churches in various denominations here in Hawaii, such as Baptist, Alliance, Assemblies of God, and even some non-denominational churches, we are the only Chinese church proclaiming the creeds every Sunday—the Nicene Creed on the first Sunday of every month and the Apostles' Creed every other Sunday.

The teaching of the articles of faith and the weekly repetition of the creeds constantly reminds the congregation of what we believe. This is very critical as we are surrounded by Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and most recently, Eastern Lightning (or, the Church of Almighty God, a cult that originated in China).

Since "the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine" (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 9), it's essential to find ways to ensure that Scripture is taught properly to the congregation. To maximize the outcome of the Bible study, we study each passage twice. Every other Wednesday evening, small group leaders from each fellowship group will gather together

on Zoom to study the scriptures that their fellowships are going to read together in the next two weeks. Each session is led by the most experienced co-workers. This approach effectively improves the quality of our Bible study with clear key messages and corresponding applications of each passage.

A new member once questioned me, "Why do we believe in what Martin Luther said? He was just a man like us." Not only is it true that our Lutheran confessions are not reducible to the thoughts of Martin Luther, but also, my brief answer is: "Yes, you are right! Martin Luther was indeed just a man like us. We believe in what he said because he rightly pointed us to Scripture, to its true meaning."

At our weekly gathering in an underground meeting place beneath the campus chapel, out of curiosity, a classmate at the NALS asked me, "How did you choose to be a Lutheran?" A question similar to the one the elder in Pittsburgh asked me. "I didn't choose. I was chosen," I said. I was baptized by a pastor in my late twenties back in China. He happened to be a Lutheran pastor though little did I know about Lutheranism—I don't think I could even spell "Lutheran" correctly at that time!

While we discuss and debate denominational differences here in the US, let us remember millions of our brothers and sisters across the globe who are still underground and under persecution. It might be too early and too luxurious for many of them to have a denomination! They are simply Christians, chosen by our Lord Jesus Christ to evangelize the world around them.

CONFESSING THE FAITH

Dr. Alexander H. Pierce

Assistant Professor of Historical Theology
North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS)

The word "confession" refers not only to binding documents which expound the church's faith, but also to certain declarative acts undertaken by the church and her members. The confessional documents of the Lutheran tradition were themselves first articulated as the confessional acts of a movement motivated by a desire for reform of the church. It is important for the church to remember that confession is always an act before it becomes a document. Without a recognition of this fact, it can be easy for the church to forget that the documents contained in the Book of Concord ought to remain *living* documents, i.e., documents through which the church continues to confess the faith in our own time and place. As Reformed theologian John Webster put it, rightly understood, "a confessional formula does not put an end to the act of confession but ensures its persistence."[1]

The Augsburg Confession attests to the crucial importance of the *act* of confessing the faith. Emperor Charles V summoned Elector John of Saxony and his entourage to an imperial diet in Augsburg during the spring of 1530, demanding that an account be given concerning the practical reforms introduced in Wittenberg and its surrounding regions. Shortly after arriving in Augsburg to prepare for the diet, however, the evangelical theologians tasked with providing a written explanation learned that there was considerable subterfuge already afoot. At the bidding of Archduke Ferdinand and papal legate, Lorenzo Campeggio, controversialist Johann Eck of Ingolstadt had composed and disseminated his *Four Hundred and Four Theses*, a polemical document which ascribed all manner of heretical teachings and practices to the Saxon theologians. As Melanchthon quickly realized, a simple explanation of the evangelical faith would no longer suffice for the occasion. It was now incumbent upon the reformers to "*confess* their adherence to the core of catholic teaching, to the heart of the biblical message, in the presentation of their call for reform to Charles."[2]

Melanchthon thus decided to call the *document* he was preparing the "Augsburg *Confession*," a document that would eventually come to be regarded as the heart of the Book of Concord.[3] The *Confessio Augustana* does not simply provide a dispassionate account of reform efforts undertaken by the Wittenbergers, but sets forth a confession and proclamation of the evangelical faith. As Melanchthon and his colleagues explain in the preface,

> we offer and present a confession of our pastors' and preachers' teaching as well as of our faith, setting forth on the basis of the divine Holy Scripture what and in what manner they preach, teach, believe, and give instruction in our lands, principalities, dominions, cities, and territories.[4]

The Wittenberg reform movement performed the act of publicly and corporately confessing the contents of the Augsburg Confession before each other, the emperor, and the many political and ecclesiastical parties present at the diet.

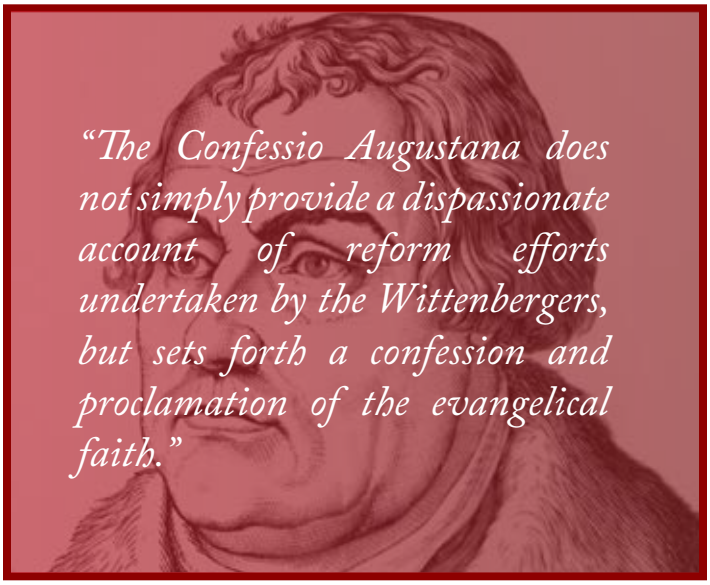
---

1 John Webster, "Confession and Confessions," *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher Seitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 119–131, here 125.

2 *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 31. Emphasis added.

3 George A. Lindbeck, "Confessional Faithfulness and the Ecumenical Future: The J.L. Neve Memorial Lecture," *Trinity Seminary Review* (1990): 59–66, here 61, for example, submits that "According to the Book of Concord itself… the proper procedure is to focus on the Augsburg Confession. After the ecumenical trinitarian and christological creeds of the early church, it is the most authoritative of the Lutheran symbols of faith." See e.g., SD, preface (K./W., 525, 527).

4 AC, Preface (K./W., 32, German).



This public act of confession was meant to bring about a reform from within, to unify the church around true teaching, or at least to create a space in the church where the gospel was not obscured.[5] In the preface, the Saxon theologians lifted up Christian unity as their express intention in "what follows in the confession which we and our people submit."[6] Such unity would be possible, "if the doctrinal substance of the catholic faith (summarized in twenty-one articles in Part One of the Confession) is not repudiated and, second, if there is freedom to disagree on such matters as are dealt with in Part Two."[7] They believed that along these lines even the "matters at issue… may be so explained as to unite us in one, true religion, since we are all enlisted under one Christ and should confess one Christ."[8]

The twenty-eight articles of the Augsburg Confession were presented to Charles as "a declaration of our confession and the teaching of our people," and as an attempt to demonstrate that the reform movement in Saxony led by the likes of Luther and Melanchthon "prevented any new and godless teaching from insinuating itself into our churches, spreading, and finally gaining the upper hand."[9]

We are all well aware that the Lutheran church has not always maintained purity from false belief, as even the later documents of the Book of Concord make clear, but these articles are the standard we confess as Lutherans. The more basic rule to which these articles adhere but which they do not exhaust is that we accept with the reformers "nothing in doctrine or ceremonies… that would contradict either Holy Scripture or the universal Christian church."[10]

In the North American Lutheran Church, we confess with the catholic church our adherence to the divinely inspired Scriptures and the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian). With the authors of the Solid Declaration, we likewise "confess our adherence to [the Augsburg Confession]… as our creed for this age" and as "teaching, drawn from and in accord with the Word of God."[11] Perhaps even more fundamentally, we aspire to be a church which continues zealously and actively to confess the faith within our contemporary context. May we look to the confessional documents of our tradition not just as the standard of right belief, but also as a means and an impetus to carrying out that joyful task.

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5 See Lindbeck, "Confessional Faithfulness," 62: "What the Lutherans asked, it needs to be emphasized, was not that the Romanists adopt reformed teachings and practices for themselves, but that they acknowledge that these were not uncatholic."

6 AC, Preface (K./W., 32, German).

7 Lindbeck, "Confessional Faithfulness," 62.

8 AC, Preface (K./W., 32, German).

9 AC, Conclusion (K./W., 104, German).

10 AC Conclusion (K./W., 104, German).

11 SD, Preface (K./W., 527).

THE BONHOEFFER HOUSE

VISION TO REALITY

The Rev. Dr. Eric Riesen

President
North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS)

The idea of the Bonhoeffer House had its beginnings in February, 2022 when leaders from the North American Lutheran Church and the North American Lutheran Seminary gathered in Ambridge, PA to discuss the future of the seminary. There were different, and even conflicting, understandings of the seminary and our "hub and spokes" model. It was vitally important that leadership take time to think through the issues and the various possible futures and to get on the same page.

To help this process we secured the assistance of Dick and Londa Amundson. They are the founders of Tentmakers which is a consulting ministry which has worked to develop Christian leaders for more than 40 years. We spent two and a half days together. We talked and listened and prayed.

On the last day each of us was asked to share our thoughts. Serendipitously, I was the last one to speak and tried to pull together the threads of our hopes and dreams for the NALS. Unlike the nihilistic crooning associated with the John Lennon song, I asked us to imagine a future in which God was truly at work…

> Imagine a growing and vibrant community of Lutheran seminarians embedded in an ecumenical setting with Christians from other traditions. Lutheran theology is strengthened when we encounter different theological perspectives.
>
> Imagine recruiting the finest Lutheran theologians in North America to teach our students. This would include full-time teaching theologians and a cadre of excellent adjuncts with which we are blessed.
>
> Imagine students from our "spoke" seminaries gathering with students at the "hub" for intensive classes focused on our core values. Our core values need to be theologically

and pastorally understood so that they really shape the way pastors are formed. In other words, our core values form the ethos of the NALC. They provide the theological gravitas that holds us together.

Imagine a physical space, a chapel, where our students could experience the richness of Lutheran liturgical and sacramental life. We could call it the Chapel of the Incarnation. We all know that online/distance theological education is here to stay. Technology has made this possible, but let's be wary of unintended consequences of this technology. Nothing can replace the vital importance of incarnate community formation.

Imagine a place for our students to live, study, and hold theological discussions outside of the classroom.

Imagine all of us pushing and pulling and praying together in the same direction! A future in which all of our pastors and lay leaders owned the NALS as "our" seminary network.

Imagine life together in our own place dedicated to the memory of the Lutheran pastor, theologian, and martyr – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

"Imagine a growing and vibrant community of Lutheran seminarians embedded in an ecumenical setting with Christians from other traditions."

To be sure, all of this took a lot of imagination! We were meeting in the a drab basement. We lacked students and funding, and we were in the middle of a pandemic. Was this sanctified imagination or wishful thinking?

Today, the number of students is increasing. They are studying both at the seminary center and at several spoke seminaries. We have a renewed relationship with the Program in Lutheran Studies at Gordon Conwell Seminary in Charlotte. Our seminary network provides flexibility without sacrificing excellence. Thanks to our supporters, generous financial aid is available for qualified students.

On October 22nd students, faculty, and clergy gathered to dedicate the Bonhoeffer House. Bishop Selbo preached, and I presided at Holy Communion. Less than three years ago this was only a vision, a possibility of what might be. The Bonhoeffer House is a "mustard seed," a very small beginning. But, who knows what will happen when God is at work?

Imagine a growing and vibrant theological center in which students, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders come for years or weeks or just a few days. They come to sharpen their theological knowledge, experience Christian community, and the renewal of their faith. The best years of the NALS are in the future. I believe this because we can depend upon God's promise "to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:2).

THE LORD'S SUPPER

EXODUS 12:1–27 AND MATTHEW 26:20–29

Lutheranism has always claimed that its teaching, including on the Lord's Supper, does not vary "from the Scriptures, or from the Church Catholic" (Augsburg Confession, XXI). The Lord's Supper has its origins in the Exodus story, the Passover sacrifice, and God's covenant with his people. This link is evident in the Gospels when Jesus portrays himself as the Passover lamb: Jesus is the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36). John notes that Jesus's death occurs on the day of the Passover to picture him as the Passover lamb (John 19:14) and the other Gospels highlight Jesus's celebration of the Passover when he inaugurates the Lord's Supper: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover" (Luke 22:15; Mark 14:12; Matthew 26:17–19). The Exodus and the Passover form the theological horizon of what is happening in the Lord's Supper.

Scripture highlights the Exodus as the pinnacle of God's rescue of his people; their continued trust in the Lord stems from his act of love and protection. The Psalms and the Prophets picture the people of God in exile and under oppression, yet in this context they regularly sing of God's past redemption of his people in the Exodus (Psalm 105, 106, 114; Hosea 2:14–15; Ezekiel 20:33–38). By retelling past history, they ask him to do that again, and invoke God's future redemption: history is linked to the hope for God's future restoration. In the story of the Exodus, God subdues the evil Pharaoh who has enslaved God's people. God demands that Pharaoh release his people, and he refuses. God finally says that he will send a plague that will kill the firstborn of all in the land so that Pharaoh would release his people, and they would be freed to live harmoniously as God's people in the Promised land of Canaan.

Movement 1: Passover Sacrifice and Exodus Redemption – Read Exodus 12:1–27

- What must cover the houses of the people so that they are not destroyed by the holiness of God's presence that passes over them (Exod 12:7, 11–13, 22)?
- Certain Old Testament sacrifices require that their offerors "eat the flesh" (Deuteronomy12:27; Leviticus 7:6). How do the people personally participate in the Passover sacrifice so that it is applicable to them as individuals (Exodus 12:8–10; 46–47)?
- What must be done to someone who is not part of the people of God, in order that the person may participate in the Passover (Exodus 12:48–49)?
- How is God's past redemption in the Exodus the basis for future hopes during the exile (Psalm 106:47; Hosea 2:14–15)?

The Passover launches God's redemption of his people in the Exodus and the promised land. The relationship between God and his redeemed people is maintained through his covenant. The Passover becomes a ritual meal whereby the people of God remember that YHWH had redeemed them in the past. In its annual celebration, there is a transition from the past reality, of God saving them, to the present reality of his saving "us" with his present redemption: "the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery" (Exodus 13:14).

When we turn to the story of Jesus, God's people are once again oppressed under the powers of evil and sin. It appears at first that Jesus is celebrating a normal Passover as a participation in God's past Exodus redemption. The shocking surprise is that Jesus turns the attention away from the flesh of the Passover lamb and reshapes the ritual around himself, around his body and blood that he gives to his followers. Just as in the Passover meal YHWH's presence delivered his people, likewise in the bread and wine Jesus's sacrifice will save his disciples. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus initiates the new covenant, which signifies the pouring out of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and new creation to believers in his body.

Movement 2: The Lord's Supper – Read Matthew 26:20-29

- What is shocking about Jesus's Passover meal? Who is the sacrifice?
- Like the Exodus in the past, the people of God hoped for a new covenant. Who is the new covenant centered on in the Lord's Supper? What does the new covenant mean for the people (Jeremiah 31:31–34; 2 Corinthians 3:5–6)?
- Just as the remembrance of the old covenant related to the Passover (Exodus 12:14), to what does the remembrance of the new covenant relate (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:25)?
- Just as the Passover ritual provided hope in exile, how can the Lord's Supper provide us hope now?

These parallels suggest that we can understand the Lord's Supper as a new Passover. By placing his body and blood at the center of the meal, Jesus incredibly states that he is the new Passover lamb. The hopes and promises of God's people are now combined and received in the person of Jesus. As the memorial of the new covenant, early Christians observe the Lord's Supper with rituals like those used in the Jerusalem temple. Because of its holiness, they encourage a proper approach by discouraging idolaters from participation (1 Corinthians 10:15–22), requiring discernment before receiving (1 Corinthians 11:27-31; *Didache* 14.2) and restricting it to the baptized (*Didache* 9.5). They follow a familiar sacrificial ritual pattern used in contemporary religions by saying the words of Jesus and taking, breaking, and distributing the bread and wine. Jesus takes bread, breaks it, and says "this is my body"; he gives his blood "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26, 28). Jesus gives his presence in the bread and the wine so that in them we can commune with him: "is not the bread which we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). Instead of worshipers manipulating God to come down to them, in the Lord's Supper, God comes and gives himself to believers, to the members of Christ's body. Jesus himself, who atones for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), gives himself, his sacrificial body, to believers when they take and eat his body and blood "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). In the meal Christ gives his very being and we Christians receive "His benefits, a sealing and confirmation of the new covenant…, and a firm bond of union of Christians with Christ, their head" (Solid Declaration VII).

The Rev. Peter Beckman

Pastor
Bardo Lutheran Church in Tofield, AB

BILLIE FISCH

Billie Fisch's journey to the North American Lutheran Seminary began when she was a freshman in college and a pastor looked at Billie and told her she thought she was called to ministry. Two years into her studies, Billie was not convinced and even found the idea somewhat comical. But while still in college, she felt God's call once more, so upon graduating she applied to seminary. Although she was accepted, her advisor was a "no show" when it was time to schedule her classes, so she thought perhaps God was not calling her after all. Rather than continuing to pursue seminary formation, Billie became an Intervention Specialist.

Fifteen years later, Billie met her husband, Bob. Driving by a well-placed "Seminary Rd.," she explained her sense of call and Bob responded, "I could really see you being a pastor - you should apply!" Billie then prayed, sought the will of the Lord, and took the next step of applying to a short list of seminaries. As Billie reflected upon her experience of being accepted, receiving scholarship offers, and accepting God's call, she explained, "accepting this call has given me a joy and a peace that I cannot explain except to say it's from God."

Billie's experience of God's call involved a more protracted process than it does for some people, but it also involved passing through several Christian traditions. Reflecting upon the path through which the Lord brought her to the NALS, Billie explains, "Until coming here, I had never been Lutheran. I had been Baptist, Methodist, and Non-Denominational, but not Lutheran." After working in a United Methodist Church in Northern Virginia where her theology was out of place, Billie found her way to Annapolis Lutheran Church (ALC) where she applied for a youth ministry position. It was in the application process that Billie realized that Lutheranism was a good fit for her. This conclusion would be confirmed more deeply once she accepted the position. Billie continues to serve at ALC to this day.

Pastor Mark Metze of Annapolis Lutheran has mentored Billie, displaying for her what life as a pastor looks like, providing sound counsel, and giving ample room for creativity in her ministry to the youth at ALC. Pastor Metze also pointed Billie in the direction of the NALS.

Billie is currently pursuing her Master of Divinity degree at the NALS through the seminary center in Ambridge, Trinity Anglican Seminary. Among her favorite experiences as a NALS student was her time in Ambridge for the June Intensive course, *Word and Sacrament: Mission in a Post-Christian World*. The opportunity to spend time together with classmates inside and outside of class was a joy-filled experience. During this fall semester Billie has been driving to Ambridge for her courses.

In her time at the NALS, Billie has found her classes to be safe spaces where she can share her theological perspective without negative repercussions. When Billie reflected on her short time in the NALS, she noted that "It has been a wonderful experience full of sound theology, and it's also a very friendly and supportive atmosphere to learn in." It has not been without its challenges, since her recent acclimation to Lutheranism has left her without an awareness of specifically Lutheran patterns of theological speech.

Billie has also found the NALC candidacy process to be a great source of encouragement. As she describes it, receiving the committee's approval "confirmed my call for me. It helped me to realize that this is really what God wants me to do and the path he wants me to take!"

As Billie continues serving at Annapolis Lutheran and pursuing her seminary formation remotely through the NALS seminary center, she looks forward with anticipation to joining the NALC ministerium, which, in her experience, is filled with "pastors who are at once firm in the Word and Sacraments, but also lovers of sinners."

ABOUT THE NALS HUB & SPOKES MODEL

The North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) operates on a unique hub and spokes model, designed to provide comprehensive theological education while ensuring accessibility for student needs. At the heart of this model is Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, PA, serving as the Seminary Center where core curriculum, faculty expertise, and administrative support converge. Surrounding the Seminary Center in Ambridge are various spoke seminaries. Together, these spokes complement the central offerings of the Seminary Center, offering students a wide range of study options while maintaining alignment with the mission and Core Values of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). This innovative model allows the NALS to uphold its commitment to forming pastors and leaders for the NALC while accommodating the needs and circumstances of students across North America.

Core Curriculum at the Seminary Center

LUTHERAN TRACK SEMINARY

ST 540	CREEDS AND CATECHISMS
ST 550	LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS
ST 660	THEOLOGY I
ST 670	THEOLOGY II
ST 755	CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE LUTHERAN TRADITION
PT 670	LUTHERAN LITURGY

NON-LUTHERAN TRACK SEMINARY

ST 540	CREEDS AND CATECHISMS
ST 550	LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS
ST 660	THEOLOGY I
ST 670	THEOLOGY II
ST 755	CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE LUTHERAN TRADITION
PT 550	HOMILETICS
PT 670	LUTHERAN LITURGY

Recommended

CH 680	THEOLOGY & WRITINGS OF MARTIN LUYTHER

Two June Intensive Courses + Retreat

at the Seminary Center in Ambridge, PA

Extra-curriculars for all students

- Online Lutheran Formation Group (LFG)
- Online liturgical practica
- Mentorship opportunities
- Recommended resources (as needed)

NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

LUKE RATKE

Luke Ratke is a second-year M.Div. student completing his theological training residentially in Ambridge at the NALS seminary center. Like many others, his call story began long before he first considered the possibility of seminary education.

Luke is from Edmond, Oklahoma, where he and his family have long attended Peace Lutheran Church pastored by Orrey McFarland. As early as elementary school, Luke remembers feeling God's call. Although his parents did not push him to be a pastor, Luke's experience of the call of God led him to answer childhood questions about his hopeful occupation with "pastor."

While Luke considered other vocations as he grew older, the call of God upon Luke's life steadily deepened. Even as he pursued a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering and management, Luke knew that "God has worked through my entire life to shape me for a calling and vocation in ministry." This internal calling was affirmed time and again by the encouragement of pastors and mentors in Luke's life.

Luke counts his blessings when it comes to the ministry mentors God has placed in his life. Early in his life, it was Pastor Keith Falk who answered Luke's questions about theology, the Christian life, and the vocation of pastoral ministry. Once Pastor Orrey took a call at Peace Lutheran, he too began providing Luke with pastoral care, answered his theological questions, and even opened the pulpit to him. Likewise, the faithful members of Peace Lutheran, Luke explained, "helped to teach me the foundation of my faith, prayed for me, and continue to encourage me in various ways." Pastor Matthew Magera of Zion Lutheran Church has served a similar role for Luke during his time at the NALS.

For Luke, the NALS was a natural choice. He had grown up attending a NALC congregation and the NALS could offer an affordable, high quality seminary education.

But Ambridge is a long way from Edmond, and this distance has been one of Luke's greatest challenges. "The biggest challenge," Luke reported, was "the distance… since I had never lived more than an hour away from my immediate family." Nevertheless, Luke considers the NALS to this day, "the best seminary one could attend." Luke is grateful for his "opportunity to spend time with other seminarians, pastors, and professors," and cherishes focusing "so much time and energy learning about God's love."

In addition to the pastors in Luke's life, he also mentioned his appreciation for being mentored by Drs. Luy, Pierce, Riesen, and Gabig during his time at the NALS. Dr. Luy and Dr. Pierce, Luke explained, "have graciously led me through my seminary journey thus far. Seminary is such a time of formation, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, etc. and to have these two great professors leading this formative process on myself and my faith has been a profound benefit of my seminary education at the NALS." Regarding all the mentors in his life, Luke commented, "having so many Christ-loving men and women in my life to mentor me in different ways… is a true blessing from God."

Alongside his theological studies, Luke has appreciated the depth of spiritual formation seminary life has brought with it, and he is also grateful for extensive training in many of the practical skills needed for congregational ministry. Whether through weekly times in our Lutheran Formation Group or a mission trip to San Juan, Puerto Rico, Luke reports that "forming relationships with fellow Christians at the seminary, professors and students, is wonderful!" In Luke's description of his time at the NALS, one of his experiences stands out:

"Sharing in the excitement, anticipation, and awe just before a group of us seminarians lead a worship service is a truly amazing part of seminary. We put on our cassocks and robes together in the sacristy and pray together. It is times like these with the

anticipation and the hunger to worship well that are amazing. The energy and hunger among fellow students for the gospel message to be proclaimed is astounding. Worshiping God next to my fellow seminarians is always a highlight, especially when we are praising God through singing hymns boldly."

As Luke looks ahead to the prospect of joining the NALC ministerium, he is excited "to work beside and support other ministers in spreading God's love to the world." He is encouraged that he will get "to spend his life of ministry growing and strengthening Christ's church next to so many other ministers who feel the same way." He awaits with great anticipation the day that he can "administer the sacraments to strengthen the faith of believers," and he looks forward "to learning from other ministers how to become a better minister throughout my life and spending a lifetime telling other people about how Jesus loves them."

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING CONFESSIONAL AND RELATIONAL

WHILE MINISTERING TO YOUTH AND FAMILIES

Colin Neill, M.Div. '21

Minister to Students and Families
St. Stephen's Anglican Church in Sewickley, PA

The church currently finds itself in a unique cultural setting. We are in a new territory with new challenges and also new opportunities. How does the church continue in a post-pandemic and post-Christian culture? How do we continue to pass on the faith to a generation that is constantly inundated with technological advancement and overcome by anxiety? How do we proclaim a truth, which we know and profess to be the truth, in a culture that claims to have numerous self-proclaimed or self-selected truths? In our contemporary culture, which is often viewed as chaotic and confusing, I want to bring us back not simply to "the way things used to be," pre-pandemic, but rather to the very beginning. There is an apostolic and confessional character to the church's ministry and theology. As we, the church, minister to and disciple the next generation, we must rest on such a firm foundation. As the continual cultural waves crash around us, we are wise not to conform to, and to construct on, "societal sand," but rather to build on the rock of ages upon whom we stand.

After his resurrection, Christ Jesus appeared to his disciples and gave them this mission: to go and "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19–20). Instituted by Christ, this apostolic mission is the charge by which Christ's victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil is taken to the world. It is the means by which we reclaim territory that has been occupied by the enemy. For the church, adherence to this mission begins from the very place where Christ Jesus is first confessed as Lord, in the waters of baptism. In this way, catechesis is not divorced from baptism, but rather joined to it through a continual remembrance of baptism in the triune name. We are wise to return continually to the place where our citizenship changed, where God the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (Colossians 1:13).

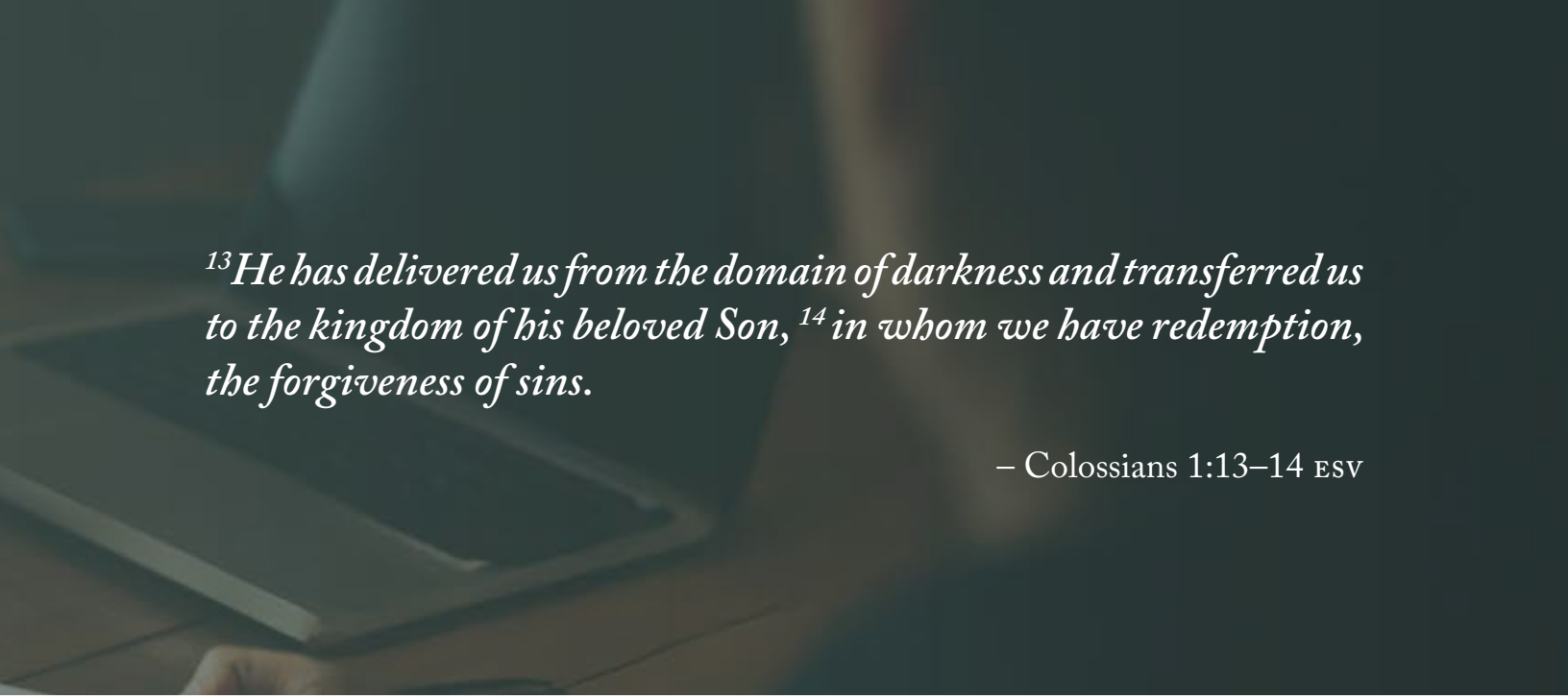
In his second century work, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus wrote:

> The Church … has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God, and the advents, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and His [future] manifestation from heaven in the glory of the Father to gather all things in one. (Ephesians 1:10)[1]

This is one of the earliest examples of the "rule of faith," the foundational belief of the church from the age of the apostles that summarizes our faith and aids the Church in all that it is, says, and does. This rule was later outlined in the Apostle's, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds; the first of which is regularly pronounced over a recipient in the sacrament of baptism.

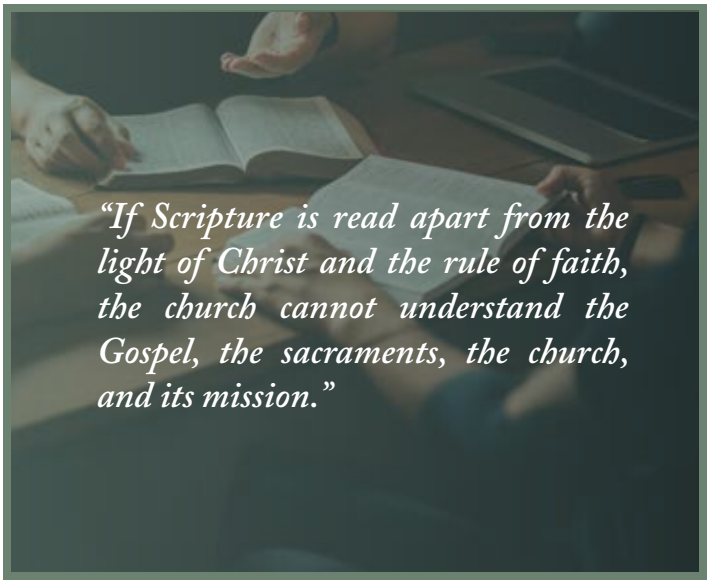
Just as baptism marks entrance into Christ's kingdom, it also marks the central point of confession. By confessing Christ as

1 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.10.



[13] He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, [14] in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

– Colossians 1:13–14 ESV



Lord, we make a public commitment, standing in allegiance to the one true god amid the continual enticement of this world and the allure of its many false gods. Due to our flesh, this struggle is lifelong, and thus, this confession or public commitment is something that we need to do regularly. By confessing our faith in God the Father, his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, believers not only remember who we are and whose we are but are also aided in the interpretation of Scripture. By reading Scripture in light of the rule of faith, the church is informed of who it is and instructed in everything it does, including its ministry and theology. If Scripture is read apart from the light of Christ and the rule of faith, the church cannot understand the gospel, the sacraments, the church, and its mission. Thus, the rule, outlined in the form of creeds, helps the church to identify the overarching narrative of Scripture and its centerpiece, the gospel of Christ.

The youth and teenagers of today want to know truth and we are called to give it to them. But how do we engage a culture that contains so many self-proclaimed truths with the rule of faith or the gospel which we know to be the truth? I sat down with an eighteen-year-old young woman within our congregation to gain more perspective. I asked her how she would broadly describe "teen culture" today. She said that it is one of confusion and brokenness that often leads to the pursuit of unhealthy habits and often destructive coping mechanisms. Teens today have a deep need for a sense of community, belonging, and to be loved. However, many of them have a distrust of institutions. In this way, the church is viewed as outdated and in opposition to a hyper-individualized lifestyle that is perceived as beneficial. They have been formed by a culture that is saturated with the doctrine of instant satisfaction. If faith formation is not instant or is hard to quantify, and if spiritual formation involves a dying to self, why would teenagers want to engage? When the next dopamine hit from scrolling their socials is readily available, why would they want to be a part of a church?

Perhaps the answers to these questions require us to dig a little deeper. One question to ask is: are these places in which teenagers are seeking a deep sense of community, belonging, and love actually delivering on their promises? The truth is, they are not. The connection and community that is advertised via technological devices are man-made mirages that always over-promise and under-deliver. They lack the embodied, incarnate reality of Christ-centered community that fosters a place of deep connection and love. But teenagers today may not even know this because many of them have not had the chance to experience such an embodied community that pursues and loves them.

I asked this young woman, "How do we make the faith accessible to teenagers today? And what advice would you give to current pastors in doing this?" She said that young people need the church to teach the faith by sharing life experiences. In her case, having relationships with those who teach her the faith has helped to make her feel more safe and secure in the teaching. She said that she is far more willing to learn from someone whom she trusts and loves. She also said that faith formation within the home is very important. Many parents today are so busy and exhausted. Teenagers have relentless schedules packed with continuous activities. Communication and connection within the home often simply involves logistical coordination and lacks relational intimacy. In many of these homes, faith formation is an afterthought. Our families need to be catechized alongside our teenagers. How do we do this? Consider inviting parents to be a part of your confirmation classes. Allow gatherings historically designed for teenagers to include the whole family. Create opportunities for families to serve together. Visit homes and have dinner with families or invite families over to your home for dinner. Be creative with ways to meet them where they are and foster community amongst them.

I also asked this young woman what her advice would be to pastors in reaching teenagers today and she said this: make sure to cultivate a community in which teenagers can grow. Identify and train up lay leaders who will share their lives with teenagers and ask them how they are doing. It is so important to have voices in addition to parents' voices speaking truth into their lives. Get to know the students and be present in your youth ministry. Take the time to get to know their names, their interests, their families, and share yours with them. She said that she is better able to understand your sermons and teaching if she knows you and the place from which you are teaching. Discipleship for her is not just an exchange of information or a change of behavior, but a shared life, and when I read Scripture, I see how this rings true.

So how do we engage our ever-changing youth and family culture today? We are wise to teach the foundations of the faith that provide spiritual depth. However, we must do so not only by engaging the mind, but also the heart by living out such a faith within authentic relationships. Discipleship is by nature highly relational. Just look at Jesus and the twelve. When discipleship is relational, we are formed in the faith and grow in our relationship with the Lord, we grow in community with fellow believers, and we are strengthened to go out and share the gospel with those we meet along the way. In Christ, together we find authentic community and loving connection rooted in the truth given to us by Christ himself through the apostles: the gospel message outlined in the rule of faith and the creeds, the scriptures, and the sacraments. With these gifts, along with the power of the Holy Spirit, who is with us now and until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20), we can contend with the formulated fallacies of our age and reclaim territories and hearts occupied by the enemy.

"Discipleship is by nature highly relational. Just look at Jesus and the twelve. When discipleship is relational, we are formed in the faith and grow in our relationship with the Lord, we grow in community with fellow believers, and we are strengthened to go out and share the gospel with those we meet along the way."

BYLD

BUILDING YOUTH AS LEADERS WHO ARE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

GENEVA COLLEGE

NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN CHURCH

JULY 7 – 12, 2025
BEAVER FALLS, PA

BYLD is a week-long event for high school students that focuses on leadership skills, theological education and discernment all from the perspective of the NALC Four Core Values.

BYLD will take place July 7–12, 2025 at Geneva College, only 14 miles from the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS). The cost for students is $100 and their transportation to PA (a travel subsidy is available for those coming from further away).

Spaces are limited, so make sure to register quickly! For more information and to register contact Pastor Teresa Peters, director of Youth and Family Ministry for the NALC, tpeters@thenalc.org.

LEARN MORE AT
WWW.THENALC.ORG/YOUTHANDFAMILY

BAPTISM AS THE FOUNDATION FOR VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

The Rev. Jeff Morlock

Director of Vocational Discernment
North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS)

The word *vocation* is experiencing something of a resurgence today, not only in religious circles, but in secular society. The conversations about vocation and the practice of vocational discernment, however, are often narrowly framed by an emphasis on one's talents and passions. The focus of this column is to explore how a Lutheran understanding of baptism corrects misunderstandings about the nature and significance of vocation.

For Martin Luther, the distinctive characteristics of vocation were as follows:

> (1) All human work is equally valued, not only specifically religious work.
>
> (2) The purpose of human work is not primarily to please God but to serve the neighbor.
>
> (3) All of us have multiple vocations–over a lifetime, of course, but also within multiple dimensions of human life at the same time.
>
> (4) The call to live faithfully in service of the neighbor is not limited to Christians but is part of God's intent for the whole creation.[1]

While Luther's expansive definition of vocation continues to be invaluable in our modern context, my focus here is confined to vocation as job or career. Anxiety over choosing a meaningful career path is increasing today, especially among young people. What gives rise to this anxiety is often the question, "What if I choose the wrong college or major or job?" The pressure for teenagers to have what feels like a comprehensive life plan in place during high school years weighs heavily on many. But what is the source of this anxiety? Author David Zahl suggests that it stems from living in a culture which idolizes work.

> When work becomes the primary arbiter of identity, purpose, worth, and community in our lives, it has ceased to function as employment and begun to function as a religion. Or at least we have made it responsible for providing the very things for which we used to look to God.[2]

Reacting to this idolization of work, some choose to see labor from merely from a utilitarian perspective, as either drudgery or a means to an end such as early retirement, and feel pressure to choose an occupation that is lucrative, even if it is not something they personally value or enjoy. In our secular culture, even many Christians are less likely to consider their choice of work as having much at all to do with faith. However, this is precisely where the witness of Martin Luther, the Reformers, and the Lutheran Confessions have much to contribute to a richer understanding of vocation today, both in and beyond Lutheran contexts.

The Reformers' insight that holy baptism confers not only grace and faith, but also a given identity, as beloved sons and daughters of God, has the potential to set believers free from overvaluing or idolizing work to justify themselves. As the framers of the Augsburg Confession stated, "It is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before

1 Kathryn Kleinhans, "Distinctive Lutheran Contributions to the Conversation about Vocation" (*Intersections*: Vol. 2016, No. 43, Article 7), 24.

2 David Zahl, *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do About It* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2020), 94.

God through our merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by 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."[3]

At the same time, Lutheran confessional commitments can serve as a safeguard against undervaluing work. Helping Christians understand baptism as the source of their identity, righteousness, and justification before God will set them free to understand work, not as a means of finding or creating an identity, but as an expression of their identity as God's children, by virtue of the sacrament. As youth make the connection between baptism and vocation through confirmation classes, youth groups, retreats, mentorship, and conversations with older adults, they will learn to view work, not primarily as a source of income or reputation, but as an opportunity to serve their neighbor. Hence, the phrase, attributed to Luther himself, "God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does."

Christian baptism then, is a commission to contribute to the flourishing of our neighbor. "Work is no longer simply a job … It is a summons from God. Vocation is also where the Spirit sanctifies the Christian's life, not in a self-centered quest for perfection, but rather in humble service to the neighbor."[4]

To people experiencing anxiety over choosing a career, the truth that vocation is a gift given by God should come as a relief. There is a certain freedom in understanding that one's various vocations, including work, are given by God in baptism along with the ability to fulfill them, and thus belong to a higher order.

Finally, baptism is also a foundational basis for all subsequent discernment, which is a lifelong process of listening to the Spirit of God through the word of Scripture and the community of the church. The constant pressure to decide about vocation is eliminated because God has already decided! One can practice this type of listening and move boldly forward to pursue that which they have discerned, knowing that where the Lord has called them, He will provide. I often emphasize this truth to our prospective NALS students who are often in mid-career and married with children. In many cases, their call to ministry is clear, but they wonder if they will have the time and finances to pursue theological education. It may sound trite, but where God has already decided, He has already provided. I think here of Abram and Sarai who left Ur when God called them to "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1).

Lastly, my personal belief and testimony is that if a person has wrongly "discerned" God's call the Holy Spirit will continue to use his word and other people to correct, guide, and encourage. As a freshman in high school, I discerned a call to Word and Sacrament ministry, a call that was not questioned until my sophomore year in college, when I declared a major in social work, in addition to my religion major. The final confirmation came, though, when my Jewish social work supervisor completed my final evaluation, gave me a glowing review, and remarked, "Just be sure to invite me to your ordination!" When we pay attention, the Lord will confirm his intentions in unexpected ways. As a friend of mine likes to say, "It's already written in the book."

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3 AC IV 1-3 (Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959], 30).

4 Robert Benne, "Martin Luther on the Vocations of a Christian," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.363, August 31, 2016.

DR. ALEXANDER H. PIERCE PRESENTS AT OXFORD

THE XIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PATRISTIC STUDIES

From August 5–9, 2024, Dr. Alexander H. Pierce participated in the XIXth International Conference on Patristic Studies at the University of Oxford, an international conference that takes place every four years. His paper, titled "Pelagius as the Patron of Perfection(ism)? The Shaping of Anician Asceticism amidst Competing Programs of Moral Instruction," considered competing visions of the Christian life in the early fifth century by analyzing an episode of the Pelagian Controversy.

The paper examined a letter Pelagius wrote at the request of Juliana, a leading member of the Anician family, which represented the upper crust of the Roman aristocracy. Juliana sought clerical guidance from leading theologians of the time (i.e., Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine) concerning the spiritual life of her daughter, Demetrias, who had recently committed to a path of celibacy. That these theologians each proposed their own programs of moral instruction to this same young virgin at the outset of the Pelagian Controversy provides a unique opportunity to compare their divergent theological perspectives concerning the nature of moral reform and the Christian life.

For Pelagius, it is a basic principle of the spiritual life—much criticized by Augustine—that the grace of nature (i.e., proper use of created human powers and capacities) merits the grace of the Spirit. This basic counsel shows up prominently in Pelagius's letter to Demetrias. He writes: "spiritual riches no one can give you other than yourself… Spiritual riches can not be there, unless they come from you alone" (*Ep. ad Dem.* 11.1). Pelagius affirms that "grace enables all the holiness we have," but for him grace is really just a way of referring to the gifts of human nature as grace with which God endows Adam and Eve from the beginning. From this perspective, grace in the sense of special divine assistance (the more conventional sense assumed by most subsequent strains of the Christian tradition)

ends up functioning as a due payment from God for proper moral exertion on the part of human beings created in God's image. Neither Jerome nor Augustine were comfortable with this way of seeing things, and they thus opposed Pelagius and his teachings concerning nature and grace.

Dr. Pierce's paper at the conference highlighted aspects of Pelagius's self-interest on display in this crucial letter with an eye towards pushing back on the recent trend among scholars to dismiss criticisms of Pelagius's theology of grace. The essay will be published sometime in the next year or so as a part of the conference proceedings, the *Studia Patristica*.

We are grateful for Dr. Pierce's ongoing research as it promises to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the witness historical theology has to offer to the church of today.

TOO COOL FOR SCHOOL?

Rebecka V. Andræ Frontz

Administrative Coordinator
North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS)

NALS Network seminarians were among the 300 youth and leaders who came together for four days in July 2024 at the inaugural NALC Continental Youth Gathering (CYG). They gathered around the theme "We Belong" and spent time getting to know each other: engaging in local activities (such as the Tejas Rodeo); conducting mission work and completing projects; listening to speakers on various topics (such as Michelle Bauman from Lutherans for Life—or, Y4Life—and Pastor Michael Wikstrom who is a retired US Army chaplain and an expert in suicide prevention); enjoyed lots of singing; dove into God's word in small-group Bible study; and worshipped the triune God in large-group liturgy.

Ethan Zimmerman and Cody Cooper are residential seminarians at the seminary center in Ambridge, PA, where Ethan is in his final year of seminary study and Cody is in his second year. Both could be spotted wearing the yellow shirts worn by leaders and the YALLs: Young Adult Lutheran Leaders, the moniker selected by those in attendance.

As Cody reflected on the gathering, he noted that the theme was well developed, and nothing was "dumbed down", which he believes the youth noticed. He observed candid discussions on various topics such as suicide and abortion, which helped make the time together authentic and not superficial. The depth of conversations and the insights gained became even more meaningful as the youth experienced being part of Christ's church within the current cultural context. Attendees were demonstrably encouraged to see that there are many other young believers with whom they can identify and find fellowship. The theme was brought to a crescendo when a teenager was baptized at the final worship service. Having been asked to attend by a friend, she fully experienced God's love for her, and he claimed her as his own; she belongs! She was not "too cool for school."

Silly… that's one attitude that Ethan decided to embody during the large-group gatherings. Observing that some members of the youth started acting like they were "too school for school," Ethan decided to be silly and to use exaggerated hand-movements during the songs and dance around. Within a day, the youth who had previously shied away from movements were joining Ethan and the rest of those assembled in movement and song.

One attendee was so inspired by Ethan's exuberance and joy that he gave Ethan a note on the last day which read:

Thank you for always being kind and showing me what it means to be a true Christian.

Instead of being "too cool for school," we pray that all future pastors being formed to serve in the NALC can be described this way by those people whom the Holy Spirit will call them to serve.

A DECADE OF PASTORAL FORMATION

NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN SEMINARY
CELEBRATING 10 YEARS

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Ten years ago, the North American Lutheran Seminary was only a vision. We dreamed of a seminary where pastors are formed in the Great Tradition of the Christian faith and the evangelical witness of the Lutheran Confessions. Over the past ten years, that vision has become a reality. The NALS has grown into a hub-and-spokes network of schools across North America that are focused on raising up faithful and well-prepared leaders for the NALC.

As we look back on the past ten years, we can't help but celebrate the countless ways God has blessed the NALS—through our students, our faculty, and our alumni, and through generous supporters like you.

From day one, the NALS has been dedicated to nurturing pastors and leaders who are passionate about the gospel and prepared to serve our congregations. Our students not only learn theology, they experience it. NALS students are being formed to grow in their love for God's Word, to dive deep into the richness of the sacraments, and to become part of a community that shapes them into the pastors and leaders that the Church so desperately needs.

We are astounded with immense gratitude. So many of you have walked alongside the NALS—through prayer, encouragement, and financial support. Thanks to your care for our seminary community, we can celebrate this milestone. Your partnership has allowed the seminary to flourish in ways we could have only dreamed of ten years ago. Today, NALS alumni are serving congregations and communities across North America, bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. It's beautiful to behold this impact—and, it's just the beginning!

As we celebrate the first ten years of the NALS, we also look ahead with excitement and hope. We know the Lord has even more in store for the NALS in the years to come. But, we will need your continued partnership. Join us in dreaming about the next ten years of the NALS. Your support—whether through prayer, spreading the word, or a financial contribution—makes a difference. Together we can equip future pastors and leaders to continue the work God has set before us in the NALC.

GETTING TO KNOW MADDIE BENSON

Maddie Benson, the Director of Development for the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) and the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS), brings a wealth of experience and passion to her role, rooted in a lifelong connection to the church. Raised in Upper Arlington Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio, Maddie's faith was nurtured in this vibrant community, which formed her commitment to service within the church.

Having served the NALC from 2016 to 2021, Maddie has been an integral part of our journey. Starting out in an administrative role at the Ohio office, she later transitioned to a communications position, where she collaborated closely with the Rev. Dcn. Andrew Ames Fuller, M.Div.'20, S.T.M.'22. Her prior experiences laid a solid foundation for her current leadership role, allowing her to blend administrative expertise with an understanding of the church's mission.

In 2021, Maddie and her husband launched Yellow Tent Nomads, a creative video production company that allowed her to explore her entrepreneurial spirit while remaining connected to the church. Now, as she has returned to our staff, Maddie is more committed than ever to fostering robust relationships with churches and congregants, recognizing the importance of direct engagement in her development work.

She is currently completing her Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree with a concentration in nonprofit management. She continues to equip herself with the tools necessary to enhance the NALC's development strategies. Her educational pursuits align seamlessly with her vision for broadening the church's impact and deepening its witness in communities across North America and beyond.

Maddie has expressed her enthusiasm for her role, saying, "It is an honor to serve the NALC as the Director of Development. The potential to deepen and broaden our faithful witness is vast, and I am committed to illuminating these opportunities and engaging our community in support of God's work through the North American Lutheran Church."

Maddie is leveraging her experience and passion for building meaningful connections. Her appointment reflects not only her individual gifts but also the collective vision of the NALC to strengthen its mission and outreach.

As Maddie assumes the responsibilities of her new role, she looks forward to connecting with congregations and individuals, working together to support the mission of the NALC and NALS. Her commitment to collaboration and community engagement promises to enhance the church's development efforts and foster a vibrant future for all.

CONNECT WITH MADDIE

EMAIL DEVELOPMENT@THENALC.ORG

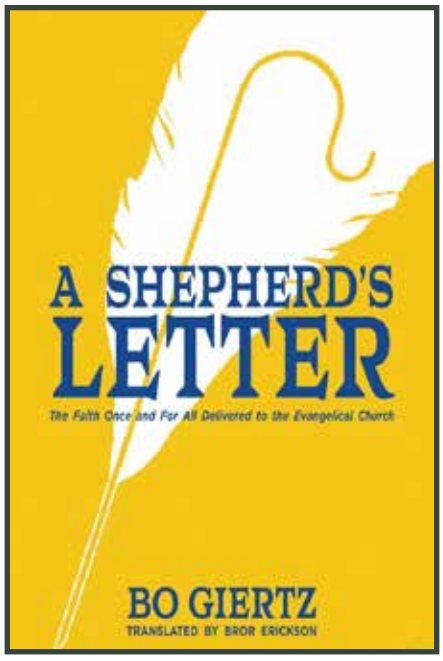
FANNING THE FLAMES OF FAITH

ONE CONGREGATION'S JOURNEY TOWARD SPIRTUAL RENEWAL

Cody Cooper

M.Div. Candidate
NALS Seminary Center

My pastor and friend, the Rev. Dr. Bert Eldredge, recently introduced *A Shepherd's Letter* by Bishop Bo Giertz to his congregation, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Casper, WY. Pastor Bert shared with me how it has enhanced the life of the congregation. Pastor Bert first encountered *A Shepherd's Letter* in a June Intensive taught by Drs. David Luy and Alex Pierce at the main campus of the North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) in Ambridge, PA. Moved by the book's content, Pastor Bert decided to lead members of his parish through the book as a part of their Adult Sunday School class. The book has had a deep impact.



The study opened the minds and hearts of the members of Prince of Peace to the beauty and significance of liturgy, to the awakening of the soul, and to the importance of confessing their faith boldly and publicly. Members of the congregation would often come into the church saying, "We've got questions, Pastor Bert," and on one occasion there was a gentleman who came in and said, "I didn't have a conversion experience like you, Pastor Bert. I was born in the church. I always believed. I was raised and taught in the church, and, for a while, I left the church. I didn't fail in my belief, but I was just falling empty. So I don't understand this awakened soul." Pastor Bert reminded the gentleman of a story he had shared about the time he was at church with his mom for Christmas, when all of a sudden, the gospel message started to make sense. Relating back to the book, Pastor Bert told the man, "That is what it means for your soul to be awakened."

As a result of their new understanding of what it means to be a part of Christ's church and the inheritance we have received through her, members began engaging more actively in the life of the church. Another outcome of the study was the way in which the congregation began to appreciate the power of prayer, that God hears us when we pray and responds for our good. Throughout the interview, Pastor Bert emphasized how the people at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church had begun to internalize the unity between the spiritual and scholastic aspects of our faith.

When asked what he would suggest to fellow pastors and congregations across the NALC, Pastor Bert stressed how crucial it is to order Bible studies and Adult Sunday School materials to the needs of the local parish. For this very reason, pastors should be careful to select materials that are simple enough for the average congregation member to understand. Pastor Bert identified three books he would recommend that all congregations consider studying: (1) *A Shepherd's Letter* by Bishop Bo Giertz, (2) *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, and (3) the Augsburg Confession. He deemed the Augsburg

SAVE THE DATE FOR THE 2025 JUNE INTENSIVE

June 9–14, 2025

The NALS Seminary Center
Ambridge, PA

The theme of the 2025 June Intensive will explore Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Pastor-Theologian. This course will explore how Bonhoeffer exemplifies the NALC's Core Values: Christ Centered, Mission Driven Traditionally Grounded, and Congregationally Focused.

LEARN MORE AT
WWW.THENALS.ORG/INTENSIVE

Confession to be especially important, as our congregations often have many people who have come into the Lutheran tradition without any prior knowledge of its distinctives. While they may have been attending the church for years, many of them are not aware of what we believe as Lutherans, not to mention how we can defend our faith and our tradition in this increasingly hostile world. Together with Luther's small and large catechisms, the Augsburg Confession articulates the heart of what it means to be Lutheran.

Pastor Bert strongly encouraged all pastors in the NALC to consider participating in the annual June Intensive program here at the North American Lutheran Seminary at Trinity Anglican Seminary. Pastor Bert views these June Intensive courses as a necessary opportunity for pastors to get a better sense of the direction the church is moving, and to receive valuable continuing education by which pastors will be further equipped to strengthen their ministries to our local churches.

WATCH THE FULL INTERVIEW WITH PASTOR ELDREDGE

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Rebecka V. Andræ Frontz

Administrative Coordinator
North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS)

When Pastor Taylor Rister-Stempniak, M.Div. '20 agreed to an interview at Immanuel Lutheran Church in the agrarian region of Easton, California, she did so without an expectation of it being a good fit for her. However, she describes it to this day as "love at first sight." The Holy Spirit calls and equips God's people for ministry in many places and contexts and he called Pastor Taylor to the historically Danish congregation of Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Immanuel's gospel ministry has been a long and fruitful one. Founded in 1888, it merged with another Danish congregation in the early 1900s and has continued to bear witness to the good news through its weekly liturgies; semi-annual, intergenerational Vacation Bible School (VBS); a 20-year collaboration with Fresno Mission (ministry to those who are homeless and/or living with addiction); a booth at the local fair; the annual Thanksgiving Eve pie fellowship with Fresno Mission; and a holistic approach to stewardship.

While these outward signs demonstrated to Pastor Taylor that Immanuel was a healthy congregation, what was it that made her experience her first encounter as *love at first sight*?

Much like falling in love, it can be difficult to explain. We can each enumerate the qualities of our beloved, yet others possess those same qualities. The moment of connection and the process of falling in love is an intrinsic reaction and recognition. Pastor Taylor recognized and appreciated all the qualities of Immanuel: the proud Danish heritage, the mission-minded atmosphere, the intergenerational approach to ministry, and more. Immanuel fell in love with her in return and called her to be their pastor. Thankfully, her love was requited!

Pastor Taylor arrived in 2021 and jumped right in. She reframed post-pandemic recovery work as growth opportunities and guided the congregation in evaluating its ministries to determine what Immanuel is passionate about and what, if anything, Immanuel was doing simply because they've "always done it." Pastor Taylor assisted the congregation in working to build ministries around the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ as opposed to building a ministry around any one person.

Pastor Taylor graduated from the NALS in 2020 as a residential student at the seminary center in Ambridge, PA. She found the preparation she received was integral to her pastoral formation. "The incredible faculty, the academic rigor, and discipleship at the forefront of every class helped to prepare me to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ—not only to get good grades," said Pastor Taylor. The two most important classes for her were Homiletics and Liturgy. She recalled, "Dr. Schifrin is so passionate about liturgy, about how liturgy forms us and weaves us into stories of salvation."

Pastor Taylor has stepped into a new role as the mission district dean for Central Pacific Mission District. Married to Luke, an attorney, she has settled into life in Easton, California. Coming from the Carolinas Mission Region, she's had to adjust to wide-open spaces and congregations located hours away. The Holy Spirit continues to equip her as she serves and loves God's people at Immanuel, in the local community, and throughout the mission district.

CALLING ALL ALUMNI!

We want to hear from you! Stay connected and keep us updated with your latest news. Sharing your information helps us strengthen our community and keep you informed about upcoming events and opportunities.

Visit our webpage below to update your information today!

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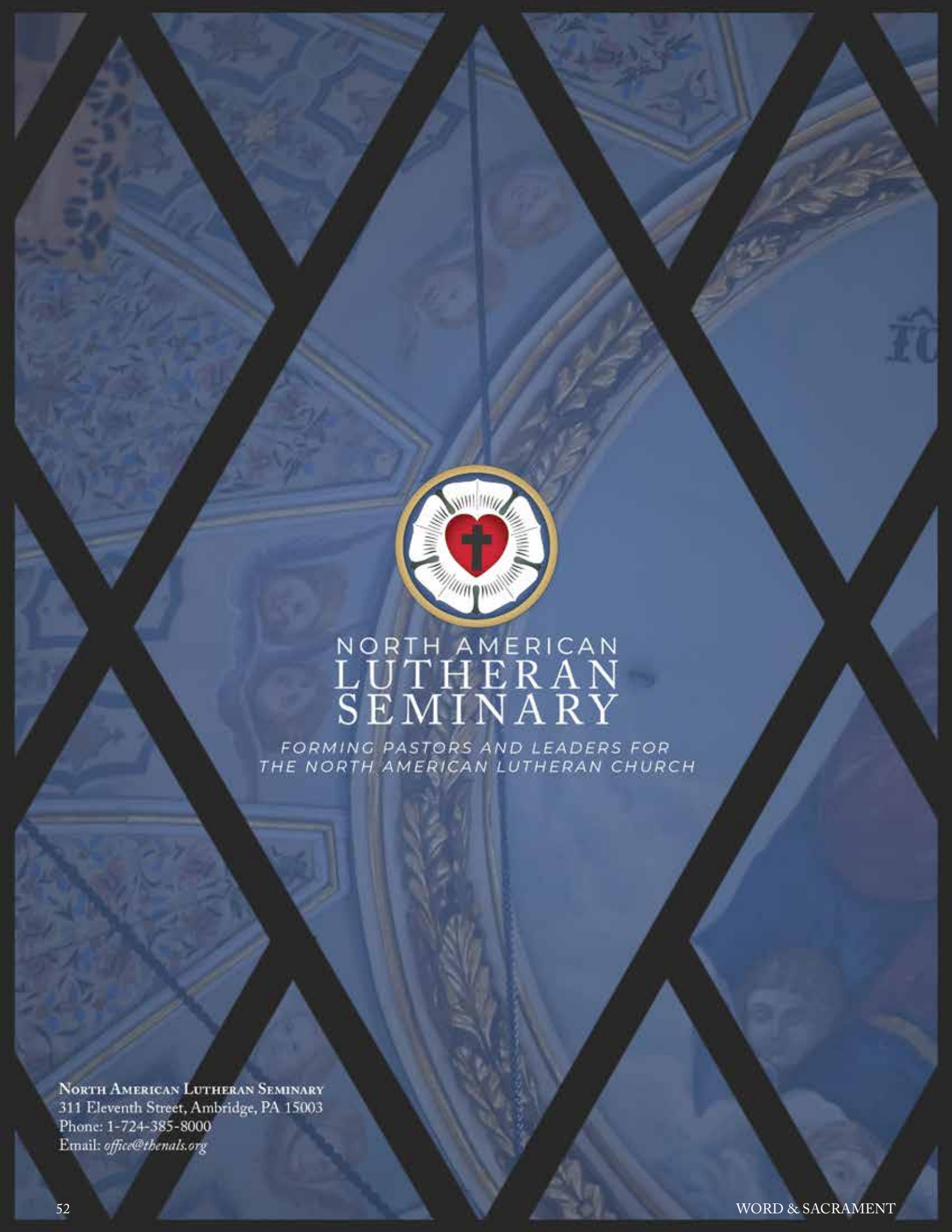
NORTH AMERICAN LUTHERAN SEMINARY
CELEBRATING 10 YEARS



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