

Confessing the Faith: Luther at Worms
Convention of the Wyoming District, LCMS
Rev. John E. Hill; May 6, 2021

The doctrinal essays at this convention will be given by four of our pastors. We are remembering and giving thanks to God for an event in our Church's history 500 years ago, on April 18, 1521. Luther stood before central Europe's Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and confessed the truth of Christ. We are the children and heirs of his confession and his piety. Our essays will explore these four general topics: first, Luther's Confession at Worms and its implications for our church today (that's my task); second, "The Biblical Doctrine of Confession" (Pastor Kenneth Mars); third, "Lessons from Magdeburg for Today" on the Church's confession (Pastor Christian Preus); and fourth, "Confession in our Culture and World today" (Pastor Jonathan Lange).

From the outset, I would like to emphasize to you that Christian confession includes both the act and the content of the confession. It is an action, that is, you will have to take a stand both with your words and with your body and life. But it is also content, that is, true doctrine, without which any stand you take would be sheer vanity and a participation in the devil's lie. The Church's confession – the Christian's confession – is the confession of Jesus Christ and His Word. With that, let's turn to our first essay.

Introduction

It turns out that the history of the church at any place or time is a part of the history of the whole Church. You can enter into that history and see the acts and deeds of one man, or one congregation, or one event in the long and growing account of Christendom, and you will have entered into the history of the whole church. It is a history of God's deeds, beginning with many deeds that the world denies or overlooks, including the death and bodily resurrection of Christ, the daily Baptism and forgiveness of Christians, and the return of Christ in glory. The Church's history is a history of the contention for His Word, of Christians bearing scorn, of confession by words and confession by deeds and confession by martyrdom. There is deep sorrow because of sin, and error, and evil, on account of which we cry out to God daily. There is joy because of forgiveness, and truth, and goodness. There are craven, cowardly deeds. There is persecution that fills up the suffering of Christ. And there is always the confession of the truth of God's Word.

Luther knew and believed this great truth about the Church and her confession. Late in 1520, as Luther contemplated the potential summons to stand before the court of

the Holy Roman Empire, with Emperor Charles V and the imperial estates as his judge and jury, he wrote a letter to his good friend, George Spalatin. Would he come and stand before this court, even if it meant imprisonment, torture, or death? Here is Luther's answer:

Of course I would by all means come, if called, in so far as it would be up to me, even if I could not come by my own power and instead would have to be driven there as a sick man. For it would not be right to doubt that I am called by the Lord if the Emperor summons. Further, if they should employ force in this matter, which is most probable (for they do not want me called there because they want to learn something), then this matter can only be commended to the Lord. For He who saved the three men in the furnace of the Babylonian king still lives and rules. If He does not want to preserve me, then my head is of slight importance compared with Christ, who was put to death in greatest ignominy – a stumbling block to all and the ruin of many. No one's danger, no one's safety can be considered here. We must rather take care that we do not expose the gospel (which we have finally begun to promote) to the derision of the godless and thus give our enemies a reason for boasting over us because we do not dare confess what we have taught and are afraid to shed our blood for it. May the merciful Christ prevent such cowardice on our part and such boasting on their part. Amen.

Of course it has come about that the kings and rulers of the earth would gather and rage with the nations and peoples against God and His Christ. Yet the Spirit teaches in that same Psalm [Psalm 2] that those who trust in God will be blessed; and not only this, but also that the Lord will laugh and deride those who don't. Certainly it is not up to us to decide whether my life, or for that matter my death, will bring greater or less danger for the gospel and the public welfare. You know that God's truth is a rock of stumbling set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel [Is. 8:14; Lk 2:34]. . .

Now you have my judgment and opinion on this matter. You may expect everything of me except flight and recanting. I do not want to escape, much less recant; may the Lord Jesus strengthen me in this. I could do neither without endangering piety and the salvation of many. (December 29, 1520, AE 48.188–190)

This essay will have two sections. First, I will describe the history of Luther's confession at Worms. Following this brief history, I will discuss the place of truth, in particular, the truth of God's Word, in every Christian confession. Luther's example will serve a salutary illustration of the situation that faces every Christian in his place in life.

Luther at Worms

It is a wonder that a 37-year-old ordained monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg should stand before the most powerful civil ruler of Western Europe. Wittenberg was a backwater German town of some 2,500 inhabitants (smaller than Glenrock, WY). The University was only 10 years old when Luther first arrived in 1512. When he addressed the Emperor at Worms, Luther apologized if he used the wrong titles and modes of address. He simply had no exposure to such things in Wittenberg.

And yet, here he was before Emperor and Empire. You know that 3 ½ years before, Luther had nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, an act that was intended to initiate debate about an abusive pastoral practice regarding indulgences. The Theses were copied, printed, and distributed across the empire. The unknown professor suddenly gained notoriety. It also earned him enemies.

God was at work in the growing controversy, for He drove Luther into a deeper and better understanding of the doctrine taught in Holy Scriptures. Luther studied, wrote, taught, debated, and defended over those 3 ½ years. In the summer of 1518 he participated in a widely publicized debate in the city of Leipzig. That debate put him on a direct collision course with the papacy in Rome. By August that year, Luther was summoned to Rome to be tried. Although he did not go to Rome, his official trial began that October with a hearing before the papal legate in Augsburg.

The death of Emperor Maximilian I in January 1519 delayed Luther's trial while the seven electors of the Empire chose his successor. The papacy tried to court the favor of Luther's prince, the Elector Duke Frederick, in the political wrangling that ensued. The election maneuvering gave Luther time to work in peace. Charles V was elected Emperor on June 28, 1519 and was crowned at Aachen, Germany on October 26 the following year.

1520 turned out to be a year of great productivity for Luther. He proposed a full agenda of reformation to the rulers of Germany and wrote major works against the Roman sacramental system and on the teaching of Christian freedom. Nevertheless, in January 1520 proceedings against Luther returned in earnest in Rome. Meetings at the papal court in late May and early June produced the papal bull, *Exsurge Domine*, which threatened Luther's excommunication. This official condemnation of Luther's teachings finally reached Wittenberg on October 10, 1520. On December 10, Luther and a crowd of students outside the Elster Gate of Wittenberg publicly burned the bull, along with books of canon law. The time of reckoning was coming.

The pope issued a bull of excommunication January 3, 1521, which required that Luther be handed over to the Roman church for punishment. But the civil rulers did not immediately obey the pope's demands. From the end of 1520 through the early months of 1521 Duke Frederick and Emperor Charles negotiated about how to give Luther a fair public hearing before they proclaimed him a notorious heretic and imposed civil penalties upon him. They finally agreed to give him that hearing at the parliamentary assembly – the Diet – of the Empire, to be held at the Imperial free city of Worms in southwest Germany. Importantly, a guarantee of safe-conduct was issued for Luther to attend. The summons arrived on March 29. He left Wittenberg on about April 2.

It is over 300 miles from Wittenberg to Worms. Luther traveled with companions in a covered wagon and preached at stops in Erfurt, Gotha, and Eisenach. In Eisenach he was not feeling well and had to be bled. In Weimar he learned that he had already practically been judged guilty in a ruling of the Emperor.

They reached Frankfurt on April 14 and Luther was feeling better again. In a letter to his friend George Spalatin, he wrote, "But Christ lives, and we shall enter Worms in spite of all the gates of hell and the powers in the air." He was determined to enter Worms, "even if as many devils were in that city as tiles on the roofs" (Brecht I.449f).

They entered Worms on April 16, welcomed by crowds of supporters. The next morning, Luther heard confession from an ailing knight and celebrated communion with him. The formal summons came later that morning to appear at the diet at four o'clock that afternoon. There was to be no debate; he was only to answer questions addressed to him. At his appearance, the imperial records give this description of him: "Forty years old, eyes and lively features which he frivolously changed. As clothing he wore the garb of the Augustinian order with its leather belt, the large tonsure freshly shaved, with his hair cut somewhat more than was customary" (Brecht I.453).

Luther was to answer two questions: Were the books – piled on a table in the hall – his books? And would he retract, or recant, anything in them? He replied first in German, then in Latin. After examining the books in question, Luther willingly acknowledged them as his own. In reply to the second question, however, he asked to be given a day to consider and prepare a faithful answer. He had come ready to answer for specific teachings, but not to give a total confession or total rejection of all his books. Luther knew that the salvation of his soul and the Word of God were at stake, that indeed he stood before the Final Judge of all men. He asked for time.

Time was granted him, though with some reluctance. Luther was warned “that he should keep in mind the unity of the holy, catholic, and apostolic church and the general peace and quiet of the Christian commonwealth, and that he should not contrive to rend apart what he ought to respect, venerate, and adore” (AE 32.124). He was dismissed, to appear the next day.

In a letter written later that evening, Luther summarized his appearance before the Emperor and the demand to renounce his books. Luther wrote, “With Christ’s help, however, I shall not in all eternity recant the least particle” (AE 48.200).

It was about six o’clock the next evening, April 18, before Luther was again brought before the Diet, this time in a larger hall to accommodate the crowds. The court official placed the question before Luther again and reprimanded him for not being prepared to answer the previous day. But Luther was now well prepared to give an answer: “I can bear no other witness about myself but that I have taught and written up to this time with simplicity of heart, as I had in view only the glory of God and the sound instruction of Christ’s faithful” (AE 32.109).

Luther continued by dividing his varied writings into three groups. The first group were books in which he taught Christian faith and piety so simply and evangelically that even the opponents recognized them as good and useful. He could not retract such sound teaching.

The second group were writings against the papacy and its teachings, which were destroying souls, tormenting consciences, and torturing the church with cruel tyranny. He could not retract these writings, lest he confirm and strengthen such evils.

The third group of writings were against individual persons who either defended the Roman church’s tyranny or attacked the doctrine Luther was teaching. Here he conceded that he had at times written more sharply than was appropriate for his call as a teacher of theology. Nevertheless, he could not retract these writings either, because the teachings were not his but Christ’s. But if someone would refute him from Holy Scriptures, he was prepared to recant any error immediately.

In concluding his answer, Luther responded to the reminder to “keep in mind the unity of the holy, catholic, and apostolic church and the general peace and quiet of the Christian commonwealth.” He declared,

To see excitement and dissension arise because of the Word of God is to me clearly the most joyful aspect of all in these matters. For this is the way, the

opportunity, and the result of the Word of God, just as He [Christ] said, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, etc.' [Matt. 10:34-35]. Therefore, we ought to think how marvelous and terrible is our God in his counsels, lest by chance what is attempted for settling strife grows rather into an intolerable deluge of evils, if we begin by condemning the Word of God. (AE 32.111)

Although it was hot in the hall, so that Luther was now perspiring heavily, he insisted on repeating this lengthy speech in Latin. The official who was questioning Luther rebuked him for believing that he alone could interpret Scriptures, that he held his judgment above many famous men who went before him, that he should bring doubt into the true faith instituted by Christ and the apostles – confirmed by the blood of the martyrs, expounded by the teachers of the church, and fixed by the judgment of councils.

He then demanded of Luther directly that he give a simple, honest, and straightforward answer, without "horns," that is, without clever reservations. Would he, or would he not, recant his books and the errors in them? Luther spoke for us all in this great confession:

Since then your serene majesty and lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by a clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen. (AE 32.112f)

The second part of our essay will give attention to the substance of Luther's great confession. But let me first summarize briefly how the rest of Luther's journey played out. Still that evening, before the assembly adjourned, the court official pressured Luther to reconsider, but he would not change his answer. The next day the Emperor declared himself in writing as Luther's opponent, "I am absolutely determined to stake on this cause my kingdoms and seigniories, my friends, my body and blood, my life and soul. . . I am determined to proceed against him as a notorious heretic" (AE 32.114).

Luther was not sent home immediately, and his case was still pending before the diet. There were intense negotiations on April 24 and 25, again pressuring Luther to

recant and throw himself upon the mercy of the Emperor. Finally, he was officially dismissed. He departed April 26, still protected by the safe-conduct he had been granted. On April 28 he wrote a letter to the Emperor, a letter which was apparently not delivered to him, in which he summarized the confession he had made in the Diet. Luther preached twice on his return trip, despite being forbidden to do so by the Emperor. On June 4, Luther's party was attacked. He was captured and taken into hiding at the Wartburg Castle, where Luther would spend the next ten months.

It was only after the official conclusion of the diet, after Duke Frederick and others had departed, that a judgment was rendered. The Edict of Worms, as it came to be known, declared Luther an "obstinate schismatic and manifest heretic" (Brecht I.474). The Emperor would enforce the bull of excommunication against Luther. He was not to be given food or hospitality. He was to be taken prisoner and delivered to the Emperor. The same treatment was to be used against Luther's supporters. Their property could be seized for one's own use. It was forbidden to read or distribute Luther's writings. The Edict of Worms continued to dominate Reformation politics for the decade to follow. Yet Duke Frederick asked to be excused from carrying out the Edict, and apparently was granted his request. Thus, despite the Empire's sentence against him, Luther was able to continue his work untroubled by the enmity of either Empire or Papacy.

Looking Past the Media Narrative: I have told the story of Luther's confession at Worms at some length because I believe it is important to understand that the confession of the Christian faith takes place in the actual events of a Christian's life, under many pressures, under temptations, under adverse circumstances. There were numerous pressures for Luther to compromise, be silent, even recant. Life was complicated for him as it is for us. But I don't want you to misunderstand the events I have just related to you, nor your own life of confession. Let me cut away the dead wood here.

It has been customary for centuries now to view Luther's stand at Worms primarily as a heroic event: Luther the Hero, standing up against the forces of the Empire, the Pope, the darkness of the Middle Ages, and so on. And it is true, you cannot miss the virtue of Luther's fortitude and courage. As we shall see, Luther's stand also revealed his faith in God's Word and the conviction that he must not yield to his opponents. We can in fact be greatly encouraged by his example to act with such virtue in our own life and confession. But if we look at the Diet of Worms simply as the scene of a heroic stand, we have missed the point.

Others prefer to see this event in light of the grand movements of culture and history taking place at that time. Humanism and the Renaissance were bringing in sweeping changes to man's understanding of himself and his place in the world. The community, state, and Empire were also changing. The Reformation would forever change the Church, breaking the tyranny of the pope, and its defeat would produce a thousand tyrant sects to replace him. Luther's stand could rightly be understood to play an important role in these developments. But again, if we only see Luther's confession in terms of culture, history, or even religious organization, we have failed to understand its actual significance.

And let me dispel one more illusion. Some people want to portray Luther's stand at Worms as a great political and cultural event in German history and German nationalism: Here is Luther the German patriot, throwing off the foreign chains of both Empire and Pope. Now, it is true that Luther is an important character in the history of the German nation. It is even true that Luther was aware that he could have stirred the German people to violence by his actions at Worms. He knew that the wellbeing of Germany was also affected by his role at the Diet. But we might compare this nationalist understanding of Luther's confession to the narrative in our own church body, in which we are somehow supposed to be a German Synod, stuck in the cultural webs of an ethnic and political world long past. Or that now we are somehow supposed to embrace a rival web of cultural and political forces, that we are supposed to be an American church and a 21st Century church, and for some people, it seems, a Republican church, or a Fundamentalist Evangelical church, or a Progressive church, or a Woke church, or the like. Let's be sure to recognize that whatever the political, national, and cultural forces at work in Luther's stand at Worms, there is still something far more important that took place there.

And what, finally, is so important about Luther's confession? In short, Luther's confession was the confession of a Christian. It was the confession of God's Word. It was an act of the Church of the living God, done in time and place, by one Christian, before one man's neighbors, before the world. The act of confessing is important only because of the content of his confession, because of the truth that he confessed. "My conscience is bound by the Word of God;" therefore, "I cannot and I will not retract anything." This is the Church's perpetual confession to the world in every age and in every place.

The Paramountcy of Truth

At the heart of every Christian confession is the truth. I do mean, of course, Jesus Himself, who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). But in confessing Christ,

we also confess all that He does, all that He teaches, and all that He gives – that is, “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). We saw in Luther’s confession at Worms that it is the truth of God’s Word, divine truth, that is always the stuff, the subject, of the Christian confession. In this section I will begin by contrasting truth and lies. I will comment on the polemical nature of truth and the unity of truth. This will lead to the heart of Luther’s confession, that God’s Word is truth.

The Truth and Lies: Let me describe our present situation as the collision of two worlds. In one world, the created world, truth corresponds to reality itself and can be expressed or described by way of words and signs. In plain language, this means that we expect our speech to be simple, clear, honest, and true. Our words describe the way things are, and we speak of things as they can be rationally known. We Christians expect this because we believe in a God who created the world, gave man the gift of language and reason, and then spoke to man in the reasonable language He had given him. We believe in a God who is truthful. He cannot lie (Titus 1:2). We believe in a God who speaks clearly. He reveals to us what He wants us to know. He wants us to “be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). He speaks to us so that we may know and believe in His Son, whom He sent into the world to save us and to give us new life (John 20:30–31). With these divine Words He also teaches us what it means to be Christian, to be human, to live lives according to His own mind and will. We have confidence in human speech because God Himself speaks to us in our language. We believe that our speech should imitate His in clarity and truth.

The realm of truth is all things – Creator and creature, visible and invisible. In the created world many things are subject to man’s reason, and their logical relations to each other can be debated and concluded. This realm of knowledge is as broad as the creation itself, even if our grasp of it is fragmentary and fallible. Knowledge of the creation is frustrated by man’s corruption under sin, by his own creaturely limitations, and by the inherent mystery of the created world. This realm of knowledge is often summarized by the term Natural Law. If we knew Natural Law perfectly, we would see that it corresponds perfectly to what is taught us in Holy Scriptures, since God is the author of both.

But then there are things that are not subject to man’s reason or experience, things known only by God. Some of these things remain hidden in God’s unrevealed will, and we are taught not to search for this hidden knowledge. But what God wants us to know for our salvation and for the good of our lives, He teaches us in the words of Holy Scriptures. This knowledge is often called Special Revelation, in contrast to Natural Law or the Natural Knowledge of God and the world. By Special Revelation we

mean the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which are the very words of God Himself. The things revealed in the Scriptures also belong to the world that actually exists, the created world and the God who made it.

But there is another world, a pseudo-world, that is intended to subvert and destroy this created world. That other world is a nightmare, a world in which so-called “truth” is something that is created by man in the telling of lies. Language is coopted for evil use. This is the world, to give one of a thousand examples, in which a man can become a woman simply by saying it. This can be even if biological or medical science affirms without dispute that this man is a biological male. This lie becomes the “truth” not by way of reasonable inquiry, or by scientific or medical investigation, and certainly not by divine revelation, but simply by the expression of a man’s spoken will. “Truth,” as it is called in this alternate world, does not correspond to the way things are, but to the way a man wants them to be. In this world, man’s will creates his own reality.

Now, this world of lies is not actually new. It’s not even Postmodern or post-Christian. It is as ancient as the serpent in the Garden of Eden. And it is always anti-Christian. It is the nature and purpose of a lie to create an alternate reality and make that alternate reality replace the truth. The serpent in the Garden of Eden presented an alternate reality: “You shall not surely die. . . You shall be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4, 5). As we know from the outcome of that first lie, lies cannot create anything. Satan’s lie certainly did not create the world he promised, where sin is not punished with death, and man overthrows God. To the contrary, lies break, corrupt, destroy, and kill things. It is, in fact, in the very nature of the lie to bring about the death of man.

In John 8:44–45 Jesus rebukes the Pharisees, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe in Me.” Jesus teaches us that lies are always set against the truth, just as the devil is always set against God. Lies belong to unbelief; the truth belongs to faith. Lies lead to death; the truth gives us life and sets us free.

The road to hell is paved with lies. Lies are the devil’s language. Lies destroy the soul of man. Lies dehumanize us, bestialize us. Lies destroy all that is good: good marriages, good households, good governments, good churches. Lies rob us of faith and hope and love. Lies turn loving marriages into cold and barren wastelands. Lies make cowards out of bold men and tyrants out of just men. Lies destroy the unity of the

church and abolish the integrity of her confession and fellowship. Lies are the death of man.

So the Holy Spirit warns us. He warns us against lying words, lying witnesses, lying preachers, lying “christs” (Matthew 24:24). The confession of lies is no Christian confession. It is the liars who say, “We have made a covenant with death . . . for we have made lies our refuge and in falsehood we have taken shelter” (Isaiah 28:15). The Spirit declares the justice and wrath of God against all lies and falsehood. “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth . . . they exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Romans 1:18, 25).

Not only do we renounce lies when we renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways, but we commit ourselves – body and soul – in faith and confession, to the truth. Professor Marquart summarized our own confessional situation this way: “Our western world, thrashing about in a surfeit [an excess] of soulless information, is dying from lack of truth. This starvation, moreover, is self-imposed.” (Yes, that was written before the year 2020.) And he described the offense of the truth: “The idea of authoritative revelation, truth handed down from on high – and from antiquity – is particularly distasteful to this mentality. For it implies a standing rebuke to the ideology of normlessness and unbridled self-indulgence mistaken nowadays for freedom” (Kurt Marquart, “The Contemporary Significance of the Formula of Concord,” 32). As Hosea decried, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6), that is, the knowledge of God’s Word, the knowledge of the truth.

Christians confess the truth. God Himself is the “God of truth” (Psalm 31:5 KJV). “All His work is done in truth” (Psalm 33:4 KJV). He “delights in truth” in our souls, in our minds and hearts and consciences (Psalm 51:6). When the God of truth “became flesh and dwelt among us,” He was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). He is the Truth incarnate (John 14:6). The Spirit of Jesus whom He sends to us from the Father, is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

Truth, pure doctrine, belongs to the Godhead. It is not an added extra or a mere description. Truth corresponds to being in God. The Son is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3). To know Jesus, who is the Truth, is to know the Father. He who has seen Jesus has seen the Father also (John 14:6–11).

Truth alone is the object of Christian faith – true and saving faith. Christian confession of the truth is a fruit of faith and a mark of the Christian life. This pure faith

and confession is worked by the Spirit of truth through His Word. It flows from the pure teaching of God's Word and right faith in that same Word. By that same pure teaching the Spirit of truth gathers the holy Church. By this same Biblical truth He unites His Church in a true confession. The truth is prior to all other considerations. As Professor Marquart reminds us, truth is paramount (Kurt Marquart, *The Church*, 57-59). We cannot finally come to true unity in the church or true love between members except by way of true doctrine.

Truth Is Polemical: Dr. Herman Sasse reminds us that "the symptoms of truth . . . are polemical." (Sasse, *Here We Stand*, 97). That is, truth is always at war with lies. Truth always anathematizes the lie, just as the lie abolishes the truth. C. P. Krauth reminds us that the lie has a permanent battle plan. First it demands accommodation with the truth. Then it demands equal standing and equal time. Then it takes over and overrules the truth. But truth never desires accommodation and never seeks equal time with lies. It must be the queen who rules, or it must perish. Truth and falsehood are utterly and finally incompatible. There can be no neutral ground between the two, not in the church, not in the home, not in government and society. The Christian confession takes a stand, like the battle line in a war, against lies.

The polemical nature of truth is revealed in the Church on two fronts. The first is that we explicitly reject and condemn whatever is opposed to true doctrine (FC Ep Rule and Norm. 6). As we affirm, "In order to preserve pure teaching and fundamental, lasting, God-pleasing unity in the church, it is necessary not only to present the pure, beneficial teaching correctly, but also to censure those who contradict it and teach other doctrines" (FC SD Rule and Norm.14). Our confession of the truth includes the condemnation of lies.

But second, the polemical nature of truth is revealed in its persecution by the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Luther was called to confess at Worms because a false church with false doctrine hated the truth and wanted it destroyed. It waged war against God and attacked the truth of God's Word by seeking to destroy the confessor of that truth. As Luther acknowledged before the Emperor, "This is the way, the opportunity, and the result of the Word of God, just as He [Christ] said, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword'" (AE 32.111).

The Unity of Truth: We confess our faith in a world of isolated and conflicting "truths." Religious "truth" has nothing to do with scientific "truth" which has nothing to do with political "truth." The world has allowed isolated "truths" to be "true" in their own

sphere, but nothing is universally true. For example, homosexuality – or rather, sodomy (to give it its proper name) – is a sin in Christianity, a barren and unnatural aberration in science, but nowadays a glorified virtue in politics and culture. Three different “truths” about sodomy, like three petty gods competing for supremacy in the hearts of men. The failure to confess objective and universal truth leads us into a new polytheism.

We could call this polytheism a pantheon—a community of gods—like that of the ancient world. The Romans had Jupiter, Juno, Mars, Venus, and various other gods and goddesses. Each represented divine power in some aspect of life and the world. Jupiter was king of the Roman pantheon at the time of the Empire, but it had not always been that way. Nor was Jupiter king in the non-Roman world. “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven and on earth – as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:5-6).

So it is with truth in our polytheistic world. Random “truths” are like the so-called “gods.” The goddess Reason ruled as “truth” for many years after the humanistic Renaissance. She was the dominatrix of the pantheon. Then Science came along and unseated Reason. Now we have every reason to conclude that Science has lost her place as ruler of the gods and has been replaced by Political Will and Power. Many “gods” and many “lords.”

But here is the point. Just like the polytheistic cultures throughout the ancient world, most people today – unfortunately including many Christians – assume that there are many truths, a pantheon of truths. Religion-truth is perhaps acknowledged by those who recognize that man has a soul, but it is allowed only as a minor god in the ghetto of personal opinions and sentiments. Recently dethroned Science-truth still impresses most people, even after it has been demonstrated conclusively to be founded on a swamp of fallible presuppositions and observations, and not on a bedrock of truth (Marquart, “The Sacramentality of Truth,” 88). Politics-truth has reasserted itself as king, ruling with the three-pronged trident of media, money, and governmental coercion. It presently trumps all other “truths.” And it would take you only a few minutes to begin to fill in the rest of the pantheon of “truths,” things like Philosophy, Mathematics, Psychology, Sociology, the Human Heart, the Internet, and the like. Our culture is left with the belief that there are many irreconcilable and competing truths in the world, a cacophony of sounds and a shattered mirror for vision.

But for Luther at Worms, and for us Lutherans, God's Word is the first and final truth. God's Word demonstrates to us that the uncreated God and all His creation constitute one single universe, one seamless reality, one truth. What is true in the Bible is true in the world of Natural Law. What is true in Church is true in the Home, is true in the Workplace, is true in Society and Civil Government. Ultimately, the Bible alone reliably teaches us how we should look at and understand the world and our own lives. Ordinary sources of knowledge – history, custom and law, science, and reason – can teach us things that are true, but they will also quickly lead us astray if God's Word does not unite these ordinary truths with the divinely revealed truth of Christ, in whom "all things are united" (Ephesians 1:10, Colossians 1:17).

God's Word is Truth: The problem that Luther faced in 1521 was that the many lies that competed against the truth were united in the powerful office and doctrine of the pope, defended by the late Medieval academy, and enforced by the might of the European empires and nations. When Luther appealed to "the testimony of Scriptures" and professed that "my conscience is captive to the Word of God" (AE 32.112), he was not arguing for an unbound conscience or a free-floating conscience. He was asserting that God's Word, and God's Word alone, could bind the conscience. Only in this way could the conscience be bound to the truth and be free of corruption and lies. One must either "embrace the paramountcy of truth, or else surrender one's conscience and integrity unconditionally to an institution which is thereby granted absolute power to corrupt absolutely" (Marquart, *The Church*, p. 59). Luther's confession went directly to the source of these powers, to destroy the foundation of this house of lies.

There were other competing sources of truth that Luther rejected in his confession. Besides the papacy, Luther rejected the Enthusiasts, who asserted that they had the truth in their hearts apart from Holy Scriptures (SA III.viii.3-13). He rejected the humanists, who taught that man's reason and investigation of the world can find the truth. When we reject the pope, the false doctrines and claims of erring churches and false philosophies, and the overblown claims of science and the academy, we are doing as Luther did: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God."

Luther asserted that Holy Scripture alone is the true authority and source for the knowledge of God and man, Creator and creature. This is to say that only God's Word is the source of the Church's doctrine and life, and that every Christian life and confession must conform to God's Word. He stated this point repeatedly before, during, and after Worms. For example, in his evaluation of the papal bull that condemned his teachings, he wrote,

Holy Scripture must necessarily be clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings. . . . necessity forces us to run to the Bible with the writings of all teachers, and to obtain there a verdict and judgment upon them. Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. (AE 32.11f)

During the negotiations at Worms, quoting 1 Thessalonians 5:21 and Galatians 1:8: Luther “besought them all the more not to violate his conscience, bound as it was by the chains of Scripture and the holy Word, by forcing him to deny that clear Word of God” (AE 32.119). Again, “I would rather lose my life and head than desert the clear Word of God” (AE 32.122). In his April 28 letter to the Emperor he repeated the point many times, including here,

Concerning the Word of God and the eternal values, however, God does not allow this risk, that is, that man should surrender [the Word of God] to man. For he has ordered that all men and all things should be submitted only to him, as he alone has the glory of the truth and is truth himself. (AE 48.206f)

Every Christian confession is founded upon the great Reformation truth: *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. The Holy Scripture is the sole source and authority for doctrine. “Sanctify them by the truth; Your Word is truth” (John 17:17). “The sum of Your Word is truth” (Psalm 119:160). We have various dogmatic terms and phrases to emphasize this point: the *infallibility* of Scriptures, that the Bible is incapable of lies or deception, because it is God’s own Word; the *inerrancy* of Scriptures, that it is free from error; the *sufficiency* of Scriptures, that the Bible has all the knowledge needed to give us salvation and teach us the Christian life; the *clarity* of Scriptures, that the words of the Bible are clear and understandable, because God Himself is the speaker and teacher; the *efficacy* of Scripture, that God’s Word is the power by which He accomplishes and gives what His Word says. “God, who cannot lie” (Titus 1:2), speaks truthfully, clearly, and powerfully in His Word.

The doctrine of Holy Scriptures, confessed simply and powerfully by Luther at Worms, is drawn into our public confession in the Book of Concord. We confess its purpose: “on the basis of God’s Word . . . to expose and reject false teaching, and clearly to confess the divine truth,” and “that . . . an unalloyed explanation of the truth might also be transmitted to our descendants” (BOC Preface 9, 13). So also in the Solid Declaration: “First, we confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain [*reinen, lautern Brunnen; limpidissimos purissimosque fontes*] of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged and evaluated” (BOC Rule and Norm.3). That is, Scriptures is the source of all truth, all doctrine. It is our

Formal Principle, or to use the old term, the *Principium Cognoscendi*. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Conclusion: Before the Judgment Seat of Christ

The Christian confession, like all of life, is given in anticipation of “the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 6:14). Just as we were baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-12); just as we “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” when we receive the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:26); just as the charge to “preach the Word” is given “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom” (2 Timothy 4:1-2); so also the confession we make in this life is the confession we make before the throne of God on the day of judgment (1 Timothy 6:11-16). Listen to Luther, seven years after the Diet of Worms, in his Large Confession of 1528 (AE 37.360f):

I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide by it until my death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hence if any one shall say after my death, “If Luther were living now, he would teach and hold this or that article differently, for he did not consider it sufficiently,” etc., let me say once and for all that by the grace of God I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, have examined them again and again in the light thereof, and have wanted to defend all of them as certainly as I have now defended the sacrament of the altar. I am not drunk or irresponsible. I know what I am saying, and I well realize what this will mean for me before the Last Judgment at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

This is our confession. We confess the truth, true doctrine, the teaching of God’s Word, before the Church, before our household and neighbors and communities, even before kings and princes. We make this confession before Jesus Christ, our final Judge:

By means of God’s grace we, too, intend to persist in this same confession unto our blessed end and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ with a joyful, undaunted heart and conscience. (BOC Preface.16)

And, in the conclusion to the entire Book of Concord (FC SD XII.40):

Therefore, it is our intent to give witness before God and all Christendom, among those who are alive today and those who will come after us, that the explanation here set forth regarding all the controversial articles of faith which we have addressed and explained – and no other explanation – is our teaching, faith, and confession. In it we shall appear before the judgment throne of Jesus Christ, by God's grace, with fearless hearts and thus give account of our faith, and we will neither secretly nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it. Instead, on the strength of God's grace we intend to abide by this confession. Thus, after careful consideration and in the fear and invocation of God, we have subscribed our signatures to this document with our own hands.

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