

Lessons from Magdeburg for Today

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At Worms 500 years ago a single man made a confession at the risk of his own life. There is no denying the historical impact of that confession. Nor should we fail to learn from Luther's example to put our confession of the true faith above our own life. But we are not Martin Luther. He is inimitable, the man of God his contemporaries labeled the third Elijah and identified with the angel of Revelation 14, the fulfillment of the prophecies of Daniel, the man God raised up to end the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. And we are not that. Not the laymen here, not the pastors here. Every one of us has a more humble, localized role. Luther changed the world in a matter of years, because God gave this to him to do through call and through circumstance. We have our own calls, our own circumstances, and it is our duty to make our confession within these circumstances and according to our callings. We may dream for grand results, for changing the world, but we cannot make this our goal. Man makes the plans, God decides the outcome. Our goal is instead to follow Luther in being faithful, in making the true confession, and this in itself we must learn to consider our victory and our success, even if our eyes see something quite different, even if we witness the church declining in numbers and losing her standing in the world. Regardless of anything else, the church wins, she conquers, when she makes the true confession. What is it that has overcome the world, St. John asks, except our faith? (1 John 5:4)

I will be taking as the basis for considering the Church's confession in our day the example not of Luther but of the churches he inspired after his death. Luther's confession at Worms is well known, the Augsburg Confession of 1530 is famous, but relatively unknown is the Magdeburg Confession of 1550. And it's this confession that I think speaks most directly to our circumstances today. So first, we will go through the history of this Magdeburg Confession; second we will hit on four points the Magdeburg Confession teaches us about how the church confesses. And third we will look into a number of practical applications of this in our day, with specific attention to the recent restrictions the governments of our country have attempted to impose on churches in the name of public safety.

In 1546, the blessed Martin Luther passed to heavenly glory. Philip Melancthon, the obvious leader and spokesman for the Lutheran Church after Luther's death, hailed Luther once again as an Elijah, speaking the words of Elisha as he saw his teacher rise in a whirlwind to heaven, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and her horsemen." But Melancthon was sadly no Elisha. God didn't grant him the double portion of His Spirit. So when in the spring of 1547 Emperor Charles V, in alliance with the pope, invaded Lutheran lands, attacked and decisively crushed the Lutheran armies, captured the Lutheran princes, and forced the surrender of Lutheran cities, there was no Luther, no Elijah, no Elisha to lead the church. Melancthon failed miserably. He played politics instead of fighting for the pure confession. The Emperor imposed on Lutheran lands the so-called Augsburg Interim, which ordered Lutherans to worship like Roman Catholics and in many points of doctrine, including justification by works and the sacrifice of the mass, to confess like Roman Catholics. Melancthon, along with many pastors, princes, and professors, instead of

outright rejecting the Interim, made a compromise document called the Leipzig Interim, which said they would worship like Roman Catholics, but would not confess the Roman faith.

Meanwhile the faithful Lutheran pastors who refused to compromise were either killed or driven from their cities. Hundreds of them fled to the north. Most cities compromised and most pastors caved in. The most prominent city to refuse to compromise was Magdeburg. They would worship as Lutherans and confess as Lutherans, come hell or highwater. What came were thousands of imperial troops, which surrounded Magdeburg and put up a siege that lasted well over a year. The order was simple. Start worshipping like Roman Catholics, submit to the authority of your emperor, or we will take your city by force, capture your pastors, and convert your churches to the pope's control.

It was in the face of this violent threat to their city, to their church, to their confession, that the church of Magdeburg wrote and issued their Confession in 1550. It was authored by Nicholas von Amsdorf, who had accompanied Luther at Worms 29 years previous. As the troops surrounded their city, the Magdeburgers refused to compromise in the least. They had learned from Luther's example. They were obviously hoping and praying for success. They even called for assistance from other cities, told them that they were guilty of their blood if they failed to defend them in their time of need. But the Magdeburgers also knew and confessed implicitly, that their Confession was a victory in itself. They were holding to the truth. So even if their city burned to the ground, even if they were all slaughtered, even if they were ravaged by plague (the great risk to besieged cities), even if their church steeples tumbled to the ground, the victory was theirs. As it happened, God crowned their confession also with military victory in the end. Not only did the Magdeburgers pick off hundreds of imperial troops, but by 1551 the commander of the imperial troops switched sides and turned the same troops against the Emperor, which forced the Emperor to retreat from Lutheran lands. Magdeburg had won the day.

We turn now to the four lessons this Magdeburg Confession teaches us.

First, to confess is itself the victory of the church. The Magdeburg Confession states it plainly, "The truth is not conquered by strength of arms. Military victory cannot change anything about what is true nor does it always accompany the truth."¹ It may look like the church is losing. It may look like it's losing precisely because it is confessing. But the confession of the truth is victory, it is the goal, and that means that if we are confessing and standing uncompromisingly on the truth of God's Word, we have every reason to be optimistic, to be confident. There has been, since the last election in the United States, a gloom of depression and pessimism hanging over the church in our country. It is unsettling to see the so-called Equality Act passed by the House of Representatives, a bill that openly opposes Christ's commandments and threatens the persecution of institutions that confess the truth about man and woman. It has been astounding to see the government overreach into churches in our country during the Corona crisis and tragic to

¹ *Confessio et Apologia Pastorum & reliquorum ministrorum Ecclesiae Magdeburgensis* (Magdeburg: Michael Lotther), 1550, preface. All translations are my own. *LOGIA* will begin publishing this translation serially in its next several issues. An English translation is already available, a valiant first attempt, but with numerous and sometimes serious translational flaws. *The Magdeburg Confession*, trans. Matthew Colvin, (Matthew Trehwella), 2012.

see so many Christians and churches abandon gathering together for fear of death and a misguided, unqualified obedience to the government. This pessimism that has infected us in the face of this persecution and in light of this cowardice is from the devil. We need to knock it off.

The Magdeburgers were not pessimistic. The confession of the church is never pessimistic. We are the church militant, so we fight. But we fight with the outcome of the battle already determined, that the head of the serpent is crushed, and that every knee will bow to our Lord in heaven and on earth and below the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. So the Magdeburgers, as military defeat seemed to loom over them and they'd been abandoned by the other cities and had every earthly reason to be pessimistic, the Magdeburgers write, "The enemy's recent victory should not give them occasion to condemn Luther's cause or to be overly haughty, nor should it lead the pious to be overly distressed. The cause of the prophets, of Christ, and of the apostles first truly began to come to light in their oppression, and they themselves began to be more glorious after their death. For this purpose, in fact, God appointed His prophets and apostles, that they might go forth and bear fruit, and that their fruit may remain, that He himself might work power from their weakness, life from their death, glory from their shame, and planting from their being uprooted. And so Luther himself also, though dead, lives to eternity, and the fruit of his work, like the dead man himself, as it were, lives, will live, and will shine to all ages, among still more nations."² That was written while troops surrounded their city and defeat seemed a foregone conclusion. And it smacks of optimism grounded on the reality of God's Word.

Nor did the Magdeburgers see the cowardice of the other cities and the compromising Lutheran churches to be a reason for despair. Instead, it was another reason for them to confess, to call out the cowardice, call out the compromise, and recall their former brothers to the faith and the fight. After condemning the compromise of other Lutheran states and churches in no uncertain terms (they call it apostasy and fornication with the Antichrist), they warn them with these words: "We ... warn all the godly of all churches, both magistrates and subjects, and we ... point out not only how great a crime they have committed who have brought aid against us and to the persecutors of this doctrine and church, but also how they also are not without fault who have failed to lend us their aid, and how each of these offenses, the attack against us as well as the desertion of us, will be perilous to their temporal wellbeing and to their eternal salvation, as well as to all their posterity."³ This boldness and confidence and naked optimism is really refreshing. Again, the Magdeburgers are surrounded by troops. They're alone. By every earthly measurement they're going to lose. But they still call out the compromisers, and not only this, but they tell them that if they continue to compromise, they risk their temporal wellbeing and their eternal salvation, which will extend down to their children and grandchildren. Here are the people whose city is literally being besieged and they warn others who are living in earthly peace about their temporal welfare. Why? Because they actually believe in God. They actually believe that He is in charge and that He will reward those who stand on His Word and He will judge those who compromise it. They believe the words of the Psalmist, "I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading

² *Magdeburg Confession*, preface.

³ *Ibid.*

himself like a native green tree. Yet he passed away, and behold, he was no more. Indeed I sought him, but he could not be found” (Ps. 37:35). This is the optimism of the Church’s confession and it’s an optimism that must reign among us today. So long as we make the good confession, the victory is ours and the future is bright for us and for our children.

Second, the Magdeburg Confession teaches us that the church and her members are called to make certain confessions at certain times. Obviously we confess the creed every Sunday. Obviously we confess throughout the Church year the incarnation of our Lord, His death and resurrection, His ascension into heaven, the sending of the Spirit, the reign of the holy Trinity over His Church. This is simply our life. But circumstance forces specific confessions. Luther, for instance, was called before the Emperor and told to recant his writings, and he made the good confession and refused to withdraw a word. St. Peter was brought before the Sanhedrin and told to stop preaching Jesus, and he said, “We ought to obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29). The Magdeburgers were told to worship like Roman Catholics and they answered by burning everything outside their city, locking their gates, and putting up armed resistance to the Emperor, together with their great Confession published during the siege.

So we too make our confession not only constantly and generally as we teach the faith at home and at church, but also according to circumstance, when confession is called or forced from us. So, for instance, when the Supreme Court of the United States calls perverted homosexual contracts marriages and forces them on the states, the church should respond with definite confession that this is wrong. To be silent, to ignore it, would be to give the impression that this is of little concern to the church or that God’s Word leaves such things up to the individual conscience. More recently, we all experienced the government telling churches whether they could worship, how they could worship, what they should wear when worshipping, and even how to distribute the body and blood of Jesus. And the answer of the churches, whether it was to acquiesce or to disregard and reject these mandates, was a confession, whether we wrote it down or not. And we’ll be taking up that issue here shortly. The point right now is simply to emphasize that sometimes the church has no choice. It must confess a very specific issue, must take a stand one way or another. And silence, as the Madgeburgers make very clear, silence is itself a confession. The Magdeburgers, in fact, considered it their duty to make the confession they made, precisely because the circumstance required it. The Confession states, “[T]here remains still a poor remnant of states, however weak they may be...who also hold to the articles of doctrine handed down to us by the ministry of Luther, and thereby confess Christ, like the thief on the cross. Since among these is also our magistracy and our Church, the Church of this city, so that, in fact, the enemies themselves brag that in attacking us they are attacking the last of this Confession, we have decided that it belongs to our office, since we seem by the singular kindness of God to have a voice still free to speak for the whole Church, that we publicly set forth something for the purpose of vindicating in some way the revealed doctrine of the Gospel against this unjust oppression.”⁴

Third, every confession we make has to do with the entire Word of God and therefore with Christ and His Gospel, which is the material, the stuff, of God’s Word. The Magdeburgers could

⁴ Ibid.

have simply had their pastors start wearing chasubles, start observing certain holy days, start enforcing a fast during Lent, start elevating the host during communion. This is what the Emperor really wanted. Outward conformity. They could have pretended to be in compliance, could have compromised on some practices, and they would have been able to teach the truth otherwise. That, at least, was Melancthon's argument and his tact in Wittenberg. But the Magdeburgers correctly noted that if they compromised in one area, it would bleed into the rest, it would in the end compromise their confession of Jesus Christ Himself. And this, not simply as a slippery slope, that once you cave on one thing you're bound to cave on another, though that is true, but that when you cave on a single article of Christian doctrine or its practice you are compromising the body of doctrine. And so, and this is simply beautiful, even though the Emperor had not challenged every single article of the faith directly, the Magdeburg Confession sets forth the entire Christian faith, article by article, from God and creation all the way through Christ and the Church and to the power of the government, in order to show that this, all of it, the entire body of doctrine, was at stake, and this is what they would not give up. You tell me I must sacrifice the mass, or even give the impression that I am sacrificing the mass, and you have just brought into question everything the Bible teaches, which centers in the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And so it is in our day. The issues we must confess and address may not seem to directly touch on the Gospel (though in the end they do). The so-called social issues, homosexuality, transgenderism, abortion, divorce, feminism, these are front and center in our culture. These are questions of the law of God, of God's creation, His order in the world. But to dissociate them from the Gospel is an impossibility. The Son of God took into His person created human flesh, He came to fulfill this law, restore order in the world, to redeem marriage, man and woman, family, from sin in order for us to live according to His law by His Spirit. You strike at the law, at morality, at marriage, at the difference between man and woman, you erase it or part of it, and you are striking at the eternal will of the God who became our Bridegroom and laid down His life to sanctify His Church by His blood. Marriage itself, after all, is a God-given picture of Christ's redemption and union with His Church.

Fourth, the Magdeburg Confession makes very clear that the church may not change its confession or its practice because of the edicts of the government. The government is God's institution. We should not and must not conclude from this that we are obligated to obey its every decree. No more than we would say we should obey the church's every decree. Or a father's every decree. Neither the government, nor the church, nor the father of a home has absolute authority. Their authority depends on Christ, who meant what He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18).

It is in fact the primary duty of both the home and the government to serve the Christian church, and the final goal of every one of these estates is the glory of God and the salvation of men. It can't be otherwise, because this is Jesus' goal and He's the one with all authority, His is the authority the home, the state, and the church all wield. So the Magdeburg Confession states, "Although [God] does not want the estates to be confused with one another, He does want them so to serve one another that in the final result they all harmonize one with the other and each in

its own place and its own way promotes as of first importance the true knowledge and glory of God and the eternal salvation of their members; or, when it does not attain this ultimate goal, at least effects the secondary goal of men living peacefully, honestly, and beneficially in this life's civil society.”⁵

The Magdeburgers point out that every time the Bible commands obedience to the government, it qualifies it, gives a reason for it. The government is to reward the good and be a terror to evil. And this “good” must be understood to include not only the last seven commandments, but also the first three commandments. If the government punishes or persecutes or becomes a terror to the good of confessing Jesus, going to church and worshipping Jesus according to Jesus’ instruction, then it is owed no obedience. They sin, the Confession states, “who think that [governmental] powers are so sacrosanct and inviolable even when they try to oppress the good works which they ought to honor, and on the other hand, to establish and honor the evil works to which they ought to be a terror.”⁶

So when it comes to the church and the home, to Christians as members of their churches and to Christian parents as leaders of their homes, and to pastors who are to conduct services in the Christian congregation according to God’s Word, the government may make no law to oppress the good. And if they do, we are at the very least to disobey it. It depends on our calling in life and our ability as to what else we should do. So the Magdeburgers confess, “Just as it is for God’s sake that citizens necessarily owe obedience to their leaders, and likewise children and the rest of the family owe obedience to their parents and masters, so on the other hand, when magistrates and parents depart from true godliness and virtue, obedience is not owed them because of God’s Word. When they openly persecute true godliness and virtue, they remove themselves from the offices of magistrate and parents before God and their own consciences, and instead of an ordinance of God they become an ordinance of the devil, which can and ought to be resisted in an orderly manner according to one’s vocation.”⁷

So when the government told the Magdeburgers to worship like Roman Catholics, it’s not simply that it was stepping outside its God-given role, it’s that it was exactly contradicting, denying, and removing itself from its God-given role to protect the Church and serve it. And at that point it becomes the duty of the Christian to resist and disobey. And we resist of course according to our vocation. A pastor will still preach the truth, that is, even if the government tells him not to. A layman will still bring his family to church, even if the government tells him it’s illegal. A pastor will still distribute the blood of Christ from the chalice, even if the government mandates something else.

And by so doing, not only does the Church confess the Word of truth, she exalts it to its proper place, which is over the church, over the government, and over the home. Jesus’ Word is simply the final authority.

⁵ *Magdeburg Confession*, chapter 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

So now we turn to some practical application of these lessons in our day. And the segue should be quite clean and obvious. In the last year, our government did in fact order the Christian church, our congregations and congregations all over this country, to do bad things. In some states they banned meeting together completely for weeks or months. In other states they banned the Lord's Supper. In still others they banned singing in churches. In Wyoming they attempted, very briefly thank God, to tell us we couldn't use the common cup for the distribution of Christ's blood. These are objectively bad things. The government has been instituted by God to be a terror to these bad things, not to promote them and most certainly not to mandate them.

The word of God commands us in no uncertain terms to take the Lord's Supper often, and gives us the example of the ancient church, which celebrated the Lord's Supper every single Lord's Day, with far more disease going around then than in our day and with no such thing as plastic jiggers or hand-sanitizer. The word of God commands us not to forsake meeting together, as is the habit of some. The Bible exhorts us to sing with one another (Eph. 5:18-19). Most instances of the command to pray in the Bible, even, are not commands to pray at home by ourselves or with our families (though that is certainly our Lord's will), but specifically commands for public prayer in the congregation (Eph. 6:18-19, 1 Tim. 2:1-2; cf. Acts 2:42). And the commands to read the Scripture are likewise commands that Scripture be read in the gathered congregation (1 Timothy 4:13, Col. 4:16). This is the command, the assumption, the context, the background of the entire New Testament.⁸ Christ's Church is to meet together to hear the Scripture, hear preaching and exhortation, receive the body and blood of Christ, and pray together. This is the greatest goal, the overriding priority of our Creator and it is the end to which He directs all authority in heaven and on earth, including the authority exercised by the government.

So, in the first place, it was wrong and it is wrong for the government to order the closure of Christian churches or for them to dictate how the Christian church is to distribute the body and blood of Christ. The argument that the government's job is to protect the lives of people and therefore has the right to ban the gathering of Christ's church or to mandate how we distribute the Holy Supper is completely misguided. The government's job is to protect and promote the good, and having the Christian church meeting together regularly is a greater good than having temporal health. It is the greatest good. This is how the Magdeburg Confession puts it, "[W]e must hold the eternal salvation of souls more important than the fleeting health of the body, and that the preservation of His few members is more precious to Christ than all the rest of the world of unbelievers, together with all their trappings and gifts."⁹ Besides this, going to church contributes to overall health, something most epidemiologists can't wrap their minds around, but which a seven-year-old Christian knows very well.

Now as to the Church's confession in this last year of Covid, it was our duty to have church. Real church, with people gathering together around the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. What an amazing thing. That the greatest confession we could make in A.D. 2020 was to actually have church, to actually do what God commands us to do, what we simply took as a matter of course until March of 2020 – as did the entire Christian

⁸ The term church (*ekklesia*) means a bodily gathering, an assembly.

⁹ *Magdeburg Confession*, preface.

Church for two millennia, through hundreds of serious pandemics – the gathering together for church on a Sunday morning.¹⁰ And this, our very simple duty, this meant in many cases defying the state's mandates.

It was our duty to do so. I want to stress this generally, and then to talk about a few specifics.

First, generally, it was our duty to put first things first. It is more important to hold church and distribute the body and blood of Jesus than to live a long life or to be healthy or to possibly slow the spread of a disease. The people of God needed not only to hear that but to see it. I'm not saying that we should have told people who are obviously sick and symptomatic to come to church – we don't do that with any disease; we don't want people vomiting in church: individuals can and sometime should miss church for a week or for a time because of sickness. And I'm not saying that it was wrong to hold smaller assemblies or offer more services to avoid crowded sanctuaries. Not at all. I'm saying it was our duty to hold church so that the faithful could come and in order to encourage those who were inordinately frightened, to teach them and everyone that hearing God's Word and receiving the body and blood of Jesus and singing and praying as Church is more important than anything in the world. Our children needed to see it, our youth needed to see it, our young families, our middle-age, our elderly, all of us needed to see it and know it. We ask our children to risk death fighting needless wars. Is it really so hard a thing to ask Christ's Church to risk getting a cold with a .3 percent mortality rate in order to receive the medicine of immortality? In short, any government mandate to close Christ's church and ban its assembly altogether should be defied.

Now for a couple of specifics. The government told us, here in Wyoming and in many other states as well, to distribute the Lord's Supper in (prepackaged) individual containers.¹¹ Jesus says something different. He tells us to distribute bread. And then to distribute wine. To distribute the body. Then the blood. None of us would have thought of distributing the body and blood of Christ in a prepackaged individual container or of allowing such a thing in our congregations, had the government not ordered us to do it. When the government ordered it, they decided to be a terror to the good – Jesus' clear command. So we were dutybound to disobey.

The second specific was the mandate to wear masks, especially that pastors wear masks.¹² Masks, even if they have some health benefit, have also obvious deficits. I have several old ladies in my congregation, for instance, who can't understand me on the phone, because they can't see my lips and my voice is too deep for them. They need to see my face to hear me preach.

¹⁰ Some have argued that the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic is precedent for shutting down churches. There are 5 reasons this is not a good precedent to cite. 1) The Spanish flu was a far more serious pandemic than Covid-19, killing 1 percent of the U.S. population, and primarily affecting the young, not the old, as is the case with Covid-19. 2) The lockdowns were localized, especially in big cities. 3) We have records of Lutheran churches meeting despite the lockdowns. 4) The lockdowns were very brief. 5) Precedent of banning church services is precedent of a bad thing, not justification for further banning of church.

¹¹ The Wyoming health order of May 13, 2021 included this mandate: “g. Communion shall be served in individual containers.”

¹² The Wyoming health order of May 13, 2021 included this mandate: “i. Staff who come within 6 feet of attendees or other staff must wear a face covering.”

More than this, the face itself is a vehicle of communication. Everyone knows this. When you cannot see the face and its expression you can very often misunderstand the meaning of words. It would have been one thing if the government recommended masks. It was quite another to mandate it. It is a bad thing, an evil thing, if people can't hear the Word of God because of a mask. If the government's goal were God's goal, as it should be, it would not make such mandates. The church must know this and act accordingly.

The confession from our District has been, as far as I have seen, the good confession. Our president has urged us pastors throughout this whole ordeal, as was his duty, to have regular services and to fulfill our callings as pastors to the sheep committed to our care. Our congregations have in large part insisted on remaining open and holding church. This is the good confession. It puts first things first. It encompasses all the elements of confession taught by the Magdeburg Confession. 1) It evinces an optimism that preaching Christ is the end goal, that so long as we do it we have everything. 2) It understands that this particular time called for a specific confession, a simple one, but a necessary one, to stay open and do what the church does, even in the face of death. 3) It realizes that not just the doctrine of the role of church and state was at issue, but the Gospel and its primacy. 4) And finally it shows that the Church obeys God rather than man. And God has and will bless this confession.

If we have failed in this confession, and most of us, if not all of us, did fail in one way or another, especially at the beginning, then we need to own this failure and admit it as pastors and congregations. At the beginning we were caught off guard. We were told any closure would be temporary. We were told about outrageously high mortality rates of 8%. But instead of justifying shutting down services or obeying unrighteous mandates because we didn't know any better, we should learn from any mistakes made and never let them happen again.

The response of the synod at large has been quite mixed. From the synod, we received no encouragement to stay open. In fact, Palm Sunday of last year pastors of the synod received an email telling us to "refrain from regular congregational services" and to obey the government, even though some state governments had banned meeting altogether and banned the Lord's Supper.¹³ A similar appeal was made in the Lutheran Witness.¹⁴ Many churches have remained closed for over a year. And many pastors have decided to pretend to give the Lord's Supper over the internet. Some banned singing. Others banned the common cup. It's become common to assert, "I go to church over the internet," as if watching a service online is the gathering of the church. These are all bad confessions. They were and remain wrong. They obey man rather than God. They evince fear. Some are just silly. And just as the Magdeburg Confession called on those who had obeyed the government instead of obeying God to return to the good confession, we should do the same according to our calling and ability and circumstance. We should first correct any impression we ourselves may have given that gathering as church and singing and

¹³ The email of April 3 included the following: "Please, for your safety and well-being and that of your parishioners, refrain from regular congregational services. While we cannot gather together, many pastors are using the best technology to stay in contact with their people." And: "The government is not persecuting us (Fourth Commandment). These rules apply to all, as reasonably as possible. And it appears we are nowhere near the end of this."

¹⁴ "This pandemic is temporary," Lutheran Witness, Matthew Harrison, May 1, 2020.

praying and receiving the Holy Supper as Christ instituted it is somehow secondary or non-essential or dangerous to human life. We should commit to never making this mistake again. We should thank God that here in the Wyoming District we have had brothers – and I know I have benefited from this tremendously – brothers and fellow congregations who have encouraged us by word and action to put church first. And then we should call on the rest of our brothers in the Synod to walk with us in this. That there are still churches closed after a year, that churches were closed for more than even a Sunday or two, that pastors are robbing people of the chalice or of the Lord’s Supper, that they have banned singing, these false confessions need to be addressed for the good of the church and the glory of God.

Many in the synod have already worked to correct these false confessions to some extent. I would point to a Lutheran Witness article of June/July, 2020, where Rev. Thoma writes, commenting on Acts 5, “[T]he apostles’ flexibility [with the government] came to a screeching halt the moment they were commanded to stop preaching and teaching the Gospel. Again, as Christians, we know that a government born of God’s truest intent – one that can rightly be called good – would not call for the silencing of the Gospel, but at a minimum would let the church be.”¹⁵ But even here, the article stops short of addressing what it means to silence the Gospel. Banning the assembly of the church is silencing the Gospel, period. Mandating masks on a pastor is silencing the Gospel (again, for my old ladies, this is literally true). That this was not the message from synod from the start is one thing. It is quite another for synod not to realize it now and confess it. A confessing church is a repenting church. I recommend Dr. Joel Biermann’s short article on the necessity of meeting together, which comes much closer to calling on the synod to realize the obvious danger and error of shutting down church services.¹⁶

There are finally some conclusions we should draw, both from our review of the Magdeburg Confession and from its application to our time. First, it is never too late to confess. Magdeburg stood alone for some time, but the Lutheran lands returned to Lutheran control and the Lutheran confession before too long, spurred on in part by the written and visual confession of Magdeburg, which put gathering as a Lutheran church over their health and over their government’s decrees. So also, those who made the mistake of slavishly obeying the government’s mandates instead of obeying their confirmation and ordination vows can and will, I pray, come to realize their mistake, especially if we humbly realize ours and we continue to confess the truth frankly. Secondly, God has put us here at this time and in this place to confess the truth of God’s Word, and this confession will last all our life through. So long as we are doing it, we have every reason to be optimistic. Luther confessed at Worms fully expecting death as a result, but God gave life to His church through Luther’s confession. Magdeburg confessed to

¹⁵ “When does the church say, “Enough?”, Lutheran Witness, Christopher Thoma, June/July, 2020.

¹⁶ “The Post-pandemic Pew: A reflection for pastors,” <https://issuesetc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/The-Post-Pandemic-Pew-A-Reflection-for-Pastors.pdf>, accessed 5/5/2021. “Perhaps the notion that ‘the church can still be the church even when we can’t be together’ has merit in the teeth of a legitimate crisis (a flood or a fire) and for a few week’s duration; but it cannot ever become a normal way of thinking or behaving, which is, I believe, precisely what we have allowed to happen. We need to be together in the flesh, and separation for any reason should provoke a restlessness and yearning that will not be satisfied until we gather again in person. Despite our sincerest aspirations, love of technology, or yearning for the avantgarde, the virtual church is a patent oxymoron. To pursue this course for the church is complicity with the designs of the enemy.”

its own bodily detriment, even though it meant lack of peace and constant war and death for over a year, and through that confession God overturned armies and gave peace to Lutheran churches all across Germany. So we confess that the Lutheran faith, the truth of the Bible, hearing it at church, singing it, praying it at church, confessing it at home, this is our life and can never be given up. And God will bless this confession now and forever.