

From the Director's Desk

LUTHERAN 101-108

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WORLD MISSION PRAYER LEAGUE

Lutheran 101:

THE FIRST THING TO SAY...

If you know anything at all about the World Mission Prayer League, you may know that we are a Lutheran missionary community. Many of you are devout Lutherans, too: you will be pleased, I should think. Others, however, will be mystified. “Lutheran” means so very many things, nowadays. What kind of Lutheran are we talking about?

Over the next few months I hope to unpack, a little, this widely used, sometimes abused moniker. What does “Lutheran” mean for us, anyway? (Maybe you’ll want to ask what it means for you...)

The first thing to say about being Lutheran is that being “Lutheran” is not the first thing to say. Lutherans do not share this conviction uniformly, I am sorry to report. Some of our Lutheran friends are *LUTHERAN!!*, first of all. They wear their “Lutheranity” directly on their sleeve.

But they did not get the practice from Martin Luther.

“I ask that my name be left silent and people not call themselves Lutheran,” said the Great Reformer. “Let us extinguish all factious names and be called *Christians*.... I have not been and will not be a master” (cited by CFW Walther, 1844; *italics added*).¹

The World Mission Prayer League is a Lutheran community, through and through. We confess the Lutheran confessions. We stand in the Lutheran tradition, with joy and deep conviction. Yet it is not the first thing that we will say about our community: it is not even in our name. And we take our cue here from Luther himself.

There are many deeply Lutheran church and para-church structures that do not carry “Lutheran” in their name, as it turns out – though you will find the Lutheran confessions featuring prominently in their doctrinal statements. The “Batak Christian Protestant Church (HKBP)” of Indonesia is one of them. The “Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY)” is another. “Youth Encounter” is a para-church organization, deeply and deliberately Lutheran, that does not carry the moniker. Monikers are not what it’s about. “Lutheran” is not the first thing to say.

A second thing to say about being Lutheran is that being “Lutheran” can mean an awful lot of things. Years ago, you might have presumed that Lutherans had read the Small Catechism: not any longer. You might have supposed that Lutherans observed Advent: not so much today, I am afraid. Some Lutherans ordain women; others do not. Some Lutherans gather to worship in German or Swedish; most

others do not. Some Lutheran pastors wear special black collars and colorful stoles; others wear sneakers and blue jeans. Some Lutherans will not associate with anyone but “their” kind of Lutheran – not even to shake an outsider’s hand. (I have met Lutherans like these!) Other Lutherans associate with anybody, it would seem. The moniker means so many things to so many people as to mean little at all, nowadays.

And here is a third thing to say about being “Lutheran” – and it may surprise you. Lutherans don’t speak Norwegian, for the most part. Lutherans don’t come from Missouri or Minnesota, generally speaking. They don’t have blue eyes. And Lutherans eat more ugali, these days, than lutefisk. (At this you may be relieved.)

This was not always the case, of course. Most Lutherans were northern European, once upon a time long ago – and you will still find many in northern latitudes. In the Americas, most Lutherans were northern European immigrants.

Today, however, many of the largest and fastest growing Lutheran churches on the planet are found in Asia and Africa. The Lutheran church of Tanzania is more than double the size of the Missouri Synod. The Lutheran church of Ethiopia is larger than the ELCA, NALC, AFLC, WELS and LB *combined*. I was recently visiting with the General Secretary of this burgeoning African church. He reported growth of 300,000 in the preceding year alone! Among Lutherans today, blue eyes and lefse are decidedly out of vogue.

So let’s be more precise.

“Lutheran” identifies us as a particular sort of Christian fellowship. Some Christian communities organize around hierarchy – bishops and popes, and such. Some traditions emphasize more or less democratic ideas – the power and rights of congregations, for example. Other Christian communities are mostly cultural phenomena.

But Lutherans, traditionally, find their bearing in a distinctive set of core documents: we call them our “confessions.” Lutherans are a *confessional* Christian fellowship. A *shared, articulated faith* stands at the center of our tradition. It is our confession.

And behind the confession, of course, there is the One who is confessed. *There is One* who stands behind our confession, at the focus and the center of our faith. That’s where we must find a “first thing to say”: the first thing to say will have always to do *with him*.

¹ <http://www.lutherquest.org/walther/articles/nameLuth.htm>

Lutheran 102:

BECOMING CONFSSIONAL

The World Mission Prayer League is a *Lutheran, confessional* faith community: we are introducing the concept over the next few months. The World Mission Prayer League does not gather around hierarchy (as do some of our Catholic friends.) We are not distinguished by a favorite set of spiritual gifts (as are many of our Pentecostal friends.) We do not base our identity on a particular slant on a particular rite or tradition (as some of our Baptist colleagues do.) We are not distinguished by our methods (as some Methodists), or our congregational polity (as some Congregationalists), or having a bishop to bishops in Canterbury. (*But please forgive my generalizations.*)

We do not even gather around Luther (as Lutherans are sometimes tempted to do.) We gather around *shared* and *articulated* statements of Christian faith. Lutherans print them in their hymnbooks. We teach them to our children. We project them on screens at worship services or distribute them in worship bulletins – on every Sunday, in many Lutheran churches.

(This is because Lutherans are notoriously forgetful. Let me speak for myself: I need constant reminders regarding who Jesus is, what he has accomplished on my behalf, what I may

expect of him, and what difference this should make in my life.)

We begin with the most fundamental confession of all: “*Jesus is Lord*” (Romans 10:9). Christians of all stripes have been making this confession since New Testament days. The notoriously forgetful should constantly call it to mind.

Then we have the “ecumenical creeds” – the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene, and the Athanasian. We confess them, again, with Christians everywhere. You are likely to find one or another of these confessions projected on screens at Lutheran worship services.

We confess more recent statements, too: the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism, in particular. Some Lutherans add the Formula of Concord. Some add a letter Luther wrote about the Pope. During the horrific years of World War II, some Lutherans added the “Barmen Declaration” – taking a stand for the gospel of Jesus Christ in a world gone completely awry.

We cannot here summarize these wonderful documents: many, many volumes have been written about them.¹ Yet let me make a few very general observations. What does it mean to confess statements such as these?

The confessions are biblical: above all, they root us in the Word of God. We do not confess the Nicene Creed because it comes from Nicaea, or the Augsburg Confession because it was written by Germans. We confess our confessions because they are based in the Bible, as authentic summaries of its Good News. The confessions keep us grounded in the Scriptures.

The confessions are contextual: they drive us outward, into the contexts and challenges that surround us. They cannot be “confessed” in an armchair: they drive us into the rough and tumble street. Luther himself illustrated their characteristic flavor when he confessed before his accusers, with boldness and much daring: “*Here I stand. God help me!*”

The confessions are Christ-centered: they center our attention (and our message) in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Confessions are never ends in themselves. They are *signs* and pointers: it is their function to direct us beyond themselves – to the One who stands behind them – to our Lord and Savior Jesus.

The confessions are shared: they position us in solidarity with the people of God. The confessions are not so interested in the unique positions that you have heroically carved out for yourself. Their characteristic pronoun is the first person plural. They are interested in the broad faith consensus of the church of Jesus Christ, around the world and throughout the ages.

The confessions are evangelical: it is their nature always to proclaim Good News. The confessions are communication events. They do not build walls, but bridges. We confess their

truths to open windows into the gospel of Jesus, not shields or barriers to protect it (as if that were our prerogative). The confessions communicate, positively, the life-giving truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the practical, sometimes conflictive contexts in which we live today. They are not bludgeons or barricades. They are good news.

A “confessional” identity can mean a lot of things, in differing contexts to different people – just like “Lutheran” itself. Some Lutherans use their confessions to clobber one another. Some use their confessions as vapid cultural markers – along the line of “Lutheran” lutefisk dinners. Some use their confessions instead of their Bibles – like CliffsNotes instead of Shakespeare. Others retreat from the adventure of personal faith by appeal to their confessions.

This is a kind of “confessional” that we can do without.

Confessional communities like ours are driven to *faith* by their confessions, held accountable to *Scripture* by their confessions, and mobilized for *mission* into the world. This is a kind of “confessional” that we can confess with conviction. It is the kind of confessional to which we aspire.

1 You will want to read these documents for yourself. You will find a good online library at <http://www.projectwittenberg.org/>

Lutheran 103: **SOLA SCRIPTURA**

In the project of Christian life and ministry there are many creative ways to wander. Have you noticed?

Hierarchical communities may do *unity* rather well. They look “to the top” – to a single individual, sometimes – for a centering focus and a sense of cohesion. Yet when *the top* errs, as it must sometime, hierarchies may follow uncritically. They may find themselves wandering collectively from *truth*.

Congregational communities do *flexibility* quite well. They maintain a “light footprint,” so to speak, and pride themselves on their adaptability to the challenging world that surrounds them. Yet flexibility may fracture communities, sometimes. They may find themselves wandering from *love*.

Communities organized around spiritual gifts may wander from their Giver. Communities organized around polity and structure may wander from missional purpose. Our many varieties of Christian community have developed many clever varieties of wandering, I have found. You may have developed a few of your own.

And then there are confessional communities like our own. Lutherans are pretty good at long-term evangelical memory, the preservation of evangelical liturgies and hymnody, the careful study of Biblical traditions, the collection and

exposition of theologies and doctrine, and so on. Yet confessions may beget confessionalism; traditions may become traditionalism: this indeed is the characteristic error of communities like ours. And when we wander in this way, we lose everything – including, ironically, the tradition itself.

In the next few months, we aim to describe (ever so briefly) the dynamic center of our confessional worldview. It is often summarized in four “*solas*” – four “*onlies*” – that beat at the heart of our faith. We want to be rooted *only in Scripture*. We receive salvation *only by grace*, and live it out *only by faith*. At the center of it all stands *only Christ*.

The first of our “*solas*” is mindful, in particular, of our disposition to creative wandering, and is absolutely basic to the other three. We must root the project of Christian living in the living Word of God. Christian faith and service must stand in *sola Scriptura*.

It is not uncommon to describe a Lutheran worldview by reference to the things that Lutherans do when they gather together – in particular, the way that we “do” the sacraments. You may hear, “Oh, yes, these are folks who baptize their children.” Or, “Oh, yes, these are folks who do the Lord’s Supper at the altar, and with something they call *‘The Words*

of Institution.” You may have described our worldview in this way yourself.

It is the wrong place to begin.

A Lutheran perspective begins in the Scripture. We do what we do because we find it in the Bible. We preach what we preach because we read it in God’s Word. This is where our confessional documents always begin: “on the basis of divine and holy Scripture” (AC, Pref, ¶8). “Out of the Word, as from a spring, flows our entire religion,” explained Martin Luther (WLS, p.1465).

Confessing “sola Scriptura” is to confess, in a sense, our proclivity to wander – then to place ourselves under the authority of God’s Word, with trusting intentionality. We will look to God’s Word to define our world, articulate our priorities, and guide us in life and service. We will trust God’s Word more than our emotions, wisdom, training or experience. We would not know about sin, after all, unless the Word of God instructed us. We would not know about grace, unless God’s Word pointed us to the Savior. We would not know hope, unless assured by God’s promises. We would not know faith, unless the Word of God awakened it in our hearts. And we would know nothing whatsoever about the mission of God in the world – and nothing about our role in it – unless shown by the Word of God. “*You will be my witnesses...*” (Acts 1:8).

As it turns out, “sola Scriptura” is what we have to offer the world, as well. Let us be frank: the world does not especially need our own wisdom, passions, or impressive competencies. We have news to tell. We have a gospel to share. It is a Word

that once spoke worlds into being (Genesis 1:3ff) – and still speaks faith into human hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Lutheran 104:

SOLA GRATIA

Last month we introduced the first of four “solas” that beat at the heart of our faith tradition: we teach what we teach, preach what we preach, trust what we trust – because we find it assured in the Word of God. We stand upon “*sola Scriptura*.”

“The Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else,” assert our Confessions, “not even an angel” (SA II, ii, 15). It is a good thing, too. The articles of our faith, from a human point of view, are pretty preposterous. You could never invent things like these – unless you heard them from the mouth of God (cf. SA III, viii, 3).

Take grace, for example. We are saved only, only by grace: *sola gratia* (AC IV).

“Grace” is an interesting word, often misunderstood. We tend to think of it as a quality of character or action – as in, “He speaks with grace,” or “She carries herself with grace.” Sometimes we think of it as a simple, short prayer – as in, “Please say grace before eating.” This is not the kind of grace we are talking about.

The grace that leads to salvation refers explicitly to the favor of God effected and made accessible in the life and work of Jesus Christ. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to

himself, not counting their trespasses against them,” explains St. Paul (2 Corinthians 5:19). “Grace... came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

This is not grace that finds something “gracious” within *us* – as if God found something “favorable” to favor. This is grace that springs entirely from God’s own heart, from his own nature and will. It is the way the Creator looks at his creation – as a Father looks at his children, with favor, from a fatherly heart of love. Lutherans confess that God “acts out of his pure, fatherly and divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness on [our] part” (SC, 1st Art). “Grace signifies that favor with which God receives us, forgiving our sins and justifying us freely through Christ,” explains Martin Luther (WLS, 1837).

We say “only by grace:” “*only*” is an interesting word, too. It means no admixtures. It means simple, unalloyed, standing alone, complete and sufficient, all of itself. “Justification is strictly a gift of God” (Ap IV,362). Taken together these words mean that we are eternally forgiven by the simple favor of God in Jesus Christ. Now we may stand in grace (Romans 5:2). We may live under grace (6:14). “[God] has enriched [our] whole lives” because of “the gift of his grace in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:4, Phillips). *Sola gratia!* We are made

who we are, made children of God, redeemed entirely – *only by grace!*

Maybe you are a consistently decent fellow: your decency won't make you a child of God. Maybe you pray many times a day: your prayers won't get you to heaven, either. Maybe you aren't a thief, or a murderer, cheat, adulterer, liar, or bully. Congratulations. Your wonderfulness is not yet wonderful enough. Christians are made Christian – *only by grace.*

Who could invent something like this?

The opposite of grace is not doubt (or clumsiness!) but something the Confessions call "*works.*" "Works" is the fundamental human addiction. Its whirring motor is *acceptance through personal achievement* – and once we have come to taste it, we must have it again and again. We are forever plotting our next "fix." We may work our "religion" in this way. We may manipulate one another for some kick of acceptance or praise. We may come to think that God himself will value us because we are busy, or accept us at last because we "work." We can never get enough of these things. We always crave for more.

"For the more those who try to justify themselves by works labor and sweat to remove sin," Luther explains, "the worse their burden of sin becomes. For *only grace* can remove sin, and there simply is no other way to remove it" (WLS, 1850, *italics added*).

The distinction is utterly vital. While in the obsessive wheel of works, "Christian ministry" becomes an utter oxymoron. We are simply too frantic to serve anyone or anything but ourselves. Works-fueled ministry will use and ruin others,

make "objects" of supposed beneficiaries, minimize its own weaknesses and maximize its acclaim. It will pretend heroic autonomy. It will divide and marginalize. Works-fueled ministries serve, in the end, only themselves.

Only grace can lead others to Jesus.

Grace-based ministries, on the other hand, have nothing to defend, no turf to maintain, no personal advantage to calculate or preserve. They don't "need" their beneficiaries, in a weirdly co-dependent sort of way. They don't "need" the people they serve in order to feel valued themselves. They can release them to the gracious care of Jesus – as they are themselves redeemed only by grace.

Yes, indeed – who could invent something like this?

The Lord God Almighty: that's who. He is reconciling the world to himself, by the wonderful grace of Jesus. He has sown that grace into our hearts – and sent us into the world to share it. *Only, only by grace!*

Lutheran 105: **SOLA FIDE**

Last month we considered the irreducible core of our Lutheran Confessions: we are saved only, only by grace. But the Confessions say more than this. We are saved by grace – *through faith*. And only, only through faith.

Here again we have a pair of interesting words, so very often misunderstood.

We think of “faith,” often enough, as a kind of *action*. We imagine carefully collecting doctrinal assertions: we formulate something to believe about creation, then something about “the fall,” something further about processes of redemption, and so on. We imagine something that happens between our ears: an intellectual activity, a theological pursuit, or maybe some kind of philosophical inquiry. We “do” faith. We “get” faith.

It is natural, I suppose, to think of faith in this way. We are experiential creatures: we know the world by *acting* in it. Yet thinking in this way misses the key characteristic of biblical faith – the faith that we find described in our confessional documents. *Faith is not an action*. It is not something that we *will*. It is not something that we conclude intellectually, or assert philosophically – as we might, let’s say, decide our political affiliation or the church we will attend.

Faith is a gift of God’s grace. Faith is created in our hearts by the action of God’s Word. Faith, in short, is a miracle.

Here is the confessional formulation: “We receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us” (AC IV).

There is something to believe, it is certainly true: we trust that Christ suffered what he suffered *for us*, and that the life he gives he gives *to us*. To *us*, precisely, as preposterous as it seems. Yet *we* don’t do the suffering. *We* don’t do the giving. And it is not our own experience of “trusting” or “believing” that accomplishes the interchange. The locus of faith is not between our ears: we do not think it up.

Faith is like holding tightly the rope of a swing, as you lean your head back and kick your feet high into the air. Do you remember what that feels like? Faith is not the rope. Faith is not the seat of the swing. And faith doesn’t push you into the air. Faith is the leaning, trusting, holding, clinging – without which you fall on your head.

Faith is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” to borrow a marvelous image from St.

Paul (2 Corinthians 4:6). It is knowing God in an utterly new way – by looking into the face of Jesus. It is finding God’s Fatherly heart – by the grace that we find in Jesus. More accurately, it is *being found* by God’s Fatherly heart. It is *being found* by God’s grace. It is leaning, trusting, holding, clinging to the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

In this same wonderful image, we see how faith is created, too. It is *spoken* into being. As God spoke into the darkness once upon a time and created the stars, he speaks into our hearts – and faith is born. “God, who first ordered ‘light to shine in darkness’, has flooded our hearts with his light,” St. Paul explained (4:6, Phillips). “[Faith comes] from hearing,” he adds elsewhere (Romans 10:17).

The Confessions present a similar image. Faith is “conceived by the Word” (Ap. IV, 73). It is birthed by God’s Word. God “imparts, increases, and strengthens faith *through the... Word*” (L.C. II, 62, *italics added*). Faith learns to “see in the dark,” Luther explained. It does not see anything with irrefutable certainty. Yet it *hears* a certain, reliable Word. Faith then becomes “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). “Faith [sees] where nothing whatever is visible; it feels where nothing is to be felt” (WLS, 1378) – because it hears the word of grace, and clings.

Our Confessions qualify the concept with a little word we have seen before: “*sola.*” *Only* through faith. Nothing more. This is the way saving faith must work.

Imagine the horrors of conscience we might experience if there were something “more” than simple faith. (But maybe

you don’t need to “imagine”: maybe you have experienced doubts like these yourself.)

What if a particular set of intellectual assertions were required for salvation? What if you had to understand the complexities of the Trinity, for example, if you hoped to be saved? What if you had first to digest the nuances of the “Filioque” debate, if you aspired to heaven? How would you ever know that you knew *enough*, or had reached the intellectual bar?

Or what if some human endorsement were required for salvation? What if your pastor had to vouch for your competence in faith? What if you had to present a letter of recommendation from your bishop, or your Sunday School teacher, or maybe your mother or dad, when once you arrived at the gates of heaven? How would you ever know that you had collected *enough* affirmations to gain entrance to paradise?

And what if the grace of Jesus Christ were not as sufficient as you had supposed? What if “works” were required for salvation, after all? Have you worked enough? Have you performed acceptably? How would you ever, ever know? (If you don’t have this question firmly settled, you may now take a moment to shudder.)

Faith steps into our shuddering and settles it. It steps into our darkness with light. Faith fixes our eyes on Jesus, and finds him sufficient. When we get this right, we stand. When we get it wrong, we must certainly fall on our heads.

Lutheran 106:

A FAITH THAT IS NEVER ALONE

We are saved by grace through faith: this wonderful confidence stands at the core of our Lutheran Confessions. Only grace. Only faith. Yet the faith that is “only” ... is *never alone*.

“Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith,” wrote Martin Luther. Faith is constantly birthing works of love, acts of kindness, gospel outreach, and gestures of peace and reconciliation. It is forever reflecting the light that it has found in Jesus, and forever erupting in love and good works. Indeed, “it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly,” wrote Luther.¹

Faith is not an action itself: this is most certainly true. It is an open hand more than a capable intellect. It is a yielding more than an act of will. Faith is the simple acceptance of God’s grace for our desperate need. Indeed, it is desperate need before it is anything else.

Yet faith erupts in action and service from the moment we believe. The Gospel “has been bearing fruit among yourselves,” St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God” (1:6). Luther put it this way: “If he have faith, the believer cannot be

restrained.... He breaks out. He confesses and teaches this gospel to the people at the risk of life itself.”²

“After a person has been justified by faith,” our Confessions explain, “a true living faith becomes ‘active in love’ (Galatians 5:6). Thus good works always follow justifying faith and are certainly to be found with it, since such faith is *never alone* but is always accompanied by love and hope” (FC Ep, III, 11, *italics added*).³

What are these “works” exactly? In a wonderful sermon from 1522 based in Matthew 21:1-9, Luther explained that the works produced by trusting faith “*have no name*.”

“They have no name, so that there may be no distinction made and they be not divided, that you might do some and leave others undone. You shall give yourself up to [your neighbor] with all that you have.... Thus it is not your good work that you give alms or that you pray, but that you offer yourself to your neighbor and serve him, be it with alms, prayer, work, fasting, counsel, comfort, instruction, admonition, punishment, apologizing, clothing, food, and lastly with suffering and dying for him” (WA 10, I, [2], 38, 2).⁴

Luther does not mean to say that we cannot recognize good works when we see them. You may recognize prayer when

you see it, often enough, or the sharing of food and clothing, and so on. Good works are discrete, identifiable actions of love and obedience.

Yet to “name” them may give you the idea that you can complete them, if you try hard enough. Good works are simply incalculable. Their responsibility is simply immeasurable. Good works have no discrete “name” or boundary – as if you could discharge them, then tick them off your check-list of responsibilities.

Maybe you will think that “good works” include feeding the hungry – but not programs of development. Maybe preaching good news – but not works of justice. Maybe helping the poor – but nothing to do with politics. Maybe compassion – but not discipline. Maybe visiting the ill – but not those in prison. Good works are more wholistic than this. They have no limit or “name.”

This also means that good works are not easily self-aware. They do not even “name” themselves – as if to conclude, “Ah, now I am feeding the hungry or preaching the gospel – *now*, I am really good!” Good works do not notice what they are doing (cf. Matthew 6:3). As Luther explains, “[Faith] does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them.”⁵

And what makes our good works *good*? It is not the action in itself that makes a work good, or sometimes bad. It is the heart from which it springs. If our service is fueled by trust in the dependable grace of God in Jesus Christ, it will issue in good works naturally, in the spirit and style of Jesus – as a

wholesome vine produces wholesome fruit. But if our service is fueled by doubt and uncertainty, self-reference or self-serving – if we are more interested in our own advancement or recognition than the simple benefit of another – then our service will issue in evil works – “commendable” things, perhaps, yet done for the sake of commendation (cf. Matthew 6:1). Works like these do not easily lead to the Savior.

Here on Clifton Avenue, we have recently enjoyed the visit of Margaret Obaga. Margaret serves with her husband, William, in Bavaria. William gives direction to our far-flung ministries in Africa.

Margaret made mandazis for us, one day – a kind of East African donut. I asked her for the recipe. “The first ingredient is love,” she said. “If you have everything else right – and forget love – no mandazi will turn out well. You must mix, stir, fry and drain first of all with love.”

Love makes a good mandazi. Faith makes good works good. “[F]aith alone is the mother and source of the truly good and God-pleasing works,” our Confessions explain (FC SD, IV, 8-9). Faith, indeed, is their recipe.

So faith in Jesus is never alone: it is always breaking out! If your kind of faith is this kind of faith, *so will you*.

¹ *Commentary on Romans*, J. Theodore Mueller, trans. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p.xvii

² *Preface to the New Testament*, in John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (Garden City: Anchor, 1961), p.18

³ Find our Confessions online at <http://projectwittenberg.org/>

⁴ Cited in George Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1954), p.101n.

⁵ *Commentary on Romans*, op.cit., p.xvii

Lutheran 107:

SOLUS CHRISTUS!

Over the last few months we have revisited the faith convictions that stand at the heart of our believing community. They are “confessional” convictions. They are based in the inherited faith of the church of Jesus Christ throughout the centuries and around the world, reflected in the “creeds” and “confessions” of the Christian church.

Confessional communities do not invent convictions like these; we inherit them; we “confess” them. Convictions like these root communities like ours in the established witness of the ages.

We have organized our reflections around three Reformation “solas”: we are saved *only* by grace, *only* through faith, as we know it by the singular, sure witness of Scripture. A fourth “sola” is often added to these three – a trusting confidence that lies beneath them, you might say. It is fundamentally different from the other three: they are convictions about the way that God operates in the world and makes salvation known. The fourth “sola,” however, is not another conviction. *It is a Person.*

Jesus is the inner spring of our faith: Jesus is the indispensable motor. Only Jesus! *Solus Christus!* Jesus is Life for the dead, Light for our darkness, Truth for our wavering hearts, and the dependable Way to the Father. Jesus is the

Conquering Lamb of Calvary. He is the Great and Coming King. Jesus is the Eternal Son of God, the Wonderful Redeemer, the great Lover of our souls.

Most of all, our Confessions remind us, Jesus is “*a mirror of the Father’s heart*” (LC II, 65).¹ “We could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge.” In Jesus Christ we see that God “has completely given himself to us, withholding nothing” (LC II, 26). At the center of our faith, there is room for *only One*. There is one Door into God’s fold. There is one “Mirror” into God’s heart. It is a Person. It is Jesus Christ. There can be no other.

The doctrine of Jesus Christ, our Confessions insist, is “*The Chief and First Article*” of our faith (SA, II, I). “Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered... though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin” (SA, II, I, 5).

We affirm “only Scripture.” But the affirmation is aimless without the “chief article.” The Scripture is filled with Jesus Christ, from first to last. The Scripture points always to Jesus.

We affirm “only by grace.” But grace is effected and made available in the life and the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the basis of grace. If we are interested in living in the grace of God, or sharing it perhaps with others, we will find it and share it in Jesus.

We affirm “only through faith.” Yet our faith, if it is Christian faith, is always clearly directed: it is directed to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who creates faith in our hearts. In faith our hearts are directed always to him.

“Christ must be everything,” Martin Luther explains, “the beginning, the middle, and the end of our salvation. We must lay him down as the first or foundation stone, rest the others and intermediate ones on him, and also attach the rafters or the roof to him. He is the first, the middle, and the last rung in the ladder to heaven (Genesis 28). Through him we must begin, must continue, and must complete our progress to life” (WLS, 545).²

It is said that Martin Luther’s theology is coextensive with his Christology. His ecclesiology is Christology. His missiology is Christology. Luther knew what he knew about God, church, heaven, sin, redemption – and Christian mission in the world – in and through his encounter with Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the indispensable key to understanding Scripture, formulating doctrine, living a Christian life, resting in Christian hope, participating in God’s mission, and enjoying eternity at Christ’s side.

“Everything depends on the article of Christ, and everything is involved in it,” Luther said. “Whoever has this article has everything” (WLS, 438). “For God has made everything

depend on this Man, has directed everything, has turned everything, has given everything into his hand. He who has him is to have all; he who does not have him is to have nothing. So matters stand” (WLS, 589).

The Holy Spirit is like a lute player, Luther once surmised. But he is a special kind of player: he sounds but *one note*, on *one string only*. Everywhere and always, he sounds the note of Jesus (WLS, 436).

This should be the “tune” of our believing community, as well. Our spiritual health is not based in psychology. Our effectiveness in service is not based in missiology. Our salvation is not based in theology. And our confessional integrity is not based in our confessions. There is one fundamental “Note” that ties our hearts and lives together. It is none other than the Savior of the world.

¹ Find our Confessions online at <http://projectwittenberg.org/>

² Luther references from *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), a classic three-volume series of pithy Luther sayings.

Lutheran 108:

OTHER STUFF

The World Mission Prayer League is a "*Lutheran community in mission*," as you will have discovered by now (*Handbook*, 13). Over the past few months we have reviewed the basic tenets of this faith identity: we are saved *only* by grace, *only* through faith, as we know it by the *singular witness of Scripture*.

This month we add an important concluding chapter. It is not another "sola," exactly. We do not "confess" it, exactly – as we do, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity, or the work of Christ at Calvary. It is rather a nod to the very, very many things *beyond* this simple core of faith convictions. Most things lie beyond this simple core, in fact. And the confessions have a word for them. We call them "*adiaphora*."

"Adiaphora" (ἀδιάφορα) is an ancient word that means, basically, "*stuff that doesn't matter*." It is a category for the "other stuff" of life – not clearly "good" or "bad," not clearly "right" or wrong" – but simply indifferent. Our life of faith and service is full of things like these.

What kind of music should we use in church? Pipe organs? Saxophones? Maybe charangos? This is stuff that doesn't matter. When and where should we meet to worship? Thursday evening in a living room? Sunday morning in the

sanctuary? It doesn't exactly matter. How about the liturgy we may use? How about the administrative structures we may invent – how we select and train our pastors, for example? A bit of order is certainly advisable; but in the end, our Confessions remind us, it doesn't much matter. (See AC XV, Ap XV, FC SD X, SA III 15, etc.)¹

Missionary communities like ours should be very clear about "stuff that doesn't matter." Hymnals don't matter much; music doesn't; architecture doesn't. Should our pastors wear blue jeans or albs? It doesn't matter a bit. Almost all of the cultural and linguistic shape of our ministry doesn't matter much in the end. It is *adiaphora*.

We misunderstand the concept, however, if we suppose that it means "anything goes." Where the cultural shape of our ministry undermines confidence in the pure grace of God in Jesus Christ, or discourages trusting faith in the One and Only Savior, or directs our attention to human efforts rather than Jesus Christ the Son of God – then something is seriously off track. This is stuff that matters very much indeed.

Let me give you an example: public witness to the forgiveness of sins. When given half an opportunity, Lutherans will declare the forgiveness of sins to one another. We proclaim it

publically. We proclaim it with confidence. We call the practice "absolution."

I have been to worship services characterized by lively singing, warm fellowship, impressive choreography, earnest teaching, and sincere appeals for deeper commitment – yet without witness whatsoever to the forgiveness of sins. The manner of singing (did they use charangos?) or appeals (did they speak from the pulpit?) may be considered adiaphora. It is "stuff that doesn't matter." Until it does.

If *all we have* is lively singing, then things may have gone off track. Does our teaching point our hearers to Jesus and his work on our behalf – or to our own efforts on his behalf? Does our fellowship point to the crucified and risen Lord – or simply a sense of togetherness? Do our services and singing provide a clear solution for sin? There is a clear solution for sin, as it turns out – and it does not consist of impressive choreography. *The solution for sin is the grace of God in Jesus Christ, apprehended by faith alone.* And it is delivered by the promises of God's word, simply proclaimed and believed. If our worship activities do not somewhere, somehow, proclaim the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then something has gone off the rails. Pipe organs and albs, blue jeans and bongos, etc., (it doesn't matter!) are no longer "adiaphora" *if that's all we've got* – if they do not proclaim the grace of God for wayward sinners in Jesus Christ. You may call the practice "confession and absolution," if you like. (Lutherans do: but it doesn't matter.) It *does* matter, however, that we point the world to Jesus. To no one else. And to nothing less.

This is true for our entire Christian life of discipleship, mission and service. We should not get too excited (positively or negatively) about the cultural shape of our mission in the world. It will take many forms, employ many languages, adopt many cultures, and demonstrate creative cultural variety (if indeed we do things correctly). We will wear blue jeans sometimes, and sometimes albs. "We intend to be unmolested with these things," Luther advised brilliantly (SA III,15,5).

Yet we affirm this creative variety in order always *to witness to Jesus*. Creative variety is not the goal of our life and service in the world. It is our goal to point people to grace, through faith, in Jesus alone.

This is why there is "other stuff" in life: "that I might by all means save some," as St. Paul affirms (1 Corinthians 9:22). The "other stuff," in itself, is neither here nor there. But the "*saving by all means*" bit – that is what we live for. That is what "the basic tenets" are all about.²

1 Find our Confessions online at <http://projectwittenberg.org/>

2 You may download a copy of "Lutheran 101-108" at <http://wmpl.org/lutheran/>