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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?
POSTMODERN PREACHING INSPIRED BY THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

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What place, if any, does a static set of confessions have within the dynamic reality of postmodernity? While all denominations must wrestle with this question as the church continues to emerge, those with historically bound confessional texts, like Lutheranism's *Book of Concord*, must take special care to consider the role of confessions in life of contemporary Christians. This paper sets forth one way Lutheran congregations may continue to find value within the confessional witness is through the application of Luther's central question—"What does this mean?"—to the preaching ministry of the church. This powerful query provides Lutheran preachers with the ability to mine the invaluable resources offered by the *Book of Concord* with a particular emphasis upon applying the Lutheran confessions to the *Sitz im Leben* of 21st century Christians.

Some may wonder why postmodernity requires denominations to reconsider the role of confessions in church life at all. For Lutherans, the *Book of Concord* has provided solid theological ground upon which to stand through five centuries and across every continent. Why change now? Simply put, postmodernity calls into question the rational foundations of modernity, the social movement in which the Reformation texts were born. David Lose explores the nature of the divide between modernity and postmodernity in his *Confessing Jesus Christ*. In particular, Lose points out that, "postmodernist critics assert that certainty demands a homogeneity of experience that simply does not exist. Rather than contend with the uncertainty heterogeneity implies, modernist imposed their own order... [and] not only subdued nature but all too often subjugated those who differed from their imposed norm."¹ In other words, postmodern thinkers consider modernity a false construct that seeks to establish a dominant worldview to make sense of the world, not to mention culpable for a proclivity toward the pillaging of natural resources and oppression of those who failed to submit to the standards set forth by modernity.

¹ David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 26.

In harmony with Lose, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen points out that postmodernism fundamentally rejects the foundationalism of modernity. Foundationalism, per van Huyssteen's, "is the thesis that all our beliefs can be justified by appealing to some item of knowledge that is self evident or indubitable...[and] therefore always implies the holding of a position inflexibly and infallibly."² As a core tenet of modernity, the assumption of foundationalism allowed for the construction of a modernist worldview precisely because one could make appeals to some sort of supposedly objective foundation. In rejecting foundationalism, then, postmodernity contends that objective foundations necessary for a universal worldview like modernity either do not exist or are not fully accessible to humanity.

Here we begin to see the potential problem with utilizing confessions within the postmodern context. As the *Book of Concord* arose under the auspices of modernity, the cultural milieu of the texts assumes both the existence of foundations as well as the human capacity to access those foundations. How can a foundationalist text offer a word of life in an era that dismisses foundations?

Some postmodern thinkers, called antifoundationalists, argue that no foundations exists, or if they do exist, they exist inaccessibly far beyond the ken of humanity. For this camp, confessional texts provide little more than a relic of modernity and an example of foundationalism's shortcomings. Indeed, an antifoundationalist might find the rationalizations to dismiss theological interlocutors through vitriolic language as particular evidence of how modernity fails to fully grasp the diversity of valid religious experiences, especially within documents like *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* and *The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*.

² J Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2-3.

Lose and van Huyssteen provide us with another postmodern perspective, one that may allow postmoderns to find value within Lutheran confessional texts, called postfoundationalism. Postfoundationalists still contend that ultimate foundations lie beyond the grasp of humanity, but accept the existence and embrace the utility of “penultimate foundations” as epistemically valuable.³ By this, foundationalists admit that we hold certain beliefs and speak in ways that reveal convictions about our reality. Concomitantly, postfoundationalists contend that these views, while valuable, ought never become tools for subjugation or oppression. Rather, as van Huyssteen suggests, they exist as deeply held views on truth from which we may communicate cross-culturally in order not only to express our perspective, but to fully appreciate the other.⁴ This allows for mutual growth in knowledge as well as provides avenues through which penultimate foundations are tested, a process that Lose calls “critical conversation.”⁵ Penultimate foundations suggest, then, that we speak provisionally, both admitting our beliefs and the ever-present reality that, as fallible creatures, our beliefs may be wrong.

With this recognition of penultimate foundations, then, we may recast the *Book of Concord* in the postmodern context as a provisional text. David G. Truemper makes one such attempt in the 2002 dialogues between the Mennonite Church USA and the ELCA, where he contends, “it is the doctrinal content of the Confession that is bidding for Lutherans today, and that historical judgments contained in the Confession are relative and fallible.”⁶ Herein Truemper attempts a postfoundational distinction that critiqued the application of Lutheran theology in the 16th century, especially as it related to the anathematization of other Christians. In this lack of

³ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, 43.

⁴ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 4-5.

⁵ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, 33ff.

⁶ David G. Truemper, “The Role and Authority of the Lutheran Confessional Writings: Do Lutherans Really ‘Condemn the Anabaptists’?”, in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76.3 (Jul 2002): 299.

humility, Truemper sees a reliance upon false foundations, and as such requires temperament in the dialogues with American Mennonites at the dawn of the 21st century.

However, notice also that Truemper's attempt to make a clear distinction between the theology of Concord and its historical judgments seems a false dichotomy. As temporal creatures, all our theology remains culturally bound. As such, our beliefs reflect both the benefits and pitfalls of our social locations. Truemper's admission that Concord's condemnations arose from false foundations at least raises the specter that the doctrinal commitments of the Lutheran Confessions require reflection and revision.

Paul O. Ingram offers another perspective that helps us to see how Lutheran confessions might operate within the 21st century. He suggests that the "context of contemporary religious pluralism requires that Lutherans create a 'Lutheran theological identity' that is pluralistic in structure, while simultaneously avoiding either theological exclusivism or inclusivism."⁷ In other words, as postmodernity critiques the foundational structures of modernity, Lutherans may continue to develop a particularly Lutheran character that embraces interaction with other theological viewpoints. At the same time, this embrace cannot subsume the identity of others, nor ought it deny the validity of others, insofar as these religious beliefs represent provisional beliefs. Notice that Ingram goes a step beyond Truemper. Not only does Ingram embrace dialogue in the way that Truemper does, but he also allows for a sort of critical conversation. This allows for discussion that not only admits the differences between worldviews, but also allows for faithful critique and testing of those penultimate foundations.

In these Lutheran authors we see an initial attempt to continue a faithful adherence to the Lutheran confessions within the postmodern landscape. Yet, neither addresses the role of

⁷ Paul O. Ingram, "On Being Lutheran in a Religiously Plural World," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46.4 (Winter 2007): 345.

preaching in this process. In particular, as a dialogical act, preaching may model the sort of critical conversation necessary for theological interaction in postmodernity. This may allow a sort of confessional faithfulness that admits the flaws of the *Book of Concord* even as we apply the deep well of wisdom therein to the 21st century context.

From the Reformed perspective, Wilbert M. Van Dyk offers valuable insight to the importance of confessions as preaching guides. In his words, “confessional material stands between the inspired Scripture and the established church,” and as such, “it is the primary responsibility of preachers to show their congregations the confessional plumb line and the confessional link between the Bible and the church.”⁸ Van Dyk points to the central role of Reformation confessions, namely that they sought to interpret Scripture into the Christian life. Pastors inhabit a privileged position as those trained in the confessions of the church. From this place, preachers may not only enlighten congregants to the content of their denominational confessions, but also enliven Scripture through a confessional lens.

Preaching from within a confessional heritage, then, helps to accomplish what Robert Priest considers a core task of preaching: to build “a bridge of understanding across the chasm between these two worlds [of Scripture and contemporary life].”⁹ This bridge metaphor helps us to understand the vitality of confessional preaching. Bridges help to ease transportation between locations otherwise separated by obstacles. Whether rivers or highways, gorges or train tracks, bridges elevate conveyance over obstructions. The postmodern context complicates Van Dyk’s position, particularly since Confessions arose under foundationalist assumptions. However, if we consider the *Book of Concord* as a collection of proximal claims—making best guesses that rely upon penultimate foundations—then Van Dyk’s encouragement becomes a vital model of critical

⁸ Wilbert M. Van Dyk, “Preaching the Creeds and Confessions of the Church: The Case for Theological Literacy,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 47 (2012): 230.

⁹ Robert J. Priest, “Building a Bridge to Somewhere,” in *Trinity Journal* 33 (2012): 176.

conversation. Within sermons framed by confessions, preachers may speak from humble convictions within a tradition.

In fact, sermons of this sort take their cue from the very existence of doctrinal confessions. The *Book of Concord* arose as an attempt to define Lutheran agreement about how to apply scripture to 16th century Europe. The confessions themselves are a theological bridge for application, and as such provide a model from which sermons may borrow.

Indeed, Martin Luther provides an invaluable model for postmodern confessional preaching with his legendary question from the Small Catechism: “What does this mean?”¹⁰ Luther presents this question at least twenty three times as a pedagogical method for elucidating the import of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. This allows Luther to both admit the difficulty of various catechetical concerns, such as the complex realities of the incarnation found in the Second Article of the Creed, even as it opens up a potential for quite personal meaning. Indeed, the Small Catechism utilizes first person language in reference to the reader precisely because Luther sees an intimacy between confessional content and the Christian life.¹¹

The question of meaning lies at the heart of the Lutheran Confessions. Though the original form—“What does this mean?”—disappears from the catechism, and rarely appears in the rest of the *Book of Concord*, meaning seems to guide the entire confessional conversation. Later in the Small Catechism Luther asks “What gifts or benefits does baptism grant?” and “How

¹⁰ While I generally prefer the recent translation released by Robert Kolb and Tim Wengert, I prefer the more common translation of this key question—“What does this mean?”—to Kolb and Wengert’s—“What is this?”—precisely because of the postmodern location for application. The latter implies a certitude, or perhaps a singular definition with little subtlety or situational flexibility. The former allows the catechism to speak clearly even as it welcomes more nuance and application to particular contexts. See Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress: Minneapolis, 2000), 351ff.

¹¹ For instance, in considering the Second Article, “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a human being, born of the Virgin Mary, is *my* Lord. He has redeemed *me*, a lost and condemned human being.” Ibid.

can water do such great things?”¹² Melancthon succinctly addresses the meaning of the church in *The Augsburg Confession VII* and verbosely discusses the meaning of repentance in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession XII*.¹³ The entirety of the Schmalkald Articles sought to establish a basis of agreement upon theological meaning for those Lutherans within the politically motivated Schmalkaldic League. A key concern of the confessions is the meaning of Scripture in the Christian life, and as such, ought to inspire questions of meaning within confessional preaching.

Such concern with the meaning of God, scripture, and theology reveals a concern for application. Yet, this application piece ought not become a rehearsal of activities to perform in light of the sermon. Rather, as Scott Hoeze says, “Sometimes sermons prove themselves more than worthwhile to preach and to hear if they do no more than lighten someone’s load of guilt and duty by joyfully celebrating the heart of the gospel in and through the ongoing work an presence of our Lord and Savior.”¹⁴ Hoezee here seeks to move away from the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism common to the American religious experience, where sermons become less about Christ and more about behaviors, less about good news and more about the good works of good citizens.¹⁵ Application in a confessional sense focuses upon God first. Of course, this includes a sense of how that changes our lives, but this begins with a proclamation of God’s gift of justification in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, justification is perhaps the great answer to “What does this mean?,” for the meaning and ramifications of justification resound throughout the *Book of Concord*. As N.T. Wright points out, Paul speaks of justification in three senses, for Paul “thinks eschatologically:

¹² Ibid., 359.

¹³ Ibid., 42 and 188-218.

¹⁴ Scott Hoezee, “Applying Gracefully,” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 47 (2012): 247.

¹⁵ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 166.

God *has acted* in Jesus the Messiah, he *is at work* presently affirming that all who believe are justified and so giving them assurance, and he *will act* through Jesus when he comes again in glory.”¹⁶ This is vital because it reveals the complexity of the confessional focus upon justification. Indeed, we see throughout the Lutheran confessions a concern for salvation history, that God acted in the past to secure justification for all. Further, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* makes clear the present sense of justification in the claim that we become righteous after baptism.¹⁷ The *Book of Concord* addresses the future sense of justification through the Large Catechism, where Luther writes of the continuous work of the Holy Spirit, who not only promises to daily draw us to Christ in assurance of justification, but works toward sanctification through participation in the church, forgiveness of sin, and assurance of resurrection.¹⁸ In other words, the entirety of the Lutheran confessions seem focused upon the holistic application of justification to the Christian life.

As preachers seek to apply the confessions to the life of the church, they ought not only focus upon behavioral minutia, nor ought they offer a simplified sense of justification. Rather, as a part of the critical conversation of preaching, the sort of application necessary within the postmodern context is the fullness of justification. In the midst of the postmodern matrix, where certitude gives way to uncertainty, must be reminded of the precious, penultimate foundation that God saved us, Christ is saving us, and God will save us.

So far we have seen that Lutheran confessional preaching in postmodernity occurs as critical conversation that offers a bridge between Scripture and the church, especially through the

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, “Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever,” in the *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 54.1 (Mar 2011): 49-50.

¹⁷ “After regeneration, we are without a doubt righteous, that is, accepted by God, and have peace before God through mercy on account of Christ.” Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 166.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 436.

proclamation of the Gospel of justification. The rest of this essay considers the impact of some postmodern homiletical suggestions for content and delivery upon confessional preaching.

Through the lens of Jacob's wrestling with God at Peniel, Ronald J. Allen offers a powerful consideration for how preaching may benefit from the rise of postmodernism. In relation to confessional preaching, he raises up the topic of interpretation, a reality also explored by Lose and Van Huyssteen. Allen suggests that "the postmodern preacher, recognizing that every act of awareness is interpretive, is called to help the congregation interpret interpretation. When members of a congregation are cognizant of the interpret lenses through which they perceive congregational life, deeper (and more respectful) conversations often result."¹⁹ Here Allen points to the growing realization amongst postmodern thinkers that every act of speech is an act of interpretation, and, more fundamentally, that every interaction is interpretive. Rather than see this as impossibly daunting, confessional preachers may follow Allen to see this as an opportunity to interpret the *Book of Concord* into the lives of the congregation. In particular, this process may allow for the Lutheran confessions to become a more consistent conversation partner with individuals and communities, as well as foster more genuine conversation about Lutheran identity within and amongst Lutheran communities.

Robert Kysar and Joseph M. Webb consider the nature of meaning to postmodern preaching. Since we saw earlier the importance of meaning to the Lutheran confessions, this provides a powerful interlocutor. Rather than considering the text to have a singular meaning, or considering authorial intent as the chief authority upon meaning, Kysar and Webb reveal the central role of the reader, or more accurately, the interpreter, as an equally important locus for meaning. "The meaning of a text is one horizon, and the interpreter (with his or her presuppositions, cultural setting, and ideologies) is the other horizon... Meaning, then, arises out

¹⁹ Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching and Postmodernism," in *Interpretation* (January 2001): 36.

of the relationship between these two horizons, these two points of view.”²⁰ In other words, ultimate meaning does not lay latent within a text, though some meaning surely resides there. Neither does meaning simply occur only out of the interpreter’s perspective. Rather, in the constant collision between text and interpreter, meaning arises that is related to the text and the interpreter, but impossible without the input of both. This looks back to Lose’s critical conversation, and reveals the important of more voices in the conversation. As perspectives increase, meaning blossoms in the centrifuge of conversation.

For confessional preaching, this not only encourages a faithful interpretive approach to the confessions themselves, it also extends an invitation for an exegetical conversation with other interpreters. This will, of course, involve reading Lutheran theologians past and present, but preachers ought to also find ways to faithfully engage the meanings present within their communities not only after the sermon event, but prior to it, and perhaps, in the midst of it.

A growing chorus of homileticians argue for a dialogical dimension to sermon preparation. Lucy Atkinson Rose, John McClure, and O. Wesley Allen, Jr. each argue for a sort of preaching that increases congregational input into the construction of the sermon, not only in terms of examples or construction, but also of theological content.²¹ Doug Pagitt, a prominent preaching within the Alternative Worship²² movement, takes this conversational commitment even further as he argues for a sermon that includes unscripted congregational dialogue that follows a more traditional sermon.²³

²⁰ Robert Kysar and Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching to Postmodern: New Perspectives for Proclaiming the Message* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 184.

²¹ See Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: WJK, 1997); O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: a Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

²² A subcategory within the Emerging Church.

²³ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: the Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (El Cajon, CA: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2005).

In different ways, each author offers a way that Lose's critical conversation may appear within the liturgical act of preaching. While Rose, McClure, and Allen each provide compelling arguments, Pagitt provides a model that seems most viable within a postmodern context. Of course, this Pagitt's conversational approach seems contrary to our modern sensibilities of liturgical structure, but the deconstructionist tendencies point postmodernity toward a more flattened hierarchy. As Lose indicates, postmodernists often distrust authority, especially that based upon knowledge, because "knowledge is always inextricably bound up with power."²⁴ This is why preaching has earned a negative cultural resonance: to be preached at is to have someone use a sort of knowledge to try to gain power, and thus authority, over another. While Rose, McClure, and Allen try to mitigate the effects of this, only Pagitt's willingness to cede power in the liturgical act of preaching invites a sense that authority is truly distributed. To retain only a monologue, even one informed by congregational discussion prior to the event, communicates that the sermonizer retains the ultimate authority within the community.

This idea invites an exciting possibility within confessional preaching. The opportunity for conversation allows for inquiry and pushback, for excitement and concern, in the midst of the proclamation of justification. To allow this play on equal ground as the sermon validates the dialogue as a vital part of the catechetical process. As critical conversation, it affirms the perspectival realities of congregations. As a bridge, it brings congregations closer not only to the written Word, but the Living Word to whom scripture testifies. As an assurance of justification, it allows a church to engage in a conversation based upon the penultimate foundation: that in Jesus Christ humanity is restored to full relationship with God.

What does this mean? It means that the Lutheran confessions found within the *Book of Concord* retain a valuable role in the development of life and faith, even in postmodernity. Of

²⁴ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, 23.

course, this requires a significant shift in the way the confessions are considered, taught, employed, and even read. Yet, through the act of preaching, we may model to congregations not only the vitality of the confessions, but that we may continue to speak with assurance about the God to whom the confessions testify, Jesus Christ.