

## *Smoky Mountain Reflections June & July 2010*

Summer is upon us and I find myself always looking for ways to share the truth in love. A common phrase used in the old South is “you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.” This has its source in a small glass fly-trapping device used in antebellum homes to trap flies and reduce their annoying presence in the room. It has come to be used as a phrase that is understood to mean you can communicate your point of view more clearly and attract your opponent to your position more often by being polite and courteous than you can by being bitter and argumentative. Some hellfire and brimstone preachers could make use of a more loving presentation of the gospel without in any way compromising on its truth. That being said, we must also acknowledge that the cross is a scandalous way to die and there is no way for us to sugarcoat the horrible price that had to be paid for our sin. The Law must be proclaimed in its truth, purity, and sternness, even though it will sting the human conscience, so that the sweetness of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit can work their salvific work on a dead and dying world.

As I continue to address things that can help us to lead a life that is growing in a spiritually God-pleasing way, while avoiding things that can lead us away from God, I will use the tried and true format that has carried five centuries of Lutheran confessions to the altar to publicly confess their faith before God and the world. This consists of six simple chief parts. If, after I review these, you find yourself in full agreement, then even if you are in another church, you hold a Lutheran position on your faith. If however, you find yourself in disagreement, this does not mean necessarily that you are not a Christian. It simply means you may want to consider how that doctrine has the potential to take you away from instead of towards God.

We have already established that scripture is the rule and norm for all of our positions as Christians. However, what I am about to present is a confessional biblical Lutheran stand which is unique among Christians in that we do not make excuses for mysteries that God reveals to us but does not fully rationally explain. At the same time, we acknowledge all that is true that can be explained, but when our human reason falls short, we do not dismiss God or His word. We acknowledge our inability to fully comprehend beyond that which He reveals to us.

So what about these six chief parts: the 10 Commandments, the Apostles Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Confession and Absolution, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. If a person can publicly confess a biblical understanding of these six basic concepts as revealed to us by God in His word, they are then ready to begin a life of learning and growing as a disciple in His church. I know that many non-Lutherans read this article. I ask simply that you prayerfully consider the biblical truths I am about to share. Before dismissing them out of hand, consider them in the Light of God’s word.

It is not possible to do justice to Luther’s Small Catechism in a couple of small articles. I will simply attempt to hit some points of agreement and disagreement within the invisible body of Christ. My motivation is not to get other Christians into my church; it is to get Christians to share the truth in love in their church and their community.

First—the **10 Commandments**: Regardless of how you number them, we can agree that Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 give us the Law of God, and Christ further clarified this Law in Matthew 22 & Mark 12 as loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and loving your neighbor as yourself. If we love God and our neighbor in this way, there is no danger in our violating His commandments. However, we were all born sinful, and that is actually the first point of disagreement. Even though God’s word tells us we are born sinful in Genesis 3 & 6 and Psalm 51:5 and many other places, some depart from the biblical view and go to a sociologically enlightened view that is more appealing to our sinful ears—that we are born basically good and become sinful. The problem with this position is three-fold. It blames our environment which is the same as blaming God as its creator; it leans on self by implying it may be possible for someone besides Christ to live a sinless life; and it denies the simple truth of a crying infant—that is not the cry of an innocent being but the cry of a self-centered sinful being that wants to be fed, changed or coddled. It may be their only method of communication, but it is still self-centered which is what sin is: self centeredness, self above all others.

Once we acknowledge we stand accused in the face of the Law, we then have access to the knowledge that we are in need of salvation. This is why the biblical stand on original sin is important.

**The Apostles Creed:** This is among three ecumenical creeds written by the early church 1700 years ago to fully explain the triune nature of God in the form of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This became necessary to stand against a number of false doctrines that were circulating which called into question the deity of Christ. Some say “no creed but Christ” but if you ask them what they believe, they will tell you... if they profess to believe something, that is a creed! These three creeds are not the inspired word of God, but they are a tried and true expression of His word, and Christians should never hesitate to boldly proclaim their faith in the one and only triune God. The Creeds are only a tool to help us do that in a clear and uncompromising way. I have never met any Christian against saying creeds who could show me something in the creed that was not biblically sound. It might sound cool to say “no creed but Christ” but the Creeds were written to boldly confess who Christ is and to proclaim our faith in Him.

**The Lord’s Prayer:** When Jesus was asked “how should we pray?” the Lord’s Prayer was His answer. We are blessed with two great things in this prayer: first—a prayer that we can and should pray, not in an empty and rote fashion but in a sincere and heartfelt way focusing on the meanings, blessings, and responsibilities that the words communicate; second—we are blessed with a format for prayer: address God, acknowledge who He is, and submit our supplications or petitions. The format is simple and straight forward and we should be thankful for it, and we should also include that thanks in our prayers.

The last three parts of the catechism are sacramental in nature. A confessional Lutheran understanding of a sacrament is that it must be instituted by Christ, it must contain a physical element, it must contain the word of God, and it must provide faith and forgiveness. The three subjects that follow are where Lutherans look more Catholic than protestant, but I think the best label for these positions would be biblical.

**Confession & Absolution:** We hold that John 20:23 means what it says: *“If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”* We can and should get forgiveness from God ourselves in private prayer as often as possible, but that does not negate these words of Christ. The purpose of this gift is so that God’s people can be blessed with a private absolution from their pastor or a public one in worship. Either way, this is so that we can hear with our ears that God forgives us through Christ. This is no special power from the pastor because it is not his forgiveness—it is God’s forgiveness, spoken in the way that He has blessed us with. Many hold that this is sacramental but not a sacrament because it lacks the physical element. I leave it as an open question and enjoy the real forgiveness it provides. If you say no one can forgive sins but God, this statement contains truth, but that does not deny God and His church this method of blessing you with forgiveness from God that you can hear with your ears. (There is debate even today as to whether or not this is a sacrament, So, some Lutherans say we have 3 sacraments and other say we have 2, two being the majority view.)

**Baptism:** Many hold that this is an outward sign of an inward feeling, and that it is how you proclaim your Christianity. But consider these truths: Titus 3:5 *by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, baptism provides faith, forgiveness and salvation;* 1 Peter 3:21 *Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you;* Acts 2:38-39 *“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”* The Greek word “baptizo,” translated “baptize,” means to wash, and while it can mean immerse, it does not require immersion. And if this gift is something God is doing, and it is for

your children, and we should do it to all nations, and there are many scriptural examples of whole households being baptized, the real question is why would we not baptize infants?

**The Lord's Supper:** Jesus said in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and in I Corinthians 11, *“this is My Body,” “this is My Blood.”* Paul further clarifies this in 1 Cor 10:16 *Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the Blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the Body of Christ?* Before communing, we should examine ourselves in accordance with God's word found in 1 Cor 11:28 *A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.* In Christian love we are reminded how important this is in 1 Cor 11:27 *Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.* Our worthiness is not determined by our good works, but through faith, accepting this mystery as it is clearly revealed to us in God's Word. Martin Luther explains it this way: “Anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared.”

Because God loves us so much and created us as physical beings, He chose to bless us by giving us these sacraments that we may see, hear, smell, taste and touch the forgiveness of God. Let us all walk closer to Him by receiving these gifts with thankful hearts, and not taking a rational stand that cheats us out of these mysterious gifts from God.

In Christ,  
Pastor Portier