

“We Believe, Teach, and Confess” Addressing the Form-Content Issue in a Context of Post-Constantinian Mission

Roberto E. Bustamante

Latin American Lutheranism and Negotiation of Religious Identity

Latin American Lutheranism has always subsisted as a minority. It was born in proscription, with the Spanish Inquisition’s sentence.¹ The Edict of Cartagena de Indias (1610), for instance, catalogues the Lutheran heretics together with the pirates and corsairs, enemies of the Spaniard Crown, as the same type of criminals.² It was only in the nineteenth century that the independence revolutions, promoted by Masonic associations, provided more favorable conditions for Protestantism (especially liberal Protestantism) to enter the region.³ Despite this, far from taking a prominent place in society, Lutheranism that entered Latin America during the nineteenth century largely functioned as an instrument of protection and cultural preservation for Russian-German immigrant minorities.⁴

As “transplant (or immigrant) churches,” the main Lutheran church bodies in the region still have a hard time inserting themselves into the *mestizo* cultural context.⁵ In fact, having already left behind much of its Catholic and Spaniard identity during the last century, Latin American culture has migrated into Pentecostalism, and finally into a variety of neo-pagan religious forms.⁶ Therefore, the Post-Constantinian marginality of Western Christianity today, is not a great novelty for Latin American Lutheranism, which is used to being an “outsider.”

The practice of a marginal religion is never easy. In many cases, it pushes its adherents to use survival strategies, such as negotiating its religious identity. This strategy can be defined as “a transactional interaction process, in which individuals attempt to evoke, assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others’ desired self-images.”⁷ A paradigmatic example of negotiation of religious identity in Latin America was the phenomenon that historians of the time of the conquest narrated: in order not to be



Rev. Dr. Roberto E. Bustamante is an Argentine pastor who serves the Sinodo Luterano de México as assistant pastor in México City, as well as the Seminario Concordia el Reformador in the Dominican Republic as Academic Dean and Professor of Exegetical and Systematic Theology.

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

punished by the Holy Spanish Inquisition nor by their gods, the natives hid their idols beneath, behind, or even within the Catholic religious symbols. Thus, wrote Fray Juan of Torquemada, “giving the impression of revering the cross, they were actually worshipping nothing but the demonic images that they had hidden [within the cross].”⁸

This struggle between what is actually believed and worshiped, on the one hand, and what is shown and expressed before an antagonistic environment, on the other hand, exacerbates a type of religiosity that clearly corresponds to the model of experiential-expressive religion in George Lindbeck’s typology.⁹ In this form of religion, the experience of the holy (reality and content) is, by definition, independent and previous to any attempt of its symbolic expression (sign and form). This sleight of hand with polarized categories makes it possible both that traditional Christian religious symbols get loaded with new meanings, and conversely, that pagan symbols be easily adopted with the intent of filling them up with some sort of Christian meaning.

Case Study: Lutheranism in Argentina

Latin American Lutheranism has not been immune to negotiation in the strife for forging one’s own identity, and for surviving as a religious minority. Let’s take into consideration the case of the *Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Argentina* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Argentina), as it is displayed in one of its official publications, *Revista Teológica (The Theological Journal)*. The appearance of the hymnal, *Culto Cristiano*, during the seventies, in resonance with the LCMS’s preparations of the *Lutheran Worship*, triggered the publication of a series of articles in *Revista Teológica* (mainly translations from the North Atlantic) focused on the church’s liturgy. These articles were sympathetic to recovering liturgical forms of the church’s Lutheran tradition, but at the same time questioned their validity and suitability in the mission context of Latin America. Consequently, in 1987, Argentine Pastor Pablo Wahler proposed to “take advantage of the same elements that were always part of the Christian worship... in a renewed, positive, and up-dated way, one that may be adequate to local and personal circumstances.”¹⁰ Wahler proceeded to reinterpret a few central components of the divine service (i.e., preaching, worship, prayer, confession, and the Lord’s Supper), which in some cases received definitely strange contents. For example, “confessing” described as “telling God and the brother what is going on, how we feel, what we intimately think about things.”¹¹ Wahler concluded his essay saying:

I think that, to the extent that the church gets rid of its tradition, discarding what is not fundamental, and, above all, what is an impediment to the action of the Holy Spirit; and, to the extent that it builds on the true foundation, which cannot be changed in the church of Christ and which is He himself, the communities will be strengthened on the basis of the gospel and will also create their own forms of cultic expression.¹²

A few years later, Prof. Jorge Groh sought to retrieve the missional significance that the Sacrament of the Altar had held in the early church. Captivated by the images of “proclamation” (*keryssein*) and “communion” (*koinonia*) that the apostle Paul expressed

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

in First Corinthians (11:26 and 10:16 respectively), Groh proposed to reclaim and emphasize an understanding of the Lord's Supper in terms of *verbal witness* ("over against any ritual conception") and *prompt receptivity* ("over against [any extended process of indoctrination with] ecclesiastical concepts.")¹³

These two instances exemplify the effort of a Latin American Lutheran Church to instill content and missional relevance to its inherited liturgical forms. Some years later, Prof. Sergio Fritzler depicted the resultant effect of this trajectory:

In general terms and out of ignorance, the liturgy has been trimmed, amputated, and manipulated with whimsical criteria ... But on the other extreme, there are some who think liturgy as a "tiny clock", in terms of a constant repetition, without losing a single comma, every Sunday, throughout the year, all over the years! ... We could call it an "uncritical imitation," that is to say, a repetition that does not consider what it is all about.¹⁴

This picture still describes the current state of affairs in an *Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Argentina* that is polarized this way in attraction toward these two extremes that Fritzler labels as "liturgical abolitionism" and "liturgical legalism."¹⁵ There is risk of losing sight of the connection between form and content in the struggle for symbols.

Addressing the Form-Content Issue

The Liturgical Movement, which had a great impact upon the historical and liturgical churches during the second half of last century, sought to reestablish the bond between form and content, under the motto *lex orandi–lex credendi* (the law of prayer–the law of faith). The motto reshapes a phrase attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine, a fifth-century monk and disciple of Saint Augustine. Lutheran liturgiologist James Waddell conjectures that it was Don Prosper Gueranger, a nineteenth century French Catholic monk—described by Pope John VI as the father of the "Liturgical Movement"—who coined the modern form of the axiom.¹⁶ The attempt was to give back its doctrinal substance and reflection to the church's liturgical life, and at the same time to reestablish the ecclesiastical liturgy to its function as the proper matrix for doing theology.¹⁷

So far, so good. But, in spite of the great promise to reconnect the fundamental realities of the liturgy (*lex orandi*) and the dogma of the church (*lex credendi*), the absence of a connective verb in the motto was neither accidental, not innocuous. Each theologian and each ecclesiastical tradition that embraced this proposal came to interpret *lex orandi–lex credendi* as they wished, and in some cases in mutually exclusive ways. In his doctoral dissertation, Joseph Omolo finds three basic interpretations of the motto: (1) Whereas some participants in the discussion put liturgy above doctrine (*lex orandi* establishes *lex credendi*; Alexander Schmemmann, Aidan Kavanagh, David Fagerberg, and Gordon Lathrop); (2) others reverse this order (*lex orandi* expresses *lex credendi*; Hermann Sasse and Vilmo Vajta); (3) and finally other authorities put liturgy and doctrine in mutual correlation (*lex orandi* and *lex credendi* complement each other; Regin Prenter, Pope Pius XII, and Geoffrey Wainwright).¹⁸

But, in spite of the great promise to reconnect the fundamental realities of the liturgy (*lex orandi*) and the dogma of the church (*lex credendi*), the absence of a connective verb in the motto was neither accidental, not innocuous.

Paul De Clerck has demonstrated that the original phrase by Prosper of Aquitaine, *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, not only does not support the usual way of the liturgical movement understands it (i.e., that doctrine has to be established on the basis of the liturgical practices), but even moves in the opposite direction. De Clerck reminds us that the fifth-century Augustinian monk was refuting the Semi-Pelagian reading of 1 Timothy 2:1–2, arguing that “if the church has the custom of praying for unbelievers and other enemies of the cross of Christ in order that they be converted and receive faith and charity, then this is clear proof that God alone is able to be the author of conversion. The command to make supplication formulated by the Bible and put into practice by the Church determines, therefore, the rule of faith.”¹⁹

The relation between liturgical forms and dogmatic content is thrown into an ambiguity that not only severely limits the usefulness of the Liturgical Movement’s claims behind the motto, but also exposes its truly “anti-dogmatic” agenda,²⁰ whereas the church’s dogma is reduced to a fragmentary and transitory intellectual expression of the ineffable mystical experience rather lived in the liturgy.²¹

We might be better served by the conceptual schema that historian Jaroslav Pelikan used in his magnum opus, *The Christian Tradition*, to describe the historical dynamics with which the church formulated its doctrine and, from time to time, either embraced it or distanced itself from it.²² I refer to the classic triad “we believe, teach, and confess,” which Pelikan adopted from the traditional language that the church has used to formalize its dogmatic decisions.²³ The Yale historian uses this triad as a descriptive tool to indicate increase and solution of the conflicts that form part of the history of the Christian tradition.²⁴ In the introductory definitions, Pelikan proposes a programmatic understanding of the components of the triad:

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Without setting rigid boundaries, we shall identify what is ‘believed’ as the form of Christian doctrine present in the modalities of devotion, spirituality, and worship; what is ‘taught’ as the content of the word of God extracted by exegesis from the witness of the Bible and communicated to the people of the church through proclamation, instruction, and churchly theology; and what is ‘confessed’ as the testimony of the church, both against false teaching from within and against attacks from without, articulated in polemic and in apologetics, in creed and in dogma.²⁵

Throughout his massive work, it is possible to see that Pelikan considers the dynamic relationship among the components of the triad (what is believed, taught, and confessed) in order to describe, for example, the process that led to the formulation of the dogmas (often moving from individual piety to public teaching, and later becoming confession),²⁶ to indicate the strength of a tradition, such as the Eastern Church (which historically preserved the unity of the triad),²⁷ the relevance of the Lutheran Reformation (which indicated the correct hierarchical relationship between the components in the triad),²⁸ or the root of the great doctrinal crisis of Modernity (which reversed the proper hierarchy).²⁹

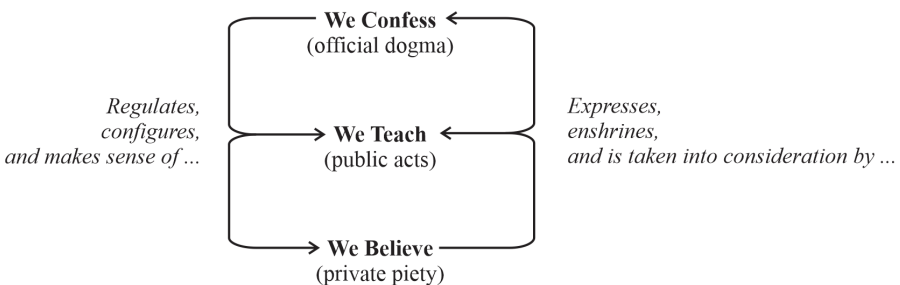
Therefore, we can join this author with the following statements:

1. The components in the triad “we believe, teach, and confess” describe ascending levels in the church’s life and doctrine, moving from the basis of the believer’s individual piety (“we believe”); passing through the public teaching and practices of an ecclesiastical body (“we teach”); to finally arrive at the official dogmas codified in the creeds and the confessions of the church (“we confess”).³⁰

2. A church body’s doctrinal health and integrity are damaged when the components of the triad “we believe, teach, and confess” go separate ways, isolating the individual piety from the public teaching, or both from the confession of the church.

3. A church body’s doctrinal health and integrity are damaged when the hierarchical order of the triad “we believe, teach, and confess” is subverted; for instance, making the popular piety or public practices in the church regulate the actual confession of the church.

4. A church body’s doctrinal health and integrity are fostered when the components of the triad “we believe, teach, and confess” exhibit both a relation of reciprocal interaction



Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

and a relation of normative regulation. Thus, there is a dynamic movement within the triad (see Figure 1).³¹

Figure 1. Reciprocal Interaction and Normative Regulation among the Components of the Triad.

Conclusion

What contribution does the triad “we believe, teach, and confess” make in addressing the form-content issue in a context of post-Constantinian mission? The schema just presented (and that historian Jaroslav Pelikan used as a descriptive device to appreciate the different trajectories and stages in the history of Christian tradition) may serve to assess and regulate the doctrinal health and integrity of a church body in connection with the liturgical decisions a church body makes in a context of mission.

These are its possible contributions.

This schema recognizes the normative role that belongs to the Lutheran Confessions as *norma normata* ³²

This schema acknowledges the strategic and formative function of public practices in the church (among which the liturgical practices and forms have an eminent place).

This schema helps the church to explicitly and intentionally configure its liturgical forms from their proper substance and basis for decision: the pure doctrine of the Gospel as confessed in the Book of Concord.

This schema protects the church from a vacuum of dogmatic content in the liturgical forms that the church puts into practice.

This schema promotes a recapture of its liturgical heritage, but only with consideration of its proper dogmatic content, and its contextual relevance.

This schema takes seriously conversation concerning private piety and the daily experiences of those to whom Christians reach out in mission.

This schema provides valid criteria for assessing the adequacy of content (the confessed truth), of form (public rites), and of contextual relevance (people’s piety).

Without claiming finality, these seven statements changed into binary questions (yes/no questions) may help in using the triad “we believe, teach, and confess” as an evaluative and regulatory instrument that aids in the church’s daily struggle to establish a liturgical identity that is both consistent with the divine doctrine and suited for its missional context.

Endnotes

¹ Enrique Dussel, *Historia general de la iglesia en américa latina* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1983), 1:661.

² Dussel, *Historia general*, 1:650, 661.

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

- ³ Enrique Dussel, “*Historia del fenómeno religioso en América Latina*,” in *Religiosidad e historiografía: La irrupción del pluralismo religioso en América Latina y su elaboración metódica en la historiografía*, ed. Hans-Jürg Prien (Frankfurt/Madrid: Vervuert Verlag/Iberoamericana, 1998), 75.
- ⁴ Vitor Westhelle, “*Considerações sobre o etno-luteranismo latino-americano: Panfleto para debate*,” *Estudos Teológicos* 18, no. 2 (1978): 84; René E. Gertz, “*Os luteranos no Brasil*,” *Revista de História Regional* 6, no. 2 (Invierno 2001): 17–18.
- ⁵ Waldo L. Villalpando, ed., *Las iglesias de transplante: Protestantismo de inmigración en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios Cristianos, 1970).
- ⁶ Robert A. White, “*Secularización y pluralismo religioso en América Latina: ¿Cambios ... o continúa el mismo sincretismo de religiosidad popular? Una perspectiva de análisis*,” *Diálogos de Comunicación* 41 (1995), accessed March 15, 2022. <https://rolandoperez.files.wordpress.com/2009/02/secularizacion-y-pluralismo-religioso-en-al-por-robert-white.pdf>
- ⁷ Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge, “Introduction: New Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts,” in *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*, eds. Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2004), 4.
- ⁸ Fray Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana* (México DF: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas de la UNAM), 5:102.
- ⁹ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 31–32.
- ¹⁰ Pablo Wahler, “*El culto y la presencia del Espíritu Santo*,” *Revista Teológica* 32, no. 130 (1987): 14.
- ¹¹ Wahler procedures exhibit remarkable similarities with the demythologization of the New Testament proposed by Rudolf Bultmann, since he preserves the symbols, attempts to find out a core meaning, and translates it into a modern (and secularized) understanding of the symbol. For example, Wahler reinterprets the confession of sins that takes place in the divine service this way: “Why should we think the confession just in terms of confessing sins? It would be better for our communities to cultivate that quality of being communicative, sincere, open minded; and this especially with regard to those aspects it would be beneficial to know each other. I repeat, the confession should not be limited to recognizing our sins, for, to be honest, many times it not even has to do with sins, or at least not with sins we are aware of. Rather, [our problems] may be related to errors made in ignorance, to our limitations, to forgetfulness. Confessing is also telling God and the brother what is going on, how we feel, what we intimately think about things. We might be suffering, confused, nervous, empty, anxious, hurt, ashamed, happy, optimistic, overflowing, or full of life [!]. Why should we not share and participate others of these experiences, if this can become therapeutic for me and for others?” Wahler, “*El culto*,” 17–18.
- ¹² Wahler, “*El culto*,” 20.
- ¹³ Jorge E. Groh, “*La santa cena y la misión de la iglesia*,” *Revista Teológica* 38, no. 146 (1993): 8.
- ¹⁴ Sergio A. Fritzler, “*Confesionalidad y liturgia*,” *Revista Teológica* 50, no. 168 (2011): 66.
- ¹⁵ Fritzler, “*Confesionalidad*,” 66.

- ¹⁶ James A. Waddell, “Rethinking *lex orandi lex credendi*,” <https://lexcredendilexorandi.wordpress.com/> (accessed June 23, 2017). See also Damasus Winzen, “Guéranger and the Liturgical Movement—Comments on Bouyer’s *Liturgical Piety*,” *The American Benedictine Review* 6 (Winter 1955–1956): 424–26; A Sister of Ryde, “Dom Geranger: Prophet of Ecclesial Renewal,” *Faith* 38, no. 4 (July–August 2006): 19.
- ¹⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, “Theology and Liturgical Tradition,” in *Worship in Scripture and Tradition*, ed. Massey Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 165–78; Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984).
- ¹⁸ Joseph T. Omolo, “Worshipping Meaningfully: The Complementary Dynamics of Liturgy and Theology in Worship” (Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2014).
- ¹⁹ Paul De Clerck, “‘*Lex orandi, lex credendi*’: The Original Sense and Historical Avatars of an Equivocal Adage,” trans. Thomas M. Winger, *Studia Liturgica* 24, no. 2 (1994): 189.
- ²⁰ Kurt E. Marquart, “Liturgy and Dogmatics,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2003): 186.
- ²¹ Cyprian Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1976), 530.
- ²² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975–89).
- ²³ This is the formula with which the Formula of Concord (particularly the Epitome) introduces the affirmative dogmatic definitions. See, for example, FC Ep, “Rule and Norm”, 1; I, 2, 3, 8; III, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11; VII, 6, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20; VIII, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15.
- ²⁴ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1:1–5.
- ²⁵ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1:4.
- ²⁶ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1:4–5.
- ²⁷ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1:341.
- ²⁸ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 4:4–5.
- ²⁹ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 5:122.
- ³⁰ Here, in truth, the contents that belong to each component in the triad are redistributed. Taking into consideration the way the *Solid Declaration* (“Binding Summary,” 3, 10) establishes a hierarchy of three different types of ecclesial speech acts (i.e., Scriptures, Confessions, and any other ecclesial written or oral discourse), we preserve the first order component (we confess) for the normative text of the Lutheran Confessions alone. Any other kind of public action and speech-act of a particular congregation or church body (e.g., its public proclamation, its administration of the sacraments, Christian instruction, and official theological education and publications, etc.) is placed under the second order component (we teach). Finally, the third order component, (we believe), is referred to private Christian piety in general.
- ³¹ I have labeled this operative device in Pelikan “a model of orthodox dynamics.” See, Roberto E. Bustamante, “Contemporary Confessional Commitment: A Models-Based Approach with a Particular Focus on Global South Lutheranism” (Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary), 62–72.
- ³² FC SD, “Rule and Norm.”