

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***

Winner of  
Concordia Historical Institute's  
2017 Award of Commendation



Volume XXVI, No. 1 (Issue 52) May 2018

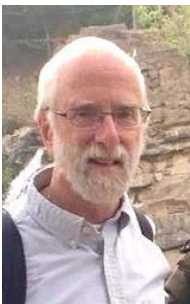
# Confessing Sin in Mission

Richard Carter

**Abstract:** In personal stories and professional studies, the author proposes attention to sin—its confession and absolution—as vital to confessing in mission. As suggested by the *Ablaze!* movement in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and its global partners, there is an important place for appropriate leadership, planning, and administration in mission; but there needs to be space between evaluation/assessment and making new plans, space for recognition of sin in the assessment, and space for absolution to set free for mission. The David Kolb four-stage cycle for learning is adapted for engaging in mission, with the addition of that space for confession and absolution. The author invites the reader to reflect on places in her/his life where sin has impeded mission and to hear absolution for such sin. The last word, the first word in mission, is God’s: You are forgiven.

The insight came at a district outreach training event. I remain grateful for it. The facilitator opened the session something like this: “Here is significant, appropriate data about how we have not followed through in mission, in our Lord’s Great Commission. With this new program we have the opportunity to correct that. What choices can we make, what programs and plans in our congregation and district, to get going in mission?”

The event was part of *Ablaze!*, a multi-year outreach program of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and its partner churches around the globe. The intention



*Rev. Dr. Richard Carter is rounding out fifty years in ministry by serving a third year as a volunteer theological educator at Concordia Theological Seminary, Hong Kong. He frequently introduces himself in classes this way: He climbs up on a desk and notes, “Three master’s degrees and one and two-thirds doctorates. Who has all the answers?!” And then climbs down, sits on the floor, looks up, and says with a line borrowed from Robert Kolb, “Unless, of course, I am witnessing from my vulnerability” (in Speaking the Gospel Today, p. 16). He served in two congregations as a DCE before entering seminary. After Yale he taught for six years at Lutheran Seminary for the Lutheran Church of Nigeria. Following doctoral studies, he taught at Concordia University, St. Paul, until his retirement in 2013. His professional interests include Christian education and the integration of faith and life, supported by Luther’s Catechisms. [carter@csp.edu](mailto:carter@csp.edu)*

was 100 million distinct faith-sharing events over the years leading up to 2017, the five hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. “Did not our hearts burn within us?!” such that 100,000,000 people would be on the receiving end of some sharing of the Good News of Jesus.

At that particular presentation, however, my heart burned within me for a different reason. I thought and felt, “If we haven’t been faithful and obedient in mission, our first choice is to confess our sin and hear absolution.” A decade later, my interest and concern remains: one element of “confessing in mission” is confessing our sin in mission.

The colleague who had made the presentation seemed to miss what we (I) so often miss, that the power of mission, the power in Christian living to do what we haven’t done, is the power of the Good News, not first the power of our program decisions. As Christians, we may do well with Law, speaking to ourselves and others about God’s will and the ways we are not “in” God’s will.<sup>1</sup>

If we haven’t been faithful and obedient in mission, our first choice is to confess our sin and hear absolution.

It may be that in formal speeches—in sermons—we make clear the Good News proclamation as the sequel to Law. In traditional communion liturgies, absolution follows confession, before we move on to sanctification, to other activities of worship in prayer and praise.<sup>2</sup> But in common Christian thinking and, I would wager, in common parish and denominational practice, we move from confession to sanctification without the “pause” for absolution—the pause that truly refreshes—for Good News. We move from assessment to strategies. That may be good administrative practice, but we miss out on accessing the Good-News freedom to make that move.

Some may rush in to read this article eagerly in terms of “never did like Ablaze.” That may be its own sin to confess. An intention and effort to proclaim Jesus to 100 million?—Praise God, even if you don’t like the particular organizational structure. The sense of celebration was evident almost a decade ago in lines from a *Lutheran (LCMS) Witness Reporter* article:

**“Ablaze!” faith-sharing counter exceeds 10 million**

The Web-based “counter” that tracks the number of times LCMS Lutherans have shared their faith with others as part of the *Ablaze!* movement hit 10,006,997 as this *Reporter* was going to press April 29 [2009]. That figure includes some 310,000 additions from the Synod’s Southeastern District, which has been recording Gospel-sharing events for three years and last month added them to the *Ablaze!* Web site.<sup>3</sup>

A photo caption with the article noted, “Sharing one’s faith with others—even across a backyard fence—is what the Synod’s *Ablaze!* initiative is all about.”

Lutherans teach all three articles of the Creed. There were significant gifts in the *Ablaze!* proposal besides that Spirit-working, Third Article “backyard fence” sharing of the Good News of Jesus. The First Article of the Creed invites Christians, including church leaders, to work with goals and objectives, appropriate leadership, planning, and managing of tasks, as *Ablaze!* demonstrated with articulated and engaged planning for many people globally for activities by which to be in mission. Too often in the life of the Church there is a lack of attention to planning and administration, to the development in the church (as an institution) of the knowledge, attitude, and skills by which well-organized business and community groups go about their tasks. How will we face our Lord and explain that Servant Leadership or Management by Objectives or Policy-Based Governance was fine for the world, but we are people of the Word and wouldn’t touch such things. (Erasmus in the 1500s in his “In Praise of Folly” noted that a bishop was so pure that he would never touch a gold coin. Erasmus’ point, however, was different. The bishop would never touch a gold coin, except with gloved hands.)

A story about a pastor’s reflective and planning work in his congregation gives a sample of how the church can use such “public” skills and methods:

In short, the gut check, brought on by an honest look at the parochial report and faith-filled prayer [and absolution?] led to the realization that he had been leading the congregation as if they were in the “church business,” when in reality they were supposed to be in the “reconciliation business”—in mission!

This pastor used a professional planning skill, distinguishing between “adaptive challenges” and “technical solutions,” as part of his reflective process. The world’s “work” may well work in the church, the administrative and leadership attitude, skills and knowledge it develops being useful also in church “work.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps such use of public, professional skills is a matter of “Two Kingdoms” theology. The Kingdom of the Left teaches us to manage well the Kingdom of the Right, insofar as it is a human organization. When the Kingdom of the Right loses—missionaries brought back, schools closed—how much might it have been our sins in the Kingdom of the Left that set up such losses? There may be a time and a place rightfully to close a congregation, school, or other agency. But how often is it wrong, the consequence of months or years of failure to lead, to plan, to administer well? How often is it our sin that needs confessing, not just pressures such as a downturn in the economy or a change in the demographics?

To be clear, this article proposes absolution, not administration, as the first step on the way forward to confessing the faith in mission. Doing a better job of

“running” the church is not our salvation. Using effective administration—or any other method of “remaking itself in the image of whatever is happening lately”—to restore the church to some glorious status, would be sin, pursuing an illusion. “The church is to be about the things of salvation: forgiving sins, pointing and guiding people to the way of life outlined in the Scriptures.”<sup>5</sup> Absolution, then effective administration in mission.

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This article commends the *Ablaze!* effort, and all those who worked in it (globally!) across the years—as it commends schools, pastors, and other church leaders who have recognized the need for skillful administration, for assessing need and setting goals, objectives, and plans to respond to those needs. The critique here is of the much wider and deeper issue, the need to make space in or after assessment to identify or clarify our sin, and to hear Good-News absolution applied to it. Who knows where and how we might serve in witness and mission when we have made such confession and heard such absolution as God is eager to speak?!

Two examples come to mind, one congregational and one personal. The congregation had bumped along for a number of years with their pastor, unhappily. Some were displeased with the pastor’s work and some were displeased with those who were displeased, etc. The pastor accepted a call to serve elsewhere. Everyone could breathe a sigh of relief and get on with the business of calling the next pastor. Yes? Or maybe, “No.” In this case in a Sunday morning service before the call meeting, the opening Confession and Absolution was adjusted to use Corporate Confession and Absolution. A parish leader spoke briefly, inviting members to consider their sins in general and their sins in particular, whatever sin might have been theirs during the last pastor’s years of service. The vacancy pastor followed with time for silence for reflection and confession. Then, with the general absolution to all worshipers he gave the invitation to come forward to receive absolution individually, as the order provides. The absolution could be for any and all sins; it was clearly a way for the congregation to acknowledge its sins—confessing—and be freed for mission—confessing—with whomever would be the next pastor. Confessing sin in mission cleared the air, brought the light and life of the Gospel to bear on congregational life and allowing freedom to move forward, confessing the faith in mission.

A particular example of Confession and Absolution opening my life for mission turned up when I had not sinned yet. But for the event coming up in two months with some mission options, any time I thought of it, all I could think of was sins. Imagine it was a family reunion: All I could think of was that I would punch out Grandma

and kick Grandpa in the shins. I was stuck. Stuck? “In bondage to sin and cannot free myself” came to mind. I made an appointment, and in his office I asked: “Pastor, would you please hear my confession?”<sup>6</sup> I haven’t sinned yet, but I do find myself in bondage to sin. I cannot change my thinking about Grandma and Grandpa.” I confessed this, my sinfulness in mission. “As a called and ordained servant of the Word” he proclaimed to me forgiveness in Christ. Before I had straightened up from receiving the absolution, I noticed something new in my mind and heart: the equivalent of “I could shake hands with Grandpa and hug Grandma.” The absolution set me free for mission.

This personal example brings to mind the “double work” of absolution. We are freed from the guilt of sins and from our bondage as sinners; the Good News of Jesus deals both with actual sins and with original sin. How easy it is to think that my ideas, my plans, my preferences are the right ones; and yours are sins. How easy to think that you should repent and realize that my way is the right way. How hard is to think that even with my right ideas I am a sinner—that, in addition, my idea might not be the best one. How easy it is in the determination to be right that we lose the New Testament command to love! How powerfully absolution can set us free for loving.

So, then, the facilitator and that presentation helped me to recognize the need for confessing and absolution in the midst of programming. Our opportunity (our mission?) is the integration of the Good News of Jesus with planning, the unity of faith and organizational life. I wonder how this might be applied to confessing “in mission.”

Imagine this conversation between a newbie and a seasoned cross-cultural, overseas missionary. The seasoned one says, “We brought them the Gospel, but we never taught them to lead.” “But there has been a seminary there for years.” “Yes, we taught them to be pastors, but we never taught them to lead.” That may have been simply an educational or administrative mistake. Or it might have been, coming from pride or laziness, a choice that was also sin. If appropriate, might the seasoned missionary even now make individual or corporate confession of the failure, and hear absolution applied? And what events or programs or conversations might follow—reconciliation and leadership development for a church body where leadership had not been introduced? Might a partnership begin to grow where there had been something more “colonial”?

Might I or we or you need to confess our sin, our holding on to particular doctrinal terms or worship practices in a way that is sinful and impedes mission? Am I ready to confess my fear, that if we don’t “do” Gospel in this way that I know how to, that these people (congregation, culture) won’t hear Good News?”—as if God cannot speak any language other than mine? This is not a proposal to get new doctrine; the witness of the Scriptures and the Confessions is enough, *satis est*. This

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is a proposal to reflect on and confess our sin—in domestic and congregational mission and in cross-cultural and overseas mission—our sins of being set in our ways, not God’s. Let the Good News we intend to proclaim be the power of the Gospel that liberates us to confess the faith in mission.

Consider Luther’s Small Catechism. Do we hold on sinfully to language that doesn’t “do” mission? I affirm, practice, and teach memorizing and remembering the Small Catechism. But might we, freed in absolution, think carefully about the particular words we use? For example, many have learned the words, “What does this mean?” There is a Latin ancestor for that English translation—a word about thinking—but that so easily leaves Luther’s excellent teaching in the mind, the intellect. By contrast, if we note the German ancestor of this traditional question, it sounds more like a two-year-old exploring her world: “What’s this?” “What’s this?” “What’s this?” The words of the Small Catechism might more easily move from mind to heart and hand, a part of exploring the life God gives. Might we have a sin to confess in mission, in teaching the faith, that we are so used to one set of words that we fear, or are too lazy, to consider other sets of words?—even when they are in an original language?

Consider our use of the word “Gospel.” Imagine this headline in some (Lutheran) tabloid: “Lutheran Pastor gives up ‘Gospel!’” It is the habit of the tabloids to find the outlandish headlines that will get our attention,

Lutheran Pastor gives up  
“Gospel”!

before we read the lines and in between the lines. Would that Lutheran headline get your attention? Would you be ready to go to the next convention and press charges? You might, until you listened and recognized the sin of rushing to judgment in mission. The pastor’s point, whether the tabloid caught it or not, was that the word *Gospel* is pretty much useless for most of the world. Without a long explanation, it hardly conveys the wonder of what God is doing in Christ. As twenty-first century religious language, *Gospel* hardly conveys the nuance that (pagan and believing) people heard in the first century, some announcement of victory and/or joy.<sup>7</sup> The words *good news* might communicate more quickly. Then, instead of delaying mission by having to explain Old English and Greek terms, we can move directly to discussing why this Jesus would be “good” and why this Jesus would be “news.”<sup>8</sup>

In that Small Catechism Luther asks—invites us to ask, “What sins should we confess?”<sup>9</sup> Which are the sins, mine and yours, that might prevent or impede mission? Well, all of them! The “gross sins” come to mind easily: adultery and other sexual wrongs, and theft and embezzlement, especially by any in the Christian community and even more so especially by its ordained leaders. While I wish none of those is yours, as this list continues and I find my place in it, you may find your own: lack of personal and professional growth, whether from laziness or fear;

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disconnection from family and community because of a focus on work (again, especially hard when it is the pastor focused on “ministry”); arrogance or willful ignorance in congregational life; refusal to consider my role in whatever trouble is brewing in family, community, or congregation. What would you add to this list?

Which are the sins,  
mine and yours,  
that might prevent  
or impede mission?  
Well, all of them!

- 1
- 2
- 3

How many corporate and personal sins frustrate God’s mission? Missing the mission comes easily even when the setting seems so “mission.” Three days into teaching theology cross-culturally in a setting outside the U.S., I found myself angry. These students don’t speak my language! They don’t eat my kind of food! They don’t eat my way! A colleague/pastor who was there heard my confession, my sin of cultural and personal arrogance—that God should run the world my way; and in the absolution he spoke, I was freed to love and serve. My lesson plans didn’t change, but I was changed. Relationships could settle down, the learning curve could go up, because of absolution.

What sins should we confess? For most American Christians, the tensions surrounding food offered to idols (1 Cor 8) are perhaps not an issue, though they may be for Christian sisters and brothers with a heritage in other parts of the world. Might the question for many in worship in the U.S. not be food offered to idols but instruments used in worship? Paul’s counsel to practice love for each other may go out the window in our arguments on that subject, as our fear or pride rules. Mission to the world is lost in loveless argument “at home.” Can we acknowledge our sins and sin on such parish and denominational questions—and then by absolution restored in our relationship with God and each other, we could go on to celebrate together in mission?

An implication of the doctrine of original sin is that we never have a purely good motive. Absolution is the invitation to a secure relationship in which motives can be examined, feelings noted and considered, sin recognized—and forgiven. Indeed, absolution opens the possibility to sin boldly, and believe more boldly still that God chooses to work in and with us. Hard choices to make in challenging cultural contexts? Perhaps the freedom to choose, more than a particular choice, will demonstrate the Good News of Jesus.

Another implication of the doctrine of original sin is that we sit alongside our neighbors, not over and above them, in daily life. That “we”—Christians—have the

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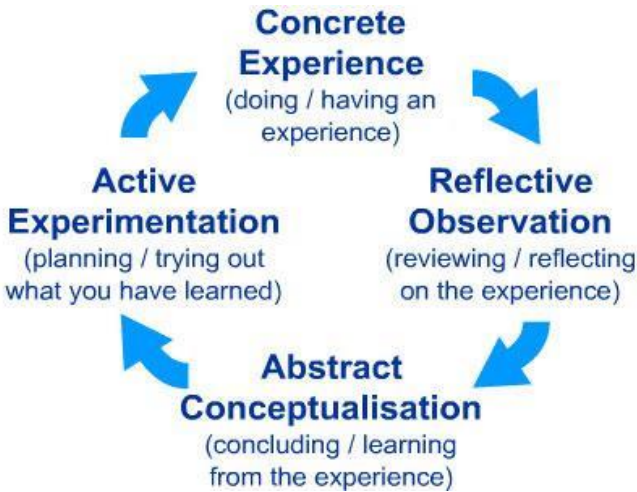
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right answers does not make us righteous and the others “wrongeous.” We are free to be in mission alongside our neighbors not because we have the truth, but because Jesus is the Truth. The lectionary readings for Palm Sunday this year, e.g., Phil 2:5–8, invite us to a serious practice of humility in mission. The glory is God’s, not ours. If we sit next to our neighbors, rather than standing over them to preach (actually or metaphorically), we might better listen to their experience of Law and help them better hear the Good News that we beggars have heard.

It might be easy in this article, with so much attention to sin, to disparage “the things of the world.” However, believing that “God has made me and all that exists” suggests that one can learn much from the world to apply to ministry in the Church, much from the Kingdom of the Left that can be used in the Kingdom of the Right, in mission. One such learning is the David Kolb Learning Cycle, a model for classroom and lifelong education/learning, which can be adapted also for administrative tasks. It allows and fosters the opportunity to recognize strengths and weaknesses, creative gifts and sin.



**Figure 1. David Kolb’s Learning Cycle<sup>10</sup>**

For convenience in this cycle, start at the top with experience, in the classroom, in life, in mission. Then comes reflection: What did I notice, think, feel? The abstracting work fits such observations into one’s current personal and professional paradigms, while risking the change of paradigms to fit the “reality” of the experience and reflection. And that leads to experimentation and new experience, to a “Plan B,” and the cycle continues.

Where in the cycle would you locate absolutism? It can be seen as part of abstract conceptualization, after the reflection (indeed, the quiet for reflection that

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comes often with confession of sin). One “track” of the reflection, alongside “What went well?” and “What missed?” could be “What might be my sin?” There may be no actual sin involved. (Mistakes, of themselves, may be simply mistakes, with no sins directly involved.) A disease theory of sin, that is, a dis-ease theory of sin, may help. In reflection, where I notice my discomfort, one question to ask is, “What sin might be hiding behind my dis-ease, my not-at-ease, my discomfort?”

It might not be appropriate to call absolution “abstract.” It is audible, even tangible, when in private or corporate absolution the sign of the cross touches the forehead. Still, in “learning from the experience,” one can learn of his sin and his Savior’s freedom. Conceptualization, and then experimentation, are free to operate, moving us on in mission.

Consider this model applied to mission:

1. Concrete (Mission) Experience: personal, congregational, judicatory, and denominational activity
2. Reflective Observation (Assessment): what strengths and weaknesses become evident in professional review, in personal/emotional reflection, and in spiritual examination?
3. Abstract Conceptualization: personal and professional reading and conversation, and also Christian Conversation (absolution where appropriate, pastoral, mutual conversation and consolation,<sup>11</sup> Bible study, and worship). These allow, with the freedom of absolution where appropriate, for celebrations and corrections.
4. Active Experimentation: personal, congregational, judicatory and denominational pilot projects, etc., which can lead to . . .
5. New (mission) Experience

This mission-minded adaptation of the David Kolb model invites recognition of First Article gifts—professional and personal/emotional activities—as well as Second-Third Article gifts that set us free to use them. In community conversations, in business and society, with “neighbors,” perhaps we can move directly from strengths to celebrate, etc. In Christian conversation, as also for oneself as participant in community and church conversations, repentance and absolution are unique resources for moving ahead, for mission; indeed, the Good News of Jesus is unique! It is “news.” It is new.<sup>12</sup>

Another article in this issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters* makes a parallel proposal for mission.

Today’s cultural context calls for the confessing church to reengage in the art of gathering. Eschewing fear, complacency, distraction, and arrogance, the confessing church must face the brutal facts of a post-church and

emerging pre-Christian society with a willingness and readiness to let God's Word do its gathering work. What are some next steps for the confessing church?

First, the confessing church must resist the temptation to exclusivity.<sup>13</sup>

This article disagrees with that article only slightly. The first step is confessing our/my sins of fear, complacency, distraction, etc. Then the facing and resisting can be more viable, more powerful.

Consider again the place of confession of sin in the 1,000 Gifts "movement." This effort, visible online,<sup>14</sup> proposes that a person look back at his day, recognize particular (positive) elements, and write words of thanks or praise, naming those elements. That is Experience-Reflection-Conceptualization before moving on. Excellent!

Then consider the risk when the reflection and conceptualization occur apart from consideration of sin and absolution (whether for a believer or one who does not believe). The focus may easily descend to my life, my good experience. Easily I miss "God gives daily bread."<sup>15</sup> Also for the believer in this process, Christian life risks becoming my effort, my experience of success, my good things—and my trouble if I don't have a long enough list. There is something parallel here to congregations with a "praise band" supplying music for worship. Likely well meant, such a title may subtly tell a lie, that worship is all about praise, about my good experience. Judging by the Psalms, a congregation that has a praise band should also organize a "lament band," or rename its group as a "worship band." No, this paragraph is not asserting that praise bands are sinful. It is noting how easily we can lose mission—confessing the whole of God's truth—even in the "good" things we do.

The intention of this article is our telling the truth about our sin, but not stopping there. From absolution we intentionally practice mission grounded in God's grace. This grounding may be recognized in the Lord's Prayer. "Hallowed Be Thy Name" and the other petitions invite the believer to a life that sees in our experience God's speaking first, God's giving the words we pray, our turning to God, who is holy, rather than attempting to "holify" our lives. Every act of our turning to God in Christ is a witness to our world, a testimony to God's mission working through us.<sup>16</sup>

Making space and time in mission for reflection, for seeing sin and hearing its absolution, frees space and time for moving ahead in experimentation. Leaders and followers can join in risk-taking, partnership, and messy successes. Consider this parallel, or parable: The professional counselor seeks first of all to develop with a client a secure attachment. In that attachment, particular troubles can be faced and healthier choices made.<sup>17</sup> God offers the attachment in Christ, and we can practice offering the same in the Body of Christ. Secure in the relationship with God, we can practice restored relationships with each other. Our mistakes and our sins then have

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time and space to be named, the mistakes corrected, the sins forgiven. Growth in mission can follow—not that we will have a divine answer for every choice, but that we can rest ourselves and our risk-taking in God’s absolving, freeing care.

Confessing our sin, my sin, in mission. God grant us the personal and professional and spiritual clarity to do reflection/assessment well, including the recognition of our sins and sin. Then for experimentation, God grant us courage, energy, wisdom, and skill for mission. And in between those two, “your sins are forgiven, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Growth in mission can follow—not that we will have a divine answer for every choice, but that we can rest ourselves and our risk-taking in God’s absolving, freeing care.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Epitome VI:2 in the Formula of Concord distinguishes between life under the Law and life in the Law; the latter, because of the Good News of Jesus, is an option for believers.

<sup>2</sup> It is always the Good News that frees, but it has not always been that Confession and Absolution came early—or at all—in the order. Communion liturgy did not include corporate confession until the Medieval period (Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947], 257.). Might it be one of our sins that we think of an “historic liturgy” when in reality “the” liturgy has been adjusted throughout history, rightly and wrongly, for cultural concerns?

<sup>3</sup> Paula Schlueter Ross, “‘Ablaze!’ faith-sharing counter exceeds 10 million,” *Reporter* (May 5, 2009), retrieved March 12, 2018, <https://blogs.lcms.org/2009/ablaze-faith-sharing-counter-exceeds-10-million>.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Kasper, Assistant to the President—Congregation Mission and Ministries, in “No more ‘Business as Usual,’” in *Michigan* [District of the LCMS] in *Touch* (February 2018): 14.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Alms, “The Fat Elvis Conundrum,” in *Forum Letter* 47, no. 2 (February 2018): 4–5.

<sup>6</sup> I am so grateful for the pastor, decades ago, who at a young adult retreat introduced me and all of us there to the option, the choice, of individual confession.

<sup>7</sup> *Euangelion* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 269–272.

<sup>8</sup> Consider also the word *sin*, part of the theme for this article. As I understand it, to preach in Chinese the Good News of Jesus as Savior from sin is to preach that Jesus saves from criminal behavior. Not so many people in Chinese contexts need a savior?

<sup>9</sup> SC V 17

<sup>10</sup> Saul A. McLeod, “Kolb - Learning Styles,” *Simply Psychology*, 2017, [www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html).

<sup>11</sup> Smalcald Articles III iv.

<sup>12</sup> Please note that it would not be your fault, as a part of your (own, congregation, other Christian “unit”) participation in the public conversation, if people ask about the freedom and

love that you demonstrate. It would be a gift of God and another opportunity to be in mission explicitly.

<sup>13</sup> See Michael W. Newman, “The Confessing Church: An Act of Excluding or the Art of Gathering?” in this issue: 67.

<sup>14</sup> <http://onethousandgifts.com/>

<sup>15</sup> SC III 13.

<sup>16</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father: Sermons on The Lord's Prayer*, trans. with an introduction by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 43–54 and *passim*.

<sup>17</sup> Cora Lau Mei Kuen, presentation on February 15, 2018 to a visiting team from Pearl Health Clinic (Idaho Falls, Idaho; Mr. Zak Warren, Clinical Director) at Rainbow Lutheran Centre of Lutheran Social Service, #6 Chi Shin Street, Tseung Kwan O, New Territories, Hong Kong.