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The Confessing Church: An Act of Excluding or the Art of Gathering?

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Abstract: Confessing. Ask a person on the street about confessing, and you'll very likely hear accounts of criminals admitting their guilt as detectives press them with evidence. Ask church adherents what it means, and they may describe humbling moments of acknowledging their sin in prayerful tones during worship or voicing one of the ecumenical creeds in the company of a Christian congregation.

The word means “to declare together.” It is derived from the Latin prefix *com* (together) and the verb *fateri* (to admit, declare).¹

The Greek equivalent is *homologeō*. Its classical meaning is “to say the same thing, to agree in statement, or to admit a charge.”² The New Testament deepens its significance, as the admission and speaking involves testifying to the truth of Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus used the word in Matthew 10:32, “So everyone who acknowledges [*homologeisei*] me before men, I also will acknowledge [*homologeiso*] before my Father who is in heaven.” The apostle Paul proclaimed in Romans 10:9, “If you confess [*homologeiseis*] with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

God's children speak the same saving message they've been given. This saving message is vocalized as disciples follow Jesus' mandates to make disciples (teaching and baptizing, Mt 28:18–20) and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation (Mk 16:15). As followers of Jesus go into all the world, they are confessing people.

This paper will unfold the biblical paradigm of confessing as an integral component of God's mission effort to reach His beloved yet straying people. We will see the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the actions of God's faithful servants in history reinforce the truth that the confessing church is a church engaged in the art of gathering. While confessing sets boundaries and creates differentiation, the Word confessed always reaches, invites, calls, and gathers as it is empowered by the Holy Spirit.



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Exclusion?

Quoting Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490–1700*, Dr. Mary Morrissey, a Reformation literature scholar from the University of Reading, commented on the character of the age of confessionalization: "By the 1570s, 'ordinary people were beginning to own the religious labels that the officially agreed confessions and the decisions of Councils were creating: they found that they were Protestant, Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed. They were proud of these identities, and they often grew to hate people of different religious opinions.'"³

"Confessing," a term meant to communicate oneness with Jesus Christ by grace through faith in Him, began to morph into exclusivity and division. That which was freighted with speaking the same message God first gave and voicing aloud the saving news of the Gospel began to acquire the baggage of division, a focus on finding inferior confessions and "thinning the herd."

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Confessionalization mutated the disciple-making mission purpose of confessing into a fault-finding quest.

In his book, *Accidental Pharisees*, Dr. Larry Osborne discussed how exclusivity can be harmful to God's Kingdom purpose. Speaking into the evangelical context of measuring up to specific outward marks of faith, Osborne said,

If you continue farther down the path of contempt for those who fail to keep up, you'll end up in a place of arrogance. Fewer and fewer people will measure up to your definition of a genuine disciple. Inevitably, being right will become more important than being kind, gracious, or loving. Thinning the herd will become more important than expanding the kingdom. Unity will take a back seat to uniformity.⁴

Osborne's analysis applies to an exploration of the confessing church. If what is confessed goes beyond what God has given or if the confession becomes narrower than the biblical witness, arrogance and judgmentalism inevitably take hold. Confessing mutates from that which gathers to an act of excluding.

Consider the Pharisees. Once scholarly teachers of God's Word and navigators for people who desired to follow Him, the Pharisees devolved into a Jewish sect known for its complex legal constructs and a sharp-eyed search for transgressors of the law. They gave birth not to an ever-expanding confessing community, but to a selective and exclusive enclave of arrogant confessionalism. A similar stumbling block exists today. Setting forth the truths of God's Word in an orderly way is beneficial to God's people and advantageous for the proclamation of the Gospel. But

history shows how sinful pride can easily take hold. Osborne noted about today's church,

Now, I'm not saying that anyone is intentionally trying to produce a brood of Pharisees. In most cases, people who prescribe a more radicalized and activist faith have the best of intentions. They want our churches and people to reach their full spiritual potential. They don't want to settle for mediocrity. But there is something worse than settling for mediocrity. It's exclusivity. It's the temptation to up the ante and to raise the bar of discipleship so high that it disqualifies all but the most committed, and thus thins the herd that Jesus came to expand.⁵

The confessing church is always in danger of becoming an excluding church because those who confess are fallen and sinful people. What is the answer? It is the very Word confessed. God's Word creates a confessing church that gathers. Not only is the biblical witness invitational, welcoming, and reaching, but the Word made flesh, Jesus the Son of God, became the friend of sinners and the seeker of the lost. He embodied confessing as the art of gathering. Jesus demonstrated that the very confession of the truth presses the church outward to share that truth.

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Scripture, The Gathering Word

How is the confessing church portrayed in the Scriptures?

The confessing church may be seen at its best during times of persecution, marginalization, and exile. Consider the biblical book of Daniel. Ripped away from his childhood home of Jerusalem by the conquering Babylonians, young Daniel and his comrades faced the dilemma of either silent capitulation to Babylonian indoctrination or a posture of confessing that could result in persecution and death. Demonstrating faith in the God of heaven, the young captives chose the latter. But their confessing did not alienate or exclude. It called and gathered—as God's Word, by His grace, always does. Remember how Daniel's confession drew his captors in: "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs" (Dan 1:8–9 ESV).

After Daniel spoke respectfully to the Babylonian steward and proposed a test-run for ten days, “At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables” (Dan 1:15–16 ESV).

The chief of the eunuchs joined in the act of confessing. He was gathered in—not particularly into a full confession of all the nuances of faith in Yahweh, but definitely into a dramatic departure from Babylonian diet practices. Suddenly this Babylonian official was a participant in facilitating meals that gave glory to the God of heaven. But this was just the beginning.

In Daniel 2, a frustrated King Nebuchadnezzar resolved to kill all the wise men in the land—Daniel and his friends included. After spending the night in prayer and receiving God’s revelation of the pagan king’s dream, Daniel went to King Nebuchadnezzar with the answer he was seeking. But Daniel didn’t scold King Nebuchadnezzar. The young prophet didn’t point out the king’s inadequacies and theological shortcomings. Daniel became a confessing servant of God. He declared to the king, “No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days” (Dan 2:27–28 ESV).

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What was the result of this confessing? After hearing Daniel detail the king’s dream and its meaning, the astonished monarch of the Babylonian Empire “fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel, and commanded that an offering and incense be offered up to him. The king answered and said to Daniel, ‘Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery’” (Dan 2:46–47 ESV).

Daniel confessed the true God, and it led the king to speak back what he had seen and heard. Nebuchadnezzar declared with Daniel the truth about the God of heaven.

As you may very well know, the book of Daniel continues to display bold confessing that calls and gathers. In the face of belligerent rejection, the confessing of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego elicited another acknowledgment of the God of heaven from Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3). In Daniel 4, the prophet challenges the king to a life of godly virtue: “Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to

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you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity” (Dan 4:27 ESV). Daniel’s overt but respectful confessing called Nebuchadnezzar to walk with God. Once again, after an odyssey of rejection, the king praised the God of heaven (4:3, 34–35).

The missionary Daniel (one sent to the foreign land of Babylon) continued confessing as he interacted with succeeding kings. Darius’ remarkable declaration shows the calling and gathering nature of the Word confessed: “I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions” (Dan 6:26–27 ESV). The ruler of the Medo-Persian Empire was gathered into voicing the Good News of the God who saves.

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Even the written language of these accounts displays the gathering quality of the confessed Word. While the book of Daniel opens and closes using the Hebrew language, the core of the book is written in the language of the world, Aramaic. The confession cried out to the world and sought to gather all who heard in order that they would receive life and salvation by faith in the God of heaven.

And that’s just the book of Daniel. Think about Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon as he called them to settle in the land, plant gardens, build houses, marry, multiply, and seek the welfare of their strange surroundings. They were sent. This was God’s Kingdom mission. They were not to evade or exclude. They were there to gather (Jer 29).

Fast-forward to Jesus, the embodiment in word and deed of the gifts of God received and confessed. Jesus, the Way and the Truth and the Life, sought the broken, the outcast, and the sinner. He was rejected by the arrogant and egotistical, even though He yearned to gather them. In tears He said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Mt 23:37 ESV).

Jesus’ confessing was all about gathering. In John 10 He admitted that there were many more outsiders to gather: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (Jn 10:16 ESV).

Consider Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well in the Gospel of John (chapter 4). Jesus immediately declared the gift of God to the Samaritan woman. He persisted in His confessing by unfolding the blessing of eternal life. He dug into the woman's personal life and led her into a conversation about true worship and the source of eternal salvation. Then He revealed Himself as the Messiah.

Remember, this was an interaction with a Samaritan woman. Jesus had every right NOT to communicate with this person who was—according to the legal and cultural viewpoint of the day—sinful, inferior, unworthy, and unclean. If anyone deserved to be excluded, it was she. She not only passively didn't fit into the category of a righteous person; she actively opposed God's standards. But Jesus' act of confessing didn't alienate her; it called her to the living water that wells up to eternal life (Jn 4:14).

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Larry Osborne captured this gracious fact:

Jesus didn't come to thin the herd. He didn't come to recruit "special ops" Christians. His goal was to expand the kingdom, to bring salvation to people who previously were excluded. He came to seek and find the lost, including a large group of folks no one else wanted to invite to the party. Everything about Jesus' ministry was designed to make salvation and the knowledge of God more accessible.⁶

The scriptural witness to a confessing that gathers fills the New Testament. The apostle Paul took a stand against the well-established apostolic leaders when they backed away from eating with Gentiles. He said, "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy" (Gal 2:11–13 ESV).

For Paul, there was no "Benedict Option" for the confessing church.⁷ No matter how "unclean" or "offensive" the constituency, confessing meant gathering, not excluding. Paul went on to make sure everyone understood why such radical table fellowship was appropriate. He said, "We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one

will be justified” (Gal 2:15–16 ESV). The heart of the Gospel—justification by faith in Jesus Christ, being gathered by the God of grace because of what He has done through Christ, not because of our merits—propels the confessing church to call and gather all people into this saving faith.

Even the final chapter of the Bible puts an exclamation point on the gathering nature of the confessing church: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17 ESV).

You may be thinking, “But the very act of confessing does indeed exclude. Heresies are out there. People live as enemies of the cross of Christ. The church is not to be flimsy in its doctrine or weak in the message it declares.”

And you’re right. Confessing will always encounter rejection. The confessing church confronts error, admonishes the straying, and holds one another accountable. And people will back away. They will exclude themselves from the Gospel confession. But the primary task of the confessing church—the people of God entrusted with the Gospel—is to gather people into the saving gift of life in Jesus Christ. Even when the apostle Paul commanded that certain individuals be “handed over to Satan” (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20), the purpose of that command was that they “may be saved ‘in the day of the Lord’” and that “they may learn not to blaspheme.” The intent was to gather.

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The Confessing Church in History, The Art of Gathering

Our forefathers grasped this truth about the confessing church. Confessing was about gathering, not excluding. Klaus Detlev Schulz remarked in his book, *Mission from the Cross*, “Luther’s efforts at making the Christian Church doctrinally sound were designed to strengthen Christians for their witness and confession to the world. His emphasis on the Word of God, the Sacraments, faith and obedience, catechesis, worship and liturgy, and translation makes most sense in view of the Church’s primary mission of preaching the Gospel and bringing in the lost.”⁸

This focus is evident in the preface to the Book of Concord. The reformers emphasized that the Confessions were to have Gospel-enfolding repercussions throughout the world. The Book of Concord was “set forth for all estates of the

Empire and was disseminated and has resounded publicly throughout all Christendom in the whole wide world.”⁹

This worldwide declaration had as its intent to train people for service in the church and for the holy ministry so that “among our descendants the pure teaching and confession of the faith may be kept and spread through the help and assistance of the Holy Spirit until the glorious return of our only redeemer and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The confessors were compelled to gather all people possible into this saving truth: “Then too, we acknowledge, on the basis of the divine injunction . . . to continue to do all that may be useful and necessary for the increase and expansion of God’s praise and glory, for the spread of that Word of his that alone bring salvation.”¹⁰

Exclusivity never crossed their minds. It was never their intention “to keep this salutary and highly necessary work of concord hidden in the dark and secret from everyone or to place the light of divine truth under a bushel or a table.”¹¹

The forefathers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) followed in those steps. As the new frontier of Lutheran mission began to unfold in the mid-1800s, Rev. Friedrich Wyneken sent an appeal to the Lutheran Church in Germany. With so many new residents of the growing United States still disconnected from the church, Wyneken connected the sound confession of the church to the gathering action of the church. He pleaded, “Ought not the church, as a good mother, to have set out long ago through her servants and gone after these languishing children, dying in wretchedness, in order to help them?”¹²

After the formation of the LCMS, the newly organized effort stood firmly as a biblical and confessional church body. But a recognition of the central focus of a confessing church remained clear. As the church agreed to send out traveling preachers, missionaries at large called “*Reiseprediger*,” theses were formulated to outline the rationale of such missionary action. Thesis 11 described the kind of emergency that allowed setting aside traditional pastoral formation. It also showed the heart of a confessing church: “An emergency occurs then when, through a legalistic retention of the order, souls, instead of being saved, are lost, and thus love is thereby violated.”¹³ The confessing church, the staunchly confessing Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, knew its confession was focused on mission. The church was a steward of the Gospel that gathered people in.

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How easy it is to drift from this delicate balance. Instead of striving to embrace, understand, and open a dialogue with people who do not know Jesus or walk with Him, the church can lose confidence in the transformational power of the living Word and shun the very people who need its confession. Under the premise of refusing to compromise the confession, the church can fall into the trap of quenching the work of the Holy Spirit by excluding people who do not appear to fit the confession of faith. Larry Osborne commented, “I’m concerned that the new boundary markers and litmus tests of today are not leading us back to New Testament Christianity; they’re leading us back to New Testament Phariseeism. They’re simply the newest iteration of old-school legalism.”¹⁴

Gospel Movements Today, The Confessing Church Gathers

But, you may say, aren’t today’s mission movements experiencing success only because, in an effort to attract people, they throw away or dilute the biblical confession? Doesn’t the art of gathering imply a theology that has to capitulate to the whims of pluralistic spiritualism? In order to bring the central message of Christ to the world, aren’t we seeing solid doctrine tossed aside?

To be sure, there will always be people and movements that compromise God’s Word. But a Gospel tragedy would occur if, in our fear of compromising God’s Word, we put it under the proverbial bushel in order to protect it. That act, perceived to be faithfully guarding the truth, deviates from orthodoxy, falsely teaching that the confession of the Gospel is limited to a select few. God may have loved the world, but His Word of truth cannot be entrusted to the world.

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The fear about mission movements, however, is ill-founded. Dr. David Garrison, the Southern Baptist International Mission Board’s Global Strategist for Evangelical Advance, noted in his seminal work, *Church Planting Movements*, that today’s mission movements are not diluting the message. In fact, it is faithful confessing that empowers the rapid multiplication of the church around the world. Garrison said,

Those who have successfully navigated a Church Planting Movement are unanimous in their conviction that “it must be God’s word that is authoritative for the new believers and the emerging church not the wisdom of the missionary nor some foreign creed nor even the local church authorities.” By continually pointing back to the source of one’s own authority, the church planter is modeling the proper pattern for the new believers who will soon become the new conveyers of the movement.¹⁵

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A Call to Action for the Confessing Church Today

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. Two years before the LCMS was founded, Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther recognized the need to gather rather than exclude. As he engaged in seeking partnerships with those of the orthodox faith, he emphasized the hard lesson he learned during the emigration to the United States under Rev. Martin Stephan. He said, "God knows that we ourselves under Stephan had nothing else in mind but to prove ourselves completely faithful to the true Lutheran Church. But there was nothing which caused us to fail in this very thing more than our stubborn exclusiveness."¹⁶ A narrow, critical, arrogant, hateful, judgmental, or mean spirit has no place in Christ's church. Taking on a primary mission to "thin the herd" or exclude those who are "inferior" is neither biblical nor confessional. The confessing church never has an excuse to be mean. No, the confessing church rejoices, loves, bears witness, and shares good news. It lets God's confession of love and grace override ego and unkind speaking. It reaches all with the good news of the One who died for all (2 Cor 5:15).

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Second, the confessing church must persist in its Christ-mandated activity. The confessing church walks in the footsteps of Jesus, the friend of sinners and tax collectors. The confessing church is invitational. It engages, welcomes, calls, and gathers. The confessing church is an agent of the Holy Spirit who "calls, gathers, enlightens and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth."¹⁷ The confessing church ventures into new territory, takes risks, and is not afraid that the Word of God will crumble or return empty. The confessing church is sent by Christ Himself and, as it goes, it makes disciples of all nations. It hones the art of gathering, empowered by God's living Word of grace and truth. The confessing church is the church in mission.

Consider the apostles Peter and John. They were told to stop, to keep quiet, and to give their confessing a rest. What was their response? Were they satisfied that they reached enough people with the Good News of the risen Savior? Was it time to take

a breather? Should they coast for a bit to see what time would bring or let people start coming to them for spiritual information and guidance? No. They were sent to gather. That's what confessing meant. To the opposing church leaders they exclaimed, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19–20 NIV).

May we do likewise. May we be the confessing church.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/confess>, accessed February 4, 2018.
- ² Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 200.
- ³ Mary Morrissey, "Confessionalism and Conversion in the Reformation," Oct. 2015, accessed Feb. 4 2018 at <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-73>
- ⁴ Larry Osborne, *Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and the Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith* (Zondervan, 2012), Kindle Edition, Locations 116–119.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 742–747.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 807–810.
- ⁷ In his book, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Rod Dreher advocates that Christians may have to "build strong arks" to safeguard Christian faith and values in a world that is hostile to them. He suggests that Christians may need to take the same strategy St. Benedict of Nursia took in the sixth century: retreating into isolated places in order to build protected and stable Christian communities.
- ⁸ Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross* (Lay Reader's Edition) (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 53.
- ⁹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 5.
- ¹⁰ Kolb-Wengert, 14.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Carl Meyer, *Moving Frontiers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 95.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 206–207.
- ¹⁴ Osborne, *Accidental Pharisees*, Kindle Locations 1017–1019.
- ¹⁵ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements, How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (WIGTake Resources, LLC, 2012), Kindle Edition, Locations 2803–2807.
- ¹⁶ Roy A. Suelflow, trans., ed., *Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther: Selected Letters* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 86.
- ¹⁷ Kolb-Wengert, 355.