



Confessional Perspectives on Worship

A Bath, a Meal, and the Schwenkfeldians

By Jon Zabell

Simple can be beautiful. As you watch the sun set, it casts shades of orange and purple across the sky. You could keep a science book open in front of you for researching information about the surface temperature of the sun or the nature of refracted light, but such things won't make the sunset any more beautiful than it already is. Just watch. Baptism is simple. It is water connected to God's name for the forgiveness of sins. Communion is simple, too. It is the body and blood of Jesus under bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. You don't have to earn a doctorate in theology to be able to appreciate the beauty of the Sacraments.

Complex things can be beautiful, too. A chess grandmaster wins the world championship. Whether you are a fan of chess or not, you can't help but marvel at the beautiful mind behind such a victory, a mind that can think dozens of moves ahead, a mind that can consider in advance every possible outcome for each move. So also there is a beautiful complexity to both Baptism and Communion. In his *Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper* of 1610, Johann Gerhard makes masterful use of Scripture to address nearly seventy key questions concerning the Sacraments. It's like he's holding two multifaceted gems in front of you, turning them over and over again for you to admire.

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To view the Sacraments or any other scriptural doctrine from a confessional perspective is to appreciate both what is simple and what is complex, but not merely for the sake of beauty. It is a matter of necessity.

The Confessions needed to be simple.

The Lutheran Confessions needed, first of all, to be simple. By the dawn of the sixteenth century, the central message of the Christian Church had been so obscured by matters relating to penance, ritual, and ecclesiastical authority that finding the gospel within the visible church had become more challenging than a game of *Where's Waldo?* (AC XXIV:10ff; AC XXVIII).

Consider how plainly the confessors established the theme for what they wrote. When Rome disputed the confessors' brief treatment of justification (Article IV) at Augsburg, the confessors began their defense by saying, "but in this controversy, the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated" (AP IV:2). They then expanded their discussion on justification from Augsburg's single paragraph into a treatise in the *Apology*. In his *Smalcald Articles*, Luther made *Justification* his *Article 1* and called it *The Chief Article*. Even the way the confessors numbered the Sacraments demonstrated their desire to let the doctrine of justification shine. They narrowed the field of sacraments from Rome's seven to "the two Sacraments instituted by Christ" (LC IV:1). The confessors had many issues to address within the visible church of their day, but there was only one theme, a theme that was plainly present in everything they wrote: *Justification comes not by good works, but through faith in Christ alone.*

The Confessions of the Lutheran church needed to be simple for the sake of conscience.

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Consciences cannot be set at rest through any works, but only by faith, when they take the sure ground that for Christ's sake they have a gracious God. As Paul teaches, "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (Romans 5:1). This whole doctrine (i.e. justification) must be related to the conflict of the terrified conscience. It cannot be understood apart from that conflict (AC XX:15-17).

The Confessions needed to be complex.

Simple was good, but simple wasn't the end of the story. In terms of diverse subject matter and the artful logic of debate, the Confessions are quite complex. There were enemies of the gospel within the church, enemies who falsely claimed to agree with teachings of Scripture. They twisted the meanings of words

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to their own advantage, so that people were led astray from the teachings of God's Word. Such threats required careful diagnosis and a clear response. The confessors addressed these threats by defining terms. They clarified what Scripture says and what it doesn't say. They voiced their support of those teachings that were in line with Scripture, and they condemned those teachings that weren't. Their goal was to help God's people see through every variety of sheep's clothing to the wolf underneath (Matthew 7:15).

This was no simple task. The Apostles' Creed is noteworthy for its simplicity, but when it came time for a response to those who would deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) adopted an expanded version, one that clarifies what Scripture says about the person of Jesus. So also, both the Apology and the Formula of Concord are expanded defenses of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Throughout, the confessors dealt masterfully with the likes of Anabaptists and Antinomians, Calvinists and Carthusians, Papists and Pelagians, Sacramentarians and Schwenkfeldians. Whether or not you are a fan of debate, you can't help but stand in awe of the complexity and harmony of the Book of Concord.

Even in its complexity, the Book of Concord is about comfort for burdened souls.

Once again, this was about more than beauty; it was a matter of necessity. The visible Christian church was getting a heart transplant. It wasn't enough to just trade a new gospel heart for the old one. God raised up learned theologians and skilled communicators to address each source of incompatibility between heart and host, and he sent his Holy Spirit through his means of grace to strengthen the bonds of fellowship in the process. Even in its complexity, the Book of Concord is about comfort for

burdened souls. As they strove to speak out against false teaching, the confessors were doing more than defending pure doctrine. This was about Jesus.

The Confessions needed to be both simple and complex. We approach the Sacraments with the spirit of the confessors.

The Sacraments invite our simple trust.

There are people for whom nothing is ever simple. Such people often have a sharp mind and a keen perception. They observe and remember so many details that it's difficult for them to sort through them to know which are the most important. If you ask them to offer a short summary of a book they've recently read, they struggle to do so.

Each of us suffers from a similar phenomenon when dealing with the troubles of life. We get lost in the complexity. Our friends confide in us. They tell us about the mess in their lives, and they ask us for advice. But what can we say? There is no quick fix. There are no easy answers. We can't even handle our own messes. Just when we think we've got one all cleaned up, just when it seems as though everything is under control, we're blindsided by some new trouble, some seemingly insurmountable challenge.

And these are just the messes we see. What about the inner temptations we deal with from day to day? It's been said that the devil works harder on servants of the gospel. Even if he doesn't, we have



to agree that there is more at stake. He doesn't care how he snags us. Whether it happens slowly or quickly, whether privately or played out on stage for all to see, he knows that if he can get one of us to topple, there's a row of dominoes behind each of us that may soon follow. He knows this by firsthand experience. His own fall from heaven meant the same for his followers.

So what should we do? We are thinking people, and on top of that we are well-trained in what Scripture says. Mature Christians may be tempted to lean on a complex answer, one involving a combination of patience, hard work, careful thinking, and perseverance. We may become overconfident in our knowledge of Scripture, as though the possession of such knowledge is in itself enough to keep us safe. God does want us to grow in knowledge of him and his Word, and to use the abilities he gives us to deal with our problems as best we can. We are right to aim for good stewardship of our gifts. But nothing in us will ever be enough to get us around the devil's temptations to sin. We may find ourselves spending so much energy on our complex approach that we forget the simple help to be found in Baptism and Communion.

For it is of the greatest importance that we value Baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted. We contend and fight for Baptism chiefly because the world is now so full of sects arguing that Baptism is an outward thing and that outward things are of no benefit. But let Baptism be a thoroughly outward thing. Here stand God's Word and command, which

institute, establish, and confirm Baptism. What God institutes and commands cannot be an empty thing. It must be a most precious thing, even though it looked like it had less value than a straw (LC IV:7,8).

There are so many hindrances and temptations of the devil and of the world that we often become weary and faint, and sometimes we also stumble. Therefore, the Sacrament [of the Altar] is given as a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so that it will not fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger. The new life must be guided so that it continually increases and progresses. But it must suffer much opposition. For the devil is such a furious enemy. When he sees that we oppose him and attack the old man, and that he cannot topple us over by force, he prowls and moves about on all sides. He tries every trick and does not stop until he finally wears us out, so that we either renounce our faith or throw up our hands and put up our feet, becoming indifferent or impatient. Now to this purpose the comfort of the Sacrament is given when the heart feels that the burden is becoming too heavy, so that it may gain here new power and refreshment (LC V:23-27).

Jesus knew how complex our problems would become in this sin-filled world. Still he once called some children to his side and said, "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Luke 18:16). He was talking about a child-like faith. And what is it that little children need? The life of an infant is not complicated. You eat. You sleep. You are bathed.

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Baptism is our bath. Communion is our meal. Neglecting the Sacraments is like saying, "I'm not really into eating or bathing." God has given these Sacraments to us because we need them, and because we need them regularly. This isn't just any bath. This is no ordinary meal. Each connects you to the shed blood of Jesus, your Savior for forgiveness and life. When it comes to what we need most for our problems in this life, we learn from the confessors what we learned from Jesus. It's all about humble trust. Keep it simple.

The Sacraments deserve our careful study.

At the same time, a simple, sacramental approach to life's problems does not preclude a careful and ongoing study of scriptural teachings, especially the teachings concerning Baptism and Communion.

There are people who want to receive all their communication in a simple way. They'd rather not hear explanations; they just want the bottom line. It's not necessarily that they can't handle complexity; they just don't want to. It's the way of today's world. Breaking news is the news that happened five seconds ago. We are given a brief headline and a video clip, and it's on to the next story. Living in an age of instant information and communication has its advantages, but finding



encouragement to dig carefully through, say, the writings of sixteenth century Lutheran dogmatists isn't one of them. So when there is an opportunity to make a careful study of doctrine, we may find ourselves or others begging off: "Can't we just talk about Jesus?"

The truth is that each of us needs to be as well-versed as we can be in the complexities of the Lutheran Confessions in general, and the Sacraments in particular. It might not seem like there's anything new to learn about the papists of the sixteenth century, but the *ex opere operato* approach of those papists is still alive and well in your sinful nature and mine, and it shows itself in whatever way our personal use of the Sacraments becomes mechanical. It might seem irrelevant to

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spend time reviewing the false teachings of the Schwenkfeldians, one of the sects that disregarded Baptism as a necessary means of grace, but by nature we all want to pull away from this external means in favor of our own self-driven version of Christian living. Sin is sin, and grace is grace, but to study the heresies of the sixteenth century and the confessors' deft rebuttal of those heresies in the Book of Concord is to know your own sin more clearly, and to appreciate God's grace all the more.

People might not think that a study of *Free Will* in the Formula of Concord would provide them a renewed appreciation of what their baptism means on a daily basis, but consider how many applications can be drawn for your life and for your relationships with fellow believers just from this short quote:

There is a great difference between baptized and unbaptized people. According to the teaching of St. Paul in Galatians 3:27, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ," and are made truly regenerate. They now have a freed will. As Christ says, they have been made free again [John 8:36]. Therefore, they are able not only to hear the Word, but also to agree with it and accept it, although in great weakness.

We receive in this life only the firstfruits of the Spirit [Romans 8:23]. The new birth is not complete, but only begun in us. The combat and struggle of the flesh against the spirit remains even in the elect and truly regenerate people [Galatians 5:17]. For a great difference can be seen among Christians. Not only is it true that one is weak and another strong in the spirit, but each Christian also experiences differences in himself. At one time he is joyful in spirit, and at another fearful and alarmed. At one time he is intense in love, strong in faith and hope, and at another time he is cold and weak (FC SD II:67,68).

When you make a careful study of the Sacraments in Scripture and in the Lutheran Confessions, you are strengthening your understanding

of your daily life under the cross, and you are equipping yourself both to defend and proclaim the blessings of the Sacraments as you interact with others. It's true that when it comes to Christian faith and living, all we need is a meal and a bath. But we need the water to be clean, and we need our food to be free from poison. We learn from the confessors how important it is to apply ourselves diligently to the complexities of doctrine.

In Conclusion

When applying ourselves to doctrinal matters, it's easy to fall entirely into one camp or the other. On the one hand we may think only about what is simple as an excuse to forsake any in-depth study, claiming: it's all about Jesus! On the other hand we may let our careful study of the details pull us away from the point of those details, so that we begin to think that it's all about pure doctrine. One or the other approach alone won't do. We need both. The confessors understood this.

We give thanks to God for giving us such a rich understanding of the Sacraments in his Word, and for preserving this teaching through the confessors who have preceded us. For the sake of our souls and the souls of others, the time we spend in careful study of the Lutheran Confessions is time well spent. At the same time, we rejoice to know the beautiful simplicity of God's means of grace. As complicated as our struggles in life and ministry may be, the Lord's answer for us each day couldn't be simpler. All we need is a bath and a meal.

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