

Current Implications of the “We Condemn Statements in the Lutheran Confessions

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Currents asked Dr. Schroeder to prepare a series of theses and supporting paragraphs on the “We Condemn” passages in the Lutheran Confessions, with the understanding that Dr. Armin Moellering would prepare a reply or rejoinder. It should be emphasized that Dr. Schroeder was not given the opportunity to reply to the Moellering rejoinder. ed.

1. The condemnation clauses in the Lutheran symbols cover a wide and diverse list of false teachings, but do so in what was for that time a new way. The Lutheran confessors condemn not because there is some council decree against a particular false teaching, but because the teaching contradicts (literally: speaks against) the Gospel of “faith alone” which is the heart of the Christian message.

St. Paul in Galatians 1 sets the pattern for Christian use of the anathema. “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be anathema.” The contrary gospel in Galatia is cursed because it is contrary to the Gospel of Christ. Its proponents “pervert the Gospel of Christ,” the net results of which are that the salvation-center is destroyed, that “Christ died to no purpose.”

In the many centuries between Paul and the Reformation the practice of the anathema had an involved and complex history. But the fundamental shift from a protective to a punitive measure is clear to see. Paul uses the anathema as a protective measure for the Galatian Christians, since the foundation of their faith itself is undermined: Christ’s death is rendered purposeless. By contrast Luther received the anathema from the medieval church as a punitive disciplinary device. Together with excommunication it was one form of censure that the 16th-century western church used to keep people under churchly jurisdiction. As Luther personally experienced it, it was the church’s punishment for heretics.

In the Book of Concord the confessors refocus the anathema in the Pauline mode. When they say “we condemn,” it is not because some previous conciliar decree said so—although in many cases they do agree with previous condemnations of ancient heresies. Instead, as with Paul, the grounds for their anathema is that a particular theological assertion perverts the Gospel of Christ. Not always do they spell out the connection, but when they do, as in the anathema spoken on the ancient Pelagian teaching, their grounds are that the Pelagian doctrine “disparages the sufferings and merit of Christ.”

2. In keeping with the principle of the Lutheran confessors, the traditions which we have inherited and new ones that develop—especially the ones on doctrine—must regularly be tested for their fidelity to the Gospel of “faith-alone.”

The Reformers use the Gospel of “faith-alone” (“Justification by grace for Christ’s sake through faith alone” is their full expression) as their yardstick for measuring all past and present traditions of doctrine and practice. When they condemn the semi-pelagianism that surfaced in late medieval parish theology, they find that false teaching condemnable because it deflects a person from trusting Christ alone for his salvation. Especially by the time of the *Apology* (1531) when the Roman Catholic critics are hauling out: “scripture-alone” and “grace-alone” as their own battle cry against the Augsburg confessors, the confessors take recourse to the one touchstone that exposes the infamy of the critics, namely, “faith-alone.” Here is how they proceed. Since at the heart of the Gospel is God’s promise to forgive sinners, the only way, the *alone* way that that promise can go into effect is if it is trusted. Nothing more will make it more effective, and with anything less it will not be effective at all. So “faith-alone” becomes the Reformers’ shorthand formulation for the decisive yardstick of measurement.

The doctrine (or dogma) that is mandatory in Christian preaching is that which must be preached for “faith-alone” to happen. There have always been preachments—both inside and outside established religious institutions—which contradict the “faith-alone” proclamation. In the Confessors’ day it was the winsome words of monastic superiority over normal Christian life, or a piety of performance, or an obedience to the church rules and regulations of the day that were the false gospels tugging people away from “faith-alone”. In our day it may be the message of racism which says to certain people: “you are nobodies”; or the message that we must stick with what our church has always taught; or the message of getting out there and winning some souls for Jesus; or the message of “sticking by the handbook” that can become the false gospels tugging people away from the Gospel of “faith-alone.” Any practice or any way of proclaiming Christian truth is to be tested not by its long historical pedigree, but by its fidelity to the “faith-alone” Gospel. That’s the only touchstone whereby the church (and the single Christian) stands or falls.

3. The Confessor’s interpretive key (law/promises) is the Lutheran way to practice such testing—both to specify the one Gospel and to expose “other” gospels. There is in this process already an expectation of the shape that false gospels will take: they always propose to pull people away from the “faith-alone” whereby a sinner’s salvation stands or falls.

Of course the Confessors claim Scripture alone as the rule and norm for their doctrine and for their condemnation of other gospels. But their opponents do too, so Melancthon has to clarify just how the Confessors read their Bibles. In *Apology IV* he spells out the law/promise interpretive key as a consciously practiced method of exposing in any given text both the full “bad news” about human sinners and simultaneously the full “good news,” the fullest and deepest probing of the promise of Christ. Thus the sinners just exposed in the “bad news” may be moved to trust Christ and have His

promise go into effective action for them. Whatever skills of scholarship help to expose the full scale of the “bad news” to the first audience of a text, and also to lift out how Christ’s promise is “good news” for them then and there, are to be cherished and not ridiculed. For the sake of the gospel they are to be utilized.

This key also helped the Confessors see what Biblical word is regularly found at the base of false gospels. It is the word of law. Yes, even God’s law which announces to the reader that performance pays and non-performance will cost, finally will cost you your life. Because of the Old Adam in every human this word of law finds a ready listener. Salvation-by-performance sermons can always anticipate attentive audiences and considerable success. When such a message is passed off as Christian, it actually does make Christ useless. But of course, it is not presented that way by its proponents. Rather the legalist adds the performance-requirement on to the faith-in-Christ component which is “of course, taken for granted!” This Christian legalism is a meshing of Gospel and law. It finally dethrones Christ and in the end also defuses the law by suggesting that performance is not only possible, but also finally rewarded with God’s additional approval. But as in Galatia, any requirement added on to “faith-alone” destroys “faith-alone.” It is a tacit vote of no confidence in “faith alone.” And that means a tacit vote of no confidence in Christ’s promise. Any such doctrine is anathema.

4. The confessional movement afoot today (of which this journal and its sponsors are a part) takes its rise in the Lutheran church—Missouri Synod from the Book of Concord renaissance associated historically with such names as Mayer, Piepkorn, Bouman, Bertram, and Caemmerer. Its intention therefore is to be as broad and as narrow as the principle of the Lutheran Confessors originally was, both in condemning and approving doctrine, and in its bridge-building latitude to other Christians.

It is a new confessional movement, not initially a new Biblical-scholarship movement, which is designated “moderate” in the LCMS today. When ELIM conventioners wear buttons saying, “Isn’t it big enough?” they mean, of course, the LCMS itself. Isn’t it big enough for such consciously Book of Concord positions on doctrine and church fellowship? Naturally this does not mean “anything and everything goes.” But it does mean that we do not measure the permissible by what has been traditional. We search the traditions, maybe even finding two or three that have been braided together in our church history (as the Reformers did when they looked at their inherited tradition). We then separate the good from the bad, using one thing only as the touchstone: conformity to the “faith-alone” promising Gospel of Christ. That applies to doctrinal traditions, parish traditions, traditions on women in church professions, educational traditions, and especially also church-relations traditions.

In Article 28 of both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, Melancthon is so radical in the practice of this Gospel-touchstone that he is willing to abandon church traditions which the apostles themselves prescribed in the New Testament. He does not deny that they are the Word of God, but when measured by “the perpetual aim of the Gospel” he claims the apostles’ own support for abandoning them. What the apostles put

down in the church's first "handbook" they themselves would not want used to burden our consciences. And thus here we must follow the apostolic example in *not* placing an anathema on such words and actions of fellow Christians which may even conflict with apostolic tradition (to say nothing of our own parochial or denominational tradition). The only grounds for a "we condemn" is if it violates "the perpetual aim of the Gospel", namely to comment Christ's promise for sinners to trust—"alone."

5. When the "we condemn" is spoken, it is the message, the doctrine, of a person that is being condemned, and not the person. In designating a doctrine as condemnable the action is objective; the false gospel is laid alongside the objective sole Gospel of "faith-alone", so that the hearer can discern that A contradicts B.

It is not always so easy to distinguish person and message in the condemnation of false doctrine, but the distinction is important. The apostolic practice is consistently much gentler with the person than with the proclamation of a false teacher. It may well be that the advocate of a false gospel actually does trust the false gospel and thus places himself back under God's own condemnation of unfaith. Such a person is then the concern of individual pastoral care. In designating a doctrine—not a person—as condemnable, the action is rather objective. Just as the genuine Gospel, if actually presented, is objectively valid and energetic even if the conveying person doesn't trust it, so also the false gospel has an objective character of its own. It can be detached from its promoter and looked at separately. The task incumbent upon the anathematizers then is to lay the objective false gospel alongside the objective sole Gospel of "faith-alone" so that the hearer can discern that A contradicts B.

Although New Orleans resolution 3-09 is a bit muddled in its rhetoric for distinguishing persons from positions, it is good that the positions were put into the spotlight. For that makes "objective" treatment possible. Argument about who was more or less ethical, or unbrotherly, or unchristian—though not insignificant—is a matter of pastoral care. A position thus separated from the more or less moral behavior of its proponent can be objectively laid alongside the "faith-alone" Gospel to see if it does indeed contradict it, and thus rightfully deserves the anathema. Although 3-09 did separate the positions from their alleged proponents, the resolution does *not* test the positions by the touchstone that these theses are proposing. The overarching test to which the positions are subjected is the test of tradition. Do they conform with the LCMS' (ostensibly unified and monochromatic) tradition? And by that criterion the resolution framers found the positions wanting and passed the heavy anathema: "not to be tolerated in the church of God."

6. As in the apostolic age the churchly purpose of the "we condemn" is the care-taking of the Christian congregation; it is not a vehicle for punishing or subduing the person promoting the condemnable doctrine. The power invoked in the anathema is not the punitive and coercive power that is present in church organizations, but the "word of God", the law/promise message(s) of the Holy Scriptures.

The anathema does not protect the Gospel. By definition such protection is impossible. “The power of God for salvation” is something we couldn’t protect even if we wanted to. The Gospel protects us. The anathema in its apostolic usage fulfills a protective function, however, for the congregation. It does not do this by forcing silence upon the false gospel or muzzling the false-gospeler. Rather it does its protection by showing the endangered Christians that A contradicts B, and that they live really and *alone* by B. To that extent it refers them both to their own Christian experience of faith and temptation, as well as to the Scriptures themselves to see how the false gospel is objectively contrary to the “faith-alone” message at the heart of the Scriptures.

To think that forcibly chasing a false-gospeler out of one congregation (only to have him appear elsewhere) is a victory for the Gospel is itself a false notion of what Gospel and church are. The church has won no victory if a false-gospeler has “sought his fellowship elsewhere” in the world and is not bothering us anymore. That might seem to suggest that the false-gospeler must be forcibly silenced. But that is a misreading of the Gospel and its victory. In the Scriptures who forcibly silenced the (alleged) false teachers with stoning and other forms of physical interference? It never was the Christian congregations. Their only weapon against false gospels was the true Gospel. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

It is the weakness of the Gospel that it cannot be defended any other way. Did I say weakness? Wrong, that is its strength. It wins its battles—against all alternate gospels—by the mere reclamation of the promising good news. The only defense of the Gospel is to say it again. When the congregation is helped to see for itself that A contradicts B, they already have been safely “guarded” from A no matter how long or loudly it continues.

For the possible benefit of the false-gospeler this protective pacifist procedure may also help him to see that A contradicts B and that his life is to be found in B alone. This turn around may not happen, but in any case it would surely not happen if he were forcibly dispatched by coercive power instead of the power of the Word. That Word in Reformation theology criticizes the false-gospeler for his unfaith and yet offers him too the promise of Christ. And that, of course, is the only course of action for converting false teachers.

7. “To be or not to be tolerated in the church of God” is spoken by the confessors to true and false gospels. How this non-toleration is administered in given cases reflects whether the administrators themselves are working from the one Gospel or are operating from some other gospel.

The mode of administering the anathema was already touched on in the previous paragraphs. Here it might merely be added that the Confessors recur to the doctrine of the two kingdoms and the two powers to clarify their stand. They see their own opponents (AC 28 and Apology 28) wrongly using the resources of God’s left-hand kingdom—coercion, threats, power-pressure, physical suffering, loss of position—for managing the doctrinal affairs of the church. And the confessors could never imagine

that things might get so bad that there would be no other way. If that *is* the only way then all is already lost in the church, and such a grand finale is only final documentation that it is so.

To rule the church” not by the Gospel,” to not “be a bishop according to the Gospel” is to have another gospel at hand. The “weakness” of the bilateral word of God is the only power that is appropriate for countering the false-doctrine. Any other option simply won’t work. It is inappropriate to the job-description, just as you cannot catch air in a sieve. It may be that a church official is ignorant and thus uses wrong means to achieve church ends, but if he willfully chooses left-hand powers to achieve right-hand pastoral goals, then he has actually chosen a false gospel. In our day the governing of a church has been described thus: “It is a matter of Law or Gospel. Time alone will tell which succeeds better.” Those words, if serious, reveal a conscious decision on this very issue.

8. Sinners can be tolerated everywhere in the church of God.

Any Christ-trusting sinner is tolerated in Christ’s own church. In fact, such a sinner is not only tolerable, but is indeed without spot or blemish or wrinkle or any such thing since the Head of the Church Himself declares it to be so. If some other Christian nevertheless declares such a Christ-trusting sinner to be intolerable, the critic is in trouble. For at this point the Head of the church contradicts the critic, saying in effect, “Your fight is with me.”

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