

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Last Sunday, as we celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit, I claimed that Reformation theology is Spirit theology. It is a Word and Sacrament theology.

Reformation theology is also a Confessional theology. Lutherans confess the faith. It begins at Baptism where we confess together for the child or with the person the Apostles' Creed. It happens at confirmation where we acknowledge the gifts that God bestowed in and through Baptism, and we confess that we believe it still. It happened two Sunday's ago when Justin Mason was ordained into the Holy Ministry. "Do you believe and confess the three Ecumenical Creeds...?" "Do you confess the Unaltered Augsburg Confession ... the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms ..., the Smalcald Articles, ...," and so forth. "Yes, I believe and confess ...," he said.

We follow in the footsteps of brave confessors who offered their necks rather than submit to Rome's false teaching. We are confessors, although right now we don't risk what our spiritual forebears did. We confess, acknowledging the Christian faith before men, that Christ might acknowledge us before the Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32). Every Sunday, we confess usually in the words of the Nicene Creed, but today using the Athanasian Creed.

And the truth is...I think you enjoy it. Oh, I sometimes hear some grumbling — it's too long; it's repetitive — but, truth be told, I think that you find the "we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance" language of the Athanasian Creed rather satisfying. I think you confess with some pride the almost enigmatic "the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; and yet there are not three Gods, but one God."

And, indeed, when it comes to confessing the faith, this is great! In confessing, you can begin with the more abstract subject of "God"; which for Christians means "the Holy Trinity." That's the way the foremost of our Lutheran Confessions, the Augsburg Confession, does it: "Our churches teach with common consent that the decree of the Council of Nicaea about the unity of the divine essence and the three persons is true. [2] It is to be believed without any doubt." (I:1-4). Then it goes on to explain further the teaching on the Holy Trinity.

That works for a Creed or a Confession, which were often written to distinguish truth from error. The Nicene Creed, for example, was written to combat the Arian heresy and its false teaching about who the Son is; the Athanasian Creed, written years later, also weighs in on the side of the orthodox teaching concerning the Holy Trinity, the Divinity of the Son, and His act of redemption for sinners. Our Augsburg Confession sought both to emphasize where the Evangelicals and

the Papists agree and to highlight where we disagreed, that errors in the church's teaching might be addressed.

These creeds begin with God the Holy Trinity because it's established Christian doctrine, confessed in the ancient creeds, confessed by every Christian, everywhere, at all times. But let me remind you: besides being confessors, Christians are also evangelistic. Lutherans are evangelistic — proclaimers of the Gospel. Lutherans were the original Evangelicals—it's still in our church's name: Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church. We are evangelistic. We confess that before His Ascension, Jesus sent His church forth with the command to go and make disciples, and to do it by baptizing and teaching. Moreover, the baptizing is to be done explicitly in the name of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but the teaching ... Jesus says that we are to teach "*all that [He had] commanded*" (Matt. 28:20).

Here, I submit that, as much as you like confession, neither an abstract discussion of God nor a discussion of the mystery of the Holy Trinity is how you should begin your evangelistic efforts with an unbeliever. Begin, rather, with Jesus.

Christians often simply want to talk about God. A few years ago, you might remember an effort by some churches in Fort Wayne to pray for the city. Some Christians stopped by Zion and wanted to pray with me. Sure, I agreed. And the one leading this small delegation offered some prayers: "Father God," they prayed. "Father God, we ask you," and so forth, with hardly a word about Jesus, except perhaps at the end, the perfunctory, "In Jesus' name." I was given the opportunity to say a prayer, and having heard the prayer they offered, I purposed to make sure Jesus figured prominently in the prayer.

I deal with it at our LSUS school chapels, too, where the preaching is more interactive. There I might ask the students a question expecting "Jesus" as an answer, but getting the answer "God." "Who is the One who came down from heaven to be our brother?" for example. "God." And that answer is not wrong; Jesus is God, after all, the second person of the Trinity; it just lacks specificity. Or I ask my catechism class: "What does it mean to be a Christian?" Answer: "I believe in God." Again, it's not completely wrong, but it's incomplete. That answer doesn't differentiate a Christian from a Muslim, for example. Indeed, we are called Christians because we look to Christ as our Savior and believe in Him.

This is the problem with so much of the generic God talk. It's so abstract as to be meaningless, nothing more than a personal idea of God. And when that's all it is, then God is often made into whatever one imagines, and that is not Christian. That's a religion made in one's own image.

On the other hand, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is truly Christian. Still, beginning a talk with an unbeliever with this mystery would surely lead to puzzlement at the least, or frustration and rejection at the worst. The Trinity is surely what the Scriptures reveal about God, but it takes a bit of convincing to come to confess it. Surely, we want people to confess the Holy Trinity, but it's not the place to begin.

Rather, I submit, the place to begin is with Jesus, as Peter did in his Pentecost sermon, for one cannot come to the Father except through the Son (John 14:6); one cannot know the Father unless the Son reveals Him (Matt. 11:27); one does not honor the Father unless he first honors the Son (John 5:23). Jesus, in fact, is our access to the Father (Rom. 5:2). He is the very personification of Wisdom, at the Father's side from eternity; He is the Word by whom all things were made, who in the fullness of time received our human flesh and became man (Gal. 4:4; John 1:14).

Jesus is no abstraction. He is no figment of our imagination. He is not made up, though He is both God and man. He is true God, "*the Son of the Most High*" (Luke 1:32), the "*I AM*" who was and is and will be forever, who IS before Abraham was, who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, who sent Moses to lead the Israelites out of bondage, who parted the Sea and held back the waters that Israel might pass through, who destroyed mighty Pharaoh and his army, who led Israel by fire and cloud, who fed Israel with Bread in the wilderness and gave her water to drink from the Rock, who led Israel to the promised land. He is the eternal Son of God who assumed humanity into His Divine person, and was called Jesus, and continued to show Himself to be God by mighty signs and wonders.

Therefore, Jesus is equal to the Father, and yet less than the Father, for He is also a real man who lived in real time, who had a history. He was conceived and born David's son, yet He was David's Lord. He had a mother and a guardian, brother and sisters. He submitted Himself to His parents, and ultimately to the Law, so that He could redeem mankind from the Law's curse by being Himself cursed to hang from a tree (Gal. 3:13). And so, Jesus showed Himself as mortal man by dying, giving up His life for the life of the world, but He also showed mortal man what lies ahead for those who look to the Son and believe in Him, for Jesus rose again in three days and showed Himself alive to many disciples—all of this to win for us eternal life ... resurrection and life, when He comes again in glory. And He doesn't just leave this to our imagination; but He comes to us still ... today ... concretely by Word and water and supper.

And, to be sure, some people will reject this Jesus. They will reject what Jesus offers, but at least they will not be rejecting some God made up out of thin air. They will be rejecting the true God, the Holy Trinity, because they will have heard

of the real Jesus. As Jesus teaches: “*the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me*” (Luke 10:16). On the other hand, others will hear and believe in this same real Jesus, God’s own Son, the Beloved of the Father, sent down from heaven to be our Savior, the One who sent the Holy Spirit to work in the means of grace to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify His church.

Then, engaging with this concrete Jesus as you do, especially as they come regularly to the Divine Service filled from invocation to benediction with its Trinitarian language, they will be taught, they will come to believe in, they will worship the Holy Trinity, apart from whom there is no salvation. That’s what we do here. Oh sure, today we’re dealing with more details of the Holy Trinity, but week in and week out, we simply “worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.” “Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy.” “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.” “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Sabaoth.” It’s what we confess: “the catholic faith” “whole and undefiled” with Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of the Father, at the center, that we might not “perish eternally” but have everlasting life.

Therefore, God grant that we may go forth not just confessing, but bearing witness — and not simply to God, but to the salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus. And God grant that that witness may always bear fruit in a Trinitarian confession.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.