

MESSAGE FROM THE MASTER

This is Pastor Wayne Mueller. The following is the Message from the Master sermon broadcast November 25, 2007. The sermon theme is "The Formula of Concord," based on 1 Timothy 1:19. Part of series, "What does it mean to be Lutheran?"

More lip service is paid to peace, harmony, and unity than to anything else in the world. From the Geneva Accords to the V sign of the Vietnam protesters in the late sixties, to the budget debates that go on in state and national legislatures, peace, unity and harmony are the ever elusive goals.

One way our sinful world seek to achieve at least a temporary unity is through compromise. Two warring nations fighting over boundaries seek peace by moving the border halfway into the disputed territory. Each side compromises by giving up a part of what it wanted. When a husband and wife cannot agree on a vacation destination, they compromise and choose a getaway that provides each of them some of what they were looking for. When two political parties cannot agree on a budget proposal, each side must compromise what it wanted for taxes and spending in order to come to resolution.

The other way to peace and unity, at least on a temporary basis, is through confrontation and conquering. The British were not willing to compromise their rule over the American colonies, so the Revolutionary War brought peace and independence by conquering the British. Hitler was not willing to compromise his iron military grip on Europe, so the Allies in the Second World War brought an end to his plans by conquering his armies and liberating the countries he had occupied.

In the kingdom of Jesus Christ, however, neither compromise nor conquering is the road to peace and unity. Granted, there are many church bodies today who have joined forces by compromising their teachings, but that is not the path Jesus has laid out for his redeemed. In his letter to the young pastor, Timothy, St. Paul urges, "Timothy, my son, I gave you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding onto faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected them, and so have shipwrecked their faith" (1 Timothy 1:18,19).

Yet the major trend in American churches these days is away from denominational identity entirely. Mega-churches and storefront chapels alike choose generic names they hope will attract people of all religious persuasions without driving away those with denominational consciences. I remember interviewing the popular pastor of a fast growing non-denominational church a few years ago. I asked him what his church's practice was in regard to the divisive teaching about infant baptism. Without missing a beat he said, "We baptize the babies of those who believe in infant baptism, and do not offer baptism for those who don't."

The true path to unity in Christ's church, however, begins not with compromise or confrontation. It starts with the belief that the church belongs to Jesus and not to us. Jesus bought the church with his own blood. He calls his sheep his own, and he says that his sheep know his voice. Truth, then, belongs not to any denomination or individual church

11-25-07 Message from the Master, p2 W. Mueller

but to him who said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Any gathering of believers that purports to teach Jesus must realize that the truth of the gospel is not ours to compromise, water down, or barter away. Jesus spoke for the existence of absolute religious truth when he said, "There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words. That very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life" (John 12:48-50).

In this sermon series over the last few weeks we have been talking about what it means to be Lutheran. A Lutheran believes that the Lord Jesus bought peace and unity between sinful men and an angry God with his own blood. We also believe that the same Lord Jesus brings unity among the members of his flock, the Church, with his message of absolute truth. We do not believe that unity in teaching begins when believers agree with each other on what is truth. It begins rather when believers agree that Jesus speaks the truth to all of them.

For that reason Lutherans are a confessional church. Confessional means that we put down on paper our agreement with the teachings of Jesus, .These historical agreements of unity are called confessions or statements of faith. To be a Lutheran means to say what you believe and believe what you say. St. Paul wrote to Timothy and said, "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord," (2 Timothy 1:6)

We have been reviewing the historic Lutheran Confessions the last few weeks. Today we consider the last of them, called the Formula of Concord. The composition of the Formula of Concord was the culmination of various efforts to attain harmony through doctrinal compromise and political coercion. After Martin Luther died in 1546, the Emperor Charles tried to undo the blessings of Luther's Reformation. Charles reimposed Roman rites on Lutherans in Germany and compromised the central message of the Lutheran Reformation, the teaching of justification by faith alone.

Even some of the leaders in Lutheranism, like Philip Melanchthon, gave into the political pressure and acceded to compromise. Other Lutheran leaders went to opposite extremes in their opposition to the newly imposed false teachings. For twenty years Lutheran leaders fought among themselves as well as against the imposed heresies. In 1567, more than twenty years after Luther died, Jacob Andrea was commissioned to draw up articles of harmony. Andrea and Martin Chemnitz were the

chief architects of what would come to be known as the Formula of Concord.

The Formula of Concord sought peace and harmony among believers neither by compromise nor by political force. Like the Lutheran Confessions that were written before it, it simply observed what the Lord Jesus said through his prophets and apostles in Holy Scripture. It asserted the simple teachings of the Bible over against not only Rome but the other Christian movements that had arisen at that time, such as the Reformed and Anabaptists.

08-05-07 Message for the Master, p3 W. Mueller

It asserted that all human beings are sinful from the time of their conception, and have no free will in matter of religion or faith. Thus it taught that faith is a gift of God, just as St. Paul writes clearly in Ephesians and Corinthians. It set again before the world the central doctrine of the Bible and of Lutheranism that we are saved alone through faith, for Christ's sake, by grace. Faith itself, as well as the blessing it brings to the believer, is a completely free gift of God. It stated again with emphasis that the believer receives all the blessings earned for him by Jesus Christ through his innocent life and his sacrificial suffering and death.

It observed that Jesus instituted two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, not seven. It made a clear distinction between the law and gospel in Holy Scriptures, a hallmark of Lutheran preaching to this very day. It taught as the Bible does that the good works in the life of a Christian are a free and willing thanksgiving for God's gift of salvation. Never are good works a means of earning heaven from a God who demands not goodness, but perfection from his creatures.

The Formula of Concord stands today as the crown jewel of the Lutheran Confessions. It is remarkable for its approach to reaching unity among Christians, as well as its clarity of content. It is a rare thing today, even among Christians, to seek unity and harmony by some means other than compromise or political force and expediency. The writers and signers of the Formula sought with careful attention to the very words of Scripture to say everything the Bible says on a subject but no more.

The signing of the Formula of Concord in 1580 marked the end of many years of compromise, political oppression, and turmoil following the death of Luther. It was a clear beacon that drew Lutherans to each other and people from the outside to Lutheranism. A confession, after all, is like a profession, a profession of faith. It speaks to our brothers and detractors alike, saying, "This is what Jesus teaches; and this is what I believe "

An extremely popular nationwide television preacher was interviewed recently. He said, in effect,

that his message is geared to give people what they want to hear. Unfortunately, that is the state of much of what passes for Christian preaching these days. As we approach the 430th anniversary of the signing of the Formula of Concord, we need to revisit the way in which we seek unity among believers in Jesus Christ. Is it possible that the modern eclectic, have it your own way, do your own thing style of religion is not the cure for what ails Christianity in America, but the disease? When ever did Jesus address his audience and say, "What would you like to hear?"

The Formula of Concord with its lengthy first article on original sin would not be well received in most quarters today. But it is much needed. The Formula's lengthy profession of salvation by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ would not be well received by most Americans who still believe the lie that we can earn our way to heaven by trying hard. The Bible's message of law and gospel was not shaped by how I feel, what I think, or how you think and feel. It was shaped by Jesus who speaks to me and you about what we both need to hear before it is too late.

08-05-07 Message for the Master, p4 W. Mueller

From the Golden Calf to Baal worship to our present day adoration of the almighty buck, idolatry has been the result of man trying to create God in his own image. Idolatry is the reshaping of God into a provider of what we think we need or want at any given time. That means that our pandering of the message of Jesus Christ to match what we think, how we feel, and what we need is nothing but poorly disguised idolatry. Lowest common denominator messages will never bring about a serious renewal of Christian faith.

The Formula of Concord is a model for how to seek harmony and renewal in the Christian message. By seeking first of all to listen to Christ and to his Word, it brought harmony among all those who were looking for Jesus and his truth. It sought no compromise with the political forces that sought to strip Lutheranism of its biblical message. It did not give in to the strong personalities among the leaders of the church.

Confessional Lutherans still today seek harmony, unity and truth in the same way. It attaches itself neither to persuasive personalities nor to political correctness. To everyone who enters the doors of our churches, we invite them to ask, "What is Jesus saying to me? What does Jesus' Word in the Bible tell me that I need?" On the basis of those questions we not only evaluate the messages coming at us from many different directions; on that basis we also constantly evaluate ourselves and our own messengers who bring the story of Jesus to us in our church. That's what it is to be a Lutheran. Yes, it's about the truth, but it is also about how we get at it. Amen.

PRAYER

We thank and praise you, dear Father, for the many faithful confessors you have given to

your Holy Christian Church throughout the ages. We ask your continued blessing to faithful confessors today who are persecuted for their unwillingness to compromise the message of your Son, Jesus Christ. By your Holy Spirit, secure us in the faith that we are saved alone through faith, alone by grace, and alone by Jesus Christ. Help us in our humble faith to be neither compromising nor contention. Give grace and love to our speech as we share the love of Christ you first shared with us. In Jesus name we ask this and pray the words he taught us::

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,

your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

now and ever. Amen.