

11-25-2018

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Recommended Citation

Boyd, John Caswell (2018) "An Apostolic Harmony of the Gospel: The Structure of the First Eight (Six) Articles of the Augsburg Confession," *Consensus*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol39/iss2/6>

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An Apostolic Harmony of the Gospel: The Structure of the First Eight (Six) Articles of the Augsburg Confession

John Caswell Boyd¹

In 1976, Wilhelm Maurer wrote his *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, an exhaustive study of the history behind the drafting of the *Augsburg Confession* and an analysis of its structure and content.² Maurer's thorough investigation of historical events that were the cause of writing and revising the manuscript of the *Augsburg Confession*, and the effect of these causes on the version presented publicly to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg, grounds much of our current understanding of the document's arrangement and meanings.³ Though Maurer employs several methods of analysis in his commentary, a primary technique is the comparison of the *Augsburg Confession* and its source documents with the ecumenical creeds – in particular, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (hereafter, the “Nicene Creed”) of 381 C.E.

Maurer's understanding of the theology of the patristic “Fathers” (church elders) who contributed to the content of the ecumenical creeds is, however, distorted by the historicizing trends of Western theologians and scholars interpreting patristic texts during the seventies.⁴ A primary example of Maurer's bias is his assessment of Martin Luther's *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* of 1528.⁵ Maurer begins by comparing Luther's confession with the “Trinitarian confession of the ancient church on which it is based.”⁶ Maurer follows with a contrasting statement that, at the center of Luther's confession, “*more clearly than in the fathers*, stands the saving work of Christ, given to faith and only appropriated in faith.”⁷ Referring to the patristic “fathers” in general comparison avoids the

¹ John Caswell Boyd is a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. He has done graduate work at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York, and currently lives in Kamloops, B.C. – My thanks to Rev. Dr. Robert Kolb who took the time to answer my questions and provided guidance in selecting the source material for this article, which gave it a manageable scope. I am indebted to Dr. Pamela Giles and Rev. Dr. Jann Boyd who edited my quite artistic usage of punctuation in earlier manuscripts of this article.

² Wilhelm Maurer, *Historical Commentary on the Augsburg Confession*, H. George Anderson, tr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). The original German edition, *Historischer Kommentar zur Confessio Augustana* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1976, 1978) was printed in two volumes.

³ For less exhaustive summaries of the events surrounding the public reading of the *Augsburg Confession*, see Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 28–9 (Hereafter cited “BC”). See also Charles P. Arand, James A. Nestingen and Robert Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 3, 102–105.

⁴ Some of these trends and assumptions from the seventies are still in effect. For a critique of the Western approach to patristics and the history of the early church, see John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), especially pages 3–18.

⁵ “Confession Concerning Christ's Supper (1528),” WA 26:261-509; LW 37:153–372, especially pages 360–72.

⁶ Maurer, *Historical Commentary*, 23. As Behr notes, none of the church elders set out to do “Trinitarian” theology, “Christology,” etc. These categories of thinking and speaking about the content of the writings of patristic authors are imposed from modern disciplines, such as systematic theology; see John Behr, *The Mystery of Christ* (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), 174.

⁷ Maurer, *Historical Commentary*, 23. Emphasis added.

task of describing specific arguments in patristic writings and reading “the fathers” on their own terms.⁸ Thus, Maurer does not adequately defend his claims about Luther’s distinctiveness from patristic authors.

Despite Maurer’s bias and the problems it creates when comparing the *Augsburg Confession* to the ecumenical creeds, his commentary contains the invitation to subsequent generations of readers to re-examine the text of the *Augsburg Confession* from an ecumenical perspective. One example of such an invitation is Maurer’s claim that, “The foundation and cornerstone of Reformation theology is that every internal and external action of the Trinity is directed toward the salvation of the world.”⁹ If the content of the *Augsburg Confession* urges ecumenical reevaluation, then the recent efforts of scholars such as John Behr to “recover” what the church elders wrote in their own words about faith and Jesus Christ provide us with an opportunity to approach the *Augsburg Confession* anew. Behr can help us to distinguish what is truly unique and different in the *Confession’s* form and content from what is Philip Melancthon’s sincere attempt – in his own language and style – to “recapitulate” the true Christian faith of the Church.¹⁰ As Behr notes, many of the patristic elders, especially those in agreement with the confession of the First Council of Nicaea, affirm that theology proper cannot be done apart from beginning with the divine economy of Christ’s Passion. Behr states: “[We] cannot look anywhere else [than this economy] to understand who and what God is; there is no other means to come to know God. Those who stand in this tradition must follow the apostle Paul in refusing to know anything else apart from Christ and him crucified.”¹¹

Augmenting the ecumenical dialogue with Behr’s research we find the edition of the *Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, that encourages renewed, careful study of the structure and content of the *Augsburg Confession*. Their edition gives Christians who hold to the *Confession* an opportunity to learn more about what it means to be “Lutheran.” Future serious studies of the *Augsburg Confession* must take into account the recent ecumenical scholarship (such as Behr’s) which clarifies the various patristic approaches to theology and the identity of Christ.¹² In turn, this recasts how we are to understand the Ecumenical creeds, their composition and their purposes. Following Maurer’s lead, the question “What it is to be Christian from a ‘Lutheran’ perspective” must be situated in its intended ecumenical environment. We must juxtapose the Lutheran

⁸ Cf. Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 18–19.

⁹ Maurer, *Historical Commentary*, 240.

¹⁰ Melancthon first uses recapitulate as a technical term (in Latin, *repetitio*) in the title of the *Saxon Confession of 1551*. See C.G. Bretschneider, ed., *Corpus Reformatorum* (Halle: Schwetschke et Filium, 1834), 369–568. In some editions we see this term used again, according to Wengert’s *Introduction to the Book of Concord*, for the “Christian, Recapitulated, Unanimous Confession of the Teaching and Faith by the Undersigned Electors, Princes and Estates of the Augsburg Confession and by Their Theologians.” BC, Introduction, 3. See also BC, “Preface to the Book of Concord,” 10.

¹¹ Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 33 (references to the divine economy are throughout).

¹² Other Lutheran confessional resources published recently that greatly assist this ecumenical project are the original texts of the documents in the Book of Concord and two volumes of source materials; see *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelische-Lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelische-Lutherischen Kirche. Quellen und Materialien Band 1: Von den altkirchlichen Symbolen bis zu den Katechismen Martin Luthers*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelische-Lutherischen Kirche. Quellen und Materialien Band 2: Die Konkordienformel*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

confessions to those confessions of historical assemblies of the early church – especially those leading up to, and including, the First Council of Constantinople in 381 CE.

An initial foray into this work is provided fortuitously by Kolb and Wengert’s edition of the *Book of Concord*. In the footnotes to the text of the *Augsburg Confession* the editors remind us that many textual witnesses did not originally have the titles and numbering system we are familiar with today.¹³ This fact immediately calls to attention Maurer’s use of structural analysis as a method in his commentary for understanding the *Augsburg Confession*. In the new edition of the *Book of Concord* – when the numbers, titles, and text of the first eight articles of the *Augsburg Confession* are reorganized according to details given by the editors,¹⁴ we can perceive a “new structure” to the beginning of the *Augsburg Confession*. This “new structure” invites us to re-examine how the *Confession* is organized and how its parts contribute to understanding the document as a whole.

Harmonizing the content of both the German and Latin editions of the text, a simplified outline of the “new structure” of the “first six articles” of the *Augsburg Confession* (anathemas omitted)¹⁵ is produced:

Preface – rationale for the *Confession*, and the assertion that the following exposition summarizes the understanding of the apostolic Christian faith held and taught by the German Reformers in their assemblies for public worship.

1. God – a synopsis of the Nicene understanding of how to speak and think about God the Father, the Son of God and the Spirit of God. This is phrased according to the “normative” medieval Western Christian style.¹⁶
2. Human Beings – we exist as sinners, conceived and born in sin,¹⁷ who need God’s direct action in order for us to have true trust and faith in God. Because we are born sinners, to truly live we must be born anew in baptism and the Holy Spirit.
3. Jesus Christ – the Son of God who accomplishes for us, by his own birth, suffering, death, and resurrection, all that we are commanded to do by God and cannot do ourselves. Christ is the source of the forgiveness of our sin and Christ is “our

¹³BC, 36 n26.

¹⁴Note especially the details about the original formatting and grammatical composition of the 1531 *editio princeps*, given in the footnotes of the new edition. For the notes that establish the “new structure” treated in this paper, see BC, 36 n26, 40 n47, 42 n56.

¹⁵It should be noted, however, that the anathemas themselves may serve to identify the conclusion of a complete piece of the “ecumenical core” of the *Augsburg Confession* (up to AC XVIII in the new edition); and thus, serve as “markers” of where one “recapitulated article of faith” ends and another begins. This would, again, restructure the format of what is presented in the new edition of the *Book of Concord*, and how it reads. This topic will be treated fully in a forthcoming article by the author of this paper.

¹⁶The differences between the “Eastern Orthodox” and the “Western Roman Catholic” understanding of the Nicene Creed’s distinction between God the Father, the Son of God, and the Spirit of God are far beyond the scope of this article. For a succinct, but meticulous introduction to the issue, see Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*.

¹⁷This phrasing of contrast between “natural” birth, and “rebirth,” is quite striking when one considers the way in which the apostle Paul and other patristic elders of the Church (such as Ignatius) spoke about the birth of human beings in Christ as our “true” birth. That there is another possibility of how humans are to be born – in direct contrast to procreation – is a recurring theme in the teaching of the Church. This implies that in our current lifetimes we are not yet truly human. For a discussion of this subject, see Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*. Melancthon and the other Wittenberg theologians assume a medieval Western version of this teaching, with their “corrections” in light of the proper understanding of God’s righteousness and how sinners are justified.

righteousness before God.” Much of the content of this article is taken from the second clause of the Apostle’s Creed.

4. How, for the sake of Jesus Christ, God gives us the gracious gift of faith in who Christ is – as the Son of God – and what Christ has done for us, according to the previous article. This faith is counted by God as our righteousness, and God continues to consider it so; and God creates “the office of preaching” in order that this faith may be given to us and maintained.
5. The proper understanding of works that God commands us to do and how they relate to faith, our righteousness before God in Christ Jesus, our salvation.
6. The Church – namely, one holy assembly of all who have faith in Jesus Christ. This assembly is marked, whenever “the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word.”¹⁸ This assembly of all faithful believers who comprise the Church in every time and place will be interspersed with those who are not faithful. Nevertheless, the sacraments that are rightly administered still “do what God intends them to do” – even if an unfaithful person administers them.

This structure, with its content, create the primary framework for how people are to “hear, believe, and see” reality as revealed in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. In other words, the “first six articles” of the *Augsburg Confession* are not merely a collection of separate theological points with which to argue dogma. Rather, they are the shape of a *theologia crucis*, an ordo of the apostolic “pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ.”¹⁹ Further, in the view of Melanchthon and those German Reformers who attended the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, this understanding of reality *must* be publicly confessed, for the gospel is publicly preached.²⁰

In the field of Lutheran confessional studies succeeding Maurer’s commentary, the understanding that the structures of confessional documents themselves hold meaning is not a new concept among contemporary Lutheran scholars. Charles Arand writes about the structure of Philip Melanchthon’s *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

Each and every article of the Apology ultimately centers on the confession of the gospel. Equally important, this confession of the gospel arises within a specific matrix or framework for thinking about the gospel in a way that serves to preserve and promote it. Thus the Apology not only makes an important contribution to the articulation of the gospel itself, but it also provides Lutherans with an invaluable conceptual framework for thinking about the gospel in the twenty-first century by laying out the theological presuppositions necessary for its proclamation.²¹

As Arand, Maurer, and many others note, Melanchthon was both the author of the version of the *Augsburg Confession* that was read before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg, and the “*editio princeps* of 1531.”²² Melanchthon’s understanding of what it is to be a Christian –

¹⁸ AC VII, 2. BC, 42.

¹⁹ Ap. The Church, 5. BC, 174.

²⁰ See Arand et al, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 4–6.

²¹ Charles P. Arand, “Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospel in the Apology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* XV no 4 (2001), 417.

²² “Editors’ Introduction to the Augsburg Confession,” BC, 28-9; Arand et al, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 3, 102–104.

a sinner who has been addressed by God, through Christ, in the forgiveness of sin and one who responds to God's forgiveness with living repentance unto death – permeates the structure and content of the *Augsburg Confession*.²³ Melanchthon's understanding of what it is to be a Christian is, in turn, shaped by his collegial relationship with Luther. Melanchthon reflects Luther's understanding of the distinct kinds of righteousness; he is rooted in the context of the study of theology in Wittenberg during the early years of the German Reformation.²⁴

This does not ignore or deny the influence of numerous source documents, such as the *Articles of Schwabach* and the *Marburg Articles*, which Melanchthon drew upon when preparing the manuscript for the first public reading of the *Augsburg Confession*. Rather than dismissing the historical causes in the years leading up to Melanchthon's completion of the *Confession* (as identified by Maurer and other scholars), we use Melanchthon's understanding of what it is to be a Christian as a primary tool to interpret the *Confession*. This interpretive method takes seriously the assertion by Maurer and others that these source documents and causes are markers of how Melanchthon's personal, theological framework can be identified in the *Augsburg Confession* itself.²⁵ As it should be, proof for this assertion is found in the structure of the *Confession* when this method is used. Though at first glance the *Augsburg Confession* is not structured in the way that one would expect if the starting point of theology were to be the crucified and risen Christ, when the "new structure" is perceived its "six" articles delineate the first principles of a *theologia crucis* – or as Robert Kolb puts it, "a Wittenberg Theology of the Word."²⁶

The *Augsburg Confession*, like the preceding *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, the *Articles of Schwabach* and the *Marburg Articles*, begins with an affirmation of God in a fashion similar to the ecumenical creeds. Unlike the creeds, however, the *Confession* immediately shifts from speaking about God to speaking about the created person, born in the natural way, and the pervasive, universal problem of human sin. The shift is subtle. But, what it signals is that to be a person in the presence of God cannot be understood apart from knowing oneself as a sinner who seeks forgiveness. This structure provides a dialogic form of understanding the claim that there is God – the One who is, alone, righteous – and the subsequent claim that there are people – unrighteous creatures upon whom God chooses to show mercy, through the Word.²⁷

²³ See Arand et al, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 4: "Melanchthon's way or habit of thinking of God and human creatures – in terms of what God has said to his people and the ways in which they respond in the conversation he has initiated – led him to fashion a new Christian literary genre, a new label for the definition of public teaching and therefore of the church itself."; Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith; Reformers Define the Church, 1530–1580* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1991), 13–42. See also, Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness; Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* XIII, no. 4 (1999), 449–66.

²⁴ Arand et al, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 2–3. For a summary of the "two kinds of righteousness," its usage by Luther, Melanchthon, Martin Chemnitz, and its current place in Lutheran dialogues about faith, see the entry by Robert Kolb, "Twofold Righteousness," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, Timothy Wengert, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 754–55.

²⁵ Maurer, *Historical Commentary*, 241, 285–87; Arand et al, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 93, 99–101; "Editors' Introduction to the Augsburg Confession," BC, 28–9.

²⁶ Robert Kolb, personal correspondence, August 11, 2018.

²⁷ Cf. Exodus 33:19; Arand et al, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 2–4, 96; This also opens up the possibility of interpreting "God's righteousness," as a way to speak about *what it is to be God* – a category that could be both fruitful and problematic in juxtaposing the AC to the writings of church elders. For comparative

The first and second articles of the *Augsburg Confession* are arranged to demonstrate bluntly that there is an “ontological abyss” between God (who has no ontology) and people (who are created *ex nihilo* by God). The ontology of humankind hinges on the evasion of death and the possibility of “nonbeing.” This stark, truthful understanding of reality destroys any notion that the righteousness of God can be obtained by people (sinners who are subject to ontology) who work “civil righteousness” (functioning in vocational offices) in creation. Such working, apart from the guiding of God’s Word and the Holy Spirit, is merely human imagining of what righteousness looks like.²⁸

Arand notes that Melanchthon’s foremost concern in framing the chief issue of dispute between the Wittenberg theologians and representatives of the mediaeval Roman Catholic Church is to properly distinguish between two kinds of righteousness: righteousness in the eyes of the world, and righteousness before God.²⁹ Melanchthon’s claim is his opponents have conflated the two, making the practice of the righteousness of the world the means for achieving righteousness before God.³⁰ However, for Melanchthon, and for subscribers to the *Augsburg Confession*, the two kinds of righteousness are evidence that there are two aspects to being a person.³¹

In a “Wittenberg Theology of the Word,” clearly, a person has one historic existence in life: “there is one ongoing conversation God initiates with all creation.”³² But when we properly engage in the dialogue with and about God, teaching “the gospel purely and [administering] the sacraments in conformity with the divine Word,”³³ we perceive that the Wittenberg Reformers believed Scripture contains God’s “grammar”³⁴ as it relates to the “vocabulary” of the dialogue. Furthermore, this is true when our “speaking part” involves us with all of the other creatures that God has made. In other words, God creates, setting the rules for the language used in the conversation, Creatures cannot change the dialogue’s structure without risking an abrupt end – the creature will realize it has been talking to itself in vain.³⁵ This distinction between the two kinds of righteousness, in relation to the person according to a “Wittenberg Theology of the Word,” forms the basis for theologically understanding the economy of salvation which is established by God through the Passion of Jesus Christ.

starting points on this topic, see, Ap. II, Original Sin, 7–10, 16–22; FC-SD III, 54–55; BC, 113–15, 571–73; Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 32–3, 86, 94–5, 102–14.

²⁸ See also Timothy Wengert’s discussion of one’s “standing” before God, the public office of preaching, and the debate between the “ontologists and functionalists,” *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops: Public Ministry for the Reformation & Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 1–32, especially 7–8.

²⁹ Arand, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 418–9.

³⁰ Arand, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 428.

³¹ Cf. Charles P. Arand and Joel Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?” *Concordia Journal* 33:2, 2007 (116–35), especially 118–20.

³² Arand et al, *History and Theology of The Book of Concord*, 2–4, 96. Cf. Behr’s premise concerning the perennial task of the Church to engage in dialogue (theology proper) by beginning with the response to Christ’s question, “Who do you say that I am?” For a discussion of this premise, see Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 1–2; *Mystery of Christ*, 21, 26–7.

³³ AC VII, BC, 42–3.

³⁴ Cf. Behr, *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 7.

³⁵ Cf. Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 30–37. This entire section, in which Behr describes Irenaeus’ understanding of the “coherence of Scripture, the apostolic preaching, the canon of truth, etc.” contains enough parallels to the “Wittenberg Theology of the Word” in these “first six” articles of the *Augsburg Confession* that it warrants further study beyond the scope of this article.

When we contemplate Christ's Passion, in faith, we perceive how Melancthon understood this distinction between the two kinds of righteousness as a helpful tool for correcting the teachings of the medieval Roman Catholic Church about reality in the presence of God. Though the framework of the two kinds of righteousness is couched in the juridical categories and the contextual language of Melancthon's times, we miss his meaning unless we go deeper. In this ecumenically informed way of interpreting the *Augsburg Confession*, Lutherans find hope for true ecumenical rapprochement to the traditions of biblical teaching, speaking, and thinking theologically used by apostles, such as Paul, and patristic elders, such as Irenaeus. For Melancthon, Luther, and those reformists who subscribed to the vision of reality portrayed in the *Augsburg Confession*, the truth about God the Father could not be approached unless the starting point for theological speaking was God's economy of salvation revealed in Christ's Passion.³⁶ Before and after the public reading of the *Augsburg Confession*, Luther argues in his writings that any attempt to speak cohesively and truthfully about "what it is to be God" according to Scripture must cohere with Christ's death and resurrection for human salvation and the gift of faith.³⁷ As Behr notes, this impossibility of speaking theologically about God the Father and the necessity of beginning theological reflection with Christ's Passion is a belief that apostles and patristic elders of the Church confessed for centuries prior to the German Reformation. There is no other starting point from which to begin thinking or speaking truthfully about *what* it is to be God, or what God intends for us in creation, other than Christ, "and him crucified."³⁸

From this "viewpoint of the cross," which makes it possible to properly distinguish between the two kinds of righteousness, the arrangement of the "first six articles" in the "new structure" of the *Augsburg Confession* is based upon this apostolic understanding of the crucified and risen Christ as the only way to know God in truth. This true knowledge of God – in Jesus Christ, God's Word, through faith – declares how the Church is to speak theologically in dialogue with God and proclamation about God to the world.

Examining the first six articles of this "new structure," then, we see that the third article in the *Augsburg Confession*, which focuses on Christ, describes who this Word of God is by his "vocation"³⁹ in the dialogue" with us. Taking into account the previous articles about God and the human creature in bondage to sin, it becomes clear that this "conversation" is about death and life, about all that is in creation, and the truth about humans: we are sinners in need of God's forgiveness. Repeatedly, throughout the documents of the *Book of Concord* there is the assertion that Christians, "reborn by the Holy Spirit and baptism,"⁴⁰ understand

³⁶ Cf. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 7.

³⁷ See, Timothy Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 43–6, 62. Cf. Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 27, 38–9, 173–77.

³⁸ Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 173–77; 1 Cor. 2:2.

³⁹ In Luther's writings about our *Stände* in Christ and "vocational offices," there are traces of an argument that baptism does away with (literally) anthropology in a physical or sociological sense. Baptism reveals that our created particularities are matter of vocation – a primary aspect of living in repentance as thanksgiving for God's gift of Christ's righteousness. See Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 5, 7–8, 11–14, 28, 31–2. This is an understanding, *mutatis mutandis*, that is similar to teachings of certain patristic elders. For a discussion of such teachings, see Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 73–114. Human individuality is the horizon against which we learn to die to ourselves and to live for the sake of others. This topic concerning baptism, anthropology, and vocation will be treated further in a forthcoming article by the author of this paper.

⁴⁰ AC II, BC, 38–9.

themselves first and foremost as forgiven sinners.⁴¹ Thus, the third article of the *Augsburg Confession* is concerned chiefly with the way we know Christ, by faith. We know Christ as God's righteousness for us. Christ's work and being takes us across the "ontological" boundary of being a sinner, to forgiven sinner; through suffering and death, into life eternal.⁴² This article bears traces of the apostolic understanding of how to speak rightly in faith about Christ. The First Council of Constantinople and those who subscribe to its creed affirm the right speech about Christ: one should never speak about Christ theologically (as the Son of God the Father) apart from the economy of his salvation of us.⁴³

The fourth article in the "new structure" of the *Confession*, on "Justification" defines our continued participation in dialogue with God. Without justification, there is no full human engagement in the conversation that God initiates. The article about justification reiterates the differences between God's righteousness and civil righteousness in the framework of the previous articles. In other words, the language of the fourth article keeps the two aspects of what it is to be a human creature distinct, yet unified.⁴⁴ Much is written about the Lutheran understanding of the sole concept of justification that is beyond the scope of elaboration for this essay.⁴⁵ However, the "new structure" of the first "six" articles of the *Augsburg Confession* causes a reframing of justification and salvation when one carefully attends to the clause concerning God's "choices" to use justification and thereby institute the "Office of Preaching" in the economy of salvation.⁴⁶

The clause on Justification is grammatically linked with the clause on the Office of Preaching in the text of the *Augsburg Confession*. This linkage points to Luther's description of the Church as *Mundhaus* (literally "mouthhouse").⁴⁷ The *Mundhaus* is where God's Word engages humans and the dialogue is carried on precisely. This gives specific expression to the two kinds of righteousness. God's bestowed righteousness has a dialogical context. God's justification of sinners – their reception of Christ's righteousness through faith – presupposes specific communication taking place in a specific context: "the gospel purely preached and the holy sacraments administered according to the gospel" occurs in the Christian assembly (*ekklesia*), "the Church."⁴⁸ This understanding of the relationship of justification to the Office of Preaching in God's economy of salvation clarifies why Luther and the Wittenberg reformists placed so much value in preaching the pure gospel and properly

⁴¹ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 73–4.

⁴² The forgiveness of sins (as "only God can forgive sins") is an aspect of Christ's righteousness. Receiving the forgiveness of sin—especially in baptism—and forgiving the sins of others is a mark of becoming fully human according to God's image (Christ).

⁴³ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 33, 88–9.

⁴⁴ Compare this unity in distinction to the way that the "Chalcedonian definition" speaks of the two natures of Christ as distinct yet unified in his person. The "Chalcedonian definition" is a way of understanding how Scripture speaks correctly about Christ—an exegetical concern for teaching the "pure gospel;" an explicit concern of the *Augsburg Confession*. Cf. Arand and Beirmann, "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?" 134–35.

⁴⁵ For example, see Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Erdman's, 2004).

⁴⁶ For an excellent example of this reframing, see Gordon Lathrop and Timothy Wengert, *Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

⁴⁷ Advent Postils, 1522, Advent I Sermon on Matthew, 21:1–9. LW 75:51, n.72; WA 10/1/2,48.5.

⁴⁸ Cf. N.F.S. Grundtvig, "Only at the bath and at the table, do we hear God's Word to us (*Kun ved Badet og ved Bordet, Horer vi Guds Ord til os.*" See Lathrop and Wengert, *Christian Assembly*, 46; Gordon Lathrop, "The Bath and the Table, the Prayer and the Word: N.F.S. Grundtvig and the Lutheran Contribution to Ecumenical Liturgical Renewal," *Grundtvig Studier* 51 (2000), 104–17.

distinguishing between the two kinds of righteousness. Without properly distinguishing between the two kinds of righteousness, one cannot preach the pure gospel; and without the pure gospel, justification does not happen and the Church is not present in creation.

Rather than elaborating immediately upon “what it is to be Church” in an article following justification, however, Melancthon completes the summary of the proper distinction between the two kinds of righteousness with the fifth article in the “new structure” of the *Confession*. In this article, separate from article four to emphasize that the two kinds of righteousness must not be confused, Melancthon notes the implications for humanity’s life in creation as sinners, capable of civil righteousness, whom God “justifies” in the economy of salvation. Article five caps the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness by addressing the practice of civil righteousness in creation and its role in God’s economy of salvation. God creates humans for salvation, and accomplishes this through Christ’s willingly offering himself up to death for humanity’s sake, in order that humans may be justified. Justification marks the “beginning of the completion,” of God’s work in creating a human being who passes through death and is raised to life fully human.⁴⁹ All that can be done for our righteousness before God and salvation is done. In the *Augsburg Confession’s* vision of reality, through Christ’s Passion, God has cut off any dialogue on civil righteousness (“good works”) as a means of achieving God’s righteousness: “It is finished.”⁵⁰

Christ, who is the image of the invisible God,⁵¹ completed the work of creating what it is to be a human being according to God’s image. Thus, all those who are “born anew” into this image by baptism and the Holy Spirit⁵² are the “children of God” who are freed from sin to “grow up” into Christ by offering their lives for the sake of “their neighbors.” This offering witness (living repentance) is so that others “may see the good works [of the children of God] and give glory to God in heaven.”⁵³ Thus, the practice of civil righteousness – instituted, shaped and given purpose by God’s Word that “knits us from the womb”⁵⁴ is for vocational offices. This is a result of the Holy Spirit creating faith.⁵⁵ Human self-offering in the “new obedience” is not for the purpose of achieving God’s righteousness. Only God’s Word in the economy of salvation can declare God’s righteousness upon us. Rather, human self-offering plays in the economy of salvation as God’s power transforms humans and creation. As justified sinners, humans embrace a life of obedience to God’s command to serve (“ministers to”) others and God’s creation. Just so, our flesh is “pressed into the mold of the image of Christ.”⁵⁶

By faith, when humans enact repentance through the exercise of gifts in vocational offices, they begin to experience the full meaning of the Pauline “newness of life” that courses through the New Testament.⁵⁷ Baptismal life is lived in obedience (“true fear”) to God, an awe that comes from the true knowledge of Christ, through faith, as the Son of God who offered himself to enact God’s will “for us and for our salvation.” Faith that justifies, linked

⁴⁹ Cf. Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 106-9.

⁵⁰ John 19:30. Cf. John 15:1-11.

⁵¹ Col. 1:15.

⁵² John 3:3-8.

⁵³ Matt. 5:16.

⁵⁴ Jer. 1:1-9.

⁵⁵ Wengert, *Priesthood, Pastors, Bishops*, 5, 7-8, 11-14, 28, 31-2.

⁵⁶ Cf. Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 73-114.

⁵⁷ Romans 6. Cf. Philippians 2:1-8; 1Peter 1:3-7, 9-11; etc.

with our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, consecrates us to this economy of God in our living repentance.⁵⁸ Thus, the fifth article in the "new structure" of the *Augsburg Confession*, "concerning the new obedience," summarizes the entire argument of Luther's treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, written eleven years prior to the public reading of the *Confession*.⁵⁹

Likewise, a summarizing of the "fourth and fifth article" of the "newly" structured *Augsburg Confession* yields the shape of God's conversation with humans according to a "Wittenberg Theology of the Word." Through the Office of Preaching and the work of the Holy Spirit, God engages sinners in a dialogue. Some of God's message claims, "This is what I have done, what I'm doing, and what I will do through my Son, the Beloved; listen to him . . ." This is the Word of God that God alone speaks in the conversation. It is revelation; therefore, sinners cannot speak this Word because they are unable to speak it to shape God's claims. This language is not theirs. This Word of God in the dialogue justifies sinners and is communicated by the Holy Spirit, who creates faith. Justified, forgiven sinners respond to God's declarations by enacting repentance, which includes serving others through various God-given vocational offices. Sometimes, for specific people created by God with the proper gifts (charisms), this includes the Office of Preaching.

This is divine "grammar and vocabulary."⁶⁰ It forms the language by which the Holy Spirit and God's Word teach forgiven sinners to speak and witness about God. In this "Wittenberg Theology of the Word," teaching the "grammar and vocabulary" of our dialogue with God is a primary function of the Office of Preaching within the Church. The Church is the *Mundhaus* in which the Holy Spirit opens the dialogue, helps the exchanges to find clearest expression in the Word of God, and – ultimately – fulfills the dialogue amongst forgiven, participating sinners.

"Article six" of the *Augsburg Confession's* "new structure" describes the Church according to this dialogical understanding. Considering the previous five articles in the "new structure" of the *Confession*, these simple clauses of article six concerning the Church round out the core of the "Wittenberg Theology of the Word." They conform faithfully to the premises underlying the proper distinction between the two kinds of righteousness. The definition of the Church expressed in article six of the "new structure" of the *Augsburg Confession* contains a uniquely subtle element of a *theologia crucis*, yet it is so obvious that its full import is often overlooked. The definition of the Church in article six gives the perception that Christ, the one who is always coming to us in the gospel purely preached and sacraments administered according to his own command, chooses to "hide" himself in the temporal locations where sinners gather. In the "true assembly" of those becoming forgiven sinners and passing from death to life in order to become fully human according to the image (Jesus Christ) of God is Christ's chosen hiding place in plain sight of the World.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Thesis 1, *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences (1517)*, WA 1:233.10–11; LW 31:25. See also Luther's explanation to this thesis in WA 1:530.16–531.18; LW 31:83–5.

⁵⁹ See here WA 7:49, 20–25 (Latin) WA 7:20.25–21.3 (German); LW 31:344: "To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all [through faith, as Christ's righteousness], subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all [by God's command, as Christ's obedience—our "newness of life"], subject to all."

⁶⁰ Cf. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 7.

⁶¹ Cf. Behr, *The Mystery of Christ*, 107–109.

That God is “hidden,” first and foremost, *exactly where Christ promises to be* in the Church, seems absurdly simple. Seemingly obvious, this idea escapes us; it is uninteresting. But it is the anchor of the Church’s true life and its mission to the world. The Church is to be the presence of Christ in creation, the Kingdom of God drawing near. In the midst of the decline of Lutheran religious institutions in North America and Europe, however, this truth is all too often unnoted in the programmatic measures championed to “save” the institutions.⁶² A Lutheran understanding of “the nature” of the Church gives primacy to the Church’s faithfulness in doing what the church “does” concerning the gospel.⁶³ In the sixth article in the “new structure” of the *Augsburg Confession* the connection is made to the third article regarding the Son of God and parallels are drawn between the reality of Christ and the reality of the Church. Christ is understood by what Christ does *for humanity* in God’s economy of salvation. Thus, the reality of the Church can only be perceived when the church fulfills its primary purpose: to be the assembly (*Mundhaus*) wherein, through the preaching of the pure gospel and administering the sacraments in accord with the gospel, Christ creates true human beings according to God’s economy of salvation.

From a Lutheran perspective, the Church is not recognizable until, by the preaching of the gospel and the administering of the sacraments, it becomes visible in creation. Yet, at the conclusion of the assembly’s gathering for this purpose, the Church is no longer perceivable. The Gospel according to St Luke makes similar claims about the risen Christ. As Behr notes, Christ remains unrecognizable to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus until he “[interprets] to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself”⁶⁴ and “he [takes] bread, [blesses] it and [breaks] it, and [gives] it to them.”⁶⁵ Only then are the eyes of the disciples opened to recognize Christ for who he is. Yet once he is recognized and the meal administered, he vanishes from their sight.⁶⁶ About this way in which Christ becomes visible and then vanishes, Behr remarks, “[As] the apostle Paul put it . . . we no longer know Christ after the flesh, but according to the Spirit (2 Cor 5.16)”⁶⁷ Further, Behr states that these two ways, namely “engagement with the scriptures and sharing in the Lord’s meal, ‘proclaiming his death until he comes’ (1 Cor 11:26),”⁶⁸ enacted by the Church throughout history, “constitute, as it were, the matrix and sustenance of the Christian tradition.”⁶⁹

Therefore, according to the *Augsburg Confession’s* definition of the Church, the promise of Christ that God the Father will give the Holy Spirit to baptized believers⁷⁰ who gather in assemblies where the Word is present through the pure preaching of the gospel and sacraments is a promise that the Holy Spirit and God’s Word are present in, with, and through baptized believers in their apostolic gatherings in space and time. In short, the Body of Christ, the Church, possesses the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. A constitutionally

⁶² These institutional measures often include programming and methods of “being the Church,” that direct members to look for Christ everywhere *other than* where Christ has promised to be and directed us to look first: in the assembly of baptized believers when the pure gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel.

⁶³ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 117–8, 123–6, 137–8; *The Way to Nicaea*, 37–9, 42–3.

⁶⁴ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 26–27; Luke 24:25–7. Cf. Luke 24:44–7.

⁶⁵ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 26–27; Luke 24:30.

⁶⁶ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 26–27.

⁶⁷ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 26.

⁶⁸ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 27.

⁶⁹ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 28.

⁷⁰ John 14:16–21.

defined, chartered, agreed upon, etc., religious institution, despite its cultural atmosphere, or public claims, cannot claim to “be” the Church in decline.

The clauses about the Church in the *Augsburg Confession* contain both a warning and a possibility of hope for our contemporary Lutheran gatherings to worship God. The shrinking membership numbers reported in Lutheran congregations across North America and Europe are often explained as part of the supposed “decline” of Christianity in the global North. This phenomenon actually shows the decline of religious institutions wherein cultural atmospheres and governance structures currently obscure the primary purpose to manifest the Church in the “preaching of the gospel according to a pure understanding and the administration of the sacraments according to the gospel.”⁷¹ The Wittenberg reformists understood that religious institutions and created structures can be corrupted by sinners and do harm, which is why they sustained watershed challenges to the mediaeval “Church” of Rome. The Wittenberg reformists championed the preservation of biblical teaching concerning how God works to establish and sustain the Church itself, so that the gospel continues to be purely preached in every time and place. They did not risk their lives for the preservation of a particular religious institution. “Handing down” the gospel in harmonious preaching according to a pure understanding and distributing the means of grace as instituted by Christ according to the gospel, is the primary “mark” of the Church and the cornerstone of her unity.⁷² For this grace, the reformists risked everything.

Articulating a “Wittenberg Theology of the Word” in the *Augsburg Confession*, Melancthon gives us an understanding of the Church according to her purpose established by the crucified and risen Christ. Whenever and wherever an assembly of people hears God’s justifying Word and receives the faith-creating Holy Spirit – when the pure gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered according to this gospel – there we are “in” the Church, presence of the Kingdom of God in creation.

There are significant differences between this understanding of the Church contained in the *Augsburg Confession* and the understanding of the Church according to Orthodox Christians, such as Behr. However, there is enough focus on the gospel and the sacraments in the clause of the *Confession* about the unity of the Church to be able to compare with Behr’s conclusions regarding specific apostolic and patristic understandings of “tradition and canon” in the Church.⁷³

The first six articles of the “newly structured” *Augsburg Confession* form an ecumenical core. The “Wittenberg Theology of the Word” that these six articles outline is a vision of reality perceived by the proper distinction between God’s righteousness and civil righteousness, according to faith, created in the experience of the crucified and risen Christ who justifies sinners. This experience constitutes the apostolic preaching of the pure gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to this gospel. Thus, there is the “basic framework” to “locate” the Church in any time and place. This ecumenical core bears curious resemblance to an Orthodox understanding of the apostolic tradition. As Behr puts it:

⁷¹ AC VII, BC, 42–43.

⁷² Though the term “means of grace” is a category deeply alien to the Orthodox Church, “the preaching of the pure gospel,” is an understanding that bears ecumenical fruit. Cf. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 42–48.

⁷³ For an introduction to these apostolic and patristic understandings of “tradition and canon,” see Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 12–16, 33–48, 84–5, 143–44; *The Nicene Faith*, 1.

[The] apostolic tradition is nothing other than the Gospel proclaimed by the apostles as the foundation for the Church. Insofar as the Gospel, proclaimed in public, has been preserved intact, it is possible to appeal, as a point of reference for what has been taught from the beginning, to the succession of presbyter/bishops who have taught and preached the same Gospel. In this way, apostolic succession becomes an element, alongside Scripture, canon and tradition, in the self-identification of orthodox or normative Christianity.⁷⁴

Wengert notes that there are two parts to the *Augsburg Confession*.⁷⁵ In the “new structure” of the *Augsburg Confession* the articles immediately following the six-article ecumenical core of the “Wittenberg Theology of the Word” complete the first part. These articles describe the sacraments, how these sacraments enact the gospel in the Church, and how the Office of Preaching governs the Church to remove any obstruction to her primary purpose. Then, the final articles of the first part of the *Augsburg Confession* twice reiterates the relationship between the properly distinguished forms of righteousness in God’s economy of salvation⁷⁶ Following Melanchthon’s own words, the articles of the second half of the *Augsburg Confession* are best understood as an application of the vision of reality described by the “Wittenberg Theology of the Word.” This application of the vision of reality argues against contextual examples of the contemporary abuses in the Church that resulted from confusing the two kinds of righteousness. This confusion obscures the gospel, then and now.⁷⁷

The first six articles of the “new structure” of the *Augsburg Confession* remind the Church of the biblical teaching about the reality that forms the Church: preaching the pure gospel and administering the sacraments according to the gospel. The *Augsburg Confession* harmonizes with the apostolic tradition expressed in the ecumenical creeds to aid proper discernment, by faith, of all the things concerning Jesus Christ that are spoken about him in Scripture and the New Testament.⁷⁸ In other words, the ecumenical creeds and the *Confession’s* ecumenical core – a “Wittenberg Theology of the Word” – define the “matrix and sustenance”⁷⁹ of the pure preaching of the Gospel. For Lutherans, affirming this apostolic framework is so vital to the Church that it is included during the injunction and questioning of an ordinand:

We accept, teach, and confess the Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian creeds.
We also acknowledge the Lutheran confessions as true witnesses and faithful

⁷⁴ Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 42.

⁷⁵ Timothy Wengert, “Philip Melanchthon’s Last Word to Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggio, Papal Legate at the 1530 Diet of Augsburg,” *Philip Melanchthon: Theologian in Classroom, Confession and Controversy*, eds. Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, Nicole Kuroпка and Timothy J. Wengert (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 83.

⁷⁶ These reiterations are, first, AC XIV (which also plays a role in ensuring that the primary purpose of the Church remains unobstructed), XVI (civil righteousness) and XVII (the judgement of Christ over both aspects of righteousness that constitute being a person.) The second reiteration is AC XVIII, XIX (together describing the “ontological limit” of sinners with regard to the will and our inability to “produce the righteousness of God in civil affairs), XX (where the axes of righteousness “intersect” in the justified, baptized believer; yet they remain properly distinguished and not “confused”), and XXI (which touches on “sanctification,” through addressing the communion of saints in the Church with regard to the two kinds of righteousness), BC, 46–59.

⁷⁷ BC, 60–1, 82.

⁷⁸ FC–Ep. 6–8, BC, 487.

⁷⁹ Behr, *Mystery of Christ*, 28.

expositions of the Holy Scriptures. Will you therefore preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions?⁸⁰

In this “Wittenberg Theology of the Word,” what the Reformists hand down (“tradition”) to us is this framework for “hearing, believing, and seeing” reality from the perspective of Christ’s Passion. This framework, by faith, imparts an understanding of the proper distinction between the two kinds of righteousness. This distinction gives an understanding of what it means to be made fully human according to God’s Word in that dialogue that God has with people. For Lutherans, and for those who subscribe to this *Confession*, it is a restatement of the apostolic faith in Christ Jesus. This distinct understanding of Christ and humanity is not an innovation; it is the “harmonious preaching of the gospel, according to a pure understanding of Scripture.”⁸¹ We should be cautious not to confuse this framework – a heuristic device – for the content of Christian faith. For the Wittenberg Reformists, the experience of Jesus Christ is primary, in the midst of the Church—present in the gathering of baptized believers, hearing the preached gospel, confessing and forgiving sins, baptizing and eating the Lord’s Supper. In faith given by the Holy Spirit, theology proper is speaking, about who this Jesus Christ is. In its simplest definition, the *Augsburg Confession* is a “canon of faith,”⁸² as are the ecumenical creeds. This core function of the *Confession* and the creeds is often forgotten.

Gathered in the worship of God or experiencing life which appears to hold the transformative power of God, humans are invited to use the ecumenical creeds and the *Augsburg Confession* as a guide. These canons can help people discern if their experiences – and our way of speaking about them – echo what the Church has (for centuries) preached. They can help us notice the presence of the crucified and risen Christ working salvation upon us in creation. They can direct us to notice the gospel. As did the patristic elders who confessed according to the ecumenical creeds, so also the Wittenberg Reformists confess in the *Augsburg Confession*, “If what people experience or say about Jesus Christ and the gospel does not align with the way in which the Church experiences and speaks about Christ, we are not preaching the gospel; we are no longer speaking with God or about God to other people.” In other words, with the gospel “for us,” “for me” there is also handed on a rule for reading rightly – for remaining in an orthodox dialogue with and about God.

This “method” of constantly discerning and living in truth and reality contextualizes one’s experience of the gospel apostolically proclaimed. This method of discernment grounds the repentance that characterizes the whole life of the Christian who encounters Christ. Life in, with, and through Christ is a continuous conversation with God, through God’s Word, in the Holy Spirit. The “Wittenberg” insight gives a method to create genuine ecumenical dialogue. The “Wittenberg Theology of the Word” – discoverable in the “first six articles” of the “new” structure of the *Augsburg Confession* – is a core ecumenical understanding of our Christian faith, penned by Philip Melancthon in the language of his era.

⁸⁰ “Ordination,” *Occasional Services for the Assembly* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 188.

⁸¹ AC VII, BC, 42–3.

⁸² “*Symbolon*” is also a useful word, as described by Timothy Wengert in his introduction to the BC, 1. The two halves of a *symbolon* would be joined, in order to make a complete whole; in the same way as a “canon” is literally a rule or model to conform to. For a discussion of the “canon of truth,” see Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 12–13, 13n4, 33–34.

The ecumenical creeds are gifts inspired and given by the Holy Spirit for the Body of Christ, the Church, to cherish and steward faithfully by using them for the sake of prospering truth and the lives of others. These creeds and the *Confession* are guides for us not only in times of crisis when the harmonious preaching of the gospel and the pure understanding of Scripture are in danger, but also in ordinary times where Christians orient themselves to the experience of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, the One who is always coming us in a world whose present form is passing away.