

# We Still Believe!

A Seven-Session Bible Study on Lutheran Themes in  
*“The Common Confession”*

Highlighting Biblical & Confessional Lutheran  
Teachings at Risk in the Church Today

*“As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 3:14-15)*

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This study is designed to be used in teaching basic Lutheran doctrine, as well as to introduce congregations to the *Common Confession*, the shared faith statement of the *WordAlone Network* ([www.wordalone.org](http://www.wordalone.org)) and *Lutheran CORE - The Coalition for Renewal* ([www.lutherancore.org](http://www.lutherancore.org)).

## Acknowledgements:

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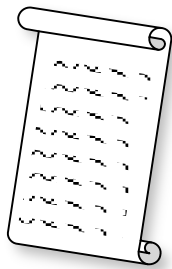


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## Introduction

*As for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14-15)*



Throughout the history of the Church, each new generation of God's people has been called to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering" trusting that "he who has promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:23)

In the early centuries of the Christian era, when many heresies threatened to undermine the Gospel and distort the teaching of Scripture, faithful people drew up the Ecumenical Creeds, to teach the basics of the Christian faith, to warn against false belief, and to provide a common confession by which faithful Christians could speak of their faith together.

Likewise, in the Middle Ages, when the Gospel of Christ had become obscured by the human traditions of the Church, reformers wrote new confessions to address the challenges confronting the biblical message in their own time. Documents such as the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord did not seek to invent new doctrine, but were an attempt by the reformers to remove obstacles that had been placed before the Word.

All of these historical confessions are still used to this day, that we as believers may "continue in what we have learned and firmly believed" (2 Timothy 3:14), in a testimony that is consistent with those who have gone before us in faith.

In our own day, the Gospel of Jesus Christ faces new obstacles and distortions. As Paul warned, there is always the risk that the Church may be "deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." (Galatians 1:6-7).

To address the doctrinal issues at stake for those in the American Lutheran tradition today, many individuals and reform movements have attempted to outline the biblical teachings we have inherited, as it relates to our own context. Various statements and confessions have been drawn up, to which many have subscribed. One of the more broad-based statements is the "Ten Affirmations of the WordAlone Network," a summary of beliefs that have helped to guide the work of this reform group. Another is the "Dorado Covenant," a statement of principles offered in support of biblical and evangelical proclamation, supported by congregations and individuals (this same statement is also known as the "Lighthouse Covenant").

Along with the constitutional Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, these statements formed the basis for the text of the *Common Confession*, a document written in 2005, which has since been subscribed to as a statement of faith by hundreds of individuals, congregations, and reform groups, including the WordAlone Network ([www.wordalone.org](http://www.wordalone.org)) and Lutheran CORE ([www.lutherancore.org](http://www.lutherancore.org)).

The *Common Confession* is not a presentation of any new doctrine, nor is it intended to replace the historical confessions that came before it. It was not written to serve as a comprehensive summary of Christian doctrine, but rather, to address the particular theological concerns facing Lutherans in the 21st Century.

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This Bible study is offered as a resource for reflecting on the biblical teaching contained in the *Common Confession*, with the hope that it will inspire individuals and congregations to examine the core beliefs of traditional Lutheranism and how these beliefs apply to our own context.

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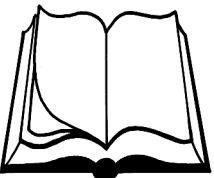
## Using this Study

This study was designed to be led by a pastor or lay facilitator in a small-group question and discussion format. It was written on an introductory level, focusing on texts from the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Each session includes a number of questions that are meant to help participants understand the texts and what they mean for our present lives of faith. Many of the questions are open-ended, asking what participants think about what the Bible is saying. This is not to suggest that there are no right and wrong answers. Real biblical study is more than just a conversation amongst ourselves; it is an opportunity to hear God himself speak to us through his Word.

Leaders are encouraged to reword questions, or ask new ones, to help participants think about what they are reading. Let the Bible itself serve as the ‘answer key’ if participants get stuck. They should also be open to how other biblical texts or stories from Scripture might inform the discussion.

Most importantly, both participants and leaders should try to listen for how God may be using the text to encourage or challenge them in their own life of faith. Remember the words of Martin Luther in the Small Catechism:



*God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word, and live a godly life on earth now and to eternity.*

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*Visit our website at [www.solapublishing.org](http://www.solapublishing.org) to find materials for children and adults that teach and adhere to the faith position of the Common Confession.*

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# **The Common Confession**

## *A Traditional Lutheran Statement of Faith*

### **1) The Lord Jesus Christ**

We are people who believe and confess our faith in the Triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We trust and believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

### **2) The Gospel of Salvation**

We believe and confess that all human beings are sinners, and that sinners are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God alone justifies human beings by faith in Christ — a faith which God creates through the message of the Gospel. As ambassadors for Christ, God uses us to speak his Word and build his kingdom.

### **3) The Authority of Scripture**

We believe and confess that the Bible is God's revealed Word to us, spoken in Law and Gospel. The Bible is the final authority for us in all matters of our faith and life.

### **4) A Common Confession of Faith**

We accept and uphold that the Lutheran Confessions reliably guide us as faithful interpretations of Scripture, and that we share a unity and fellowship in faith with others among whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the Gospel.

### **5) The Priesthood of All Believers**

We believe and confess that the Holy Spirit makes all who believe in Jesus Christ to be priests for service to others in Jesus' name, and that God desires to make use of the spiritual gifts he has given through the priesthood of all believers.

### **6) Marriage and Family**

We believe and confess that the marriage of male and female is an institution created and blessed by God. From marriage, God forms families to serve as the building blocks of all human civilization and community. We teach and practice that sexual activity belongs exclusively within the biblical boundaries of a faithful marriage between one man and one woman.

### **7) The Mission and Ministry of the Congregation**

We believe and confess that the church is the assembly of believers called and gathered by God around Word and Sacrament, and that the mission and ministry of the church is carried out within the context of individual congregations, which are able to work together locally and globally.

## SESSION 3

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*We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)*

*From the Common Confession*

### **Article 3: The Authority of Scripture**

We believe and confess that the Bible is God's revealed Word to us, spoken in Law and Gospel. The Bible is the final authority for us in all matters of our faith and life.

### **Introduction**

Most discussions of the authority of Scripture tend to focus on what the Bible *is*. For Luther, the more important question had to do with what God's Word *does* — to us and in us.

Luther taught that God reveals his Word to those who read the Scripture. He said: "The Holy Spirit speaks to those who read the Word of God." This active function is reflected in the classic Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel. As Law, God's Word shows us our sin and need for repentance. As Gospel, God's Word speaks the promise of forgiveness and new life in Christ. In the simultaneous working of Law and Gospel, God uses the Word to engender faith. As it says in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the Word of Christ."

The message of Christ is the central theme of both the Old Testament and the New, and it is in this same Word that Christ reveals himself to us. As it is written in Luke 24:44-45: "Jesus said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures..."

The power and authority of Scripture rests in the fact that God does something to us through his Word. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to create faith, when and where he pleases. The Bible's

primary purpose is to lead us to repentance of sin through the Law and salvation by faith in the Gospel. If this living faith is removed from the equation, the truth and authority of the Scriptures is lost to us.

### **Entering the Biblical Story**

• *Read: Acts 2:14-42*

Read the story of Peter's sermon in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, and note the Apostle's use of Scripture.

1. When Peter addressed the crowd of people in Jerusalem on Pentecost, he made reference to passages from Joel 2, as well as Psalms 16, 110, 132, and others. What role does Scripture play in Peter's sermon? Why does he quote them?
2. What writings would Peter have considered to be "the Scriptures"? What about us? How are the two related?
3. Compare: 2 Peter 1:16-21. What authority did Peter believe was at work in the Scriptures? Did Peter's experience confirm his trust in the Scriptures, or did Peter set his experience over against Scripture?
4. In what way is God's Word a light to, rather than a reflection of, the world? In what way must this begin with individual Christians?

#### **From Luther's Small Catechism:**

*"God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word, and live a godly life on earth now and in heaven forever."*

*"We are to fear and love God so that we do not neglect his Word and the preaching of it, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it."*

## Digging Deeper into the Word

• *Read: 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5*

Scripture has authority because it comes from God. Or as Scripture itself says in 2 Timothy 3:16, “all Scripture is inspired by God” — literally *God-breathed*. This means that the Holy Spirit is at the heart of what the Bible is and what it does.

### Questions:

5. What is the difference between the words of human beings and the Word of God? Which is easier to trust? Explain.
6. How would you describe the way in which the Holy Spirit was at work in the writing of the Scriptures? How does this establish its authority?
7. In what way is the Holy Spirit at work in the hearing or reading of God’s Word? Does the Bible have the same authority in our lives when it is sitting unused on a shelf?
8. Do you tend to see God’s Word as more of a comfort or a challenge? In what way is it both?
9. What does it mean to “receive” the Word of God? Is faith a human action, or does God himself create faith in his Word? Explain.
10. The Lutheran Confessions state: “*Scripture is the only judge, rule, and guiding principle, according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are good or evil, correct or incorrect.*”<sup>\*</sup> What other authorities does such a statement reject? How does God’s Word give a content to our faith that reason cannot?

<sup>\*</sup> *Formula of Concord (Preface to Epitome 7)*

## Scripture Passages for Further Study

To meditate further on God’s Word, read the following Scripture texts and reflect on how these verses engage the theme of this lesson:



- Psalm 119:97-105
- 2 Timothy 3:14-17
- John 8:12-32
- 2 Peter 1:16-21
- John 17:6-19

### Putting This All Together

11. Lutherans have often referred to Scripture as the “sole authoritative source and norm” of our proclamation, faith, and life. What is a *source*? What is a *norm*? How does Scripture provide the final measure against which all teaching can be judged?
12. What do Lutherans mean by the distinction between God’s Word as Law and Gospel? What is Law? What is Gospel? For what purpose does God use each of them?
13. Jesus prayed to the Father: “Your Word is truth” (John 17:17). How would you define the word *truth*? On what basis would you argue that the entire Bible is **true**?
14. Some words that Christians have used to describe the Bible include: inspired, infallible, and inerrant. How do these words differ? How are they similar? Which of these words best conveys to you the way in which Scripture is **authoritative**?
15. What would help you to make Scripture more significant and meaningful in your life of faith?