

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE

Confessional Lutheran

A Practical Guide for Lay Teachers

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Introduction: Why This Matters

If you teach in a confessional Lutheran congregation—whether you lead an adult Bible study, facilitate an adult Sunday school class, or teach children and youth—you hold a sacred trust. You are not simply sharing your personal opinions about God, nor are you free to teach whatever sounds right to you. You are teaching on behalf of a church that has publicly committed itself to specific doctrinal standards rooted in Holy Scripture. This guide explains what that commitment means and why it matters for every lesson you prepare and every word you speak in the teaching ministry of the church.

1. What Does “Confessional” Mean?

The word “confessional” comes from the Latin *confessio*—a public declaration of what one believes to be true. In the context of the Lutheran church, it refers to the historic documents known as the Lutheran Confessions, which were written in the 16th century to articulate what Scripture teaches over against the errors of Rome on one hand and the errors of the radical reformers on the other.

To be a “confessional” Lutheran congregation means that the church does not treat doctrine as a matter of personal preference or shifting cultural opinion. We confess—that is, we publicly declare—specific teachings as true because they are faithful expositions of God’s Word. This is not a human tradition imposed on Scripture. It is the church’s careful, tested, and enduring reading of what Scripture actually says.

Being confessional does not mean being rigid, cold, or merely academic. The confessions themselves are deeply pastoral documents, born out of real pastoral crises where the eternal destinies of real people were at stake. They address questions like: How can I know I am forgiven? What does Baptism actually do? Is Christ truly present in the Lord’s Supper? The confessions answer these questions not with speculation but with Scripture.

2. The Confessional Documents

Confessional Lutheran congregations subscribe, in their constitutions, to the following documents:

The Three Ecumenical Creeds

The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed are called "ecumenical" because they belong to the whole Christian church across all times and places. They establish the foundational truths of the Christian faith: the Holy Trinity, the full deity and full humanity of Christ, His virgin birth, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and bodily return. These creeds are not Lutheran inventions—they are the inheritance of all orthodox Christianity. By confessing them, we declare our continuity with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Any teaching that contradicts these creeds is not merely un-Lutheran; it is un-Christian.

The Unaltered Augsburg Confession (1530)

The Augsburg Confession (*Confessio Augustana*, often abbreviated "AC") is the chief confession of the Lutheran church. Presented to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg on June 25, 1530, it was drafted primarily by Philip Melanchthon under Luther's guidance. It is divided into two main parts: Articles 1–21 lay out the chief articles of faith (God, original sin, justification, the ministry, the church, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, repentance, and so forth), while Articles 22–28 address abuses that had been corrected in Lutheran territories.

The word "Unaltered" is significant. After 1530, Melanchthon made revisions to the Confession (the *Variata* of 1540) that softened the language on the Lord's Supper in a way that opened the door to Reformed interpretations. Confessional Lutheran subscription is to the *original* 1530 text, which clearly confesses the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. This distinction matters, and it is worth knowing.

For Sunday school teachers, the Augsburg Confession is especially important because it addresses the core doctrines you will most frequently teach: justification by grace through faith (AC IV), the Office of the Ministry and the means of grace (AC V), the new obedience that flows from faith (AC VI), the nature of the church (AC VII–VIII), Baptism (AC IX), the Lord's Supper (AC X), confession and absolution (AC XI–XII), and the proper distinction between faith and works (AC XX).

Luther's Small Catechism (1529)

The Small Catechism is, in many ways, the most practical of the confessional documents for the Sunday school teacher. Luther wrote it after visiting Saxon parishes and discovering that both pastors and laypeople were shockingly ignorant of basic Christian teaching. It is organized into the Six Chief Parts: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Holy Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar (the Lord's Supper).

The genius of the Small Catechism is its method. For each topic, Luther asks, "What does this mean?" and provides a brief, clear, Scripture-saturated explanation. This pattern—Scripture, then faithful explanation—is the model for all confessional Lutheran teaching. If you are ever unsure what to teach on a given topic, the Small

Catechism is your first and best resource. It is not beneath you; it is the concentrated wisdom of the Reformation distilled for everyday use.

3. Quia Subscription: “Because,” Not “Insofar As”

Confessional Lutheran churches subscribe to these documents on a *quia* basis. This Latin word means “because.” We accept the Confessions *because* they are a faithful exposition of Holy Scripture—not merely *insofar as* (*quatenus*) they happen to agree with our personal reading of the Bible.

This distinction is not academic hairsplitting. It is the difference between a church body that has a confession and a church body that merely has a collection of historical documents it finds generally interesting. A *quatenus* subscription effectively makes each individual the judge of the Confessions, allowing anyone to discard whatever portions they personally find unconvincing. The result is doctrinal chaos—no one can be held accountable to any standard because the standard itself is always subject to private reinterpretation.

A *quia* subscription, by contrast, says: “We have examined these documents against Scripture, and we confess that they faithfully teach what Scripture teaches. Therefore, they are binding on our teaching and practice.” This does not elevate the Confessions above Scripture. Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) remains the sole source and norm of all doctrine. But the Confessions are the church’s public, tested, and authorized summary of what Scripture teaches. They function as what the Lutheran fathers called a *norma normata*—a “normed norm”—a standard that is itself normed by the higher standard of Scripture (the *norma normans*, the “norming norm”).

What This Means Practically for You as a Teacher:

- You are not free to teach contrary to the Confessions, even if you personally disagree with a particular point. If you have concerns, raise them with your pastor—not in the class you are teaching.
- When preparing a lesson, ask: “Is what I am about to teach consistent with the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession?” If you are unsure, consult your pastor before teaching.
- The Confessions are a resource, not a burden. They exist to help you teach with confidence and clarity, not to restrict you.
- Curriculum materials from outside publishers (even those marketed as “Lutheran”) must be evaluated against your church’s confessional commitments. Not all Lutheran-branded materials are confessionally sound.

4. Scripture and the Confessions: The Right Relationship

It is essential to understand the proper relationship between Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, because this is a point where confusion frequently arises.

Scripture is the sole source and final authority for all Christian doctrine. The Confessions do not add to Scripture, replace Scripture, or stand alongside Scripture as an independent authority. The Reformers were emphatic about this. The Augsburg Confession itself appeals constantly to Scripture as its basis.

However, the claim “I just follow the Bible”—while well-intentioned—is insufficient and often naive. Everyone who reads the Bible interprets it, and not all interpretations are equally faithful. The history of the church is littered with heresies that claimed biblical support. The Confessions provide a tested, public, accountable framework of interpretation that prevents individuals from reading their own assumptions into the text.

Think of it this way: Scripture is the gold. The Confessions are the assayer’s report—a reliable, expert evaluation that tells you what the gold is, how much it weighs, and how pure it is. You don’t throw away the assayer’s report just because you have the gold in hand. And you certainly don’t substitute your own amateur assessment when a rigorous, tested evaluation already exists.

5. Common Misunderstandings

As a Sunday school teacher, you may encounter—or even hold—certain misunderstandings about what it means to be confessional. Here are some of the most common, along with brief corrections:

“The Confessions are just human traditions.”

The Confessions are indeed written by human beings, but their authority does not rest on the men who wrote them. Their authority rests on the fact that they faithfully exposit Scripture. To dismiss them as “just human traditions” is to claim that your personal reading of Scripture is more reliable than the careful, tested, corporate reading of the church—a claim that should give anyone pause.

“I don’t need the Confessions; I have the Bible.”

You do have the Bible—and so does every Jehovah’s Witness, every Mormon missionary, and every liberal theologian who denies the bodily resurrection. The question is never merely “Do you have the Bible?” but “Do you rightly handle the Bible?” The Confessions are the church’s testimony that, yes, this is how Scripture is rightly taught. They are a gift, not a competitor to Scripture.

“Being confessional means being legalistic or dead.”

The opposite is true. The Confessions are among the most pastorally vibrant documents in the history of the church. The Small Catechism teaches a child to pray. The Augsburg Confession proclaims free justification for terrified consciences. Confessional fidelity is not the enemy of vibrant faith—it is its guardian. What kills faith is not clear doctrine but unclear doctrine, the kind that leaves people unsure whether they are saved, unsure what Baptism does, and unsure whether Christ is truly present at His table.

“As long as we love Jesus, the details don’t matter.”

Which Jesus? The Jesus of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who is a created being? The Jesus of the prosperity gospel, who exists to make you wealthy? The Jesus of liberal Protestantism, who is merely a moral teacher? Love for Jesus is inseparable from right knowledge of Jesus. The Confessions protect us from inventing a Jesus of our own imagination and instead direct us to the Jesus revealed in Scripture: true God and true man, crucified for our sins and risen for our justification.

“Our church is free, so we can teach whatever we want.”

Congregational freedom in the free-church tradition means freedom from hierarchical control—freedom to be faithful to Scripture and the Confessions without interference from a distant bureaucracy. It does not mean freedom from doctrinal accountability. A confessional congregation’s constitution binds it to the Augsburg Confession, the Small Catechism, and the ecumenical creeds. Every teacher in such a congregation operates under that commitment, and it is a joyful one.

6. A Practical Guide for Sunday School Teachers

- **Know the Small Catechism.** Read it regularly. If you are teaching the Six Chief Parts, the Catechism *is* your curriculum in its most concentrated form. Luther’s explanations are not merely suggested interpretations; they are confessionally binding summaries of what Scripture teaches.
- **Familiarize yourself with the Augsburg Confession.** You do not need to be a theologian to read it. The first 21 articles are remarkably clear and accessible. When in doubt about a doctrinal question, check whether the AC addresses it—it almost certainly does.
- **Evaluate all outside materials.** If you use curriculum from any publisher—even one that calls itself Lutheran—compare it against the Catechism and the Augsburg Confession. Watch especially for language about the sacraments, justification, decision theology, and the role of the Law.
- **When in doubt, ask your pastor.** Your pastor is called and ordained to oversee the teaching ministry of your congregation. He is your ally, not your adversary. If you are unsure whether something you want to teach is consistent with your confession, ask. It is far better to ask beforehand than to correct afterward.
- **Teach with confidence.** You are not making this up as you go. You stand in a tradition of faithful confession that stretches back through the Reformers to the Apostles themselves. The Confessions give you a solid floor to stand on. Teach from it with joy.
- **Pray.** The Small Catechism is, among other things, a manual of prayer. Begin every class in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to work through His Word. Sound doctrine and fervent prayer are not competitors—they are companions.

Conclusion

To be a confessional Lutheran is to be part of a church that knows what it believes, why it believes it, and where to find it in Scripture. The Confessions are not chains; they are an anchor in a world of shifting doctrine and spiritual confusion. As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher, you carry forward a heritage that has sustained believers through persecution, war, cultural upheaval, and every fad of the age.

Teach faithfully. Teach confidently. Teach what the church confesses, because what the church confesses is what Scripture teaches. And trust that the Holy Spirit, who inspired that Scripture, will use your faithful teaching to create and sustain faith in the hearts of those you serve.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

— Romans 1:16 (ESV)

For Further Reading

- *Luther’s Small Catechism* — Begin here. Read it devotionally as well as theologically.
- *The Augsburg Confession* — Especially Articles I-XXI. Available in many editions and online.
- *The Nicene Creed, Apostles’ Creed, and Athanasian Creed* — The three ecumenical creeds are found in most Lutheran hymnals and online.
- McCain, Paul T. (ed.), *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions — A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord* (2nd ed., Concordia Publishing House, 2006).
- Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, 2000).
- Sasse, Hermann, *We Confess* series (Concordia Publishing House).

QUICK-REFERENCE SUMMARY

What It Means to Be Confessional Lutheran

For Sunday School Teachers — Keep This at Your Desk

THE ESSENTIALS AT A GLANCE

Key Concept	What It Means
“Confessional”	We publicly declare specific teachings as true because they faithfully exposit Scripture.
The Documents	The three ecumenical creeds + the Unaltered Augsburg Confession (1530) + Luther’s Small Catechism (1529).
Quia Subscription	We accept the Confessions BECAUSE they are faithful to Scripture — not merely “insofar as” they agree.
Scripture & Confessions	Scripture = the sole source and final authority. The Confessions = a faithful, tested summary of what Scripture teaches.
Your Role	Teach what the church confesses. Evaluate all materials. Consult your pastor when uncertain.

THE QUICK TEST

✓ TEACH THIS	✗ NOT THIS
Salvation is God’s work from start to finish, received through faith alone.	Salvation requires a personal “decision for Christ” that we initiate.
Baptism is a means of grace through which God works faith and delivers forgiveness.	Baptism is “just a symbol” or an outward sign of an inward decision.
Christ is truly present — body and blood — in, with, and under the bread and wine.	The Lord’s Supper is merely a memorial meal or symbolic remembrance.
The Bible is God’s inspired, inerrant Word and the sole source of doctrine.	Personal experience, feelings, or “what God told me” can override Scripture.
Good works are the fruit of faith, not the basis of salvation.	Good works contribute to or complete our salvation.
The Confessions faithfully summarize Scripture and are binding on our teaching.	The Confessions are optional historical documents we can pick and choose from.

When in doubt, ask your pastor. That’s what he’s there for.

More from Larry Herzog Jr.

If this guide was helpful, here's where to find more like it.

The Newsletter

Ordinary Means — a weekly confessional Lutheran newsletter for lay teachers, weary evangelicals, and serious laypeople. Free to subscribe at newsletter.larryherzogjr.com.

Books for the Reader Who Wants to Go Deeper

- ***The Hollow Altar: A Confessional Lutheran Invitation to Weary Evangelicals*** — for the reader who has loved Christ inside evangelicalism but kept running into things their tradition couldn't quite explain.
- ***Judeo-Christian Values?: A Confessional Lutheran Reckoning with Dispensationalism, Christian Zionism, and the Gospel They Replaced*** — a timely volume on where modern evangelical eschatology actually came from.
- ***Ad Fontes: Textual Criticism for Lutheran Laity*** — why we can trust the text of Scripture in the first place.
- ***What Horse?: Common Misconceptions About What the Bible Actually Says*** — for the reader who has heard things “the Bible says” their whole life and started to wonder.

Bible Study Series for Adult Sunday School and Small Groups

- ***Pauline Captivity Letters*** — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon.
- ***Letters to the Church Under Pressure*** — James, 1 Peter, 1-3 John, Hebrews.

All available on Amazon. Each volume includes discussion questions, doctrinal notes, and clear Law/Gospel handling of the text — built for the person who has to teach the lesson on Sunday morning.

About the Author

Larry Herzog Jr. is a confessional Lutheran layman in Valley City, North Dakota — but he got there the long way. He came to Christ as a college-age atheist through an online debate on the reliability of Scripture, then spent over two decades working through North American Baptist, Evangelical Free, Nazarene (where he served as an associate pastor), a Calvinist Baptist church, and Reformed Baptist seminary before finally landing in confessional Lutheranism (AFLC). He teaches adult Sunday school and leads Bible studies at Grace Free Lutheran Church. His weekday job is cybersecurity.