



THE BOOK OF CONCORD: A SOURCE OF HARMONY

Peace and a Sword

By Dr. Jeffrey Oschwald

*Associate professor of Exegetical Theology
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri
Serves in The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod*

Through the publication of the Book of Concord the Holy Spirit brought unity to 16th-century Lutherans.

“Don't think I have come only to bring peace,” our Lord told His followers. “I have not come to bring only peace, but also a sword” (Matthew 10:34).

For the world, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been both suture and sword; mighty fortress and stumbling stone; the fragrance of life and the odor of death; a word that creates one, holy, united people from all nations and a word that can set father against son and daughter against mother.

What was true in our Lord's day was true in Martin Luther's time and is true today. So it's hardly surprising that not all 16th-century Lutherans welcomed the Book of Concord with shouts of “*Gott sei dank*” (“Thanks be to God”). It was not unity, but the life-threatening *lack* of unity and agreement that called for the book's publication in 1580. And, like every confession of the truth, it brought peace—and a sword.

Three points about the publication of the Book of Concord are particularly relevant in this 425th anniversary year.



First, it is the Book of *Concord*. In their fierce struggle to bring about concordia (harmony) among Luther's followers, men like Jacob Andreae, Martin Chemnitz, David Chytraeus, and Nicholas Selnecker did not simply produce a new confessional statement. Rather, they gathered into one volume the confessional writings that had provided guidance and unity through some of the church's most difficult times (e.g., the creeds, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the catechisms of Luther) and could help the church address her current divisive issues.

These statements of faith point to the Holy Scripture as the wellspring from which all true and pure confession flows. New challenges had not rendered old statements irrelevant; rather, the ongoing struggle for unity forced the church to return to these earlier statements of faith and, through them, to the Word of God.

The Book of Concord was compiled in the Reformation spirit—this was no attempt to introduce a new teaching, but rather an attempt to understand and apply the self-revelation God gave the world in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Second, the unity sought by the Book of Concord was not simply an agreement among theologians but a true *concordia* among the people of God. The story of the "Formula of Concord" begins and ends with appeals to parish pastors and the members of their congregations. The divisions were serious and the issues literally of vital importance, but the problems could not be solved in the faculty lounges and administrative boardrooms of the day. The battle for harmony had to be waged and won in sanctuaries and living rooms. Andreae's sermons and Caspar Fuger's "A Brief, True, and Simple Report of the Book Called the 'Formula of Concord,'" written as a catechism in order to gain the support of the laity, are evidence that those working for unity and peace realized this truth.

In her study of Fuger's efforts toward unity, Dr. Irene Dingel, professor of church history at the University of Mainz in Germany, notes: "Not only pastors and scholars were to support the new book of confessions, however. The 'simple folk' were also supposed to grasp that what was at stake here was the preservation of the truth of the Gospel and defense against false teaching."

Dr. Robert Kolb, professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, makes a thought-provoking observation in an article on the Book of Concord. He traces the development of the meaning of the phrase "body of teaching." The ten documents composing the Book of Concord were seen as a "body of teaching" that defined the public faith of a particular group of Christians in a particular place. In earlier times, the term had meant those documents in which a particular rule of faith could be found. Earlier still, the term simply referred to that rule of faith, or interpretive principle, by which the faith could be understood, taught, and applied.



The final point is that real concordia (harmony) is a matter of the heart. These writings strive to bring about a unity in readers that goes far beyond simply saying, "We accept this and that." It is a unity brought about by making new hearts and transforming minds. It is a oneness coming from being born again, and it shows itself in a new way of thinking about and understanding creation, the history of the cosmos, the purpose of "it all," and, most important, God's Word.

This oneness of heart and mind arises when we understand that all Scripture testifies of Jesus Christ. It is the oneness coming from believing and confessing that the message of Scripture, expounded in the confessions, is that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Such unity can come about only through the reconciling ministry of the Spirit of Christ among us.

In the closing decades of the 16th century, the Spirit brought such unity to thousands of Lutheran pastors and their congregations through the publication of the Book of Concord. But some could not accept this book immediately, and some could never accept it. The Lord's work to unite His people in a faithful confession of His truth would continue—and continues through us.

Let's give the last word to Martin Luther, who closed a letter to fellow-reformer Martin Bucer, sent from Wittenberg and dated Jan. 22, 1531, with these words:

"May the Lord Jesus enlighten us, and may he make us perfectly of one mind; for this I pray, for this I sigh, for this I long. Farewell in the Lord."

On April 26, 1847, 12 pastors representing 15 congregations signed a constitution that established "The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States." Today, **The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod** (the name was shortened on its 100th anniversary) has 6,150 congregations served by more than 9,000 professional church workers. The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod International Center is located in St. Louis, Missouri, USA.

