

“Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

To look at their outrageous outfits and painted faces, or to hear them singing and shouting for the full 90 plus minutes of a match, you would have to believe that soccer fans are the most committed people in the world—or maybe you think they all should be committed. European soccer fans are quite caught up in the frenzy of Euro 2024 and while this doesn’t bring the same frenzy that happens during the World Cup, it means more to most of the European nations than the Grey Cup or the Stanley Cup finals mean to Canadian sports fans.

Soccer fans are a unique group. They are fiercely loyal to their clubs, even to the point of being hooligans toward other fans of another team. They proudly display and wear team colours in a way that even hockey fans will never understand. I don’t know if it is true for the Euro cup, but it is known that a loss in the World Cup has an affect on the stock market of a competing country—a loss bringing down the stock market; a win boosting it. With those loud cheers, the team songs and an ‘in-your-face’ attitude, soccer fans declare, both loud and clear: “this is who we are”.

We may not wear team colours or paint our faces, but we do have something that says, “this is who we are”. On this day in 1530, Luther’s friend and co-worker Philipp Melanchthon completed the draft of the confession that would be presented two days later to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg. This Tuesday, June 25th marks the 494th anniversary of the publication of the Augsburg Confession. This confession is our team colour and our team flag. This statement of faith, so firmly and fully based on the Scriptures declares what we believe, teach and confess. It is our confident statement to the world of our faith and hope in the Living and Redeeming Lord, Jesus Christ.

Sports fans are proud of who they are. They are faithful and loyal to their team, even if the team hasn’t won a championship in years. Just ask any Toronto Maple Leafs fan! Do we have that excitement and joy in being God’s people? We do not want to be rude or ‘in-your-face’ about who we are and what we believe, but the world needs to hear of the truth that we have come to know through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, who has called us by the Gospel, first brings us to know all that God says to us about our sin, but He also reveals the grace of God which is greater than our sin. The Spirit enables us to know and believe that Christ has taken away our sins through His death in our place on the cross. By the Spirit we know that Christ has destroyed death through His own resurrection from the dead. This is the joyous truth we cling to and confess before the world, even as so many seek to manipulate or ignore this truth. Paul knew that *“the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”* (2 Timothy 4:3-4, ESV) We see this happening all around us. With so many false teachings we could become confused and uncertain of what is true. This isn’t because the Scriptures are unclear, but because our own feelings and understanding get in the way of the Scriptural truth.

That is why we are blessed to have not just the Augsburg Confession but *The Book of Concord*, the statement of faith that we have as a church. This book is no substitute for the Bible, for the Bible alone is the source of all our teaching and confession. But it does help us set forth the truth of Scripture as we confess our faith before an unbelieving world. *The Book of Concord* is a collection of documents and statements about the Christian faith as defined and defended by the Lutheran Reformers back in the 1500’s. It contains the *Large and Small Catechisms* of Martin Luther. It includes *Augsburg Confession*, the confession

of faith that Luther and the Reformers presented to Emperor Charles V 494 years ago. It includes the *Formula of Concord* as well as other writings that were seen as important and significant to a clear understanding of Christianity. We state this confession before the world because it is a clear declaration of what Scripture declares. At its heart it confesses the justification of sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, for the sake of Christ alone.

It is that message of God's grace, by faith, through Christ alone that the world still needs to hear. They need to hear it from those who know this truth! It was the message that Paul wanted all people to hear, and for which he laboured. Paul worked tirelessly for the sake of the Gospel, the only hope for lost sinners. He, like the Reformers who presented the Augsburg Confession to the Emperor, was willing to make that confession, no matter what the consequences.

Confessing Jesus Christ before the world is not always easy. Paul knew that so very well. He tells the Corinthians: *as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise.* When Paul says that he and the other faithful witnesses commend themselves in every way, he is saying: "Our lives demonstrate that we are God's servants. Our confession and our struggle reveals just how important this good news of Jesus Christ is for us, for you and for all people! Paul, along with the other apostles and evangelists suffered because they confessed Christ as Lord and Saviour. All of the apostles except John, would be martyred because of that confession. But no matter what the consequences, they would not give up that blessed truth. If anything, Paul confessed: *"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ"* (Philippians 3:8, ESV)

We would indeed hope and pray that the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ would be a welcome message to many. Paul prays for people *not to receive the grace of God in vain.* Sadly, even as we confess that blessed biblical message of hope there are many who confess something different. They oppose this truth, even with violence. That may seem daunting to us, but we do not fear. We look to the One who has the power to control the wind and the waves with a mere word, *"Peace! Be still!"* (Mark 4:39, ESV) Trusting in Him, we can confess the truth, no matter what the circumstances. We will confess this truth of God, even if all the world should believe something else. On June 25th in 1530, when the Reformers stood before Emperor Charles V to make their confession of Christ through the words of the Augsburg Confession, German princes like George of Brandenburg were willing to make this confession, too, no matter what the consequences. And so Prince George said: *"Before I let anyone take from them the Word of God and ask me to deny my belief, I will kneel and let him strike off my head".*

That is the confidence St. Paul had in all his evangelistic ministry. He went out to make a bold confession in all circumstances. He did it *with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.* In the same way, we go out to a lost and dying world with our Bible, the weapon of righteousness in our right hand, and with the Confessions in the left. We have the sure and certain hope that leads us and guides us. We know the forgiveness that surrounds us. We know the life that lies before us because of God's grace. We have His Spirit and the faith that the Spirit works in us. This glorious hope isn't just for us. Scripture declares that God *"desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."* (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV) Our confession is not a means of our saying, "Our team is better than yours". No, we go to carry out our calling as God's people in what Paul calls *a favorable time.* Since we have this gift of life and salvation and because we know who we are and what God has done for us, we confess this before the world, so that others may know this glorious truth, too.

Soccer fans may be dedicated to their team, but that is nothing compared to those who, like Paul, will confess the greatest truth of all before the world—the truth of the dying and rising Saviour, who alone saves us from sin and death. The reformers who presented the Augsburg Confession before the emperor knew the risks. But they also knew what was at stake: and that was the truth that God has made known in the Words of Holy Scripture and in His Son. As a church, and as members of the church, we live in the sure and certain hope that God has made known to us. Although we may never be called upon to give an account of our faith in quite the same manner as the Wittenberg reformers did at Augsburg, may God enable us to make a bold confession of Christ in all circumstances before the world knowing that whatever the negative social, political, or personal consequences, the forces of this world do not have the power to control our ultimate fate. Our lives are in the hands of Him who created the world and who has already overcome the world—Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.