The Lutheran Confessions in Korea

By Jin-Seop Eom

Abstract: Although Christianity has been active in Korea for two centuries, the church of the Lutheran confessions was planted only a half century ago, in 1958, by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. With an ecumenical face, Korean Lutherans provide a dynamic leaven in wider society and the church is growing. Even though other Korean church bodies have engaged in writing new confessional statements, Lutherans are finding the richness of the Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord sufficient for self-understanding and expansion.

Key Terms: Confession, Lutheran, Korea.

In Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” We know what Peter replied: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:13–16). This is the question each generation must answer. Faith, Philip Schaff says, “has a desire to express itself before others.”1 ‘I believe; therefore I confess’ (Credo, ergo Confiteor). This is exemplified by a Korean pastor in the early part of the twentieth century who used to shout in the streets with eschatological urgency, “Believe in Jesus and [go to] Heaven!,” later shortened to “Jesus, Heaven!” This attitude is still alive. A Korean Christian might ask the following question when meeting another person: “Do you believe in Jesus?” An expatriate missionary from Germany remarked recently that such a question would be unthinkable in western countries. This is a question of confession.

Confession includes a quality that makes it more than dogma. Confession is profoundly personal. The personal aspect, though, comes only after the collective “We believe, teach and confess” (Credimus, confitemur et docemus), which is characteristic of the genuine confession of the whole church.

Lutherans Confessing Christ in Korea

Roman Catholicism was introduced into Korea more than two hundred years ago. Protestantism was introduced approximately one hundred years later, pioneered by Presbyterians and Methodists from North America (1885). Seventy-three years later (1958) Lutheranism came to Korea through the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in America. As result of that missionary effort, the Lutheran Church in Korea was established in 1971 as an autonomous national church. It continues to this day as the only national Lutheran church body in the country. Focusing at the start primarily on mass media programs, Christian literature materials, and social outreach work rather than on a more traditional type of church planting, the Lutheran Church in Korea presently has only thirty-six local congregations with some four thousand members, while Protestants as a whole count nine million church members out of South Korea’s population of forty-eight million. Presbyterian Christians are the greatest in number with the Methodist, Full Gospel (Pentecostal), and Holiness churches following behind. However, the Lutheran presence, influence, and impact are strong because of the Lutheran Church in Korea’s mass media ministries, such as the Korea Lutheran Hour, Christian Correspondence Course, its publication ministry, and the extensive penetration of its Korea Bethel Series Bible study program.

Because of the Lutheran Church in Korea’s small size, both ordained pastors and lay members are all the more eager to keep their sense of Lutheran

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identity strong. Major factors binding them together have been the liturgy, vestments, the lectionary, the Christian church year calendar, and similar elements of church life. The importance of doctrine has been of second rank even though the three sola principles are frequently preached from the pulpit. The Lutheran Church in Korea subscribes to the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed), the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism as “representative creeds of Christendom and true interpretation of the Scriptures.” In addition, the church refers to Luther’s Large Catechism, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Formula of Concord—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope is missing!—as “faithful exposition of the evangelical theology of the Lutheran Reformation.” The entire Book of Concord was not translated into Korean until 1988. At ordination, a pastoral candidate is asked whether he subscribes to and will hold fast to the Confessions.

The Apostles’ Creed is recited each Sunday while the Nicene Creed is used once a month in certain congregations, and the Athanasian Creed once a year on Trinity Sunday. Luther’s Small Catechism is the most used of the Lutheran Confessions for catechetical teaching, even though it would be most natural to recommend it also for home use in a Confucian society like Korea, remembering that the Small Catechism is primarily intended for fathers to teach his family. Beyond this, there appears to be little interest in the Lutheran confessional writings, even though there have been sporadic attempts to read the entire Book of Concord as a course of study.

There has never been a split resulting from doctrinal discord in the Lutheran Church in Korea, nor has there really been any inter-Lutheran debate about the meaning of the contents of any specific item/article in the confessional writings. This probably has something to do with the fact that the Lutheran Church in Korea is a relatively young mission church and has therefore been more preoccupied with church growth. Moreover, many of the pastors and lay members have come from different denominational backgrounds, mainly Presbyterian and Methodist and Full Gospel (Pentecostal) churches.

### Bible and Confession

The Bible is the norma normans; the Confessions are the norma normata. That is why Korean Lutherans insist on translating the word Confessions ‘shin-jo’ instead of ‘shin-kyeung’ (‘shin’ stands for faith; ‘jo’ for article[s]; ‘kyeung’ for scripture[s]) to differentiate the Lutheran confessional documents from ‘Seong-kyeung’ (‘seong’ stands for holy), Holy Scriptures. Carl E. Braaten categorizes five types of attitudes among Lutherans toward the confessional writings: 1. an attitude of repristination, 2. an attitude of nonconfessional Lutheranism, 3. an attitude of hypothetical confessional Lutheranism, 4. an attitude of anti-confessional Biblicism, 5. an attitude of constructive confessional Lutheranism. In my opinion, the third type best applies to most Korean Lutherans in the sense that they would accept the confessions only “insofar as” (quatenus) they conform to Scripture and commit themselves to the confessions only “insofar as” (quatenus) they are relevant to modern times. The first type, however, also applies to a certain degree in the sense that Lutherans are conscious of their identity as mentioned above, thus subscribing and holding fast to the confessions “because” (quia) they are Lutheran. It has something to do, among others, with the authoritarianism at work in Korea.

These two attitudes are also reflected in the other denominations. Korean Protestantism is largely influenced by the Presbyterian Church, which represents some sixty percent of Protestants in the country. As a retired professor of church history at a Presbyterian seminary remarked, the Korean Presbyterian Church does not think highly of her confessions due to the influence of the evangelical revival movement from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This perspective is combined with a Pietistic and Puritan orientation, despite the fact that Protestant orthodoxy was also introduced into Korean Presbyterian churches. Presbyterian missionaries from North America transmitted the “Westminster Confession” and the “Westminster Catechisms.” The Korean Presbyterian Church today holds fast to the reformed confessions even though it is divided into many factions.

True to its reformed tradition, some Presbyterian churches have written their own confession in recent
times, after having rejected “The Confession of 1967” proposed by the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The Presbyterian Church of Korea, the second largest of the more than one hundred organized national Presbyterian church bodies in Korea, wrote the “Confession of Presbyterian Church of Korea” in 1986. The fourth largest, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, known as a theologically progressive and socially activist church with a strong ecumenical orientation, wrote the “New Confessional Statement” in 1972. In the estimation of this church’s leadership, it is first of all significant that these were written by the hands of Koreans. The church also has composed statements, declarations, and other documents about social, political, economic, national reunification, indigenization and environmental issues. These social statements sometimes seem to be given almost a “confessional” status. From their standpoint, which emphasizes diversity, these church leaders would maintain that Lutheranism needs to overcome its uniformity in confessional matters.

With these basic background considerations in mind, we will review a number of roles the Lutheran Confessions play in Korea.

The Role and Function of the Lutheran Confessions (Individually and as a Whole) for the Lutheran Church in Korea

Lutheranism has been from the beginning a confessional movement. Confessions define what Lutherans believe, and they are the lens through which we continue to understand and interpret the Scriptures. One should note how much of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession is exegetical, as the understanding of “justification,” for example, informs the interpretation of certain Bible passages that are related to “works.” This is our hermeneutic. The Confessions are a correct exposition because they faithfully interpret the Scriptures. In short, they will have a role in identifying what it means to be Lutheran and the function of clarifying the faith.

The Confessions increasingly remind us in our day of the importance of theology for the church and for the life of individual Christians. A church without a reliable theology based soundly upon the Holy Scripture will inevitably go astray. Reliable theology is unthinkable without confessions. The Christian Church has never been without a creed (Ecclesia sine symbolis nulla).

In Korea we can learn the importance of confessions from the case of the Holiness Church. A denomination unique to Korea, and celebrating its one hundredth anniversary in 2007, this church was established by two Koreans educated in Japan under Wesleyan influences. To strengthen the identity of the church, theologians are articulating their theology of the church with materials from the formative period of the church. In so doing, opinions differ regarding how far to go back: whether to the nineteenth century Holiness movement, or to John Wesley, or to the sixteenth century Reformation. In this sense it is a great blessing that we Lutherans already have a set of Confessions on which to build without perplexity. With theological winds blowing from the four corners of the earth, it is important to have a solid theological foundation on which to stand. It is, however, all the more important to study the Confessions and their significance for the present situation. Simply retaining the Confessions like a museum fossil and parroting them back has neither meaning nor persuasive power for modern people.

It is not necessary, however, to write our own new confession, as The Protestant Christian Batak Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan) in Indonesia did in 1951. The Karo-Batak Protestant Church followed when it composed its own reformed “Basic Confession” in 1979, and the Church of Toraja did also by adopting its “Toraja Confession” in 1981. It is a good sign that the Lutheran Church in Korea pastors of the younger generation have formed a “Luther Reading Club,” meeting regularly to discover and to discuss the significance of Luther’s thoughts for the everyday life of the church and for each believer. As an extension of the Luther reading program, there is a plan to study the Confessions in a similar fashion.

Among the confessional documents, especially Luther’s Small Catechism should be used more diligently for catechetical instruction of new converts and for edification of laypeople, both young and old. Among a great variety of Bible study tools, the Small
Catechism has proven itself the best tool for teaching the basics about Christian faith and life.

**Potential Uses that the Lutheran Confessions Might Find in Other Denominations**

Mainstream Korean Protestantism has been one-sidedly devoted to church growth with the percentage of Protestant Christians increasing from about five percent of the population in 1961 to roughly twenty percent in 2005. However, the one-sided emphasis on church growth has also had its downside: schisms, materialism, overemphasis on size, a distorted “health and wealth gospel,” too much of an “other-world” emphasis, mysticism, enthusiasm on the one hand; and Liberation theology in terms of Minjung Theology on the other hand. The means of growth took precedence over the purpose of the growth. As a result, there are really no substantial doctrinal differences that characterize Korean Protestant denominations.

Korean Protestantism, however, is now trying to overcome the disadvantages of the church growth emphasis on quantity and seeking a growth in quality. After multiple schisms in the past, some Presbyterian churches have now begun rallying for reunification. This process will help them become more conscious of their own heritage. As they become more true to their own tradition, they will also have an eye for the Confessions of Lutheranism, especially the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Catechisms, which were originally intended for use by the “whole” church. One condition for such a positive ecumenical contribution from Lutherans would be that Lutherans themselves take an active stance in advocating and using the Confessions.

**Confessions and Evangelism**

In its relatively short history, the Lutheran Church in Korea has made remarkable contributions to the entire Christian church in Korea through the Bethel Series Bible study program, the Korea Lutheran Hour radio ministry, and the Christian Correspondence Courses. About 750,000 people have enrolled in the Christian Correspondence Course since 1960. Korea Lutheran Hour programs drew many radio listeners and TV viewers in the 1960s when there were few educational programs on the radio and TV. The Korea Bethel Series is still popular with courses that started with an intensive overview of the Old and New Testaments, later extended to additional courses on Christian Life, Salvation, Faith, and Worship. Many denominations, including even Roman Catholic nuns who participated in the leaders’ seminar, have used Bethel Series materials for the nurture and edification of church members. For some churches it has contributed to an increase in membership. This is evidence that Lutheran doctrine has competitive power to win people. It only needs to be adapted to the local environment in this post-modern age.

The Confessions also serve the preaching of the gospel, helping to assure that the preaching of the gospel does not go astray. They are some most valuable resources for educating people about the gospel. But they do need to be articulated for people living in this present age.

**Confessions and Ecumenism**

People today ask why we need a confession for each denomination. However, each denomination needs its own confession as the ecumenical movement seeks “unity in diversity” or “koinonia in diversity.” It is important for us moderns to internalize the self-understanding of the original confessors. They did not want to break with the *Una sancta* of God, but, as Hermann Sasse insists, they confronted the church and humanity with the “question of truth.”

The Lutheran Church will always be “the catholic church” in the strict sense of the word. Lutherans are decidedly not a sect-type denomination. Rather, we believe that what we “believe, teach and confess” is what all Christians should “believe, teach and confess.” Likewise, the Lutheran Confessions are not meant to be parochial, but “transcendent,” “crossing
over” time and cultures, etc. As a former missionary from the USA jokingly talked about his Bible study entitled “All the Lutherans of the Bible,” we need to be more self-assertive in theological discussions. We can be that when we agree with what Edmund Schlink says: “It is not the ‘Lutheran’ church . . . but the una sancta catholica et apostolica ecclesia which has spoken in the Confessions.”

With this in mind, we need to engage much more in ecumenical conversations with different Christian traditions in our country and region. It can be mutually helpful to make more comparative studies of different confessions within Christendom with mutual respect and appreciation for each other—not merely with an apologetic aim but for the sake of better mutual understanding, particularly in light of the resurgence of world religions. However, modern ecumenism with its “agree to disagree” mentality too often guts any notion of Confession in the biblical sense, or in the Reformation sense. Self-identity is necessary in ecumenical dialogue. It is, therefore, most important to learn the confessions of our own church. At any rate, the Lutherans should have a loyal commitment to our Savior Jesus Christ with an open attitude and humility.

**Particular Contributions to Our Understanding of the Lutheran Confessions from Korean Theologians in the Coming Half Century**

The Presbyterian professor mentioned above suggested the following: If Korean and other Asian theologians like them would shape their various confessions in accord with the social, cultural and national situations in which they are called to minister, it would contribute to the catholicity of Lutheran churches all over the world. However, that kind of enterprise would be difficult for Lutherans who emphasize confessional identity. The Confessions would have meaning for Korea in what we confess and in what we practice. The contribution might not be so much in any new insight about the Confessions (historically), nor in the study of their background, as in making known that the biblical truths confessed in Germany in those historical circumstances are still the same biblical truths and equally valid in today’s totally different historical circumstances. To that end, getting the Confessions “out”—translated, printed, discussed—by church leaders, professors, and then preached by preachers in Korea would be the most significant contributions that can be made.

**Endnotes**