

Introduction to the *Book of Concord*

What Is the *Book of Concord*?

From the Latin “with heart,” concord means harmony and peace. The *Book of Concord* (*Concordia* in Latin) is the collection of writings from the 1500s that many Lutherans have long used as the biblically-based foundation of their Christian faith and practice. As a title, *Concordia* expresses the great hope of unity in faith and service that many religious communities share and strive for. Also, uniqueness and diversity are built into this idea of harmony, because it is impossible to be harmonious if everyone is singing the same note.

As a collection of writings rather than a single work, the *Book of Concord* has multiple authors. Additionally, even if individual sections carry the name of one person, all the works grew out of a highly collegial environment, in which reformers discussed their work with each other before publication. Even more, theologians and politicians outside the writing circle frequently added their signatures to the documents to show their public support for these texts. Seen in this light, all the works within the *Book of Concord* belong to communities rather than individuals. Of the individuals who contributed to the

writing of these texts, the most prominent and frequent authors are Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon. For this reason, it is helpful to get acquainted with these two reformers.

Born in 1483, Luther entered an Observant Augustinian monastery in 1505. The “observant” part of that name came from the seriousness with which these monks took their religious callings. The “Augustinian” part derives from the fact that this medieval monastic order looked back to St. Augustine (354–430), a North African bishop whose theology emphasized the amazing grace of God who justifies the ungodly.¹ Encouraged by his superiors in the order to continue his studies, Luther earned a doctorate and became a theology professor at the University of Wittenberg in 1512. The publication of his *95 Theses* in 1517 led to a movement for reform of the church in Europe and the beginning of Protestant Christianity.²

Though about thirteen years younger than Luther, Philip Melanchthon became a valued colleague in Wittenberg as soon as he began teaching there in 1518. Especially gifted in Greek and Latin, Melanchthon taught his students the classical subjects of grammar, rhetoric and logic in order to understand and share Christian faith and human wisdom as clearly as possible. During a career that spanned more than fifty years in Wittenberg, Melanchthon taught nearly every subject at the university. His interest in teaching the building blocks of faith and fundamental educational concepts meant that he was not interested in being ordained or receiving a doctorate (even though he wrote the exams for PhD students!).³ His keen mind and effective

1. As mentioned above, the phrase God “who justifies the ungodly” comes from Rom 4:5. This verse was an important part of Augustine’s theology in works like *On the Trinity* and *On the Spirit and the Letter*; see *Augustine, Later Works*, edited and translated by John Burnaby, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 114, 201, 205, 238, 240, and 244; the Latin citation from *On the Trinity* occurs in PL 42:1048.
2. Biographies of Martin Luther in English include Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3 volumes, translated by James Schaaf (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985–1993); James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986); Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1989).
3. Heinz Scheible, “Fifty Years of Melanchthon Research,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 26, 2 (Summer 2012): 168.

reforms of church, society and schools justly earned him the title *Praeceptor Germania*—teacher of Germany.⁴

After Luther died in 1546, religious and political controversies hounded the Lutheran movement, with external critiques coming from both the Roman Catholic side and from other Protestant communities led by reformers like Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin. Among themselves, Lutherans also started to disagree about essential points of faith and practice, making it difficult for leaders and congregations to build up the church together. Concord seemed far away.

In 1577, a second generation of church leaders put together a statement called the *Formula of Concord* that addressed key disputed points. In 1580, theologians and politicians hoping to further resolve these disputes combined the *Formula* with writings by Luther and Melancthon to create the *Book of Concord*. By accepting these works as clear statements of their shared faith, leaders of church and society wanted to put days of *discord* behind them.

More than two-thirds of German Lutheran lands gave their approval to the *Book of Concord* at that time.⁵ This partial acceptance reveals both success and failure in attaining religious harmony. On the negative side, some parties rejected the *Book of Concord* out of the conviction that their concerns had been misrepresented or gone unheard. In the centuries that followed the Reformation, disputes between Orthodox Lutherans who emphasized “right doctrine” and Lutheran Pietists who stressed “right practice” might suggest another failure to achieve lasting concord.⁶ Further, the frequently contentious history of Lutheranism’s spread beyond Europe shows how hard it has sometimes been for Lutherans to agree on essential points of belief and practice.⁷

4. Recent articles on Melancthon in English can be found in *Philip Melancthon: Then and Now (1497–1997)* (Columbia, SC: Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, 1999) and Timothy Wengert, *Philip Melancthon, Speaker of the Reformation: Wittenberg’s Other Reformer* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

5. Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb and James Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 277.

6. Eric Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), chapters 4 and 5.

7. Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), especially chapter 6. On global Lutheranism, see Jan Pranger, “Lutherans in the World Church,” J. Paul Rajashekar, “Lutheranism in Asia and the Indian Subcontinent,” and Munib Younan, “The Future of the Lutheran Reformation Tradition: From the Perspective of Palestinian Christians,” in *The*

Despite all this, the *Book of Concord* succeeded in many of its original goals. First, it demonstrated that Lutherans value decision-making that comes by consensus and not by coercion, even if that means that some will go their own ways. Second, the *Book of Concord* did cultivate unity among many people in the sixteenth century. Original signers included three electors of the Holy Roman Empire (powerful German princes with the right to elect the emperor), eighty other heads of state (nobility and city councils), and more than eight thousand pastors and theologians. Those who adopted the *Book of Concord* lived across a geographical area that ranged from Prussia on the Baltic Sea to Württemberg near France and Switzerland.

Though Scandinavian Lutherans did not adopt all the writings within the *Book of Concord* as normative for their churches, they shared with the Germans a common focus on the *Augsburg Confession* and Luther's *Small Catechism* as definitive expressions of their churches' teaching and worship life. The two largest Lutheran church bodies in the United States—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS)—both affirm all the writings within the *Book of Concord* as normative, though the ELCA prioritizes the *Augsburg Confession* as the basis for unity in the gospel.⁸

An important example of Lutheranism adapting in a non-European setting comes from the Protestant Christian Batak Church. This Indonesian church body belongs to the international Lutheran World Federation to which a majority of the world's Lutheran churches belong. Recognizing the great historical distance between sixteenth-century Germany and twentieth-century Indonesia, the Batak Church affirmed its Lutheran heritage and the teachings of the *Augsburg Confession* while also writing its own foundational confessional statement.⁹ The Batak Church provides a good example of how the

Future of Lutheranism in a Global Context, edited by Arland Jacobson and James Aageson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

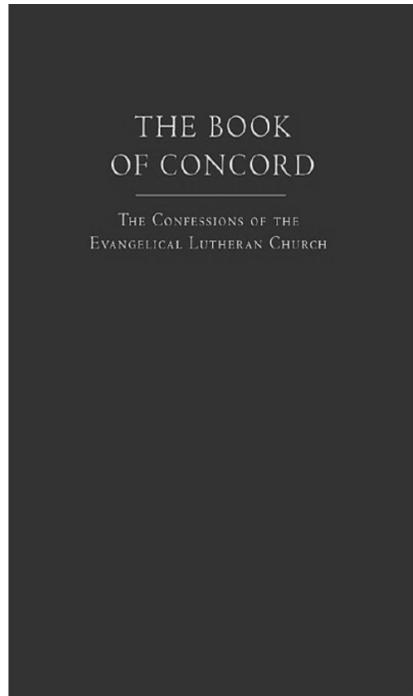
8. "Model Constitution for Congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2013," <http://www.elca.org/Resources/Office-of-the-Secretary>, section C2.05. And "Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation," The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (Kirkwood, MO: 2010), 13.

9. Rajashekar, 71.

Lutheran tradition possesses a flexible foundation for Christian unity amid difference.

Evangelical Lutheran Confessions: What's in a Name?

The first editions of the *Book of Concord* were published in Dresden, Saxony in 1580 [title page below, left].¹⁰ English translations have been available in the United States since the mid-1800s, with the latest English-language edition published in 2000 [cover image, below right]. It was edited jointly by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, Reformation scholars who belong to two different branches of American Lutheranism.



The 1580 edition begins with the book's title in all caps—*CONCORDIA*—followed by the Hebrew letters that spell the unpronounceable name of God, YHWH, as an invocation of and

10. Image is in the public domain.

dedication to the Lord whose mysterious name is I AM WHO I AM (Exod 3:14).

The cover of the English-language edition includes a short subtitle, *The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. This subtitle is an adaptation of the German title page, which in English begins: “Christian, Recapitulated, Unanimous Confession of the Teaching and Faith by the Undersigned Electors, Princes, and Estates of the *Augsburg Confession* and Their Theologians.”¹¹

From this subtitle, the contents of the *Book of Concord* are often called the “Lutheran Confessions.” As a summary of its contents, the name “Lutheran Confessions” offers the benefit of brevity, though further explanation is probably needed. First, what kind of “confessions” are Lutherans talking about? Second, what is the “Evangelical Lutheran Church” that holds to such confessions?

First, on confession. In everyday usage, a confession means an admission of guilt. Since the time of the early church, Christians have used this word to describe the acknowledgement of sins or wrongs committed against God and other people. The Christian practice of repentance has long included either the public or private confession of sin as part of the ritual of reconciliation.

In a similar sense, St. Augustine’s classical work *Confessions* (written around the year 400) was an early “tell-all” autobiography of how a proud, self-absorbed scholar unexpectedly became a servant of God and the church. It presents a confession of his past sins, as well as a confession (or profession) of his faith in Jesus Christ, as he expressed in the prayer to God that opens the book: “You stir [us] to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹²

This second sense of confession as a profession of faith in God is what Lutherans mean when they speak of their “confessional writings.” Beyond Augustine’s *Confessions*, for instance, this usage became more common as Christians in Western Europe started to introduce creeds

11. BC 3, with footnote 1, which explains the word recapitulation as “a technical term . . . for an exposition and reaffirmation of an earlier confession of faith.”

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

and other statements of belief with the words “we believe and confess” (*credimus et confitemur*). In this way, “confessing the faith” meant announcing personal and communal beliefs publicly.¹³

When Lutherans were asked to explain their beliefs and reforms to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the imperial congress (also called a “diet”) held in the German city of Augsburg in 1530, the task of writing this new statement of faith primarily fell to Philip Melanchthon. He originally planned to describe this collective statement of Lutheran faith as an *apologia*, or defense. As he prepared the text, however, he realized that the situation required more than just an intellectual or theological defense of Reformation ideas. Spiritual and physical matters of life and death were at stake: spiritual, because of the seriousness with which the Lutherans took their understanding of gospel salvation and relationship with God; physical, because Emperor Charles could have tried to end the Reformation movement by force at any given moment. In fact, violence had already threatened to erupt in Augsburg in the first days of that diet.¹⁴

With these life-and-death realities in mind, Melanchthon gave his work the heading: “The Augsburg Confession. Confession of Faith by Certain Princes and Cities Presented to His Imperial Majesty in Augsburg in the year 1530.”¹⁵ Because Melanchthon presented Lutheran theology and reforms in this way, some scholars have suggested that he invented a new genre of Christian literature with the *Augsburg Confession*: the communal confession of faith.¹⁶

Luther had made a similar personal statement in his 1528 *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, as he clarified his beliefs so that no one would misunderstand them after he died (he had been gravely ill in 1527).¹⁷ Melanchthon's work, however, presented the faith of an entire group as a shared confession. The physical danger that Charles' power posed to the reformers, to the political leaders of reforming lands, and to the

13. Arand, Kolb and Nestingen, 4.

14. Arand, Kolb and Nestingen, 104.

15. BC 30. Note: the title appears in the first published edition, May 1531.

16. Arand, Kolb, and Nestingen, 4.

17. LW 37:360–72.

common people themselves underscored the conviction and courage required to make this “confession” of the faith in Augsburg. For the Lutherans, confessing the faith was not only an intellectual exercise; it was an existential and spiritual event, as well.¹⁸

Given this background about what Lutherans mean by “confession” and confessional writings, we move to the Lutheran use of the word “evangelical.” Evangelical comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means gospel or good news, as in the opening words of the Gospel of Mark: “The beginning of the good news [*euangelion*] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1).

More than just being books in the genre of “gospels,” the Lutherans identified the gospel with the singular message that God gives sinners grace, reconciliation and new life through faith in Christ. As Paul wrote in Rom 1:16, the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”¹⁹ Emphasizing the centrality of this message, the Lutheran Confessions assert that “the chief worship of God is to preach the gospel.”²⁰ While Christianity and church life can include any number of spiritual and practical aspects, for Lutherans the sharing and receiving of this particular message of good news always comes first. This is the sense in which Lutherans have long used the word “evangelical” to describe their theology. As Luther wrote in his *Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* (1521), “The gospel is a story about Christ, God’s and David’s Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord.”²¹

It is worth noting that in English “evangelical” came to be associated with the Great Awakenings of the 1700s and 1800s, characterized by charismatic preaching and an emphasis on personal conversion. While

18. Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991), 13–42.

19. SD 582.3–6. See also Luther’s *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, LW 35:117–24, and his Preface to the New Testament, LW 35:360. In the 1521 *Loci Communes* (as well as many other places), Melancthon followed Rom 1:17 in defining gospel as “the promise of the grace and mercy of God, especially the forgiveness of sins and the testimony of God’s goodwill toward us;” Philip Melancthon, “*Loci Communes Theologici*,” *Melancthon and Bucer*, edited by Wilhelm Pauck and translated by Lowell J. Satre (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 71.

20. Ap 229.42.

21. LW 35:118.

Lutherans care deeply about good gospel preaching and a personal relationship with God, there is enough of a difference between these traditions that the application of “evangelical” to both groups may be misleading. For instance, where American Evangelicalism emphasizes that people need to make a personal choice for Christ, Lutheranism emphasizes that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit through baptism and the word of God, a lifelong relationship that has its beginning, growth and culmination in God.²² When it appears in this work, “evangelical” will be used in the sixteenth-century sense as a description of reforms based upon the gospel teaching that Luther emphasized.

Like many labels, the name “Lutheran” was originally used as an insult. Luther’s longtime theological adversary Johann Eck first put the word “Lutheran” in print, as he meant it to be a disparaging description of a heretical sect.²³ For several reasons, Luther himself did not like the name. Instead, in a 1522 tract he expressed his hope that the reform movement around him could be known as just plain “Christian” rather than Lutheran.²⁴ Later he came to prefer the name “evangelical,” a word connecting church reforms to the gospel²⁵ and an adjective that Luther had been using since at least 1517 to describe his work.²⁶ This usage remains common in German, in which the name *Evangelisch* can refer to Protestants in general or Lutherans in particular.

When not calling themselves evangelicals, Lutherans in the sixteenth century described themselves as people and churches of the *Augsburg Confession*, as seen above on the title page of the 1580 *Book of Concord*. This description is still used among several Lutheran church bodies, especially those in central European countries like Austria,

22. On the emergence of a general “evangelical consensus” in the United States, see Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale, 1972), 293–94.

23. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521*, translated by James L. Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 328. Historian Franz Posset has pointed to early examples of “Lutheran” being used in a positive sense as early as 1519, as well; Franz Posset, *Unser Luther: Martin Luther aus der Sicht katholischer Sympathisanten* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2015), 18.

24. LW 45:70.

25. Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), 42.

26. Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521*, 154.

Poland, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia, where the churches are officially known as the “Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession.”

Despite these other options, the name “Lutheran” is the one used the most widely in English. Although it was initially given as an insult and seems to emphasize one individual—Luther—rather than diverse communities of believers, there is a fascinating aspect to Luther’s own name that adds depth to this label.

As signs of their educational status, scholars of the period would sometimes adopt Greek or Latin versions of their names. Melanchthon, for instance, is a Greek version of the German name *Schwarzerd*, which means “black earth;” Agricola is a Latin version of the German name *Bauer*, meaning farmer or peasant. Further, because spelling was not standardized in the German language of the early 1500s, people could be fluid in how they spelled their names. In this vein, the eldest son of enterprising miner Hans Luder added an *h* to his name when he entered the University of Erfurt in 1501 in order “to suit the more elegant, academic usage: the student named Luder was entered in the university register as ‘Martinus Ludher.’”²⁷ (In the German of the time, the *t* and the *d* in Ludher were interchangeable.)

In the weeks after the publication of the 95 *Theses* in 1517, Martin Ludher started signing his name, “Martinus Eleutherius.” This follows the academic style of taking a Latin or Greek name, as mentioned above. Even more: similar in sound and spelling to Luther, Eleutherius comes from the Greek for “the liberated one” or “freed person” (as in 1 Cor 7:22), a meaning which Luther clearly claimed for himself at the time.²⁸ Although he eventually settled on “Luther” as the standard spelling of his family name, the freedom and liberation of Eleutherius could now be said to belong to his name.

What’s in a name? More than simply interpreting “Lutheran” as followers of a single person, Lutherans today might claim the name as

27. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1989), 86.

28. Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, translated by Martin Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 167–68 and footnote 36.