

WE HAVE A COMMON CONFESSION: Unity in the Spirit

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Highly esteemed members of the CELC!

By God's grace we have been led together as representatives of churches which rejoice to be in sound fellowship, founded on doctrinal agreement—something which our fathers longed to see. Our hearts are filled with gratitude. But we also feel some trembling that the Old Foe may not destroy or weaken our CELC as he has done with other federations of churches.

Since we in the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK) had to live more than forty years behind the Iron Curtain, it is a great honor and privilege to us that you have chosen Germany for the first gathering of this conference and have planned to close it in the youngest congregation of our ELFK, Immanuel Congregation at Steeden. May God pour out his richest blessings on us during these days!

The outline of this essay consists of six questions:

1. What is our common confession?
2. How did we receive our common confession?
3. What is the connection between the Bible and our common confession?
4. What is the correct use of our common confession?
5. What is the fruit of our common confession?
6. How can we preserve our common confession and unity in faith and in the Spirit?

1. What is our common confession?

Certainly every one of us has to confess his sins every day. Like the people of the Bible, we can trust in God's Word, that he will grant us forgiveness of all our sins if we ask him to be gracious to us for Christ's sake. We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Only if we admit that we are sinners who deserve God's punishment can we hear the word of absolution to comfort our hearts and consciences. This must be the common confession of all men.

But many people don't ask for forgiveness, or they want to gain peace with God in different ways. They think they can earn forgiveness by their works and endeavors. They imagine they can please God if they at least try to become better members of the human race. They assume God will be satisfied as long as they don't live below normal moral standards. Because of the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of our salvation, it has become necessary to say in clear sentences who God is and how he will help sinful men to be accepted as his children.

If Jesus were only a human being, he could never have freed us from our debt of sins against God and from all their evil consequences. So, already the early church had confessions of faith—especially concerning the Holy Trinity—which Christendom kept in the hearts and minds of believers for many centuries. The Apostles' Creed is still our verbal confession of faith at baptism and confirmation. At the time of the Reformation, new confessional writings had to be added, so that false interpretations of the Bible and wrong ways to eternal salvation could be excluded and to help sinners find the clear way through Christ Jesus alone. Since then, the threefold sola (*sola gratia, sola scriptura, sola fide*) has been proclaimed as the main principle of the Lutheran faith.

Now, what is our common confession today? Is it "This We Believe" of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod? Or is it "We Believe, Teach and Confess" of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod? Or is it the Theses of Agreement (*Einigungssätze*) of the ELFK or some other Bible-based statement, which one of our sister-churches has had to confess against errors which have arisen?

In the constitution of the CELC, Article II is our common confession of faith. There we read:

1. The Conference accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God and submits to this Word of God as the only infallible rule and authority in all matters of doctrine, faith, and life.
2. The Conference also accepts the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, not in so far as, but because they are a correct exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God.

All churches who belong to the CELC subscribe to this confession of faith. We have no political or social confession, stating how we would like to change the world. Ours is a common confession showing all sinners God's way to bring them to heaven through his Word. It is not a dry doctrine with no use in practical life. As a common confession, it will show all the world what God's only-begotten Son has done so that all men might regain Paradise and will warn against errors which will mislead us to hell. Article II is our common confession *in nuce* (in a nutshell), but it is not a minimal confession, like some use for the outward unity of Christianity: Christ is Lord (nothing more!). Since it is a biblical confession, it really is an ecumenical confession for all who believe what the Bible teaches.

2. How did we receive our common confession?

It is our great heritage! Nobody among us will deny that the Planning Committee has done well to put into the constitution such a clear confession of faith in such a short form. But they could only do so because we already have this blessed heritage. We consider it a gift from God. We know that the church fathers of early Christendom had to struggle hard for the Ecumenical Creeds. Also the fathers of the Reformation and of the 16th century had no easy task to write what finally has been compiled in the Book of Concord. We praise God, who, through the faithfulness and zeal of the confessors, gave us our common confession.

We want to stress that we are not proposing a new confession. Our churches have the biblical/Lutheran doctrinal tradition. By our common confession we are unanimously connected with the apostolic church. Let us lift high our common confession, so that everybody can test if this Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference has a sound, biblical foundation.

If some churches do not have all the writings of the Book of Concord because they have not all been translated into their native languages, they still agree with us as long as they do not speak against the full Book of Concord, for the later writings are only an exposition of the former ones.

We received our common confession as a help to prevent wrong developments and false teaching. By not only showing us the affirmative but also rejecting the negative, it keeps us away from old errors, which often are repeated in church history. We value it highly and have no reason to change it in any way, because it is the correct exposition of the pure doctrine of God's Word.

We received our great heritage already long ago. The churches that are gathered here at Oberwesel these days have not come to begin seeking a common confession. We have it already in the constitutions of our churches at home. There is no envy and distrust among us, because we are thankful to God that our common heritage has brought us together in one faith and confession.

We are blessed heirs.

3. What is the connection between the Bible and our common confession?

Article II of our constitution has two sections. Holy Writ and the Confessional Writings are not on the same level. The canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the source from which the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church have been drawn. The biblical doctrine cannot be judged or overruled by the Confessions. The only foundation for everything that we believe, teach, and confess is the Bible. We will not find everything that is in the Bible in the Book of Concord, although it is a very thick book. We are not allowed to reduce the biblical message to the articles we find in the Confessions. We have to preach the full message, as Christ says in his great mission command, ". . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 2:20), and as Paul said to Felix, ". . . believing all things which are written in the

law and in the prophets” (Acts 24:14). The Bible rules above all confession. It is the “sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas with all teachers should be estimated and judged” (*Trigl.*, page 777).

As a correct exposition of the pure doctrine, our Confessions are Christ-centered and defend the Gospel (which very often means the whole Bible). They have become necessary, because the redemptive work of Christ has been neglected and the Gospel has been preached as a new law, or the means of grace have been considered as magic means or as mere signs without any power to forgive sins and to save sinners.

You will find no special article in the Lutheran Confessions about the authority of the Bible or how much in it should be considered as God’s inerrant Word. But you can read: “We receive and embrace with our whole heart the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure and clear fountain of Israel which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines should be judged” (*Trigl.*, page 851,1).

The Confessions not only show what is in accordance with Scripture; they also reject and condemn false doctrines. They do this in accordance with the pious fathers to help souls to the right knowledge of their Savior. The doctrine of the forgiveness of sins is the chief doctrine which honors Christ and “is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ and alone opens the door to the entire Bible” (Apol., IV, *Trigl.*, page 121).

4. What is the correct use of our common confession?

It is not enough to have a common confession, written down in the constitution of the CELC (*de jure*). It is not enough that all who are in the public ministry of our churches know our common confession and subscribe to it at ordination, installation, or in any other way. We do not only use it to demonstrate our churches’ and our CELC’s right to exist, or to tell the world why and how we differ from other church bodies and federations.

It is essential that we all believe, teach, preach, and confess, do mission work, broadcast, write books, etc., in agreement with our common confession. It should not be only a paper confession, but one that will be used (*de facto*).

Our common confession will help us to agree not only on doctrinal terms, but also on the matter which these terms express, *in rebus et phrasibus*. Many speak about the resurrection of Christ. Some think Christ is risen from the dead only in the thoughts of his disciples, but not in reality. But the Bible and our Confessions say that he was bodily resurrected by the power of his Father. Or take the word “creation.” Some mean by it that God used evolution to create the world. But the Bible and our Confessions say that he created the universe out of nothing by his almighty word in six normal days. You can find a similar misuse of the word “infallible.” Luther meant by it that God’s Word does not err or fail. But some theologians write that God’s Word is infallible in that it achieves its goal without fail, but not in this sense, that all the words of the Bible are really God’s words or inerrant. In so many churches pluralism rules and disturbs troubled consciences, because special biblical terms are no longer used in the real sense, but with new, different meanings.

False teachers build up a foggy wall of terms in which they hide their false doctrine. What they say is like soft soap: it always slips away until they finally explain to the people that they don’t believe all that is written in the Scripture. Paul admonishes the Corinthians and us, “Be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10).

Not only the name of a church or an outward obligation to an orthodox confession determines the correct use of that confession, but what is really proclaimed in the pulpits, theological schools, and books. Orthodoxy always rejects heterodoxy. If some error comes up but is treated with church discipline, then a church can still be considered to be orthodox.

5. What is the fruit of our common confession?

Unity in the Spirit! It is true, the Holy Ghost has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, sanctified, and kept us in the true faith. Then he has gathered us, united us in the one true faith in Jesus Christ. His work of sanctification rules before we can do anything to and in our common confession. But this is also true, that we can harvest, as a fruit of his work which has brought us to our common confession, the unity in the Spirit. He has made us eager to pray for this unity and to work together on the basis of our common confession to establish the CELC. We have to give all honor to our gracious God.

Look around in our assembly! You will see representatives of churches from nearly all the continents. They share the same message which Luther, troubled by many afflictions but guided by the Holy Spirit, brought to light once again in Germany. Today in this country you can hardly find a church still clinging *de jure* and *de facto* to the Lutheran Confessions; only a small remnant is left. But the Holy Spirit has let two churches which are trying to stand steadfast in God's Word and Luther's doctrine grow in the U.S.A. During the last decades they have had to struggle hard not to become pluralistic church bodies. Their brotherly admonition called our church back to all the articles of faith. By the mission work of our American sister churches, the Holy Spirit has founded new churches or restored small groups which, for doctrinal reasons, had to leave their former church bodies and go a very lonesome way. Is it not amazing that we are here together in the unity of the Spirit? Is it not a miracle, in these last days of the world, that we have a common confession? Does this not show us the power of the Word which, in spite of the great apostasy, still leads small flocks to the clear well and comforts them through Christ's efficacious sacraments? Is it not a surprising gift that also in the eastern part of Germany, where Communism ruled to wipe out religion and where the blessings of the Reformation are hardly treasured, still some congregations have been spared to confess with you unity in the Spirit as a fruit of our common confession? Is it not a special present to all of us that none of our churches have to live in a country that recently has been destroyed by a war, although we have to hear of wars and rumors of wars every day, according to the prediction of Christ? Don't we have reason enough for great joy in this, that we will end this conference in a service with our Lord's Supper because we are united in the Spirit? Is this not an uplifting message, that we can bring back to the churches which sent us to Oberwesel, that we want to work together and to fight together in the future and together proclaim God's Word to a helpless world? Thanks be to God for our unity in the Spirit!

6. How can we preserve our common confession and unity in faith and in the Spirit?

Some say there is no need to preserve it, because the Gospel has the power to preserve itself. It is true that God's Word is eternal. Nobody can throw it out of this world to which God has revealed it through his Spirit. But it is also true that many false prophets will come and that the devil would also move the believers to apostasy, if this were possible. Everybody is tempted in different ways to start to argue with God's Word. Strong Lutheran church bodies which have struggled for many years against unionism and indifference have been defeated. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed, lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). We are all in danger of losing our great heritage and our common confession.

We all have the responsibility to preserve the truth and not to spoil it. We have to keep it pure for ourselves, our contemporaries, our children, and following generations. Although each generation has to appropriate our great heritage for itself ("*Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen*"), we have to be careful that we hand it over in its pure form. Let us take the admonition for ourselves: "Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel and in nothing terrified by your adversaries" (Phil. 1:27,28). And "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9). Church history shows us that the change from one generation to the next is a dangerous time, not only in seminaries, but also in congregations and families.

To preserve our common confession, let us pray fervently and constantly. Let us use Luther's exposition of the First and Second Petitions. He himself could pray for hours and even asked the children to pray against the Pope and the Turks as enemies of the Gospel:

Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word.
And curb the Pope's and Turks' dread sword,
Who'd wrest the kingdom from Thy Son
And set at naught all He hath done.

And when the evening bells are ringing, we pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide,
For round us falls the eventide;
Nor let Thy Word, that heavenly light,
For us be ever veiled in night.

So, we should use our common confession. The Book of Concord belongs on our bookshelves and in our hands. We could rebuke false teaching much earlier and much more easily, if only we would use and apply to certain problems of our day that which our Lutheran fathers have said.

And we should teach our common confession. By teaching others we will learn more for ourselves and appreciate all the more what has been done for us in times past. Our common confession is right in place in our instruction classes, Bible classes, congregational meetings, pulpits, pastoral conferences, doctrinal papers, mission counseling, and also in dealing with many practical problems. Especially Luther's *Small Catechism* could be quoted very often. "And because such matters concern also the laity and the salvation of their souls, we also confess the *Small and Large Catechisms* of Dr. Luther, as they are included in Luther's Works, as the Bible of the laity, wherein everything is comprised which is treated at greater length in Holy Scripture and is necessary for a Christian man to know for his salvation" (Summary Content, *Trigl.*, page 777). We marvel at the experience of our American sister churches in teaching in parochial schools and church-owned high schools, colleges, and seminaries. Education in the pure doctrine is the backbone of doctrinally sound churches.

We need constant indoctrination of our members, so that they will know why they are Lutherans and will be able to teach others. Since we cannot force hearts to believe the Christian truth but can only convince them with the help of the Holy Spirit, we should know passages of the Bible and of our common confession by heart. We can preserve our confession best if we give it to others.

Use it or lose it. In our times, it is an easy task for the devil to draw churches away from the Lutheran Confession. The ecumenical movement will have outward unity in reconciled plurality, which mostly means pluralism. If we would follow this rule and establish some kind of fellowship relations with churches who do not agree with our common confession, we would very soon lose it. The pure doctrine is so precious that we dare not mix it with impure doctrines. If you want to bring wine across the ocean, you will not pour the wine into the sea at Hamburg, expecting that the currents and winds will finally transport it to New York. You keep the wine in a bottle. But you are ready to invite thirsty people: "Come, all you who are thirsty . . .," like Jesus Christ did.

To preserve our common confession, we will have to reject and condemn false doctrine and practice. *Lehre und Wehre* (teaching and defending) was the biblical principle of our fathers in the last century and should remain the obligation of churches bound to the Confessions. So, for instance, the constitution of the ELFK says, "The church rejects all pluralism and unionism, all amalgamation of churches and beliefs, all church, pulpit and altar fellowship with false teachers and with all who outwardly acknowledge our confession, but in doctrine and practice differ from it, and we reject participation in worship services and mission work of false-teaching and unionistic denominations."

Out of love, not stubbornness, we should refuse the *communio in sacris* with false churches, in obedience to God's Word, even if it aches our hearts and feelings and will afford opportunity to some to destroy our good reputation. The doctrine belongs to God. We will receive his wrath, if we try to change it. Nevertheless, we should be ready for doctrinal talks with everyone who asks us the reason for the hope that is in us (1 Pet. 3:15). But finally we have to make doctrinal decisions. We have to be on guard, lest captious criticism and arrogance fill our minds. We will

also be ready for doctrinal talks with former sister churches who did not listen to our admonition. But these talks should take up the differences and not anything else. Otherwise we will waste our time and strength.

If we no longer have the courage to point out error, if we no longer dare to admonish one another, very soon false doctrine will raise its head and will do its destructive work like cancer in a human body (2 Tim. 2:17). We have a precious treasure in trembling hearts. If we lose our humility and reverence, we will become secure and fail to be true Lutheran Christians.

Usually, there is only a short time of peace for a church. Most of the time, we are afflicted and have to fight against enemies from inside and outside. It will be helpful if we come together often, according to our constitution. Then we will have opportunities to discuss matters of doctrine and developments in our churches and our surroundings, and to search our hearts, lest we become lukewarm.

The exchange of students, pastors, professors, missionaries, books, newspapers, theological papers, etc., may also offer possibilities to stay together in our common confession and to preserve it.

May God grant us his grace, so that by his Word we can preserve our unity in faith and spirit, and with our common confession fulfill more and more the purposes of the CELC, which are spelled out in Article III of our constitution.

Let me close with the hymn which gave the theme to this meeting and whose melody was composed by Professor Fritz Reuter, a former member of the congregation I am privileged to serve in Zwickau-Planitz.

God's Word is our great heritage
And shall be ours forever;
To spread its light from age to age
Shall be our chief endeavor.
Through life it guides our way,
In death it is our stay.
Lord, grant, while worlds endure,
We keep its teachings pure
Throughout all generations. Amen.