

Four Doctrinal Statements of the Common Confession that Fueled the “Pamphlet War”

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“In thee, o Lord, do I put my trust; let me never be ashamed: deliver me in thy righteousness. Bow down thine ear to me, deliver me speedily: be thou my strong rock, for an house of defense to save me. For thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name’s sake lead me, and guide me.’ Amen.”¹ This was the opening prayer of the report of the Wisconsin Synod’s Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union at the recessed session of its thirty-third convention in 1956. The prayer set the tone for the weighty decisions that the committee, and subsequently the synod, had to make regarding continued fellowship with its sister synod, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). By God’s grace the Wisconsin Synod resolved in that year to continue to maintain its fellowship with LCMS.

The reason for the potential breach of fellowship between the two synods at that time was due in large part to a proposed merger document between LCMS and the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The document under consideration was called the Common Confession. As discussions were taking place between the two potentially merging synods, the Wisconsin Synod was warning their fellow brothers of Missouri to be on their guard against ambiguous language

¹ *Report of Floor Committee No. 2—Church Union to the Thirty-third Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States—Recessed Session*, by Conrad Frey, chairman (Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1956), 17.

in the Common Confession. In their 1951 Convention the Wisconsin Synod resolved that “we not only find the Common Confession to be inadequate...but we also hold that the adoption of the Common Confession by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod involves an untruth and creates a basically untruthful situation since this action has been officially interpreted as a settlement of past differences which are in fact not settled.”² This “settlement” on doctrinal matters due to ambiguous language in the document brought rise to a series of writings between the two synods, which became known as the “pamphlet war.”

Four doctrines were prominent in the matters that were discussed between the synods in the 1950's. These four doctrines were election, the inspiration of the Scriptures, objective justification, and conversion. In the end Missouri had resolved to reject any false interpretations of their unclear doctrinal statements made in the Common Confession regarding these four doctrines.³ This came, however, only after much ink was spilled and many word battles fought. These battles also brought to light doctrinal differences between Wisconsin and Missouri that would not be resolved, as time has demonstrated, and would eventually lead to the break of fellowship. This paper seeks not to explore the eventual break of fellowship, but will limit itself to an examination of the four prominent doctrines in the controversy of the “pamphlet war” between the Wisconsin Synod and LCMS.

I. Election

Common Confession, IV. Election—We believe and teach: God from eternity, solely because of His grace in Christ and without any cause whatever in man, elected as His own all those whom He makes and keeps members of His kingdom and heirs of eternal life. The Holy Spirit by the Gospel has called us and assured us of our status before God, testifying to us that he has chosen us for Himself in Christ from the foundation of the world, and by

² *Report of the Floor Committee on Church Union to the Thirty-first Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States*, by K. Sievert, chairman (Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1951), 147.

³ *Report of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity to the Forty-Third Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, by Rev. R. Wiederaenders, chairman (St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1956), 546.

the imputation of Christ's righteousness has given us the assurance that He will present us faultless before the throne of His glory. Cf. Acts 13:48; Romans 8; Eph. 1; 1 Peter 1:1-9.

As a person examines these articles of faith as they are presented in the Common Confession, he might very well come to the conclusion that these are wonderful statements to which a truly orthodox Lutheran can certainly subscribe. He would be right. But it is important also to consider the purpose for this doctrinal statement. The intention of the Common Confession was to present a confessional statement upon which two Lutheran church bodies *who formerly did not agree* could mutually come to a correct understanding of Scripture regarding a specific doctrine. Therefore, it is necessary to ask, "In what way was there previously a disagreement which separated the two church bodies?" Then the proper understanding of the doctrine according to Scripture can be presented *as opposed to* the false belief. In the Common Confession the reader will search in vain for such an antithetical statement regarding the false understanding.

What is the false understanding of Scripture regarding the doctrine of election that was separating the two church bodies, LCMS and ALC? The false teaching of Scripture, held by the Ohio Synod, a charter member of ALC, which caused the Synod to break fellowship with the Synodical Conference in 1881 was the understanding of election *intuitu fidei*. This was the great Election Controversy of the nineteenth century! The controversy arises from an argument of reason trying to answer the question, "Why some and not others." The argument is that God elects some *because* he views beforehand the faith that the person will have. Therefore, there is something in man that merits faith. The foreknowledge of a man's faith is a reason for his salvation. This is classic synergistic theology. Yet this faulty theology was the direct cause for a separation between Missouri and members of ALC seventy-five years prior to the Common Confession.

Does the Common Confession explicitly deny this false teaching of election in view of faith, or does it use language ambiguous enough to allow both parties to subscribe to the document without actually being in doctrinal agreement with each other? The Wisconsin Synod, in examining the article, resolved at the 1951 Convention that “the article falls short of confessional clarity.”⁴ Considering the former disagreement, a clear statement of the doctrine must include a rejection of God’s foreknowledge of faith as a cause for election. Also, it should include a statement that election is a cause of faith.

In their pamphlet, “A Fraternal Word,” LCMS presented a defense of the doctrinal statement of the Common Confession by emphasizing the words “solely because of God’s grace in Christ, and without any cause whatever in man” in reference to God’s election.⁵ Surely, they claim, this must suffice in refuting the false teaching. But Wisconsin responded that it does not clearly reject the false teaching. Wisconsin argued that LCMS in their former doctrinal statement, the Brief Statement, clearly rejected the merit of man in any way for his own election, but had now softened the argument and opened the door for a false understanding of the doctrine:

How important Missouri once considered this last point of the doctrine appears from its own *Brief Statement*, where we read in Article 39: “Furthermore, by election of grace, Scripture does not mean that *one* part of God’s counsel of salvation according to which He will receive into heaven those who persevere in faith unto the end, but on the contrary, Scripture means this, that God, before the foundation of the world, from pure grace, because of the redemption of Christ, has chosen for His own a definite number of persons out of the corrupt mass and has determined to bring them, through Word and Sacrament, to faith and salvation.” Nevertheless, the paragraph from Part I on the CC, which is quoted at this point in order to show that our objections have been met, is the same one which contains the very terminology that is so definitely opposed by the *Brief Statement*. In fact, we find that this paragraph of the CC sometimes uses even the very words that were rejected by the Brief Statement.⁶

The former statement of Missouri clearly rejected the false teaching that any merit is found in man for election by saying that “Scripture *does not mean* that *one* part of God’s counsel of salvation according to which He will receive into heaven those who persevere in faith unto the

⁴ Sievert, 130.

⁵ Rev. H. Harms, *A Fraternal Word* (St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1953), 5.

⁶ [E. Reim], “*A Fraternal Word*” *Examined* (Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1953), 9.

end.” The reference to terminology denied by the Brief Statement but used by the Common Confession is the phrase “those who persevere in faith unto the end.” The Common Confession certainly does not deny such an understanding in its article—that God will receive those who persevere unto the end. In fact, instead of denying it, it almost suggests the thought when it says that God has “elected those whom He makes and keeps members of His kingdom.” Just that phrase suggests a perseverance “to assure” election.

So Article IV of the Common Confession does not strengthen the position of the Missouri Synod against the false teaching of election *intuitu fidei*, but instead it makes the wording ambiguous enough to be able to be understood by both parties without having doctrinal agreement at all. The Common Confession failed to clearly speak against the false teaching which their counterpart so strongly defended to the point of separation in 1881. The Common Confession, as deemed by the Wisconsin Synod, was inadequate.

II. Inspiration of the Scriptures

Common Confession, V. Means of Grace—The Word. Through the Holy Scriptures, which God caused to be written by men chosen and inspired by Him, God instructs and assures us regarding His will for us. The Holy Scriptures constitute His Word to men, centering in the revelation of Himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. Through the Holy Scriptures God continues to speak to men in all ages until the end of time. He speaks as the infallible and unchanging God, Whose message to mankind never changes. Since the Holy Spirit by divine inspiration supplied to the holy writers content and fitting word, therefore we acknowledge the Holy Scriptures in their entirety as the inspired Word of God. His Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that His Word is true, that He will keep all His promises to us, and that our faith in Him is not in vain.

We therefore recognize the Holy Scriptures as God’s inerrant Word, and this Word of God alone shall establish articles of faith (cf. Smalcald Articles, Part II, Art. II). We pledge ourselves to teach all things taught in the Holy Scriptures, and nothing but that which is taught us by God in the Holy Scriptures.

The Holy Scriptures teach both law and Gospel, but the chief content of the Holy Scriptures is the Gospel. The Law enters into the service of the Gospel by bringing man to the knowledge of his sins and by convincing him that he is under God’s judgment because of his sins, and by telling the believer what fruits of faith he should produce.

Concerning this statement there were two main phrases attacked by the Wisconsin Synod: the one was the phrase “content and fitting word,” the other “the Holy Scriptures in their entirety.”⁷ These phrases can be understood in a Biblical sense to express beautiful truths about the inspired Word of God; yet at the same time they can also be and indeed have been understood in an unscriptural way.

“Content and fitting word” was an expression that was used in the Pittsburg Agreement of 1940. This was a document that was drawn up by ALC and ULC (United Lutheran Church) in an effort to establish fellowship between the two church bodies. One of the parties who signed the agreement officially expressed his understanding of the phrase “content and fitting word.” His interpretation was that the phrase does NOT mean verbal inspiration. This false interpretation was never denied by ALC. So it was very convenient for LCMS to use such a phrase in the Common Confession that could permit a church body to cosign such a doctrinal statement whether it believed in the verbal inspiration of Scripture or not.

“The Holy Scriptures in their entirety” is also a misleading phrase. It could be understood to mean that all of Scripture in its entirety, every part from word to word and thought to thought, is inerrant and inspired. But it could also mean that Scripture as a whole unit is inspired, but with regard to individual thoughts and words it is not necessarily without error. Because of its potential for misinterpretation such a phrase should have been avoided, and instead a clear and explicit confession should have been made, much like LCMS had done in the Brief Statement when they said, “Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are *in all their parts and words* the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10,

⁷ Sievert, 131.

35.”⁸ Instead LCMS softened the statement and made it ambiguous so as to permit a common article which could be confessed by two church bodies with opposing doctrines.

Missouri defended the phrase “content and fitting word” by suggesting that the Common Confession was written in a different context than was the Pittsburg Agreement. In addition, the understanding of this phrase to be NOT verbal inspiration was that of one individual and not the belief of the entire church body. Finally, a third party must not judge the entire church body of the individual on the basis of a misunderstanding of that one individual.⁹

The fact of the matter is that an ambiguous phrase that is misunderstood in one context can in the same way be misapplied in another context. And the fact that it has been misunderstood in one context should lead a group to be all the more clear in their confession the next time, lest the ambiguous phrase in the same way lead someone to the same misunderstanding as before. To say that the beliefs of one individual do not represent the beliefs of the group may certainly be valid. But what is a person to think when that church body which does “hold to the correct understanding” of Scripture does not correct the individual who publicly holds to the misunderstanding? Such a practice (or lack thereof) does not lend much credence to the claim that the church body does not support the interpretation of the individual. On the contrary when a church body joins hands with such an individual in the work that they do, they increase the individual’s confidence in the misunderstanding that he holds.

III. Justification

Common Confession, VI. Justification—We believe and teach: By His redemptive work Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world; hence, forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men. (This is often spoken of as objective justification.) “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation,” II Cor. 5:19. Hence no sinner need

⁸ Edmund C. Reim, *Where Do We Stand?* (Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1950), 45.

⁹ *Another Fraternal Endeavor* (St. Louis, MO: CPH, [1954]), 19.

be eternally lost on account of his sins. God offers this propitiation and reconciliation freely to all men through His means of grace. There is nothing in sinful man or in what he may do to merit God's declaring him righteous. God justifies the sinner solely on the basis of Christ's righteousness, which He imputes to the sinner through the Gospel and which the sinner accepts by faith. Such faith is wrought in man by the Holy Spirit. Through this faith we not only receive from God but also retain the blessed assurance of our righteousness in His sight for Christ's sake. Cf. Romans 3-5; 8; Gal. 2:16-3:29; Col. 1; I John 2:2.

This article deals with the question of the function of faith in justification. Justification is a matter of what God does for the sinner, not what the sinner does for God or with God or by God. Faith is purely the receiving instrument in the act of justification. It is not the cause of justification. This truth was boldly confessed by LCMS in their first doctrinal statement to ALC, the Brief Statement, where they stated, "God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ, Rom. 7,19; 2 Cor. 5,18-21; Rom. 4, 25."¹⁰ The Common Confession emasculates the doctrinal statement as it turns the strong, declaratory act of God in justification into a weak passive statement, "forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men." Such a statement opens the door wide for the synergist, who believes that the work of justification is not complete until the subjective element of faith is supplied by the one believing. This false opinion is even defended and strengthened in the confession with the words, "which He imputes to the sinner through the Gospel and which the sinner accepts by faith." In that statement justification has become something that the sinner completes.

In Missouri's responses in their pamphlets ("A Fraternal Word" and "Another Fraternal Endeavor") to Wisconsin's objection, both times Missouri ignores the issue and goes into an explanation of the forgiveness of sins, which, according to the Lutheran Dogmaticians, is synonymous with the term objective justification. "A closer study of the phrase, 'forgiveness of sins' will give the answer. This phrase, 'the forgiveness of sins' is constantly used in Scripture, in our Lutheran literature and in the Confessional Writings as an exact synonym for justification

¹⁰ *The Common Confession and Other Pertinent Documents* (Milwaukee, WI: NPH, [1950]), 28.

and reconciliation.”¹¹ What does that point have to do with the argument at hand? Whether one wants to use the term “forgiveness of sins” as the work that a man completes by faith, or “justification” as the work that a man completes by faith, he is still a synergist.

The Doctrine of Justification has been appropriately identified as the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. To deny objective justification is to deny the efficacious work of Christ. The softened wording of the Common Confession opened the door wide for synergists to stand up next to orthodox Lutherans and pass themselves off as ones who believed as Luther did. In this case once again, to not say enough is more deceptive and ultimately more harmful than to say the wrong thing.

IV. Conversion

Common Confession, VII. Conversion—We believe and teach: The sinner’s conversion takes place when God brings the contrite sinner to faith in Christ as his Savior. This change of heart with respect to sin and this reliance upon Christ for salvation from sin is the work of God the Holy Spirit, without any cooperation whatsoever from sinful man. “No one can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost, “ I Cor. 12:3b. Cf. Acts 5:31; 26:18; Eph. 2:1-9; Jer. 31:18-19; Ezek. 11:19-20.

The Common Confession was not bad because what it said was wrong. The Common Confession was bad because it *did not oppose* what was wrong. It did not properly draw the distinction between the truth and the error. To understand this properly one has to understand the situation which the times presented. “Next to election this [article] was the outstanding issue in the former controversies.”¹²

The article strongly states that conversion takes place “without any cooperation whatsoever from sinful man.” This is a flawless confessional statement. The problem is that neither LCMS nor ALC ever denied that conversion was the work of God without the help of

¹¹ *Another Fraternal Endeavor*, 10.

¹² Reim, 46.

man. Neither party had any problem with stating that issue concerning conversion. But there was an issue in conversion that ALC did have a problem with expressing, so the Common Confession presented a statement that didn't force them to express it. The issue that ALC didn't want to express (and LCMS made it possible for them to have "doctrinal agreement" without having to express it) was that every person willfully resists God in conversion, the one who believes just as much as the one who rejects (Rom. 8:7; Gen. 6:5; 8:1). "This tragic omission of a point which, while decidedly unpopular in our day, is still so highly necessary in the teaching of the Church, is perhaps the most deplorable instance of the weakness of the new document."¹³ The point is unpopular because it clearly denies the perfectly logical solution to the age old question, *cur alii prae aliis?* Because of ALC's need to answer this Scriptural conundrum "why some before others?" with logic that is elevated above Scripture, any attempt to answer this question must absolutely be rejected as heretical. The Common Confession remained silent and let reason reign.

In the matter of conversion, many people would be happy to simply state that a man is entirely passive as God acts upon him in conversion—God turns the sinner around. This false statement could be made even if one accepted article seven of the Common Confession. "This change of heart...is the work of God the Holy Spirit, without any cooperation whatsoever from sinful man." "You see, man is completely passive in conversion. He does nothing." But this statement is wrong. Man *does* do something in conversion, and it is worse than doing nothing. Man actively resists that turning around of the Holy Spirit, the one who becomes converted *just as much as* the one who rejects and goes to hell for his stubborn resistance. This does not make sense. This leaves the question *cur alii prae aliis* entirely unanswered. It is unpopular with the

¹³ Reim, 47.

majority, but it is exactly the way Scripture speaks, and not the way reason speaks. The Common Confession fails to confess this truth.

Missouri tried to defend the Confession by stating that the exclusive particles in the article are strong enough to deny the work of man in conversion—“*without... cooperation... from sinful man*”; “without *any* cooperation,” “without any cooperation *whatsoever...*”!¹⁴ Yes, these particles do express the inactivity of man in conversion. But man is not inactive; rather, he actively resists conversion. This truth the article fails to express.

The Common Confession did not contain false doctrine. The problem was that it also did not refute false doctrine. It was unacceptable as a Common Confession between LCMS and ALC not because of what it did say, but because of what it did not say. Both parties could subscribe to the Confession, and yet still not be in agreement in all matters of doctrine. The unionistic spirit said, “That does not matter.” Wisconsin said it does.

There were other matters discussed in the pamphlet war between Wisconsin and Missouri—the issue regarding Boy Scouts of America, joint prayer, military chaplaincy, and other unionistic practices. But most of those were poor practices which derived from poor theology.

A spirit of union was the driving force behind such confessional laxity. The Missouri Synod was seeking to soften its confessional statements in order to present a document that could be agreed upon by two groups that really didn’t agree. This sacrificing of doctrine upon the altar ecumenism was a game played by many church bodies in the mid-twentieth century. A recommendation made by the president of ULC regarding the organic union they were seeking with both ALC and LCMS demonstrates this fact very clearly:

¹⁴ *Another Fraternal Endeavor*, 13.

The record of our meetings with the commissions of both the American Lutheran church and the Missouri Synod serves to indicate the great extent of agreement and the slight extent of disagreement. The disagreement relates furthermore to a matter of theological interpretation which in addition applies only to a non-existent original text of the Scriptures. In itself it is not a sufficient warrant to keep the various Lutheran bodies apart, especially as Lutheranism faces the conditions which were declared at length in our Savannah Convention when this commission was appointed. It is not our judgment that we can regard their views as outside of a Lutheran conception of the Scriptures, much less that they can so regard our views. We therefore recommend to the United Lutheran Church in America: 1. That this Commission on Relationships to American Lutheran Church Bodies be continued, to deal with and confer with similar commissions from other Lutheran Church bodies upon all matters that may lead to closer relations and organic union.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Report of Commission on Relationships to American Lutheran Church Bodies to the Eleventh Biennial convention of the United Lutheran Church in America*, by H. Offermann, chairman (Philadelphia, PA: United Lutheran Publication House, 1938), 469.

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