

A Confessional Church, Not Just a Confessional Movement

by Karl Wengenroth

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Honorable and Esteemed Brethren in Christ!

The church desires concerned Christians, and Christians desire a concerned church. Concerned Christians are confessing Christians, a concerned church is a confessing church. However, confession means confessing Christ, the one divine Truth. He is the center of all confession that grows out of the faith: “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9). The proclamation of this message is possible only when I make it my own in faith, and it involves my personal identification with it in word and life.

I

Our age is not without confessors. The demonstration of youth against war bears a confessional stamp. Youth believes in peace with an almost religious fervor. Youth embraces all causes that promise to improve the world and lead it to righteousness and brotherhood. In many instances the church permits itself to be swept along by this wave of confession. More and more pastors become weary of much talking. They have fewer and fewer hearers. In their opinion, the Gospel of Christ exerts no drawing power and accomplishes nothing among men. So they turn to action. A pastor of the Steyler Mission in South America recently told his pupils: “Gospel means to relieve the misery of mankind, satisfy their hunger, clothe them, and help them in their illnesses. We have no time to occupy ourselves with theology and finally with fruitless preaching. We must devote our time entirely to the hungry and needy of the world.”

How vastly different is Christ’s view of the task of our confession and service! His command is: “Preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mk. 16:15–16). At the same time, the question of success intrudes itself into the field of vision of the apostles and the church. But they do not permit this to change their commitment. Even in failure the church sees an incitement to more faithful preaching and clearer confession. It does not retreat but becomes more intensive in attacking unbelief and the despising of the will of God. This is the tone of the advice the apostle Paul gives to his co-worker Timothy for a time “when they will not endure sound doctrine,” as he writes: “Preach the Word: be instant in season, out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (II Tim. 4:2).

Confession, involvement in the church, can finally be nothing else but Gospel action, a call of repentance to the world and the comforting assurance of salvation to the lost and the forlorn who are ready to acknowledge their separation from the living and peace-giving God as the tragedy of their life. Confession can never cease to place all men under the judgment of God, “that from the fall of Adam all men who are born naturally, are conceived and born in sin, that is, that from their mother’s womb all are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature have the fear of God and true faith in God” (CA II). This is what we mean when we speak of the truth of Jesus Christ, of the truth of the Gospel and of the Law of God, which are both definitively revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. Only this confession is valid before God. It is bound to the truth of the Scriptures and their interpretation in our Lutheran Confessions. In a church which is determined to be a confessional church, and by the grace of God can still be such, also in our time, we must cling to the immovable foundation for our preaching and our faith, which will then, for the sake of our salvation, be able to state with equal firmness: “We cannot obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God by our own

merit, work, or satisfaction, but we obtain forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God through faith, if we believe that Christ suffered for us, and that for His sake we have forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life given to us freely” (CA IV). For the salvation of men and the honor and truth of God we contend in our confession for the church “in which the Gospel is preached in all its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel” (CA VII) In other words, we seek the justification for our religious acts and confession not in men and their wants. We trust in God’s command and promise as He reveals it in His certain and inerrant Word. Only in this has the precious treasure of the Gospel been delivered to us. Only in this is the truth of Christ to be found. Only through the Word does the Holy Spirit work faith in our hearts. Only in the Word do we have the Holy Sacraments. It gives them to us and interprets them for us.

The Word of God terminates the freedom of our thinking in the church. He takes it captive. But with the Word of God freedom actually begins. It teaches us to think God’s thoughts; it enables us to share them in faith. It gives us the full and final undivided truth, which I, as a human being, can never comprehend “from below,” except it is given to me “from above.” The orthodoxy of our confession requires an indivisible and inseparable identification of our confession with the truth and infallibility of the Word of Scripture. That this truth largely escapes our testing is the risk of our faith. But this risk is outweighed by the trust I have in Christ my Deliverer, and in God my Father. This is what really counts. Only a serene holding fast the Word of God in its validity and truth can give us the joy of championing the cause of God in a real churchly manner, which does not enthuse but fills us with deep concern. A confessional church, as we wish to view and portray it, needs above all things a firm hold on the command and promises of God. How else could we take a stand against church movements which adapt themselves to the ruling of opinions of the world and our age? Our speaking, confessing, and our life always demand the *imprimatur*: “Thus saith the Lord!” For that reason I hear Him, for that reason I believe Him, for that reason I act in the manner He prescribes. For a Lutheran confessional church that wishes to proclaim the Gospel according to God’s testimony and the deeds of our Lord Jesus Christ, Graf Zinzendorf’s formulation will be helpful:

*Wenn dein Wort nicht mehr soll gelten,
Worauf soll der Glaube ruhn?
Mir ist nicht um tausend Welten,
Abet um dein Wort zu tun.*

II

Do not the various confessional movements of recent years offer an alternative for our understanding of a confessional church? You are aware of the fact that in the various territorial churches, especially in the Lutheran, groups have been formed that contend for an unrestricted validity of the Scriptures and the Confessions, as well as the correct doctrine concerning the administration of the Sacraments. They feel themselves engulfed by a theology which is taking over the pulpits, and in which the essential articles of our faith are subjected to a different interpretation, which amounts to denial. The leadership in the churches no longer has control of the situation because they have long ago taken the position that varying tendencies have a right to exist in the church, such also as take a critical stand over against true confession, in fact, even exert their influence to wipe it out and change the functions of the church completely. Pastors who are truly confessional are told that they soon ought to recognize the fact that they are *de iure* right, but that *de facto* the church is no longer bound under the Scriptures and the Confessions, as they demand it should be. If they were to persist in demanding sole acceptance of their conception of correct doctrine in the church, they would be guilty of unbrotherly conduct and actual sectarianism. The viewpoint of the truth must be given up in such churches in favor of a continuing compromise in matters of faith, confession, and life. Are we surprised that some of the men who are active in these confessional movements speak of their churches only as administrative institutions? Does this really solve the problem of the church or bring it nearer to solution? Must there not be clearer, more incisive speech, so that there will be more consistent action?

Clearer speech would require, above all, that it become evident from these confessional movements that they would not at any price tolerate a different teaching or preaching of the Gospel, that an equality of rights in theologies and confessions is out of question. To this must be added the requirement that correct doctrine not only be championed but that it be vigorously employed to attack false doctrine. There is more at stake here than to provide a truly Lutheran reserve in one's own church, in which one is then let alone. One's own person and church would thereby be served, but the wider field of the church would after all be left to other forces. This we can never do, if we are truly concerned about the truth of the Gospel, which alone can save men. Not just any kind of faith can save, except the faith in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One, the true Son of God, the faith in which the love of the Father was bestowed on us for our deliverance from guilt and loss. However, I am not only to hold this faith personally; I am to contend for its validity in the entire church. This is the situation, as we see it, and as the brethren in other confessional churches see it. The move toward change cannot lie only in the exposure of false doctrine and departure from the confession on the part of individuals. The second step is more essential. We must press the church at large and its leadership in particular, which is responsible for the purity of doctrine and confession by virtue of its position, to remedy the situation or—as painful as it may be—to identify it as a leadership that is false because of its disobedience to God's Word; and if the church as such condones such loose and lax action, it must also be labeled as a church which is guilty of false doctrine and practice. In the long run there can be no making of common cause under one "church roof," even if it is painful to declare a suspension of fellowship. Romans 16:17–18 with its "avoid them" will be of greater import than all pastoral and human considerations for a Lutheran Christian who orients his faith, his confession, and his life in the Word of Scripture. We can truly serve man in the church only if we render unreserved obedience to the Word of the Lord.

We note that such thoughts are gaining ground in the confessional movements. We are grateful for this for the sake of the future of the Lutheran Church as a confessional church. A movement simply cannot get around declaring plainly what its clearly defined goal is, if it wants to shape and realize its considerations concretely. To this must be added the inauguration or achievement of a church leadership which is truly bound to the Word and confession, which exercises true doctrinal discipline and is fundamentally opposed to a plurality of opinions in the church, which would have simply been carried over into the church of Jesus Christ from the sphere of worldly associations. I concede that at the end of this section I am extremely happy to quote with inward concurrence a portion of an advance copy in the information sheet of the *Kirchliche Sammlung um Bibel und Bekenntnis*, of May 20, 1970 (Pastor Dietrich Studer, Buecken): "For these reasons I plead over against the 'All-Evangelical Superchurch' (which has already been designated as the 'Federal Church') for the genuine confessional church. For me this is the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church." God grant that this be acknowledged: Confessional movement must lead to a confessional church. If the maintenance of a true interpretation of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions leads to such clear church action, then we shall not be the last who will participate joyfully, wholeheartedly, and with good conscience.

III

A third essential aspect must of necessity be added to the foregoing statements. Correct doctrine, pure proclamation of the saving Gospel, impressing the full truth of the Scriptures upon scriptural and confessional church procedure, is lasting only where there is a living, confessing congregation. Finally, the confessional church lives in confessing congregations, else it is threatened with inward deterioration and condemned to final downfall. May I quote Hans Kitsten here (*Lutherische Kirche*, June 4, 1970, p. 63): "The church of the future will and must be a church of congregations, else it won't exist at all." The best-oiled leadership and administration, at the "top," the most unequivocal proclamation from the pulpit, will be without foundation, if there are no hearing, believing, confessing congregations, which are the true basis of the church "below." "Confessional" church remains wishful thinking, if the clear and pure proclamation of the Gospel is not accompanied by an active identification of a congregation with the same. Many church procedures, for example in the territorial churches, actually hinder the active life of the Christians in the sphere of a congregation and the

entire church. The confessing Christian and the confessing congregation simply cannot develop for the welfare of the whole. They are actually deprived of their maturity as a church. We know the consequences: inactivity or indifference, or spontaneous revolutionary action. No church can long live without or contrary to its congregations. Neither can it ignore the faith and life of the Christians. This will sooner or later react upon the decisions of the church. Are we fully aware of this in our time? Where a congregation or a number of congregations develops a piety and churchliness that no longer is covered by the Gospel of the Scriptures and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, the church will cease to exist as a confessional church, in fact, it will cease to exist. Where the process of forming a confession, as well as determining the will of the church, travels from below to above, or so far as I am concerned, here and there still from above to below, but is no longer decided by the Word of God, there the confessional church which is bound by the Word of God and confession must break up. We ought to give this problem much more attention than we have been giving it.

What can we do for a confessing congregation? Supply it with pastors who will faithfully instruct and lead it, who unreservedly bow to the Word and will of God and proclaim this faith in word and deed. The proper training of the future servants of the Word is the deep concern of a confessional church. To the correct doctrine in the pulpit, in instruction and Bible classes, there must be added the other: Not every belief and confession of the hearers has the right to existence in the congregation. The rejection of false doctrine must be accompanied by the rejection of every false belief and self-conceived piety, to say nothing of manifest godlessness and avowed and, therefore, manifest unbelief. Discipline in doctrine and life is not restricted to the pastors; it is of equal concern to the congregation. If it is neglected, the church will be contaminated from below and eventually lose its confessional character. A congregation that is not a congregation of believers can in the last analysis not be a confessional church, because confession stems from faith. This calls for an exposure of unbelief wherever it confronts us, and an honest attempt to overcome it with preaching and teaching or, where this fails, to make it clear that in reality there is no possibility of membership in the church, the Body of Christ. The antitheses of our confessions are equally valid in a congregation when heterodox beliefs and false doctrine arise. If the procedure of a congregation hinders self-cleansing by means of excommunication as the final end of pastoral and confessional action, which is largely lacking in the state churches, it becomes guilty of causing the downfall of the church as a confessional church.

At this convention of our Church of the Evangelical Lutheran Confession we extend to our congregations through their delegates the opportunity of responsible participation in the deliberations and discussions of all matters that affect the church. We cannot and will not waive their collaboration and a share in the responsibility. In a congregation where the Gospel is proclaimed in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered correctly, there is a confessional church. This right must be viewed as a responsibility. Only in this way can we demonstrate credibly that the Church of the Evangelical Lutheran Confession through the joint action of all its pastors and members is in a position to be what it wants to be before God and men: A church in which all worship, all discipline, all giving of the glory and all obedience flow out of true brotherly unity in faith and confession. Lord, preserve and strengthen it!