

5. Confessing and Confession Today

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Perhaps there is one or the other among us, who is of the opinion that it is still clear in a church faithful to the confession of the Christian faith what confessing means according to the Confessions that bind us and unite us with the true church of all times and that for that reason no great discussions need be held about confessing and confession. I cannot join this conviction, at least not in view of the theological and ecclesiastical situation in Germany; and for that reason have chosen the above topic. The conditions in church and theology of the United States are, of course, not as familiar to me as those in Germany, but according to my observations and personal impressions that I have had during various visits in the U. S. during the last ten years, the confessionally serious Lutheran churches in America are in danger of relativizing the concept of the historic confessions by an existentialist concept of faith and confession, and thus to see no more in the Confessions than a witness of generations of confessors of previous generations to their faith, which we will honor, but whose statements touch and concern us only inasmuch as they show clearly, how existential faith presents a confession as its own product out of itself.

Such and similar ideas, and the insecurity thus given to every genuine confessional position, are no doubt due to the so-called existential theology, which in turn is a child of the existentialist philosophy. Let me, therefore, begin my lecture by demonstrating by the example of an internationally known German existential theologian, namely Gerhard Ebeling, to show by this example what kind of a concept of faith and confession this theology has. I hope you will pardon if I must feed you a number of Ebeling quotations for this purpose. In his book "Vom Wesen des Christlichen Glaubens" Ebeling talks about what he calls the place of faith (Ort des Glaubens) in the following manner: "Faith does not derive from certain intellectually acquired objects of consciousness (Bewusstseinsgegenstaenden) but from its own foundation. And only this can be object of my faith to me in the traditional sense of what is the foundation of faith (Grund des Glaubens) and becomes for me a witness to that faith. To cling to that, to depend on that with every fiber, in order to live as faith on that basis, is of course essential to faith. But I deem it unfortunate, to call this the Foundation of Faith, because the disastrous concept of a certain mass of articles of faith to be acquired and laboriously to be mastered is raised thereby. We had better abandon the concept of the object of faith altogether and speak of the Material of Faith. Fichte once called the world the material of duty. Now I would in contrast like to call the world the material of faith. This is not the material of the duty of faith. Doubtless faith has a number of problems to solve in the world as the material of faith does not in the first place mean something that falls into the category of works and fruits of faith, rather that which belongs into the category of the essence of faith. This is the essence of faith that it alone and by itself overcomes the world, that it finds in this world its material, its object, its resistance, its concretion and therewith its reality. What then does it mean 'I believe in God the Father', or 'I believe in Jesus Christ', or 'I believe in the Holy Ghost'? In themselves these are certain thoughts, confessional statements and doctrines, and these are in a necessary connection with faith. But only in concrete situations, i.e. in face of that, in endurance

of that, in persistence against that which concretely blocks and contradicts this that God is my Father, that Jesus Christ is the Lord, that the Holy Ghost has been outpoured, can we believe concretely. Where faith is not assailed it is no faith at all, for faith exists only where it can say 'nevertheless', this is valid also for thoughts — and is ever concrete in its realization in life."¹ What really happened here? Here is a conscious secularization not only of the object of faith, or as Ebeling chooses to call it the "material of faith," for the world is, according to Ebeling, material of faith; here faith is not only cast back upon itself and separated from the effect of the workings of the Holy Spirit, but here furthermore every continuity of faith which dwells necessarily in every confessional statement is dissolved in favor of a concept of a situation, which makes faith in the Triune God a concrete act of life, which is in the last analysis determined by a negation. Faith in the Triune God which has permeated the history of the Church from the time of the Apostles to our day is not known to Ebeling. This he openly says: "Faith is not a separate act, or some kind of speculative lift into the beyond. But faith is the determination of existence as existence in the here and now, and therefore not something besides all that which I do, suffer, and hope and experience, but something that is concrete only in all this, namely the determination of my doing, suffering, hoping and experiencing. If faith determines man's personhood, if it decides concerning who I am before God (that is, one with whom God is), then faith is never without all of that which I am concretely and only in relation to this. If only with all reflection on the essence of faith one would learn this above all that faith does not want to be believed *per se* but concretely! Then it should also have become clear that, since the world is the place of faith, one may and must also say, time is the place of faith. For the world is viewed here as that world which concerns and touches me in a concrete situation, that world that is determined by time, the historical world. One who does not concern himself with the world, that is, does not consider what time it is, one who is not open to the fact that everything has its time, and one who does not pay attention to the difference in the times, in other words, one who flees from the place of faith, such a one may indeed have a timeless relationship to concepts of faith which were shaped by the past, but this is not faith. On the horizon of history this general manageability of concepts of faith appears as an abstraction. It is time alone which turns faith into an 'I believe!'"²

Time, therefore, is the place or locus of faith, but a time that has no extension, which knows only the *hic et nunc* but no fulfillment as the New Testament has it. Just so sporadic is also the concept of history that Ebeling develops. The horizon of his history allows only abstract concepts of faith, which thereby also are of yesterday and surpassed by time and history, since presumably they are without concrete act of faith or life. Except that Ebeling here confuses as a true disciple of the existentialist philosophy "Geschehen" and "Geschichte" (event and history). Thereby he foregoes the possibility of seeing the workings of the Holy Ghost in time and history. This punctiliar understanding of time and history is an essential trademark of existentialism, to which every historic confession must be an abomination.

Faith is for these theologians always only possible in an existential way and cannot be passed on, transmitted, or consummated by others. The faith of this existential theology believes only in itself as the ground of faith. The faith in Jesus is made into a "faith like Jesus" and Jesus Christ, the very foundation of our faith, is turned into Jesus of Nazareth, a witness of faith. Ebeling asks: "What is believing in Jesus Christ?" and answers: "It means to let him be the witness to the ground of faith and therefore enter into him and his work; to participate in him and his way and thereby participate in that which has been promised to faith, namely the Omnipotence of God."³ Our faith therefore is supposed to enter into the way of Jesus and thus participate in something God has never promised to faith. Such a statement is blasphemy when it is confronted with the statements of Holy Scriptures, that God has promised forgiveness of sins to all that believe in Jesus Christ.

It should be clear from the above that for an existential theologian actual

confession of faith is something altogether different from what it is for a Christian, who confesses his faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior and Redeemer. It is also clear that to such a theologian any formulated confession which claims to be the confession of the Church throughout this time and world until judgment day is nonsense.

Now, I do not think that in our churches which take the confessions of the Book of Concord seriously there are a number of theologians who fully endorse existential theology. On the other hand, I am convinced that many of our theologians, especially some of the younger ones, have been strongly influenced by existential theology, without necessarily being aware of it. This is true particularly with regard to the confessional question when one asks: Shall I spontaneously and concretely confess my faith in Christ in word and deed? "Yes!" Must I be pledged to a confession that was made 450 or even 1600 years ago under completely different intellectual, cultural, and social circumstances? "No!" Perhaps this is not often stated so bluntly, but there are more who think this way than we would like. This is our problem: How can we properly bring the historical confession of the church and our own act of confession together? How can we confess our faith and our theological conviction resulting therefrom in such a way that it does justice to the historical confession of the church? To put it another way, How do we find an inner access to the historical confession of the church which will enable us to understand its ultimate concern and central thrust, so that we will not only have no difficulty in supporting this confession but that we may also see our own theological stance embedded in it, and the central affirmation of the confession becomes our very own confession? "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord." This statement is not only well known and familiar to us, but we should have no difficulty to give expression to our own conviction in these words.

Admittedly, we have less difficulty repeating Luther's Catechism statements, since they are directed at the expression of a personal faith, than we have with most of the other confessional statements. No one can seriously question that Luther's explanation of the 2nd Article correctly interprets Paul's word in I. Cor. 12: "No man can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Ghost." But this manifests not only the continuity in content of all scriptural confessions, coupled with the process of a legitimate interpretation and unfolding of the content of the apostolic proclamation, but also extremely important but often neglected fact that confessional statements are affirmations of faith, which are existentially possible for the believer only in faith, not on the basis of scientific research but by the operation of the Holy Spirit. However, this dare not be overlooked, the faith affirmation of the confessions does not have faith as such as its content, it does not reflect on the phenomenon of faith as existential theology does, but it is directed toward the object of faith. This object has been recognized in faith and is made manifest in the confession.

Hans Joachim Iwand, it seems to me, has said something very significant about the relation between faith and the object of faith, especially in view of the modern existentialist concept of faith: Iwand says: "Modern Protestantism is fully on the road to a complete inversion of faith. Although everything you could ask for is there: the ego that is conscious and certain of itself as believing; the proper order of the 'credere' before the intellect, also the understanding, which now refers to this act of faith. But this all is irrelevant and empty. Everything vibrates around the 'Ego', the Reflecting. Everything concerns this Ego as becoming a Believing out of an Unbelieving. Here Kierkegaard has opened a chasm, into which modern theology was thrown deeply and no one knows how to fill the gap. Is it not significant that the Bible speaks differently? The Bible says: 'We have believed and known that thou art the Holy One of God.' Knowing is thus more than self-realization. I do not only arrive at an understanding of myself but rather the Object is grasped and held firmly in the statement I make. Not the condition but the Object is the

theme, not that we are something, have or attain something, but this that man lets go of himself, is free of himself and apprehends as does the eye of one healed of blindness, the reality, which lies in view."⁴

* The ultimate content of our faith and confession is therefore Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. He is this however in two ways, according to His person and work. Though the person of the God-man stands in the center of every apostolic statement of faith, yet one can never and dare never disregard the fact that Jesus Christ, Son of God and Mary's Son is our's and the whole world's Redeemer. Never must the fact that He was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification be pushed into the background. For this reason Luther in his explanation of the second article joins to the confession of the person of the Redeemer the confession of the work of the Redeemer. "Who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death." Without exaggeration we can say that in this sentence Luther makes a confessing statement with the fullness of the apostolic proclamation of the work of redemption in a truly unique condensation. Again I can quote Hans Joachim Iwand here who defines the content of every genuine confession: "What now are the contents established by a confession? They all proceed from the person of Christ. In Him the government of God has become present (Mt. 12:28). And we note that the contents refer in such a way to Him that they are at the same time a confession of His person and His work. It is possible to emphasize the person so strongly that thereby His work recedes and vice-versa. From these two sides of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus one could explain the history of dogmatics. Eastern theology has (in following St. John) occupied itself much more with the mystery of the person, and western theology with His work. If the work of Christ is completely absorbed by His person, as it was done in the christology of the ancient church, there is danger of speculation. If the work alone is made the point of departure there is the danger that the dogmatic dissolves itself in ethics, that is the danger of western theology."⁵

The correctness of Iwand's last sentence, it seems to me, is evident in the development of the Existential theology, which finally, because it doesn't know what to do with the person of Christ as the Son of God made man, has only a legalistic ethic left over and proclaims a life "like Jesus." The apostolic gospel in every case does not separate the person and work of Christ but proclaims both in indivisible unity. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). "But when the fullness of time was come God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:4,5).

And this gospel in its uniform testimony to and of the person and work of Christ is to the Lutheran Confessions, which claim to be ecumenical confessions, not only the center of all confession but at the same time the center of the whole Bible and the key to its understanding. Apology IV, Paragraph 2 and 3 (Translation of the German Text) we read: "Again, that we hold, teach, and confess, that no one is reconciled to God and no one obtains forgiveness of sins, except alone by faith in Christ. Since, however, there is such dispute about that highest and chief article of the whole Christian doctrine, so that so very much depends on this article, which also serves eminently for a clear and correct understanding of the whole Scripture and alone shows the right road to the inexpressible treasure and the true knowledge of Christ, and also alone is able to open the door into the Bible, without which article no poor conscience could have a true, constant and sure comfort, nor would be able to recognize the treasures of the grace of Christ, . . . we beg that imperial majesty would listen to us concerning this great, brave, most important matter according to need and graciously."

The Gospel in its application, namely that a sinner is justified before God by believing the Gospel and believing in the person of Christ and in that

which this person has done for us is herewith unmistakably defined as the center of all confessing, the center of Scripture and at the same time the sole legitimate access into it. The ultimate content of Scripture is exactly just as the ultimate content of confession the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed to be believed and confessed in faith. In *De Servo Arbitrio* Luther says: "For what higher thing can be hidden in the Scriptures after the seals have been opened (Rev. 6:1) after the stone has been rolled from the door of the tomb and the highest mystery has become revealed, that Christ suffered for us and that He will reign forever? . . . All of Scripture deals only of Christ. It is therefore all clear as to what matters are contained in Scripture." For Luther the final decision in his confessional stance is taken always starting from Christ and from the Gospel, and this particularly in his defense against false doctrine. So, for instance, in regard to the Lord's Supper. In his *Great Confession of the Lord's Supper* this becomes especially evident. A statement which he makes in this work, which was also used in the Formula of Concord, shows this to my opinion, especially clearly: "For you must place this being of Christ, who is one person with God, very far, far outside of the creatures, as far as God is outside of them; and again as deep and near within all creatures as God is within them. For He is one inseparable person with God, where God is there must He also be, or our faith is false." (Sol. Decl. VII, 101) Luther who placed the work of Christ back into the center of theology, who rediscovered the *theologia crucis*, never forgot that the faith in the person of Christ as the God-man Redeemer, absolutely and unconditionally belongs together with faith in the redemptive work of Christ. Wherever he saw this unity endangered he reacted with severity and a consistency, which we can only appreciate, if we see clearly that the confession of the full gospel demands a rejection of all such opinions and statements that deprecate this gospel from any direction and endanger the unity of the apostolic confessions as to the person and work of Christ.

The discussion about the "condemnations" in our Confessional Writings and their meaning and validity is particularly timely, since in North America as well as in Europe dialogues have been held between Lutherans and Reformed, which aim at establishment of fellowship between the Lutheran and Reformed Churches of the world. Such is of course only possible if and when more than one "damnamus" of our Lutheran Confessions is pushed aside. Dr. Marc Lienhard of the Strasbourg Institute for Ecumenical Research was commissioned to conduct an examination of the condemnations of the confessions of the 16th Century ("Untersuchung zu den Kondemnationen der Bekenntnisse des 16ten Jahrhunderts"). He reaches among other things the following conclusion: "On the one hand the condemnations cannot be weakened or overcome by considering them timebound phenomena of that time which have no validity for our day . . . Whatever has been recognized as faulting the gospel cannot become truth in a new situation. If, for example, the Lutheran Confessions reject an opinion that sees the Lord's Supper merely as a memorial meal then this decision cannot simply be reinterpreted." If this were the final theological result of his investigation we could have only a happy agreement with Dr. Lienhard's conclusion, for he has recognized, that the condemnations and rejections of the confessions are all made in view of the Gospel and reject the attempt to adulterate the Gospel. Sorry to say, he believes to have discovered something more and by this he nullifies what he has just said. He continues, "On the other hand, the confessions also are subject to the contingencies of history. We must certainly respect the Lutheran concern and conviction to have found the center of Scripture in the doctrine of justification founded on Christology. Certainly we will have to speak of a continuity of the Church in relation to the confessions of the past. And yet, the confessions including the condemnations cannot simply be repeated for the sake of their place in history, but must be confessed with a new interpretation. In this perspective the Lutheran Church today will not be able to adopt all the condemnations in the Formula of Concord." "Thus," he continues, "it does not seem possible to condemn the opposition to 'genus majestaticum' and the doctrine of 'ubiquity' as false doctrines." Lienhard, as we see, brings

the point of history into play. We will immediately have to speak of this. For the sake of the Gospel he does not want to join in the condemnations of the Formula of Concord against the doctrines which raise doubt precisely against the properly understood Gospel which is based on the unity of person and work of Christ. For the "genus majestaticum" and "ubiquity" safeguard just the unity of the divine and human Nature of Christ. Whoever denies these doctrines must hear the "damnamus", for the sake of the Gospel. The apostolic Gospel knows no separation of the person and work of Christ, and for that reason the christologically based doctrine of justification is not just a concern (Anliegen) only, that we should hear, as Lienhard says, but it is the Gospel, the redeeming and saving message of the person and work of Christ. The confessions of the Lutheran Church have never seen it otherwise. All their thinking and speaking proceeds from the center of Scripture, the Gospel. Especially also there where the confessions speak of matters which seemingly have little to do with the person and work of Christ, we can see that light flash forth, sometimes unexpectedly, as a point of reference. So, for example, in the Apology of the A.C. in the second article where Melancthon comes to grips with the scholastic concept of original sin. Twice, in this connection, the same argument arises, even if not in the same words; once we read in Paragraph 33: "Neque enim postest intelligi magnitudo gratia Christi, nisi morbis nostris cognitis." (Triglotta, page 113 Apology) Engl.: "For the magnitude of the grace of Christ cannot be understood unless our diseases be recognized." Again in Paragraph 50: "Beneficia Christi non poterunt cognosci nisi intelligamus mala nostra." (Trigl. Apology page 119) Engl.: "It will not be possible to recognize the benefits of Christ unless we understand our evils." In other words according to Melancthon the right understanding of the Gospel presupposes recognition of the complete and full sinfulness and lost condition of man, and vice-versa.

It might be proper at this place to avert a possible misunderstanding, one of which some men of the time of the reformation were victims, namely that the importance of the Gospel for Lutheran Theology and for the Confessions was seen so onesidedly that thereby the one immutable will of God, as the Formula of Concord says, namely God's holy law is considered superfluous. The confession itself does not fall prey to this misunderstanding. Immediately following the citation above from Article IV of the Apology, namely that only by faith in Christ and the gift of justification before God all Scripture can be understood, we read (Triglotta, Apology, page 121) "All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics, the Law and the promises. For in some places it presents the Law, and in others the promise concerning Christ, namely, either when it promises that Christ will come, and offers for His sake the remission of sins, justification and life eternal, or when, in the Gospel, Christ Himself, since He has appeared, promises the remission of sins, justification and life eternal." (Note: The English text is a translation and conflation of both the Latin and German texts. The quote above is the translation of the Latin).

For the Lutheran Confessions the law is the essential counterpart to the Gospel, for the confessions are clear on this that the Holy Spirit must first do His "strange" work in us by the Law before He can perform His proper work by the comfort of the Gospel and proclaims to us the grace of God for Christ's sake. S. D. V. Paragraph 11 we read: "Therefore the Spirit of Christ must not only comfort, but also through the office of the Law reprove the world of sin, John 16:8, and thus must do in the New Testament as prophet says, Is. 28:21, opus alienum, ut faciat opus proprium, that is, He must do the work of another (reprove), in order that He may, afterwards, do His own work, which is to comfort and speak of grace."

But let us return to our main topic.

If we want the Confessions to come alive in our own faith and confession and for our theological thinking and speaking, if furthermore we will not be satisfied with only citing statements out of them or accepting them *en bloc* at the time of our ordination, then we will have to undertake the task to try and

understand and use them according to their own essential content, and I can add of my own personal experience, that this would really be worthwhile. The Confessions not only point to the gospel as the foremost hermeneutical principle but demand that they be interpreted and understood according to the Gospel.

In this a difficulty becomes evident which anyone of us who has tried to understand the historical confessions has clearly experienced; this difficulty is the fact that they are conditioned by history. This is after all the age old difficulty of faith and history. The last of the Confessional writings in the Book of Concord has recognized this historic character which by the very essence of history is part of all historic confessions and therefore has established that in matters of doctrinal decisions the confessions must never be taken in isolation but must always be finally made on the basis of Holy Scripture. In the Summary of the Epitome of the F.C. we read: "The other symbols and Writings mentioned are not judges as is the Holy Scripture, but only witnesses and declarations of faith, to show how at all times the Holy Scriptures have been understood in regard to disputed doctrines and interpreted by the then living confessors, and how the contrary doctrines have been rejected and condemned." The Confessions are here understood to be the witnesses of faith and interpretation of Scripture on the part of their first confessors. Are they not thereby decidedly devaluated and thus only have the significance of historic monuments to faith? The Formula of Concord is not of this opinion. In view of the Augsburg Confession we read in the Solida Declaratio: "Thus we subscribe to the first unaltered Augsburg Confession not because it was set up by our theologians, but because it was taken from Holy Scripture and well and firmly founded on it." Here we have the confession of theologians, of whom none were among the confessors at Augsburg who now fifty years later state that the Augsburg Confession is their confession, not in pious respect of the fathers, but because they had to accept the confession of the fathers since it was based on Holy Scripture. And since we know that the authors of the Formula of Concord understood and interpreted the Scriptures by its core, namely the Gospel, it clearly becomes the deciding factor also for us today.

Our faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ is the faith of men who live in time and history. This faith, strictly speaking has no unhistorical or suprahistorical content, but is faith in the revelation of God's act in time and history by Christ Jesus and His vicarious suffering, death and resurrection for us. Faith in the Gospel is therefore faith in this act of God in this world and its history. This faith comes to life through the witness of this act of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, and calls forth this confession to the person and work of Christ in the course of history again and again in those who believe in their Lord and Savior. So there is not only a continuity of faith but also a corresponding continuity of confession. The legitimacy of a historic confession can therefore be established always only in reference to the Gospel and I can make it my own only in faith in the Gospel. Thus it becomes my personal confession.

This Gospel, whose preaching and teaching the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned to His disciples and His whole church before His ascension, is being accepted, declared, taught and defended against all heresy that might adulterate the truth of God in and by the confession of the church throughout the centuries of the church's history. The defense, however, can only be done in such manner, that that Gospel given to us in the Scriptures, the Word of God, is unfolded and interpreted. Confession, therefore, is always also and not only in a lesser manner *Exegesis*. The Confessions can and will never say or teach anything beyond Scripture, but it intends emphatically to declare its doctrine and to reject expressly any contrary doctrine. Thus the Confessions never intend to be a substitute for the Scriptures of the Old or New Testament. Luther has expressed this clearly in his writing "Of the Councils and the Church." He says: "And there is no council or fathers, where we might find and learn the whole Christian doctrine . . . The Nicene Creed

tells mainly that Christ is true God. The confession of Chalcedon that Christ has two and not one nature, a divine and human; . . . and in summary, put them all together and you would not dig the whole doctrine of Christian faith out of them and if you'd dig at it eternally" (WA 50,546). The importance and function of the Confessions of the Church is found mainly in this, I dare say, that it has a serving character. It is not just to lead us to the Holy Scriptures, but into the Word of God. It shows us the person and work of Christ, the Gospel as the center of the Scripture. It thus brings us by the power of the Holy Spirit to the confession of Jesus Christ and so includes us in the confession of the true Church of all times until the Day of the Lord.

FOOTNOTES

¹Gerhard Ebeling, *Vom Wesen des Christlichen Glauben* (Tuebingen: J. C. Mohr, 1959), p. 207 ff.

²Ibid., p. 209 ff.

³Ibid.

⁴Hans Joachim Iward, *Du bist Christus*, Vol. I, p. 32 ff.

⁵Ibid.