

How to Be Both Confessional and Ecumenical

**Southeastern Pastoral Conference
November 3-5, 1981
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In Scripture a tension very often must be maintained between two truths so that one does not go overboard in either direction. This tension (not conflict) maintains a sense of sobriety. This balance is a part of "rightly dividing the Word of Truth." For example, a proper tension is maintained in the Scriptures between faith and works. To emphasize one of these truths to the exclusion of the other does violence to God's revelation and risks the loss of the truth. The person who says "I am saved by faith; therefore it doesn't make any difference what I do" is just as wrong as the person who thinks he will be saved by his works. A proper tension must be maintained between both faith and works.

Sometimes two seemingly opposite truths must be taught at the same time to preserve this tension. Francis Shaeffer makes much of this in connection with our topic. "To be really Bible-believing Christians we need to practice, simultaneously, at each step of the way, two biblical principles. One principle is that of the purity of the visible church: Scripture commands that we must do more than just talk about the purity of the visible church, we must actually practice it, even when it is costly. The second principle is that of an observable love among all true Christians. In the flesh we can stress purity without love, or we can stress love without purity: we cannot stress both simultaneously. To do so we must look moment by moment to the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit."¹

The 1981 Pastoral Conference of the CLC wrestled with this problem of balance and maintaining a proper tension in regard to the question of AAL/LB. "This particular conference showed that two concerns are powerful among the brothers. Though they seem at times to be in conflict, the Gospel requires both. The one complements the other. In true proportion, the two concerns make for a healthy church. Out of balance they invite the rebuke of the Lord, 'But I have this against you' (Jesus to the Seven Churches, Revelation 2-3)"²

The assignment of this topic is an admission that there is a difficulty or a tension involved in being both confessional and ecumenical. This is not an either/or choice. To be confessional without being ecumenical is as wrong as being ecumenical without being confessional. The problem is to be both confessional and ecumenical simultaneously and thus maintain the proper Scriptural tension between the two. It is fitting, especially at this stage of our development as a church body, that we as pastors and laymen examine how we can be both confessional and ecumenical in the truest sense of the words.

¹ Francis Shaeffer; Christianity Today ; April 10, 1981, p. 29

² Rollin Reim; "In Conference Assembled"; Lutheran Spokesman; Vol. 24 #3 p.9

A. Confessional

Confessional means a public profession of what is believed in the heart. Two Greek verbs are used in the New Testament with the meaning "to confess." EXOMOLOGEO means to speak out the same and is defined in Arndt and Gingrich as to promise or concede and in the middle voice to confess, admit, acknowledge - leading also into the idea of to praise. HOMOLOGEO means to speak the same thing and is defined as to promise, agree, admit, confess, declare (publicly), acknowledge, and praise.

The root meanings of both words stress the unity of speaking. They also emphasize the public nature of this joint speaking. This public profession indicates in the New Testament an identifying with Jesus.

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. Acts 19:18

Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God. John 12:42-43

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth you confess and are saved.
Romans 10:9-10

Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I Timothy 6:12

Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. Matthew 10:32-33

It should be noted that this confession primarily refers to our publicly identifying with Jesus. The confession of a child of God directly relates to Jesus. This includes anything that marks us as followers of the Risen Christ. For the early Christians, identifying with Jesus meant refusing to offer the pinch of incense to the emperor. The confessional requirements of today are not always so neatly framed in black and white. There are many things which may call into question our confession - our identification with Jesus of Nazareth.

Within our framework, confessional has come to mean the setting forth of Scriptural truths in propositional statements which become the public confession of the church. Our Synodical Conference heritage

places a great deal of emphasis on being a confessional church in this sense. While our doctrinal confession is a very important part of identifying with Jesus, we must realize that it is a part of the total confession of life called for by discipleship. Confessional then means clearly identifying ourselves with Jesus and His Word both in doctrine and life.

B. Ecumenical

Today the term ecumenical leaves a bitter taste because the modern ecumenical movement has become an agreement to disagree. The modern ecumenical movement denies the basic truths of Christianity in its attempt to produce an organizational unity. Using this definition we can never be both confessional and ecumenical. "The Scripture prerequisite of confessional unity precludes the ecumenical movement."³ Most organizational churches today preceiving a choice between being confessional or being ecumenical have opted for ecumenical.

However, the word ecumenical (OIKOUMENE) means inhabited earth or all of mankind. In this sense the word ecumenical means universal and stresses the universal nature of Jesus' church. There is a unity of faith or oneness which joins all believers the world over together in Christ Jesus. This ecumenical oneness is a mark of the Holy Christian Church. This unity is not an organizational unity, but a reality of Spirit created faith in Jesus. The Scriptures describe the true ecumenical nature of Jesus' Church.

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you . . . May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20, 23

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. I Corinthians 12:12-13

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:3-5

As we confess: "I believe in the Holy Christian Church; the Communion of Saints," we are stressing the ecumenical nature of Jesus' holy Church.

³Paul F. Nolting: "The Book of Concord and Ecumenism"; Journal of Theology; Vol. 19, No. 4; p. 2

C. The Problem

The problem is how to maintain the proper balance or tension between a confessional stance and a witness to the true ecumenical nature of Christ's Church. The existence of many denominations would seem to deny the reality of the oneness of Jesus' Church. And yet on what basis can we join with those who deny basic Christian truths? How can we be both confessional and ecumenical?

There is the danger of being ecumenical at the expense of confession. The basic problem of the modern ecumenical movement is that it seeks to make the oneness of the Holy Christian Church a visible, organizational unity. The ecumenical movement believes that we must give visible, organizational expression to our oneness in faith. This is the fatal flaw of the Catholic Church's teaching "Outside the church (meaning the organization), there is no salvation." Thus the ecumenical movement sees confessionalism of any kind as a hinderance to an expression of the unity of the Church. The ecumenical movement seeks to bring Jesus' prayer "that they may be one" to an organizational fulfillment.

This organizational ecumenicism creates some problems. If organizational fellowship is based upon membership in the Holy Christian Church, where do you draw the confessional line? Some have claimed there must be agreement on the seven fundamental articles of faith. Others would argue that a confession of faith in Jesus is necessary for organizational unity. However, the World Council of Churches has found even this confessional basis too restrictive. An ecumenical movement without confessionalism finally concludes that everyone is right with God in his own way.

To illustrate what happens when a church body loses its confessional character, consider what has happened within the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). The Presbyterian Church was locked in a struggle that is representative of what happened in all major protestant denominations. In the thirties men like Machen protested and resisted the liberal tendencies in the Presbyterian Church. Francis Shaffer who was also involved in this struggle looks back at what happened fifty years ago. He points out what happened when the Presbyterian Church ceased to be a confessional church. He speaks of the thirties as the birth of a general latitudinarianism, an elasticity of belief and confession, in the PCUSA.

What happened in the last fifty years is the gradual moving back of the line at which a firm stand must be taken. Men who stayed in the PCUSA would roll over in their graves today when the Presbyterian Church advocates the ordination of practicing homosexuals and lesbians. The line of demarcation has constantly been rolled back in the face of each new attack. As a result the Presbyterian Church today, like other

major denominations, "accepts the existential methodology that says the Bible is authoritative when it teaches religious things but not when it touches on what is historic or scientific or on such things as the male/female relationship."⁴

What also developed is a pattern of organizational latitudinarianism (co-operation in externals) becoming doctrinal latitudinarianism. The history of religion in the United States during the last three generations bears this out. Those who remain in an organizational unity at all costs will struggle to paper over differences regarding Scripture so as to preserve an external veneer of unity where, indeed, there is no unity at that crucial point of Scripture. "When doctrinal latitudinarianism sets in, we can be sure both from church history and from personal observation that in one or two generations those who are taught by the churches and schools that hold this attitude will lose still more, and the line between evangelical and liberal will be lost."⁵

These same patterns are present in the history of the Lutheran Church. The dangers of being ecumenical at the expense of confessionalism are written in the history of the last fifty years - history which we have lived. In this non-confessional age, we must be careful that we do not disown Jesus or His precious Word. We are called upon in this age to give a clear confession.

There, however, is another danger. There is the danger that we be confessional without being truly ecumenical and thus become a sect. Confessionalism can easily become an end in itself. It is possible that the ecumenical movement is a reaction to a confessionalism which denied the universal oneness of the Church. Because of our Synodical Conference heritage and the circumstances surrounding the formation of our church body, these are very real dangers for us. We recognize this in the CLC Directory: "Many are the pitfalls in the way of orthodoxy. Legalism, rigorism, formalism, exclusivism and arrogance are only some of the temptations which beset especially those who are concerned about true teaching of the Gospel."⁶

The confessional church may make the same mistake as the ecumenical movement if it attempts to define the Church in terms of a confessional organization. We may conclude or at least give the impression that confessional fellowship is based on faith in the heart rather than a confessional oneness grounded in the Scriptures. The discussions we had as a church body in 1970: "Does Scripture Allow Us to Regard as Christians Only Those Who Are in Complete Doctrinal Agreement With Us?" reveals what happens when a proper tension is not

⁴Francis Shaffer: "Christianity Today"; April 10, 1981; p. 29

⁵ibid; p. 29

⁶CLC Directory; p. 2

maintained between the confessional and the ecumenical. Approached from the confessional position it was difficult to "admit" that there are Christians in other denominations lest we negate our confessional position and principles. In our concern for confessionalism, we may lose sight of the ecumenical nature of Christ's Church and the power of the Gospel.

Even as we realize that by our confessional principles we are not defining the Holy Christian Church as our little group, do we communicate this to those outside our fellowship? In our non-confessional age, the avoiding of Romans 16:16-17 is seen as a judgment upon another's personal faith. This is a perception that we need to be sensitive about. When our bulletin reads: "We believe that participation in communion is based on a oneness of faith," the person perceives that we are denying him the Lord's Supper because he is not a believer. Should we not clearly communicate that close communion is based upon a oneness of belief and teaching? Many times a confessional action that we view as a non-participation based upon a lack of doctrinal unity is seen as a denial that the person is a Christian. Our ecumenical age concludes that fellowship is based upon faith in Jesus Christ. Let us clearly communicate the fact that fellowship is based upon an attitude toward the Word of God.

As a personal, historical judgment, I would agree with Pastor M.J. Witt that one reason WELS found it difficult to terminate fellowship with the Missouri Synod is that they saw this as an action on the level of excommunication i.e. the members of the Missouri Synod were no longer Christians. This was reflected in their postponing of the termination of fellowship until they could extricate the true believers in the Missouri Synod.

Secondly, there is the danger that confessionalism becomes an end in itself. If we lose sight of the ecumenical nature of the Church and the power of the Gospel, confessionalism becomes empty Pharisaism. There develops the conviction that confessionalism will safeguard the Gospel and the Word of the living God. It is interesting to note that the golden age of confessionalism (16th and 17th centuries) became the age of dead orthodoxy. Confessionalism dare never be divorced from the power and spirit of the Gospel. And the Gospel dare never be subordinated to confessionalism.

The mark of a sect is that its existence centers around one particular doctrine or teaching. The Seventh Day Adventist defines a true Christian in terms of the keeping of the Old Testament Sabbath. The hard-shell Baptist defines a Christian in terms of not smoking and drinking. The Pentecostal or Evangelical defines a Christian in terms of a religious experience or new life-style. It is very easy for us to define a Christian in terms of church-fellowship. Early in my ministry a devout lady from the ALC remarked that whereas in the ALC she had heard nothing of confessional fellowship now she seemed to hear nothing but fellowship. And she was right.

Thirdly, a stress on confessionalism without an ecumenical balance can become loveless in its treatment of other people. Too often confessionalism degenerates into proving that I'm right and you're wrong. Especially in the heat of controversy, when confessional action is called for, love goes right out the window. Church bodies and individuals have proven that it is very difficult to be confessional and at the same time exhibit Christian love. Some of the bitterest battles are fought among those who are closest in confessional position. Without Christian sobriety and fear, it is possible to be confessionally right and still be wrong. Francis Shaffer observed within the Presbyterian Church this sad fact: "Christ's command to love one another was destroyed. What was left was frequently a turning inward, a self-righteousness, a hardness. The impression often was left that coming out had made those who did so so right that anything could be excused. Having learned such bad habits, they later treated each other badly when the resulting new groups had minor differences among themselves."⁷

A confessional position which is accompanied by hatred and lovelessness is counter productive to the Gospel and self-destructive. Our fellowship principles need to be put into action in the perspective of Christ's command to love one another. To do less is in itself to deny Christ. This love is a mark of our Christianity before the world. As Francis Shaffer reminds us we stand "before a watching world, before a watching church, before our children, before the watching angels, and before the face of the Lord Himself."⁸ All too often the picture is not very pretty.

Fourthly, confessionalism carries with it the dangers of spiritual pride. It becomes very easy to transfer our trust in Jesus to our confessions. This misplaced pride was seen in the Missouri Synod's attempt to prove that it was the true visible church. Dr. Walther in his book The True Visible Church sought to prove that the Lutheran Church is God's true visible church on earth. This brought him to the following conclusion contained in his last thesis (XXV): "In short, the Evangelical Lutheran Church has all the essential marks of the true visible church of God on earth, as they are found in no other denomination of another name; it is therefore in no need of reformation."⁹ This view within the Missouri Synod may have led to its downfall as a confessional church.

Perhaps we carry the excess baggage of scholastic confessionalism which believed that man's reason was able to capture the truths of God's Word in perfect propositional statements. We realize in our lives that we are simultaneously saint and sinner. Must we not con-

⁷ibid; p. 28-29

⁸ibid; p. 31

⁹C.F.W. Walther: The True Visible Church; p. 134

fess that also in our theology we are simultaneously saint and sinner. Our theology and confessions are only perfect when viewed through the merits of Jesus Christ. While we recognize that the Word of God is perfect, do we dare claim dogmatical or doctrinal perfection for ourselves? In theology as well as in life pride is a deadly sin. And confessional pride is a deadly virus.

D. The Solution

What makes this subject so difficult is that we are talking about a spirit, an attitude, about the very spirit of the Gospel. The proper balance between confessionalism and ecumenicism is impossible for the flesh. The proper balance is entirely a work of the Holy Spirit and a Spirit-wrought fruit of faith. This sobriety is worked through the Gospel of the unconditional forgiveness of sins. This spirit comes to us through the Scriptures, the words of the living God. We rest secure in God's promise that His Word will not return unto Him void, but that it will accomplish His purposes. The Holy Spirit, alone, will maintain the proper sobriety or balance in our lives.

This paper was assigned with the intent of spiritual introspection and repentance. We need to be aware of the dangers around us. We live in the age of ecumenicism which seeks to destroy the very authority of Scripture. On the other hand, as a confessional church body we need to recognize the dangers which stare us in the face. We need to recognize our own weaknesses and failings as we seek God's promised blessing and rejoice in the salvation He has provided for us in Jesus Christ.

It is heartening to observe the grace of God as past generations maintained the correct balance between confessionalism and ecumenicism. We see this in the three so-called ecumenical creeds: the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. These creeds were written as a confession of the truth in response to error. And yet they breathe a true ecumenical spirit. The spirit of these creeds is a true evangelical, Gospel-centered spirit.

We also note this balance in the Lutheran Confessions. On the one hand they exhibit a remarkable faithfulness to the Scriptures. On the other hand they also represent a truly ecumenical spirit. Perhaps none of the Lutheran Confessions succeeds in this quite like Luther's Small Catechism. It is a miracle of the Spirit that Luther with his polemical nature and in the heat of controversy could write a document that communicates a positive, Gospel-spirit as it presents the truths of Holy Scripture. "Here is ecumenicism at its very best!"¹⁰

¹⁰Paul F. Nolting: "The Book of Concord and Ecumenism"; Journal of Theology; Vol. 19, #4; p.24

This ecumenical spirit is also exhibited in the other Lutheran Confessions especially in the Augsburg Confession. In this confession the Lutherans sought to establish that they were not a new sect. They carefully established their connection with Christ's Church through the ages. The Augsburg Confession emphasizes the ecumenical nature of the Lutheran faith. The Lutheran Confessions while clearly confessing the truth do not degenerate into narrow, partisan or shrill confession of the "Lutheran" faith. They are faithful witnesses to God's Word as confessed through the centuries.

May we be found true to this heritage as we seek to be by the grace of God both ecumenical and confessional.