Our Common Confession and Its Implications for Today

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Editorial Note: At its recent Fourth World Assembly in Uppsala, Sweden the World Council of Churches featured three speakers from three worldwide sectors of Christendom that do not, at present, hold membership in the WCC: one from the Roman Catholic Church, one from the Pentecostalist churches of the world, and the present author, who spoke, though unofficially, as a member of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. His address, here published by kind permission of the World Council of Churches, appears also as an appendix in the official *Uppsala Report*.

You have kindly invited me, your grateful guest, to speak of our common confession and its implications for today. Permit me to celebrate with you just four such implications. (Of course there are more.) Our common confession – that is the confession of the Christian church – is (1) revolutionary; (2) it is corporate; (3) it is God's own; (4) it is world conditioned.

(1) OUR COMMON CONFESSION IS REVOLUTIONARY

a. What is it that our confession, or rather the God we confess, is revolutionizing? What is He overturning and replacing? Our

sin with His righteousness? Yes, but not only that. Our old world with His new world? That too, but not only that. The tyrants and principalities of this age with His new age? Not even only that. What He is replacing is His *own* old order – old, yet truly His. And what He is replacing it with is His own new order. And what He is replacing it with is His own new order. The old order, because it is His, is ultimate. "For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). But because this old order, though His, is not His new order, it is only penultimate, His word of reconciliation, not His word of judgment, is His last word. Yet the word of judgment is still His. What He saves us from, finally, is Himself. No revolution is more radical than that.

b. What is it about the new order that is new? Does "new" mean up-to-date, keeping with the times or ahead of the times, futuristic rather than traditional? Is "new" opposed to "old" as "recent" as opposed to "ancient"? That is an important half-truth, still only a half-truth. To absolutize mere temporal change, as the novelty-mongers do, is to idolize the god Chronos. They commit the Chronic Fallacy. They content themselves with one word: You have heard what was said to them of old time, but we say to you. Or: We thank You, Lord, that we are not as other men were. They may be ecumenical geographically, but distrusting anything over thirty, they are chronologically sectarian. The only one worse than the novelty-monger is the reactionary. His god, too, is change, which he worships by fearing. The warning by Karl Barth (here slightly amended) is still in place: The novelty-monger is probably wrong but has at least a chance of being right; the reactionary is always wrong. With both of them, though, what is worse is not their idolatry. Rather they mislocate the New. For that reason they are both old. The New does not come simply with historical

change. It is too revolutionary for that. But that is why it can take the most drastic changes in stride and can initiate a few of its own.

c. Old and new are not only chronological. They are also, shall we say, biological. New is to old as life is to death. Here "old" is the idiom of the pathologist, the mortician. Both are the doing of God, death as well as life. He is the "I" who makes "all things new" (Rev. 21:5), whose "new" is "life" (v.6). But alas, He is likewise the One who makes the opposite, "death" (v.8). So death, as no modern nihilist doubts, comes with the highest authority. Yet not quite the highest. For the dying and living that are most the doing of God are His own: the dying He did in Jesus His Son, and the resurrection by which He outlived it. It isn't that God is dead, or ever will be. But His own reign, His old reign, is – "for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1)

d. There, if you will pardon the pun, is the crux of the matter, the turning point of the revolution. There, not in some remote heaven or in some apocalyptic vision but in the flesh and fullness of time, as temporally and biologically as could be, God suffered His own mortal criticism. He suffered it out of existence. Into this off-limits world, "under the curse," He came. He fraternized with the enemy, a friend of sinners, and still does, revolutionizing His judgment into forgiveness, death into life, Revolution that is, not only revelation. This is no mere charade for human eyes of some timeless truth which has prevailed all along. It is the achievement of that truth historically. The Eastern church was reluctant to canonize the Book of Revelation. So were some of our dearest fathers in the West, since the book seemed neglectful of the historic Christ. But they made the most of it, finding Him even in the apocalyptic Michael, the "Who-is-like-God" (12:7). And sure enough, on second glance, the One who sits on the throne and

makes all things new rules side by side with “the Lamb.” And when He here announces, “It is done!” (21:6), He only confirms what was said on a hill called The Skull outside the walls of Jerusalem: “It is finished” (John 19:30). To conclude, as the seer does, with “Come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20) is to agitate for a most earthly revolution. Do we do less when we pray God that His “will [not His “earthly” will but His “heavenly” will] be done *on earth*,” asking Him in effect to improve on His rule of the world? And would we be far off if we translated the Second Petition “Thy revolution come,” remembering whose prayer it is? (Matt.6:10)

e. Still, it is not enough that this revolution in Christ is there. Our churches need reminding that that is what it is. Many of them, not least the confessional churches, seem often to suffer from an inferiority complex. Surrounded by an age of change, they hold the line, loyally but still somehow apologetically. In fact, they are sitting on the most revolutionary change of all. Where else in the world is it the reconciler – not the compromiser but also not the gap-monger, but the reconciler – who is the true revolutionary? Neither of course is it enough simply to dignify whatever the churches happen to be doing by the “in” word “revolutionary,” as cheap apologetic. God’s trumping His own criticism by His mercy, in His cross, and henceforth in His Word, is revolution indeed. If it isn’t, nothing is.

(2) OUR COMMON CONFESSION IS CORPORATE

a. Is our confession the confession of Christians? Yes, but not of individual Christians alone, of this believer and that. Nor is it the confession merely of all Christians added end to end, in the aggregate. Much less is it the confession of particular

churches or presbyteries or synods. It is the confession rather of the one body of Christ. And that body, being one, is more than the sum of its parts. It is not a sum-total but a one-total, not merely an accumulation but an organic whole. For many of us, particularly for our churches in the West, this truth of the one body bodying forth in one common confession has become a forgotten truth – so forgotten, in fact, that we find it well nigh inconceivable except as a theological abstraction or as preacher-talk. But the corporateness of our confession is no abstraction. True, to discern – to divine – in that confession the one body of Christ does require the eyes and ears of faith. But the confession itself, in which the one church is ever so concretely embodied, is altogether visible and audible to everyone.

b. The corporate confession is trans-personal. Or suprapersonal. Not that persons aren't needed to speak the confession or to act it out. They are. How else would it be confessed? Still, what is it that identifies their confession as Christian? Is it that they themselves, personally, are Christians? That of course is no small concern. For it is at least conceivable that the faith may be confessed, sung, prayed, celebrated sacramentally, theologized, subscribed to, pantomimed in works of love – the very faith of the Christian church! – by men who personally disbelieve it or misconstrue it. It is hardly beyond imagining that I, who am now rehearsing our common confession, am not myself a Christian. Yet whatever Christian substance there might still be in my words you can feel free to share as the Christian faith, in spite of me. Really though, it is not this ugly possibility (its name is hypocrisy) which interests us. Our interest rather – indeed, our delight – is this: In that confession of Christ which every Christian does, and in the most various ways, he knows he is joined by one holy Christianhood in all times and places. And that not because of how spiritual he

himself may be but because of what, because of whom, he confesses. Wherever the confession is Christian, however unlikely its bearers, we are all its sharers.

c. Whoever it may be, therefore, whatever denomination or congregation or individual, who confesses the Gospel of Christ, speaks for the body as a whole. For that he need not first ask the members' permission. Nor could he, since most of them are inaccessible to him geographically and in time (and many are yet unborn) – even assuming he could tell who the true members are. In speaking for the Head, he speaks for the whole body. Suppose, however, that someone who represents the Christian name should nevertheless defile it by heresy. (That has been known to happen.) Does he also represent the body? Indeed, the body at its worst. For it is that, too. Also for its hirelings it bears common responsibility.

d. Since the confession is corporate, the whole is represented by its parts. When Justin and his pitiful handful of Scillitan martyrs answered the Roman magistrate, "We are Christians," and "We wish to undergo vengeance for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ," for whom all did they speak? Only for the six of them? When 20 years ago some churches gathered at Amsterdam, although they knew they were not as such the Una Sancta, yet confessed, "We are one in Jesus Christ," whose confession was that? Isn't it simultaneously the Una Sancta's? When the Russian church prays "for those who hate and malign us," and the Roman church baptizes in the triune name, and the Church of England chants the psalms, and the helpless in Guatemala or Nigeria or Chicago are helped "in the name of Jesus," and a white congregation in Mississippi or South Africa heeds the costly call of His Spirit – are these deeds done alone? Or also the deeds of their Head – and therefore of His body, one and entire? But what of the horrendous schisms which still divide them? Ah, but for that too they have yet another confession in common: "Forgive us our

trespasses." The "our" extends to the trespasses of all. And so does the forgiveness.

e. How treacherously easy it would be to invoke the very corporateness of the church to rationalize separatism. For after all, if the church is one anyway – and not only invisible but also, here and there, visible – what further need have we of unity? That is the way which God's noblest gifts. They are the most likely to be demonized. However, since criticism is not God's final word, but His promise is, it is His promise finally which unifies His church. And not without the Spirit's empirical encouragements. One such encouragement, of course, is today's ecumenical movement, so apparent in every corner of the church. An additional encouragement, less contemporary and perhaps unexpected, may come from our respective historic traditions, which the ecumenical movement has helped us rediscover. In my own immediate tradition, to cite but one example, over four centuries ago our confessors challenged their posterity to what could have been the boldest sort of ecumenical dialogue. It could still be that. In full view of the empire of their day they invoked on their confession not only the verdict of "God" and of His "Christ" but of "all nations" as well, "of all pious people" and of "future generations" (Apology, Preface 17, 19; Art. XXVIII, 27; Art. IV, 398). In effect, they were opening their books to public audit by the whole church. To quote an expression from this assembly, they recognized that "to be honest before God we must be honest with one another." This too is encouragement, not for my tradition to vindicate its past but to expose itself once again to the whole church under the one Word of God. Other traditions provide similar encouragements. But it is hard to see how such interconfessional exposure can occur without some public, whole-church forum. If in the 16th century the hopes for a "general, free and Christian council" gradually despaired, and then only very reluctantly, that is no

reason not to renew the hopes today. These encouragements, from the past as well as the present, do show promise. That is, they show that promise which our Lord has given for His church's wholeness.

(3) OUR COMMON CONFESSION IS GOD'S OWN

a. The church's confession is God's own, not only because it originates in His Word, nor even because it has His endorsement. That it does. "Everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). Still, before ever we acknowledged God, He acknowledged us. "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3). "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). True, it is we who confess that, but only because it is what God first of all has confessed to us. Our confession, as something we do, is only reflexive, our response to an always prior message from God. However, and this is the point, that prior Word from God is always implicitly present right without our own response. When we confess, "We believe in God the Father almighty," that is but God's reverse way of saying: "I will be a father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor 6:18; Hos. 1:10; Is. 43:6). Our confession is God's Word meeting itself coming back. For that very reason, however, we claim too little when we say that it is only the public proclamation of God's Word which creates and unites the church, if by proclamation we mean merely a formal, people-directed preaching. All confessing, also by the people – in their liturgy, for example, or their bearing of the cross – already contains God's preconfessional, proclamatory Word. But then neither is it "our common confession" as such that unifies the church, but only that Gospel from God of which our confession is the echo.

b. Too often that Gospel from God has been restricted by a false individualism. It has been needlessly confined to what used to be called “personal salvation.” As a result, this individualistic Gospel had little to say about church, especially in an ecumenical age. The misimpression was given that God’s saving and His ecumenizing are two separate operations, as thought He first of all declares this sinner and that sinner forgiven and only subsequently, because of their new resemblance to one another, declares them one. Now there is great truth in all this. It is indeed by God’s forgiveness of men, by his being reconciled to them, by his merciful reevaluation of them, that He restores them. Yet His reevaluation is not only that they are now righteous, each by each, but – *what comes to the same thing* – they are all one. His uniting them is His forgiving them, and visa versa. His previous strictures upon them, His judgment, had not been kept secret in the privacy of the divine anger but had been played out against them in their mutual divisions. That was His doing no less than theirs. But His forgiveness likewise is no far-off thing. As down to earth as His divisive criticism, it invalidates these critical divisions where they are. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). His cross was not to reconcile us first to God and only after that to one another, but rather to “reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (Eph. 2:16). If we are not one, then by that same token we are not forgiven. Being forgiven is being one. For the disinherited of this world, the forlorn, the sectarian, who need to be forgiven by hearing that they are, wouldn’t it be all the same thing to assure them that they are one holy people of God (1 Peter 2:9), one “household of God” (Eph. 2:19), one body with one Head, one faith, one hope, one Baptism, animated by one Spirit (Eph. 4:4-5; 1 Cor. 12-13; Rom. 12:4-5)? And isn’t it that confession, because it is God’s

forgiveness which forgives the church into unity?

(4) OUR COMMON CONFESSION IS WORLD CONDITIONED

a. Ordinarily when the church's confession is conditioned by the world, that is thought to be cause for regret. But that may also be cause for joy. For the world, not only the church but the world, is God's. Isn't that finally why we abjure all neat bifurcations of church and world: not only because the church is in the world or the world is in the church, but ultimately because operative in both of them is the same God? True, His function in the world, also in His worldly church, is a critical one (*krima, krinein*). Yet that is not His final function. The church of Christ must see to that. The church is the world in process, from under the divine criticism into the joy of His love. Here His worldly law, if I may call it that, is being sublimated to higher service, domesticated to the humbler role of "our custodian until Christ came" (Gal. 3:24). The selfsame God of church and world does not conduct the two in isolation, ambidextrously, as though His right hand didn't know what His left hand was doing. But then neither dare His church – that sector of history where His world is to come of age, the "new age" – ignore what in the world He is doing. How else but in closest identification with that moving world will the church join purpose to purpose, transmitting tragedy into joy?

b. From this ambitious standpoint there is no reason to boggle at the suggestion that "the world help write the agenda for the church." What have we to fear? I am sure, of course, that that motto may be quoted out of context by critics who may wish to make trouble. But even their criticism (which ought not automatically be equated with God's) need not be feared, not when the agenda which the world helps write belongs to the

church of Jesus our Lord. And where His Spirit of Pentecost still emboldens the church, why not (as the suggestion is also being made) invite into the very strategy sessions of the church also those dear worldlings whose pleas we must heed? And need we restrict their advice only to our medical work or our social action? Haven't they an interest as well, sooner or later, even in our evangelism and proclamation of the Gospel? They are free, of course, to decline our invitation. And it is only fair that we admit from the outset what predatory designs of love we have on them, and that the church fully intends to stay in business as the world's happy subversive. But for such godly goals as the "development of peoples" and a "new humanity," about which our Gospel has some ideas of its own, we are not above being advised.

c. Finally, as the church goes about absorbing into the surpassing cross of Christ the world's guilt and suffering, it absorbs yet another thing from the world: its contradictions. It absorbs them, as it has reason to, into The Higher Laughter. This is that holiest humor for which the world is so sorely ready: not only the scornful humor of Him who sits in the heavens and laughs and holds them in derision (Ps. 2:4) but, beyond that, His laughing away all tears from their eyes by His eternal Easter. The church can be, even now, that one locale in which the world hears the last and kindliest laugh. For, speaking of contradictions, who has more of them than the churches? The WCC, as you know better than I, is no exception. As Edmond Schlink once said: "The World Council of Churches is probably the most paradoxical organization in the history of the Church," and he proceeded to document his thesis. But that humor by which the church triumphs requires more than paradoxes. As Schlink went on to say: "The WCC can exist with these paradoxes only so long as it does not make them a permanent fixture, but must…press on toward the Coming of Christ who will gather and

judge his flock.” And that – that gathering, coming Christ – is finally the secret of our earth-shaking laughter. Here is humor enough for the world, and not for this world alone.

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