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## CONFESSING AT AUGSBURG: A MODEL FOR CONTEMPORARY EVANGELISTIC AND ECUMENICAL WITNESS

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*Robert Kolb*

The most ecumenical of the confessions of the Protestant Churches, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, bears the name of the capital city of the German state in which it was written. The Reformation was introduced into the Palatinate in 1546, the year of Luther's death, and soon that region became a veritable battleground for various and contending evangelical views. Looking for advice, Frederick III, the wise prince who became elector of this important principality in 1559, called upon a native son of the Palatinate, Philip Melancthon, for assistance. Melancthon counseled biblical simplicity, moderation, and peace as the gains of reform were being consolidated, and warned against extremes and scholastic subtleties in theological position. After a quarrel between two representatives of the Lutheran and Reformed parties at the altar of the Church of the Holy Spirit in Heidelberg, Frederick ordered a catechism to be written in an attempt to bring the people together.

The men chosen for this important task were Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus, then twenty-eight and twenty-six years of age. Ursinus had been trained by Melancthon and was a professor of theology at Heidelberg. Olevianus was a gifted biblical preacher. . . . To Olevianus was given the responsibility for a final revision and translation into German. A man of eloquence, he was one "in whom imagination and pathos combined to clothe the logic of religion with beauty as well as power."

FROM THE FOREWORD TO *THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM* (1962)  
ALLEN O. MILLER, M. EUGENE OSTERHAVEN, ALANDAR KOMJATHY  
AND JAMES I. MCCORD.

Confessions and catechisms not only provide a comprehensive view of Christian faith but they also preserve that faith over time. Churches that recite them, even after the members have lost a vital, living faith, can experience revival later as the younger generation raised in the church grasp these truths.<sup>1</sup>

Three of North America's leading missiologists recently made this observation in their treatment of bringing the Christian faith to the adherents of "folk religions" at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Their statement reminds us of the enduring significance of these two related genre of Christian witness and instruction. Although the terms "catechism" and "confession of faith" were used in the ancient church, they became terms for written documents for the first time in the early years of the age of printing, that is, in the first third of the sixteenth century. Only since 1536 has the word "confession" been used in English to designate "a formulary in which a church or body of Christians sets forth the religious doctrines which it considers essential; a creed."<sup>2</sup> What are the origins of the concept, "confession of the faith," in the form of a document, an extended creed which summarizes biblical teaching? How did the literary form of the confession develop in Christian churches? Why do Christians still find them important and critical for the life of the church today?

The apostle Paul recognized the inevitable connection

between trusting in Jesus Christ and confessing him so that others might hear his Word and come to believe in him (Romans 10:10-17). Christians in all ages have confessed their faith and given witness to Christ. Yet the term "confession" has undergone a significant development in its usage over the centuries. Since the Reformation of the sixteenth century it has been used as a designation for formal statements of the content of the Christian faith, expressions of common Christian belief that summarize the biblical message for public use in the church. In 1530, in the south German city of Augsburg, "confession" became a synonym for "creed."

In the spring of 1530 Emperor Charles V issued a demand that the followers of Martin Luther among the governing princes and city councils of Germany justify the reform efforts they had undertaken in the previous decade. Luther, who had been excommunicated by Pope Leo X and outlawed by the Emperor nine years earlier, could not attend the imperial assembly without threat of arrest and execution at the stake. His colleague at the University of Wittenberg, Philip Melanchthon, was commissioned to lead a team in the preparation of an explanation of the measures introduced to abolish abuses and restore proper Christian practice to the churches in the "Lutheran" territories.

When Melanchthon arrived in Augsburg in May 1530, he was greeted with a new publication by one of the leading Roman Catholic opponents of the Wittenberg call for reform, John Eck. A critic of the Wittenberg reform movement for over a decade, this professor from the University of Ingolstadt had assembled 404 articles—brief theological statements—demonstrating that the Wittenbergers and a wide variety of others who were raising their critique of the Roman church had diverged from the tradition of Christendom.<sup>3</sup> His charge of heresy undercut the claim of Luther and his colleagues that they were teaching the biblical mes-

sage in accord with the ancient rule of faith (in Latin, *analogia fidei*; in English "the analogy of faith"), as it had been handed down by faithful teachers of the church. Melanchthon recognized that he would have to compose a different kind of explanation or justification of Lutheran reform than he had originally planned.

At first his working draft of this explanation was titled an *apologia*, that is, a defense of the Lutheran position. As he worked on the document, he changed the title to *confessio*, a confession of faith.<sup>4</sup> In this text Melanchthon set forth the "confession" of the biblical message held by the followers of Luther in twenty-one articles of the faith, together with seven articles regarding reform measures introduced by the Lutheran reformers. In the earliest historical reports regarding its composition and presentation, the term "Augsburg Confession" designated not merely Melanchthon's text but also the entire action of formulating it, presenting it, explaining it, and seeking agreement with his Roman Catholic adversaries on the basis of it.<sup>5</sup> This document is the enduring record of that activity of giving witness to Christ. It was designed to animate the people of God in subsequent times and situations to acts of confessing Christ, and it has served ever since to guide such witness within the body of Christ and to those outside it.

Within days of Melanchthon's presentation, four cities in south Germany offered their own "confession" to the emperor, the *Confessio Tetrapolitana*.<sup>6</sup> Within a few years others working for the reform of the church produced confessions, e.g., that of the city of Basel in 1534 and that of a group of Swiss churches, the *First Helvetic Confession of 1536*, composed to present the teaching of these churches at the papally-called council.<sup>7</sup> The term was employed not only for official statements of the churches of cities and principalities. Individual theologians and lay people published their own confessions during the sixteenth century,<sup>8</sup>

and in 1528 a group of German Anabaptists composed a similar statement of faith, the *Schleitheim Articles* (titled a "confession" only much later).<sup>9</sup>

These confessions, and many others that followed, resembled Melanchthon's work in a number of ways. The Wittenberg professor had combined certain historic modes of expressing biblical teaching with the methods of the educational reform movement often labeled "biblical humanism." From the time of the ancient church Christians had assembled in councils bringing together representatives of the local churches of a number of provinces or lands. In these councils or synods theologians addressed critical doctrinal debates of the time and formulated solutions to pressing problems in the teaching or practice of the church. Individual teachers of the church also composed overviews and surveys of biblical teaching, such as *On the Orthodox Faith* by John of Damascus. Peter Lombard constructed a review of differing views of the fundamental topics of Christian doctrine in his *Sententiae*.

In Augsburg, lay people—rulers of princedoms and cities, not theologians, confessed their faith (though their theological advisors composed the text of their confession). This public profession took place not in a council of the church but in the halls of Congress, in the vicinity of the most influential banking houses of the empire, in the middle of public life. On June 25 the Saxon chancellor Christian Beyer stood before the assembly of the Holy Roman Empire's leaders and read the Lutherans' statement of faith with a voice loud enough to carry the confession through the open windows and to the crowds in the streets outside. *Confession of Christ* had claimed its place in the midst of the hurly-burly of daily living.

Melanchthon wanted to set forth a clear testimony of the biblical truth, and he did so, both to shape and cultivate the faith of hearers or readers of his confession and to

call fellow Christians to unity around this confession of the faith. He therefore formulated something less than a complete treatment of all biblical teaching. (He set forth a more complete overview and summary in his famous textbook of Christian teaching, *Theological Topics* [*Loci communes theologici*], which he had first published nine years earlier and would go on to revise in 1535 and subsequent years). In his confession Melanchthon offered an overview of basic biblical teaching with particular attention to those issues which were dividing the churches of his day.

His confession was not designed to go beyond Scripture but rather to retell and repeat its message in a form which addressed the contemporary problems of the church. Melanchthon intended to translate God's Word across the cultural boundaries that separated ancient Israel and Jesus' Palestine from sixteenth-century Germany. As a biblical humanist, Melanchthon always sought to go back to the sources, to refresh them for use by his hearers and readers. That is what his confession was designed to do: to tap the life-giving waters of Scripture for the spiritually thirsty of his time.

The Wittenberg professor expressed his confession in a rhetorical form employed by the teachers of that era for communicating ideas effectively to readers and hearers, the method of organizing topics or "commonplaces." Melanchthon, a leading communication theorist of the period, had contributed extensively to the development of the topical form of analyzing any and every subject, including the teaching of the Bible. These topics contained definitions of the subject matter and often supporting materials or examples from ancient authors, authorities of one age or another. In the *Augsburg Confession* Bible passages and occasional references to the ideas of ancient teachers of the church were used to explain and support the summaries of Christian doctrine. Standard in this approach was also a clear

demarcation of false opinions regarding the topic. Melanchthon made clear to readers of his princes' *Confession* that the heresies which the church had previously rejected stood in opposition to God's revelation of the truth.

Melanchthon conceived of his topics in terms used by the medieval church: as articles or "members" of a larger "body" of doctrine. Individual elements of biblical teaching were not regarded as pearls of equal worth on a chain. The Wittenberg professor saw the topics of God's revelation as interrelated parts of one integral whole. All parts had to function together for the body to enjoy good health, for the whole of the confession of Jesus Christ is larger than the sum of its individual aspects. Biblical teaching was of one seamless piece, and a hole in one corner threatened to grow larger and damage the whole. A ragged garment can still provide warmth, just as the message of Christ's saving love can still be found in flawed presentations of it. But clothes without patches are preferable. The body of doctrine could indeed suffer illness in one part and still provide an overall healthy confession of Christ and his gift of salvation. But, to use the image of the Wittenberg Reformers, the infection of one article or member of the body of teaching can spread the ache to other parts and weaken both torso and limbs. In constructing the *Augsburg Confession* Melanchthon aimed to demonstrate that the call for reform from Wittenberg was a healthy exposition of biblical teaching. He intended to show that the Wittenberg theology adhered to the rule of faith, which the church had mined from biblical treasure throughout the ages.

The biblical humanists believed that words have power, and so they sought to communicate ideas in the most effective forms. The lean and clean *Confession of Augsburg* had no space for rhetorical embellishment, but it did aim at clearly articulated expressions fashioned to move the minds and

hearts of people. For Melanchthon shared Luther's conviction that God uses human language as his tool for restoring the relationship between sinful rebels and himself, as he creates faith through the words of his good news in Jesus Christ. Luther's concept of the "living voice of the gospel" shaped Melanchthon's expectation of what his confession could and would accomplish. He believed that conveying the teaching of Scripture delivered God's power to save to hearers and readers.

Therefore, Melanchthon understood a document which proclaimed God's teaching to be what the Austrian-Swiss Reformation scholar Peter Fraenkel has called a "verbal noun."<sup>10</sup> To write a confession, to believe what a confession contains, involves the author or the reader in the action of the God who speaks his Word through even such a human paraphrase of the Scripture. Those upon whom such a confession makes its claim will inevitably be involved in repeating the confessing of faith. "Having a confession" means echoing it. Confessions of faith are made to be shared, with those outside the faith and with fellow believers. As Melanchthon's work demonstrates, confessions are designed for several reasons: (1) To remind believers of what those who have witnessed to the gospel before them have taught, and to recall them to a fresh recital of the message of Christ; (2) To interpret the biblical message for the current time and situation, so as to lead to clearer understanding of its significance for contemporary proclamation of that message; and (3) To orient formulation of the church's proclamation for future testimony and for the life and practice of the church.

#### TO REMIND AND RECALL

As he prepared to explain the Wittenberg reforms at Augsburg, Melanchthon was conscious that he was being drawn into a long line of confessors of the faith. He was

concerned to make clear to Christians across Europe that the biblical faith confessed by all who adhered to God's Word in Scripture bound them together as brothers and sisters. He did so by grounding the content of his *Confession* in Bible passages and by rejecting the ancient heresies which the church had condemned, particularly those that undermined the biblical doctrine of the Trinity and its teaching regarding the power of God's Word in the sacraments.

Just as an individual's amnesia looses a person from his or her moorings and even changes personality itself, so ecclesiastical amnesia cuts the foundation out from under the contemporary proclamation of the message and sets the church adrift at sea, to be "tossed to and fro by every wind of other teachings." The church's confessions of faith provide anchors for our message, foundations for fresh expressions of the core elements of biblical revelation. These confessions embrace and include us in the larger, historic community of the people of God.

Most Americans claim that they do not want anyone else to "do their thinking for them." In fact, we are more gullible than some other peoples. The media in our culture sweep our minds along with their campaigns to take charge of our thought processes, as well as our checkbooks and credit cards, with great ease. However, Christians do not let others, even trusted fellow Christians "do their believing (their thinking in the faith) for them," but they do treasure the edification that comes from conversations with other believers. Listening to voices from the past in the form of the church's formal confessions of the faith has two advantages. First, we have the privilege and joy of discovering how some fellow disciples of our Lord have presented him in different situations and times. Second, as we use such confessions of faith we share the conviction not only of their original authors and adherents but also of those who have accepted them as a standard of teaching

in the time between their origin and our own time.

Particularly in the face of rampant individualism, believers at the beginning of the twenty-first century need to recall that they belong to the community of faith that the Holy Spirit has created through his Word "in all times and places" where the gospel has been preached. Confessional texts help to rein in arbitrary inclinations to play with God's revelation in Scripture according to our own likings and the pressures of the moment.

#### TO INTERPRET AND LEAD TO UNDERSTANDING

To view an issue as others have viewed it always offers an opportunity to expand our own thinking, a challenge to think in other categories and channels. Confessions not only teach us to understand the jargon of the church—the family language of the children of God—they also give us a glimpse of how other Christians have thought, and why they have handed down to us certain expressions of the faith we have learned from parents, pastors, and Sunday school teachers. Confessions also provide a means of dialog with other believers whose insights arise out of other times and situations.

In addition to this function as a guide and doctrinal conscience, confessions of faith free us from the burden of having to rethink every part of our teaching intensively at all times. When we join our tongues and lips with those of the past and of believers in other parts of our own world, we have a certain liberty, built upon the confidence that the Holy Spirit speaks through those whom he has joined with us in his church. Trusting in the coming of Christ and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, believers let the faith of the ages resound as they adapt the expressions of the biblical message that their predecessors have used to the needs of hearers inside and outside the church in their own day.

Confessors from the past can fire the imaginations of

those faced with different cultural situations but with the same underlying sinful defiance or ignorance of God's Word. Because they are bound in their own times, confessions may not make good reading for the beginning of a person's exploration of the faith. But because they are set in the eternal Word of God, they do provide guidance and insight for believers of all subsequent ages. They prepare believers to deliver the power of God's forgiving and life-restoring Word to others, and in integrating new believers into the community of the faith.

#### TO ORIENT FOR FUTURE TESTIMONY AND LIFE

In composing his confession of faith Melanchthon intended to give witness to God's revelation of his gift of new life in Jesus Christ. In his circumstances his witness sought first of all to summon other Christians back to what he regarded as the biblical writers' way of thinking. But confessing the faith is designed not only to strengthen fellow believers and correct their misapprehensions of God's Word. It is designed to call those yet separated from Christ to trust him and find new life in him.

Believers are always formulating their witness in the tension between "there is nothing new under the sun" and "every day is a fresh gift from the Lord." We are constantly assessing how best to approach people caught in specific culture-bound forms of sin and evil—people who often do not recognize what is evil in their lives—so that we might repeat the biblical message, aiming it at them rather than our own situations and the questions posed by our own experiences.

The historic confessions of faith help contemporary Christians set proper limits and exercise a healthy kind of self-discipline as they attempt to convey the gospel of Jesus Christ to their own cultures. It is not good when every preacher and witness says what is right in his or her own

mind. Confessions provide a beneficial and often invigorating corrective to ideas that just pop into our minds from somewhere, often from current cultural breezes that blow in from non-biblical sources.

Confessions are not constructed to serve as fortresses (even though they may sometimes be misused as such). God is the mighty fortress of his people, and he dwells in the midst of his world through his Word and Spirit. God sends his people into that world in the safety of his promise, presence, and protection. He sends us to risk all for the confession of the faith as we repeat and apply his Word to the times and places to which he calls us. The confessions of the church offer a starting point for the task of considering how to express anew the changeless Word given in Scripture for the situation around us.

Called to confess, we proceed, however small and unworthy we may feel ourselves to be, on the shoulders of those who have confessed before, and particularly on the shoulders of those whose confessions of biblical truth have endured for new use through several ages. Such a confession is that which Melanchthon offered in defense of the Lutheran reformers. We may unite our voices with such confessions, comforted and inspired by knowing how the Spirit has preserved the church in his Word and how he continues to open up new avenues for our proclamation through the power that he has deposited in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

#### Author

Dr. Robert Kolb is professor of systematic theology and director of The Institute for Mission Studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. He is the author of eight books, some of which are *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580*, *For All the Saints*, and *Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the*

*Lutheran Reformation*. He is a contributor to numerous periodicals and has previously contributed to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

### Notes

1. Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religions: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1999), 253.
2. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, third edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 1:395.
3. The text of Eck's 404 *Propositions* in English translation will appear in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*. Edited by Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2001).
4. *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2000), 27-105.
5. Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530-1580* (St. Louis: Missouri: Concordia, 1991), 46-49.
6. *Confessio Tetrapolitana und die Schriften des Jahres 1531* in *Martin Bucers Deutsche Schriften*, volume 3. Edited by Robert Stupperich. (Gütersloh: Mohn, and Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969), 13-185.
7. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*. Edited by E. F. Karl Müller. (Zurich: Theologische Buchhandlung, 1987), 95-100, 101-109.
8. Examples abound, from Luther's own *Confession concerning Christ's Supper of 1528* in *Luther's Works* 37 (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress, 1961), 151-372, to the statement of faith issued by an aging pastor toward the end of the century, *Confessio, das ist: Bekendtnuss Caspar Angelanders, des Blinden Pfarrers, in seinem langwirigen Creutz vnd Elendt* [Confession of Caspar Angelander, the Blind Pastor, in His Many Years under the Cross and in Suffering] (Erfurt: Georg Baumann, 1589).
9. See John C. Wengert, "The Schleithem Confession of Faith," in *Memorandum Quarterly Review* 19 (1945), 243-54.
10. "Revelation and Tradition. Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melancthon," in *Studia theologica* 13 (1959), 97-133.

I often tell my students, theology is for doxology and devotion—that is, the praise of God and the practice of godliness. It should therefore be presented in a way that brings awareness of the divine presence. Theology is at its healthiest when it is consciously under the eye of the God of whom it speaks, and when it is singing to his glory.

JAMES I. PACKER, *CONCISE THEOLOGY* (XII)

When in the early church, from the second century onwards, a man said, "I believe," using the words of what we today know as the *Apostles' Creed* (or one of its earlier forms), he had as a rule the preparatory instruction for baptism behind him. Three questions were put to the second-century candidate for baptism: "Do you believe in God, the Father almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, our Saviour? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, a holy church, and the forgiveness of sins?" If he answered these questions with a threefold "I believe," he was baptized, on this confession of faith, in the name of the triune God to whom the three parts of the creed relate.

WOLFHART PANNENBERG, *THE APOSTLES' CREED IN LIGHT OF TODAY'S QUESTIONS* (1)