

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 1

A. THESES OF AGREEMENT

IX: The Lutheran Confessions

The discussions on the attitude towards the Lutheran Confessions were initiated at the joint meeting of April 24, 1952. On the basis of a statement submitted by Dr Hamann and on the basis of theses drafted by Dr Sasse, the following theses on the Lutheran Confessions were unanimously adopted at the joint meeting on September 25, 1952.

Reviewed July 2001, unedited.

1. With the fathers of the Lutheran Church in Australia, who came to this country as confessors of the biblical truth expressed in the Lutheran Confessions, we solemnly reaffirm as our own confession the Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as they are contained in the Book of Concord.
2. With the Book of Concord we teach that creeds and confessions are necessary for the Church as a means to
 - a. summarize the true doctrine of the Word of God ('compend and brief summary of all the Scriptures', Large Catechism, Preface 18, Trigl. p 573; 'sum of our Christian doctrine', Sol. Declaratio, De comp. regula 11, Trigl. p 855);
 - b. express the common consent ('magnus consensus', C.A.I., Trigl. p 43) not only with the believers of today (Sol. Declar., De comp. regula 1 and 2), but also with the true Church of all ages from the time of the apostles and the ancient creeds to the end of the world (*coram tota ecclesi*, Sol. Declar., closing paragraph, Trigl. p 1103);
 - c. reject error and heresy (Preface to the Book of Concord, especially Trigl. p 19; Epitome, De comp. regula 2 and 3, Trigl. p 777) and thereby fight the devil who tries to destroy the Gospel (Apol. III, 68, Trigl. p 175);
 - d. confess the truth before the world (*coram mundo*, Apol. III, 68; 'before kings', Psalm 119:46, quoted in the title of the C.A.; cf Matt 10:18);
 - e. confess the faith 'in the sight of God' (*in conspectu Dei*) and in view of the last judgment (Sol. Declar., closing paragraph, Trigl. 1103; Luther's Confession of 1528, quoted in Sol. Declar. 29 and 30, Trigl. p 981f).
3. With the Book of Concord (De comp. regula, Epitome, Trigl. pp 777 and 779, Sol. Declar., Trigl. pp 849 and 853f) we make the fundamental distinction between the

Scriptures and the Confessions. Holy Scripture is God's own Word, the Confession the human answer to that Word (cf Matt 16:16; 22:42ff; John 6:68f). The Scriptures are given by inspiration of God and are therefore the only source of Christian doctrine, 'the only rule and standard according to which at once all dogmas and teachers should be esteemed and judged', while the Confessions, like all human writings, even if written with the assistance of the Holy Ghost, 'should be altogether subordinated to them'. They 'are not judges, as are the Holy Scriptures, but only a testimony and declaration of the faith, as to how at any time the Holy Scriptures have been understood and explained in the articles in controversy in the Church of God by those then living, and how the opposite dogma was rejected and condemned' (Trigl. pp 777 and 779). Thus all doctrines of the Confessions have to be examined again and again in the light of Holy Scripture.

4. With the Formula of Concord and the Lutheran Church of all time we accept the Lutheran Confessions, including the three 'Ecumenical Creeds', not only as highly important historical documents, or as necessary and correct doctrinal decisions of the Church in times past, but as dogmatic statements which bind the Church today on account of their pure Scriptural doctrine. While their authority is a secondary one (*norma normata*), derived from the authority of Holy Scripture (*norma normans*), they nevertheless possess real authority as a correct interpretation of Scripture. As the confessors of the Formula of Concord accepted the Unaltered Augsburg Confession 'not because it was composed by our theologians, but because it has been derived from God's Word (*quia e Verbo Domini est desumpta*) and is founded well and firm therein' (Sol. Declar., De comp. regula 5, Trigl. p 8511), so we accept the Lutheran Confessions as a summary and as a correct exposition of the Word of God. We hold that the acceptance of and the subscription to the Confessions in the Lutheran Church must always be made *quia* (because), not *quatenus* (as far as) the Confessions are in agreement with the Word of God.
5. In accepting the Lutheran Confessions we accept all doctrines taught therein on the basis of God's Word, both in thesis and antithesis, whether they are solemnly proclaimed as dogma of the Church (e.g. by the formula: 'We believe, teach, and confess') or not. As the confessors of the Formula of Concord saw in the various Confessions, which they accepted, the summary of the Christian doctrine, so we find in the various writings and articles of the Book of Concord the doctrine of the Lutheran Church, that is, the doctrine of the Gospel in its various aspects. Just as Jesus Christ is the centre and content of Holy Scripture, so the article on justification by faith in Christ is the soul of the Confessions. Every single article points to the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* (the article by which the Church stands or falls, because 'of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered'; Smalc. Art. II, 5, Trigl. p 461) and is therefore a witness to the Christ of the Bible.
6. We do not regard as belonging to the doctrinal content of the Confessions matters that lie on the plane of human knowledge, learning, science, and philosophy; these do not touch the doctrine of Holy Writ. Nor is the confessional obligation violated when doubt is expressed whether, in the case of some Scripture passage used as a proof-text in support of a doctrine, the intended meaning has been adequately grasped and applied. To regard the Confessions as correct interpretation of Holy Scripture does not imply that in every case the understanding of a Scripture passage is to be recognized as sufficient and final.
7. In interpreting the Confessions we regard as the standard text in each case the original and official text, i.e. in the case of the Augsburg Confession the German and the Latin text, the Latin text of the Apology and the Tractatus, and the German text of all other writings. The early translations included in the Book of Concord are to be valued as important commentaries, but otherwise they have no authority.

8. Together with the positive doctrine of the Confessions we accept the 'condemnations', i.e. censures and rejections of errors and heresies. According to the authoritative explanation of the Book of Concord (Preface, Trigl. p 19f; Sol. Declar., De comp. regula, 14ff, Trigl. p 857ff) the condemnations do not mean that true believers and therefore the Church of Jesus Christ are found only in the Lutheran Church. They mean that false doctrine is rejected and that no church fellowship can exist with those who consciously and persistently hold such doctrines. Among these doctrines the denial of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar is especially mentioned. Loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions includes the practical application of these principles in the life of the Church.
9. Although we accept the Book of Concord as the Confession of the Lutheran Church, we recognize that there are Lutheran Christians or Churches who have not officially accepted the whole Book of Concord. Churches which have never accepted the Formula of Concord are to be regarded as Lutheran as long as they faithfully subscribe to and uphold the other Lutheran Confessions, for it is possible to be a Lutheran without having accepted the Formula of Concord, but not if rejecting it. We recognize that for laymen, especially for simple Christians and children, the Small Catechism is the simplest summary of the Lutheran faith. Besides the Catechism, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, whose main articles can be understood by every adult Christian, must be the confessional basis of every congregation which claims to be Lutheran. The Young Churches on the mission field may find it necessary to make a new formulation of the Lutheran doctrine. This is possible, provided that the doctrine remains the doctrine of the Confessions of the sixteenth century, because they need the doctrine contained in the Confessions, especially in the Catechism and in the main articles of the Augsburg Confession, in whatever form this doctrine may be presented. The Lutheran Church in future may be obliged to formulate new confessional statements on subjects or about questions which may arise in the course of history. Such new confessions will be Lutheran only if they reaffirm and presuppose the doctrine contained in the Book of Concord, just as the Augsburg Confession confirmed the Ecumenical Creeds, and the Formula of Concord reaffirmed the older Lutheran Confessions.
10. In accepting the Confessions as our confession, i.e. as the expression of what 'we believe, teach, and confess' today, we recognize the duty of the Church, its pastors and congregations constantly to use the Confessions as a guide into the riches of Holy Scripture and to be a truly confessing Church, as our Lord wants us to be (Matt 10:32). For sin and error will continue, and with them will continue the obligation of the Church to confess in living faith Christ and all His Word in the face of opposing error, until He Himself will confess before His Father in heaven those who have confessed Him on earth.