

The Confession of Faith

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The author of these pages remembers from his student days, those happy years shortly before World War I, when Protestantism had succeeded in getting rid of the dogma of the Church. "Not the Son, but the Father belongs to the Gospel as Jesus has proclaimed it." This was Harnack's great discovery. The dogma of the Triune God and of the God-Man Jesus Christ was regarded as a product of the Greek mind in the Church. These doctrines were necessary for the preservation of the Gospel in the Ancient World. The Greeks had lent their philosophy to the Church, just as the Romans had put their gift of administration and organization into the service of the Gospel. These were temporary necessities, still of great importance to the Middle Ages which had taken over the heritage of the ancient culture. But it was a misunderstanding if the Reformers kept the ancient dogma. The Gospel no longer needs these obsolete means of defence. On the contrary, they have become a hindrance to its true understanding. Christianity is essentially not a dogmatic religion. This view corresponded with the popular conviction that the dogma was a straight-jacket that hindered the free development of true religion, an invention of priests, a product of human speculation on mysteries which essentially are incomprehensible to the human mind. The man in the street who dislikes anything that goes beyond the narrow horizon of his pure or poor reason felt justified by the great discovery that one can be a good Christian without accepting the Christology of the Church.

The great scholars of that age themselves felt sometimes that something was wrong with their theology. There were moments when they were aware of their tragedy. Harnack was sometimes quite upset by the use liberal pastors and laymen made of his thoughts. Friedrich von Hugel felt the tragedy in the life of his great friend Troeltsch. The crisis of liberal theology, or rather of that "historism" in theology which was one of the great topics if not the real theme of Troeltsch's thought, became manifest in the pathetic life of Albert Schweitzer. He spoke the last word in an era of Protestant theology in the famous conclusion of his "The Quest of the Historical Jesus." The names once given to Jesus, in the terms of late Judaism, such as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, he states, have become historical symbols to us. By referring these titles to Himself he indicated that He thought of Himself as a commander, a ruler. We do not find a name that would express to us what he really is. "As one unknown and nameless He comes to us, just as on the shore of the lake He approached those men who knew not who He was. His words are the same: 'Follow thou me!' and he puts us to the tasks which He has to carry out in our age. He commands. And to those who

obey, be they wise or simple, He will reveal Himself through all that they are privileged to experience in His fellowship, of peace and activity, of struggle and suffering, *till they come to know*, as an inexpressible secret, *who he is...*" (A. Schweitzer, "My Life and Thought. An Autobiography." Transl. by C. T. Champion. London, 1933, p. 71f.). This is the key to the understanding of the great turn in Schweitzer's life. The great historical theology had spoken its last word on Jesus. This great man drew the conclusion. There is no human greatness without consistency.

I

In silent obedience to the call of that mighty ruler, Schweitzer hoped to reach that understanding of the secret of Jesus which historical research could not give him. Has he reached his aim? We cannot know. This is a secret between him and his master which we must not try to investigate. "Secretum meum mihi." One thing, however, we must state. Schweitzer's thinking in so many fields of learning has not led to a new theology, and theology always includes Christology. What we read in his philosophical books, and especially in his ethical writings where his thought comes sometimes nearer to Indian thought than to the New Testament ethics, shows that, whatever he may have come to know of the mystery of Jesus, has remained inexpressible, as he had predicted.

Why is that so? It is strange that a New Testament scholar of Schweitzer's rank has never seen that according to the Gospels discipleship is never silent obedience only. Human curiosity has not asked the question who this Jesus is. It was our Lord Himself who asked his disciples: "Whom do men say that I am?" "Whom say ye that I am?" (Mark 8:27ff) and who put the question to His adversaries: "What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?" (Matth. 22:42). Men are not responsible for the Christology. Christ Himself has created it by claiming to be what He is, by demanding from men a clear statement as to whether they accept His claim. It is generally acknowledged today by New Testament scholarship that not only the Father, but also the Son belongs to the Gospel as Jesus has proclaimed it. The names "Messiah", "Son of Man", "Son of God" were to him not only symbols denoting an inexpressible fact, but titles that exactly expressed His dignity. He claimed to be the fulfilment of what the Old Testament had prophesied concerning the Messiah, the Servant of God, the Son of Man. One can accept or reject that claim just as did the witnesses of His earthly life. One can regard it as blasphemy as the High Priest did when Jesus made His "good confession (kalen homologian) before many witnesses" (1 Tim. 6:13, cp. Matth. 26:63f. and parr.). One can regard Him as possessed of the devil (Mark 3:22 parr.) as the scribes did, or, with modern scribes, as a psychiatric case. One can accept in simple childlike faith His claim as His disciples did. Whatever attitude men may take, they have to answer the question who He was. This belongs to the mystery of His person. Wherever a man is confronted with Jesus he cannot avoid answering the question, "who is He?" Buddha or Mohammed do not ask this question. Jesus does it. Even His bitterest enemies have to answer it.

II

“Thou art the Christ” (Mark 9:29). This was the answer which Simon Peter gave to the question of his Lord. It was the first confession made by Simon, the spokesman of the Twelve, on their behalf, on behalf of the future church. A personal beatitude is spoken to the first confessor (Matth. 16:17): “Blessed art thou Simon Bar Jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” This answer is not the result of human thinking. It is given by God.

Thus the confession of faith is the answer to the question which Jesus puts to man, either directly, or as a question implicitly contained in the Gospel. All creeds and confessions of Christendom are meant to be essentially a repetition and continuation of the confession that Jesus is the Christ. This first confession needed clarification and enlargement as soon as it was no longer understood properly. There were Christians of Jewish background who would accept Jesus as Christ, as the Messiah, but who thought of Him as a man who had become Son of God by adoption. Thus very early, probably in Antioch before Paul, Hellenistic Christianity confessed Him as “Kyrios”, using this Greek word to render the Aramaic “mar”. Thus the “maranatha” of the Aramaic speaking church which is still preserved in 1 Cor. 16:22 became “erchou kyrie Iesou”, as we find it Rev. 22:20. “Kyrios” is “the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:9), God’s own name. It is wrong to understand “kyrios” as meaning less than “theos”. “Kyrios” is the translation of Yahve in the Greek Bible. It means, as also “kyrios” means in the pagan mystery religions, “God in his revelation”. In this sense the words “theos” and “kyrios” must be understood also in 1 Cor. 8:6 where Paul interprets the “heis theos” of the Jewish Creed, the schemah of Deut. 6:4 in the Christian sense. To call Christ “Lord” means to apply to Him the Holy name of God in the Old Testament, as he Himself in the Fourth Gospel uses the “Ego eimi”, “I am”, hinting at Ex. 3:14. “Kyrios Iesous Christos”, Jesus Christ is Lord, is the second stage of the Christian confession. He who calls Him Lord says no less than what the later Creed says of Him: “God from God, light from light, very God from very God.”

III

The confession is the answer to the question of Jesus, who He is. Who gives that answer? It is noteworthy that Jesus has asked the Twelve: Whom say ye that I am? He expects an answer given by all of them. It seems that He is not so much interested in what Simon or John or Matthew or Judas may believe and confess. It is in the name of the Twelve that Simon answer: “Thou art the Christ” (see also John 6:68f). How can he answer on behalf of them all? Has he made an enquiry? We in his stead would have called a meeting, perhaps appointed a committee to investigate the matter and to report to the full assembly of the Twelve. That is the way modern confessions are made. And this is the reason why modern confessions as a rule are no confessions at all. To give only one example. When the constitution of the “Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America” was drafted in 1908 it had been proposed to speak in the preamble of Christ as the Son of God. This was unacceptable to many. So the Constitution called Him “divine Lord and Saviour”. What do the words “divine”, “Lord”, “Saviour” mean if Christ is not the Son of God?

The confession which Peter makes is not based on inquiries and negotiations. It is not a compromise between various personal views—maybe there had been several personal views among the Twelve. Simon does not even ask his fellow-believers. He speaks for them all, as he speaks for himself. The true confession is always the confession of the individual—“Blessed art thou Simon”—and the confession of all true believers. It is the confession of the individual believer and of the Church as a whole. A true confession can begin with the “I believe” of the Baptismal Creed which is always confessed by the individual, or it can begin with the “pisteuomen” of the Creed as it was formulated by a synod and confessed at the Eucharist. There is no essential difference between the “I” and the “We”. We modern men have understood the Creed mainly in the sense of the individual confession. Today we are in danger of thinking only in terms of a collective society, the church. In the former case we forgot the reality of the Church. In the latter case we forgot the conversion is always something which happens to the individual. Individuals only can be baptized, not tribes or families. Even if a whole family is baptized, Baptism is administered to each individual, and the formula is “I baptize *thee*.” This fact that in the Church of Christ the “I” and the “We” belong together is no longer understood by modern Christians, because they do no longer understand the work of the Holy Spirit. As we do no longer realize the meaning of “Kyrios”, so we do no longer understand the “Pneuma Hagion”, the “Parakletos”, as our careless religious language shows. If we take it seriously that faith in Christ is always the gift of God, then we understand why the true faith and confession of the individual believer must be the same as the faith and confession of the Church. Luther in his exposition of the Third Article in the Small Catechism puts it this way: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called *me* through the Gospel, enlightened *me* by His gifts, and sanctified and preserved *me* in the true faith; in like manner as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies *the whole Christian Church* on earth, and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the true faith...” Modern Christendom has tried to understand faith, the work of the Holy Ghost, psychologically, and the Church, the work of the Holy Ghost, sociologically. Hence many Christians do no longer understand that reality which the New Testament means when it speaks of the Holy Spirit and His work. How often do we speak of something as being the work of the Holy Spirit when it actually is the work of the human mind, without realizing that the name of the Holy Ghost also comes under the commandment: “thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain...”

IV

If the confession of faith is essentially the work of the Holy Spirit in the individual soul as well as in the entire Church, then we understand the first great function of a true confession: It binds believers together. This first function of the confession is nowhere better expressed than in the Liturgy of the Eastern Church where the Creed follows the kiss of peace: The deacon admonishes: "Let us love one another that we may confess in one mind." The choir continues: "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the one and indivisible Trinity." Then follows the Creed, originally in the form of the "we": "Pisteuomen eis hena theon..." At all times the confession of faith has been the strongest expression of that "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" that belongs together with the "one faith, one baptism".

It is not necessary to dwell upon this point any longer. But one thing must be said over against modern misunderstandings of the Christian faith. If on the one hand the confession is the point around which the church gathers, it has on the other hand a critical function. The confession "Jesus is the Christ" expressed the unity of faith in the first church. He who confesses this as the conviction of his heart belongs to the Church of Christ. At the same time this confession drew the border-line between Church and Synagogue, as John 9:22 shows: "for the Jews had agreed already that if any man did confess him as the Christ (auton homologese Christon) he should be put out of the synagogue". In the same way the name "Kyrios" drew the border-line between the Church and the Hellenistic synagogue ("kyrios" was Yahve for the Greek speaking Jews), but also between the Church and the many cults of other kyrioi (1 Cor. 8:4ff.; 10:20f.), or between the worship of the Lord Jesus and the worship of Kyrios Kaisar (see Martyrdom of Polycarp 8ff.). The truth cannot be confessed without rejecting error. Thus already in the most ancient eucharistic liturgy we find the "Pax", the Holy Kiss, side by side with the Anathema against schismatics and heretics (1 Cor. 16:20-22). It is the constant task of the Church to confess the truth and to reject error. Already, therefore, the apostles had to warn against heresies, as the Pastoral letters of Paul especially show these having been written at a time when gnosticism began to threaten the Christian faith. And it is certainly not accidental that the apostle of love had to reject and condemn in strong words those who denied the incarnation (1 John 4:1ff., 2 John 9ff.). We have no report of the reaction of those Christians who differed from John in that they assumed that the body of Christ had not consisted of dirty, earthly flesh. Most likely they claimed to love their Savior just as well, and perhaps even more than that irreconcilable keeper of (what he regarded as) orthodoxy, who not only denied them the name of brethren, but even the courtesy of a greeting, claiming that they had the spirit of Antichrist. However, one has only to ask what would have become of the Church, if the apostles had been less orthodox, and more tolerant. Supposing they had called ecumenical conferences between the various groups who claimed to be the true Church of Christ and Christendom of the second century had been spared the terrific splits between Basilidians, Valentinians, Catholics, Marcionites and all the other groups, then there would be no Church today. The same is true of the Church of Nicea. Without the Anathema against the deniers of the Homoousios in the Nicene Creed of 325 there would not be a Church today. It is quite clear that not every anathema that has been uttered in the course of the history of the Church was justified, as it is true, on the other hand, that there have been false, heretical creeds and confessions which have created not true unity but false unity, not the unity created by the Holy Spirit, but man-made unity. This, however, has always been the way God's revelation was received by men. The people in Jerusalem at the time of Jeremiah were confronted with the problem as to who really spoke the Word of God, the many prophets who proclaimed as God's the comforting message which once had been proclaimed by Isaiah that

Jerusalem would be saved, or that lonely man who called those prophets liars and their visions and auditions dreams. God's Word can be misunderstood. There is no infallible magisterium which could decide for me what is truth and what not. This gives the confession of the Church its seriousness. That is the reason why the Church should confess nothing which is not contained in God's Word.

V

It is significant that the words used in the New Testament for “confess” have several meanings. While “homologeîn” and “homologia” mean confessing the faith, confession of faith (the use of “homologia” for the “confession” which Jesus made at His trial (1 Tim. 6:13) is unique, but quite pertinent), “exhomologeisthai” is used for the confession of sins (Mark 1:5; Matth. 3:6; James 5:16) and for the praise of God (Matth. 11:25 cf. Luke 10:21, Acts 19:18, Rom. 14:11; 15:9). The second meaning is present in Phil. 2:11 together with the meaning “confess Christ.” In this passage the Church’s confession of faith is at the same time the “confession” of the entire universe at the end of the world, the acclamation of triumph and praise. In the Latin of the Church the three meanings are contained in the words “confiteri,” “confessio,” which is quite in accordance with the New Testament usage. The “Te Deum” is at the same time confession of faith—it has often been enumerated among the creeds—and praise of God: “Te Deum Laudamus, te Dominum confitemur” (exhomologeisthai, see Phil. 2:11). The “Confessiones” of Augustine are “Praises of God,” but they contain the “confession” of his faith and the “confession of his sins.” In the Greek Church “exhomologesis” is used for the sacrament of penance and for the praise of God. This usage points to a very important theological fact. Confession of faith, confession of sin and praise of God belong together. When Peter, overwhelmed by the great miracle, addresses Jesus for the first time as “Kyrie”, this confession is at the same time a confession of his sinfulness: “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). In deepest humility only can we acknowledge Jesus as Christ and Lord. On the other hand, the confession of faith is praise of God. It is prayer. The first confession is addressed to Jesus: “*Thou art the Christ,*” or according to John 6:67ff.: “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life, and we have believed and come to know that Thou art the Holy One of God.” Whether the confession is a simple acclamation like the earliest confessions of the New Testament, or a Baptismal or other Creed, or a doctrinal statement like the Symbolum Quicunque, or an elaborate confession like those of the 16th century, they all want, each in its way, to give Christ praise and honour. This explains the fact that the creed has its place in the liturgy. The close connection between liturgy and dogma, the fact that each dogma appears first in the liturgy (e.g. the Trinitarian formula is older than the Trinitarian dogma, the “*erchou Kyrie lesou*” older than the dogmatic definition of the Lordship of Christ, the homoousia of the Holy Spirit appears first in the liturgy, as the Nicaenum of 381 suggests; the sola gratia and sola fide of the Reformation appears in the medieval liturgy, etc.) has been emphasized by the Liturgical Movement, though sometimes at the expense of the dogma. “Orthodoxy” has always been understood in the Eastern Church as “right doctrine” as well as “right worship.” The word “theologia” which means with the Fathers of the 4th century the doctrine of the Triune God and especially of the divinity of Christ, is originally praise of God. According to old liturgies (e.g. James) the Sanctus is sung by the Seraphim and Cherubim “*asigetois theologiais*”, in never ceasing “theologies.” John the Apostle is “John the Divine” (ho theologis) because he is the liturgist, his language being the language of the liturgy (see the hymns of Revelation). A confession, a theology, an “orthodox” theology which do not contain the praise of God are most certainly wrong. A confessional or confessing church which would be interested in the doctrinal confession only, and not in confession as penance and as praise of God, would not be a truly confessing church. The really great theologians of the church have always been at the same time great liturgists, as Ambrose, Basilus, Thomas Aquinas, Luther. Schleiermacher and Ritschl were no theologians at all in the old sense. One cannot sing or pray their theology.

VI

A last aspect of the New Testament confession may be mentioned. A true confession has always an eschatological aspect. The confessing Church, as the individual confessor, stands always at the border of time and eternity. That Latin “confessio” is also used for the “grave of the martyr” over which the Church is built. Thus the “confessio” of Peter is the grave under the main altar of St. Peter in Rome. The cathedral of Fulda is built over the “confessio” of Boniface. The confession is made before governors and kings. This confession before the earthly judge is made with the help of the Holy Spirit, as every true confession (Matth. 10:18f. comp. 1 Cor. 12:3). To confess Christ is dangerous. It involves a risk of life. Still more dangerous is it to deny Christ. This can happen very easily, as is indicated by the fact that Peter, the first confessor, became the first to deny his Lord, a sin which later incurred ex-communication. More dangerous is it because eternal death may follow. For we confess not only before a human judgment seat, but also before the judgment seat of God. Confession and denial follow us into eternity. There the earthly confession will be followed by the heavenly confession, not only by the eternal praise of God in the ecclesia triumphans, but also by the confession of Christ: “Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven.” As our confession is the answer to the question of our Lord, so His confession will be the answer to every faithful confession made here on earth.