

Belhar und Bekenntnis: Response aus lutherischer Sicht

Belhar-Konferenz, 25. Januar 2019, Detmold

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English working translation

1. For a Lutheran understanding of confession of faith, it is important to be aware of three different uses of the term *confessio*.

Confessio can be understood as the confession of sins. *Confessio* can also be understood as a good work that follows faith as the fruit of faith. In this case it is a public confession of faith before other people. And finally, *confessio* can be confessional writings in the sense of “doctrinal confessions of faith that can be passed on”. All three modes have specific functions and tasks. But what they have in common is that they are man's answer to the revelation of God. Finally, it should be noted that already the Lutheran confessional writings speak about confession in this threefold sense when they refer to the rite of penance, talk about the fruits of faith, but also when they reflect on themselves. In the following, some thoughts about the nature and purpose of confessional writings will be presented.

2. The Lutheran confessions are scriptural interpretation, namely scriptural interpretation of the Church

This is the classic definition of Edmund Schlink in his standard work on the theology of the Lutheran confessional writings from 1940. More specifically, he defines confessional writings as scriptural interpretations of the church in consensus with the fathers and brothers in faith (Schlink didn't seem to “know” mothers and sisters). They are scripture interpretation, since they are "summary accounts of the whole Scripture" – here the keyword *summa* of Scripture should be mentioned – and therein they are testimony of the gospel, which demands compulsory attention by the church and the individuals. This distinguishes them from theological convictions of individuals.

As Scripture interpretation, the confession is "also a statement of what is believed and preached in the Church of Jesus Christ." As scriptural doctrine, the confession emerges from Scripture and "now becomes a heuristic-hermeneutic help for the approach to the Holy Scriptures". In short, as *norma normata*, the confessional writings are binding, because and insofar (*quia, quatenus*) they assert scripture as *norma normans* for the church.

3. The Lutheran Confession has a church-structuring (kirchenordnend) character

The most up-to-date and for the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* (regional churches) most relevant deliberations on an appropriate Lutheran understanding of the confession of faith is a brief thesis paper by Christine Axt-Piscalar, chair of the Theological Commission of the United Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Germany. To her as well, it is fundamental that the confession serves as an orienting and normative guideline for the doctrine and life of the Lutheran churches. In that sense it has a "church-structuring character" for Axt-Piscalar: "It formulates doctrine in keeping with the gospel according to which in the Lutheran churches the preaching and the administration of the sacraments, the teaching, the doctrines as well as the social conformation of the church are to be aligned." The formation of the Lutheran confessions is considered completed with the Book of Concord. This is, on the one hand, factual the case in that no other texts have been received so far; and "on the other hand, it is substantiated by the fact that everything necessary for the pure preaching and administration of the sacraments, for teaching and doctrines as well as for the social conformation of the Church, has been given sufficient clarification in the Book of Concord."

4. Coming back to the distinction between confessing and confession

The church-structuring character distinguishes the Lutheran confessions of faith from acts of topical confessing. Although the individual confessional writings go back to such acts of topical confessing in specific historical situations, they have a different function and task in their present form. They are an expression of the truly ecumenical faith. Thus, they are considered to have a supra-regional binding for the churches of the Lutheran family.

To be distinguished from this is a specifically reformed conception of confession, which is oriented primarily to the current implementation of topical confessing. In this later understanding, of course, the current situation within a particular local church comes much more into focus. Here, the formation of confessions is understood as an ongoing process.

5. New confessions of faith?

For Axt-Piscalar, the seclusiveness of confessional formation is not a "rigid closure". This is already shown by the fact that not all Lutheran churches have accepted the Formula of Concord. In my own words: Similar to the biblical canon, there is a core base stock, yet somewhat blurring fringes. The second insight of Axt-Piscalar is: It cannot be ruled out that further texts could be received. But new authoritative teaching documents would then have to be "with the caveat that the doctrinal confessions of the reformation remain valid" and the new texts would have to answer to the

Lutheran confession of faith. It would therefore have to be made plausible that "the reception of a new, church-binding document is necessary and appropriate" and that through this text the Lutheran confessions "are refined in a necessary and by their own conditions indispensable way."

I do not know of any Lutheran church in which discussions are currently going on whether the Lutheran confessions should be supplemented in this sense. Also, in the Lutheran World Federation itself, this is not an issue at the moment, nor have there been any theological positionings on this question in the past.

I also suspect that in fact it would not be possible to come to a consensus within the LWF communion that a new text should be recognized as binding for the entire communion of the LWF in the sense of a heuristic-hermeneutic help for the approach to the Scriptures and thus given it a church-structuring character.

6. The Barmen Declaration

There has been one exception to this basic rule: The late and tedious discussions of the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* in Germany about a decisive appreciation of the Barmen Declaration. It is precisely in this context that the deliberations presented by the chair of the Theological Commission of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany have emerged. Axt-Piscalar raises the question of whether Barmen "made a decision for the teaching and life of the church which is required by the confessions of faith and already indirectly implied by them, but nevertheless not directly fixed in them". Axt-Piscalar asks whether Barmen is making a refining decision that has lasting value beyond the situation of the time. In deed Barmen exposes the heresy of a totalitarian ideology that has to be understood as an attack on the Church's confession of Jesus Christ. Thus, Barmen offers a "confessional surplus" to the Lutheran confessional writings and could be added to the confessions as an essential teaching document.

However, Axt-Piscalar also emphasises that this consideration is neither self-evident nor obvious to all Lutheran theologians and that it is also completely unclear how Lutheran churches outside Germany could be involved in such an opinion-forming debate and reception process.

Against this background, it is logical that the German Lutheran *Landeskirchen*, which have dealt with Barmen, have not simply included the Barmen Declaration in the enumeration of the confessional writings in their constitutions, but have gone a slightly different way. By way of example, this can be shown for the Lutheran Church in Northern Germany. After a thorough discussion process the Church's constitution now states: "The North Church "professes the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as given in the testimony of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as expounded in

the Ecumenical Creeds and in the Lutheran Confession, and as it was confessed anew in the Theological Declaration of the Confessional Synod of Barmen".

7. Belhar as a confession?

The Belhar's confession is certainly an important testimony of world Christianity. It prophetically raised its voice in the fight against apartheid. It has to be considered as courageous confession in a specific historical situation. Therefore, it is, if I can assess it correctly as a Lutheran, absolutely in line with Reformed confessional hermeneutics. And certainly, one can say that it is also to be appreciated for Lutheran in the 3rd mode of *confession* that I mentioned in the beginning.

But does Belhar contain statements of faith that, from a Lutheran point of view, make it necessary and appropriate that the text should evolve over time into a confessional writing in the normative and church-structuring sense, as I briefly sketched it?

Here, first of all, the Lutheran Churches in Southern Africa should be asked. Can in their opinion the faith of the fathers and mothers recognized in the Belhar Confession in such a way that there is a real *surplus* to the already existing confessions? To my knowledge our Lutheran sisters and brothers in Southern Africa are not working on this issue.

Of course, German Lutherans can ask themselves the same question: is there a *surplus* for our German context that goes beyond our Lutheran confessions and the Barmen Declaration, which has meanwhile been taken up in many constitutions? My very personal assessment is that I am not sure whether a necessary, meaningful and indispensable *surplus* could really be ascertained. A *surplus* that would be evident to a large majority. Such a *magnus consensus* would be necessary if one wanted to include Belhar in the *corpus doctrinae*. I remind you that in the constitutions of Lutheran *Landeskirchen* even the Barmen Declaration is separated linguistically and theologically from the confessional writings.

And finally, it is unclear how consensus could be reached with our brothers and sisters of the worldwide church. Certainly, it would be desirable to have a certain consensus throughout Christendom. But I'll leave that difficult questions aside. In any case, a consensus within the Lutheran communion would be desirable. I do not see that.

In short, personally, I am very sceptical whether it would be a purposeful discussion process to ask, whether Belhar has to be necessarily, meaningfully and indispensably understood as a binding confessional writing with church-structuring character.

8. Conclusion: What to do?

Nevertheless, one should welcome the discussion process started with this conference. Hopefully, this process can help to clarify whether Belhar that confessed the Christian faith at a particular time (1986), in a given geographical region (South Africa) and in a specific context (resistance to apartheid), can guide German Christians to confessing their faith also today in 2019, in another country and in a different context. Does Belhar hold theological insights beyond the confessions of the Reformation and the Barmen Declaration so that it should become today, here in Germany an important and needed testimony for our church life, for example, in the light of the electoral success of right-wing populist parties and our heated discussions about a proper refugee policy?

If it turns out that this is not compellingly the case, then in my opinion - at least from a Lutheran point of view - there would be good reasons not to include the text in the constitution of a *Landeskirche* but of ensuring its appreciation and significance in different ways.

If the now initiated process comes to the positive realization that Belhar actually holds indispensable insights of the Christian faith that cannot be deduced from Barmen and the confessional writings, then for the reasons given above, it is probably still not a viable option to introduce Belhar into the rank of the Lutheran confessions. But in this case, it would be worth considering how Belhar could be properly addressed in the preamble to the Constitution of the Church of Lippe. Currently this reads as follows: "Founded in the message of Holy Scripture, as preserved in the Old and New Testament, as testified in the Ecumenical Creeds, as brought to light in new clarity by the confessions of the Reformation and as interpreted by the Theological Declaration of the Confessional Synod of Barmen as guidance for the contested church."

Should the Church of Lippe choose this path, a wording would have to found that – like Barmen – preserves the distance to the aforementioned confessions of the reformation. I am sure that could be achieved. However, one question still remains, which would have to be answered convincingly: With mentioning Belhar by name this text and its specific assertions would gain a massive theological weight in the preamble, since even the Ecumenical Creeds and the confessions of the Reformation are only summarily and not individually mentioned. But why Belhar and not another confession with ecumenical dimension, for example the one of Accra of the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches or the so-called "Social Confession" of the Evangelical Methodist Church in Germany, with which all German *Landeskirchen* are in full communion? This question shows maybe one more time, why Lutherans concentrate on the church-structuring interpretation of their historic confessions and are reluctant to add new confessions to this canon.