

President Behnken's Defense of the
Common Confession in The Lutheran Witness

Mark J. Sattler

April 27, 1980

Senior Church History

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

President Behnken's Defense of the
Common Confession in The Lutheran Witness

It has been thirty years since the Common Confession was first adopted by both the Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church. This document was intended to settle past differences in doctrine between these two bodies so fellowship could take place. But did this document settle past differences as it intended to do? Almost immediately, the Wisconsin Synod charged this document as being "inadequate" and creating a "basically untruthful situation." It furthermore requested that Missouri repudiate its stand that the Common Confession was a settlement of past differences.

The Missouri Synod did not take the action requested by the Wisconsin Synod. Instead it defended it. President John W. Behnken, president of the Missouri Synod, defended the Common Confession publicly. He did so in The Lutheran Witness, the official organ of the LC-MS. Did President Behnken defend the Common Confession adequately against the charges made by the Wisconsin Synod? It is the position of this paper that he did not. It is the position of this paper that the only reason the members of the LC-MS may have been convinced is that their president was an honored and proven leader who would not lie to them. His defense alone was not enough.

This position will be proved by looking at the articles President Behnken wrote for The Lutheran Witness

during the years 1953 and 1954. Not all of the contents of these articles nor all of the articles themselves will be discussed. But the majority of the articles will be looked at and will show that President Behnken did not adequately defend the charges.

The format of this paper will be to look at each article individually. Then, after all the articles have been presented, there will be a final section looking at the whole tenor of the articles. May the Lord prevent me from making any unfair judgements about President Behnken.

The first of the many articles by Behnken defending the Common Confession appeared shortly before Missouri held its 1953 Houston Convention. This article began by reporting that there was some dissension within Missouri over the Common Confession. Behnken informs his members that the Wisconsin Synod did not approve of this confession.

The honorable Wisconsin Synod informs us that it rejects the Common Confession and asks us to rescind resolutions of 1950 wherein we expressed "that agreement had been achieved in the doctrines treated by the two committees".....1

Behnken made his people realize that the Wisconsin Synod did not approve of the course Missouri was taking. But unfortunately, he did not inform his people why this request came from Wisconsin and why Wisconsin was so concerned about the Common Confession. I feel that Behnken did his people a great disservice already at the beginning of the argument. The people only knew Wisconsin was against Missouri's actions, but did not have the facts to decide

Page 3

for themselves if there was indeed a reason for the alarm. While this is really an introductory article to the problem, it probably would have been better for a fuller discussion at this point. It would have allowed people to make an informed decision before the convention. Then they could have put pressure on their delegates.

The major series of articles begins in the March 2, 1954 issue. Behnken begins the article by referring his readers to the report about the "meeting between officials of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States and officials of our own Synod."² It soon becomes evident one of the major discussions at this meeting was the Common Confession. He then continues by discussing some of the questions raised by his own people.

Some of our people have asked why the points in controversy are not discussed in our church periodicals. They argue that the Wisconsin Synod has brought the charges against our Synod in print. Articles have appeared in their church periodicals, and pamphlets are being distributed. Why, then, do we not reply in our periodicals? ³

It seems people did not know the points of controversy Wisconsin had raised. These questions arose despite an article entitled "A Fraternal Word" which appeared in 1953. This article "was intended to bring information to our people on the objections voiced against the Common Confession, etc., and at the same time in all kindness and in a fraternal spirit to answer the objections by quoting statements from the Common Confession itself."⁴ This, then, is the purpose of the articles that followed: To defend Missouri against these charges by bringing more information and more arguments.

In the March 16, issue, Behnken pointed out that Wisconsin had not been "charging the Common Confession with false doctrine, but rather with inadequacy."⁵ To Behnken's credit he did point out the areas of doctrine where the Wisconsin Synod noted the inadequacy. They were justification, conversion, election, the means of grace, the Church, the Antichrist, and Sunday. He even went so far as to define the meaning of the charge of inadequacy.

What is meant is that the Common Confession is not adequate "as a settlement of the doctrinal differences which have hitherto divided it (the Missouri Synod) from the American Lutheran Church."⁶

Unfortunately, Behnken did not tell his people that the ALC's teaching on these doctrines had not only divided the two synods, but had been the source of considerable fighting in times past. He did not tell his people that these were areas that the ALC's teachings in times past (and even at that time) were contrary to the teachings of Scripture. If one did not know what the background on these issues was, there would be no way of knowing the seriousness of the problem. From this article it would appear that the differences that existed between Missouri and the ALC were only inconsequential. Therefore, the charges made by the Wisconsin Synod would be petty and fairly unimportant. From this article the people of Missouri would not have known that if the Common Confession had made the same statements as the Brief Statement, the ALC could not have subscribed to the Common Confession.

"With reference to the charges that the Common

Confession is inadequate, this must be proved."⁷ In my mind, this statement leaves the impression that the people should take the word of their trusted leader; that every thing is okay in the Synod and with the Common Confession. This statement certainly is misleading considering the charges made by not only the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS, but also from congregations and individuals within Missouri.

One problem that muddied up the waters in this controversy was that the writers of "A Fraternal Word" did not quote entire sentences in their refutation of the charges. One area that this procedure caused problems was in the doctrine of justification. The next issue of The Lutheran Witness picked up this point. Behnken~~t~~ quoted the entire sentence from the Wisconsin Synod's "Proceedings" which contained the charge of inadequacy concerning justification in the Common Confession. "Any clear and correct presentation of this article requires not merely the inclusion of the terms 'objective justification,' but a clear statement that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has already declared every sinner righteous in His sight."⁸

(The underlined words were omitted in "A Fraternal Word.")

To refute this charge, Behnken quoted sections from the Common Confession. But he did so with an emphasis that was not contained in the original document. He did this by italicizing key words. These words can be interpreted correctly. But they can also be read in a way that allows for some type of justification that is not objective. This did not answer the charge.

He also quotes "'A Fratern Word' Examined,"⁹ concerning justification in the Common Confession. In reply, he did not refer to the Common Confession. He referred to Scripture and the Brief Statement. The Brief Statement made a good confession, but the Common Confession, the item under discussion and attack, did not relate the same confession. It is a much watered down statement. It does not dismiss any improper views of justification. It contains no antithesis. In this way, the ALC could interpret it differently than Missouri.. Yet, Behnken said the Common Confession made it clear that only objective justification could stand. "That is precisely what the Common Confession means to say. Read it again, and convince yourself."¹⁰ It may mean to say it, but does it? I think not. That is why the Common Confession was charged with inadequacy. It may intend one thing, but what it said may have several different interpretations.

In the next issue of the Lutheran Witness, Behnken dealt with the subject of conversion in the Common Confession. He again quoted a charge made by Wisconsin, "We note that the Common Confession not only fails to include such a specific rejection, but that its positive wording does not exclude the thought of man's preparing himself for conversion by his refraining from such wilful resistance."¹¹

Behnken's defense of this charge is this:

In all fairness let us ask whether the Common Confession contains a rejection of the "untenable distinction between a natural and a wilful

resistance." If "specific rejection" means a rejection in such express words as "we therefore reject, etc." then we could answer No. 12

Behnken's answer itself pointed out what was wrong with the Common Confession. The confession is not specific enough in that it does not contain an antithesis. Because it is all phrased positively, and in some cases loosely, it is possible to read another view into it which is opposed to the scriptural doctrine it is supposed to uphold.

It is amazing to note that Behnken's defense of the Common Confession of the doctrine of conversion was not only better, but also longer. The entire statement on conversion covers only three sentences, while Behnken needs an entire article to explain what the Common Confession intends to say. Even in the space Behnken used, he did not adequately defend the Common Confession. How can he, when it is indefensible?

In the April 27, issue, Behnken made a defense concerning the doctrine of election as treated in the Common Confession. He did this by concentrating on a section that the writers of "A Fraternal Word" left out when it tried to defend the Common Confession. By including a point the "Fraternal Word" deleted, it does appear that Behnken wanted to correct any misunderstandings the Common Confession may have caused. But he did not take kindly to the statement made by the author of "'A Fraternal Word' Examined," which says:

How important Missouri once considered this last

point of the doctrine appears from its own Brief Statement, where we read in Article 39: "Furthermore, by election of grace, Scripture does not mean that one part of God's counsel of salvation according to which He will receive into heaven those who persevere in faith unto the end, but on the contrary, Scripture means this, that God, before the foundation of the world, from pure grace, because of the redemption of Christ, has chosen for His own a definite number of persons out of the corrupt mass and has determined to bring, them, through Word and Sacrament, to faith and salvation." 13

To defend this charge Behnken did not refer to the Common Confession, but back to the Brief Statement.

Why must the writer of "'A Fraternal Word' Examined" say: "How important Missouri once considered etc.?" Our Synod still believes and teaches this very thing, and by God's grace will continue to believe and teach it! We accept wholeheartedly what Article 39 of the Brief Statement declares. 14

Behnken claimed adherence to the Brief Statement, but he did not say why this point was not made in the Common Confession. If the Common Confession had made a statement like the Brief Statement had, there would be no charge of inadequacy. But then, the ALC would not have signed this document.

In the final paragraph, Behnken made a beautiful confession about the doctrine of election. He said this was the same thing contained in the Common Confession. But the Common Confession did not say this. This is why it is charged with inadequacy. Behnken's argument is not convincing and does not refute the charge.

"Let us take these words as they read."¹⁵ Behnken made this statement several times in the next issue when he defended the article on inspiration in the Common Con-

fession. In particular it was in defence of charges made in "'A Fraternal Word' Examined." This charge stated the Common Confession "is just sufficiently vague to allow for the idea of a 'limited revelation' and therefore, a 'limited morality' in the Old Testament."¹⁶ Behnken stated the proper view of inspiration and said this is what the Common Confession means and is not to be taken as the author of "' A Fraternal Word,' Examined" took it.

However, President Behnken did allow that the words may be taken a way other than the way he wanted to take them. He says, "Permit the ALC to determine whether it wishes to accept the words as they read." But doesn't this allow them to read into it whatever they please? Wouldn't this lead to an untruthful situation if adopted this way? This statement does not defend the Common Confession but actually aids the opponents of the confession. Once again the president of the Missouri Synod failed to defend the Common Confession.

The article authored by Behnken in the May 25, 1954, Lutheran Witness begins with this statement:

One of the objections voiced by the Hon. Wisconsin Synod against the doctrine of the Church as it is presented in the Common Confession is the use of the term "duty" when it speaks of the commission to preach the Gospel. The use of the term "duty" is called "externalizing the concept of the Church." A further statement reads: "The Church must ever be presented as a creation of the Lord also in the work which it performs on earth." 17

Behnken did not seem to take this criticism in the same light the convention of the Wisconsin Synod meant

nor in the same light the author of "'A Fraternal Word' Examined" meant it. He would not yield on there ⁷ "duty." To defend this term he pointed to the context to show it did not meant external compulsion. But the point of the charge was that it "may" lead to an understanding of external compulsion. That is why "'A Fraternal Word' Examined" said, "Our criticism was intended as a warning for which we believe there are very strong reasons."¹⁸

In this same article Behnken defended the Common Confession against the charge of allowing the possibility of a visible side of the Church. To do so, he once again departed from the Common Confession and refered to a whole list of other confessions and actions in the Missouri Synod. Even though the Common Confession made no mention of the means of grace being the marks of the Church, he said it was not the intention of the Common Confession to have a "visible side of the Church" meaning.

Again, the Common Confession was charged with inadequacy. If the document was not inadequate, why must Behnken resort to the type of defence he used? If the document was adequate as it stood, there would have been no need to go outside of it to prove it was adequate.

Another point under fire in the Common Confession debate was the stand on fellowship the document contained. This Behnken defended in the June 8, 1954, issue. I must believe that Behnken did want every thing to be discussed and settled. I believe this because he brought up the

Page 11

charge of selective fellowship by quoting the 1951 "Proceedings" of the Wisconsin Synod Convention and "'A Fraternal Word' Examined!"

But although Behnken did want to iron things out his defense did not prove the adequacy of the Common Confession on this point. I have read both the Common Confession Part 1 and Part 2. No where did I find a statement that prohibits selective fellowship. But Behnken believed it did, or at least that is what he said. In defense of the Common Confession, Behnken gave a history of the ALC and selective fellowship. He stated, that selective fellowship "has not worked out" and that "to our knowledge the American Lutheran Church has not succeeded in introducing such 'selective fellowship.'"¹⁹ Was this to mean that the ALC would not read the possibility of selective fellowship into the Common Confession? The ALC had not recinded their resolution calling for this type of fellowship. There was nothing in the Common Confession that would stop them from continuing this false fellowship practice. That is why the confession was charged with inadequacy. Behnken has not convinced me.

Thus far in this column I have sought to answer some of the objections made against our Synod on doctrinal matters; better stated, the objection that the Confession is not adequate to settle former controversies with the American Lutheran Church. I attempted to be fair in the quotations used. The reader is thus able to judge the matter. 20

That is the way President Behnken felt about his defense of the Common Confession in the July 20, 1954, issue.

Page 12

He may have sought to answer the objections but failed to do so.

President Behnken, I believe, wanted to be a peace maker. He did not want to see Missouri and Wisconsin split. At the same time he did not want to spoil the supposed unity he had with the ALC. To do this, he had to defend the Common Confession in a way that would not upset any of the parties.

This was an impossible task. He could not say that the Common Confession was inadequate and keep peace with the ALC. At the same time he could not keep peace with Wisconsin if he said the Common Confession was adequate. Unfortunately, Behnken chose to defend the Common Confession to the hilt.

I should say, he tried to defend the Common Confession. He had to resort to other statements from the Missouri Synod to prove his point. He did not do this just on occasion but time after time. I feel this only added to the problem. It showed just what the confession was missing and why the charges had to be made by the Wisconsin Synod.

In every article, Behnken appeared to be a very orthodox teacher, preacher, and leader. But he compromised his orthodoxy by holding on to a document that was too vague. He wanted peace so much, he gave up pointed orthodox statements to statements that could be taken several ways. Although an orthodox man, he did not prove that the

Page 13

Common Confession was an adequate document for settling
past disputes with the ALC.

End Notes

- 1 John W. Behnken, "Your Synod," The Lutheran Witness, 72 (1953), 201.
- 2 John W. Behnken, "Your Synod," The Lutheran Witness, 73 (1954), 74.
- 3 ibid.
- 4 ibid.
- 5 LW, 90.
- 6 ibid.
- 7 ibid.
- ~~8~~
- 8 LW, 106.
- 9 "A Fraternal Word' Examined", n.a., n.d., n.p., p.6.
- 10 LW, 106.
- 11 LW, 124, quoting Wisconsin Synod "Proceedings," 1951.
- 12 ibid.
- 13 "'AFW' Examined", p. 9.
- 14 LW, 144.
- 15 LW, 164.
- 16 "'AFW' Examined", p. 9&10
- 17 LW, 182.
- 18 "'AFW' Examined", p. 10.
- 19 LW, 198.
- 20 LW, 250.

Bibliography

"A Fraternal Word on the Questions in Controversy between the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod", n.a., n.p., August 31, 1953.

"'A Fraternal Word' Examined", n.a., n.d., n.p.

Behnken, John W., "Your Synod", The Lutheran Witness, 72 (1953).

Behnken, John W., "Your Synod," The Lutheran Witness, 73 (1954).

Proceedings of the Forty-Second Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Houston, Texas, June 17-26, 1953, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo.

Proceedings, Thirty-Third Convention, Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, Saginaw, Michigan, August 10-17, 1955.

Reim, Edmund Carl, The Common Confession and Other Pertinent Documents, n.p., 1951.