

55. A TESTIMONY OF FAITH:
“The Bekenntnisparagraph”

(1848)

The small, interconfessional group of German pastors who founded the Kirchenverein des Westens (Church Society of the West) in Gravois Settlement in Missouri, on October 15, 1840, formulated their doctrinal self-understanding in 1848 in the famous Bekenntnisparagraph (Confessional Paragraph).

Although brief, the Bekenntnisparagraph revealed much that was distinctive about the Kirchenverein. First of all, it was an objective, confessional statement, referring to the great confessional documents of German Protestantism (Lutheran and Reformed) rather than to the more subjective and Pietist dictates of much of frontier religion. At the same time, it stated clearly that no one of these confessions could contain the whole truth. Only the Word of God in Holy Scriptures could be said to contain that. The paragraph also upheld an important principle of Protestantism: the interpretation of God's Word was not entrusted to any ecclesiastical authority, but to the freedom of the individual Christian conscience.

The Bekenntnisparagraph remained the doctrinal standard of the Evangelical Synod of North America for many years. As late as 1928, the synod debated whether it ought to create a more elaborate creedal statement or whether the Bekenntnisparagraph was enough. The paragraph's affirmation that the confessions attested to the truth of God's Word in Holy Scripture, but were not themselves tests of that truth, undergirds the principle within the United Church of Christ that confessions and statements of faith are testimonies to the truth of God's Word, not tests of it.

“We recognize the Evangelical Church as that communion which acknowledges the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the Word of God and as the sole and infallible rule of faith and life, and accepts the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures as given in the symbolic books of the Lutheran and Reformed Church, the most important being: the Augsburg Confession, Luther's and the Heidelberg Catechisms, in so far as they agree; but where they disagree, we adhere strictly to the passages of Holy Scripture bearing on the subject, and avail ourselves of the liberty of conscience prevailing in the Evangelical Church.”