

Election: Article Four of the Common Confession

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The first doctrine that caused controversy and division within the Synodical Conference after its organization in 1872 was the doctrine of Election. Because of the differences that arose the Ohio Synod, one of the organizers of the Synodical Conference, withdrew from that body in 1881. Two years later also the Norwegian Synod withdrew in order to try to settle the differences that had developed within that Synod in regard to this doctrine. However, in 1887 it brought about a split also within that Synod, the followers of Schmidt agreeing with the Ohio Synod, the Norwegian Synod agreeing with the Synodical Conference and remaining in fellowship with it, although not a member. The doctrine of Election again came up for considerable discussion when in the years 1903 to 1907 intersynodical conferences were held to try to reach agreement. (Particularly in the meeting at Fort Wayne in 1905 did the discussion center around the passage Eph 1:4 and Election.) Again in the twenties intersynodical conferences were held which resulted in the Chicago Theses of 1928. There, too, the doctrine of Election was dealt with at length. Of the 19 pages of the Chicago Theses nearly 7 deal with the doctrine of election, more space than is devoted to any other single doctrine. A.L.C. in 1947 still said there was not agreement. These historical facts are presented to show that this is a doctrine which for nearly three quarters of a century was in controversy between the Synodical Conference and the Synods which now make up the American Lutheran Church. This is important in evaluating article four of the Common Confession, which is, as we understand it, to settle these differences so far as the American Lutheran Church and the Missouri Synod are concerned. In view of this long history and the seriousness of the controversy the question in judging this article must not merely be: Can we accept this article as a Scripturally correct statement of the doctrine of election? The question must be: Can we accept this article as the statement of this doctrine which on the basis of Scripture settles the differences that came to light during the election controversy? This article is not merely to restate the doctrine of election or parts of it for those who have always been agreed regarding it. Its very purpose is to settle some very definite differences that existed for many, many years. That is why this is the question we must answer regarding this article. To illustrate: If we Lutherans and the Baptist Church wanted to agree on the matter of baptism and wrote a confession to that end, would we feel satisfied with a general statement regarding baptism which stated that it is to be administered to all people? Would such a statement settle the actual differences that now exist regarding infant baptism? Such a general statement the Baptists might understand to mean that all people, that is, all adult people are to be baptized. We would understand it to mean all people, that is, children included. How much would have been settled through such a general statement subscribed to by both? Wouldn't we expect that statement to go into just the matter of infant baptism, since that is one of the points of difference? So it is particularly the differences that must be dealt with. Therefore our question regarding this article four: Can we accept this article as the statement of this doctrine which on the basis of Scripture settles the differences that came to light during the election controversy?

I.

Naturally we then first ask the question: What differences came to light during the election controversy? Let us look at them and see whether they have been settled. At the height

of the controversy in 1881 Dr. Walther stated the “*status controversiae*” as follows: “Does the faith which was foreseen of God flow out of the election of grace, or does the election of grace flow out of the foreseen faith? Is the election of grace based alone on God’s mercy and Christ’s merit, or also upon the conduct of man which God foresaw? Can and should a believing Christian become certain of his election and thus of his salvation, or can and should he not become certain of them?” These are the points of difference as stated by Walther in 1881. However, as late as 1942 a Dr. Gerfen of the A.L.C. writing in their German churchpaper, the “*Kirchen-blatt*,” said referring to these points listed by Walther that “they today yet are the real points of difference between the two Synods.” (Quart. 1942, 11 p. 218.) We look then at these points, considering the position of God’s Word, the position of former Synods of the A.L.C. and see which differences have been settled.

1. One difference pertains to the relationship of faith to election. This was perhaps the most important out of which flowed also other differences. The question is: Which is the cause of the other? Do we believe because God elected us? Is election the cause of our faith? The Synodical Conference says Yes, for that is Scriptural. Acts 13, 48: “And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” This gives all glory for our salvation to God alone. Schmidt and the Ohio Synod, however, said: God saw that we would believe, therefore He elected us. In this way they tried to find a solution to the question: Why are some elected before others? In other words, faith was considered a cause of our election. Some hesitate to use the word “cause” and instead speak of it as the “condition” of election. This was called the election “*intuitu fidei*.” This however, was strongly rejected by the Synodical Conference because it gives some credit for his salvation to man. It does not give God full and sole glory for man’s salvation. In effect the deciding factor (in this case his foreseen faith) lies in man himself. Such a teaching perverts the entire Gospel of free salvation.

2. The second difference Walther pointed to referred to man’s conduct. Does man’s conduct have a part in election? Let’s put it this way: Did God elect us because He saw that we would not willfully resist His Gospel preaching? Ohio said Yes. This also involved the doctrine of conversion. The Synodical Conference said: Our conduct has nothing to do with God’s eternal election. Again, all glory for our salvation must be given to God.

3. Walther also makes reference to our certainty of election. Can we be certain of our election? The Synodical Conference said: Yes. God through His Gospel lead us to faith and to a certainty of our election and salvation. That certainty is a wonderful comfort to a Christian. The opponents (the Ohio Synod) attacked this teaching of the Synodical Conference. And we can readily see that if our election is supposed to depend upon our faith, we can never be certain of it. Those are the three points of controversy pointed to in 1881 by Dr. Walther.

4. Another point of controversy pertained to the difference between God’s universal will of grace and His election of grace. On the one hand the Synodical Conference teaches on the basis of Scripture that it is the earnest will of God to save all men through Christ. “God would have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” That is one thing. But we also teach: God from eternity in His grace in Christ elected certain people (some) unto salvation. These two teachings don’t harmonize with our reason. The Synodical Conference was then accused of teaching two contradictory wills of God. Ohio and Iowa on the other hand attempted to bring the two into harmony through their reasoning, by applying what was called the analogy of faith. As a result they did not keep the proper distinction of these two doctrines and of necessity fell into false doctrine denying “*Personenwahl*”.

5. Finally we call attention to a fifth point. They made election and universal will identical. See *Confessional Lutheran*, March 1951, page 34. Ohio accused the Synodical Conference of teaching an election unto damnation. In "Grace for Grace" 12 accusations Schmidt brought against Missouri are listed. The first two are: 1. "That God does not will the conversion, faith and perseverance (in the faith) of all men in the *same way*." 2. "That God had determined to provide for the conversion, faith and perseverance of only some by foreordaining then alone to salvation and *excluding the rest*." This never was taught by Missouri nor the Synodical Conference. Schmidt drew those conclusions himself by rationalizing on the basis of certain teachings. Since such accusations were made and Missouri was accused of being Calvinistic as a result, a common confession might want to repudiate this.

Those are the chief differences that came to light during the course of the election controversy. Now we must again ask the question: Can we accept article four of the *Common Confession* as a statement that on the basis of Scripture settles these differences? We take them one by one and see whether we find a settlement in the Common Confession.

II.

1. Is the relationship of faith and election clear in the Common Confession? Does it repudiate the election in view of faith? This is what we have in the Common Confession: "God from eternity, solely because of His grace in Christ and without any cause whatever in man, elected as His own all those whom He makes and keeps members of His kingdom and heirs of eternal life." The closest it comes to saying anything on this matter is in the words: "Without any cause, whatever in man." But we remember that some A.L.C. men would be willing to say that, considering faith as a *condition* of election. We also note that Lenski very definitely states that man's election is the work of God alone, but then goes on to defend also very definitely election "in view of faith." Remember also that this is a point which has been under controversy for many, many years. Shouldn't a Common Confession which is to settle this difference clearly and definitely state that election is the cause of faith, that we are elected unto faith, that we repudiate any election that is taught in view of faith, that we repudiate any thought that God in eternity foresaw our faith and therefore elected us? We cannot but note in passing how by way of contrast the *Brief Statement* speaks very clearly on this point in par. 36. The Common Confession does not settle this difference satisfactorily.

2. What about the part man's conduct plays in the doctrine of election? This, no doubt, too is supposed to be covered by the words: "Solely because of His grace in Christ and without any cause whatever in man." This might be understood to take care of the matter. But if it is really to settle the matter, why not speak out more clearly and repudiate the idea that possibly our "right conduct", our "refraining from willful resistance" had a part in our election. Neither here nor in the article on conversion is the matter of natural and willful resistance spoken of. This is done very clearly by the *Brief Statement* again in par. 36. To settle a difference it is necessary not only to hint at something, but to speak out clearly and name everything by its proper name without any possibility of not being understood. It must be so clear that we not only can find the correct teaching in it, but are compelled to find it in it, are compelled to see that it repudiates the false teaching. That certainly is not the case here.

3. We next come to the question: can and should a Christian be certain of his election? Concerning this we have in the *Common Confession* the words: "The Holy Spirit by the Gospel has called us and assured us of our status before God, testifying to us that He has chosen us for Himself in Christ from the foundation of the world, and by the imputation of Christ's righteousness has given us the assurance that He will present us faultless before the throne of His

glory.” This point we believe can be understood correctly, even though it does not go into detail to the extent that the *Brief Statement* does. Or does this only speak of the assurance referred to in Madison Agreement? We should also prefer to see this point stressed that our certainty of election and salvation flows out of objective justification, this that God has through Christ declared the whole world righteous. When God leads me to faith, that is, personally to lay hold upon that objective justification, then I have with it certainty of my salvation, for if God loves the whole world, if He has reconciled the whole world unto God, how can I doubt that I too am reconciled? This basis for our assurance should be clearly pointed to as is done in the *Brief Statement*, par. 40.

4. What about the difference between God’s universal will and the doctrine of election? On this point the *Common Confession* is silent. The *Brief Statement* went into this question in par. 38 and 39. Since there was confusion in regard to this, false teachings resulting from it, should it not, too, have been dealt with in this new confession? Since the A.L.C. tendency to try to harmonize various doctrines with human reason by applying the so called analogy of faith was applied here, should it not have been included? We ask quite naturally: Has this now been settled or not?

5. We had a fifth point regarding an election unto damnation. The *Common Confession* is silent on this matter. This may not be a serious omission. The *Brief Statement*, however, includes it in par. 37. It might be well to do so. It would be a safeguard for ourselves against those accusations of Calvinism that have been made against the Synodical Conference.

III,

What conclusions do we draw from all this? 1. This article does not speak clearly on the points of difference to be considered a satisfactory settlement of them. It does not in an unmistakable way point to our election as a cause of our faith, rejecting in clear terms any election in view of faith. This point is so vital to the Gospel of free salvation, to our personal salvation, to the certainty of our salvation that we must be very sensitive to any possibility of its being perverted in any way whatsoever.

2. This article omits some of the points that were in controversy and so can hardly be considered a settlement of them. Does that mean that whatever has not been touched upon here has been relegated to the realm of open questions regarding which agreement is not necessary?

3. This article falls far short of what we have in the *Brief Statement*. Why accept a statement that is not clear in preference to one that speaks out very clearly?

4. We are amazed how it is expected that a statement consisting of one short paragraph (8 lines) should be presented as a settlement of serious differences that are of almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of a century standing. The *Formula of Concord* speaks at much greater length and with greater clarity on these same points than this article. Yet at a time when the *Formula of Concord* was accepted by all, these differences arose. How can a confession that speaks much more briefly and with less clarity, that adds nothing to the *Formula of Concord* settle these differences now?

5. This all leads us to say that this article is a compromising confession rather than a clear confession of the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of Holy Scripture. And whatever compromises the truth of Scripture in any way must be considered false and rejected.