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The Challenge of The Confessions Today

By JOBST SCHURNE

1. *The function of the confessions in the church*

WHEN WE WANT TO comprehend the confessions as opportunity, we have to clear up at first how the confessions want to be understood according to their own directives. They are not to be regarded as comprehending a revelation in their statements themselves, or as further development or accomplishment of the Scripture on the same level, but rather in the dimension of a reflection, of an answer to the revelation. They have their "own necessary place and indispensable significance precisely in this functional context." (Ernst Kinder, "The Confession as Gift and Task"; *The Unity of the Church: A Symposium*, Rock Island, Ill. 1957 p. 107.) "The confession is the response of the church to God's word. It is its echo of faith to God's revelation of salvation." (*Ibid.*, p. 104).

In the confessions the church speaks. She speaks of what has been revealed to her by the Scriptures. The confessions are therefore the necessary outcome of working with the Scriptures. They arise from the Holy Scripture and return to them. There is no such thing as a Biblicism without any presuppositions, for we never have a purely neutral access to the Scripture. "Every man has in this respect, whether it is manifest or hidden, known or unknown, certain guiding principles, and, when they are not those of the church, then they are those of a philosophy, or a 'Weltanschauung' (ideology), of a limited subjectivity, of the spirit of the age, or politics." (*Ibid.*, p. 109). Those principles of understanding and interpretation are usually unexamined and not exposed to any norm *extra nos*. The confessions on the other hand, according to their own directives have been and will be controlled and verified by the Scriptures. Originated from and returning to the Scripture, the confessions are to be considered as an instrument for the church to comprehend the knowledge of God's revelation and to proclaim it.

The confessions do not have an autonomous validity and sense. A confession should not be understood as an isolated source of knowledge. What we find in the symbolical books are certain concrete precise confessional statements. On the one hand, these statements reflect back on the Scripture and on the other hand they serve the church's preaching and proclamation of today. The purpose of the confessions is that they function as a connecting link between the Scriptures and the preaching the Gospel. As a matter of fact, the Holy Scripture provokes and demands the answering echo of a confession.

The process of making a confession consists of formulation, draftings, and statements. To do this it may and can make use of

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statements formulated long before. There is no compulsion to produce new formulations and statements over and over again, as long as we have no other intention but to express the truth already stated in the confessions. The church may well find herself in the position of being led to a truth of the revelation not yet completely comprehended, but she must and cannot deny a truth once confessed to the world.

2. *The problem arising from the nature of the confessions as historical documents*

At this point we are confronted with the problem of the historical situations in which our confessions arose. The formulation of our general theme started with an unquestioned and implicit assumption that to subscribe to confessions is to be entrusted with these statements as men are confronted with a challenge and to face an opportunity. This is the situation at present time, at the end of our century.

But to recognize this assumption means nevertheless to call it into question. The confessions are also historical documents, fixed about 400 years ago, at a period of culture which is not ours and which cannot be reproduced any more. This is more than the problem of intelligibility of language. We are faced with the question of how such statements and expressions of life, in many respects extraneous and different to ours, can be revitalized and transformed into an expression and utterance for our own time. To solve this problem demands precise knowledge of the conditions from which the confessions originated along with the appropriate exegesis and interpretation. We have to perform this task if the confessions are to retain their power and effectiveness. And we have to do it without being afraid of losing the declaration which the confession itself makes by the recognition of its historically conditioned form. If the confessions give voice to the truth, we should be confident that this truth will be effective by its own power. There is no reason to disqualify the confessions as merely historical documents. I'm afraid that those who do so have not sufficiently examined their contents.

This is not the place to deal extensively with the whole problem of the historical circumstances of our confessions. I wanted only to point this out in order to make clear that we cannot talk of them as if there were no problems. The arguments that they are historical products and that history never stands still are used against the validity of the confessions, against the applicability of their statements, and against any assertion of their contemporary effectiveness. We can never meet these arguments by simply denying them, as there is some validity to the arguments, but as Lutheran theologians we will draw different consequences.

3. *The relation of the Confessions to Holy Scripture*

As Lutheran theologians we consider and understand the confessions in their relation to Holy Scripture as having a normative function (*norma normans*) over against the confessions.

"Genuine church confession is a confession of the essential and decisive subject matter of the Holy Scripture. It arises out of the experience made in and by the church in its actual life with regard to and through the essential contents of Holy Scripture." (*Ibid.*, p. 106). The confessions therefore have a twofold thrust: first, they are to act as a guidepost to the center of Holy Scripture; secondly, they have their function as a "guidance for the church's service along the line of proper proclamation of the gospel to others." (*Ibid.*)

When the church responds to God's word in her confessions this means that she "declares the Gospel as that from which she derives her existence, and that for which she exists, the reality which is the basis of her being and the content of her duty and service." (*Ibid.*, 104). Our confessions want to be understood, in the first place, as confessions of and responses to the Gospel. Since they are a true expression of the Gospel, they have an authority derived from the Gospel. Thus they bind us to its truth, they free us from error and false doctrine, they instruct us to listen to and to understand the word of God, and they help us to confess in the sense of actual performance.

The contents of the confessions include nothing new over against the contents of the message of salvation. Faith as the source of confession is not a creative principle bringing forth new contents of confession. It rather receives all those contents by and from the apostolic message.

It's a part of the idea of confession that the church, proclaiming it and being bound to it, has to take over the whole responsibility for her confessional statements. She therefore cannot claim unalterability for them. This fact cannot simply be derived from their being historical documents.

The church tests her confessions and her *corpora doctrinae* on the Gospel and the Holy Scripture as the sole and supreme judge of all teaching and all doctrines. Only those documents can be regarded as valid confessions and valid *corpus doctrinae*, whose contents are attested and verified by the Holy Scripture. On the other hand the church herself confirms the Gospel and Holy Scripture with these documents, verified by this supreme judge.

In the same way in which the church is bound exclusively to the Holy Scripture by her confessions, she is freed from all authority of doctrines not based in the Word of God. In the same proportion in which the concrete authority of the Scriptures is dissolved, the church will lose her consensus with respect to the contents of her gospel teaching.

We have to realize that the confessions expect to be accepted, understood, and confessed not merely as a doctrinal statement as such, but a statement implying a doctrinal obligation. Their affirmation and negation belong together. Only in this way can the confessions serve for the prevention of perverse appeal to the Scriptures, "when men claim its authority in a spirit other than that of the gospel. The church must dissociate itself from such activity. This it does by means of its confessional statements . . . the confession has its own critical and deciding function which for the sake of the

truth of the gospel we must never disregard . . . In times of uncertainty, i.e. when it was a matter of the meaning of the fulness of the gospel for the church 'to be or not to be,' the church has presented a confessional statement as a pointer to the decisive center of Scripture, a pointer to its continuing message." (*Ibid.*, p. 108).

4. *The obligation to and the application of the confessions*

The charge and mission of the church is to proclaim the Gospel. This mission has to be carried out within this world, i.e., in our time, with people alive today. To formulate this indispensable commission with which Christendom is entrusted, the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC in 1968 has coined the slogan: "to preach the gospel to the world's agenda." However, we have to raise this question: who or what is going to be the norm in this respect—the Gospel or the world's agenda? There exists the imminent danger that the second one, the world's agenda, will become normative, unless the confessions serve as a safeguard and keep the church under the authority of the gospel helping to a proper performance of her task.

For this purpose the confessions need to be activated in the church—they are not to exist as something static. Such an activation has to apply the confessions in their

"functional and instrumental organic connection to both sides," i.e., "in the direction of Gospel and Holy Scriptures, as well as in the direction of the life and proclamation of the church." "Thus we cannot and indeed must never be content with the mere historical and ecclesiastical possessions of the confessions as such . . . A confession in its real nature is a matter not of possession but of obligation . . . The right use of a confession consists in always keeping it in its living context and in the position between gospel and Scripture on the one hand and the life and the preaching of the church on the other hand."⁸ (*Ibid.*, pp. 110f.)

"Our preaching must be actually addressed to modern man, but it must be identical in its essence with the preaching of the apostles and prophets! It is this which the confessional statement sets forth. Without this, other principles as regulative for Scripture interpretation and preaching would of necessity creep in." (*Ibid.*, p. 109).

How does this actually look like? I'll try to give an illustration of this matter in the second part of my paper, in which I'm going to show the opportunity of the confessions with respect to certain specific fields of theology.

5. *What the confessions have to say with respect to the understanding (conception) and the effect of Holy Scripture*

The confession binds the church and her theologians to Holy Scripture as the authoritative Word of God effective by its own power. It proclaims the power of God, which is going to come to action through "the preaching of the cross" (1. Cor. 1:18). We don't have this effectiveness and action at our discretion. But the

proof of effectiveness of God's word in Holy Scripture by its own power can confidently be left to God the Holy Spirit—*"tibi et quando visum est Deo"* (CA V). This doesn't mean that we can ignore our obligation to give reasons for the statement about the effectiveness of God's word by its own power.

By means of the confession the church bows to the authority of Scripture. She confesses to hear God's voice and to be confronted with God in the Scripture, and that the Scripture gives witness to the eschatological event of salvation in the past, which comprises the present time and the future as well. The confessions establish an understanding of Scripture according to which God announces the gospel of our salvation on the background of His law! With an act of grace He pardons the accused man and grants him the redemption for Christ's sake. This is the absolutely fundamental essence of the Scriptures as set forth in the confessions.

There can be no doubt that the confessions demand an exegesis, of a kind which bids us speak, when the Scriptures speak, but orders us to keep silence when the Scriptures do so. This doesn't mean that the church can be silent at pleasure, nor speak when she wants to. But, whenever she speaks or has to speak, she must proclaim what her Lord wants to be proclaimed. She has to give voice to the gospel without asking whether people like it or not.

By means of the confessional obligation, the church is bound to her mission. She knows about the fundamental basis of this mission, she knows about its origin, source, and purpose. Precisely this makes the church independent of all those influences, powers, and authorities which constantly try to make use of the church for their own purposes.

The understanding of the church's mission seems to be developing into a crisis. There are many attempts to determine anew this mission by an orientation toward the intentions and requirements of modern society, thus running the risk of a new "Babylonian Captivity of the Church." The church's and theology's right to exist is called into question, and shows itself by a precipitous search for a new proof for this right. Activism and criticism of all aspects of the church are commonplace. The attempts at change are given intrinsic value, without being legitimated by the word of God. No one asks for this legitimization. Some people believe that the church has to appear on all fronts: ecology, world peace, and overpopulation, problems of East-West tension and questions of the Third World, the structure of economics and problems of education, city planning, traffic conditions and social order—all these and even more bother the church. She gives her opinion without being asked. No one actually knows why she speaks to these problems as the church and with what kind of authority by her Lord. Her opinion remains without an echo. Instead of preaching what the church and only the church is able to preach, namely the witness of the grace of God to an unholy world, the direct participation in changing the world is proclaimed as having first priority in the church's engagement. The aims of the revolutionary movement in the sense of social justice and humanity assume a theological quality in themselves. But we

should well be aware of the fact that all the envisaged goals can well be reached without theological considerations. All attempts to substantiate this program biblically are suspect, because they only endorse what has already been determined. A modern German atheist, Joachim Kahl, who holds a doctor's degree in theology from Marburg University, has published a pocket-book, *Misery of Christendom (Elend des Christentums)* in which we find this sentence: "to a progressive critical atheistic theory no theology, speaking even in the most modern and revolutionary terms, can ever contribute anything new." This seems true to me—except for the uniqueness of the Gospel itself.

Let's focus our attention again on the Uppsala definition: to preach the Gospel to the world's agenda. This definition assumes that we know what the Gospel is. In this respect the confessions serve as indispensable guidepost. They direct us to the Scripture. Wherever this guidepost is lost, we face the danger of the "world's agenda" determining the church's preaching.

In some theological trends in Europe this is not merely a danger, but already a fact. A new kind of theology is arising, characterized not only by taking over the *methods* of empiric sciences, but also by assuming their questions. The confrontation with God will take second place to the confrontation with the needs of this world. This strongly influences the conception of Scripture and its usage. In this kind of theology, Scripture has lost its character as authoritative word of God effective by its own power. It has become a kind of sample book of models, in which human experiences in mastering earthly problems are collected. Those experiences have to be made effective anew and can prove their authority only from case to case. In this concept the Bible is merely regarded as collection of documents about previous cases of humane, righteous, and exemplary behaviour, which *a priori* can be replaced and superseded—or even as a sort of textbook of techniques of revolution. In this way man is addressed by Holy Scripture in his relations to this world only—if he feels addressed at all.

This kind of application of Scripture doesn't aim at faith any more. Wherever man is considered only in his relationship to this world (and all usage of Scripture is integrated into this concept), where no one cares for the confrontation with God, but only with this world and its needs, no faith can arise and man can respond only with his own activity, with his own works.

I don't want to be understood as if I would once more yield to the quietism with which Lutheranism has traditionally and constantly been reproached, a quietism inexperienced in the ways of the world and characterized by failure to meet the test of faith in this world and age. The Lutheran church has to speak to the needs and troubles of this world and the men living in it. And it is truly a misunderstanding of her position when she is charged with sanctioning all kinds of establishments. The Lutheran church is obliged to speak. But she has to do so in the name of God, and legitimated by God's word. The confessions give her the opportunity to do so.

6. *What the confessions have to say with respect to theological anthropology (Menschenbild)*

The Lutheran confessions are perhaps in no respect more acute and up-to-date than when they discuss their concept of man. I'm sure they provide an excellent opportunity to understand man's situation.

On the one hand we find in the confessions a clear statement on the fall of man and its consequences, i.e., his sinfulness and his guilt. On the other hand the confessions express that man is still God's creature and he is therefore still responsible and will be called to account by God. His free will is strictly limited, but is not extinguished. Man has his chances to bring his life to order in external matters, but he is not able to surpass the limits drawn by the Fall. I don't intend to quote the revelant passages in the confessions to underline this. But we should never conceal those statements from modern men, rather we should use them as a help in the search for understanding men in the world of today.

Our present day situation is characterized in two ways. First, man's optimism about himself, and his self-confidence are stressed with great emphasis: A new hope for mankind is derived from this. Typical of this is the edict of the Marxian philosopher Ernst Bloch "*eritis sicut Deus*" (*you shall become as God*). This is the actual and true message of salvation for modern man. Secondly this kind of optimism and self-confidence are constantly questioned by man because of his nature.

After World War II we had—at least in Europe—the impression that the times of such an superficial optimism and confidence in man's abilities had definitively passed away. By the experience of unchained brutality visible in the horrors of war, in the terrors of the concentration camps, in the demonic manipulation of multitudes, in the muzzling of consciences, people seemed to have become aware of what was still *in* man. This could never be extinguished merely by appropriate education or training or the like. We had experienced what the *homo incurvatus in seipsum* was able to do.

Today the situation has changed. The rapidly increasing progress in technical sciences has pushed aside this negative view of man. Modern psychology as well as Marxian philosophy have made man the only measure of all things. They have, each one in its specific way, changed the needs of man for salvation into needs for simple improvement and correction. The ability to do this out of his own power is claimed for man.

But it is exactly this view of man which is no longer challenged. Psychology as well as philosophy, even Marxian philosophy, are discovering the inevitable defectibility of man. Man is supposed to subdue the world and he is doing so, but look at the false paths of culture and civilization we have strayed into! Men begin to doubt in their ability to subdue the world. Let me quote for example the physicist and Nobel Prize winner Max Born, who died in January 1970:

"It seems to me that the attempt of nature to bring forth upon this earth a being, who is able to think, has completely failed.

For in this being, i.e., in man, we find bestial instincts mixed with intellectual powers in such a disastrous way, that this mixture cannot be brought under control."

Naturally this is not yet the biblical doctrine of original sin according to CA II., but we may now feel how useful this doctrine can become in the discussion about the reasons for man's defectibility. Pascual Jordan, a German natural philosopher, has quoted Robert Oppenheimer as having said that the physicists are going to rediscover sin. The question of guilt and responsibility is bothering these men again. And it cannot be answered by merely pointing to the correctness of their mathematical formulations or by the verification of scientific hypothesis by experiments. Helplessness and insolvable questions do arise not only for physicists, but in the fields of biochemistry, medicine and so forth as well. *Eritis sicut Deus*—this becomes not a message of salvation any more, rather it appears as fate and guilt. To do sin arises from being a sinner.

Now sin is certainly not a category of anthropology. Man's perversity cannot be understood by measuring him with an ideal norm existing for itself. It is rather a theological category. Recognition of sin does not result from an isolated analysis of existence of the natural man, but in the final analysis from the confrontation with the truth of God. This basic understanding of sin cannot be applied for the sake of an anthropological pessimism, but on the contrary for the sake of soteriology.

In this respect we should be aware of the confessions' opportunity. They equip us with a truly realistic view of man without any illusions. They show that the proclamation of total self-redemption of man after the "death of God" is nothing but a literal unholy utopia. This kind of self-redemption is offered today by those theologians, whose theology has shrunk to social ethics and who transform the need for salvation into a need for society's improvement. In this conception human activity replaces the grace of God. For example let me quote from the *Credo* of Dorothee Sölle:

"I believe in God, who . . . wants the alteration of all conditions by our work, by our politics . . . I believe in Jesus Christ, who arises into our life that we may become free from prejudice and arrogance, from fear and hatred, and promote his revolution toward his kingdom; I believe . . . in our responsibility for what will become of this earth: a vale of tears, hunger, and violence, or the city of God."

No wonder, that a prayer composed under Mrs. Sölle's authority, ends with these words: "Come, Lord Jesus, and let us bring up your future." If we examine those statements for their understanding of man and compare it with the statements of the confessions, we will soon discover the unbridgable difference. And we will also discover the opportunity of the confessions: to witness to the world, which becomes so helpless; the truth about man, a truth, which is helpful, because it clearly speaks about the limits of man as well as his possibilities, but expects the salvation of the world not from human welfare, but from God himself.

7. *What the confessions have to say with respect to Christology and the Doctrine of Justification*

When the confessions bind us to the Scriptures, they give a center of gravity to our theology. This consists in Christology. The confessions are not doubtful about this. Christology is the very basis for the message of the church. But it is not to be considered as an isolated or isolatable value in the confessions, rather it flows into the soteriology and is combined with it. So we come to an existential relation of Christology to man. The doctrine of justification presupposes Christology and is a fruit of the theology of incarnation and cannot be separated from it. "It is impossible to confess the justification of the sinner if Jesus of Nazareth is not truly God." (Peter Brunner, "The Present Significance of the Lutheran Confession," *The Unity of the Church*, p. 93).

Since the Lutheran Church is bound to confessions that preserve this connection, it has no choice but to make Christ alone the center of her proclamation and nothing else. It cannot proclaim a different way of salvation than that of justification of the sinner *gratis, propter Christum per fidem* (CA IV). This salvation was wrought by God's own action *extra nos*.

However, Christology, the very heart of Lutheran theology, is questioned today. We are told that the present day problems cannot be met by Christological formulations of the past, but rather something else is demanded. We are told that the confessional doctrine of justification is not able to meet the requirements of our time. It is said that modern men are becoming or are already totally apathetic to the quest for a merciful God. The confessions are regarded as having lost their attraction in this respect. It is a fact that Christology plays no part any more in the most prominent discussions. But where Christology is no longer the center of all theological discussion, it follows that the doctrine of justification as its necessary corollary has already been lost.

What are the consequences? Christology has shrunk to a statement in which Christ is merely a point of orientation, serving only as a model. The way to salvation is no longer found in believing *in* Jesus Christ, but in acting *like* Jesus Christ. In this way man is thrown back on himself, and the comfort of a redemption performed *extra nos* has been taken away.

In this situation, our faith is challenged. Because we must put our confidence in the salvation won for us by Christ, we cannot separate Christology from the doctrine of justification. But the question of the opportunity of our confessions in this matter cannot be stated out of a concern whether our teaching will be accepted and agreed to, or not. If we are sure that the confessions speak the truth in this respect, we have to trust that this truth will find its listeners and followers. The theology and preaching of the church is never justified by visible success, but by the validity and legitimation of their statements according to Holy Scripture.

As for the rest, those men who expect salvation from their own activity and engagement will discover before long that they become subject to the Law, which is a *lex semper accusans* and knows no

mercy. Peace, freedom, justice, salvation are terms of comfort. They give what they mean only when they are considered as God's gifts acquired already by Christ, but not when they are considered as objects to be accomplished by ourselves. This can only be done by God's action happening in the event of the cross. It comes to us by justification *sola gratia per fidem*.

8. *What the confessions have to say with respect to the ecclesiology*

To have a confession is the necessary outcome of the self-understanding of the Lutheran church. She is a church only because and while she is "constituted by *the* Gospel, which is preached in her and by her as the word of God absolutely above the world's limitations, withdrawn from human grip with all its results." (Translated from Werner Eilect, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, II, 269.) Because the Gospel is simply not a matter of personal discretion, therefore the confession of the Gospel, which distinguishes and characterizes the Lutheran church, is also not a matter of personal discretion. Only when the church gives voice to the Gospel by means of a confession over against all falsification and error and submits herself to the Gospel through her confession, does she become a church according to her Lord's intention and becomes able to fulfill her task in and at the world.

The church is in fact constituted by the Gospel. In other words, her existence depends upon and can be perceived by word and sacrament as the effecting instruments. This implies that the church has always to keep in mind that she is established by God. She is a *creatura evangelii* existing before the individual. Therefore she defies sociological definition of any type. Of course, her external form and order, her constitution and the shape of her service to the world depend on the historical conditions which she lives. They are *de jure humano* and therefore in principle changeable at any time. But this is not true for the constituting factors which make up the church.

So the Lutheran church cannot agree with those expectations uttered for instance at the 1963 LWF assembly in Helsinki, namely that the Lutheran church should always be ready to give up her own existence as a distinctive confessional church in order not to hinder the unity of Christendom. Such an idea is based on a conception of the church which denies the fact that she is founded by God and entrusted with his word. Word and sacrament as the instruments which establish the church have to be understood as demanding a confession to their truth and validity.

Modern trends in theology like to interpret and understand the church by means of anthropological categories. The consequences will be that the church will be regarded as a special interest group in our pluralistic society. This means that she is exposed to the conflicts of interest in this society on the one hand, and on the other hand that she becomes a political factor in the power struggle of society delivered up to manipulation and being used as an instrument to carry out specific aims of social politics. In the moment that the church serves only certain groups of society, she surrenders her position above the factions, and the universal claim of her proclamation is curtailed.

What is the value of the confessions in such a situation? I think as long as they help us to understand the church as being founded by God, as having her existence *in* the world, but not *of* the world, they preserve us from delivering the church up to the powers of this world, and they free us from any pressure of accommodation and any opportunism which endeavors to insure the church's existence and influence. They grant to the church the true catholicity and universality and preserve it from being worried about failure, a concern which has never helped the church, but on the contrary has held her back.

9. *What the confessions have to say with respect to eschatology*

The church on earth is not to exist for eternity. Her mission and her existence are in this time and for this time. That's what the confessions say. She is the ark to rescue us from the flood of God's wrath until a new heaven and a new earth have appeared.

Judgment and new creation according to Holy Scripture are indispensable parts of what the confessions proclaim. As soon as we relax our tie to Scripture, as soon as man is not comprehended in his sinfulness, as soon as the redemption by Christ has been replaced by self-redemption, as soon as the church degenerates into a pressure group in a pluralistic society, then judgment and new creation will have no part in theology. That's exactly what we are experiencing today, the loss of eschatology, a characteristic of much of Christendom today. But when we keep silent about these statements of Scripture, nothing has been done to solve the problems of men today, nor have those problems become easier to solve. Man comes to a dead stop facing the unsolvable contradictions of his life, being confronted with his own defectibility. He pursues the utopia of a kingdom of God on earth which he wants to establish by himself; but peace, freedom, justice, and salvation are far from him.

The statement concerning the "Last Things" enables us to give an answer, whose truth and validity God himself guarantees in his word. The confessions call us to grapple with the "truly apostolic task," "in the midst of a gigantic progress and enthusiastic optimism for this world to preach *the* kingdom which are not from this world." (*Ibid.*, p. 269 Translated by writer.).

This mission we have to face. It has been entrusted to us. We haven't asked for it ourselves. The confessions will be of great help to fulfill this mission. That's their purpose. It will be ultimately irrelevant whether the message we have to proclaim will be accepted or not. For as a church of Jesus Christ we would be disobedient if we would try to secure our chances in this world by digressing from the theme. This theme can never be determined by ourselves, but only by the Lord of the church.

The ultimate purpose of the confessions consists in their pointing to the basis for which we are responsible, too.

In ecclesia non valet: hoc ego dico, hoc tu dicus, hoc ille dicit; sed: Haec dicit Dominus (St. Augustine). (In the church it is not valid that: "I say this," "you say that," "he says this;" but this is valid: "Thus says the Lord").