

S:t Johannes evangeliska lutherska församling, Finland (St. John's evangelical lutheran congregation)

Statements of belief

Appendix to the constitutional document of August 1, 2008.

1 Background

The reason for the establishment of this congregation lies in the continued and rapidly accelerating dissolution of the doctrine within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. We the undersigned have seen it necessary to find a congregation, where preaching the Word of God and administering the Sacraments can be done in accordance with God's Word. With the desire to remain in God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions as true expressions of scriptural doctrine, we have carried out this work in prayer for God's will to be done and that everything is to serve the Lord's glory and the salvation of souls.

According to peoples view the work has been slow. However, we have been committed to practical solutions which should not cause divisions. God has given us many external evidence of his leadership, which has encouraged us to go to work and establish a church, even though we are few and externally weak.

I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.
(Revelation 3:8)

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

2 Statements of belief

The regulations of the Congregation have for practical reasons no references to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. The following provides a brief overview of some doctrinal points where we felt it important to clarify our position with respect to the uncertainties in many places, with Bible references and quotes from the Confessions. We use the following abbreviations:

- CA: The Augsburg confession
- SA: The Smalcald Articles
- P BC: Preface to the Book of Concorde
- E FC: The Epitome of the Formula of Concorde
- SD FC: The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concorde

2.1 The Scripture as the only and infallible norm

The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. (Psalm 19:8-9)

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morn-

ing star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19-21)

We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be tested and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119:105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal. 1:8. (E FC 1.)

1. First [then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart] the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged. (SD FC, Rule and Norm 3.)

2.2 The Creation and Fall of Man

We believe that the universe, the world, and the human race came into existence in the beginning when God created heaven and earth and all creatures. We believe that the Bible presents a true, factual, and historical account of creation. We believe that God created man in his own image and that he lost this divine image when he yielded to the temptation of Satan and disobeyed God's command.

We reject all theories of evolution as an explanation of the origin of the universe and the human race and all attempts to harmonize the scriptural account of creation with such theories. We reject all views that look upon people as good by nature and fails to recognize their total spiritual depravity.

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them (Exodus 20:11)

For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. (Psalm 33:9)

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. (Genesis 6:5)

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (Hebrews 11:3)

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (Psalm 51:5)

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. (Ephesians 2:3)

Also they teach that since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost. (CA, Chief Articles of Faith, Article II Of Original Sin, 1-3)

2.3 Jesus Christ and Redemption

We believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who was with the Father from eternity. By a miracle of the Holy Spirit, he assumed a true human nature when he was conceived as a sacred child of the virgin Mary.

We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, and that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Through him the forgiveness of sins was acquired for all people, meaning an acquittal of humanity. This substitutionary work by Christ is the objective basis for sinner's assurance of salvation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. (John 1:1–2)

The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18–19)

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (...) God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21)

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification, Rom. 4:25.

And He alone is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, John 1:29; and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all, Is. 53:6.

Likewise: All have sinned and are justified without merit [freely, and without their own works or merits] by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood, Rom. 3:23f.

Now, since it is necessary to believe this, and it cannot be otherwise acquired or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us as St. Paul says, Rom. 3:28: For we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law. Likewise 3:26: That He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Christ.

Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered [nor can anything be granted or permitted contrary to the same], even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin. For there is none other name under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved, says Peter, Acts 4:12. And with His stripes we are healed, Is. 53:5. And upon this article all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the Pope, the devil, and the [whole] world. Therefore, we must be sure concerning this doctrine, and not doubt; for otherwise all is lost, and the Pope and devil and all things gain the victory and suit over us.

(SA, Part II, Article I)

2.4 The Holy Spirit and the Means of Grace

We believe that the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, which is the Gospel in the Word and Sacraments, works faith in people, who by nature are hostile to God. This faith worked by the Holy Spirit or the regeneration of man leads to a renewal of man and makes him an heir of eternal salvation. Confession and Absolution are means in which the Holy Spirit works.

We believe also that through the Sacrament of Baptism the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to sinners, giving them new life. We believe that even small children can believe and receive the blessings of Baptism.

We believe that all who join in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper receive the true body and blood of Christ "in, with, and under the bread and wine".

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:16)

And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. (John 20:22-23)

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ. (Romans 10:17)

I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? (Galatians 3:2)

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:4-6)

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:19-20)

In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power [life], and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet. (SA. Part III, Article VIII)

Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God's grace. They condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the baptism of children, and say that children are saved without Baptism. (CA, Article IX)

Of the Supper of the Lord they teach that the Body and Blood of Christ are truly present, and are distributed to those who eat the Supper of the Lord; and they reject those that teach otherwise. (CA, Article X)

Of Confession they teach that Private Absolution ought to be retained in the churches, although in confession an enumeration of all sins is not necessary. For it is impossible according to the Psalm: Who can understand his errors? (CA, Article XI)

2.5 Justification and repentance

We believe that God justifies a person through faith in Christ and his redemption for all people.

This faith justifies not because of any power it has in itself, but only because of the salvation prepared by God in Christ. Unbelievers forfeit the forgiveness won for them by Christ.

We believe that a person's conversion is entirely the work of God's grace and has its root in the election to faith God made already before the world was created.

When the gospel is rejected it is, however, entirely peoples own fault.

We reject every teaching that people in any way contribute to their salvation or that present faith as a condition people must fulfill to complete their justification.

For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. (Romans 3:28)

So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. (Romans 11:5-6)

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. (Mathew 23:37)

St. Augustine writes further: I erred when I said that it is within our own power to believe the Gospel and to will; but it is God's work to give to them that believe and will the power to effect something. (SD FC, II. Free Will, or Human Powers, 27)

For few receive the Word and follow it; the greatest number despise the Word, and will not come to the wedding, Matt. 22. The cause for this contempt for the Word is not God's foreknowledge [or predestination], but the perverse will of man, which rejects or perverts the means and instrument of the Holy Ghost, which God offers him through the call, and resists the Holy Ghost, who wishes to be efficacious, and works through the Word, as Christ says: How often would I have gathered you together, and ye would not! Matt. 23:37. (SD FC, XI: Election, 41)

Also they teach that since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence; and that this disease, or vice of origin, is truly sin, even now condemning and bringing eternal death upon those not born again through Baptism and the Holy Ghost. (CA, Article II, 1-3)

Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4. (CA, Article IV, Of Justification)

2.6 Church

We believe that there is one holy Christian Church, which is the temple of God and the body of Christ. The members of this one Church are all those who are the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, regardless of the nation, race, or church body to which they belong.

We believe that it is the Lord's will that Christians meet regularly to build up one another and to grow spiritually together so that the mission of our Lord can be fulfilled. Since these visible gatherings confess to the marks of the church, they are called congregations or churches because of the true believers present in them.

We believe that it is God's will that Christians are united in the confession of faith. We reject all teachings that are not in accordance with the Word of the Lord and reject those who after being admonished persist in teachings that are false. We also reject the contention that Christian fellowship may be practiced where there is no agreement in confession.

We believe that every Christian is a priest and king before God and is called to share the gospel with other people. We believe that it is the will of God that the church, in accordance with good order, calls qualified men into the public ministry. This ministry is called the power of the keys, because the church through this ministry exercises the power to bind or to release from sins.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord,

one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:3-6)

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. (Romans 16:17)

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. (Titus 1:5-6)

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18)

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. (CA Article VII, Of the Church)

We are also in great hope that, if they would be taught aright concerning all these things, the Spirit of the Lord aiding them, they would agree with us, and with our churches and schools, to the infallible truth of God's Word. (P BC, The Book of Concorde, 20)

For, thank God, [to-day] a child seven years old knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd. (SA, Part III, Article XII. Of the Church)

If the bishops would be true bishops [would rightly discharge their office], and would devote themselves to the Church and the Gospel, it might be granted to them for the sake of love and unity, but not from necessity, to ordain and confirm us and our preachers [---] But because they neither are, nor wish to be, true bishops [---] and, moreover, persecute and condemn those who discharge these functions, having been called to do so, the Church ought not on their account to remain without ministers [to be forsaken by or deprived of ministers]. Therefore, as the ancient examples of the Church and the Fathers teach us, we ourselves will and ought to ordain suitable persons to this office. (SA, Part III, Article X. Of Ordination and the Call)

The keys are an office and power given by Christ to the Church for binding and loosing sin, not only the gross and well-known sins, but also the subtle, hidden, which are known only to God, as it is written in Ps. 19:13: Who can understand his errors? And in Rom. 7:25 St. Paul himself complains that with the flesh he serves the law of sin. (SA, Part III, Article VII. Of the Keys)

That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God... They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works. (CA V: Of the Ministry)

2.7 Jesus' return and judgement

We believe that when Jesus returns he will be visible for all people. No one can know the exact time of Jesus' return, but we have been given signs that show his return is near so that the day will not come upon us unexpectedly. At Jesus' return this present world will come to an end. Together with those still living, the resurrected will appear before his throne of judgment. The unbelievers will be condemned to an eternity in hell, but those who by faith have been cleansed in the blood of Christ will be glorified and will live with Jesus forever in the blessed presence of God in heaven.

We reject any hope of salvation for all people, and any claim there is a special way of salvation for the Jews.

We reject the teaching of an earthly thousand year kingdom, because it has no valid scriptural basis and leads Christians to set their hopes upon an earthly kingdom of Christ.

This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. (Acts 1:11)

But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Matthew 24:36)

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. (John 5:28-29)

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Matthew 25:31-32)

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:36)

My kingdom is not of this world. (John 18:36)

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

Also they teach that at the Consummation of the World Christ will appear for judgment, and will raise up all the dead; He will give to the godly and elect eternal life and everlasting joys, but ungodly men and the devils He will condemn to be tormented without end. They condemn the Anabaptists, who think that there will be an end to the punishments of condemned men and devils. They condemn also others who are now spreading certain Jewish opinions, that before the resurrection of the dead the godly shall take possession of the kingdom of the world, the ungodly being everywhere suppressed. (CA, Article XVII: Of Christ's Return to Judgment.)

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Bible references: NIV

Lutheran Confessions: <http://bookofconcord.org>