

THE CONFESSION OF FAITH OF THE CHURCHES OF SWITZERLAND.

Modernized and annotated by
William H. Gross www.onthewing.org Mar 2026

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The following English translation of the **FIRST HELVETIAN CONFESSION** was composed by **George Wishart**. The original Confession was under the direction of a conference held at Basel in January 1536, prepared in Latin by the Reformers Bullinger, Myconius, Grynaeus, Leo Juda, and Grossmann. In the following March it received the united sanction of the representatives of the different Swiss churches at a second conference at Basel. In versions of Latin and German it was submitted to an assembly at Wittenberg by Bucer and Capito, and also to the Protestant princes at the meeting at Smalkald in February 1537, and was on both occasions approved. Subsequent to the latter event, Wishart produced his English translation. From a unique copy, formerly in the possession of Mr. Richard Heber, Wishart's version has been reprinted in the "Miscellany of the Wodrow Society." From that work it is transferred to these pages. The original is a tract of fifteen leaves octavo,¹ in black letter. There is no date or printer's name, but it is believed to have been printed at London by Thomas Raynalde about the year 1548. The title-page is inscribed:

"This confession was first written and set out by the ministers of the church and congregation of Switzerland, where all godliness is received, and the word held in most reverence, and from there it was sent to the Emperor's majesty, then holding a great counsel or parliament in the year of our Lord God, 1537 in the month of February. Translated out of Latin by George Usher (*i.e.*, Wishart), a Scotchman, who was burned in Scotland, the year of our Lord 1546.

"OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE.

"The Canonical or holy Scripture, which is the Word of God, taught and given by the Holy Spirit, and published to the world by the prophets and holy apostles, which also is the most perfect and ancient science and doctrine of wisdom, it alone contains consummately all godliness and all sorts and manner of fashion of life.

"OF THE EXPOSITION OF SCRIPTURE.

"The interpretation, or exposition of this holy writ, ought to and should be sought out of itself, so that it should be the sole interpreter, the rule of charity and faith having governance.

"OF MAN'S TRADITIONS.

"As to other things, of traditions of men, however beautiful and however much received they are, whatever traditions withdraw us and stop us from the Scripture, of such we answer the sayings of the Lord, as of things hurtful and unprofitable, 'They worship me in vain, teaching the doctrines of man.' Matt. 15.

¹ *Octavo*: a book size resulting from folding each sheet of paper into eight leaves.

“OF THE HOLY FATHERS.

“For which sort of interpretation so far as the Holy Fathers has not gone from it, not only do we receive them as interpretations of the Scripture, but also we honour and worship them as chosen and beloved instruments of God.

“THE END AND INTENT OF THE SCRIPTURE.

“The principal intent of all the canonical Scripture is to declare that God is benevolent and friendly-minded to mankind; and that he has declared that kindness in and through Jesus Christ his only son: which kindness is received by faith; but this faith is effectuous through charity (love), and expressed in an innocent life.

“OF GOD.

“Of God we believe in this way: that he is almighty, being one in substance, and three in persons. Which even as he has created by his Word, that is, his Son, all things out of nothing, so by his Spirit and providence he governs, preserves, and nourishes most truly, righteously, and wisely, all things.

“OF MAN.

“Man, which is the most perfect image of God on earth, and also is the chief dignity and honour among all visible creatures, being made of soul and body; of which two the body is mortal, the soul immortal; when he was created by God holy, by falling in vice and sin through his own fault, drew with him in that same ruin and fall, and so subjected all mankind to the same calamity and wretchedness that he fell in.

“OF ORIGINAL SIN.

“And so this pestiferous infection which men call Original, has infected and overspread the whole kind of man, so far that by no help (he being the son of wrath and vengeance and enemy of God) could be healed by any means but by the help of God only. For if there is any good that remains in man after the fall, that same being jointly made weaker and weaker by our vice turns to the worse; because the strength and power of evil overcomes it, and neither suffers us to follow reason nor yet to exercise the godliness of our mind.

“OF FREE WILL.

“Therefore we attribute such free will to man as we, who witting and willing to do good, feel and experience of evil. Also, we may truly do evil of our own will; but we may not embrace and follow good (unless we are illuminated, stirred up, and mounted by the grace of Christ): For ‘God is he who works in us both to will, to perform, and to accomplish for his own good will’s sake; and from God comes our health and salvation, but of ourself comes perdition.

“OF THE ETERNAL MIND OF GOD TO RESTORE MAN.

“And however it is that through his fault man was subject to damnation, and was also run under the just indignation of God to take vengeance upon him, yet God the father never ceased to take merciful care over him. Which thing is manifest not only from the first promises and the whole law which, as it is holy and good, teaching us the will of God, righteousness, and truth, so it works wrath and stores up sin within us, and does not slacken; and that is not

through any fault of itself, but through our vice; but it also clearly appears through Christ, who was ordained and given for that purpose.

“OF JESUS CHRIST AND WHAT IS DONE BY HIM.

“This Christ, the very Son of God, and very God and very man also, was made our brother; at the time appointed he took upon him a whole man, made of soul and body, having two natures unpermixed² and one dual person, to the intent that he should restore to life us who were dead, and make us arise of God annexed with himself. He also, after he had taken upon him from the immaculate Virgin,³ by operation of the Holy Ghost, flesh, which was holy because of the union of the Godhead, which is and also was like our flesh in all things except in sinfulness. And because it behoved the sacrifice for sin to be clean and immaculate, gave that same flesh to death, to expel all our sin by that means. And he also, to the intent that we should have one full and perfect hope and trust of our immortality, has raised up again from death to life his own flesh, and has set it and placed it in heaven at the right hand of his Almighty Father.

“And there he sits our victorious champion, our guider, our captain, and head, also our highest bishop indeed, sin, death, and hell, being victoriously overcome by him, and defends our cause, and pleads it perpetually until he reforms and fashions us to that likeness to which we were created, and brings us to be partakers of eternal life. And we look for him, and believe that he shall come at the end of all ages to be our true righteous just Judge, and shall pronounce sentence against all flesh, which shall be raised up before to that judgement, and that he shall exalt the godly above the heavens, but the ungodly he shall condemn both body and soul to eternal destruction.

“And as he alone is our mediator and intercessor, host and sacrifice, bishop, lord, and our king, we also acknowledge and confess him alone to be our atonement and ransom, satisfaction, expiation, our wisdom, our defence, and our only deliverer — utterly refusing all other means of life and salvation, except thus by Christ alone.

“THE END OF THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL.

“And therefore, the whole doctrine of the Evangelists annunciate and show to be the first and chiefly to be inculcated and taught, that we are safe only by the mercy of God, and merit of our Saviour Christ. And that men may better perceive and understand how necessary is the mercy of God, and Christ’s merits for them, their sins should be clearly shown to them by the law, and remission by Christ’s death.

“OF FAITH AND OF THE POWER OF IT.

“And these such godly benefits, with the very sanctification of the Holy Spirit, we obtain by faith, the very true gift of God, and not through any other power or strength of ourselves or our merits.

² *Unpermixed*: not blended or combined into one substance or identity.

³ This is not the immaculate conception of Mary, per the Roman Catholic dogma of 1854. Rather, it distinguishes “virgin,” meaning a young woman, from a woman who has never been with a man (which this affirms).

“This faith is one certain and undoubted substance and apprehension of all things that we hope for to come of the kindness of God, and it comes first out of self-charity: it works noble fruits of all virtues. Yet notwithstanding, we attribute nothing to the deeds; although they are godly, yet they are men’s works and acts. But the health and salvation that is obtained, we attribute to the grace of God alone. And truly, this worshipping alone is the very true worshipping of God; faith, I mean, is most pregnant and plentiful of good works, yet without any confidence in those works.

“OF THE CONGREGATION OR CHURCH.

“Also we hold, and believe, that the Church — which is the congregation and election of all holy men, which also is the spouse of Christ, whom he shall present without spot to his Father, washing it in his own blood — is of such lively stones aforesaid ⁴ laid upon this lively rock in this manner.

“This Church, though it is evidently known only to the eyes of God, yet by certain external rites instituted by Christ, and by one public and lawful teaching (teaching of the Word of God), not only is it seen and known, but it is also so constituted by them, that without these ceremonies, no man is reckoned to be of this church, unless it is by a singular privilege of God.

“THE MINISTERS OF THE WORD OF GOD.

“And for this reason we grant that the Ministers of the Church are cooperators of God, as Paul calls them, ⁵ by whom God gives and ministers both knowledge of ourself, and remission of sin, and converts men to Himself, raises them up and comforts them, affrays ⁶ them also, and judges them; but such that the virtue and efficacy of it we ascribe also to the Lord, and the ministration of the sacraments. For it is manifest that this efficacy and power is not bound nor knit to any creature, but is dispensed liberally and freely to whoever, and whenever, he pleases. For, ‘He that waters is nothing, nor is he that plants anything, but He that gives the increase, which is God.’ ⁷

“THE POWER OF THE CHURCH.

“The authority to preach God’s Word, and to feed the Lord’s flock, which properly is the Power of the Key, prescribing and commanding all men, both high and low, all alike, should be holy and inviolate; and should be committed only to those who are fit for it — and chosen either by the election of God, or else by a sure and advised election of the Church; or by their will, to whom the Churches depute and appoint that office of choosing.

“THE CHOOSING OF MINISTERS OR OFFICERS.

“This ministration and office should be granted to no man but to him whom the ministers of the Church, and those to whom the charge is given by the Churches, and found judged to be of knowledge in the law of God, and of innocent life. Which is saying that it is the very election

⁴ “aforesaid” here seems to refer to their being “chosen before the foundation of the world.” (Eph 1.4)

⁵ 1Cor 16.16.

⁶ *Affray*: here it means to impart the fear of God to them.

⁷ 1Cor 3.7.

of God, it is well and justly approved by the voice of the Church, and the imposition of hands by the heads of the priests.

“THE HEAD AND SHEPHERD OF THE CHURCH.

“Christ, truly, himself is the very true head of his church and congregation, and the only pastor and head; and he also gives presidents, heads, and teachers, to the intent that in the external administration they should use the power of the church well and lawfully. Therefore we do not know those who are heads and pastors in name only, nor yet the Romish heads.

“THE DUTY OF MINISTERS OR OFFICERS.

“The chief and principal office of this ministration is to preach repentance and remission of sin through Jesus Christ; to pray continually for the people; to give diligence wholly to holy studies and to the Word of God, and resist and pursue the devil always with the Word of God, as with the sword of the Spirit, and do that with a deadly hatred, and by all means to chase him away; to defend the holy citizens of Christ. And by all means compel and reprove the faulty and vicious; and to exclude from the church those who stray too far, and do that by a godly consent and agreement of those who are chosen by the ministers and magistrates for correction, or to punish them by any other convenient way and profitable means, so long until they come to amendment, and so are safe. For this is returning to the church again, for one such citizen of Christ: if he acknowledges and confesses his error with converted mind and life. For all this doctrine seeks and wills that we require willing and healthful correction, exhilarate, or comfort all godly by a new study of godliness.

“OF THE POWER OR STRENGTH OF SACRAMENTS.

“There are two Sacraments which are named in the Church of God: Baptism and Hosting.⁸ these are tokens of secret things, that is, of godly and spiritual things, from which things they take the name; they are not naked signs, but they are signs and verities together. For in Baptism the water is the sign, but the thing and verity is regeneration and adoption in the people of God. In the Hosting and Thanksgiving, the bread and the wine are signs, but the thing and verity is the communion of the body of our Lord; health and salvation are found, and remission of sins, which are received by faith, even as the signs and tokens are received by the bodily mouth.

“Therefore we affirm the Sacraments not only to be badges and tokens of Christian society, but also to be signs of the grace of God, by which the ministers work with God, to the end that the promise brings the work to pass; but so, as said before about the ministration of the word, that all the same power is ascribed to the Lord.

“OF BAPTISM.

“We affirm Baptism to be by the institution of the Lord, the laver⁹ of regeneration, which regeneration the Lord exhibits to his chosen by a visible sign, by the ministration of the congregation, as aforesaid. In this holy laver we wash our infants for this reason: because it is

⁸ Originally “howslynge” – “host” refers to the bread in the Lord’s Supper, which represents Christ’s body. In a sense, He is “hosting” by inviting believers to dine with Him at His table.

⁹ *Laver*: wash basin.

wickedness to reject and cast out of the fellowship and company of the people of God those who are born of us, who are the people of God, except those who are expressly commanded to be rejected, by the voice of God; and for this reason chiefly: because we should not ungodly presume their election.

“OF THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR.

“But the mystical supper is that in which the Lord offers his body and his blood, that is, his own self, truly, to his own, for this intent: that he might live more and more in them, and they in him. Not so that the body and blood of the Lord are communicated naturally to the bread and wine, or enclosed in them as in one place; or put in them by any carnal or marvelous presence; but because the body and blood of our Lord are received truly by one faithful soul, and because the bread and the wine, by the institution of the Lord, are tokens by which the very communion or participation of the Lord’s body and blood are exhibited by the Lord himself, through the ministration of the church — not to be a corruptible food of the body, but to be a nourishment and food of eternal life.

“And this holy food we use often for this reason. For when through the monition and remembrance of it, we behold with the eye of our faith, the death and blood of him that was crucified, and remember our salvation and health, not without a taste of heavenly life and very true feeling of eternal life — when we do this, we are wonderfully refreshed through this spiritual living and eternal good. And with an unspeakable sweetness, we exult and rejoice with a mirth inexpressible in words, for the salvation that is found; and we all and whole are utterly effused with all our power and strength, in giving thanks for so wonderful a benefit of Christ toward us.

“Therefore it is greatly without our deservings that some allege and say of us, that we attribute little to the Holy Sacraments; for they are holy things and honourable, because they are instituted and ordained by our high priest Christ, and received; exhibiting the things that they signify in their own manner as aforesaid; being witness to the thing that is done in deed; representing such high and hard things, and it brings by wonderful correspondence & likeness of similitude, a light and a clearness to the ministers that they signify — so wholly is our belief and estimation of the Sacraments, but truly appropriating the virtue of quickening and sanctifying to him alone who is life, to whom be all honour & praise forever. Amen.

“OF COMING TO CHURCH.

“We believe and think the holy conventions and gatherings should be held in this manner & sort: so that first, chiefly and before all things, the word of God be preached to the people openly in an open & public place, and that is daily: and the secret & obscure places of the Scripture be opened & declared by fit and competent men. And that by the Holy Supper of thanks, called Hosting, the faith of the godly often be exercised, and that they should be continually in prayer for all men & for the necessities of all men. But the rest of the ceremonies, just as they are unprofitable, so they are innumerable, such as vessels, garments, wax, lights, altars, gold, silver, in so much that they serve to subvert the true religion of God — and chiefly Idols & Images that stand open to be worshipped, and give offence & slander; all such profane and ungodly things, we abandon, reject, and put away from the holy congregation & convention.

“OF HERETICS & SCHISMATICS.

“We also abandon & reject from our holy conventions all those who depart from the society & fellowship of the holy Church, and bring in strange or ungodly sects and opinions. With which evil the Anabaptists are chiefly infected at this time; which we judge should be constrained and punished by the magistrates and high powers if they obstinately resist and will not obey the monition of the Church, and with the intent that they should not infect and corrupt the flock of God through their wicked evil.

“OF THINGS INDIFFERENT.

“The things that are called, and indeed also are indifferent, a godly man may use them freely however, and in every place, and at all times; yet notwithstanding, he should use them with knowledge and of charity (love) to the glory of God truly, and the edification of the Church and congregation.

“OF MAGISTRATES OR GOVERNORS.

“And seeing that every magistrate and high power is of God, his chief and principal office is (unless he would rather use tyranny) to defend the true worshipping of God from all blasphemy and to procure true religion, and as the prophet teaches about the voice of God, to execute for his power. In which part a true and sincere preaching of the word of God remains with a right and diligent institution of the discipline of citizens, and of the schools: just correction and nurture, with liberality toward the ministers of the Church with a solicitous and thoughtful charge of the poor, to which end all the riches of the Church are referred. This, I say, has the first and chief place in the execution of the magistrate.

“Then after, to judge the people by equal and godly laws, to exercise and maintain judgment & justice, to defend the commonwealth, and punish transgressors according to their fault, either in goods, their bodies or their lives. And when the magistrate executes these things he honors God as he should in his vocation, and we (however free we are both in our body and in all our goods, and in the studies of our mind and thoughts also, with a true faith) know that we should be subject in holiness to the magistrate and should keep fidelity and promise to him, so long as his commandments, statutes, and empires evidently do not repugn ¹⁰ with Him for whose sake we honour and worship the magistrates.

“OF HOLY MATRIMONY.

“We judge Marriage, which was instituted by God for all men, apt and fit therefore, which are not called from it by any other vocation, to repugn holiness of no order; which marriage as the Church authorises & celebrates it, so solemnises it with orison (reverence) & prayer. And therefore we reject & refuse this monkish chastity and all, & hold this slothful & sluggish sort of life of superstitious men, as an abominably invented & excogitate (contrived) thing, and abandon it as a thing repugnant both to the commonwealth & to the Church. And as we confirm and establish marriage, so it belongs to the magistrate to see that it is worthily both begun & worshipped, & not broken but for a just cause.

¹⁰ *Repugn*: to be inconsistent or contend with.

“A DECLARATION OR WITNESSING OF OUR MIND.

“It is not our mind to prescribe by these brief chapters a certain rule of the Faith for all Churches & congregations, for we know no other rule of faith but the Holy Scripture. And therefore we are well contented with those who agree with these things, though they use another manner of speaking, or a Confession different apart from to this of ours in word; for the matter should be considered, rather than the words. And therefore we make it free for all men to use their own sort of speaking, as they perceive most profitable for their churches, and we will use the same liberty. And if any man attempts to corrupt the true meaning of this our Confession, he will hear both a confession and a defence of the verity and truth.

“It was our pleasure to use these words at this present time, that we might declare our opinion in our religion & worshipping of God.

“FINIS.

“The Truth will have the upper hand.”