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THE ACT OF MAKING A KNOWLEDGEABLE CONFESSION: A RESPONSE TO MAKITO MASAKI

by Lawrence Rast

The catechism and the Word are daily guides for Christians as we engage the current context as Confessional Lutherans. The Word alone accomplishes God's task in the mission of the Church.

Introduction

A GAIN, THANK YOU for the opportunity to engage the presentation of my dear friend, Makito Masaki, with whom I studied in the STM program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, many years ago. The opportunity to study with an insightful, thoughtful, and above all faithful Lutheran theologian like Dr. Masaki was really a memory that I deeply cherish.

I will take out a few points from Dr. Masaki's presentation and then put those into my area of specialty, which is the history of Christianity in North America. We will then consider some of the Lutheran implications of that.

I did find one quote that Dr. Masaki drew from Dr. Luther particularly important for how we move forward informing people in their Confessional Lutheran worldview: "For you should not assume that the young people will learn and retain this teaching from sermons alone."¹ This is not by any means to diminish the importance of the sermon. Nobody held preaching more highly than Luther did. But he also was realistic; namely, that to form a person took more than simply listening to a sermon for 20, 40, 60, or however many minutes per week. Rather, Luther knew that learning was life—all of it. Thus, in his explanation to the third commandment, which we learned

from the Catechism, when Luther talks about keeping the Sabbath, he encourages us "not despise preaching or God's Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it."² And how has this happened, when does this happen? It happens not only Sunday in the divine service. Yes, that is the beginning, that is the core; but it continues into all of our Sabbath life, that is, our entire life in Christ. It is, as we like to say in the United States, 24/7, 365—every day, every hour, every minute.

So, with that in mind, thinking about a Confessional Lutheran worldview, Dr. Masaki pointed out to us that there are six components to this, that our worldview provides answers for our ultimate questions. It provides emotional security for us, it validates our deepest cultural norms, it helps us integrate culture, it monitors cultural change and helps us adapt to those changes, and it provides psychological reassurance. These are deeply held commitments that inform the whole of our life—what we think, what we say, and, of course, also what we do. And in this latter respect, then, I think Dr. Masaki is correctly pointing us towards the distinction between the *status confessionis* and the *actus confessionis*. His definition of *confessio*, of confession, means to praise God, confess sins, to confess the faith (the *fides quae*) that was once delivered to the saints as Jude tells us. This faith that we confess then informs our way of life. So, the *status confessionis* becomes the basic question of believing, that is, the

¹ LC, Preface, 24–25. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the Book of Concord are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

² SC, I, 6.

interplay, we might say, between the *fides quae*, the faith that we believe, and the *fides qua*, the faith that believes—heartfelt trust and assurance in Jesus Christ as Savior. And that heartfelt trust and assurance then manifests itself in practical expressions of what we confess.

Here I think you can hear some echoes of two other of our presentations from Dr. Pfeiffer and Prof. Bustamante in respect to the interaction of confession and act. Here this echo of *lex orandi lex credendi*, however, I think takes on a particularly Lutheran edge. That is our emphasis on *lex credendi*, the confession, the faith which we believe,

in forming and producing in our lives the acts of confession. That is to say, doctrinal theology is primary. But, how do you make that transition from principle to action, from *status confessionis* to *actus confessionis*? Luther thought about this, of course, and reflected on it. Again, from the Large Catechism, Luther wrote that pastors would “morning, noon, and night ... read a page or two from the catechism, the Prayer Book, the New Testament, or some other passage from the Bible, and they would pray the Lord’s Prayer for themselves and their parishioners.”³ Luther also makes it clear that “it is the duty of every head of household at least once a week to examine the children and servants one after the other and ascertain what they know or are learning of [the catechism], and, if they do not know it, to keep them faithfully at it.”⁴

This comes home in a very personal way with me, if I might share this story. My mother’s father was not a typical Lutheran in the city of Chicago in the first third the 1900s. He was a pure-blooded Scotsman. His name was Raymond Kirkpatrick, the least German-sounding name you could ever imagine. Having come from Scottish roots and with roots in the Presbyterian tradition, the Kirkpatrick’s had over time drifted into the Salvation Army. He found that very unsatisfying and, as a result, had largely removed himself from active participation in any expression of the church—until he met

my grandmother. Her name was Edna Alma Frederica Wilhelmina Cubycheck. She was baptized at St. Paul’s German Reformed Church on the north side of Chicago, and brought up in German-speaking home that became very Lutheran. One of her conditions for dating my grandfather once they had met was that he study Luther’s Small Catechism. He did, and he learned to love this as a marvelous expression of the Gospel, and so influential and informative was it for him that from that time forward, beginning already in the year 1929, he regularly studied the Catechism. And by regularly, I mean he took a copy

of it with him as he worked. He was a very humble simple man, pipe fitter we would call him, he was a pipe fitter, installing and repairing heating and air conditioning units. During his work breaks, he would take this catechism out of his pocket and read it and study it. He knew the Catechism better than any person I have ever met in my life. You could ask him any explanation, to repeat any one of the six chief parts, you could ask him the proof text from the catechism explanation and he could tell you right away. He knew them all much better than I do. And, when his catechism

came to me after his death as a memento, I was stunned at the battered condition of it. He had repeatedly put new covers on it, and every page was grimy and dirty from constant usage. He had gone from having this from *status confessionis* to *actus confessionis*. His whole life was *actus*.

That is what we are looking for in terms of our own catechetical enterprise, and that is what I think Dr. Masaki is challenging us, to hold up as a way forward and the task for confessional Lutherans, and it is key that we do so for we know that within the Lutheran tradition that has not always been an easy thing to maintain, confessional faithfulness.

When our own Dr. Luther died in 1546, the future of his work was uncertain. That was due to the fact that his reforming work occurred within the context of very challenging circumstances. There were several reformation problems that consistently posed themselves. For example, the question of ecclesiology consistently faced

This faith that we confess then informs our way of life. So, the *status confessionis* becomes the basic question of believing, that is, the interplay, we might say, between the *fides quae*, the faith that we believe, and the *fides qua*, the faith that believes—heartfelt trust and assurance in Jesus Christ as Savior. And that heartfelt trust and assurance then manifests itself in practical expressions of what we confess.

³ LC, preface, 3.

⁴ LC, Short preface, 4.

the Lutheran Reformers: Are we a movement within the Church Catholics or are we a Church? How do we know when we have moved from being one to the other? If we are a Church, what does that mean? How should we prepare pastors? Can and should we ordain pastors? There was also the problem of living within the confines of a territorial Church—his region, his religion (*cuius regio, eius religio*). Luther confronted these issues in part during his own life; they became very pronounced among the Lutherans following his death.

We sometimes romanticize the Reformation and think, “well everything was wonderful ‘back then.’” We have our great Martin Luther posting the 95 Theses and he never had to face anything difficult from that point forward. Reality, of course, was something different. Student populations at Wittenberg plunged after Luther’s excommunication and it took years to rebuild. Then there was the question of who should be ordained. In 1539, this question was being addressed in a very concrete way. We know that in 1535, the ordinations began in Wittenberg. The question of “can we ordain?” was answered positively, as was the question of how to do it. What remained was the question of who should be ordained. In 1539, a full third of those ordained were not fully trained at the university in Wittenberg. There was a merchant, there were two town secretaries, ten burghers, one stonemason, six sextons, one councilman, one clothier, three village schoolmen and eleven printers; those book buyers are always involved. So, thirty-six of one-hundred ten men who were ordained at Wittenberg in the year 1539 had not gone through the full program. Conditions were such that Luther and his colleagues said we must take the best candidates we can find who have a sufficient theological education and set them apart. But setting apart was necessary.

This is a concrete action of the Reformation taking its ideal and working it out in difficult circumstances. At the same time, and this must be said as well, this was never seen as the ideal for preparation for Lutheran ministry. Rather Wittenberg’s aim was to move beyond this, once Lutheranism as an institution began to establish itself. And so, the numbers of those not going through the full program quickly declined as well, even as the student population of Wittenberg increased. Thus, the emergency was overcome.

There is still a residue of God-thinking in the United States, and this provides an opportunity for Lutheran catechesis.

And then there were more emergencies. In the wake of Luther’s death, theological, political and social issues foisted themselves upon his church. The picture we often get of the Holy Roman Empire and the German nation is one that shows some of the complexity in comparison to the surrounding nations, but when one takes a closer look at the positions of Germany as we like to refer to it singly, in the singular, it really begins to manifest itself. The German states were not united at this point in time. Indeed, there were hundreds of discreet political-ecclesial entities within the Holy Roman Empire. However, within that context of the *cuius regio eius religio* principle, there was a different ruler for each of those entities. There were social realities, and, as we know so well, there were the numerous theological challenges that stretched Luther to Concord and beyond. The emergence of the Radical Reformation, the Counter or Catholic Reformation, the

Reformed tradition and Calvinism particularly in the Palatinate and then troubles, of course, within the Lutheran family that would be addressed finally by the Formula of Concord (1577). However, even the Book of Concord in 1580 did not settle all matters. Shortly thereafter, in 1592 to be precise (a little more than a decade after the adoption of the Concordia), the Saxon Church issued its Visitation Articles because theological divisions remained among

the Lutherans. The four articles of the Saxon Visitation Articles were: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, election, and Christology. The Formula’s primary target is Calvinism. It is even more obvious in the Saxon Visitation Articles. As a result, the Visitation Articles’ purpose was to determine whether there were still crypto-Calvinists among the Lutherans a decade and a half after the Formula of Concord.

Within the Lutheran tradition, however, there were other points of tension. Marvelous works that emerged from this period of difficulty, like the Magdeburg Confession of April 13, 1550, are now available in English translation. Our Concordia Publishing House has published the Church Order from Braunschweig-Woffenbüttel assembled primarily by Martin Chemnitz—this is a tremendous resource that everyone interested in the Book of Concord should read. It provides a window into what Lutherans were actually doing, how their doctrine informed their practice in the year 1569; namely, the how the *status confessionis* informed the *actus confessionis*.

Twenty-first Century Application

Perhaps you are thinking, “That is all old stuff. What does this mean for the twenty-first century? Can we express the Biblical faith in enduringly valid terms?” This was a question raised within the Missouri Synod in the 1960s, and the answer given then was, no. I, however, insist on answering yes. The Biblical faith, the *fides quae*, is one and it must be translated into our times. Reminding ourselves of the Luther quote once more, “For you should not assume that the young people will learn and retain this teaching from sermons alone.”⁵

In 2008, the Pew Research Forum issued an extensive study of the American people and their religious beliefs, and one of the amazing things that came out of this investigation was that nearly 80% of Americans self-identified as Christian—a remarkable statistic for a developed Western country. 78.4% of Americans answered the question “Are you a Christian?” favorably. At that point in 2008, 51.3% of Americans self-identified as Protestant, either evangelical, mainline or in one of the historically black churches of the US. Over 50% of America was Protestant (it has since fallen just under 50%). This is what makes people think that America is a Christian nation.

In this religiously saturated situation, some interesting things do emerge. Some that are hopeful, and some that are challenging. 16.1% of Americans self-identified as unaffiliated. We call them “nones” in the United States—those who have no religion. When they are asked, “What is your religion?” they check the box that says “none.” This is the fastest growing religion in America if you can call it that—“none.”

When you begin to drill down into the data some remarkable things emerge. When asked if they believe in God, 90% plus of Americans in 2008 answered “yes.” Among Protestants, 98% said they believe in God, and of that, nearly 75% believe that God is a personal God. Only 19% believe God is an impersonal force. Higher among evangelicals, and this is where our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is typically located in these kinds of surveys, 99% believe in God, and 80% believe in a God with whom they have a personal relationship.

Then 97% of the mainline churches, this would be where the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the ELCA is located, 97% believe in God, but less than two-thirds believe that God is a personal God, 26%, 1 in 4 as a personal force. Looking at the rest of those as you are interested.

Where things get interesting, however, is in Pew’s data on the unaffiliated—the nones. Among the unaffiliated, 21% of atheists indicate that they believe in God. How can this be? It may be that the “halo effect” is in play; namely, when one is asked a question, one responds with the answer that one thinks the questioner wants to hear. If that is the case, it still will not account for 1 in 5 atheists believing in God. More important than explaining why this might be, I think it is more important to realize the opportunity that this provides. It does indicate is that there is a rich mission field within the United States, and that there is still the opportunity to speak very frankly with people about God. More than half of agnostics self-identify as believers in God. Among the secular unaffiliated, two-thirds believe in God, and among the religiously affiliated, a higher percent than the national percentage believe in God. There is still a residue of God-thinking in the United States, and this provides an opportunity for Lutheran catechesis. But it is going to be a challenge, because one of the other questions that the Pew researchers asked was among those who are affiliated, “Do you believe that many religions can lead to eternal life?” Those

The challenge is for each of us to be faithful in confessing the faith once delivered to the Saints so that we can see individuals then in turn hold to that faith in their hearts, trusting in Christ as their Savior.

affiliated, 70% said yes, including, and alarmingly to me, including, 57% of evangelicals. Now, another word of caution at this point, it could be given America’s denominational character that when asked, “do you believe many religions can lead to eternal life?” people thought in denominational terms. But, it also suggests that there is increasing number of people who simply do not believe in the exclusive claims of Christianity, and this will be a challenge for confessional Lutheranism. Here, we must be clear in our confession of the faith once delivered to us.

In the wake of the Pew report, we see an ongoing decline. By 2015 the number of “nones” have climbed to 22.8, going from 1 in 5 almost to nearly now 1 in 4 Americans being religiously unaffiliated. Americans are departing from the Church in record numbers. But they

⁵ LC, Short preface, 24–25.

are not secularizing necessarily in the same way as it has occurred in Western Europe.

Conclusion

All of this underscores why we need to know our various contexts. If we are going to confess the unchanging faith, faithfully in our changing contexts, we need to make the effort to know and understand those contexts. We need to know what our people are thinking and what people outside the Church are thinking, in order to be faithful. Faithfulness is the bottom line for us as a practicing Lutherans, faithful in the twenty-first century. We can't simply look back romantically to images real and imagined of Wittenberg. The challenge is for each of us to be faithful in confessing the faith once delivered to the Saints so that we can see individuals then in turn hold to that faith in their hearts, trusting in Christ as their Savior. It will be difficult, it will be challenging, but I take heart from my closing quote here, it is one I often use particularly when I become a little distressed at the enormity of the task that lies in front of each one of us. It comes from C.F.W. Walther, one year into his presidency of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, it was 1848, he was giving his first speech after a year as president of our Senate, and he said this, "Above all and of all matters be concerned about this that the pure doctrine of our dear Evangelical Lutheran Church may become known more and more completely among us, that it may be in vogue in all of our congregations and that it may be preserved from all adulteration and held fast as the most precious treasure. Let us not surrender one iota of the demands of the Word. Let us bring about its complete rule in our congregations and set aside nothing of it. Here, let us be inflexible. Here, let us be avid. If we do this, we need not worry about the success of our labor, even though it should seem to be in vain, it cannot then be in vain, for the Word does not return void but prospers in the thing where to the Lord sent it. By the Word alone, without any other power, the Church was found. By the Word alone, all the great deeds recorded in Church history were accomplished. By the Word alone the Church will most assuredly stand also in these last days of sore distress, to the end of days, even the Gates of Hell will not prevail against her."

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