

Confessing the Faith on Confirmation Day

Colleagues,

A few weeks ago we were out of town for the confirmation ceremony of 24 eighth-graders, one of them from the Schroeder clan. The congregation's practice is to ask each confirmand to offer a personal confession of faith to the assembly in a Friday evening service before Confirmation Sunday. Each confirmand has an adult congregation member as personal mentor. The personal confessions had been prepared in advance, were then printed in the Friday service folder (2 pages each) and then publicly confessed one by one from the lectern. All of it enwrapped in a liturgy of Evening Prayer.

Curmudgeonly old prof of the Lutheran Confessions that I am, I was listening for the Christ-component, the "Christ-is-necessary," in the faith statements of these young Christians. When the service concluded I was not rejoicing. Now back home I've read the printed texts of what I heard as oral witness. I report them here in three categories

- In nine of the 24 confessions the word Jesus or Christ does not appear at all. God is confessed, but there is no Christ. "God is there with me," "God is staying with us," "I see God in many places." "God plays a part in my life because he gives me the power to be an individual." "God will help you face the hard times in your life no matter who you are if you hope and believe in Him." "Although bad things happen, God helps us get through them." "I know that with the things I have been taught and with God as my co-pilot I can begin to trust myself to choose the paths and make the decisions that are right for me." "Through

everything, every evil or misfortune, God will still be there, on our side, loving us." "God is there to watch over us, but not to interfere with everything in our lives." "With God leading the way, I can be strong and courageous to do the right thing and I do not need to be frightened or dismayed that what I am doing is not enough." The faith being confessed here is faith in a hidden god who is always "there," always helpful, never critical. With "do the right thing" added, we have theistic moralism, but not the Christian faith.

- In seven of them the word Jesus or Christ (or both) occur, but with no reference to his work of salvation. In some the terms Jesus or Christ are used as interchangeable synonyms for the word God and the core-confession is like the one above, "generic" God-talk. with no necessity to link the Jesus/Christ nouns to what's being confessed. "Our Holy Father and Jesus Christ give us the strength to get through bad times." "God is present and guides us throughout our lives." "God's going to be there for us no matter what situation you are in....I feel Jesus is there to help me make good decisions. I believe that Jesus is the voice in my head that tells me to do the right thing." "[God] calls us . . . to work heartily, as if serving the Lord, and look forward to receiving the inheritance as my reward through Jesus Christ." With no salvation-reference when naming Jesus, these confessions are in the same ballpark as those above, with the name of Jesus as an addendum, but not a needed one.
- In eight of them the name of Jesus occurs with explicit reference to his saving work. Frequently with "Jesus died for my sins" or "sacrificed his life for me." Yet here too moralism surfaces, and "sacrificed his life for me" leads to the conclusion: "I can hear Jesus saying 'You can do it, Sandra [not her real name]. Just try your best and

believe in me.'" "God sent his Son Jesus down to earth, who died for our sins. [conclusion] God has a plan for me and in order to achieve his plan I must work hard at all things that are put in front of me. As I head on to High School, no matter which path I take, I know that God will be there for me." Even in these confessions the theology of the cross gets entangled with theology of glory. But Jesus-as-savior is there, sometimes central. One of these eight confessors did so with reference to God's Promise! "God does not fulfill his promise when Judah is conquered But he does, through the new covenant in Jesus Christ. Not just to Israel, but to the whole world, God heals and restores us to life by sending his son to die for our sins. In the new covenant, he fulfills his promise of old." Where did he get that?!

These 24 confessions articulate explicitly personal-life-linked faith-statements, eminently publishable prose, often telling of personal struggles and linking the confessor's faith to those life situations. Super! But what was the faith confessed? By my curmudgeonly calculation one-third of the confessors confessed Jesus as Savior (mostly); two-thirds confessed faith in a generic God—yes, a hidden God—along with a commitment to live a moral life under that God's guidance. Question: Isn't that the folk religion of America? Generic world-religion? Islam without the Quran? On Sunday all were confirmed.

All of which left me wondering—after almost weeping. What was the guidance these confirmands had in the run-up to this Friday evening? What were they told about what they were doing? What role did the pastor, the mentor, the parents play? What was the catechesis that preceded these confessions? The opening sentences in Jochen Teuffel's article (last week's ThTh post on Islamization) are haunting: "What threatens Christianity's existence among us is [not Islam, but] the fact that people do

not really believe in the One who gave Christianity its name, nor trust his message or his work. Unlike unbelieving Thomas, people are unwilling to put their finger to Jesus' wounds and thereby come to trust the crucified and risen Christ."

One of the 24 confessors set my mind to wandering—and wondering. He was the only one to cite Luther's catechism in his faith statement. It was a sentence from Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed. "The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." That led this confessor to "work for the Lord by participating in the church whatever our task. I have studied violin for several years . . . I think this is a gift God has given me, that I enjoy spreading the Word of God through music." Good enough.

Yet he didn't get to Luther's main point (and very first words) in this third article explanation: "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or resources, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. BUT the Holy Ghost calls me by the Gospel . . ." for that explicit purpose: that I DO believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord, DO come to him.

Luther's point is that the SECOND article of the creed is what makes this creed, any creed, Christian. That's really a no-brainer. Christian = Christ confessing. Christ is the Greek word for Messiah. Christian faith is a Messiah-faith. A messiah is a rescuer, aka redeemer, savior.

Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, no one ever "comes to him." There is so self-salvation in the Christian story, nor any self-connection to the one who brings salvation. But since Christ's Easter-cum-Pentecost the Holy Sprit is now loose in the world. Doing what? "Calling, gathering, enlightening" disconnected sinners "to come to Jesus Christ as their Lord and

believe in him.” The Holy Spirit is the Christ-connector, doing so via “the whole Christian church on earth.” One vehicle of which is churchly catechesis, aka confirmation instruction.

The Apostles Creed was printed at the center of the booklet of these 24 confessions. Except for page-proximity most of the 24 were not close.

So how about this? For these 24 dear confessors, patently serious in expressing their faith, would this have helped them make clear, Christ-clear, confessions as they went to the lectern that Friday evening? Give them all a Christian “classic” confession—say, this one below straight from Luther’s catechism—and ask them to “make it your own” by putting something from your own life, your own heart and mind, your own struggles, at every place where Luther has “I, me, my, mine” in his confession. And then tell us. Remember we’re talking about the Christian faith. The crucified and risen Messiah is the hub at the center of the wheel.

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.”

If they had started with that classic confession, a “standard” confession of the Christian faith, what might they have come up with for this Friday service? How might they have then possibly “needed” in their thinking to get to the third article

confession, so that they might see how they came to the Christ-is-my-Lord confession in the first place? And then from that center get back to the first article on creation, even to Luther's own proposal for What does this mean? Which says nothing at all about Genesis 1—nor the big bang, of course—but rings the changes on these opening words: "I believe that God created me."

I have no knowledge of the catechesis curriculum that these young confessors traversed.

My own thoughts about such matters, especially after this event, go in this direction:

1. DO NOT start with the Bible. Do NOT start with Adam and Eve. The Christian faith is NOT a "religion of the book." Islam definitely is, and Judaism may well be, but Christian faith is the "religion" confessed by the one-time unbelieving disciple Thomas: "You, Jesus, are my Lord and my God." Its center is a God-person, not a God-book.
2. Biblical illiteracy may be a fact of life in American society today—and among many (most?) church-goers too. But knowing what's in the Bible is not identical with Christian faith, nor any guarantee to get you there. Jesus' on-going debate with his critics, who were super-literate about the Bible but missed the Gospel IN the Bible, makes this point "perfectly clear." There is absolutely no correlation between a Bible-quiz whiz and a Christ-confessor. Even granting Bible-illiteracy as true within the churches as well, it is Christ-illiteracy that is the Trojan horse.
3. So start with the Christ-confession at the center of the Christian creed. If you can't find a better text for this, use Luther's own single paragraph in the Small Catechism.
4. From there go to article three and then to article one.

Luther's paragraphs for these are not bad.

5. Before you go to the Bible, shake out of the catechumens the alternative "lords and gods" their hearts are hanging onto. Canvass the "lord and god" proposals they confront in just one day in their lives at school or after school.
6. Then first go to the Bible, beginning with the N.T. Maybe one of the Gospels, maybe one of the "easier" (?) epistles. Always keep the focus on the core and alongside that, the alternatives to the core that show up in the Biblical text(s) as teasing proposals to trust instead of Christ.
7. When the time is right, move on to the spokes that radiate from that Christ-hub at the center. You could begin with other parts from the catechism.
 - The decalog as God's X-ray of the de facto realities tugging at our hearts to not "fear, love and trust him."
 - The Lord's Prayer presented (as Luther proposes, explicitly in his Large Catechism) for daily-life coping to "keep the faith" in daily life with the "devil, the world, and our own egos" pulling our hearts to hang onto other lords and gods.
 - The three sacraments—in their respective distinct paradigms—as resources for doing just that.
8. THEN go to the Bible. Reading the N.T. for illuminating, deepening, connecting data about the Christ-hub and the spokes.
9. When going to the OT, go "carefully," keeping in mind that the O.T. scriptures are a running report of the faith and unfaith of God's ancient people, their personal hospital chart, and not God's diagnosis nor prescription for all people of all times. Rather, as the NT apostles and evangelists keep insisting, they were written "to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." To "use" the OT for that end will entail some reconnoitering, some

ingenuity, some selection (and some rejection?), some practice, and, quite likely, some mistakes.

10. When it comes to confirmation time, asking the candidates to write their own confession is a good idea. Don't let these confessions be "saved" until confirmation day, but use them in the final catechesis sessions for "mutual edification," and, of course, for helping each confirmand make a clearer, crisper, confession of the hub of the wheel—and of as many spokes of that wheel as she/he wishes to address. Or catechesis might simply begin with the Easter shout: "Christ is Risen!" and then ask: what's that all about? Why would anyone respond "Risen indeed!"? Why "Hallelujah!"?

Start at the center. So that on Confirmation Day the new confessors do too.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder