

Faith-Statements from Young Confirmands (revisited)

Colleagues,

Few weeks back [ThTh 676] you received a Thursday post about the personal confessions of young confirmands, one of whom was our grandson. One of whom put God's promise into the center of his faith statement. For more details check <http://www.crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur052611.shtml>

Responses have come in. Here are some of them.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

ELCA Pastor

Well, your comments on the Confirmands' Faith Statements struck a nerve! I've tried to help them get the "necessity of Christ", the "sweet swap of faith", good old St. Paul in Galatians, and Luther's Small Catechism. But it doesn't work. At least it doesn't seem to work. By the time they go home to put the "finishing" touches on their faith statement, by the time their parents have rewritten it for them and finally have it the way the parents want it, by the time they are steeped in the moral religiosity of this world—Christ gets edited out of their confession of faith. On Confirmation Sunday I just shake my head and the rest of the congregation applauds. Heck, their parents are usually in worse shape—lifelong Lutherans who keep trusting in their own works, self-improvement projects and being nice. I guess I just hope, pray and continue to work in the proclamation of the Gospel that the Spirit will use the means of grace to

create faith where and when the Spirit wills.

If anybody has any ideas on how to improve Confirmation—I'm all ears.

Retired LCMS pastor. [Aka founder of Bread for the World]

Ed, your suggestions for confirmation instruction are amazingly perceptive, and I wonder why we haven't been doing it that way for centuries. I confess with shame that my own confirmation instructing would have been immeasurably better. Why not turn this into an article for The Lutheran or some other journal to spread the idea?

A Voice from the Twin Cities, Minnesota.

Brother Ed, you are stuck operating from an assumption with little basis in liturgical theology, and so the task is bound to be frustrating – if not downright heretical. Confirmation is, in the words of one liturgical historian, a rite in search of a theology. The basis premise – never stated boldly, of course – is that baptism doesn't quite do what it says; we need an add-on – or better, adds-on. So we have instruction on first communion (as though one can “understand” the real presence and/or communion in holy things with holy one).

And so, confirmation was rescued from the ash heap where Lutherans ought to have left it. We are left with a ministry which seeks to make would-be confirmands “feel it” (what's “it”? welcome? personally warm? close to Jesus?). I was told by the shapers of confirmation ministry at our congregation that intellectual content was not important; the kids needed to “connect.” Let's not drive them away, I was told, with

unrealistic expectations and boring (to the confirmation instructors, including the then-pastor) church-y stuff.

I fear that your very good outline is wasted except on those of us who already agree with you, for the ministry of confirmation “on the ground” is not really about the faith – it’s about religion (to use the Blessed Barth’s distinction). We cannot “judge” each other’s faith and so we cannot judge each other’s talk about faith. We in the Church are so desperate – er, happy – to have the kids involved at all (if only up through the Rite of Confirmation), that we don’t want to tromp their delicate egos and utter creativity with anything approaching a dogmatic boot.

The sad thing is that kids would really, I think, get into discussions of soteriology and Christology (perhaps not using those exact words) if they were invited by confirmers who themselves had any insight into them beyond the pious platitude. Kids of confirmation age are the world’s best skeptics, speculators, philosophizers – I remember this from “my days” and from my experience. They would rabidly enter into the world of good theology if they were given a chance.

You refer to yourself as a curmudgeon. Sorry, Brother, but I have that title sewn up in spades!

A retired math prof.

My experience with Valparaiso University students, four to eight years older and not necessarily much changed by their Theology education, is that their faith statements might not be much different. And I kind of wonder whether the faith statements of most of their parents, and of their pastors, would be much different.

Partly it might be because of our emphasis on a God who is not distant. Partly it might be because of our desire to “make faith something active in our lives.”

Both of those could be called laudable. BUT

Both of those, coupled with a moral development that hasn't yet progressed much beyond the stage of “There is right and wrong, and it's knowable which is which, and it's always black and white, even if I myself don't always know which is which,” would produce the kind of “faith” that believes the role of God is to help us to be good people. It's curb-and-rule Law, not Gospel. And yes, it's our American civic religion, or at least a large part of it.

I'm also pretty sure that coming right out and saying, “Our confirmation classes this year are not going to start with the Bible” might not go over very well, even with a straightforward explanation. Lots of people in our congregations have knees that jerk in rhythm with those of any Bible thumper you care to mention. But I think your curriculum would be very helpful to these kids, and to their parents and their pastors, as they try to tease out just what this “faith” thing is that we keep talking about.

A church sign in town recently showed the following: If God is your co-pilot, maybe you should switch seats.

Another voice from the Twin Cities.

Ed, I thought this was pretty interesting. The last two times I have attended my niece/nephew's confirmation, where they have the students give their faith statements before the church service, I was actually quite relieved that most of them “got it.” But they were products of a Missouri Synod day school with

an LCMS pastor as their confirmation instructor.

It does not surprise me in an age where so few parents, much less young people, seem to have any relationship with God that their parents and mentors would be focused on making sure that they had SOME relationship with God for coming times of trouble, and perhaps figure that these youngsters haven't had to seriously confront "real" sin enough to make the Lutheran confession meaningful to them. That is perhaps a result of our cheapening and limiting the way in which we conceive of sin, i.e., to criminal activity or its equivalent. Even from a moral standpoint that's scary of course—if it is not a sin to let children starve in Africa or Minneapolis, or gossip against your neighbor, or to extort the highest price out of a poor person for a good you sell, then we have a pretty rotten society (as we do.) And then there's the next (and real) level—the self-justification built into that now narrowed definition of sin—yikes. I confess it as much as the next person, but not to understand at all that you are doing it . . . aaugh!

All of which suggests that teaching the faith takes a village. As a single always scrambling mother, I'm well aware of my shortcomings bringing up my own children in this regard, and both of my kids attended LCMS or Covenant Church schools where I think they heard the real deal fairly regularly. I worry what will happen with my grandsons who don't have that. But, I realize that's pinning my hopes in the wrong place, isn't it.