

Risking in Faith

Colleagues,

Last week (ThTheol #729) we offered you the introduction to Dr. Michael Hoy's 2011 paper, "Like Living Stones: Chips of the New Rock: Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for 21st-Century Lutherans." Mike ended his introduction by quoting Luther's own introductory remarks on 1 Peter 2: "We have said often enough that a Christian life is composed of two parts: faith in God and love toward one's neighbor." Today we give you the next section of Mike's paper. In this section, he focuses on faith—the first of those two parts of Christian life—with an emphasis on the risks inherent in living a life of Christian faith. Next week we bring you the final section, in which Mike reflects on love as a fruit of that faith.

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

“Like Living Stones’: Chips of the New Rock” Confessional Reflections on 1 Peter 2:1-10 for 21st-Century Lutherans Central/Southern Illinois Synod, ELCA June 2-4, 2011

1. What all are we willing to risk in faith?
 - a. Is not risk at the heart of being faith-confessors—also at Augsburg, 1530? Today? The header on the Latin text of the Augsburg Confession (1530) cites Psalm 119:46: “I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame.” Notice

how this is similar to 1 Peter 2:6, “those believing in him will not be put to shame.” [Cf. also Isaiah 28:16.]

[Note: Luther himself, who lauded the Augsburg Confession from a distance, may well have had a hand in the capstone text from Psalm 119: “I am tremendously pleased to have lived to this moment when Christ, by his staunch confessors, has publicly been proclaimed in such a great assembly by means of this really most beautiful confession. And [so the word] is fulfilled: “I spoke of your testimonies in the presence of kings.” What follows will [also] be fulfilled: “And I was not put to shame.” For “whoever will confess me ... before men, him I also shall confess before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 10:32) LW 49:353-56.]

Whatever else the confessors at Augsburg had to be wary of, certainly being “put to shame” was part of the risk in making a theological “defense” (confessio, in Latin; apologia, in Greek) of their faith before “kings.” And those kings included not only the emperor, Charles V, but also the court of the “Holy, Imperial, and Catholic Majesty” and, as the Confutation expounded with great pride, its “several learned, mature, and honorable men.” And then when they considered that those who stood before them were not the most eminent theologians of the Reformation, they were all the more dismissing. Sure, many of the Reformers’ brightest and best helped to craft the document, over several months prior to June 25, 1530. But the presenters themselves, the confessing risk-takers at Augsburg were lay princes and city-council members, all of

whom knew very well their place before the emperor, and the risk entailed. [See Confutation, preface.] Many of the ecclesiastical superiors were really not interested in even hearing out these Augsburg Confessors. They regarded them as insubordinate trouble-makers, and they tried to persuade the emperor not even to give them a hearing.

[Note: "The confessors at Augsburg had to count it a favor that the emperor should so much as grant them a 'hearing,' and barely that, and then only to order them to plead guilty. That demand they had to refuse, of course, yet their refusal only compounded their insubordination and in turn the defensiveness of their whole posture. Not only had they presented their confession originally under the vague onus of trouble-makers. Their confession, the more they maintained it, rendered them all the more uncooperative. Simply as defendants they were now offending against imperial authority as they had long since done against ecclesiastical, the papacy and the bishops, who had tried to dissuade the emperor from allowing a hearing in the first place." Robert W. Bertram, A Time for Confessing, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 25. Bertram also notes that "for even such ambivalent treatment, Luther, as of 1530-31, was still inclined to put the best construction on the intentions of Emperor Charles V. WA 30/3: 291-296; LW 47: 30-33."]

Hence, part of the risk—but only part—was being shamed before one's superiors, the very ones who are persecuting and criticizing them precisely for making their confession of faith. And there are many who could tell you just how risky that is. Ask

Bonhoeffer, in his time of confessing before the representatives of the Third Reich. Or Martin Luther King, Jr., in his time of confessing before this nation that was very much segregated. Also realize what happened to both of them for this risk—how they were both martyred, in a long trajectory of such witnesses. Ask any who have had to face this embarrassing moment of looking like disagreeing insubordinates, which is precisely what they are. Yet, they risk confessing risk precisely because they trust Who it is that says they will not be “put to shame”—namely, Jesus the Christ: “whoever confesses me ... before others, I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32)

Still that is only the tip of the iceberg of what all is being risked.

- b. Why is the risk worth taking? The Reformers soon became aware that their critics' disagreements had less and less to do with them than it did with what they were defending—the gospel. The gospel was being compromised by an alien gospel that had found foundational status in the very church which they loved; and that alien gospel was being used now to justify people on a basis other than Christ's benefits. Hence, Philip Melanchthon, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, lifted up why the risk was worthwhile: because “the most important topic of Christian teaching [was at stake, namely, the gospel] which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need.” [Apol. IV:2]

What makes the risk worth taking is knowing full

well what one is seeking to defend—the gospel of Jesus the Christ. The “builders,” by contrast, were standing on a castle of sand, not on the Rock of the Living Stone. So even for their sake, this confession is warranted.

But maybe more importantly, standing up for the gospel meant also standing up for the very ones who were being oppressed and deprived of their very consolations and benefits that Christ seeks to bring. It is a risk for the “least of these,” the oppressed; and yet, the risk-taking confessors also seek to encourage these oppressed to stand up and join the ranks of the proclaiming “holy priesthood.” There was no sense in Luther that this priesthood of faithful witnesses to the promise were ordained or lay. All shared in the same promise, and all were empowered by the gospel to be comforted and encouraged to witness. What a breath of fresh air to all who are oppressed, that they are not only liberated by the gospel’s promise, but also get to join the ranks of those who now “proclaim the mighty deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

[Note: Luther went to great lengths to explain that this holy priesthood in 1 Peter is the priesthood of all believers, not just the ordained; and he might just as well have said the same thing about the entire New Testament. Quoting Luther, “We ask further whether St. Peter is differentiating between spiritual and secular, as today one calls the priests the clergy and the other Christians the laity. They must admit against their will that here St. Peter is addressing all those who are

Christians, namely, those who put away all malice, guile, hypocrisy, hatred, etc., who are like newborn babes and drink the unadulterated milk... Consequently, since [Christ] is the Priest and we are His brothers [and sisters], all Christians have the authority, the command, and the obligation to preach, to come before God, to pray for one another, and to offer themselves as a sacrifice to God... They are all alike and only a spiritual people. Therefore they are all priests. All may proclaim God's Word." And even when Luther felt constrained to accept women into the ordained priesthood, he did at least acknowledge in his commentary something that would have probably raised the eyebrows, if not also the ire, of his critics: "If, however, only women were present and no men, as in nunneries, then one of the women might be authorized to preach." LW 30:53-55.]

- c. What is the deepest risk of all? Still, the critics can come back with the most damning question of all for those who are risking faith-confessors: "Who do you think you are?"

The risking confessors are still seen by their critics as mere rubble. Luther was nothing more than a boar in the vineyard, a creature that had to be dispensed with, and for whom there was already bounty on his head. (That is why he was not also present at Augsburg, much against his own wishes.)

"Who do you think you are?" is a legitimate question. But it also provides grist for the mill for a promising answer. How will you now give "an accounting of the hope that is in you"? (3:15)

The One to whom the risking faith-confessors point

is he who, by all appearances, was a loser, a reject, a cursed and condemned criminal, hanging from a tree. This one is the final answer, their final trump, trusted by faith as the one whom they place before all other alternative foundations—even ones that their critics fancy and dangle before the faith-confessors as a way to strike a bargain. But faithful confessors realize just how high the stakes really are: “either fidelity or apostasy, either divine acceptance or divine rejection.” [Bertram, A Time for Confessing, 3] The same Lord who said, “whoever confesses me ... before others, I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven,” went on to say “whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 10:32-33)

So they run the risk, like Jesus before them, to be branded as blasphemers, ostracized from the community, and left with the haunting prospects that they may have been wrong all along. What do they finally have to go on? Faith, and faith alone. Their risk is putting all the eggs in the basket of their crucified Lord.

- d. What is, therefore, the posture of the risk-taker? The posture of the risk-taker is humility and boldness; or maybe better, boldness in humility. Boldness and humility may not seem to go together, but they do. Bold humility was the posture of the One they follow, who also faced rejection. He didn't laud his authority over others, like the Gentiles do, but chose the path of a servant, and in total humility. (Mark 10:42; Matthew 20:25) “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8).

So this path of humility is taken up also by the witnessing risk-takers, not only because they follow their Lord, but even more profoundly because they realize that the ambiguous truth of their own lives is not all that different from that of their erring brothers and sisters, all of whom Christ came to liberate. Yet the witnessing risk-takers are bold, because for all their faults and foibles, they are mortifyingly right in making this confession of faith in the gospel.

The Divorce of Sex and Marriage: Sain Sex, a new book by Robert Bertram, is now available for a \$10 donation to Crossings. Please include \$3 for shipping and handling, and send your request to clessmannATcharterDOTnet.

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