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Confession as Mission in a Secular Age

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Abstract: In his 2007 tome, *A Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor asks the question, “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”¹ With this question, Taylor taps into a mood of many in the Western world, in a time when unbelief is seen as the default position, even for believers.

How does the Church respond? As a confessing church body, the simple answer is to “be faithful to our confession.” At face value this appears to be a fine answer. However, if the confession of the Church is misplaced, she can lose her mission. Consequently, the focus of this paper is to show that the truest confession of the Church demands a response of mission in our secular age. It will do this through understanding the secular age, refocusing the Church’s confession, and articulating a way forward in mission in line with the truest confession of Christ’s Church: Jesus Christ is Lord.

The World Is Flat

In *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard presents “The Occasion,” the moment when the individual encounters the risen Christ. In that moment, confronted by the risen Jesus, the individual must respond either in faith or offense. Kierkegaard explains:

The possibility of offense is the crossroad, or it is like standing at the crossroad. From the possibility of offense, one turns either to offense or to faith, but one never comes to faith except from the possibility of offense. The possibility of offense, as we have tried to show, is present at every moment, confirming at every moment the chasmic abyss between the single individual and Jesus over which faith and faith alone reaches. . . . The possibility of offense is the stumbling block for all, whether they choose to believe or they are offended.²



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This dichotomy of faith or offense at the presence of Jesus is an argument employed by Christian apologists again and again throughout the ages. Recent examples include C. S. Lewis’s “liar, lunatic, or Lord” proposition in *Mere Christianity*, Josh McDowell’s *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, and the popular podcast *Hinge*, which pairs an atheist and an evangelical pastor in a deep dive into the historical reliability of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All of these arguments are predicated on this idea of “The Occasion,” that once one encounters the resurrected Jesus the response is either faith or offense.

But, what if there’s a third option? What if, upon encountering the resurrected Jesus, the response is neither faith nor offense, but apathy? It seems that, regardless of well-crafted arguments, persuasive presentations, and seemingly irrefutable evidence for the resurrected Jesus, the response in today’s West is often, “So what?”

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Why is that? The world is flat. The Augustinian notion that we all have a “God-shaped hole” that we’re looking to fill, seems to have almost evaporated from our modern imagination. Or, as one billboard put it, “Jesus is the Answer” underneath was spray painted, “What was the question?” Referencing the mood of many in the postmodern West, philosopher James K. A. Smith puts it this way: “They don’t have any sense that the ‘secular’ lives they’ve constructed are missing a second floor. In many ways, they have constructed webs of meaning that provide almost all the significance they need in their lives (though a lot hinges on that ‘almost’).”³

The lack of even an attempt to find meaning beyond our material existence points to the reality that we live in what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “a secular age.” When Taylor speaks of “a secular age,” he doesn’t mean a “secular society” in which there is a separation of religion and state. No, a secular age is one in which all the emphasis is on the *saeculum*, the here and now, without any concept of the eternal. Meaning, wisdom, and happiness are sought in this life, simply as we see it—with no appeal to outside forces. Succinctly put, we’ve constructed a way of being in the world that offers significance without transcendence.

To be clear, the mood of “a secular age” is not limited to the avowed secularist or the unbeliever. On the contrary, many in the postmodern West believe in something beyond us, but generally live as if that doesn’t really matter. We’ve constructed what Charles Taylor calls an “immanent frame,” *a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order*.⁴ Georgetown Professor Paul Elie comments on this in his 2004 book, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*:

We are all skeptics now, believer and unbeliever alike. There is no one true faith, evident at all time and places. Every religion is one among many. The clear lines of any orthodoxy are made crooked by our experience, are complicated by our lives. Believer and unbeliever are in the same predicament, thrown back onto themselves in complex circumstances, looking for a sign. As ever, religious belief makes its claim somewhere between revelation and projection, between holiness and human frailty; but the burden of proof, indeed the burden of belief, for so long held up by society, is now back on the believer, where it belongs.⁵

Perhaps the believer reading this might identify best with James K. A. Smith's succinct summary of this idea: "We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting. We're all Thomas now."⁶ It's not that faith doesn't exist in "a secular age," it's that deeply held religious belief does not come easy, even for those who want it to! The experience of belief in a secular age can be likened to Abraham's great test of faith to sacrifice his own son. Sometimes to hold on to the historic Christian faith in this secular age feels like being asked to hold knives over one's son on Mt. Moriah.

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In their book *Good Faith*, authors David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons lay out the numbers behind the reality that many feel. In their research Kinnaman and Lyons distinguish between those who see faith as background noise from those who are actively engaged. They call the latter group "practicing Christians," people who "say their faith is very important to them and attend church at least once a month." According to their study, 3 out of 10 Americans are "practicing Christians."⁷

Of course, many millions more have some sort of faith connection, but exercise little of it today—folks who may have been raised in the church but now see the practices and tenets of the faith as just landscape. This is the largest faith group in America today. Three out of four U. S. adults have some Christian background, but 3 in 5 American Christians are mostly inactive in their faith.

Why is that? Kinnaman and Lyons lay out a few perceptions that help explore why faith is irrelevant to many. First of all, leadership, or lack of it. Only 25% of adults say ministers are very reliable in helping people live out their convictions privately and in public.

Secondly, the perception is that religious people aren't very charitable. Half of Americans believe that a majority of charity work would still happen if there were no religious organizations or people to do the work. This is far from reality, but perceptions matter.

Thirdly, Christianity is irrelevant to life and culture. Large proportions of the culture believe our faith has had little or no impact on art, culture, personal well-being, politics, community cohesion, or community services. Again, not an accurate perspective, but still perceptions matter.

Fourth, people can live a good life without Christianity. Seventy-five percent of U. S. adults agree that people can live a good and decent life without being a Christian. This raises the question, if I can be a good person without all the hoops of Christianity, what do I need it for?

And finally, many of Christianity's good ideas are taken for granted. In the centuries preceding our time, many Christians profoundly and positively shaped the institutions we enjoy today. Schools and universities, hospitals, labor unions, public libraries, voting rights for women and ethnic minorities, endowments for the arts and sciences, etc., all have connections to people of deep faith, but many have since been divorced from their founders.

So, if companies offer mission trips to do humanitarian good, nonreligious nonprofits feed the hungry, celebrities talk about the Sabbath, fasting, and meditation, politicians shepherd their flocks towards transcendent goals, and life coaches help people find purpose and calling, then, do we really need this ancient faith any more when life is just fine without it? The confession of the Church is a resounding, yes, of course! But the path forward requires a reexamination of what it means to be a truly "confessional" church.

The Iceberg Is Deeper

The belief that the conflicts in our church body are about "wine, women, and song" is a myth. Those are tip of the iceberg issues. The real issue lies much deeper under the water. The real issue centers on faithfulness to our confession. And confession simply means to speak what is true. Our confession is what one believes is true about the world.

If the Church gets her confession right, then what it looks like to be faithful to that confession should naturally flow. So, when there is a division in the practices of the Church, it's not "merely" a matter of pragmatics. It's a matter of confession. This is because practice flows out of confession.

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For example, when a pastor insists that the prescribed Divine Service is the only way in which people can receive the Means of Grace, what is he actually confessing?

He's confessing that the Divine Service is what we must be faithful to. And when another pastor insists that the Church always be "culturally relevant," what is he actually confessing? He's confessing that adapting the Church to the culture is what it means to be faithful.

The problem with both of these confessions and consequent practices is that they have forgotten what they confess. And so, what does the Church confess? In Matthew 16, Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And the disciples say, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, others Jeremiah, or just another prophet." And Jesus says, "But who do you say I am?" Peter answers:

Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (vv.16–18, ESV)

Jesus says, Peter, you got it right. And it is on the rock of that confession that I am the Christ, the Son of the living God that I will build My Church. The rock of the Church is the confession that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God. More simply put, the confession of Christ's Church on earth, and therefore the confession of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is "that all tongues shall confess Jesus is Lord." This is what Paul writes in Romans 10:9: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

It's important to note that when the Church confesses, "Jesus is Lord," she is making a political statement, that is, a statement about whose kingdom she belongs to. As theologian Kurt Marquardt points out, "The Church is not a democracy but a Christocracy: Christ alone is Lord."⁸ Similarly, we find this same confession and kingdom allegiance in the Lutheran Confessions. In his explanation of the second article of the creed in the Small Catechism, Luther writes, "I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord. He has redeemed me . . . in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."⁹

The Church is defined and identified by her confession that Jesus is Lord. In this confession, the Church declares that she is faithful to nothing else, but to her Lord and consequently to His kingdom.

It is understood that boiling the Church's confession down to "Jesus is Lord" seems overly simplistic. But it is to this confession that the focus must return. Because, in a secular age, when everything else is stripped away, it is to this confession that the Church must remain faithful. Any debate or discussion about church practice or doctrine must submit itself to this question, "Are we being faithful

to our confession of Jesus as Lord?” Actually wrestling with this base question puts everything in perspective. Now, of course, what exactly it means for Jesus to be Lord needs to be defined, taught, and agreed upon by the Church. And indeed this is exactly what the Lutheran Confessions aim to do!

To subscribe to the Confessions is to confess Jesus as Lord. This should inspire the Church to actually wrestle with her Confessions, instead of using them as a club to beat one another over the head with. When the Confessions are understood as the confession that Jesus is Lord, it drives the Church back to this basic confession and calls her to align all of her doctrine and practice with the simple truth of Christ’s Lordship.

The confession that Jesus is Lord means something. It means that the Church believes that Jesus is actually in charge, that He really inaugurated God’s kingdom during His earthly ministry, that the Father gave Him His “stamp of approval” by raising Him from the dead, and that Jesus ascended into heaven and reigns from now unto all eternity. If Jesus really is Lord, if He really is King over all the earth, then living for Him and His kingdom becomes a powerful antidote to the flattening effect of “a secular age.”

Article III of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession emphasizes this thought: “This same Christ suffered and died in order to reconcile the Father to us and rose from the dead in order to rule over, justify, and sanctify believers.”¹⁰ It’s clear that Scripture and the Confessions confirm that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus happens not only so that the Church would have life in the age to come, but also that she might live in Jesus’ kingdom and under His Lordship right now as His church on earth. David Yeago summarizes this thought well: “The Good News is not that ‘we don’t have to do anything’; the Good News is that we get to have Jesus for our Lord instead of the devil.”¹¹

Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God. Through Baptism and faith in Him, people are moved from the kingdom of darkness to God’s kingdom. Walter Rauschenbusch writes, “His (Jesus) task was not to impart correct concepts about the kingdom but to make it possible for men to respond to it; as a parable of the kingly God, he invited men to look through him into the kingdom, with the result that his hearers could not respond to the kingdom without responding to him.”¹² In other words, the kingdom is where the king is. But, what does this confession mean for the mission of the Church in a secular age?

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The Mission Is Enchantment

One of the greatest North American writers in the last twenty years is the late David Foster Wallace. For anyone who has read his work, he has this uncanny way of tapping into the flattening experience of postmodern life. Following the release of his most notable work, *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace was interviewed by *Salon* and asked what the book was about. He said “it was about what it is to be a human being in America at the turn of the Millennium.” When asked what exactly that was like, he said this:

There’s something particularly sad about it, something that doesn’t have to do with physical circumstances, or the economy, or any of the stuff that gets talked about in the news. It’s more like a stomach-level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself as a kind of lostness. The sadness that the book is about, and that I was going through, was a real American type of sadness. I was white, upper-middle-class, obscenely well-educated, had had way more career success than I could have legitimately hoped for and was sort of adrift. A lot of my friends were the same way. Some of them were deeply into drugs, others were unbelievable workaholics. Some were going to singles bars every night. You could see it played out in 20 different ways, but it’s the same thing.¹³

So, Wallace says, in this secular age, there is this pervasive sadness. When asked why that was, he suggested that it came from the inability of our culture to confront the deepest questions about who we are. This is what philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelley call “normal nihilism,”¹⁴ in which the question why has no answer. Thus, Wallace concludes the *Salon* interview with the words, “I get the feeling that a lot of us, privileged Americans, as we enter our early 30s, have to find a way to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values.”¹⁵

It’s in that last line from David Foster Wallace that a crack in the seeming impenetrable “immanent frame” of “a secular age” begins to show. And it’s in that crack that the Church’s confession-fueled mission can begin to take root and grow. Theologian Arthur Glasser explains, “What this means is that Christians in the world have a role to fill that non-Christians cannot possibly fill. They have to break the fatality that hangs over the world through reflecting in every way the victory that Christ gained over the powers. They are to be a sign of the new covenant, a demonstration that the new order has entered the world, giving meaning, direction, and hope to history.”¹⁶

It’s understood that a call to a realignment of the Church’s core confession of “Jesus is Lord” may appear to be simplistic or reductionist response to our secular age to some readers, but in keeping with the theme of this journal, it seems an appropriate place to start. When the Church takes seriously her confession of Jesus

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as Lord, she suggests to “a secular age” that another way is possible, that perhaps this world is enchanted after all. One of the first ways this is expressed is in corporate worship. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin explains, “A community of people that, in the midst of all the pain and sorrow and wickedness of the world, is continually praising God is the first obvious result of living by another story than the one our world lives by.”¹⁷

Of course, worship alone is hardly the full embodiment of mission fueled by the confession of the Lordship of Christ. But, a community of people who see the transcendence of God not only in the religious experience of a worship gathering but in deep communion with their fellow citizens of a kingdom that is “not of this world” provides another opportunity for the re-enchantment of the Western world. Author Mark Sayers explains, “The small commitment of regular attendance grows in to the commitment of loving brothers and sisters in Christ, which blossoms into the service of those outside the church, love of neighbor in sharing good news and seeking of mercy and justice.”¹⁸

The confession of Jesus as Lord propels His church into a mission of enchanting the Western world through her worship, her community, and finally her friendship. As any professional ministry practitioner will tell you, one of the most challenging aspects of evangelizing his or her community is the lack of relationships Christians have with non-Christians. But those who confess Jesus as Lord are part of a kingdom that transgresses boundaries and prioritizes friendships with those who do not believe as they do. This transgression of social boundaries, though seemingly small, opens up the possibility of enchantment. Lesslie Newbigin writes, “Such a community is the primary hermeneutic for the gospel, all the statistical evidence goes to show that those within our secularized societies who are being drawn out of unbelief to faith in Christ say that they were drawn through the friendship of a local congregation.”¹⁹

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Worship, community, and friendship may hardly seem a large enough antidote to the complexities of the secular age, but in so many ways the Lord tells His people that His kingdom is built through such seemingly small acts; tiny mustard seeds make trees, yeast causes bread to rise, and confessing the Lordship of Christ can enchant “a secular age” with the good news that we are not doomed to fatalism, but that there is hope for history.

Endnotes

- ¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2007), 25.
- ² Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 81, 139.
- ³ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), vii.
- ⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.
- ⁵ Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), 427.
- ⁶ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 4.
- ⁷ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 28–34.
- ⁸ Kurt E. Marquardt, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance* (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 1990), 207.
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- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ¹¹ David Yeago, “Sacramental Lutheranism at the End of the Modern Age,” *Lutheran Forum* (Winter Edition: 2000): 12.
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- ¹³ Laura Miller, “David Foster Wallace,” *Salon*, March 9, 1996, https://www.salon.com/1996/03/09/wallace_5/.
- ¹⁴ Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelley, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 1–21.
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- ¹⁶ Arthur F. Glasser, Charles E. Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Shawn B. Redford, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 339.
- ¹⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 153.
- ¹⁸ Mark Sayers, *Strange Days: Life in the Spirit in a Time of Upheaval* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017), 171.
- ¹⁹ Newbigin, *A Word in Season*, 153.