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Encountering Mission

Useless and Bankrupt: Confession and Mission in Light of the Symbols

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Abstract: When misunderstood or misaligned, confession and mission are useless and bankrupt. Confession is useless, or without purpose, when it exists only for its own sake. Mission is bankrupt, or empty, when it fails to bring the content of the Gospel to the life of one in need of receiving it. This article seeks to learn from the Symbols the nature and purpose of confession and mission. Specifically, it seeks to understand and suggest how Lutheran confession shapes Lutheran mission, not just for those who first confessed, but for those who by God's grace continue to live in accord with that same confession.

A Little White Package

There is only so much for which seminary can prepare a pastor. Courses cover a wide range and depth of topics related to ministry and are designed to form within a candidate the heart and head necessary for life in the parish. But what about those unanticipated situations and events that seminary cannot predict and prepare a student to face? What about those events and situations that arise in the normal course of events in the twenty-first century that will undoubtedly impact the life of a parish. For example, the spring of 2015 in Baltimore, Maryland, was marked by social unrest, protests, violence, and, for one parish pastor, the unexpected arrival of a message from the Ku Klux Klan.

It was a Thursday morning. I arrived on our campus in rural Baltimore County to find on the doorstep to the fellowship hall a peculiar package. When I opened it my heart sank; the business card inside this little white bundle came from a local



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chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. Emblazoned with the symbols of the Klan, including the prominent placement of the American as well as the Confederate flag, in my hand was the contact information for an organization known for its violence and hate-promoting activities. To be honest, I didn't know what to do. Were they watching me? Were they waiting to see how I would react? I was not sure. But I did know that whatever I did, I had to do it quickly. Why? Because this particular Thursday was the Thursday after the riots erupted in Baltimore. Although safely away from the riots themselves, our community could still feel the repercussions. And on this day, I, as a pastor, and we, as a congregation, had a decision to make. We had to decide what we would do about this. Would we cower in fear? Would we react altruistically? Or, would we pretend as though nothing had happened?

The seminary cannot predict moments like this. The good news, however, is that the seminary does not need to predict them. Throughout the formation process, I was taught not simply what to think, but how to think. I was given the tools to mine the sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions regardless of the situation into which their truth needed to be confessed and embodied. The moment for me as a new parish pastor appeared to offer a missional, as well as a confessional, opportunity. For, in responding to this challenge, I recognized that the congregation needed to engage a society composed of a growing number of people who have little interest in or connection with the church. It required me to delve into the Symbols¹ and Scriptures to discern what to say and how to act.

Often those two things, confession and mission, are put in opposition to each other, as if a person could be only confessional or only missional. To do so, however, is extraordinarily problematic, as it cuts against the very purpose of the Symbols.² When misunderstood or misaligned, confession and mission are useless and bankrupt. Confession is useless, or without purpose, when it exists only for its own sake. Mission is bankrupt, or empty, when it fails to bring the content of the Gospel to the life of one in need of receiving it. This article seeks to learn from the Symbols the nature and purpose of confession and mission. Specifically, it seeks to understand and suggest how Lutheran confession shapes Lutheran mission, not just for those who first confessed, but for those who by God's grace continue to live in accord with that same confession. Simply put, only through an engagement with the Symbols in their own context can one understand that confession exists for the sake of mission. Or, put another way, the Symbols themselves argue that confession exists not for its own sake but for the sake of people in need of hearing the Gospel. By gaining such insight from the Symbols, the church is prepared to engage any and every context, whether it is a normal Thursday morning or not.

A Specific Time and Place

The church around the world will shortly pause to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. It will be marked by celebrations, intense academic discussion and debate, and a general curiosity about what actually took place all those years ago and what difference that might make today. The world has changed much since the time of Luther and the other reformers. No longer does the church have the same influence in society.³ This fact is often met in the church with fear and concern, or worse, with a reactionary impulse to disparage the world and all that is in it; but whether we like it or not, the world is not the same as it was fifty years ago, let alone five hundred.

Luther's time is different from ours. This difference means, then, that before one can read or engage the writings of Luther or Melancthon, time must be spent understanding the situation that gave rise to their work. If not, the possibility is greater of misunderstanding, or worse, misappropriating a specific thought or insight. What, then, does that mean for how we approach the Symbols? Simply, that we must understand the events surrounding the time when the Symbols were written if we are to confess them faithfully in our day. This does not mean that the truth confessed in the Symbols is valid *only* for a specific time and situation but that the enduring truth of the Symbols was confessed *in a specific time for a specific purpose*. It is conditioned by its context, not shackled by it. One cannot simply lift a phrase from the sixteenth-century European confessional documents and apply it unmediated to twenty-first-century North America. Repristination is not a useful enterprise precisely because it fails to express adequately the situation that gave rise to the text. When approaching the Symbols, any Lutheran wishing to confess not just the words but the truth encapsulated in them must take account of the situation in life that gave birth to them. To do otherwise is not simply irresponsible or ethically questionable, it is contrary to the Symbols and the truth they confess.

During the era in which the Symbols were codified, a nearly fifty-year period from the Catechisms and Augustana to the Formula, the vast majority of the citizenry of Germany, and indeed of Europe itself, was Christian. Not all were Lutheran or Reformed. On the contrary, the structure of Roman Catholicism still overwhelmingly influenced ideas about the structure and purpose of the church. To combat this, the reformers ushered in a period when the church began to restructure its outward forms

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to make them conform to its understanding of the Gospel. The work of Luther, Melancthon, and other reformers was an attempt to identify and challenge what they perceived to be broken or flawed within the institutional church, a structure that had served God's people, for better or worse, for well over a thousand years. All of this is to say, that even though the issues about the meaning and purpose of the church were sorting themselves out on the fields of theological, political, and actual battle, the people within the provinces still in large part considered themselves to be part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. "The confessors of the sixteenth century confessed for the sake of other believers."⁴ This specific purpose had a profound impact on how the church understood its role, or mission, in society. Robert Kolb suggests, "Insofar as pastors and laity had a mission to share God's word with others, it was a mission of reformation and repentance—reclaiming those within historic Christendom who had little or no concept of the faith which they claimed—rather than conversion."⁵ Arand, Nestingen, and Kolb together affirm the reality that, "Luther and Melancthon, and their students as well, seldom met an unbaptized person. They had little opportunity for witnessing their faith to those outside the faith."⁶ The reformers clearly lived in "Christian" Europe.

Today, on the other hand, both Europe and America are understood as living in a post-Christian age. This means that although the "church" has influenced societal structure, the effects of which might still be felt, it no longer holds sway for individuals in society. Research by Barna seems to suggest at least a growing number of "unchurched" and "dechurched," as well as "nones."⁷ Members of society have either never been to church, went and then stopped going, or understand themselves to hold no religious affiliation at all. While it is true that there have always been people who have never set foot in a Christian community, or even left it once they had, the rates at which people are leaving or ignoring the church are rapidly increasing. The same could not be said of fifty years ago much less five hundred. I am also finding that my own context of northern Baltimore County has a unique set of characteristics, one of which is the kind of racial hatred the KKK tends to inflame among our neighbors. Each segment of society is uniquely affected not just by the role, or lack thereof, that the church plays or has played, but also by other factors that have an impact those segments. Put bluntly, the context of today and the context that surrounded the Symbols are by no means identical. In some ways the ecclesiological and sociological aspects are so disparate as to suggest that the past has little to nothing to say to the present.

A Word from Yesterday

What did the Symbols say in their own time about confession and mission? At the core of the Symbols is their commitment to the Gospel as the unchanging truth and work of God in the life of the Church.⁸ The preface to the Book of Concord expresses this succinctly, "It would be our disposition and intention never to accept,

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defend, or spread some different or new teaching but rather with divine assistance to remain and persist unwavering in the truth once recognized and confessed at Augsburg in the year 1530.”⁹ What was expressed at Augsburg? “That human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness.”¹⁰ Certainly Article IV was not the only article of the Augustana, but no Lutheran would suggest that it is not the central one. This is the article upon which the church rises or falls.¹¹ It is the core of the Augustana and that which the preface of the Symbols holds to unswervingly. It is the central confession of the church.

But, for what purpose is the Gospel confessed? To this too the preface speaks a word:

To this Christian confession, founded upon the witness of the unchangeable truth of the divine Word, we again unanimously subscribed, in order—as much as lies in us—to warn and to protect our descendants in the future from teaching what is impure, false, and contrary to the word of God. . . . We did this in the confidence and hope that thereby not only the adversaries of the pure, Evangelical teaching might be prevented from making up slanders and smears against us, but also that other, good-hearted people might be reminded and encouraged by this our recapitulated and repeated confession to investigate all the more seriously the truth of the divine Word which alone grants salvation, to accept it, and for the salvation and eternal welfare of their souls to remain and persist in it in a Christian way without any further disputation or dissension.¹²

The Symbols are constructed for the sake of the next generation, that they might persist in the truth, but also that the truth might go forth and enliven faith in the hearts of those who hear it. Put another way, the confession is preserved for the sake of the present and future mission.¹³ Such an attitude is expressed elsewhere throughout the Symbols. For example, Article XX of the Apology recognizes the effect the Gospel has on people:

Put another way, the confession is preserved for the sake of the present and future mission.

The consciences of the godly will not have sufficiently firm consolation against the terror of sin and death or against the devil’s inciting them to despair, unless they know that they ought to stand firmly upon the fact that they have the forgiveness of sins freely on account of Christ. This faith sustains and enlivens hearts in their most bitter struggles with despair.

Therefore our cause is a worthy one. Because of it we shrink from no danger.¹⁴

The message is clear, for the confessors of the Augustana and its Apology, and indeed for the entire content of the Symbols, the purpose of preserving the confession of the Gospel was for the sake of the mission. It was so that consciences stuck in the Roman system might be assuaged and freedom in Christ be brought forth. Confession happened for the sake of people in need of hearing the Gospel, not for its own sake. This is not to downplay the content of the confession by any means. For it was the content of the confession that assured the assuaging of the conscience because the content of the Gospel is and will always remain Christ and His work.

As Kolb suggested above, the mission of the church during the era of the composition of the Symbols was not directed at conversion but at reformation and repentance. Not surprisingly, the same Gospel that achieved the latter will also achieve the former. It is only the Gospel that will save the unchurched, nones, and klansmen¹⁵ of today, because it is only the Gospel that saves all sinners. The question today is: How does it do that? For the confessors of Augustana's Article IV, Article V gives the answer. "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted."¹⁶ However, one must not be too quick to insist that such an article refers to the pastoral office itself. Robert Preus has spoken clearly on this issue saying:

Confession happened for the sake of people in need of hearing the Gospel, not for its own sake.

Notice that in this passage no mention of the office of pastor is made, no mention of man, of rank, of *ordo*. Rather an activity is spoken of, a function, a preaching activity (*ministerium docent evangelii*). This is the means whereby faith is created and nourished, the means whereby the church is born and nourished. And thus this ministry becomes the essential work of the church.¹⁷

Clearly, Preus argues that Article V forms the basis of what the church does. It cares for people through the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments because these are the means or tools God has given to accomplish the task. This article is about the gifts given to people in darkness, not about the administrators of those gifts. Put another way, a confession about what the church is supposed to do does not exist for its own ends, but for the tasks of caring for people and the calling of all to faith. Confession is preserved and expressed for the sake of mission, both for those who first confessed in Reformation times and those who continue to confess today.

A Word for Today

In Northern Baltimore County, the picture could not have been clearer. To be a Lutheran, to share that confession, was to be concerned about people: the people in the pews and the people outside the walls, the ones who suffer, and the ones who cause the suffering. For me, it meant I needed to tell the congregation what had happened. I needed to preach to the moment, to give Christ to those who would go back into their neighborhoods where hate and hurt lurked in the shadows. It was by no means a final step, but it was the first one. That much became clear.

It seems as though the church today is in a completely different position from the church of yesterday; and to some extent that is entirely true. But the confession of the church, the Gospel, is not bound by time or circumstance. Confession of the Gospel without concern for the people is useless, because it seeks only to defend truth for truth's sake and in doing so ignores the impetus of the Gospel itself. The Gospel is a Word that became flesh, a Word that dwelled with and cared for sinners. Mission, going to people and caring for them, that lacks or compromises the content of the Gospel is bankrupt. It is a Band-Aid on a broken leg. It may feel good, but it accomplishes nothing.

Confession and mission are not antithetical, nor are they only labels; they are inextricably and inescapably bound one to the other, one for the other. Confession exists for the sake of mission, but also mission exists because of confession; without it, there is no work to be done. It is also clear that it is not easy to find the balance between the two, but it does mean the balance must be sought. No longer is it acceptable to use “confessional” or “missional” as an accusation, allegedly emphasizing that a concern for truth is opposed to a concern for people. It is not enough to sit back and repeat a word of truth and not engage the culture that so desperately needs it. It is not enough merely to engage the culture without a real message of hope. The church lives because of the Gospel. The church breathes, is cleansed by, and feeds upon that word of forgiveness; but it does not hoard it. It must go out into the surrounding zip codes and bring that life-giving word of hope to a broken humanity. After all, it isn't every day that those who need it, and may not know it, show up and leave a little white package at your front door.

Endnotes

¹ The term “Symbols” is used specifically to refer to the Book of Concord, also known as the Lutheran Confessions. Because this article seeks to differentiate between confession and mission in general and not the Confessions in particular, the use of the term “Symbols,” while somewhat antiquated, is useful to avoid confusion.

² “Preface to the Book of Concord,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 7.

³ Dave Kinnaman's works, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011); the book he co-wrote with Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012); and the one he co-edited with George Barna, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), document such change.

⁴ Charles A. Arand, James A. Nestingen, and Robert Kolb, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 10.

⁵ Robert Kolb, "Late Reformation Lutherans on Mission and Confession," *Lutheran Quarterly* XX (2006), 29.

⁶ Arand et al., *The Lutheran Confessions*, 10.

⁷ Again, the works referenced in note 2 are helpful, as is the seemingly never-ending research by the Barna Group, in particular, on the subject. However, a recent work by Linda Mercandante entitled *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Mind of the Spiritual but not Religious* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014) documents in detail the unique perspective of the "nones" category.

⁸ Consider the following: "Confessing in the Wittenberg manner, following the example of those who composed the documents found in the Book of Concord, means (1) confessing the evangel of Jesus Christ at the center of proclamation and theological reflection, and doing so with (2) eschatological sensitivity, (3) ecumenical commitment, (4) evangelistic passion, and (5) the desire to edify God's people for the comfort of their consciences and for the further confession of their faith in word and deed." Arand et al., *The Lutheran Confessions*, 9.

⁹ Kolb and Wengert, "Preface to the Book of Concord," in *The Book of Concord*, 7.

¹⁰ Kolb and Wengert, "Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord*, 39, 41.

¹¹ Luther famously said of the doctrine of justification, not specifically of Augustana IV but of the doctrine itself in particular that, "On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise everything is lost, and the pope and the devil and whatever opposes us will gain victory and be proved right." Kolb and Wengert, "The Smalcald Articles," in *The Book of Concord*, 301.

¹² Kolb and Wengert, "Preface to the Book of Concord," in *The Book of Concord*, 7.

¹³ See again note 8.

¹⁴ Kolb and Wengert, "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord*, 236.

¹⁵ I recognize that the claim of the KKK to be a "Christian" organization would seem to suggest the need for reformation and repentance, as in a former era, as opposed to the conversion efforts need of the present day. However, to place the Klan within the bounds of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church would be to give them more credit than they are due. The fact that a group claims to be a Christian organization or a church does not make it so. The Symbols themselves affirm this in AC VII & VIII when speaking of the church.

¹⁶ Kolb and Wengert, "Augsburg Confession," in *The Book of Concord*, 41.

¹⁷ Robert Preus, "The Confessions and the Mission of the Church," *The Springfielder* 39, no. 1 (Je 1975), 22.