

We Need the Lutheran Confessions Because a Theology of Experience is Not Easily Transferable

By: Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard

“Feelings come and feelings go, and feelings are deceiving; my warrant is the Word of God—naught else is worth believing. I’ll trust in God’s unchanging Word till soul and body sever, for, though all things shall pass away, His Word shall stand forever!”

-Martin Luther

This past week I had a dialogue with a gentleman on Facebook over a theological topic. Part way through the discussion he asked me to define my position so that he could properly understand my context and perspective. I also asked him to define himself a little more thoroughly. Therefore, I took 2 minutes to type out a brief paragraph that was rooted in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. To my surprise though, the gentleman did not give me a brief paragraph but a 5 minute Youtube video of a person giving their personal testimony. Long story short, I posted another question asking him to further clarify his position and he then responded with 4 more testimony Youtube videos.

What was happening here? Whether this man knew it or not, he was finding it very difficult to communicate his theology in print because his theology was rooted in experience. In other words, his theological framework was rooted not in doctrinal content but primarily experience, which made it

nearly impossible for him to transfer/communicate. This is the reason why he had to resort to presenting 5 testimony videos ranging in length from 6-8 minutes apiece. His hope was that I would capture the overarching spirit of approximately 30 minutes of videos, so that I might understand his theological context.

Dan van Voorhis in a Faith Lutheran Church of Capistrano Beach Vimeo Presentation speaks on this saying,

A theology of experience cannot be easily transmitted from generation to generation. Without an external set of beliefs, passing on the faith is extremely difficult and catechism is impossible.¹

Carl R. Trueman his small booklet, “The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind,” also comments on this saying,

“Experience without doctrine is an unstable, often mystical, and wholly inadequate tool by which to define a movement. ‘To repent of sins,’ ‘to trust in Jesus for salvation,’ ‘to be born again’—the expressions used by evangelicals to describe conversion imply doctrinal content. But if there is no consensus about what repentance means or why it is necessary, about what constitutes sin or a sinful nature, about who

¹ Dan Van Voohrhis. “Faith Lutheran of Capistrano Beach Vimeo,” January 2013, <http://vimeo.com/channels/vanvoorhis>.

Jesus was and is, about what Jesus did and does, and about what terms like 'born again' mean, then the problem of a lack of doctrinal coherence stubbornly remains. Experience without content—or experience about which there is no agreement on the meaning of the words used to describe it—remains incapable of proving any clear identity..."²

It is very tempting to define our theology solely by what we experience as a Christian. The reason being, personal experiences grip us because we are, at times, captivated by the ethos embedded in these experiences. Furthermore, there is the pressure to exchange the supposedly dead, heady, and cold Lutheran Confessions for active, alive, tangible, and visible experiences; the words of Rick Warren echo throughout American Christianity, "We need deeds, not creeds." However, as noted by Trueman and van Voorhis, experience is very unstable and inadequate to define, communicate, and transmit Christianity, especially when experience is void of doctrine. Furthermore, the reason why experience is not adequate to describe the church and her theology is that many people's experiences will differ. Whose experience will the church be defined by and what means could be used to pass down subjective experiences to our children and

² Carl Trueman. "The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind," January 2012, <http://www.pastormatrichard.com/2012/01/real-scandal-of-evangelical-mind.html>.

grandchildren? Keep in mind that one's experiences are closely tied to their working Ethics; Ethics depend on one's worldview; one's worldview rests on doctrine; and one's doctrine rests on the Word of God. J. Darly Charles says, "Without a theological foundation, the church is utterly incapable of explaining, much less presenting, the outlines of Christian Ethics."³

Experience void of doctrine does not transfer easily, but the Confessions can be transmitted from generation to generation. Furthermore the Confessions are objective, external, time tested, grounded in the Word, and wonderful in shaping and forming every generation's epistemology and worldview. Thus, there is a great need for us to be continually grounded in the Word and our Lutheran Confessions today and especially tomorrow.

May our experiences be filled with content, Biblical content that is transferable, stable, and able to provide a clear picture of our identity in Christ.

³ J. Darly Charles, *The Unformed Conscience of Evangelicalism: Recovering the Church's Moral Vision* (InterVarsity Press, 2002), 71.