

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

For many years, I would hear a mantra from neo-evangelical churches: “Christianity is not a religion. It’s a relationship”; and not just any relationship, but “a personal relationship with Jesus.” It has been repeated so often, it has become cliché. As a Lutheran, I’ve always felt uncomfortable with it.

As Paul stood before King Agrippa, he testified: “[*My accusers*] have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers” (Acts 26:5-6). Then, he told again of his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, and he testified: I am “saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22-23).

Paul used the word *θρησκείας*, which is here translated “religion,” and it sounds like that’s what Paul is confessing, no longer Pharisaic Judaism that rejected Jesus as Messiah, but Jesus the Christ, the Christian faith, the Christian religion. King Agrippa responded to Paul: “would you persuade me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28)? That’s a religion, it seems to me. Merriam-Webster says a religion is this: first, “a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices,” and second, “the service and worship of God or the supernatural.”

Attitude, beliefs, practices, worship ... we might add confession. This is the way Lutherans talk. You don’t really find relationship language in our Lutheran Symbols. I did a search and found this kind of relationship language in only one place — relationship not with Jesus, not a personal relationship, but just a relationship with God. It was in the Large Catechism in the section on the Lord’s Prayer, 5th Petition: “For where the heart is not in a right relationship with God, or cannot take such confidence, it will not dare to pray anymore.” Luther here is talking about faith and trust. “Such a confident and joyful heart” he continues, “can spring from nothing else than the certain knowledge of the forgiveness of sin [Psalm 32:1–2; Romans 4:7–8]” (Luther, Large Catechism, 5th Petition, 92).

Yes, that’s the way Lutherans talk. They talk about forgiveness of sins. They talk about a righteousness that is apart from works; they talk about a salvation by grace through faith. They talk about the world being justified by Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice and about their own righteousness that comes through faith. *Sola gratia, Sola fide, Sola Scriptura* — grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone.

Thinking about the coming of the Holy Spirit, which we celebrated last Sunday, Lutherans talk about the Holy Spirit who “has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (Luther, Small Catechism, Explanation to the Third Article). Nothing there about “a personal relationship.” In Luther’s Small Catechism, the relationship language is in the Second Article of the Creed: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, . . . , and also true man, . . . is my Lord, who has redeemed me a lost and condemned person,” My relationship with Jesus is that He is my Lord and God; I am His subject. My relationship with Jesus is that I’m a sinner, lost and condemned; He is my Redeemer and Savior. And these relationships were established by Him, not by my doing, not by my choice. I believe, as we confess . . . I have faith, because God has called me, enlightened me, sanctified and kept me.

This is the so-called *fides qua creditur* of Christianity — the faith that believes, the faith in the heart that trusts. But besides this faith, Christianity has the faith that is believed, the *fides quae creditur*, the content of our believing. It’s what Jude wrote about: “*the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3), for, he said, “*certain people have crept in unnoticed . . . ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ*” (Jude 4). That’s what the *fides qua* becomes when it loses connection with the *fides quae*: mere “*sensuality*.” As our own Erik Saunder’s uncle, Klemet Preus, once wrote: it becomes “*emotionalism with all sorts of heartfelt sentiments but no understanding of precisely what Jesus is all about*” (Klemet Preus, “*Fides Qua and Fides Quae*,” steadfastlutherans.org). That’s right . . . without an understanding of what Christianity is about, Christianity is doctrine-less and rudder-less.

But we have rudders for we have a doctrine; we have a *fides quae creditur* that we confess; that’s found, in part, in the creeds of Christendom, the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. How interesting that today is also the Church’s commemoration of the Council of Nicaea, a council called to set firm the *fides quae* concerning Jesus’ divinity, “*God of God . . . begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made*”

This truth is expressed in our Old Testament lesson: Wisdom, the pre-incarnate Son, was at the Father’s side participating in the work of creation. St. Paul says it this way: “*For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things were created through him and for him*” (Col. 1:16. At Advent we sing of Him this way: “*O come, Thou Wisdom from on high, Who ord’rest all things mightily*” (LSB357:2).

The incarnate Son also expressed His eternal essence when He said, “*Truly, ... before Abraham was, I am.*” And the Jews knew exactly what He was claiming as they picked up stones to kill Him. This truth is confessed in the creed we confessed today, a creed named after Athanasius, the man who fought so fiercely against the false teacher Arius and his false jingle: “there was a time when the Son was not.” No, as we confess: “the whole three persons are coeternal with each other and coequal.” Athanasian Creed, Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed!

Indeed, to be a Christian, one must hold to the doctrines of the ecumenical creeds. Indeed, that’s the one thing that I appreciated at a little meeting held at The Lutheran Foundation this week about something happening at the Electric Works campus. I missed it in the paper. It’s called Prayer Works, and it’s a place for 24/7 prayer in Fort Wayne, manned by people from Fort Wayne churches. Here’s the point: the presenter made a point to say that the effort was interdenominational, meaning Christian, and not interfaith, and he used the Apostles’ Creed as the rule. If you can’t confess the Apostles’ Creed, you can’t be a supporting church of the Prayer Works. Now, I’m not convinced that this is something we at Zion would want to get involved in, but I did appreciate the point about the Apostles’ Creed.

Today on the Festival of the Holy Trinity, of course, we confessed the Athanasian Creed, although it’s a bit different than the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. They both begin: “I believe ...,” linking the *fides qua* with the *fides quae*. The Athanasian Creed doesn’t use those words, but sets forth the *fides quae*, what it calls “the catholic faith,” what Vincent of Lérins said was “the faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.” “This is the catholic faith,” we recited today, the *fides quae*, meaning “this is what we believe,” the *fides qua*.

And the catholic faith confessed in the Athanasian Creed has two parts: first, a detailed exposition of the God we worship: “one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.” Three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet not three Gods, but one God; each person uncreated, infinite, eternal, almighty, yet each person distinguished: the Father unbegotten distinguished by His begetting of the Son; the Son by His being begotten; and the Holy Spirit by His procession from the Father and the Son.

Second, the catholic faith thinks rightly about Jesus, that He is the eternal Son of God who in time became flesh and was born of His mother. Jesus is both perfect God and perfect man, yet He is not two but one Christ, the human nature assumed into the eternal person of the Son of God. We think rightly about Jesus when we confess our redemption by His suffering, cross, and death, by resurrection victory, descent into hell, and ascension back to the Father, for which we are promised our own resurrection and life.

This is the faith we confess as Christians, and, I admit it, it contains some mysteries. Holy Trinity? It's a mystery! The incarnation of Jesus? It's a mystery! These are mysteries of our faith — *fides quae creditur* — that God has revealed to us, that we confess, that we proclaim. The Holy Trinity, and the Son that reveals Him, is the God that we worship, that we believe — *fides qua creditur*. For us as Lutherans, it's one of those "both ands," as St. Paul says, "*For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved*" (Rom. 10:10).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.