

From Believing to Acting: 50 Years of Being Church

The title of this reflection piece, *From Believing to Acting*, will seem out of place for many people, especially as I am writing this on Reformation Day, when Lutherans commonly consider how we are saved by faith. Full stop. Good works or any kind of demonstration of an outward dimension of our faith are not often mentioned on this day. I propose a correction to that. I also propose that beliefs and actions do indeed go together, and that we are well beyond the time when the church needs to be more obvious about proclaiming what it is we actually *do*—whether individually or as collective members of the body of Christ.

I was confirmed exactly 50 years ago this fall. My confirmation class was a large one—36 students in all—even though my home congregation in Independence, Iowa was not particularly large. It was merely the height of the baby boom era, and there simply were a lot of children and youth around. What I do remember about my own confirmation experience is a strong reliance upon key texts of our tradition. Not only was Luther's Small Catechism used, but each student was expected to have memorized it completely over the course of a two-year program. So every Wednesday afternoon confirmation students would take turns, one at a time, going before one of the pastors to say the portion of Luther's Small Catechism that we had memorized for that week. While it was a painful exercise for us as students, I can't imagine how dreadful this must have been for the pastors who needed to prompt and help each student along in remembering ancient texts, even while they had been similarly memorized by previous generations of Lutherans before.

Many of our most treasured words from the scriptures and elsewhere nevertheless proclaim that actions are important. I need only mention a few:

The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8, NRSV)

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' (Matthew 25:34–36, NRSV)

In 2 Corinthians 8, the apostle Paul praised the churches of Macedonia who gave beyond their means to support the church of Jerusalem that at the time was undergoing a great need. This action has come to be known by many as a *joyful exchange*, wherein God blesses us so that we can in turn be a blessing to others.

Martin Luther famously spoke about this same concept when he wrote the following about the meaning of the sacrament of holy communion in *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ* (1519):

When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship, as has been said....Here your heart must go

out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy. See, this is what it means to bear in your turn the misfortune and adversity of Christ and his saints.

A Reformation-era hymn by Paul Speratus, titled *Salvation unto Us Has Come*, speaks about the relationship between faith and action in this way:

For faith alone can justify;
works serve our neighbor and supply
the proof that faith is living. (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Hymn #589)

I am convinced we have reached a moment in the life of the church where we need to be more visible about demonstrating our faith than ever before. Many people who are not Christians do not know what the church is, and many probably do not care to know either. What people should know about us is that we serve Jesus' own mission to a needy and hurting world. Moreover, I am convinced that other people would join us in such a mission if they knew that we weren't primarily concerned about them having to believe every word of the creeds or of the Bible in exactly certain ways. We have the freedom to hold to certain beliefs in our own ways. The important thing is that we all serve the world in some manner following Christ's example.

For several years the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has used the tagline "God's work. Our hands" in its logo. The same line is the theme for one Sunday each September. Yet the theme isn't just for one Sunday of the year. It is what we are about always, each time we gather throughout the year.

If anything may have changed in my own preaching over the ten years that I have served as United's pastor, I hope that it has been this: that the words we have heard from the gospel have led to preaching that demonstrates what an appropriate response of faith might be in our daily lives beyond the time that we are together in worship.

When I was confirmed 50 years ago, not only was there an accent on what it was we were to *believe*, but there was basically no time spent on how our beliefs were to play out in our daily lives. While we were expected to know key texts that spoke about our faith, the idea of service projects, whether as individual students or together as a class, was still a ways off. Thankfully this has changed in most confirmation programs since that time. Students are expected to contribute a number of hours serving others and the community around them. Each student's confirmation program is not complete unless it has some kind of tangible demonstration of faith in real life. Faith isn't just an invisible element residing somewhere within each of us, it is also visible by the things that we do. The best of our tradition has realized this and the younger generations of people alive today expect for the church to be doing things about the problems that we face as a society.

We not only *do* things, but practicing the faith in tangible ways is indeed essential, and perhaps even more important than the actual things we may believe or say. While I realize this is an incredibly audacious thing to be saying—particularly on Reformation Day—I also believe that it is fundamentally important to whether or not the church actually lives for another generation in many places. Hoards of people have left the church because they cannot believe much of what the church teaches. Many statements in our creeds and throughout the scriptures do not seem relevant to a

number of people today. And yet Christ's mission to serve the needs of the world has never been more necessary or urgent. A church in action will speak to many people. Perhaps we can wear the beliefs of our faith more loosely, while we clothe ourselves more obviously in doing the work of the church. The brightly-colored yellow shirts that church members wear in many congregations on "God's work. Our Hands" Sunday offer signs to the world about our common call to service.

The Hymn of the Day, *Lord, You Give the Great Commission* (ELW #579), used during the final worship service while I was at United (May 29, 2022) ends with this refrain, "With the Spirit's gifts empow'r us for the work of ministry." It's a prayer that we could all use at the start of each day.

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