

July 10, 2022 – Colossians 1:1-14

If you really want to get a debate going among Lutheran pastors, you only need to ask them one question: “How should we be doing youth confirmation?” Because, for several decades now, we have been struggling with that very thing.

Some say we should be doing confirmation younger. Before adolescence, while their minds are at an ideal stage for rote memorization, and before the distractions of their high school years. Others say we should be doing it when they're older. To help guide them through the temptations of high school and college and make the catechism relevant to a young adult life.

Still others say we should toss out confirmation as an “event” altogether. Make catechesis a lifelong process. Bring them to communion when they're ready to receive communion. Make them members when they're ready to be called members. Stop turning confirmation into a sort of graduation from church.

And the reason for all this debate is not that each pastor feels he has the right answer. Quite the opposite. Usually, it's because we feel we have the wrong answer. That what we're doing isn't working as well as it should and therefore should be changed.

And while we've got lots and lots of good theories, the numbers say that we're right to be concerned. Because our youth are leaving the church at an alarming rate. But as I myself ponder such issues, especially between the end of one confirmation class and the beginning of another, I wonder if the method or timing of teaching confirmation is really that important at all.

A few years ago, the Fixed Point Foundation decided to conduct a survey of young people. Specifically those who had been raised in the Church and then lost their faith. And we're not just talking about young men and women who stopped going to church here. We're talking about people who renounced their belief in the existence of God altogether. Who became full-fledged atheists. What made them do it?

What they found was actually pretty straightforward. They left the Church because they felt it had no answers. It had no truth. They went through year after year of Sunday School and VBS and youth groups. Playing games. Singing songs. Eating snacks. But they were never taught anything meaningful. They never received what we as Lutherans call “catechesis.”

And they finally reached a point where they simply said, “They're not teaching me anything because they don't know. So I'll go find someone who does.”

To a degree, they may have been right. There are an awful lot of churches out there who don't have a clue what they actually believe, teach, and confess. They have pastors who stand in their pulpits and give self-help sermons and every now and then mix in an out-of-context quote from scripture. But they're not actually teaching them anything real. They're teaching opinions and platitudes and the power of positive thinking. They're not teaching the word of truth.

Which is where St Paul steps into this equation, with our epistle lesson for today. Because, believe it or not, today's epistle lesson is addressed to a confirmation class. OK, maybe not a youth confirmation class. But close.

You see, the church in the city of Colassae was a very, very young church. Only a year or two old. Planted there by a pastor named Epaphras, of whom we know virtually nothing. Other than the fact that he's been giving them an excellent foundation in God's Word and has earned a standing ovation from St Paul himself.

So these are all new Christians, of various ages, but young in the faith, who are receiving their first catechesis. Their first training in God's Word. Their first instruction in Christianity. They are, quite literally, a 1st century confirmation class. And they have reached a point in their education where it is appropriate to recognize them as disciples of Jesus Christ and brought into the Church. And that's what Paul's letter to them is all about.

And he gives us some clues here as to what is really important in a Christian education. In a confirmation class, if you will. And there isn't one word in here about method. We don't have a clue how Epaphras has been teaching these people. Nor does Paul really care. All he cares about is the content of the curriculum.

And it all begins, Paul says, with the Word of the Truth: the Gospel. The good news of God's grace to humanity. That's what they heard first. That's what lays the foundation. That is the core of the Colossians' catechesis. That is what has brought them to faith in Christ Jesus. That is what has given them the love they have for all the saints. That is what has convinced them of the hope laid up for them in heaven.

But while that is definitely our message, it's not necessarily our only goal. Knowing the Gospel, confessing the Gospel, is certainly something we should strive for. But Paul reveals in his prayers for the Colossians that the Gospel is only the foundation for much, much more in our life of discipleship.

There is, for example, being filled with the knowledge of God's Will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. What is God's Will? Well, it's God's Law. Not in the sense that this is what we must do or we're going to hell. The accusation of the Law has no power over a Baptized child of God.

But in the sense that this is what he wants for us. It's his will. His desire that, as Paul puts it, we walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him. Bearing fruit in every good work. And growing in our knowledge of him.

Paul also prays that as disciples of Jesus Christ we might be strengthened with God's power, which is glorious in its might. He prays that we might use that power to have endurance and patience. Through suffering and hardship. Through doubt and despair. Through all the troubles that this sinful world throws at us.

But it is not grudging endurance and patience, that suffers through with bitterness and discontent. It is endurance and patience with joy. Able to always give thanks to the Father, who is the giver of every good thing.

Who has qualified us to be called his saints. To share in His inheritance. Who has delivered us from a place of darkness and into the kingdom of His beloved Son. A place of redemption and forgiveness. No matter how many times we defy God's will. No matter how many times we break his laws. Because it is not a kingdom of Law. But a kingdom of Gospel.

In a sense, that's really the whole purpose of confirmation. That's the goal of catechesis. To be made a citizen of a new kingdom. In baptism, God rescues you from the kingdom of the world. The kingdom of darkness. The kingdom of death. And he brings you into the kingdom of His Son.

But then you need to be taught how to be a citizen of this new kingdom. How to live and work and function in this place of redemption and forgiveness.

Too often we miss that. I mentioned earlier that there's a school of thought that Confirmation should be less of an event and more of a process. Because, when you think of it as an event, then it just becomes like graduation from school. Where you leave and never come back.

There's a nugget of truth in that criticism. Because, on the one hand, I think if Paul can make a big deal about the Colossians finishing confirmation, then we can make a big deal about it too. But on the other hand, Paul also makes it clear that the Colossians have only just begun their journey of faith. That they have received all this instruction so that they can make use of it. So that they can be good citizens of God's Kingdom.

So that they can study God's Word. Learn God's Law. Live a good and decent life before the Lord. Find strength in the sacrament. And endure all things with patience and joy and thanksgiving to the God who gave them this undeserved gift.

You see, we're all still in catechesis. We're all still waiting to graduate from confirmation class. Because unless you're as arrogant as that foolish lawyer in our Gospel lesson, convinced you know and do the entire Law of God perfectly, then you know you have more learning to do.

The Word of Truth – the Gospel – is always before you, always leading you into more truth about what God has done for you. The knowledge of God is always something you can increase in and the Spirit can always make you more fruitful in your work.

But I don't say that to make you despair of an endless task. No, rather I say it to give you reason to rejoice and give thanks. For when the world seems too smart for you, the God of all wisdom will make you smarter. When the world seems too strong for you, the God of all strength will make you stronger. When the world seems too dark for you, the light who shines in the darkness will make you a saint in light. And when sin itself seems too tempting, the God of all redemption will grant you the forgiveness of sins. Amen.