

Rorate Coeli - John 1:19-28

If you ask someone what kind of Christian he is, you are usually asking about his denomination. You are asking if the congregation he attends is Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, or something like that. But you often hear the answer, "I'm nondenominational." In other words, "The congregation I attend is not part of any denomination." It's good to ask people, "What does your church believe?" This is what we mean when we ask, "What denomination are you?" But unfortunately, people mean completely different things when they use this term.

When we talk about our denomination, we are talking about our public confession. We are talking about what we teach. We teach that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God, and the only source, standard, and norm for Christian doctrine. We believe in one God – the Father, his only begotten Son, and his Holy Spirit – three distinct persons yet one eternal God. We believe that God has created all things, that he has redeemed all sinners by the blood of his Son, and that he calls us to faith by his Holy Spirit. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. We confess that the body and blood of Christ are given for us Christians to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins in the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper.

Our teaching is summarized in the Small Catechism, the Creed, and our other confessional documents, which are included in the Christian Book of Concord. This is our standard, drawn from the clear teachings of the Scriptures. So if you want to know what we teach and what we have committed ourselves to teach, then just pick up the Small Catechism. Or if you want to dive deeper, pick up the whole Book of Concord.

But if you ask someone what denomination he is, he won't necessarily understand that you are asking what his congregation believes, teaches, and confesses. Part of this is because of a loss in translation. The German word for denomination is Konfession. That's a much more helpful word to describe what kind of church you attend. It would be better for us to ask, "What is your congregation's confession?" If someone said, "My congregation doesn't have a confession," then that wouldn't make any sense. So your congregation doesn't teach anything? You don't believe anything? You don't hold your preachers to any standard?

Then again, it would likely take the mask off of many churches that don't hold themselves or their teachers to any standard of doctrine. They would reveal themselves to be nothing more than social clubs that don't require any solid instruction in what the Scriptures actually teach.

To confess means to speak together the same thing. Jesus says, "Whoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father in heaven." He asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered correctly, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." This is always at the heart of the Christian confession. Whether we are confessing that we are by nature sinful and unclean in need of God's mercy, or that God created man – male and female – in his image, God's providential care, the work of the Holy Spirit, the power of God's Word, or the coming judgment, we are always confessing Christ. We are speaking together who Jesus is, why he was born, why he died, and that he lives and reigns for all eternity to intercede for us before the Father's throne.

When the priests and Levites asked John, "Who are you?" John confessed. He confessed and did not deny. He confessed Christ. And he didn't confess some abstract concept of a Christ figure. No, he confessed the Christ who was very near. He was standing among them. He confessed the Lord whose way he was called to prepare. When John confessed Christ, he was also not alone. His confession remains the confession of the entire Church. His baptism remains the baptism of the entire church, trusting that Christ is right here in our midst with his Holy Spirit.

When John confessed Christ, he also denied himself. "I am not the Christ," he says. This is also our confession. We all confess that we cannot save ourselves. This statement is true and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners. I am a sinner. No matter how great of a position God has given me in this life, no matter how important I might be seen in the church, I can do nothing to save myself or keep myself unstained before God. I am not worthy even to untie my Lord's sandals.

Christ is our confession. He is the high priest of our confession, because he made the good confession before Pontius Pilate, and he gave himself as sacrifice before God. He did not deny who he was, and in doing so, he did not deny us whom he came to save. When I confess Christ, I am therefore confessing with all the faithful everything he said and did for poor sinners. I am denying myself while holding on to who Jesus is. He is the only begotten Son of the Father, by whom all things were made. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and he has come from heaven to save me. His birth, his life, his baptism and temptation, his obedience, suffering and death, his resurrection and ascension, his Spirit and Word, his body and blood, his very righteousness – this is my confession.

This is what I rely upon by faith. By his grace alone, I will hold onto it in the hour of my death and before his judgment throne. I claim nothing of myself, nothing from the world, nothing from my imagination or senses. I deny all of these things, and I confess Christ who alone stands as my advocate. And when I confess this, I am standing with all the saints who rely on this confession of Christ.

The church is identified by this confession of her Savior. She isn't identified by where her headquarters are located, how her governing boards are organized, or who is in charge. But this is what a lot of people think of when they think of a denomination. It's why a lot of people call themselves nondenominational. For them, a denomination is just the outward structure or national association. Of course, we need to organize. God desires all things to be done decently and in good order, because he doesn't want chaos. He wants us to be at peace. He wants us to agree on our confession.

This means that how we organize should always serve to guard our confession. It is so that we would agree in what we teach and keep one another accountable to Scripture and to Christ. But the particular organization is not what makes us the church. People often confuse the confession of Christ and the Scriptures with their own relationships, traditions, and associations. They confuse human authority with the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments of Christ.

And this confusion of Christ's church with the outward, earthly structures is nothing new. God established his church in Jerusalem when he made David king and when he guided Solomon to build the temple. He gave order in Zion to preserve the pure teaching of the coming Christ. It was important to have priests and Levites and other leaders in Jerusalem. It was important to keep up the business of the temple and the sacrifices so that the promise of the Savior would have free course. But as people focused on the earthly authority and organization of the temple, they lost sight of the Lord of the temple. The builders eventually rejected Christ, the chief cornerstone and Savior of his people. When this is done, then Jerusalem and the temple lose their entire purpose.

And yet, those who worked in the temple still held onto their status. This breeds jealousy and envy toward anyone else who might seem to have more influence. This is why these priests and Levites came to confront John. They were sent from Jerusalem by the Pharisees. They were sent to find out who John was and why he was baptizing. They wanted to know what kind of status he

had. Of course, John was a prophet. John was the second Elijah promised by God through the prophet Malachi. But John didn't claim any of these titles. He knew that the Pharisees weren't interested in what God actually promised through his prophets. He knew that they didn't really care about why God was sending Elijah. They weren't interested any of that. They were only interested in status.

John therefore didn't get into a debate about his credentials and status. Instead, he simply focused on what Isaiah the prophet said. John is the voice calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord." They wanted to know what team he was on. Instead, John gave them his confession.

Of course, we should pay attention to our church order. We live in the world, and we need outward structures to keep up discipline and allow things to run smoothly. God also makes use of the gifts he himself gives to his Christians. We shouldn't needlessly tear down what we have inherited from our fathers. We should build on it. This is good order. Even when Christ sent out his apostles to preach the gospel to all nations, he told them to begin their mission in Jerusalem. Because that is where the Word of God was first planted. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, the teaching of the gospel would go forth from Zion. This outward order therefore serves a purpose so that the good news would have free course and be proclaimed to every creature.

So don't lose sight of why we have our outward structures and organizations in our church. It is all for the sake of our confession of Christ. We have wholesome traditions in this congregation, many gifts that God uses to build people up. It is all for the sake of fostering that confidence in the confession of the gospel. When these children recite memory work, sing hymns and songs they have learned, and reenact the Christmas story, remember why. It isn't just so we can see cute kids up front. It is much deeper than that. It is so that our children would learn to confess the gospel of their Savior. As you sing and recite by heart the pure gospel of Jesus Christ, this remains your refuge in life and in death. It gives you confidence that you, a sinner, stand righteous before God for Christ's sake. It is why he was born in the flesh. It is the confession of the angels who proclaimed God's glory and peace on earth. It is the confession of all the prophets and apostles. It is your confession now and forever.

You can therefore, with John and all those who have gone before you, confess your Savior Jesus Christ before kings. And you will never be put to shame. Amen.