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An Asian Perspective

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I. A TRADITION OF PROTEST

The Boeing 747 is "the safest airplane in history," a Japanese engineer told me more than a decade ago, after having heard my lecture on Luther and the Reformation one Sunday afternoon in one of the suburban congregations. "The airplane itself is a large computer system, but it does not have another computer system to check the whole system." His words came in reaction to my description of what had happened in the church at the turn of the fifteenth century. "One whole system without a system to check it." Several years later, in August, 1985, a B-747, without such a checking system, had trouble with the pressure bulkhead and crashed in Japan, killing more than two hundred people.

The medieval church was such a complex system, with its perfect hierarchical, sacramental, and theological subsystems, able in every part at any moment to operate as part of the system. The penitential system—with its concept of venial and mortal sins; the sacrament of penance comprising the three movements of contrition, confession, and satisfaction; the treasury of the church in heaven to which only the Pope had access; purgatory, and finally, temporal and eternal indulgences—was perfect in the sense that it was ready to meet the religious needs of the people of that day. One recognizes the thoroughness of its good, reasonable, and even humanitarian arrangements when one reads that an indulgence was sold for thirty gulden to the lords, for ten to the nobles, for five to the traders, for three to the knights and merchants, and for only one gulden to the common people.

After Martin Luther initiated his criticism of the church of his day, for more than a decade his Reformation exercised the role of checking the whole system of the contemporary Roman Catholic church. Recent studies of the Augsburg Confession have shown us that the identity of the reformers consisted in their belonging to a reforming wing of the whole church, which raised its voice in request for and acceleration of the reform in the church of the West. In their voices of protest and in their push toward concrete reforms in their areas the reformers were checking

the whole system. It was then not without reason that they began to be called "Protestants," after delivering their *Protestatio* at the Diet of Speyer in 1529. They were *Protestants* in the true sense of the word.

On the Japanese scene, Western Christianity in the form of Protestantism has been a newcomer from outside. Among these, Lutherans were really latecomers, beginning their mission work in 1893 in the city of Saga, an area of feudalistic traditions on the southern island of Kyushu. Whether socially engaged or not—and this is an interesting issue to be dealt with in a

different context—the Lutheran mission, as well as the whole Protestant mission, played the role of checking the existing systems. Of course in Japan this meant not the ecclesiastical system, as had been the case with the Reformation, but political, social, cultural, and religious systems of the day. As is natural, these systems were negative toward these new- and latecomers, which included the Communists. Both Christianity and Communism were regarded as not national or nationalistic, but rather as international.

As a case in point, we can mention the fact that people understood Christianity as destroying the traditional, feudalistic family system with the *Tenno* (Emperor) at the top of the pyramid. *Tenno*-ism, which claimed and demanded of people "loyalty to the Tenno and faithfulness to parents," has been the common ruling ideology for the Japanese. When Christianity in Japan stood against such traditions, it was heavily attacked and impaired. Still Christians were brave enough to influence the ethical and moral life of the Japanese. The impression of many Japanese that Christians were seen to be non-smokers and non-drinkers has been a good pietistic tradition which has left its positive mark. To be a Christian in Japan has meant to be a "Protestant" in society. At this point the Lutheran church could be a good influence, if it were to follow the footsteps of the reformers. After one hundred years we need to examine ourselves as to whether we have been dynamically faithful to this living tradition. We Lutherans in Asia, too, should have the role of being a check to existing systems by raising our voices of protest in our own situation.

II. *PROTESTATIO*: THE CORE OF CONFESSION

The term *protestatio* means not only "making a protest," but also has another connotation, "making an assertion," or "witnessing." What the lords and dukes of the Reformation party actually did at the Diet of Speyer in 1529 was to give testimony or witness to their faith. The historical background of this action had been Luther's declaration at the Diet of Worms in 1521. The *protestatio* of 1529 took positive, concrete form in the confession of faith presented at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, the "Augsburg Confession." The Augsburg Confession was not simply a voice of protest, but rather an act of confessing the faith, an invitation to reform announced to other elements of the church in the West. Far from being critical or negative, it sought to show that the Reformation party stood in the succession of the apostolic Christian faith. In "making their witness before kings," this group, laypersons in front and theologians in back, was conscious enough to formulate their faith affirmatively with short sentences, calling attention to the minimum of the faith, without which the church could no longer be a church. I myself have tended to describe this position as Lutheran "minimalism."

One of the antecedents of the Augsburg Confession was Luther's personal confession, attached to his important treatise "On the Lord's Supper" of 1528. Even

before this writing, Luther had declared the inevitable necessity of confessing one's faith in the form of "assertion." This, indeed, was one of the points of his controversy with Erasmus. More than a decade later he wrote his confession again in the so-called "Smalcald Articles." As one of the preparations for the Council of Mantua called for 1537, these articles stated his beliefs concretely and decisively, with a dynamic power contrasting the more soft-hearted Melanchthon. With one treatise he said a clear "no" to the ecclesiastical and theological trends of his day, and

with the other he clearly stated his convictions on paper.

In retrospect, however, we now recognize how difficult it was for them to shift from functioning as critical check to functioning as a constructive operating system. In that sense, it is much easier to be *protest*ants, to raise voices in protest, than to be pro*testants*, to act as ones who give the core movement its dynamic form and lead it in a definite direction. The above-mentioned documents were only one side of those attempts, which for Luther and the other reformers necessitated a decade or more. One may criticize Luther at this point for his traditionalism or conservatism. But in reality, observations of this changeover by a new system from functioning as a check to operating as a constructive agent could give us a good point from which to interpret Luther and the Reformation in the course of history.

It seems to me that not only the tradition of protest, but also that of confessing the faith with an affirmative, minimal formulation has been typically "Lutheran." We Lutherans—and I personally—have tended to be negative toward what is typically Japanese or Asian. We have laid rather more emphasis on the "otherness" of the Christian faith in our contexts. The resulting attitude of confrontation has been thought to derive from the typical Protestant attitude against its environment. Karl Barth's theology, with its understanding of the exclusive nature of the gospel, has made a special contribution in this direction. Yet, as far as his attitude to his context is concerned, Luther seems to have been much more inclusive, showing both his interest in and his understanding of the things that existed around him. His strict Christ-centeredness enabled him to be broad enough to appreciate, understand, and accept things in his own unique way.

We Lutherans in Japan are to be encouraged to be more open and dynamic in relation to our context. Concern for issues such as culture, subcultures, religions, world-perspective, politics, and economics invites us not only to confrontation but also to interpretation, understanding, and acceptance. It will be our task in the second century of Lutheran presence and work here in Japan to affirm and to assert also our "*pro*testatio" besides our protest.

III. *PROTESTATIO*: THE NEED FOR TRANSLATION

Lutheran "minimalism" has been recognized and welcomed on the ecumenical scene. The intensive ecumenical study of the Augsburg Confession in its anniversary year in 1980 contributed to this new positive picture. That means that not only the Lutheran stance of protest, but more strongly and positively its stance of "*pro*testatio," of moving forward in behalf of the common Christian faith with minimal absolute formulations has been recognized and appreciated. All of the Lutheran confessional documents of the first generation were occasional documents, in remarkable contrast to the Reformed documents, which were in their origin intentional, that is, created with the conscious intention of formulating a

doctrinal standard for a certain time and place. The Lutheran documents have only gradually in the course of history become the doctrinal standard of the Lutheran church.

All of the Lutheran documents express our common Christian faith, albeit with our distinctive Lutheran accents and emphases. Analysis of any one of them demonstrates how Christ-centeredness is at their core, namely, that in and through Christ God accepts us sinners and works our salvation. Law and gospel could be interpreted in this way: the law makes us seriously conscious about ourselves, while the gospel tells us about God's acceptance of us in Christ.

It is a quite popular notion, I believe, that in order to be oneself, to get one's own identity, human beings need more consciousness about themselves as well as others, and at the same time, a greater sense of their acceptance. Especially in our contemporary world, in which everyone has a deep sense of alienation or disintegration in one way or another, we need this absolute as well as intimate identification and acceptance.

To simply repeat the Reformation doctrine in the form of catch phrases like "justification by grace through faith alone," or the need to "distinguish between law and gospel," can be meaningless for people today. The dynamic Reformation faith should be interpreted and translated into our present language. Luther did just that when he translated the Bible into German. His every writing and every sermon was an effort to do that work of translation.

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" (Heckel, late nineteenth century), a well-known principle in the field of biology, could be adapted to explain what is happening or must happen within us when we come to the Christian faith. In this sense Luther is still and is more and more the common father of faith for both Catholic and Protestant Christians. The ontogeny of Luther's faith involved many things: intense struggling with God, even at times hatred of God; deep wrestling with interpretation of the Scriptures; assertions about the core of the Christian faith; widening the implications of his dynamic perspective for the particular context; and application of that perspective to existing systems so as to construct a new type of the Christian life, both communal and individual. We need a recapitulation of this ontogeny in our own existence.

But simple recapitulation is not enough to enable a species to continue to exist. Dynamic development beyond recapitulation is inevitably necessary. Biology tells us that this kind of dynamic development would be expected when a definite, small number of any species lives in a limited and enclosed area. This figure, with its expression of the critical need for development, could be applied to Christianity, and especially to Lutheranism in Japan and in Asia where we are living as a minority.

In this essay I have mentioned two critical needs: the need to take hold of the living core of the Christian faith, and the need to translate that living core into language for our own context. It has been said that the Reformation was an event of language (*Sprachereignis*). Today we are invited to continue this "event of language" beyond Luther's Reformation. With "Protest," "Protestatio," and "Testatio," with critical evaluation of present systems, clear confession, and with a concern to translate that confession for today, we go forward to give fruit to this event of language in our context.