



New Accents in Confessing Christ

YOSHIRO ISHIDA

Department of Studies, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, Switzerland

The subject of this article certainly requires a considerable amount of research and elaboration, but the scope of this paper is, by request, limited to some of the findings of the project of the Lutheran World Federation's Department of Studies: Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts.¹

The project of Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts, initiated in 1975, was conducted cross-culturally among theological institutions in the following three pairs of countries and completed in 1981: Indonesia-Federal Republic of Germany; Tanzania-Sweden; and U.S.A.-Japan. The general objective of the project was to assist the LWF member churches and their theological institutions in their search for a fundamental self-understanding as related to questions of indigenization, enculturation, modernization, and self-reliance in the context of mission and service. The inter-relatedness of such a study with the Lutheran churches' ongoing reflection on their Lutheran heritage, particularly through reexamining the Augsburg Confession in 1980 in light of the manifold challenges facing them, came repeatedly to the fore.

The meaning of the act of confessing, the cultural context in which Christ is confessed, the Christ who is confessed, and ecumenical dimensions of confessing Christ were accentuated throughout the project.

I. THE MEANING OF THE ACT OF CONFESSING

The intentional use of the verbal form "confessing" is noteworthy, though it was not the first time that emphasis was placed on the act of confessing. As early as 1966, the East Asia Christian Conference (now the Christian Conference of Asia) called for a Faith and Order conference. The originally suggested title was

¹The first of the publications on the Project is available in book form, *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*, Volume I: Lectures, Reports, Recommendations, International Consultation, Jerusalem, March 1981 (LWF, Department of Studies, 150 Route de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland).

"The Confession of the Faith in Asia Today," which was later changed to "Confessing the Faith in Asia Today." The introduction to the *Report* of the Conference explains this change:

...to make it quite clear that as churches in Asia we were concerned with the total form of confession, not just a confession, either traditional or new. This was not to decry the churches' need of a theological statement of belief, a confession of faith. But the main thrust was envisaged as one that would concentrate attention on the

fact that the churches in Asia today live in the midst of such a welter of changing values, religions, ideologies and faiths, old and new, that if the Christian faith is to be confessed in Asia, this must be done by churches that are confessing churches, that is, committed in the totality of their lives to the Christian confession of faith in God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.²

In the same *Report*, the EACC Statement reads as follows:

It is to him and not to our faith in him that we seek to point when we confess, confessing him as we do in stumbling words and through fumbling deeds. Not our confessions but the Christ we confess is the foundation of the church....Essentially it is a person who is confessed rather than a doctrine; so that the emphasis must fall not so much on the confession made as on him to whom, in confessing, the churches point.³

The *raison d'être* of the Christian church is not only in its possession of a confession, even of the *Book of Concord*, but it is found in a community of men and women as the confessing, witnessing people of God, serving in the world. The real issue at stake today is not the sheer possession of the documented confessions; in fact, mere historical endurance of the confessions does not establish a case for present-day relevance. As serious efforts toward the united, evangelical witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ were the source of the dynamic act of confessing of the Lutheran confessors,⁴ so is such a confessing act urgently called for today; an act of confessing springing from confessionality that is faithful obedience to the Scriptures, confessing Jesus as the Christ today, thus bearing evangelical witness to the catholic truth of the gospel.

This act of confessing, therefore, must be clearly distinguished from a mere confessional position and, more specifically, from a rigid and stagnant adherence to confessional writings (confessionalism). Confessing is an act (*confessio in actu*) by which we proclaim Jesus as Christ the Lord today and, thus, with thanksgiving and praise, assume a distinct identity as Jesus' disciples.

This emphasis on the act of confessing is of particular importance to Lutherans. The International Consultation on Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts (Jerusalem, March, 1981) demonstrated, however, that the act of confessing was understood in various ways:

1) as the obligation to affirm existing confessional statements or as a call to

²*Confessing the Faith in Asia Today*, Statement issued by the Consultation convened by the East Asia Christian Conference (Hong Kong: 1966).

³*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴*Cf. Augsburg Confession*, Art. VII and the Conclusion, Sec. 5.

draft new statements of faith in particular cultural contexts (e.g., *Confessio Africana*);
2) as a response to a crisis of faith or practice or heresy, i.e., a *status confessionis* (e.g., LWF Sixth Assembly Statement on racism in South Africa, a call to "Confessional Integrity");

- 3) as a prophetic declaration against injustice or evil addressed to governmental authorities, business corporations, international organizations, etc. (advocacy, demonstration, organized pressure);
- 4) as the normal clarification or repetition through preaching, catechesis, or liturgy of what Christian faith or Christian identity means in the local context;
- 5) as non-verbal witness through personal behavior, life-style or committed discipleship of individual Christians, especially under situations of challenge, stress, or tension; and
- 6) in the ultimate case, as martyrdom for a cause.

A relevant question is whether confessing Christ should be identified chiefly with specific activities such as the above, or in a comprehensive way with all of them. At the same time, an important question was raised as to the connection between confession as inherent in a body of truth (*fides quae*) and confession as the act of confessing (*fides qua*). The issue was not the either-or choice of these two, but the vital inter-relatedness of both. The need for balancing ever-increasing activism and confessionalism was registered; in fact, the act of confessing is only generated from *fides quae* or, more precisely, it occurs interdynamically with *fides quae*.

It is significant in this connection to note the following two statements made by two different consultations during the time the LWF project was taking place:

Group 1 (“Traditional Confessions and Confession of Faith Today”) commended the Nicene Creed as the point of departure for developing a common confession of faith which expresses confession, affirmation and hope for the future....Group 3 (“Challenges of Our Time in View of Our Confession of Faith”) rejected the idea of preparing a common creedal statement as such in favor of broadening our concept of confession to embrace the various modes of confessing in the Church’s life, e.g. proclamation, liturgies of Baptism and the Eucharist, teaching, advocacy....⁵

While the act of confessing the contemporary meaning of the Apostolic faith has to be done again and again in different situations and in different forms, and this life of contemporary confessing and witness must never be interrupted, nevertheless we consider that designing a new creed, intended to replace the Nicene as the Ecumenical Symbol of the Apostolic Faith, is not appropriate.⁶

⁵Press Release on Colloquium on the theme *Confessio Fidei* (November 3-8, 1980), co-sponsored by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg and Papal University of San Anselmo, Rome.

⁶“Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today,” Draft Paper (FO/81:9, August 1981) of the World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, I, A, 2.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on the act of confessing resulted in the following findings:

- 1) In so-called “Christianized” or “post-Christian” cultures, confessing Christ continues as probing critique of church structures, a renewal of preaching and catechetics and the need for re-evangelization in each generation;
- 2) In relation to atheist Marxist socialism, scientific humanism, and the ideology

of repressive national security systems claiming religious sanction, confessing Christ takes the form of raising questions of human value and meaning, witnessing to freedom and transcendence, challenging the arrogance of power, and condemning torture and violence; and

3) In relation to other religions or value systems, confessing Christ is a call to thorough study and identification with the people of those faiths and the practice of patient presence and dialogue.⁷

II. THE CULTURAL CONTEXT IN WHICH CHRIST IS CONFESSED

It has been for some time that special note has been taken on the diversity between specific cultures, religions, and social contexts to which the essentials of the apostolic faith must be addressed. The accent on such human conditions has been adequately sensitive to both the human contexts and the resources of the traditional confessions of faith.

This concern has been deepened particularly among Lutherans in conjunction with the question of the relationship between the Lutheran confessions and so-called Lutheran identity. Subsequent discussions have developed to indicate that: a) the Lutheran confession is by no means the only link between the Lutheran churches all over the world nor their sole mark of identity; and b) the confessions are time-conditioned and situation-conditioned (contextual), and therefore require “interpretation” or “reformulation.”

We are in fact familiar with the idea that our confessions are conditioned by a certain historical and cultural situation, and the consequences of this are no longer denied. A number of meetings to discuss this have taken place. For example, a consultation was held at Copenhagen, back in December of 1969, on the subject of “Lutheran Unity,” and it produced a study document for the Fifth (Evian) Assembly of the LWF, “More than Church Unity.”⁸ The report on Section II of Evian states:

Seeking guidance from the Lutheran confessions for our proclamation and service in the present situation must do more than simply refer to the confessional statements of the Reformation fathers. Nor can our answer be found only in our response to the contemporary questions and current problems.

The concern is that we together interpret the gospel anew from the viewpoint of the present context of our witness and formulate this reinterpretation. A constant criterion for this new interpretation will be its consonance

⁷LWF/Dept. of Studies, *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*, 19.

⁸*Lutheran World* 17/1 (1970) 43-50.

with the basic intent of the Lutheran confessions, namely, the justification of the sinner through faith for the sake of Christ.⁹

The Sixth Assembly of the LWF in Dar-es-Salaam in 1977 had this to say:

In some Lutheran churches mission suffers as much from being too deeply imbedded in its culture as from being too foreign. In various ways the churches

are often bound up with their traditional culture or the classical religions. The question is how far Lutheran theology and faith influences culture and how far the values of society are reflected in the churches.

...The Lutheran World Federation and its member churches are urged at regional, national and local levels to take seriously the challenge of the traditional cultures, ancient faiths and classical religions on the one hand, and the new religious movements on the other hand.

They should pursue studies of other faiths in relation to confessing the gospel (confessing Christ) in different religious and cultural contexts, in their theological training and in the educational ministry.¹⁰

It is in this statement that we saw the endorsement as well as the promotion of the project of Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts.

The terms “context” and, particularly, “contextualization” were widely used in the 1970s in the circles of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches (the predecessor of the present WCC Program for Theological Education). The then director Shoki Coe made the distinction between indigenization and contextualization. Coe claimed that indigenization derived from the idea of “taking root in the soil” tends to suggest a static response “in terms of traditional culture.” It has, therefore, a tendency toward being “past-oriented.” Indigenization also means that something which originally is not so is made or becomes indigenous. The process of indigenization is thus seen mainly in terms of adaptation in which something is made to fit into a place or situation where it does not belong naturally or originally.

Context, on the other hand, is considered to be not “static culture” nor purely the object of adaptation. Rather it sets a framework for the search for the new, and at the same time, involves culture itself. Using the term contextualization thus implies a more dynamic intention, a future-oriented conception, open to change. While recognizing some possible negative implications in contextualization, Coe sees it as “missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and challenges us to participate in it.”¹¹ It is at this point that the subject of confessing Christ confronts us all.

This emphasis on the context in which Christ is confessed has made a special case for South Africa. The Lutheran World Federation had made great efforts to help especially the Lutheran churches and their members in South Africa to recognize the situation in which they live as a confessional situation. The Commission of Studies, in particular, has been engaged in work over a number of years that draws the attention of the South African churches and

⁹*Sent into the World*, The Proceedings of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF (1970) 74.

¹⁰*In Christ, A New Community*, The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the LWF (1977) 204.

¹¹*Mission Trends No.3*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 19-24.

their partner churches to the challenge which the South African context presents to confessing Christ in the present situation. The Dar-es-Salaam Assembly in 1977 extensively devoted attention to the task of the churches in South Africa, which resulted in passing the following resolution:

Under normal circumstances Christians may have different opinions in political questions. However, political and social systems may become so perverted and oppressive that it is consistent with the confession to reject them and to work for changes. We especially appeal to our white member churches in Southern Africa to recognize that the situation in Southern Africa constitutes a *status confessionis*. This means that, on the basis of faith and in order to manifest the unity of the Church, churches would publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system.¹²

The final consultation on Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts (Jerusalem, 1981) reflected various patterns of response to confessing Christ in the cultural context. Some patterns referred to were:

- 1) “Christ and Culture in Conflict” (Japan): confessing Christ involves struggle, discrimination and perpetual vigilance;
- 2) “Christ and Culture in Organic Association” (Indonesian Adat): culture serves as a vehicle for propagating Christianity;
- 3) “Christ and Culture in Co-existence” (U.S.A., Sweden): culture accommodates Christian confession and vice-versa. Critical distance and differentiation are normally absent, but points of tension may arise to disrupt this harmony (e.g. the struggle versus racism, militarism, pollution, etc.); and
- 4) “Christ as the Shaper of Culture” received some support, but not consistently. Despite the attractiveness of this view it was not felt to correspond with the practical possibilities during the interim between Resurrection and Parousia.¹³

In some cases several patterns overlapped. Several questions were raised: Is there one normative view of Christ and culture? Do different approaches complement one another? Can Christ be confessed in accordance with more than one pattern of response?

While pursuing these questions, George Forell had this to say:

But aware of the complexity of the relationship of Christ and culture, what, if anything, can we say as Lutherans about confessing Christ in the cultural context? If we keep in mind the basic theological distinction between law and gospel, God’s demand and God’s gift, and try to apply this distinction to our assignment, it becomes clear that culture is in the realm of the law. It always raises questions about our human situation. It is our culture,... which addresses the problems of marriage and family, death and dying, meaning and meaninglessness. No culture can escape these issues as was apparent in our discussion. But culture also raises the question of justice, whether that be in Brazil or Sweden, Tanzania or West Germany. Sensitivity

¹²*In Christ, A New Community*, 180.

¹³*Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*, 20.

to the cultural context should help us to become aware of the real issues which

confront us in our time, to hear the actual questions which our particular period of history poses.¹⁴

III. THE CHRIST WHO IS CONFESSED

While no clear Christological image emerged as a basis for the act of confessing, the following Christological references were given at various times as aspects of the total picture of Christ:

- 1) Christ who vaguely represents the totality of Christian tradition, cultic practice, and church structure in a given context;
- 2) Christ who suffers with the poor, the oppressed, the victims of racism, the slum dwellers, and the aboriginal Indians (Brazil, South Africa);
- 3) Christ whose resurrection is not understood and in some cases not accepted (e.g., in relation to cultic death and burial practices in Tanzania);
- 4) Christ who as *Kyrios* confronts the pretensions of Caesar and the demonic powers (e.g., Emperor Worship in Japan);
- 5) Christ who calls his followers to a theology of the cross and away from a theology of glory; and
- 6) Christ who incarnates God's love and conventional faithfulness to his people, the Jews.

Illustrative are the comments made by theologians from India and Japan. B. H. Jakayya of India asserted that confessing Christ in the cultural context should be Christ-centered, by stating:

What is Christ-centered? A simple question. But not so simple if we take the Asian religions and cultural context into consideration. Its difficulty and vastness lie in the fact that our Asian theologians are trying to understand biblical Christology in its depth in relation to cultural conditions and the mission of church in Asia. What is actually needed here is a thorough study of the emerging Indian/Asian Christology.¹⁵

To him, confessing Christ is confessing the "total Christ," the "whole" Christ. He implies that both the divinity and the humanity of Christ are to be equally encompassed in our confession.

Masami Ishii of Japan, however, claimed that in confessing Christ the aspect of his two natures, true God and true human, is "not so much of a prob-

¹⁴George W. Forell, "Christ and Culture: Reflections and Questions," *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*, 66.

¹⁵Quotation from B. H. Jakayya, "Criteria for Confessing Christ in the Asian Context," the article which will appear in the Second Volume of *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts* (Geneva: LWF, 1982).

lem for the Japanese mind, for the divine-human existence is familiar to it altogether in a different meaning."¹⁶ He continues to say:

However, even if we can find our similar ideas with Christian confession in the

history of Japanese thought and religion, it does not mean that Japanese people can easily accept Christ as their Lord.¹⁷

Ishii comes close to Jakayya when he also recognizes that:

The confession of Christ must be a completely new thing from God, and must be a challenge to any human thinking. Japanese people easily tend to abstract a metaphysical principle from Christ, or to make Christ the ideal example of humanity. Over against their mind, the conception of God the Creator, the understanding of sin, and the historical reality of the Redeemer are particularly important challenges.¹⁸

This “Redeemer” image of Christ is of specific significance, corresponding to what Wolfram Kistner of South Africa attempts from his peculiar situation to express:

Perhaps we in South Africa are in...a situation where confessing Christ in the South African context means to go outside the gate and to accept suffering. Confessing Christ can entail that many people of our own cultural context avoid us. It can also mean that we become isolated from many people in our own church, and that we establish links of friendship with members of other churches who have a better understanding of Luther’s theological insights and experiences, that are rooted in the Bible, than many members of churches that bear his name.¹⁹

This leads us to the firm assertion of the Trinity in which we must deal properly with Christological issues in our confession. The Trinity must be seen as the foundation of Christian life and experience, thus of our Christian confessing. And this definitely demands our attention, as we have been asked:

to undertake a common effort to receive, reappropriate and confess together, as contemporary occasion requires, the Christian truth and faith, delivered through the Apostles and handed down through the centuries. Such common action, arising from free and inclusive discussion under the commonly acknowledged authority of God’s Word, must aim both to clarify and to embody the unity and the diversity which are proper to the church’s life and mission.²⁰

The churches are also confronted with the *filioque* (“and the Son”) issue in

¹⁶Masami Ishii, “Confessing Christ in Our Cultural Context,” *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*, 99.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Wolfram Kistner, “Confessing Christ in South Africa,” *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*, 57.

²⁰Quotation from the WCC/Faith and Order, Draft Paper (FO/81:9).

Symbol of the Apostolic Faith.²¹ The *filioque* clause (the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son) has been a long-standing issue on one particular level, that of the official, ecclesiastical controversy between East and West. On another level, yet directly related, there are theological issues such as the relationship of the eternal Trinity (immanent) to the economy of salvation (economic trinitarianism), the reciprocity of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Incarnation, the historical redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and the renewed attention to pneumatology.

The Odessa Consultation of the WCC Faith and Order Commission (October, 1981), urging the WCC member churches to come to an agreement, stated: "...we are prepared to support the proposal of the Kringenthal Memorandum to delete the *filioque* clause from the Creed, provided the positive reasons which led to its inclusion be appreciated."²²

The real issue appears still to be the second person of the Trinity: namely, the historical character of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Having had a thorough clarification of such a trinitarian theology, the dropping of the *filioque* may in principle be defensible. But, at the same time, we must be aware of the fact that such a move would be perceived by many as a victory for the so-called "low Christology forces" of the contemporary theological stream, rather than an assertion of the power of the Holy Spirit.

IV. ECUMENICAL DIMENSIONS OF CONFESSING CHRIST

Introduction to the Final Report on the LWF project of Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts reads in part as follows:

To confess Christ is to acknowledge the Lordship of One who calls his followers to be one so that the world may have credible evidence that the Father has sent Him. The correlate of the confession of "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism" (Eph. 4:5) is the unity of all in each place who confess Jesus Christ. Here in Jerusalem, visiting the sacred sites of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection, we were given a shocking reminder of the seeming impotence and irrelevance of a divided and competing witness to Christ.²³

The Report, at the same time, admits:

Although our international consultation did not deal in detail with the matter of confessing in unity, we feel compelled to give the strongest possible endorsement to inter-confessional dialogues having as their goal unity in the essentials of faith. At the same time, we would encourage steps toward joint witness to Christ through fellowship and prayer, study and evangelism, and

²¹*Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ*, Ecumenical Reflections on the Filioque Controversy, ed. Lukas Vischer (Geneva: WCC, 1981).

²²From the Recommendations of the *Odessa Report*: The Ecumenical Importance of the Nicene Creed (1981) to the Lima Meeting of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order.

²³*Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*, 21.

cultural context cannot escape the obligation to make our unity in Christ visible.²⁴

The ecumenical dimension of confessing Christ in cultural contexts is not merely one of the accents, but rather the task for the future.

The following are two quotations from the papers provided for the LWF project, one from Latin America and the other from India, only to indicate that reflection on the ecumenical dimensions of confessing Christ is not totally absent in the minds of those who have been involved in this study project: *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*.

The paper from Latin America, describing five outstanding movements—of biblical, liturgical, charismatic, ecumenical, and social—which are deeply transforming the Latin American Catholic Church, mentions: “...sectarian and non-ecumenical Protestantism, which still probably includes the great majority of Latin American Evangelicals, feels threatened by the changes in Catholicism.”²⁵ The writer goes on to say:

It is obvious that the One Holy Church is not an invisible entity, because it is made up of believers who hear the gospel and partake of the sacraments. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, it is not a visible institution with its centre in Rome or Geneva. It is also obvious that the One Holy Church is not the particular church called “Lutheran,” because the “Lutheran Church” did not exist when the Confession was written and presented. On the contrary, as we recall, it was written and presented *from within* the Latin Catholic Church of the West. As far as I know, until the present day, no instructed Lutheran identifies his/her confessional church with the One Holy Church of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. On the contrary, the only Church which exists and will exist “forever” is the One Holy Christian and Catholic (Universal) Church. Our Augsburg Confession is therefore catholic and ecumenical and is defended today for the benefit of the entire Catholic Christian Church. It then follows from our own confessional base that the growth and strengthening of the Evangelical Lutheran Church *is not an end in itself*: rather, this growth occurs so that *all* the Holy Catholic, Apostolic and Christian Church may be built up and edified.²⁶

The paper from India states, after making a point that confessing Christ in India today must be a confession to a new community in Christ:

...It goes without saying that the ecumenical movement has been an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some very outstanding, we can even say revolutionary, changes in the Christian churches. The old order that until recently existed between the churches was one of mutual suspicion, hatred, misunderstanding, prejudice, condemnation, etc. But, thank God, today—if not completely—these walls are breaking. Today we

²⁴Ibid., 20-21.

²⁵Robert T. Hoferkamp, “The Augsburg Confession in Latin America Today,” the article which will appear in the Second Volume of *Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts*.

²⁶Ibid.

have come to the post-ecumenical age. We need to understand the full meaning of what ecumenism means. "Oikumene" in its original sense means all people, the whole world, humankind as a whole. It is this vision of ecumenism that Paul holds before us in 1 Cor. 1:17, 20. What we should be working for is not just the unity of churches, but the unity of all humankind. This is the mission for which the church is called. As a matter of fact, we must say that the unity of the churches can be achieved only when we all unite in order to work for the unity of humankind.

What is most needed today in India, a country that is torn by disunity, parochialism and communalism, is a demonstration by the Christian church that is one in Christ, a new community, a foretaste of the community of all peoples, the kingdom of God, the new heaven and a new earth. If the Christian church in Asia can be a sign and sacrament for the unity of all humankind, what an effective confession to Christ that would be, to Christ who is the one Lord, Redeemer and Reconciler of all humankind!²⁷

In summary, I should like to call the special attention of the LWF member churches and the related theological institutions to the outcome of this project of Confessing Christ in Cultural Contexts. As I experienced in this project, Lutherans, I believe, through this type of joint project, will have a rich reciprocal experience in such a challenging ecumenical venture towards the common confession of Christ in and for today's world.

²⁷B. Jakayya, "Criteria" (see note 15 above).