

THE CURRENT CRISIS IN AMERICAN LUTHERANISM: CAN WE REMAIN LUTHERAN?

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Gotthilf Doehier, a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Germany, delivered a paper to a pastoral conference in 1973 in which he defended the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell over against the liberal intrusion that "he went to the realm of the dead." In his introduction he had this to say about Biblical authority: "The Holy Scriptures have been abandoned as God's errorless Word in the territorial churches" and that "false teachers have more and more been placed in positions of authority on the faculties of theology and church administration." In defense of the Biblical doctrine of Christ's descent into hell he went on to say, "Holy Scripture itself for some time has been in the process of being dismantled piece by piece" the result being that "we are confronted with a decisive dissolution of church dogma."

What Doehier said in 1973 characterizes the situation in much of American Lutheranism today. Over the years there has been a steady erosion of Biblical authority with the result that Biblical doctrines are questioned and/or denied. Is the Bible God's verbally inspired and inerrant Word, as Scripture itself teaches, or does it merely contain the Word of God and that it is up to the trained theologian to determine what is God's Word and what is not?

A common view of American Lutheranism today is that the Bible is inspired as God's authoritative message in spiritual matters, but that in historical and scientific matters we must recognize the human fallible element deal with the possibility of errors. The controversy, then, over Biblical authority centers around a split between inspiration and inerrancy. That word "inerrancy" has been bandied about in our day, the idea being that inerrancy is not to be applied to the text of Scripture but rather to the truth which it seeks to convey. The new Lutheran church chose not to use the word inerrancy in its constitution. Its Task Force on Theology explained why:

The words inerrant and infallible can be understood in ways that lead to interpretations of the Scriptures that are contrary to what the Scriptures are... they may lead people to think that if there is one proven error in the Bible, however minor, its whole teaching is subject to doubt. Therefore, we recommend that the words inerrant and infallible not be included.

This is quite a departure from the Minneapolis Theses of 1925 which has a strong statement on Scripture. It says,

The synods signatory to these Articles of Agreement accept without exception all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as a whole, and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God, and submit to this as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life. (*Document of Lutheran Unity in America*, R. C. Wolf, p. 146)

A religious news writer for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune commenting on the debate that took place over Scriptural inerrancy wrote: "The proposed 'confession of faith' for the new church was hammered out earlier and revised in accord with suggestions from the grass roots.

Some conservative evangelicals had sought to have the Scriptures described as inerrant (without error), but lost out.”

We quoted what Gotthilf Doehler said about dismantling the Bible piece by piece, the result being that “we are here confronted with a decisive dissolution of church dogma.” We are witnessing this in American Lutheranism. In some Lutheran seminaries a textbook on Christian Doctrine is used which does just this. We submit some samplings:

On Scripture: Today it is impossible to assume the literal historicity of all things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place. (Vol. I, pp. 76-77)

On Genesis: It is now almost universally held among theologians that the stories and concepts we have of Adam and Eve in paradise are legends and myths. The idea of humans living in a blessed primeval stage before the fall is looked on as poetical speculation, not history. It is sometimes argued that faithfulness requires our belief in a primeval condition of blessedness. Such an argument confuses faithfulness with the imposition of a mythical speculation on a modern historical outlook on human life. To hold to the primeval condition in Eden as a matter of history would be an intellectual impossibility and to misunderstand faith. (Vol I, p. 328)

On Incarnation: The history and phenomenology of religions have called our attention to the mythic character of the incarnation. The notion of the preexistent Son of God becoming a human being in the womb of a virgin and then returning to his heavenly home is bound up with a mythological picture of the world that clashes with our modern scientific world view. (I, p. 527)

On the Gospels: The story of Christ in the Gospels is a mixture of historical events and mythological symbols. The purpose of the myth is to interpret the significance of the events. Today we must search the myth for the existential meaning of the events, and not take the myth at face value. We must ask about the existential significance of the myth of the preexistent Christ and of his cross and resurrection. To accept these as objective descriptions of a supernatural realm of happenings is to miss the point of the myth; to relate the apostolic kerygma to human existence.. . Myth and its symbols are indispensable to express the reality of God in the person of Jesus. Myth is an appropriate form of language for expressing the events and meanings of God’s revelation in history. (Vol. I, pp. 528-29)

On the Virgin Birth: The primary interest of dogmatics is to interpret the virgin birth as a symbol and not as a freakish intervention in the course of nature... .It is possible to hold to the virgin birth as a biological fact and miss its point. It is also possible to make the same point without reference to the virgin birth, as the writings of Paul and John prove by not mentioning it. It is important, then, not to let the story get bogged down in biology, but to read it as a symbol witnessing to the truth of the kerygma.... (pp. 546-47)

On Christ's Death: Jesus himself, though he might have and quite possibly did reckon with a violent death at the hands of his adversaries, seems not to have understood or interpreted his own death as a sacrifice for others or ransom for sin. (II p. 12)

On the Trinity: The trinity is simply the Father and the man Jesus and their Spirit as the Spirit of the believing community. (p. 155)

On the Resurrection: We do not really know what a resurrection is because it is a unique event unlike anything that we know. We can imagine a dead body suddenly awaking and getting up, but the Gospels do not give us any description of this kind. If we picture the resurrection in this way, we must realize that such a picture is a metaphor or an analogy used to convey what we think the resurrection involved. What is actually described for us is what happened to the disciples: they were confronted by the living, transformed Jesus. This means that the resurrection as an event that happened to Jesus is something the disciples inferred from their being confronted by him. The resurrection as something that happened to Jesus in which he was "raised from the dead" remains a mystery to us, something beyond our reach. Thus the question, "Was the resurrection a historical event?" (or "Did the resurrection really happen?") proves to be a very complicated question. The important thing is that Jesus really appeared to the disciples; here is the beginning of the resurrection faith. (invitation to Faith, Paul Jersild, pp. 89-90)

On Christ's Second Coming: When you know that Jesus is truly your friend, and you believe in him as your Lord, then for you he has come to this world a second time. The first time was when he lived in Palestine. The second time is when he lives in your heart. ("Today's Grace, Tomorrow's Hope," p. 7)

BIBLICAL INTERPRETAION

In order to understand this radical departure from historic Lutheranism we need to understand that lurking behind this departure is the use of the Historical Critical Method of Interpretation. This method approaches the Bible with the presupposition that it is like any other book, that its writers are fallible, that there are errors in it, and that it is up to the trained theologian to determine what is truth and what is error. For example, practitioners of this method regard the Gospels as stories that circulated in the early New Testament community which may or may not be factual, and that it is up to the trained scholar to decide. That kind of interpretation undermines Biblical authority making it difficult to determine between true and false doctrine. It is really an assault on the source of doctrine, Instead of clearly stating "this we believe, teach, and confess" adherents of this view go their own way doctrinally, and consequently anything goes. The end result is that we have no final determinate of truth.

REFORMED INFLUENCE

Included in the current crisis in American Lutheranism is, in my opinion, Reformed influence on Lutheran theology. Lutheran theology is rooted and grounded in the doctrine of the means of grace, namely that the benefits of Christ's redemptive work are brought to us

through the Word and Sacraments and are made our own. A two-fold power resides in the means of grace, namely the *vis dativa* and the *vis operativa*, the former a giving or conferring power and the latter an operative power actually working the faith to accept what God offers.

Reformed theology does not really have a doctrine of the means of grace. It looks upon the gospel as an offer of grace rather than an application of grace and that it (the Gospel) has no power of itself but the power is in one's decision or commitment he makes. This is a gross commingling of justification and sanctification. Commitment is not a part of the essence of faith itself; it is rather a result or fruit of faith which belongs in the sphere of sanctification.

Reformed books are flooding the book markets and Lutheran people are buying them and in many cases swallowing Reformed doctrine hook, line, and sinker. As a result there are many Lutheran sheep dressed in Reformed theology. Lutherans have been napping while the Reformed have been reaping and exerting a strong influence.

A new book *Sanctification: Christ in Action* by Harold Senkbeil is now on the Lutheran market which clearly shows how the theology of today's Evangelicals and Evangelical Lutheran theology differ in their approach to theology. It explains how the two theologies answer the question: "Where in the world is God?" Reformed theology answers that He is to be found in the subjective feelings of the heart whereas Lutheran theology answers that He is to be found in the means of grace. The author convincingly shows the inseparable connection between justification and sanctification, pointing out that the Christian life is the fruit of faith based on the objective truth of the gospel. This is a book that will benefit clergy and laity alike. It is high time that Lutherans be alerted to the pitfalls of Reformed theology.

CAN WE REMAIN LUTHERAN?

Only if "we pledge ourselves to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments as the pure clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true norm according to which all teachers and teachings are to be judged." (SD, Rule and Norm, Tappert, p. 503) That's the subscription our Lutheran fathers made to the Bible and we their descendants should do no less.

The Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod (adopted in 1932) reflects the spirit of our fathers in these words:

We teach that the Holy Scriptures differ from all other books in the world in that they are the Word of God. They are the Word of God because holy men of God who wrote the Scriptures wrote only that which the Holy Ghost communicated to them by inspiration, 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21) . . . Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical and other secular matters, John 10:35. We furthermore teach regarding the Holy Scriptures that they are given by God to the Christian Church for the foundation of faith, Eph. 2:20. Hence the Holy Scriptures are the sole source from which all doctrines proclaimed in the Christian Church must be taken and therefore, too, the sole rule and norm by which all teachers and doctrines must be examined and judged.

And along with our commitment to the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God there must be a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. We accept the confessions because they are a clear interpretation of the Scriptures. A *quatenus* subscription will not do.

CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

We can remain Lutheran if we accompany our subscription to the Bible and Confessions with a firm position on church fellowship, that is, insist on doctrinal unity and practice fellowship on the basis of full agreement in doctrine and practice. A strong position on Scripture and church fellowship go hand in hand; they are interlocking. A firm subscription to Scripture without a firm position on church fellowship can lead to a demise of the *Sola Scriptura* principle. We need to clearly distinguish between true and false doctrine and maintain doctrinal discipline when necessary. No church can remain confessional if it does not make this distinction and admonish errorists and remove them if they persist in their error. God means what he says in passages such as Romans 16:7 and Titus 3:10 and Matthew 7:15. As we confess the truth we must also expose error.

Our Lutheran fathers have left us an example in the way they dealt with controversies of their day. They did not vacillate or waffle when it came to exposing false doctrine. We read in *SD, Rule and Norm*:

These controversies are not, as some may think, mere misunderstandings or contentions about words, with one part talking past the other, so that the strife reflects a mere semantic problem of little or no consequence. On the contrary, these controversies deal with weighty and important matters, and they are of such a nature that the opinions of the erring party cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended. (*SD, Rule and Norm*, Tappert, p. 503)

Over against the Sacramentarians and *Schwärmer* of his day who denied the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament Luther said, "Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final." (Tappert, p. 575) You recall what Luther also says about those who demonstrate that whoever regards his doctrine, faith, and confession as true and certain cannot remain in the same stall with those who teach or adhere to false doctrine. In his lectures in Galatians in 1535 Luther has this to say on his commentary on Gal. 5:9 ("a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump") in his response to the sectarians:

In philosophy a tiny error in the beginning is very great at the end. Thus in theology a tiny error overthrows the whole teaching. Therefore doctrine and life should be distinguished as sharply as possible. Doctrine belongs to God, not to us; and we are called only as its ministers. Therefore we cannot give up or change one dot of it (Matt. 5: 18),...On this score we cannot yield even a hairbreadth. For doctrine is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition. On the other hand, life is like a physical point. Therefore it can always be divided and can always yield something... Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect....

Hence this passage must -also be considered carefully in opposition to the argument by which they accuse us of offending against love and thus doing great harm to the churches. We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith. to which everything must yield – love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.’ Therefore when they minimize this issue in such a dishonest way, they give ample evidence of how highly they regard the majesty of the Word. If they believed it is the Word of God, they would not play around with it this way (*LW* 27, 361).

And the Brief Statement also reflects the spirit of the fathers in this regard when it says, “Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian church, I Pet. 4:11; John 8:31,32; I Tim. 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church fellowship only with orthodox church bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God’s command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9,10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2: 17-21.

On the 300th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation Claus Harms, who revived confessional Lutheranism in his day, decided to reissue Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses and also write ninety-five of his own. Citation of several of the theses will give us an idea of their content and also of their considerable effect on the country, and I believe are relevant to the current crisis in American Lutheranism.

Thesis 1: When our Master and Lord Jesus Christ says, “Repent,” he wills that men shall be conformed to his doctrine, but he does not conform to the doctrine of men, as is now done, in accordance with the altered spirit of the times. (II Tim. 4:3)

Thesis 27: According to the old faith, God created man; according to the new faith, man creates God, and when he has finished with him he says, Aba!

Thesis 32: The so-called religion of reason is without reason, or without religion, or without both.

Thesis 43: When reason touches religion it casts the pearls away, and plays with the empty shells, the empty words.

Thesis 78: If at the Colloquy at Marburg, 1529, the body and blood of Christ was in the bread and wine, it is still so in 1817.

The March issue of *Affirm* has a stimulating article on “Take Heed to the Doctrine” in which the author points out what indifference to doctrine can do. He writes:

If we are ignorant of or indifferent to true doctrine, if we just don't really care to spend any energy refuting the false doctrine, we deserve what we get as a result. Here are some examples: A Jane Schaberg can write, in a "feminist" interpretation of Christ's birth, "The illegitimacy of Jesus makes more precise the claim that Mary represents the oppressed who have been liberated.. .The illegitimate conception turns out to be grace, not disgrace..." The "Jesus Seminar," a body of so-called "scholars," has now determined that the Lord's Prayer isn't the Lord's but just a construction of the early church. Jesus never really said those words! "So what," you say, "those things have nothing to do with me. I'm a Lutheran." Well, my friend, since you need more examples: a Lutheran pastor in Milwaukee asked his congregation for permission to perform homosexual wedding ceremonies.

How we need to heed the words of the apostle: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." (I Tim. 4:16)

LAW AND GOSPEL

Finally, we can remain Lutheran if we continue to emphasize the importance of properly dividing law and gospel in our preaching and teaching. Dr. Waither observed that "the birth of the Reformer dates from the moment when Luther understood this distinction." No one since the time of the apostle Paul better understood the difference between law and gospel than Luther.

The risen Savior gave the command "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations." (Luke 24:26) And the apostolic injunction is: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Tim. 2:15) Our confessions sum up the importance of Law and Gospel preaching in these words, "We believe and confess that these two doctrines must be urged constantly in the church of God until the end of the world, but with due distinction." (SD Art. V. Tappert, p. 562) If the proper distinction between these two doctrines is not maintained, the results are disastrous for the Christian; the Gospel is made into a new law, the merits of Christ are obscured, and troubled consciences are robbed of the comfort of the Gospel promises.

Real law and gospel preaching is becoming more of a rarity in our day. Instead of law preaching we hear much moralizing and tirading against the evils of the day, which only fuels the *opinia legis* in a person and make hypocrites out of people. The law is spiritual and it must be preached in such a way that "every mouth is stopped and all the world becomes guilty before God" as Paul says. Dr. Koren, a theologian of the old Norwegian Synod, emphasized the importance of law preaching in these words: "If we preached only concerning the forgiveness of sin but not concerning repentance, then that doctrine would neither be understood, nor would it bear fruit. For without repentance there is no faith and consequently not justification by faith." And Luther says somewhere that if you were to go up to a heathen and tell him that his sins were forgiven, without first showing him his need, he would stare at you like a cow stares at a new barn door; he wouldn't know what you were taking about.

However, Law preaching, important as it is, is as our confessions say "a foreign work" and its purpose is to lead to Christ's "proper work" which is the preaching of the good news of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. The hymn says it well,

When sinners see their lost condition
And feel the pressing load of sin
And Jesus cometh on His mission
To heal the sin-sick heart within
All grief must flee before His grace,
And joy divine will take its place.
(*The Lutheran Hymnal* 65, v. 1)

The gospel is the only solution to man's problem of sin and therefore we cannot emphasize enough the importance of preaching the gospel, the good news of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. I shall never forget what my homiletics professor emphasized: "No one must ever leave your service without the ringing assurance that he/she has a Savior from sin." While the law must be preached in all of its sharpness and severity, the gospel must always predominate. Walther said it well: "So preach the law that it drives the greatest saint to despair; so preach the gospel that it gives the greatest sinner hope." True law and gospel preaching must always be a priority for a Lutheran pastor.

In conclusion, we can remain Lutheran only if we firmly adhere to the Bible as God's verbally inspired and inerrant word, our only source of doctrine, and the foundation of our faith. Along with that subscription we must also have a firm position on church fellowship, not only in word but also in practice, and that we emphasize the importance of properly distinguishing between the law and the gospel. Then God will be glorified and His people edified!