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THE HISTORY AND TRADITION OF THE LUTHERAN MINISTRY

Helmut T. Lehmann

The inclusion of the term "Lutheran" in the formulation of our subject suggests a restriction of ministry to one part of the Christian Church. This suggestion is not unambiguously done. On the one hand, the term "Lutheran" restricts our understanding of the ministry to those branches of Christendom which acknowledge the Augsburg Confession as their foundation of the Christian faith. On the other hand, by virtue of their very acknowledgement of the Augsburg Confession, these branches of Christendom understand their ministry as being an integral part of the message of the Christian church of all times and places. That is to say, "Lutheran" is understood as referring to a specific Christian Communion among and within the churches in the world today. Within our churches of the world today the Lutheran ministry has characteristics and dimensions which are especially, though not exclusively, evident in the history and tradition of that ministry.

I should like to focus on two of the dimensions apparent in the history and tradition of the Lutheran ministry. One of these dimensions, perhaps more apparent than the other, is that of the ethnicity of the Lutheran ministry. There are good reasons for associating a strong ethnic emphasis with the history and tradition of the Lutheran ministry. Either by inference or explicitly these reasons will become evident when we turn to the subject of ethnicity in the Lutheran ministry.

The other dimension of the Lutheran ministry which is perhaps less apparent and, according to some, actually present only in a fractured form is what I want to describe as catholic, i.e., universal in the sense of agreeing with the doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the New and Old Testaments and as this Gospel is confessed in creeds and writings from time to time down through the centuries.

ETHNICITY IN THE LUTHERAN MINISTRY

The very dimension of ethnicity seems to and sometimes does contradict the dimension of catholicity. However, at times ethnicity gives expression to the very

catholicity which this ethnicity may at other times deny. A reason for this self-contradictory nature of ethnicity is to be found in the manner in which the Reformers (particularly Luther and Melancthon) reinterpreted the Pentecost event.

While there may not be unanimity among biblical scholars concerning the interpretation of the Pentecost event as reported in Acts 2, the Reformers did not interpret glossalalia — the speaking in tongues — as a charismatic utterance requiring the Holy Spirit's gift of interpretation, as I Corinthians 12 and 14 suggest. Instead, they viewed the gift of speaking with tongues as a language miracle. The miracle of Pentecost thus did not consist in an esoteric understanding of glossalalia by the few but by the many people who understood what was being said in their particular language. By extension, the miracle of Pentecost was understood as the Holy Spirit's power to convey the message of the crucified and risen Christ in the language and culture of representatives of ethnic groups from all parts of the then-known world. In this context, ethnicity became on that first Pentecost the effulgence of the catholicity of the ministry of Peter in his sermon.

In part, it is in consequence of the understanding of Pentecost as a language event that the sixteenth century Lutheran reformation movement clothed its rediscovered Gospel of righteousness through faith alone in the language of the people wherever the reformation gained a foothold. This observation is true to such an extent that it is a commonplace to point to the Lutheran Reformation as giving birth to modern German. It is a commonplace to record the fact that in part the Lutheran Reformation gathered momentum in central and northern Europe because its tenets and goals were set forth in the language of the people (vernacular).

The language of the people was so important because in and through it ethnic groups gave expression to their culture and to their aspirations. In this ethnic context the Reformation message, stressing the dialectical relationship of law and Gospel, was proclaimed. It is important to be aware of this stress on the dialectical relationship of law and Gospel in the ethnic cultural context. For the tension between law and Gospel does not baptize a language or a culture of a people as an unambiguous good. The law condemns peoples who confuse the beauty of their language with the beauty of holiness. The law condemns ethnic groups who abuse the Christian faith so as to make the Christian faith the means of preserving ethnic language and custom, instead of using language and custom to preserve and extend the Christian faith.

Case Study 1 — The Volga Germans

It is difficult to arrive at a clear-cut judgment about the legitimate role for language and custom to play in the minister's proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments. How difficult such a judgment is can be illustrated by reference to Paul Hansen's discovery in 1976 of Volga German Lutherans in Russia, 2000 miles east of Moscow in Tselinograd, a city of about 130,000 people in Kazakhstan. Their forbears had immigrated to Russia on invitation of the Russian Empress, Catherine II.

This ethnic group of German Lutherans has a number of noteworthy features. Until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, German Lutherans in Russia made up a

flourishing Lutheran Church. They consisted of some 800 congregations and a million baptized members. Since 1917 their decimation has continued. Interestingly enough, this group of Lutherans apparently did not think of theological education for future ministers until it was cut off from its ministerial supply in Germany and the Baltic countries. The seminary the German Lutherans, established in 1925, was closed down in the 1930's. From the point of view of our immediate interests these Volga German Lutherans exhibit a feature particularly significant for our consideration. Throughout more than two hundred years of history in Russia, these Lutherans retained their German language and customs in their religious life and in their congregations. By and large most of us would be inclined to criticize these Volga Lutherans for not employing the language of their adopted country in their religious life. Most of us do not favor employing one language at work, and another at worship. That kind of split-level existence does not accord with our stress on the Christian faith as something dynamic for all of life on every level. We may be inclined to look upon a bilingual ministry as a betrayal rather than a confession of the Christian faith. Yet after having visited, counselled and worshipped with these diaspora Lutherans, Hansen concluded, "It's really another world. These people have lived for so many generations without anything. They have no denominational organization, no trained clergy, no dogmatics. I felt as if I were looking at the first century church where they had only the words of the Lord."

Hansen's comment raises myriads of questions. Was the first century church without "denominational organization"? The New Testament, particularly the corpus of Pauline letters, bears ample testimony to a confessional cleavage between Jewish and Gentile Christian congregations. If Paul, Barnabas and Apollo were not trained clergy (perhaps not in the modern sense), then the Christian Church has never had "trained clergy." Definitions of dogmatics vary; but if by dogmatics we refer to developed creedal statements of the Christian faith, then the New Testament provides ample evidence of these, too (e.g. Phil. 2; the Nunc Dimittis in Luke 2; the Magnificat in Luke 1; the Prooimion in Eph. 1, etc.). On the face of it, Hansen's evaluation sounds more like that of a romanticizing liberal than of a realistic biblical scholar.

Though these ethnic German Lutherans were without a pastor at the time of Hansen's visit, they did presumably enjoy the leadership of a bilingual ministry until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. From 1955 - 1972 they had the services of a nearly blind pastor, Eugene Bachmann who remembered the names of 78 other pastors who had died without being replaced.

Today's Volga German Lutherans represent a martyr church whose continued existence seems to rest on two pillars which mutually support each other: a German ethnic character and the Christian creeds. At least until very recent times these two pillars of a diaspora church were maintained by a German ethnic clergy in the largest slavic country in the modern world.

Case Study 2 — Western Canada

A less spectacular but equally important contribution to our awareness of the role ethnicity plays in the history and tradition of the Lutheran ministry has been a small

booklet which outlines the place two seminaries in northern Germany played in supplying German-speaking Lutheran congregations in North America with pastors. Both of these seminaries were established for the specific purpose of educating and preparing men for the ministry in North America. Though European countries with significant Lutheran constituencies supplied those who emigrated with pastors from time to time, I am not aware of any country in which institutions were specifically established to prepare pastors who would or could minister to the waves of immigrants which came to North America in such large numbers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pastors who served the Scandinavian churches in their early days were either educated in their native country, tutored by a pastor or group of pastors in this country, or sent to a seminary of another Lutheran body. An example of the latter is the Norwegian Synod which, prior to 1876, educated its theological students at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.²

While the uniqueness of the educational institutions at Breklum and Kropp benefited Lutheran churches in all of North America with its many organizational divisions, these German institutions are of special significance for the beginnings of Lutheranism in Western Canada. The Rev. Heinrich Schnieder, the first pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Winnipeg, who subsequently moved to Edenwold, Saskatchewan, graduated from the seminary in Kropp, arrived in the U.S.A. in 1886 and in Winnipeg in 1889. The first president of the Lutheran College and Seminary in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the Rev. Dr. Juergen Goos, was also a graduate of Kropp Seminary.

While not a graduate of either Kropp or Breklum Seminary, a founding father and first president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Manitoba and other Provinces, the Rev. Dr. Martin Ruccius, was encouraged and assisted to go to North America by "The Lutheran Pastoral Aid Society for the Lutheran Church in America."³

In retrospect, it is apparent that furnishing pastors who could minister to members of congregations in the language of the homeland sometimes proved to be a mixed blessing. In some instances, preservation of native custom overshadowed proclamation of the Christian creed; promotion of the native language became more important than the propagation of the Christian faith; ethnicity of a people outranked in significance the catholicity of their faith. Yet failure to provide pastors who could minister to people in their own language often not only resulted in a loss of members to Lutheran congregations but in their falling away from the Christian faith altogether. Consequently, the solution posed by the problem of ethnicity is by no means a simple one. The history of Lutheran churches on this continent is in many ways a story of frustration, anxiety and conflict in coming to terms with the ethos of congregations which is rooted more in ethnicity than in Christian ethics.

1. Otto W. Heick, *Go Into All the World*, 1978.

2. E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church among Norwegian-Americans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), p. 186.

3. V.J. Eylands, *Lutherans in Canada* (Winnipeg, 1945), p. 247.

Case Study 3 — The Seven

The direction which a Christian ministry, including a Lutheran one, must move in dealing with the presence of different races, customs, cultures and languages in the missionary outreach of the Christian Church is clear. The clarity of this direction derives from the New Testament, more particularly from what is in a pre-eminent sense a missionary book in the New Testament canon, the Acts of the Apostles.

I have already referred to the Pentecost event in Acts 2 in which ethnicity becomes, not a barrier to but a channel of the universal outreach of the ascended Lord by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As a matter of fact, the theme of the Acts of the Apostles is this: the conquest of national, racial, social linguistic barriers through the proclamation of the Gospel by the witnesses of the primitive Christian Church accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. While this theme is developed in a variety of reports and situations, the appointment of the so-called seven deacons in Acts 6 and the activity of two of the seven in Acts 7 and 8 offers one of the more striking and interesting examples of the transcendence of ethnic barriers and thus of the progress of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In evaluating the example of the seven in terms of this transcendence, it is only possible to sketch some of the more important elements in the narrative we have before us in Acts 6 and the two subsequent chapters.

You will recall that it was the bickering of the Hellenistic Christians against the Hebrew Christians which led to the appointment of the seven “to wait on tables”. The difference between Hellenistic Christians and Hebrew Christians was not a matter of race. Hellenistic Christians were diaspora Jews who had grown up in and adopted the Hellenistic culture and language. Hebrew Christians were native, Palestinian Jews who had maintained Jewish customs, grown up in Jewish culture and spoke the Hebrew language. The difference between Hellenistic and Hebrew Christians was one of language, custom and culture — a difference in ethnicity and ethos.

This ethnic difference erupted into conflict when the Hellenists complained of the neglect of their widows in the daily distribution of food. The author of Acts tries to paper over this serious conflict by making it appear that the apostles smoothed things out through creation of a division of labor. The apostles would attend to the preaching of the Word of God. The primitive congregation in Jerusalem would elect seven men from its midst to wait on tables. The strange thing is that the seven men elected for this task were all from the Hellenistic party, as their names clearly show. The apostles, who were to attend to the Word of God, belonged to the Hebrew party.

Stranger still is the fact that this division of labor in the early church remained a theory. In practice things looked quite different. No sooner has the report of the election of the seven been brought to a close when we are told the most prominent man among the seven, Stephen, did great signs and wonders among the people. More than that; we find him in a local synagogue pointing out to the local Jews and those from the diaspora how Jesus of Nazareth supersedes the laws and customs handed down by Moses. As we read on, we discover Stephen doing the work not of a deacon but of an evangelist. He was doing what the apostles said they were going to do — preach the Word of God. Moreover, his preaching of the Word of

God stressed the transcendence of the law of Moses together with its accompanying ceremonial and social customs through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Ethnicity could no longer be divisive.

Another deacon who rose into prominence along with Stephen was Philip. He, too, was active as an evangelist instead of serving as a deacon — a welfare officer in the Jerusalem congregation. In Acts 8 we find Philip has left the Jewish communities in Judaea and has crossed the boundary into Samaria, a region with whose inhabitants the Jews would have no dealings. When the inhabitants heard how Philip preached the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ they were baptized, “both men and women” (Acts 8:13). When the Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem heard about what was going on in Samaria they quickly dispatched the apostles, Peter and John, to investigate the unauthorized missionary activity of deacon-evangelist, Philip. When they got there, they found the rumours they had heard were true. Those who had been baptized had indeed received the Holy Spirit.

Thus the election and activity of two of the seven deacons shows us how the outreach of the Gospel of Jesus Christ transcends geographical borders, language barriers and social customs. In brief, by the power of the Holy Spirit ethnicity becomes a channel of, instead of a barrier to the spread of Christianity.

In the history and tradition of the Lutheran ministry we have sometimes acted like the conservative apostles in Jerusalem and allowed ourselves to be fenced in by ethnicity. Sometimes we have followed the example of the deacon-evangelists and allowed ethnicity to become a channel for the catholicity of the Gospel. In this instance, it is the deacon-evangelists who are the models of a truly apostolic ministry.