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The message of the Reformation is not one merely for half a millennium, but one for all time.

# THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION AND THE NORTH AMERICAN INHERITANCE

by Gerhard Bode

## Introduction

HISTORIANS RECORD THAT, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Native American princes were in attendance. They were guests — if not newly conquered subjects — of Emperor Charles V. Perhaps they were witnesses of Luther's famous stand and heard his declaration before the illustrious gathering at the Diet. History does not record what, if anything, the Native Americans thought of Martin Luther. For his part, Luther seems not to have noticed them. He knew the so-called New World existed, but he didn't think much about it, referring to it only a few times in his writings. Yet, the New World has not neglected Martin Luther and his Reformation.<sup>1</sup>

## The question of Lutheran identity in America

Lutherans have been in North America for four hundred years now, and the expectations of a future presence are optimistic. Given the past-and-present dedication of Lutheran churches in America to evangelical teaching, mission, and service, the future should be bright, at least in some centers. Yet the questions of Lutheran identity and the consequences of that identity remain key for Lutherans in the North American context. What does it mean to be a Lutheran Church in America? What is our identity as heirs of the Lutheran Reformation? These questions matter because they give us clues as to how new generations become heirs of Luther's Reformation message. Yet the nature of this heritage and the dedication to Luther's message has not always been certain. Perhaps a story will illustrate this point.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lewis W. Spitz, "Luther in America: Reformation History Since Philip Schaff," in *Luther in der Neuzeit: Wissenschaftliches Symposium des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte*. Herausgegeben von Bernd Moeller. *Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte*, Band 1929 Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1983), 177.

In the spring of 1931, a young German theologian traveling across the United States came to St. Louis, Missouri. While he was in town, he visited the campus of Concordia Seminary. He strolled among the buildings, explored the quadrangles and took in all the sights. Concordia Seminary made an impression on him; in fact, he wrote about it in the report of his travels to the folks back in Germany. Reflecting more broadly on the state of Lutheranism in America, and German Lutheranism

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in particular, he drew some definite conclusions, for example: "There is no pure, German church ... as far as I know, anywhere in America." He noted that in some churches preaching was still in German, but in his experience, these sermons were pretty dismal. "The pastors generally do not have a good training." As far as Concordia Seminary was concerned (which he noted was of the Missouri Synod), the pastors it

produced were "in their exclusive orthodoxy, insufferable; and although the Missouri Synod has made the greatest financial sacrifice [in building the campus of Concordia Seminary], it is, without question, on its way to collapse." He noticed that in the worship services in the German Lutheran churches only a few old people came — hardly any young people. That was because the preaching wasn't any good. He concluded his report by observing: "[O]f a particular understanding of the Reformation heritage in these German churches I found not a trace."<sup>2</sup>

This young theologian may be excused; he was what his circumstances had made him. Sure, he thought we

<sup>2</sup> Quotations translated from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika 1928–1931*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 10 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1991), 275. For a fictional story along a similar vein, cf. Brother John [W. N. Harley], *Little Journeys with Martin Luther* (Columbus, OH: [s.n.], 1916), 227.

were losers, and that our seminary and our Synod were going belly up. Perhaps he was right about the lousy preaching, but I find it particularly irritating that he assumed we didn't get the Reformation, let alone follow its teachings. But we can understand him. He didn't know us very well, and he didn't understand our history. He wasn't from the North America after all, in fact, he was from Berlin, Germany, and his name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Lutherans in America likely would have been disappointed in Bonhoeffer's assessment of them in 1931. I suppose some Lutherans today might agree that Bonhoeffer's assessment of American Lutheranism is truer now than when he first arrived at it. Still, this story may be helpful because it prompts the important question: Just what is our understanding of the Reformation heritage? This takes us back to the problem of Lutheran identity and the question of what it means to be a Lutheran Church in America.

### **The religious and cultural context in North America**

Every generation of Lutherans in America has been confronted with these questions. And the question, "What does it mean to be Lutheran there?" remains an important one, especially as new Lutheran immigrants come to live in cities and towns of North America. Here the problem of Lutheran identity is often combined with ethnic identity, both of which are of critical importance. What does it mean to be an Ethiopian Lutheran in America? What does it mean to be a Lutheran from India living there, a Chinese Lutheran, a Lutheran speaking Spanish, a French-speaking West African in America? How does the Reformation message of freedom in Christ translate? These questions of Lutheran identity in the American context are key, given the complexity and diversity of its religious landscape.

The Lutheran Church in America exists in a context that is increasingly pluralistic. The influences of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism — especially American Evangelicalism — have confronted Lutheran churches for centuries. And for years now they also have been encountering Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and a long list of other religious traditions and movements, all of which

are staking a claim in the American religious and cultural landscape.

In the pluralistic culture of America, religion is privatized. It is classified as a voluntary activity and may be picked up or discarded at an individual's discretion. It is sometimes hard for Lutherans to compete in this "free market" religious environment, since the environment requires dealing with other religious groups with forbearance, charity and mutual respect. In this tolerant context, doctrinal positions are often deemphasized, individual belief is diminished, and the churches gradually accept the ethical standards and values of the broader culture. For many in this culture there is no fear of God because there is no God to fear, let alone a God to fear, love and trust.

In this American religious and cultural context, Lutherans face a number of significant challenges. Some of these challenges result from a failure to think critically about the past and all of them result from a failure to think theologically. Christian churches — some of them Lutheran — are often ignorant of their own

history and do not know what their churches have confessed in the past and why they have confessed it. They do not know their own theological history, their own theological identity and distinctness, and so have little bearing on the way forward. Moreover, their denominational ambivalence leads to an uncertainty about the content of the church's mission as well as its goals. Finally, Christian churches in America, some of them Lutheran, identify themselves less and less with traditional theological teachings. Lutheran churches rooted in a clear historical, confessional tradition may feel pressure to become more like those that do not because it is uncomfortable to be outside the norm. It is difficult to take a stand where very few others are standing. Then again, aren't Lutherans supposed to take a stand for God's Word and its truth? Everything depends upon what Lutherans stand.

Historically, the American Lutheran churches were largely comprised of European immigrants and their descendants. Perhaps it is inevitable that what will happen to the new immigrants is what happened to those that came before them. They will become new Americans,

It is helpful to remember that our faith is determined not by the personal reassurance we may have as Lutherans. Our confession is not decided by what others think of us or even what we think of ourselves. Our faith is defined and formed by Jesus Christ crucified for us.

bringing with them their unique traditions, perspectives and insights, and add their own contributions to what it means to be a Lutheran Church in America. Once again history and theology become present partners informing all of us about the way forward.

### **The key to Lutheran identity: past, present and future**

Traditionally, questions of Lutheran identity have been informed by our confessional basis, our commitments to the Scripture and to the ecumenical creeds and the other Lutheran confessional documents. The Confessions guide the work of the Church; they inform what we believe and how we practice the Christian life. They do these things because they faithfully reiterate what God's Word says. Although the Church believes, teaches and confesses the entire Word of God in Scripture, what is at the heart of the Scripture makes all the difference: Christ is at the heart. The purpose of the whole Scripture is to proclaim Christ, to proclaim the Gospel of Christ for the salvation of sinners, the Christ-given freedom from sin, death and the devil. The Lutheran Confessions are centered in the Gospel and the concern to comfort sinful human beings. Broader still, we see that God's Word is a living, creative instrument through which God cares for and preserves His Church.

The Lutheran Confessions reveal how the first generations of Lutherans in the Wittenberg tradition understood the truth of Luther's Reformation message and provide the key for us to understand this truth today and in the future. Lutherans must be concerned about the Church's fidelity to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions even as they are concerned about the Church's mission. Faithful confession of God's Word, and outreach with that Word to the world, belong together. Without both, the Church will not stand.

### **What is the Reformation heritage? Who are we today as Lutherans?**

It is helpful to remember that our faith is determined not by the personal reassurance we may have as Lutherans. Our confession is not decided by what others think of us or even what we think of ourselves. Our faith is defined

and formed by Jesus Christ crucified for us. The Gospel: That is the message Martin Luther proclaimed and that is what we claim as our own as Lutherans.

In John 8, Jesus says: "If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free ... if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

In this text, Jesus is speaking to Jews who had believed in Him. They didn't need to be freed from anything, they think, because they have Abraham as their ancestor. Makes no difference, Jesus says, because everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Slaves have no permanent place in the household, but a son remains forever. Who is a son? One set free by the Son — all those abiding in His Word,

true disciples who know the truth and are set free.

Sin doesn't care who our favorite reformer is. Sin and death don't care what church we go to, what hymns we sing or with whom we have fellowship. Sin, death and the devil only care about who our master is. Whom do we obey; whom do we follow? In whose way are we going?

Being justified by faith alone in Christ alone by grace alone is not our inalienable right, not a personal privilege handed down. Our freedom is

not inherited from our Lutheran ancestors. Only Christ gives this freedom to those abiding in His Word.

Why are we free? Because we are in Christ, we are in His Word, we are His disciples. We have the truth, we have Him who is the Truth. We are free because Christ alone is the object of our faith, not ourselves, not our heritage, not Luther, nor any saints, but Christ alone. We are free because of His glorious suffering, His glorious death, His glorious resurrection — to save wretched sinners. He has set us free from sin and death and the devil, and we are free indeed. As free sons and daughters, we dwell in the Word. We take up permanent residence in Christ. As true sons and daughters, we abide in God's saving presence among us. This is our identity, who we truly are. And it is this Christ that we proclaim to the world, to the culture in which we live.

Why do we follow Christ? Because Christ calls us. The way may be hard, but we follow Christ! As Luther proclaimed in the last two of his 95 Theses: "Christians should be exhorted to be zealous to follow Christ, their

As true sons and daughters, we abide in God's saving presence among us. This is our identity, who we truly are. And it is this Christ that we proclaim to the world, to the culture in which we live.

Head, through penalties, deaths, and hells; And let them thus be more confident of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through a false assurance of peace.” Where Christ bids us follow may shake our confidence to its very foundation, but we follow Christ! Remaining in Christ’s Word we are free. And that is who we are.

### **Conclusion**

The message of the Reformation is not one merely for half a millennium, but one for all time. The message of the Lutheran Reformation — centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ — is by no means a message merely for Wittenberg, but for all places, for the world. And it is into the world that this message has been proclaimed and will, by God’s grace, continue to be proclaimed.

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