

Sermon at the Ordination of Bishops  
for the Mission Province of the Lutheran Church of Sweden

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WHY ARE WE HERE TODAY?

The date of February 5th, 2005, will have its permanent place in the future history of Lutheranism. On this very day, the Mission Province within the Lutheran Church of Sweden received three bishops. On the same day, Lutheran Christians in the Lutheran churches in Sweden and Finland received new ordained pastors who are to serve them with the Word of God and the Holy Sacraments. In all this that we have accomplished here in Gothenburg, the passage of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians has, once again, been realized, "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men" (Eph. 4:8).

This date of February 5th, 2005, naturally raises the question, why are we here having arrived from various parts of the wide world? Why us, from Africa, Eastern Europe, Germany, Scandinavia and North America? This question can be addressed to us even with a certain degree of indignation. The same question can also be asked out of perplexity and embarrassment. But we should not forget either, that there are Lutheran Christians in Sweden and Finland who can answer this question with the deepest thankfulness. Their prayers have been heard as was heard the request from Macedonia to St. Paul: "Come over and help us!" (Acts 16:9). We have not come to Gothenburg out of frivolous love of adventure. I want to make the reasons of our coming very clear to all who, for one reason or another, raise this question.

We are here demanded by the Christian love and solidarity. Time and time again, the motivation for my resolution to come over and help Lutheran Christians in Sweden and Finland has been expressed in the words of St. Paul in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, concerning the well-being of the mystical body of Christ, the church, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). This was also my Biblical reply to the letter of the Primate of the Lutheran Church of Sweden a full year ago, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it."

My decision to take this step has not been an easy one. I have struggled with this call. But a call it is, a call from God. I did not make my decision lightly. How many times I have been tempted to listen to well-meaning advice not to come here! I have received an abundance of such advice. Yet, my conscience is in bondage to the truth. I have received my Episcopal office in a Lutheran church to serve the divine truth and Christian love. Christian Biblical truth and love cannot be insensitive in the presence of suffering. This suffering has been felt even on other continents and this is the reason why we are here.

The state of emergency among our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Europe, especially in Scandinavia, has been heard and felt. This state of emergency is not an issue of yesterday. Indeed, it has been an open wound in the Lutheran body for decades, at least since 1983 when the 1958 clause of conscience was abrogated in Sweden after an intense and politically well-orchestrated media campaign. What is worse, such a clause was never adopted in Finland. What this meant in practice was that Lutheran Christians have been denied their fundamental Christian freedom to attend apostolic services in their churches. Instead, various attempts have been made to force them to church services that are not conducted according to the Bible and according to the order handed down to us by the Apostles of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I speak out openly.

In Africa and in other parts of the world, we completely fail to comprehend this kind of rigid ecclesiastical tyranny in the age global human rights, including the freedom of religion and worship. Civil and

church regimes that resort to coercion and even tyranny are never promoting a good cause, on the contrary. As long ago as the 17th century, England left the tyranny of the kind Archbishop William Laud pursued, seeking watertight ecclesiastical uniformity by unscrupulous, merciless, worldly means. Germany has left behind the years when the Prussian king even used troops to crush the peaceful resistance of his Lutheran subjects who could not accept church union with Protestants whose teachings ruined the Lutheran doctrine. Scandinavia should have left this kind of tyranny against Christian consciences far behind in the 19th century when governments, laws, state-church bishops and diocesan chapters persecuted in many and various ways popular Lutheran revivals in the Nordic countries.

Lutheran worship and the office of the ministry go together. Strangely, it is Lutheran churches in Scandinavia, which has been in many respects a model of common welfare for the whole world, that have chosen to part ways with Christian love in favor of oppressing consciences. Whether it is the hard-dying legacy of the state church past that is still hounding Lutheran Christians, I do not know. In doing this the churches are reflecting the societies that surround them, which are becoming more and more intolerant towards the Christian faith. One of us, Bishop Borre Knudsen, has been jailed in Norway because he has vocally defended the lives of unborn children by opposing abortion. Recently, a Pentecostal preacher in Sweden was sentenced to jail, simply because he has taught his flock the truth, which we all can read in the opening chapter of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans.

We must not accept any attempts to intimidate and muzzle the Biblical voice of the true Christian faith. Indeed, it is wrong that ordination is denied to men who have been called by God and the Christian congregation and whose only defect is their true strength and the strength of the true church, namely faithfulness towards the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions. Those who are genuinely being called to the office of the ministry and who meet the genuine requirements of this office must be ordained to the same office.

This is not the first time Lutherans are facing this kind of dilemma. We

need only to bear in mind the life and example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who could not serve under a church regime that had compromised itself, who as lecturer at Zingst and Finkenwalde piloted the same course we have set today. Where the royal highway of God's call is being blocked by political and cultural prejudice, by human authorities and human traditions, against the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, those of us who are free must come to the aid of our oppressed fellow Christians. The love of Christ demands this. This is why we are here today.

## 2.

We are here because of the Word of God. I have said a few words about Christian love. In order to keep us all on the right track when using the word 'love' I quote what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ says in the Gospel of St. John, "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him" (John 14:15, 21).

There is no genuine Christian love apart from the truth of the Word of God. Anything in this world claiming the noble name of love and yet parting ways with the truth of the Word of God is only human pretension or sheep's clothing covering packs of wolves. It is not by chance that ecclesiastical oppression of Christian consciences goes hand in hand with various kinds of denials of the truth of the Word of God. What begins as diluting the Bible in the name of Liberalism will soon end as unyielding intolerance towards Christian faith. This is the development we have witnessed in the West.

In the past, Nordic countries have given many excellent Biblical scholars to the entire Christendom. Today the sad fact is that most traditional majority churches in the West have completely lost the light of the Word of God. The scepter of Christ who, according to his firm promise (Matt. 28:20), is present in his church has been pushed aside by human intellectual hubris. The crisis concerning the Word of God in churches is

not an issue of yesterday. This crisis has brewed in various traditional churches for decades.

In the Anglican Communion, issues of Biblical truths concerning Christian morals, which has recently come to a head over the question of homosexuality in the church, have worn out the patience of African and Asian churches. Their strong protest against the corrupting apostasy from the Word of God compelled Western church leaders to reconsider seriously their stance. This same issue nearly split the General Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. The majority of Christendom lives outside the West. The time has already come that Christians in Africa and Asia have learned to say clearly 'yes' and 'no' when the truth of the Word of God so demands. In the famous words of the 1960s British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, "The wind of change is blowing through the continent [Africa]. Whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact."

We are no longer nice child-like creatures from exotic mission fields. We are in fact Christians come of age. When I speak out these critical words, I am not forgetting all the spiritual and material good we have received from the West. The Apostle says, "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them" (Hebrews 6:10). Our Lutheran Church in Kenya is particularly indebted to Swedish Lutheran missionaries who in the past came over and helped us. We want to follow their Biblical Lutheran teachings, not selling our faith in the vanity fair of the changing fashions of this age.

The teachings, which we received from Sweden a long time ago, have now come back from Africa. We received this teaching from you and today we give it back to you with grateful and bold hearts. When we bear in mind what those people are teaching who have attempted to prevent Apostolic worship and ordinations, and what those who have been subjected to their oppression teach, the choice is crystal clear. The only true church is the church in which the Word of God is the unquestioned supreme authority in all and everything just as Dr. Martin Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles: "We do not want to hear what they command or forbid in the

name of the church, because, God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and "the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd. Its holiness exists in the Word of God and true faith" (Smalcald Articles 12).

Where the Word of God is being oppressed in the life of Christians who adhere to this word, it is our Christian duty to come over and help them in any way we can. Indeed, we are here today because of the Word of God.

### 3.

We are here because of the Lutheran Confessions. We believe, teach and confess that the Word of God is clear, unambiguous, because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is this word, as St. John wonderfully teaches us in the opening of his Gospel (John 1:1). Further, there is no change, no diminishing of the Word of God, since "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The Lutheran Confessions are a right summary of the teachings of this word. It was Dr. Martin Luther's work as Reformer to re-establish the sole legitimate authority of the church, namely, the authority of the Word of God. All disputes in the church must be solved by the Word of God and in accordance to the Word of God.

The Lutheran Confessions are crystal clear on the questions of authority in the church, worship, the office of the ministry and ordination. When I received the call to come over and help, my question was whether the disputes in the Nordic Lutheran churches were being solved under the legitimate authority of the church, namely the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, or whether other authorities were being followed and obeyed?

We all know the answer. Those who are oppressed in the church suffer because of the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Those who oppress follow other authorities. Thus, the choice is very clear. I only remind us of the prophetic words spoken the renowned Swedish theologian, Bishop Anders Nygren, in 1958: by changing the office of the ministry, which had prevailed from the very beginning of the Christian Church, by rebelling

against the Command of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:37), the church had nothing ahead of it but the path of Gnostic heresies.

Today, everyone with spiritual understanding must concede that the late Anders Nygren was a true prophet. But, thanks be to God, there are faithful Biblical Lutherans who do all that lies in their power to tend the lamp of God in his house (1 Sam. 3:3). They are true heirs of the Lutheran Reformation. This is why we are here today. We are here because of the Lutheran Confessions.

#### 4.

We are here because of church polity and judicature. One might think that this is our weakest point to justify why we are here today. Christian love, the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions, these might be on our side, but what about legal ecclesiastical polity and judicature?

Parliaments and ecclesiastical synods in the Nordic countries have made their majority decisions and passed laws. Legal ecclesiastical organs have applied these laws to the daily life of the church. For these reasons, our case might look weak, our prospects pale indeed. However, this kind of reasoning, which separates church polity and ecclesiastical judicature from the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, is not Lutheran at all. It is not Biblical at all.

The separation of the Bible and Lutheran doctrine onto one side, with ecclesiastical polity and judicature on the other side, is an illegitimate impostor in Lutheranism. It is a child of the Enlightenment, an heir of the German philosophical idealism of the 18th and 19th century cross-bred with the age-old state church mindset. It comes from Friedrich Schleiermacher rather than from the Reformer of the church, Dr. Martin Luther.

The idealistic legacy in the fashion of Schleiermacher and his successors made a sharp distinction between religion and justice. According to this conception, justice was understood purely as a worldly business, distinct from religion. New, secular ideas have further stirred this judicial muddle.

The idea that the sovereign will of the people, 'the will of the public', is the supreme authority even in the church comes from the writings of the Swiss philosopher J.J. Rousseau, not from the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Against any kind of 'will of the public' we have learned to pray: "Our Father who art in heaven ... thy will be done."

This divine, fatherly will is not a kind of evolving, positivistic awareness or self-processing 'Zeitgeist', but it is laid down in the Word of God. The sole supreme authority in the church is the Word of God. This eternal word is not only some thing within the category of religion. It is ecclesiastical justice as well, since there can be absolutely nothing legally binding in the church that contradicts this word. All and everything in the church must be prosecuted in conformity with the Word of God. This is the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions.

This judicial principle has also been clearly written in the constitutions of the Lutheran Churches in Sweden and Finland. It is unfortunate that this judicature is not being practiced in church polity. We have witnessed how the un-Lutheran separation of faith and justice continues amongst those who have parted ways with Christian love, the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. Therefore, we should, again, bear in mind the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his activities, which were officially declared 'illegal' by his church body executives on December 2nd, 1935. Only three months later, in March 1936, the second 'illegal' course from the 'illegal' Finkenwalde seminary was warmly welcomed in Sweden.

Even the renowned Archbishop of Upsala, Dr. Erling Eidem officially received Bonhoeffer with his seminarians on March 4th, 1936. By doing so, Archbishop Eidem acknowledged the truth, which we must remember and respect today, namely, that emergency justice, too, is justice. At home in Germany, Bonhoeffer was declared to an enemy of the state and demands were voiced that he should not be permitted to educate German theologians. Thus, our presence and our actions in Gothenburg are legitimate in terms of church polity and ecclesiastical judicature since they are authorized by the Word of God.

Therefore, I conclude by quoting the Lutheran Confessions, summing up



in words from the Smalcald Articles concerning ordination and vocation. This quotation is not only a theological opinion but it is church polity and judicature according to divine right because it is Biblical: "If the bishops wanted to be true bishops and to attend to the church and the Gospel, then a person might - for the sake of love and unity but not out of necessity - give them leave to ordain and confirm us and our preachers, provided all the pretense and fraud of unchristian ceremony and pomp were set aside. However, they are not now and do not want to be true bishops. ... In addition, they persecute and condemn those who do take up a call to such an office. Despite this, the church must not remain without servants on their account. Therefore, as the ancient examples of the church and the Fathers teach us, we should and will ordain suitable persons to this office ourselves" (Smalcald Articles 10).

Finally: We thank God for his faithfulness. He has made us, his servants in this present state of our infirmity, competent to heed his divine call and to accomplish our task he has given to us. "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men" (Eph. 4:8). We humbly thank him for this. It is also our innermost wish that the Nordic Lutheran churches would be helped by what we have done today in Gothenburg. Since the royal highway of worship and ordination cannot be blocked infinitely against all human odds and political calculations, is this not the time to sit down, to put aside all arrogance and bitterness and talk as Christians brothers and sisters should do, in one faith, in one Lord, as partakers in one baptism and under one sole authority to be obeyed, namely the Word of God, who is one "God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:5)?

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