

Is it still worth being a Lutheran?

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Mahtomedi, Minnesota

I want to start with a story that some of my students have heard before because I've been telling it for 50 or 60 years, but it illustrates some of the problems of ecumenism. That's why I am telling it. It's a story of a discussion that took place about a thousand years ago.

In Rome, some pressure was being brought on the pope to get rid of all the Jews in Rome. And he didn't want to do anything about it so he said to the cardinals: "Please I want to talk to the chief rabbi. If the chief rabbi says the right things, the Jews will be allowed to stay and if he says the wrong things, we'll get rid of them." So they brought in the chief rabbi and the pope said to him: "Rabbi, we are both theologians, so we communicate in symbols and signs and our discussion will be entirely in signs. And if you say the right things, the Jews will be allowed to stay and if you say the wrong things, they'll have to go. Then the pope went like this (draws a big circle with one finger) and the rabbi went like this (points a finger at the pope); and the pope went like this (makes a large X with his finger) and the rabbi went like this (points two fingers at the pope). The pope looked around and found an apple and held it up. The rabbi went through his pocket and found a piece of matzos, you know the flat Jewish bread, and held it up. The pope shook his hands and said, "That's a wonderful statement. The Jews will be allowed to stay. And he sent him away."

And he called in the cardinals and said, "I don't know what you people were fussing about." I said to him: "There's one church and it surrounds the entire world." He said, "You are the head of this church." I said to him, "There are two swords, a secular, a worldly sword and a holy sword, a sacred

sword." He said, "You hold them both." Then I said there are some foolish people that say that the earth is round. And he said, "No, the earth is flat." The rabbi went home to his wife and said, "I don't know what the fuss was all about. I got in and he said, 'We got you surrounded.' And I said to him, 'We can get to you too.' And he said, 'We can hack you to pieces.' And I said, 'We can poke your eyes out.' And then he took out his lunch and I took out mine."

Well there are always some problems with ecumenical discussions, you see. And we have inherited some of these problems. My topic that was assigned to me and that I shall address "Is it still worth being a Lutheran?"

There is a very short answer to this question. I could say, "Yes," and then we could all go home. But I would like to change it a little bit and ask: "Why is it still worth being a Lutheran?" I'm assuming that we all agree that it is still worth being a Lutheran otherwise we wouldn't be here. And I want to discuss our reasons for this conviction. There are first of all a number of fairly inadequate answers and we shall just mention them briefly.

1. Some people say it is worth being Lutheran, because, "My family is Lutheran and I have always been a Lutheran." For some people this seems to be the obvious answer. Some of you might suggest that this answer fits me, George Forell, in particular. My great grandfather, my grandfather, and my father were Lutheran pastors. My younger daughter is a Lutheran pastor and my second granddaughter is finishing her last year of education at a Lutheran theological seminary. One

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could say my family is Lutheran and we are in a rut. But this is not the reason for any of us to be Lutheran. In our pluralistic world this family approach does not appeal to many people. Most of my students, for example, would say that it shows that you have not given any thought to this rather important question of religion. On that basis we should all be pagans. There was a time when our ancestors worshipped Odin and Thor. Some of our contemporaries practice astrology and witchcraft. That is the “old-time religion.” “Give me the old-time religion,” is hardly an adequate reason for being a Lutheran.

2. My second false answer is, it is worth being a Lutheran because the church can and should be a source of entertainment and diversion. Some people believe that Lutheranism can be entertaining. They promote entertainment evangelism and claim that it is worth being a Lutheran if you only avoid all depressing aspects of Lutheranism—talking about sin and suffering, for example, putting so much emphasis on Good Friday, starting our service with a confession of sins, singing all these hymns with tunes in a minor key. That should be abandoned. If all this depressing stuff is dropped, it would still be worth being a Lutheran.

3. Then there is a third group that says—it is not a much different approach—that claims that being a Lutheran makes you healthy, wealthy and wise. It is worth being Lutheran because Christianity, and

they think especially its Lutheran version, can be the road to success. Some claim that the church is a good place to sell insurance or meet the right people. The Lutheran church is a well-established middle class church and membership is good for business. You don't have to believe anything or do anything. In particular in America there have been many who claim that the first commandment is, “Keep Smiling,” and tell you stories how once they found Christ and joined the church, economic success and personal happiness followed immediately. If you are still sad it is a sign that you are not fully Christian. The church should be a community of happy and successful, upwardly mobile people. These people may not be great readers of the Bible and may even feel Jesus and the apostles could have used more of the power of positive thinking. They claim that it is worth being a Lutheran because it will assure you a happy and successful life. They will, of course, try to avoid all theology – because they think it only leads to controversy and unhappiness.

4. And then there are those bright people—they were mentioned by other speakers—who claim that it is still worth being a Lutheran because staying with the Lutheran church may give you the opportunity to lead the Lutheran church back to Rome. They say, Rome has changed so much, adopting the vernacular, the everyday language of the people, in its liturgy, singing hymns and allegedly accepting justification by

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grace through faith, that it is time to declare the Reformation over and guide the Lutheran church back to the holy Roman church with its apostolic ministry and infallible leadership. But it will have to be done by something like a Lutheran Oxford movement. Just to convert individually to Roman Catholicism as some have done will not bring the church along. It is, therefore, still worth being a Lutheran in order to guide the Lutheran church back to Rome.

While this last group is perhaps the most interesting, it is not the largest but has probably some of the most intelligent and theologically sophisticated among its members. It is my claim that all these reasons for bring Lutheran must be rejected.

On the contrary I claim it is still worth being a Lutheran because of Lutheran theology. Lutheran theology is the Lutheran church's responsibility to the ecumenical movement. I'm a true ecumenist. I believe we ought to be Lutherans because we owe it to God, and our Lord Jesus Christ to bring the message that the Lutheran church proclaims to all Christians. We have a duty to take Lutheran theology seriously and share it with our sisters and brothers in the ecumenical church. We do this not out of pride but out of gratitude for what God has done for us by means of this theology. We are called to witness to this tradition because we believe that without this witness, an essential dimension of the Christian message would be dangerously obscured or even lost.

The center of Lutheran theology is the Cross of Christ. Lutheran theology is profoundly Christocentric. When we speak of the Word

we mean first of all the Word that became flesh according to the Gospel of St. John and which is proclaimed to us in the Holy Scriptures.

Secondarily we mean the proclamation of this word by prophets and apostles and evangelists and recorded in the Holy Scriptures. And thirdly it is the proclamation of this word, visible and spoken by the priesthood of all believers.

We live in an age when the emphasis on the centrality of Christ is considered by some exclusivist and dispensable. I constantly run into people who are willing to say it is all right to talk about the Creator God and the big bang that he caused. It is all right to talk about the Holy Spirit, who makes us all spiritual. But the Christ who says "I am the Way the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father, but by me," (John 14:6) is embarrassing in a pluralistic age. But we are called to bear witness exactly to this Christ.

The centrality of the Word in Lutheran theology means the centrality of Christ. We read the written Word from Genesis to Revelation in the light of Christ. The key to the Scriptures for us is expressed in Luther's words: *Was Christum treibet*, What drives Christ home. This hermeneutical principle of Luther's theology is one factor that makes it worth being a Lutheran because it supplies the key to the Scriptures. If it is lost, neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament makes much sense except as colorful documents of ancient times.

We read every part of the scriptures in the light of Christ's cross and resurrection. We have so much trouble with the Old Testament because we ignore the witness of Christ in the Old Testament. The Old

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Testament is, of course, a document of Jewish religion, but for us it is not only that, but also speaks about Christ from the story of Adam and Eve to Isaiah 53. If we want to understand the Old Testament as Lutherans we should note how Luther reads the Old Testament. Christ is the key, but the centrality of Christ has many implications for Lutheran theology.

It entails the distinction between Law and Gospel, God's demand and God's gift. To expect people to see the Gospel as good news demands that they know that we are involved in the Law that reminds us of the reality of fate and death, guilt and condemnation, emptiness and meaninglessness. These terms, which I first learned from my teacher Paul Tillich 60 years ago, enabled me to translate the reality of the law to my students, who thought that the law was the conventional rules of our particular society. That's what they thought the law was when they came, before they read, "Courage to Be." It is the realization that we are sick and in need of a physician, to use Jesus' terms. The universality of fate and death, guilt and condemnation, emptiness and meaninglessness made my students understand the sickness unto death, the need for a Gospel that addresses all these overwhelming realities. Lutefisk and lefse, or entertainment evangelism and, "keep smiling," do not address any of these profound realities that we must all confront. When the New York towers explode "keep smiling" or a sauerkraut supper are hardly an adequate response.

We must know that Law is real and confronts all human beings. But the Law is not the Gospel. Luther's distinction between Law and Gospel reminds us of the reality of Sin and Chaos that constantly threaten us,

and at the same time tell us of the reality of the forgiveness of sins which saves us and empowers us to forgive. The Gospel of the forgiveness of sins, for Christ's sake, is in the center of our theology. It speaks to the evils that threaten to destroy us. The glorification of the opposite of forgiveness is revenge. The reality of revenge destroys individuals as well as families and countries and constantly threatens to annihilate the world. It can only be overcome by the reality of forgiveness. People who say that the gospel of forgiveness is irrelevant to our world must live in another world from mine or the world reflected in the literature of the 20th and 21st centuries. It is constantly described in the media. You read the newspaper and it's full of this reality. It is worth being a Lutheran because the forgiveness of sins is central to Lutheran theology and the greatest need in the 21st century is precisely the forgiveness of sins. It is addressed by a clear distinction between Law and Gospel.

And it is worth being a Lutheran because we learn from it that we are sinners and saints at the same time. We are sinners when we look at ourselves, and saints when we look at Christ. There are some Christians who believe that once they are saved sin is no longer a problem. In fact some claim that since they were saved they have not sinned. This means that they either have a very trivial understanding of sin or they are not very honest, which is already a sin. One of my best agnostic friends, a distinguished professor of law, has told me many times that while he is not sure about the existence of God, he is very sure about the reality of original sin. He believes in original sin though he doesn't believe in God. We know that sin threatens us as long as we live. It is not removed by age, it only changes and

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becomes more subtle and dangerous. We have to pray for the forgiveness of sins all the time. But we also know that our sins are forgiven daily. Holy Baptism means “that the old Adam and Eve in us together with all sins and evil should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death and that the new man or woman should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God’s presence.”

Thus we can be sinners and righteous at the same time—sinners we are out of our own power and egotism, righteous because of God’s love and mercy. And this remains true as long as we live and that is why we can sing with Luther, “The Kingdom ours remaineth.”

If you are talking about a difference between these various hymnals we have, in the old red hymnal the last stanza of Luther’s great hymn was translated—in German it is “*Das Reich muss uns doch bleiben*” –it was translated, “His kingdom is forever,” which is an interesting piece of information but has nothing to do with what Luther said. He said “*Das Reich muss uns doch bleiben.*” The kingdom is ours forever. And if you don’t like the green book, I can say it has really improved the translation of Luther’s great hymn. The Kingdom is ours forever.

And the centrality of Christ in Lutheran theology also means that we have been told that the finite is the bearer of the Infinite. Now you bear with me, that’s a little complicated. God comes to us in a human baby who is true God and truly human. As Luther sings: “*Den aller Weltkreis nie umschloss liegt jetzt in Marien’s Schoß und ist ein Kindlein worden klein, der alle Ding erhaelt allein.*” Which means he who

couldn’t be contained by the universe, by the entire universe, is now in Mary’s lap and he has become a small infant who maintains everything that is. That is, the finite is the bearer of the Infinite. But while this Christological miracle is in the center of our faith. It has all kinds of implications in our Lutheran understanding of theology. It has the explanation of our understanding of Word and Sacrament and of Christian vocation. We owe the proclamation of these implications to all our Christian sisters and brothers. We mustn’t give this up. We have to share it. We are irresponsible to our Lord Jesus Christ if we give up what we have learned and not share it with the whole Christian church.

One of our great controversies in the Christian church is the conflict between Fundamentalists and Modernists. Lutherans have trouble with both groups because we know the finite is the bearer of the Infinite. The Holy Scriptures are at the same time human words and God’s Word.

They aren’t partly human and partly divine. I don’t like Bibles with red print in them because always some people think, “that’s the real Bible, the red stuff.” And the rest isn’t so much God’s words. These human words have not been transubstantiated, they remain human words but in, with and under these human words God speaks to us, God reaches us. This is true of the entire Bible. We do not believe that the Bible contains the Word of God. The Bible is the Word of God, but it does not abolish the human words and we can and should study these human words.

We are alienated from Fundamentalists because we believe that the finite bears the Infinite and are comfortable with the

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humanity of the biblical words. We are alienated from the Modernists because we believe the finite bears the Infinite and we are overwhelmed by the reality of God's Word as we encounter it in the human words of the Holy Scriptures.

Lutherans have always taught that we receive the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in with and under the bread and the wine. Here, too, we teach that the finite is the bearer of the Infinite and do not need Aristotelian substance and accident philosophy to know that we receive Christ's true body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Our Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper removes the burden of making it dependent on outdated philosophy as well as the trivialization of making the Lord's Supper a delayed memorial service for the late departed Jesus.

But there is still another aspect of the realization that the finite is the bearer of the Infinite. The Lutheran understanding of vocation depends on the awareness that we all are bearers of the Infinite. The Christian life as vocation has sometimes been understood as if the meaning of our life depended on success in our daily work. As it was occasionally described the notion was that we are saved *per vocationem* (through our vocation). This led to the notion that the rich are the good and that poverty is a sign of divine rejection. All this resulted in the understanding of capitalism as the result of Protestantism, or of success in business as evidence of divine election.

Lutheran theology never bought into this understanding of vocation. Luther taught us that we are saved *in vocatione* (in our vocation) not *per vocationem*. We are saved in our daily life and our daily work not by

what we accomplish or fail to accomplish. God may use us when we are unemployed or even when we are retired. As a person who has now been retired, for more than a decade, I am grateful that the Lord reaches out to me in my present undistinguished vocation. It is worth being a Lutheran because it teaches us to accept all of our life as a calling of God even the years that are depreciated in our culture.

For us vocation is the opportunity to serve God. As Luther writes in his wonderful little book, "The Freedom of the Christian," "As Our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor though our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same to all, that is that we may be truly Christians." ([Luther's Works] American Edition, Vol. XXXI, p. 367, if you think I made that up.) Some people claim that Luther said that you should become little Christs. He doesn't say anything about little Christs. That you should become Christ to each other, he said. That is the description of our vocation. It does not depend on our employment or on our salary. You can be unemployed and have a vocation in this sense.

Thus the finite becomes again the bearer of the Infinite and you and I become means through which God's grace reaches our neighbor. We are called to become Christs to each other, and there is no age limit to this process.

Lutheran theology has been accused of being pessimistic about human beings because Luther took sin and our involvement in sin so very seriously. But as we have seen Lutheran theology takes grace

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even more seriously; it is penultimately very realistic about the human situation. It is totally unsentimental about human goodness and virtue. We are not saved by our morality or spirituality. But ultimately Lutheran theology is completely optimistic about God's grace and willingness to save sinners. Our hope is not based on our goodness and ability to save ourselves but completely on God's love and willingness to save us. This is revealed to us on the cross of Christ. Saints are not moral superstars but sinners saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It is still worth being a Lutheran because if we trust in our own accomplishments, that we are number one and the biggest and the best as individuals as families or as nations we are bound to fail. But if we trust in Christ and His Cross we shall be saved. Not because we deserve it but because "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

A final observation—I'm almost through. If it is still worth being a Lutheran as I have claimed, then it is important to acquaint the members of our churches with our theology. One of the simplest ways is the introduction to Luther's "Small Catechism." There was a time when that wonderful little summary of the teaching of the Word was printed in every hymnal. If you have agreed with what I have described as Lutheran theology you may have noticed that it was all an exposition of the catechism. We do not need fancy theology, incomprehensible to most people. If Lutherans take the "Small Catechism" seriously we would be in good shape. It would help all of us, young and old alike. If it is still worth being a Lutheran it is essential for all of us to study Luther's "Small Catechism." Thank you.