

Doubt and Certainty in “A Lutheran Christian Life for Today”

Colleagues,

I have a poor track record in getting letters to the editor published in our ELCA magazine, THE LUTHERAN. Size-wise they are always too long, and in substance regularly quite op-ed-ish. So for this first ThTh post in August 2010 here's what the August 2010 issue of our magazine churned up in me with its one-page article under that caption above offering in the sub-head “An appreciation for doubt.” Given past rejection slips, I doubt that I should even bother to send it. So it comes your way on a hot summer day.

Maybe one of you should “say something.” For the topic of doubt and certainty is not trivial. And when you propose to be offering a distinctively “Lutheran” perspective, you've got some criteria to respect. But that doesn't happen here. Nor did it happen four years ago when the March 2006 issue of THE LUTHERAN offered four feature articles under an even feistier caption—“In Praise of Doubt.” [Check <https://crossings.org/thursday/2006/thur042706.shtml> for that one, if interested.] This time around THE LUTHERAN gets no closer to those criteria for that subject than it did in 2006. So don't believe what it tells you. THE LUTHERAN word on doubt and certainty is something else.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

To the Editor, THE LUTHERAN

The August 2010 issue urges readers (p.3) to “appreciate doubt” and to get rid of their yen for “certainty.” It’s the first offering in a series under the rubric “A Lutheran Christian Life for Today.” That “L” adjective nowadays is in debate throughout world-wide Lutheranism. So what IS a Lutheran perspective on doubt and certainty? Page three gives us THE LUTHERAN’s answer. Question: By what criteria does the p.3 perspective deserve the “L” adjective?

The author is going after fundamentalist rigidity, know-it-all folks, who have no doubts at all and are “certain” about everything in Christian faith and life. Granted, he’s not pooh-poohing fiducial faith or confident trust in God. But concern for certainty sure takes a beating. Put mildly, his brush-strokes are way too wide.

E.g., there is “non-fundie” rigidity too on this one, know-it-all folks—also in the ELCA—who are just as rigid in their own brand of certainty as the fundies may be. But that’s another topic.

Vexing in this article is that certainty itself – with no qualifications – becomes the whipping-boy. There’s no hint that there might be a valid kind of certainty-seeking in what the header calls “A Lutheran Christian life for today.” That sort of certainty, that confident trust in God, doesn’t presume to know or speak everything about God (what Luther sometimes termed the “hidden” God, sometimes the “nude” God) of glory-theology. Instead rightful certainty-seeking – precisely for Lutheran Christian life today – arises from the theology of the cross. Here faith is not know-it-all, but a confident trust in God’s promise arising from Good Friday and Easter. But that too gets

brushed away on p.3.

Certainty becomes a real villain on that page. It is “unneeded . . . seductive . . . impoverishes faith . . . very un-Christian . . . the opposite of faith.” The very last words of the article urge us “to bring the arrogance of certainty to its knees.” And with certainty now having no leg to stand on, former certainty-seekers are encouraged to get on the doubt-bandwagon. Why? Because “doubt is really quite beautiful. For too long we have been denying doubt the respect it deserves.”

For a second opinion on this subject, a genuine “op ed,” listen to these sentences from Luther. They come from his 1525 debate with Erasmus, super-scholar of the 16th century, who also praised doubt and pooh-poohed certainty-seeking as Luther’s hang-up.

“My dear Erasmus . . . To start with . . . you say that ‘you find so little satisfaction in assertions that you would readily take up the Sceptics’ [=a school of philosophical doubters in Greek antiquity] position wherever the authority of Holy Scriptures and the Church’s decisions permit.’ That is the outlook which appeals to you.”

“To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all.”

“Away with Sceptics . . . from the company of us Christians! Let us have people who will assert, people twice as inflexible as the Stoics! Take the Apostle Paul—how often does he call for that “full assurance” [Luther uses Paul’s Greek term “pleerophoria,” appearing many times in Paul’s epistles], which is, simply, an assertion of conscience, of the highest degree of certainty and conviction.”

“Nothing is more familiar or characteristic among Christians than assertion. Take away assertion, and you take away Christianity.”

“I am the biggest fool of all for wasting my time and words on something that is clearer to see than the sun. What Christian can endure the idea that we should deprecate assertions?”

“You wish that you had liberty to be a sceptic! What Christian could talk like that? . . . For uncertainty is the most miserable thing in the world.”

Luther concludes: “My dear Erasmus . . . leave us free to make assertions, and to find in assertions our satisfaction and delight; and you may applaud your Sceptics . . . till Christ calls you too! The Holy Spirit is no Sceptic, and the things he has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions, but assertions—surer and more certain than sense and life itself.”

Enough already.

That “appreciation for doubt” in this August issue is the first in a coming series, “A Lutheran Christian life for today.” Which of these two authors—with their 100% contrary proposals on doubt and certainty—should we heed for living THE LUTHERAN Christian life today? Next question: What are we likely to get next month as this series unfolds? What will be the sources, the criteria, that inform that “L” adjective? Ought they not be identified? Seems to me that is not an unfair question.

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