

Theology of the Cross

Colleagues,

On the last day of this month, the Eve of the big celebration All Saints Day on Nov. 1, Lutherans celebrate Reformation Day. The day recalls Luther's "going public"—482 years ago—with his 95 Theses critiquing congregational practice of the sacrament of penance in the medieval church. If Luther's action actually constituted the opening shot of the Reformation, it's well to note that it was issues of pastoral theology that were the trip wire. Bons mots among the 95 theses are such as these: Jesus' own word about penance (repentance) makes it an everyday component of Christian life. The true treasure of the church is the Gospel, not at all the extra merits accumulated by the saints. Penance is no commercial transaction with God in order to minimize pain or suffering. It is rather following Christ in faith while carrying one's own cross. Just to be shouting "the cross, the cross" is no guarantee that a pastor is promoting the "theology of the cross."

In this summer 1998 a bombshell, not unrelated to the above, dropped in the midst of Lutherans in the USA. It was a "Survey of [USA] Lutheran Beliefs and Practices," carried out under the eye of the top research analysts from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Lutheran Brotherhood, one of the two mega fraternal insurance groups among US Lutherans, sponsored the research and published the results. In introducing the document the LB editors "forewarn [us] that some of the responses to our survey questions are disturbing." "Disturbing" is a tame word. "Horrendous" was the first one that came to my mind, and then a more reflective "sobering."

Last November 4600 four-page questionnaires went out to Lutheran

households across the country from all US Lutheran groupings. After 4 weeks half of them had come back. Here's the results:

1. 48% said "People can only be justified before God by loving others."
2. 60% agreed with the statement "The main purpose of the gospel is God's rules for right living."
3. 67% said yes to the statement: "Although there are many religions in the world, most of them lead to the same God."
4. 56% affirmed that "God is satisfied if a person lives the best life one can."
5. 44% would not say yes to the statement: "Property (house, automobile, money, etc.) belongs to God and we only hold it in trust for God."
6. 41% disagreed with the notion that children enter the world as sinners.
7. 28% couldn't say yes to the statement "God is one divine essence but three persons."

So, as Luther says in the Small Catechism over and over again: What does this mean? Here are some possible answers:

1. It means legalism is alive and well in American Lutheranism. But why should that surprise us, since Luther's own theology of "simul justus et peccator" [Christians are righteous and sinners at the same time] says "old Adam" (= a legalist) is alive and at work in every baptized Christian? Yet it does come as a jolt when so many Lutherans publicly confess it as their considered belief, and not as the demon they too need to wrestle with daily.
2. It signals how US Lutherans have been feeding on the Pelagianism of America's cultural religion, with its "innocent babies, trying harder, and doing the best you

can.” It also points toward the pervasiveness among Lutherans of America’s “religion in general” where all people of good will & moral fiber are OK with God regardless of their religious affiliation—or disaffiliation.

3. Although 77% said “It is important for me to be a member of a Lutheran church,” you wonder what the term “Lutheran” meant for these folks, since justification by faith was a minority opinion among the respondents. The same goes for what the term “Christian” meant to these Lutherans when two-thirds of them thought that “most religions in the world lead to the same God.”
4. These results are revealing data to set alongside the international Lutheran event of the summer, the formal adoption of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Rome’s official response to the Joint Declaration, a subject of earlier ThTh essays, asked whether works and merit didn’t still factor in for a sinner’s justification. Half of the Lutherans in the LB survey said the same thing. Even as some of us Lutherans may twitch, there’s almost a “joint declaration” here too. One slight difference between the focus on works in the late Medieval church and that of these Lutheran Pelagians is that the Medieval variety still wanted to keep faith in the mix. Faith AND works was their motto. Thus the Reformers designated them semi-Pelagians. The folks in the LB survey however seem not to bother with the faith component at all. They opt for Pelagianism “straight,” with no faith-additives at all.
5. Whatever else the LB survey reveals, it shows that Lutheranism in the USA is a mission field. As Pogo once said back in the fifties: “We have met the enemy and he is us.” Regardless of formal agreements on justification at the official ecumenical level, back home the Lutheran

“church militant”—as one wag put it—shows symptoms of being the “church malignant.” There’s widespread infection from “another Gospel,” which is, of course, no Gospel at all. The “world religion” that has invaded us is patent Pelagianism with its American capitalist twist that property I have acquired is rightfully “mine,” not goods on loan from the Creator. Episcopal oversight, mission strategies, pastoral praxis, all need to focus here.

6. “The time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God.” So said Saint Peter in his first epistle (4:17). Could this be the message US Lutherans need to hear? Peter’s Greek word for judgment is “krima.” The crime, the incrimination, he pinpoints is “not obeying, not listening to, the Gospel.” Yet he is upbeat for those who do listen to that Gospel. Such Gospel-listeners do indeed survive the judgment, and he concludes by encouraging us to “entrust ourselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.” That’s a good word for Lutherans to hear as we attend to the “in house” reformation we need when we celebrate on the Eve of All Saints this year. The place to post this year’s Reformation Manifesto is on our own church door.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder