

# A Review of Carl Braaten's "Principles of Lutheran Theology"

Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007)

A few weeks ago, Ed Schroeder handed me his own copy of Carl Braaten's *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Second Edition) and asked whether I might append a word for Thursday Theology in review of this text. Ed was well aware that Carl Braaten was my Doktorvater. For Carl's impeccable courage and willingness to work with me and see me through the process of getting my Ph.D. (though at the time it was still called a Th.D.), I will forever be grateful.

In this second edition, appearing 24 years since the first edition, one will note the same seven chapters corresponding to the seven principles he wishes to lift up for our Lutheran integrity: canon, confession, ecumenism, christocentricity (really, about soteriology or salvation), sacrament, law/gospel, and two-kingdoms.

What is different in this second edition is his inclusion of a chapter on The Trinitarian Principle. Commenting on the difference, Braaten notes, "Ever since its [the first edition's] publication I was aware of a glaring shortcoming. There was no chapter on God." (ix)

I purchased and read the first edition of *Principles*, interestingly enough, the very year I entered doctoral studies at LSTC in 1983. It was hot off the presses. For some, this book's appearance marked a change from Braaten as the champion

of liberationists to being liberation theology's critic. To be sure, there are criticisms of liberation theology in Principles; but it would be a caricature to consider Braaten antithetical to the concern of liberation of the oppressed. Braaten, for his part, has always maintained that. Perhaps this rereading has helped me to see a little more clearly that he was right.

In fact, this rereading has helped me to see that Braaten continues to be a passionate advocate for confessional integrity, and for that I would see him as a kindred spirit. There are also signs of ecumenical hope in his work (part of his desire to be an "evangelical catholic"), which correspond with his choice of seeking to work these last many years at the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. His own Doktorvater was Paul Tillich; and it was Tillich who called for holding up both Protestant principle and Catholic substance. Carl has much of Tillich's fervor in his work.

His undaunted pointing to the gospel as the center of Scripture is powerfully inviting. In this rereading, I find his criticisms of Protestant fundamentalism on the use of Scripture and canon ring out with a freshness today that needs greater hearing. Reading Scripture apart from Luther's "canon within the canon" (was Christum treibt-what conveys/urges/necessitates Christ) is to miss the message. But there are many who legalistically contend for a kind of authority of Scripture and an undifferentiated sense of canonicity does precisely that damage. "This flat, undifferentiated view of the books of the Bible finally triumphed and today survives in Protestant fundamentalism; some Lutherans are located in this group." (11) Maybe a few more than "some."

His understanding of Lutheranism as a confessional movement within the body of Christ is likewise refreshing (35-37). We need to be continuing to ask the place of "justification by

faith alone" in the midst of a church and world that often disowns this principle. If we forget this, if we forget the *semper reformanda* (which is not separation from the church, but reforming the church) in this effort, Braaten maintains, we may as well pack it in as Lutherans. We would be betraying our own heritage.

I also find that Braaten's new chapter has the merit of lifting up the value and place of Trinitarian thinking in spite of general disregard for the teaching in many universities. The contention for a new way of doing natural theology, in this regard, is seen by Braaten as not incompatible with Luther's sense of the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God). His analysis of Karl Jasper's on the subject is particularly intriguing and helpful in giving us a sense of the nature of how God is real but not in a way that we can appreciate God's realness, a presence that begs for revealing in the presence of Jesus the Christ, grasped by faith. "Luther's *deus absconditus* is a God who exerts pressure on the backs of all persons and institutions to do what is right, demand justice, apply the law, and secure the common good, even at times against their own self-interest." (82) But Luther's theology of the cross "meets God in the suffering and death of the crucified Jesus" (85), over/against all the theologies of glory that misrepresent God in all of God's fullness. "In Jesus Christ there takes place an exchange of attributes, an action that Luther called the 'blessed exchange' (*die froehliche Wechsel*). Jesus takes all that we are in our sinful humanity so that we might receive all that he has from the plentitude of his divinity." (86) In many ways, this chapter is a helpful addition, even more openly appealing to Luther (six of his twenty-one indexed references to Luther are in this chapter alone).

I guess I would still have preferred, though, that Braaten had made more explicit reference to the confessions in his attempts

to put together principles of Lutheran theology. Those were lacking in his first work, and of course, still lack here since the other chapters were not revisited. In particular, for example, is a noticeable absence of seeing the place of Article IV in the Apology as a useful hermeneutic for Scripture. To be sure, he cites the shibboleth of justification by faith alone and all the solas, but the substance is not as crisp or clear as it might otherwise be had he gone to explore how Apology IV helps provide a hermeneutic over the real problematic alternative-opinio legis, our leaning toward the law in biblical hermeneutics.

This is also apparent to me in his treatment of the teaching on ministry. Rather than seeing the ministry as an issue of old vs. new (as in 2 Corinthians, for example), he sees ministry as dichotomized between high church (ordained) over low church (laity) (53ff.) He cites AC VII, but the issue here is AC V-and again, seeing the fuller treatment of ministry in Apology IV (which took up articles IV, V, VI, and XX) would have been useful.

And again, this distinction of law and gospel might have provided keener insights on the treatment of the two-kingdoms, seeing them as "both kingdoms" of God but different ways that God deals with the world-as different as justice and mercy. To be sure, Braaten is on track with this to some degree, but an authentic Lutheran view here is hard to discern from the larger impetus of Karl Barth (Barth receives almost as many notations as Luther).

Why not, when articulating principles of Lutheran theology, truly go ad fontes and bring the freshness of the Lutheran confessions to bear on the signs of our times today? I think that is still possible-and still liberating and ecumenical and refreshing in the promise of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

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