

# Aarhus Conference by Fred Niedner and Dave Truemper

Last week (January 16-19) approximately 125 Lutheran theologians from around the world gathered in Denmark's second city, Aarhus, for a conference, "The Future of Lutheran Theology: Charisms & Contexts." Sponsored by the Theological Faculty of the University of Aarhus and the Editorial Board of Dialog, along with support from the Danish and German Lutheran churches, the conference sought to identify those charisms that are both characteristic of Lutheran theology and promising as resources for that theology's future development, as well as to note and describe those (especially new) contexts in which Lutheran theology will be required to play out whatever future it may, in the mercy of God, still have before it. Our aim in this guest report is to describe the event we experienced, and then to offer some analytical and critical reactions to the conference.

The planning committee commissioned about half a dozen papers for presentation to plenary sessions of the conference (there were two such on each of the three days). In addition, participants were invited to propose papers for workshop/seminar sessions around approximately twenty or twenty-five pre-selected themes; about sixty proposed papers were programmed for the three three-hour sessions that ended each afternoon's work (with six to eight workshops running in parallel during those times).

The plenary papers were "In Search for an Adequate Theology of Grace," by Robert Jenson (response by Christoph Schwoebel of Heidelberg); "Communicating the Grace of God in a Plural Society," by Ingolf Dalferth of Zurich (response by Risto Saarinen of Helsinki) [Dalferth was unable to attend, and as a result Saarinen was invited to expand his response into a free-

standing paper]; "The Grace of God and Equality of Human Persons," by Monica Melanchthon of Chennai, India, with a response by Christina Grenholm from Karlstadt, Sweden; "Reconciliation and Forgiveness in an Unjust Society," by Bishop Ambrose Moya from South Africa, with a response by Guillermo Hansen of Buenos Aires, Argentine; and "The Grace of God in a Darwinian World," by Ted Peters of Berkeley, with a response by Choong Chee Pang from Singapore. In addition there was a panel discussion one evening on "Lutheran Contributions to Ecumenical Theology: Minimalism versus Maximalism," and on another evening a pair of lectures on Danish notables Grundtvig and Kierkegaard and their respective relationships with Luther and the Lutheran Reformation. Topics for the workshop sessions developed the conference's theme and aims; these included "Lutheran Ecclesiology and Lutheran Catholicity," "Lutheran Theology and the Non-Christian Religions," "Modernity and the Doctrine of God's Regiments," and "The Tensions in Lutheranism," to name just a handful of the more than twenty session themes.

Significantly, the conference was marked by prayer and Eucharist. The opening evening session was concluded with a celebration of Holy Communion at St John's church adjacent to the campus, and on Sunday morning the bishop of the Aarhus diocese presided and preached at a Eucharist at the Cathedral Church. Striking was the fact that the pastor of St John's church, as well as the bishop, participated in the whole conference, and the three local members of the planning committee served as assisting ministers at the Sunday celebration at the cathedral.

One other feature of the conference arrangements deserves mention. With meals served in a student dining room at the university, it was possible for conferees to continue conversations and expand acquaintances at the midday and evening meals.

The arrangements, as well as the facilities, made possible the extensive and delightful contacts that were possible among the participants, who represented Lutheran churches and educational institutions from about eighteen countries around the world. Though Scandinavian participants were the largest contingent, there were about a dozen and a half from southern hemisphere countries. Striking by their small number of registrants were the Germans – though it was reported that this was examination week in the German universities.

## **The Theme**

It's evident from even a casual reading of the invited plenary addresses that the conference organizers counted on the theme of "grace" to carry the weight of moving Lutheran theology into the future. Conversely, one might well notice that a number of traditional Lutheran theologoumena were notable in their absence, such as justification by faith, the distinction between law and gospel, the corrolary relationship between promise and faith, the notion of tension and paradox, the differentiation and distinction of God's two kingdoms or realms, and the theology of the cross (though this theme did appear in at least one of the plenary addresses and in one of the workshop sessions).

Robert Jenson argued that the future of Lutheran theology may be found in the extent to which it ceases to be particularly Lutheran theology and becomes a piece of and contributor to catholic theological work.

Niels Henryk Gregersen presented "Ten Theses on the Future of Lutheran Theology." He argued the impossibility of making Luther fit in the molds and patterns that have become the cliches and bumper stickers for generations of popularizers of the Reformer's thought; specifically, he insisted that Luther taught

“double predestination” and that the “theology of the cross” was precisely not the meta-theological concept that shaped the whole of Luther’s thought.

Continuing the notion of grace as the lynchpin for the future of Lutheran theology, two presentations by theologians from the so-called third world gave the Saturday plenary sessions an edge of liberation and social justice concerns. Monica Melanchthon, from the Gurukul seminary in India, and Bishop Ambrose Moya from South Africa, gave back-to-back expression to theology from the underside. Melanchthon sought to link the experience of the grace of God with the achievement of liberation from oppression; Moya argued that the role of the church is to work for the liberation of the oppressed.

Finally, on Sunday morning PLTS’s Ted Peters gave attendees a look at the challenge presented by the worldview of Darwinian thought. He suggested (in the printed and more theologically-developed version of his presentation) that one of the more important areas for conversation between Lutheran theology and Darwinian thought is the extent to which it might be possible to speak of “grace” within the framework of a world dominated by evolutionary biological principles.

At the risk of giving a short toot with your reporters’ own horns, we offer a quick summary of Niedner’s and Truemper’s workshop papers. Building on biblical gospel narrative, Niedner developed a case for connecting Lutheranism’s traditional reticence about “double predestination” with the question of the extent to which it is required or even necessary for Lutherans in dialogue with persons from other faiths to conclude that Muslims or Buddhists, e.g., are to be consigned to hellfire or outer darkness. He argued that, just as the Lutheran view of the doctrine of election stops short of the “terrible decree” of condemnation or election to perdition, so Lutherans might well

give energetic witness to the Christian Gospel while stopping short of insisting that those of other faiths will necessarily “burn in hell.”

And your other guest correspondent, Truemper, read a paper in which he suggested both the need to, and a method for actually accomplishing, the kind of reading of the Lutheran Confessional Writings that can make positive and constructive use of them for the contemporary theological task. Proposing a method he called “evangelical analogy,” he suggested that one could find the confessional writings to be resourceful if one sought to identify how a given portion of those sixteenth-century documents developed its confession of faith and witness to the gospel, both by discerning the document’s diagnosis of a particular problem and by identifying that same document’s way of using the gospel to address that problem. “Do it like that,” was his counsel – without being restricted either to the precise language and theological formulation of the confessional writings or dismissing the confessional writings as so historically relativized as to make them irrelevant.

Sometime ThTh correspondent and Crossings community leader Robin Morgan gave a workshop presentation on the value of a law/gospel hermeneutic for the church’s concern for social justice. (Robin’s paper circulated earlier on this network as ThTh 228.)

And our regular ThTh guru and commentator, Ed Schroeder, in fact made two presentations, one to a pre-conference gathering on missiology and the other at a workshop session. The former sought to articulate a freshly Lutheran theology of mission that was at once grounded in Reformation theology and at the same time engagingly critical of much of the accepted assumptions of contemporary Lutheran missiological thinking, and the latter presented distinctive Lutheran charisms (law/gospel as bible-reading hermeneutic and two kingdoms as world-reading

hermeneutic). (Ed's second paper circulated earlier here as ThTh 229.)

So the Crossings Community and the ThTh crowd were well represented and weighed in with substantial appeals to the law/gospel and two kingdoms tradition that have been hallmarks of the CC and ThTh since their beginnings.

### **Reactions, Laudatory and Critical**

There's a lot to praise about the conference.

- The very fact that the conference occurred as it did is a laudable achievement. Global in scope, consciously giving voice to the wide range of schools of thought in contemporary Lutheran theology, patient in allowing the various points of view to come to expression and to engage one another in open forum and in the more private forum of table talk, the conference was patently a clear success.
- The juxtaposition of theological conversation and prayer/worship was impressive. Two celebrations of the Eucharist in local churches, and daily morning worship (simply a chorale and a reading from scripture) – all with conference planners (Niels Henryk Gregerson, Bo Kristian Holm, Peter Widmann) as leaders or assisting ministers – were impressive in their explicit location of theological thought and conversation in connection with the church's life and language of prayer and worship.
- Though (in the judgment of your visiting correspondents) the planners' "line" on grace as the focal concept for the conference dominated the setup and scheduling and assignment of topics for the plenary sessions, it was quickly evident in several of the responses and in numerous interventions from the floor that the collective opinion was much less united around that theme than was

the effort of the planners. And that diversity was richly echoed in the workshops and in the table talk.

Nevertheless, it strikes us that there continues to be a substantial and significant gulf, perhaps a chasm of the sort mentioned in our Lord's parable about the rich man and Father Abraham, between the thought of those Lutheran theologians who would construct a future out of the stuff of "nature and grace" and of a theology about the cross and those who (like us) are committed to a law/gospel and two kingdoms hermeneutic and to an understanding of theologia crucis as more than merely a theology about the cross or about human suffering. In what follows, we propose to expand our analysis and critique of the current state of Lutheran theology as that can be measured from expressions and interventions at this conference, in particular with reference to these two themes: why focus on grace rather than faith? and why not use the notion of a theologia crucis in recognizable continuity with its origins in Luther and his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation?

### **Sola gratia or sola fide?**

Several conference participants, including Ed Schroeder, pointed out that by identifying the characteristic Lutheran charism as grace, Lutherans would in effect return to the Medieval theologies that saw "nature and grace" as the framework of God's and the church's primary action in the world. "God perfects nature through grace," says the kerygma that both underlies and proceeds from such theology. That very theology made room for the developments and abuses that gave rise to the reformers' objections, and after the reformers made their confession at Augsburg, the Roman Catholic confutators noted that the Catholics and the protestors could agree on a sola gratia principle. The heresy of Confessio Augustana, said the confutators, was its insistence on justification by faith rather

than by the works that issue from the grace by which God perfects our nature as well as the whole world's.

It seems that the room many Lutherans find for making liberation theology and concern for justice the primary working theology for today comes from choosing grace as Lutheranism's primary charism. This tendency downplays the hermeneutics implicit in distinguishing carefully between law and gospel or between the two realms of God's activity in the world. Liberation and social justice theologians expressed fear and suspicion that emphasis on law-gospel and two-kingdoms concerns leads to individualistic forms of Christianity that can too easily sit by in apathy or paralysis while oppression overwhelms the poor. Law-gospel theologians argued, in turn, that liberation and social justice theology baptizes and even justifies political movements, and with its message of what the church ought, should, and must do it tends to preach predominantly law and not gospel. In many ways, the conversation at Aarhus between Bishop Ambrose Moya from South Africa, who presented a form of Marxist liberation theology, and Guillermo Hansen who responded to Moya with a careful law-gospel and two-kingdoms critique, epitomized the stances from which the Lutherans gathered at Aarhus sought to discern their most precious charism for today's context.

### **Which theology of the cross?**

The conference demonstrated that "theologia crucis" remains a highly popular shibboleth among Lutherans around the world. "Theology of the cross" seemed to mean several different things, however – judging by how various presenters at Aarhus used the phrase. For some, "theology of the cross" served as the name for the assertion that God suffers with or along side humankind. In a similar vein, others identified themselves as theology of the cross proponents because they proclaim a Christ whose life reveals that God takes the side of and works justice for the



oppressed, the poor, and the outcasts of this world.

One African theologian declared that on his continent all talk of the cross is irrelevant at best and dangerous at worst. Crosses of silver and gold remain symbols of colonialist oppression in Africa, he argued, and he offered as an alternative a “theology of blood.” Some speakers criticized certain images and messages that claim the name “theology of the cross.” For example, simplistic notions of a transaction by which “Jesus died for our sins” fail to capture the full import of “theologia crucis,” as does the common view that suffering is a portal through which one must pass so as to reach vindication and resurrection on the other side.

Curiously, neither the approved nor discredited versions of “theologia crucis” correspond clearly to Luther’s formative use of that phrase in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518). There Luther proposes not so much a message, but a method of doing theology. In theses 19 – 21 Luther distinguishes between theologians of glory who claim to see the invisible things of God in earthly things and events (including events in the life of Christ!), and theologians of the cross who comprehend the visible and manifest things of God through suffering and the cross. Understanding the difference between these alternative methods requires hard work and faithful conversation partners. Moreover, it remains a continual challenge because we sinners are wired to function as theologians of glory. We instinctively see God in the waxing and waning of our personal circumstances or in the fortunes of our politics. As a community of Christians who would find in “theologia crucis” a formative tool, we Lutherans have plenty of work to do if we would continue our use that term and its referent in a coherent and unifying manner.

**Closing Remarks**

We warmly commend the planners and organizers of this conference, and we sincerely hope that it will be possible, as many participants have expressed the hope, to arrange another conference in a couple of years, in order to continue and even focus the global conversation around the future of Lutheran theology. For its charisms are great resources, and the contexts in which that theology will have to be done will be increasingly diverse and challenging in the years ahead.

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