

Lutheran World Federation Consultation—The Augsburg Aha! of 1530 at Augsburg 2009.

Colleagues,

It was agony and ecstasy.

Ecstasy for all 120 of us from 30 different nations just to be together at the Lutheran World Federation consultation for seven days (March 25-31, 2009) in Augsburg, Germany. That alone was heavenly. And the theme: “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches. Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today.” Focusing on that for a whole week with Lutheran sibs from around the world! Even more heavenly.

So where the agony? Who suffered?

The Gospel suffered—to be more explicit, the Gospel as confessed at Augsburg 1530 [hereafter A1530]. The original Augsburg Aha! about the gospel, documented in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, suffered. That A1530 Gospel was sometimes in agony. No wall-to-wall ecstasy for that Gospel at A2009.

For some participants seeing/hearing the Gospel itself in agony at A2009 was itself a new Augsburg Aha! Well, it may not really have been a new Aha!—not for everyone in attendance. If you’ve been reading LWF publications over the years, which reflect the “Perspectives and Practices Today” in world Lutheranism—AND if A1530 is central to your own “Perspectives and Practices Today”—you’ve seen ample evidence of the dissonance. Of course, it’s not the LWF that is the cause of this, for it simply mirrors what’s going on among the 140 member churches and 70-some million Lutherans around the worldwide Lutheranism. In worldwide

Lutheranism today, A1530, Lutheranism's Magna Charta, is not a common confession among Lutherans—though it is claimed to be such, I would imagine, in the constitutions of nearly all of those 140 member churches.

So, even if you knew this beforehand, A2009 gave eye-and-ear-witness to the fact. Saddest of all perhaps was that even though we were meeting just minutes away from the very palace where the AC of 1530 was first read out loud, some of the presenters at A2009 were clueless about, and in some cases flat-out contradicted, A1530.

Why do I say that? Because “other gospels” were also offered from the podium—both at the plenary sessions where all of us listened to 21 (yes!) presentations during those 7 days, and in the 4 smaller-numbered seminar study groups, where 40-plus additional papers were offered. Now and then one of the offerings explicitly contradicted A1530, though I'm fairly sure the persons making these proposals didn't know they were doing so. It's hard to imagine that they would knowingly have done so—in Augsburg of all places! More on this below.

At first these paragraphs may sound like a cranky old Lutheran moaning “They didn't do it my way!” Not so. I am initially “just” reporting. No commentary—yet. Here's a case in point.

At the closing communion service the name of Christ appeared 20 times in the printed worship folder, along with 10 or so “Jesus” mentions. In the sermon, by contrast, we never heard either name spoken once. And the preacher was an LWF staffer from Geneva. I'm confident that the preacher didn't know, didn't notice, that the homily was Christ-less. But it clearly was. I did listen.

That crass contradiction – 30 times and never once – was the elephant in the living room that no one spoke about. But that grey-eminence was there throughout our time together. “Is Christ

necessary, or not? And if necessary, necessary for what?" That was THE issue at A1530. And so it was at A2009. "Is Christ necessary—and why?" really ought to have been THE stated theme for the consultation. For it continued to spook us throughout the conversations, and no one addressed it head-on. Many (most?) seemed not to notice it.

In the language of 1530, as Bob Bertram, taught many of us, it is the issue of "Christum necessare," "necessitating Christ" in order for something, anything, to claim the name Lutheran. Of course, those Augsburg Confessors in 1530 never claimed to be Lutherans. Their claim was that "necessitating Christ" was the sine qua non, the foundation-stone, for any teaching or preaching to qualify as "Christian." At Augsburg 1530 they confessed that if any sermon didn't "need" to "use Christ" (that was their verb) to bring Good News to the congregation, it was not a Christian sermon. The labels that A1530 gave for Christless sermons are not flattering.

Throughout the 6 days preceding that closing liturgy at A2009 that same Yea! and Nay!—that yin and yang, that agony and ecstasy, that bang and whimper—about the Gospel itself marked our meeting. But we never addressed it head on. Other yin/yangs dominated.

Publicly discussed were agonies, tensions between the northern and southern hemispheres of world Lutheranism, masculine-feminine theological perspectives, the "oppression" of everybody needing to speak English, and the dominance of European and North American theology in world Lutheranism to the diminution of theology coming from Asian, African, Latin American voices.

As serious as those yin-yangs are, the Christ-necessity question is surely more fundamental. Literally "fundament-al," at the foundation. It was not only in the sermon at the very end, but

throughout the week we heard proposals where Christ was not necessary for the lecturer to bring us to the goal that he or she proposed. That doesn't mean that Christ's name did not appear regularly in the "Transformative Perspectives and Practices" that speakers proposed. Instead it was this A1530 measuring stick: was Christ actually "needed" to give the proposed "perspective" its foundations. Was Christ needed to validate a proposed "practice" for the life of the church? More than once the de facto answer was No—though no speaker ever spoke such words.

Those may sound like harsh words—or even worse, "judgmental," (at the top of the list of no-no's in today's p.c. world)—but initially they are simply reportorial. In that closing sermon, though I do not have the printed text before me at the moment, I did listen hard, riding "high" on all the Christ-confessing in the rest of the liturgy, and THAT word was never spoken. It was a Christ-less sermon. But more about the sermon below. More than one of the presentations followed the same pattern. I heard all 21 plenary papers "live" and the ten in my own seminar. The several dozen papers in the other three seminars I didn't hear, but I've checked the printed text for them on the consultation website. I am simply reporting what happened at A2009. Yes, it was great fun, a gift to be personally present in that assembly. But it was not all fun for the Gospel.

Sometimes sparks about that did erupt in the plenary. But no sustained blaze. Example: plenary presentation by a seminary professor (US, ELCA), topic: "What God has Created will not be Lost: Constructing a more Inclusive Soteriology." First question from the floor: "Your proposal about 'the demise of hell' contradicts AC 17. Does that make any difference to you?" "I'll have to think about that" was the response. Next question, possibly even feistier: "Can you show us how your more inclusive soteriology is different from the all-inclusive soteriology of

universalist/unitarian theology?" Answer: I object to being labeled.

Neither of these interventions came from me—which may surprise ThTh readers. Had I spoken it might have been this: "Your overarching thesis, made very explicit at the beginning, is the 'relationship of love God has with creation.' Never once do you tell us about the Creator's criticism of that same creation that is also loved. It finds no place in your proposed "more inclusive" soteriology. It DOES, however, have a place in the soteriology of A1530. So whose soteriology is more inclusive, whose soteriology less so?

And then this second one, if I would have had the floor-mike a second time: "The major theologians you cite for support are Juergen Moltmann, Ian Barbour, Sally McFague, Hans Kueng, S.Mark Heim. Maybe Moltmann, maybe Kueng, both Germans, know what happened here in 1530, but their own theological confession is different from A1530. They've said so many times. But do any of the others even have a clue about the soteriology of A1530? If they are clueless about A1530—and I've read them, published reviews of their books, so I know they are—why should we here at A2009 take our clues from them?"

There were other sparks. E.g., African voices noting the absence of "mission" anywhere in the titles of the 21 plenary presentation—and never for serious consideration in the discussions that followed. "Those are the Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today that we are looking for in coming here," was their word. Only twice in the 40-some seminar presentation titles did the word Mission occur. One was Seminar III: Worship and other Christian Practices, where Thomas Shattauer (Wartburg Seminary, USA, ELCA) presented his "God's Mission in the Practice of Assembly." The other was my own offering on Luther as Mission Theologian in Seminar II on

Creation, Redemption, Eschatology. I don't know what happened in Tom's seminar with his offering. My presentation came as the very last in our seminar and since the clock was ticking very little discussion ensued. Hardly a bang, more like a whimper.

Another spark. In oral reports at the very end from the seminars and discussion groups one reporter asked: "Are we in danger of creating a new Luther-cult here at A2009?" That was a surprise to me. I wonder what had happened in his small group conversations during the week. With A1530 a minority voice all week long in the plenary's 21 proposals—and Blessed Martin likewise—I wondered where he saw this nemesis. If it had come from his seminar group, then I wish I had been there. For neither Luther nor the AC were in any danger of being put on pedestals in my seminar, nor from anything else I encountered at the consultation.

But ML and AC weren't totally absent. Also in the plenary program—mirablile dictu! Get this—another Augsburg Aha! Four of the plenary speakers at A2009—one Argentinean, one Australian, and two Americans—all of them profs at Lutheran seminaries today were once students of blessed Bob Bertram. Imagine that! Though not to the plenary audience, but at table-talk, all four confessed: "I learned my Lutheran theology—especially A1530—from Bob." So their presence on the program was extra ecstasy for me. Could that reporter's shreck about a possible Luther-cult have been grounded in these four A1530-faithful speakers? Maybe so. They were persuasive—but then, I'm not exactly neutral on this one.

With my own Aha! about four of Bob's students up at the mike on the podium, I re-focused the introduction to my small part in Seminar II. "We started our seminar 5 days ago with Kristin Graff-Kallevåg's presentation from the 'Mannermaa-school' of Luther scholarship. Here at the close of our seminar I want to

show you something from the 'Bertram school' of Luther interpretation—not only about Luther but from the “Bertram school” of Augsburg Confession interpretation. Here are a few sentences about this school (I ad libbed a bit) But we do not call ourselves the Bertram School. Instead we use the label he proposed, the Crossings-school. It is now a worldwide internet Crossings Community <www.crossings.org> where the theology of the cross is at the center of our work and our agenda is “crossing” the church and world with that theology wherever God has placed us. Here is an example of “Crossings theology” linked to the mission agenda Christ has given us.

After all this (allegedly neutral) reportorial data, now some analysis and critique.

We were meeting in Augsburg, and frequent mention was made of the historic Augsburg Confession and Apology confessed in this city in 1530, and then the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, and then in our lifetime the Roman Catholic–Lutheran “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” of just ten years ago(1999).

Back to that Magna Charta A1530. Fundamental to that confession was a specific statement of what the Christian gospel is, contra the semi-Pelagian gospel that dominated the church catholic of that day. Central to that gospel confessed in 1530 was “the merits and benefits of Christ” as the heart and center of what the gospel is, of what God in Christ saw fit to do—in that first-ever Holy Week—in order to offer free forgiveness to sinners.

At A1530 it was the “Why Jesus?” question, the same question asked today of Christians by Hindus, Muslims, all other world religions and now prominent in our day, the proponents of secular gospels. We saw and heard at A2009 that the A1530

question is still alive today, now within worldwide Lutheranism—and that not all the answers coming from voices in this worldwide Lutheranism give the A1530 answer. “Times have changed,” we’re told—also at 2009, but have they changed on what’s needed “for us and for our salvation”? For everybody—even today.

That Christ-empty sermon at the end—and I cannot find a printed text on the consultation website, so I’m operating from memory—started out that way. Like this: Luther’s question was “How can I find a merciful God?” That’s not our question today. Instead it’s “How can I find a way of mercy to my neighbor?” And to answer that the preacher centered on the OT text in the day’s liturgy: Jacob wrestling with the Stranger (=God) the night before he “wrestled” with meeting his brother Esau. The two meetings were mirror images of each other. Relating to God and relating to neighbor/sister/brother are Siamese twins. Inseparable. Illustrations followed to verify that. The conclusion came with a focus on the term reconciliation. In both wrestling matches we strive for reconciliation. The two go together. To be reconciled with God and to be reconciled with the neighbor/brother/sister are all of one piece. That is our calling from God. Let us go from this consultation in peace and joy to carry out this ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us.

Comment: lots of God-talk in the homily, but never “The Name.” A reconciliation proclamation at the conclusion, but no mention of THE Reconciler—as in 2 Corinthians 5—nor of our need (necessity) to have one. As our segue from the liturgical real presence (umpteenth times) to the Real Presence in the sacrament, we had a “real absence” homily. And I’ll bet that the preacher never noticed it.

We had one other communion service during the week, on Sunday

where we gathered with the parishoners of "Luther's" St. Anna church in Augsburg. Because of this audience the homily was printed and handed out—in English and German—as parishioners entered. Marie and I sat with dear Roman Catholic friends we know in Augsburg. The preacher came from the "Evangelical Lutheran Church" in Cameroon, Africa. The sermon text was the Gospel appointed for the day. John 12:20-33 with that request from the "Greeks" to "see Jesus" concluding with Jesus' promise "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself."

So the preacher couldn't avoid "naming the name." Which happened—over 60 times by my count on the printed text—and I probably missed a few. But it was not just name-dropping. The Christ who was lifted up was needed—Christum necessare—for the preacher to draw us to that Christ that morning, and to animate us, to empower us, to do likewise in mission in the many lands to which we would return at the end of the week.

That same Christ was necessary for the reconciliation urged upon us in the homily at our farewell liturgy. But we didn't receive him.

One Lutheran preacher came from Africa, the other one from Germany. Is that a signal about the Gospel Platzregen, Luther's picture-word for God's Gospel moving like a thunder-shower from one place to another? I wonder.

In one of the seminar papers presented early on in the consultation, the author (also a Bertram student) began by saying "Those of us gathered here recognize 'justification by faith' as 'the article by which the church stands or falls' precisely because 'faith' is understood as faith in God's promise enacted in the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus." That's straight A1530 theology. A2009 showed that that is still the agenda that Lutherans worldwide need to keep

working on. It is not yet a unanimous conviction.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. In subsequent ThTh postings I may do more show and tell on the good and not-so-good essays in that warehouse of A2009 data. You can, of course, see for yourself. You'll find them all at the consultation website:http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/DTS-TLC_Augsburg.html

P.S.2 I do have a couple of others already in the hopper. One is a follow-up on Phil Keuhnert's review of The Schack, and one a sequel from Steve Krueger following his review of Benedict XVI. One Roman Catholic reader was unhappy—to put it mildly—about Steve's initial piece on B16. And he told me so. He also sent me documents “from the other side” to set the record straight—including the pope's own statement to his flock seeking to calm the waters. So I sent these on to Steve and asked him if they changed his mind. Couple days ago he posted back to me his B16, part two. Steve's RC critic may not be happy, but I am, for his analysis is off the charts in laying papal theology 2009 alongside Augsburg catholicism 1530 (theology of the cross, faith and promise, and all that) and showing the difference. And then even more, why that difference matters—for us and for our salvation.