

Lutheranism and World History

Colleagues,

ThTh 29 is an Advent gift from the past. Forty-five years ago—summer semester 1953—Bob Schultz, Dick Baepler and I were students at Erlangen University in Germany. Werner Elert was one of our profs. After class one day he invited us “Missourians” to come over to his home on a Sunday afternoon for “Kaffee und Kuchen.” Because the founding father of “Missouri,” C.F.W.Walther, had gotten law and gospel right in his judgment, Elert had high hopes for the Missouri Synod despite its hangup with verbal inspiration, which he knew about and lamented. So we got the red carpet. In the course of the conversation that afternoon we were brash enough to ask him if he would write an article for THE SEMINARIAN, our in-house student theological journal at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. I can still hear his response: “Das tue ich!” (I’ll do it!) Back home in the fall Baepler and I translated his German text and published it in the Reformation issue of the SEMINARIAN, Volume 43, No. 3, November 1953. It never appeared anywhere else in any publication here or abroad. There may well be more readers seeing it this time via cyberspace than saw it the first time in its one and only appearing.

In a few spots where we got it wrong, I’ve tried to correct our English translation. Otherwise it is reprinted as it originally appeared, including the non-inclusive language which now jolts me too. Even so, enjoy!

Ed Schroeder

LUTHERANISM AND WORLD HISTORY

by D. Dr. Werner Elert

In the beginning and in the center of the Lutheran Reformation stands "the lofty article of justification." A generation ago Ernst Troeltsch, a leading German theologian and philosopher of religion, wrote that this doctrine was merely a product of medieval dogmatics, a dogma which we today could no longer understand because it possessed no value in Reality. This judgment was in step with the times, because all dogma was out of step. Today dogmatic thinking is rehabilitated, in theology, in the church, and, above all, in political thought. Nevertheless, concerning the doctrine of justification, outside of the specific theological realm, it finds as little discussion now as before. There might be reasons for this, because in its Lutheran conception this teaching comes very close (and for some critics perhaps all too close) to the realities of our human living.

That man is justified before God, and in addition "by faith alone," actually appears as the most harmless thing in the world – an anaesthetic for self-accusation, or even a cover-up for dubious undertakings. Today we understand by justification that a man furnishes proof of his innocence, in any case brings forth a turn to the Good, an exoneration. Nevertheless, in Luther's age justification meant something different. It is used at that time judicially in criminal cases and signifies the execution of the penalty, even the death-penalty. In theological language it signifies that man sees himself standing before God – he the accused and God his judge. Luther also circumscribes this situation as "man summoned to his own death." This is the position in which man finds himself and from which he can never escape. His task is to justify himself before God's tribunal. But he cannot, and therefore is "summoned to his own death." Man is not looked upon here as being in some illusionary unassailable state. He stands in chains before the judge who

cannot be bribed.

With this insight the historical strength of Lutheranism begins, for it conditions Lutheranism's relationship to the medieval church. Viewed externally a great deal remained just as it had been. The Lutheran church, in contrast to others, expressed itself very conservatively in relationship to the heritage of the ancient and medieval church. The Augsburg Confession takes its position not outside of, but rather, within the "catholic" church. It uncovers distortions, theological miscarriages, errors, but it never considers substituting a new church for the church up until now. And subsequent events changed nothing of this axiomatic position. In the entire compass of the Augsburg Confession the dogma of the early church is accepted, its liturgy (to be sure, cleansed, but in the main) conserved, the practice of infant baptism carried further, iconoclasm rejected, and (in the Scandinavian lands) even the episcopal polity retained. In this respect the external structure of the church remains essentially the same.

But – man cannot sneak away from the judging eye of God and hide within the structure of the church. Nothing will safeguard him from this – no bishop, no cultus, not even a "good work," no indulgence, no dispensation, no privileges, not even the holy helpers in time of need. Even the totally accepted heritage of the church can no longer stand protective and mediating between God and man. Christ alone is the Mediator. He it is, in that He suffered Death for the others, who is our justification before God. All of the church's organizational arrangements are thereby relativized. No one dare set himself on Christ's place. The church is the sphere within which the eternal Word of God is proclaimed, but one dare not mistake this sphere for the Word itself. The structure stays; it's not torn down. But it is looked through in its human conditionality and in all its accommodations it is turned toward its single purpose: by the

divine Word to call men to justification before God. The church is forced out of her position as mediator. She is a medium, but not the Mediator.

What then? Religious individualism? Without a doubt. Except that here it is not a sociological phenomenon, but a religious one. Man is in-dividuum, indivisible, because he is summoned by God in his Totality. But the distinctive elements that condition each human life are not thereby disregarded. On the contrary, rather, they are emphatically brought to consciousness. But man before God cannot use his particular circumstances as excuse for his situation. The total person is summoned. Unconditional truthfulness before God is demanded. But this ultimately requires the confession that our moral existence is never "totally unified," but always fractured. "Total unity of the personality," the goal for which all great men since Plato have wished, exists only in submitting to the judgment of God, who judges in totality, but also in totality justifies. This is justification "by faith alone." Had Hitler been a Protestant, he would have been forced to see himself obligated to this unconditional truthfulness, and therefore would have been unable to praise his own "good works" incessantly. But he was just as little Protestant as Joseph Goebbels, the chief of his propaganda.

THE CHURCH

The medieval church, however, laid claim not only to the position of religious mediator between God and men. She is, in her intention and in her structure, a creation resembling the state with a central authority (head) – the prototype of a totalitarian and authoritarian imperialism. She is authoritarian, because she tries to direct all the areas of life

– political events, the entire social and economic order, and the family even on down to its most intimate transactions. She lays claim to compulsory power over all who want to be Christians, and she puts this into practice against all those who oppose her. She lays claim to a cultural monopoly and to a great extent she has it. Her goal is to rule the world. The Reformation was unsuccessful in completely setting aside this system, but it did succeed in cracking it open and making it null for a broad portion of Christianity.

Looked at from the standpoint of Roman world power it is understandable that Luther appears as a revolutionary. However, if the concern had been merely a rupture in the sphere of power, then Luther would have been unnecessary. But the church had never been able to push through completely her claim to total authority over the civil powers. Above all, man himself had wrought his own independence long before Luther – man who wants to be nothing more than man, but at all costs a full man. The Renaissance man is not concerned about heaven or hell. For him the church belongs, at the very best, to the World's Fair of life. His Weltanschauung (worldview) and his morality he draws from antiquity. This completely secularized humanity was also celebrated within the circle of the highest and most honorable ecclesiastical personages. This Renaissance man, free from all restraints, is also the “modern man.” He did not, however, spring forth from the soil of Lutheranism, but rather from that of the late medieval church, and since then he has not at all disappeared out of the world.

What Luther placed in opposition to the church's will to rule the world was not the autonomy-seeking Individual. Much more he calls for a return to the early Christian orientation of the church upon the coming Kingdom of Christ, which will put an end to all world kingdoms. The faithful are experiencing its beginning already now in that they are called to Him and, ruled

by the Word of Christ, are led by His Spirit. His Kingdom lies in a completely different dimension from the secular ordinances. It does not, however, do away with them, nor does it enter into contest with them.

For even these ordinances are ordinances of God by which the present world will be preserved until its final destruction. It doesn't stake out their external limitations, but instead their internal ones, and does so by uncovering the shadow of Death inherent in all earthly and even "ecclesiastical" glory. To worldly might it juxtaposes the power of suffering, to retaliation the power of forgiveness, and to legalistic compulsion the freedom of the redeemed. The church stands within the kingdom of Christ only so long and only insofar as she carries the identical characteristics. Her claim, in the name of Christ to rule the world, is usurpation. It is apostasy.

In his criticism of the secularized church Luther had numerous predecessors, but not until him were positive results ever achieved. These are evident first of all in the internal shifting (regrouping) of the church itself. By the criticism leveled against her claim to lordship the power of the entire ecclesiastical hierarchy was shot through. In the church there is no first floor, second floor, etc., of which one would be closer to heaven than the other. Because all are summoned to the same Death, the church can only be a brotherhood and not lordship. The gravitational center of all of the life of the church lies in the circle of the individual congregation. For the evangelical understanding of the church this corresponds with the priesthood of all believers. In early Christianity and even long on afterwards it is just like that. In Germany, in the Baltic provinces, in Poland and Hungary the cities are the main ones which take a hand in reorienting the church. Her members are trained to be personally responsible for the preservation and intensity of church life. Today the Lutheran churches which

have developed on American colonial soil as well as those in South Africa and Australia serve as the model for the European. Elsewhere the consciousness of congregational responsibility was hemmed in for a long time because the state rulers were the ones who took care of the Reformation. But in any case it was demanded from the very beginning by the evangelical understanding of the church.

In this manner the Church, in her historical appearance, is decentralized. Only in her unseen Head has she a fixed Center, but the exalted Christ is equally close to Greek, Pole, German, or American. Between peoples and therefore also between their resultant indigenous churches there is no nationalistic difference in rank. Also, the Holy Spirit has no particular preference for the big cities with scintillating names. Through the weakening of the power of the hierarchy the polity of the church becomes a question of secondary importance. In Lutheranism the three great types of polity enjoy equal recognition: the consistorial in the old German state churches, the episcopal in the Scandinavian lands, and the synodical in North America and other continents. The fact that these three political forms exist alongside each other guards against our seeking the unity of the Church in the wrong place.

Together with the fall of the centralized structure of the hierarchy there falls also the Latin church-language which the clergy alone understood. If only the divine Word is to rule in the Church it must be heard and understood by all in their native tongues. Therefore with the Reformation there commenced an unprecedented amount of activity in translating, totally apart from Luther himself. Swedes and Finns, Poles, Magyars, the Slovaks, Slovenes, Croats, the Prussians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians received for the first time their own formal written language, their first grammars, largely through the activity of Lutheran preachers. And from these also came the first printed

matter in their own tongue. Through the Lutheran Reformation all these languages became bearers of divine, eternal content, and in this way for the first time these peoples were drawn into the complete and equal spiritual birthright which they shared together with all the rest.

THE WORLD

This demonstrates concretely that the effect of the ecclesiastical upheaval neither did nor could confine itself to the narrower ecclesiastical realm. The claims of the Lutheran Reformation directed themselves not to the hierarchical powers as had all previous attempts, nor only to the civil representatives of Christendom, but to all believers. Taking the place of the scientific apologetic literature of the imperial publicists and of the council era of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, are now the reformatory pamphlets which everyone understands. Within two weeks after they left the presses, Luther's popular writings are known from Madrid to Riga, from Amsterdam and Copenhagen to Venice. They are voluminously reproduced. Already in the year 1522 the shoemaker and poet Hans Sachs of Nuremberg calls forty of Luther's booklets his own. With the help of the press there emerged from the debate and discussion for the first time a European public opinion.

Even without the Reformation that would have happened sometime, though scarcely at this pace; but it was of great importance that in this most critical time, all levels of society suddenly became vocal all at once. In the later age of absolutism public opinion suffered a setback, as happened again for a few years in Germany in the recent past. But on the whole these were only episodes. The theoreticians of public opinion since the 17th

century have elevated this into a science, but it was practiced already in the Reformation, at least in church affairs, and the world today still thrives on what was accomplished then. For in that moment when the total passion for reform hit the church, there was no area of public or private life that was not thereby affected. The result amounted to an unraveling which was no less consequential for all secular structures of society than it was for the Church.

Since the Church is therewith called back to her real commission in the area of the Kingdom of God, she turns loose the temporal realm which had been till now ruled or claimed by her. To let the devil have it? No. No one had such an insight into the nature of the destructive powers at work in the world as had Luther. The derision which the Enlightenment cast upon his pessimistic prophecies may well be a thing of the past for us. For to restrain these powers he had tirelessly called upon the power which was called by divine right and available for that purpose. That was for him God's structures of governance (Obrigkeit). Governance had its commission, its worth, its power not from the Church but directly from God, and truly from Him. Therefore in the execution of its commission it is bound to God's law. In accordance with this law the earthly world is kept in order, but this order (Ordnung) is different from the "Kingdom of Christ." It is a stern law, the law of retaliation for good as for evil, the law of civil righteousness, of reciprocity of work and pay, guilt and atonement.

When "structures of governance" are spoken of here this implies no preference for a certain form of government. No matter how often the contrary is asserted, Luther did not support the principle of monarchical legitimacy. "It is all the same to God," he wrote in 1520, "where a kingdom comes from; He nevertheless wants to have it ruled." For the political attitude of Lutheranism in the following century it is necessary to take

note of Melanchthon's influence at least as much as Luther's. Melanchthon as a humanist was a republican from the bottom of his heart. Especially in reference to politics one can't judge all of Lutheranism merely on the basis of German situations. Lutheran ethics allow plenty of room for very divergent political possibilities.

While in Lutheran Denmark the court preacher Hector Gottfried Masius was affirming the absolutist monarchy, the Lutheran count Emerich Tokolyi was participating in the Hungarian conspiracy of 1687. In the middle of the 19th century Julius Stahl promoted an extremely conservative monarchy in Berlin. At the same time the Danish church leader Grundtvig was fighting for the rule of the people. In Hungary the leaders of the Revolution of 1848 had their roots in Lutheranism: Kossuth, the democratic statesman; Gregory, the military leader; Petoeffi, the poet of freedom. And at the same time the Lutheran pastors Kollar and Hurban are the spokesmen for Slovak independence. In the American Revolutionary War the Lutheran Pastor Muehlenburg exchanges his clergy vestments for his military uniform and calls his congregation to arms "against tyranny and oppression." In the Civil War of the 19th century, as the flag of the conservative Confederacy waved over the Lutheran seminary in St. Louis, the theological students of Gettysburg were shedding their blood for the liberal Union. In view of all this no one can any longer assert that Lutheranism is bound to a certain form of government.

The extrication of the Church from the political world does not mean that the Christian withdraws from world events. It was just this aspect of medieval monasticism that Luther assailed the most. Man does not have to answer before God for some abstract "self." He is placed by God in specific locations as a householder, farmer, mayor or scholar, and as he serves his neighbor in these callings he serves God. The entire "worldly" ethic retains a level of highest morality when it is performed

as service to God, in contradistinction to the medieval scale of values. Thereby the medieval church's monopoly on human culture is eliminated. New fields of endeavor are opened to the temporal powers.

In the first place is the pedagogical nature of all these categories. Luther had made the support of schools a duty for rulers and magistrates. Tirelessly had he lectured to parents "that they should keep their children in school." The appropriated wealth of the cloisters was largely applied to this end. The result of it all was that Lutheran lands were the first in which everyone could read and write. Legislation and civil administration in the Lutheran states was also done in the spirit of Christian morality. Care for the poor and sick was regulated, the practice of physicians and midwives also, Sunday work in the fields and in the mines was forbidden. One must compare this with the fact that in the Middle Ages the entire welfare program was confined to the church and political thought did not get beyond matters of law and power. When today we demand from political leaders not power politics, and not only proper diplomacy and careful attention to due process, but also a social concern aimed at the welfare of all citizens, this corresponds with the understanding of society that was at home in Lutheranism from the very beginning.

We have outlined here only a few of the political lines that signal Lutheranism's significance for world-history. What it brought about in the area of "Weltanschauung" (world-view) and "Wissenschaften" (scholarly work and research) is not less significant, but we cannot go further into that right now. From these few examples, however, it should be clear that the Lutheran church's doctrine of justification is not something that avoids the world. Anyone who has understood it knows that we are responsible before God for everything that God has given and assigned to us. If only the whole world would grasp this.

For it is only those who have grasped it who can also understand what it means that in Jesus Christ we have been granted grace from God.

Erlangen

6. November 1953