

The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology

The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology
by Niels Henrik Gregersen (Editor), Bo Holm
(Editor), Ted Peters (Editor)

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Review by Frederick Niedner, Valparaiso University

Thursday Theology's regular readers will recall that in January of 2003 the Lutheran World Federation, Dialogue journal, and the University of Aarhus in Denmark convened approximately 125 Lutheran theologians from around the world to discuss presentations on "The Future of Lutheran Theology." The group included a handful of Crossings Community members and friends, including Ed and Marie Schroeder and Robin Morgan. In Thursday Theology #241 (23 January 2003), my late colleague David Truemper and I, who also attended, reported on the major themes and points of engagement developed at that conference and we also offered a few initial items of critique.

Two volumes containing papers presented at that conference have now appeared, the first late in 2003, entitled *The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology* (ISBN 87-989002-3-4), edited by Viggo Mortensen (no, not the actor who played Aragorn in the Lord of the Rings films, but an Aarhus theologian and conference organizer of the same name). Ed Schroeder's

presentation (“Some Thoughts on Mission Drawn from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions”) appeared in that collection, as did Richard Bliese’s (“Lutheran Missiology: Struggling to Move from Reactive Reform to Innovative Initiative”) and my own (“Lutheran Theology of Election and Predestination as a Model for Witness and Mission in a Pluralistic World”).

A year later a much larger collection was released, *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*. It provides a more comprehensive picture of the Aarhus conference’s work and potential significance. The book opens with Niels Henrik Gregersen’s conference keynote address, “Ten Theses on the Future of Lutheran Theology,” and then groups the volume’s nearly 30 subsequent essays under seven themes: Grace, Cross, Justification, Justice, Comparisons, Ecumenics, and World.

This review essay will not attempt to summarize or account for the arguments of each item among so many different essays. Instead, it will focus on several thematic features of the conference its papers, and it will discuss in some detail only a single essay in the collection, “The Lutheran Confessional Writings and the Future of Lutheran Theology,” by David Truemper. [I proceed in this way with some trepidation, since I still bear scars that came from using such a tactic on a difficult-to-summarize work back in days of my youth. In my second year of college at one of the Missouri Synod’s “system schools,” a religion professor required that we write a review of some important work of theology in the history of the LC-MS. He assigned the books, and I drew J. T. Mueller’s *Christian Dogmatics*. Even as a 19-year-old, I knew I had no critical perspective on the whole of Christianity’s doctrinal tradition, nor Missouri’s peculiar take on it, and I couldn’t bear the thought of summarizing every doctrine from creation to consummation. I resolved, cleverly I thought, to summarize and respond to one part of the whole. The paper received a “D” and I

endured a tongue-lashing, the gist of which was an accusation of sloth. Thus, from this point on in the present review, I shall presume to pecca fortiter, so to speak.]

Grace

Many of my personal responses to this collection the Aarhus papers have already been articulated in the Thursday Theology piece (referred to above) that reported on the conference itself. Among them remains the somewhat troublesome choice of grace as the central charism that Lutheran theology supposedly has as its contribution to the larger, Christian conversation in the world today. That assertion permeated pre-conference and conference materials, and it now appears as the title of the collected essays. In a recent *Christian Century* review of this volume (February 21, 2006, pp. 61-63) Wayne A. Holst makes a point that Ed Schroeder and David Truemper attempted to make both during and immediately after the Aarhus conference, that it wasn't grace, but rather justification by faith that drove a wedge between the 16th-century reformers and the Pope's theologians. Everybody in the dispute emphasized, relied on, and swore by grace. They couldn't agree, however, on the role and nature of faith as that which justifies the sinner before God.

In truth, as every seminarian learns, combatants on all sides talked the language of both grace and faith, but various parties of the 16th century meant different things when using either term, and the same holds true today. It's no wonder, by the way, that these categories confound generation after generation of preachers and theologians. For one thing, the whole notion of salvation by grace through faith behaves like a piece of alien tissue transplanted into our hearts and minds. Our immune systems attack it continually. Only through daily doses of anti-immune-system medications, otherwise known as preaching, the sacraments, and repentance, can we clearly remember or see how

these things happen to us and function within us. For another thing, all our language about grace and faith is of necessity glued together by prepositions, and prepositions are the most difficult and tricky elements of every language. Indeed, they often function as Judas goats. They betray us, but we need them, and at critical points we actually need them precisely to betray us by leading us into places where we find that our language has failed, and that we have failed, and our only hope is to remember that in the end the gospel is the assurance that though we cannot cling to God, or use our language to make God graspable, God clings to us and will not abandon us even in the day of our crucifixion upon our own prepositions.

For Robert Jensen ("Triune Grace"), grace is the Triune God giving himself to us. Faith receives that giving in the same way a bride or groom receives the gift that is the other. Understanding grace only through the church's Trinitarian understanding of God keeps Lutheran theology in service to the larger household of faith. Heidelberg theologian Christoph Schwöbel, in his response to Jensen, generally concurs. However, Monica Melanchthon of the Lutheran church in India ("The Grace of God and the Equality of Human Persons") understands grace as the universal inheritance of every human being into whom the Spirit of God breathes life. This leads her ultimately to define sin as the refusal of some to see the Spirit alive in others who are different, as for example the upper-caste Indians of her homeland do toward those of lower castes.

> From such a redefinition of grace it becomes a short step to understanding the primary work of all who believe in grace as the lifting up of those kept low through the refusal to recognize the grace of the in-dwelling Spirit who lives within all people. Without belaboring the point, such concerns came to dominate much of the conference discussion as it had dominated many of the pre-conference papers. Liberation theologies of

various sorts have found great favor in Lutheran World Federation circles in recent years, and that remains evident in this volume's papers. The tacit assumption of numerous essays, including Melanchthon's, could be stated as, "Our politics is better than your politics, and the sooner our kind takes over the better." Needless to day, fitting such a notion into theological containers most of us would recognize as Lutheran takes some powerful magic.

Future of Lutheran Theology

The subtitle of this volume, as for the Aarhus conference, is "The Future of Lutheran Theology." At least two questions lurk within that phrase. Does Lutheran theology have a future? And if so, what future(s) might it have? Several essays in this collection and much of the conversation at Aarhus focused on the historical fact that Lutheran theology grew up as a response and reaction to things already underway. It is not by nature innovative. Rather, it sought first to correct the perceived mis-direction of the medieval church that, as Philip Melanchthon implies in such key writings as Article IV of the Apology, failed to honor Christ's death and no longer offered comfort to penitent hearts. Instead, the church threw human beings back on their own devices as they sought to understand their place with God, and in doing so they robbed the penitent of the gospel's intended consolation.

Ultimately, radical reformers did the same thing as they responded to Rome with their own kinds of legalism and pietism. Lutherans also reacted to the tendency to fall into the ditch on that side of the road, too.

Is there a future for a movement that grew up and remains by nature reactive? Or has its moment passed with the changes that have come upon both the Catholic and Evangelical churches that

now inhabit the ecclesial scene in which Lutheranism lives as a cousin in today's household of faith?

Robert Jensen offers the most traditional answer when he asserts that Lutheran theology has a meaningful future only if it remains Trinitarian and ecumenical in its outlook. It does not deserve to live if it seeks isolation. Though he doesn't say it in so many words, he seems to work with an understanding close to the old cliché that success is working oneself out of a job. If Lutheranism really succeeded, it could, and perhaps should, disappear.

Though sometimes his keynote address and essay go off in maverick directions, as when he casually attributes to Luther a theology of double predestination, Niels Gregersen indirectly answers the question about possible futures for Lutheran theology in one very helpful way. I must quibble with the order in which he argues his points, however. Gregersen's fourth thesis states that "the 'core' of Luther's theology should not be sought in specific systems of 'Lutheran Theology' nor in the doctrine of justification taken in isolation. Luther's great discovery that the word of forgiveness is unconditional on the part of God and unconditioned by specific human activities took place in the context of first-order Christian practices that precede doctrinal formulation." What follows from that, to my way of thinking, appears in the previous thesis: "Important for the future of Lutheran theology is Luther's practical theology. The liturgical, pastoral, and catechetical dimensions of Luther's theology contain untapped resources for theological reflection." That thesis goes on to talk about important work of the church that isn't prescribed by God, but the part quoted here calls attention to something crucial in the Lutheran understanding of church.

The church is not, first of all, an organization with a theology

and a collection of assertions and covenants such that it can have a future guaranteed by the beauty or truth of that theology. Rather, it is the collection of those who hear the gospel and get drawn into that gospel through the actions of the sacraments. Theology has a future only insofar as the church gathered by the Spirit's continual proclamation of the gospel said and done remains and endures. Moreover, theology serves that activity, not the other way around.

It follows, then, that the only way Lutheranism becomes something other than reaction and correction is through proclamation, through its gospeling the world in a way that honors Christ's death and comforts penitent hearts. It has no unique political agenda, nor does it guarantee that it can imbue its adherents with insights that will give them better, cleaner, or more pure political instincts than, say, Jews or Muslims.

That brief but critical insight takes me to a brief word about my late colleague's essay in this collection. David Truemper sought to describe a way that the Lutheran Confessional Writings could have a healthy and meaningful role in whatever future there may be for Lutheran Theology. After describing various historic and contemporary ways of using, or ignoring, the Lutheran Confessions, from simplistic "proof-text" methods akin to uncritical, a-historical, fundamentalist uses of scripture to the more helpful "witness" and "map" hermeneutics of Vilmos Vajta and Carl Braaten respectively, Truemper describes a hermeneutic of analogy in which the confessions function for the church in a way similar to the canon of scripture, as analog and resource, not as barbed-wire fence.

Crossings folk will recognize the description of the Bible as a collection of "problem-solving documents," a phrase Truemper borrows from Robert Bertram and applies to the Confessions. It's like a vast medicine cabinet with all kinds of remedies for

getting things straight as we seek to share and believe in the promises of God. But the Galatians' problems weren't the same as those in Thessalonika or Ephesus, so we talk differently when we write to them. And now, after reading others' mail for many centuries, we've learned how to see when we're in the Galatian mess and how it's different from the Corinthian slough. Likewise, says Truemper, the confessional writings teach us how to diagnose certain kinds of problems, and they offer ways for seeing and receiving a prognosis in the face of such diagnoses.

In a final portion of his essay, Truemper offers "A Sample from the Feed-Box: Grounding the Church and Its Unity Eschatologically." In this brief section Truemper summarized some insights he had sought to articulate in what turned out to be the last months of his life, and the remarkable feature of those paragraphs, especially in the context of all the other learned essays in this volume, is that David Truemper was preaching in these paragraphs. The rhetoric is not that of discourse we all use in conferences and meetings of learned societies. Rather, it is the language and phrasing of proclamation. To wit:

"One more example. The gospel of our Baptism speaks to each of us God's final verdict upon us: 'You are forgiven; you are mine; I love you for Christ's sake and will never let you go!' Now, consider what that means for our dealing with one another. If God's ultimate verdict on you is that you are forgiven, righteous, God's own child, then it is already too late for me to treat you as if that were not in fact God's own last word about you and to you. If I hold a grudge against you, or if I refuse to forgive you, why, look whose 'last word' I am thereby opposing, whose 'final verdict' I would thereby disallow! God's end-time word about you and to you is forgiveness; how can I oppose that and nevertheless claim God's love myself? No, by the eschatolo-logic of forgiveness, it is too late to treat you

as unforgiven, too late to nurse a grudge, too late to pretend that I could rule you out of the kingdom! The eschato-logic of baptismal forgiveness is true, already here, already now. That is why 'it is not necessary' for human creations-formulae, contracts, declarations-to be made universal. It is too late for that. Christ's church is Christ's church, already here. Christ's church is Christ's one church, already now. It is too late to act otherwise, and it is most dangerous to put one's own standing before God in jeopardy by opposing God's end-time verdict. Enough, already, is enough."

Theology is not the last word. The future of Lutheran theology rests solely in whatever future the preached, acted-out, eschato-logic Word of God creates as the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the church, overcoming perpetually and forever the simple fact that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe any of God's promises. To the extent that our theology serves such proclamation, it has an innovative, not merely reactive future. And it cannot fail. It is already too late for that.

Frederick Niedner
Chair, Department of Theology
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, IN 46383