

“The Lutheran Message” – Just What is That?

Colleagues,

At last week's annual meeting Chris Repp was elected to the Crossings Board of Directors. So was Peter Keyel. I'm glad. You've already seen Peter's and Chris's gifts and skill in past postings of ThTh. Here's a brand new one from Chris.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Lutheran Message?

Lutheran congregations receive all sorts of solicitations for publications and programs from a variety of purportedly Christian sources. At my congregation in southern Illinois we get lots of phone calls from non-denominational Christian organizations out of Texas trying to sell us the next best thing in youth programming, or men's ministry, or Bible study. At first I would try to explain why their material probably wouldn't be suited to our distinctive Lutheran take on Christianity. After repeatedly hearing “oh, our material is non-denominational and non-sectarian – we don't get into doctrine of any kind” and futilely trying to explain that that is precisely the problem, I have abandoned that attempt at Lutheran witness. Instead I now say – usually about halfway through the first sentence, “Let me stop you right there. I don't think we're going to be interested. Have a nice day.”

And then there are devotional materials and other “Christian”

publications. When I came to my current congregation they had a number of such subscriptions. One that I remember off the top of my head was called "Christian Living," which featured the testimonials of celebrity Christians. After looking at a couple of those I decided that the version of Christianity offered up there was not helpful to my task of preaching and teaching the gospel, and so discontinued it. We also received something called "The Lutheran Message," a collection of devotional articles and poetry. Because it had Lutheran in the title, it passed under my radar. I didn't look closely. And it wasn't costing us anything since it is funded by local businesses, which receive ad space for their support on pages added in for the area to which they are sent. At some point "The Lutheran Message" stopped arriving – perhaps there was not enough local advertising? – but recently they called, offering to send us their publication (free of charge) and asking us if we would be willing to distribute it. Instead of just saying yes, I asked them to send me a sample copy. As I looked it over, I was disturbed by the decidedly un-Lutheran working theology of many of the articles. I thought to myself, "If I were to distribute material like this I would be directly contradicting the content of my teaching and preaching in this congregation, undermining what I have been called to do here." It occurs to me that well-intending, pious publications like "The Lutheran Message" are often uncritically accepted in our congregations by well-intending pastors simply because they have "Lutheran" in their title (or others because they are "Christian.") Of course we pastors should be monitoring all such publications to see if they pass muster, but I suspect that most of us abdicate this responsibility under the press of other obligations. As you see, I have done it myself, but I hope I'm learning.

I decided not only to decline "The Lutheran Message's" offer, but also try to explain why. I do not expect that it will do any

good, but I felt I had to try. The text of my letter to the editors follows. I think it will make sense even to those who have not read the edition under review.

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The Lutheran Message
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To Whom it May Concern,

Thank you for the invitation for our congregation to receive your devotional publication, The Lutheran Message, free of charge and for sending a sample copy to review. At this time I must respectfully decline your generous offer, but want to give some explanation for that decision.

Although I was born and raised a Lutheran, I am still a Lutheran today because I have come to believe and treasure the unique Lutheran insight into the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, I am not simply a Christian who happens to be Lutheran, but someone who is convinced that the Lutheran way of being Christian is the most authentic option available, and this conviction is crucial to how I understand my vocation as a pastor in Christ's church.

Central to the Lutheran insight is faith. But what we mean by this is not the abstract faith that has been stripped of any meaning in our culture, as exemplified by the phrase "you gotta have faith" (faith in what?), or the generic religious faith that simply assents to God's existence. The faith that is central to Lutherans is a specific faith and trust in specific promises of God for Jesus' sake – forgiveness of sin, freedom

from the power of sin and death, new and genuine life in Christ through Holy Baptism (new life not only after we die, but also here and now, on this side of the grave) – and the promise that all of this is ours purely because of the grace and mercy of God, and not through any work or deserving or attitude of our own. Lutherans are so radical that we are bold to claim that even the faith that grasps these saving promises is a gift of God through the Holy Spirit (see Luther's explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed).

Unfortunately, your publication does not reflect strongly enough these central Lutheran affirmations. Instead I find at the root of some of the articles a decision theology that owes more to Billy Graham than to Martin Luther. Examples of this are such statements as "...as long as we keep Jesus in our hearts we get to be in heaven with Him after we die" (p.44) and "He has promised me his forgiveness, by His grace, through Jesus His son, if I just accept the gift as it is given. That promise is good, forever. Your decision to accept it or reject it will last a long time..." (p.63) Other articles emphasize what we should do or how we should act, without any perspective on how our behavior is related to the Gospel. Without that perspective, such an emphasis can come across as legalistic: don't be judgmental, (p.15ff) pray more (p.6ff). Incidentally, I consider "the power of prayer" (used for the title of the article beginning on p.6) to be an idea that is foreign, even hostile, to Lutheranism. It is not prayer that is stronger than death, as the epitaph on page 18 claims, it is God who is stronger than death, and who conquers its power through Jesus Christ. Again and again, many of your articles make it seem that what is crucially important is not what God does for us, but what we do for God and for ourselves. In this way, so it seems to me, our American "can do," self-help culture ever so subtly alters the trajectory of the Christian Gospel and distorts its substance in the pages of

your publication.

On the other hand, there are a few articles in the edition you sent me that are not far from the mark. Especially good, I thought, was "The Taste of Wine" (pp.20-21), although I would have rewritten the last sentence to somehow de-emphasize the taste of the wine in favor of emphasizing what it is and does. And I would have concluded with a quote from hymn #469 in Evangelical Lutheran Worship:

Send us now with faith and courage to the hungry, lost, bereaved. In our living and our dying, we become what we receive: Christ's own body, blessed and broken, cup o'erflowing, life outpoured, Given as a living token of your world redeemed, restored.

Another article that I would be happy to have my congregation read is "Our Father" (p.22ff), although I would have edited out the red herring about the supposed importance of saying the Lord's Prayer in traditional language. My own wife grew up in the Church of England, and learned to pray "Our Father which art in heaven..." Why not insist on that even more traditional King James variant? It's not even true, as Doris asserted, that she and her husband have even that in common, because George carries on praying after his Catholic wife has stopped at the words "...deliver us from evil." What they do have in common is the same heavenly Father, and the gift of being able to receive the Lord's Supper together (thanks to the merciful rule-breaking of Doris' priest in allowing her to commune at George's Lutheran church). Still another useful article, in my estimation, was "Learning to Receive" (p.32ff).

In spite of these few good articles, I would find it counter-productive to my ministry to distribute The Lutheran Message, as it is currently constituted, in my congregation. I appreciate

what you are trying to do, and pray that you might take my criticism in the spirit that it is offered, out of a genuine desire that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the treasure of our Lutheran heritage, be proclaimed in its purity (Augsburg Confession, article VII) and that we not send mixed messages to our people. I am open to reconsidering this decision if the tone and content of your publication move in this direction in the future.

Sincerely yours in Christ,
Chris Repp, Pastor