

The Lutheran World Federation Needs Help. It's the "L" Word.

Colleagues,

It's not a "Tale of Two Cities," ala Dickens, but "two tales of the same city," two "tellings" about what happened at that Lutheran World Federation consultation in Augsburg, Germany, last month. That's what you received in two posts that came your way in the last fortnight from this computer. One was the ThTh #565 posting (April 9) and then an "In-betweener" (April 13), reflections on the consultation from Karen Bloomquist, director of the Department of Theological Studies [DTS] of the LWF, the host for the event.

Karen's telling celebrated what my telling bemoaned.

[One German participant, upon reading my report, told me that he agreed with the theological analysis, but didn't like my "complaining tone." And he had four German words that he could have used were he writing to me in his mother-tongue: "nörgeln" oder "jammern" oder "quengeln" oder "klagen."]

He was right—though I don't know if I covered all four of those German verbs. I was indeed complaining, complaining that the "consentire de doctrina evangelii" (consensus about preaching the Gospel) celebrated (yes, that's the right word here) in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, Article 7, was hard to find in the confessing done at Augsburg 2009. And that was not a good thing for the "L" in LWF—nor for the "free course of the Gospel" in Lutheran churches today.

In Karen's telling, she did not dispute that wide variety of Gospel-meanings present at A2009, but she saw it as a plus.

Well, was it or wasn't it?

Chris Repp, ELCA pastor in southern Illinois who was Karen's student several decades ago, didn't wait for me to ask you listserve receivers for your opinion, but sent me something right away. He's given me permission to pass it on to you as this week's ThTh post. If you wish to take another look at my telling, it's on the Crossings website <https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur040909.shtml> Karen's is not so easily accessible, so I reprint it here below. Chris's prose then follows.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

Karen Bloomquist.

"That is not the Lutheran theology or church that is familiar to me!" Some Augsburg 2009 post-consultation reflections

Many superlatives have been used to express what participants at the March consultation experienced. What participants experienced and how they interpreted it varied greatly with their respective contexts, backgrounds and pre-conceptions.

Meeting as we were in the city where the Augsburg Confession was first presented in 1530, and which since then has been the definitive confessional basis for Lutheran churches, some might assume that its tenets would be reflected in all that was said and done. However, the focus of the consultation was not on repeating one set of normative understandings of "Lutheran theology," but on hearing from and interacting with theologians from Lutheran churches around the world today that are quite different from those of 16th century Germany. Familiar Lutheran convictions did come up frequently, but how they were

interpreted or applied varied. The focus was not on Lutheran theology per se, but on discerning what being "Lutheran" actually means today, as these diverse churches interpret the Bible, pursue critical theological work, engage in distinctive church practices, and carry out their calling in the world. The approach was intentionally inductive rather than deductive, in order to open up space for daring to explore critical questions that may go outside usual Lutheran categories, for the sake of communicating the gospel and living out God's mission in today's world. This is a complicated challenge that can hardly be accomplished in one week, among theologians of such different backgrounds and understandings. Thus, some may be disappointed that there were not clearer answers that all could readily embrace. Yet that would not have reflected the reality of these churches today.

However, what did occur was itself an important movement in that direction. I sense that nearly all the participants, wherever they came from, repeatedly had surprised reactions to what they heard others expressing: "That is not the Lutheran church or theology that is familiar to me!" For some, this meant that key Lutheran formulas were not being honored, or certain practices that they have long associated with what it means to be Lutheran. Others expressed boundaries of their theological understandings being stretched in unfamiliar ways. Yes, there were reassurances that there is a Lutheran "grammar", grounded especially in justification by grace through faith, that we share in common, and many were reminded of emphases in this theological heritage that have been forgotten, or never known. But for nearly all, there was a stretching of the horizon of questions and perspectives that need to be accounted for, in rethinking if not transforming Lutheran understandings and practices in the 21st century.

As I stated in my opening presentation:

Such a “Lutheran identity” cannot be based only on coded Lutheran formulas, or historical legacies brought by missions, or on the basis of ethnic or tribal identities, or historical accidents. Instead, sifting through, re-conceiving, and “transfiguring” Lutheran theology is a dynamic movement in which the grace and promise of God is communicated through words, symbols and actions that look, sound and feel much different from those in 16th century Germany, or 20th century America.

That daunting task was only begun at Augsburg 2009. But relationships and conversations were begun there that can and must contribute to this further work in our respective contexts, and now, in more intentionally cross-contextual ways.

Meanwhile, I invite those who participated in Augsburg 2009 to share what was especially surprising, disturbing, or reassuring for them.

Karen Bloomquist
DTS. LWF

Chris Repp

There are several straw men that get dispatched in Dr. Bloomquist’s reflections: Lutheranism as “coded language,” as theology from/for a particular context/culture only, as a limited set of “categories,” and one flesh-and-blood chap (as it were), the Augsburg Confession as a “set of normative understandings,” who is summarily dismissed without a hearing. In my view, Lutheranism is precisely that latter fellow – a particular claim about who God is and what the gospel is. Of course, that particular claim must be translated for each age and culture. And I’m fully aware that translation is never as

straightforward as we would like, never simply a matter of decoding. But it does presume that there is something there to be transmitted. (Another issue here is who is in charge of the translating, and who decides whether it has been successful. But even so, the presumption remains that there is a “something” to translate.)

The methodology of the consultation, as Dr. Bloomquist describes it, effectively treats Lutheranism as something tribal or genetic (despite her own insistence that it should not be treated so) – an agglomeration of churches and ethnic groups who share a common history, but may or may not now share any set of core understandings or principles. Or at least we must now discover what common ground we might have. Or maybe not even that. Maybe we are just meant to rejoice in our diversity and forget about any commonality – rejoice that we have Luther as our ancestor and leave it at that. (But see Matthew 3:9).

Because of my understanding of what Lutheranism is, I can't really fathom what it means to discern what “being Lutheran means today” without starting with its core theology. The Lutheran Reformation was a theological reformation, as distinct from, say, the political reformation in England, or the legal/social emphasis in Geneva. It seems to me that a Crossings approach would have done exactly what Dr. Bloomquist says was the intent of the consultation without ignoring/forsaking our core theology – crossing the gospel with the diverse contexts and experiences of the various churches. (Are the Lutheran Confessions really the obstacle that she seems to suggest they are, getting in the way of the “real” work of the church? Aren't they rather the lifeblood of the Lutheran movement?)

By not beginning with a shared core theology, I wonder how we can tell the difference between “stretching boundaries” and transgressing them. How can we tell when “re-conceiving” and

“transfiguring” actually become transformation from one thing to another? Who is allowed to say when a practice that no longer looks Lutheran actually isn’t? And on what basis? Dr. Bloomquist identifies a common Lutheran “grammar” grounded in justification by faith, which she said served as reassurance at the consultation. But even Baptists will assure you that they believe in justification by faith. It’s how that conviction plays out in the broader theology and life of the church that makes the difference between Lutherans and Baptists.

Will God simply bless whatever we Children of Luther decide is our calling, whichever direction and however far we choose to stretch? Or is there some external word that addresses us, that norms our encounters with different cultures and times, even while it allows for dynamic, creative stretching that does not go so far as to change the gospel into something that ceases to be gospel?

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