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“And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’” (Matthew 13:52)

THE PROBLEM OF STABILITY

IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

David Granskou

In the ordinary testbook theology of the church the predominant tone often is that of stability and changelessness. Peter was the rock. The pastor or holy man has the answers. The church is the stable ship in the stormy sea. Or, the church is “built on the Rock”. Scripture is changeless. The ancient church had the notion that God could not participate in the sufferings of Christ because it would be unthinkable of God to be moved by Christ’s suffering on the cross. The nature of God is to be changeless and unmoveable. The changeless truth, the old old story. Luther is also pictured as refusing to be bent before his accusers. “Here I stand ,” he is reputed to say.

Is it any wonder that such a context calls for the church to be the place of preserving the past, and the pastor to be a man with answers. I can still remember the old white headed German Bishop standing boldly in the World Assembly and calling the assembly to sound the trumpet boldly. Everyone clapped, but in the silence which followed the image of our Lord standing blind-folded and silent swept across the vision of my mind. I knew then, in an instant, there must be more to strength than stiffness, more to remembering than memorization, more to authority than discipline. We shall write of the change in stability and the stability in change.

“God has made the world an evolving world, a world of change and growth; only in man and his creative deeds does it become what God means it to be: the world of man which, changeable, fleeting and sinful though it is, has been granted a share in the life of God by the God-man.”¹

1. Karl Rahner cited in *Finding Each Other*, Savary and O’Connor editors (New York: Newman Press 1971), p. 18.

“He’s a good priest, Jesus, and a very good man.
 But he’s being left behind. They’re not listening
 to his voice.
 They’re moving
 - perhaps without direction
 - perhaps toward truth
 only you can know. But they don’t look back.
 And he’s being left behind. In the well-worked rows of
 the vineyard, he stand alone.
 - and lonely.”²

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE AND THE NEED FOR TRANSLATION

“Not everyone who calls me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter into the Kingdom”

Matthew 7:21

One reason the church has been so strong on changelessness is that theology has been dominated by the view of language present in the ancient world. In those days language was vested with a sense of power, or even magic. When one said a name, it was though the words brought forth the reality spoken about. Words spoken of God never pass away. Certain words even had magical power to heal or condemn as the case may be. This view of language stands behind the medieval conception that one could prove God exists because the word “God” exists in language. To exist in language is to exist in reality. This is a simplified version of the ontological proof for God. We mention it to show how language can be viewed as reality rather than symbol. This understanding of language tended to stress that stability in life also meant stability in language.

It is important to note that Luther was instrumental in breaking down this type of thinking with his stress on translating Scripture and liturgy. He also had a free - as opposed to a rigid-style. Thus, in capturing ancient meaning he was willing to risk linguistic change. He instructively knew that ancient phrases like the Old Testament term, “Righteousness of God”, could take on subtly different meaning in the theology of his day. The discovery of the need to translate is as close to the heart of the Reformation as Luther’s attack on indulgences, and other problems of church practice. Luther knew man was oriented, not to language, but to the reality behind language. Paradoxically, translation can change language to maintain constant the meaning. This is a lesson we often forget with our love of old words, old translations of the Scriptures, and even old theological formulations.

What Luther sensed by instinct, the nineteenth century stated with more clarity when new concepts of language stressed the symbolic and practical nature of language and grammar. Rather than encase reality, language used words as symbols of meaning. Language is a reality of human experience. Language is in flux.

2. Joseph and Lois Bird, *Love Is All*, (Garden City, N.Y., Double Day 1973) pp. 143f.

Matthew expressed this idea by saying the true teacher brought forth the new and the old. (Matthew 13:52) Recognition of this characteristic of language may have been behind the practice of the Rabbis in the time of Jesus. They did not rely on Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. Instead they translated it afresh into Aramaic in the context of each synagogue service.

Inherent in preserving the changeless is the necessity of linguistic change. If the language of the creeds never change, we know the meaning will change. They are spoken in new situations which have the effect of changing meaning ever so slightly. This change in meaning is often so subtle we fail to notice it. Thus it is often most dangerous.

I still remember the shock called forth by the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Many could not accept the new wording in place of the King James Version. But now many realize the need and the R.S.V. is widely accepted. Yet many also still feel for the old faithful King James. Ironically some have now enshrined the R.S.V. as the following remark shows: "When will we quit using all these new fangled versions and get back to the R.S.V.?"

Clearly this question is not just one of taste. Rather the very stabilization of faith rests on constant re-translation. To remain the same we must accept gradual linguist change in our words.

THE NATURE OF TRADITION AS THE EXPLICATION OF THE IMPLICIT

Another aspect of tradition and its stability is the need for continual clarification. This is deeper than translation. It is a need for a tradition to retain its stability by being in a state of development. This view of tradition is often associated with certain aspects of the Roman Catholic position. For example, Cardinal Newman talked in terms of development in theology. What he meant was that all theology has to develop. All theology has to clarify in a later age what was implicit in an earlier one. There was a movement in all traditions from implicit to explicit, from unclarified to clarified.

This view also stands close to a Lutheran position in the sense that Martin Luther himself rejected the tendency toward primitivism. Luther regarded as abortive the work of the Anabaptists to reject all tradition in the church. He argued that the symbols, music, architecture, sacraments and other traditions of the church are valuable even though they are not all explicitly stated in Scripture. His only concern was to see these developing practices and traditions remain open to the authority of Scripture. The basic concern of Scripture is for the centrality of the Gospel of Christ. Therefore, the principle of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) in the Lutheran tradition does not obliterate the need of development. It stands rather as a corrective, giving an underlying consistency but never rigidity to Lutheran tradition. Just as stability calls for translation, it also calls for development that the faith is kept alive and relevant.

THE TRADITION AS REMEMBERING FOR FORGETTING: THE NEED OF CONTINUAL REFORMATION

The tradition of the church is a tradition that not only remembers but also forgets. There are certain peak or crucial points in history to which one must always return. But there are also certain aspects of the tradition which lose their significance. For instance, certain practices and official teachings in the church were developed out of intense controversies. What is repeated in later times is often not the controversy itself but the conclusion. Gradually as this conclusion is repeated through the centuries, the important reasons that surround conclusions are forgotten. In this way the very meaning is altered and the conclusions have a way of becoming problems rather than solutions, of creating questions rather than answers for subsequent generations. Therefore, as we see from Deuteronomy, it is necessary from time to time for the teachers to make new explanations that make sense out of the old artifacts of the tradition.

John Calvin said that it was necessary for the Reformed church continually to be the reforming church. What this suggests is that change is an inherent principle within tradition. What one generation accepts and understands, another generation may accept and misunderstand. There is in this insight a realization of a slight, and even unconscious, drift in all institutions and traditions. What one generation accepts and understands may still be accepted by another generation, but it stands at more of a distance from at least some issues.

Recognition of this fact has resulted in a growing awareness of recent times of the necessity to "return to the sources". Such a return is to refresh the corporate memory of the tradition and the church. Luther in his day felt that the Christian Church had forgotten the Scriptures. In the Luther Renaissance at the beginning of this century, scholars spoke of the need to rediscover the real Luther - the Luther who had been forgotten in the churches of the Reformation. In the Second Vatican Council the theologians of renewal like Hans Kung also called for a return to the sources of Catholic faith. The deceptive aspect of this kind of understanding of tradition is that those who advocate the return to the sources also look like innovators. So it is that we must not forget to remember, and at the same time remember that we also forget.

THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY AS THE THEOLOGY OF THE JUSTIFIED SINNER WHO IS STILL IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING MORE HOLY

There is another reason why things have to remain open in theology and the confessions of the church. No theologian has a right to claim he is totally on the side of God because that would imply he is beyond history and sin. One of the dangers of theology in our day is the so-called danger of triumphalism, the danger that the church speaks, not as a church militant, but as the church triumphant. When the church does this, it throws its theology askew. Its theology then lacks humour to laugh at itself and speaks as though everyone else is in error.

Triumphalism denies the timebound nature of the theologian and is not always recognized. But it may surface when the theologian says he is speaking for natural law, or the Scriptures, or the church, or for God. What is needed, instead of triumphalism, is the realization that all theology is working toward a goal of holiness and greater perfection in the awareness that it will never reach the goal and will, therefore, continually advance toward that end.

Someone once said about the preacher, "He can speak as though he is six feet above corruption." What was meant was that sermons often sound as if the perfect pastor is scolding the imperfect congregation. The same can be true of the theologian. One of the great Lutheran theologians of our day once told me, "Remember that every theologian, because he is a sinner, speaks in theology in the same condition as all men."³

A good Lutheran theology ought to have a sense of humour and humility right at this point. Luther said that Article Four of the Augsburg Confession was the article on which the church stands or falls. This Article is on "Justification" and says:

"It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5."⁴

Luther's point was that the church is first and foremost to hold itself accountable. She is to beg for forgiveness. She is not only to demand perfection or conformity in others. It is tragic how the Lutheran claim of true doctrine has often strayed so far from this central insight of the Reformation. I once read a book which outlined the amount of truth and error in all the churches of Christendom.

Denomination Lutheran - all truth, no error.

Denomination A - much truth, a little error.

Denomination B & C - some truth, some error.

Denomination D & E - little truth, much error.

It doesn't take much insight to guess that the author was a Lutheran. When can we learn constantly to seek to change and improve our theology in view of our own fallibility and self-centeredness? Until we do - are we Lutheran?

CONCLUSION

There is always a fine balance between change and stability. In a certain important way change generates stability. The church has a witness. The church is called upon to clarify its witness. It is with these ends in view that one asks the questions, "Can we find enough stability among ourselves to remain Lutheran?" and "Can we find enough flexibility among ourselves to remain Lutheran?"

3. From a conversation with Prof. Skydsgaard of Denmark.

4. Theodore G. Tappert, editor *The Book Of Concord*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1959), p. 30.

Perhaps these two questions are only one concern: "What does it mean to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ in our day?"

"Let us, you and I, lay aside all arrogance.
 Let neither of us pretend to have found the truth.
 Let us seek it as something unknown to both of us.
 Then we may seek it with love and sincerity,
 When neither of us has the rashness or presumption
 to believe he already possesses it."⁵

This article was written in response to an evening conversation with a friend and fellow Lutheran pastor who serves on the great western plains of Alberta. We were discussing how our Lutheran tradition and training had made us into the watch dogs of "pure teaching". We were also discussing how threatening it can be to admit there are "open questions" in our theology, or places where we or our church has had to change its mind. How can one preach without certainty?

Yet fear must be part of boldness,
 Doubt must be part of trust,
 Uncertainty must be part of knowledge,
 Humanness must be part of ministry.⁶

And the night wore on: and the threat of admitting finitude became our benediction: and a kind of quiet laughter filled the room.

5. St. Augustine, cited in *Finding Each Other*, Savary and O'Conner, editors (Newman Press 1971), p. 78.

6. *Ibid.*