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Dirk G. Lange

Luther Seminary, dlange001@luthersem.edu

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Confessions, Ecumenism, Ethnicity: A Lutheran Charism

Dirk G. Lange

Context of the question

Despite the often universalizing tendency of the churches in North America or their authoritative way of proposing their forms and questions (both ritual and theological) to the global church, a considerable degree of myopia has reigned within their own borders. Speaking from within the context of North American Lutheranism, ethnic loyalties and ethnically embodied confession curiously and surprisingly still rule both hearts and minds. Lutheranism on the East Coast of the USA, with its multiple points of origin in both German pietism and German orthodoxy, is noticeably different from mid-western Lutheranism, with its far-reaching and deep roots spreading from Swedish orthodoxy to Norwegian pietism (and everything in between).

These sundry ethnic origins of Lutheranism in North America, no matter how diluted today (very few people, for example, speak the “mother tongue” let alone worship in it), still maintain considerable spiritual and theological control, sometimes conscious but mostly unconscious, over both worship and theology in parishes, at the seminaries and in church-wide discussions. Though there is an interest in the “global church” and things global (for example, “global music”), our own deeply ethnic expressions of worship and theology remain unnoticed. It is from the midst of these often unnamed ethnic tensions and expressions that I write the following reflection on worship as it is presented in the Lutheran Confessions.

Surprisingly contextual in its origins, the Lutheran Confessions propose an agenda for worship that is ecumenical and, I want to argue, charismatic. The specificity of the Reformers’ Confession in the city of Augsburg almost 500 years ago, transgresses many boundaries that were subsequently placed particularly on worship and ritual interpretation. In order to highlight the way in which boundaries are broken within the text of the Confessions themselves, I turn to trauma theory. This turn also places this study squarely in a North American context with its deep interest in understanding the

movement of the human psyche and the relation of the human person to history. Trauma theory, however, will allow me to point to the particular provisional characteristic of worship that lies behind the vocabulary of the Lutheran Confessions and that allows the specificity and contextual nature of what the Confessions propose to engender a dynamism of the Holy Spirit.

Trauma theory and the Lutheran Confessions

According to trauma theory, the “thing” that is unceasingly repeated—the traumatic event—is not the event itself but that which made the event traumatic in the first place. What is repeated is the fact that the traumatic event was not known or not fully experienced in its happening. The traumatic event is experienced as a shock of survival—why did I survive? Or, as Cathy Caruth states, it is an awakening one moment too late. “Trauma [...] does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned.”¹

The event that I name as traumatic is the Christ event.² If a traumatic event is one that we cannot fully grasp, an event that is only “registered” as a force of experience, a force that continually returns, how then is the Christ event a traumatic event? How is this traumatic event remembered, repeated and ritualized? A reading of the Christ event through the lens of trauma theory suggests that the repetition or ritualization is not a remembering at a facile level. Remembering is not simply physically or conceptually representing a past event. It is not a “recalling to mind” because the event itself is inaccessible to the mind. Rather, the Christ event returns as a force that continually disrupts our usual forms of remembering and ritualizing. When Martin Luther asks the question, How do we remember this event? he is pushed to find a language for this force of a return which he finds specifically in the eucharistic liturgy.³

In worship and particularly in the sacraments, the force of a return—that which cannot be captured, known, represented, memorialized by ritual—is not some abstract notion of grace or forgiveness of sins or other theological construct, but is the irruption of the Holy Spirit as “other,” as body, as that

¹ Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 151.

² Dirk G. Lange, *Trauma Recalled: Liturgy, Disruption and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

³ *Ibid.*, see chapter 5.

which resists all human attempts at control, manipulation and mastery. Worship, and particularly the eucharistic celebration, confronts us with a failure of meaning—with the failure of the individual self to define meaning. The Word, in worship, through the sacrament, reveals to us the depth of our need. At the heart of worship is this action of the Holy Spirit: a body continually returns, the body of Christ, the body of our suffering neighbor.

Devotion

Recognizing that all worship is, in a sense, “failed” worship, frees the participants to “hear” the Holy Spirit, to encounter the Holy Spirit who comes as it wills. This freedom does not mean that practices of worship are unimportant. There are worship practices that communicate an unhelpful “works righteousness” theology (for example, forms of confession and forgiveness that emphasize the contrition of the believer as condition for rather than result of God’s grace). The recognized “failure” of worship frees the participant from the obligation of worship as a “work.”

This is one of the most surprising legacies of the Augsburg Confession and one which, in the parish and in ecumenical relations, is difficult to embody. Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti has highlighted this difficulty. She writes:

Parish council members feel the high responsibility of offering the right kind of worship to their congregation. If they did not achieve this the loss of church members could be the consequence. Here the right liturgy, serving people’s tastes as well as possible, becomes the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. The right action on behalf of the parish worship will save the church [...] or further her decline.⁴

Many are the reasons for being concerned about “right” liturgy, though none of them, as Haspelmath-Finatti points out, have much to do with justification by faith alone.

Yet, freed from the obligation to find a perfect form of memorial or remembrance for the Christ event, and freed from the temptation to immortalize a particular ethnic or cultural representation of worship, the “ceremonies and rites” (of liturgy) can be that place where the Holy

⁴ Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti, “Theologia Prima-Liturgical Theology as an Ecumenical Challenge to Lutheran Worship Practice.” Unpublished paper presented at Augsburg, p. 1.

Spirit continually returns or irrupts to reveal both human need (terrified or troubled conscience) and comfort. Article XXI of the Augsburg Confession, “Concerning the Mass,” begins with a short but succinct statement: “Our people have been unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. But it is obvious, without boasting, that the Mass is celebrated among us with greater devotion and earnestness than among our opponents.”⁵ The statement that the parishes/communities of the Reformation celebrate liturgy “with greater devotion and earnestness” opens up for us today the possibility of discussing worship, not from the perspective of specific, well-controlled or maintained rituals, but from the perspective of the work of the Holy Spirit within different worshipping traditions and ethnicities.

How are we to understand “great devotion and earnestness”?⁶ Is devotion not an expression of human piety? Does it not depend on human investment, human reverence, human seriousness, human prayerfulness and human discipline in accomplishing its task of sanctification? Do we not risk turning “devotion” into acts “that justify”?⁷ Obviously, this cannot be the case for the Reformers.

Devotion or piety, viewed from the angle of the “old person,” is only emotional investment in a particular form as if that form were itself salvific. Emotional investment, without guidance or instruction, remains in its own arena. It simply uses forms to reassure the self and reproduce the desired effect, the desired emotional outcome. Such “devotion” can be the perpetuation of a particular cultural or ethnic insight as if the original intent behind the reforming insight—the original response to a particular gospel crisis—demanded being encapsulated for eternity. The mere repetition of a form out of a desire “to be faithful” to a particular reforming insight ends up being nothing else than wishful thinking or nostalgia. This desire “to be faithful” to a particular form of worship (i.e., that practiced by our ancestors in the faith or practiced by the community that brought us to faith) leads only to stagnation not to devotion.⁸

⁵ “The Augsburg Confession—German Text—Article XXIV: Concerning the Mass,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 68.

⁶ In the German *größerer Andacht und Ernst*, and in the Latin text, stated slightly differently, *summa reverentia celebrator*.

⁷ “Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVII: Monastic Vows,” in Kolb and Wengert, op. cit. (note 5), p. 281.

⁸ In many conversations during the LWF global consultation on “Theology in the Life of the Church,” I was struck by the questions of my sisters and brothers from the global South. These questions had to deal with “permission.” Is it permissible in worship to [...] dance, clap hands, use a local symbol, etc.?

Isn't this normalization of a particular ethnic embodiment (i.e., German pietism or Norwegian free church) as if it were universally applicable, the object of the Reformers' critique of *ex opere operato*? By the mere performance of the rite or ceremony, it was argued, people receive its benefit. By the mere repetition of a form of worship, the desired "effect" is achieved, whether emotional or intellectual satisfaction. An original, Spirit-filled insight, a pneumatic moment, is captured, controlled, "put in a box," fossilized. Form, in this scenario, whether ethnic or other, trumps gospel.

Devotion as a human activity, as emotion, is turned in on itself. Unfortunately, it is with this understanding of devotion that much of Christianity has been "exported." How then are we to understand "devotion" (*Andacht*, *Ernst*, *reverentia*) in Article XXIV? The vast majority of references to "devotion" (or *Andacht*) in the Confessions are precisely references to failed human works. What is different in this article? If devotion is not a human activity or self-nurtured piety, what is it?

In the preface to the Large Catechism, Luther himself defines devotion as the work of the Holy Spirit. Admonishing pastors, Luther writes that they can never study the Catechism enough—it is a lifelong activity. In that study, in "such reading, conversation, and meditation the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested [...]." Light and devotion are bestowed; they are a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is through the practice of reading, conversation and meditation, through immersion into the Word, that the Holy Spirit accomplishes its work of driving the devil, the world, the flesh and all evil thoughts away and conforming the believer ever more fully into Jesus Christ.

In Article XXIV, the mass itself is a practice through which the Holy Spirit does its work. But now the mass is celebrated, not as rote ritualization, *ex opere operato*, but rather as something that the Holy Spirit is working on in the community of believers. To use the language of trauma theory, something "returns" in worship that disrupts subject and context, revealing human need and human inability. Devotion, as the work of the Holy Spirit, is the revelation of human need. Devotion, as work of the Holy Spirit, is the

These questions arose because of the way in which a particular European model of worship was imposed as normative. And yet, today, in Europe and North America, we have come to realize the ritual poverty and narrowness of these forms of worship. Renewal is continually required and hopefully occurring.

⁹"The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther. Martin Luther's Preface," in Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 381.

revelation that we, as human beings, can do nothing. We are brought to a place of utter nakedness where faith alone is given.

This is the place where we are marked by the cross. As Martha Ellen Stortz has observed in her article on the marks of the church, the marks (or stigmata) “belong to the whole church, to all believers. Christians live as ‘marked’ women and men. Luther shared that late medieval longing to be marked with Christ’s suffering. He simply extends the stigmata to all Christians.”¹⁰ We are marked by Christ’s suffering. They become our own as we listen and commit ourselves to the suffering in the world. The cross, as mark, however is not our possession. Rather, we are possessed by it. “Yet, the holiness of ‘the Christian holy people’ is not something they achieve; their holiness resides in the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

Melanchthon underlines this charismatic activity in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, even though the Spirit is not specifically named. “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies.”¹² Worship will be about learning Scripture but this learning is not an end in itself. The learning is catechesis; it is an admonishment “by the Word.” The Word, through the ceremonies and rites, impacts the participants, disrupting their piety, disrupting their invented self, disrupting their imagined devotion, revealing human need, so that they come to or experience (*concupiant*—take in, absorb) “faith and fear.” This experience of faith and fear of God then leads (finally) to prayer. Through worship, we are becoming Christians.¹³ Prayer itself is now conceived, in Pauline fashion, not as our work but as the work of the Holy Spirit within us (Rom 8).

The ceremonies and rites that constitute worship are continually “reformed,” so that they draw the people into an experience of the Word (through participation and instruction),¹⁴ so that they speak the Word, so that the Word admonishes through them, so that “we do not ‘do’ Christian

¹⁰ Martha Ellen Stortz, “Marked by the Body of Christ: A Lutheran Approach to Practices,” in this publication, p. 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV: The Mass,” in Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 258.

¹³ “But such orders [of worship] are needed for those who are not yet Christians so that they may make Christians out of us.” Martin Luther, “Preface to the German Mass and Order of Service, 1526,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 62.

¹⁴ This point about “instruction” is important but cannot be developed in the current form of this paper.

rite. We receive it. We can witness God's work upon us."¹⁵ The "devotion" of the Augsburg Confession is not a superior or supreme human piety, but a "being marked" by the cross, by the sufferings of Christ.

Authenticity

Lurking behind the question about devotion is a question about authenticity. Part of the argument in Article XXIV concerns the valuation of worship in the churches already subscribing to reform (Latin text) or among our people (German text). What is authentic worship? This question certainly does not come as a surprise. It sounds very familiar!

In Article XXIV, the Augsburg Confession approaches the question of authenticity through the lens of devotion. Though initially that would seem to be a rather subjective manner in which to consider authenticity, I have shown how devotion is, for the Reformers, not a human work but the impact or irruption of the Holy Spirit, revealing human need and comforting the terrified conscience. The Augsburg Confession pushes worshippers (and those who study and write about worship) away from a modernist, totalizing understanding of the "authentic." In the Augsburg Confession, authentic worship is not defined as faithfulness to a model, to a particular ethnic embodiment of worship, as if there were an ideal form of (Lutheran) worship. Authentic worship is related to the quality and purpose of devotion.

In the particular case of the Confessions, the ceremonies and rites of the Roman Mass had remained basically unchanged. Melancthon goes to some length to point this out and underline it in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.¹⁶ The argument for authenticity, however, is not found in this simple maintenance of a form or model or tradition. Authenticity is found in the way in which the form is put to use and how the Word is experienced.

The tone of the word "authentic" shifts from its usual alignment in contemporary speech with "right" or "correct" or even "only" way. That which is "authentic" is now much less tangible and therefore also much less controllable. Authenticity is not established by imitating a preestablished model. Authenticity, to use the language of trauma theory, is the force of an impact, the force of something that returns and that cannot be captured or

¹⁵ Haspelmath-Finatti, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 3.

¹⁶ Kolb and Wengert, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 258.

controlled. Authenticity is the work of the Holy Spirit, disrupting models rather than blindly imitating them.

The consequences of this understanding of authenticity can be stated very simply: one particular (ethnic, for example) ritual embodiment of faith can never impose itself as the only true way for worshipping God. The truth of any particular embodiment is, as always with the work of the Holy Spirit, a provisional embodiment. This is what renders it dynamic, even “authentic.”

The initial suggestion of Article XXIV is radical. Authentic worship has nothing to do with “form” but with devotion. Authenticity is not about the imitation but about the work of the Holy Spirit, about the irruption of the Spirit at a particular time and place. The challenge presented to worship by this reformulation of “authentic” is the arduous task of continually adapting form so that the Holy Spirit can always do its work. It is the challenge of remaining within the “provisional” of the Spirit rather than in the “firmly established” of human tradition.

Confessions and charism

Submitting to the trauma of the Christ event, worship embodies that force that can never be purely and definitively repeated. Ceremonies and rites are handed down from generation to generation, from tradition to tradition, but require that continual work of pastoral discernment so that they allow the Spirit to irrupt in every context, in every heart, leading to faith and fear and finally to prayer.

The particular charism of worship, as understood in the Lutheran Confessions, is precisely that authenticity is not found in any one particular form or manifestation but in the failure of all forms. Every culture is then challenged to translate that which is un-translatable. Every culture, every ethnicity is challenged to remember and repeat that which defies repetition—the Christ event. The mark of authenticity is not found in any one particular representation, but in that continual disruption of all our forms, all our styles, all our traditions by the Holy Spirit, who comes to us as the other, as a body.

This by no means implies an elimination of forms or ceremonies and rites. The confessions continually insist that they “keep” the mass; they keep the form but with greater devotion. We can now understand “devotion” not as our work or “right” attitude but as a sort of disposition that allows the

Holy Spirit to do its work. We can now understand “form” as practice that continually critiques itself, that continually directs us to another.

The assembly of believers is instructed in the form and invited into participation. But again, this instruction and invitation are not by compulsion, as if we had the perfect ceremony to which all must adhere, as if it were a law that must be fulfilled. The form— the ceremonies and rites—do not “represent” the Christ event. Worship is always a failed enactment of that event but, in its own failure, it translates that event so that believers come to recognize their need, their hunger, their poverty. In this sense, “charismatic” worship publicly proclaims God’s goodness, resists cultural models of making meaning and is able to name human need.

When during a plenary session at Augsburg, I asked Gary Simpson, “Isn’t worship the primary place of public theology, of ‘God’s publicity?’,” he responded affirmatively by referring to the role of intercessory prayer in worship.

Worship is the church’s first, primordial public (and thereby primordial for public church and public theology). When, during the intercessions we name people by name who among other things are unemployed and underemployed, who suffer from addictions, depression or other mental illnesses, then we will know that in our public communion as church we are resisting and overcoming the temptations to accommodate to our captivity to economic class etiquette.

When worship is this recognition and naming of human need, when worship is resistance to cultural norms (even religious norms), when worship is public theology, that place where the Holy Spirit arouses “faith and fear,” then the people will come “without our law,”¹⁷ they will be “drawn to Communion and the Mass,”¹⁸ they will be drawn to the sacrament as “real fellowship.”¹⁹ They will be drawn to the sacrament that is now not a bridge between the secular and the sacred, not a “peephole” into God’s reality, not an escape into some heavenly height or the perfect repetition of some ethnically defined order of service, but an encounter of God’s grace through and in our need and the world’s need. In that encounter, life, community, worship and finally human need are reoriented. Practices become transformative and prayer becomes possible.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” in Kolb and Wengert, op. cit. (note 5), p. 350.

¹⁸ Kolb and Wengert, op. cit. (note 5), p. 68.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods, 1519,” in Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), pp. 50–51.

Postscript

Though ecumenism is in the title of this article, it has not been thoroughly developed. I have focused primarily on the charismatic characteristic of Lutheran worship and its subsequent ethnically specific embodiment as assumed/described in the Lutheran Confessions. But I hesitate to remove “ecumenism” from the title because its reference here points to the paradoxical nature of worship that is both a local and an ecumenical reality. Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti makes an ecumenical proposal about worship that I find particularly intriguing.

In my experience ecumenical worship is a good place to find the dynamics of *theologia prima*. In ecumenical contexts no single church can determine an entire service. Here we have to let others “do.” We can receive what is the wealth of a different tradition. [...] We can receive the Word of our God out of other hands.²⁰

Haspelmath-Finatti does not propose a set pattern but suggests that the very practice of ecumenical worship “trains us” for continually receiving God’s gift. The practice of gathering together is in itself a crucial piece in nurturing a broader vision. Ecumenical worship rather than being a burden that we must carry once or twice a year (during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, for example) becomes a place where we encounter God and the gift of grace through our neighbor. Here, the Holy Spirit is at work again, continually breaking our self-imposed boundaries leading us into ever-deeper devotion.

²⁰ Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti, op. cit. (note 4), p. 2.