



Notes from a Latin American Perspective

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I. SOME TEMPTATIONS TO BE AVOIDED

In the year 1531, Martin Luther passed this insight on to the students who shared his table: “Experience alone makes the theologian.”¹ In so doing Luther was certainly not referring to intimate emotions as a source of revelation nor to the kind of scientific knowledge which derives from empirical experimentation, but rather reflecting a perception of the intimate relation between the Word of God and the concrete situation in which the Christian community lives. To do theology is therefore much more than to recognize and acknowledge a given theoretical truth. Of course, it involves the methodic theoretical scanning of the Word of God, but at the same time, it is the result both of the exposure to a given concrete life and historic situation, and—in the case of Christian theology—of the practical living out of the faith in Jesus Christ in that context.

Consequently, when trying to give an answer to the question “Whither Lutheranism?” we must resist a series of temptations, of which I will mention three.

The first we could call the temptation of *pragmatism*. We would fall into this temptation if we simply attempted to describe how Lutheranism or specific Lutheran churches function and to evaluate them according to their apparent effectiveness, organization, inventiveness in developing new programs, degree of public recognition, growth in membership, etc. In the final analysis, this approach would be a denial of the incarnational dimension of theology. In his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ reveals God’s presence in the world as a contradiction to the prevailing powers of evil, sin, and death. This implies conflicts and the very likely evaluation of “failures,” when measurement is done according to pragmatic

¹Table Talk, no. 46, in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols. (American Edition; St. Louis: Concordia, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958ff.) 54.7.

criteria. Luther quite differently stressed a “theology of the cross” according to which God’s revelation is to be found *sub contrario*, under the cross, in weakness and suffering.² The doctrine and practice of any church must be evaluated according to such theological criteria rather than according to mere pragmatic perspectives.

The seemingly opposite temptation must be unmasked and avoided as well. It would be equally wrong to establish in advance some sort of absolute standard of doctrinal truth by which we could measure the degree of “true” Lutheran identity in any Lutheran church of the world. In remarking this temptation we have not forgotten for sure Luther’s reminder that justification by grace through faith is the article by which the church stands or falls³ or that a theologian is to be

recognized by the capacity to distinguish between law and gospel.⁴ What I am stressing is precisely this: it is no easy task for a church to live out justification by grace through faith or for a theologian to distinguish between law and gospel, not only because of the fundamental reality of human sinfulness, but also and always because of the very nature of that task, which always has to be undertaken in specific concrete and changing situations.

Thirdly, we must then resist consistently the temptation of *conformism*, according to which nothing really matters and consequently everything is okay. Conformism of such a kind is a practical denial of God's existence and inevitably an attitude by which given realities and prevailing powers are taken as if they were divine in themselves. Conformism is also a subtle form of works-righteousness, namely, the righteousness that comes from "doing nothing."

After some basic considerations of the relation between theology and context, our task will be to describe the particular witness by Lutherans in the Latin American context⁵ and to assess the extent to which that witness reflects, in doctrine and practice, Jesus Christ's liberating presence in the midst of the burning issues and needs of this continent. We will also point to the difficulties and precariousness of this witness, calling attention to those aspects which, in my personal view, should be considered more consistently by Lutherans in Latin America.

II. LUTHERAN THEOLOGY AND CONTEXT

We all live in a specific context which marks our lives in whatever we do. In some way or another this fact is also reflected in our theological endeavors. Obviously, this was true in the case of Martin Luther and of all those theological traditions dependent on him. It would be pretentious to imagine that Lutheran churches were an exception to this rule. Often the contextual features accompanying a particular church's theology and witness are adopted quite unconsciously by its adherents and are perceived as such only by others living in other contexts and/or other times. At the same time, a theology developed in one context may be

²See for example, the "Heidelberg Disputation" of 1518, esp. theses 19-21, in *LW* 31.52-53; and Luther's controversy with Erasmus in the "Bondage of the Will," of 1525, *LW* 33.3-295.

³"Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised." Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles*, Part II, Article 1 in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 292.5.

⁴See Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, *LW*, 26.115-16.

⁵My remarks concentrate mainly on Brazilian Lutheranism with which I am most intimately acquainted.

understood differently and play a new role in another. When this occurs, such a theology may be used or misused unintentionally.

Therefore, to reflect on the contextual conditions under which theology is done belongs essentially to the theological task. Contextual reflection is necessary for the sake of the relevancy of the Christian witness, but here I wish to stress especially its necessity as a tool for self-critical assessment. Although historical, anthropological, sociological, and other sciences may serve that purpose, we should not fall into the trap of considering any of these sciences—or even their sum—as the hermeneutical resource for grasping the ultimate meaning of theology and the Christian witness. Quite to the contrary, we use them as auxiliary hermeneutical tools to unveil the theological message, which, whether in its precariousness or in its integrity, has an identity of its own.

The Lutheran tradition has been deeply influenced by two theological movements, which are quite antagonistic to each other in method and purpose, but which, nevertheless, have coexisted even up to the present in many Lutheran churches: orthodoxy and pietism. Orthodoxy, whose development followed close upon the age of the Reformers, was a rigorous theological effort concentrated on establishing pure doctrine drawn from and measured by Scripture. Such efforts are quite necessary in times of deep controversy like those in which the Reformation identity had to be developed. Pietism, for its part, found it necessary to stress the personal appropriation of the Word of God and its consequences for personal life. Its emphasis is, in turn, necessary whenever and wherever Christians and churches become self-satisfied and neglect living out their faith and putting their mission into practice.

At the same time, however, we observe that orthodoxy could be integrated into the process of development of territorial and state churches in which it functioned to define official religious doctrine to which everybody was expected to give assent. In such a role it became docile to established powers and increasingly incapable of evoking a critical Christian witness. Although Pietism developed originally that role of critical witness, it was largely incapable and often unwilling to resist its incorporation into economic liberalism. Religiosity and theology became thereby confined to the realm of individual, private faith. Thus as pietism became increasingly supportive of prevailing economic interests, for example in the process of colonization of the Third World, it ceased to be a critical ferment for a more humane society.

It is therefore crucial again and again to rescue Luther's work and theology from their so frequent domestication and to recover their profoundly critical and intensely revolutionary dimension. In spite of a certain widespread reputation of connivance on Luther's part, we can find in him no trace of conformism to given realities. On the contrary, it would be difficult to find a person more freely critical of whatever he considered to be against the will of God. He was uncompromisingly critical of medieval (Aristotelian) philosophy, established church structures and practices, alienating forms of religiosity, and dominant social injustices. Of course, he also took stances which we might characterize as nothing less than tragic, as exhibited in some of his writings against Jews, Anabaptists, and, in my opinion, peasants. His mistakes arose, however, out of theological or contextual misjudg-

ments, not out of uncritical yielding to prevailing powers or out of personal interests.

Thus we must acknowledge that Luther's ultimate concern was for the integrity of theology and the Christian witness which are always to be centered in the good news of God's undeserved and gracious love to humanity. In his particular context this concern was repeatedly expressed in courageous protests against very concrete manifestations of personal, ecclesiastical, and social evils. Luther was, in this sense, deeply and truly evangelical *and* protestant. Unfortunately, Lutheran churches have frequently lost much of his vigor.

III. LUTHERAN WITNESS IN THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT⁶

1. Landless Farmers and Luther's Concept of Calling.

Recently I took some visitors from North American theological institutions to visit one of Brazil's numerous camps of landless farmers. These camps, located on public or private land, are usually unlawfully occupied overnight. In this one at Capela da Conceição there were around

thirty families left out of an original more than two hundred, the others of whom in the meantime received a piece of land to start a new living. After fourteen months of living in tents under the most precarious conditions and enduring severe summer and winter weather, these remaining families were still waiting for a solution.

They told us about their struggle, their sacrifices, and their hopes. When asked about how they had become conscious of their struggle as necessary and just, one of the landless farmers replied that all of them had in the past worked very hard for many years as employees of some big and wealthy land owner. At some point, however, they had come to realize that, “in spite of continuous hard work,” their life conditions had steadily become worse and worse, that they would never reach a life with dignity and the ability to offer their children an adequate education with better prospects. “We discovered that hard work alone won’t do it. Rather, misery will be perpetuated; others will profit from our hard work.” They had become convinced that a piece of land of their own was indispensable and that, in order to reach such a goal, they would have to organize to influence public opinion and to pressure the authorities finally to put into practice the land reform so often promised but always postponed. Many of their friends had already obtained a piece of land in just this way, often after much sacrifice and successful resistance against the police sent out to expel and disperse them. Now these, too, had reasons to hope for a piece of land pretty soon.

I describe this episode at some length because it offers an excellent example of how a traditional Lutheran doctrine, namely, Luther’s concept of vocation as it relates to professional activity, must be reshaped in a different context. Contrary to then prevailing theological understanding according to which life in a religious order was thought to be of a higher quality than the exercise of secular activities, Luther argued for recognition of the secular workplace as an arena for the exercise

⁶For two important sources on this topic available in English see Gottfried Brakemeier, ed., *Lutherans in Brazil 1990: History, Theology, Perspectives*, English edition ed. Walter Altmann (São Leopoldo, Brazil: Post-Graduate Studies Institute of the IECLB/Estudos Teológicos/Sinodal, 1989); and Nelson Kirst, ed., *Rethinking Luther’s Theology in the Contexts of the Third World*, Third World Lutheran Theological Educators Conference, São Leopoldo, Brazil, September 5-11, 1988 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1990).

of divine calling, where all persons had the opportunity to serve others through their respective individual professions. In Luther’s time this recognition was obviously a liberating one, with profound effects upon society. But its direct transposition into the situation of the landless farmers would not be liberating at all, insofar as in that context “hard work” would represent nothing more than the “perpetuation of misery.” Under the new circumstances, not the work of individuals, but the work of the landless farmers to promote organization would have to be recognized as a place for divine calling. Only at a second stage would the farmer then recognize the “faithful work” on the land as a way to reflect God’s will in producing food for the people of the country.

2. *Lutheran Presence and Witness in Latin America.*

Most of the Latin American countries have in the last decade found the way to establish fairly democratic forms of government. This has brought a considerable improvement in the

political scenery when compared with the previous dictatorships and military regimes. Nevertheless, from an economic point of view, Latin America enters the nineties with the almost unbearable burden of an extremely heavy social mortgage and an extraordinarily serious lack of positive perspectives. Almost everywhere in Latin America, life conditions have deteriorated dramatically. Average income has dropped 50 percent or more. Concentration of land, wealth, and resources has increased shockingly, and corruption has become widespread. International debt has been nowhere significantly alleviated and in most countries has assumed huge proportions. One primary cause of this growth has been the continuous compounding of unpaid interest whose rates rocketed into the skies in the eighties after the United States adopted a budgetary policy based on deficits. Just to pay the interest on the debts without any reduction of the principal would consume half or more of the earnings from exports.

The social services provided by the state have collapsed under these heavy financial burdens and continuous mismanagement. Crime, especially kidnapping and trafficking in narcotics, has become increasingly profitable. In some countries, such as Bolivia, the estimated income from narcotics delivery supersedes the national income earned from legal economic activities. Social misery and the lack of an effective land reform, as well as exploitation of natural resources by internal and foreign groups has exacted a heavy toll from nature, damaging the ecological balance especially in the Amazon region.

No way out of this situation has thus far been detected and consequently none has been attempted. Any solution certainly would require profound changes in the prevailing mentality and practices, as well as radical transformations in national and international structures and relations. Somehow Latin American peoples and all Third World peoples will have to find a way to transpose to macrostructures that kind of basic perception achieved by the landless farmers mentioned above: "Just hard work won't do it." Neither will the continuously spreading growth of corruption and crime. Political organization by the people will have to lead and build the way.

No church can claim to be faithful to Jesus Christ if it is not profoundly concerned with these burning issues. Thus out of social concern the Lutheran Church in Brazil has incorporated several emphases in its social action in recent years. First, there has been advocacy and support for landless farmers and for small

farmers, who in fact produce most of the food consumed by the Brazilian people. Projects of alternative, cooperative, and ecologically sound ways of production have been supported, while political authorities have been urged to put into practice an effective agrarian reform. Second, church mission among native Brazilians has consistently included the defense of their right to the land on which they live, thereby seeking to prevent the continuation of the centuries-long process of exploitation and extermination of the indigenous populations.

While these efforts have registered some hopeful results, aided in part by the fact that 58 percent of Brazilian Lutherans still live in rural areas, nevertheless, efforts undertaken in urban areas—where the majority of the Brazilian population already lives, and to which more and more Lutherans are moving—have faced tremendous difficulties. Social tensions come more forcefully to the surface in urban areas, putting heavy stress on the capacity of congregations to maintain a true communion in the face of unavoidable conflicts. In larger cities there is, of course, the familiar tendency of establishing several congregations each of a different social composition.

But among the poor many—as “faithful” members tend to put it—“get lost,” that is to say, they join another church, possibly a Pentecostal one.⁷ Brazilian Lutherans are still haunted by past introverted practices of mere maintenance of faith within families without missionary outlook. This is reflected in the fact that persons of German descent still make up around 90 percent of Brazilian Lutherans. In spite of some significant new approaches, there is great uncertainty about how to address theologically the reality of laborers in the factories. The prevailing theology is probably still too heavily influenced by theologies developed in other continents vis-à-vis the challenges of secularization, while Brazilian workers usually have maintained deep religious beliefs and expectations which are not adequately grasped or addressed by the theology and practice of the Lutheran Church.

This reminds us, of course, that Christian witness in the social realm, as fundamental as it is under Latin American and Third World conditions, is an integral part of the church’s mission, which is wider than mere social action. One of the foremost challenges for Lutheranism today—indeed for Christian churches at large—is to foster hope where there seems to be only frustration and despair. With the Apostle Paul we detect in the midst of social injustices and suffering not only the dreadful consequences of human sin, but also the horrifying menace of

⁷The Pentecostal movement is experiencing a tremendous growth throughout Latin America. The reasons for such growth are debatable and not easily explained. Certainly, however, to be noted as factors are the great mobility of the Pentecostal movement, the active and emotional participation expected of all worshippers, the frequent promise of healing, the very ambiguous offer of spiritual comfort in the midst of poverty, and the equally ambiguous aggressive methods of fund raising.

death, God’s “last enemy” (1 Cor 15). But with Paul we are also called to proclaim in words and deeds that in Jesus Christ’s resurrection this last enemy has been overcome; that we no longer need to be without hope.⁸

IV. CONCLUSION

The specific theological contributions of Lutherans to the burning issues with which Latin America is confronted have remained rather implicit in these brief notes. In relation to liberation theology, I have outlined or developed elsewhere⁹ the possible relevance of Luther’s theology, specifically in such topics as the theology of the cross, justification by grace through faith, ecclesiology, hermeneutics, and the distinction—not separation—of the two realms of God’s action. In fact, justification and justice must go hand in hand. They are two poles of the same reality in Christ. Whenever the church neglects one of them—in Latin America, for example, we deplore the so frequent atrophy of the church’s commitment to justice—both the integrity and the relevancy of the Christian message are seriously compromised. Yet, on the other hand, “There are three things that last forever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love” (1 Cor 13:13).

⁸Here I wish to add a few brief remarks on the Lutheran World Federation, but for lack of space omit altogether the important issue of the ecumenical commitment and relations of Lutheranism.

The 1990 LWF assembly in Curitiba, Brazil, concentrated on the theological understanding of communion and on its own restructuring. The concept of “communion” is certainly theologically sounder than the vague term “federation” for expressing the kind of relationship one hopes the Lutheran churches gathered in LWF intend to

establish among themselves, namely, one of full mutual acceptance in Christ and of sharing of gifts and resources of a financial, personal, and programmatic nature. The test of this willingness will certainly be the measure of the increase in proportion of these resources in each church designated for such a process of sharing.

The structural changes in the LWF seem to allow a better flow between bodies responsible for decision making and implementation, and will enable more speedy address of issues which concern the churches, especially in the sociopolitical realm. Besides the permanent tasks of mission and church cooperation, the new world scenery—the collapse of “real socialism,” the explosion and aftermath of the war in the Persian Gulf, the emergence of a *pax Americana*, and the widening gap between North and South—also presents gigantic challenges for Christians, churches, and church organizations. Regional representation, though not necessarily representing different segments within the churches, may be better accommodated in the new LWF structures.

On the other hand, there is cause for concern in the heavy centralization of power, the establishment of vertical structures in staff work coordination, and the risk of an atrophying of the communications task in public relations. All of these phenomena contradict the concept of *communio*. The greatest reservation must be expressed regarding the concept underlying the establishment of a mammoth Department of Mission and Development alongside a shrunken Department of Theology and Studies. The hidden presupposition seems to be that a small group of theologians will be sufficient, through their noncontextual theological research, to contribute the indispensable theological basis for the LWF’s widespread programmatic effort, especially through Mission and Development. It is therefore only symptomatic that the new structure sacrificed the desk for theological education.

⁹See Walter Altmann, “Luther’s Theology and Liberation Theology,” in *Lutherans in Brazil 1990*, 67-80; “God’s Kingship in the Church and in Politics,” *Word & World* 7/1 (1987) 43-58; and *Luther and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress). In press.