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EVANGELICALISM: THE HEARTBEAT OF AMERICAN PROTESTANTISM AND THE AWKWARD COMPANION OF AMERICAN LUTHERANISM

by Walter Sundberg

Lutheranism and the First Great Awakening

THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING — often dated from 1735 to 1742 with aftershocks extending at least to the death of George Whitefield, the great itinerant preacher, in 1770 — was arguably the single most important religious event of an extended nature in American religious history. Its theological blueprint was provided by Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), pastor of a pivotal Puritan congregation, First Church in Northampton, Massachusetts, who dedicated himself to revival in large part because of the influence of his maternal grandfather, Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) who also pursued revival — or as it was commonly called in that day “awakening” — for most of his sixty years of ministry. Like his grandfather, Edwards sought a way to escape the spiritual depression that gripped two generations of Puritans and that had compromised their faith in the Halfway Covenant (1662), which allowed church members who had not given personal testimony to Christ — the essential requirement for full membership and participation in the Lord’s Supper — to have their children baptized. The effect of this decision was to define the church in terms of sacramental incorporation. This made the church an institution of convention instead of a community of the committed: an understanding that threatened the integrity and identity of the Puritan movement.

Edwards led an awakening in his church beginning in 1735 that resulted in a book that was *The Purpose Driven Church* of its day: *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1738). This book, especially given its 20 printings, provided a theological framework that separated “Old Lights” from “New Lights.” Old Lights

understood the church in terms of sacramental incorporation; New Lights defined the church in terms of adult commitment through testimony and helped to create the widespread popularity and social dynamism of the Great Awakening. As a good Puritan, Edwards taught that the normal beginning of genuine Christian life is spiritual transformation, the sign of which is when an individual publicly declares allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The principle of spiritual transformation undergirds the theology of conversion and preaching for the

Luther laments that for most people, Baptism makes no difference. They lose their way on the perilous journey on earth.

purpose of conversion that marked the awakening movement. Its most important leader was the master preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770), who in his seven trips to America between 1738 and 1770 was heard by approximately 80 percent of the colonists. Hearing Whitefield preached was the first widely shared event in the history of the American nationhood.

Commitment to awakening was a common feature of colonial Lutheranism. I will illustrate this with an anecdote. On the afternoon of August 13, 1748, in Philadelphia, John Nicholas Kurtz was examined for ordination to the Christian ministry so that he could be licensed to receive a call from the deacons of a congregation in Tulpehocken, Pennsylvania. This quintessential churchly activity is recorded as part of the minutes of the first convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania, the founding of which is recognized as the beginning of an organized Lutheran presence in America, 28 years before the Declaration of Independence. Present at the examination were the historic figures John Christopher Hartwig (1714-1796), who was at that time a missionary to German settlers in what is

One author suggests a return to Luther’s theology, to he who stands behind the parties of Orthodoxy and Pietism. What does he have to say that might get us thinking, in terms of our own tradition, about mission?

now upstate New York and would later be the benefactor of Harwick Seminary, and Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (1711-1787), who would become the patriarch of American Lutheranism. Muhlenberg is the one Lutheran pastor whom most Lutherans in America revere, whatever their Synod allegiance or ethnic heritage, as a figure of inspiration and theological guidance. According to the minutes of the Ministerium, “Candidate Kurtz” had been given these instructions for his oral examination:

The candidate is to prepare a sketch of his life, giving, in as brief a compass as possible, an account of its chief events and of his academical studies. As this may readily become too extensive, it will suffice, if he briefly narrate: 1. His first awakening; 2. How God furthered the work of grace in his heart; 3. What moved him to study for the holy ministry, and where, in what branches and under whose direction, he has attempted to prepare himself.¹

Kurtz must have given satisfactory answers to these questions for we know that on the evening of August 13, the deacons of the congregation in Tulpehocken extended him a call.

The pastors who formulated the examination questions for Kurtz practiced ministry under the rigorous discipline of what we know today as Lutheran Pietism. This movement whose most notable founder was Pastor Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) began in Germany, nearly eighty years before the historic afternoon in August in Philadelphia. Spener sought to revive a church that was in steep decline. German territories in the 17th century had been through more than 100 years of religious warfare. During the worst part of this conflict, the so-called Thirty Years War (1618-1648), the population had been reduced by more than a third. This was a result of conflict stemming from the Reformation: Catholic against Protestant, Protestant against Protestant. Adding to the crisis, many ecclesiastics were little more than religious hacks and civil servants, more interested in collecting their pay and towing the party line of officials in power than preaching the Gospel. To reform the church, said Spener, many changes were required; above all, there had to be a revolution in religious allegiance among pastors in the church and recognition of the laity

as active in the reform of the church as the priesthood of all believers.

“The office of ministry,” said Spener, must “be occupied by men who, above all, must be true Christians.”² And what he meant by this was nothing mysterious or arcane. Spener simply meant that pastors of the church needed to have experienced the dynamic impact of faith in Jesus Christ by being called as the disciples were called from their fishermen’s nets, or challenged to “rebirth” as Jesus challenged Nicodemus or confronted and drafted for arduous service as Saul had experienced on the road to Damascus. Whatever consciously brought Christians to faith, this was the faith that was desperately needed.

Spener knew in his heart a principle that is common place among evangelists today: “Changed people change churches.” As this principle is true so unfortunately is its contrary: “Unchanged people change nothing.” In the church, unchanged people usually manage ecclesiastical organizations doomed to decline. To be *awakened* is to know that Jesus Christ alone is Savior and that the purpose of life is to love God and love the neighbor before satisfying the desires of the self.

Muhlenberg carried this theology to America. It informed his preaching, teaching and presiding. I will use his practice of presiding as my example. In 1746, Muhlenberg reported to his superiors back in Halle in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, on his method of administering Holy Communion. His letter dated October 30 was but one many he would write throughout his life, the so-called *Hallesche Nachtrichten*, in which he described the conditions and spiritual state of Lutheran churches in the new land. The Sacrament, writes Muhlenberg, is given twice yearly in each congregation.³ Those wishing Communion would be expected to speak with the pastor the week preceding. “One talks with them about the inner feelings of the heart and looks for growth and also gives the necessary admonitions, encouragement and consolation as the situation requires.”⁴ Through this private encounter, Muhlenberg as pastor learned about the congregation: “One gains an understanding of inner and outer conditions and one also gets an insight into relationships in the estate of marriage, between neighbors,

¹ *Documentary History of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1898), 19.

² Philip Jacob Spener. *Pia Desideria*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 103.

³ John W. Kleiner and Helmut T. Lehmann, ed. and tr. “Letter 58” (30 October 1746), *The Correspondence of Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg*, Volume I 1740-1747 (Camden: Picton Press, 1993), 293-307.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 296.

parents, children and friends.” On Saturday evening, a preparatory service of confession was held, the sermon being directed to repentance and the concerns and tribulations of parishioners: “Without reference to specific persons one arranges the preached word according to the concerns and circumstances one has noted in the particular conversation.” After the sermon, the parishioners “form a half moon around the altar.” Those guilty of “public offense” are singled out. They are once more examined by the pastor in front of the gathered congregation and urged to “true repentance” and “improvement of life.” Thus private confession as interrogation (called *der Verhör* in German territorial church orders) and public confession are joined together. The congregation is urged to reconciliation with the offenders. Muhlenberg reports that most often parishioners readily forgive their brothers and sisters of public sins. “Then when everything has been settled members of the group bow their knees before God, and the pastor, kneeling in their midst, prays the confession.” Catechetical questions about faith and the meaning of the Sacrament are directed to the entire gathering. These are followed by a conditional absolution: Forgiveness is declared to the penitent and the warning is given “that the sins of the impenitent shall be retained until they do an about-face.” After this, the pastor is still not done. “Those who perhaps still have something against one another go to the parsonage with the pastor, are reconciled with one another and forgive each other their faults.” On Sunday, the sermon focuses on Holy Communion. The elements are consecrated and distributed. “Afterwards the school teacher has to read the history of the Passion from the four Evangelists so that one may proclaim the Lord’s death and consider the price he paid to redeem us.”⁵

This practice conforms to Spener’s understanding. Spener warns:

There are extraordinarily many people who think only of discharging this holy work and of how often they do it. But they hardly consider whether their spiritual life may be strengthened thereby,

whether they proclaim the Lord’s death with their hearts, lips and life, whether the Lord works in and rules over them or they have left old Adam on his throne. This can only mean the dangerous error of the *opus operatum*.⁶

It also suited the needs of the American environment. In order to survive, let alone prosper in a society where people were largely left to their own devices, colonists had to be disciplined and self-governed. Muhlenberg’s sacramental practice with its extended use of confession, both private and public, was an important way to uphold order and encourage mutual trust and sociability in village or town. It was also evangelical to the core, reminding Christians of their explicit obligations to their

Savior. Christian faith entails moral behavior. It seeks the transformed self. Colonial Lutheranism was an evangelical religion. Lutherans and other evangelicals (at least those who practiced infant Baptism) were close companions. Evidence of this colonial relationship can still be seen today in yoked Lutheran/Presbyterian parishes that dot the landscape in Pennsylvania and other places.

Lutheranism and the Second Great Awakening

But this companionship became awkward (to say the least) as the identity of American evangelicalism changed in the Second Great Awakening (1795-1835), especially under the influence of the most important of the revival preachers of the time: Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875). Finney preached that a relationship to Christ is a matter of free-will decision, that sanctification is the true measure of faith and that salvation is earned. Under Finney’s influence, revival became a technique, the so-called “new measures” in which people at group meetings that would extend over days had their spirits aroused by dramatic appeals to make a decision for Christ. The meetings were deliberately staged and choreographed with preaching, sustained prayer and hymn singing to pressure people to commit themselves; this in the belief that excited emotions were the channel through which the Holy Spirit worked to bring an individual to the judgment of God and the grace of Christ. The imperative to examine

In Luther’s view, if preaching, Sacrament and liturgy have any purpose whatsoever, it is not to leave Old Adam as a lump of coal in the bin, but to move him to believe and become a Christian.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Spener, 67.

oneself, the fundamental purpose of Christian worship, was not a matter of repetition in the liturgical Divine Service, but rather a concentrated single event. Those who were moved to respond would go one by one to the front of the group, sit on the seat called the “anxious” or “mourner’s bench” and receive the intercessory prayers of the evangelist and the group, culminating in conversion. Conversion was the goal of worship. This practice was considered by many to be manipulative,. It was also very successful.

Charles Grandison Finney’s “new measures” turned the phenomenon of awakening into a method calculated to produce results. Finney’s working assumption, shared among evangelicals of the time, was that “the common man, listening to the preaching of the church, was capable by the use of reason of assessing the full scope of his moral predicament as a lost creature under the judgment of God who has nowhere to turn but to the love of Christ.”⁷ Faith in Christ was an act of free will, not dissimilar to the ballot cast by an enfranchised voter in an election or a member of a jury at a trial making a decision based on the evidence. This was a theology fit for a republic founded on Enlightenment ideals and especially suitable for the age of Jacksonian democracy. The greatest itinerant evangelist of his time, Finney claimed to have reached 500,000 people in America and Great Britain. His influence, like Whitefield before him and Billy Graham a century later, transcended denominational allegiance.

Surveying and assessing this second awakening movement was the Lutheran Samuel Simon Schmucker (1799-1783), professor of Didactic Theology and chairman of the faculty at Gettysburg Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. In a pamphlet called the *Definite Platform* (1855), published under the auspices of the General Synod, which was the largest Lutheran denominational organization in America at the time,⁸ Schmucker proposed that Lutherans revise their historic confessions to bring the church more in line with the evangelical environment of American Christianity. This environment emphasized the priority of individual religious conversion as an act of the will, distrusted any form of ecclesiastical hierarchy, devalued traditional dogmatic theology and

shunned liturgical worship. This process of revision, for the purpose of what came to be known as the “Americanization” of Lutheranism, could only be accomplished, in Schmucker’s view, if the Synod rejected the binding authority of any formal confession except for the Augsburg Confession. Subscribing to Augsburg was not a matter of obedience to every word. In Schmucker’s view, the Confession is to be accepted “insofar as” (*quatenus*) it conforms with the teaching of Scripture not “because” (*quia*) it conforms with the teaching of Scripture. Finally, certain inherited teachings and practices of European Christianity not determined to be biblical or relevant to the new society in America needed to be eliminated. These included exorcism, the doctrine of original sin and guilt, baptismal regeneration, the real presence in the Sacrament of the Altar and confession and absolution.

How far this process of revision could go is illustrated by Benjamin Kurtz (1795-1865), an ally of Schmucker, grandson of the first Lutheran pastor ordained by a Lutheran synod in America and editor of the *Lutheran Observer* (1833-1861). Kurtz was mesmerized by the dynamic and successful Finney. Kurtz called the anxious bench “the archimedean lever which with the help of God can raise our German church [by which he meant the Lutheran church in America] to that position of authority in the religious world which is its rightful due.”⁹ Kurtz wanted nothing less than to import Finney’s principles into the General Synod. The test came at the annual meeting of the synod of Maryland in 1845 where the effort was made to incorporate a revivalist theology of free choice into the church in a document entitled “Abstract of Doctrines and Practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Maryland” in which “the power of choice” was defined as man’s “natural gift” by which at all times he “possesses the ability to choose the opposite of that which was the object of his choice. God “places before man the evil and the good,” urging him to choose the good. If he does so, it is by the persuasion of “the truth,” — that is to say, by an act of reason. Thus, “The sinner is persuaded to abandon his sins and submit to God, on terms made known in the gospel.” The Sacraments are symbolical representations of Gospel truth. They are ancillary to the change of heart that follows voluntary submission to God: “This change, we are taught, is radical, and is essential to present peace and eternal happiness. Consequently, it is possible, and

⁷ Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg. *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 200.

⁸ Samuel Simon Schmucker. *Definite Platform, Doctrinal and Disciplinary, for Evangelical Lutheran District Synods; Constructed in Accordance with the Principles of the General Synod* (Philadelphia: Miller & Burlock, 1855)..

⁹ *Lutheran Observer* (17 November 1843) quoted in Arie J. Griffioen, “Charles Porterfield Krauth and the Synod of Maryland,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, VII/3 (Autumn 1993): 279.

is the privilege of the regenerated person to know and rejoice in the change produced in him.”¹⁰ The Synod neither accepted nor rejected the proposed “Abstract” but instead tabled it for the following year. It was not taken up again.

Nor would it be. The 1840s saw the great wave of German immigration that would continue throughout the 19th century. Among these immigrants were staunch Lutherans influenced by the *Erweckungsbewegung*, which brought with it a revival of interest in Luther, the Reformation and the Confessions. That any Lutheran would propose free-will conversion was simply anathema. Charles Porterfield Krauth (1823-1883), Schmucker’s theological rival, who benefitted by the new confessional impulse in American Lutheranism, made this judgment on the program of Americanization: “We cannot conceal our sorrow that the term, ‘America’ should be made so emphatic, dear and hallowed though it be to our

heart. Why should we break or weaken the golden chain which unites us to the high and holy association of our history as a church by thrusting into a false position a word which makes a national appeal?”¹¹

Lutheran Pietism, as represented by Muhlenberg, found a home in America. It prospered. By contrast, Lutheran Pietism, as represented by Schmucker, brought confessional conflict and was largely drowned by a flood of immigrants whose theological leaders were dedicated to pure doctrine. The fight with Schmucker has left a permanent scar. Lutherans are largely distrustful of American evangelicals. Any effort made to construct a theology of conversion, which has to undergird any serious effort at outreach and any program of missions, is treated with suspicion as some form of “decision theology.” The tension and even opposition between Lutheran “orthodoxy” and Lutheran Pietism that has played such a dominant role in the history of Lutheranism never goes away. But the awkwardness is that evangelicalism in America is dynamic and expansive across races and ethnic groups. It is the natural form of Protestantism in the American context. Lutherans are in decline. They

depended on white European immigration as a church. This immigration dried up over two generations ago.

The Situation Today: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

In the light of this history, what is our situation today? I can only speak for the ELCA. The ELCA is a mainline Protestant denomination whose leadership is dominated by an unrelenting progressive cadre that cares neither for Lutheran orthodoxy nor Lutheran Pietism, but is dedicated to one article of faith above all others even though

it is bringing the church to its knees and threatening the very viability of its national office, its 65 synods and its eight seminaries, let alone scores of congregations declining and splitting. Since 1988, the ELCA has lost 25 percent of its membership, 15 percent of which has been lost between 2009 and 2012; that is since the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August 2009 approved the ordination of

Luther wants nothing to do with a church that accepts people where they are and as they are and keeps all talk of conversion at a safe distance.

practicing homosexuals. This cadre is, in fact, practicing a bizarre form of martyrdom for a belief; it knows what is happening to the denomination as a whole and keeps right on doing it, even to its own self-destruction. What is this article of faith? *That the Bible and the Confessions must accommodate to the cultural imperatives of today’s society and that imperatives are determined by a segment of the population and a minority segment at that: secularized, educated, middle-class, white people, vast numbers of which have drifted away from or take no interest in the church.* This is their mission; their form of evangelism is political activism. And they are relentless. That their policy on homosexuality does not attract the majority of people of color who are Christian and threatens fellowship with Lutheran churches of the global South where Lutheranism is growing means nothing.

I cannot help but think of the divine warning in Scripture: “Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5).

I want to heed this warning by going back to “the works we did at first” as a church, that is, to Luther’s theology, to he who stands behind the parties of Orthodoxy and Pietism and to whom both parties appeal to see what he says that might get us thinking, in terms

¹⁰ Ibid., 283.

¹¹ Theodore G. Tappert, ed. *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America 1840-1880* (New York: Oxford, 1972), 47.

of our own tradition, about mission and the agent of mission. And I seek companionship with evangelicalism. The relationship may not need to be as awkward as it seems, although to get Lutherans to preach conversion is a tall order.

I wish to examine briefly two subjects: Luther on Baptism and Luther on the purpose of worship.

Guidance from Luther

In his early baptismal orders of 1523 and 1526, Luther places the idea of Baptism as covenant in the context of the ancient tradition of spiritual warfare. The battle against Satan begins as soon as we enter the world. In Baptism, we flee from the prince of darkness. Baptism is an exorcism. This is ancient church teaching. It is also common among evangelicals, especially Pentecostals, and especially in the global South. Spiritual warfare is a dangerous enterprise and many lose their way. In his instructions to the Christian reader at the end of his baptismal order, Luther warns that “It is no joke to take sides against the devil.” Baptism means that the child will be burdened with “a mighty and lifelong enemy.” The child needs the “heart and strong faith” of fellow Christians along with their earnest intercession through prayer. Corporate faith demonstrated in intercessory prayer is the key to the Sacrament, not the traditional customs of a rite. “Signing with the cross ... anointing the breast and shoulders with oil, signing the crown of the head with chrism, putting on the christening robe, placing a burning candle in the hand ... are not the sort of devices and practices from which the devil shrinks or flees. He sneers at greater things than these! Here is the place for real earnestness.” Luther laments that for most people, Baptism makes no difference. They lose their way on the perilous journey on earth. This is the fault of the church: “I suspect that people turn out so badly after baptism because our concern for them has been so cold and careless; we, at their baptism, interceded for them without zeal.”¹² “Real earnestness” in corporate faith and “zeal” in intercessory prayer are both necessary to the effectiveness of the Sacrament. This is a corporate form of believer’s Baptism.

When Baptism is not attended to in the church by prayer and faith, Satan rears his ugly head. Over time, his effect is destructive: “Though [Satan] could not quench the power of baptism in little children, nevertheless [he

succeeds] in quenching it in all adults so that now there are scarcely any who call to mind their own baptism, and still fewer who glory in it.”¹³

That brings us to worship. In Luther’s view, if preaching, Sacrament and liturgy have any purpose whatsoever, it is not to leave Old Adam as a lump of coal in the bin, but to move him to believe and become a Christian. Luther places believers before the privilege and duty of explicit faith (*fides explicata*). The congregation is truly the agent of mission. In the midst of the congregation, one is called by the Word of God out of custom, lethargy, obedience to a hierarchy and outward participation in sacramental life (*ex opere operato*) into the fullness of an individual relation to Jesus as Lord and Master.

Public worship, Luther believed, would lead to “truly evangelical” private worship among those “who want to be Christians in earnest.”¹⁴ He writes of

a truly evangelical order [that] should not be held in a public place for all sorts of people. But those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reprov'd, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ, Matthew 18 [:15-17]. Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given ... Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set up a neat and brief order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on Word, prayer, and love.¹⁵

It is in this intimate group that private confession and absolution takes places in which Christians, burdened by their sins and repentant, make oral confession to a fellow Christian, usually a minister, and receive this assurance: “As thou believest, so be it done unto thee [Matt. 8:13]. And I by the command of Jesus Christ our Lord, forgive thee all thy sin.”¹⁶ This absolution can be given by “one Christian [i.e., layperson] to another in

¹³ Ibid., 36:57ff.

¹⁴ Ibid., 53:64.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53:63ff.

¹⁶ Ibid., 53:121.

¹² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–86), 53:102.

the name of God.” It is “absolutely valid.”¹⁷ According to Luther, private confession is not needed to prepare oneself for Holy Communion. Luther wrote no order for public confession.

This is the congregation in its ideal form — the converted, an assembly of hearts in one faith, the agent of change. Luther conceives of the congregation as ideal because he breaks with the visible church of Christendom mired in the inadequacies of conventional faith, lacking commitment and zeal. But as he raises up this ideal, he immediately laments: “I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it.”¹⁸ Luther wants nothing to do with a church that accepts people where they are and as they are and keeps all talk of conversion at a safe distance.

This ideal congregation of “Christians in earnest” and in “private” is a seed planted. Just as Luther inspired many on the path to political freedom, so he inspired many to seek spiritual renewal in the church. Think of the Pietist conventicle, the Methodist class meeting or dissenter prayer-meetings — all rich sources for evangelicalism and the Protestant missionary movement in the 19th and 20th centuries. Luther’s ideal reminds me of the new edgy house church movement of the present day, trying to advance the faith in China or revive it in Great Britain and, as I just read about last week, in Holland of all places. Christian faith is actually growing among Dutch young people in the age group 15-25. This growth is attributed in part to the success of the house church movement and the impact of the Alpha Bible Study program.¹⁹

Lutherans are part of this history — especially the Pietism that informed the mission-oriented theology of Muhlenberg. It is a theology that goes back to Luther himself.

The Rev. Dr. Walter Sundberg is professor of Church History at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.

¹⁷ Ibid., 53:116.

¹⁸ Ibid., 53:64.

¹⁹ Joshua Livestro. “Holland’s Post-Secular Future,” *Weekly Standard*, January 1/8. 2007, 25ff.