

LUTHER AS A PASTOR

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I INTRODUCTION

Luther's whole work is to be seen in the dimension of pastoral care. Not only a chapter but a book should be written on Luther as a pastor. In fact Gerhard Ebeling presented an interpretation of Luther's letters explaining an evangelical understanding of pastoral care and its theological foundation. And several other books have been written on Luther's understanding of pastoral care. In today's lecture I want to give a survey on the different dimensions of Luther's pastoral work; and not so much a discussion of the different aspects of current research. Thus I will start with a short history of what is meant by "pastoral care". The second part will briefly sketch the theological foundation of Luther's reform attempt. The third part lists the different situations, places and contexts in which Luther acted as a pastor. The fourth chapter looks at the main elements of pastoral care. The lecture closes with some theses which may stimulate the discussion on Luther's importance for today's thinking about pastoral care and models of consolation in Church.

II CURA ANIMARUM AND PASTORAL CARE

Almost everybody seems to know what is meant by the word "pastoral care". People who are in need of material or spiritual help get supported by ecclesiastical connected or founded institutions. Evangelical pastoral care focuses mainly on the individual (*cura animarum specialis*) Roman-catholic theory certainly looks more to pastoral care in general (*cura animarum generalis*) and understands the whole ecclesiastical work liturgy, sermons and celebration of the mass are pastoral care as much as visiting the ill and consoling the hopeless. Is this difference a consequence of the theological rooting? How did Luther understand the term "*cura animarum*".

Luther used two languages: Latin and German. He sometimes mixed these into a strange mélange with a very specific meaning. Thus we have to look very carefully at his use of the Latin and the German terms. Another distinction of interest is that

both languages distinguish between a singular and a plural use of the term: *cura animae* and *cura animarum*—Seelsorge and Seelensorge.

Luther used the Latin form less often than expected. In the lecture on the Psalms (1513-1515) he mostly used the traditional form which derived from the ecclesiastical law. In this meaning pastoral care describes the Episcopal duties. Luther connected that with a sharp attack against those who refuse or fail to fulfill their duties especially in the church. In some passages he connects this meaning with the picture of a shepherd guiding and supervising his flock.

Using the German term it is obvious that Luther prefers the singular version: "Seelsorge". Even though Luther has no modern approach to the problems of his time, he looks for the individual in its relation to God and neighbor.

Looking at the sources it seems that Luther developed the German term "Seelsorger", the one who cares for the soul, without respect to the Latin use. This word combined with the verb "seelsorgen" is often used in different contexts. Luther did not define precisely what he understood but one can find some aspects in its negative use including all that what the roman clergy fails to do. In particular, there is no difference between "seelsorgen" and preaching. For Luther the sermon is one of the main aspects of *cura animarum*: in the word which is the word of God the pastor serves as an instrument of God.

To sum up what should be explained in more detail in a full size lecture: Luther formed the term pastoral care, "Seelsorger", "seelsorgen" especially in German with a more specific—in a way: evangelical—meaning and focused on the understanding of the individual support in all kinds of temptation, sorrow, doubt and need.

III THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF PASTORAL CARE

Luther gave a Trinitarian foundation for his evangelical understanding of pastoral care:

III.1 The authorization for pastoral care through the existence and presence of God

Luther articulates his knowledge of God in a style that concentrates mostly on creation and the created beings. Thus he cannot speak abstractly about the existence of God but he argues about the existence of a creator who acts for his creation, holds it, gives it support, and so forth. He is absolutely confident in God's merciful help and comfort; even in a situation of temptation and loneliness.

His knowledge about the nearness of God comes together with the experience of the hidden God (*Deus absconditus*). This conflict remains a permanent spiritual challenge not for Luther alone but for all believers. Even though Luther taught the existence of a God who cares mercifully for his creation, he must endure the experience of the hidden God who strikes his creation painfully. Both aspects can only be combined in a theology of the cross: the crucified outcast is the victor over the sin and the king of a new empire, the dead is the victor over death, pain and hell. One cannot explain or proof this, one can only listen to the word of god and get quiet in confidence.

This firm belief is a deep root for the foundation of evangelical consolation. It is pure blasphemy to explain—or even to try to—God's work and to understand his plans: "You need to teach the unexplorable will of God, that people know about this fact. But never try to understand it, this will lead you into dangerous struggle" To understand God means to have power over him, to be greater than he actually is. Therefore it is a sin against the first commandment. All ethical advice comes together in this verse: "I am your God—you shall not have any other next to me!" As Luther says: "The one who is able to explain that sentence to me correctly will be my teacher in Theology and I will sit down at his feet and listen to his words." For those who try to solve their problems with their own power, confident in their own abilities, trusting in their own capacities are going to make themselves their own God: my knowledge, my power, my experience, my connection—this is an antigod, a demon, an instrument of the devil.

Real comfort is possible only with the power from outside (*extra nos*), with the grace of God who consoles, holds and supports.

III.2 The authorization for pastoral care through the work of redemption by Christ

The confidence in the existence and presence of God empowers pastoral care. That we know about God as a father is the consequence of his revelation in Jesus Christ. His engaged life, painful death and powerful resurrection reveal God as the almighty who works all in all throughout all. Thus the "*solus Christus*" (Christ alone) becomes the other side of the coin called knowledge of God. The witness given through the scriptures helps us to orientate our life towards the cross as the sign for the victory of God over death, devil and destruction.

Thus the cross becomes the center of the gospel. It leads to the basis of the faith, its content and its shape. Looking to Christ's pastoral care is the only legitimate medium of developing his message of the mercy of God and the redemption of the sinner. As much as the cross reveals the merciful father it shows the way to real consolation. As Luther wrote to Chancellor Müller of Mansfield: "Summa, it is written: 'Be confident, I have overcome the world' (Jn 16:33) What else can we do, than to praise the victory over world, devil, death, the flesh and all illness yes and even the contemporary problems and to accept these? His yoke is calm and his pressure sweet. But he carried our yoke and burden which were the devil and God's wrath – he has redeemed us. Thus we have to carry his lovely burden and sweet yoke."

Even though Luther will console the distressed he does not fail to show them where they are standing in the face of God: "Don't be frightened. He is with us. We will win and live although we are sinners!" Luther's understanding of justification stands behind his pastoral advice. Because he wants to show the mercy of God and his unlimited love he must show the situation to those whom he is preaching: they are sinners.

III.3 The authorization for pastoral care through the living witness of the scriptures

One would expect as the third part of this plan something about the Spirit. For Luther the Spirit is closely connected to scripture. After the long struggle with the spiritualistic radicals Luther denies that the Holy Spirit would talk directly to the

faithful. He depends on the word of scripture and says nothing more than is known from the Bible.

In particular the Spirit reveals the will of God in the difference between gospel and law. Because he uses this hermeneutic instrument he also gives the necessary information on how to use it. As much as he teaches to distinguish law and gospel, he helps to distinguish between the word of God and the word of man, between spiritual and secular things, between faith and love (in the meaning of charity), between doctrine and life, between freedom which protects life and the immense constraint of the law.

A pastor needs a little more: not only the knowledge of scripture but the feeling of living within the truth of the gospel. Scripture is somewhat like a home or, in a more military way, the secure base for his way out into the trouble and struggle of the world. Thus Luther asks his colleagues to read the Bible quite regularly, to live with Scripture and to take a sentence for meditation to bed to think about it while dozing off and to have it in mind when waking from sleep. He suggests to pray and to think with the bible and in case of discomfort and temptation to read a psalm (or let someone else read aloud) "otherwise the enemy has too much power, but praying and the Word of God he hates."

Even though Luther lived from and out of the Word of God and uses a wide range of knowledge in his letters he prefers obviously some quotations. The most quoted verse is 2. Cor. 12:9:

My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Followed by 1Peter 5:7:

Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

Quite often he quotes Jn 16:33:

These things I have spoken unto you, that in my ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

And Romans 14:8:

For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

A concrete and detailed research on that field is still missing. But it is remarkable that Luther mainly quotes Paul and John who focus on the mercy of God and his almighty help.

IV OCCASION AND PLACE [SITZ IM LEBEN] OF LUTHER'S PASTORAL CARE

Let me start with three remarks:

1. Whatever makes pastoral care necessary and wherever pastoral care is needed—a Christian understanding isn't possible without the knowledge that all help, all support, all care does not come from within ourselves but only from outside (*extra nos*). An understanding of pastoral care which relates to the personal power or some kind of ability to help yourself is not acceptable.
2. As much as Luther deals with the problems of individuals, his help, support and care have nothing to do with repair or substitution. His individual care looks always for the whole; you may call it a holistic view of pastoral care which has the whole life and situation of an individual in mind. Luther traces back the individual problems to the principle that man tries to find distance from God, that he would always try to replace God through himself. All individual problems have their roots in the sin from which no man is free. Although Luther starts with a more or less radical sermon for penance he can be rather tolerant and patient to find a solution for the individual.
3. This radical analysis of human need leads to a third remark: Even though we might experience some problems as more essential and urgent than others Luther won't follow our interpretation. Pastoral care is not only a need for those who are in danger for life and health but also in situations where nobody thinks about pastoral advice: in happiness and times which are free of worries. Ecclesiastical pastoral care has to accompany not only the worried but also the lucky and happy believers. Pastoral care should not be reduced to a trouble shooting management, a 24 hour supermarket of possibilities for those who deal with a problem.

With this in mind let us go a little closer to Luther's analysis of situations in which pastoral care and advice is at need:

IV.1 Luthers understanding of tribulation

Luther distinguishes between two kinds of challenge. The "*tentatio carnalis*" which relates to all problems with life and body: material or bodily need, poorness, hunger, homelessness, illness, imprisonment and torture. The "*tentatio spiritualis*" is of much greater interest for Luther. It roots in the conscience of the believer and comes from the experience of the hidden or threatening God as a powerful judge. With relation to some late medieval traditions Luther distinguishes four different challenges:

- a) The "*tentatio mortis*" comes when man faces death. In combination with weakness and the pain of illness he feels the impossibility to pass the last judgment.
- b) the "*tentatio de indignitate*" is close to that but of another matter: The believer feels the burden of the law and the impossibility to fulfill its demand. He is uncertain about the will of God to redeem the sinner and his judgment.
- c) This temptation leads in particular to the "*tentatio de praedestinatione*": The faithful gets more and more troubled by the thought about eternal predestination. He would like to find out whether he is elected or condemned. But he can't find any clear sign for one of these alternatives.
- d) The climax of such experience lies in the "*resignatio ad infernum*". The believer loses all faith and gets so desperate that he accepts God as far and hidden. In this state conscience becomes "hell". But the faithful conform their wills to God insofar as they accept the road to hell as the will of God, because at this point one gives up all trust in their own power and virtue and simply trusts in the eternal good will of God.

Who leads the Christian into challenge and tribulation? All reasons lead back to God. Although the devil is the one who tempts people he is able to do this only by the power God left him after his fall. Although Satan is the reason for many worries, other humans can serve as instruments of tribulation. All of them are part of God's plan for the salvation of his creation. Thus also temptations serve a good purpose. They teach the believer the powerlessness of his own possibilities and lead him to

look to Christ and his revelation of the merciful God. They are meant to destroy the human will and to educate in humility. Finally they are used to prove the faith and give power from the experience that the faith overcomes the devils power. In any case these spiritual challenges help to analyze the individual situation and to find the individual's true position in the eyes of God.

IV.2 Consolation and Assistance in times of tribulation

To understand what leads to temptation and what is the deeper reason for this personal challenge within the plan of salvation is the first step to overcome. But for Luther it is important that distress and tribulation lead to the greatest distance from God and the experience of total despair. There God will show his mercy. He uses "*sub contraria specie*" (hidden under the contrary) to reveal his mercy. Even though this knowledge does not give certainty of the continuous mercy it consoles and leads to a new vision of God.

Luther roots this consolation in Christ. Theologically speaking: Christology is the main base of his pastoral care. The distressed shall look on Christ hanging at the cross. Even in the greatest despair a) he conformed his will to that of the father, b) he promises the redemption of all sinners, and c) guaranties the support of God by announcing the help of his spirit. Thus Luther quotes the mystic motif of the meditation on the wounds of Christ. They show clearly that Christ is the representative of the sinner and the quality of the redemption.

Even though this is the source of all comfort the consolation in particular depends on the situation and the individual circumstances. Unfortunately I won't have the time to offer many examples of successful consolation Luther offered through his letters and personal advice. Therefore I must reduce my lecture to a short survey about the most significant situations in which Luther was asked for evangelical pastoral care:

IV.2.1 Luther's advice for those who lost orientation

Luther distinguishes properly questions for which the answer requires a special knowledge or ability in administration, legal advice, economy or political affairs from questions which belong to the conscience of the individual. But he knows that even

questions of an abstract nature hide problems of personal belongings. So even though one might understand the political question he does not know whether he is strong enough to pass the challenge as a whole.

Apart from the pastoral advice Luther gave when he was asked, he sometimes intervened when he felt this as a duty. As a pastor, as a doctor of Theology and as a professor in obedience to the prince of Saxony, Luther felt it was his responsibility to admonish and support his secular authorities, not only those of Wittenberg and Saxony but also the authorities of other territories and cities. Even though Luther could be very straight and direct he never saw himself as the last authority in difficult questions of daily life or political decisions. He would not be Luther if he did not know that he himself were a sinner needing the forgiveness of God. Neither his knowledge, even his knowledge of the bible, nor his understanding or authority as one of God's preacher, could protect him from misleading the people and giving wrong advice. God is the one who should be asked and God is the one who will answer. Thus Luther can only point to the necessity of patience and quietly waiting for advice from God.

IV.2.2 Luther's advise for those who suffer

Where God acts man has to be patient. This is the most central advice that Luther gives to those who are suffering from severe illness. Pain and death are a consequence of the fall. Because all people have sinned they will inevitably die in as a consequence; as St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans: "the wages of sin is death" (6:23). To deal with this situation all are asked to analyze their situation without any reservation. Only the true confession of sin and complete subordination to the will of God will show the a way out. And this way is the way of Christ: through death to life in total dependence on God's gracious love.

Even though Luther sees illness and disease as the consequence of sin, he does argue strongly for following the advice of doctors. He is not fatalistic but quite realistic!

IV.2.3 Luther's advice for those who are challenged spiritually

As mentioned before Luther is much more engaged if the tribulation is of a spiritual nature. His consolation again focuses on Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. This is combined with knowledge about the necessity of affliction and the sense of these temptations for the faithful. A characteristic aspect is the conflict between an active battle against Satan and a merely passive patience which conforms the believer to Christ.

This spiritual challenge is the main proof and seal for truth of faith. Someone who claims spiritual experience without relation to individual temptation does not talk about the revelation of the Bible. Luther gives this as the main proof to Melanchthon when he was in doubt about the Prophets from Zwickau 1521/22. Because the faith is not a gift which we are able to control it is challenged again and again.

Although Luther uses a lot of traditional technique and knowledge the most impressive motif for his pastoral care is his own particular experience. He himself often feels condemned and afflicted by the hidden God. He feels as if he were in the deepest darkness and greatest fear. Luther understands the whole of his work as part of the battle between Christ and Satan. The professor of Wittenberg University is an instrument which has to act against challenges of Satan. Again and again Satan tries to lead him astray from the way to Christ. Compared with his sermons Luther accentuates this aspect much more in his letters. In the same way as the whole development of the church as a work of the Antichrist Luther himself feels challenged by the devil.

After this short survey on occasion and place of pastoral care let us look for the main elements of pastoral care in Luther's understanding:

V ELEMENTS OF PASTORAL CARE

In the following section I will focus on some elements of pastoral care in the evangelical understanding of Luther even though I know that there are much more. Some of the elements change and one is combined with another. In pastoral care you will find never clearly find what to do and what to avoid. Rather, pastoral care

must be understood as a combination of several elements. The central point, which I do not explain because it requires its own lecture, is the meditation of Scripture. All pastoral advice, comfort, support, help, prayer, and much more relates to the Scripture and should be rooted there. Without certain knowledge and continuous reading of the Bible no pastor could work properly.

V.1 Consolation

Consolation—to comfort the threatened conscience—is the main aspect of pastoral care even in popular understanding. So too for Luther. The Reformation in fact started with Luther as a problem of pastoral care: he found no comfort in the church and the spiritual help of the confessor. His pastoral counselors did not lead him back to the word of God and the revelation of his merciful will. Instead they focused on the strength of the law in its close relation to the church and its priests with their system of reward and punishment. Luther tried to discuss this problem in the university and find a way to solve it there before giving advice to the pastors.

A closer look at Luther's writings makes clear that the Reformer uses "*consolatio/consolation*" much more than "pastoral care". Luther is not interested in an abstract discussion of ecclesiastical theory but of the practical needs and desires of Christians. Thus he stresses concrete comfort of the distressed. As mentioned before a main point of his consolation is to understand why and for what reason God challenges the faith of his children. With his comfort Luther cannot—and obviously is not willing—to change the situation of tribulation completely but to accompany and support the distressed on their way away from their own desires back to God.

Consolation actually is of the work of the Holy Spirit. He comforts the distressed, gives new hope and gives an essential guarantee of the truth of the evangelical promises of God's mercy and grace. In his earlier writings Luther focuses on the direct mediation of the spirit. After the trouble with Karlstadt, the Anabaptists and other spiritual radicals he developed his theory of the fixed relation between Spirit and Scripture. The Holy Spirit can only be found in the word of God as revealed in the Scripture.

The success of consolation is closely related to the intuition of the pastor: For if he just comforts himself and gives the comfort he feels in his heart this cannot be the work of God and the consolation will fail. Not a particular dismay or shock but the clear interpretation of a distressing situation in the light of God's word can help. This other comfort is in fact sin against the first commandment. True consolation shows the promise of God and his gracious love to all believers.

In fact Luther's consolation is the poimenic dimension of his doctrine of justification. Pastoral care is closely connected to his exploration of the evangelical truth: the free and unbounded love of God, which redeemed the sinner through the work of Christ.

V.2 Admonition to self reflection and penance

If true comfort can only be found with a humble mind and conscience another aspect of pastoral care needs to explain this evangelical habit to the Christians. Luther gave this admonition to self-reflection and its consequences—penance, humility, correction of former plans and decisions—in some cases even unexpected and not asked for as in the case of Joachim I, prince of Brandenburg.

Another example may illustrate the imposition of Luther's pastoral advice. Often parents asked him for comfort when their babies had died in their first days. Luther answered with an essay: "How to comfort women who have had severe problems with the birth of their children." (1541). He starts with a warning to those who threaten these parents with rude pastoral care and unbiblical advice. But then the tone changes and Luther asks for those who will correct the will of God. What is better, following the will of God or follow human advice and orientation? Those mothers who lost their children can believe in the true and merciful will of God. The death of the babies does not show his wrath but its majesty and supreme will. Therefore Luther asks those parents to be patient and wait for God's advice on how to carry on with their life.

V.3 Advice and Orientation

Luther was asked many times for concrete advice and help in difficult decisions. He generally reacted quite carefully and with temperate advice. But if necessary he also

could give concrete commandments. For example, when he tells a patient to follow quite exactly the advice of his doctor and to take the medicine correctly.

When he is asked for orientation in crucial situations Luther answered from an evangelical i.e. scriptural aspect. That this sometimes could be misunderstood can easily be shown with his advice to Philipp of Hesse. What Luther meant as a personal advice to help Philipp in his troubles, which was not meant to be discussed in public, the Prince understood as a biblically founded right. Thus the conflict worsened more than it was helped.

Please do not get me wrong: I do not want to defend Luther's advice. But as I understood his letter he did not want to give a general orientation but specific advice. Reading all other letters about sexuality, the relation between men and women, and marriage you will find a totally different picture: Luther usually argues that freedom of the Christians limits their radius of action. In his advice for evangelical marriage you will find a lot of fairly modern sounding advice which give orientation to a balanced partnership. Each partner has to see the other in the eyes of God as himself: as sinner who lives because Christ made atonement for him before the eternal judge. Thus redemption is the basic ground on which a real marriage can be built.

How much Luther trusts in God's guidance and gracious love might be shown in an example which is well known but usually interpreted simply from the famous quotation with rarely any relation to its real context. You all know Luther's advice to Melanchthon: „*pecca fortiter, sed fortius fide*“ – sin boldly, but even more boldly believe. Admonition, advice, and orientation come together in an evangelical decision to lead in ecclesiastical questions. Luther wrote this sentence in a letter to Philipp Melanchthon on April 1, 1521, when he was away from Wittenberg in the Wartburg. Melanchthon heavily felt the burden of being the leader of the Reform movement in Wittenberg, challenged by Karlstadt and other spiritualistic radicals. The pressing question was how to transform academic thoughts and insights into practical reforms of liturgy, worship and daily life. Karlstadt published a series of theses in which he claimed that monastic vows should be broken and the lay chalice must be given to all believers, for it is a sin to avoid the chalice in daily practice. Melanchthon sent a

copy to Luther and asked for advice. Luther changes the focus from a merely rational/spiritual argument, as Karlstadt used it, to a biblical foundation for concrete advice. Discussing the problems of biblical guidance Luther argues that Melanchthon will not be able to avoid sin and misleading decisions. But if he is a true preacher of grace and not only of wishful thinking he must also preach the reality of sin. For God redeems the real sinner and not the sinner who thinks about sin. Therefore he asks Melanchthon to be a real sinner. But in the way he will sin he may trust in the redeeming work of Christ and the truth of his promise. His faith shall be based upon Christ's victory over Sin, Death and the World. It is true, as long as this world exists sin is unavoidable. But as much as man sins Christ will redeem the sinner before his judge. For the grace of God is greater than all sin and all the power of the devil.

This advice was quoted in several books and letters throughout the centuries showing how much Luther trusted in the unbinding love of God and his will to redeem the sinner. This is the real and only foundation for successful pastoral care. All advice which strengthened the power of Melanchthon and gives him trust in his own possibilities would lead him away from God and the real goal of the reformation movement.

Such radical advice does not come from Luther's mentality or some radical interpretation of a single verse of the Scripture. Such advice is based on Luther's deep conviction of God's gracious love which he experienced even during his time in Worms and imprisoned in the Wartburg. This leads to another important element of Luther's pastoral care:

V.4 Prayer

Luther learned to pray as a monk. His day was scheduled by five or more times of worship and prayer. He used to say all 150 psalms within the week and knew even more traditional prayers. Luther lived within prayer. In his early writings after the breakthrough of his evangelical enlightenment he reduced his understanding of prayer to that of a prayer for help and support. Prayer and request become almost synonymous. The request for redemption is that more than anything else what causes a believer to pray.

Later Luther changes his understanding, going back to his monastic experience. Prayer leads to a radical analysis of the situation and to the confession of sin. But the oral confession is the first step to God. The prayer does not fix the sinner in his situation for God but gives hope and trusts in God's gracious promise that he will hear the prayer and certainly fulfill his merciful will.

Thus a prayer does not need to be a perfect poem or eloquent speech. Even the stumbled mumble of the despairing and the saddened will be heard. In his writing "a simple way to pray for a good friend" (1535), Luther widened his understanding once more. Prayer does not need words. A work, a sigh, a scream or just a silent cry for help will also be heard.

In this context Luther argues with his new understanding of the continuous prayer (*oratio continua*). All that a man does in true fulfillment of God's will and command as revealed in the scripture is in fact a prayer. Thus reading the scripture, learning a psalm, yes, even learning and teaching the catechism is a prayer to God which will be heard.

With the same energy as Luther advises other distressed Christians to pray he also prays for those who are afflicted by God, the devil or the world. And he asked other friends "to pray for the sinner Luther" who needs their support urgently. Praying for others in distress fights the devil and supports Christ in his battle against Satan. With such a prayer the believer shows responsibility for neighbor and shares the power of faith.

V.5 Visitation and community

No pastoral care is successful if it is not done in the community of those who listen to the word of God. Thus the ecclesiastical foundation is as important as the visit of those who cannot join the service and come to the table of the Lord. Luther stresses this element intensively. He traveled long distances to comfort relatives or friends. And in the same way he appreciated the visit of friends during his times of illness or deep depression.

As much as he likes the community of friends he would rather have the community of believers. It is not merely a humanistic understanding of friendship which leads him to the advice of visiting the distressed but his deep conviction that pastoral care is not possible without a relation to the church.

Thus Luther wrote a lot of letters with advice for those suffering to flee loneliness, join friends or come to a parish of evangelicals to find comfort, help and the word of God.

V.6 Tracts and Sermons

With that we come to the last element of Luther's pastoral care. Next to letters which he wrote to individuals mostly dealing with highly private and particular problems of their life he used cases with a wider aspect and wrote tracts or used the problem to illustrate his sermons. Thus he used a sermon during the Leipzig disputation at Pleißenburg to illustrate Mt 16:13-19 (Christ's question to his disciples concerning who he was) with a broad panorama of the way to salvation: The sinner has to come to complete despair and resignation. That conforms him to the will of God and after that he becomes an instrument of God's grace. A more famous example is Luther's Lenten sermons starting with the Sunday "*invocavit*" after his return from the Wartburg. He starts with an astonishing word: Everyone is commanded to die and cannot ask for a representative. Each person has to make up their own mind about their faith and their relation to Christ. After summing up the grounds of this belief Luther starts his concrete advice for the situation in Wittenberg. But he does not begin with a popular "hello" to his parish or the condemnation of the misleading advices of Karlstadt and others. Luther starts with an evangelical analysis of the situation of the individual and then leads to more general conclusions which lead finally to the concrete advice.

Because Luther used the pulpit to guide his parish, preaching and pastoral care are closely connected. The area of pastoral care belongs to preaching for theological reason: The sermon is the word of God therefore it must also comfort, admonish and advise the distressed. Pastoral care and preaching cannot be divided. Worship

belongs as much to pastoral care as to individual prayer and the visitation of the lonely.

VI CONCLUSION

To sum up, some days ago I was asked to give a short introduction to Luther's spirituality to a seminary in the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg. While preparing this lecture I thought it might be good to interpret Luther's understanding of spirituality by his pastoral care. Let us therefore have a brief glance at Luther's meaning of spirituality and finish with ? thesis this lecture:

In our times, especially in the late seventies and eighties of this century, we have experienced a real boon of words like emotion, holistic view of life, non-verbal experience, feeling—and of course, spirituality. What does this word mean in the context of an intensive search of orientation towards spirit (of what origin ever), emotionalism, inner life and so on? As it is often with such words, as much as they become fashionable they lose their original meaning. Or they are created as a meaningless container for an unspoken content. Such terms become plastic words, i.e. words which fit in certain contexts, implying a particular meaning but in fact open for the ideology of those who use it—not so much of those who hear it. Plastic words are useful instruments for indoctrinating people who are looking for guidance in the postmodern world.

But what is really meant by "Spirituality"?

Looking to the most used Dictionaries and Encyclopedias of Protestant derivation does not help too much. Either you won't find it or you get an imprecise and uncertain definition which says all and nothing. For example the German Brockhaus-Encyclopedia defines it in this way:

Spirituality means piety because it is understood as the work of the Spirit of God supported and participated by man. Furthermore Spirituality means to acquire personally the gospels message of salvation and redemption. The believer digs deeper and deeper into the relation to God through Christ not only through prayer and liturgy but also through charity and the Christian based behavior even in secular duties.

Older theological definitions accentuate spirituality as the daily life formed by the spirit and therefore are more interested in the work of the Holy Spirit and not so much in the consequences for Christians. Younger, even more ecumenical theologians define spirituality with an accent on the daily life and social problems, the real piety and practical aspects. For those spirituality does not mean individual, ascetic or reclusive life, mystic insights or experiences which almost cannot be communicated to others. Spirituality in this modern understanding focuses on the life of the Christian in the community of others. Spirituality there becomes of central importance for concepts of church growing, pastoral care and the ecclesiastical life. Thus one of the theses formulated for the seventh Assembly of the Ecumenical Council of Churches 1991 in Canberra says:

It is said, that Spirituality means to shape your life and create room for the Holy Spirit that he acts in the life of all believers. Spirituality has a most practical dimension. ... Spirituality means to celebrate the gift of God, a life which is full of his grace, hope in Jesus Christ and the change or conversion of the life of a sinner into the redeemed existence of a beloved child of God. ... Source and orientation of all spirituality is the work of the Spirit. It will be searched and found in the communion with others. Spirituality is a lifelong process of being shaped and discipleship."

This definition is obviously formulated with the pathos of the theology of liberation and a merely political understanding of the gospel.

If one understands spirituality as a particular aspect of piety, faith or something else, one needs an opposition or terms to describe the limits of the understanding. Thus one must ask what distinguishes piety from spirituality, are theology and spirituality an opposition, what is the relation between spirituality and faith, of what importance is the mystic tradition for this understanding of spirituality. This series of questions is unlimited and one won't find a precisely fixed understanding of what is meant with this word.

In the first moment it seems rather anachronistic to ask for Luther's Spirituality: He neither knows the term nor does he use it. Furthermore he cannot be blamed for the development of the church which is named after him. What we connotate with the modern understanding of spirituality for Luther is just piety; or more precise in his terminology: faith. We cannot discuss the different meanings and use of the term

"faith" in Luther's writings. But we can do a brief survey of the miscellaneous contents this term has for Luther.

In the more general sense faith has two dimensions: as belief in the promise of the gospel and the redeeming work of Christ. With the confession of sin, the prayer for atonement and redemption, and the praise of God's mercy on the one hand, faith is orientated to God. With charity, especially consolation for those who are challenged by inner and outer endangerings, sympathy (in the original meaning of the Greek word), and with correction and support on the other hand, faith is focused on neighbor and the other. Both forms of faith are the work of God done by the Holy Spirit. Neither theology nor pastoral care, or even the whole life and work of Martin Luther can be understood beyond the dimension of spirituality.

In the following I will discuss this understanding of spirituality in light of Luther's pastoral care as developed in this lecture already. I will concentrate on the theological foundation of his understanding:

1. Real evangelical pastoral care is based a) *on the existence and presence of God*, b) *the redemption through Christ's life, death and resurrection*, and finally c) *the permanent support through the power of the Holy Spirit*. He is fixed to the word in the scriptures which appears as law and gospel. However, pastoral care which is not done on that ground, which comes not from God in obedience to his commandments, is in fact a sin; a sin against the first commandment. Man overrates its possibilities, even that given by God. He puts himself in the highest place which is reserved for God alone.

Christian consolation etc. never is based on the responsibility, power or ability of a single believer but in the power of God's promise to be with those who are assembled in his name. Pastors, preacher, sextons, teacher, etc. are "*instrumenta Dei*" depending on God's mercy and the power of his spirit which guarantees the truth of his promise.

2. Pastoral care for Luther is not only consolation and help. Most of the distress that motivates Christians in the 20th century to be engaged with the church in social work Luther judges derogatorily as *carnal temptation*: misery, poverty, hunger,

homelessness, imprisonment, persecution, torture, and war. For Luther the *spiritual temptations* are severe weapons of the devil to lead the children of God astray. Spiritual temptations are blasphemy, heresy, unbelief, sorrow about the salvation and doubt in the mercy of God. Even though Luther distinguished in a dualistic sense between “flesh” and “spirit”, in his understanding God’s mercy excludes no field of creation. For all danger, need, sorrow and temptation can be related to God he is the only address for prayer: complaint and praise in the same way. Luther’s understanding of faith leads to a holistic understanding of creation and reality of life.

3. This general foundation can be shown in more detail by looking to the *elements of evangelical comfort*: consolation is successful only when it is based on the external word of God, when the spirit consoles by pouring the love of God in the heart of the believer, by preparing the heart of the faithful as the residence of Christ. In a modern way this pastoral care works is the opposite of traditional psychoanalysis or therapy which asks for the hidden power of the patient and tries to find the solution of all problems within. Luther starts the therapeutic discussion with a radical analysis of the situation in the light of the gospel. But this analysis has its measure outside of human rational knowledge and understanding. Luther starts with a sermon on repentance that should lead the sinner to clear self understanding. For Luther sin—understood as self overestimation and blasphemy—is the only reason for all danger, need, sorrow and distress. Therefore the tempted need a new interpretation of their situation, they are sinners and need Christ for their atonement. Consolation thus starts with an analysis which leads to a new self understanding and the confession of sin. The concrete consolation shows God as merciful father who sends his son and uses other people as his instruments to change the situation.

But as much as the pastor cannot prescribe how, when and with whom or with what God will change the distressing situation, the sinner cannot expect a concrete solution of all for his problems. God’s acts are hidden and sometimes contrary (*sub contraria specie*) to what we wait for.

4. *Prayer* has a central function in Luther’s understanding of evangelical pastoral care. Even though Luther concentrates mainly on prayer of petition has a wide ranging meaning. Every deed which man fulfills that is oriented towards God,

obedient to his commandment and lead by the revelation of Christ becomes a prayer. The sigh while facing the problem of others or personal fate is a prayer which will be shaped into words by the Spirit and brought up to God. But the concrete deed without words, which comforts the ill, consoles the mourning, supports the poor and homeless, etc., is a prayer. Not without reason Luther uses the traditional terminology of the continuous prayer (*oratio continua*) for his new understanding. He criticizes the traditional monastic tradition of prayer as useless and not pious because the spirit is missing—and also the faith. His understanding of faith in its holistic meaning leads to a new understanding of prayer as a concrete deed of the believer empowered by the Holy Spirit.

5. The whole of concrete acts done in obedience to God's commandment is bound to the effect of the love of God which the Holy Spirit brings to the heart of the faithful. This implies both: *freedom and limitation of pastoral care*. On the one hand the pastor, preacher, teacher etc. is free to act because he is the instrument of God's mercy. God is responsible and carries what man cannot. As much as the pastor can console with the word of salvation and forgiveness he needs this word himself. On the other hand every pastor inevitably becomes a sinner in analogy to those whom he helps to true self understanding. Thus a true confession, the *confiteor*, is the beginning of all consolatory work—or whatever is needed. The pastor himself needs the promise of God, the word of redemption and the assurance of salvation as much as those who need his comfort.

6. Therefore all true piety leads to the *community of believers*. For Luther a piety which stays alone in modesty plants itself in the wrong ground. Though Luther accentuated individual pastoral care—even more as it was in the late medieval tradition—he still points to the necessity that the pastor, as much as the consoled, needs the community of the church. The community judges the pastor and protects him from self overestimation and misjudgment. The community corrects his understanding of scripture and tests his advice on the basis of the Scripture. It empowers him and gives comfort when needed. In the same way the community takes hold of those who struggle in their lives, comforts the tempted, gives help to the poor, shelter to the homeless, visits the sick and imprisoned and offers consolation to the mourning. The center of the life of the community of believers is

the *Holy Eucharist*. In it God is present, empowers the weak, redeems the sinner, and secures the doubtful.

I hope I have showed Luther as a pastor. With his letters, tracts and sermons Luther became a shining example of true evangelical pastoral care. He never wanted to found a new religion but to lead the depraved church back to its origins. With this Luther became a true witness of a strong belief even though he was challenged more than one time by the devil, deep depression, illness and several setbacks of the evangelical movement. He always trusted in God's merciful guidance and his comfort. Let me sum up with this pastoral advice: Do read Luther. But be aware of 500 years distance and read him as a witness of true piety in his contemporary context.

In light of today's ecumenical development we must say that there is not much of a difference between Evangelical and Roman-catholic pastoral care. Thus Luther can become a witness for both churches and a forerunner on the way back to unity in Christ.

Thank's for your patience.