

present "danger" as it is by the ancient break. In the meantime, what has happened to the basic differences? Have they grown deeper or come to express themselves in more radical fashion to meet new challenges? We have not paid sufficient attention, I think, to the extent to which the dialogues themselves uncover or even generate differences hitherto only dimly perceived. To be sure, some differences are lessened by seeking consensus. But others may only be "papered over" so as to make further understanding unlikely. To this, I believe, we have to attend more carefully in ecumenical discussion. This essay to honor one of the leading spirits in the ecumenical movement is intended as an experiment in that direction. It aims to pose the question about fundamental differences by speaking of what might be called an impasse in the discussion between Lutherans and Catholics. I call it rather boldly, "The Catholic Impasse" because it involves one in questions about what makes and preserves the Catholic faith in our time. Pursuing such questions in a short essay of this sort is risky, no doubt, for it will have to venture into a "no man's land" of more or less free reflection without the benefit of the covering fire of footnoting to protect from the usual academic sniping. But so it is when one enters uncharted territory and it is hoped that the venture will be worth the risk.

To begin in useful fashion today from a Lutheran perspective our question should be something of a self-examination: What makes and keeps a contemporary, post-liberal Lutheran catholic? Why do I confess, cherish, preserve, and teach the catholic faith today? Why should I be interested at all in being "a catholic" believer? If I understand matters at all, it would seem that I do so for reasons that seem to me to be quite – indeed, fundamentally – different from those I see generally operative in the Roman Catholic church. If that is the case, we have to do with something of a fundamental difference as it appears today, and not merely with ancient difficulties. If we probe such difference I expect we might be closer to understanding one another. But we need to unpack our question more fully to get at what is involved therein.

What is a contemporary, post-liberal, Lutheran? To frame something of an answer we have to back up a bit, at least as far as the Enlightenment. What we say in an essay of this sort will of necessity be cast in broad and perhaps oversimplified generalizations, but that is unavoidable. How did the churches react to the break in the history of the West called the Enlightenment and its social and political after-

math? In broad terms, the reaction was of two sorts: resistance or accommodation. For both Catholics and Protestants the resistance took the form of a defensive hardening of lines against the Enlightenment "erosion" of the biblical and apostolic faith. At its apex, the hardening of lines took the form of rallying behind infallibilism: papal infallibility in the case of Rome and biblical infallibility or inerrancy in the case of Protestants. The threatened erosion of apostolic or scriptural truth by Enlightenment criticism could best and most safely be countered by outright refusal to consider the argument. The fact that both Catholics and Protestants reacted with something of the same tactic indicates that both operated with pretty much the same hermeneutical principles: the authoritativeness of the Holy Words rests almost exclusively in their ability to signify something on the order of "metaphysical" truth: i.e., "true doctrines." Where criticism erodes this ability or where the proper interpretation of the words is questioned, additional authoritative support is needed. Thus the resort to infallibilist claims, either ecclesiastical or scriptural. On the other hand, those who found the criticism of the Enlightenment convincing or inescapable believed that some attempt at accommodation was the only course open. Among Roman Catholics such attempts earned the name of "Modernism." Among Protestants it was called Liberalism. Broadly speaking we shall take "liberalism" in this essay to mean attempts to "liberate" from ecclesiastical or biblical authoritarianism by grounding faith elsewhere in "natural," human religious experience.

But now, for the most part, the great move toward accommodation has lost its steam or run off into sand. It was quashed in Roman Catholicism by the put-down of Modernism and superseded or upstaged in Protestantism by theological renewals of this century broadly characterized as "Neo-orthodoxy." One can, of course, debate whether the move to accommodation has in actual fact played itself out. Modernism may have been quashed, but certainly its questions linger and continue to shape current Roman Catholic theological debate and trouble ecclesiastical practice. Liberalism may no longer be fashionable among Protestants but it has left its mark. Indeed, one could argue that it has triumphed altogether in many theological circles, or perhaps even that matters have proceeded quite beyond accommodation to a capitulation complete enough to shock even an old-time liberal! But the latter case serves perhaps as much to punctuate our judgment as refute it. The age of accommodation is over.

One has either to find some way back to the catholic faith or sell out altogether to whatever one may glean from the vestigial remains of the general religiosity of the age and its surrogates.

But now to return to our question. Where does Lutheranism stand in all of this? What makes and keeps a post-liberal Lutheran catholic? What brings a post-liberal Lutheran back to faith in the triune God, the divine/human Redeemer, the atonement, the resurrection, the church, i.e., the main corpus of traditional catholic doctrine? Most assuredly not the magisterial authority of an infallible ecclesiastical office or assertions about the inerrancy of an infallible Scripture. And not, certainly, just romantic nostalgia for the safety of a lost conservative haven. The Enlightenment has swept all that away. It is when we pose this question in the light of recent history that we arrive at what we have termed "the catholic impasse" and begin to locate what would likely have to be considered a "fundamental difference" today.

To state the impasse at the outset, it has been my experience that precisely that which makes a post-liberal Lutheran catholic is that which makes most Roman Catholics exceedingly nervous and what they appear most concerned to reject. The "post-liberal Lutheran" is, of course, something of a shadowy, if not menacing, figure on the contemporary scene, perhaps not yet clearly defined, often a puzzle to both friend and foe, usually mistaken simply for a hard-line conservative confessionalist or orthodoxist. But that is seriously to misread the situation. It is a post-Enlightenment, post-liberal position. A post-liberal Lutheran is one who has been through the options spawned since the Reformation and realizes that they have all been used up. Least of all does infallibilism or reactionary conservatism of any sort provide an answer. In any case, Lutherans have always been uneasy with infallibilist solutions to faith's questions. Even where they have flirted with the ideas of scriptural infallibility they have had some anxiety and suspicion that it might be contrary to a gospel appropriation of the scriptural message. But attempts to ground faith in "natural religious experience" of some sort are also perceived finally to undercut the gospel as well and do not finally liberate. Thus the post-liberal has been driven to reach back beyond the confessional, "orthodox," and liberal settlements and compromises of the post-Reformation era to the the roots of the Reformation protest, particularly in Luther himself. What attracts the post-liberal in Luther and the Reformation is precisely the most radical dimensions of the message that give promise of new possibilities beyond used-up

options. In particular, one has to point to such things as what it means to be a theologian of the cross rather than a theologian of glory,³ the argument against nascent humanism in *The Bondage of the Will*, and the significance for hermeneutics of the arguments about letter and spirit, law and gospel. None of these things, it is to be noted, are discussed in any depth in ecumenical dialogues. When the issues are raised, they usually meet with stony and studied silence. Indeed, it is significant, and a mark of the impasse here, that Roman Catholic theologians mostly show a marked preference for the more irenic and even innocuous formulations of Melancthon in such crucial instances. But the irony is that the "Melancthonian trajectory," if one may call it that, does not lead back to the catholic faith, but rather in the direction of Reformed Christianity and finally liberal accommodation. It is precisely Luther's radical stance that grounds and preserves the catholic faith and recalls the post-liberal to that faith today. The fact that this is ignored in ecumenical dialogue means, in effect, two things. First, that whatever voice a post-liberal Lutheranism may have is effectively silenced, and second, that reactionary infallibilism or liberal accommodation of some sort remain practically the only ready responses to the enlightenment in the church. Contemporary Christians, Catholics or Protestant, are confronted with the choice of either capitulation to authoritarianism or a kind of liberal accommodation to the fads of the age.

What is it in the theology of Luther that attracts a post-liberal and impels a return to the catholic faith? In the trade one has grown used to the idea that it is something peculiar to the theology of the young Luther that fascinates. That is shortsighted if one knows what one is looking for, but we need not argue that here. What is it? One could say many things or approach the matter from several different angles. Here, however, it will have to do to say it is simply the peculiar realization that the proclamation of the gospel when rightly done as the "word of the cross" itself cuts the ground out from under previous ways of doing theology, and does it more surely and radically than the Enlightenment ever did. The Enlightenment attacked the church and its God, you might say, but left autonomous man more or less intact. Luther, however, attacked autonomous man in the name of God and his Christ. He saw that as the heart of the matter. In joining the battle with Erasmus he addressed the world yet to come. In this sense one finds in Luther a critique in the name of the gospel more radical than that of the Enlightenment at the same time as one

detects a proposal for a different way of being a theologian and doing theology. It is the recognition that the proclamation of the gospel is an absolute end to the old and its ways and a new beginning, a putting to death of the old and a calling of the new into being in faith.

If we are to set the impasse of which we speak clearly in focus, there are at least two things to be noted about such claims in behalf of a post-liberal Lutheranism. First of all, it is the *right proclamation* of the gospel that does the deed. Proclamation of a quite specific sort is mandated, one that succeeds in being living, present-tense gospel declaration that ends the reign of law and sin. That is, not Bible reading, not teaching, not meditation, not some supposed direct or immediate mystical experience or encounter with "the spirit," however valuable such things may be, but concrete person-to-person address is the only vehicle for a communication that could be called gospel. Paradigmatically it finds its most direct expression in its liturgical forms: "I absolve you," "I baptize you," etc., and in that finds its roots in the catholic faith. And if one follows the "theo-logic" of such pronouncements one realizes they can only be made in the name of the triune God.

Second, it is crucial, particularly for Roman Catholics, to see that in the Lutheran view such proclamation absolutely requires a proclaimer. This, if anything, has become more clear for the post-liberal than it was even for the Reformation age or certainly for subsequent Protestant optimism about the possibility of "finding God" somewhere. The post-liberal recognizes that all the other options seeking to ground faith in religious experience, mediated via either "enlightenment" or via immediate experience of whatever sort, are used up because there is no gospel there. If there is to be anything called gospel it must be proclaimed and therefore a proclaimer. Or, as the *Augsburg Confession* puts it, by the very fact of providing the gospel and the sacraments, "God has instituted the office of preaching" (Art. V). Roman Catholics from the beginning seem to have feared that Lutherans were "subjectivists" proposing an unmediated gospel. But this is clearly not the case, or at least would have been clear had more notice been taken of bitter battles with the "spiritualists." If faith comes by hearing, there must be a speaker, indeed, a word from without, what Luther called "the external word." The sacraments punctuate this inescapable externality. Precisely in that sense they *are* the gospel.

If that is understood, it is apparent that too much time has been

wasted on the question of mediation as such. There should be no disagreement over whether or not the gospel is mediated. Indeed, I should think it could be agreed that it is of the very essence of the catholic faith that it insists on the concrete mediation of God's saving gifts. That is not where the impasse comes to light. It appears rather when we begin to ask *what* in fact is mediated and how that *what* affects and shapes the mediation and the "office" through which the mediation takes place. In a recent reflection on the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, Karl Peter put the matter thus:

There are, as I see it, genuine differences between Lutheran and Roman Catholic members of the dialogue when it comes to assessing creaturely mediation and cooperation in the ways in which Christ's grace reaches human beings. Two different approaches are taken—motivated at least in part by diverse hopes and fears. Lutherans have a fear that the truth of Christ's unique mediation will be compromised and hope to avoid this by criticizing any function, form of worship or piety, office or person that looks like a pretender in this context. Roman Catholics fear that Christ's unique mediation will thus be made needlessly fruitless and hope to avoid this by stressing the truth of the manifold cooperation to which that mediation gives rise as his grace is communicated to those in need of it.

I suspect that we are dealing here with what ecumenists today might call a fundamental difference. I doubt that it will ever be completely eliminated. But could such a difference exist in a more united church—could it be a difference within one faith rather than of diverse faiths?⁴

While Peter's statement does accurately reflect differences that surfaced in the dialogue they are stated too formally, I believe, to get at what is at stake. It is not simply the bare uniqueness of Christ's mediatorship versus human cooperation that reveals the "fundamental difference," but the question of how what is mediated reflects back on the mediation itself and the offices that carry it. For the "office" is precisely to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ that sets believers free. What is to be mediated is the freedom in Christ that comes through the death of the old and the rebirth of the new. The gospel of that freedom is consequently the highest exercise of authority in the church. To place something above the proclamation of that gospel would be simply to subvert it. The mediation, therefore, though absolutely necessary, is such that in the very act of mediation it limits itself. I am tempted to use an image from the television show "Mission Impossible" where the "team" receives its instructions via a tape or record that then announces that it will self-destruct in a number of

seconds. The mediation is such that it seeks to remove itself once it has done the mediation. It seeks to set people free, that is, to get out of the way for the Christ it proclaims. "He must increase, I must decrease." Eschatologically speaking, the mediation is such that it limits itself to this age and ends itself precisely by its witness to the new age, the kingdom of God. The office does not seek to call attention to itself and impress its "subjects" with its institutional grandeur and perpetuity, but to commend all to the Christ who is the sole head of the church. It does not seek to subjugate people to itself, but to place them securely in Christ, who shall be all in all, and so to work itself out of a job. The peculiarity of this office, therefore, consists precisely in the recognition of its penultimate character and so in its announcement of the end of all offices. Where it claims more than that it betrays itself into the hands of law. It may be claimed with some justice that this office is the "highest," but that is so only because, so to speak, it is the last office to close!

Now perhaps we are in a position to speak more directly about "the catholic impasse." One way to put the matter is in terms of the old question about the concreteness and objectivity of the church's message. John Henry Cardinal Newman voiced a common Catholic complaint when he called Protestantism a great abstraction divorced from the actual flow of history. Perhaps there is some truth to that if one has in mind a Protestantism that hides behind the inerrancy of scripture and seeks only to reconstitute the past. But the real question is what constitutes or guarantees true concreteness and "objectivity" in the church. Can claims made about the institution do it? A post-liberal Lutheran is not likely to find such claims attractive or convincing. What attracts, however, is simply the power of the gospel proclaimed as the word of the cross. The theologian of the cross is aware of a quite different sort of concreteness and objectivity: that of the quite alien and external word that puts the old subject to death to raise up the new. Perhaps one can say that it is only in death and the promise of new life that we come up against that which is truly and irreducibly "from without." And only so is it truly "objective." In this light, institutional claims to objectivity fall short of the mark. At best they preserve a kind of continuity under the law, and if not limited, put the gospel in jeopardy.

So we have to ask, in conclusion, whether we do not arrive at what appears to be a real impasse over the grounding of the catholic faith. What attracts and holds a contemporary post-liberal Lutheran to the

catholic faith is the very things that a Catholic is likely to reject—or at least has done so to date. Is this a real impasse? Is it permanent? Or if so, can we live with it together in the same church? Whatever our personal answers may be, only time and the will of God will tell. However, it is to be hoped that precisely in attempts such as this to probe what seem to be real differences, equally real and deep commonalities hitherto unnoticed will come to light. Certainly in this essay the insistence upon the mediation of God's saving gifts in Christ Jesus our Lord and the necessity for the mediation of those gifts objectively and concretely in the living present reveals a bond in the catholic faith that, it is to be hoped, unites us more deeply the more we understand the difference. If that is the case, the essay will have reached its goal.

CHAPTER 7: THE CATHOLIC IMPASSE

1. *Facing Unity*, published by the Lutheran World Federation, 1985; *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982, Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, tr. Ruth and Eric Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, and New York: Paulist Press, 1983).
2. *Implications of the Gospel*, Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue, Series 3, Ed. William A. Norgren and William G. Rusch (Minneapolis: Augsburg, and Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1988).
3. It is important to state the matter in terms of the being of the theologian rather than abstractly in terms of "a" or "the" theology of the cross. It is difficult if not impossible to write "the" theology of the cross. It is rather a matter of how the theologian operates, what theology is for, what one does with it.
4. "A Moment of Truth for Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue," *Origins* 17 (31): 541.