

# Responsible Lutheran Theology

## Open letter to Prof. Carl Braaten

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Dear Carl,

It is unlikely that you will remember me from my semester at the LTSC as a visiting professor way back in 1992. Your open letter to Bishop Hanson reached me through the email system and I cannot help but respond. Your letter is being circulated in South Africa and I am afraid it might reinforce the stance taken by some Lutherans in this country (and in many others) to deny fellowship to their fellow-Lutherans. We are living in the global village!

Before I continue, let me make three things clear. First, I have no intimate knowledge of the theological and spiritual situation in the ELCA and do not wish to comment on that at all.

Second, I respect your person and your work. With what follows, I do not wish to hurt or to attack an elder colleague (being elderly myself). My sole purpose is to reflect on our common task as Lutheran theologians in the worldwide Lutheran community at the beginning of the 21st century. I am using your letter merely as a series of prompts to state my case.

Third, I share your concern for an appropriate theology. In my career at two ecumenical institutions in SA during a time of political, cultural and religious turmoil, I probably have had to face much more hair-raising alternatives to our understanding of the Word of God than you have to face in the ELCA today. It was a constant source of agony.

My question is, however, what an appropriate theology might be in a situation that has become so exceptionally fluid and pluralistic. I will refer to some publications of my own to show that my response to your letter is not based on sudden and rash judgments but on many years of reflection as a Lutheran theologian. Let me go step by step.

## **Abandoning ship**

I am honestly puzzled by the fact that your colleagues have left the Lutheran Church. I do not believe that our eternal salvation depends on being a Lutheran, and I rejoice if people, who are uncomfortable with what we preach and live out, find a spiritual home elsewhere, rather than leaving the church of Christ altogether.

However, assuming that it is true that the theology of ELCA (and world-wide Lutheranism) in general is on slippery ground - would that not have been a powerful motivation for professional theologians to stay put and work against the trend? How can one abandon ship when all hands are needed to keep it afloat? Why did they not see it as their calling to teach the next generation of pastors a more solid theology, if that indeed was the problem?

I am sure your colleagues are 'fine theologians' who are 'not stupid', who do not 'tell lies' and do not 'rash decisions' that lead to sacrifices of their families. I do not know their motives and will not pass judgment on their decisions. But may I ask what **our** motives should be? Is it to take responsibility for the ongoing mission of the church in a very complex world, or the desire to go back to a cosy womb where all problems have been solved by Father God and Mother Church and where we can enjoy our infant innocence?

Christian theology has been contentious from its very inception in New Testament times - not to mention the theological conflicts recorded in the Old Testament. Lutheran theology had its fair share of internal controversy, not only in the 20th, but right from the 16th century onwards. It would be highly extraordinary if we would be spared a struggle for the truth of the Word of God in a world of accelerating change. To sort out such things is surely part of our job description as professional theologians.

## **Karl Barth – which heresy?**

It struck me that you referred twice to Karl Barth as a witness for your contention that 'liberal Protestantism' (as you call it) is a heresy. This is remarkable for a number of reasons.

1. The early Barth castigated not only one heresy, but two: Modernism and Roman Catholicism (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 1955 (1932) I/1:33). In your letter, Catholicism is not considered a heresy. For your colleagues at least Catholicism is a legitimate alternative to current Lutheranism, one that is more in line with what you call the Great Tradition. Why that?

2. Karl Barth emphasised that these two heresies were not irrelevant paganisms, but real possibilities of understanding our faith, thus possibilities within the one church, not outside it. They call us to account for the fact that we

opt for an 'evangelical' and not a Catholic or modernist understanding of revelation. Does it solve any problems if we consider one church to be inside, the other outside?

3. Karl Barth was not a very good Lutheran. He led a formidable attack not only on Neo-Lutheranism (which was probably justified), but also on Luther himself and the Lutheran core doctrine, the law-gospel dialectic (which he probably misunderstood). You seem to sense this tension because his Reformed denomination is not mentioned among the participants of what you call the 'Great Tradition'. But on which grounds should we Lutherans be closer to Catholics and high Anglicans than to the Reformed churches?

4. More important for my argument is the fact that the impact of Barth's powerful voice overshadowed, rather than solved problems that were raised by 19th century philosophy and theology. This 'revelation positivism' gave a frightened and shaky Western religiosity a welcome breathing space, but the problems posed could not be bypassed or ignored in the long run without giving up on the integrity of Christian faith and theology. I shall come back to that below.

### **The Catholic haven**

If it is true that some Lutherans decide to join the Catholic Church for dogmatic reasons, are there really no serious theological and spiritual problems in the official Catholic Church? Let me emphasise that I am not an enemy of the Catholic Church. I am a committed ecumenist. As a Lutheran, I cannot want to belong to a sect. Luther did not want to establish a separate church, but to restore the one church of Christ to its gospel foundations. I admire the personal greatness of Pope John Paul II and I hold my Catholic friends and colleagues dear.

Yet, I am perturbed by the trend in many Lutheran churches, especially in the Third World, to fall back on the authoritarian doctrinal assumptions and ecclesial structures that Luther has fought so hard to overcome. Can you really say with a good 'Lutheran' conscience that the problems Luther had with the Catholic Church have since evaporated, or that they were illegitimate in terms of the gospel of Christ? What exactly are the "solid traditions that Lutherans share with Roman Catholics"?

Yes, we have had the Joint Declaration on Justification, praise be to God! But what difference has it really made in our relations with Catholicism worldwide? Our ministry is still not recognised as legitimate. We are still not welcome to participate in 'their' Mass and they are still not allowed to join us in 'our' Lord's Supper. Apostolicity is still based on institutional authority, transferred through a ritual, rather than on the contents of the apostolic message. We are still

required to subject ourselves unconditionally to the authority of a pope deemed to be infallible when speaking *ex cathedra*.

In spite of Vatican II, Luther's insistence on the freedom and the responsibility of every Christian, thus on the priesthood of all believers, is still not recognised. Clergy and laity remain two distinct castes; women cannot be ordained; priests cannot have families; church leaders are appointed, not chosen. The church is still an absolute monarchy. The pope is free to consult with his subordinates, but he does not have to. He can still pack the 'sacred college' of cardinals with supporters of his own conservative stance. He is still entitled to judge every believer and cannot be judged by anybody.

Do none of these things disturb you? In my view they are thoroughly out of step with Christian freedom and Christian responsibility, as Luther understood it, apart from the fact that they are also highly inappropriate in terms of the democratic values and procedures that humanity has fought so hard to achieve. Luther's spirit has allowed Christianity to breathe again. It provided the spiritual rationale for an emancipated commitment. Our African continent is slowly groping its way towards democracy, equal dignity, public responsibility, transparency, and accountability of the leaders to their constituencies - and the Lutheran church is paddling backwards!

I sometimes wonder how profound our agreement on the essential meaning of the classical Trinitarian, Christological and soteriological doctrines really is. Does the elevation of Mary and other saints to the status of mediators of salvation have no impact on the meaning of these doctrines?

More serious is the vast area of superstitious assumptions and practices that manifest themselves, for instance, in relics and pilgrimages in Southern Europe, ancestor veneration in Africa, or Voodoo in Latin America. I assume that you will not want them to be part of the Great Tradition. But if your colleagues can tolerate such phenomena in their new home, are they more acceptable than the 'aberrations' they find in ELCA?

### **In which way do we take the Bible seriously?**

I am not sure whether your main concern is the biblical truth, the Lutheran heritage, or the 'Great Tradition' - or all of them collapsed into one. If the biblical truth, which biblical truth are you referring to - the truth of the kings, the prophets, the post-exilic priestly tradition; the truth of Matthew and James, or of Paul and John? As we all know by now, the Bible is not a systematic theology characterised by a consistent set of propositions.

The dogmatic tradition we inherited from Protestant Orthodoxy is also not the result of careful analyses of biblical texts but a deductive construct underpinned by selected proof texts. When one takes the biblical texts

themselves seriously, one is confronted with massive theological problems. I am certain that you are not a biblical fundamentalist. Thankfully, Luther applied a criterion to the Scriptures ('what promulgates Christ') that can embolden us to scrutinize their theological and ethical contents.

I want to put it to you that no static dogmatic system can serve as a permanent criterion of a truth that is, and has always been, in historical flux and situational plurality. The Word of God is God's redemptive response to human predicaments in all dimensions of life; it is therefore infinitely versatile and dynamic. My own research has shown (in my view convincingly) that, throughout a millennium of biblical history, preachers and writers of the 'Word of God' have responded to ever new problems in terms of ever new frames of reference. They never hesitated to reformulate the traditions they inherited to match the challenges they had to face.

This process has led to the highly dynamic, multi-faceted biblical witness that we find in the Bible today, that (according to the New Testament) culminated in the Christ-event, and that is heading for the eschatological future of God. Before that future arrives, closure is not on the cards. (See my books, *Theology of the Biblical Witness: An evolutionary approach*. Muenster: LIT-Verlag, 2002. *Biblical Theology in Outline: The vitality of the Word of God*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004).

We cannot help but become part of the process or we become irrelevant. We must do for our times what the biblical authors did for theirs. To be true to the Bible is to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the situation to which the Word of God wants to respond. That is a missionary imperative. We cannot extricate ourselves from oncoming philosophical, scientific and social challenges without losing the redemptive thrust of the Word of God - and with that the plausibility, integrity and relevance of our witness. That brings me to the next topic.

### **How many members have already left the Lutheran church?**

You are concerned about colleagues who have left the Lutheran church for the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. This is indeed disturbing. But there are at least three kinds of people world-wide who leave the Lutheran churches: (a) those who leave for Catholicism, (b) those who leave for Evangelicalism (the other great fundamentalist tradition), (c) those who leave for Pentecostalism, or in our case the African Initiated Churches, and (d) *those who leave the church altogether*.

Looking at our empty churches the latter seem to be by far in the majority. Where is the youth, where are the workers, the middle class men in their prime,

the academics? In South Africa, at least, our churches cater mainly for elderly prayer women's leagues, in Germany not even that.

There are indeed those for whom our understanding of the Bible or the dogmatic tradition has become too shaky, who long for 'solid foundations'. But there are also those who simply have come to ignore the existence of the church because they have found no plausibility, integrity, and relevance in our message to their contemporary world.

Since the 16th century, alchemy has changed into chemistry, astrology into astronomy, feudalism into liberal democracy. What makes theology stick to patterns of thought that belong to another age? Why should a 'doctrinal situation' be 'stable', while the entire world around us is in accelerating flux? If our predecessors in the 17th century were bold enough to learn from Aristotle, whom Luther considered a heathen, surely we could learn from Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Einstein, Heidegger, Bloch, or Derrida.

In my view, we are simply failing our generation if we do not pick up the problems posed by modernity; postmodernism; the mind boggling insights of the natural sciences; world-wide pluralism; the explosive trends in the global capitalist economy and its impact on the natural environment; the hedonistic culture consciously cultivated by the advertising and entertainment industries for the sake of profit; the disintegration of traditionalist religious and cultural assumptions right across Africa and Asia, and the rise of new fundamentalisms in response to the spiritual entropy created by our greedy and imperialist culture (cf my book, *Prosperity, Poverty and Pollution: Managing the approaching crisis*. London: Zed Books, 1999.)

I am glad that you decided to stay put because, as you say, you could not 'reinvent yourself'. But your colleagues believe that your church has lost its moorings. Whether this is true or not, I cannot judge. I want to ask, rather, whether our ship is really *meant* to sit in the harbour, tightly bound to moorings of whatever sort? Is it not meant to cruise the high seas? What is the mission of the church - to preserve a Great Tradition, or to be involved in God's redemptive action in a multiplicity of ways and in all spheres of life?

The Great Tradition on which our faith is based is the tradition of Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul and Luther. They have made their impact because they dared to question the great traditions of their times. They taught us that to absolutise human-made institutions, doctrines and prescriptions is idolatry. Their ministry led to conflict and split the community, but it also led to integrity before God and before the world.

Surely, the past is where we come from, but it is the future where we should be heading. It is a rough climate out there in God's world, but it is the task of theology to give the church the courage and the orientation needed to face the

issues that confront humanity, rather than withdrawing into a safe doctrinal haven.

### **What is "rank antinomianism"?**

What precisely is the law that you think we have to uphold? There is a family law in Ex 21:1-11 that allows a father to sell his daughter into slavery. There is the commandment in Deut 7 to apply ethnic cleansing. There is the legitimation of a universal dictatorship found Psalm 2. My research has shown that already in biblical times these atrocious views have been abandoned and replaced with new insights - emboldening us to do the same. If one cannot critique untenable perceptions and practices found in the Scriptures, one has no spiritual authority to critique them in contemporary society either. That is why we took such an awfully long time to overcome slavery in the Christian West.

Paul and Luther have led us to freedom and responsibility before God, rather than reinforcing fixed codes of commandments and prohibitions. In taking political decisions and tackling ethical issues, Luther advised us to use our God-given reason and the collective wisdom of humanity, rather than hunting for instructions in the Bible.. Inspired again and again by the redemptive will of God, ethical insight is not fixed forever but undergoes historical process of refinement and adaptation to changing circumstances and frames of reference. Luther said that we must write "new decalogues" as the situation requires and he did that himself, for instance in his treatise 'On good works'.

You close your letter with a reference to the last judgment. Will the criterion of the last judgment be a theological and ethical tradition, or the question whether we have taken responsibility for those whom we find on the streets of this world entangled in concrete and diverse predicaments - whether spiritual, physical, or social (Mat 25:31ff)? We cannot lock ourselves up in a mind-set that may have served its purpose well when it was formulated, and which is certainly able to inform and guide us, but which will not solve our problems for us today.

### **The gospel**

I rejoice that the Joint Declaration on Justification could have been achieved and accepted - although I am not convinced that many Lutherans and Catholics have any idea of what the whole debate is all about, and why it should still exercise our minds. Recently I have published a book arguing that the German colleagues, who have urged Lutheran churches to reject the Declaration, are out of step with the core doctrine of the Lutheran Reformation (*Zuspruch des Seinsrechts: Verstellt die Lehre die Sache?* Muenster: LIT-Verlag, 2003).

The argument runs as follows. Translated from legal into communal terminology the gospel of justification by grace accepted in faith, and not on account of our dispositions or achievements, can be rendered as *God's unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable into his fellowship*. The parable of the prodigal son is the prime biblical example of this rendition. Fulfilment of the law (acceptability before God) is not a precondition, but a consequence of God's acceptance, just as righteousness is not a precondition, but a consequence of justification, as Lutherans understand it. We are allowed to share in the 'foreign righteousness' of Christ (*iustitia aliena*). Good works are the good fruit of the good tree.

What is unacceptable in the eyes of God surely cannot be reduced to moral derailments; it also includes wrong assumptions about God and his salvation. Being sinners and justified at the same time, we too are prone to error. Accepting us in Christ, God suffers our lack of insight as much as our lack of righteousness. If we participate in God's unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable in Christ, we will accept each other unconditionally. The necessary struggle for an appropriate formulation of the truth of the Word of God must *follow* rather than precede mutual acceptance.

The centrality of Luther's understanding of the gospel for theology and ecumenicity is often not recognised by Lutherans. According to Lutheran theology there is a 'core heresy': turning the gospel into the law, that is, making God's unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable conditional - whether the conditions are institutional, dogmatic, moral, or cultural. That is also the reason why I have to use inverted commas: I do not think that the concept of heresy is very helpful in ecumenical encounters.

Christians have never been, and will never be, in total agreement on dogmatic issues – whether within a denomination or across denominations. If they are unable to bear each other in love, and endure the resultant tensions and conflicts, they are simply out of step with the cross of Christ. They are also out of step with the core of Lutheran theology, the “article by which the church stands or falls”.

### **The unity of the church**

That means that the unity of the church can never be built on dogmatic consensus; it can only be based on the gospel of God's unconditional, redeeming, reconciling acceptance of the unacceptable. As mentioned above, a struggle for the truth is not a precondition but a consequence of our unity in Christ (cf my article, Can unity be based on consensus? *Journal of Theology in SA* No. 116, July 2003, 9-25).

I have spent most of my career in ecumenical institutions. My colleagues and students came from 'across the ark of Noah'. As mentioned above, the kinds of 'aberrations' that we had to deal with probably surpassed those that you encounter in the ELCA by several orders of magnitude. Yet, we could struggle for the truth together and celebrate our unity in common worship and shared in the Lord's Supper. We have *experienced* that the unity of the church is primary and fundamental; that consensus on theology is secondary, partial, and provisional.

In a new book, *Luther's message for us today: a perspective from the South* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2005), I use two pictures to make the point clear. The church can be understood to be like a fortress built on a hill, where those who are inside cannot get out, and those who are outside cannot get in, unless they go through heavily fortified and controlled gates. This is how most churches, including the Lutheran churches, operate in practice. But in the Roman Catholic Church the practice is underpinned by its theology, while in the Lutheran churches the practice contradicts its theology.

The other picture is that of a low-lying lake:

- The water is held together by nothing but the force of gravity, which has no rigid boundaries and into which rivers are flowing from all sides. The 'force of gravity' in the picture is the suffering and redeeming love of God in Christ. Christ attracts people to himself, and that is how they end up in the same community (John 12:32).
- The rivers freely flow into the lake, and the lake expands or shrinks according to the volume of the inflow. That is, God accepts us into his fellowship without condition and it is up to those who have been accepted whether they want to accept being accepted or not.
- Yet, the water congregates in one place. That is, those who are accepted and accept being accepted, form a definable community. Even a lake has a distinct shape. The institution is important, very important, but it is based on the spiritual content which the church represents, not the other way round.

This is what Article VII of the Augsburg Confession says: for the unity of the church, nothing is needed but the proclamation of a true understanding of the gospel (that is, the gospel in contradistinction to the law) and a corresponding administration of the sacraments. After 5 centuries, there are still Lutherans, in this country and in the US, who exclude us from their communion, or themselves from ours - as if the Lord's Supper could ever be 'theirs' or 'ours'. Likewise, there are Lutherans who submit to the conditions of acceptance presented to us by other denominations. With all their orthodoxy, have they ever understood what Lutheran theology is all about?

Turning the gospel of God's unconditional, suffering, redeeming acceptance of the unacceptable into humanly conceived and upheld conditions of

acceptance is the 'core heresy' that we are up against. It is the 'heresy' that denies the gospel, as Paul and Luther understood it; that does not lead to reconciliation but makes reconciliation impossible; that erects walls which the gospel has broken down (Eph 2:13-16); that separates us from our sisters and brothers, from the one true church that Jesus had in mind and that Luther wanted to restore.

Your open letter has provided the occasion for me to present my case to the worldwide Lutheran communion and I thank you for that. May God bless you!

Yours in Christ,  
Klaus Nürnberger