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“Responding as Lutheran Churches to Pentecostal Influences Today”

This message is based on the presentations and discussions at the LWF (Department for Theology and Studies) theological seminar, “Critical Lutheran beliefs and practices in relation to neo-Pentecostalism,” meeting 6-11 July, 2008 in Soweto, South Africa.

As Lutheran churches in Africa, and in many places throughout the world, we are surrounded by various types of Pentecostal churches. These churches emphasize the importance of accepting Jesus Christ as one’s personal Lord and Savior and being “born again” through “Spirit baptism,” gifts of the Spirit such as speaking in tongues, deliverance from the forces of evil and the ills of daily life, inspired lay leadership and expressive praise worship with powerful preaching and praying. In addition, more recent forms of neo-Pentecostalism also emphasize material prosperity as a sign of God’s blessing.

As Lutherans, we often experience these rapidly growing churches as competitive threats since their popular appeal may attract some of our members. Sometimes charismatic features associated with Pentecostal churches—such as testimonials, healing, exorcism and praise worship—have been incorporated into the life of our churches. Spiritual gifts practiced by some members, such as speaking in tongues, may be tolerated rather than rejected. This is not new, since throughout church history, established churches have often been challenged by various renewal movements of the Spirit, which at first tended to be rejected, but later were incorporated, or became sources of learning and renewal for the whole Church.

We are thankful and praise the Triune God for all the spiritual gifts and fruits of the Spirit with which God has blessed the whole Church, including faith itself. Lutherans need not react defensively to those who question whether the Spirit is active in and among us, or feel in competition with Pentecostal churches. Our rich theology of the Holy Spirit is central to how the Triune God is active in our lives and world, creating, redeeming and sustaining all of life.

As Christians, we receive the fullness of God’s Spirit in many ways, but especially through baptism with water and through the Word. God’s decisive action through baptism, apart from any initiative on our part, rules out the need for any second (“believers” or “Spirit”) baptism. In baptism, we are buried and rise with Christ, a drama which is repeatedly re-enacted in worship. Luther certainly knew the power of demons. Consequently, in Lutheran baptismal liturgies, the congregation denounces the powers of evil, the devil and all the ways in which sin draws us from God, and confidently confesses faith in the Triune God. Through baptism, we are “possessed” by the Spirit to live in communion; spiritual gifts flow from this indwelling. Liturgies explicitly remembering baptism remind us of the power we received when we were baptized. This power continues to be renewed in us today, especially through Holy Communion.

The Spirit who animated the church at Pentecost is active in many ways today. We need to acknowledge and affirm more clearly the many ways in which the Spirit is active in our lives, in churches and beyond the church. There is no deficit of the Spirit’s gifts and fruits in Lutheran churches! We only need to confess boldly what we believe, teach it and live it out.

Some theological questions and concerns

We appreciate and can learn from the vitality and some of the practices of the Pentecostal churches. At the same time, we must raise some theological questions about what is being taught and practiced by some of these churches, and what this implies for us as Lutherans. For example:

- In Pentecostal churches, is there an overemphasis on personal, immediate spiritual experience to the neglect of critical theological reflection, that is, faith seeking understanding? While theology is important for communicating the faith meaningfully to people today, have Lutherans sometimes overly emphasized theology and undervalued spiritual experiences?
- Is there too much focus on ecstatic “spiritual highs” to the neglect of the many less dramatic ways in which the Spirit is continually enlivening, sustaining and empowering human beings, communities and the rest of creation?
- How active the Spirit is in a church is sometimes measured by a dramatic increase in membership, but is the Spirit necessarily less active when this is not the case? The Spirit is also active in forming structures that can sustain churches over the long term.
- We receive God’s Spirit through the Word and sacraments. Have the life transforming and healing powers of baptism and Holy Communion been overlooked?
- Is the Holy Spirit emphasized to the neglect of the other ways in which the Triune God is active in our lives and in the rest of creation? Do Pentecostals have a sufficiently triune understanding of who God is and the different ways in which God acts in the world?
- The heart of the gospel, God’s undeserved gift of grace, is, for example, compromised by implying that blessings of prosperity or healing will come to people because of their faith, prayers or works.
- Does concentrating on whether individuals are saved or blessed limit the scope of how God is involved in our lives and world? Where is the prophetic critique and call to transform social, economic, political and environmental injustices?
- While the Bible is the privileged witness to God’s Word, it must not itself be deified. We must question tendencies to read the Bible in literalistic ways, or apart from its wider context, or in ways that deny rather than affirm life for all today. A Christological hermeneutic is central for Lutherans. The Spirit is present as we read and interpret the Bible in community with one another, thereby counterbalancing our own subjective readings.
- Central for Lutherans is the cross, transforming our present experiences of suffering and death. In some Pentecostal churches, a theology of glory seems to overshadow a theology of the cross; Easter is emphasized to the neglect of Good Friday. Some Lutherans, on the other hand, may overly emphasize the cross instead of the new life and joyful exuberance of the resurrection.
- Some Pentecostals seem to focus primarily on life after death, whereas others focus too much on material prosperity and success in this world. How can material well-being and eschatological hope be kept in tension with each other, such as through the Lutheran paradox of being both “in but not of this world”?

- Is there sufficient appreciation of how both the sacred/holy and the secular/profane are arenas in which God is active, or does the sacred tend to “take over” all that is secular? How can a Lutheran “two governances” framework help?
- What audience do neo-Pentecostals appeal to—the poor or the upwardly mobile—and what are they being offered? What does emphasizing that God provides material blessings say to those who continue struggling for their basic survival? On the other hand, what does a focus on the spiritual to the neglect of material needs imply about the scope of God’s concern?
- Prosperity has to do with how resources are rightly distributed among all. If we do not prosper together there is no prosperity. Giving or sacrificing to God should not be done in order to prosper.
- Being blessed by God should not be measured by what people “have.” A person’s health and wealth should not be seen as indications of a right relationship with God. On the other hand, poverty must not be glorified. When people move up, they sometimes move out of the Lutheran church; how do we relate to those who are prospering?
- Placing too much emphasis on healing through prayer and the laying on of hands, and trusting in God alone to heal, can lead to the danger of no longer seeking medical care and treatment. As Lutherans, we disagree with this. On the other hand, if churches only provide medical care without addressing people’s spiritual needs they become only secular NGOs. The healing power of both God and medicine are needed.
- If exorcism is to be practiced, then criteria, guidelines and training are needed. There is a great danger of exorcism being misused. A focus on casting out demons can avoid going to the root of the problem. Dialogue beforehand with the person affected, along with careful discernment and psychological assessment, are necessary. Further, the demonic may be present not only in persons but also in oppressive social, economic and political realities. How can these be exorcised?
- Some assume that neo-Pentecostalism is popular in Africa because it draws upon African spirituality. On the contrary, it typically rejects indigenous cultural beliefs and practices. Instead, its popularity may be due to a globalized “Americanization.” Neo-colonizing, homogenizing forces are at work here, including in the kind of worship and songs commonly used.
- Do some leaders of Pentecostal churches reflect roles previously played by religious shamans or political rulers? Are some Pentecostal leaders too self-absorbed and focused on building their own “kingdoms” in competition with other churches, to the neglect of being ecumenically involved? Is this also the case for some Lutherans?

Lutherans especially need to give further attention to the following:

To relate theology to people’s daily life challenges: many of Luther’s writings addressed the challenges of his day; we need to do the same today.

To understand and appreciate the whole scope of how the Holy Spirit is active: the Spirit is active in our lives, in how we relate to one another in church and society and throughout creation. The Spirit may use us, for example, to speak the truth even at great risk. Renewal

movements, where the power of God's Spirit has been especially evident, have often emerged in times of economic turmoil and political persecution.

To explore more deeply the meaning of sanctification: the Holy Spirit makes us "good"—we are not so on our own. The Holy Spirit empowers us to forgive and to do good, even to our enemies. But is sanctification totally the work of God in us, or is there a sense in which we participate with God? Might this be understood as God cracking open our self-centeredness and turning us toward others, so that we participate in God who is love?

Recommendations for those planning and leading worship

Worship should be dynamic, creative and participatory and not a "one-person show" led only by the pastor or evangelist. Bring the altar and the people closer together. Encourage members to exercise their various gifts in worship and other activities of the congregation.

A good balance is needed between order/tradition and spontaneity/experience. Although the apostle Paul had concern for good order, he still did not prohibit speaking in tongues. Be open to spontaneous expressions of emotions, such as lament or joy.

Concentrate less on set forms or structures and more on how effectively to communicate the faith in relation to the daily concerns, needs and problems facing the people. Luther had a sense of the holy pressing into the ordinary aspects of life; incorporate this more into worship. Use local languages whenever possible. Sermons should provide the opportunity for responses from or dialogue with the people.

The power of the Holy Spirit is experienced especially through prayer. It is personally empowering when persons and concerns are named specifically in the church's intercessory prayers.

Be creative with different parts of the liturgy, bringing in fresh symbols and dramatic actions. For example, consider how absolution itself is a holy *kairos*. Emphasize what can be seen and touched, as well as that which can be heard. Consider incorporating ancestral traditions in appropriate but not uncritical ways. Appreciate that not only the sermon but also the whole liturgy and our participation in it give us a foretaste of God's salvation.

Songs used in worship should be theologically sound, drawing upon the rich Lutheran and other historic traditions, as well as being lively and creative, engaging people and local cultures today. Intentional efforts should be made to find, select and create appropriate music for worship. The theology conveyed in popular songs associated with Pentecostal praise and worship, also used in many Lutheran congregations, should be carefully examined. For example, are the words focused mostly on the intimate relationships with Jesus, to the neglect of *agape* love that overflows to the neighbor? Are there gender differences in how women and men relate to the erotic imagery in these songs? Why do so few songs express anger toward God, or invite us to wrestle with God, or remind God of what God has promised? How can a wider array of human emotions and responses to God be reflected in the music used in worship?

Recommendations related to education

There is an urgent need for all church members to understand distinctive theological emphases associated with Lutheranism, and how these speak to their daily lives and challenges today. What does it mean not only to worship Jesus but also to follow him? The Lutheran church has been known as a teaching church, but in many congregations today there are almost no educational programs beyond Sunday worship. Consider weekday educational opportunities, workshops, home visits, Bible studies, and discipleship groups.

Relating to people, caring for their actual needs and educating all members are all important but impossible for the pastor to carry out when one pastor is serving a number of congregations. Training more lay persons to carry out this work is essential. Teaching centers for ordinary Christians need to be built up and strengthened in order to prepare them to take over various responsibilities as volunteers in the church. The gifts and ministries of all God's people need to be nurtured and developed.

Too often Lutherans turn to the widely marketed and readily available publications from Pentecostal perspectives that are inconsistent with Lutheran theology. We need to develop and publish educational resources that discuss basic questions of faith, doctrine, ethics and spirituality in ways that are easily accessible and available, so that people will be better informed about what Lutherans believe and practice.

In theological institutions, deepen the basis for theological encounters with Pentecostals. Invite them to participate with us in theological education, aware that as such movements mature, the need for theological work becomes more important.

Dialogue with Pentecostals

Finally, we should make efforts to pursue dialogue with Pentecostals, when and where appropriate, on questions such as those raised above. We yearn that the unity of the Triune God might be seen in us, Christ's one Church. With that hope, we seek to communicate and build bridges with those with whom we have differences. We do so with critical discernment yet in the strong conviction that the Spirit is actively working through our efforts.

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