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Department for Theology
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SUMMARY STATEMENT OF THE SECOND HERMENEUTICS CONFERENCE ON THE PSALMS

EISENACH, GERMANY, 20–27 MARCH 2013

1. Introduction

“They may have life abundantly” John 10:10-life in all its fullness-the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As Christian readers of the Bible we affirm that God speaks to us through the Holy Scripture. The process of understanding a biblical text reaches its goal, when the text becomes effective in the lives of the reader and listener. Employing Lutheran hermeneutics requires that we give attention to the manner in which Luther read and interpreted the Psalms and reflect the hermeneutical principles used in the Lutheran tradition. Through Psalms, the gospel is preached that the world may be transformed for they equip us to address the human condition and to promote life for all and liberation from oppression.

2. How do we Read the Psalms?

- a. We read the Psalms with attention to their contexts, i.e., context of the biblical text, context of the Lutheran tradition, contemporary contexts, acknowledging the hermeneutical circle spiral of texts, readers and contexts.
- b. As Christians we read the Psalms both individually and as part of the Psalter, as part of the Old Testament related to the New Testament and as readings and prayers in our worship; we also took into account that Jesus himself and the New Testament writers made use of the Psalter testifying to the unity of two testaments.
- c. We read the Psalms informed by their historical origins, by the history of their receptions and theological interpretations and by their relevance and meaning for us today.
- d. We read the Psalms being aware that there is no single way to read a biblical book, but that the Psalms have been read in different ways within the Old Testament, in Early Judaism, in the New Testament and later, each reading offering significant insights.
- e. We read the Psalms sensitive to the description of the human condition addressed in them and attentive to issues of justice and injustice, vengeance, violence, enemies, gender, human dignity and joy, worship, meditation, praise, lament and prayer.

3. What did we Discover in Reading the Psalms?

- a. The Psalms teach us how to pray, praise and give thanks to God.
- b. The Psalms shape us as we pray them.
- c. By reading the Psalms, we gain deeper insights into Christ and the human condition.
- d. The Psalms help us make sense of the human condition by creating a framework for interpreting our experience.
- e. In our common reading and interpreting the Psalms and reflecting the hermeneutics of the Psalms we recognize the plurality of contexts and the commonality of human experience. Even though the plurality within the Lutheran family is large, we do not see the various contexts as a source of problems but, rather, as something which can inform the tradition.
- f. Especially in the Psalms of lament we recognize the paradoxes of life, which we all are living despite all differences of context.
- g. The lament Psalms are about protest, revenge, anger and a cry for justice emanating from experiences of pain, injustice, suffering, abandonment and rejection. They offer ways for the reader to identify contextual crises, which urgently call for justice. The Psalms of lament speak of the nearness of God.

4. What Were our Challenges in Reading the Psalms?

- a. We have to take into account, that the Psalms are Jewish texts, but we read them as texts of the Christian Bible.
- b. As a result, a Christological interpretation, which is traditionally taken for granted for reading the Old Testament, becomes a crucial point for reading the Psalms in contemporary church settings.
- c. However, the challenge is that this results in a fracture between some sectors of biblical scholarship and the use of Psalms in church settings. For this reason, there remains a gap between the results of biblical scholarship and their use in the church. The question is how this gap can be bridged.
- d. We face the challenge that some biblical texts have been misused to justify oppression and marginalization, for example the apartheid system or the exclusion of women.
- e. The question is, How can such misuse be prevented, especially when the biblical text seem to sanction it?
- f. While we all recognize the centrality of the Bible for our faith, life and witness, we also realize that the issue of misuse is closely connected to the issue of authority. What authority does the Bible have over us as community of readers? What is the relationship between the authority of the Bible to the authority of Martin Luther and his interpretations of the Bible?
- g. We also noted that even though there is goodwill among Lutherans from different contexts as they read the Bible together, sometimes they do not fully understand each other because their use of certain Lutheran categories (e.g., law and gospel) is already influenced by certain contextual influences. This tends to create difficulties in communication across different reading contexts.

5. What Lutheran Hermeneutical Principles Emerged?

- a. Lutheran hermeneutics take seriously the literary form of the text.
- b. Lutheran readings include Christological interpretation of the Psalms. A Christological reading of the Psalms means to understand more deeply who Christ is for us today in light of the Psalms and the New Testament. In this we share the experience of Martin Luther, for whom the Psalms deepened and extended his understanding of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the symbol

of the human condition in the presence of God, which we share and agree on; hence we read the Psalms in light of Christ rather than simply looking for references to Christ.

- c. A contemporary Christological reading of the Psalms implies a hermeneutical spiral; the Psalms help us to understand Christ as much as Christ enables us to understand the Psalms.
- d. Lutheran hermeneutics involve the sense of transcendence of God, of God coming to us without our doing anything.
- e. Lutheran hermeneutics mean that we seek and focus on the center of our interpretation, for example being attentive to the life-giving spirit against the killing letter (cf. 2 Cor 3).
- f. Lutheran hermeneutics are oriented toward the movement of text from despair to faith, from loneliness to praise of God, from distance to community.
- g. Lutheran hermeneutics lead to repentance of sin and the healing of victims.
- h. Lutheran hermeneutics proceed from reading, listening and understanding and aim toward the verification of the biblical texts in daily life.
- i. The characteristics of Luther's way of interpreting the Psalms was first to insist on the historical meaning of the texts; second, that all biblical texts refer to Christ; and third, that the first interpretation of the Psalms is the difference of the killing letter and the life-giving spirit (cf. 2 Cor 3). The killing letter is not inspired by the life-giving spirit. For Luther, "the life giving power is the spirit of the biblical texts that is the divine spirit."
- j. Lutheran hermeneutics learn from Luther, but go beyond Luther. Lutheran hermeneutics mean critically to evaluate Luther. Luther is to be criticized, for example, when he marginalizes women (treatment of the Jews).
- k. Lutheran hermeneutics call readers to interpret in community and to be in dialogue.
- l. Lutheran hermeneutics speak prophetically for the transformation of the self and the world

6. What Recommendations Surfaced for our Lutheran Churches?

- a. We encourage our churches to use the Psalms in various ways, including praying, preaching, teaching and even action.
- b. Coming together in an intercultural group to study a text such as a Psalm makes clear that we have different understandings of Scripture: there are learnings which are specific to the respective contexts, responding to the political, economic, cultural and religious situations and challenges of the different readers.
- c. As a result, we recommend always to try to understand and respect each other's readings. Eventually we might even challenge contextual interpretations outside our own contexts and receive challenges to our own contextual interpretations from others.
- d. We are aware that there are some especially uncomfortable texts in the Bible, which we should allow to challenge us. Speaking in particular of the Psalms, there is need for a continuous dialogue in the churches about how problematic texts should be used in the lectionary.
- e. Given that Luther held a very high view of the Psalms, it is recommended that Psalms be used also as the textual basis for sermons.
- f. We would like to encourage especially the use of the Psalms of lament, as they provide a model for speaking of human crises.
- g. We also recommend the use of the Psalms in worship, meditation and in lament.

7. Recommendations for the next consultation:

- a. Distribute summary statements of previous consultations to all participants in advance.