



# Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

*"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).*

What is a Lutheran? Is it someone who is of Scandinavian or German descent? Is it someone who loves lute-fisk or lefse? Or it is someone who is eternally shy about expressing faith or emotion, a stoic saint for whom the most enthusiastic utterance tends to be "not too bad."

An old joke comes to mind. Apparently they crossed a Lutheran with a Jehovah's Witness. The good news was that the person was now very good at knocking on doors, the bad news was that he had nothing to say. What do Lutherans have to say?

One of the best ways to understand Lutherans is to understand something of where we came from. Of course our roots go way back to the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in fact go all the way back to the New Testament 2000 years, and go back much further than that to Genesis 1. But Lutherans have had some very specific ways of interpreting the Christian message, and it is helpful to understand them. Of course what we find is that there is no such thing as a uniform Lutheran stance.

A favorite professor of mine while I was at seminary was Dr. Kent Knutson, later to be elected President of the American Lutheran Church. He taught that Lutherans have tended to follow one of three major theological streams since the Reformation. We all claim to follow the same Bible and the same confessions, but we have very different emphases. While some of his teaching was quite complex, I will try to make it less so. The three major streams include:

1. Orthodoxy. This is most clearly articulated in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. To be a Lutheran above all is to hold to correct doctrine. Correct doctrine demands a pure church and pure teaching, which relies on a perfect book, the Bible.

Orthodox Lutherans believe there are no open questions about which people can disagree and still be together. The role of the church is to enforce pure doctrine. Anyone who does agree on every nuance of doctrine cannot participate in the Sacraments.

The church for the orthodox is made up of people in whom the Holy Spirit has worked faith, those who are saved. Because faith is known only to God, the true

church is invisible. The key to faith is a relationship to God, relationship with other Christians is secondary.

Therefore the church needs to build very strong hedges around the true church, it needs to protect people from false doctrine. Unity of belief creates the church that which destroys the church is disunity. There are only two kinds of churches, orthodox and heterodox. Pure doctrine is the criteria. A pure church is orthodox, a church that tolerates false doctrine is heterodox. Fellowship between orthodox and heterodox churches is anathema, called unionism. Even Christian love cannot demand fellowship when there is a difference in doctrine.

Since the early 70's, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod sees itself as Orthodox and all other Lutherans as heterodox. One of the major influences on that direction was when the ALC and the LCA voted to ordain women. In addition, the ecumenical alliances which the other Lutheran bodies have made has produced wider splits between LCMS and other Lutheran bodies.

2. The second major stream is Pietism. Pietism is very, very different from Orthodoxy. Pietism comes from Norway led by people like Ole Hallesby and Hans Nielson Hauge, and from Germany led by Frederick Spener. Pietists strongly declare that faith is centered in experience, not doctrine. The most important thing is not correct doctrine, but rather to have an experience of God, of Jesus Christ.

Pietism was at the heart of the old Evangelical Lutheran Church, and then became a part of the American Lutheran Church, which together with the Lutheran Church in America were predecessor bodies to the present ELCA. Also the Lutheran Free Church was strongly centered in a Pietist tradition.

The work of God and Jesus Christ was objective; life, death, resurrection. But the only way it has meaning to us is that we have a subjective experience. We decide for God. The church is not made up of people who believe certain doctrine so much as it is people who have an experience. The Bible is not so much a perfect book as it is a witness of people to their experience of God and Jesus Christ, and a guide to living.

Pietists emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is always evangelism, helping more and more people have this experience. Worship is evangelism, helping people experience God through the Holy Spirit.

Sacraments have not been very important in much of Pietism, as they were offered only twice a year for generations, once a month in more recent years. For Pietists there is a direct experience of Christ, not mediated by pastors or church or sacraments or Bible.

Pietists see the church consisting of people who have a relationship with Jesus and with each other. The center of the church is koinonia, which means fellowship, unity is found in a shared experience. Pietists have little interest in putting hedges around the church, but reach out to other Christians who have had an experience. Pietists love to participate in wider rallies such as Promise keepers, various crusades, Bible studies, prayer groups.

Pietists also have emphasized the importance of a holy life. Moral issues are most important. A Christian does certain things and refrains from doing other things. For much of history Pietists were known by what they did not do; drink, dance, smoke, play cards, go to movies, etc. Jesus called them to a holy life.

3. A third stream does not have as identifiable name, so Knutson calls this the Lundensian stream, because the leaders came from Lund Sweden. The two key theologians were Gustav Aulen and Anders Nygren.

This stream was found most strongly in the old Lutheran Church in America, the LCA. For Lundensians the most important thing is not correct doctrine or a personal experience of Jesus Christ, but rather "Have you been baptized?" Do you receive the Eucharist? People are saved by grace, not by the correctness of their doctrine or by the intensity of their experience. Christ's death and resurrection are objective, the victory was won, God did it all. It becomes ours through the Sacraments, grace is central.

The church is a real thing in itself, it is not created by doctrine or experience. The church is the body of Christ, it is Christ himself, who gives himself to us in the Sacraments. Therefore the church is universal, much larger than the local congregation or the individual. The power of the Gospel is never dependent on the quantity of response.

The key to the church is faith active in love, agape love, love for the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts. We

have unity with all those who wish to love their neighbor. Inclusivity is at the core of the church. This stream has often seen social justice as more important than evangelism, advocating primarily for social and institutional morality rather than personal morality.

Of course one of the difficulties we are having today in the 1988 merger of the ALC and the LCA is that we are trying to bring together Pietists and Lundensians. They tend not to see eye to eye on much of anything, even though they both claim to be Lutheran. Pietists tend to focus on personal experience, on evangelism and a holy life. Lundensians tend to focus on a Sacramental ministry, on grace and on agape love for the world. Every major conflict we have had since 1988 basically splits because of the two different emphases described above.

By way of summary, I would add that something from each of these three streams is needed today in Lutheranism. It is important to know what we believe, that our doctrine corresponds to biblical truth, although we are not saved by correct doctrine. It is also important that we have an experience of God in Jesus Christ, that Jesus is Savior and Lord. A holy and moral life is central, a transformed life, again we are not saved by what we do or don't do.

And it is essential that we understand all of this comes by grace, God's amazing grace which has created the church and given us the gift of faith and life, Baptism and Holy Communion are central. Faith active in love is always a core value for Lutherans.

We need to find the best of each of these streams and incorporate them into our understanding of our faith and life. Each of these streams have overemphasized some things and ignored other important things, we need to find the proper balance. Our Lutheran heritage is an incredible gift, we need to understand it and always seek to find ways to help it become a living faith for our present age.