An Evangelical Protestant Perspective
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American evangelicals need the Lutherans, and we need them now. The reason for this need is that the excesses of evangelicals in theology and life are currently most obvious where Lutheranism, because of its confessional heritage, is best equipped to administer a corrective. For a Protestant evangelical who looks upon the rise of Lutheranism as a providentially ordered means for reasserting the gospel of Jesus Christ, the question “Whither Lutheranism?” is of much more than academic interest. It is rather a question that touches the current situation of evangelicals, and it is one which probes the Lutherans’ capacity to bring their heritage to bear on present circumstances. (Of several legitimate uses of the term “evangelical,” I mean here the modern descendants of those eighteenth-century movements of renewal among English-speaking Protestants growing from the market-oriented evangelism of George Whitefield, the organizational genius of John Wesley, and the theocentric piety expounded, in different ways, by Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.1)

The dispositions of American evangelicals that Lutheranism is ideally situated to correct are activism for the sake of activism, self-consciousness verging into self-preoccupation, and Christian perfectionism run amok into tribal triumphalism. Activism has a laudable history, but in the twentieth century it has been driven to extremes among evangelicals for whom pro-life activity, evangelistic activity, and even (in some cases) political activity come close to preempting the center of the faith. Evangelical self-examination can be a veritable means of grace, as in the hymns of Charles Wesley or the psychology of Edwards’s Treatise on the Religious Affections. But if it descends to a fixation upon the individual—whether accepting Christ, attaining a higher life, securing the tongues-gift of the Holy Spirit, or defining acceptable styles of worship and forms of spirituality with which I am comfortable—it comes dangerously near to an idolatry of the self. John Wesley’s sober kind of Christian perfectionism could be an edifying tonic, for it was directed to the holiness of God and was pursued with careful qualification. Among latter-day evangelicals, however, the push toward holiness has been distorted in so many directions—lingering pietistic legalism, perverse “gospels” of health and wealth, and a multitude

of sectarian escapisms—that triumphalist assertions of what God so eagerly desires to do for us come close to obliterating reminders of how far in holiness, love, and humility we fall short of God.

Lutherans could help evangelicals precisely at these points of need, if they still care about the resources of their confessional tradition and if they can translate ideas that arose first in early-modern Germany and Scandinavia into a conceptual vocabulary understandable by modern, pluralistic Americans. Thus, in respect to the evangelical tendency toward activism for the sake of activism, Lutherans, preeminently Martin Luther himself, but also others like Søren Kierkegaard, recall for believers the ironies of religion. Precisely when Christians mount their most valiant efforts for God, such voices say, they run the greatest risk of substituting their righteousness for the righteousness of Christ.

To the evangelical preoccupation with the self and its spiritual achievements, Lutherans offer exactly the words they once offered to a Roman Catholicism that had also grown overly confident about doing what lay within:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.  

For evangelicals who regard the fullness of the heavenly state as their legitimate birthright immediately in this life, the words of Martin Luther at the very beginning of his reforming work point to exactly the proper antidote.

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened....He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross....A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.  

What Lutherans, therefore, have to offer—a sense of irony to qualify activism, a belief in objective justification to counteract a surfeit of subjectivity, and a theology of the cross to restrain a lust for glory—is exactly what Protestant evangelicals need.

But can a Lutheran corrective ever reach us evangelicals? Both the long course of developments since the sixteenth century and the more recent history of Lutherans in America do not make me overly optimistic. In the first instance, there is a substantial difference in heritage
that has made it quite difficult for Lutherans, as the first Protestant “evangelicals,” to communicate with the modern American Protestants now known as “evangelicals.” To be sure, Lutheran orthodoxy has stressed the infallibility of the Bible much like fundamentalist and conservative American evangelicals. Lutheran pietism has emphasized the new birth, holiness of life, and missionary service in forms very similar to emphases of American evangelicals. Yet with only a few exceptions, like Samuel Schmucker in the nineteenth century or the speakers on “The Lutheran Hour” (Walter Maier, Oswald Hoffman) in the twentieth century, links between Lutherans and American evangelicals have been scanty. Linguistic and cultural barriers have stood in the way, as has also the faithfulness of Lutherans to the Augsburg Confession. Confessionalism does not go down well with American evangelicals who traditionally have appealed to “no creed but the Bible.” Only among those offshoots of Lutheran pietism which had already begun to break from the European state churches before immigration (e.g., Swedish Covenant and Evangelical Free churches) has a rapprochement occurred with American-style evangelicals.

If longstanding historical circumstances make it difficult for Lutherans to offer a helping word to American evangelicals, so may more recent developments. Lutherans in America stand at a crossroads in their own history. The infusion of European migration has been over for two generations. Assimilation to American cultural patterns proceeds rapidly. Lutherans now cannot avoid choices about how to relate more generally to other American churches and to the American environment itself. The choices that have been made so far seem to throw into doubt either the ability to communicate an authentically Lutheran word in America or the capacity to maintain such an authentic word.5

To an outsider, the recent history of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod looks like a retreat into parochial dogmatism. The confessional inheritance may be saved, but only at the cost of erecting more barriers against others, Lutherans and non-Lutherans alike. Such choices may save something of authentic Lutheranism, but in a way that both makes it look suspiciously like American fundamentalism and keeps it from exerting a beneficial influence on American Christianity more generally.

For the Lutheran Church in America, the American Lutheran Church, and now the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the danger seems to have been the opposite. These “mainstream” Lutherans appear to be drifting toward the common fate of the old, large, Americanized, and increasingly endangered denominations. The ELCA will no doubt continue to make room for a party promoting historic confessionalism, in the same way that the mainline denominations regularly accommodate the tastes of their pluralistic constituencies. But the dominating concern of the denomination seems to be less the offering of


Lutherans from speaking the word that American evangelicals need to hear are not the product of ancient historical circumstances, but of contemporary choices.

The Lutheran heritage has left contemporary Lutherans with many gifts to offer the American churches. Not the least of these gifts are hints about the possibility of simultaneity (justified yet a sinner, active yet dependent), insights into the objectivity (Word and Sacrament) of justification by faith, and, above all, an understanding of what the Bible is all about (“There are problems and will remain problems [with apparent contradictions in the Bible]....But if we understand Scripture properly and have the genuine articles of our faith—that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, suffered and died for us—then our ability to answer all such questions will be of little consequence”). Protestant evangelicals need those gifts as much, if not more, than others. God grant that, in the future, Lutherans may retain these treasures and be given the grace to share them as generously as possible.
