



Piety: A Key to Evangelism

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How does Lutheran theology express itself in evangelism? This question implies that there are some problems in trying to make the connection. Once I asked some students what the phrase “Lutheran evangelism” suggests. Their responses were of three types.

Some snorted, “Evangelism! Everybody is for evangelism these days! Why? What really is evangelism?”

Some asked, “Why is evangelism so difficult for Lutherans?”

Others replied, “How should one preach, Sunday after Sunday, if evangelism is the focus?”

As I sifted these questions out and thought about them, I remembered an interesting meeting I had with a black theologian some years ago. We were mutual guests with a group of other post-graduate students at a reception being given by the dean of the school we were attending. I was surprised by the warmth of this man’s greeting when he and I were introduced. “I am so happy to meet a Lutheran!” he exclaimed. (I was the only Lutheran at the reception.) Astonished, I asked him why. “Because,” he said, “Lutherans are providing the best preachers in the country.” Since I didn’t know that, I took an instant liking to the man!

As we conversed, we discussed the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the leadership of Martin Luther King. He claimed that it was because King stayed within the black folk piety that he was such an effective leader. This folk piety provided a framework within which the minorities could live and work with freedom, and it served as an effective force to convict the white conscience. He added that when H. Rapp Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, and the SNCK movement took over directing the civil rights movement, they separated the cause from what they considered the weakness of Christian idealism and piety. This caused the movement to deteriorate and collapse. The end result of their leadership was a strident tone, which created an atmosphere of hate and alienated the white conscience.

This raised for me the question, “Is there a Lutheran piety any more? If so, what is it like? If not, why not?” Now, all this happened about ten years ago, when “piety” was a bad word among us. Remember? We would rather be neurotic, or wicked, than “pious.” The young, taught by the middle-aged, thought freedom to be a shedding of their misguided piety, and they pursued something called “no-piety” with vigor.

But we have found that scholarship could not carry the freight. Scholarship can define and refine the theological issues, but it cannot preach them into the human heart.

And “doing what comes naturally” turned out to be license in a new form.

Evangelism is the heart-language of the gospel fueled by the heart-language of faith. One cannot *add* a program of evangelism, one can simply express the faith which is already there.

Perhaps this is why what we know as evangelism flourishes best in the southern Bible belt. Evangelism is a cultural form in that part of our land. People there don't ask questions of why or how. They simply do their Christian work in the supposition that all people must have a born-again experience, as dictated by their culture. It is their piety.

So, what is piety? Piety is not a code of ethics. That is legalism. It is not a doctrinal position alone. That becomes orthodoxy, concerned with dogma. Piety is a natural part of every Christian's life. Piety is not pietism. It is not a movement. It is simply the way we naturally, instinctively, without second thoughts, express our faith. We live out of the heart, as Pascal reminds us. In the heart are stored the convictions and experiences which have already molded us inwardly, often without our awareness. Piety insists that the gospel's saving truth must be experienced to be real. Therefore every Christian group and person has piety, since piety is our Christian life rhythm. It is not a question of *whether* we are pious or not. The question is, "What kind of piety do we have?"

It is clear that we cannot function effectively without it. Suddenly the younger generation is rediscovering piety in all shapes and forms, many times in shapes we older persons cannot easily recognize. There is a piety about health, of ecology, of personhood, of "knowing the Lord," of success, to mention just a few.

So, is there a Lutheran piety? Is there a Lutheran life stream flowing beneath the surface of our studies and doctrines, which empowers us and interprets for us? I like to think there is, and that we will be more effective evangel-bearers if we tap this resource.

First, there is a Lutheran piety communicated through our form and understanding of baptism. We baptize an infant and say to the infant that God will never leave the child, not ever, never! The piety of this is that we live in the conviction that God is always calling us, seeking us, to tell us that if we look to the cross, we will see how deep and pervasive is his love for us.

Our piety is that we do not chase God. God chases us. To be reborn is to be captured by God. Conversion is not shedding our human skins. Conversion is accepting our human skins by letting God into them. We can never overstate this glorious truth.

Flannery O'Connor has written a story called "Parker's Back" which in its humorous way illustrates this. Parker is tattooed on every inch of his body, except for a spot on his back which he can never see. He marries a Christian woman, and though avowedly an unbeliever, he pays tribute to her by having the face of God tattooed in this spot on his back. Now poor Parker is hooked. God is always as close as his back, looking at and into him. Parker cannot escape. He cannot see God and so decide for or against him. He can only let God catch him. He can only accept, after a struggle to the death, the death of the old Parker.

This is a picture of Lutheran piety. God is calling, seeking, and we will never know what he is like until we let him catch us with his forgiving, life-renewing love.

Second, we have the great theological gift of *simil justus et peccator*. We are all of us simultaneously and always justified, yet sinners. Both conditions are always true of us. This should be heard loud and clear, especially clear. We are born again when we become totally dependent upon grace, and are shed of the notion that Christians are super people. I am always

surprised when I experience, as I have many times, the awe and surprised disbelief of college students when they first understand this statement, *simil justus et peccator*. It attacks the triumphalist image they have of Christianity, and with which, in their honest moments, they have never been comfortable.

Another story from Flannery O'Connor, entitled "The Artificial Nigger," helps make this clear. It is the story of Grandpa Head and his grandson, Nelson, as they make their first trip ever from the small town to the big city. They are cut from the same mold. Both are headstrong and self-righteous as if they were competing for the honor. When Nelson becomes lost in the city and it becomes apparent that Grandpa is lost too, there is a big commotion as Nelson runs into a woman carrying groceries and knocks her to the ground. Grandpa comes on the scene, and a man asks him whether this boy belongs to him, whereupon Grandpa says, "I ain't never seen him before." The two wander around the city in a daze after that, with Nelson walking behind his grandpa and burning two holes into his back. For the first time, Grandpa Head is aware of his deep, pervasive sinfulness. He is also aware for the first time of the wonder of forgiving love. He is overwhelmed by the thought that all a person can carry into God's presence is God's own mercy, and is ashamed that he has so little of it to carry with him. He had never thought of himself as a real sinner before this, but now he realizes that God in his mercy had withheld from him this disclosure until he could bear it. Now he can bear it only because he is sustained by forgiveness. *Simil justus et peccator*.

Third, Lutheran piety celebrates the humanness of Jesus. This, to Calvin and to Barth, is the great Lutheran "heresy." Let us shout for joy and say, "Yes, we rejoice that God was incarnate all the way and became totally human in Jesus, who even became sin for us, that sin may have no more dominion over us." Of course we worship him as divine, but we love him because it is in his humanity that he shows us his true power. He came all the way to meet us and deliver us from our deepest need. So it is really true—it is not merely romanticism or sentimentalism—that God is with us, wherever we are, that he never leaves us, whatever we do, and that God is simply to be found in whatever is

really real. There is no make-believe about faith. God meets us wherever and however life is lived. This is expressed by us as we live out of the sacraments, which make mercy as concrete as the death and resurrection of Jesus. The sacraments help us remember that when God had created the world, he pronounced it all good, and he redeemed his creation by becoming a "friend of sinners."

Yes, there is a Lutheran piety. We have always been most vital when we have drunk deeply at these wells. And, of course, there is more.

Our piety says the gospel alone gives life. The law can only kill. Our piety calls us to and through the church, not merely as set apart individuals. We have a kind of horror of merely personal piety. In fact, we have a hard time understanding it. We feel so strongly that we are called to be a part of God's people in the church, in order that we may be a more effective part of all God's people outside the church.

And it doesn't hurt at all to remind ourselves that evangelism focuses on feeling and results in a methodology.

Piety is not pietism, a movement; it is not measurable behavior, legalism; it is not a

language pattern, a method; it is not a feeling, either romanticism or sentimentalism. Piety is the instinctive, life-feeding way in which we live with God. We cannot create it; it is God's personalized gift to us.