



Evangelical Catholicity: *The Lutheran Tradition*

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Lutherans in the united states have been reclaiming their traditional language. *Evangelical* in the name of the new church is evidence. Instead of referring to the gospel as the key to biblical interpretation “evangelical” had often become associated with a more rigid literalism. Instead of justification by grace alone, through faith in God’s saving work in Jesus Christ, this gospel was being clouded with a legalism bent toward self-righteousness among many who called themselves evangelical. Now the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has taken back the term, and with it a fresh responsibility to teach, clarify, and emphasize the true biblical meaning of evangelical.

Similarly, the term *catholic* has been regaining its proper place in Lutheran usage. The creeds in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* provide the best example. By referring to the church as catholic, Lutherans not only accept the language used by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican Churches, but also by Presbyterians, Methodists, and many other Protestants.

As Jaroslav Pelikan put it, for the reformers the church was catholic more because of its identity than because of its universality. The church was truly catholic or universal when it relied on biblical teaching. Christ died for all, and the church as the body of Christ moves out to include all. The church is catholic exactly because it is evangelical (*The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* [1959] 49-50, 184-186).

The orthodox Lutheran theologian, John Gerhard, wrote during the century after the Reformation, “If the papists want to prove the truth of the name ‘catholic’ as applied to their church, let them demonstrate that the dogmas of their church are catholic, that they are in conformity with the catholic writings of the prophets and apostles. If the papists want to deny us the name ‘catholic,’ let them demonstrate that we have seceded from the catholic faith and that we deny the mystery of the Trinity” (quoted by Pelikan).

It was the impact of pietistic individualism and enlightenment liberalism that weakened the Lutheran consciousness of being catholic. With the confessional revival in the late nineteenth century and the renewed interest in historical roots, the catholic nature of the Lutheran movement began to be rediscovered.

The eminent theologian Paul Tillich provided a useful analysis when he identified the *protestant principle* and the *catholic substance* (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 [1963]). The protestant principle is the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith. In other words, in

relation to God, everything is done by God, and there is no way to establish a human claim—not religious, nor intellectual, nor moral, nor devotional. The protestant principle recognizes the infinite distance between divine and human and is the basis for protest against any self-elevation of religion. The protestant principle transcends every church.

Tillich rejects any absolutizing of either the institutional church or of individual religious experiences. No church or individual represents God so perfectly as to justify a claim to absolute holiness or power to the exclusion of all others. The protestant principle is betrayed by every church, yet is effective in every true church.

Hence, Tillich is critical of the Roman Catholic claim that its system of doctrine and its authority must be accepted unconditionally. There cannot be infallibility for a pope speaking *ex cathedra*. All churches are fallible.

Because of such distortions, Lutherans had become wary of the term catholic. As Warren Quanbeck wrote, however, “The term catholic has become for many connected with the Roman Catholic Church and has therefore come to mean a quality of exclusiveness. Its original meaning is precisely the opposite. Catholic means universal, or ecumenical. It emphasizes that as people of God, the church is above all human differences of race, color, nation, economic class or social status. The church of Christ is open to all and seeks to bring all into obedience to their proper Lord” (*Search for Understanding* [1972] 13, 103).

For Tillich, churches are universal because of the universality of their foundation on Christ; the church as the body of Christ is not completely identical with any one institutional church. The church is not above but beneath the cross of Christ; its structure, doctrine, and ritual are not uppermost.

At the same time, Tillich sees the flaw in any spirituality that does not need mediation in relationship to God. Private, subjective religion is never an isolated experience but is dependent on a community of faith, as indeed is personhood.

When Tillich asserts that a church which does not claim catholicity has ceased to be the church, he means that God works through the organized church to bring the good news about Christ to all people everywhere. The catholic substance is seen in the means by which the gospel is transmitted. Human words are the vehicle for the Word of God. Sacraments are the means of Christ’s presence and action. These are fundamental, but there are also creeds and confessions of faith, liturgy, an order of ministry in an organized community, and an ethical system for relating to human society beyond the institutional church.

It can be seen that Lutheran churches share all of these forms for the embodiment of the gospel in the church’s life of worship, nurture, and service. Lutherans are as well equipped as any to define, demonstrate, and enjoy the ancient understanding of the church as they reclaim its terms evangelical catholic.

Evangelical Catholicity: A Lutheran Faction

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My objection to the phrase “evangelical catholicity” has nothing to do with the words “evangelical” and “catholic.” They are both honored terms in the Christian lexicon. But what we

are dealing with here is not two words, but a single phrase: “evangelical catholicity.” This phrase is not new; it began to be used in the nineteenth century to identify a particular approach to church history by romantic, historicist theologians dissatisfied with emerging secular culture and liberal Protestantism. These theologians yearned for what they perceived to be the organic wholeness of the church in past ages (see Sven-Erik Brodd, *Evangelisk Katolicitet* [Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1982]).

The phrase was given a particular ecumenical slant by the Prussian jurist, Ernst Ludwig von Gerlach (1795-1872), who was part of a reactionary Lutheran party that wished to combine authoritarian social policy with theological orthodoxy. The members of this party knew that theirs was a time of uncertainty and social upheaval. They hated democracy and especially the revolutionary movements that swept Europe in the 1840s. They believed that God orders the world hierarchically. The king, they argued, must rule the people and the clergy must rule the laity. Von Gerlach admired Rome for its rejection of modern, pluralistic culture that stems from the Enlightenment. He hoped for union with Rome. He employed the term “evangelical catholicity” to define his position as a conservative, hierarchical Lutheran, longing for the return of premodern culture.

“Evangelical catholicity” gained renewed currency among Lutherans in two other periods of social uncertainty and upheaval: after both the First and Second World Wars. In the 1920s the phrase was used chiefly by the Roman Catholic convert to Lutheranism, Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967) and his Swedish mentor, Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931). In the 1950s it found a home among a party of Lutherans in Germany which included such prominent theologians as Hans Asmussen (1898-1968) and Max Lackmann. These figures were not as uniformly conservative in social policy as their nineteenth-century forebear, von Gerlach. But they were nevertheless deeply conservative in the sense that they distrusted such hallmarks of modernity as individualism, pluralism, and (as in the case of Asmussen) historical

criticism of the Bible. Because of the fragmentation of modern life, they longed for a principle of comprehensiveness and organic wholeness to govern Christian faith. They saw this principle incarnated in the Roman Catholic Church. The Lord’s Supper, conceived as “eucharist,” and the office of bishop were interpreted as chief symbols of unity in the church. Apostolic succession through the Roman clergy was considered to be of essential importance. Protestantism, they declared, is a creature of modernity. It is threatened by a sectarian spirit. It lacks the necessary uniformity of structure. “We are either Catholic Christians or we are not Christians at all,” writes Lackmann. And this means abiding “in union with the Church of Rome and with the Roman pontiff as its visible head” (see Hans Asmussen, ed., *The Unfinished Reformation* [1961] 69, 78).

We are now in another time of uncertainty and upheaval. Mainline Protestantism is in decline. The ELCA is fragmented by diverse special interests. It is no surprise, then, that the programmatic phrase, “evangelical catholicity,” should raise its head once again. As before, so now, *it is a label that defines a particular party within the church*. Indeed its partisans see themselves this way. They are appalled by what they regard as Protestant factionalism and political partisanship. They question American society, identifying it as a mass culture of vulgar democratic populism and materialism. They distrust individualism, pluralism, and the modern enterprise as a whole. They are sometimes attracted to conservative and elitist social and political

policies. They have a loving respect for sacramentalism, ritual, and a disciplined clergy under the office of bishop, defined in the Catholic sense. They long for reunion with Rome.

The evangelical-catholic Lutheran party has pertinent criticisms to make of a denomination that is undergoing a difficult period of transition. I, for one, am glad to hear its voice in the church. I find myself generally sympathetic to theological arguments of a conservative nature for they are necessary to maintain balance and help to restore balance in the continuing debate over our common life as a church. *But I object when one self-conscious party in the church, identified by a phrase with a long and particularly polemical history, seeks to elevate itself by means of that phrase to hegemony over the church as a whole.*

“Evangelical catholicity” is not a term symbolic of wholeness in Lutheranism but the label of a faction. This is why “evangelical catholicity” causes debate when it is used. This is why it raises up passionate detractors and equally passionate defenders. It will always be so. Therefore, as the ELCA seeks to define itself and its mission over the coming years by such means as an official ecumenical statement or the ministry study, it must rely on the inherited and shared confessional terminology of Scripture and *The Book of Concord* and eschew party labels like “evangelical catholicity.” Lutherans must do this for the sake of nothing less than the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.”