

THE WEAKNESSES OF TRADITIONALISM

These days people are buffeted by change on all sides. Many people look to the church to preserve what is changeless and enduring, and it is easy to see why this should be so. The Word of God is enduring, and will not pass away. During the time of rationalism what preserved the faith, humanly speaking, were not the humanistic sermons, but the liturgy and the hymns that had been handed over from the past. The New Testament often regards traditions in a positive sense (Ac 24:14; 2 Th 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor 15:3-4). However, it is natural but deceptive to look back at our parents' and grandparents' customs in worship as the last word. The danger in this is forgetting to ask how much they knew and how much we know of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. The traditionalist approach too easily takes an over-optimistic view of Lutheranism and is short on knowledge of its history.

The adoption of the *Augsburg Confession* was soon plagued by Melancthon's alterations of it, chiefly in Article X on the Lord's Supper. After the adoption of the *Formula of Concord* in 1578 settled a broad range of controversies, early Lutheranism had a serious setback when, in 1613, Elector John Sigismund of Brandenburg, who had been a confessional Lutheran, embraced the Reformed faith and became aggressively active on behalf of Calvinism. From that time the union of Lutheran and Reformed churches became fixed policy in the Berlin court.

The period of Pietism encouraged people to minimise doctrinal truth and differences in confession in favour of exaggerated subjectivism, and led to a lessening of regard for Baptism and the Lord's Supper. On the three-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation (1817) Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia proclaimed that he would celebrate the occasion by uniting the Reformed and Lutheran churches of Potsdam. The liturgy of the Lord's Supper in the royal chapel left it open to individuals how they would understand the presence, with the compromise formulation, "Take and eat. Jesus says, 'This is My body.'" Some loyal Lutherans migrated to USA and Australia to avoid state persecution, and those who were opposed continued in Prussia as the "Old Lutherans" (Breslau Synod). However, the majority acceded to what came to be called the "Prussian Union." The basic principle was church union without full agreement. Since then it has grown like a cancer.

During the Second World War Lutherans in the territorial churches resisted Nazi pressure to join the "German Evangelical Church." However, in 1948 most of them, without pressure, joined a movement that expanded the Prussian Union to almost the whole of the country, in the formation of the Evangelical Church in Germany.

In 1973 the Leuenberg Concord extended a compromise confession of the Lord's Supper to most of European Lutheranism. It used weak formulations that were open to a Reformed understanding of the Sacrament.

In 1996 a similar development was marked by the Porvoo Declaration in 1996, which extended a compromise view of the Lord's Supper and promoted inter-communion with Reformed in most of the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches, with the exception of Denmark and Latvia.

In 1923 the Lutheran World Convention had been founded chiefly in order to resist the inroads of the Prussian Union. However, after the Second World War, when it was reconstituted as the Lutheran World Federation, it has followed policies that were anti-confessional. In 1977 it adopted the basic principle of the Prussian Union in the form of what it called "reconciled diversity." It is the policy that churches keep their confessions, but drop their condemnations of each other. Contradictory confessions are understood as balancing each other, all within the circle of practised fellowship. It is significant that almost all member-churches of the LWF also foster the ecumenical movement within the WCC and similar national ecumenical councils.

Since 1995 the anti-confessional movement has endeavoured to embrace the Roman Catholic Church. Lutherans had from the beginning regarded justification through faith as the article on which the church stands or falls. However, many Lutherans gladly embraced the LWF-sponsored "*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*", which paid homage to the Roman view that renewal of life (or sanctification) is necessary for justification and salvation. The document conceded that saving faith is not faith alone.

In the United States the largest Lutheran body, the ELCA, has also lost the right to call itself Lutheran. It has established altar fellowship with several Reformed church bodies.

Two of the cardinal teachings of Lutherans have been justification through faith alone and the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. However, the problems go deeper. The spread of church-union without confessional agreement would not have happened without loss of confidence in the full authority of Scripture. One symptom of this is the fact that almost all of the Lutheran churches that have given way on justification and the real presence and have adopted ecumenical or "unionistic" practices have also adopted the unscriptural practice of having women pastors. The LWF fiercely attacks member churches that have refused to ordain women, such as the Latvian Church. The Hong Kong Assembly of the LWF appealed to all member churches "at last to make access to the pastoral office possible for women."

Sadly, when there is church union, the people who follow the principles of the Prussian Union usually win out. The publication of the "Statement of the 44" within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1945 was followed on the Australian scene when the Jindera Pastoral Conference adopted a different interpretation of Romans 16:17. The fact that the ELCA gave ground on this opened the way for the formation of the LCA in 1966.

On the Australian scene, the LCA has made a similar agreement with the Roman Catholics on justification. Its adoption of a new policy of what was euphemistically called "Responsible Communion Practice" in the early 1990s led to a loosening of the earlier practice of closed communion by both the UELCA and the ELCA before 1966. There has been a majority vote favouring women pastors. Such a decision and the pursuit of full membership in the "Lutheran" World Federation have been hindered only by the failure so far to reach a two-thirds majority in convention. Inter-communion with Anglicans in some rural areas under certain circumstances is now established, although officials of the Anglican Church have pointedly refused to affirm the real presence.

Against such dangerous heretical novelties, mere traditionalism is not enough. In such a grave situation, it is not enough for those who call themselves confessional Lutherans to be traditionalists. They must take their subscription to

Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions seriously. They must not think that they know enough to ignore Bible Study. They must actively resist the collapse of right teaching on the unity of the church and the practice of false fellowship. Traditionalism is no safeguard against uncertainty and confusion. It is far too optimistic. Traditionalists happily assume that they know what they do not really know.

In the face of this situation, confessional Lutherans must affirm the words of Scripture, “a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law” (Rm 3:28; *Augsburg Confession* IV). They must affirm and practise their confession that the bread of the Lord’s Supper is “the communion of the body of Christ” (1 Cor 10:16; *Augsburg Confession* X, *Formula of Concord SD* VII, 32-33). They must insist that the inerrant Word of God alone establishes articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel. They must resist the modern ploy of setting up a false antithesis between the authority of all Scripture and the Gospel in Scripture. They must regard the practice of women pastors as direct disobedience to a clear command of the Lord (1 Cor 14:33-37).

Everything is not rosy. The hour calls for sober realism. Confessional Lutherans need to know their Scriptures and their Confessions well. They need to look not just at the past generation of church life, but be aware of the trends in their church as history shows them. They need to recognise that the requirements of love to individuals must also include the affirmation of their confession and the rejection of doctrines and practices that are contrary to the faith. Jesus does not want us to deny either Him or His Word (Mark 8:38).