

Lutheran Identity or Lutheran Charism?

Any weary parent of teen-agers knows that adolescence breeds identity crisis. So much is at stake in these fragile and formative years. Teens struggle to define themselves in terms of or over against their parents, their peers, and their friends. They try on identities like outfits in a shopping mall. A dismayed parent might take scant comfort in the old saw about the weather: "If you don't like it now, wait a few minutes and everything will change." But beneath the surface tension run questions that have puzzled the human species since it mustered the brain cells to think. From the fourth century B.C. the Greek historian Xenophon summarized them well: "And so we sit around the fire, drinking wine, eating chickpeas, and asking the ancient questions: Who are you? Where did you come from? And where are you going, my dear one? How old were you when the fear came?"

With the beginning of the new millennium, the ELCA enters adolescence. Founded in 1988, this church finds itself in its mid-teens pondering the ancient questions. Not surprisingly, the issue of identity comes to the fore, as this church wrestles with sexuality and ministry, with public witness and ecclesial dissension. The charges that resound across the church sound a lot like cries that might be heard in any house full of teen-agers: "I wouldn't be caught dead wearing that!" "That's simply not who I am!" "I'll never speak to you again." At stake is nothing less than the whole matter of Lutheran identity itself.

The Aarhus conference offers light rather than heat in the midst of our intra-mural squabbings. With wisdom and wit, the conference planners framed

discussion at Aarhus not in terms of "Lutheran identity in the 21st Century" but in terms of "Lutheran charisms for the 21st Century," and I want to applaud and explore that shift. As one privy to planning of Aarhus, I can say that the whole matter of identity was discussed - and quickly discarded. The planners consciously chose to speak of "charisms" instead. The language is salutary - "helpful" in the Pauline sense of the term. After all, Lutherans could understand a fierce and unflinching "Here I stand! I cannot do otherwise" posture on matters social or ecclesial, as if moving from that place or shifting that pose would fundamentally alter one's genetic code. Perhaps the words of Luther himself justify an almost involuntary tendency to think of everything in terms of what would enhance or threaten our prized "Lutheran identity." But I regard as exceedingly helpful the challenge to think in terms of "charisms" rather than "identity." Let me elaborate, and now I reference the catechetical Luther rather than the polemical Luther.

Thinking of "charisms" assuages our adolescent angst in two salutary ways. First, a shift to the language of charisms presumes an already fixed identity and focuses on the gifts that stem from it instead. Indeed, as Christians our identity is already set, because we have been marked by Christ and for Christ in baptism. Baptism is that rite that claims us as Christian, sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. That is who - and whose! - we are. Being Christian is our identity of primary reference, and a Christian can qualify that noun with various adjectives. One can be a Catholic Christian, a Lutheran Christian, a gay or lesbian Christian, or an African Christian. But the primary identity is clear: being a Christian.

I often get asked - and the question often comes as a dare or a challenge! - "Are you a feminist?" I reply that I am a "feminist Christian." It's important which is the noun and which is the adjective. My primary identity lies in being a Christian, not a feminist. Those who declare themselves "Christian feminists" imply that their identity of primary reference is being a feminist - not being a Christian. For similar reasons, in these highly charged debates on sexuality or the doctrine of ministry, it's worth worrying where lies the primary identity of some of the most vocal spokespersons on all sides of the debates. Does primary identity lie in being a Lutheran? or in being a Lutheran Christian? Does primary identity lie in being gay or Lesbian? or in being a gay or Lesbian Christian? Nouns and adjectives matter.

To shift the whole matter of being Lutheran from identity to charisms creates space to focus on the primary identity given to all of us in baptism: we are Christians. We can debate about the adjectives we'd draw on to modify that identity, but it is indelibly there. We belong not to this or that group or faction or denomination: "We belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God."

Second, shifting the language from "identity" to "charism" reminds us of the particular gifts we bring to the table - precisely because of our identity as "Lutheran Christians." Let me name some of them: an insistence on grace in the face of all human striving or ability; a high tolerance for ambiguity; a dialectical imagination born of the conviction that humans are creatures both "saved and sinning;" a concrete commitment to Word and Sacrament; a spirituality expressed in song - and people who can sing it. These are our unique gifts as Lutheran Christians. These are the "charisms" we

bring to the table. Of course, they are not the only offerings at the feast. Take seriously the lacunae identified by Niels Gregersen in his provocative "Ten Theses on the Future of Lutheran Theology: Charisms, Contexts, and Challenges" (*dialog* 41:4; Winter 2002). Lutherans cannot claim to have all the answers for what it means to be Christian. But as Lutheran Christians, we do have some unique gifts to bring to the table - and if we don't bring them, they won't be there.

Martha Ellen Stortz
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Copyrighted material. Reproduced for one time educational purposes.

Used by permission of the author.