



A Message from Harare by Black Lutherans

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I. AN INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

We, African and African-American theologians and church leaders of the Lutheran family of churches, have met as a Conference of International Black Lutherans at the University of Zimbabwe, Harare, from September 4-12, 1986, to explore what it means for us to be both Black and Lutheran and to share our experiences of this doubly rich heritage. The participants comprised Lutheran pastors, teachers, students, church officials and bishops from the Lutheran churches in Africa and North America.

The choice of Harare as the venue of this conference was not fortuitous. Zimbabwe has enormous significance for us as a member of the Frontline States which border on South Africa, a country which symbolizes the denial of human rights and dignity to the people of colour, especially of the African ancestry. Therefore, our conference, held in Harare on the heels and in the shadow of the eighth summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which focused on the economic problems between the North and South and between the rich and poor countries, was intended to call the world's attention to South Africa as the embodiment of the plight and oppression of the people of colour as well as of the hope of victory for Blacks in their struggle to break the chains that hold them in bondage on the global level.

The conference brought together thirty-nine African and African-American Lutherans to dialogue with one another and to reflect together on the theme: "The Lutheran Heritage and the Black Experience in Africa and North America." Under this rubric, a number of lectures were read on such topics as: "Justification by Faith and Its Social Implications," "The Two Kingdoms Doctrine and Its Continuing Relevance," "The Theology of the Cross," "The Priesthood of All Believers," "Apartheid and Racism," "Ecumenical Issues," "Relationships to Ideologies and Non-Christian Religions," "Liberation Theologies," "Theological Education and Preparation for Ministry," and "Worship and Theology in the Black Context." These lectures and the daily Bible studies conducted in conjunction with them were intended to stimulate discussion and thereby help us to speak to one another and to share our experiences as Blacks and as Lutherans. In addition, the lectures

were intended to help us achieve the following objectives:

- (a) to dialogue about our African and African-American experience, our identity, our relationships and mission as Blacks and Lutherans;
- (b) to develop our God-given potential for the continued passing on of our historical legacy through research, production, and publication of materials for theological education;
- (c) to posit common solutions and to create new theological insights based on Black experience in order to enrich the Lutheran church in particular and the Church Catholic.

As we wrestled with the theme for the conference and what it means to be both Black and Lutheran, we were struck by a general consensus that the Lutheran heritage and its doctrinal formulations continue to be a resource for us in our present situation. This notwithstanding, we could not help but sense that the manner in which this heritage has been appropriated by Lutherans in different historical contexts leaves much to be desired. In consequence, Lutherans have not been in the forefront of human struggles for sociopolitical and economic liberation. Our awareness of the contradiction between theory and praxis in Lutheranism with its detrimental consequences for Black Lutherans has made us appreciate all the more the significance of our being both Black and Lutheran, a significance for which we would like to give a theological affirmation and interpretation:

- (a) we are irrevocably Black by divine act, and therefore are a gift of God to the Church;
- (b) we are Christians by miraculous divine intervention and the work of the Holy Spirit;
- (c) we are Lutherans under paradoxical circumstances reflecting the sinful human condition and the sin of denominationalism.

This twofold heritage as both Black and Lutheran should be understood as God's special gift to enrich

the Church. It challenges the Lutheran Church to become more open to the excluded experiences and theological insights of its Black constituents, so that the Lutheran portrayal of God's presence in and among humanity might yet be inclusive of all of human experience. It is out of our appreciation of this divine gift of our twofold and rich heritage that we joyfully affirm our commitment to the continuing reformation

of the Church for the purpose of the salvation of humanity in all its spiritual and physical aspects, and the transformation of our world and interpersonal relationships through our understanding and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, the writings of Martin Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and our Black heritage.

II. A BLACK CRITIQUE of the LUTHERAN HERITAGE

As Black Lutherans of Africa and North America, we both affirm and claim as our own the essence of the Lutheran heritage, which we understand to be the faithful confession, in every age, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. We, however, wish to assert unequivocally that for Lutherans and Lutheranism to be faithful in the contemporary confession of Christ as Lord and Saviour, the Christian faith must be understood, interpreted, and lived out in a theologically wholistic, ethnically inclusive, and culturally contextual manner. Therefore, we take issue with any and all expressions of Lutheranism which are less than faithful to its essence, the Gospel. As such, we respectfully and charitably raise several issues with those of our Euro-American Lutheran sisters and brothers in Christ who, in our day, understand, interpret and live out the Christian faith in a theologically dichotomous, ethnically exclusive, and culturally monolithic, if not imperialistic, fashion. In so doing, we declare our commitment to join with them in the common struggle to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Specifically, we take issue with that Euro-American understanding of justification that affirms and maintains a radical dichotomy between God's activity of justification and sanctification. As Black Lutherans, we agree that the confession of Christ has profound significance for humanity in terms of God's love and unconditional acceptance in Christ of the repentant sinner and God's promise of eternal life. Yet we believe that the confession of Christ also extends to an understanding of the transformation (sanctification) of the believer which is rooted in the converting reality of justification. Hence, while acknowledging that Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners (*simul justus et peccator*), we also assert

unequivocally that there is an inextricable link and relationship between who one is, namely, a baptized and adopted child of God, and what one does, namely, living and acting in conformity to the will of God. Given our Black experience, characterized by racial oppression, which currently assumes the forms of apartheid, discrimination and lingering effects of Western colonialism, and cultural imperialism, and our understanding of the Biblical witness, we declare that God is concerned about the whole of life. That means that justification and justice must never be separated, for God's will for humanity is justice. In consequence, those who have God's mercy in Christ are called to seek after, work for, and engage themselves in those activities that will bring about justice for those who are oppressed. For in the final analysis justification has to do with right relationships, namely, reconciliation between God and alienated human beings and between human beings themselves. In this regard, the message of the Epistle of James with its emphasis upon the connection between faith and good works embodies an understanding of discipleship which is indispensable to the faithful confession of Christ.

Second, we take issue with what we consider to be Lutheranism's misinterpretation and misappropriation of the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. From our perspective there is an essential theological truth reflected in this formulation which provides the basis for Christian activism in the world. Yet scholars have persuasively pointed out that Lutheran quietism has been grounded in a dualistic interpretation of the Two Kingdoms doctrine. We know from Black experience that, in the face of racial, colonial, sexist, and class oppression, this tradition of political conservatism and quietism more often than not predominates.

Hence, with exceptions, Lutheranism proclaims the liberating message of the Gospel in a way that dichotomizes reality, proclaiming spiritual liberation while ignoring the implications of that liberating message for those suffering under sociopolitical structures of oppression. Theologically we declare that our God is the God of both heaven and earth whose will extends to the totality of reality. Even as we recognize that some Lutherans have misappropriated the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in a manner that has led to the Lutheran tradition's legacy of quietism, we summon Lutheranism to understand, interpret, and live out the doctrine in accord with the injunctions of Matthew 7:21, Acts 5:29 and James 2:26, so as to faithfully confess Christ.

Third, we take issue with the manner in which some Lutherans have articulated the ministry of the whole people of God (the priesthood of all believers). In the life of the church, this theological insight has often been employed to pay lip service to the calling and the ministry of the whole baptized community. In actual practice however, it has encouraged clericalism, effectively making the Sacrament of Baptism a rite while making the rite of ordination a sacrament. The ministry of the whole people of God is conceived vertically, being grounded in clerical authority and prerogative. Yet both the Biblical witness and our cultural experience confirm the fact that an understanding, interpretation, and embodiment of the ministry of the whole people of God should be horizontally oriented, emphasizing servanthood and communal cooperation in the utilization of God-given gifts for the sake of the Gospel. To confess Christ faithfully with respect to both the whole people of God and the doctrine of justification is to be ethnically inclusive rather than

exclusive, since God's diverse humanity is present among all baptized people of God.

Finally, we take issue with that Euro-American understanding of Lutheranism that imposes upon Black Lutheranism a culturally monolithic expression of the Lutheran tradition rather than a culturally contextual and diverse expression of the tradition. We consider to be culturally monolithic that approach which views ecumenism from the perspective of creedal theology alone. While valuing an exploration of creedal theology, our cultural experience and the Biblical witness require us in our ecumenical contacts with all Christians to raise the issue of ethics, or praxis, in relation to the concern for liberation, wholistically understood. We consider to be culturally monolithic that approach to theological education which exclusively emphasizes the Western theological tradition, a tradition that places strong emphasis on intellectual formulation and reflection. While valuing intellectual reflection, our cultural experience and the Biblical witness require us to insist upon the integration of theological knowledge with professional skills and personal belief in ministerial formation. We consider to be culturally monolithic forms of worship which, while grounded in a particular culture, are claimed to be universal. While valuing all forms of worship through which God is praised, we are persuaded by the spirit of God and Luther's concern for indigenous worship, that the African and Afro-American cultures are gifts of God to us. Accordingly, we declare our intention to embrace both our Lutheran heritage and our respective cultures in worship, to indigenize worship. Thus, as Black Lutherans of Africa and the United States, we intend to commit ourselves to culturally contextualizing the Lutheran heritage we share in common with others.

III. CONTRIBUTIONS and GIFTS of BLACK LUTHERANS

While there is much in the Lutheran heritage and its historical appropriation that deserve to be criticized, there is also much in this heritage which continues to be a resource in our present situation. Not wanting to throw out the baby with the bath water, Black Lutherans have gathered in Harare to initiate a constructive as well as a critical examination of Lutheran theology in the light of Black experience and our understanding of Biblical witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Liberator. This initiative was undertaken in the belief that our unique historical experience which has given rise to a particular appropriation of the Biblical and Lutheran heritage has much to offer the Church which is at present dominated by a Euro-American theological and cultural outlook. This we herewith offer for discussion to the whole international family of the Lutheran Church.

Out of the many theological concepts that were presented and discussed in the course of this conference, a number of themes point to the fundamental and distinctive theological contributions that African and African-American Lutherans may make to the Lutheran theological heritage. The following are some among others.

1. Justification by faith points to the intrinsic relationship that exists between faith and deeds and between who one is as a forgiven sinner and child of God and what one does in relation to one's neighbours in fulfilment of God's will. Put differently, justification by faith points to the effecting of reconciliation and the restoration of broken relationships between God and humans and between humans themselves who, as forgiven sinners and brothers and sisters in Christ, engage in acts of love toward one another, thereby building up God's world/community.

(a) This Black insight enlarges the traditional Lutheran emphasis on faith almost to the point of excluding good deeds. To the average Christian, traditional Lutheranism has been understood to teach a separation between justification and

sanctification, between Christian righteousness before God (*coram Deo*) and social righteousness before our fellows (*coram hominibus*).

(b) To overcome this separation, Black Lutherans are persuaded that Lutheranism would be greatly enriched if it were to embrace the Epistle of James as the epistle of wholistic Christian power rather than "an epistle of straw." For this epistle rightly asserts that faith and good deeds belong together and that faith without works is useless and inauthentic.

2. The Two Kingdoms doctrine points to the need for a better theological portrayal of God's twofold governance of the world which, correctly understood, should promote a healthy Christian activism that leads to the transformation of the world politically, socially, and economically without collapsing into one the world and the future Kingdom of God.

3. The priesthood of all believers points to an understanding of Christian ministry which is inclusive and emphasizes the servanthood of all the people of God who must be horizontally oriented and serve one another in a utilization of their God-given gifts for the sake of the Gospel. In so doing, believers build up Christian community, edify one another, and develop solidarity among themselves. Understood in this way, this doctrine criticizes the present clericalism and hierarchical church structures in their preoccupation with the ordained ministry and proposes alternatives.

4. Ecumenism points beyond the western, Euro-American ethnocentricism of many Lutheran ecumenical ventures, particularly those that point to a recovery of (or return to) "catholic unity" especially on the part of Lutherans and Roman Catholics and Anglicans. Black Lutherans assert that catholic unity is more than consensus on Western creedal theology. We consider such a Euro-American understanding to be but a culturally monolithic expression of the Western Catholic tradition which is pursued at the

expense of an authentic ecumenism which is culturally, ethnically, and contextually diverse in its expression of the Christian faith. We commit ourselves to ecumenism that is more inclusive and culturally contextualized, a Christian unity whose vision is diverse and broad enough to include African and African-Americans and other non-European cultural expressions of Christian faith. Our findings thus present a new vision of ecumenism.

5. Theological education points to a contextualization of the Lutheran curriculum so that we might produce leaders with a clearer proclamation of the Gospel and more relevant ministry among Black Lutherans.

6. Worship points to a contextualization of the liturgy as the work of the people. This must be done with and inseparable from the brothers and sisters around the world who struggle for liberation in a variety of ways.

We have initiated at this Conference answers to the critical question of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Who do you [Black Lutherans] say that I am?" We have begun the task of answering this question by rescuing theology from the hands of Euro-American Lutherans, from the shelves of the seminaries and universities and from arrogant absolutism, thereby allowing the Holy Spirit to direct our path toward wholeness.

Faith in Christ active in love and justice is the cure, the healing balm from Gilead.

IV. PROJECTIONS of OUR FUTURE WORK

Our deliberations here in Harare have driven home the point that, as Black Lutherans, we already are bound together by such physical and spiritual ties that we are now impelled to and do hereby propose the organization of a body which shall be known as the Conference of International Black Lutherans (CIBL) whose function shall be:

1. to bridge the gap which presently exists between Black Lutherans in diaspora in the Americas and the Carribean and their counterparts in the Mother Africa.

2. to involve Black Lutherans in Lutheran theological discussions and dialogues at both domestic and international levels in order to contribute, out of their African and Lutheran heritages, toward a broader, more inclusive present and future Lutheranism.

3. to work, through the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, toward the spiritual and physical liberation of all human beings, thereby to help heal broken relationships between males and females and young and old. To this end a communication network is to be established to facilitate sharing, support, and growth of people in all age groups, sexes and races.

4. to develop and bring into use contextualized theological education for effective ministerial formation and the uplift of the whole people of God. Materials are to be developed and produced for inclusion in the curricula of theological education centres. Emphasis will be placed on liberation theologies.

5. to bring about appreciation of our Black contributions to Lutheranism and to other Christian churches all over the world.

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