

STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATION IN GHANA

For the Sake of the Gospel

Last year I wrote to you about teaching Confessional Lutheranism in a culture that is dominated by a charismatic Christianity and its old African tribal spiritism. Perhaps some of you wondered what I meant by that. Upon returning a third time I think it is important to detail a few of the challenges of this “African Christianity.” Because the African tribal religions often involved controlling the “evil spirits” through a religious leader in the tribe, Christian pastors are often perceived as simply a different type of spirit controller. Problems in your lives are always blamed on the devil and evil spirits. Thus, a pastor is sought to drive away the evil spirit or determine through whom the evil is coming. Thus, in a culture where many have little food, health issues, and very little income, they will willingly obey a pastor who summons them to engage in 21 days of fasting and prayer with the objective of receiving a miracle. They will skip work, not feed their families, and even give away all their money to have the pastor rid them of the evil in their life and reward them with a miracle. For some, the pastor is even credited with doing a miracle if he helps them get a visa to the United States or Great Britain.

Of course, this is pure theology of glory where the works of man earn him rewards in this life and God’s love is sought in earthly benefits. This theology is also very popular in this country and has infiltrated many Lutheran churches. It has been popularized in Contemporary Christian Music (the same songs that dominate this African Christianity), the Christian bookstores that spring up everywhere, and in a “one size fits all” Christianity that minimizes the Scriptural teaching (doctrine) while claiming to be faithful to God’s Word. While the people of

Ghana are leery of being dominated by American political influence, they have swallowed whole the American “pop Christianity” and tweaked it with African influences. This is far more dangerous than anything else Americans could do to them.

How is the Lutheran pastor to respond to all this? The easy way would be for these men in Ghana to leave the seminary and simply adopt the ways of their miracle selling counterparts because it is highly successful. After all it would sell well and keep them from having some of the financial and physical hardship they will face as Lutheran pastors. But Lutherans take seriously the theology of the cross, that is, “God

accomplishes His greatest good in the midst of suffering and when human reason is contradicted.” This is a teaching that can only be held through faith centering upon the death of Christ for sinful men. Through the great suffering of Christ the good of our salvation was fully accomplished. Now He calls us to take up the cross and follow Him through suffering in this world to eternal glory. Luther

writes, “When God makes alive He does it by killing, when He justifies He does it by making men guilty, and when He exalts to heaven He does it by bringing down to hell.” (*Luther’s Works*, AE, 33:62) Only through sharing in the sufferings of Christ will we also share in His resurrection and ascension. Thus, these pastors ultimately need to see Christ in the Scriptures so that their faith will be centered upon the Christ who died for the sins of all and was raised for our justification.

The challenge for me as their professor is to help them see the Scriptures as more than just a surface document that may lead us to rules for living or examples of how to be better in our daily interactions with others.



Jesus is not the new Moses, but rather the One through whom comes the grace and truth of God the Father who loves all men. I assigned each student a text to present as a fifteen minute sermon. After each sermon I subjected them to up to an hour of questioning by the students and me to see if they knew the text well and critique the message. This was an opportunity to talk about the proper use of Law and Gospel, connections to the liturgy, the need to speak of the Sacraments in the sermon, and the way they might include teaching the Catechism in the exposition of the text. Because most Africans do very little reading, they often have trouble thinking of the text in anything but a surface fashion. This exercise exposed that weakness and as the class went on students began to take the assignment more seriously and improve their sermons.

I supplemented that with daily group textual discussions on readings from Series C, texts that they will be preaching on this fall when they are on vicarage. Each group was expected to come up with ten questions regarding the text and the word usages, research them with the concordances, cross references, and commentaries. A minimum of an hour was spent on each text. I had to reject many of their initial questions as being too shallow and not seeking Christ. Then the entire class was challenged to improve the questions. The first few days were slow, but a number of them began to understand that this “different way” of seeing the text led them to center more upon the preaching of Christ in the text. To see that they made progress on this, I spent an extra hour several days making sure they did the homework by staying around, offering assistance, and not letting them leave the classroom. I came in earlier this year in an attempt to push them a little harder. There must be no false assumption that all of this will reap great rewards. It is such a different way than the preaching of rules because Lutherans are of a

different Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with His gifts and sanctifies and keeps us in the true faith. It is this Spirit who will strengthen them through the hearing of the Gospel and teach them to see Christ in all the Scriptures. This is not the “spirit” of the charismatics or American popular religion, but the Spirit who calls us by name in Baptism, teaches us to confess our sins, comes through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the crucified, nourishes us in the Christ-centered Divine Service, teaches us the songs of heaven in good hymns, and feeds us on the Bread of Heaven at the altar.

In addition I spent time each day dealing with questions on the liturgy, the importance of the church year, and teaching the Catechism. I realized this year that Africans often think the liturgy and the Church year are American (as Americans sometimes mistakenly think they are German) so I emphasized again that they are shaped by the whole Church throughout all the earth and thoroughly centered in the proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord. Without the structure of the Divine Service keeping the pastor and congregation centered upon Christ, men wander aimlessly and always move toward preaching Law.

As always I have more Africa stories of traffic, government corruption, and little discoveries I make along the way. This trip is not a vacation though. There is much work to be done in teaching the pastors of Ghana the truth of the Gospel and helping them learning to preach Christ crucified. I thank you for supporting this work and I bring you the thanks of the President of the church body for sending me there.

Pastor Fabrizious