

The Early Lutheran Tradition 135

A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.⁴¹

Whether this attitude toward infallibility language can be maintained in later Lutheranism or whether it provides a sufficient basis for establishing the preaching and teaching office of the Church is a subject for subsequent papers.

Appendix

The puzzling question about the status of propositional truth *vis á vis* infallibility in Luther's thought raised in the current discussion would have to be handled, it seems to me, in the light of the development of Luther's hermeneutics and the distinction between law and gospel and between the "Word of God" and "human teachings" (*Gotteswort* and *Menschenlehre*). It is well known that Luther insisted, in the argument against Erasmus, on the place of assertions in the Christian faith ("Take away assertions and you take away Christianity"),⁴² and that "doctrine must be straight as a plumb line, sure and without sin."⁴³ How can this be maintained in the face of denials of infallibility and perhaps seeming unconcern about the status of propositional truth? Luther's disparate assertions here can be held together, it seems to me, only if one takes into account his fundamental distinction between law and gospel as it develops out of his hermeneutics (see the several studies by Gerhard Ebeling in this regard). Perhaps it can be stated briefly as follows: The Word of God impinges on us as law and as gospel. This means first that it takes up residence in human discourse in the form of propositions, i.e. as literal word, in the form of law, subject to the canons of human discourse. But the ultimate purpose of the letter or law is not to call attention to itself, but to point to another who is its end and *telos*. That is to say that the important question (*a la* Ebeling) is not merely what the words signify, perhaps infallibly, but what they do and how they do it. The important question for Luther, is how the words are used. Indeed, one must say that the purpose of the letter, the law, is to "destroy all confidence in the flesh," all attempts to base faith on human forms of

legitimation. The law kills the "old Adam" according to the flesh so that the new person may be raised in the Spirit. The gospel heard through the power of the Spirit is precisely that word of liberation from God which frees from the tyranny of the law, i.e. from dependence on "the flesh" and its forms of legitimation (which bind us to the tyranny of the law). The gospel is therefore the true and ultimate Word of God which authorizes itself and stands above all human forms of legitimation.

The Church is the body of believers that has been called into being *by the gospel*. Its primal doctrinal *datum* is thus precisely the difference between law and gospel. The Church knows this difference and has as its primary doctrinal responsibility the custodianship of this difference. Indeed, this is the canon by which purity and rectitude in doctrine is to be measured. Whatever position the Church may take on the truth or infallibility of propositions, it would be guilty of confusing law and gospel were it to invoke such truthfulness or infallibility as legitimation for its claims. At the same time, however, the Church as the custodian of both law and gospel is concerned about the letter, the law, through which the gospel comes and the Spirit does his work. That is to say that the Church is concerned about propositional truth, about assertions, and about the "external clarity" of the Scriptures. The Word of God has taken residence in such propositions and the Church is concerned to preserve, guard, and protect them.

Since, however, revelation occurs *sub contrario*, under the form of opposites (through the letter which kills that the Spirit may give life), the movement from propositional truth to faith is not a direct one. Faith occurs in the freedom of the Spirit through the hearing of the gospel when the law has done its work. Therefore it seems to me questionable whether one can simply link infallibility *in docendo* with infallibility *in credendo* and infer forwards or backwards from one to the other. Faith is called forth by the gospel and has its own form of legitimation apart from the rectitude of the teachings. The "assertions" which *faith* makes (in which it delights, and without which the Church would cease to exist) are, for Luther, *confessions*, assertions "of conscience" placed on believers' lips by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the ultimate subject of those assertions is the Holy

Spirit. Thus the section in the debate with Erasmus where such assertions are at issue closes with the famous words: "The Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and it is not doubts or mere opinions that he has written on our hearts, but assertions more sure and certain than life itself and all experience." 44

The manner in which the assent of faith is worked, therefore, is not through the insistence on the infallibility of propositions as such but through the proper use of the words in the preaching of the Word. Thus Luther says that one need not pray for forgiveness if one has *preached* correctly and truly about God.⁴⁵ The doctrine, indeed, must be "straight" and "pure." Doctrine for Luther, however, is primarily a summary of the Church's preaching. The concern of Luther and even later Lutheranism was for "pure" doctrine rather than "infallible" doctrine. *Purity*, it would seem, indicates a concern somewhat different from *infallibility*. Doctrine should not be "mixed with" or "contaminated by" the opinions of human beings, and, perhaps one can also say, their systems of legitimation. And the critical measure for this is the proper distinction between law and gospel so that the affirmations of faith are made in the freedom of, and bondage to, the Spirit.