

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]

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LUTHERAN DISTINCTIVENESS

- A) Almost a year ago I was honoured by Lutheran Campus Ministry at Syracuse University as Distinguished Disciple. It's an honour that LCM / SU has given out yearly at a banquet on the Sunday evening of the weekend of Reformation Sunday. Last year it was simply my turn, apparently!
- B) I had spent almost twenty years as Lutheran Campus Pastor at SU, so over the years since I have become something of an *eminence gris* there. I did enjoy myself in that position! You can't imagine how exciting it was to be on a campus during those years, 1960 - 1979!
- C) Martin Luther King. The Civil Rights Movement. The Women's Movement. The Peace Movement. Gay Liberation. The Ecology Movement! And in religion, the Second Vatican Council, which promised to turn Roman Catholicism inside out! Those were altogether heady days. We shall not see their likes again soon!
- D) In my Remarks at that Banquet, I determined to do a little Christian Apologetics. You have probably been aware, faithful reader, of my recent interest in apologetics – giving “an account of the hope that is in [us]”
(1 Peter 3:15.)
- E) My experience lately has been that political correctness has paralyzed the missionary mandate within the Christian movement. We have become so terrified of offending Muslim, or Buddhist, or Indigenous sensibilities that we have altogether forsaken any desire to “make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19.)
- F) So I took it upon myself to ask, in my Remarks that night, what have we got that's good? As Christians? As Lutheran Christians? Is there anything here that's distinctively Lutheran? That's worth preserving? Worth promoting?
- G) In any apologetic endeavor I'd want to protect my flanks, so to speak, by an appeal to three Important Principles.

H) The FIRST Important Principle for Apologetics I take from a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” The point: Actions speak louder than words. The witness of my life will always be more persuasive than any preaching of my doctrines or dogmas.

I) The SECOND Important Apologetic Principle I take from Gregory Baum, our era’s premier Canadian Roman Catholic apologeticist. He says Christians have no business trying to convert anyone happy in their own religion. ‘Nuff said.

J) The THIRD and final Apologetic Principle I call the Paul Bosch Principle, although I am certain others have held it as well. Every person, every religion, every culture has something to teach me. But by golly, I have something to teach them as well!

K) With all the above as prologue and as qualification, I reproduce below my Remarks on receiving that award last year. I hope you won’t be offended if I do not attempt to take out the personal comments.

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REMARKS on receiving the LCM / SU “Distinguished Disciple” honour

Paul Bosch / October 27, 2019

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1 First, thanks so much for this honour. I am truly overwhelmed. It is a lovely and unexpected act of grace. I am further honoured to be surrounded by old friends – and family. Thanks so much for attending and for your good wishes. You all have greatly brightened my old age!

2 I specially want to introduce my daughters, Anna Bosch of Lexington, Kentucky, and Sarah Holbrooke of Telluride, Colorado. They still think of Syracuse – and of Lutheran Campus Ministry, Syracuse – as home! I want to thank them publicly for their presence here tonight.

3 Second, a theological reflection. (Third will be some personal reflections. They tell me I have 15 minutes...) I feel I owe it to you all to extend and to clarify my remarks in the print piece that introduced this event. I quoted the great Reformer John Calvin in those remarks. He is supposed to have said, “The human mind is an idol factory” – that’s I-D-O-L. “The human mind is a factory that produces idols.”

4 I will endorse that view. And I’ll argue on the basis of it that there are no atheists. If you’re not worshiping the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, that is, you’re not god-less. You’re simply worshiping some other god. Huston Smith, late of SU’s own religion department, used to say that the universal human religious impulse is simply loyalty to life’s Intangibles.

5 Now when I argue that, I’m stretching the notion of religion in human life, I’ll admit There are a million other gods you can worship. Sex, sports, science, celebrity, self, are just a few. And your spiritual life, if you want to use the term – the inner you – takes distinctive shape when you do.

6 You can find all this in various places on my website, the worship website of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, If you go to www.worship.ca. you'll find most of what I'm saying here.

7 I've used the shorthand of The Four Cs in speaking of how this all takes shape. The Four Cs: They're Creed, your beliefs or value system. Code, that's your code of conduct, your ethics, your acting out of your value system. Cult, that's your liturgies and ceremonies that ritualize your beliefs. And even Constitution, how you give political shape to all the above.

8 Now, among all these alternative religions – and I haven't even mentioned three currently popular religions, like Islam and Buddhism and various Indigenous Spiritualities, each with their own distinctive Four Cs – I'll argue that the Christian Tradition, the Lutheran Christian Tradition – gives a pretty good account of itself, with its own distinctive characteristic Four Cs.

9 FIRST, the Lutheran Christian Tradition is eminently compassionate and humane. It does not require of me or of my co-religionists – male or female – that we dress in distinctive clothing. That we eat only specific foods in our daily diets. That we assume distinct or demeaning postures or positions in our weekly worship.

10 The Lutheran Christian Tradition has honoured the pre-Reformation history of the Jesus Movement. It's not a new religion; it's ancient Christian faith, classic catholicism, cleaned up. It has given people of colour, and women, positions of leadership in the church, including ordination. It is committed to blessing same-sex marriage, and ordaining gays. The principles behind these positions are simple justice, and the conviction that the Holy Spirit is doing a genuinely new thing in our day, opening our embrace to the widest possible human community But see Gamaliel's advice in *Acts 5:38-39*.

11 SECOND, the Lutheran Christian Tradition, with its Four Cs, is notably rational. It honours scholarship, including Biblical scholarship. It does not fear poetry and myth and metaphor. Its intellectual history is rich with some splendid names, from Luther himself – in spite of all his pathologies – to Tillich and Bonhoeffer today. Only the intellectual and theological traditions of Roman Catholicism and John Calvin – with all their pathologies – come anywhere near to touching the Lutheran Christian Intellectual Tradition, for breadth and depth. Its clergy have been among the best educated in the world.

12 The language of current North American Lutheran liturgy – and hymnody! – is a noble and contemporary vernacular. It is inclusive and non-patriarchal without being cutsey or infantilizing.

13 THIRD, the Lutheran Christian Tradition honours the molecules. It is steadfastly incarnational and sacramental and kataphatic. (Great word: Look it up.) Far from rejecting or fleeing from this world and its physicality and materiality – its molecules! – this Tradition celebrates, honours, and embraces that palpability, to the level of your human body. And it stretches to the Body Politic. And even to the body of nature and to the cosmos, from the stones to the stars. That is an important ecological witness sorely needed today, even more than other days.

14 Now: Why am I telling you all this? This has been a kind of apologetic exercise on my part. I'm trying to make our mutual faith credible. Attractive, even!

15 So: FIRST, I want to assure you that you don't have to apologize for being religious. Everybody is. Atheists and agnostics to the contrary notwithstanding. Every human being who ever lived has those Four Cs. I've told you about mine. You tell me about yours.

16 SECOND: You don't have to apologize for being a Christian. Those Christian Four Cs stand up pretty well against other alternatives. You don't have to go knocking on doors to spread the Word. But when it's appropriate, you can "give an account of the hope that is in you." (*1 Peter:3:15*)

17 THIRD: You don't have to apologize for being a Lutheran. Same reasons.

18 But remember: "Christendom" is dead, that seventeen-hundred-year period when the Church held unseemly world-wide power, prestige, and privilege. I won't shed a tear that it's gone.

19 We're living today in the "Good Friday" of the Church. When I started out, now 65 years ago, it was "Palm Sunday". "Hosannah"! Lots of money. Lots of people. A new church building in every suburban subdivision. It's not like that today.

20 But we still have something great going here. Don't lose heart!

21 OK. Now a couple of personal reflections. First, Lutheran Campus Ministry changed me personally. I was greatly affected by co-workers at the national level, and at the local level. Hey, I found my wife Kathy in Campus Ministry. She had been working as a counselor on a campus in Minnesota a full year before I came to Syracuse. We met at an annual Staff Conference, and courted at a subsequent Student Conference.

22 And those annual Staff Conferences and Student Conferences had a larger effect on me than even my Seminary training five years earlier. At an early Student Conference, I learned to respect the term "religion" – my Seminary training had taught me to be suspicious of that word.

23 But it also taught me that religion – with my four Cs – is often at the point of murdering faith. Each of those four Cs – Creed, Code, Cult, and Constitution – can become counter-productive, a threat to the spontaneous overflowing of the heart that represents true spirituality. So I'm not blind to the power of religion – for good and for ill.

24 I also met some truly amazing co-workers, at the national level and at the local level. They became quite frankly my mentors. Henry Horn, Art Seyda, Gil Doan, Kurt Reichert, Harvey Bates, Charlie Noble. Even SU's rabbi and Roman Catholic chaplain. They were people of such winsome energy and such burning intelligence they made a lasting impression on me.

25 And students themselves. Some of you from those long-ago days are here tonight. I won't try to name you – I'm afraid I'll miss someone. But students themselves have changed me, even as I believe I have changed them. I still get an email from some student I had long ago forgotten, who claims I have made a big difference in their lives. Lutheran Campus Ministry has made a big difference in their lives. Made them who they are today.

26 So again I say – in spite of the church's current "Good Friday" – don't lose hope. We have a faith that's humane, rational, focused on the molecules, and altogether grown-up. Let's keep Lutheran Campus Ministry alive and vital and influential in the lives of many more generations of young people! We have a good thing going here.

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