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Address to Lutheran Assembly

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“A Baptist Blessing to My Lutheran Cousins”

I’m here to bring a Baptist blessing to you, my Lutheran cousins. I mean that in a familial sense, both personally and ecclesiastically. On the formal side, although Baptists are technically Separatists, not Protestants, we are certainly related—sisters and brothers in Christ, cousins in faith tradition. I will tell you more in a minute about the informal side, but for now you should know that most of my blood cousins are Lutherans and my uncle is a retired Lutheran pastor. So, I’ve got that going for me.

At this point, though, I should pause to congratulate you on 500 years of life together as Lutherans. Of course, like every denomination today, the word *together* is a dubious descriptor.

We Baptists know very little about togetherness. We specialize in splitting. Forgive me now, but in fairness, you started it. Once Lutherans got the idea they didn’t need to stay in the Roman Church to reserve their ticket to heaven, all hell broke loose. We’ve all been splitting and splintering ever since. Of course, we all know it was the Catholic Church that pushed you out, so let’s blame them. I blame Southern Baptists for pushing my kind of Baptists out. And lately, Texas Baptists have done the same to my church. And on and on it goes.

Happily, it seems, you have lately got it into you that the unity of the Church is a good goal. For most of the last half millennium, we have all left that to God work out, figuring if we were all *one* in Christ spiritually, being *many* in Christ denominationally doesn’t matter. But now you are getting down to business rejecting the Platonism of that approach and working on getting soul and body together—what with clergy sharing with Episcopalians and others, agreements on justification by faith with Rome. My goodness. Now if you can just get the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods on board ...

This unity movement frankly creates a bit of a problem for us Baptists. We have always tracked your movements and trailed along behind you, trying to perfect them. We were just getting used to being great splitters and now we have to learn reconciliation. Be patient with us. It might take us 100 years, but we'll get there.

As I mentioned, I know a little about you from personal experience. I was baptized as an infant in a Norwegian Lutheran Church in Staten Island, NY. My mother was a Lutheran pietist. Eventually her church became ALC, then ELCA. My parents put me in a Missouri Synod school, K-8. I learned my creeds there, and my German hymns. My parents emigrated over to the Evangelical Free Church, where a lot of "squareheads" went for a little more evangelism and emotionalism. I was rebaptized at age 13 by immersion and learned my gospel songs in that church.

These two traditions occasionally confused me as a child, and it seems I haven't been able to get clear on them as an adult either. I'm now a Baptist pastor who follows the lectionary, observes the church year, thinks creeds are useful guides to faith, and doesn't require Lutherans to be rebaptized to join our church. You see my problem, what you've done to me?

I remember when I was in about the 4th or 5th grade and our religion teacher put a formula on the chalkboard that read: GRACE + ____ = SALVATION. Well, I was part of the believer's church tradition, don't you know? So, I knew the answer to that one. I raised my hand and offered to fill in the blank. FAITH, I said. GRACE + FAITH = SALVATION. But the good Lutheran teacher told me it wasn't a fill-in-the-blank question. It was a statement. The blank was blank for a reason. Blank meant NOTHING. *By grace we are saved.* Period. And even if Paul adds the phrase *through faith*, he quickly makes sure we don't think it's a work, *lest anyone should boast.*

Baptists, like the Free Church I was raised in, work hard to get people to make their own decisions of faith. *I have decided to follow Jesus.* That's not a bad thing as far as it goes, but it goes too far if we end up turning salvation into something we do, instead of something God has done for us in Christ.

And that takes us back to Uncle Martin. Among his great gifts to the church was his bombastic reminder that everything begins and ends with God. The church is to remind the world of that, rather than make it all about us. Luther couldn't find peace until he located it in the faithfulness of Christ rather than in his own faith. *The just shall live by faith* means the faith of Christ, not our faith. If it does mean our faith in some sense, it only means Christ's faith being lived in us and through us so that all the glory redounds to God.

This persistent emphasis in Lutheran teaching has kept grace a gift, not an offer. Baptists are part of the chooser tradition; or in the parlance George W. Bush, we are deciders. The good side of that is we practice a responsible faith. And that is good if by *responsible* we mean we are responding to God's initiative; we are not taking matters into our own hands. We choose only because we are chosen. We decide only because we have been decided for. Or as Tillich put it, faith is accepting our acceptance.

Getting the Church out of the way of salvation and making it the Church on the salvation way was another of Luther's great blessings to Baptists that we bless you for.

Two of my friends were visiting St. Peter's in Rome some years ago. They were standing near the back of the church, gazing at the size and opulence of the building. One of them said to other: *Wonder what this cost the Catholic Church?* Quick as a flash, the other replied: *Only the Protestant Reformation.*

For all our gratitude for the patronage of the Roman Church that gave us works by Michelangelo and others, Luther reminded us of what Irenaeus had said long ago: *The glory of God is a human being fully alive.* It's no accident that the Reformation follows the Renaissance. You don't get the democratizing of the church without the humanizing of God. Luther did theologically what the Renaissance artists did aesthetically: he depicted the human Jesus as the crucified God.

Luther saw that in Jesus the hidden God had come into view, cutting away the undue mystery of an angry God behind a merciful Savior. There can be no theology of glory that is not a theology of the cross. If you want to know who God is, look there at the man on the cross. Look to the God-man hanging on the tree. The wrath of God would never again be an attribute of God on its own. It can now only be understood as an aspect of the love of God.

And then there's the focus on the Word. This is a never-ending train of thought, but we Baptists have much to thank you for here, too. We are Bible people. We're all about the Word of God. *Here we stand.* Oh, sorry, that was Luther too. *My conscience is captive to the Word of God.* We Baptists know *it is neither right nor safe to go against conscience.* Oops, there I go again.

Luther's relocation of authority from the Church to the Word is a crucial move we picked up on. And his bestselling German translation of the Bible set in motion a movement to the vernacular I sometimes wish would stop. Anyone else? All these newfangled translations! Give me the good old New Revised Standard Version.

But Luther meant something deeper by the Word of God than we Baptists seem to see. He saw it as the living and lively presence of Christ himself who is the Word of God. And he addresses us in the word of preaching. Theologians as different as Bultmann and Barth agree on that.

This is something we Baptists need to recover from you Lutherans—well, from you ELCA Lutherans anyway. We have so identified the Bible with the Word of God that the God of the Word has trouble getting our attention. This is the human work of idol-making to which we are all susceptible. We want a god in the hand, as Frederick Buechner puts it, rather than the One in the burning bush. Which leads us to worship the Bible rather than the God of the Bible. We replace the magisterium of the Church with the magisterium of the Book. When I think of Luther, I am always brought back to the living Word of God.

Well, to conclude, we've spent a lot of the last 500 years cursing one another in the dysfunctional family of God to prove that we are right and our Christian kin are wrong. I hope we can spend the next 500 years blessing one another to prove our love in this big, messy family of God. Inviting our ecclesial cousins to family reunions like this is a step in the right direction. Thank you for having me. I bless you, my dear brothers and sisters.