Salvationist theology today in the light of Luther’s teaching
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It is a pleasure to share with you some thoughts concerning Salvationist theology in the light of Luther’s teaching. With this theme there is focus on the more theoretical issues, but looking around I see some of the Lutheran Salvationists from Northern Europe, where the influence is more profound than just in theoretical theology. The influence is in the lived life in a Lutheran country, where the mode of accommodation the Army chose at its beginning in these countries still can be seen. It concerned the Army’s choices both practical and doctrinal, as well as in the personal choices as for instance double membership or double allegiance. General John Larsson describes the situation as dual nationality with two passports in the foreword to my book Lutheran Salvationists?: “The Lutheran passport was not only for decoration.” This can be part of the discussion or dialogue, after my lecture.

For the theoretical part I have chosen 6 areas from Luther’s teaching which I consider to have had a continuing and pervading influence on the Army as well as on other churches of the reformation. An influence which is still there - at least as a challenge.

1) The turning towards the world from the Christian church, that religion should walk out into the world, being in the world, not being of the world. It was not the monastery or convent, but everyday life that became part of the story of salvation. Medieval Christianity separated the temporal and the everyday from the spiritual and everlasting. Because the spiritual realm was deemed superior to the temporal, those in holy orders were assumed to be superior to ordinary people, and therefore their vocation – their calling from God – was deemed to be a superior calling. Luther reacted to this kind of teaching as false. He wanted to restore the church to a genuine biblical understanding of Christian life. The spiritual and the temporal belonged together, as there was sanctity to all creation – God had seen all of his creation as good and worthy.

2) Luther rediscovered a personal faith where the individual would meet a personal God, whose grace was at hand for all without any clerical intermediary. The grace of God brought freedom and salvation through faith. This also liberated the individual to follow his own conscience. Only the grace of God could save sinful man. God became a reality, not only in the soul of man, but in everyday life. Luther introduced the ‘priesthood of all believers’ which points to the common dignity, calling and privilege of all Christians before God. “By virtue of his priesthood, the Christian exercises power with God, for God does what he asks and desires”.

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3) Luther began addressing the notion of vocation by reminding his hearers and readers that all Christians are called first to God and then to daily means of living out one’s faith in the world in response to God’s love and in service to God. All vocations are equally worthy, and all vocations can serve God. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* from 1520 he stated that, “the works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous that may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic labourer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but ... all works are measured before God by faith alone... Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith”. It was the question of faith that was important. The individual can secularise the work when it is done in disregard for God and his creation.

4) The importance of the word of the Bible which Luther rediscovered or focused on turned the attention to the need for ordinary people to be able to read or listen to the Bible in their own language. The sources of Scripture became the kernel for the church and for the faith of the individual. Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone. By placing Christ at the center of the Bible and showing that the God given revelation in Scripture was centered around him gave a sort of measure line for interpretation of Scripture. The central revelation was the death of Jesus on the cross as an atonement for our sins. A very important attitude from Luther was that he defended what was not opposed to Scripture in contrast to other protestants that only accepted what was commanded by Scripture. The claim from Confessio Augustana (the Augsburg Confession that gathered the central issues and truths of the Lutheran Reformation) that uniformity was not necessary in anything except the fundamental doctrines of Scripture – the experience of the forgiveness of sins by faith in Christ - left all other matters to the freedom of the congregation.

5) Luther reminded us of the need for the church’s and the individual’s constant renewal of faith by seeking towards the sources of Christianity. ‘Ecclesia semper reformada est’ – the church must always be reformed/renewed

6) Music – this issue is a central part of Luther’s teaching. He reformed the liturgy where he accorded full importance to the sermon and to community singing. He saw this as an assertion of faith and a spiritual commentary on biblical texts. He translated old hymns into German, as he stressed the importance of understanding the songs being song. He wrote new hymns, 36 in all, based on Psalms or as spiritual commentaries. He wanted hymns in everyday words. He often adapted folk melodies to the hymns as well writing new melodies. Here are two quotes from Luther: “Music is a gift from God and next to theology” and “Christ enters the depth of the singing heart with incomparable power and rises out of it again”.

*The influence of these 6 issues on The Salvation Army’s teaching and theology*

1) The turning towards the world has been at the heart of Salvationism from its early beginnings to this day. Discipleship is meant to be lived out in the everyday life among ordinary people. William Booth with his roots in Methodism even turned closer to the everyday life than Luther by taking the gospel to the streets and market places through preaching and worshipping in the open air, in the midst of daily life and its hustle and bustle. For the Army special sacred buildings were not required either, as theatres, music halls and other ordinary buildings could become holy buildings, because of God’s presence there when people were saved and sanctified. There was no need for sacred items for religious rituals as for instance a special altar. Any item could become a holy center piece for a personal meeting with God. Kneeling at a drum or a simple bench in the street...
or in any hall could turn into the holiest of holy, because salvation through Jesus Christi was experienced personally. Even with a long history behind us and therefore with halls for worship this is still true and comes to life in different outreach situations.

In Salvationism the division between sacred and temporal was not only ignored in material matters, but also in spiritual things. In the understanding of salvation the distinction between the temporal and the spiritual was pushed aside as William Booth in his later years saw salvation as social as well as personal. Salvation was not alone a spiritual experience it was an experience for the whole being. There was a gospel of redemption from personal sin and a gospel of redemption from social evils. In an article “Salvation for both Worlds” in All the world January 1889 William Booth wrote:

“But with this discovery there also came another, which has been growing and growing in clearness and intensity from that hour to this; which was that I had two gospels of deliverance to preach – one for each world, or rather, one gospel which applied alike to both. I saw that when the Bible said, “He that believeth shall be saved,” it meant not only saved from the miseries of the future world, but from the miseries of this also. That it came with the promise of salvation here and now; from hell and sin and vice and crime and idleness and extravagance, and consequently very largely from poverty and disease, and the majority of kindred foes.” Today this is called integrated mission.

This has led to considering diaconia as constitutional for being a Salvation Army church. The overall sign in this constitution is mission in the world and together with diaconia, martyrria (sharing the gospel in testimony and preaching) and koinonia (fellowship) it makes up the Army’s idea of what a true church is.

2) The focus on a personal faith is central to Salvation Army teaching. Each individual has to decide for themselves whether they will receive God’s gift of salvation through repentance and faith. The decision is a personal one and so is the assurance of salvation “he that believeth hath the witness in himself” (doctrine 8). It is even for the ‘whosoever’ (doctrine 6), as nobody is excluded and nobody is predestined for this. The liberation of such a personal experience is meant to be shared in everyday life, where salvationists can be preachers, ministers and deacons at their work and among their neighbours. Everyone belong to the priesthood of all believers. Their salvation is the ordination to this task (Luther said that baptism was the ordination for this).

In SA history there are many examples of the trust in being liberated to follow one’s own conscience – William’s and Catherine’s wandering towards starting and consolidating The Salvation Army is an example of this.

3) The notion of vocation is linked to the priesthood of all believers, but especially sets the vocation of everyday life and work at the center. Countless testimonies in Salvation Army meetings have through the years told amazing stories of how the daily vocation has served God and even at times opened the door to people’s hearts and minds for the message of salvation. It has also focused on how responsibility towards God for exercising one’s vocation has led to deepen loyalty to the task and to raise the quality of it.

We as Salvationists need to be reminded of the fact that all vocations are equally worthy and can equally serve God. Today it is seldom to hear the language of calling apart from the calling to officership both in testimonies and preaching. The danger of elevating the calling to officership about the everyday calling has been a continuing temptation within the Army, and we constantly
need to be reminded of the equality of vocations. A similar tendency has also marked most other churches. 1. Peter 4:10-11 reminds us of this: “Each one should use whatever gifts he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.” All our vocations are genuine callings from God and we follow those vocations in obedience to God himself and to the glory of God.

4) Salvation Army doctrines start with a statement on Scripture: We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by divine inspiration of God and that they only constitute the Divine rule of Christian faith and practice. In this Salvationists confirm the centrality of Scripture.

Christ as the center of the Bible and the measure line for interpretation of Scripture have stayed in Army teaching. Salvation Story express this truth in this way: “There is one theme, the saving grace of God, and one story, God’s dealing with his people, culminating in the saving work of God in Christ. There are two testaments and one revelation. Thus these writings stand alone as unique witness and possess unique authority deriving from their content, theme and divine origin.” (p.3) The attitude which Luther had, that he defended what was not opposed to Scripture, has been shared by the Army’s founders in their decisions concerning the Army’s faith and practice. In different questions they listened to the voice of the Spirit and with their grounding in Scripture they made decisions, that to other protestants that only accepted what was commanded by Scripture, were questionable. One example could be the role of women officers another the non-observance of the sacraments.

For Luther it was imperative that the Bible should be translated to people’s own language. This was developed further by the founders, the Bible message should be taught and preached in a way that ordinary people could understand. William Booth envisioned another translation of the Bible as he stated: “I want to see a new translation of the Bible into the hearts and conduct of living men and women. I want an improved translation – or transference it might be called – of the commandments and promises and teachings and influences of the Book to minds and feelings and word and activities of the men and women who hold onto it and swear by it and declare it to be an inspired Book and the only authorized rule of life...it is no use making correct translations of words if we cannot get the words translated into life.” (Barnes, The founder Speaks Again, 198). The claim from Augustana of the freedom in all matters except the fundamental doctrines of Scripture was of central importance for Catherine and William Booth in the way they formed the Army... and this freedom is still among Salvationists in the willingness to explore new ways and means of worship. It is also clear in the development of ethical issues and new insights of theology.

5) The need for renewal that Luther stressed by going to the sources of Christianity is a constant challenge to the Churches. The focus on renewal within the Army has always been in personal spirituality, and even in the spirituality within a corps, as well as in corps programs, while a certain complacency has been in the overall structures. Luther’s Ecclesia semper reformanda est - the church must always be reformed/renewed is a challenge to the whole church, including the Army for a renewal that does not separate the spiritual from the temporal. There has been focus on renewal in theology and in ethics.....and within recent years also in structures, economy and administration. There can be theology in these matters as well, actually there need to be. It is an area where the Army’s theology has not been overly involved or developed.
The reform of the liturgy that Luther inaugurated has had an immense influence in the churches of the reformation. The stress on music and congregational singing is at the very heart of Salvation Army’s ‘liturgy’. The songbook has until recently been the most important theological book for Salvationists, a grounding catechism (the wide use of the screen with songs and choruses, which are only present electronically has altered the picture). Luther considered the congregational singing as a commentary on biblical texts. Looking into the song book the songs stand as very fine Bible commentaries. Take for instance Albert Osborne’s *My life must be Christ’s broken bread*:

*My life must be Christ’s broken bread,*

*My love his outpoured wine*

*A cup o’erfilled, a table spread*

*Beneath his name and sign,*

*That other souls, refreshed and fed,*

*May share his life through mine.*

Number 610, SA Songbook, 2015

Next to the number of the song there is a reference to Luke 22.19. All songs in this new songbook from 2015 have bible references placed next to the number, so song as commentaries are highlighted here in this edition.

Looking into Army history in different countries it is remarkable how quickly songbooks were published after opening the Army’s work. Normally a number of songs were translated, but these songs were not the only ones, also well known songs or hymns from the country were included. Denmark could stand as an example of this as the first songbook with 131 songs was published the same year as the Army started its work in the country – 1887. Already the year after a new songbook with 262 songs was published.

As Luther adapted folk melodies to the hymns, so the Army used popular melodies to its songs, melodies known from the Music Halls and which ‘the man on the street’ knew. It was important that people could join in the singing.

It was quite fun to search Google on the saying” Why should the devil have all the good music?” According to this article the saying has been attributed to Martin Luther, John Wesley as well as William Booth, but none of them have actually written or said this. However, Cyril Barnes in *Words of William Booth* p. 43 does attribute this saying to William Booth in connection with a visit to Worcester in January 22, 1882. It was after George ‘Sailor’ Fielder, the commanding officer had sung his testimony with the words, ‘Bless his name, he set me free’ to the tune of ‘Champagne Charlie is my name’. We don’t know if this is just a good story or actually true, but the reason why this saying has been attributed these three reformers must have been that they all had focus on how important singing hymns and Christians songs was and therefore wanted the singing to be accessible for ordinary people.

**Conclusion**

These main issues show how strong the influence from Martin Luther has been on the churches of the reformation including The Salvation Army and their theology and practice.

For Salvationists living in countries with Lutheran state churches the influence has come not only from Luther, but mostly from the church bearing his name. I mentioned shortly in the beginning the double membership which to a great extent has signaled that Salvationists were proper Finnish, Swedish,
Norwegian or Danish. Nevertheless, the outcome has been that Salvationists have brought their children to the church for baptism and confirmation, have participated in the Lord’s Supper on special occasions, weddings and funerals have also been celebrated in the church, especially in Norway and Finland. It has often been double ceremonies with the Army’s ceremony afterwards (apart from funerals). In Sweden and Denmark most ceremonies have been performed in the Army alone for many years. In Norway the Army started having their own funerals in the 1980s and weddings from 2005. In Finland all ceremonies are performed by Lutheran pastors. Confirmations were introduced in the Army in Sweden in the sixties and Denmark early seventies, in Norway in the beginning of 1980s, but it has not been introduced in Finland yet.

This situation has had an impact on Army theology in these countries. In ecclesiology there has been and still is a tension in what constitutes a church within the Army – Mission reached through diaconia, martyria, and koinonia most agree on, but the question stands if this is enough or if the sacraments have to be there as well. Salvationists have participated in the sacraments in the Lutheran church throughout the Army’s history in these countries. Another area where the influence can be seen is concerning holiness. The saying simul justus et peccator – at the same time righteous and sinner, the stress would be more on sinner than on righteous because of the Lutheran influence. These are just a few examples of the more profound influence in the Lutheran countries.

**Literature**


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