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# *Awakening is Central to Lutheran Identity*

Lutherans proudly proclaim both justification and sanctification as acts of God—the Spirit of God working through the Means of Grace. We tend to emphasize so strongly that faith and faith life are the work of God that we sometimes back away from anything that seems to be a call to personal renewal. Indeed, there are Lutherans who sneer at the idea of “awakening” as part of the true Christian faith. Why should this be? History, after all, does not support such contempt. If one goes back to the beginning of Lutheranism in America, one finds that the idea of awakening was absolutely central to the faith.

For example: on August 13, 1748 in Philadelphia, John Nicholas Kurtz was examined for ordination to the Christian ministry. He sought to be licensed to receive a call from the deacons of a congregation in Tulpehocken, Pennsylvania. This examination is recorded as part of the minutes of first convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania, the founding of which is recognized as the beginning of an organized Lutheran presence in America, 28 years before the Declaration of Independence. Present at the examination were the historic figures John Christopher Hartwig and Henry Melchior Muhlenberg (acknowledged as the patriarch of American Lutheranism). Muhlenberg is the one Lutheran pastor whom all Lutherans in America revere, whatever their synodical allegiance or ethnic heritage, as a figure of inspiration and theological guidance.

According to the minutes of the ministerium, “Candidate Kurtz” had been given these instructions for his oral examination:

*The candidate is to prepare a sketch of his life, giving, in as brief a compass as possible, an account of its chief events and of his academical studies. As this may readily become too extensive, it will suffice, if he briefly narrate: 1. His first awakening; 2. How God furthered the work of grace in his heart; 3. What moved him to study for the holy ministry, and where, in what branches and under whose direction, he has attempted to prepare himself.*

Kurtz must have given satisfactory answers to these questions for we know that on the evening of August 13, the deacons of the congregation in Tulpehocken extended him a call.

The pastors who formulated the examination questions for Kurtz practiced ministry under the rigorous discipline of what we know today as Lutheran “Pietism.” Pastor Philip Jacob Spener founded this movement in Germany nearly 80 years before that historic August

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afternoon in Philadelphia. Spener had sought to revive a church that was then in steep decline. German lands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century had been through more than 100 years of religious warfare. The population had been reduced by more than a third directly as a result of religious conflict stemming from the Reformation. People were dispirited. The crisis was exacerbated in that many pastors were little more than religious hacks, interested in collecting their paychecks and towing the party line of officials in power.

To reform the church, said Spener, many changes would be required; above all, there must be a revolution in religious allegiance among the pastors of the church.

When Spener said, “Ministers must be Christians,” he meant nothing mysterious or arcane. Spener knew that pastors of the church needed to have experienced the dynamic impact of faith in Jesus Christ; by being called as the disciples were called from their fishermen’s nets; or challenged to “rebirth” as Jesus challenged Nicodemus; or confronted as Saul had been confronted on the road to Damascus. Whatever consciously brought Christians to faith, this was the faith that the church desperately needed.

Spener knew in his heart a principle that is commonplace among evangelists today: “Changed people change churches.” As this principle is true, so, unfortunately, is its contrary: “Unchanged people change nothing.” In the church, unchanged people usually manage ecclesiastical organizations doomed to decline. To be awakened is to know that Jesus Christ alone is Savior and that the purpose of life is to love God and love the neighbor before satisfying the desires of the self.

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg arrived in America in September 1742 in response to the desperate call of Lutheran colonists. They had written to Halle (a Pietist center in Germany) because many of the pastors that had been sent to serve them in the New World had neither character nor the conviction of faith needed to serve people and evangelize new members. Muhlenberg changed this terrible situation by preaching the gospel and tirelessly visiting congregations in far-flung settlements. Depending on the Holy Spirit to give him the strength, he persevered in his mission.

How strongly did Muhlenberg persevere? Six months before the examination of Candidate Kurtz, in February of 1748, Muhlenberg found himself in the backwoods of Pennsylvania lost in the snow. He was on one of his typical visits to congregations. His account of the incident in his diary makes for compelling and revealing reading:

*First I rode two miles in the wrong direction toward  
the left and had to work my way laboriously back again.  
After that I kept to the road fairly well, but several times I  
fell suddenly with the poor horse through the snow and soft  
ice into the swamp and had to work my way out again with*

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*God's help. The horse became weary and reluctant to go through the unbeaten tracks of deep snow, so I was obliged to walk ahead on foot and make a track for the horse, which exhausted me greatly, and I still had three miles to go. I would have been glad to sit down in sheer weariness, but it was so bitterly cold and I was perspiring so profusely that I did not dare rest and risk a sleep of death. I once more summoned up my remaining energies in the name of the Lord and finally reached my lodgings safely that same night. Had I remained on the road, my enemies would probably have jeered and said that I had died drunk, since I had no witnesses with me.*

*I was unusually encouraged on this trip to the congregations because I perceived a number of beneficent stirrings of the Spirit of God. Sometimes one would rather stay home when the bad roads and weather set in; but since one's coming must usually be announced several weeks in advance and the people must gather from considerable distances, the sectarian people profit by it if one fails to come. They say to our people, "That's the way your parsons are; they promise much, but keep little."*

Through prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit, Muhlenberg did his work of ministry. Inconvenience, hardship, even danger on isolated and poorly marked roads, did not stop him from his call. Muhlenberg visited congregations in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and New York, modeling a ministry of faithfulness that relied on the commitment of heartfelt faith instead of formal, institutional recognition. Thus, while Muhlenberg believed that ordination to the ministry was important as a public witness of trust in an individual called to lead, he also knew that there was no replacement for the testimony of faith reflecting personal commitment to Christ. "Experience shows," Muhlenberg observed, "that neither Episcopal nor presbyterial ordination infuses any natural or supernatural qualities else there would not be so many counterfeit ministers."

Thus candidate Kurtz was asked about his personal journey of faith, his "awakening" to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, many major Lutheran theologians writing today are unsympathetic to the heritage of Pietism. This is especially true of European Lutherans who, despite the fact that the church is in severe decline in lands such as Germany, Norway, and Sweden, continue to draw on old, narrow arguments to dismiss the Pietist critique of the church. Oswald Bayer, for example, in his otherwise fine book, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, (2003) characterizes Pietism's concern for "the regeneration of

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individuals” as little more than a naïve belief in “progress,” which emerged in the Enlightenment. He considers that movement as one of the most dangerous and destructive illusions of modern secular life, culminating in “Marxism.” This analysis, certainly typical of intellectuals in the church, is patently ridiculous.

When Spener talked about regeneration or awakening in the church of Jesus Christ, he did not have in mind society’s material benefits but the transformation of people through the mission of the church. Christ calls us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Mission is what the church is called into being to do. Unless a church is in mission, it is no church. The question for Lutherans—in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Spener wrote; in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Muhlenberg came to America and mentored young men such as John Nicholas Kurtz to serve the congregation in Tulpehocken, Pennsylvania; and the Lutheran Church today, a faltering mainline denomination confused as to what its purpose should be—is whether or not to obey the divine call to mission. Make no mistake about it: the call that God issues will be fulfilled through the Holy Spirit whether Lutherans participate or not. The “hope for better times in the church” is in the promise of God. The challenge to Lutherans is whether or not they will participate in what God is doing. Here is how Spener put it in 1675:

*There is no doubt at all that the counsel of God will be accomplished without us, and what is revealed in the Scriptures will be fulfilled no matter what we may do. But we should remember that the answer which Mordecai returned to his kinswoman Esther also applies to us: “If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s house will perish” (Esther 4:14). If we, to whom God restored the bright light of the Gospel through his servant Luther, fail to do our duty, God will get help elsewhere and preserve his honor.*

The mission of the church requires awakened souls. Awakened individuals and Lutheran congregations built the church in America from colonial times to the great flowering of membership after the Second World War. Since the 1960s, however, Lutherans seem to have entered 40 years (a long time in the Bible) of membership decline and doctrinal drift. Perhaps, once again it is time for our synod committees, who are charged with the responsibility for examining ministerial candidates, to ask them about their “awakening” in the faith! If our ministers and members could give personal testimony to the work of Christ, we would be in a much different place as a church.

We stand, like those colonial Lutherans more than 250 years ago, in the unformed, wild American wilderness where people hunger for spiritual meaning in their lives. Now as

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then, true churches are few and far between. As faithful Lutherans, we are looking for what the good elders at the congregation in Tulpehocken sought in candidate Kurtz: a leader who could speak the Gospel that has the power to renew from a faith that is awakened and alive by the power of the Spirit.

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