

The Smith Brothers (A. Leonard and Philemon),
the Mamrelund Church and Parsonage, and the Lutheran Ethos

By Leonard. S. Smith

From the sixteenth century through the end of the Augustana Synod in 1962, but increasingly less so since that time, one could usually distinguish a Lutheran from a non-Lutheran if he or she understood what you were talking about if you mentioned (1) that a Christian is both sinner and justified “at the same time,” (2) the connected prepositions “in, with, and under,” (3) the “Small Catechism,” and (4) “the three articles of the Creed.” In my study *Religion and the Rise of History: Martin Luther and the Cultural Revolution in Germany, 1760-1810* (2009), I claimed that a knowledge of these four notions or things was helpful for understanding not only the history of Lutheranism but also for an understanding the development of German education, history, literature, philosophy, and theology since the sixteenth century. Here I also contend that it was primarily though the confirmation and the First Communion experience (1) that young Lutherans first learned to perceive how it was possible to be a humble and repentant sinner, and, at the same time, a justified Christian; (2) that in, with, and under the bread and wine they first experienced an entrance of the divine into their souls. Thus the confirmation and the First Communion experience together was the key event and the key experience within Lutheranism from the year 1529 through 1962 in turning baptized Christians into adult Lutherans with a common ethos and way of viewing life.

From the time of Luther to the present, Lutheran pastors have emphasized how all the institutional structures of the secular world should be seen as divinely ordained means of serving one’s neighbors in one’s calling or vocation. At the same time, however, Lutheran pastors have encouraged their sons and young men of ability and character to prepare themselves for the calling of the “Ministry of the Word.” Although Lutherans have not regarded the ministry as a special calling in the sense of a highest calling, from the beginning Lutheran pastors have taken special interest in this calling because (1) the ministry of the church was to teach the Gospel and to administer the sacraments, (2) the church has the command from God to appoint ministers and thus this office was instituted by God, and (3) only pastors were ordained by the church. In the words of the Augsburg Confession, “Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called” (art. 14).

Since the time of Luther and Melancthon, who wrote these words, Lutherans believed that “the call” to be a pastor came not only from the church as “the assembly of all believers,” but that this call was also the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus from the time of Luther to the present, young Lutherans have wrestled with the problem of whether or not they were “called” by the Holy

Spirit to become a pastor. This has been especially true for sons of pastors, for here the problem of a calling to preach the Word was often a strong personal and family concern.

The other calling that has been closely linked with the Ministry of the Word has been the academic calling, for Lutheran pastors have always had a special interest in the professors and teachers who taught the future ministers of the Word. Many professors, historians, and writers within the Lutheran tradition were pastor's sons or entered academic life first through the ministry of the Word, and/or after discovering that their real calling in life was to teach or to write rather than to preach.

In an important essay for all Lutherans, an essay called "Luther and the Modern World," Thomas Nipperdey emphasized the unique relationship between "university and *Wissenschaft* (science and/or scholarship) within the Lutheran tradition. Luther was a teacher of Holy Scripture, he said, and the pulpit and the rostrum were his places of work. "It was professors, rather than pope or council," Nipperdey argued, "who determined the right doctrines, to which the princes also were subject," and this remained an inheritance of the Lutheran church. "It is a pastor church," Nipperdey claimed, and in Germany pastors were "university-trained theologians" and scholars. More intensively than anywhere else, he argued, "the other university pupils, the jurists and the officials especially, were taught and formed in the shadow of theology."¹

Now the Augustana Synod was always "a pastor church," and Augustana pastors always took a special interest in the professors and teachers who taught the future ministers of the Word. In the United States, however, Swedish Lutheran pastors and other church leaders had to create their own colleges and their own seminary to educate future pastors and leaders for the church. With this general introduction, I want to introduce two Swedish farm boys who became pastors and who were known either as the "Smith Brothers" or the "Smith Brothers' Cough Drops" within their generation of Augustana pastors. One of the things which distinguished them from their fellow pastors was their last name, for it really stood out among all the Petersons, Johnsons, Andersons, and other Swedish names on the clergy roster of the Augustana Synod.

One of the ways my father's career differed from most of his seminary classmates was his age. As the oldest of ten children, he was needed on the family farm and completed only eight grades of country schooling. After he turned 21, however, he was on his own, rented eighty acres, and really became a farmer. My father's heart, however, was not in being a farmer, and at the age of 27 he acted on the belief that he had "the call" to become a Lutheran pastor. Thus in August 1921, he had a farm sale, paid his debts, and entered Luther Academy in Wahoo, Nebraska. He did his high school work in two years, his college work (at Luther College and Augustana

¹ Thomas Nipperdey, "Luther und die moderne Welt," *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte: Essays* (Munich: Beck, 1986), 37-38.

College) in three, graduated from Augustana in 1927, and was ordained in June 1929 in Morrison, Illinois, his first congregation (1929-1933). Only then could he marry Pearl Peterson, a young lady from Swede Home, Nebraska who first became “the Pearl of his life” seven years earlier while he was still an academy student and she was a college student at Luther.

The most important aspect of my father’s ministry was that from January 1934 through August 1949 he was the pastor of Mamrelund Lutheran Church in Stanton, Iowa, a town of about 600 souls that liked to call itself “The little white city with the big white church,” for even the depot was painted white. Now Stanton was known not only for its big church but also because it was the hub of a Swedish settlement in southwestern Iowa known as the “the Holland Settlement,” for in 1948 ten Augustana congregations and five Mission Covenant congregations were the fruits of Pastor Bengt Magnus Halland’s “Settlement” that began with Stanton, Nyman and Bethesda in 1870.

After the big white wooden church with its 160 ft. steeple burned to the ground in August 1938, Pastor A. Leonard Smith was the guiding force in building the present “big white stone church” with its 150 ft. steeple. At the time this “beautiful edifice” was dedicated in May 1940, Mamrelund was a congregation that had 975 members and 184 children. Since both the old and the new church could seat almost all of its adult members, it was a natural meeting place for clergy in southwestern Iowa, for the Iowa Synod, and for the Augustana Synod as a whole.

Mamrelund also had a huge, old, and now-gone parsonage that was located between the church and the oldest building in the county, the twelve-grade Stanton Public School (now a Swedish Museum and Cultural Center). Unlike most parsonages that I have known, however, this one was a natural meeting place for deacons, trustees, and clergy; for the first floor had five large rooms, two of which were usually used as large, open, and joined living rooms. Since the only person who ever dared to smoke in “Pearl’s parsonage” was P. O. Bersell (the lord and master of the Augustana Synod in the 1940s), the only ash tray in the Stanton parsonage was a special one that my mother purchased just for him: a donkey pulling a toilet stool that required the user to lift the lid to deposit the ashes. I think I can still recall his booming voice when he settled into one of the large easy chairs, lit up a large cigar, and announced, “Pearl, where is my ash tray?”

Like Martin Luther, my father was an “inimitable” personality. As my mother wrote, “Leonard was a person who loved people, fishing, and telling stories. He had a strong personality, which led him to be a dominant figure in any conversation going on in a room.” Like Luther, he had an overwhelming sense of his sinful nature and his need for daily repentance and forgiveness. Like Luther, he had a powerful sense of the freedom of a Christian. And like Luther, this “Pope on the Hill” (an accurate and friendly description of his power and influence in the Stanton community) lived and acted like he was “a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none,” and, at the same time,

“a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all.” Most of all, however, this big-hearted pastor had an awesome sense of responsibility for his calling, to be a servant of the Word.

To illustrate these points, I wish to relate just two stories about him. One was one that I learned from my brother, Rev. Dr. Carlyle A. Smith, who was told this story long after my father was dead. One time at a meeting of pastors in the sanctuary of Red Oak Lutheran Church, when two younger pastors were arguing so strongly with each other that they were close to coming to blows, my father got out of his pew, strode up to them, grabbed both of them firmly by the shoulder, and exclaimed, “How dare you behave this way in the temple of the Lord!”

The other story is a conversation that once took place with my life-time friend Max Kirkeberg in his home in San Francisco. “Your father” (who was the agricultural teacher in the Stanton Public High School), I said, “was the most respected man in town.” “Yes,” Max agreed, “but your father was the most loved man in town.” Then he went on to say, “Your father was the closest person to being a saint that I have ever known.” Wow! What a tribute!

Unlike my father, who had a very short ministry (a ministry that ended tragically in Spencer, Iowa in 1953 followed by seven years of complete incapacitation), Rev. Philemon Smith had a full and uniformly successful ministry from the time he was ordained in 1928 until his retirement in 1969; for he served congregations in Newman Grove, Nebraska, Wausa, Nebraska, Lindsborg, Kansas, and Duluth, Minnesota. In addition, he was elected president of the Nebraska Conference, served on the Augustana Board of World Missions, taught Bible courses and philosophy at Bethany Lutheran College, and served as vice-president of the Kansas Conference. In fact, Uncle Phil never really retired, for the next ten years he also served as a visitation pastor and/or in interim ministries.

Like my parents, who met at Luther College in Wahoo, each of the four children of Leonard and Pearl Smith attended Luther College. Since the president of this college was an Augustana Seminary friend of my father, he appointed himself as my faculty advisor. When he really pressed me to declare a major and professional goal, and after I had reluctantly admitted that the idea of becoming a pastor had at least crossed my mind, he said: “If you are even considering the **possibility** of becoming a **Lutheran** pastor, you should take three years of German, two years of Greek, and a History major.” This was the best academic advice I ever got, for professors Dowie and Pfinister made a real student out of me and I received a good education. While my brother Carlyle, did become a pastor, four of my cousins **married** Augustana pastors: Philemon’s daughter Rhoda Smith (Rev. Donald Nelson), Elaine Thorson (Rev. Dean Swenson), Farrell Rae Carlson (Rev. Merle Bolte), and Carol Shellhammer (Rev. Hilbert Johnson, Jr.). In addition, Elaine’s older sister Gloria was married to a Luther Seminary graduate (Rev. Gaylord Grant).

The final story that I want to relate goes back to my youth in Stanton. One day my father came home looking very sad, and my mother asked, “What is the matter?” “This afternoon,” he said, “my friend Pastor Walter Peterson [pastor in Red Oak] received a letter from his oldest [and college-age] son saying that he was not going to become a pastor. Instead, he is going to become

a history teacher.” For some reason, this overheard remark registered in my mind. Unlike Walter Peterson, however, my father never really knew that I went wrong and became a history teacher. But perhaps he is not sad today since last year this history teacher published a book that argues that Lutherans are good for something besides preaching and music; for we Lutherans—especially Lutheran pastors, PKs, and students in Germany who first prepared themselves to become Lutheran pastors--were second to none for the rise of modern historical thought and the *Beruf* (calling or profession) and the *Wissenschaft* called history. This is my story, this book is a “PK” book, and it is also the result my calling as a professor of history for 36 years at two Lutheran colleges.