Church and State in Ethiopia: Contribution of Lutheran Understanding of the Community of Grace

Dr. Samuel Yonas Deressa

Assistant Professor of Theology and the Global South
Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota[1]

Introduction

Ethiopia is currently suffering political unrest from broad social, economic, and political grievances shared by many citizens,

---

[1] Deressa earned his PhD from Luther Seminary, St. Paul; his MDiv from Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and his BTh from Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa. He serves as a pre-seminary coordinator for the Department of Theology and Ministry, Condordia University, and has been on the faculty of Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He has written, *The Life, Works, and Witness of Tsehay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017; 299 pp.); *Cultural Ethics and Inter-Religious Coexistence and the Ethiopian Context: The Case of Karrayyu Oromo* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Makane Yesus Seminary, 2011; 92 pp.); edited, *Revisiting the History, Theology, and Leadership Practice of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, Journal of Gudina Tumsa Theological Forum* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016; 174 pp.); and wrote and edited, *Emerging Theological Praxis* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012; 140 pp.). See www.CSP.edu/person/dr-samuel-deressa/ and Deressa@csp.edu.

particularly the two largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and Amhara. Citizens are being imprisoned, tortured, and killed for demanding their God-given human rights. According to a recent Human Rights Watch report in 2016, the country has registered a high death toll and mass arrests.[2] The present government, which promised democracy and prosperity when coming to power twenty-five years ago, has turned out to be one of the most brutal and dictatorial regimes Africa has ever seen.

Changing the Ethiopian situation requires all kinds of institutions, religious and non-religious, to be involved in public matters. A large number of non-religious institutions are already participating to determine Ethiopia's future both within and outside the country, including opposition parties, civic organizations, journalists, academicians, and political activists. Religious institutions, however, are being criticized for ignoring their public responsibility by remaining silent.

The approach of religious institutions (the church in particular) to Ethiopian public life can be described in two ways:

1. They are either more closely identified with the government than the people they serve, or
2. They are totally withdrawn from the public life of the community.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) worked hand and glove with the government following the "Christendom" model. As Paul Balisky has rightly noted, leaders of this church "viewed all of Ethiopia, whether pagan or Muslim, as their domain."[3] At present, even though the EOC does not follow the "Christendom" model; it continues to work closely with the government. After 1991, some evangelical churches also joined the EOC by declaring allegiance with the government. On the other hand, some Pentecostal and evangelical institutions consider their mission to be only evangelic work focused on "soul saving." With a narrow definition of the Great Commission, they emphasize spiritual services over the social, economic, and political roles of a church.

---

[2] Human Rights Watch, "Such a Brutal Crackdown: Killing and Arrest in Response to Ethiopia's Oromo Protests." See www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/16/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopias-oromo-protests, accessed 11/02/2016.

[3] Paul Balisky, "Ethiopian Church and Mision in the Context of Violence," in *Mission in the Context of Violence*, ed. Keith E. Eitel (Pasadena: William Cary Library, 2008), 226.

This paper explores the Ethiopian churches' approach to public life and proposes a prophetic challenge to social, economic, and political fragmentation resulting in the violation of human rights in Ethiopia. In sum, we will describe briefly the church and state relationship in Ethiopia from the time of the state's formation and Luther's understanding of *sola gratia* and the church as a community of grace. Lastly, informed by Luther's understanding of a church as a community of grace, we propose how the church can bring healing to the fractured Ethiopian community.

A. The State in Ethiopia: the Dynamics of "Center" and "Periphery"

Ethiopia came into existence when the Emperor Menelik II of Showa conquered the areas in the southern part of today's Ethiopia between 1886 and 1894. Some scholars describe Menelik's act as the expansion of his kingdom or "reunification of modern Ethiopia" rather than a colonial act that left the southern people under subjugation.[4] This incident, however, resulted in a radical change in the life of the conquered people. The people living in these areas were subjected to brutal, systemic, socio-economic exploitation, and political subjugation by those in authority.[5] Patrick Gilkes emphasizes that Menelik's "expansionist" policy "brought extensive slave trading, loss of land, the status of serfs for themselves, onerous burdens of taxation and corrupt and inefficient government."[6]

The land in the conquered territories was distributed among the soldiers, local administrators, and the EOC. The land owners built a system in which they were able to exact tribute and tax from the peasants who lived on those lands. It was named the *gebbar* system: the Amharic word *gebbar* is translated as "tribute giver." The conquered people were forced to pay tax or tribute to the landlords. In other words, Menelik introduced a tributary mode of production, whereby there existed "a structural relationship where peasant

---

[4] Oyvind M. Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth and Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85* (Oxford: J. Currey, 2000), 15.

[5] Arne Tolo, *Sidama and Ethiopian: The Emergence [of] the Mekane Yesus Church in Sidama* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet 1998), 61; Ulrich Braukämper, *Geschichte Der Hadiya Süd-Äthiopiens: Von D. Anfängen Bis Zur Revolution 1974* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980), 443.

[6] Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and Modernization in Ethiopia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 205.

communities are in the possession of the land they till, but the production is collected by outside rulers who appropriate portions of peasant surplus by exacting a tribute."[7]

Oyvind Eide, in *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, defines the Ethiopian community from two perspectives: the "center" and the "periphery." [8] These metaphors are used by many researchers to describe the socio-cultural and socio-political context created by emperor Menelik. In short, the dichotomy is utterly predatory in nature. Those in Ethiopia described as the "center" are communities that have been beneficiaries of the political and economic system of the country for the last few centuries. At the "center" are ruling parties, which were predominantly from one tribe in the northern part of the country and from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Those on the "periphery," however, are those people who are oppressed and marginalized by a system that only favors those that are at the "center." In other words, Ethiopia today as formed by Emperor Menelik has a clear dichotomy between the subjugator and the subjugated, the subjugator as a "center" that subjugates the "periphery."

Upon coming to power in 1931, Haile Selassie I (1931–1974) named himself the Elect of God and the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and he sought to lead the country into a new age of modernization. He introduced the first constitution in Ethiopia as a first step towards achieving his goal. In this constitution, he included a section dealing with the need to reform the land tenure system as part of his plan to "modernize" Ethiopia.[9]

Selassie introduced a new taxation system under a centralized government structure. Feudalism replaced a tributary mode of production. According to the feudal mode of production, the rulers were given the right to appropriate the land, and peasants were reduced to tenants in such a way that they were attendants to the rulers or the land owners. According to studies conducted on this tenant system, the tenants were required "by law to hand over up to

---

[7] Michael Ståhl, *Ethiopia, Political Contradictions in Agricultural Development* (Uppsala: Political Science Association in Uppsala, 1974), 10.

[8] Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 12.

[9] Ta'a Tesema, *The Political Economy of Western Central Ethiopia: From the Mid-16th to the Early-20th Centuries*, PhD diss. (Michigan State University, 1986), 209.

three-fourths of their produce to landlords, who often were absentee."[10] This huge burden on the peasants continued to favor the landlords (rulers) rather than the tenants, and the livelihood of the peasants came under the mercy of their rulers. In this system, the landlords became the "center" of the system, and those at the "periphery," the southern people, were forced again into paying heavy taxes. Injustice and poverty continued to prevail over the people.

The feudal government also introduced the concept of modernization to Ethiopia. In the dynamic imperial politics, becoming "modern" (*zemenawinet*) or "civilized" required one to adopt an Orthodox Christian identity.[11] As Asmarom Legesse rightly indicates, "*Ethiopia glorified her Sabean, Jewish, and Christian heritage at the expense of her African identity*. As the result, the remaining people of Ethiopia, the Cushitic and Nilotes, were viewed as alien and inferior."[12] Therefore, as Christopher Clapham accurately explains, "participation in national political life [demanded] assimilation to the cultural values of the Amhara core: the Amharic language, Orthodox Christianity and a capacity to operate within the structures and assumptions of a core administration."[13] Scholars refer to this action by the government as *Amharanization* of the empire.

Selassie's imperial regime ended in September 1974 and was replaced by what eventually became a Marxist-Socialist regime known as the Derg (1974–1991). The first two years of the socialist government gave hope to the oppressed people. In 1974, the Derg published a manifesto with a ten-point program emphasizing the "themes of equality, self-reliance, the indivisibility of the nation, state control of the economy, and the elimination of landlordism." [14] Separation of church and state was officially declared. Equal status of all religions before the law was emphasized. The feudal system was eradicated, and the Derg formed peasant associations (*Gebere-*

---

[10] "Ethiopian Measures for Rural Transformation," a report from the Ministry of Agriculture and Settlement (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Ministry of Agriculture and Settlement, February 1978), 5.

[11] Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 128.

[12] Asmarom Legesse, *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System* (Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 2000). Italics in the original.

[13] Christopher S. Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21.

[14] Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 26, 129.

maheber) at the grass-roots level. Marxist-Leninist ideology became a general framework in which Ethiopian history, economy, cultures, religions; and societies were analyzed in academic institutions.

The Derg, however, was no better than the previous governments. According to Markakis, the Derg can be characterized as "garrison socialism" in reference to its ideological orientation and military background. [15] Despite its Marxist-Leninist orientation, nation building continued the previous imperial approach that continued the distinction between the "center" and the "periphery." This division was enforced by following the ideology of previous Ethiopian emperors with an uncompromised position on religious unity as a means for securing the national unity of the country.[16] The Socialist government like its predecessors adopted the same tradition and legitimized the superiority of the "center" (Amhara culture and EOC traditions). Just as in the previous hegemonic governments, the Derg regime also declared a manifesto emphasizing that the ruling party is determined to "aim at the united country without ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences."[17] All forms of ideologies that seemed either to question or to challenge the homogenized and inherited Empire of Ethiopia were subverted. With the inherited legacy of imposition and absolutism, Ethiopia became a militarist state under the dictatorial leadership of Mengistu Hailemariam.

At the formation of the present government in 1991, a historic opportunity seemed to present itself to the Ethiopian people. A multi-party democracy was introduced for the first time in Ethiopian history, and religious freedom was granted as a constitutional right. The administrative structure of the country was divided into nine member states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) demarcated on the basis of settlement patterns, language, and the consent of the people concerned. According to the Ethiopian Constitution, Article 39, the unconditional right of self-determination, including secession, is given to nations, nationalities, and the

---

[15] See introductory section in John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[16] J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Christian Church and Missions in Ethiopia (Including Eritrea and the Somalilandsz* (London: World Dominion Press, 1951).

[17] Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 17.

people.[18] This constitution defines nations, nationalities, and peoples as "group(s) of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable contiguous territory."[19] While Amharic is constituted as a working language of the federal government, regions are allowed to use their local languages in primary education and local administration.

During the transitional period of the current government, the constitution as a whole and the way the country is structured (the federal system) gave a positive impression to many Ethiopians. It was widely perceived that Ethiopia had finally eliminated the system that divided the nation as a "center" and "periphery." Several believed the country was transitioning from a dictatorial regime to one of freedom and democracy.

What happened, however, was a change of the "center" and the "periphery." The Tigrians, who were at the "periphery" of the previous regimes, became the "center," while the Amharas and all other tribes were left at the "periphery" of the system. The minority Tigrians, a mere 6% of the total population, controlled the economic and political dynamics of the country. They used ethnic federalism to keep all other states apart as a means of control. They knew that their existence would be endangered if other nations united, and therefore they used this system to evoke divisions, hatred, and enmities between these groups. Ethiopia's violent clashes between people of different ethnic groups testifies to this reality.

Today Ethiopia is still crippled from a lack of democracy. The government has not been able to abide by the constitution it ratified. Many agree that not enough was done to make the constitution practical. The transition from a dictatorship to a democratically elected government did not materialize. As Samuel Huntington tried to suggest, this probably happened because "Ethiopia has no democratic traditions" in the first place.[20] Elections held in the last

---

[18] Quoted after the English translation from the Amharic original of the FDRE constitution, 1994.

[19] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1994) Constitution, ratified by the National Constituent Assembly, 8 December 1994, Art. 46 and 47.

[20] Huntington Samuel, "Political Development in Ethiopia: A Peasant-Based Dominant-Party Democracy," in *Report to USAID/Ethiopia on Consultations with the Constitutional Commission* (1993).

three decades (1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015) indicate that the government's intention has not been to dedicate itself to real democracy that it had promised to the people. Those elections were characterized by compulsion, threats, imprisonments, and unfavorable treatment of non-EPRDF candidates.

In 2016, massive demonstrations in several parts of Ethiopia have been going on against the ruling government, including Oromoia and Amhara regional states. Thousands of protestors have been killed and tens of thousands jailed and tortured. Oromiya is the largest regional state in Ethiopia, and the Oromo is the largest ethnic group (34% of the total population). The Oromo have been demanding their basic human rights for years and claim that they have been deprived of social, cultural, economic, and political rights, and have been reduced to second-class status within the Ethiopian empire for so long.

B. Public Engagement of Ethiopian Churches

Ethiopia is a country of diverse religions. Among these religions, Christianity was the first to be welcomed in the fourth century C.E. to the royal court. From there it gradually penetrated the common people. This created a phenomenon whereby the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity became a state religion from its beginning until the coming of the socialist government in 1974.

Evangelical churches, however, started at the same time King Menelik conquered and annexed territories beyond the Abyssinian border. It began with the arrival of Swedish Evangelical Mission missionaries in 1868, and their subsequent effort to evangelize the Oromo through indigenous missionaries in the early twentieth century. These indigenous missionaries were liberated Oromo slaves and Eritrean priests. These first converts to the evangelical faith later became pioneer missionaries who translated the scriptures into Oromo, planted schools, and preached the good news of Jesus Christ to the people at the "periphery," the marginalized and oppressed communities.

The EOC started in the palace, at the center of the empire, while evangelical Christianity started among those at the "periphery." In other words, the EOC theology and service related to the privileged communities while the evangelicals preached to a people that had been deprived of cultural, economic, and political rights. The latter had been reduced to second-class status within the Ethiopian empire.

For evangelicals, their places of preaching became the foundation upon which Lutheran congregations were established, which could be considered the strong foundation for the start of evangelical churches in Ethiopia.[21] Most evangelical churches in Ethiopia, including the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), the largest Lutheran church in the world with a membership of 8.7 million, were born out of those communities at the "periphery."

The EOC functioned as a state church until 1991 and still considers itself an ally of the government. One of its roles as a state church was to legitimize the power and actions of the kings. When Ethiopia was constituted in its present form, Menelik's actions were legitimized by the state church. In fact, the EOC used the opportunity to expand its spheres of influence. The church gave divine sanction to Menelik's act in conquering the territories of other people.[22] During feudalism, the EOC played a similar role by legitimizing Haile Selassie's policy of integration (assimilation), which demanded religious and language homogeneity for nation formation.

Some research indicates the EOC's mission to the conquered south was mainly politically motivated, with little or no interest in evangelism. [23] For them, Christianization was understood as tantamount to a civilizing mission, and therefore the EOC's mission was directed towards "civilizing" the conquered people. According to Negaso Gidada and Donald Crummey, this missionary approach of the EOC placed "very strong pressure" on the southern people, since "only adherence to Christianity could give access to 'civilized' status and an equal footing with other Christians who were, in fact, the overlords."[24]

---

[21] Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS Förlaget/Addis Ababa, Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1978), and Fakadu Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement in Ethiopia: Origins and Establishment of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus*, trans. Ezekiel Gebissa (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2009).

[22] Haile M. Larebo, "The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Politics in the Twentieth Century: Part I" *Northeast African Studies: Incorporating Ethiopianist Notes Northeast African Studies* 10, no. 3 (1987): 379; Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 151.

[23] Tibebe Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 694.

[24] Negaso Gidada and Donald Crummey, *The Introduction and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity in Qélém Awraja, Western Wälläga, from About 1886 to 1941* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1972), 111.

During the military government, the EOC worked hand in hand with the government. As Donham notes, "The result was cultural reaction in which Marxist-Leninism was overlaid on Old Orthodox Christian notions of the nation."[25] In order to implement its policy with regard to religious unity, the Derg officially began to back the EOC financially; 1,729 patriarchate workers of the EOC received an annual subsidy of two million pounds as salary, while its higher officials received a monthly allowance of eleven thousand pounds from the Ministry of Finance.[26]

Yet the evangelicals were persecuted by the central government for decades. As churches emerged from the communities at the "periphery" of the empire, they suffered with the people. They were labeled as *mete haymanot*, which means "foreign" religions and anti-revolutionaries. Under the banner of the national unity, which government officials thought could only be attained through religious and cultural uniformity and with the EOC behind them, the government harassed the evangelical Christians.[27] Sidelined by the government from having any kind of role within the system, evangelicals were considered threats to Ethiopian ideology. Christian church leaders who tried to engage the government were imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Many considered politics as a matter of life and death and preferred not to be involved.

The evangelical Christian response to such reactions from the government has been different. Some churches, particularly the EECMY, have actively engaged the public in the past, regardless of the fact that its active participation sometimes resulted in mistreatment of its members. In the last thirty years, however, these churches have been silent at best or blessed the system at worst. When it comes to non-political affairs, the EECMY as well as other evangelical churches have been actively engaged in social and development activities. By opening schools, hospitals, and other social service institutions, they serve communities that demand a response to the multifaceted forms of injustice that condemn many persons to hunger, disease, unemployment, ignorance, displacement,

---

25 Donham, *Marxist Modern*, 137.

26 Haile Larebo, "The Orthodox Church and the State in the Ethiopian Revolution," *Religion in Communist Lands* 14, no. 2 (1986): 153.

27 Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 149.

and violent deaths resulting from civil conflicts, developmental stagnation, and so on. Some evangelical and Pentecostal churches, however, have adopted a non-political position founded on a theology that emphasizes evangelism as merely bringing a person to faith.

C. Church as Community of Grace

Ethiopian society is still in crisis, and many faithful men and women still too often fail to find appropriate responses to their life problems. What has the church to offer this society? The Lutheran understanding of grace speaks emphatically about the Christian's responsibilities to each other and to the public. It speaks to divisions between people of different ethnic or racial groups and structural injustices that have fractured the community. Luther's theology of *sola gratia*, grace alone, sets a premise for how a church as a community of grace can live out its prophetic role in public.

What is grace? The phrase *sola gratia* has been used by theologians since the time of the Reformation to indicate that justification and salvation can only be attained by faith, not by any works on humanity's part. In Romans 5:15, where Luther found a warrant, Paul writes: "how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many." Grace is a transforming mercy and gift of God. It is God's favor, mercy, and gratuitous good will "toward humankind redeemed by Christ and it enters lives through the word of the Gospel, which offers and effects genuine union with Christ."[28]

As Robert Jenson has noted that the right approach to understanding the meaning and significance of grace is through a theology of the triune God's self-giving. Based on the Apostle Paul's description of grace as the favor and gifts that God bestows on God's creation, he argues that grace is nothing but the self-giving God.[29] God the Father, "the ungifted giver," gives himself in Christ and the Holy Spirit; this is the grace given to or bestowed on human beings and the whole creation. Jenson's description of grace correlates with Luther's emphasis that the triune self-giving of God is foundational

---

[28] Stephen Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Michael Glazier, 1993; Eugene: Wipf and Stock. 2007), 190.

[29] Robert Jenson, "Triune Grace," in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

for understanding grace and its implication for the ongoing creative work of God.[30] Luther explains,

> These are the three persons and one God, who has given himself to us wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall. Therefore the Son subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, suffering, wisdom, and righteousness, and has reconciled us to the father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the father and his gifts. But this grace would benefit no one if it remains so profoundly hidden and could not come to us.[31]

According to Jenson, "Christ as word is both *extra nos* (outside us) and *qua fide in nobis* (as faith in us), and just only in this simultaneity he is the act of grace."[32] Christ is the Word of God that is addressed to human beings as *extra nos* (outside of us), and a Word that unites humanity with the triune God through faith. When the human soul is addressed by this Word, it is united with the triune God in faith. As Luther states,

> To cloth oneself with Christ is to cloth oneself with justice, truth, [and] grace. If you clothe yourself with Christ and Christ is the Son of God, you too are the children of God. Christ cannot be separated from us, nor we from him, since we are one with him, in him as the members are one in and with their head.[33]

This Word also evokes a transformation and leads to the experience of faith from within—which Jenson refers to as Christ being in us. In other words, as Luther states, "the soul of the one who clings to the word in true faith is so entirely united with it that all the virtues of the word becomes virtues of the soul also."[34] As God created the world by His Word, God also gives himself to His own creation in grace through the same Word.

---

[30] Schwobel Scristoph, "The Quest for an Adequate Theology of Grace and the Future of Lutheran Theology: A Response of Robert W. Jenson," in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 35.

[31] Martin Luther, "Word and Sacrament," in *Luther's Work*, ed. Robert Fischer and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 37 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 366.

[32] Jenson, "Triune Grace," 27.

[33] Cited in Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 188.

[34] Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520," in *Luther's Work*, ed. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut Lehmann, Vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 24.

The Spirit, on the other hand, is God's freedom that liberates humanity from within individuals in enabling them to love each other and their neighbors. As Luther states, "The Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand" Jesus' work in our lives and "helps us receive and preserve it, uses it to our advantage and impart it to others, increases and extends it" in, by, and through grace.[35]

What is a community of grace? A community of grace is a coming together of those who are loved by God unconditionally and therefore join in solidarity and share with one another the transforming grace of God. They let themselves be strengthened and transformed by the grace of the triune God and become an embodiment of God's grace to each other and to their neighbors. Grace enables each individual to be freed from egoistic self-love and to connect with his or her neighbor. Such community is created in a context where God's grace is communicated through the proclaimed gospel and administrated sacraments.

This community is called a missional community of grace—a church. For Luther the missional community of grace—the church— is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is proclaimed and sacraments are properly administered. [36] The Augsburg Confession describes *word* and *sacrament* as the "means of grace." The word "means" refers to how and where grace happens. It happens when the word is preached and sacraments are administered within and among the believing community, the missional community of grace.

The church as a community of grace experiences God's grace through, by, in, and with the Word and the Spirit. God's grace is experienced in the relationship of humans with the triune God as well as with each other. Such a relationship is experienced when the sacraments are administered within a believing community. Humans are restored in forgiveness and blessing which results in a healing of the relationship and transformation among human beings.

The community of grace is described in the Apostles' Creed as the *communio sanctorum*, the "communion of saints." Luther's

---

[35] Luther, "Word and Sacrament," 366.
[36] Augsburg Confession, Article VII.

account of the Eucharist provides us with a comprehensive view of this communion and its practical expression. The gospel, according to Luther, is what leads to the "communion of saints." The gospel mediates the Holy Spirit, who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."[37] In other words, it is the gospel mediated by the Spirit that opens the way for us to share the life of the Triune God, by virtue of which we are also enabled to commune with each other and share God's grace. Luther's argument regarding the significance of the gospel is similar to Scot McKnight's definition of the gospel: "The Gospel is the work of God to restore humans to union with God and communion with others, in the context of a community for the good of others and the world."[38] It is within this definition of the church that we find a more comprehensive and practical explanation of what it means for the church to be a missional community of grace.

According to Luther, "the significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of all the saints."[39] To take part in Holy Communion is to have fellowship with Christ and all the saints.[40] In the Eucharist, the Triune God shares Godself with us through bread and wine, and "we become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the saints." As Luther contends, while partaking in the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, "all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacraments."[41] Furthermore, according to Luther in eucharistic fellowship, "We are [also] to be united with our neighbors, we in them and they in us."[42] Quoting Luther,

---

[37] Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 124. Small Catechism II, 6.

[38] Scot McKnight, *Embracing Grace: A Gospel for All of Us* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2005), 12.

[39] Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*, ed. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 50.

[40] Luther, *Blessed Sacrament*, 59.

[41] Luther, 51.

[42] Luther, 51.

> To receive this sacraments in bread and wine, then, is nothing else than to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints. It is as if a citizen were given a sign, a document, or some other token to assure him [her] that he [she] is a citizen of the city, a member of that particular community.[43]

For Lutherans, there exists a connection between the Eucharist and the life and ministry of the church. When we participate in Holy Communion as a community of grace, we take part in "his life and good works, which are indicated by his flesh."[44]

To participate in Holy Communion means to share the life of the Triune God (his abundant love and blessing) with the whole of creation, which is manifested through our involvement in the ongoing creative work of God. In taking the blood under the wine, we also take part in "his passion and martyrdom, which are indicated by his blood."[45] We take part in the suffering of Christ that was meant for our salvation, and in the suffering of the whole creation. The Eucharist is the way God offers God's self to the whole of creation, and this is what we call grace. The believing community responds with thanksgiving. The thanksgiving offered to God is then as such:

> What sacrifices then are we to offer? Ourselves, and all that we have, with constant prayer…. Whereby we are to yield ourselves to the will of God, that He may do with us what He will, according to His own pleasure.[46]

In Eucharistic fellowship, all profits and costs are shared. In other words, as joy, support, protection, and so on are shared (between God, humanity, and the whole of creation), suffering is also shared within such fellowship. As God partakes in the joys and suffering of creation, the believing community does the same.[47] In Luther's own words, "In this sacrament, man is given through the priest a sure sign from God himself that he is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common [with them], that Christ's suffering and life are his own, together with the lives and sufferings of all the saints."[48]

---

[43] Luther, 51.

[44] Luther, 60.

[45] Luther, 60.

[46] Martin Luther, *A Treatise on the N.T., That Is, the Holy Mass, 1520*, ed. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 98.

[47] Luther, *Blessed Sacrament*, 51–52.

[48] Luther, 51–52.

Eucharistic fellowship is a fellowship that requires willingness to share others' burdens and suffering. It is through the practice of such sharing that the Christian community of grace is formed. As Luther explains, in the Eucharist, "Christ has given his holy body for this purpose, that the things signified by the sacrament—the fellowship, the change wrought by love—may be put into practice." [49] We encounter God in and through each other's life. By carrying each other's burden with the love of Christ, we form a communal culture through which each member is formed into the likeness of Christ. As Luther emphasizes, "By the means of this sacrament, [grace is communicated in that] all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all; and through the change wrought by love there is one bread, one drink, one body, one community." [50] For Luther, to experience such transformation, one must:

Take to heart the infirmities and needs of others, as if they were [one's] own. Then offer to others strength, as if it were their own, just as Christ does for [him/her] in the sacraments. This is what it means to be changed into one another through love.... To lose one's own form and take on that which is common to all. [51]

D. Church's Role in Engaging the Public

Therefore, the social implication of the Lutheran understanding of a church as a community of grace has several applications in real life. Grace as a self-giving of the triune God relates the faith in the Trinity with a practical expression of that faith at all levels of social life. Understanding the church as a community of grace also helps us constructively and critically engage with the role of church in public in the Ethiopian context.

The major problem in Ethiopia is that there exists a distorted relationship among people of different ethnic groups. As clarified above, the political dynamics of the country have created a fractured community, grouped primarily into the "center" and the "periphery." It is vital for the church to address the question how Christian communities in Ethiopia are able to naturalize and provide healing to communities affected by so much oppression.

---

[49] Luther, 60.

[50] Luther, 67.

[51] Luther, 61–62.

In view of grace founded on the self-giving of the triune God, this grace restores broken relationships in human communities with the purpose of creating "a universal community in which the love revealed in Christ seeks the fulfilment of all things in such a relationship to one another that what flows from the life of each enriches the life of them all."[52] In other words, grace is the activity of God to make the human community whole. This speaks directly to the Ethiopian fractured community.

How does the church as a community of grace live out its responsibility in restoring the divided communities? The churches in Ethiopia have not been able to provide an answer for at least two reasons: because they are 1) either too closely identified with the government or 2) have withdrawn from public engagement. On the first, the EOC has been serving hand and glove with the government following the "Christendom" model, legitimizing the oppressive governments. Even though the EOC has lost such status under the current government, it still identifies itself with the government at the "center," giving itself an image of patriarchy. On the second, some evangelical and Pentecostal churches follow the teaching that the gospel has nothing to do with social and political engagement. In their ministry, they emphasize evangelism over social, economic, and political services. At worst, they perceive their Christian responsibility as a solely "soul saving" enterprise.

Neither of these two positions is supported by what it means to be a community of grace. They are contrary to the foundational teaching of Christianity in loving and serving our neighbors. Those transformed by God's grace are to reach out to their neighbors and the whole world and empower them in every sphere of their human life. This understanding of God's grace and its implication in our social life negates both the Ethiopian churches' patristic approach in the EOC and those who the evangelical churches' social work and limit its mission solely to evangelism. The churches' mission in every context should be the same, which is participating in God's ongoing creative work by sharing God's grace with every human being, and that leads to empowerment and the transformation of individuals and communities. As Leonardo Boff clearly articulates, "Finally, the grace

---

[52] Harold Ditmanson, *Grace in Experiance and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 60.

of God is to be seen in our invisible certainty that we are nurturing a new kind of society more worthy of human beings and God."[53]

The main problem with churches that follow the "Christendom" model is that they present themselves more as masters and Lords rather than as servants. However, as mentioned, grace is founded on the triune God's self-giving, which means that God's intention to bestow his grace on humans is founded in the sacrifice he made by offering his Son as a sacrifice. Christ, God's gift to humanity, came as a servant and shared this grace by laying down his life for all. The church shares this grace the same way, by serving others as servants. As it is written, "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:44). We are not called to be masters over others, but to serve others. As Luther states, a Christian should "empty himself [and] take upon himself the form of a servant [so that he is able] to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him."[54] Quoting Luther,

> A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise, he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.[55]

When it comes to evangelical churches, on issues concerned with the public, they argue that submission is the only option, as described Romans 13. [56] But Christians have immensely more to offer in situations of oppression than merely service and solidarity. To bring justice to social, economic, and political relations in Ethiopia, the church should participate in the work of the triune God because, as Luther contends, God "does not work in us without us, because he has created and preserved us that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him, whether outside his Kingdom through his general omnipotence or inside his Kingdom by the special virtue of his

---

[53] Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), 86.

[54] Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520," 366.

[55] Luther, 371.

[56] Olana Gemechu, *A Church under Challenge: The Socio-Economic and Political Involvement of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Rita, Latvia: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013).

Spirit." [57] In other words, changing or reversing the Ethiopian problematic situation is the work of the triune God in which the church is invited to take part by the power of the Spirit.

A few evangelical churches, particularly the EECMY, have a legacy of critically engaging governments in the past. However, the present leaders have now chosen to follow other evangelical churches by limiting their ministry within the four walls of the church. The EECMY is being criticized for its unhelpful quietness in the face of a brutal government. As Luther indicated in his 1523 essay, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed,"[58] there is a limit to submitting to authorities. Therefore, the church should refrain from sanctioning an unjust and dictatorial government. When citizens are faced with harsh empires, the church is expected to rebuke such a system. As Gary Simpson rightly argues, "While publicity's rebuke comes from God, God does not work immediately, but rather through earthly means. God rebukes 'immediately.' In this sense, publicity is the vehicle that installs the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom and wise politics."[59]

As a community of grace, Ethiopian churches are called to renounce their complacency and silence and evaluate their lack of family spirit, their unwillingness to share, and their lack of active solidarity with persons struggling to break free from misery and oppression. This is not simply about doing charitable works among the needy, but it has to do with being courageous enough to confront the systems—be it political, social, economic, etc.—and confront rather prophetically in loving grace.

Summary

Christianity has enormous human and material resources (people, buildings, etc.), communication and social networks, and very rich and dynamic spiritual and cultural traditions and modes of thought and practice which have centrally informed democratizing movements

---

[57] Martin Luther, "The Bondage of the Will," in *Luther's Work*, ed. Philip S. Watson and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 243.

[58] Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, 1523," in *Luther's Work*, ed. Walther I. Brandt and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1962).

[59] Gary Simpson, "Retriving Martin Luther's Critical Public Theology of Political Authority for Global Civil Society," in *Theological Practices That Matter*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2009), 163.

such as the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa or the freedom movement in the American south. Thus, theology has the potential to enrich our understandings of both the complexity and the vast agentic potential of the human person.

The Lutheran theology of grace can help address the divisive social, economic, and political structure in Ethiopia. Grace, founded on the self-giving of the triune God, is experienced through the Word and participating in the sacraments, which then brings transformation in our individual lives as well as our communal life. The church as a community of grace participates in the ongoing creative work of God and, by doing so, presents itself as a means through which God bestows his transforming grace for the betterment of the community.

Sharing this grace with our society as a community of grace requires the church to engage the public. The Ethiopian churches that have either identified themselves with the oppressive government or have withdrawn from politics have thwarted God's purpose to share His life with all creation through the church. As Christians, we focus on Christ and His sacrificial love for all humanity. In Christ, we are given the crisp and clear picture of what it means to give ourselves and of ourselves to others as a community of grace. Grace is God's gift of himself to other people in need, and so too should the church present itself, especially in Ethiopia.

Bibliography

Arén, Gustav. "Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus." EFS Förlaget, 1978.

Balisky, Paul. "Ethiopian Church and Mision in the Context of Violence." In *Mission in the Context of Violence*, edited by Keith E. Eitel. Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 2008.

Boff, Leonardo. *Liberating Grace.* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979.Braukämper, Ulrich. *Geschichte Der Hadiya Süd-Äthiopiens: Von D. Anfängen Bis Zur Revolution 974.* Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980.

Clapham, Christopher S. *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Ditmanson, Harold. *Grace in Experiance and Theology.* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977.

Donham, Donald L. *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.

Duffy, Stephen. *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Antropology.* edited by Peter Phan. Vol. 3. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993.

Eide, Oyvind. *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974-85.* Oxford: J. Currey, 2000.

Eshete, Tibebe. *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009.

Gemechu, Olana. "A Church under Challenge: The Socio-Economic and Political Involvement of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus." Berlin University, 2006.

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal
Focusing on the Eternal Security of the Christian

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti