

Luther's Vision for a Reformed Church

Last week, we followed Luther to the Diet of Worms where he took a stand on the basis of the fact that his "conscience was captive to the word of God." Luther's spiritual journey: his quest to find a gracious God, had led him finally to scripture. He had tried to find assurance and "righteousness" before God by becoming a monk. He tried to follow the system of sacraments, particularly the sacrament of penance, but to no avail. God's law that demanded unconditional love continued to haunt him because, in all honesty, he knew he couldn't live up to this demand. During this period in Luther's life, God seems more like an enemy than a loving Father because he seemingly demanded a level of righteousness that was not humanly possible.

After having been confronted with the Gospel message as it was contained in scripture, Luther found an answer to his dilemma. In the writings of the Apostle Paul in particular, Luther discovered that God did not, in fact, demand that we make ourselves righteous. This idea was a dead end. In fact, the very idea that we could make ourselves righteous before God was an expression of our sinfulness and alienation from God. No wonder he continued to feel the heavy burden of guilt, and separation from the love of God. The simple fact of the human condition is this: it is not possible to please God or to obtain a reward from God by trying to obey the law through good works. For, when we attempt to do this, we find that our motivation is not to accomplish anything good for others. It is to merit good for ourselves.

What then is the Christian message regarding our status before God? If God demands righteousness, and if we can't deliver on that demand, then how do I find a gracious God? The church at that time had prescribed all kinds of works that, in theory, would accomplish the meritorious life we needed to earn God's favor. For *earn* example, there was the sacrament of penance and penitential works. There was fasting. There was adoring relics. There was praying to Saints. There were pilgrimages. And there was the radical step of becoming a monk. Last but not least, there was the option of buying an indulgence.

This was all a fool's game for the simple reason that trying to earn or obtain the love of God was itself an expression of our alienation from the very love we seek. They are all self-centered acts and not expressions of the love God commanded in any sense of the word.

What Luther discovered in scripture is that the Christian message—the Gospel, or the good news of Jesus Christ--had nothing to do with attempts to please God by doing works of any kind. Rather, it was the good news that God has given us the gift of his love in Jesus Christ and that we can receive this gift through faith. We don't make ourselves acceptable to God. Rather, God makes us acceptable, righteous, justified in his sight through his gift of love to us in Jesus Christ. Moreover, when this gift is received through faith, our hearts are changed such that we are now on a path whereby we are enabled to love god and neighbor in return.

The simplicity of this is that Luther perceived in the Gospel a role reversal. We don't first love God. He first loves us through the gift of Jesus Christ. This gift changes our hearts. It does the very thing we are unable to do. The power of God's love is what makes us righteous. The power of God's love justifies us so that our sin is not held against us. Rather, it is forgiven. And this transaction, this "marvelous exchange" takes place through faith.

And so, for Luther, what has happened is that he has come to the realization that the Christian faith is something altogether different from what the Roman Church taught. In the words of Luther's biographer Scott Hendrix:

"The purpose of religion was not longer to obtain a reward by pleasing God but to allow God to change the heart. For the heart to be changed was to receive the gift of faith, and that faith replaced the meritorious deeds that dominated medieval piety: 'I teach that people should trust in nothing other than Jesus Christ, not in their own prayers, merits, or works.'" no

This was the message his conscience was captive to and therefore this was the message upon which he set out to reform the church. This, and other sections of scripture, led to the following conclusions regarding both the theology and practice of the Christian faith.

- 1) We cannot become righteous, or be justified before God through the law. Rather, the law makes us aware of our sin and separation from God. Because we cannot do what the law demands, we stand condemned before God. This is the second or evangelical use of the law.
- 2) The righteousness of God consists in this: not that he demands meritorious works whereby we demonstrate our love for him and others. Rather, he makes us righteous, blessed, innocent and acceptable to him through the gift of Christ. He took our sin and mortality on himself when he was crucified, and he overcame sin and death on Easter morning.
- 3) We receive the gift of Christ through faith and therefore we are "justified by grace through faith."
- 4) Christ is present in faith and we experience his presence as love, peace, healing, hope and eternal life. These spiritual blessings are in Christ, and because Christ is present in us, these gifts are ours.
- 5) Therefore, the Christian faith is not about works of piety that supposedly please God. Rather, the Christian faith is about a changed heart, spiritual renewal, and the gifts of the Spirit. It is first and foremost about the abundant life we receive within through faith in Christ.
- 6) Having received the gift of God's love in Christ, we are enabled and motivated to do good works. God does not need our works. Our neighbor

needs our works. And what makes them good is that they benefit our neighbor rather than ourselves.

- 7) The gift of Christ comes to us through the Word and Sacraments. The Holy Spirit conveys the gift of Christ through these “means of grace.”
- 8) A sacrament is an outer “sign” which conveys a promise from God. Because of this, only Jesus himself can institute a sacrament for the promises of God come through him. According to scripture, Jesus institutes two sacraments: Baptism and “the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood.” In Baptism, we receive the promise of being made children of God. The sign is water. In the Eucharist, we are assured of the promise of forgiveness. The sign is bread and wine. Christ is truly present in the bread and wine because that was his promise. “This is my body. This is my blood.” Gone are the other five sacraments.
- 9) The only authority in matters of faith is scripture. However, it is important to understand that scripture does not teach on matters pertaining to things that have nothing to do with faith. For example, the picture of the cosmos presented in Genesis 1 – 3 is not binding on our conscience. Luther was no fundamentalist. What is binding is the gospel itself. Therefore, scripture should be made available to everyone.
- 10) Meritorious works were done away with. There is no need for monasteries, relics, saints, pilgrimages, or anything else thought to be meritorious.
- 11) Priestly celibacy is not only unnecessary; it is an undue burden. Moreover, marriage is a perfectly good calling from God. Therefore, pastors should not be required to remain celibate.
- 12) Ordination is a vocation, a calling to preach the word and administer the sacraments. Moreover, each Christian community should be allowed to call their own pastor without the interference of bishops or church authorities.
- 13) The worship service was reformed to include the proclamation of the word. All baptized Christians should be able to receive the bread and wine. However, the traditional service, while it is just fine, should not be prescribed as if it were a law. More spontaneous forms of worship ~~and~~ are perfectly acceptable.
- 14) The “first use of the law” is the political or temporal use. Governments are ordained by God to keep order, establish justice and insure peace and security. Governments rule through the establishment of law. The Ten Commandments are reflective of the moral law or “natural law” recognized by all people as the basis for the establishment of justice.

- 15) Therefore, God rules through both law and Gospel. In the temporal life of this world, God rules through the law. In this way, he curbs the negative effects of sin and maintains order. In the spiritual kingdom, which is eternal, God rules through the Gospel. Spiritually, we receive love, life, hope, and faith through the Gospel. This is sometimes referred to as “the Two Kingdoms.”

This is a synopsis of the main theological and practical implications of Luther’s “Reformation insight.” His books of 1520 contained many if not all of these points. This is what he was asked to “recant.” He said, “No,” based on the freedom of his conscience as informed by the scriptures.

Following this event, many other controversies arose as the Reformation era picked up speed and momentum. For example, there was Thomas Munster and the rise of the so-called “radical reformation.” These folks wanted to go further than Luther, that is, further away from Roman Catholicism. One of the key disagreements they had with Luther was on the subject of baptism. For them, baptism was a sign of faith and therefore they considered infant baptism as inappropriate. Adherents to this movement were therefore re-baptized as adults. Hence the name “Anabaptists.”

To Luther, this was absurd. The sacrament is not based on our faith. It is based on the promise of God. The promise of God comes to us as a gift whether we believe it or not. Otherwise, there would be nothing there to receive through faith if and when there was a return to God and his promises for us. It was therefore perfectly appropriate to retain the practice of infant baptism in the new Lutheran Church.

In Switzerland, several theologians came along and created what has come to be known as the “Reformed” tradition. One of their key disagreements with Luther had to do with communion. The Reformed theologians wanted to believe that this was purely a practice designed to remember Jesus’ sacrifice. The bread and wine were not the body and blood of Christ. They merely represented it. After all, Christ has ascended into heaven. He is now at the right hand of God, not in bread and wine.

Luther’s response was based on Jesus’ words in the synoptic gospels. “This is my body and blood.” He didn’t say, “This represents my body and blood.” There again, we have a promise. Jesus promised to be present in the bread and wine. This promise we receive through faith.

Therefore, coming out of the Reformation era, there were three perspectives on the Sacrament of the Altar.

- 1) Roman Catholicism: Their view was termed “Transubstantiation.” It was based on the Aristotelian distinction between “essence” and “accidents.” All objects have an essence, which designates what they are (for example, a chair) and individual accidents (for example, a “wooden” chair). When the priest says the mass, the essence of the bread and wine turn into Christ’s body and blood. However, they retain the accidents associated with bread and wine.

2) Reformed and Radical Reformers: Communion is essentially a memorial meal in remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice. The bread and wine represent his body and blood. Moreover, he is not present in the body and blood because he ascended into heaven.

3) Lutheran: The words of institution are a promise from Jesus to be present in some sense in the bread and wine. How is not relevant. We might understand this presence using the image of a pot over a burning stove. The heat from the fire is in the metal of the pot without the pot becoming something other than what it is. In the same sense, Christ is present in the bread and wine. In any case, what is important to understand is that we receive his presence through faith alone.

There were several other important issues that distinguish Luther's theology from that of the Anabaptists and the Reformed. The latter also accepted the "*sola scriptura*" doctrine. No problem with Luther here. However, the Anabaptists took this further and came to the conclusion that, in order to be a Christian, a person had to take Christ at his word and obey everything he said. This was the "imitation of Christ" idea, which persists to this day.

For example, Jesus, in the gospel of Matthew, says we should "turn the other cheek" in response to violence. Obviously, this clearly suggests a complete non-violence ethic in Christian life. Therefore, Christians should not participate in anything that requires the use of force. The military is out. Even police activity would be forbidden. They were, in fact, "pacifists."

Also, in the book of Acts, it is said that the early Christian community "held everything in common" and that there was no private property. This suggests that Christian groups need to separate themselves from normal society and become a distinct group unto themselves. This is called "separatism" and exists to this day among the Amish in places like Buck County, Pennsylvania.

Another idea that gave them their sense of identity as Christians was that "the world" was ignorant of God and lived in darkness. This idea is present in the gospel of John in particular. So obviously, real Christians need to separate themselves from the world. On a practical level, this led to suspicions on the part of the authorities—suspicions that these people represented a security risk. They were, therefore, persecuted and often hunted down and martyred by both Catholic and Protestant Princes.

The Reformed, on the other hand, believed that governments could and should rule using the Bible as their authority. Reformed theologians often occupied positions of power and tried to enact laws consistent with their view of scripture. This was particularly true in Switzerland where several of the Cantons enacted laws based on the authority of the Bible.

For Luther, all of this was based on a misunderstanding of the use of the law in the Bible. First, the imitation of Christ in a legalistic sense represents an attempt to turn the Redeemer into a lawgiver. Christ is our Savior, and we accept him through faith. Any program of imitation with respect to how he lived would and could only proceed on the basis of having first received him as the One who redeems us from sin and death. We live differently, but this is based on love and gratitude, not on obligation. Christ is not a new law. He is the Gospel itself.

Moreover, God does not require a stance of non-violence on the part of government or law enforcement. Were that the case, sin would go unchecked. Paul said as much in Romans 13. So, while we as individuals may be able to “turn the other cheek” with respect to our own safety, we should not do that when the safety of others is at stake.

Because God rules in the temporal realm of this world through law rather than through the Gospel, Christians are free to serve in the military or as government officials. Enacting laws that establish justice in this world is pleasing to God. Luther wrote a small book on this subject entitled Whether [] Too Can Be Saved.

Soldiers

This law/Gospel principle also led Luther to disagree with the Reformed idea of enacting a “Christian Government.” Government rules through law, not the Gospel. This applies to all people whether Christian or not. Moreover, it is impossible to rule through the Gospel because the Gospel is under the control of the Holy Spirit. We don’t control people in matters of faith. Only the Spirit can give a person faith in Jesus Christ. Both the Anabaptists and the Reformed are confused on this.

The Reformed responded with the idea of a “third” use of the law. The law not only established extreme control: it not only convicted us internally of our sin; it is also a guide for life. I don’t think Luther necessarily disagreed with this. However, the law can only be a “guide” for people of faith. Moreover, people of faith don’t have to be told to love God and neighbor. They do it in response to God’s overwhelming grace and love. Therefore, the primary guide to the Christian life remains the “new commandment.” “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Finally, Luther was no proponent of “separatism.” He believed all Christians had a calling to use their gifts in service to others in the world. The “world’ is ignorant of the truth of the Gospel. However, that is not a reason to withdraw. We are to love our neighbor, not ~~revoke~~ ourselves from our neighbor.

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