

Luther and the Bible 6

Luther Summer Studies 2017

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Last week we discussed the so-called “reformation insight”—that God does not demand that we make ourselves righteous in his sight but rather that he makes us righteous through the gift of Christ. He [Christ] dies to take away our sins so that they are no longer counted against us. Through faith in him, we are considered perfectly pure and righteous before him. He was raised from the dead so as to win a victory over the consequence of sin—death. Death is a consequence because sin separates us from our ability to live in the grace and love of God. Had we done that, there would be no death. Union with the eternal gives us eternal life. However, because he was raised, he is now available to live in us through the gift of the Spirit. As Luther said, “Christ is present in faith.” And because Christ is present in faith, (we don’t necessarily feel his presence but he is there in what Luther called “the darkness of faith”), we are given the gifts that he has to give.

He takes our sin, sorrow, suffering, and death, and he in turn gives us his love, forgiveness, peace, blessedness, strength and life. This Luther calls the “great exchange”, and it happens through faith.

Luther found other examples of how God shows mercy and gives promises he wants us to believe in throughout scripture. For example, the lives of the patriarchs are examples of God giving a promise that only he can fulfill, and that those he gives the promise to are called to live by faith in that promise.

The children of Israel on their way to the promised land is the same. And, their lives in the promised land were similar. The prophets gave them promises to live by all the way to the end of the age of Israel when they were promised a messiah.

We also talked about the law of God. According to Luther, there was the natural law—the Ten Commandments--and the laws that pertain only to Israel as in the holiness code in Leviticus. These laws do not pertain to Christians as Jesus so often illustrated in the stories from the gospels. This includes the Sabbath law.

For Luther, it is important to understand that Christ is the center of scripture--both Old and New Testaments. In John, Jesus is described as the Word through which all things were made. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus revealed the true meaning of the law. In the prophets, there was predicted a time of redemption. The lion will lie down with the lamb, and swords will be beat into plowshares. The law would be written in their hearts, and all would know the Lord.

Sometimes people get confused about whether or not Jesus is primarily an example. “Do what Jesus would do.” For Luther, Christ must be understood primarily as a gift.

He is begotten by God the Father from all eternity, and he becomes the gift of God that makes fellowship with God possible after sin and separation. Christ as gift is to reign in our conscience so that the message our conscience gives us does not come from ourselves. When this is the case, we will either find excuses and justify our sinful behavior, or we will feel condemned. He is to be an "alien" presence, a presence that does not originate from our own desires or wishful thinking. When he reigns in our conscience, the message and power is love, peace, and hope. Thus he creates in us what we cannot. "Christ is your own," Luther would say. Regard him as God's gift of salvation to you. Only secondarily is he an example—when we have been freed from sin and can do what he says.

This also led to Luther's notion that we are *simil justis et peccator*. We are at the same time righteous and sinners. We are counted as righteous because of Christ, what he did, and his presence in our lives. Yet, we still sin. We are not entirely transformed into his image—the goal of Christian spirituality.

In Genesis, we are said to have been created in the image of God. This image was distorted by sin. It's like we behave in ways contrary to our deep down identity. Christ restores that image. Christ's presence in us has the transforming power to make us new people, the people we were created to be.

Luther clearly understood that the words written in the Bible are not to be simply identified with the Word of God. Jesus Christ is the Word of God. The words in the Bible are testimonies by the prophets and apostles as to who they experienced Jesus to be, and they are a collection of stories (gospels) of what they saw him do and say. These are therefore testimonies of who he is. They point back to Jesus himself so that we can accurately identify who he is. Moreover, his teachings are reflective of how people behave after having been changed by him.

The letters of the New Testament were written to churches to answer specific questions they had in terms of living as the body of Christ. I Corinthians is a perfect example.

What makes the words of scripture the Word of God is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes a dead letter a living word. So, for example, the letter tells us we are forgiven. But what if we don't feel forgiven. Through the Spirit, the promise becomes a real experience.

Those who take the words of the Bible to be the literal word of God turn truth into a series of propositions. If I say that a triangle has three sides, that is a proposition. And when I understand it's true, that is because I have a mind capable of understanding its truth.

The Bible is not like that. The Bible is meant to be a proclamation that reveals who God is to us. And we know God, not through propositions about him, but by having fellowship with him. And through that fellowship, we are changed==we become children of God. The Bible is a living word.

How do we know it's true? It validates itself. How do you know a particular piece of music is beautiful, or the Yosemite Valley, or the Sistine Chapel? You know because it presents itself to you as beautiful. You don't have to argue about it or prove it. It just is.

Likewise with scripture. Its effect on us speaks for itself. When we have Christ, we know we have God because he confers divine gifts.

It's important, Luther pointed out, to understand that the literature in the Bible is of various kinds and genres. It is not possible to properly exegete a text from the Bible without knowing historical context and the genre. For example, the story covers about 2000 years of history from Abraham to Jesus.

- I) Torah – books of Moses. Includes story of freeing the slaves and giving the law.
- II) History – From conquest in Joshua, united confederacy under judges, to the kings in I & II Samuel and I & II Kings. Prophets, wisdom literature, apocalyptic.

We must also understand that the history of the Bible is Trinitarian. God reveals himself and acts in history as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Bottom line. The Bible is not a self-help book. Pastors are often asked to preach sermons that apply the texts to everyday life in this world such that people know what to do. This is not what the Bible does. Rather, the Bible is primarily a text meant to show us who God is and what God has done for us. Therefore, its primary purpose is to create faith in our hearts. That is, it is meant to lead us to Christ. For this to happen, we must approach it in humility. Look at Christ. He was never prideful or boastful. He was humble and submitted himself to the will of God.

This is the goal of the Bible's message for us. It is meant to give us Christ in such a way as we receive him through faith and thereby receive salvation from sin and death.

This does not mean it answers every question. In many cases, we are left with tensions, as for example when Job grappled with the issue of suffering.

Finally, the Bible gives us the vocabulary of prayer. Its words, its concepts, its perspective—all help us to know how to pray aright.