

Fall 2017 Luther Series 3
Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Daniel Severson

Luther's Doctrine of Anthropology

The study of anthropology is the study of what constitutes being human. In today's world, this question is addressed from a variety of points of view. There is, for example, evolutionary biology, the study of the human brain, various schools of psychology, and sociology. There is also theological anthropology, a subject that has been a formal part of theological reflection from its beginnings.

What sets theological anthropology apart from other disciplines that examine what it means to be human, or what sets humans apart from other creatures, is the fact that its perspective is centered on our relationship with the creator. For theologians such as Luther, it is not possible to fully understand what it means to be human without reference to our relationship with God. Anthropology in theological perspective understands that our being as humans is determined by how we exist in relation to our source—our creator. In other words, the nature of our being and existence is going to be characterized by our relatedness to God.

The concepts used in theological anthropology are largely derived from scripture. For example, in the first creation story, human beings are said to have been created in “the image and likeness of God.” What this means is key to our understanding of what a human being is meant to be.

The other key concept in this regard taken from scripture is “sin.” How we define the nature of what is meant by sin will also be one of the central concepts in how we understand what it means to be a human being in relation to God.

Since theological anthropology is relational in nature, that is, since theologians understand human beings in terms of their relatedness to God, theological anthropology is also going to emphasize the process of reconciliation between God and humans. For Luther, as for most theologians, that means the process of “justification” and “sanctification.” This is particularly important for Luther since the center of this theological perspective was that we are “justified by grace through faith.”

We are going to begin by looking briefly at some of the theological perspectives Luther was exposed to as a student. In general, the theology taught at the universities at that time was referred to as “scholasticism.” The scholastic theologians were heavily influenced by the then recently rediscovered philosophy of the 5th century B. C. philosopher Aristotle, especially his books on ethics.

According to Aristotle, and most people in the ancient world agreed with this, human beings were defined as “rational animals.” What that meant to them is that we have what all creatures have—passions. They didn't use the word “instinctual” as biologists do

today, but this was part of what it meant to have “passions.” Passions were like drives centered in our bodies. However, there were other passions as well—what we might call “psychological” passions such as anger, jealousy, envy, etc. Passions were irrational. They simply took possession of a person to act in ways that fulfilled that particular drive. There was no rational thought involved when a person acted on the basis of passion. They simply did what the passion drove them to do—like fulfilling an appetite.

At the same time, human beings also had the capability to reason, and could, with effort and practice, learn to control their passions by using their rational faculties. For Aristotle, the goal with respect to becoming a truly human beings was to use our reason to become virtuous. Acting on the basis of passion does not lead to a happy or satisfying life. Becoming virtuous does. Therefore, using our reason to exert self-control and develop habits of virtuous behavior would lead to a life that reflected our inner desire to become happy and to lead a satisfying life.

Notice that this perspective on human nature looks at humans from a purely individual point of view. It does not look at how we exist in relation to our creator. As already mentioned, theological anthropology is relational. It does not attempt to understand human nature part from its relationship with God.

The scholastic theologians nevertheless accepted Aristotle’s ethics up to a point. For the scholastics, reconciliation with God required both practicing virtue, as Aristotle described, and the “infusion” of grace that comes through participation in the sacraments. While they believed our rational capacities were tainted by sinful desire, nevertheless, they also believed that the image of God in us continued to function up to a point. Therefore, God required that, in addition to the need for grace, we still needed to “do our best” to be reconciled to God. The spiritual virtues in particular—faith hope, and love—were created in us by God’s grace.

This is an overly simplified version of scholastic theology. Nevertheless, it points to several ways in which it different from Luther’s mature perspective on human nature, the most important of which is Luther’s emphasis on the idea that human nature is relational and cannot be understood in isolation from that in which the human heart places its trust.

From St. Augustine, Luther learned that human beings are motivated by what they believe will make them happy or lead to a joyful and satisfying life. This has some parallels with ancient Greek philosophy, but for Augustine, reason has nothing to do with this. The human heart by nature seeks to rest in, or relate to, or possess the object believed to hold out the promise for happiness. Therefore, human nature is relational. It seeks to identify or put its trust in external objects, goals, persons, positions of power, or celebrity. What constitutes being human is our desire to trust in that which leads to happiness. It is therefore relational.

In his explanation to the first commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther said, “Faith creates God.” He did not mean that God’s existence is created by our faith. Rather, what he meant was that we can know God—have a relationship God—only by putting the trust of

our hearts in God. Human beings become who they are depending on what or who they put their trust in. Our nature is relational. We cannot understand ourselves apart from the objects in which we put the trust of our hearts with the goal of reaching our and happiness.

From a biblical point of view, this means we have a basic choice. We can rest our hearts in our creator, or we can rest them in a created object—an idol. If we believe wealth will make us happy, we will trust wealth. If we believe a certain lifestyle will make us happy, we trust in that lifestyle. If we believe power will make us happy, we trust in power. And so on, and on, and on.

Human existence is grounded in something. Whatever we trust in, that is what we ground ourselves in. That becomes the foundation of our lives. That is what creates the human self. We are not born grounded in something. This happens over time through a series of choices. We choose what becomes our identity. The current rage over ethnicity is a case in point. Now, people have their DNA traced to discover where in the world they came from. Having discovered that, they adopt their findings as their identity. This is a choice, not a necessity. While our physical characteristics will be determined by our DNA, our spiritual identity is not. If we identify ourselves as our ethnicity, this is a choice.

Biblically, human beings cannot develop into the persons we were created to be, and we cannot find rest or happiness by choosing to identify with anything other than God. This is what it means to have been created in the image of God. That image will become distorted if we choose to trust in a created object rather than our creator. In the Bible, this is called “idolatry” because it not only leads to regarding something as God that is not God, it distorts who we really are. It limits us to something that is lesser than God and therefore stunts our growth as human beings. It limits who we can become. As Luther said, “The faith of the heart creates both God and idols.”

Because putting the faith of our hearts in something other than God separates us from God, we become bound to or slaves of “sin.” Sin means “missing the mark.” When our faith is in an idol, we miss the mark--which is our source and our creator. Moreover, as Luther describes it, we become “curved in on ourselves.” To be curved in on ourselves is the same thing as to identify with objects we wish to possess and control for our own purposes. Our concern is not with other people or God. Our concern is with the thing we desire to possess.

In sum, the image of God in us can be restored only insofar as we put the trust of our hearts in God as God reveals himself in Jesus Christ—true God and true man. Sin is putting the trust of our hearts in something other than God. This results in becoming curved in on ourselves and distorts the image of God in us. Our identity as human beings is relational. It is determined by what we identify with, and this is a matter of the heart, not our ability to learn.

According to the Bible, from which Luther derives his theology, we live in a fallen world. We are born in “original sin” (Augustine) which means we are born alienated from our creator. This is the source of sin and evil in the world. Because sinners seek their own

interests, what they think will make them happy—and this to the detriment of others—the consequence is misery and death. So the question is, “How can we be restored to trust in God? How can we put the faith of our hearts in a God that we cannot see, hear, or detect in any way? How do we know God even exists?”

This is what the story of the Bible is about. The Bible records the ways in which God has revealed himself through his actions in history. We know God by what God has done among us and for us—in other words, by revelation. This we call grace.

The definitive revelation of God took place in Jesus Christ. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible spoke of this again and again in various and sundry ways. Because we could not find God, because we could not establish trust in God by our own power or strength, God appeared to us as a human being and revealed himself in Jesus Christ--in his life, death, and resurrection. Through Christ, God broke through the barriers of sin and death and established a relationship with us that is meant to overcome sin and restore the image of God in us. This was entirely a work of God. We had nothing to do with it. Therefore, we are given the gift of faith by which we are healed, restored and saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

This brings up the issue of free will. For Luther, free will is limited. We are free with respect to those things that are “below” us but not with respect to our faith in God. We are free to choose an idol. We are free to choose the things that pertain to life in this world, such as what we eat, where we live, and what we do for a living. We are not free to choose God. Rather, God chooses us.

This is illustrated in Jesus’ choosing of the disciples. He chose them. They didn’t choose him. This is true even with Israel. They didn’t choose God. God chose them, beginning with Abraham.

We can be restored to the status of Children of God; we can have the image of God restored in us only by grace. We can seek it. We can pray for it. We can ask for it. But we can’t choose it. This happens only through the gift of Christ. And Christ comes to us through the Holy Spirit. By faith, created by the Spirit, Christ enters our hearts, overcomes our sin, and restores us to the image of God. Through the presence of Christ in faith, we receive his gifts of forgiveness, new life, and hope. We thereby participate in the life of Christ through faith, and the image of God in us is restored.