

## Luther and the Bible 1

Luther Studies Summer 2017

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Martin Luther was above all else an interpreter of scripture. He was not what we now call a “theologian” in the strict sense of the term. Theology, as an academic discipline, is more properly the study of church doctrine. While theology in the Christian community is most certainly dependent upon scripture in one degree or another, it focuses less on direct interpretation of scripture and more on clarifying the meaning of such doctrines as the Trinity, the incarnation, soteriology, eschatology, and the church. Luther certainly wrote about these doctrines. However, he tended to do so in connection with specific biblical texts. For example, he wrote commentaries on Psalms, Romans, Genesis, and his most famous book, his 1535 commentary on Galatians. Seldom did he write about doctrines as such, his book The Bondage of the Will was one such example. Moreover, what Luther was very proud of was his translation of the Bible—a translation used in the German church to this day.

Luther and the Bible is a huge endeavor. His collected works include over 100 volumes of books, many of which are sermons or biblical commentaries. We can only touch on a few highlights in this regard. My plan is to look at some of Luther’s interpretive keys to scripture, and also how Luther, on the basis of scripture, understood the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. We will also look at some of his insights related to the Christian life.

I want to begin by looking at the basic ideas that Luther used in order to understand how the texts of scripture intersect with and help uncover the nature of the human condition. Scripture as the word of God is meant to be a personal address to each of us, an address that not only diagnoses our existence, as a doctor diagnoses a patient, but also provides a prescription for healing that condition. So, as we think of these, think in terms of how God addresses us as sinners in need of redemption.

The first is Luther’s insight that scripture can be divided into texts that are prescriptive—texts that prescribe actions on our part. These Luther calls “law.” The most obvious example of this is the Ten Commandments, but there are many others. The Sermon on the Mount comes to mind, or Jesus telling the rich man to sell all he has and give the money to the poor. Whenever we come across a passage that makes a demand on us, that is law.

The second is passages that contain promises from God. These are texts that tell us, not what we do but what God does. The most important example of this is the promise contained in the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. These examples Luther calls “gospel.”

What is the purpose of law in the Bible? The most common misunderstanding of this is that God's laws are given for the purpose of telling us what we have to do in order to become acceptable to God. Our relationship to God is not one that is based on law in and of itself. However, having said this, the law is in fact to be understood as the concrete will of God for our lives. We do owe God obedience. And we are expected to conform our lives to God's will for us. But before we can even consider how this can be done, we need to look at what Luther calls "the second use of the law," or sometimes, "the theological use of the law."

The second or theological use of the law is diagnostic. Were we fully reconciled to God and living in a state of grace—in union with God's love for us as God intended, then God's law could in fact function as a guide to our lives and something we would be entirely capable of obeying. In fact, were we living in union with our creator, we would not even need God's law for we would live according to God's will joyfully and in gratitude for divine love.

But that is not our existential condition. The fact is, we live in separation from divine grace and love, and therefore in rebellion against God's will for us. As is made clear in the second creation story in Genesis (2: 4a-3), we were fooled into believing we could become like God if we disobeyed and went our own way. This means that we function as autonomous human subjects, deciding for ourselves how we will live, and what we will pursue in life. We are not born as children of God. Rather, we are born with the task of creating our own identity, and with the desire to serve other things. This necessarily results in becoming "curved in on ourselves" meaning that we act on our own desires and inclinations. In this sense, we have lost our freedom. Our will is bound to what scripture calls "the passions of the flesh" (the self that exists apart from and in alienation from God).

For this reason, the law of God is beyond our capacity to obey. The first commandment serves as the basis for all the others. It requires that we love God above all things. The others require that we love our neighbor as ourselves. As people who are bound to our own desires, and who cannot free ourselves from this bondage, the commandments are impossible for us to obey.

Spiritually, this means that insofar as we take them seriously, they [the commandments] become our accusers. They disclose our sin, or rather, make us aware of ourselves as sinners who are alienated from our creator. If we had no law from God, neither would we become aware of our sin. The law then unmasks our lives. It attacks our pride, our sense of self-righteousness, and the illusion that we can fulfill God's demands, thereby making ourselves acceptable before him.

Another way of saying this is that the law makes us aware of our need for grace. Convicted of our sinfulness, we have no choice but to throw ourselves at the mercy of God. Unless we can be forgiven—free of the guilt for sins, and re-established as children of God on a new basis, we stand condemned and hopeless. And so this is the second use

of the law: it serves to expose our sin and make us aware of our need for God's mercy and grace.

On the other hand, verses in the New Testament that contain promises Luther calls "gospel". The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, and therefore the verses that describe what Christ has done for us, apart from our deserving, and based solely on God's love for us, are called gospel. Verses that communicate the gospel contain God's promises to us which are based on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

God's promise to us in the gospel is that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God accomplished reconciliation between those of us whose lives are in bondage to sin and death. Out of love for us, and because God desires to have fellowship between himself and us, Jesus bore our sin on the cross and rose again, thereby winning a victory over both sin and its consequence, death. This is entirely a work of God on our behalf.

Therefore, reconciliation with God is not something we can accomplish through works-- by trying to make ourselves righteous before God and therefore acceptable to him. Rather, God does that for us, and therefore we are made righteous before God, not by what we do but as we accept God's promise in Christ through faith. All of God's promises in scripture are tied to what he does on our behalf. Faith in those promises is how we receive God's gift, and it is this that makes us acceptable to him.

This distinction then is essential to understanding how God addresses us personally as sinners in need of the redemption he has accomplished. The law is diagnostic. It unmasks our pride and self-righteousness by demanding the very thing we cannot do. The gospel is therapeutic because it offers mercy, forgiveness, love and reconciliation as a gift. What we can't do for ourselves, God does for us.

At the outset of the Reformation, Luther's protest was eventually based on the idea that the church had perverted the gospel into law. What is a gift was made a demand. The task of becoming "righteous" before God was based on such things as doing penance, reciting prescribed prayers, funding private masses, or buying indulgences. If a person really wanted to become righteous, meaning "right relationship with God," you joined a religious order. It was a matter of meritorious behavior on our part. This is law because it pertains to things we do. In the gospel, God is the doer. We are passive. We receive the gift of righteousness from God. Therefore, what is also clear in scripture is that a right relationship with God comes through faith in what God does for us.

However, the distinction between law and gospel in scripture cannot be understood as God's personal address to us without also understanding that law and gospel are ultimately not two separate words from God, but rather constitute one Word of God. What makes the word in law and gospel one and the same is the gift of the Spirit. With the gift of the Spirit, God gives what the law demands. The law demands love for God above all else, and love for neighbor that is free of self-interest. Apart from the gift of the Spirit, we are entirely unable to live in obedience to this command. With the gift of the Spirit, we are in the process of growing in our ability to actually obey this command.

The gospel gives what the law demands in the following sense: the gospel conveys a promise and the Spirit fulfills that promise in us. For example, the Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts so that we can love God and others in return. The gospel promises us forgiveness. Through the Spirit, our conscience is freed of the burden of guilt and the accusations of the law. The gospel promises us new life. Through the gift of the Spirit, we receive this new life, and so on with the promises of God.

So, the one word of God in law and gospel frees us from the sin that separates us from God and thereby also frees us to obey God's law.

This leads us to point out another duality in Luther's interpretation of scripture, namely, that of inner and outer. The word of God is proclaimed to us either through reading scripture, hearing the word in preaching, or through the elements in the sacraments. In other words, God addresses us externally as we receive the word by hearing or participating in communion and baptism. This Luther refers to as God coming to us externally or outer.

But this can have no real transforming effect on us unless it has power to change our hearts. This Luther refers to as inner or inside of us.

Jesus refers to this when the Pharisees confront him concerning his disciples' refusal to observe the ritual laws pertaining to cleanliness. Jesus responds by saying that it's not what goes into a person that defiles but rather what comes out from the heart. Evil thought, murderous intent, and so forth. These come out of the heart, and they defile a person.

The law exposes what is in the heart by requiring love for God and neighbor. We can't simply by our own power create love in our hearts because we are in bondage to sin, or as Luther puts it, we are curved in on ourselves. But what we can't do—the impossible possibility—the grace of God can do. Through the gift of the Spirit, our hearts are changed such that we can begin to take steps in the direction of obeying the law of love. And this because by the grace of God we receive God's love into our hearts. So again, what the law demands, the gospel gives. It comes to us externally, but it changes us internally.

This leads to another of Luther's observations concerning how the word of God has a powerful effect on us. The Holy Spirit does not work in us independently of the external promise or word that comes to us through hearing or receiving the sacraments. Some people whom Luther called "fanatics" suggested that the Spirit was leading them to do certain things that were not in keeping with God's word. Luther responded by pointing out that the Holy Spirit does not testify to messages outside of God's revealed will. Rather, the Spirit works in conjunction with the promises revealed in Holy Scripture. There is one God and therefore there is one will of God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all work as one God with one message revealed through the story of salvation in scriptures. So, the Spirit confirms internally what God reveals through Christ externally.

But how does the Spirit confirm the truth of God's promises in our hearts as we receive them externally by hearing or participating in the sacraments? According to the apostolic witness in the New Testament, our salvation was accomplished in the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God. By his death on the cross, Jesus atoned for our sin such that we are no longer held accountable, and in his resurrection he won a victory over death. Therefore, salvation is in Christ. This is the promise of the gospel, and it comes to us through the word and sacraments. Therefore, it's the Spirit who conveys the presence of Christ to our hearts. What the word of God concerning Jesus tells us externally, the Spirit conveys to us internally—to our hearts. The presence of Christ as our Lord and Savior comes to us externally in the Gospel and internally through the Spirit. We receive him through faith. Thus, as Luther puts it, "Christ is present in faith."

We do not always feel or sense his presence. Luther says there is "a darkness" in faith so that Christ's presence can be veiled or hidden from us. Nevertheless, Christ is present, and because he is present, we participate in his death and resurrection. This is how God brings salvation to us. Salvation is in Christ. Paul says it this way: "It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me." And because Christ lives in us, we have salvation for he overcame sin and death on our behalf. This makes us right with God for now we live in fellowship with God through Christ.

The word for this used mostly by the Apostle Paul in Romans and Galatians is "justification." Justification means being made righteous before God. It means our sin is not counted against us and that we have become acceptable to God. Christ is our righteousness. Because Christ lives in us through faith, we are therefore justified by grace through faith.

This idea is very important to the Reformation because the Church at the time taught that justification came through a combination of grace and meritorious behavior. In other words, we earned merits which led to justification by doing penance and other works prescribed by the Church. This, as I mentioned previously, led to a perversion of the gospel by turning it into law when, in fact, it is a promise—the promise of salvation accomplished by God in our behalf through his Son Jesus Christ. We receive Christ into our lives, not by doing works of the law, but by faith in the promise. As the word of God, that promise confirms itself as the truth. Because it came from God and because, as Luther was wont to say, "God doesn't lie," there is no higher standard needed to confirm its truth. Luther said, "The word of God validates itself." This is done by the Spirit who fulfills the promise in our lives by conveying the presence of Christ. Thus by faith, we accept the presence of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Again, "We are justified by grace through faith." This becomes one of the cornerstones of the Reformation.

Another of Luther's bifurcations based on law and gospel is what he referred to as two kinds of righteousness. In order to understand this, we need to point out what Luther called the first use of the law. This will be covered next week.