

Luther And the Bible 4

Luther Summer Studies 2017

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July 12, 2017

We have covered the fact that, according to Luther, God speaks to us through scripture in law and gospel, law referring to prescriptions for behavior on our part, and gospel referring to promises from God concerning what God has done for us.

Today I want to go into greater detail concerning how the promises of God are made effective in our lives. In other words, if God's promises indicate actions on the part of God for our benefit, how are these promises made effective in terms of real changes in our lives? God's promises are not only actions God will take in the future. They relate to actions God initiates in our lives in the present so that we experience a real transformation in our lives.

First, as we have already covered, the law, being out of our reach, serves to convict us of our sin. Not only that, the law remains an accusatory influence because we remain ever incapable of obeying its demands by our own power.

If this is where it ended, we would remain condemned sinners with no hope of redemption. The law demands righteousness from us; that is measured by our ability to love God and to love our neighbor.

By the way, let me say something about what it means to love our neighbor. A common misconception of loving our neighbor is that it means being "nice" to everyone. That's not what it means. It often is the case, that because we love someone, we will need to say things that are not going to be welcome. For example, is a parent loving a child if, whenever the child is doing something wrong, simply excuses them and lets them off the hook? That is not love. Love is concerned for the neighbors' well being. That means mutual correction may become necessary if a person is engaged in hurtful and harmful behavior. Love therefore tells the truth. That can be painful because it means calling someone to repent. We need to be careful with this because we ourselves are not morally pure. Calling a person to repent presupposes that we ourselves have repented of something we've done. Also, hypocrisy is rampant in our society, especially in politics. Standing up for the truth, even for political foes, is also a loving act.

Luther refers to the communication of God's promises as the means of grace—the way in which God's promises are conveyed to us. And these means can be divided up into word and sacrament, the two basic sections of every worship service.

The first of these is the verbal communication of God's word. For Luther, the gospel is essentially something to be heard, not read (although reading the Bible is also included in this).

When we hear God's word, God is revealed to us. God is made known to us. As we pointed out, revelation has three levels.

- 1) the original revelation to prophets and apostles
- 2) the written record of that revelation (the Bible)
- 3) the proclaimed word based on the Bible

The second is the sacraments. As we already covered, Luther identified two sacraments based on certain criteria, some of which were inherited from St. Augustine.

- 1) A sacrament is an inward spiritual grace signified by an outward sign. The outward sign is a physical element to which is attached a promise from God. Also, it has to have been established by Jesus Christ himself.

A) Baptism. The physical element is water. The promise is rebirth as a child of God.

- 1) controversy over infant baptism
- 2) Not a matter of our faith, but of the promise conveyed by God. Augustine and original sin not so much emphasized, but rather the priority of the promise.

B) The sacrament of Christ's body and blood. Here too much controversy.

- 1) Catholic view
- 2) Reformed view
- 3) Lutheran view

For Luther, two things are important to understand with respect to communion, first, that Jesus said categorically, "This is my body," and "This is my blood." For him, this indicates Jesus' real presence in the bread and the wine. It's not symbolic. It's not a representation or a memorial meal. He is present. So, while philosophical speculation as to how he is present is superfluous, nevertheless, it's important to acknowledge that this is real in some sense.

Secondly, the promise attached to the meal--the forgiveness of sin--can be of no benefit to us unless, through the presence of the Spirit, we receive it through faith. Eating and drinking alone is of no account. Without faith, there is no forgiveness. With faith, forgiveness will be real.

This then also leads to the observation that there is an inner and an outer aspect to the means of grace. They come to us externally, but they are received internally through the Spirit. The Spirit is what makes them effective. When by faith the Spirit gives us internal testimony, then what the promise says becomes real. We have what it promises by faith and through the Spirit.

The main doctrine of the Reformation is usually identified as justification by grace through faith. This is central to the Reformation because, prior to this, justification or being made righteous was a partnership. We were responsible for developing virtuous behavior through practice and discipline. Based on Aristotle's ethics, the idea was that virtue is like learning a skill. After a long time of disciplined effort, it becomes second nature. We just do it because it comes easily and naturally over time.

However, it's not perfect. Moreover, the spiritual virtues of faith, hope, and love need to be given to us by grace. This happens in the sacraments of the church. These things are "infused" into us as we receive the sacraments.

For Luther, this is biblically absurd. Not only is it not possible to please God by our virtue, it makes Christ's sacrifice superfluous. It is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that saves us, not our own efforts. And this we can receive only by faith.

Externally, Christ makes us righteous by what he does. But we must appropriate this internally in the heart. This we do by faith in the power of the Spirit.

So there are two aspects to this:

- 1) Imputation (Genesis)
- 2) Through Christ's presence in faith.

What about the role of good works?

- 1) Good works as a self-centered act.
- 2) Good works for the sake of our neighbor

God doesn't need our good works. Our neighbor does. The good works don't save us. They are the fruit of faith. (Luther's metaphor of the healthy tree and the good fruit)