

Sidelights on Luther

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Preface

During the winter of 2010-11, I was privileged to be able to recuperate from nervous anxiety depression in Switzerland. There, with little more than a Bible and some daily readings in the Reformer Martin Luther, I found myself richly blessed under his faith-based ministry. The result (except one that has already appeared in the magazine *Peace and Truth*) is these studies.

I have termed them ‘sidelights’ rather than ‘highlights,’ for although they touch on the most momentous issues man can ever consider, the angle of approach is not the one usually found in books on the Reformer, and my treatment of them is neither comprehensive nor intense. The studies are meant to be an appetizer for those who do not normally have Luther on their theological or spiritual menu. With these limitations, they reveal to us a most penetrating theological mind, a heart burning with love for Christ and ordinary people, a will as resolute as any that graced the Reformation scene, and a racy Saxon style specially suited to ‘the common man.’ After three months delving into his thought and teaching, I reached the conclusion that if John Calvin was a polished rapier, Martin Luther was a sledgehammer.

If the reader finds himself edified by the studies, I will be thankful. May the Lord Himself take all the glory.

The bracketed references are to the American (English language) edition of Luther’s Works, published by Zondervan. The Daily Devotional from which they are taken is entitled ‘FAITH ALONE.’ I have occasionally changed the wording without sacrificing the sense.

John M. Brentnall

Luther's Gospel

Introduction

Lest any one should charge him with introducing new teaching devised by himself, the Reformer Martin Luther explains: "It is not my teaching . . . I did not create it in my own head. It did not grow in my garden. I did not give birth to it. Rather, it is the gift of God."

Immediately afterwards, however, he proceeds to claim that the Gospel he taught was truly his. "This Gospel is mine . . . This is my teaching . . . Luther's teaching."

"So both are true. The Gospel is mine, yet not mine, because it is God's." (Luther's Works. American Edition. Volume 23, Page 224)

His Gospel Described

What his Gospel is, and how it is both his and God's, Luther picturesquely describes while preaching on the angels and the shepherds (Luke 2.8-20). Why does Luke, he asks, call the light that shone round about the shepherds 'the glory of the Lord'? "He does this to emphasize the mystery and show us the nature of the Gospel. It is a heavenly light that teaches Christ alone." Let us carefully note this description: "a heavenly light that teaches Christ alone." This same light, he gratefully observes as the Reformation increasingly dispelled popish darkness, "shines around us through the apostles and their followers who now preach the Gospel." (52.18)

His Gospel is Joyful Tidings

To Luther's regenerate heart and uncomplicated faith, the Gospel is good tidings of great joy to all who receive it. The angels, he reminds us, does not say: 'I would like to preach to you,' but 'I bring you good tidings – I am an evangelist; my words are the Gospel.' "So the Gospel is a . . . joyful message . . . the main

message of the New Testament . . . a joyful message about Christ our Saviour . . . How can our hearts have a greater joy than through knowing that Christ has been given to us to be our own?"

To stress the need for personal appropriation, he adds: "The angel does not merely say: 'Christ has been born,' but . . . 'Christ has been born to you.'" Therefore, "what would it help me if Christ were born a thousand times, and the news of His birth was sung to me every day with wonderful music, if I did not . . . make it my very own? No matter how badly it is preached, my heart hears the Gospel with joy. It penetrates all the way through and sounds wonderful." (52.20)

However, he warns, it becomes joyful news only when we believe it. Nor is faith mere "believing that the narrative you are reading is true as written. That does nothing for anyone. Even unbelievers can believe that this Bible story about Jesus' birth is true. Faith is not a natural work, separate from God's grace . . . Rather . . . [it firmly believes] that Christ was born for you. His birth is yours and occurred for your benefit. For the Gospel teaches that . . . everything He did and suffered was for us." (52.14)

His Gospel is a Unique Message

Because it is such joyful news to every believer, and no other teaching remotely resembles it, the Gospel is unique. That is, there is only "one Gospel." "We must be careful," Luther cautions, even "when we talk about four evangelists [Matthew, Mark, Luke and John] and four Gospels." "All the apostles taught one message . . . Everything the apostles wrote is one Gospel."

The Gospel is unique, too, because it is the only news that proclaims salvation by some-one's death. "The word *Gospel* means nothing other than an announcement about God's grace, earned and purchased by Christ in His death." It is "a living word, a voice that rings throughout the whole world. It is publicly proclaimed and heard everywhere." (30.3)

When He died, this heaven-sent Saviour paid our debt to God, and when He rose again, He freed us from all obligation to try and pay it ourselves.

As we need “a Saviour who can save us from the power of sin and death,” so in mercy God sent us one. (22.24) “He had mercy on our misery, and He knew that no-one else could help us. So He sent His Son into battle” against our enemies – sin, death and hell. By dying the death we deserve for sinning against God and His Law, “Jesus . . . destroyed death;’ and having defeated these enemies, “He gave us this victory so that we can call it our own, just as if we had won it.” (28.212)

This is why “we must preach about Jesus Christ, that He died and rose again, and why He died and was resurrected . . . so that the people will believe in Him and through faith be saved. This is what it means to preach the true Gospel. Any preaching that is different from this is not the Gospel, no matter who preaches it.” (30.9) What could be plainer?

His Gospel is No New Law

Being news of sheer unmerited mercy on the part of God, Luther’s Gospel is not a new law, requiring obedience on the part of man.

“The Gospel – the most loved and comforting doctrine of all – does not focus on our works or the works of the Law. Rather, it shows us the incomprehensible, inexpressible mercy and love of God toward us who are unworthy and lost.” (26.280) “It does not tell us to do good works to become virtuous, but announces God’s grace to us, given freely and without our merit. It tells us how Christ stood as our Representative. He paid for our sins and wiped them out, so that we can become faithful and blessed through *His* work [italics mine],” not ours. (30.3)

Gospel light is thus as far removed from the darkness of the Law as heaven is from earth, and day from night. (26.115) Those who know the difference between Law and Gospel are therefore “true theologians.” They rightly regard Law-righteousness as “earthly

and human,” and Gospel-righteousness as “heavenly and divine.” In the momentous matter of becoming right with God, they have “nothing to do with the Law, works or earthly righteousness.” Instead, their conscience “keeps its eye only on the forgiveness of sins and Christ’s righteousness.” (26.115) “So, when you are frightened by the Law [i.e. because it demands full payment from us in person] you can say: ‘Lady Law, you are not the only thing . . . there is something even greater and better,’ namely, ‘grace, faith and blessing. They don’t accuse, frighten or condemn me. They comfort me . . . and assure me of my certain victory in Christ.’” (26.341)

His Gospel Requires Only Faith

Because its heavenly light already shines before us on Christ the Way, the Gospel requires from us only faith. If you begin, continue and end by holding onto Christ, Luther assures us, “you will be saved.” (24.48) Keep “an unswerving gaze . . . on Christ alone,” and you will learn throughout life to trust Him who is “the Conqueror of sin and death, and the One who gives us righteousness, salvation and eternal life.”

What, then, must we do to be saved? “Nothing but grasp Christ by faith” and say to yourself: ‘I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered, was crucified and died for me. In His wounds and death I see my sin. In His resurrection I see the victory over sin, death and the devil. In Him also I see righteousness and eternal life. I want to see and hear nothing but Him.’ This is true faith in Christ and the right way to believe.” (26.356)

To send us on our way with the joyful message ringing in the ears of our hearts, Luther bids us never forget that “the Gospel teaches everyone to trust in Christ.” So then, “glorify Christ” by holding “tightly to the testimony that was brought down from heaven,” first by the angels, then by “Jesus the Son of God” Himself. (52.18; 22.322)

Conclusion

How simple and uncluttered is Luther's Gospel! It is so unlike the false gospels contrived by man! Plainly Biblical, directly personal and joyfully infectious, it still rings out its glorious message to us: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.' Therefore, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.'

The challenging question we leave with ourselves and the churches is this: 'Is Luther's Gospel our Gospel?'

If it is, then there is hope that the Lord will bless it to us and save us from all the modern counterfeits that threaten our precious souls.

But if it is not, then both we and our churches are doomed, unless we find grace to repent and return to 'the truth as it is in Jesus,' so aptly described in the old English but very Lutheran carol:

'This is the truth sent from above,
The truth of God, the God of love.'

May we by grace be enabled to call Luther's Gospel our Gospel. May we receive its glad tidings, love and cherish it, hold it fast and bear its fruit – especially joy and peace in believing, the crucifixion of our sinful nature and practical Christian love to all, whether friends or enemies.

Learning with Luther To Live by Faith

Introduction

Whenever we draw near to God in worship, we must believe that He is listening to us and must address Him as our venerable Father and Friend. Neither right words nor a humble spirit can take the place of really believing that we are meeting Him face to face. As Martin Luther says: “We come to God through faith alone.” (22.275) This is true of every time we pray or praise. It is also true of our entire life. Because Luther knew this so well he is a safe guide in teaching us how to live by faith.

Seeking Peace with God by Faith

When Luther was a monk, he diligently sought peace with God. “I tortured myself with praying, fasting, keeping vigils, and freezing . . . but I did not accomplish anything.” This, he admitted, was because he did these things without faith. Graphically he depicts Christ as saying to him: “You did all this without me. That is why it amounts to nothing. Your works do not belong in my kingdom. They cannot help you or anyone else obtain eternal life.” So, he concludes from John 15.6, “in this passage Christ has passed a terrifying judgment on all works – no matter how great, glorious and beautiful they might appear. If these works are performed apart from Christ, they amount to nothing . . . They do not grow out of Him, nor do they remain in Him. They will not pass God’s test. As Christ says, they will be tossed into the fire as if they were rotten, withered branches . . . without any sap or strength.” (24.229) But no sooner had the Spirit of God taught him that peace with God becomes ours through faith than he gained access to the Father’s presence. (5.157)

He also discovered that not even love – the quality that the mystics urge us to take with us to God – has the power to bring us peace with God. “We should conclude with Paul,” comments Luther on

Galatians 2.16, “that we are justified by faith alone, not through faith formed by love.”

“Why cannot love contribute to our peace with God?” he asks. Because “only faith takes hold of Christ the Saviour and keeps Him in our hearts.” “This faith justifies us both apart from love and prior to love.” (26.136)

It is essential for us to learn this lesson at the outset of our spiritual pilgrimage. For no sooner are we within reach of peace with God than certain spiritual enemies try their utmost to rob us of our faith.

First, there is our deep sense of unworthiness to appear before God. Luther himself felt this. But he had a ready answer to those who say: ‘I would feel better about God hearing my prayer if I were more worthy and lived a better life.’ “If you don’t want to pray before you feel worthy or qualified, then you will never pray. Prayer does not depend on your personal worthiness or the quality of the prayer itself; rather, it must be based on the unchanging truth of God’s promise [i.e. to hear us when we cry to Him].”

Indeed, the Lord’s Prayer itself teaches us this: “You must firmly believe that He will hear you, because He is the One who taught you to pray this way.” (42.35) “We pray because we are unworthy to pray . . . A lack of faith is what condemns you.” (42.88)

Coupled with this deep sense of unworthiness are the accusations of a guilty conscience. When conscience condemns us we feel that God can never accept us. We may not be able to say why this is so, but it is because deep down we sense God’s awesome holiness and our own vile impurity.

At this point, even as we strive to break through into God’s presence, our innate legalism tries to rid ourselves of the burden of sin. We would be willing to do anything to silence this accusing voice. But, Luther replies, you have been shown the way to get rid of your sins: “When you firmly believe that Christ’s wounds and

suffering carried and paid for your sins, you throw your sins on Christ. As Isaiah said: 'The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.' (Isaiah 53.6) Peter said that Christ Himself 'bore our sins in His body on the tree.' (1 Peter 2.24) And Paul said: 'God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us.' (2 Corinthians 5.21) You must rely on these and similar verses with your whole heart. The more your conscience torments you, the more you must rely on them." Luther is so insistent on this point that he adds that if we try to silence conscience in any other way, we shall never find peace, but in the end will fall into despair. (42.12) Once more, the solution lies with faith.

Satan too has a hand in our fight for spiritual survival. "The devil is a furious enemy . . . when he cannot rout us by force, he sneaks and skulks about everywhere, trying all kinds of tricks, and does not stop till he has finally worn us out so that we renounce our faith or . . . become indifferent and impatient." (The Larger Catechism, quoted in Stephen J. Nichols: Martin Luther. 129)

Here Luther again urges us to believe. "Peter has instructed us on how to fight against the devil. It does not require a lot of running around or doing special kinds of works. Rather, it calls for nothing more than clinging to the Word through faith. If the devil wants to drive to despair because of your sin, just grab the Word of God. It promises forgiveness of sins. Rely on God's Word, and the devil will quickly leave you alone." (30.142)

Worldly companions and pursuits also play their part in obstructing our progress. They cling to us like leeches, reluctant to let us go to Christ and to live the new life that is in Him. When they find us resolved, they resort to scorn and arrogance. Luther knew something of this too. He refers us to John 15.19, where "Christ warns us . . . about the world's opposition to Christians . . . Because of this ongoing opposition, we must know how to overcome it." (24.272)

What is the cure? To live by faith, as Abraham did. When the Lord promised the patriarch His guiding presence, Abraham believed.

(Genesis 12.1ff) At God's bidding he "left his familiar homeland to look for an unfamiliar foreign country." He "started on a journey without knowing where he was going." And when "outward appearances made this seem uncertain, faith convinced him that he would get there."

So, comments Luther, "faithful people have always lived this way." Even while they participate in the affairs of this world, they see themselves as "temporary residents of a foreign land." To them, "this world is merely a hotel that they will soon have to leave. Because they know this, they do not allow themselves to become too attached to the things of this world." (2.252) Once more, it is faith that carries them forward, even where the future is unknown.

These spiritual enemies are often accompanied by a subtle foe working within; namely, our proneness to imagine "that faith is a quality that sticks to the heart on its own, with or without Christ." "This is a dangerous error. Christ should be placed directly before our eyes so that we see or hear nothing apart from Him, and believe that nothing is closer to us than Christ." Indeed, Paul assures us that He is continually present with us, living and working in us (Galatians 2.20) . . . Therefore, faith is an unswerving gaze that looks on Christ alone." (26.356)

Another subtle foe that creeps into the heart as soon as we are accepted in Christ is over-confidence. We actually imagine we are not going to sin again! Keenly aware of this snare, Luther reminds us that the righteousness we now have is not our own, but Christ's. King David received God's approval "by a righteousness completely outside of himself." It was only because of His mercy and grace in Christ that God put away his sin. So, it is only "because of Christ" that "we" too "can expect mercy and compassion, as David did in Psalm 51." Even as recipients of saving grace, we are still sinners. Thus no room remains for boasting or complacency. For when all is said and done, we are no better in ourselves than the criminal who deserves "nothing but

death” yet who the prince forgives out of mere kindness. (12.328)
Those of us who are tempted to become self-confident must never forget this.

It is clear from these initial thoughts that living by faith is no easy matter. “In the beginning it is hard to find the way. Then as we continue life becomes even more difficult.” When we “are about to reach our final shelter – heaven – it becomes extremely tough.” This is why we must never let Christ out of our grip. “If you hold onto Christ by faith, you have started in the right place. If you remain with Him, you will be walking on the right path. If you persevere to the end, you will be saved. Christ wants to pry our hearts away from trusting anything else. There is no other way, highway, bridge or path for us but Christ alone.” (24.48)

Believing is God’s Main Requirement

The more Luther unfolds the Biblical teaching on living by faith, the clearer it becomes that believing is God’s main requirement. He deduces this from the Lord’s reply to those who asked Him what they must DO to work the works of God: “This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.” (John 6.29) The only way to enjoy God’s grace, approach Him with confidence, know that the penalty for our sins has been paid, receive forgiveness and escape eternal death is to “believe in Christ. Here Christ is plainly telling us what we should do – believe.” (23.23)

Believing is both God’s Work and Ours

Yet this very believing is not a work we can perform by nature. True, it is something we must do; yet it is also God’s work in us. That is, “faith is a divine work that God asks us to do. But . . . God must give us” this “faith, for we cannot believe on our own.”

“What an excellent passage this is! (i.e. John 6.29)” he exclaims. “Like a lightning bolt, it strikes down all wisdom and righteousness . . . It lays before us . . . a work that is above and beyond us . . . Therefore faith cannot be our own work. We are drawn to Christ.” (23.23)

Believing is Opposed to Free Will

In his debate with Erasmus on the will, Luther forcefully reminds us that, simply because it is fallen, we are not free to believe at will. “Free will,” he claims, echoing Augustine, “brought us sin and death . . . So . . . anyone who thinks that by free will he can do anything says ‘No’ to Christ.” Faith and free will are diametrically opposed, and can never be reconciled. (Table Talk, quoted in Nichols. 116)

In his masterpiece ‘The Bondage of the Will’ Luther argues cogently that because salvation is the exclusive work of God, nothing we can do will ever avail for our salvation. “We are beggars,” he insists, and all that beggars can do is hold out the empty hand of faith. And that very hand is stretched out only by God’s enabling power.

Believing is Opposed to Reason

Luther’s spiritual perception is equally evident when he exposes the fallacies of fallen reason. “Reason,” he claims emphatically, simply “cannot identify God correctly.” It “knows that there is a God, but it cannot figure out which god is the true God.” This is why the Jews failed to recognize Christ. So too in our case reason “plays ‘blind man’s bluff’ with God.” It always misses the mark. “It calls something God that is not God,” and cannot identify the one true living God. It “just blurts out, calls something god, and gives divine honour to its own concept of God. By so doing, it misses the true God.” The sum of the whole matter is that “only the Holy Spirit can teach us who that God is.” (19.54)

Believing is Opposed to Unconcern

Luther strikes a further warning note when he speaks of the deadly unconcern of Gospel hearers. “People go to hear a sermon and leave again unchanged,” he bemoans. “They act as if a sermon is worth only the time it takes to hear it.” Indeed, “some people listen to sermons for three or four years and still do not learn enough to respond to a single question about faith.” The root of the problem

is clear: “More than enough has been written in books, but not nearly enough has been driven into our hearts.”

This is why we should train our children early in the doctrine of faith. “When children are old enough to begin grasping the concepts of faith, they should make a habit of bringing home verses of Scripture from church. They should recite these verses to their parents at mealtime. Then they should write the verses down and put them in little pouches or pockets. Let the pouch of faith be a golden one. Verses about coming to faith, such as Psalm 51.5; John 1.29; Romans 4.25 and Romans 5.12 are like gold coins for that little pouch.” Lest anyone should think that faith by itself is enough, they should make a silver pouch – about love and good works. “The verses about doing good, such as Matthew 5.11; Matthew 25.40; Galatians 5.13 and Hebrews 12.6 are like silver coins for this pouch.”

Lastly, should anyone think himself “too smart for this game,” let him recall that “Christ had to become a man in order to train us. If we want to train children, then we must become children with them.” So, he concludes, “I wish this kind of child’s play was more widespread. In a short time we would see an abundance of Christian people rich in Scripture and in the knowledge of God.” (53.66)

Dear friends, how many Christian fathers fail to train up their children in the way of faith! Does not this failure account for much of the unconcern, and even rebelliousness, of our children? And may it not account in a large measure for the spiritual ignorance of many church-going adults?

Believing is Opposed to Mere Assent

Some of Luther’s most decisive teaching on faith is against mere assent to divine truth. Commenting on the ‘Song of Mary’ (Luke 1.46ff), he indicates how it “strengthens our faith, comforts those who are humble and terrifies all the powerful people on earth.” It is by believing it.

Mary, he explains, is praising God for His “power, knowledge and desire to perform many amazing and great works.” Yet she did not sing it for herself alone. It is for all of us, who must sing it with her.

By believing God’s Word concerning the birth of His Son, she teaches us that we shall derive no comfort at all unless we “believe that God is capable of doing” amazing things. Even more importantly, we must believe that He “is willing to do them.” But giving mere assent to His words and believing that He can and will do them for others is “inadequate.” “This is what people who don’t fear God do.” Unless you believe that God is willing to help you, “your faith is dead. It’s like believing in a fairy tale.”

The lesson is clear: “You should not waver or have any doubts about God’s intention towards you. You must train yourself to firmly believe that He is” both “able” and “willing” to do great things for you. “This kind of faith is alive and real. It will spread throughout every aspect of your life and transform you. If you are powerful it will make you afraid. If you are humble, it will give you comfort.” Therefore, believe. (21.306)

When Faith needs to be Strong

While we need to exercise faith throughout our whole lives, there are certain times when it needs to be particularly strong. Luther identifies some of these, and helps us to see when strong believing is especially called for.

The first is when we pray. “Before you pray,” he counsels, “check to see whether you believe or doubt that you will be heard.” This advice is fundamental. “If you are doubting or uncertain, or if you are merely trying a prayer to see what happens, your prayer will not be worth anything . . . God cannot give anything to this kind of heart, just as you cannot give something to someone who does not hold her hand still.” How would you feel, he asks, if the person who had asked you for something then added: ‘I don’t really believe you will give it me, even though you had promised to do

so beforehand. You would think he was mocking you by his request . . . How can it please God when we do the same to Him when we pray? God assures us that when we ask Him for something, He will give it to us. By doubting Him, we call Him a liar and contradict our own prayers. By not believing Him, we insult God's truthfulness . . . This is why we say the little word 'Amen' at the end of our prayers. We use it to express our firm, heartfelt faith." (42.76)

Times of distress and anxiety are also times when strong faith is especially required. So, Luther exhorts, "whenever we feel distressed and anxious, let us trust Christ and strengthen ourselves with His words [i.e. John 14.1, which Luther translates as 'Trust in God, trust also in Me.']. . . It is as if Christ is saying to us . . . 'Why are you cringing? . . . Be encouraged and take heart. All is not lost, even if the devil, the world and your conscience plagues and terrifies you. You are not ruined if you do not feel my presence.'" Indeed, he adds, this is one great reason why Christ came into this world, to take away sorrow and fear from our hearts, and replace them with cheerfulness. So then, "whoever can trust in what Christ says in this passage will be in good shape and will have won more than half the battle." (24.12)

A third time that we need to trust the Lord with all our heart is when we suffer. Here Luther's teaching is most enlightening. Having stated that "suffering does not occur apart from God's will," he reminds us that "Christ wants to teach us that we should look at trials and suffering very differently from the way they appear and feel to us in this world." That is, suffering is "not a sign of His anger," but of His tender care. Just as "grapevines can grow and produce much fruit only with careful tending" by the vinedresser, so we can produce the fruits of godliness only through pruning by our divine vinedresser. If the vine could speak, it would cry out: "Oh, what are you doing . . . scraping me with those iron teeth . . . tearing and pinching me everywhere, leaving me to stand here half naked?" But the vinedresser would reply: "You simply do not understand. If I cut off a branch, it is because it is a useless

branch, which takes strength and sap away from you.” Unless I lop off this branch, “the other branches will not be able to bear fruit . . . So off it goes. It is for your own good. I am doing it so that you will yield more fruit and be able to produce good wine.” So, he concludes, “it is an art to believe that what hurts and distresses us does not harm us but improves us.” The way to face suffering is by faith. (24.193)

Besides this imagery from John 15, Luther refers us to the “unusual imagery” employed by the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 4.12-13. Here, as elsewhere, the Bible speaks of suffering as being engulfed by fire or tested by fire.” As with pruning, God’s purpose is not destructive, but salutary: “We are tested by fire just as gold is refined by fire.” Indeed, no sooner do we “begin to believe” than God tries us in order “to strengthen our faith. The Gospel is a powerful word, but it cannot do its work without trials. No one will discover its power unless they experience it.” And “the Gospel can show its power only . . . where there is suffering. Because it is a word of life, it must exercise all its power in death.” It is only through suffering that we learn by trusting that the Gospel is “stronger than sin and death.” God makes His people “experience and demonstrate” His power when they depend on His Word even while suffering. (30.126)

A final occasion when God calls for strong faith is when we are afraid of dying. “What should you do,” asks Luther, “when the thought of death frightens you and your conscience bothers you? Continue to live in Christ. You must believe that you can accomplish nothing by your own works, and that the only way is through the righteousness of Christ.”

Take David for an example. “When Nathan corrected David, and David confessed his sin (2 Samuel 12.13) . . . he did not even think about trying to satisfy God with his works.” He was already afraid of dying at God’s hand because of his sin. But “when Nathan said: ‘The LORD has taken away your sin,’ he was proclaiming the message of grace. And David believed it.”

Take Adam for another example. “After Adam sinned, he could do nothing that would bring him into a state of grace.” He realized he had incurred the death sentence for disobedience. “But God said that one of his descendants would crush the serpent’s head (Genesis 3.15). It was by this promise that Adam was made alive. Because he believed in this word, he was saved and justified without any works.”

“Our nature,” Luther continues, “struggles fiercely against being saved without our works, and tries to deceive us with a grand illusion of our own righteousness. So we may find ourselves attracted to a life that merely appears to be righteous. Or because we know we are not righteous we may be frightened by death or sin. Therefore we must learn that we should have nothing to do with any way of becoming righteous except through Christ alone.” In short, whenever we fear that God will slay us for sinning against Him, we must trust in God’s grace, and all will be well. (30.263)

After all, Luther concludes, what is the believer’s death but the planting of a seed in the ground? “If the seed could see and feel what was happening, it would fear that it was ruined for ever.” But the farmer sees the seed “as if it were already a growing plant with a beautiful stalk and tiny ears of grain. So we must picture in our own hearts that when we are buried under the ground we will come up again and grow into a new existence and everlasting life.” We must not think of ourselves “as dead and decaying, but rather as planted.” By faith we must learn “a new way of speaking about death and the grave. When we die, we are not dead . . . we are seeds planted for the coming summer. The cemetery is not a mound for the dead but a field full of little seeds . . . God’s seeds. One day they will blossom again and become more beautiful than anyone can imagine.” (28.177)

It emerges from the foregoing thoughts that true faith relies wholly on God’s Word: “We should stand firm and rest on the foundation of the Word.” (23.190) In particular, it rests on “God’s promises,” which “require faith.” (3.26) “Trusting in the promises,” believers

will find that from a “flicker” their faith will become “a great fire,” able to “devour all terror and sin.” (27.27)

Even more specifically, their faith will rest in Christ, because “all God’s promises are based on Christ.” (3.26) So, Luther concludes: “You must do nothing but grasp Christ by faith and say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who suffered, was crucified, and died for me. In His wounds and death, I see my sin. In His resurrection, I see the victory over sin, death and the devil. I want to see and hear nothing except Him.’ This is true faith in Christ and the right way to believe.” (26.356)

It would be easy to conclude from Luther’s repeated insistence that ‘the just shall live by faith’ (Habakkuk 2.4) that good works are un-necessary. But this is the conclusion of the ungodly. “When unbelievers hear about . . . God’s approval coming from faith instead of from what they do, they conclude that they do not need to perform any good works. They think they can go on sinning because faith is enough.” (15.74)

But believers know that though they live solely by faith (19.197), that faith is always fruitful of good works. “In other words, faith brings about a tree, and then the fruit (which is good works) grows.” This is because the faith that God works in the heart “transforms the person into someone who can then do good works . . . After the tree is planted – after faith in Christ makes a new person – then the works will follow. The doer must come before the work, not the work before the doer.” (26.255)

That is to say (from John 15.5) that “Christianity is not something we put on externally . . . like clothes.” Nor is it something we “adopt as a new lifestyle that focuses on our own efforts . . . Rather, Christian faith is a new birth brought about by God’s Word and Spirit . . . Once the heart is born anew in Christ, these fruits will follow: confession of the Gospel, love, obedience, patience, purity and so on.” Thus, “true Christians produce much fruit.” (24.227)

Conclusion

Perhaps Luther's comments on the words: "He believed God" (Galatians 3.6) form a fitting conclusion to his thoughts on faith: "With these words, 'He believed God,' Paul shows us that faith in God is the highest worship, the greatest allegiance, the ultimate obedience, and the most pleasing sacrifice . . . Faith gives God the greatest honour anyone can give Him," for it considers Him "truthful, wise, righteous, merciful, and all-powerful." (26.226) In short, it acknowledges that God is God. We can rise no higher than this. And so, after urging us to remain in our true callings – whether as government officials, or as mothers bringing up children, or as fathers working to keep our families, or as students in university – he concludes: "there is no other way to serve God except simply living by faith." (3.128) May this, through grace, be our lifelong experience. We have so much to learn.

‘No Master of Prayer’

Introduction

We know that the Reformer Martin Luther prayed three hours a day before beginning his round of commitments. We also know that he said: “To Pray is to Work.” A transcription of his mighty wrestling with God before the terrible ordeal at Worms is also extant. Yet he is on record as saying: “I am no master of prayer.” (12.314) In this article we shall consider some of Luther’s most emphatic teaching on prayer. It may, with God’s blessing, leave us feeling that we have never really prayed as we should. If so, may it please the Lord to make us cry constantly to Him: “Lord, teach us to pray.”

The Nature of Prayer

While commenting on one of Jude’s closing exhortations: “pray in the Holy Spirit,” Luther states with his customary frankness the nature of true prayer: “All teachers of Scripture conclude that the essence of prayer is simply the lifting up of the heart to God . . . it follows that that everything else that doesn’t lift up the heart to God is not prayer . . . The name and appearance might be there, but the essence is missing.” Prayer from the heart, however, “is the only kind of prayer that God regards.” (42.25) Let this be our first lesson on prayer.

Praying in Faith

The most prominent feature of his teaching on prayer, however, is that “prayer is the work of faith alone.” That is, not merely that “no one but a believer can truly pray,” but also that true faith believes that when we pray, God is present and listens intently to what we have to say. (24.241) Further “a good prayer that is heard by God believes that the true and faithful God . . . promises that our prayers will be answered.” (42.87) Accordingly, he counsels us to “check before you pray to see whether you believe or doubt that you will be heard . . . By doubting, we call Him a liar” (42.76), but by believing, we credit His truthfulness in promising

to hear us. (24.241) This is why we add the word ‘Amen’ to our prayers, “to express our firm, heartfelt faith.” (42.76)

The work of faith in prayer goes further. It believes that God not only hears us, but also wants to answer us, and even “to give us more than we ask for.” This being so, we must acknowledge that His “wisdom, grace, mercy and power are most certainly with us.” The only caveat he adds is that we must wait His time and way in answering our prayers. Meanwhile, we should never doubt that He “will remain faithful” to His Word. (7.174)

To strengthen our confidence, Luther rebukes our unbelief in expecting so little from such a generous God. “It is impossible,” he assures us, “for sincere, persistent prayer to remain unheard. But because we do not believe, we are not persistent enough and do not experience God’s goodness and help.” So we must pray believingly, “knowing [from Matthew 7.7] that God is pleased when we persevere.”

He is certainly able to give “more generously than we could ever ask or imagine.” (Ephesians 3.20) But through the power of an evil heart of unbelief, we both “ask for less than we should,” and do not really believe that “God is willing to give us what we ask for.” “We think small, but the Lord is great;” therefore He “expects us to ask for great things.” When we do so, He will demonstrate to us “His almighty power.” (6.158)

After all, Luther reminds us, “God has plenty of resources,” and He is “not tight-fisted.” He generously offers His children “the best gifts available in heaven and on earth.” So then, we must “ask Him for many things” and “sincerely believe we will receive what we ask for.” For instance, “when we receive what we ask for in the Lord’s Prayer we are in effect receiving heaven and earth and all they contain.” But “because we are so narrow-minded and have such weak faith” we “are in the habit of praying for trivial and insignificant things.” And to His great dishonour, “we do not take

into account the great majesty of God.” (4.364) Praying in faith would cure all these faults.

Sincerity in Prayer

While condemning certain ‘mumblings’ that are not prayer at all, Luther informs us that “God . . . wants sincere prayers that flow out of a faithful [or believing] heart.” (21.143) He draws this conclusion from our Lord’s teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6.5-6). “In this passage Jesus emphasizes that our prayers must be sincere.” That is, they must be free from all hypocrisy and false motives, such as trying to curry God’s favour or impress others present. Because “our entire lives should be devoted to God . . . whatever we do must be grounded in sincere prayer.” (21.139)

In this connection, Luther takes special note of the Lord’s complaint: ‘This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.’ (Isaiah 29.13; Matthew 15.8-9) It is not prayer when men’s “hearts are far from what their lips are praying.” It lacks all “inner feeling,” an ingredient essential to true prayer. Yet these same people go away pleased with themselves, thinking “they have satisfied God through their prayers.” This is frightening, for they both rely on this kind of praying, and never send up any other prayer to Him. By contrast, even when we are mentally confused while praying, yet “because our heart says more than the lips,” we then pray “the best type of prayer.” (42.23)

A Sense of Unworthiness

It is not inconsistent with either faith or sincerity to pray with a deep sense of personal unworthiness. We may learn this from the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18.9-14). From the latter’s heart-broken sense of unworthiness, Luther draws the lesson: “We pray because we are unworthy to pray.” Only a heart filled with such a sense of unworthiness will “risk everything on God’s faithfulness alone.” Acceptance of our prayers is not based on either “personal worthiness” or “unworthiness,” but “on

the unchanging truth of God's promise" to hear us when we cry to Him. (42.88)

Luther reverts to this theme while explaining David's repentance in Psalm 51. Here he depicts us as saying to ourselves: 'I know I am a sinner and that God hates sin. How can I pray?' This dread of meeting God face to face may lead us to "think we have to postpone praying till we feel worthy." Not so, Luther counters. "We were born in sin . . . If we had to wait till we felt pure and free from all sin before we prayed, we would never pray." The solution is to "shake off" such "unchristian thoughts." "Even while drowning in our sins, we should cry out to God, just as David did in this psalm . . . No matter how sinful we feel, we must encourage ourselves to cry out to God: 'Have mercy!'"

As a rider to these thoughts, Luther adds: "I have learned from my own experience that praying is often the most difficult thing to do . . . In fact, I admit that I have often said these words, 'God have mercy on me,' coldly. I prayed that way because I was worried about my own unworthiness. Yet ultimately the Holy Spirit convinced me: 'No matter how you feel, you must pray.'" So Luther leaves us with the comforting assurance: "God wants us to pray, and He wants to hear our prayers – not because we are worthy, but because He is merciful." (12.314)

Addressing God as Father

A particularly winsome aspect of Luther's teaching on prayer is the encouragement he offers to believers to draw near to God as children to their heavenly Father. "How should we address God?" he enquires. By "calling Him Father." This is "a friendly, affectionate, deep and heartfelt way to address Him." In fact, grace will instinctively and naturally speak to Him in this way. "That is why hearing us call Him Father pleases God the most and moves Him to listen to us . . . For there is no voice more dear to a father than his own child's voice." (42.22)

Luther re-enforces this consideration from the blessings we derive from such intimacy. Believers who "do not doubt His fatherly love

and good intentions” towards them “experience His tenderness first-hand when He reaches down to them and helps them in a fatherly way.” (7.319)

An even stronger incentive to draw near to God as our heavenly Father is found in the Lord’s Prayer. Commenting on the opening words, ‘Our Father,’ he says: “Here God would encourage us to believe that He is truly our Father and we are truly His children, in order that we may approach Him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father.” (The Small Catechism, quoted by Stephen J. Nichols in ‘Martin Luther.’ 160.) [In 1531 Luther confessed that he prayed the Lord’s Prayer every day with his children Hans and Lena. This fact reveals to us both his fatherly love and his child-like faith.]

But, adds Luther as a caution against undue familiarity, because He is such an august Father, He “insists that we give Him the respect, honour and reverence He deserves.” And because He is such a kind, benevolent Father, He “wants us to trust that He will meet our needs,” both temporal and spiritual.”

It is impossible for us to reproduce Luther’s spirituality when he exults: “we are overjoyed to be His children through Christ.” Yet we ought to grasp the encouragement that our praying this prayer “pleases the Father immensely.” (21.145)

Brevity in Prayer

Following both the precept (Matthew 6.7) and the example (Matthew 11.25-26) of our Lord Jesus Christ, Luther insists strongly on brevity in prayer. “God does not want long, drawn-out prayers,” he dogmatizes. (21.143) “We should pray with few words but with deep, meaningful thoughts . . . Few words and deep meaning are Christian. Many words and little meaning are pagan. Long-winded “mumbling and babbling” show “no respect for God,” even though to others it may sound like prayer. “The spiritual and true prayer, however . . . comes from the sighing and yearning of the depths of the heart.” This is praying “in the Spirit,

or . . . spiritually.” It is also the mark of “true believers and reverent children of God.” (42.19)

Luther re-enforces this dictum with three telling arguments:

First, as it is the Holy Spirit who prays within believers, He “knows that God is listening to Him and that excessive rambling is un-necessary.”

Second, such Old Testament saints as Elijah, Elisha and David “used few words when they prayed and came straight to the point.”

Third, the ‘Church Fathers’ “recommended short, whispered expressions of sorrow and prayers consisting of only a word or two.”

The main requirement in prayer, therefore, is not length, but faith and sincerity. “Believers . . . pray in faith because they know God has promised to hear them. They pray from the heart, revealing their agony and needs.” (21.143)

Luther’s pre-conversion experiences are never far from his mind in delivering such counsel. “I used to pray this way [i.e. long and thoughtlessly] when I was a monk. I called out to God . . . but . . . I was only mumbling words.”

But after being united to Christ by the Holy Spirit he discovered that “real prayer . . . comes from deep down . . . from a heart full of faith that realizes both the need to pray and God’s command to pray. Both these truths [along with God’s promise to hear] should inspire you to pray and to think carefully about the words prayed.” Those who “pray routinely . . . are not really praying, for they do not even know what they are saying.” In sum, “a real prayer does not require a lot of words.” Indeed, “it often involves long, deep sighs, without any words at all.” (6.111)

Special Times for Prayer

While stressing our need to pray at all times, Luther singles out certain times when prayer is most urgent: in times of trouble and in the heat of temptation.

1. In Times of Trouble

It is true, he admits, that the ungodly cry to God when they are in serious difficulties; but their prayer is nothing but a cry of despair motivated by self-preservation. When their trouble has passed, they no longer call on God. To the godly, by contrast, praying in times of trouble is just part of their habitual prayer life.

Take King Hezekiah for an example. When the Assyrian invader attacked Jerusalem, ridiculed him and insulted his God, though the situation seemed hopeless, yet, “instead of losing hope, Hezekiah went into the temple, spread the” blasphemer’s “letter before God,” and in deep self-abasement “prayed a heart-felt prayer.” And he was heard and delivered.

From this good king’s example, Luther draws the lesson that praying in times of trouble is a habit formed by “a lot of discipline.” Instead of torturing ourselves “with anxiety and worry,” and focusing on how to “get rid of the problem . . . we should get into the habit of falling on our knees and spreading out our needs before God the moment we have an emergency or become afraid. Prayer is the very best medicine there is . . . if only we would use it.” (21.232)

Luther takes up the same strain while commenting on Psalm 118.5 and Psalm 142.2. Here he virtually shakes us out of our lethargy: “Get a grip on yourself . . . Fall on your knees, and raise your hands and eyes to heaven. Read a psalm. Say the Lord’s Prayer . . . tell God what you need!” After all, “God knows you are too weak to overcome your troubles by yourself. He wants you to grow strong in Him. Then He will be the One who receives the glory.” Many, he warns us, “talk a lot about faith and the Spirit,” but because they have never been sifted by afflictions, they do not know “what they are saying.” They are strangers to the psalmist’s testimony: ‘He answered by setting me free.’

The root of all our problems in prayer is lack of faith. “You must never doubt that God knows your troubles and hears your prayers.”

If you do, then “it would be better not to pray at all!” (14.60) This curt and final answer is designed to stop every complaint and give ourselves to prayer.

2. In the Heat of Temptation

With equal urgency Luther urges: “You must pray when you are in the heat of temptation – when your mind is pre-occupied with thoughts of lust or revenge.” Such a time is critical; for then we make the excuse: My mind is “too impure” to commune with God, “as if your dirty thoughts leave no room for prayer.”

With customary curtness, Luther dismisses the excuse. “You must not wait for temptation to end or the thoughts of lust and other sins to totally disappear . . . before you pray.” In fact, “at precisely the moment when you feel the temptation strongest and are least prepared to pray, go to a place where you can be alone” and “pray the Lord’s Prayer or any other prayer . . . to defend [yourself] against the devil and his temptations. Then you will feel the temptation decrease.” His closing dictum is most practical: “the time when you feel your sins the most is exactly the time when you most need to pray to God.” (12.318)

The Difficulty of Prayer

In view of Luther’s keen awareness of both the vigour of indwelling sin and the power of temptation, it does not surprise us to learn that he found prayer difficult. The very fact that King David asked the Lord to open his lips (Psalm 19.14) indicates “how difficult it is to offer thanks to God,” not least “because the devil is constantly trying to stop us” honouring Him. After all, praising and thanking God “opposes the devil, the world, our own sinful nature, and everything evil.” (12.393)

Among other obstacles to prayer that render its faithful exercise difficult are distracting thoughts. Unless we guard our prayer life carefully, they will make us postpone prayer “for another half hour or another day” or till we have finished a task we had begun earlier. “This common obstacle shows us how maliciously the

devil tries to trick us.” He also “has an influence over our bodies, which are so lazy and [spiritually] cold that we cannot pray the way we want to. Even if we do begin to pray, we become distracted by useless thoughts and lose our concentration in prayer.” Here Luther’s self-knowledge echoes that of every believer.

Again, so subtle is sin and self-deception that the very sense of unworthiness that should drive us to pray can become an excuse for postponing prayer. “How can you pray to God?” we tell ourselves. “You are too unworthy and sin every day. Wait until you are more devout . . . This serious obstacle crushes us like a heavy stone.” There is only one remedy: “our hearts must struggle to remove this obstacle, so that we can freely approach and call on God.” (24.385)

Luther repeats his warning against putting off prayer ‘to a more convenient season’ elsewhere. “It is good,” he counsels, “to let prayer be first in the morning and last at night. Be on guard against false, deceitful thoughts that say: ‘Wait awhile . . . First you must finish this or that.’” Such thoughts turn us away from prayer altogether; whereas “we should pray continually. Christ says: ‘Keep on asking, seeking and knocking.’ (Luke 11.9-11) And Paul says: ‘Never stop praying.’ (1 Thessalonians 5.17) Necessary work, which usually is not necessary anyway,” should never keep us from calling on God. (43.193)

Even when “our own urgent needs should be enough to make us pray . . . our sinful nature . . . an enemy of prayer,” makes us “indifferent to what God says and the good life He gives us . . . Every day our sinful nature hangs around our necks and drags us away from prayer.”

“The world is also an enemy of prayer. It is so envious that we have faith and God’s precious Word that it refuses to put up with any of it.” Consequently, it “condemns us, tries to take away what we have, and gives us no peace.”

“These are the two enemies of prayer: our sinful nature and the world.” The one tries “to decrease our desire to pray;” the other tries “to chase us away from prayer. All we can do” to overcome them “is to continue crying out to God.” (21.230)

In view of these formidable obstacles to the most spiritual exercise of our lives, let no-one say that prayer is easy work!

The Parts of Prayer

Like many before and after him, Luther divides prayer into five parts: confession, supplication, intercession, thanksgiving and praise.

1. Confession

Luther begins here because sin is such a serious thing, and as we are all guilty of it, we cannot be right with God without confessing both our sinfulness and our particular sins to Him. “Whether people believe it or not, no agony, pain, or burden could be worse than feeling all the evil that lies within themselves. The evil they do not feel is even greater and worse than the wickedness they do sense. For if people were able to feel all their evil, they would get a taste of what hell is like.” In His mercy, however, God “hides” much of “our wickedness from us. He wants us to see it only through the eyes of faith.” (42.125)

This is why He ordained confession. As King David discovered after his sin with Bathsheba and against her husband, we must see our sin in the light of God’s mercy; otherwise, we shall never confess it aright. “Even while drowning in our sins, we should cry out to God, just as David did in this psalm. (i.e. Psalm 51) . . . No matter how sinful we feel, we must encourage ourselves to cry out to God: ‘Have mercy!’” (12.314)

Furthermore, we must never try to hide our sin from God, for “hiding from God,” which we all do by nature, “is the essence of sin.” And unless God calls us back into His presence, as He did Adam, we “will keep on trying to hide from God.” And so we try

to justify ourselves with lies, and pile one sin on top of another. In the end we reach “open hypocrisy and deep despair,” and accuse God of causing our sin, rather than place the blame on ourselves.

For example, “Adam should have said: ‘Lord, I have sinned!’ But he did not do this. Instead, he blamed God.” Like Adam, we all “are guilty of sin,” but “do not acknowledge it.” “Our human nature allows us to do nothing else.” Yet because sin is an infinite evil, we should confess it to God. (1.175)

Even if we do not blame God for our sin, we blame others. We are so “bad, evil, and full of sin” that we place our own “guilt on other people’s shoulders.” If only we would admit our sin, we would be forgiven, “and would find that God is merciful. God would not deny us anything if only we would crawl to His cross.” (22.319)

True to himself, Luther places sincerity at the heart of all confession of sin. The incident of the woman caught in adultery (John 8) leads him to reflect on insincere and sincere confession. There are many, he claims, who imagine “they haven’t sinned notoriously,” and so “refuse to admit that they are sinners.” Yet they still use the language of confession. “I used to act like this when I was a monk. I would say: ‘Today I did nothing evil. I was obedient to my superior. I fasted and prayed. Therefore, may God be merciful to me.’” This is insincere confession, and “Christ does not want sinners who refuse to admit they are sinners.” But when we confess “real sins,” which “break God’s law,” we need “genuine forgiveness.” (23.316)

One last great consideration that should spur us on to confess our sins is that “the sweet aroma that comes from a humble, groaning heart pleases God.” Though we may feel as if we are dying, the Lord will not crush or extinguish us. Rather, He will strengthen us and even make our spiritual lives “glow brightly,” as he did Joseph’s. (7.174)

2. Supplication

A superficial reading of Luther might lead us to think that he regards supplication as the chief part of prayer. But this is not so. The truth is, he felt his need and dependence on the Lord for everything – both spiritual and physical – so keenly that he is always asking, begging and pleading for something or other.

This is one reason why he valued the Lord's Prayer so much; because "all blessings, all that is useful, and everything else that people need for their bodies and souls on earth and in heaven overflow from this prayer." (42.21) So we should pray the Lord's Prayer often: it implicitly promises to provide all we shall ever need.

When we discover that we cannot believe what God promises to provide, we should "ask God for faith," like the father of the demon-possessed boy (Mark 9.24). "For" even "the ability to believe is in God's hands alone." (42.13)

We must also realize before we ask that our heavenly Father is a magnanimous God. He "wants to give us more than we ask for, not just fulfil our weak prayers." This is why "Paul is absolutely correct when he says that God 'is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine' (Ephesians 3.20)." (7.174)

3. Intercession

Luther rightly places intercessory prayer in the context of loving our neighbour as ourselves. As 1 Corinthians 13.5 teaches, "love is not self-seeking." So "if we have not died to ourselves . . . how can we seek what is best for others?" (30.269) Following Christ's own example of His love for us, we should show love to our neighbour "in a tangible way." (24.251) After all, "your neighbours are not devils, lions, bears, or wolves . . . They are living beings who are much like you." Luther even goes so far as to say: "Nothing in the whole world is worthier of our love than our neighbours." (27.57)

A significant expression of this love is intercessory prayer. Luther himself spent many hours in prayer for the cause of reform, which he knew was the work of God; for Germany, his fatherland, so long crushed by the burdens imposed by Rome; for his family and friends, who were very dear to him; for poor papists, that they might be delivered from thralldom; and for the Anabaptists, that they might be saved from their fanaticism.

4. Thanksgiving

Clearly, thanks are due to our Maker and Provider for everything. Yet “only a few devout people notice what God has done. Most people don’t praise God or thank Him. They never say: ‘Great are the works of the Lord.’ (Psalm 111.2) Though they are completely surrounded by His gifts, they have got used to them.” So they spend their lives “rooting around in God’s gifts like a hog in a bag of feed.” They see nothing special or thankworthy in the sun shining every day, fire giving them warmth, the ocean yielding fish, the earth giving grain, cows producing calves, hens laying eggs, and women giving birth to children. “These things happen every day!” And so they withhold the thanks that God deserves. O, he bemoans: “How ungrateful and blind people are!” He even resorts to ridicule at their ingratitude: “However, if a clown can walk on a tightrope or train monkeys, people are ready to admire and praise him for it.” Yet they do not thank God for His bounty. Still, the “great works of the Lord . . . are appreciated” by “God’s faithful followers.” (13.366)

5. Praise

Luther takes up the same strain when he considers praise, severely upbraiding both himself and others for withholding praise from God. “We should be ashamed that . . . we need to be prodded into praising God . . . We are showered with blessings every day, and we are always using what God gives us. Why do we need to be continually reminded of the wonderful things God does for us? . . . God’s gifts alone should inspire us to praise God. But this does not happen. We have to be yelled at before we start praising the Lord.”

One major cause of our neglect is thoughtlessness. “We all use God’s blessings every day, but we never think about where they come from – God. He is the One who gives us everything.” Even animals acknowledge the hand that feeds them. But if we Christians need to be shamed into praising Him, “how can the world be expected to do any better? It’s astounding how unwilling people are to acknowledge what God has done for them and to praise Him for it.” (14.111)

We should follow the example of Mary, the mother of our Lord. In her response to the angel’s message (Luke 1.46-48) “Mary put things in the right order . . . First, she called God her Lord. Next, she called Him her Saviour. Then she proclaimed what God had done. By doing this, she teaches us to love and praise God for who He is,” and for “His goodness. We should find joy and pleasure in who He is. This is an exalted, pure, and tender way of loving and praising God.”

Now follows a severe but just rebuke: “By contrast, some people are only parasites, always expecting to get things from God. They don’t love or praise God because He is good . . . By doing this, they prove that they don’t find joy in God their Saviour.” They love the gift rather than the Giver, the creature rather than the Creator. (21.309)

The Lord Jesus Christ and Prayer

Two aspects of prayer come to the fore in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ: praying through Him as our Mediator and praying to the Father in His Name.

1. Praying through Christ as our Mediator

Because “we were all conceived in sin” and are now “so horribly corrupted by” it that we cannot approach God, we need the Lord Jesus Christ as our Mediator. (22.155) “We come to God through Christ alone.” (24.32)

2. Praying to the Father in the Name of Christ

On several occasions, Luther reminds us, the Lord Jesus Christ promises that His heavenly Father will grant our requests when we ask in His Name. (e.g. John 14.13; 16.23) Why does He make such a promise? Because, on the one hand, He is God, who can and will give us everything we need. “Why else should Christians pray in Jesus’ Name?” he asks indignantly. On the other hand, through superstition we are so prone to “call on saints as helpers in times of need – Saint George for protection in war, Saint Sebastian for protection from pestilence, and on others for other circumstances.” People actually believe, he says incredulously, that “these saints will answer their prayers.” “But Christ claims this role for Himself . . . He is the One who can help in every situation . . . He is mightier than the devil, sin, death, the world, and all creation. No being – whether human or angelic – has ever had or ever will have such power.” Therefore we should ask only in His Name. (24.89) Armed with such an almighty Saviour, how can the Christian fail to prevail with the Father for all he needs?

A Word to the Prayerless

Luther is under no illusions about those who claim to be religious but never raise their hearts to God in prayer. Because “Christ commands us to pray” and “admonishes us” for neglecting prayer, he says: “If you do not pray, you risk the greatest disgrace and the highest penalty;” for His command is as serious as the command “that prohibits worshipping any other gods and blaspheming God’s Name.” Therefore, “those who never pray should know that they are not Christians and do not belong to God’s kingdom.” He then remonstrates with the prayerless in the strongest terms. “Don’t you think that God has good reason to be angry with idolaters, murderers, thieves, blasphemers, and others who despise His Word? . . . Why then aren’t you afraid of God’s anger when you disrespect His command and confidently acts as if you were not obliged to pray?” (24.389)

Conclusion

Luther's teaching on prayer is timeless. It springs from a heart trained to pray by the eternal God, who sees all His people's needs at one glance. This is its great value for us. We have the same needs, He is the same God, His Son is the same Mediator, His Spirit is the same Intercessor within. Let us then lay this teaching to heart and practice it in our lives. Perhaps in His sovereign will the Lord will grant us another Reformation such as Luther experienced.

‘Our Dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’

Introduction

Martin Luther’s God-given penchant for personal application surfaces nowhere from the depths of his Spirit-taught heart more prominently than when he identifies the Lord Jesus Christ as “our Saviour” and “my Lord,” or, more fully and tenderly, “our dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (22.14) Not to know Him as our Saviour and Lord is not to know Him at all. We may believe in His divine Sonship, death, resurrection, ascension and heavenly session, yet still remain strangers to Him. To know Him “in the right way” is to know Him as the One who “delivers us from sin and death . . . reconciles us to the Father, makes us godly, and saves us apart from our own works.”

Therefore we must not think of Him as He is in Himself, but as “He belongs to us.” For “God sent Him” into this world “to proclaim the truth and win us over, so that all who believe in Him would be saved.” (30.29) That is: “your salvation does not depend on the fact that you believe Christ to be the Saviour of the godly, but that He is a Saviour *to you*.” (Sermons. 1905. 1.21)

This element of personal appropriation stands at the heart of all Luther’s writings on the Lord Jesus Christ. Around this central sun he fixes His birth, life, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection, ascension and second coming. For they all serve one prime purpose: to show us HIS glory in such a way that we might believe on Him and be saved. “Everything points to Christ.” (22.167)

The Only Way to Salvation

Because everything in the Gospel narrative “applies to this one person, Christ,” He “must be everything – the beginning, the middle, and the end of our salvation . . . He is the first, middle, and last rung on the ladder to heaven (Genesis 28.12). For through Him we must begin, continue, and finally reach the life beyond.” As “there is only one Christ,” there is only one way to salvation.

“There is no other way . . . bridge, or path for us than Christ alone.” “So if you hold onto Christ by faith, then you have started in the right place. If you remain with Him, then you will be walking on the right path. If you persevere till the end, then you will be saved. Christ (in John 14.6) wants to pry our hearts away from trusting anything else.” (24.48) In brief, “your salvation does not depend on the fact that you believe Christ to be the Saviour of the godly, but that He is a Saviour to you.” (Sermons. 1905. 1.21)

Trusting Christ as the only way to be saved rules out trusting anyone or anything else.

Among the substitute saviours that Luther identifies is seeing God apart from Christ. This was the misplaced aim of the Pharisees. In their confrontation with Him, recorded in John 8, “the Pharisees wanted Jesus to place the Father right before their eyes . . . Otherwise, they would not believe . . . But Christ pointed them to the Father’s testimony, not so that they might see and touch the Father, but so that they would believe . . . Christ does not show us the Father the way we might want Him to. Rather, the Father shows us Christ, who says: ‘The Father points you to Me, not the other way round.’ . . . This is the main point . . . we should always keep Christ before our eyes.” (22.345)

Luther implicitly rejects the same error while expounding John 14.1 – ‘Trust in God; trust also in Me.’ “If you want to invest your faith and trust in the right place, where it will never fail, then invest in me. For all of God lives in Me . . . If you want to meet God, then take hold of Him in Me and through Me. If you have Me, you have the Father also.” “So,” he warns, “whoever tries to go around Christ will not meet the true God. God is completely in Christ and places Himself in Christ for us.” (24.33)

The substitute saviour that Luther condemns most is our own works. Time after time he anathematizes it, knowing how deeply rooted it is in our fallen nature. While expounding John 14.6 – ‘no man comes to the Father but by Me’ – he states categorically:

“Christ clearly rules out and powerfully disproves all teaching that salvation can be obtained by works . . . Salvation can be obtained only by a faith that clings to Christ. No work of ours – or of any other person or saint – can have this same honour . . . Only through Christ do I come to the Father.” (24.52) From Galatians 2.20 he educes that “the phrases ‘Son of God,’ ‘loved me,’ and ‘gave Himself for me,’ are thunder and lightning from heaven against the idea that we are saved by good works.” (26.175)

He is equally exclusive while preaching from John 6.53 – ‘Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.’ “Some scoundrels say: ‘Your teaching is correct, but ours is also correct.’ . . . They create many ways to receive eternal life, including praying to the saints, worshipping the Virgin Mary, or living in a monastery. But none of these ways can achieve eternal life. Christ excludes all other ways [but faith in Himself.] They are all unacceptable.” Always reluctant to drop the subject, he adds (probably recalling his own thunderstorm experience when he cried for help to St. Anna): “I may call on St. Mary or Saint Peter, but they cannot help me . . . Life, grace, and salvation come to us by faith alone and not by good works.” (23.136)

Not even the most self-denying asceticism can save us. Taking John the Baptist as the one on whom many sought to model their life-style, Luther forcefully reminds us that “John is a servant . . . not the Lord . . . John points us to the true Light and leads people to it, but he is not the Light.” After thanking God for giving us John, he firmly rejects the imitation of John as a way to salvation. “I will not depend on John to save me. I cannot rely on his holiness, ascetic life, and good works.” Never forget that John himself “admitted that he was not the Messiah,” but rather directed sinners to “the Lamb of God.” “So,” he concludes, “if John’s holiness, ascetic life, strange clothes and food, and refusal to drink wine cannot help me obtain eternal life and salvation,” then “no lesser saint can help me.” (22.64)

The solemn, sobering truth is that we all “have been plunged into sin by the devil,” and “only the Lamb can lead us out.” “You cannot pay for your own sins” any more than Peter and Paul could pay for theirs. “There are no exceptions. Therefore do not listen to your own thoughts. Listen to God’s Word. It promises forgiveness of sins to anyone who believes” in the Lamb. Christ, not works, is all our salvation. (22.168)

The Believer’s Privileges

The believer who by grace has gone to Christ for salvation, and through Him to God, enjoys many privileges.

1. To be reckoned righteous

The first of these, claims Luther, is to be reckoned righteous before God. This momentous truth shines with a rare warmth in the Reformer’s famous letter to his friend George Spalatin: “Now, I would like to know how it is with your soul, if it has . . . learned to despise its own righteousness and seek comfort and joy in Christ’s . . . Dear brother, learn Christ and Him crucified. Praise and laud His Name, and despairing of self, say to Him: ‘Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, and I am Thy sin. Thou hast taken what is mine and given me what is Thine.’” (Letters. 1908. IV.) This ‘Great Exchange’ – my sin for His righteousness – is the privilege of every believer. Once discovered and possessed, it is the joy and peace of each new-born soul; for as Luther says: “In Him we find a trustworthy and complete righteousness.” (27.85)

This righteousness, which is none other than the righteousness of God, is so complete that Luther uses the term ‘purity’ to describe it. Through faith alone, believers are “covered by the purity and innocence of Christ,” even when “because of our sins we are never as clean and holy as we should be.” God’s Word, our Baptism and Christ’s blood, received by faith, render us “absolutely pure” before God. Take this covering from us, and “we would be left” in our spiritual nakedness “with nothing but sin.” (12.366)

2. No need to try and win God's favour

The second great privilege of having Christ as our Saviour is that we no longer need to strive to keep the Law to find favour with God. From his study of Romans, Galatians and Colossians, Luther speaks of “many passages” in which “God has fulfilled all the requirements of the Law in Christ . . . Christ is the fulfillment of the Law.” Therefore, “the person who holds onto Jesus by faith will receive forgiveness of sins [transgressions of the Law]. God’s laws will be fulfilled, death [the penalty for transgression] and the devil – the original Law-breaker and instigator of all our Law-breaking] – will be overcome. That person will receive the gift of eternal life. For in this one Man, Jesus, all is settled. He has fulfilled everything. Whoever accepts Him has everything.”

Applying this to himself in his customary way, Luther continues: “When I feel anxious about sin and hell, I remind myself that when I have Christ, I have all that is necessary. Neither sin, death nor the devil can hurt me. If I believe in Christ, I have fulfilled the Law; it cannot accuse me.” (23.28) What a relief to a sin-burdened conscience this privilege can be is known only to those who experience its power.

3. Holiness

A further privilege Luther enumerates is the purity of holiness wrought in believers through their “renewal . . . by the Holy Spirit.” The new creation produced by His regenerating work transforms every part of us – mind, affections, will, physical senses and conduct. Consequently, we form new judgments of everything, set our affections on new objects and choose a new way of life. Neither are these changes merely verbal or fictional; they are “real changes,” affecting every part of us.

How this is so Luther proceeds to explain. “Formerly, when our hearts were blinded by error in teachings from Rome, we imagined that God was a salesman who sold His grace in exchange for our works and achievements. Now, however, since the light of the Gospel has dawned, we know that we are credited as righteous

only by faith in Christ. So we “throw out all self-chosen works” and perform only the works of our calling and of love, “which God commands . . . This is what Paul meant by a new creation” [in Galatians 6.15]. (27.140)

In delineating the features of our new life in Christ, Luther is quick to stress that the chief beneficiary is our neighbour. He who considers the second table of the Law (Mark 12.31) as the abiding demand of his God will love his neighbour as never before. He will not think of him as a devil, a lion, a bear or a wolf, or even as a piece of stone or wood; but as one who needs and is worthy of our love. (27.57) So he will proceed to love and care for him in practical ways. (52.26; 27.54)

Though it affects every part of us, and demonstrates its reality by love to others, this new purity is far from perfect. The remains of indwelling sin to which Paul refers in Romans 7.23 are very active in us, and greatly mar our purity. Nevertheless, God assures us that “any remaining sin is not counted against” us. (26.235) Deeply humbled by it, believers continue through life to “struggle against sin,” especially their “evil inclinations” and “evil desires.” They “have life,” but not “complete health.” (30.68)

So then, believers must never forget that though they are “righteous through faith,” they are “still sinners.” (27.230) Their purity is real, but very imperfect.

4. Other Privileges

Only mentioning such further gracious privileges as Christ making us His friends (John 15.15); that is, those whom He befriends (24.256); answering our prayers (John 14.13) (24.89); and enabling us to face death victoriously (1 Corinthians 15.56-57) (22.355 and 28.212); we notice finally the culmination of all these previous privileges, that of seeing Christ face to face, being conformed to His likeness and dwelling with Him for ever.

At His Second Coming, all the dead shall be raised. Resurrected believers and living saints will “all be taken up to the Lord.” “In one moment” they shall be transformed, given “beautiful eyes” with which to see Him and each other as glorified. (51.252) This momentous event shall prove to be “pure comfort and joy” for them. Nor should we doubt it. “Christ will resurrect and draw us to Himself as easily as a person waking out of sleep.” (28.114)

Christ’s own victory over death, depravity and the devil already ensures our victory. Therefore we should hold it “in our hearts with firm faith and strengthen ourselves with it . . . and sing about it as we travel along joyfully till the day when we experience it in our own bodies.” (28.212; 22.24)

Neither shall God go back on His Word. “Nothing could be more certain than” this “eternal life.” After all, “we know that Abel, Enoch and Elijah are living with God – even with Christ Himself.” He is the first-fruit of those who slept. (1 Corinthians 15.20,23) So, just as the earliest believers “eagerly anticipated eternal life because they knew that Abel and Enoch were living with God, we have an even greater anticipation because we know that Christ has already come and has gone back to the Father to prepare a place for us.” (1.348)

In the light of such inconceivable privileges, how then should believers live? “As guests . . . travelling through this land to another city – their true destination. When they arrive there, they will no longer care about the places where they stayed along the way; for throughout their journey they were always thinking: ‘Today, I am a guest on the earth . . . but tomorrow I will proceed on my way to an eternal life in the kingdom of heaven, where I am a citizen.’” And “when they come to the end of this life, they will let go of everything physical and enter a spiritual life that shall never end.” (22.290) Thus, the “seed planted in the ground” when the believer’s body dies “will blossom again and become more beautiful than anyone can imagine.” (28.177) And we owe all these privileges to Him.

Our Saviour's Life and Work

To Luther, all that the Saviour did, suffered and taught during His mission of mercy in this world, and all that He continues to do in glory, and all that He will do in future and throughout eternity, was for us. His birth, life, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection, ascension, heavenly session and second coming were, are and will be for us.

1. His Birth

A favourite text of Luther's is 'unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.' (Isaiah 9.5) Accordingly, he dwells lovingly on the Incarnation of the Son of God.

His hymns, 'From heaven above to earth I came' and 'Beside thy cradle here I stand' are classic examples of his devotion to the infant Saviour. They possess a rare and winsome naivety.

His advent sermons, too, are full of the truth that Christ was born for us. "The right kind of faith . . . that flows from grace and . . . God's Word . . . firmly believes that Christ was born for you. His birth is yours and occurred for your benefit." From Luke 2.10-11 (the angel's good tidings) "you can clearly see that He was born for all of us . . . For you! . . . This joy is for everyone who has this kind of faith." (52.14) Though it was "a dark night for Bethlehem" when He was born, for "no one noticed . . . what God was doing in that stable," yet those who believe will realize that His holy birth was God's answer to our sinful birth; for "Christ willed to be born that through Him we might be born again." Thereupon he lets out his consistently held conviction: "Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times . . . if I were never to hear that He was born for me?" (Sermons. 1905. I. 138, 143-4, 149) Surely Luther's faith is just the kind of faith we need.

2. His Life, Teaching and Miracles

When he speaks of our Redeemer's life, teaching and miracles, Luther is concerned to present Him wholly in a Biblical light, as a divine Person in a human nature. (15.292) Though "we can never

fully grasp” the awesome fact that ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1.14), “nevertheless we must believe it, and . . . cling tightly to what Scripture says about it. The Bible says that Christ our Lord is true and natural God and true and natural man.” (22.21) Therefore His whole life is a display of His divine nature, veiled in human flesh. It is God, too, who is teaching men, for “God the Father gave His Son the words [for example] of the Lord’s Prayer, and sent Him to introduce it.” (21.145) Likewise, all His miracles are the works of God, revealing His power through frail human nature. Suffice to add: we need such a Saviour – One who can sympathize with us in our human infirmities, because He too is man, and One who is powerful enough to overcome all our enemies, especially sin, death and the devil. (22.24)

3. His Death

In view of the full satisfaction our Saviour gave to the Law, especially in its penal demands, Luther loves to dwell on the title ‘Lamb of God.’ For “He, He and no-one else, either in heaven or on earth, takes our sins on Himself.” (Sermons. 1905. I. 132)

John’s directive to look to the Lamb (John 1.29) shows us how impossible it is for us “to try to get rid of sin by obeying God’s laws. What does work is stated in this verse and in Isaiah 53: ‘the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,’ and ‘for the transgression of my people He was stricken.’ (verses 6 and 8) Everything points to Christ.”

Therefore the godless, who hope to dispose of their sin by “pilgrimages and good works, are blind.” They simply cannot see that “Holy Scripture” does not lay the world’s sins on the world, nor John’s sins on John, nor Peter’s sins on Peter. “Rather, the world’s sins were laid on Christ. He is the Lamb of God. He stepped forward to become a sinner for us, to become even sin itself [that is, by imputation], and to act as if” He were guilty. “The Lamb’s mission, role and function were to take away the sins of the world. The Lamb carried them all.” (22.167)

How did He achieve this? Our merciful Father “put all the sin of all the people on His Son and said: ‘You will be Peter, who denied me; Paul, who persecuted, blasphemed and acted violently; David, who committed adultery; and the thief on the cross . . . Make sure you pay for these sins and make atonement for them.’” And as He offered Himself to do so, the Law said: ‘I do not see sin on anyone else except Him. Therefore He must die on the cross.’ Then the Law grabbed Him and killed Him.” In this graphic personification, Luther places before our eyes the slain sacrifice that God demanded, provided and accepted on our behalf. (26.280) Reckoning our sins to His account, He extracted the ransom price for our release from His own dear Son. (26.175) Therefore, begs Luther, “hold onto Him by faith . . . remain in Him” who destroyed our death by His death, and so secured our victory over it. (22.355)

4. His Resurrection

Just as we must look to Jesus as crucified for us, so too we are to look to Him as risen for us. Having crushed sin, death and Satan in battle, He emerged from the field victorious. Therefore “we also” who believe “can sing: ‘But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Corinthians 15.56-57), praising God for this victory.” So never think you can conquer sin and death by yourselves, but rather cling to Him who shares with you the victory He has won. (28.212) Only by faith in His resurrection can we overcome death. (28.177)

This is the comfort that the apostle Peter sets before us (1 Peter 1.3): “God has given us a new birth to a living hope through Christ’s resurrection . . . These are genuinely evangelical words that must be preached. May God help us.” How little of this truth we find outside Holy Scripture, he complains, even in Jerome and Augustine. “Therefore we must preach about Jesus Christ, that He died and rose from the dead, and why He died and was resurrected. We must preach so that the people will believe in Him and through faith be saved.” For good measure Luther characteristically adds: “This is what it means to preach the true Gospel. Any preaching

different to this is not the Gospel, no matter who preaches it.”
(30.9)

5. His Ascension

Having left His disciples in no doubt as to the truth of His resurrection, the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving us His Holy Spirit to act in His place. In the Lutheran Church calendar, His ascent into heaven is celebrated particularly for the promise of His spiritual presence: He left us in order to remain with us. “He does not sit idly in heaven, but is continually present in us. He is working and living in us . . . Galatians 2.20.” (26.356)

6. His Heavenly Session and Intercession

Though Luther does not develop the mediatorial offices of Christ to the same extent as Calvin, he nevertheless looks to Him both as our triumphant King and our Great High Priest.

Just as He created the universe, so He sustains it. As the Father’s co-worker, He “will continue to rule . . . everything and everyone . . . till the end of the world.” The thing to remember is that He rules for us, His Church. (22.28)

Luther’s view of our Saviour’s Priestly work is also experientially orientated. He is particularly concerned to console the troubled believer. “Do not despair after you have sinned, but lift your eyes upward, where Christ intercedes for you. For He is your Advocate and Intercessor. He pleads for you, saying: ‘Father, for this man I have suffered. I am looking after him.’” This intercession is always effectual, because God Himself appointed Him our High Priest (Hebrews 5.10). “So, reach out to Him and say ‘Lord Christ, I know of no other advocate, comforter and mediator but you alone. I do not doubt that you are all this to me. I cling firmly to it, and I believe it.’” Just as “Christ was born for us” and “suffered for us,” so too “He ascended into heaven for our sake, sits at the right hand of the Father, and prays for us.” (30.235) And where would we be without Him? “If we did not have Christ as our

Mediator, God would have nothing to do with us.” (3.26) How thankful then we should be for His continuous mediation.

7. His Second Coming

True to his consistently practical approach, Luther does not try to delve into apocalyptic teaching as the Anabaptists did. He simply looks for the Saviour, who promised to come again and receive His people to Himself. When He does come, all believers shall “be taken up to the Lord together at the same time . . . We will all, at the same time, be drawn to heaven,” where “we will be lighter than the birds and much more beautiful than the sun.” (51.252) May this ‘taster’ of the Reformer’s anticipatory faith and hope stimulate us to look and long for the appearing of our great God and Saviour.

Conclusion

In this article we have merely touched the surface of Luther’s relationship to his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Let us close our account with a personal confession from the Reformer himself. “Though everyone else may abandon me and leave me lying in ruins, I will still have an eternal treasure that can never fail me. This treasure . . . is Christ – the way, the truth and the life . . . I will hold to this, live by this, and die by this.” (24.52) And by the grace of God, so he did. May we believe He will give us grace to do the same.

Why We Need the ‘Solas’

Introduction

Martin Luther is not merely a key figure in the unfolding of events in the Protestant Reformation; he also played a major role in moulding its ideas. “Perhaps more than any other person, Luther shaped the presuppositions that define Protestantism.” (Stephen J. Nichols) These presuppositions are known to scholars in their Latin form as the five Reformation ‘solas’: ‘sola Scriptura’ = ‘Scripture alone’; ‘sola fide’ = ‘faith alone’; ‘sola gratia’ = ‘grace alone’; ‘solus Christus’ = ‘Christ alone’; and ‘soli Deo gloria’ = ‘to the glory of God alone.’ That they each find their place at the root of Luther’s thinking is sufficient testimony to the seminal role he played in their fuller development by later Protestant theologians. In this short study we will consider why Luther thought we need these ‘solas.’

Scripture Alone

We begin where Luther begins, with ‘sola Scriptura,’ the formal principle of all Reformed teaching. We need ‘sola Scriptura’ because in this dark world of spiritual blindness, “the only reason we can see at all is that the light of God’s Word shines brightly (2 Peter 1.19).” Without that light “we would not know or understand anything.” (6.148) Luther hammered this truth as firmly into his hearers’ minds as he hammered the Ninety-five Theses onto Wittenberg Castle Church door. At every opportunity, he calls us away from the spurious claims of Rome, reason, mysticism and the sects, back to the written Word of God. “We must learn to depend on the visible Word of our invisible and incredible God” (5.183), for “faith . . . does not judge . . . by what it sees or feels but by what it hears. It depends on the Word alone.” (Sermons. 1905. I. 23)

Indeed, the only reason we know that God is present with us is “through His Word.” To trust in it is to trust in Him. So, he

resolves: “God’s Word alone will be my rod and staff.” (12.169) “I will live by what it says.” (22.6)

Luther’s heroic stand at Worms can be explained in no other way. In danger of his life from the Roman Catholic emperor Charles V as he recalled John Hus at the Council of Constance; opposed by the papal nuncio Aleander, ready to thunder Rome’s anathemas against him; barely supported by Germany’s petty princes, hesitant and uncertain of the outcome; Luther refused to be intimidated. When called on to recant, even when no heresy had been proved against him, he replied: “I am bound to the Scriptures . . . my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” The Bible alone was his sheet anchor during this Satanic storm, as it was throughout his entire life.

Faith Alone

Luther hammers home our absolute need of faith as vigorously as he does our total dependence on Scripture. Let us not imagine, however, that with him ‘sola fide’ was nothing more than belief in God and assent to the articles of the Christian creed. No, it is especially the personal appropriation of Christ and God’s gracious promises in Him, as given to us in Scripture.

1. Appropriating Christ

Forceful convictions mingle with child-like tenderness in Luther’s teaching on appropriating Christ. “Of what benefit would it be to me,” he cries, “if Christ had been born a thousand times . . . if I were never to hear that He was born for me?” (Sermons. 1905. I. 149) By contrast he gently affirms: “My sweet Redeemer is sufficient for me. I shall praise Him all my life.” (Letters. 1908. XXIV)

But whether forceful or gentle, Luther is always pointing us – both preachers and hearers – to Christ alone. In preaching, “Christ should be placed directly before our eyes so that we see and hear nothing apart from Him.” In hearing, “faith is an unswerving gaze that looks on Christ alone.” (26.356)

What could the snake-bitten Jews do to heal themselves? He asks vehemently. Nothing! Moses commanded them to look at “the bronze snake, which points to Christ (John 3.14) . . . with an unswerving gaze. Those who did so were healed.” Those who did not, but “looked at their wounds instead . . . died.” So too, we must not pore over our own sins, but “do nothing but look to Him.” In Him we see our sins dealt with by His death, and our victory over sin, death and the devil secured by His resurrection. “This is true faith in Christ and the right way to believe.” (26.356)

2. Appropriating God’s Promises

Since “all God’s promises are based on Christ,” to appropriate them is to appropriate Him. There is no basic difference between Abraham’s faith and ours. The only difference is that “Abraham believed in the promised Christ who was still to come. We believe in the Christ who has already come. We are all saved” through “this same faith.” (3.26)

“The Holy Spirit” holds God’s promises “before us so that” we “may find refuge and comfort” in them when we sense God’s anger against us, or when we are assailed by “serious doubts . . . such as: ‘What if God does not want me to be saved?’ . . . When our consciences are troubled in this way we must continue to believe the promise of salvation – a promise we can trust in and depend on . . . We must hang onto God’s promise, because if Satan can prevent us believing it, then we have nowhere else to turn. We must hold tightly to the promise and be ready for the times when God will test us.” (4.93) From Joel 2.15, he adds: “It is wonderful to see the way the Holy Spirit works. He highlights the threat in order to show us the goodness and mercy of God.”

When God-fearing people hear the Word, they apply these promises to themselves in the right way. “Disheartened and crushed by God’s anger and threat of punishment,” knowing “they deserve divine judgment,” and recognizing “the seriousness of sin and its condemnation . . . when they hear these promises they turn to God’s mercy,” and He calms their consciences. This is the way

God works in His people. After terrifying them “with threats, He comforts them with His promises.” (18.97) And it is the faith He has given them that appropriates these promises for their deliverance.

This kind of faith, and no other, Luther claims, is sufficient for our salvation. Therefore “we should conclude with Paul [in Galatians 2.16] that we are justified by faith alone . . . faith that takes hold of Christ the Saviour and keeps Him in our hearts.” (26.136)

As if to strike one last hammer blow on behalf of faith alone, Luther concludes that without it we cannot understand the Lord’s dealings with us at all. But faith “will comfort me” even “when I leave this earth . . . My body will be buried in the ground and eaten by worms . . . When I look at death I do not see God’s plan for me. Yet God has promised that I will come back to life. Christ said: ‘Because I live, you will live also’ (John 14.19). But how will I live? I will live in eternal life, in a body that is brighter and more beautiful than the sun. I cannot see or feel any of this yet. But I believe it, and I can tolerate the short delay.” (6.401)

We need ‘sola fide,’ then, because faith is the only thing that lays hold of Christ in the promises of the Word for our salvation.

Grace Alone

Luther has as much to say in defence of ‘grace alone’ as he has about ‘faith alone.’ Indeed, he sees it operating in every part of the believer’s life. As with other 16th century Reformers, he divides Scriptural teaching on it into two parts. The first is God’s objective grace, or free, unmerited mercy towards us. The second is His subjective grace infused and working in us.

1. Objective Grace

Objective grace opens the door to our justification. “People are not justified and do not receive life and salvation because of anything they have done. Rather . . . because of God’s grace through Christ. There is no other way.” Those who are tired of hearing this great

truth because they learned it when young barely understand how important it is. “If it continues to be taught as truth, the Christian Church will remain united and pure,” for it “alone makes and sustains Christianity.” It is so essential that “we will always remain its students, and it will always be our teacher.” Those who really understand it “hunger and thirst for it. They yearn for it more and more. They never get tired of hearing about it.” (14.36)

Grace is so necessary to our justification that “wanting to be justified by our own works through the Law is . . . throwing away God’s grace . . . This is a serious error.” From Galatians 2.21, he infers that to reject salvation by grace alone also makes “Christ’s death . . . pointless, which is the highest blasphemy against God.” (27.240) It is only “because of God’s mercy and grace” that sinners are accepted by Him and receive from Him a righteousness not their own. (12.328)

This constitutes the glory of the Gospel. “It does not tell us to do good works to become virtuous, but announces God’s grace to us, freely given and without our merit.” (30.3)

2. Subjective Grace

Grace becomes subjective when it is infused into sinners’ hearts by God’s Holy Spirit in their new birth. This is the grace that actually unites them to Christ and makes them new creatures. “We cannot feel the new birth . . . we cannot see it . . . we cannot . . . understand it.” Yet it is real, and “we must . . . believe it. What is born of the Spirit is spiritual.” Because it is so, its primary benefit is eternal life. (22.290) Just as after Adam sinned he could do nothing to restore to himself the life he had forfeited, so we too can do nothing towards our restoration to God. (30.263) God Himself must restore us. This makes subjective grace absolutely necessary.

Once God’s grace has been infused into us, Luther continues, it does marvellous things. For a start, it enables us progressively to keep God’s Law, which we could never do before. He who

“brought God’s grace and truth” to us (John 1.17) really enables us to keep the commandments. Being “enlightened by the Holy Spirit, renewed by the Word of God, and having faith in Christ,” we who believe now have “a new spirit that makes God’s Word and God’s laws a pleasure to obey.” Moreover, as we proceed through life, it is the same grace that enables us to “find joy in trusting God above everything else.” (22.143)

It is grace alone too that deals with the darker side of the believer’s life. When cast down by sin, fear and doubt, he finds grace at hand to uplift him. Even when, like the psalmist in Psalm 42, “you see only the Law, sin, terror, sadness, despair, death, hell and the devil . . . grace is present when your heart is restored by the promise of God’s free mercy . . . Are not grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, comfort, joy, peace, life, heaven, Christ and God also present?” Therefore, say to yourself: “stop being troubled, my soul . . . Trust God.” “Whoever truly understands this [i.e. by experience] can be called a theologian.” Grace is thus so necessary that we must be “diligent students” in its school “as long as we remain in these sinful bodies.” (26.341)

Finally, when this sin-troubled life is over, it is grace alone that gives believers the victory over death. We do not win it. Rather, it is given us “out of God’s grace.” Christ secured it for us, and we share in His victory over it. (28.212)

From foundation stone to topmost stone, then, the house of salvation is built entirely of grace. Luther states why we need both grace and faith in one sentence: “If grace or faith is not preached, then no one will be saved, for faith alone justifies and saves.” (27.48)

Christ Alone

‘Christ alone’ is the next ‘sola’ that Luther dings into our dull ears. How greatly we need it is evident from the knowledge God gives us of our legalistic, self-righteous hearts. From a wealth of

available sources, we select a small sample to illustrate his firm conviction of its necessity.

In a letter defending his attack on papal indulgences, he writes: “I teach that man must trust solely in Christ Jesus.” (Letters. 1908. London. XXI)

While expounding John 3.16, he says: “God gave His Son to the lost so that they might be saved. Then what should you do? Nothing! Don’t go on pilgrimages. Don’t do this or that good work. Instead, simply believe in Christ alone.” (22.374)

A leading aspect of the Holy Spirit’s testimony within the believer is that “Christians can depend on nothing except Christ, their Lord and God.” (24.119)

From the expression: ‘of His fullness have all we received’ (Colossians 2.10) Luther deduces that we need no-one else but Christ. Whether our faith is strong or weak, we “have the same Christ” and “are all made perfect through faith in Him . . . Whoever accepts Him has everything.” (23.28)

In such varied ways as these, Luther proclaims a thousand times the sole saving efficacy of Christ. Having done on our behalf all that God requires, He alone can be our Saviour. “There is no other . . . but Christ alone.” (24.48) Here is reason enough for us to hold onto the principle of ‘solus Christus.’

The Glory of God Alone

By his constant insistence on believing, it may be suspected that Luther places man’s salvation above God’s glory. But it is not so. Luther teaches that God is glorified more in man’s salvation than in his damnation. This is why He Himself – by His prophets, His Son and His apostles – repeatedly beseeches them to come to Him. So, concludes Luther: “Glory belongs to no-one but God alone.” (Sermons. 1905. I. 156)

Chief among Luther's thoughts on how to honour God is that we should hold His Name or character in the greatest reverence. When His Name is "holy in us . . . God becomes everything, and we become nothing." (42.27) Everything that threatens to usurp this unique honour is anathema to him.

Inevitably, Luther ascribes equal glory to each Person of the Godhead. All the Father's glory belongs to the Son, who is "one God together with the Father. Likewise the Holy Spirit has the same divine nature and majesty." (22.6) When by grace we give God His due, we glorify all three Persons of the Godhead.

The same honour must be given to all God's attributes or perfections. Singling out His goodness and mercy for special treatment, Luther is most practical in showing us how to honour God because of them. When, for example, we read that the Lord is good (Psalm 118.1) we should not "skim over" this truth "quickly or irreverently," but should "remember that these are vibrant, relevant and meaningful words that emphasize the goodness of God." Pausing to ponder them should lead us to realize His inclination to do us good "from the bottom of His heart." He punishes people only because of their "wickedness and stubborn refusal to change." His "daily and continual goodness" should draw from our grateful hearts the praise and thanks He deserves. (14.47)

Luther makes a special point of encouraging us to "reflect back on the years of our lives." Even when we are bewildered by what has happened to us, we should be able to see "God's wonderful power, wisdom and goodness" guiding us. "Only when we look back do we fully realize how often God was with us when we neither saw His hand nor felt His presence." But as Peter says: 'He cares for you.' (1 Peter 5.7) Luther is so insistent on this practice that he says: "Even were there no books or sermons to tell us about God, simply looking back on our own lives would prove that He tenderly carries us in His arms. When we look back on how God

has led and brought us through so much evil, adversity and danger, we can clearly see the ever-present goodness of God.” (42.130)

As for His mercy, it is the balm of every sin-burdened and guilt-ridden heart. When we by faith hide beneath His mercy seat, we find ourselves “covered with a vaulted ceiling called mercy.” So, resolves Luther, setting us an example: “My heart and conscience will crawl under it and be safe.” (51.278)

True to character, Luther extracts from the angels’ song at the birth of Christ (Luke 2.13-14) two delightful lessons for us.

“First of all, by joyfully singing about the honour of God, they show how full of light and fire they are.” Furthermore, “they don’t take credit for anything. They enthusiastically give glory to God, the One to whom it belongs. If you wonder what a humble, pure, obedient and happy heart in God is like, then think of the angels praising God. This is their priority as they live in God’s presence.” Secondly, they show us how much they love us, because “they celebrate our salvation as if it were their own.” So we should “regard them as highly as we would our best friends.” “We might not know what they are made of,” he concludes with childlike simplicity, “but we know what their highest desire is.” So we should imitate them in praising and honouring Him. (52.29) Charles Haddon Spurgeon said that not one stitch in the garment of salvation is sewn by man. For this reason God should be given all the glory for it.

Conclusion

Even from the few select references we have offered, it may be clearly seen that the five ‘Reformation Solas’ – Scripture, faith, grace, Christ and God’s glory – are internally united and therefore inseparable. This is because the mind of God as revealed in Scripture is one. We need them because all other ground is shifting sand. When the Holy Spirit combines them in our experience, we too cannot think of one without referring to the rest. This is the aim of all true theology – to think God’s thoughts after Him, and

so be conformed to His mind. May He accomplish this in us, that we might live by them, and be able to teach others also.

Is This Hair-Splitting?

Introduction

Partly through his pre-conversion scholastic training, but chiefly through his God-given spiritual discernment, the Reformer Martin Luther cannot help making distinctions. Many today would decry this as theological hair-splitting. Because they hate precise definitions that condemn their 'jelly-fish' way of thinking, they prefer to float on a sea of vague mystical feelings that teach us nothing. Luther, however, shows us that distinctions are necessary and valid, because they are made by God Himself. When He distinguishes things that really differ, we are to take note and adopt the same distinctions.

God bestowed this gift on His servant with a view to his life's work: to pull down in men's hearts the rotten edifice of Rome, and to build them up in what to believe and how to live. The purpose of this article is to bring some of Luther's more important distinctions to our notice, and to show us their practical bearing on our faith and lives in today's confused world.

Distinctions within the Godhead

Luther inherited the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity from the tradition in which he was reared. Yet he never assumes that we do not need to be reminded of it. To hold it faithfully is to avoid two opposing deadly heresies: that of Sabellius, who "claimed that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all one person;" and that of Arius, who "divides the nature of God into three parts."

The true Christian Faith, however, confesses "the individuality of the persons and the indivisibility of God's nature. The Father is a different person from the Son, but not a different God." So too is the Holy Spirit. (52.48) "So you should say: 'Even though I cannot completely understand it, I believe and confess that there is one eternal God, who is also three distinct persons.'" This is how God reveals Himself in His Word. (22.6)

The main practical implication of this distinction is that we are to honour the Father for purposing, the Son for accomplishing, and the Spirit for applying salvation. When we do so, we enjoy true communion with each person of the Godhead.

The Distinction between the Two Natures of Christ

“You already know,” Luther reminds us, “there are two natures in Jesus, but there is only one person.” These two natures, “the human and divine, are inseparable, and they are united in one person.” So they each “keep their character.”

Yet Scripture attributes the characteristics of one nature to the other.

For instance, to die is human, but [on the warrant of Acts 20.28] “we can say: ‘God became a man. God suffered. God died,’ even when we know that God cannot die.”

So too we are warranted [on the basis of John 3.13] in saying that “Christ can come from heaven and yet be in heaven.” However foolish human reason considers this truth, “you must believe it, for all Christians dare to believe what Jesus says.” (22.322)

This is the only way to speak correctly about Jesus, that His “two natures reside in one person,” the Person of the Son of God. (22.491)

This, adds Luther, is the kind of Saviour we need: One who in our very nature “can save us” from the power of “this world’s god . . . sin and death.” While giving full acknowledgment to His true humanity, therefore, Luther lays the emphasis on Christ being “the true eternal God, through whom all believers receive God’s approval and are saved . . . Because He is God’s Son,” infinitely “better than Moses, Elijah, Isaiah or John the Baptist,” He is “able to reclaim and free us from our sins,” which He did “when He shed His blood” for us. The truth of “Christ’s deity . . . gives us wonderful comfort.” (22.24)

Despite the absence of developed explanations in Luther such as Calvin provided in the next generation of Reformers, he does point us to the Man to whose human sympathy we can appeal and the God on whose almighty arm we can lean. After explaining the opening of John's Gospel, he concludes: "This keeps us from having doubts as to who the Son is. We can know and believe that our dear Lord and Saviour, born of the Virgin Mary, is also the real, true, natural God . . . together with the Father and the Holy Spirit." (22.19)

The Distinction between God's will and ours

We must settle it at the outset that God's will wholly prevails over ours. "A fierce battle has been raging in the world" over this issue "since the very beginning." It is still raging. (24.260)

In his debate with the Roman Catholic humanist Erasmus and in his treatise *The Bondage of the Will* Luther argues that salvation is exclusively a work of God. Consequently he stresses man's total inability to save himself. Man's will is impotent, but God's will is potent. As recorded from his table talk, Luther is emphatic on this: "Free will brought us sin and death." God's will brings us righteousness and life. So, we must do full justice to the Biblical teaching that ascribes all in salvation to the will of God. (Stephen J. Nichols: *Martin Luther*. 2002. 114-116; 5.157)

The Distinction between Law and Grace

Commenting on John 1.17 – 'for the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' – Luther tells us that "we need to learn how to clearly distinguish the laws given through Moses from the grace that came through Christ . . . We need to know precisely what purpose each one fulfils so that we don't become confused."

This distinction is no quibble about words. It is a matter of life and death. "I was confused about" it "myself for over thirty years. I just could not believe that Christ wanted to show His kindness to me." But when God showed him the difference between them, he

realized that merely “out of grace and kindness He brings us the forgiveness of our sins at no cost to us whatever.” (22.145)

Let it be laid to heart that “the Law . . . cannot . . . produce a new birth . . . It does not make us children of God.” (26.351) But God uses the hammer of the Law to “smash us to pieces” and crush our self-righteousness. Then after “the conscience has been terrified in this way by the Law . . . the teaching of the Gospel and grace . . . restores and comforts” it. (26.314) Hidden from us during our distress, “the merciful Father saw that we were oppressed by the curse of the Law and held under it.” So “He sent His Son into the world” to be a curse for us, and thereby show us His “incomprehensible, inexpressibly mercy and love.” (26.280)

The Distinction within the Righteousness of God

Inseparable from the distinction between Law and Grace is that between the attribute of righteousness in God that condemns sinners and the righteousness He has graciously provided for them. The latter is the spotless obedience of Christ, wrought out on their behalf. Its discovery proved to be the turning point in Luther’s life.

He describes it as follows: “We [i.e. my fellow monks and I] believed and taught that no matter what people do, they can never be certain of God’s kindness and mercy . . . [but] when I realized that it was only through God’s grace that I would be enlightened and receive eternal life, I worked diligently to understand what Paul said in Romans 1.17 – a righteousness from God is revealed in the Gospel. I searched for a long time and tried to understand it again and again. But the Latin words for ‘a righteousness from God’ were in my way. God’s righteousness is usually defined as the characteristic by which He is sinless and condemns the sinner. All the teachers except Augustine interpreted God’s righteousness as God’s anger. So every time I read it, I wished that God had never revealed the Gospel. Who could love a God who is angry and who judges and condemns us?

Finally, with the help of the Holy Spirit, I took a closer look at what the prophet Habakkuk said: ‘The righteous will live by his

faith' (Habakkuk 2.4). From this I concluded that life must come from faith. I therefore took the abstract to the concrete level, as we say in [theological] school. I related the concept of righteousness to a person becoming righteous. In other words, a person becomes righteous by faith. That opened the whole Bible – even heaven itself – to me!" (5.157)

At least two lessons emerge from this momentous discovery:

1. How necessary it is to have a faithful translation of the Word of God! Jerome's Latin Vulgate fettered Luther to the dread of an angry God. How thankful we should be for the Authorized Version, the best translation in the English language.
2. Finding a righteousness bestowed by a gracious God is the opening of heaven to us sinners. It does not condemn us, but accepts us as righteous in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a perfect covering for our sin, and a perfect warrant for our standing before God. O that God's people would value it above all other righteousness; for it is the very righteousness of God!

The Distinction between True and False Repentance

When men hear God's command to repent, they respond in one of two ways. They repent either sincerely or hypocritically.

"Laban is a good example of a hypocrite pretending to repent." (Genesis 31) "Deep down, he didn't really repent. His sorrow was only an outward show." King Saul is another (1 Samuel 15.24). In the same way, "unbelievers often pretend to be truly sorry and say they are going to change the way they think and act, but inside they know it's a lie."

By contrast, "when David admitted he had sinned (2 Samuel 12.13), it was entirely different. He and Saul may have used the same words and tone of voice and showed the same remorse, but their motives were "quite different."

So too, when unbelievers say they are sorry for their sins, their sorrow is merely an expression of disappointment that they cannot

continue sinning. “They do not really want to change their behaviour.”

Sincere penitents, on the other hand, “aren’t concerned about being humiliated and disgraced in front of other people [as Saul was] as long as they know that God is on their side.” (6.42) They possess what is lacking in false penitents: “a broken and contrite heart.” For the message that brings life and God’s approval holds out His mercy and pardon to us, which sincere penitents receive with joy.

Both David (Psalm 51.1,17) and the self-condemned tax collector (Luke 18.13) exemplify this sincerity. It enables and “encourages us to believe that God is on our side even when we feel abandoned and distressed.” (12.405) How important this distinction is may be seen from Jesus’ own comment on it. The tax collector went down to his house justified, whereas the Pharisee remained self-condemned.

The Distinction between True and False Faith

Similarly, when men hear God’s call in the Gospel to believe on His Son, they are divided in their responses.

“Genuine faith” looks to Christ alone as He is placarded before our eyes. (26.356) It applies Christ to the soul’s felt need, saying: ‘I believe that Christ suffered and died for me.’ (8.192) It “changes people. It makes them see everything in a new light,” the light of God’s Word. It is “active, profound and powerful.” (2.266) It believes, trusts and honours the Word.” (52.32)

By contrast, false faith does not look to Christ alone. (26.356) It does not change people, but leaves them where it found them, “deaf, dead and in a state of decay.” (24.264) It does not produce good fruit. (24.227) It does not make them pure in heart and life, through faith in God’s Word. (21.37) Yet those who have it still expect God to accept them for “the good they do.” (1.257)

The Distinction between Faith and Good Works

In view of his momentous discovery of justification by faith alone, Luther finds it necessary to clarify the relationship between faith and good works. Accordingly he says: “We are used to speaking about faith in two ways. We sometimes speak about faith apart from works, and at other times we speak about faith accompanied by works.” This is “how the Holy Spirit speaks in Scripture.”

“When the Scripture speaks absolutely, about justification,” faith is “not connected to other things.” Rather, it stands alone. But when the Scripture speaks relatively, that is, in relation to the way “we live it out,” then faith cannot help producing good works, because it expresses itself through love (Galatians 5.6) This explains why the Spirit of God in Psalm 34.14 commands us to ‘turn from evil and do good.’ “There are countless verses like this in Scripture,” which “always speak of ‘doing in faith.’” Therefore, “if you have faith, then you are able to do good works.” (26.264)

Referring to those who are not satisfied with serving the Lord and other people in ‘common’ life as “false Christians,” Luther tells us that the reason why they cannot understand Jesus’ teaching about the branches and the vine (John 15.5) is that they believe that such works as joining a convent, lying on the ground, wearing sackcloth and praying night and day are the only good works acceptable to God. “Raising children, doing housework and other ordinary chores aren’t part of a holy life.” “But in this passage Christ says that the only works that are good fruit are those accomplished by people who remain in Him. What believers do and how they live are considered good fruit – even if these works are more menial than loading a wagon with manure and driving it away. Those false believers can’t understand this.” “But there is a big difference between a believer’s works and an unbeliever’s works – even if they do exactly the same thing. For an unbeliever’s works do not spring from the vine – Jesus Christ. That’s why unbelievers cannot please God. Their works are not Christian fruit. But because a believer’s works come from faith in Christ, they are all genuine fruit.” (24.231)

Luther sharpens this fundamental distinction while commenting on the new birth, as mentioned in 1 Peter 1.3-5. “Certain people,” he observes, claim to do good works without faith. “Such thoughts are nothing but a dream.” These deluded folk have only their own strength to rely on, whereas believers have the Spirit of God. “We have previously taught from Scripture that none of us can do even the smallest works without God’s Spirit . . . God’s power must be working in us” before we can do good works.” This is why Paul prays for believers in Ephesians 1.17-19. So then, “when God gives faith, the individual is born again and becomes a new creature. As a result, good works naturally flow from faith.” (30.14)

The Distinction between Justification and Condemnation

Luther’s next valid distinction is between justification and condemnation. It follows naturally from his consideration of true and false faith and repentance.

According to Luther, John 6.47 – “I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life’ – “is the cornerstone of our justification . . . Good works do not lead us to heaven or help us in the sight of God. Only faith can do this.” (23.105) “We are justified through faith in Christ, not through our own efforts.” For “faith takes hold of Christ the Saviour and keeps Him in our hearts.”

Luther never tires of hammering home this lesson. “How do we become justified and receive eternal life?” he cries. “We answer with Paul that we are pronounced righteous through faith in Christ alone, not by our own efforts.” (26.136) “People are not justified . . because of anything they have done. Rather . . . because of God’s grace through Christ. There is no other way.”

This is why Luther makes justification by faith alone the article of a standing or falling church. “If it continues to be taught as truth, the Christian Church will remain united and pure.” If not, it will fall into decay. (14.36)

By contrast, all who trust in their own or anyone else's works are condemned. Following Augustine, Luther describes even those works that outwardly accord with God's holy Law as "sins." (27.240) It is not merely that the works themselves are defective as that we are like Cain, unbelieving and self-willed. We expect our works to be accepted because they are ours. But just as his works were condemned because he himself was rejected, not bringing his offering to God by faith, so our works are condemned because we are condemned, not coming to Him by faith. (1.257) As the old rhyme says:

'O bring no price, God's grace is free
To Mary Magdalene and me.'

All who try to earn salvation will fail. The sum of it all is this: "if you are a Christian . . . you will be saved." But "if you remain a non-Christian, you will be condemned." (28.39)

How solemn a consideration this is! And how urgently it calls us to flee from God's wrath to Christ without delay. Only under the cloak of His spotless righteousness are we safe.

The Distinction between Mine and the Lord's

Luther was criticized and condemned mercilessly for bringing to light the Gospel of grace that had been buried for centuries beneath popish ignorance and superstition. He was accused of introducing completely new teaching of his own. He therefore felt it necessary to say more than a word about the distinction between the Gospel being his and the Lord's at the same time.

Taking as his cue the Saviour's words: 'My teaching is not my own. It comes from Him who sent me' (John 7.16), Luther points out that our all-discerning Lord knew His enemies were "accusing and slandering Him. They thought His teaching came from the devil."

Christians too call their sermon, baptism, Christ, God and Gospel 'mine.' Yet in a sense "none of these are ours," for we did not invent them. "They are ours because God gives them to us."

At the same time they are really and truly ours. What Christ says about His teaching, we say about ours. “This is why I insist that this Gospel is mine. It is different from the teaching of other preachers.” Yet at the same time “it is not my work, but God’s gift. I didn’t create it in my head. It didn’t grow in my garden.”

“So both are true. The Gospel is mine, yet it is not mine, because it is God’s.” (23.224)

The Distinction between Judgment and Mercy

Martin Luther knew, as Samuel Rutherford knew after him, the meaning of the couplet:

‘With mercy and with judgment
My web of time He wove.’

His life and writings are full of both.

On the basis of God’s act of justification, sinners, says Luther, have only “two seats” to which to repair. “One is the judgment seat.” This is for the proud who refuse to confess their sins. “The other is the mercy seat.” This is for all who “feel . . . and confess” their sins, “who despair of God’s judgment and hope to find His grace.” Luther himself describes his early life as a quest to find a merciful God.

It is only at this mercy seat, which “is Christ,” that “we can find refuge” from the storm of God’s wrath, for “we cannot withstand His judgment.” Even after we have been freely justified by His grace, we “keep on sinning against God’s Law,” and so need to “crawl under” this mercy seat “and be safe.” This is the teaching of God Himself. In passage after passage (he cites Acts 10.43; Mark 16.16; and John 3.16) “God Himself . . . directs us away from the judgment seat and towards the mercy seat.” (51.278)

The Distinction between the Righteous and the Wicked

Those who have by grace fled from God’s judgment seat to His mercy seat are the righteous. In Galatians 2.21, “the apostle clearly shows that there is no other righteousness” available to us than

what we receive “through faith in Christ Jesus.” The Son of God had to die to bring us this righteousness. (27.240) “Therefore, we must learn” to have “nothing to do with any way of becoming righteous except through Christ alone.” (30.263) The righteousness we have “is external . . . not internal.” If we are in earnest to possess it, “we must completely set aside self.” (26.166) So then, sinners are reckoned righteous “by faith.” (5.517)

Even though the righteous continue to fall into sin, they are neither classified or treated by God as sinners. “Those who are justified in Christ” are “not sinners.” Their faith has joined them to Christ, who has delivered them from sin. So despite the remaining “corrupt tendencies of their sinful nature,” the distinction still stands. (27.85; 27.230)

This paradox, that the Christian is both “righteous and a sinner at the same time – both a friend and an enemy of God” – is an enigma to “the philosophers.” But they fail to see that Christ “makes sinners holy,” at the same time making it impossible for believers to “become so righteous in this life as not to feel sin anymore.” Furthermore, being unbelievers, they cannot see that one day believers will become “as bright and spotless as the sun.” (26.232)

The dilemma, that appears again in John (1 John 1.8 compared with 1 John 3.9 and 5.18) and Job (1.8 compared with 7.21 and 9.20) is solved only in the Word. “If we look at faith, God’s laws are fulfilled, sin is destroyed [in believers] . . . But if we look at our sinful nature, there is nothing good.” “We . . . who are righteous through faith are still sinners.” (27.230)

On the other hand, those who remain outside Christ continue to be viewed and treated by God as sinners. This is not merely because they are guilty and “thoroughly infected by original sin” (2.5), for so are believers. It is also because they are “so bad, evil and full of sin” that they make every excuse for their sin, blame God and others for it, refuse to repent of it and reject Christ. (22.319)

This distinction – between the righteous and the wicked – should encourage true believers. Scripture itself says that the righteous is more excellent than his neighbour. Proverbs in particular describes their completely opposite way of life.

Also, it should always remain in our minds when we are dealing with others. God divides the whole world into only two classes – the righteous and the wicked. In a day when influential people in both church and state are trying to obliterate this distinction, we should deal with people as they are in God’s sentence, not as they appear to us.

Further, the distinction demonstrates to us how much we should hate sin: it is our greatest enemy. “After coming to faith, no one should think sin can be taken lightly. Sin is truly sin, whether committed before or after one comes to know Christ. God always hates sin. Every sin is a mortal sin – a sin that leads to death.” It is only because “Christ the Reconciler” has “atoned for sin by His death” that believers are freed from its awful consequences, not because sin is less loathsome than before. (27.76)

The Distinction between Servants and Friends

As Christ Himself makes this distinction (John 15.15), Luther finds it easy to mention. “In this passage,” he notes, “Christ stresses the word *friend* and highlights the difference between a servant and a friend.”

Servants are still “under the Law.” They neither know what their master thinks or plans to do, nor share ownership in His property. They work for wages, and receive their due.

By contrast, Jesus tells those who are His: ““You are not servants, as the false believers are. They serve me for personal gain, not from a heart of love. But you are my friends, for I have given you everything I received from my Father.”” This unexpected interpretation of the text includes a rare definition of the word friend. “Take note of whom Jesus calls His friends and why . . .

We can tell who His friends are by whether or not they receive good things from Him,” such as the wounded man on the road to Jericho received from the Samaritan who showed him mercy. “The Samaritan treated the wounded man like a friend. We usually reverse it and call people friends who do good to us. However, Christ shows us how we become God’s friends – it is by receiving good things from Christ. We cannot give Him anything.” Nor can we “earn the right to be called His friends.” But “Jesus initiates friendship with us by receiving us. He is the One who” makes “friends out of His enemies.” From this profound analysis Luther draws a most appropriate practical conclusion: “So we ought to thank God and admit that it is only because of His grace and goodness that we are His friends.” (24.256)

Here then is a most precious distinction; for in the Lord Jesus we have the Friend who sticks closer to us than a brother, as He blesses us with His salvation.

The Distinction between Liberty and Licence

The difference between servants and friends also highlights a further valid distinction: between true Christian liberty and antinomian licence. In this connection, Luther laments the fact that only a few have justifying faith. “The majority . . . understand this teaching about faith in a worldly way. They turn the freedom of the Spirit into the freedom of the sinful nature. One can see this today in all classes . . . All boast that they are evangelical and praise Christian freedom. Meanwhile, they follow their own desires, turning to greed, lust, pride, envy, and so on. No one faithfully carries out his duty. No one serves others in love.”

Such practical antinomianism (living against the law) stirs Luther up to intemperate, boiling anger. “This shameful behaviour makes me so impatient that I often wish that such pigs who trample the pearls with their feet were still under the tyranny of Rome. It is practically impossible for these people of Gomorrah to be ruled by the Gospel of peace.”

The cure is to realize, in accordance with 1 Peter 2.16, that “this freedom of the Spirit” gives us “an opportunity to serve, not . . . to act on” our “evil desires.” (27.48) Now comes the nub of the matter: “True freedom is being free from sin,” not being free to sin. Because people think they know this truth, we preachers “must preach this message again and again.” All of us need to “sit by the stove with the children and learn the lesson again.” Only by believing on Christ set forth in the Word do we acquire Christian liberty. (23.409)

The Distinction between Giving and Taking Offence

Exercising Christian liberty raises another question: that of giving and taking offence. Its value has been proved time and time again in churches. Weak or picky consciences are easily offended by a stronger brother’s apparent laxity in some matters. Though the stronger brother is not sinning, the weaker brother’s weak conscience betrays him into taking offence. Then the stronger brother is offended by his weaker brother’s criticism or complaint.

Luther’s pastoral sensitivity, as well as his submission to the Word of God, comes into full play here. On the basis of Galatians 5.13 he succeeds in balancing these “two different offences. On one side, the weak are offended; on the other side, the strong are offended.”

The trouble with the weak brother is that he “can’t distinguish” the innocent actions of the stronger brother “from evil.” Paul’s classic case regarding food shows us the solution. “Here Paul became a Jew with the Jews, a weak person with the weak,” so as “to serve them through love so that they would become strong in Christ.”

The trouble with the strong brother is that he becomes annoyed and impatient with the “slowness and clumsiness” of his weak brother.

Both should learn not to use “the spirit of freedom against the spirit of love.” The strong should put aside their own wishes and

put the weakness of their weaker brothers before their own freedom. It does not hurt you, Luther argues, not to use your Christian freedom, but “it hurts them if they are offended by your freedom. Don’t forget that the task of love is thinking of what is best for others.” So instead of seeing how much freedom you can exercise, he admonishes the strong, “find out how much service you can render to your brother or sister.” (27.382)

The Distinction between Loving Sinners and Hating their Sin

A particularly demand of Gospel obedience is to love sinners while hating their sin. Luther’s forthright language may be offensive to some, but is explicable by his total commitment to what he is saying. “We should have nothing to do with evil-doers,” he thunders from David’s practice (Psalm 1.1; 26.5). That is, he qualifies: if you listen to “false teachers, you will eventually share in their false doctrine, lies and errors.” You cannot play with tar and not dirty your fingers.

At the same time we receive the command from our Lord to love our enemies. (Matthew 5.44)

The dilemma is solved when we “love them as people but hate what they teach.” Whether we realize it or not, this problem forces us “to choose between hating them and hating God,” for His Word is at stake. Our hatred, then, must not be personal. Rather, it must be “a sacred animosity that flows from love.” Indeed, “we must be ready to serve our enemies so that we might convert some of them.” But in so doing we must “cling to God’s Word alone.” This is the big issue: “when the Word of God is at stake, love ends and hatred begins . . . We cannot risk God’s Word, because it belongs to the Lord our God,” whereas we can easily let go of “our personal property.” (12.193)

The Distinction between Arrogance and Depression

Both in dealing with the souls of his Wittenberg parishioners and in scrutinizing his own soul, Luther discovered the opposite extremes of arrogance and depression. Especially do we become

arrogant about our vaunted wisdom and plans for the future, he claims. Then when they fail to materialize we grow depressed. So he frankly confesses: “In my ignorance I often made the biggest mistakes and did the most foolish things when I was sincerely trying to help people and give them good advice.” Leaders, he reflects wisely, “often cause great harm through their advice and actions. If God did not have mercy on them and straighten everything out,” both our own and others’ lives “would be in a terrible mess.” Our trouble is that “we consider ourselves wise and knowledgeable.”

When our advice is ignored, we become [like Ahithopel] depressed. Yet we should not run away from our responsibilities, or “pretend to be so smart and important that everything has to be done” our “way. Don’t be ashamed to get on your knees and pray: ‘Dear God, you gave me this task. Please teach me and guide me. Give me the knowledge, wisdom and strength to do my duties tirelessly and well.’” (5.121)

This distinction is relevant to every situation in life. “In times of prosperity we should not become proud, nor should we despair in times of trouble.” Rather, “we should keep our arrogance in check by fearing God,” and “cling to His mercy . . . when we think He is angry with us.” These are God’s own appointed ways of protecting us from either extreme: crashing “our big heads” against heaven, and “falling flat on our faces on the earth.” The sum of the whole matter is beautifully simple: “The person who is humble and has a broken heart is neither proud nor full of despair.” (12.410)

Distinctions within the Will

It is easy, says Luther, to detect an habitually evil will: it cannot tolerate opposition. Yet there is a “will” in believers “that appears to be good but is actually evil.” It too is impatient to have its own way; but when it sees that God’s will opposes it, it yields.

Luther makes a further distinction on willing: between a good will that God accepts while providentially hindering it from taking

effect. “This is the kind of will David had when he wanted to build a temple for God. God praised him for it . . . yet did not let it happen. (2 Samuel 7.2-29)” It is also the kind of will “Christ had in the garden of Gethsemane. Even though it was good, it had to be set aside (Luke 22.42)”

So, with a typical brand of mockery, Luther taunts fanatics: if you want to save the world, raise the dead, lead everyone to heaven and work miracles, “first seek God’s will and submit your will to His.” Luther’s casuistic skill appears at its best here. The principle it enunciates is beyond our sight: “God often breaks a good will” so that an “evil will won’t sneak in by appearing good.” In any case, “our inferior will must” always “yield to the infinitely good will of God.” (42.46)

The Distinction between Believing and Speculating

With his insistence that faith in God’s Word must govern every aspect of life, Luther is quick to condemn every kind of speculation. A particular butt for his arrows is the attempt to pry into God’s predestinating will. “Beware of the philosophy,” he warns, “that leads people to say: ‘What can I do? What’s the use of praying? What good is it to worry? If it’s predestined, it must happen.’” Luther’s response is decisive. “Yes, it is true that what is predestined will happen. However, we are not commanded to know what is predestined. In fact, we are forbidden to know it . . . God has given Scripture to us so that we can know what we should and should not do. He expects us to act on this knowledge. What we cannot know, we should leave to God. We should stick to our responsibilities, vocation and position in life. God and God alone knows what is predestined. You are not supposed to know.” (43.235)

While preaching on Jacob he re-enforces his strictures on speculation. Faced with the possible anger of his offended brother Esau, Jacob “does not hesitate to do what he is able in this situation.” He leaves the outcome to God. “Someone in despair would have said: ‘I’m not going to do anything. If I’m meant to be

killed, I can't prevent it anyway. People will draw the same conclusion regarding their salvation and say: 'If I'm meant to be saved, I won't be lost, no matter what I do.'

Beware of those wicked words! Certainly it is true that what is meant to happen will happen. But . . . you don't know what will happen. You don't even know if you will be dead or alive tomorrow. God does not want you to know. That's why it's foolish to search for something that God in His wisdom has intentionally hidden from you. Similarly, it's foolish to blame everything on what God has predestined. God's plan includes His secret wisdom. We cannot understand it. God does not want you to know the future. So stick with your calling, remain within the limits of God's Word, and use whatever resources and wisdom God has given you."

Finally, Luther applies the lesson to his own preaching. "I cannot foresee what my preaching will produce – who will be converted and who will not. What if I were to say: 'Those who are meant to be converted will be converted, even without my efforts, and what is the use of trying to convert those who are not meant to be saved?' Saying that would be foolish and irreverent. Who are we to ask such questions? Take care of your responsibilities and leave the outcome to God." (6.104)

Dear friends, think of John Wesley's proud rejection of Whitefield's teaching on predestination, and of the outcome; may we lay the lesson to heart and practice it in our lives.

A Distinction in Men's Approach to Death

Our final distinction considers Luther's understanding of unbelievers' and believers' approach to death.

When they witness the death of the Lord's people, unbelievers see their passing as "sad, depressing events." When they think of their own impending death, they are "full of panic and anxiety" about the outcome. They try to throw off their fears by asking

themselves: 'Why should we worry? When we are dead, we are dead.' Just like the Corinthians, they say: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (1 Corinthians 15.32). "However, this" evasion "pretends that God's wrath, hell and damnation do not even exist."

Believers, by contrast, "can't pretend in that way." (28.104) They struggle against such thoughts and seek faith to lay down their lives in humble and peaceful resignation to God. For in Christ they see their death as "slipping into a restful, gentle sleep," till God raises their bodies in the general resurrection. (4.309)

Once more, it is faith that explains the difference. Unbelief judges by what it sees and feels in the world. Faith judges by what it reads in the Word. There believers find their death depicted as the gateway to eternal life. (23.74) Even if their lot in this world has been a poor and miserable one, they must guard themselves against fear and hold firmly to the fact that their Christ has risen from the dead, and so guarantees their resurrection. (28.104)

Conclusion

To do more than mention Luther's many other distinctions, such as between civil and spiritual authority, would stretch this study beyond its intended size. May those we have considered already be of benefit to us. The Lord knows how much we in the churches need them!

Throwing the Inkwell at Satan

Introduction

It is on record that while he was hiding from his enemies in the Wartburg, Luther was so tormented by Satan that he threw his inkwell at him! The believer who has felt the enormous power of Satanic temptation will understand this. The vivid awareness of the presence and activity of this fallen angel stayed with the Reformer all his life. The more he studied Scripture and observed human nature, the keener became his perception of the wiles of the devil. And the more he had to combat these wiles, the greater were his efforts to help God's people overcome them. In this way he became a most valuable pastor by drawing on his own experience. From the numerous references in his writings to Satan's cunning, malice, cruelty and power, we select a few that with the Lord's blessing will help us detect and resist them.

Satan a Real Spiritual Being

Under the malign influence of secular psychology, some writers have 'demonized' Luther as being mentally unstable. It is clear, however, that Satan is no figment of a diseased imagination. God Himself depicts him as a real, evil, spiritual being.

Satan initiated the Fall of Man

It was he, for instance, who maneuvered Eve into tempting Adam, the head of mankind, who brought about our present separation from God with all its attendant evils. This historical fact, claims Luther, was the prototype of all Satan's subsequent temptations: they all "follow the same pattern. First," he tries our faith and "lures" us "away from the Word of God." This was his tactic in Eden. Having "believed what Satan had told her," Eve "was convinced that she would not die, even though God said she would." So "after the devil's poisonous words entered her ears," she took and ate the forbidden fruit. In so doing, "she sinned with every part of her body and soul." Nor did it take her long to

persuade her husband to sin along with her. This is how we all “have been plunged into sin by the devil.” (22.168)

That Satan still adopts the same method to make us sin is evident “from our own experience.” He cunningly injects an idea into our mind, hiding from us its pernicious nature. When we adopt it, “we don’t think we are about to do something wrong.” We never consider “the harm and misery” we cause by disobeying God. “So we go right ahead with our sinful actions.” [This is not to assume that before we sin we are innocent, and we sin only when seduced by Satan. Luther was no Pelagian.] While sin is worming its way towards fulfillment, “we don’t feel it. Sin doesn’t scare us. It doesn’t sting. Instead, it seems friendly, kind and cheerful.” This is precisely how Satan continues to captivate us all. (1.163)

Four Consequences of Satan’s Original Success

The consequences of Satan’s first stratagem are both profound and far-reaching. Indeed, they are incalculable.

First, “the world” falls under God’s judgment “because of original sin . . . for it was led astray by the devil.”

Second, as a result it “has always been full of judgment and death.”

Third, it has never been worthy of love.” (22.376)

Fourth, it has been placed judicially under Satan’s power. He is now for a season “the world’s god (2 Corinthians 4.4) and . . . prince (John 16.11). (22.24) This accounts for all the cruelty in the world.

Satan Hates God’s People

A prime duty of believers, therefore, is to realize that they live in enemy territory and are forced to fight “on the devil’s turf.” (30.140) Here they find all the hatred and opposition Satan can muster against them. “It is inevitable” that worldly people “will hate God . . . Christ” and “us” who believe; for worldly folk are his minions. Besides, he enjoys watching their arrogant treatment of believers; for “the devil is extremely arrogant, and so is his bride, the world.” (24.272)

True to character, Satan “hates anyone who wants to live a Christian life” and to profess “that Christ is Lord.” Therefore he “keeps opposing and antagonizing believers.” And he usually attacks them through those under his control.

Believers’ bodies are particularly vulnerable. So he stirs up anxiety about food, drink and possessions, till they worry themselves into a lack of trust in their heavenly Father. Succumbing to him in this area is “opposed to the Gospel of Christ,” (Matthew 6.25) (21.192)

His main target, however, are their souls. “It is the remarkable craft of the devil,” Luther observes, that he not only tears from our hearts the love for our neighbour that God commands (Mark 12.31), but also persuades us that our neighbour is “more deserving of bitter hatred than of love. This is easy for the devil to do.” He simply points to our neighbour’s faults – especially those committed against us, injecting such thoughts as ‘he abused you; he hurt you.’” Our neighbour then becomes “contemptible to us.” “In this way, Satan can amazingly change . . . love” into “belittling, hating and persecuting.” (27.57)

Some Satanic Spiritual Deceptions

A field in which Satan is expert is that of spirituality. Here he is not lacking in tricks that easily lure people into false views of it. Under popery, for example, he moved some to teach that “contemplating God and serving Him in the world” were wholly different things. Consequently, some with the best intentions “spent their whole lives searching for visions and revelations . . . They expected to receive personal messages from God without using His Word. What else is this but trying to climb into heaven without using the ladder that God Himself has provided? [Namely, Christ and faith in Him crucified.] They were being fooled by the devil’s tricks.”

So, he counsels, “don’t let Satan trick you. Approach spiritual matters in a different way. The true contemplative life is to listen to God’s Word and believe it . . . Think about your baptism. Read the Bible. Listen to sermons on God’s Word. Honour your father

and mother. Help a needy neighbour. Don't hide in a corner like people who think their personal devotions will give them a place on God's lap" and who consider "everyday work beneath them." (3.275)

A further way in which Satan deceives believers is to magnify sin till they think it is unpardonable. "When you are suffering temptation, you should not be upset that the devil can magnify sin. At the time, he may make your sins appear so great that you fear you will be immediately and totally overcome, so that you feel nothing but the wrath of God and despair. At that moment, don't follow your feelings, but . . . encourage yourself through faith in Christ – you are not under law [and therefore not under condemnation]. Then you will have the most powerful defence with which to extinguish all the flaming arrows that the devil shoots at you (Ephesians 6.16)." (27.78)

Satan and the Ministry

Quite apart from all the ploys he uses once God's true servants have been called into the ministry, Satan devotes much time in alluring those into it whom God never called. Here Luther is most perceptive.

"Religious leaders" especially are found wanting. "Some claim they must teach because they have a talent from the Lord and . . . because of the Gospel command [in Matthew 28.19-20]. Confused by a foolish conscience," they imagine they are burying their talent if they do not teach others, and so "will be condemned." Then shrewdly Luther explains: "the devil causes them to think this way in order to make them neglect the responsibilities to which" God has actually called them.

"My dear friend," he tenderly counsels, "with one word Christ frees you from this notion." In Matthew 25.14 it says: 'He called them.' "But who called you? Wait for God to call you," for "even if you were wiser than Solomon and Daniel, unless you are called to spread the Word, avoid that calling more than hell." If God

wishes to use you, “He will call you. If He doesn’t, you won’t burst from the wisdom inside you.” In fact, your notion is nothing but folly, bloated by the devil. “The only one who produces fruit by the Word is one who is called to teach without wishing for it . . . But those who teach without being called endanger both themselves and their hearers, for Christ is not with them.” (27.166)

It requires no comment of ours to indicate both how seriously Luther viewed his own ministerial calling, and how much he dreaded the consequences of Satan’s deception in persuading men to enter it without God’s call. What havoc the great enemy of Christ and souls has inflicted on the Church by this means!

Satan Distorts Holy Scripture

Towards both teachers and hearers of the Word, Satan employs another deadly weapon. Because the Gospel upsets him so much, “he uses various methods to distort the Word” and so keep people from understanding it aright. In the early church, for instance, he stirred up “a number of heresies.” “One claimed that Christ is not the Son of God. Another claimed that He is not Mary’s son. In Basil’s time, some denied that the Holy Spirit is God.”

We, too, he continues, experience him “snatching away God’s Word” from the people. “When I and my followers began to preach the pure message of the Gospel, many” rose up to oppose it and the work it was doing in the world. This backlash only increased the number of schemes Satan already employs to destroy souls, such as “sexual sins and other terrible crimes.” Why? “Because he does not want people to believe in what God says and does.” This is why we should regard his attacks on “God’s Word and work as especially dangerous.”

Here again Luther refers us back to Satan’s original tactic. “This is how he deceived Adam and Eve” [strictly speaking, only Eve]. Instead of believing God’s truth they “believed Satan’s lies.” So, this “letting go of God’s Word is the root of all temptations.” Once yielded to, it leads to contempt of God and other people, adultery,

murder, every other sin, indeed, the “violation of all God’s commandments.”

So then, “unbelief is the source of every sin. If Satan is able to tamper with God’s Word or snatch it out of people’s hearts, he will achieve his goal – people will no longer believe in God.” (1.146)

This atheism – both theoretical and practical – is rife in our day. O may we beware of translations, ideologies and practices that lead us away from the unadulterated Word of God. They will both rob God of His glory and destroy us.

Satan Entices Believers to Forsake Christ

It is a short step from luring us away from the written Word to tearing us away from Christ the incarnate Word. “The devil continually tempts us to abandon Christ,” even to the point of seeking the Father without Him. Even Philip was caught in this net. ‘Show us the Father,’ he said to Christ. (John 14.8) But we must ward off this cunningly concealed weapon, and listen only to “the One the Father sent.” If we “respond as the Pharisees did” (John 8.19), we will “reject Christ.”

“This,” Luther believes, “is the greatest temptation to our faith.” For Christ is the only Saviour available to us. Our best defence against it is to “devote ourselves to the Word of Christ and train ourselves to hold onto it so that we never lose sight of Jesus.” (23.345)

Satan Hinders Prayer

When Satan loses his captives to Christ, he does his utmost to hinder their communion with Him. In this retaliatory fight he wields two weapons: creating obstacles to prayer and distractions during prayer.

1. Creating Obstacles to Prayer

One such obstacle he places in our way is to make us “torture ourselves with anxiety and worry” over some problem or other, till

“all we can think about is how to get rid of the problem.” He “barges in” and upsets us so much that we do not even think of praying about it. He “knows what prayer can accomplish,” and so “creates so many obstacles” that we “never get round to prayer.” (21.232)

Another of his hurdles is false humility. He prompts us to think we are not yet ready to pray, and should wait till we are more spiritually minded. Before long we cease to think about praying at all. This ploy is so successful that we find ourselves putting off prayer “from one day to the next.” “Other business” then rushes in to occupy our time, until we virtually abandon the throne of grace.

2. Distracting us during Prayer

When he fails to prevent us praying, Satan easily distracts us during prayer. And he uses the same tactic. There are always things to do, matters to attend to, people to visit, etc. All these press on us relentlessly till we are wholly “hindered and rushed with other business.”

Whether he throws obstacles in our path or injects distractions into our mind, we must “struggle to remove” them so that we can freely draw near to God and call on Him. (24.385)

Satan Hinders Our Witness-Bearing

Sometimes, says Luther, we are “challenged or asked” about our faith. Yet even when we have prepared ourselves “well in advance with Scripture,” Satan steps in to hinder our witness-bearing. Sometimes he disgraces us before others, and we find we have donned our armour in vain. Other times he snatches our “best verses” out of our hands so that we cannot recall them. While the Lord is behind these hindrances, to subdue our arrogance and make us humble, nevertheless He lets Satan grab the sword from us and give us a push! How we should both fear the Lord and trust Christ’s promise to enable us to witness for Him by His Holy Spirit. (Matthew 10.19-20) (30.108)

Satan provokes us to blame others for our sin

Besides bringing sin into this world, Satan brought 'No-one' into it. That is, when we have sinned, we virtually say: 'No-one sinned,' yet we go on to blame someone else. If only we would admit our guilt and confess it to the Lord, we would find Him a merciful and sin-pardoning God. But we refuse, and so add sin to sin. "The devil does the same. He denies everything." (22.319)

Satan robs us of all Comfort

Another of Satan's devices that Luther knew from experience is his depriving God's people of all comfort. In this arena he is most skilful, especially "in the hour of temptation," when he tears away from us "all the comforting Bible verses" we know, leaving us only with "threatening ones that crush our spirits." This should teach us that "we can easily fall if God chose to withdraw His hand from us." (26.114)

Satan's ferocity makes us lose sight of glory

If the condemned world shows its enmity to God's children, its master does so much more. Through his ferocity, believers are "executed" as evil-doers, blasphemers and revolutionaries. But so was their Saviour. "Sometimes the devil attacks devout Christians so fiercely with his flaming arrows (Ephesians 6.16) that they forget about the endless glory they have as God's children." They even "wonder if God has forgotten" or "abandoned them." Because "our faith is still very weak and cold," we need to pray continually: 'Lord, increase our faith' (Luke 17.5), lay to heart the Lord's charge: 'Fear not, little flock' (Luke 12.32), and cry out: 'Lord, I believe; help me overcome my unbelief!' (Mark 9.24)" (22.89)

How to Overcome Satan

Let us not forget that "the devil never stops tormenting believers. On the inside, he afflicts them with fears. On the outside, he torments them with the tricks of false teachers and the power of tyrants." This is why King David earnestly prayed the Lord to let His goodness and mercy follow him all the days of his life, so that

he would dwell in the Lord's house for ever. That is, says Luther, let him stay close to His Word and never be separated from His holy kingdom. [Psalm 23.6] In this, we should make David our mentor. (12.178)

1. By Faith in Christ's Death

Because we have a Saviour who is no less than "the true, eternal God," who "can save us from the power" of Satan, faith in Him will always gain the victory. "If we believe this, we can rub it in the devil's face whenever he tries to torment or terrify us." "This will quickly defeat" him. "He will be forced to retreat and leave us alone."

A bizarre illustration graphically makes the point. "The fish-hook, which is Christ's deity, was concealed by the earthworm, which is Christ's humanity. The devil swallowed both when Christ died . . . But Christ's deity ripped open the devil's stomach so that it could not hold Christ any more. The devil had to vomit Him up." He had swallowed something "that proved to be fatal."

"This truth gives us wonderful comfort. Just as the devil could not hold onto Christ in His death, so the devil cannot hold onto us who believe in Christ." (22.24)

Should this image fail to comfort us, Luther adopts another to drive home his message. Our souls are like "chicks, and the devil and evil spirits" are like "hawks in the air." We aren't as clever as chicks, who flee beneath their mother's wings. Besides, "demons are more skilful in attacking us than are the hawks in grabbing chicks." But "just as chicks don't rely on their own" skill and speed, but simply "flee under the hen's body and wings, so we must run to Christ and let Him be our shield and protection." (52.95)

For himself, Luther does not hesitate to confess: "When I feel anxious about sin or hell, I remind myself that when I have Christ I have all that is necessary. Neither death, sin nor the devil can hurt

me.” (23.28) Luther is so sure of this that he says: as we “remain in Him” and “hold onto Him by faith . . . then we shall be able to tear right through . . . the devil, for” John 3.16 says: “ ‘Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ Accept it as true! Accept this wonderful truth!” (22.355)

2. By Trusting God’s Word

“The devil is not defeated,” Luther assures us, merely by keeping our minds “clear and . . . alert.” Our “true sword is remaining strong and firm in the faith.” This faith is anchored in Holy Scripture. If, then, we “grasp hold of God’s Word” in our hearts, and “cling to it with faith, the devil cannot win. He has to flee. If you can say: ‘My God has said this, and I stand upon it,’ you will find that the devil will quickly leave.”

If, during the struggle, Satan succeeds in snatching the Word from us, as he did with Eve (Genesis 3.4,13; 2 Corinthians 11.3), we must heed Peter’s teaching (in 1 Peter 5.8-9) to cling to it by faith. Whatever ruse he resorts to in order to drive you to despair because of your sin, “just grab the Word of God.” Rely on it, and “the devil will quickly leave you alone.” (30.142)

3. By Praise

A rarely considered way of resisting Satan is to praise God. When believers can sing: ‘The Lord is my strength and my song’ (Psalm 118.14) “the devil stays far away from them.” But when they mope around in their misery, he plays havoc with them. “This is how the devil works. He likes to fish when the water is troubled.” It is then that he tempts us to abandon our faith and give up in despair.” Therefore, “as long as believers praise and thank God,” his temptations will disappear. (7.126)

In sum, through all these conflicts with the prince of evil, though it is only in the Lord’s strength that we overcome, Satan will not be defeated without our determined and persevering resistance. When we despise him and his attempts to seduce us, he retreats. If we listen to his seductive voice, he will not stop till we are thoroughly

discouraged and exhausted. Therefore, be cheerful in the Lord, and even mock the enemy, and “he will be the first to grow tired. He is so haughty that he cannot tolerate it when we defy him.” (24.272)

God makes Satan Useful to His Church

Given Luther’s view of Satan as both a defeated foe and a tool in God’s hand, we are not disappointed to find him demonstrating how God makes him useful to His Church.

1. When believers fear they are still his.

There are times, Luther claims, when the Lord’s people feel as if they were still “under the power of the devil” and are “being led to hell” rather than heaven. Luther invokes Psalm 34.7 – ‘The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and delivers them’ – to assure us that if we were really in his hands, “he would not let you live an hour without plunging you into a life of crime.” He might even kill you. But “you are still alive because of the protection of the holy angels.” And even were he allowed to unleash his wrath on you in death, you are still protected and strengthened.

2. Under Church Discipline or Spiritual Desertion

Either under church discipline or spiritual desertion, the believer is sometimes handed over to Satan. The Lord brings you into this condition, which is “only for a short time,” not “to condemn you, but to test you, to bring you to salvation and endless blessings. So when you feel Satan bothering and tempting you, pray and thank God that you will not fail, but that you are only going through a trial in order to be purified.” This is how Jeremiah survived (Lamentations 3.21-22). After all, “Christ was handed over to murderers, but only for a short time,” and that to bring about our salvation. (6.94)

Conclusion

Even a superficial reading of Luther’s teaching on Satan yields the conclusion that he was well acquainted with the wiles of the devil, even the depths of Satan. In the Lord’s kindness to His Church,

Luther's severe conflicts, both within and without, have become part of our rich spiritual heritage. When God's people hear of Satan's malice, rage, envy, cruelty, cunning and power on earth, and experience these themselves, they are encouraged to don the same weapons as Luther did, fight in the same spirit, and overcome in the same way.

They should be able to sing the closing stanza of his magnificent triumphal hymn 'A Mighty Fortress in our God' with gusto, knowing that the Captain of their salvation has already triumphed for them, and will triumph in them. May we who are engaged in the same spiritual war, strive against this vile and hateful foe till we overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the Word of our testimony. Then, metaphorically, we too can throw the inkwell at Satan, both in defiance and in scorn.

Luther and Human Reason

Introduction

Two centuries before the icy winds of Rationalism threatened to freeze the Reformed Faith throughout Europe, Martin Luther preached and wrote against its vaunted powers in the most vigorous terms. His strictures are, of course, not on reason itself, which he employs to devastating effect against the Gospel's enemies, but against its proud self-styled autonomy.

An explanation of his scorn for unaided, fallen reason is at hand. Reared on Aristotelian logic as understood by the Medieval 'Schoolmen,' he came to see that the venerated Greek philosopher was a mere specimen of 'the wisdom of this world.' His gradual enlightenment through God's Word and Spirit taught him that by such worldly wisdom no-one can come to know God. Therefore he opposed every manifestation of it he met with. In this article we will briefly review Luther's strictures on it, and perhaps learn how to put no trust in our own or others' unsanctified reasoning powers.

Reason Cannot Identify God

Commenting on the Spirit's description of depraved human reason in Romans 1, Luther informs us bluntly that it cannot even identify God aright. It "knows that there is a God," but has no idea "which god is the true God." Being both perverse and creative, it first calls things god that are not God, then proceeds to worship them. This is the source of all idolatry.

While "all creation" and "our own hearts" or consciences teach us that God is, "only the Holy Spirit can teach us who that God is." (19.54) Thus reason stumbles at the starting line and leads us into every wrong path.

Reason Rejects God's Word

When the only true and living God addresses us more clearly than He does through creation and our own consciences, reason rejects His Word.

It rejects, for example, the Messianic prophecy of 1 Chronicles 17.13-14. How can God share His eternal power with a mere human being? It asks. And how can God have a Son since He does not have a wife? In such ways proud but blind reason thinks it can "contain the incomprehensible nature of God" in a nutshell.

Similarly, it rejects the testimony of the Word about Christ being in heaven and on earth at the same time (John 3.13). "How can human reason make sense of this strange teaching?" It "says it is impossible for someone to *descend from* heaven and *be in* heaven at the same time. That is why Christians are considered foolish. We believe something directly contrary to reason."

However, we should not worry about this charge. "Christians are certainly not foolish. We know perfectly well what we believe." The trouble with rationalists is that they "want to resolve the paradox in their own crazy head . . . They all think they will find God by figuring it out, but they won't. However, you" believers "must hold tightly to the testimony that was brought down from heaven by Jesus, the Son of God. You must believe it, for all Christians dare to believe what Jesus says." (22.322)

But "shame on you . . . students of blind, foolish, miserable human reason." No one can grasp the things of God but God Himself. "All we know about them is what the Holy Spirit has revealed to us through Scripture." (15.292)

Reason Cannot Receive Christ as Saviour

Despite all its vaunted claims, corrupt human reason "cannot grasp Christ" when He comes to us as "the One whom the Father sent." That work is "above and beyond us." Only faith can lay hold of

Christ in the Gospel, and this faith is the fruit of the Father's drawing (John 6.44,65), not of man's reasoning. (23.23)

When the Jews argued about who Jesus is, He rebuked them sharply: 'Murmur not.' (John 6.43) He did this, says Luther, because "He wanted to curb human . . . reason. We too should clip the wings of human reason when it comes to Christian doctrine. God's Word isn't the kind of teaching you can grasp with reason. It doesn't reach the human heart that way . . . Christian teaching doesn't appeal to reason. That's why our reason complains about it."

What is more, reason hates us taking our salvation out of our own hands and placing it in the hands of another. This explains why Jesus instructed the Jews about the Father's drawing: it was to convince them that reason cannot understand how to take hold of Christ. "Those who want to understand these words must close their eyes, shut the gates of reason, and let themselves become . . . blind." This is what God wants. The upshot of the whole matter is that every thought must be made captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10.5) (23.90)

Reason Rejects God's Providence

Rejecting God's Word and God's Son, reason rejects also God's providence. "Among Cain's descendants" before the Flood "were some of the most intelligent people in the world." [He is thinking of Nimrod, Lamech, Jabal, Jubal and Tubalcain.] "But in God's eyes they were very evil." Why? They refused to recognize God's providential gifts to them, became "filled with pride," and finally "despised God" the Giver. Now when 'the world' hears about them, it does not believe they did wrong, and so does not condemn their conduct. "But God condemns it." (2.5)

Human reason is blameworthy on another score. Contradicting its own basic premise, that everything is attainable through reason, it "concludes that neither God nor people are in control of the world, but that everything on earth happens by chance. Chance or Fortune

(Luther would have been familiar with the medieval popular pagan song ‘O Fortuna’) is inconsistent with Rationality.

The simple explanation of the problem, however, is that “human wisdom cannot comprehend the infinite, heavenly truth that God is in charge.” Consequently “human reason makes us uncertain because we experience so much disorder and injustice. We feel uncertain because we do not see by the same light as the angels.” If we did, we would acknowledge God’s providential control of everything. (6.92)

Reason Rejects the Messengers of God’s Word

True to its fundamentally hateful character, fallen human reason rejects the messengers of God’s Word as well as the Word itself. It especially “enjoys finding fault” with their conduct, as if that were an excuse for unbelief. With subtle cunning it judges their lives by their doctrine, but rejects the very doctrine it abuses. So they make the inconsistencies of believers and preachers the excuse for their rejection of the Christian Faith. (18.363)

Reason Rejects the Spirit in Believers

Having condemned believers for the inconsistencies of their lives, perverse human reason next rejects the Spirit in them when He shows them what God requires of *them*. Measuring God by their own thoughts “rather than according to His Word,” these slaves of reason eagerly but hypocritically set about doing “works of their own choosing” instead of “the ones God commanded,” in the hope of gaining others’ approval. Thus they despise the command ‘love your neighbour.’ Indeed, “human reason and the sinful nature” unite not only to “resist the Spirit in believers” but also to “control unbelievers” in all their thinking and conduct. (27.54)

Reason Cannot Rule Believers’ Lives

If we imagine that once we are converted we can order our lives by reason we are greatly mistaken. Being still infected and warped by sin, it cannot rule us aright, but is bound to lead us astray. Therefore, “we must do what God wants,” not what reason

dictates. “Nothing is safer for us or more pleasing to God than when we trust in His Word instead of our own ideas. In His Word, we will find enough guidance about what we are to do. God requires us to believe, love and endure suffering. These three should be enough to keep us delightfully busy . . . If we don’t want to listen to what God says in His Word,” but prefer to follow our own reason, “He punishes us by letting us torment ourselves” with our own “foolish ideas and plans.”

In everything, then, we must “subject our plans to what God wants,” and yield to His will. Then we shall have learned the lesson He wished to teach us all along: namely, that “our wisdom is worthless.” Ultimately, of course, it is neither our reason nor our wisdom that makes things happen. It is “only the will of God . . . So we must learn to pray: ‘Thy will be done.’” (15.25)

Reason Deceives People into Spiritism

Being well acquainted with both Romish mystical visionaries and Anabaptist apocalyptic dreamers, Luther is able to warn us against listening to the voice of reason that dictated both. His analysis is profound. “Human reason enjoys dabbling in miraculous signs and supernatural matters that it cannot understand;” hence its penchant for private revelations, personal messages and ecstatic experiences. These are nothing but “the devil’s tricks,” he declares bluntly. So we must avoid them at all costs. (3.275)

Reason is Extremely Arrogant

A major motive behind Luther’s unsparing condemnation of fallen human reason is its sheer arrogance, towards both God and others. Take King Saul as a notable example. He “had no equal in Israel (1 Samuel 9.2),” but since he refused to walk humbly with God, and began to “look down” on others, “he fell into terrible disgrace and was rejected” by Him.

Let everyone beware of the arrogance of his own reason, for “this wicked attitude easily takes root in the hearts of believers.” Besides, it is the great evil that “sticks to good works. Rather, let

us always seek “to remain in the background” and walk humbly with our God. (18.262)

Reason Does Not Rule the World

Luther’s final word to Rationalists is that it is God who rules the world, not fallen, human reason. He controls even the minutiae of our lives. The patriarch Joseph, for example, was given a promise according to God’s eternal purpose of good towards him. But his brothers tried to thwart its fulfillment. Having put Joseph and his father Jacob through a “severe test,” the Lord proceeded to fulfil His purpose in His own way.

This, says Luther, is how He deals with all His people in this world. It is “part of His plan.” This is why “we desperately need wisdom that is above our narrow reason.” That wisdom will teach us that though nothing in our lives seems to make sense, “God will not lie to me or deceive me.” On the contrary, He will fulfil His purpose of mercy towards me. (6.360)

Conclusion

Even such a brief study as the present one elicits the fact that though it is a usurper, fallen reason strives at every point to take control of men’s lives. Some even glory in it as if it were capable of achieving every noble aim. But God condemns it, and will one day end its reign. Meanwhile, He has appointed a remedy for all its tortuous deceptions.

That remedy is the new birth. When we come to die, says Luther, the old usurper continues to twist and turn, “refusing to let go of its own thinking. It does not want to give up and turn to the Gospel. Reason simply will not let go of its own light.”

“But those who are born anew . . . surrender and follow God. They give up their old light, life, possessions, honour and whatever else they have. They trust what John records in his Gospel [i.e. ‘You must be born again’] and cling to it. As true children of God, they will receive their eternal inheritance.”

So, he informs unbelievers: when “your old, arrogant light of reason . . . is replaced by a new light, then your entire life will be transformed. For when your reason is changed, your will follows soon after. And when your will is changed, what you love and desire changes as well. In order to become new, you must crawl into the Gospel with your whole self. You must shed off the old skin, as a snake does . . . You must confidently believe” the promise of the Gospel that “God does not lie,” and act on it. Then you will find yourself “a new and different person who views everything” in a new light. (52.79)

That Luther himself had his benighted reason enlightened and sanctified is evident from the way in which he ministered spiritual truths to his own soul and the souls of others. That he believed in the strenuous use of regenerate reason is equally evident. He employs his own logical acumen at many points, notably to demonstrate the deity of Christ (22.14), to convince us of the sinfulness of sin (27.76) and to prove that believers are both sinners and righteous (26.232).

May the same gracious God who taught him the right use of reason bless his teaching to us, that we might be means of helping those who come after us.

‘O How I Love Thy Law’

Introduction

A major factor in Martin Luther’s influence on the spread of God’s truth during the 16th century Protestant Reformation was the clarity with which he discerned the difference between Law and Gospel. That clarity shone throughout Europe, as students from as far away as Hungary and Scotland who had attended his lectures at Wittenberg University returned to their native lands and shared it with their fellow countrymen.

In Psalm 119, King David may have been thinking of all God’s revealed truth available in his day when he wrote: ‘How I love thy law.’ Yet his repeated references to God’s testimonies, precepts, commandments and laws, with their peculiarly strong emphasis on moral purity, suggest that he had before his mind the Moral Law, rather than the Ceremonial or Civil Law.

Whether this is so or not, Luther certainly saw it in this light. He viewed the Moral Law as God’s permanent rule for human conduct, engraven on man’s heart at his creation and on tablets of stone in the Ten Commandments (Romans 2 and Exodus 20). The present study is an attempt to summarize his uncluttered understanding of the Moral Law.

The Law Cannot Save Us

When we recall that Luther was challenging a massive system of salvation by works, we can better grasp his lifelong insistence that obedience to the Moral Law cannot save us. True, its precepts “are God’s laws . . . They show you how to live . . . but they won’t give you life.” Though they tell you both what and how God wants things done, they also show you that you cannot do them. For they “show you what human nature is really like.” This is their original purpose, namely, “in order to reveal” to you “your sins.” They “hold a mirror in front of you,” so that when you look into it, “you become aware that you don’t have life or God’s approval” at all.

(22.143) For you are a law breaker, “guilty . . . and worthy of eternal wrath.” (26.314) Moreover, “you cannot show me one person in the whole world” who “keeps the law.” (26.255)

The Law Shows Us Our Need Of Grace

The function of the Moral Law, however, does not end there. Besides acting as a restraint on sin, holding “lawless people in check,” it also “shows us that the way of grace stands open to us.” When God sends it into our conscience like a hammer and smashes our self-righteousness to pieces, it “prepares us for grace.”

God employs it in this way because He is “a God of the [spiritually] humble, miserable, troubled, oppressed, despairing, and those who have become totally nothing. He lifts the lowly, feeds the hungry, heals the blind, comforts the miserable and troubled, justifies the sinner, raises the dead, and saves the despairing and condemned.”

His entire purpose in so crushing us is to deliver us from the most harmful and destructive of all our enemies, “presuming we are righteous.” “So God uses this hammer of the law to break, crush and annihilate this beast, with its empty confidence, wisdom, righteousness and power.” These remarks clearly evince the fact that, from the light he received through a deep study of Romans and Galatians, Luther understood the law to be spiritual, addressing the heart as well as the outward moral conduct, and was a servant of grace.

“When the conscience has been terrified in this way by the law,” he continues, “there is a place for the teaching of the Gospel and of grace, which restores and comforts the conscience.” For this very reason Christ came into the world: not to break the bruised reed or quench the smouldering wick (Isaiah 42.30, but “to preach good news to the poor . . . bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom to the captives and release the prisoners from darkness’ (Isaiah 61.1).

Those who have been dealt with in this way, so that they “can tell the difference between the Law and the Gospel, should thank God and consider themselves true theologians.” That is, they have come to know God aright. For God has distinguished the two “as carefully” as He has “separated heaven and earth, light from darkness, and day from night.” As God continues to deal with them in this way, their enlightened consciences keep their eye on “the forgiveness of sins and Christ’s righteousness,” as revealed in the Gospel of God’s free and unmerited grace. (26.314) The law has then discharged one of its major functions, as the school usher who leads us to Christ.

The Law Was Kept By Christ

The only exception to the failure of all men to keep the Law is the Lord Jesus Christ. Commenting on John 1.17 – ‘the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ’ – he says: “the laws given through Moses . . . lead to life, righteousness and everything else that is good,” but Jesus Christ “fulfilled the demands of” those laws.

When we hear this, “we begin to praise Him with a cheerful heart and regard His Name as holy.” For He did what no-one else could ever do. (22.143) Expressed another way, “God” Himself “has fulfilled all the requirements of the Law in Christ . . . He has fulfilled everything.” (23.28)

Finding ourselves “already judged” with the rest of the world, both by “the laws of Moses” and “our own consciences,” we must look to Christ, who “was sent to silence these thoughts.” Because He “is not a judge,” but “a mediator, helper, comforter and throne of mercy . . . our bishop, brother and intercessor . . . we have no reason to run away from Him,” but to flee to Him and “find refuge” in Him. (22.376) As the Lamb of God, He bore our sins, and now “offers His grace” to us. (22.168) Therefore, whoever rests in Him and His finished work is safe.

The Law Is The Only Rule For Godly Living

Once we are under the protection and care of Christ, we are not free to live as we like. God has a further use for His Moral Law: to be our rule for godly living. The coming of grace in Christ did not abrogate the Law: it remains in full force. Therefore, “when dealing with how to live in this world, you should light the lamp of the Law.” Its light “will illuminate the night” of this present world, and conduct us safely to heaven. (26.115)

Let us never forget this. The Gospel is not a rule of life, but the Good News that in Christ God gives us life. The Law, however, is a rule of life, never to be abrogated. When Luther discovered this distinction, he dealt a deathblow to antinomianism. Sadly, both doctrinal and practical antinomians dishonour God by rejecting His holy, just and good Law as our rule of life.

The Law Is Fulfilled By True Believers

While “it is faith in Christ, not the Law, that creates children of God (John 1.12)” (26.351), nevertheless, the Law is really fulfilled, however imperfectly, by true believers. Taking God’s Law out of the hand of Christ (as the Scottish ‘Marrowmen’ later put it) they cheerfully set about keeping God’s commandments. Having received the Holy Spirit in the new birth, they begin to love God and their neighbour through that faith which “transforms the person into someone who can” now “do good works.” (26.255)

Knowing our natural proneness to practical antinomianism, Luther warns us: “Don’t deceive yourself by thinking you would have treated Christ well when you don’t do anything for your neighbour. (52.26) On the contrary, realize that “there is no living creature better than your neighbour to show love to.” (27.57) So, when the apostle Paul “admonishes Christians to practice genuine good works,” he means: “Serve one another humbly in love” and “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (27.54) This is the way in which believers fulfil the Moral Law.

Conclusion

Dear friends, if we perceived these God-ordained functions of the Moral Law as Luther did, would we not be ashamed of ourselves for failing to honour it, love it, keep it, and see it kept by our Saviour? Would we not condemn ourselves for our innate legalism, clinging to our imagined law-righteousness to gain God's approval, and justifying ourselves when others remind us of our evil ways? Would we not love the Lord Jesus more for taking our law place and satisfying all its rigorous, inflexible demands? And would we not, out of sheer gratitude to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us, strive with all our might to love and serve others as we should? May God help us practical antinomians, and enable us to live as those who can honestly exclaim with David: 'O how I love thy law!'

Dictating to God

Introduction

Our desire to dominate others is so all-devouring that we are prepared to try and dictate even to God. We would be happy, so we tell ourselves, if God would do what we want, rather than what He wants.

Martin Luther exposes this evil in our hearts in a passage of pointed beauty. In only six sentences, he diagnoses its wickedness, shows us its causes and prescribes its cure. Let us hear him as he does so. “When we try to dictate to God the time, place and manner for Him to act, we are testing Him. At the same time, we are trying to see if He is really there. When we do this we are putting limits on God and trying to make Him do what we want. It is nothing less than trying to deprive God of His deity. But we must realize that God is free . . . He must dictate to us the place, manner and time that He will act.” (9.74)

Because this evil is universal, we need to examine it further.

Proof of its Prevalence

The Word of God offers us ample proof of its prevalence. From the many instances to hand, we select only one.

Israel in the wilderness was very guilty of it. The Lord had promised to protect and provide for His people until they reached the promised land. Yet at Massah “Israel complained and asked: ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’ (Exodus 17.7) The people did not trust God’s promises because He did not fulfil them in the time, place or manner they expected. Therefore they gave up, and stopped believing.”

We do precisely the same. “Deuteronomy 6 teaches us to trust that God will take care of us in good and bad times . . . God will never leave us. He will be near us.” Therefore “we have to rely on God’s

promises. If we do not rely on God, we are testing Him,” a sin of which He bitterly complains. But as with Israel, unbelief prevails, and we arrogantly begin to dictate to God. (9.74)

Symptoms of its Presence

Among the several symptoms by which our desire to dictate to God may be identified, two in particular command Luther’s attention.

1. Selfish Ambition

Luther’s acute discernment of the spiritual nature of this sin surfaces in his consideration of King David’s petition for the Lord to search and examine his heart (Psalm 26.2). Besides feeling the evils of “pride, lust, hate and envy” in his sinful nature, David discovered a further latent tendency: “the subtle poison of selfish ambition.” Even God’s people, then, “often stumble over this sin.”

2. Impatient Discontentment

How it strikes at God becomes clearer as we see it merge into impatient discontentment. Not satisfied with their lot in providence, “some people . . . are never content.” Failing to “keep this secret rebel inside them in check,” they become attention-seekers and expect others to regard them as special. One reason why “we cannot do enough to protect ourselves from this shameful wickedness” is its secretiveness. “Other human vices are so crude that we easily perceive them, but this one sneaks up on us. It disguises itself” even as honouring God and obeying His Word. But secretly it skulks behind this façade, expecting God to do what *it* wants. (12.188)

This surly resentment against God becomes blatantly obvious when people blurt out their ambition. The man in the pew wants to be a minister. The student wants to be the teacher. The citizen wants to be the mayor. How rife this disease is! Luther remonstrates: “Few people are content with their callings.” (3.128)

Causes of its Virulence

The causes of its virulence are not hard to find. As we noted in our opening quotation, Luther traces them to four in particular: refusal to take God at His word; testing Him to see if He is really there; if we happen to believe that He is there, we attempt to place limits on Him; most heinously of all, we try to rob Him of His Godhood.

1. Refusal to take God at His word

Are we not just as guilty of this sin as Israel of old? Even when the Lord has promised to protect and provide for us, do we not “put our trust in earthly things,” second causes or means, rather than our faithful, promise-keeping God? (9.74)

2. Testing God to see if He is really there

Luther makes a special point under this heading of highlighting the Saviour’s staunch resistance to Satan’s malicious attempt to make Him tempt His Heavenly Father. “Satan told Jesus to throw Himself from the temple when there were steps He could have used to climb down.” Satan was really urging Christ to test whether God was really there to save Him from dashing His human frame to pieces. (9.74) The evil spirit tried to make the Son dictate to the Father!

3. Attempting to limit God

Even when God proves His presence by fulfilling His promises to preserve us, we still try to limit Him to *our* way of thinking. This springs from our inability [and refusal] to acknowledge “the infinite, heavenly truth that God is in charge.” Unlike the holy angels, we dictate to Him how He should run the world. (6.92) How futile such an attempt is, Luther is quick to remind us from Psalm 33.10. The Lord foils the plans of nations and thwarts the purposes of peoples who try to subject Him to their will. His sovereign will and wisdom always prevail. (15.25)

4. Trying to rob Him of His Godhood

What is all this rebellion but repeated striking at the Godhood of God? It is no less than deicide, the ultimate sin. This is why it is so

evil, whatever form it takes. It would banish God from His own world, so that we can play God! No-one, then, can estimate the evil that lies lurking in the desire to dictate to God.

The Cure for its Dominance

Though we shall never be able to kill this monster while we live, yet God has provided the cure for its dominion over us. That cure is the trustful yielding to His sovereign will. This only will prove effective.

Firstly, God actually does fulfil His promises to protect and provide for His people. Joseph is an incomparable example, Luther claims. "He had so many unbelievable tortures heaped on him," and no one to help him. But God kept His promise to him; the close of his life on earth proved it.

In the same way, when God puts us through severe trials over a lengthy period, His grace and mercy are always present to preserve us. (7.130) Therefore "we must always remember God's promise and be firm in our faith . . . everything we do must flow from faith." (7.221)

Secondly, His dealings with us are always more hidden than revealed. "God leads and directs His people in mysterious ways . . . Christ Himself told Peter: 'What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.' (John 13.7) Christ seems to be saying: 'You . . . want me to do what seems good and right to you. But . . . you will not understand what I am doing or why I am doing it. Then I shall be able to mould and re-mould you the way I would like.'"

This thought then draws a characteristically frank confession from the Reformer himself: "I too have often tried to dictate to our Lord God a certain way in which I expect Him to run things. I have often said: 'O Lord, would you please do it this way and make it come out this way?' But God did just the opposite, even though I said to myself: 'This is a good suggestion that will bring honour to

God and expand His kingdom.’ Undoubtedly, God must have laughed at my so-called wisdom and said: ‘Alright, I know you are an intelligent, well-educated person, but I never needed a Peter, a Luther, or anyone else to teach, inform, rule or guide me. I am not a God who will allow Himself to be taught or directed by others. Rather, I am the One who leads, rules and teaches people.’ (7.103)

This example of self-reproof leads us to Luther’s final reminder: no matter what we wish, God is in control anyway. “Our own cleverness and foresight do not guide our lives and actions.” “God’s wonderful power, wisdom and goodness guide us.” His hand and presence are always with us. (42.130) So “ultimately,” it is not our will but God’s “that makes things happen.” (15.25) Let us then, like Mary our Lord’s mother, “marvel at God’s limitless grace.” Then we shall be “encouraged to look for everything good from Him alone.” (21.322)

The upshot of all is trust and yield.

Trust

Just as He comforted, strengthened, guided and protected the wise men who trusted Him by following the star that led them to Christ on earth, so God will comfort, strengthen, guide and protect us when we trust Him to lead us through life to Christ in heaven. (52.196) “Certainly you should believe in God and say: ‘I will trust God. Everything will turn out alright.’” (52.198)

Trust Him when you cannot see the least protection or provision. Be like Jacob, who “waited many years for the promised blessing.” For God “requires us to trust His words and promises even when the opposite of those promises is happening to us.” Just as Jacob “had to hold onto it by faith, and not doubt what he could not see,” so “we must learn to depend on the visible Word of the invisible . . . God.” (5.183)

Trust Him with your daily needs. “Even if the whole world is hungry,” you and your children “will have enough.” Luther

adduces Psalm 37.19, 25 as proof. (13.399) Why may we trust Him without the least fear or anxiety? Because He “gives us everything we need hour by hour.” (Matthew 6.25) O “what foolish people we are,” Christ tells us! Though we obviously cannot provide our basic needs ourselves, this very fact should goad us to cast ourselves on His care. Not to do so is a sin; for “not trusting God for our daily needs is like having a wealthy father . . . yet not being able to trust him for money in an emergency.” (21.195)

Such trust calls for courage. Jacob’s fear of losing Benjamin after losing Joseph made him unwilling to part with his youngest son, “as if Benjamin could not die at home!” Jacob seemed to think that his son’s life was “under his control.” “If such a great spiritual leader” as Jacob “showed such weakness, what will we do when faced with danger and trials?” We must therefore “learn to always trust in God.” (7.221)

Yield

Finally, we should yield to His will, and not follow our own. But when do we yield? “God’s will is done when our wills are broken . . . hindered and defeated.” Therefore, “instead of resisting, you should simply say: ‘Thy will be done.’” If we find it difficult “to surrender everything and not have” our “own will in anything,” we should “learn how great this prayer is [i.e. ‘Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.’ Matthew 6.10], why we need it, and how earnestly we should pray it. It is crucial that we allow our wills to be totally defeated so that only God’s will is done.”

Our supreme example, of course, is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, recorded for us as He suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22.42). “Undoubtedly, Christ’s will was . . . the best of all time. If Christ had to surrender *His* will so that God’s will could be done, why do we poor little worms want to make such a fuss over *our* wills?” (42.45)

Conclusion

Such are Luther's reflections on the evil of trying to dictate to God. However hidden in our hearts this evil may be, we may learn from Luther (following Scripture in Psalm 139, for example) to suspect ourselves at every turn, invite the all-searching God to accompany us as we examine ourselves, and trust Him to deal righteously and equitably with us. If by grace He enables us to do this, and not to lean to our own understanding or insist on our own will, but to acknowledge Him in all our ways, He shall direct our paths. (Proverbs 6.3) He is faithful that promised.

Martin Luther and the Wrath of God

Introduction

From the combined testimony of Scripture, Nature, Providence, Anthropology and Conscience, the Reformer Martin Luther concluded that the knowledge of God's existence is universal. "All people . . . know that there is a God." Yet without seeing His glory in the Lord Jesus Christ the whole world is like "a prisoner . . . sitting in a deep, dense and dark dungeon." Moreover, every attempt to approach Him except through Christ as Mediator will prove only futile and ruinous; for "if we want to deal with Him apart from Christ" He is "a terrible God . . . a God in whom we find no comfort, but only wrath." In this article we shall consider Luther's view of this awesome attribute, the wrath of God.

Wrath Real and Active

Ever since he was caught in a storm and cried in ignorant superstition to 'St. Catherine', few things gripped Luther more tenaciously than the wrath of God. An angry God was to him both vividly real and terrifyingly active.

While expounding Deuteronomy 4.24 – 'For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God' – he says: "God is called a 'fire' because He utterly destroys the godless . . . nor is there anything that can resist His wrath. He is called 'jealous' because His spirit is such that He will not spare. Who then should not fear Him?" To stress the intensity of this wrath, Luther reminds us that "fire is the strongest and most intense element of all. What one cannot subdue, cleanse, break or change, people attack with fire; then it becomes pliable and subdued. Fire can subdue silver, gold, iron and all metals. For this reason God compares Himself to this element, as if to say: You cannot escape Me; when some day I begin My visitation, no-one will be able to resist Me. If anyone sins against My commandment, I shall certainly discover [it] and know how to punish him. Then Moses calls God 'jealous', One who will not drop the matter, who must stand by His Word. Both

are here joined, the will and the power , . . so that He both can and will punish. If people held this to be the truth, they would not despise His commandments so shamefully.”

Wrath Deserved

Furthermore, the entire human race deserves to suffer the wrath of God. “For whatever man has by birth . . . is only sin and corruption, by which he brings the burden of God’s wrath to rest on him. God is eternal Righteousness and Glory. He hates sin by His very nature. Hence there is perpetual enmity between man and God.”

Wrath Visible

Should we turn a deaf ear to God’s angry voice in Scripture and conscience, our very eyes would see the wrath of God at work all around us. “All creatures . . . are equipped for our destruction.” To say nothing of our countless illnesses, “how many people are there whom fire and water destroy? How great is the danger from wild or poisonous beasts?” They harm not only our bodies, but also the very food by which God supports us. As for wars, “we plunge into mutual slaughter as if there were no other plagues lying in wait for us.” Even “our body bears the traces of God’s wrath, which our sin has deserved. God’s wrath also appears on the earth and in all creatures . . . What of thorns, thistles . . . flies, fleas and bedbugs? . . . Are not all of them messengers who preach to us concerning sin and God’s wrath, since they did not exist before sin?”

While expounding Psalm 2.5, Luther cites further examples from human history. “In this passage . . . it is terrible that the prophet says that God will speak in His wrath. For it is certain that at this word of wrath whole nations will be ruined, nor will any be able in any way to save themselves . . . Thus God spoke in His wrath when He sent the Romans against the holy city Jerusalem, and when afterwards He sent the Vandals and Goths against Rome.” Referring again to natural disasters, he concludes: “In this way He speaks in His wrath when He sends pestilence, famine and other plagues.” In short, “His wrath is evident in the [whole] world.”

Wrath Feared

It is no slight proof of the existence of wrath in God that evil men sense and fear it. “The consciousness that God is angry and that He is an irate Judge of sin is innate in the human heart . . . In such circumstances it is impossible for man to be happy. He is in constant fear that God is standing behind him, cudgel in hand, ready to strike him down.” Indeed, man does well to be afraid, for wrath really and truly hangs over him.

Wrath Not Believed

Despite this dread, the natural man refuses to take God’s threats of punishment seriously. In a sermon on Matthew 24.26, in which he links God’s judgment on Jerusalem with His sending His people into exile ‘in anger, and in wrath, and in great indignation’ (Deut 29.28), Luther remarks that these “terrible, horrible words . . . should make one’s ears burn.” “Men should not say in their hearts, There is nothing to fear.” Yet this is precisely what they do say. “For it is a plague born into the human heart that we want to know nothing of God’s threatening. This is our attitude today.” “Would to God that the world believed . . . that God is a consuming fire!” he exclaims; but “everybody . . . lets God scold and threaten as He pleases”, while in their blind boldness they continue to steal, cheat, lie, fornicate, hate and covet. Because they prosper materially, “it does not seem that such a life is bound to be destroyed . . . but it looks as if they had a gracious God.” Yet their apparent success lasts only a little while. For Moses earnestly warns them (Deut 4.24). “Beware, then; for you have a God who is a consuming fire . . . a God who will devour you and wipe you out . . . a God who is zealous, who devours and reduces to dust and ashes.” Despite such warning, “people will not believe it until experience has taught them.” But then it will be too late.

Wrath Resented

Luther next states that “the heart is hostile to all punishments inflicted because of sin. These punishments create an evil conscience, are painful to man’s heart and utterly distasteful to the old Adam. But if there were no punishments – ah, what a fine

thing a life of sin would be! Since, then, people are hostile to the Law and the wrath of God, they are hostile to God also.” This is why they invent for their comfort “a god who is” only “merciful.” Some even ascribe wrath to another god, imagining that wrath is a trait unworthy of the God of love. “But it is wicked to invent a new god” in order “to escape God’s wrath”, or to “avert what we have justly deserved because of sin.”

By contrast, Moses (in Psalm 90.3) “does not try to find a way to mitigate an inescapable evil. Rather, he teaches us to refer both good and evil [i.e. blessings and calamities] to the one God, and to learn how these evils may be overcome.” From verses 7-9, Luther draws out a prayer of simple pathos, pleading: “God, grant us grace that we may wisely meet our responsibilities; that is, that we may perform them in humility and in Thy fear, ever mindful that because of our sin we are subject to Thy wrath.” In this spirit we learn how “to live and do everything we do with humble hearts.”

Wrath God’s Strange Work

Yet, Luther continues, “wrath is really foreign to God.” That is, He punishes men in His anger only because of their sin.

For His children, this means that their punishment is a work of grace, for God is their “benevolent Father.” Such chastisement is only temporal and corrective. It is to prevent their eternal punishment that God metes out to them temporal calamities. This is why Isaiah calls judgment His “strange work.” (28.21) He brings them low to show them what they cannot see by themselves, that they really are “sinners, unjust, liars, sad, stupid and lost.” Then they become in their own eyes what they are in His. In this way God engages in “the strange work of making men sinners before He can get at His proper work of justifying them.” But for the ungodly it means pure, unmitigated “wrath.” To them He is no Father, but a strict Judge; and their “punishment is eternal” and retributive.

Wrath Appeased

Yet for God to justify sinners requires a legal foundation; for “an eternal and unchangeable sentence of condemnation has been passed on sin”, since God “neither can nor will connive at” it. “Thus His wrath remains over it eternally and irrevocably.” For this reason no-one can be redeemed “without a payment or recompense which would make satisfaction for sin . . . take the wrath on itself, assuage it, and so take away and blot out sin.”

But as man is powerless to satisfy God and to procure his own deliverance, God Himself has graciously provided the solution. “God’s only Son had to intervene in our calamity and Himself become man in order to lay this severe and eternal wrath on Himself, and give His own body and blood as a sacrifice for it. This He did because of His great and immeasurable mercy and love for us. He gave Himself to bear the sentence of eternal wrath and death. This satisfaction and sacrifice is so valuable and precious before God because His own Beloved Son made it, He who is one with Him in the Godhead and Majesty.” In assuming our sin and God’s wrath “He drowned both in Himself, and thereby reconciled us with God the Father.”

Nor was this solution an afterthought. The Lamb of God was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13.8). All the sacrifices of the Old Testament were thus types of His one, all-sufficient sacrifice (Heb 9.24). This was the only way in which the wrath of God against human sin could be appeased. For “if the body had not been given and the blood had not been shed, the wrath of God would remain over us” for ever. Just how intense that wrath was when it fell on the spotless Lamb of God we shall never know. But “we should realize” that it was nothing less than the “great, severe and terrible wrath of God against sin” that He really bore when He suffered on the accursed tree. “Atonement could be made by no other payment”, since “by our sins all of us had aroused this wrath of God” against us to such a terrible pitch. Truly, “sin and guilt are no trifles in the eyes of God.” (Ewald M. Plass, summarizing Luther’s teaching)

It is in the cross of Christ, too, adds Luther, that wrath and mercy are reconciled. Certainly, it is “truly horrible that through the wrath of God the whole human race is infected, lost and condemned by the one sin of one human being [i.e. Adam]. But the magnitude of that wrath is greatly exceeded by the magnitude of the mercy through which a Person so exalted as the Son of God was made a Sacrifice for lost human beings.”

Wrath Removed

Yet even when the wrath of God has been assuaged by the death of Christ, the sense of that wrath is not automatically removed from us. “Many have tried to find comfort,” laments Luther, “in an attempt to reconcile the righteousness of God with His mercy, but apart from faith in the God who was made flesh no basis for doing this exists; and there is no comfort.”

Psalm 6 directs us where to go: “This psalm teaches us that if anyone is frightened by the foreboding look of God, he should flee to no-one except this wrathful Lord Himself.” Certainly, “the ungodly should fear God . . . and not approach Him joyfully. But”, says Christ, “you who believe in Me shall not be judged, or run from Me as a relentless Judge. For through the medium of faith the judgment has been abolished; the mission to which I was delegated has put an end to judgment . . . whoever [therefore] accepts Me in faith banishes those awful words about God’s wrath, hell and eternal damnation.” Being “reconciled, God receives in grace all who believe on His Son and forgives them their sins.”

Luther’s treatment of John 14.23-24 brings the same joyful news; namely, that the believer in Christ has nothing to fear from the wrath of God. When I wrestle with doubts and fears, he cries from experience: “Who knows whether the Father is gracious to me, even though I do believe in Christ?” But Christ Himself “draws us to the Father”, not only to “enable us to cast and tear all wrath and terror from our hearts”, but also to defeat Satan, who “has no other weapon with which to defeat us than picturing God as ungracious and wrathful.” Let us be certain, then, “if we believe on Him and

remain in His love, that there is no longer any wrath in heaven and on earth” for us, but only God’s “pure, fatherly love.” And if so, we “should desire nothing more than to depart life this moment, so thoroughly does Christ sweep all wrath and terror from heaven, and fill it with complete security and joy.”

“Without this faith,” he warns, we remain “children of wrath, are unable to do any good work that is acceptable to God, and cannot get a favourable hearing before God.” And so it is Christ, and Christ alone, received by faith, who puts the difference between unbelievers, who spend their whole miserable lives in fear of the wrath to come, and believers, who “wait for the future, better life.”

Wrath to the Uttermost

All who despise God’s mercy revealed in the cross of Christ remain under His wrath. God judicially lets them “go on in their folly and blindness” till they drop into hell. Such a severe yet righteous expression of wrath descends particularly on those who once appreciated the Gospel but do so no longer. “What greater and more horrible punishment” can there be, Luther asks in horror, “than spiritual blindness or madness”, by which “a man no longer can or will listen when he is told how he is to be saved?” For “when God is severely angry, and allows His punishment to descend in earnest, He first closes the eyes of people so that they stagger on blindly from one pit to another. This is what happened to Pharaoh in Egypt until he drowned in the Red Sea. Later on it happened to the Jews because of Christ and His apostles.” “God’s wrath is greatest”, then, “when He removes His Word or permits people to despise it. When the Greeks despised His Word He took it away and gave them the Turk and Mohammed; to us Germans and the Italians He gave the Pope and with him all sorts of horrible things.” It is “the wrath of God” that “has brought Mohammed and the Pope into the world.”

Yet sometimes the wrath of God shows itself in ominous silence. The most striking example of this, says Luther, is the centuries-old state of the Jews. “Against them the wrath of our Lord God is so

severely inflamed that not one little word or one sign has come from Him in fifteen hundred years. They cry vehemently and pray very ardently, as the books that contain their prayers show . . . I wonder why God does not hear them. It is wrath, a great, unspeakable wrath.” And so, “the longer God . . . is silent, the more unendurable will His wrath be when He subsequently reveals it.” “Therefore we should consider it a great kindness when God does not let our sins remain unpunished for long . . . God’s gracious wrath is at work when punishment comes quickly, and calls us back from sin. But when God is silent . . . an intolerable wrath follows, a wrath that has no end.”

Conclusion

Fittingly, Luther’s fearless treatment of the wrath of God closes with a touching and characteristic prayer: “Oh, heavenly Father, let us stay with the Sun [i.e. Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, (Mal 4.2)], and let us not fall away from Thy Word.”

‘When I Was A Monk’

Introduction

The agonizing intensity of Martin Luther’s efforts to find a gracious God left an indelible mark on his highly impressionable mind. Consequently we find him repeatedly reflecting on those terrible days as an Augustinian recluse with the words: “When I was a monk.”

True, he had the Word of God in Jerome’s very faulty Latin Vulgate translation. He also had a wise counselor in Staupitz, who understood and believed Augustine’s doctrine of grace. Yet he was immersed in such a rotten system of spiritual ignorance, superstition and moral corruption that without God’s light he would never have seen through its sham or broken free from its shackles.

Day and night he wrestled with a guilt-ridden conscience and a fearful heart, but to no avail. It is not surprising, therefore, once he had received light from God’s Truth, that he found his transformation a thing of wonder.

Let us share a few of his reflections, and discover what we may learn from them.

The Root of the Trouble

There can be no doubt as to the root of Luther’s trouble. “Formerly,” he recalls, “when our hearts were blinded by errors in teachings from Rome, we imagined that God was a salesman who sold His grace in exchange for our works and achievements. Now, however, since the light of the Gospel has dawned, we know that we are credited as righteous only by faith in Christ.” (27.140) False doctrine, a false view of God and His grace left Luther and his fellow monks with no choice but to try and placate their angry God as best they could.

Being blinded to the truth by the god of this world, he simply could not see the gracious God he was seeking so agonizingly. As he himself confesses: “I just could not believe that Christ wanted to show His kindness to me.” (22.145)

As he scrutinized his fellow monks, he saw the same crude view of God. They walked around “with a sad face and hanging head,” were “celibate,” ate “only bread” and drank only “water,” and dressed shabbily, all in the hope that the halo of sanctity they cast round their heads would win them a place in heaven. Like himself, they had no idea how holy are both God and His law. (27.56)

No Way Out

So enslaved was he to the Rome-imposed tyranny of salvation by works that he worked himself into a dreadful state of mind. “When I was a monk, I read the Mass daily. I weakened myself with prayer and fasting so much that I could not have kept it up much longer. Yet all my efforts could not help me in the smallest temptation. I could never say to God: ‘I have done all this. Look at it, and be merciful to me.’ What did I achieve with all this striving? Nothing. I merely tormented myself, ruined my health and wasted my time.” (24.229)

He confesses too that “when I was a monk, I thought my salvation was immediately lost if I experienced a corrupt desire from my sinful nature – for example, an evil emotion, sexual desire, anger, hatred or envy towards any brother. I tried many spiritual exercises, such as confessing daily, but I made no headway. The desires of the sinful nature always returned, so that I could not find rest. I was constantly tormented by thoughts such as these: ‘You committed this and that sin, and you are guilty of envy, impatience and more. As a result, you have entered this monastic order in vain, and all your good works are useless.’” (27.73)

Again, he recalls: “When I was a monk, I did not accomplish anything through fasting and prayer. This is because neither I nor any of the other monks acknowledged our sin and lack of

reverence for God. We did not understand original sin, and we did not realize that unbelief is also sin. We believed and taught that no matter what people do, they can never be certain of God's kindness and mercy. As a result, the more I ran after and looked for Christ, the more He eluded me." (5.157)

Furthermore, Luther found it impossible to break away from the falsehood he had imbibed during his studies, namely, that the 'church fathers' were infallible interpreters of Holy Scripture. Since he had found errors in Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine – whose writings he loved – he simply could not calm his own heart and differ from those he so greatly respected. (22.256) There seemed to be no way out.

Luther's agony only intensified when he thought of death and judgment. He dreaded the thought of having to face God in a state of such confusion and guilt. "This is the way I felt when I wanted to be a holy monk and tried to be pious. I would rather have heard about all the devils in hell than about judgment day. The hair on my head stood on end when I thought about it." And yet, "though all of us are stuck in the muck of our own holiness," we still "think that by our lives and works we can pacify God's judgment and earn a place in heaven." So we become worse and "more hostile towards judgment day." (28.114)

A Scripture he dreaded to hear was Psalm 90. "When I was a monk, I often had to put down the Bible when I came to this psalm." This is because it speaks so awesomely of God's wrath and judgment. (13.86)

Psalm 2.11 – 'Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling' – also frightened him. "When I was a young man, I hated this verse, because I did not want to hear that I should fear God." This was because he did not realize that the fear referred to "should always be combined with joy and hope." Not being reconciled to God through Christ, Luther had no joy and no hope. (12.80)

Unresolved Contradictions

Throughout his prolonged agonizing, Luther observed some major contradictions in his situation.

First, he was surrounded by enormous wealth. “Look at the well-known religious orders,” he invites, “and you will immediately notice that all their physical needs are completely taken care of. They have a guaranteed income, food, clothing, shelter and all kinds of extra things acquired by the work and care of others and given to them.” Consequently, rather than trust in things they cannot see (which is a characteristic of faith, Hebrews 11.1), they trust in their secure possessions.

Unlike the common people, who marry, earn their living by sheer hard labour and are forced to trust in God, they have “their bellies fed free of charge,” and have neither to wait for God’s goodness nor see His hands supply their need.

“So tell me,” he taunts, “which order could rightly be called the spiritual one? Is it not the one in which faith is necessary and has its own work to do? Is it not the one that has to trust in God daily, according to Psalm 145.15-16?” “The order of marriage has a reason to trust in God. But religious orders don’t have this and don’t want it.” Indeed, they were “founded and endowed so that they wouldn’t have to worry about their needs.” Thus, they thrust out faith and plug up the holes so that it will not return. (28.18)

Yet all this wealth and comfort could not relieve his agony and distress.

A further contradiction Luther observed was that between the pride of the religious orders and their pretended humility. Scorning true Christians for eating and drinking good, wholesome food; caring for their children and pushing the plough, they want to do “something different and special – something above everyday activities.” “They want to join a convent, lie on the ground, wear sackcloth garments, and pray day and night. They believe these

works are Christian fruit and produce a holy life.” Their blindness to the sanctity of ordinary human life makes them look only “on external appearance,” for they do not see that true Christian living grows out of union with the Vine, Christ. (24.231)

Blinded himself to the wonder of salvation by Christ alone, Luther found himself torn in another massive contradiction. Like the Jews who condemned the woman taken in adultery but who had no true sense of sin themselves, he used to tell himself: ‘Because I haven’t sinned notoriously today, I don’t need God’s help.’ “I used to act like this when I was a monk. I would say: ‘Today I did nothing evil. I was obedient to my superior. I fasted and prayed. Therefore may God be merciful to me.’” (23.316)

At the same time he would spend hours in ‘babbling through prayer’ without feeling the least need of God’s salvation nor basing his prayers on God’s promises. So, he reflects: “This isn’t true prayer. I used to pray this way when I was a monk. I called out to God in times of need, but I didn’t know anything about God’s promises to hear me or about His command to pray. I was merely mumbling words.” (6.111)

Conclusion

Such, then, was Luther’s life when he was a monk. Like Augustine before him, weltering in his pride and lusts in Carthage, he came to see that it was not life at all, but living death, for it was life without Christ.

Should anyone reading an account of Luther as a monk, let him or her abandon all hope of finding God in a monastery or convent or ‘retreat,’ as some expect to do.. He is found only through faith in the One whom He has sent, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Luther's Hymns

Introduction

Those who are acquainted with 'From Heaven Above To Earth I Came' and 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God' may realize that the Reformer Martin Luther was a rugged versifier and a gifted melodist. The congregational quality of these hymns of his enable us to appreciate Catherine Winkworth's belief that Luther was the father of German hymn-writers. Excluding his arrangements of medieval antiphons (verses to be sung responsively by pastor and people) and his settings of the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, we shall here concentrate on Luther's thirty-eight hymns.

Historical Perspective

While congregational hymn-singing under Luther at Wittenberg Castle Church was not the first time God's people enjoyed this privilege (we recall Ambrose's reforms in Milan Cathedral and Huss's practice in the Bethlehem Chapel, Prague) it certainly became the first Protestant Church worship organized by a Reformer. Those who take their precious legacy of hymns for granted might well consider this. They drink from a stream that by God's grace Luther opened up to the world. Before his reforms, everyone in the churches except clerics and choirs were musically illiterate. Their role was merely to be present at mass. As the mass texts were almost wholly in Latin, the hearers could not understand a word. By restoring their original role in public worship, Luther enabled ordinary people to both participate and understand what they were singing. The result was a rich heritage of German sacred poetry and music.

When we recall Luther's remark that "after theology, I accord to music the highest place and greatest honour," we are not surprised to learn that in the midst of crushing labours on behalf of church reform, he found time to compose thirty-eight hymns.

Of these hymns Ulrich S. Leupold writes: “The sudden bursting forth of the Lutheran chorale is one of the most thrilling chapters in the history of the Reformation.” In 1523 the Reformer expressed his admiration for some medieval German hymns and his desire to find poets to write new hymns. He also wrote to his friend George Spalatin, the local court chaplain, asking him to render some psalms in verse. Before the year was over, several hymns were printed and distributed in individual leaflets or broadsheets. A Magdeburg city chronicler gives a vivid account of a peddler who on 6 May 1524 sang the new Lutheran hymns in the market place and sold them in leaflet form to the people. The mayor had him arrested and clapped in jail, but the enthusiastic burghers obtained his freedom so that they could continue singing Luther’s hymns!

Even before this event, early in January of the same year, an enterprising Nuremberg printer had begun to bind the broadsheets together into a primitive hymnal. The oldest collection that might be termed a Lutheran hymnbook contains eight items – three by Paul Speratus, one anonymous hymn, and four by Luther.

The first hymnal prepared under Luther’s personal supervision appeared in late summer, edited by his friend and musical associate Johann Walter. It is not a hymnbook in the modern sense, but a collection of motets based on Lutheran chorales. It was to be sung by the choir to familiarize the congregation with their new role in public worship. Of the thirty-eight chorales in this collection, twenty-four are by Luther.

After this ‘annus mirabilis’ of hymn writing, every year saw the publication of more and larger collections. Wherever the Reform was received, publishers vied with each other to bring out bigger and better hymnals. Such cities as Magdeburg, Zwickau, Leipzig, Erfurt, Nuremberg, Augsburg and Strasbourg produced their own collections. Almost a hundred hymnbooks were published between 1524 and 1546, the year of Luther’s death. A book containing Luther’s hymns was sure to sell, for the popular chorales opened many a door to Reformation teaching.

The Sources

“The success of Luther’s hymns was due not simply to the genius of the Reformer, but to the fact that his seed fell on fertile ground.” (Leupold) He did not so much innovate as allow the ancient German hymn to fulfil its greatest potential. Throughout the entire Middle Ages vernacular hymns had been tolerated by Rome; so had carols, a kind of sacred folk song. Luther not only composed in their style; he adapted secular folk songs to congregational use. His hymns, then, are drawn mainly from these three sources: old German hymns and carols, secular folk songs and his own compositional genius.

The Style

The words of the new chorales are not primarily expressions of individual devotion, but statements of faith. They were not meant to create a mood, like so many modern hymns, but to convey a message. This is why, like the folk music that inspired them, they present their subject without artistic refinements. To modern ears, they sound raw, uncouth. Their language is simple and direct. Rhyme and metre are both irregular, and virtually impossible to translate into smooth English.

Luther’s tunes are equally unrefined, even rugged. This is not because he was incompetent as a musician. He had received a thorough musical grounding in school, university and cloister. He was an accomplished singer, lutenist and composer. But his melodies appeared at a transition point in musical history. The old modes were giving way to the new major and minor scales, and since Luther was conservative, most of his tunes are strongly modal in character. Only a few savour of the major scale. His rhythms, too, are highly complex, typical of the early 16th century’s polyphonic style. We know that Luther greatly admired the compositions of Josquin des Prez, whose rhythms are very irregular. His own rhythms reflect Josquin’s complexity.

The Hymns

From Luther's whole output we select a few hymns that would not be out of place in English hymnals. In fact, four of them – From Heaven Above, Come Holy Spirit, A Safe Stronghold and From Deep Distress – may be found in the 1977 edition of *Christian Hymns*, while to these is added All Praise To Thee in the 2009 edition.

1. A New Song

“Among Luther's most faithful followers were members of his own [monastic] order.” (Leupold) Luther's first hymn commemorates the martyrdom of two young monks from the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp who fell under the same ban as Luther for receiving his teaching. They were burnt at the stake on 1st July 1523. Soon after hearing of their brave stand for the truth, Luther told their story in a ballad of twelve stanzas. Instead of pitying these martyrs for their sufferings, he considered their faithfulness a victory and their deaths an honour. The ballad therefore movingly records how they “tore off their cloister garments,” thanked their heavenly Father for delivering them out of the false religion by which Satan was deceiving the world, and patiently offered themselves to God, having entered “Christ's order.” This tribute to his brethren in Christ was the first hymn to emerge from the Reformation conflict.

2. Dear Christians

Luther's second hymn, ‘Dear Christians, let us now Rejoice,’ calls on the people of God to “proclaim the wonders God has done” by uniting their hearts and voices in “holy rapture.” It broadens the scope from a historical event (the martyrdoms) into the universal struggle and victory of every believer.

At the same time it reflects Luther's own experience:

Forlorn and lost in death I lay,
A captive to the devil;
My sin lay heavy, night and day,
For I was born in evil.

It goes on to denigrate ‘good works’ as the basis of deliverance and ascribe all to the ‘tender mercy’ of a compassionate heavenly Father who delivered up His own dear Son for “the poor man’s salvation.”

3. From Trouble Deep/From Deep Distress

Luther’s free paraphrase of Psalm 130 – is an earnest cry to a gracious God from the pit of deepest trouble. Disappointed by the lack of devout German poets, Luther appealed to George Spalatin to put his hand to the task of ‘making’ “German Psalms for the people, i.e., spiritual songs so that the Word of God even by means of song may live among the people.” This is Spalatin’s first response.

Its plaintive Phrygian mode melody well expresses the plight of one who knows he cannot possibly stand before God on his own account, but must rely wholly on His pardoning mercy revealed in Christ.

From trouble deep I cry to Thee,
Lord God, hear Thou my crying;
Thy gracious ear O turn to me,
Open it to my sighing.

As with other psalm paraphrases, its implicit references to the coming Messiah are turned into explicit identification of the Lord Jesus as God’s Anointed and the meritorious ground of both the believer’s and the psalmist’s hope.

In Wittenberg the hymn soon became a favourite at funerals, notably those of Frederick the Wise, John of Saxony and Luther himself.

4. Come, the Heathen’s Healing Light

This hymn is a literal translation of Ambrose’s *Veni Creator Spiritus*, with skilful changes made to the melodic line. As *Nun Komm, der Heiland Heiden* it has survived through the centuries, not least in J.S.Bach’s magnificent cantata of that name.

5. All Praise to Thee

The opening stanza of this hymn – All Praise to Thee, O Jesus Christ – was known long before the Reformation. Its melody, by Walter, is a foursquare version of an ancient plainsong tune. It celebrates the wonder of the Son of God being born in such a lowly condition, his incarnation “masking itself [as] the endless good” of poor lost sinners.

6. From Heaven On High

Unlike some of Luther’s incarnation hymns, which are translations from Latin originals, this one is entirely his own. When he composed it in 1534 or 1535 his children were just old enough to sing it. As singing formed a regular part of Luther’s family gatherings, we may safely assume it was sung at family worship. In it the Reformer follows his own axiom: “If we wish to train children we must become children with them.” Comments Leupold: “No other hymn of his is as simple and intimate in content and as folk-like in structure.” The first stanza is actually modelled on a pre-Reformation folk song, a singing game popular with children in Luther’s time. Luther’s opening words read:

From heaven on high I come to you,
I bring a story good and new;
Of goodly news so much I bring,
Of it I must both speak and sing.

Of its fifteen stanzas, the thirteenth appears as the sixth in *Christian Hymns 168*. It typifies Luther’s insistence on personal application of Biblical truth:

Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled,
Within my heart, that it may be
A quiet chamber kept for Thee.

Its now famous melody – Vom Himmel Hoch - possesses none of the composer’s earlier ruggedness, but is symmetrical and in a major key. Clearly Luther was learning from experience what best suited ordinary people. The version in *Christian Hymns* is almost identical to Luther’s original.

7. In Peace and Joy

Here Simeon's request – "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace" - is turned into a four stanza hymn for the whole congregation to sing. Its plaintive Dorian melody is quite complex, reflecting the influence of late medieval polyphony on Luther's musical style. At this stage Luther had not smoothed out his melodies sufficiently to be easily grasped by the artisans and farm labourers he so much loved.

8. In the Midst of Life

This hymn of 1524 transforms the general medieval paradox – "In the midst of life we die; in the midst of death we live" – into a specific Gospel paradox – "In the death of Christ we find life."

Its origin is uncertain. Some attribute it to a 10th century Swiss monk from St. Gallen who penned it after watching workmen span a gorge with a bridge. But this is unlikely; it is found in an English manuscript two centuries before it appeared in the St. Gallen codices.

Whoever was its author, this hymn enjoyed enormous popularity during the late Middle Ages. It was sung at funerals, as a prayer, as a battle hymn and even as a charm! What is significant is the way Luther transforms it from a despairing cry for help in mortal danger to a believing petition for help, an assurance of God's grace and a confession of God's goodness.

The melody, too, is bolder and much more confident than its medieval original. It demonstrates the effect of grace on the very stuff of music.

9. Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands

Although this is an original hymn by Luther, its roots go deep into the Middle Ages, springing from an 11th century sequence and passing through German folk song form before being re-shaped by the Reformer for his people. It has found echoes in countless Christian hearts down the centuries. In seven superb stanzas it calls on us to reflect soberly on the Saviour's death and resurrection so as to praise God joyfully and thankfully for His victory over sin and death. It was indeed "a strange and dreadful" conflict in which

He engaged for our sakes; yet the outcome was never in doubt: our death was swallowed up by His death. By removing death's sting, Christ transformed death into the gateway to life. One couplet in particular is profoundly eloquent on how His victory is to be appropriated for our salvation:

“His [shed] blood on our doorpost lies,
Faith holds that [blood] before death's eyes.”

Luther's most musical interpreter, J.S.Bach, bases a remarkably solemn yet victorious cantata – *Christ lag in Todesbanden* - on the Reformer's hymn.

10. A Mighty Fortress Is Our God/Our God He Is A Castle Strong

This majestic ‘Battle Hymn of the Reformation’ epitomizes the whole conflict in which Luther and his fellow reformers were locked against the powers of darkness. Its bold originality of thought could have sprung from no other mind than Luther's.

Opening with a mighty communal statement of faith – “A mighty fortress is our God” – it moves through this life's “mortal ills” and “our ancient foe” the devil, for whom no mere man is a match, through “the Man of God's own choosing,” who is also the “Lord of Armies,” to total reliance on Him and His Word, closing with a resolute readiness to forego goods, children, wife and life for the sake of God's kingdom and truth. Its heroic character derives undeniably from the rock-like nature of the man God formed and used to change Europe. In Cantata 80 J.S.Bach reproduces this noble, heroic spirit in a work of monumental stature and power. It appears in Carlyle's translation as number 360 in the 1977 edition of *Christian Hymns*.

11. Thou art Three in Unity

Luther's last hymn (1543) is the German version of a traditional vesper hymn – *O lux beata Trinitas* – commonly ascribed to Ambrose of Milan, praising Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God in three Persons. As a statement of faith, it fittingly concludes Luther's output.

Conclusion

Luther's hymns formed the foundation of subsequent Protestant hymnody. They formed the indispensable core of the hymnbooks of the 16th and 17th century. The enthusiastic Friedrich Blume states: "The songs flowed in a strong stream from his inspired heart, proclaiming Protestant truth and making a breach for the doctrine as did no sermon or writing." One Jesuit source actually believed that Luther's hymns "destroyed [we would say 'used by God to convert'] more souls than his writings and speeches." This is likely, for most of his contemporaries were unable to read, and few outside Saxony ever heard him preach.

Whatever the case, it appears that the sung Word in the language of the people was one of the most effective vehicles for spreading the Gospel at that time. We conclude our brief survey with an observation from a qualified Lutheran scholar: "Luther's enthusiasm for music in the church went beyond a love for an art. His education in music presented him with proof that melodies could be used for a higher goal: to bring people to God and to fight the powers of the Devil." (Rebecca Oettinger) In families, schools and churches, the Lutheran chorale became a major mark of Lutheran identity. Evangelical pastors, schoolteachers and parents viewed the singing of Biblical hymns as something that set them apart from both Roman Catholics and Calvinists. They were used to cement belief and mould morals.

In God's gracious providence, the towering figure of Luther gave sanctified song the place next to theology. Let us be thankful for him and his imperishable work.

The Protestant Work Ethic

Introduction

Martin Luther has been credited with creating the Protestant work ethic. We know, however, that he did no such thing. God created it when He first made man. Moses and the prophets re-enforced it, and the Lord Jesus and His apostles endorsed and taught it. All Luther did, he himself would say, was to unearth it from beneath the time-honoured lie that daily labour is beneath 'the religious' or 'clergy,' and is only fit for the inferior 'laity.' Men and women of 'the church,' falsely so-called, thought themselves too holy for menial work.

Through the light given him during deep and prolonged study of the Word of God, Luther dispelled this lie, and showed ordinary working people that both they and their labour were precious in the eyes of God. Let us consider his claim in the light of Holy Scripture, and see how it applies to us today.

Work is a Creation Ordinance

Luther's teaching on work begins where the Word itself begins, in Genesis, the Book of Origins. "According to Genesis 1, God created everything in the world and established how human beings should use and work with it all." Anyone disposed to disagree in the interests of laziness or self-interest should lay to heart the fact: "He is not going to revoke that created order or make a special one just for you." To ram home the point, he adds with typical and blunt directness: "You should remain in the created order God has established in Genesis 1, for He did not give it you for nothing." That means using the talents and resources God has given you "just as He created" them "to be used." (52.198)

Consider Abraham for an example. Rather than become superstitiously attached to Mount Moriah, where he had experienced God's presence and proved the trustworthiness of His promise and pledge in a remarkable way, he "regarded his duty to

his family” and resumed his “God-given responsibilities as head of the household.” With a sly hint at “overly religious folk,” superstitious founders and inmates of ‘holy’ monasteries and convents, who would plead that, after all, is that not where he had met God and His angel? “How could he return to his donkey and go back to everyday work?” Luther replies in mock solemnity: “His life did not appear to be specially religious or spiritual. Abraham left all that on Mount Moriah.” (4.181)

Similarly, the shepherds who received a heavenly visitation of such glory in the fields below Bethlehem did not spend the rest of their lives in contemplative wonder, but returned to the flocks over which God had given them charge. (Sermons. 1905. I.)

Those who belittle following the plough or raising a family are “false Christians.” They misconstrue God’s ordinance of work as something unholy. Their notion of holiness is joining a convent, lying on the ground, wearing sackcloth and praying day and night. No! Luther vigorously protests, when the farmer tills his land or loads a cart with manure, the shopkeeper provides goods for everyone, and anyone else applies himself to “ordinary, everyday tasks,” he is obeying the ordinance of God. (24.231) Therefore no one should “despise honest work and everyday chores.” (4.181)

Work is a Divine Calling

Because God ordained work, “everyone has a calling in life.” One may be government official, another is blessed with motherhood, a father “goes to work,” the student applies himself to learning. Therefore, as 1 Corinthians 7.24 teaches us, we should not hanker after callings to which we are unsuited, however strongly we might feel impelled towards them. Rather, we should stick to that employment God has already given us. (3.128)

Here Luther inserts a timely warning that has been ignored by many, to their own and their family’s loss. We should not infer, he mandates, that our conversion to Christ is God’s command to

forsake our current occupation. Paul's rule for all believers (1 Corinthians 7.17) must be obeyed.

Neither should we leave that occupation in the hope of being saved. "Stay in whatever position the Gospel finds you. You can remain there and be saved."

He also charges some who after conversion find themselves married to an unbeliever: "It is not necessary to give up your marriage and run away from your non-Christian spouse for the sake of faith or salvation."

Nor should unbelievers marry a believer in the hope of being saved. "You are neither saved nor condemned" on account of your marital status.

These warnings are issued particularly to those who might be tempted to think that on account of their talents or the Great Commission (Matthew 28.19-20) they should become ministers. Such well-meaning folk are "confused by a foolish conscience," even if they are anxious not to bury "their Lord's gold" and "will be condemned" for not entering the ministry. Satan is behind this delusion, egging them on so as to make them forsake their God-given responsibilities.

The Parable of the Journeyman and the Vineyard Workers provides Luther with his final thrust (Matthew 25.14). "He called them. But who has called you?" Before daring to apply for such service, "wait for God to call you." (27.166)

A keen practical observer of human nature, Luther points out that such restless hankering for the greener grass on the other side of the fence only leads to further unrest. Therefore, people should "remain where they are and live in peace." After all, the only truly blessed life is "being a Christian." For "all positions in life . . . can be blessed through faith or cursed through lack of faith." It is faith, not our employment, that makes all the difference. (28.39)

Work is Sanctified by the Word and Faith

The conjunction of the Word of God and faith is the hallmark of Luther's entire ministry. In one of those priceless remarks that bear his particular stamp he states: "all work is made holy through God's Word and our faith." Though worldly folk fail to see it this way, it is so. No less than the Almighty God Himself "is at work in these ordinary activities." They are "precious, not only in our sight, but also in the sight of God." Even such a menial but kind act as Jacob's watering his uncle Laban's sheep (Genesis 29.10) meets with God's approval, because it has the warrant of His Word, and was done in faith. (5.274)

Work Requires a Pure Heart

Because the Word and faith create heart purity in God's people, they perform their daily tasks with a pure heart. (Matthew 5.8) "Scripture speaks of having pure thoughts and a pure heart consistent" with both marriage and parenthood. The man who loves and cares for his family is "carrying out God's laws." This way of serving the Lord and others in 'the daily round, the common task' is the very thing that creates "a law-abiding and orderly society." Government "leaders and institutions keep the world running and are established by God Himself." "When a judge," for instance, "imposes a sentence, he is not acting on his own authority. He is carrying out God's laws . . . If he is a Christian, he is performing a good, pure and holy function . . . Even dirty and unpleasant work, such as shoveling manure or washing nappies, is pure and holy if it comes from a pure heart." (21.32)

Work Demands Diligence

Those who serve God and society with a pure heart will fulfil their calling conscientiously and diligently. "God's blessings do not come to those who are sleepy and lazy." If we desire this blessing, "we should work diligently and faithfully" in the tasks God has set us. "Even in times of hardship, exhausting work and persecution, we should wait cheerfully for the Lord's blessing." (7.65)

Work Calls for Trust in God

We should not imagine, Luther cautions, when we “work diligently” in all that agrees with the Word of God, that we are relieved of dependence on God. It is “not our own efforts” that secure a blessing, but God’s effectual concurrence. Therefore, “we should commit all our achievements, solutions and successes to God.” The Book of Ecclesiastes especially tells us both to submit ourselves “fully to God’s Word as well as to work diligently.” (15.74)

Nor should we trust Him only when we attempt “impressive and heroic acts.” We have His promised help in the most “humble, unpleasant and distasteful work.” Such Biblical forbears as Jacob lived as if they “had nothing at all. He lived like an ordinary person and did everyday work.” So too “God tells us to do the best we can and leave the rest to Him.” (5.274)

Nor should we trust and thank God only in ‘good times’ – of success and prosperity. Ecclesiastes 7.14 teaches us to “be prepared for bad times.” Life will not always bring happiness; therefore, “be ready for times of sorrow.” This means both not clinging to present joys, which are fleeting, and not exclusively expecting good times. Some are so “completely absorbed” in present joys that they imagine “good times are going to last for ever.” Christians should by contrast remain “even-tempered . . . whatever happens.” They should cheerfully labour on in their callings. In a word, “commit to Him both your past and your future.” (15.120)

Godless folk, Luther observes, “do not think they need God, and in their blindness they continue to behave in an ungodly way.” Thus they pursue their chosen path till they stumble and fall under “God’s judgments.” Then they perish.

“We can learn much from this [as set out in Proverbs 1.32 and Amos 3.1-2]. When times are bad, we should remind ourselves of God’s goodness and mercy. In good times, however, we should

remember to fear God.” (18.128) How sober and realistic is Luther’s work ethic!

Work Entails Serving Others

All lawful labour should serve God’s command that we should love our neighbour as ourselves. “Everywhere love turns, it finds burdens to bear and ways to help. Love is the law of Christ.”

Our “sinful nature – or the kind of love that is really lust – wants others to . . . give it what it desires . . . It seeks its own interests . . . People who follow this sinful nature completely reverse God’s teaching.” (27.391) Activated by “greed, lust, pride and envy,” they refuse to “serve others in love.” (27.48)

But although they neither fully understand nor perfectly keep the command to love their neighbour, true believers do seek to serve one another humbly in love. (27.54) Preaching from 1 John 3.17, Luther reasons: “If we should be willing to die for our fellow believers, shouldn’t we be even more willing to give up our property and belongings? If we have possessions and don’t share them, if we don’t give food, drink, clothing and so on – in other words, if we are greedy and stingy – then we are not Christians.”

“We should help out whoever doesn’t have enough to live on,” even if such a person betrays us. Much more should we give to “the ones related to us.” Citing 1 Timothy 5.8 as his warrant, Luther concludes bluntly that “it is a general rule that if a person who has property and belongings does not take the need of a neighbour to heart, then that person has no love.” (30.278)

Luther puts an edifying twist on this law to put our labour to the service of others while commenting on Mary’s care for the holy child Jesus. “Don’t deceive yourself by thinking you would have treated Christ well when you don’t do anything for your neighbour.” But “if you could see your neighbours . . . as if they were lying [helplessly] in front of you, then you would certainly care for them.” (52.26)

Elsewhere Luther deals with a perennial problem – that of personal selfishness within marriage – in order to make God’s demands perfectly plain. “Everything the husband has also belongs to his wife. Not only do they share their assets, but also their children, income, food, drink, bed and home.” Men in particular “are obliged to work by the sweat of their brows” in order to share everything with their marriage partners. This is because way back at her creation God called Adam’s marriage partner ‘woman.’ The appellation still stands, “because she owns property and possessions jointly with her husband.” (1.137)

When he considers the family as a whole, Luther is wholly realistic. “Family life is a training ground for faith, hope, love, patience and prayer.” While some “leave their families” and so evade all responsibility for them, believers should remember that family problems and disputes, such as Abraham and Sarah had, “are opportunities for practicing godliness and love.” For marriage is not “a secular institution,” but “a training ground for spirituality.” (4.21)

Conclusion

Even the present brief treatment of the topic reveals a firm Biblical approach to the question of work in Luther’s thinking. Because God values man, the work of His hands, so man in turn should value himself and the work of his hands. This was the truth that Abraham Kuyper discovered among the peasants of his native Holland. When they realized that God had chosen them in Christ and so given identity, meaning and purpose to their menial existence – growing potatoes and bulbs, keeping dairy cattle and producing cheese – they adopted a truly conscientious and God-honouring approach to work. What a blessing it would prove to every nation were its people to be given the same approach!

Luther's Legacy

Attempting to calculate the debt we owe the Lord for such a towering figure as Martin Luther is like trying to appreciate what it cost mountaineers to tackle the awesome Eiger North Face. Nevertheless, we make the attempt, if only by way of summary.

Setting aside the almost idolatrous veneration accorded him, as documented by Robert Kolb in 'Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher and Hero: Images of the Reformer 1520-1620', we shall attempt a factual appreciation of his life and work. In so doing, we do not forget the contribution of such enthusiastic Luther students as Roland Bainton, James Atkinson, Ewald Plass, Heiko Oberman, Gordon Rupp, Ulrich Leupold, Stephen Nichols, James Packer and Oliver Johnston.

First and foremost we thank the Lord for Luther's German Bible, still central to the worship of German-speaking communities around the world. It was not only studied by Tyndale in fashioning his inimitable translation, but also suggested several turns of phrase to the producers of our venerable Authorised Version. Furthermore, it re-moulded the German language and subsequent German literature.

Then we are thankful for such treasures as the Preface to Luther's Commentary on Romans and his Commentary on Galatians (which John Bunyan found such a relief to his wounded conscience). They have opened the only way of salvation to many seekers of God.

Students of Historical Theology have long perceived the immense value of his three great Reformation treatises – The Bondage of the Will, Address To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, and The Babylonian Captivity of the Church. God used these more than any others to free the European nations from the lie of self-salvation and slavery to Roman tyranny, and open up to them the life-giving doctrines of grace.

Neither let us forget the formative influence exercised by Luther's writings on the English and Scottish Reformations. Thomas Cranmer and Patrick Hamilton were not the least to benefit by his teaching. Calvin and his colleagues in Geneva and beyond absorbed much of his thought, as did the English Puritans in the following century. The latter quote Luther as often as they do Augustine and Calvin. The Scottish 'Marrowmen' (following Fisher) saw in his theology a true Biblical basis for the Free Offer of the Gospel. These are only a few beneficiaries from Luther's legacy.

Both theologically and practically, all subsequent believers owe an immense debt to God for Luther's bold stand against the lying wonders of Popery; his insistence on Justification by Faith alone; his unswerving devotion to the Person of Christ; his assertion of the rights of conscience under the Word of God; his reverence for womanhood, marriage and the family; his elucidation of a Protestant work ethic; his fine appreciation of God-honouring music (how he would have loved his great musical expositor, J.S.Bach!); his concern for the well-being of ordinary people; his restructuring of the 'Gottesdienst' or German public service of worship; his love for the emerging German nation; and probably much else.

All who have sympathetically read his vigorous, homespun sermons and affectionate correspondence have seen into the heart of a unique Christian leader. When we observe how the sheer spiritual power of the Word of the living God wrought in him, we begin to appreciate just how much he was born for the destiny God had appointed him. His well-educated, highly-sensitive but roughly-hewn nature was just the one to emerge as a weapon in God's hands capable of taking on all challengers, as a balm for sin-wounded hearts, and as a shining example of indomitable faith in the faithfulness of God. If we remember Luther for no more than this, we have good reason to thank the Head of the Church for him.

We close our appreciation as Stephen Nichols closes his guided tour of Luther's life and thought, with the prayer found in the Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal for Reformation Day:

'Almighty God, who through the preaching of Thy servants, the blessed Reformers, has caused the light of the Gospel to shine forth: Grant, we beseech Thee, that knowing its saving power, we may faithfully guard and defend it against all enemies, and joyfully proclaim it, to the salvation of souls and the glory of Thy Holy Name; through Thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.'

