

Interim Ministry Resources

Chapter 13 Identity

Final Examination: Theology of Martin Luther (14)

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FINAL EXAMINATION: THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER

by

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*A good paper
You are beginning to develop your
own style of expressing yourself.
This is good. There are still rough
edges, inappropriate expressions,
but as you work at it, you will
overcome these flaws.
Your mode of expression is
not yet flexible, or dialectical, enough
to do justice to Luther's paradoxical
dialectic, but keep at it. It will come.*

During the course of the quarter this student read Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand*, Gerhard Ebeling's *Luther*, Martin Luther's *Lectures on Romans*, and Martin Luther's complete text of his reply to Erasmus *Bondage of the Will*. Previously this student had read Heinrich Bornkamm's *Luther's World of Thought* and *Three Treatises of Martin Luther*, and was able to use these sources in reflection on these topics. Although Gerhard Forde's *Luther's Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* was read in satisfaction of requirements for another class, it, of course, ties in and helps to clarify some important matters. Lennart Pinomaa's *Faith Victorious* and George Ferrell's *Faith Active in Love* served as good references, although this student was not able to read them from cover to cover in the allotted time.

I. What is a Christian?

Martin Luther draws heavily upon Pauline material, especially Romans 3,4,5 to say that a Christian is one who is justified by grace through faith. Luther has a great deal to say about the need to be justified. In his lectures on Romans he makes clear what the human condition is. Each person suffers from his/her own egotism, a curved-inwardness, an overpowering love for self, all of which is known as sin. If one is to love God and his/her own neighbor as one ought, with equal or greater intensity than one loves the self, the only solution, in Luther's mind, is for this old self to be crushed and crucified, and a new and higher power take its place. For in his reply to Erasmus Luther makes it quite clear that each person's will is in bondage. One may be able to do commendable acts of civil righteousness, but there is no way that anyone can accomplish spiritual righteousness. The will in its captivity can and does only choose to love itself and to do what it desires for itself, all of which is displeasing to God. Luther says to Erasmus that, if he must talk of freewill, free will at its best is actually free will at its worst, because it cannot desire the good but only the evil. Therefore, there is an essential disruption or estrangement between God and man: things are not as they ought to be or as they could be. Because finite man in his fallen state is utterly incapable of reaching out to find God, it was only in the power of God to take the initiative in order to bring about reconciliation. Luther then speaks about God's grace,

his graciousness, love, undeserved mercy. God did not have to do what he did; he could have allowed man to follow their own self-will, (which would lead to self-destruction), and justice would be accomplished. But Luther rejoices that God is a God, not only of justice, but also of mercy. Why God should look earthward and have compassion on his fallen creatures is almost incomprehensible, but the fact is that God is a God of love who still cares about his creatures because they are still his. This overwhelming love, then, can only be appropriated for the individual by faith. Life and salvation together are a great and wonderful gift, and the only proper response can be one of humble gratefulness—in faith, trust and confidence in this most generous of good givers. Jesus Christ is the concrete Word and proclamation of God's love and forbearance for men, and it is through him that God offers salvation, and it is through him that God works to redeem and reclaim the world. All who rest in the certainty of God's salvation are known as Christians, and it is these Christians who make up the body of Christ here on earth. This then, is how it is possible to speak of God working in and through Christ in the world now to reconcile it unto himself. To complete Luther's trinitarian thinking, it is the Holy Spirit who is the energizing and creative spirit working in and through the body of Christ to call men and women to faith, to invite them into the body of Christ, and to maintain and sustain them in unity in the faith. All of the preceding, then, is an attempt to explain what Luther meant by a Christian is one justified by grace through faith.

Together with this one can also say that Luther thought of a Christian as a forgiven sinner. By grace through faith a person has been justified, made right before the eyes of God in the courtroom of law. But that person is still, at the same time, declared to be righteous and does remain a sinner. Man retains his sinful nature, and the two (old and new) natures exist side by side. A person continues to sin daily, but that person can and must live in daily understanding and realization of repentance and forgiveness. The latter makes it possible for one not to be overwhelmed and overcome by the awareness of the sinful state and sinful actions. Luther exhorts the brittle Melancthon to "Sin boldly and rejoice and believe in Christ more boldly still." In Christ there has been a death and a resurrection—a taking upon himself the sins of the whole world and suffering the curse of that sin, death, as well as being raised from the dead, thereby snatching the victory away from sin and the devil. In the same way the Christian dies daily to sin and is raised to newness of life. Because of all of this it is possible to live in spontaneity and radical abandonment of oneself knowing that one has been forgiven, is forgiven, and will be forgiven.

Finally, Luther would also say that a Christian is one who is free to care for others, to be bound up in the problems, concerns and issues of this world, not having to worry about one's own best welfare, but, instead thinking about one's neighbor. Instead of that perverted love of self, a Christian is able to truly love God and man. To this section could be added the entire response to part IV regarding Luther's ethics.

II•. What is the Christian Church?

Martin Luther preferred to think of the Christian Church in terms of the communion of saints. For Luther there is no difference between those who are in heaven and those who are on earth. All are saints, and all are members of the community. Luther did not especially like to use the word, church because it had connotations of a building made of stone and bricks instead of the meaning he chose to think of, a people distinguished by the unity that faith brings. In the same way he was not so much concerned with the institutional character of the church, but rather real, live human beings in and through whom the Holy Spirit works.

Luther, then, in a way, developed his thinking on the communion of saints in a dialectic with his opposing parties. On the one hand the Roman Catholics held very strongly to the canon law in order to maintain order in the church. It had become so powerful that it became the standard rule of faith. Luther declared that the Word of God, and not canon law, takes precedence above all else in the community, Christians are free from having to give rigid conformity to the man-made rules and regulations and are, instead, free to take seriously the message of the Gospel of the Word of God to die to self and to live anew in true love for God and man. No longer would men have to try to climb the ladder to God in the church by seeking to impress him with merits and penitence. Instead they could follow the example of Jesus Christ and live unreservedly in this world. On the other hand, the Anabaptists laid great stress

on inner and direct revelations. Luther emphatically replied that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, himself, is the all-sufficient word from God to man in revelation. Members of the community do not need to rely upon any other revelations for guidance and enlightenment in this world. The Holy Spirit encounters people with the Word of God, Jesus Christ, the true revelation, through the proclaimed word of the people of God and through use of the written word, scriptures, the account of God's working in this world and his intervention in history to reveal himself in the form of his son Jesus Christ, in order to bring about new, transformed people, little Christs.

Luther held to the Catholic notion that apart from the community (church) there is no salvation. But he did not make membership, attendance and participation in it a precondition to salvation; as the Roman church did. Instead the community is made up of individual Christians, and corporately they form the body of Christ here on earth, and it is through the body of Christ that the Word of God is proclaimed. Those who respond in trust and obedience to the Word become men and women of faith and members of and in the body of Christ. Also, the community is not bound by institutional structures. Just because a Christian does not belong to the Roman Catholic Church, it does not mean he/she is not a Christian. The communion of saints most definitely has a much larger context than just the organized church. The work of God continues from one generation to another with or without the

institutional churchy₁ to raise up men and women to be his agents of reconciliation in his program of reclaiming and redeeming the world. Together with this proclamation of the Word of God by which men/women hear the gospel, respond in faith, and become members of the body of Christ, the community of saints is also charged with the right administration of the sacraments . Baptism is where individuals are taken into the body of believers, and a covenant relationship is established between God and his child. Though administered By men/women, it is totally the work of God. As for the Lord's Supper, Luther maintained that it is there we encounter the real presence of Christ as he offers to us his gift of grace and life .

In the community of believers all are members because they have been justified by grace through faith and because all are forgiven sinners. For Luther the great distinctions between the clerical and laity tend to diminish and disappear. All members are called to be ministers, no matter what their vocation, and to give a witness of their faith. In order to fulfill certain specific tasks within the community it is necessary for some to be ordained ministers as their specific vocation . To preach, administer the sacraments, and tend the flock are their primary responsibilities .

Luther emphasizes that the community of believers are not to rule the world but to penetrate the world like leaven in bread and, like Christ, be a servant to all, The community of believers are to share in the sufferings of this world. There is more about Luther's "free to serve" thinking in Part IV on ethics .

III. What is the role of scripture in the church?

Scripture is one of the aspects in Luther's powerful concept The Word of God. The first part of course, is Jesus Christ himself, who was the concrete word of God to men in time and place. God chose to reveal himself as a human person in Jesus of Nazareth who was also fully Christ the Savior. The second part is the oral proclamation of the message of God's love in Jesus Christ for all men that everyone who heard might appropriate the free gift of life and salvation of God in Jesus Christ. Luther, with some reluctance, accorded written scripture the third part of the Word of God. He no doubt anticipated the problems that could arise from thinking in terms of scripture as Word of God. He no doubt knew that the written word could come to be thought of as the Word of God, that people could take an atomistic view of the Bible and fail to read it for the overall story of God's intervention in history to reveal himself, and that the scripture could become an object of worship. In Luther's thinking the gospel is meant to be proclaimed orally from person to person and to set it to print is to run the risk of the medium becoming the message.

Nevertheless, Dr. Luther understood the importance and necessity of the Canon. It is the church's book in that it is a faithful preservation of the working of God in history in bringing about salvation for men/women. The Bible is, of course, not a book of doctrine but a testimony and early witness of God's acts in history and his love for his children on this earth. For accuracy's sake

it is crucial to have the most contemporary and most reliable accounts of these important acts of God's self-revelation. The scripture is an aspect of the Word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to call the church itself into being. For it is a book that proclaims a mission for the church that has been called into community. The body of believers is commanded by the God-Man Jesus Christ, as recorded in the testimony of scripture, to give a witness to the message of the gospel they have come to know and experience as being true.

For Luther - the Bible must be the primary authority in the doing of theology within the church. He was violently opposed to what seemed to be the case at the time of the formulation of doctrine without taking seriously enough the witness of scripture, sometimes directly contradicting the biblical testimony, and often taking precedence over the Bible. In response to the Scholastics, he stated that reason was the whore of the devil because it seemed to be an even greater formative factor than scripture. In arguing for what he believed to be right teaching, he refuted his opponents on the basis of scripture. For him there was no other sole basis for determining sound doctrine. This was not intended to downgrade the use of reason or tradition. As a professor who took very seriously his standing in the academic community, Dr. Luther used the best tools available, including historical exegesis, to arrive at the most thorough and incisive understanding of scripture.

Likewise, he did not choose to depreciate tradition, but, instead,

felt that it was tradition that helped to decide what was most important in scripture.

Martin Luther the reformer declared that the Bible is not: to be the private possession of a distinguished clergy. He objected strongly to the case where the latter were the only educated people and where the masses had to accept the word of the clergy not having any alternative due to their ignorance. He realized how easily it was for the radical distinction between clergy and laity to be established and maintained and how easily it was for wrong teaching to creep into the ranks of the self-satisfied bishops and priests without the people being able to detect and counter the false doctrine. Because of all of this Luther realized the importance for the Holy Writ to be in the hands of all the members of the church. Therefore, he translated the Bible into the German language so that they could all read it for themselves, so that the word itself could speak to them, and so that they could interpret it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Bible could be their guide book for faith and free them from the bondage of the human canon laws. Then they would be subject only to the proclamation of the person Jesus Christ.

IV. How does Christian discipleship find ethical expression?

Martin Luther reacted strongly against the scholastic theologians whom he thought devised elaborate analytical systems of the nature of man and his relationship to God which were too abstract and bearing little resemblance to reality. The scholastics believed that they could spell out rather precisely the standards of behavior for all actions. Their system was quite absolute and very rigid. Luther rejected their synthesis and maintained, instead, that actions and behaviors are good or bad only on the basis of whether they help or hinder the neighbor. Luther then was more situational and flexible in his ethical thinking.

Luther also refused to accept the ladder-climbing approach of the Roman Catholics. By the doing of many good works and the offering of much penitence the latter thought that they could somehow win the favor of God and get into heaven. Luther strongly objected to this trying to impress God even by a multitudinous number of commendable acts to/for others. Man could never work his way up to God. Whatever man would do in the area of good works would have to be in response to God because it is God who first moved toward man and not the other way around. In the area of civil righteousness man is able to do good things for other men, but in the area of spiritual righteousness Luther made it quite clear that the will is bound, that it cannot choose the good and right, but can only choose the bad. Therefore, it is God who must call men and women into relationship with himself. Faith followed by ethics is the only acceptable and pleasing response.

Then, too, Martin Luther could not accept the thinking of many official Roman theologians that the Christian is concerned for others because of self-love. In his lectures on Romans Luther states that the self (ego) must be crushed and crucified, for original sin is the curved-inwardness-, love for self, which in effect makes it impossible to truly love others. It is only through the dying of the "ego-self" and the raising of the "other-self" that it is possible for man to transcend one's own person or one's fallen nature in order to truly love both God and neighbor.

In rejection of all of these, what he believes to be wholly inadequate and incorrect, ethical systems, he instead comes up with one which is very biblically oriented. From scriptures Luther comes to realize that in all cases the person precedes the work. Therefore, one must be justified, by grace through faith), before one can produce good actions in the eyes of God. The "being-made-righteous" has to precede the "doing-the-right." Continually living in faith results in the ongoing sanctification of the Christian, the dying of the old Adam and rising up of the new Adam, so that one grows more complete in love and concern. In Luther's mind this process is totally God's work it is by no means something man can somehow bring about. Good works then follow, never precede, faith. After one has been justified one is, of course, free from the burdensome demands of the law, but at the same time he/she comes to understand and appreciate the

spirit of the law--concern for the best welfare of the neighbor •.

This thinking gives rise to his now well-known statement, "Faith gives the freedom to do what love demands." Faith is the creative force which makes it possible for the potentialities to become actualities. Love has no concern for pampering the self but only for helping the other. Martin Luther demonstrated this well in his own life when he gave away money to those in need almost as fast as he received it, much to the frustration of his wife, Katie, who had to somehow make ends meet. The love Luther speaks about is the kind of love which does not even seek its own recognition for a job well done. Neither is it concerned about any supposed worthiness on the part of the other person. Recognizing that Jesus Christ chose to share in the anxieties of the human situation even though fellow inhabitants of that and all times are most unworthy of his presence, the Christian is likewise to be oblivious to any consideration of a deserving or not deserving to be loved. This kind of love can only come from God. Christians are channels, instruments and media through which God can and does funnel much of his love, care and concern for all people.

Luther did not think in terms of the abstract, but was instead very concrete. The neighbor is really the neighbor. The good work is a good work if it is to the best welfare of other people. The Christian then is called not to be a lord or prince over others, but a servant to others. The Christian is to penetrate and permeate the world and be like leaven in bread "little Christs" who take seriously their participation in God's world.