Luther’s View of Being Human: The Relationship of God and His Human Creatures as the Core of Wittenberg Anthropology

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At the heart of Martin Luther’s call for reform lay a change in the definition of what it means to be a human being. It was first in my sixty-sixth year that this insight was given me, and then by students in a seminar on Luther at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai, India. They had heard from me that, at least according to some scholars of comparative religion, all religions take form through their doctrine, narratives, rituals, ethics, design of community life (including polity and hierarchy), and some factor that binds these elements together—faith, submission, the search for nirvana, for example.1 Out of their experience of living in Hindu culture, the students identified what differentiated Luther’s understanding of being Christian from that of his medieval predecessors. To be sure, elements of monastic and scholastic thinking provided Luther the raw materials for his own formulations of the biblical message. However, he broke with them, my students posited, because he had found woefully inadequate, or rather

1 Ninian Smart, Worldviews: Cross-cultural Exploration of Human Beliefs (New York: Scribner’s, 1983).

Two of the key questions for modern Christianity are the nature of the human person, and how that person stands in relationship to his or her Creator. Robert Kolb here shows how Luther came to a new understanding of these questions, and how these new understandings transformed the nature of the Christian faith.
frightfully decimating, the medieval definition of Christian faith and practice. It had, in various forms, focused on human performance, and particularly the human performance of religious or sacred activities under the direction of a sacred hierarchy. The framework of ritual administered by a sacred hierarchy plunged him into despair because he could not attain works sufficiently perfect to win God’s favor. All of his teachers saw his relationship with God as a relationship initiated or at least assisted by God’s grace, but all also placed human accomplishment, particularly through performance of sacred liturgies and practices, most mediated by the sacred hierarchy, at the key point in establishing or maintaining the relationship between God and human beings.²

LUTHER’S REFORMULATION OF HIS WORLDVIEW

Luther’s training in his Ockhamist instructors’ worldview fueled his revolt against its insistence that he do his best “by purely natural powers” in order to produce an insufficient merit that would win the grace needed to produce truly worthy works. These works would gain God’s approval for eternity. Nonetheless, he never abandoned William of Ockham’s appraisal of the absolute omnipotence of the Creator and his appreciation for the material elements of creation. Luther retained Ockham’s belief that, as sure and unshakable as were the covenants God had made with his human creatures, God had indeed designed those covenants and the laws governing his creation. The Almighty had not conformed himself to an eternally independent law that existed alongside him, as contended by Realist opponents. Luther also never lost Ockham’s assertion of the limits of human reason and the necessity of faith’s dependence on revelation, even if Luther held that in its authoritative form, this revelation was mediated by Scripture alone and not the church.³

Most fifteenth-century Germans found it increasingly burdensome to meet the demands for human performance as a condition for the full reception and enjoyment of grace and God’s aid in coping with both earthly and heavenly challenges. Particularly the townspeople had more time to think of eternal life than their parents had enjoyed because slowly earthly life was improving after the disruptions caused by the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century. As the people’s investments of time and money in religion heightened and their frustrations with the old system of gaining God’s help and favor along with them, theologians at university and in the monasteries were striving to refine the system in order to make grace easier to acquire. Berndt Hamm has demonstrated how in the last decades of the fifteenth century these efforts produced bargain rates for grace, both in terms of what one needed to do and even in terms of what one needed to pay for

²For a brief overview of this way of thinking and practicing the faith, see Scott H. Hendrix, Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 1-28.

³On Luther’s Ockhamist background, see Heiko Augustinus Oberman, The Harvest of Medieval Theology, Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).
indulgences. Hamm’s judgment that Luther’s proclamation of grace brought this process to a pinnacle misses the point that Luther broke the mold. Just as the most brilliant refiners of Ptolemy in the late fifteenth century, Georg von Peuerbach and Joannes Regiomontanus, have vanished in the shadow of Nikolaus Copernicus, so Johann von Paltz, whose efforts at making grace ever more inexpensive, is not remembered, while Luther is. For Luther developed a new paradigm for the relationship of God and his human creatures.

Critical in the decade-long process of reshaping his understanding of what it means to be Christian, which grew out of his new characterization of both God and human creatures, was Luther’s rethinking of the foundation of reality.

This new paradigm redefined both God and humanity. Each definition involved their relationship, a relationship neither initiated nor maintained by human efforts, neither sacred nor the common everyday ethical performances. Instead, both God and humanity were defined by a relationship initiated and maintained by the Creator, whose re-creative Word transformed human beings through the death and resurrection of Christ and through the gift of human trust in God’s promise of a new life in Christ. Luther taught nothing about God outside of his relationship with his human creature and the environment of creation into which he placed them. The rest of God was hidden. Luther taught that the Creator had given creatures, composed of the dirt of the field animated by his own breath, their humanity. This being human revolved around trusting the God who, without merit or worthiness in their own being or performance, had created them out of pure parental goodness and mercy. When they departed from trust in him, and thus from life as he designed it, he sent his incarnate Son, who restores and renews that life through his own death and resurrection.

Critical in the decade-long process of reshaping his understanding of what it means to be Christian, which grew out of his new characterization of both God and human creatures, was Luther’s rethinking of the foundation of reality. His instructors at university had dealt with reality in terms of Aristotelian substances, the eternal forms of things as they took on material existence. In the absence of a personal Creator (Aristotle’s “Unmoved Mover” did not function as a communicating person), Aristotle had found reality in these substances. Human reason could understand and work with them according to the eternal law which determines reality. This way of thinking viewed the human being as essentially an animal rationalis, a living being for whom rational thought provides the means of dealing with reality. A Creator who is a person did not figure in Aristotle’s worldview.

Luther’s image of the personhood of God, as he found him throughout Scripture, expedited his move toward a revised view of reality. He continued to think in terms of Aristotelian substances throughout his life as a way of describing what God had made. But as he was making his way up the academic ladder, it became clear to him that a biblical view of reality rested on the substratum of the creative word of the Creator and on the relationships the Creator, as a person, established by speaking everything into existence. This relational bedrock of all persons and things framed and shaped Luther’s view of all else.⁶

This appropriation of a personal, relational foundation and structure for reality was also facilitated by Luther’s flirtation with some strains of late medieval mysticism. This piety, fostered in the cloister, had not led him into a longing for absorption into the Divine but rather into the very concrete kind of relationship with the human Jesus that certain elements of the piety of Johannes Tauler and his school cultivated.⁷ This led the young Augustinian friar to accentuate the inaccessibility of those elements in God’s person that lie outside of God’s revelation of himself in Christ and in Scripture. However, he presumed that much about God’s creation can be fathomed by the responsible exercise of human reason. Nonetheless, Luther insisted, the fullness of who God is and the fullness of our humanity lie beyond the grasp of creatures, to say nothing of sinners, who can know him and themselves truly only through his revelation.

LUTHER’S NEW UNDERSTANDING OF BEING HUMAN

Both the scholastic and monastic teachers supplied Luther the raw materials that fermented in the cauldron of his own personal spiritual struggles, as his highly sensitive temperament tried to deal with the fears generated by his recognition of the inadequacy of his best efforts to keep God’s laws. Luther proceeded into the study of Scripture he required of himself to serve as a “Doctor in Biblia” once he had completed his doctoral studies in 1512. In thinking with the psalmists for two years of teaching, and then giving voice to Paul through lectures on Romans and Galatians in the subsequent two years, Luther came to the conclusion that the piety of his youth, of his university instruction, and of the cloister could only lead him ever deeper into the valleys of despair. For that understanding of Christian existence had encouraged him to approach God with his own performance, particularly of sacred or religious activities. He discovered in the biblical text instead that God was coming to him, talking his way into this world, bringing Luther not only a word of command for living his life that turned quickly into a condemnation; the Creator was also speaking a word of new life that reestablished the relationship of


love and trust that God had intended to have with his human creatures from the beginning.\(^8\)

In this context Luther’s old definition of the human being as \emph{animal rationalis} had to give way. God made it clear throughout Scripture that the heart of being human was “fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all else.” What Erik Erikson placed at the core of his philosophy of identity (the contemporary equivalent of what Luther meant by “righteousness”),\(^9\) trust, stands also at the heart of Luther’s reproduction of the biblical theme of God’s faithfulness and the trust that it generates in his human creature [expressed in the Hebrew word family יִמְנָה]. Medieval exegetes had interpreted the Greek πίστις as “fides,” an historical acknowledgement of the facticity of a statement. They had extended this concept into a living, active concept by coupling it with hope and love. These three human activities were vital in the practice of Christianity in medieval theology and piety. From Erasmus and Melanchthon, Luther learned that the biblical usage of πίστις embraces not only that historical acknowledgement of the story of Jesus and the claims of God as Creator. It also involved “fiducia,” trust, the confidence that this story affects each individual hearer, the reliance on what the story signifies for God’s re-creative action in the lives of all whom this story confronts with its message of forgiveness, life, and salvation.\(^10\) Trust embraces the incorporation into the heart of the individual’s thinking the pronouncement that Christ died and rose “for me,” “for us,” “for you.”\(^11\)

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Trust had broken down in Eden, Luther recognized, and Luther’s view of being human incorporated this breakdown into his way of dealing with the fact that all human beings translate their doubt of God and his Word into disobedience. This disobedience of God’s commands arises from doubting his promise and defying his person; it mars and destroys their relationships with other human beings and the rest of creation. The original sin that compelled the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden only confirmed their own act of expelling themselves from the relationship God created for himself and them. Since that that relationship consisted of trust, doubt is the original sin, he told students in 1535 as he lectured on

\(^8\)Robert Kolb, \textit{Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and its Scripture-Centered Proclamation} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) 1–6, 8–10.

\(^9\)Erikson’s pioneering work was \textit{Child and Society} (New York: Norton, 1950); cf. also his \textit{Identity, Youth and Crisis} (New York: Norton, 1968).


Gen 3. The devil attacked God’s will and God’s image in the human being by attacking his Word.12 “When Satan had separated them from and deprived them of God’s Word, nothing was not easy for him.” His deception opened up a gulf between Eve and the God who wanted to be in conversation with her.13 “The fountain from which all sin flows is unbelief, doubt, and abandonment of the Word,” which are idolatry, denial of God’s truth, the invention of new gods.14 The origin of each individual sin or act of disobedience lies in that doubt.

The young Augustinian friar’s consciousness of the great gulf that doubt had created between himself and his Creator gripped his heart and made shivers turn his spine to ice. For he found himself continuing to foster such doubt of God and his goodness as he turned to his own performance and other substitutes as his sources of good and his havens in time of need, Luther’s definition of what gods provide their believers.15 In sermons from the 1520s on, it was not so much human guilt that Luther focused on as the problem, although guilt stands behind the overarching fear that he discussed: fear of having to look at himself through the eyes of an angry God. Therefore, he emphasized the inimical nature of God’s wrath in his list of the threats that took his life-breath away. Death did not trouble him so much; Richard Marius’s falsified picture of Luther as a Christian caught “between God and death,” the author himself admits, used sources selectively, and it fails to deal with Luther’s sense of Christ’s triumph over death and the first sense of hope in his own resurrection and that of his loved ones.16 Heiko Oberman hits the mark much more squarely by placing Luther between God and the devil.17 Luther consistently warned against the wiles of Satan and offered encouragement and advice for the battle against him.18

But the chief enemy that Luther encountered was the disposition of his own mind and heart, with the desire to live life apart from God, in doubt and rejection of his Word and his presence in human life that the Word delivers.19 Nonetheless, his understanding of being human celebrated God’s restoration of the trust in himself that enables truly human living. Luther acknowledged and dealt with the

13WA 42:111, 2–4; LW 1:147.
14WA 42:112, 20–22; LW 1:149.
17Heiko A. Oberman, Luther: Man between God and the Devil (German original 1982; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized without attempting to explain it. He simply used God’s Word of law to call to repentance and his Word of gospel to restore trust and the obedience to God’s plan for life that flows from it. That application of these two words from God in daily repentance and trust confronted the challenges from Satan, the world around us, and our own impulses to trust other gods. Therefore, the struggle between “the law of sin” and “the law of Christ,” of which Paul speaks in Rom 7, the battle between the desires of the flesh and the spirit reborn of God, described in Gal 5:17, formed part of the reformer’s daily experience.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Luther used the term “righteousness” in somewhat the same way as the term “identity” is used in the twenty-first century: to delineate that a person matches the design which governs and defines his or her existence, within a variety of situations in life, and at our very core.}

This struggle required the active use of both law and gospel, the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47), each day of the believer’s existence on earth. “The old Adam in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”\textsuperscript{21} If baptism accomplishes this daily activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives, according to Luther’s Small Catechism, it does so because of what Christ had done as the Lord who had acquired possession of believers and won them through his death and resurrection so that “I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally.”\textsuperscript{22}

Luther placed the restoration of human righteousness, our identity as children of God, at the heart of his theology: “Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away…. On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore, we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise everything is lost…”\textsuperscript{23} In his brief delineation of his view


\textsuperscript{21}SC, Baptism, fourth question, BSELK 884/885,13–18; BC 360.

\textsuperscript{22}SC, Creed, second article, BSELK 872/873,1–20; BC 355.

\textsuperscript{23}Smalcald Articles, BSELK 726/727,26–728/729,14; BC 301.
of the restoration of righteousness in God’s sight to sinners, Luther used Rom 4:25, among other passages: “Christ was handed over [as a sacrifice into death] for our sin and was raised for our restoration to righteousness.”\textsuperscript{24} As essential and vital as Christ’s incarnation, his life of perfect obedience, his suffering, his ascension, and his return were for Luther’s telling of Christ’s saving work, he focused on the death that buries human sinfulness in Christ’s tomb forever and on the resurrection that raises his chosen people up to a new life walking in Christ’s footsteps (Rom 6:3–11; Col 2:11–15).

Gustaf Aulén challenged much popular interpretation of Luther’s understanding of Christ’s atoning work as focusing on the vicarious satisfaction of the one who takes the sinner’s place by sacrificing himself to satisfy the law’s demand. His challenge properly highlighted the “Christus Victor” theme in Luther’s preaching. However, Aulén’s challenge badly missed its mark by slighting Luther’s extensive use of the themes of vicarious satisfaction. Early in his career, he used the bridal imagery of late medieval mystical writings, emphasizing Christ’s appropriation of human sin and his gift of his own righteousness, in a marriage that enhanced—as marriage does—the identity of each partner. Christ is never more divine than in his sacrifice for his human creatures, and they are never more human than when they are made dead to sin and live in him. Later he dramatically turns Christ into “the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc. there has ever been anywhere in the world. As such, he is not acting in his own person. In this case…he is the one who possesses and bears all the sins of every person in his body.”\textsuperscript{25} Luther believed that God takes sin as seriously as he did, and that Christ came to accept the wages of the sins of all sinners and, in their place, on their behalf, to suffer the death that is the law’s only reaction to sin. To be human in Christ means to share his innocence and no longer to have a sentence of death hanging over one’s head.

Aulén also passed by other atonement themes in Luther’s proclamation while properly emphasizing the expressions of victory and liberation. Christ’s victory and liberation constitute his triumph and the release and deliverance of Satan’s slaves. His death and resurrection have liberated these slaves from the sins that turn themselves into the prison created in their own hearts through their enslaving themselves to gods that cannot deliver the goods that God gives as a matter of his nature. Furthermore, Luther emphasized the atoning work of Christ as the enactment of a new act of creation, another \textit{creatio ex nihilo}, from the nothingness of sin to rebirth as child of God. To be human in Christ means to be a free human being, not having to slip out of the human mold in order to defend oneself at the cost of others. Christ’s people are free to trust the only absolutely trustworthy object of trust, God himself. Luther also spoke of Christ’s atoning work, as noted above, as

\textsuperscript{24}Robert Kolb, “Resurrection and Justification: Luther’s Use of Romans 4:25,” \textit{Lutherjahrbuch} 78 (2011) 39–60.
\textsuperscript{25}WA 40,1:433, 26–32; \textit{LW} 26:277; Luther labeled this the “joyous exchange,” WA 40,1:443, 23–24; \textit{LW} 26:284.
his repossession of his lost family, his making his children his own again.\textsuperscript{26} To be human in Christ means to have a place where everyone knows our name, a place that will take us in when no one else wants to find place and provision for us.

Luther’s new definition of being human centered on the trust that believers have in accepting God’s promise, which gives assurance that God has applied this vicariously law-satisfying, victoriously liberating, life-givingly re-creating, family-restoring work of Christ “for me.” Trust accepts God’s judgment that this believer is righteous, that is, has been killed as a sinner, liberated from all evils, re-created as God’s child, and incorporated into his family. Trust recognizes in oneself the righteous person God thinks he or she is. Trust cannot help but naturally act out that new identity since it is the reality of the highest authority on reality, the Creator. The reality of the law of sin in the members of the believers makes itself felt, but since Christ says that their righteousness is so, it must be so.

Righteousness fleshes itself out in the patterns God has implanted in his human creatures, following his commands within the structures of his callings. Those whom God regards as righteous demonstrate their new identities by living as God reveals and guides. Luther dedicated much of his preaching to explicating how these callings take place in the lives of God’s people and what their commands do to inform them of the shape of the godly life.\textsuperscript{27} Trust in God’s opinion that believers are indeed righteous, that is, are to be identified as his children, enables and empowers a life that acts in godly fashion.

Luther’s view of being human interprets his own experience from the viewpoint of the biblical writers as he enmeshed himself in their thinking in the 1510s. His struggle with the temptations that challenged him took place within the framework of his certain trust that Christ had restored him to his Edenic identity. That trust freed him to live risking all else that he might depend on as a source of all good and his haven in time of need so that he could live out the love that actively expresses the righteousness he had passively received through the Holy Spirit’s gifts in God’s Word. So it is with the human children of God.

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\textsuperscript{26} A more extensive description of these themes is found in Robert Kolb, “Das Kreuz—die wirkliche Befreiungstheologie,” \textit{Confessio Augustana} IV (2016) 43–54, and idem, “Bound, Freed, Freed to be Bound: The Wittenberg Understanding of Justification,” \textit{Unio cum Christo} 3 (2017) 43–54.